

# THE BIRTH OF *SOURCES CHRÉTIENNES* AND THE RETURN TO THE FATHERS

• Paolo Prosperi •

“[T]he central conviction of the circle of Fourvière was the attempt to find in the Fathers the key for a unified vision of the whole of reality entirely grounded in the mystery and person of Jesus Christ.”

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The early 1940s in France were not only the “dark years” of the Nazi occupation; they were also the years when what may have been the most important patristic movement of twentieth-century Catholicism came into being. They were years of “luminous darkness,” to use an image dear to those who were exploring the riches hidden in the mystical doctrine of St. Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius during that time. In effect, the dark years of the occupation truly coincided, in France, with the golden years of the return to the Fathers. The quantity and quality of the publications of those years is striking, considering the material and environmental conditions surrounding such vitality.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>It should be enough to cite a few examples: 1938 saw the publication of Henri de Lubac’s *Catholicisme*, a work that was not specifically patristic, but was imbued with citations and profoundly inspired by the Fathers of the Church, especially the Greek Fathers. Immediately after this came the publication of the doctrinal thesis of Henri Irénée Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, and the anthology by Hans Urs von Balthasar—at the time a disciple

How can such a phenomenon be explained? If one considers that the first volume of *Sources Chrétiennes*, Gregory of Nyssa's *La Vie de Moïse*, was published in 1942, the question arises: why would such an endeavor, which had every reason to be considered absurd, ever be attempted? From where did the enthusiasm and feverish activity of those years arise? In a book that carefully reconstructs the history of the birth of *Sources Chrétiennes*, Étienne Fouilloux has clearly brought to light the particular historical conjuncture that made such a blossoming possible.<sup>2</sup>

First of all, the birth of *Sources Chrétiennes*, just like the renewal of patristic studies mentioned above, is connected to a very precise environment: the Jesuit scholasticate of Fourvière in Lyons, where at the end of the 1930s students of the caliber of Jean Daniélou, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Claude Mondésert, and professors like Victor Fontoynt and Henri de Lubac found themselves all together, all animated by a shared passion for the Fathers of the Church. It was above all Fontoynt, an extraordinary Hellenist as much in love with the Greek classics as with patristics, who ignited in this group a love for Christian Hellenism. But it was certainly de Lubac who instilled in the group the idea that it was precisely in a return to the Fathers that the energy and inspiration could be found for a profound

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of the school of de Lubac—on Origen. In 1941, Balthasar published his monograph on Maximus the Confessor, *Kosmische Liturgie*, and in 1942, his *Présence et pensée; essai sur la philosophie religieuse de Grégoire de Nysse*. Also in 1942, the collection *Sources Chrétiennes* was finally launched after long planning, with the publication of Gregory of Nyssa's *La Vie de Moïse*, with an introduction by Jean Daniélou, who together with de Lubac was the creator and first director of the collection. From this moment on, the publications of *Sources Chrétiennes* would not be interrupted down to the present day (the collection has reached nearly five hundred volumes, and has gradually attained, after the shift that took place under the direction of Claude Mondésert, a higher and higher level of scholarship, to such an extent that it is now an obligatory point of reference for the study of the Fathers). In 1944, two monographs were published: *Platonisme et théologie mystique, essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse* by Daniélou, and *Clément d'Alexandrie, Introduction à l'étude de sa pensée religieuse à partir de l'écriture* by Mondésert. In 1948, Daniélou's *Origène* was published, while de Lubac waited until 1950 to publish his historic study on Origen's approach to the exegesis of Scripture: *Histoire et Esprit. L'intelligence des Écritures d'après Origène*.

<sup>2</sup>Étienne Fouilloux, *La collection "Sources chrétiennes," Éditer les Pères de l'Église au XXe siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1995).

renewal of Catholic theology; that is, a theology that (above all in reaction to the recent modernist crisis) was in danger of locking itself into an increasingly monolithic system of abstract truths, incapable of speaking to the outside world, closed off in a self-referential language. In the Fathers, however, the seasoned band of young Jesuits could sense the vibrancy of a freshness that had been lost, a grace of the Church's youth.

This certainly must not be confused with a naïve nostalgia for a golden age. This grace instead has to do with a certain style of thought, a style that needed to be recovered, according to the Fourvière group. In a famous article that appeared in the journal *Études*, Daniélou dared to put explicitly in question the idea—at the time practically dogmatic among Catholics—that the neo-scholastic theological method was to be taken as the only secure and reliable one, thus clarifying the profound factor that motivated the creators of *Sources Chrétiennes*: “For us the Fathers are not only the reliable witnesses of things that now belong to the past. They are also the most timely nourishment for men of today, because in them we find precisely a certain number of categories that are those of contemporary thought, and that scholastic theology had lost.”<sup>3</sup>

Here I would like to sketch out, in a necessarily summary and incomplete way, a picture of these “categories,” as Daniélou calls them, which at the time were being rediscovered and today, thanks to the work of those men, are certainly more familiar than they were before.

*a. The unity between thought and life*

First of all, returning to the Fathers meant asserting the unity between dogmatic theology and the living experience of the mystery of Christ in the Church; in brief, the unity between thought and life. The paradox of a theology so “scientific” that it could put the reality of the faith lived as a premise a priori in parentheses—with no impact on theology itself—had led to a serious dissociation between dogmatic theology and personal devotion, between Christian dogma and Christian spiritual life. The return to the Fathers meant stressing not only a more direct influence of

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<sup>3</sup>Daniélou, “Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse,” *Études* 249 (April, May, June, 1946): 1–21.

dogma on the lives of believers, but likewise a more direct influence of the life of faith on the expression of dogma. To use an expression dear to Vladimir Lossky, who in 1944 published his *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*, the inseparable bond between mysticism and theology was put back in the forefront; that bond which the Western tradition, unlike that of the East, had over the trajectory of modernity increasingly risked losing. One cannot dissociate—the Cappadocian Fathers had warned—*kathàrsis* (purification of the heart) from rational reflection on the mystery of God, because “only the purified eye sees Him who is pure” and is thus made able to talk about God. Before we “sufficiently purify our ears and minds, . . . it is dangerous . . . to take up theology.”<sup>4</sup> This meant putting back at the center that knowledge through *syngèneia* (connaturality), which for the Fathers was the only real way to access the mystery of God.

This was not at all intended to get rid of conceptualization, but rather to bring it back into the service of a more complete vision of man and of his relationship with God. What was needed, the *new theologians*<sup>5</sup> thought, was to make due room for a more vital conception, more existential, closer not only to the patristic conception but also to that of the Bible: knowledge of God understood as participation in his life, as communion with him, given in Christ through the Church. In such a vision, theology, liturgy, meditation on Scripture, and the mystical life had to return to supporting and illuminating one another in a profoundly unified synthesis, a synthesis that modern Catholicism had lost. Fontoynt, the first “godfather” of the Fourvière group and the original architect of the *Sources Chrétiennes* project, believed that a return to the Fathers could assist in re-rooting the spiritual life back into the ontological truths of dogma—rather than in morality alone—because the

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<sup>4</sup>Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 20, 1, trans. Martha Vinson as *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: Select Orations* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 108.

<sup>5</sup>This is of course a play on “*la nouvelle théologie*,” a phrase derisively applied to the Jesuits at Fourvière by R. Garrigou-Lagrange in an article published in 1946 [see “La nouvelle théologie, où va-t-elle?” *Angelicum* 23 (1946): 126–45]. The term, however, was originally coined by Msgr. Pietro Parente years earlier in his 1942 *Osservatore Romano* article attacking M.D. Chenu, O.P., and Louis Charlier, O.P., of Le Saulchoir.

Fathers themselves lived in a unity of theology, exegesis, and spirituality. His disciples did not delay in echoing this conviction fully.

In the introduction to *La Vie de Moïse*, Daniélou illustrated the exemplary way in which the great Cappadocian harmoniously combined speculative refinement and mystical experience, and pointed out the senselessness of the Western distinction between theology and spirituality. For Daniélou, Gregory embodied an ideal precisely in that he was neither a pure mystic nor a pure speculative, but both together. In his thought, as in that of many Fathers, a clear understanding of dogma can never be separated from growth in Christian holiness and in the experience of communion with Christ. The famous patristic principle, in the words of Evagrius Ponticus: “If you truly pray you are a theologian, and if you are a theologian you truly pray” suddenly came back to the forefront. “Knowledge of God can never be the result of an effort of reason, but only a gratuitous gift from God,” Daniélou insists. He further illustrates this point in his introduction to the mysticism of Gregory of Nyssa: “Gregory proved that union with God is by no means achieved through the intelligence (*nous*), but beyond all intelligence, through the abandonment of faith, in a real person-to-Person contact.”<sup>6</sup> Daniélou was quick to interpret Gregory’s aphorism as “a reaction against Greek rationalism.”

In 1948, Balthasar upped the ante when he published a famous article entitled “Theologie und Heiligkeit.” He writes:

If we consider the history of theology up to the time of the great Scholastics, we are struck by the fact that the great saints . . . were, mostly, great theologians. They were “pillars of the Church,” by vocation channels of her life: their own lives reproduced the fullness of the Church’s teaching, and their teaching the fullness of the Church’s life. . . . [T]hese pillars of the Church were complete personalities: what they taught they lived with such directness, so naïvely, we might say, that the subsequent separation of theology and spirituality was quite unknown to them.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Daniélou, Introduction to *La Vie de Moïse*, by Gregory of Nyssa (Paris: Cerf, 1955), 40–41. Translation mine.

<sup>7</sup>“Theologie und Heiligkeit,” in *Wort und Wahrheit* 3 (1948): 881–96. Translated by A.V. Littledale and Alexander Dru as “Theology and Sanctity,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1, *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 181–83.

This leads Balthasar to affirm that true theology, that of the saints, uses conceptual instruments that are at times complex, but its aim “does not involve teaching anything occult or abstruse, but bring[s] men and their whole existence, intellectual as well as spiritual, into closer relation with God.”<sup>8</sup> This means that the theologian is by nature a man of prayer. The words of Balthasar echo Evagrius, but above all Gregory of Nyssa:

Prayer is the *realistic* attitude in which the mystery must be approached: obedient faith, the “presuppositionless,” is the attitude where theology is concerned . . . in which the heart awaits all and anticipates nothing. . . . Knowledge must never be separated from the attitude of prayer with which it began. It can no more do so than gnosis could outstrip faith, and indeed it is an inner form of faith.<sup>9</sup>

Balthasar’s conclusion is practically a paraphrase of one of the themes most important to Gregory of Nyssa: “Even when found, God is still he who is sought . . . and faith fulfilled is still praying, asking, adoring faith.”<sup>10</sup>

#### *b. Apophaticism*

We thus come to introduce a second aspect, which in my judgment is profoundly connected to the first. There is among the theologians who came out of the Fourvière group, as different as they are, a certain common recourse to apophaticism. This can be summed up in the keenly felt need to liberate the mystery of the living God of the Bible from any presumption to close him up in a conceptual system of truths, so clear and definitive, that it does not leave any real space for progress and newness.

Apophaticism, which is deeply embedded in the writings of the Greek and Byzantine authors presented among the first titles of *Sources Chrétiennes*, does not at all constitute for the “knights of Christian Hellenism”—we reiterate—a call to put reason away in the attic, nor a rejection of the “strength of clear and distinct truth.”

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<sup>8</sup>Balthasar, “Theology and Sanctity,” 196.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 206–07.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 207.

The intention was rather to put the emphasis back on a fact that had always been acknowledged theoretically—by St. Thomas Aquinas no less than by the Fathers—but had little impact on the modern way of doing theology in the West: God is *really akatàleptos*, ungraspable Mystery, the *semper maior*. It is precisely because of this that he always has something new to reveal to man, and man something new to discover about the profundities of God. “Astonishment,” says Gregory of Nyssa, “is the only name that is really suitable for God.” He is the one always hidden who always reveals himself in the inexhaustible light of the Spirit. This concept, always familiar to the Eastern tradition, not only does not contradict the insuperable definitiveness of the revelation of Christ, but in fact connotes it in a distinctive way: only by uniting himself with the divine life of Christ is the fully-realized man introduced into the infinite spaces of the knowledge of God.

Emblematic in this regard is the interest of Daniélou and Balthasar in the thought of Gregory of Nyssa, the bard of *epektasis*,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Starting with the studies of Daniélou (cf. especially *Platonisme et théologie mystique, essai sur la doctrine spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse* [Paris: Aubier, 1944], 309ff.; Introduction to *La Vie de Moïse*, by Gregory of Nyssa [Paris: Cerf, 1955], 34–44; “La colombe et la ténèbre dans la mystique byzantine ancienne,” *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 23 [1954]: 389–418; “Mystique de la ténèbre chez Grégoire de Nysse,” under “Contemplation,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité: Ascétique et mystique, doctrine et histoire*, ed. Marcel Villier, et al. [Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1937–1995], 2.2: 1884–1885), it became customary to use this term to indicate the speculative affirmation most characteristic of Gregory’s mystical doctrine: that according to which the reaching out (*epekteinēin*) of the soul toward God is infinite, since the created spirit’s capacity for progress in participation with the life of God is infinite. The term comes from Phil 3:13, Gregory’s favorite Pauline verse, which he always cites in dealing with this subject: “Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward (*epekteinōmenos*) to what lies ahead. . . .” Here we offer the explanation that seems best to us, in terms of clarity and conciseness, among those given by Daniélou, who was the inventor of this term and the leading scholar of the doctrine connected to it: by *epektasis* is meant “precisely the state of possession and egression [*sortie*]” that characterizes the mystical life. “By its very composition, the word lends itself to expressing the twofold element. It indicates on the one hand possession, ‘*epi*,’ a real perception of something and the indwelling of God in the soul. On the other hand it indicates taking leave of oneself, ‘*ek*,’ the irreducible infinity of God who snatches the soul to himself in the ecstasy of love. Here the opposition between knowledge and love, between *theoria* and *agàpe*, is overcome. To the intelligence God is inside the soul and dwells there, but to love the soul is cast outside of itself toward him . . .” (*Platonisme et théologie*

the unending progress of the spirit in knowledge of the mystery of God. In Christ man is really “divinized,” and yet he always remains the supplicant creature who awaits the free self-revelation of the creator, because “one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more.”<sup>12</sup> It could be helpful to recall also in this case Daniélou’s introduction to *La Vie de Moïse*. In this work, Gregory of Nyssa presents to us the essence of God shrouded in the darkness of Mount Sinai, invulnerable to any attack of human reason. The icon of Moses, who despite speaking with God face-to-face, still burns with unsatisfied desire, “as if he had not yet known anything,” and desperately lifts up to God the plea that he show himself as he really is, becomes for Daniélou a sort of symbolic warning for Catholic theology: no theology, no theological system, as perfect as it may be—not even that of Aquinas—can be considered as closed and definitive. Theology is true and effective only as long as it is born from the openness of reason to the free self-revelation of God, a manifestation that has Christ present in his Church as its inexhaustible center of diffusion.

*c. Unity between exegesis and life*

But the aim to which both de Lubac and Daniélou consecrated themselves more deeply was that of doing justice to the biblical exegesis of the Fathers. Both of them published works that have become classics on the exegetical method of Origen and his successors.<sup>13</sup> In this field as well, so widely studied and appreciated today, they were practically pioneers, and had to row against the tide. An appreciation of the spiritual exegesis of the Fathers, in fact, sounded all the more anachronistic at a time in which the Catholic Church had to confront the attacks of Bultmannesque demythologization, conducted with the refined instruments of the historical-critical

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*mystique*, 322). Translation mine.

<sup>12</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *La Vie de Moïse*, II, 239. Translated by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson as *Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 106.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit. L'intelligence des Écritures d'après Origène* (Paris: Cerf, 1950); Jean Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1948).



method. The symbolic and allegorical exegesis of the Alexandrian school, which was the main object of interest for the scholars, appeared to most as outdated, de-historicizing, naïve, and to a great extent arbitrary. The prejudice that had surrounded allegory from Luther onward, condemned as fanciful and Platonic, ended up deeply influencing Catholic thought as well.

The Fourvière theologians were, on the contrary, convinced that precisely in this way of interpreting Scripture was found one of the secrets of the enviable unity with which the Fathers had thought of and lived Christianity. This led to the extreme importance of rediscovering, beyond its ephemeral content, the profound logic underlying the exegesis of the Fathers. With this, they did not at all intend to reject the achievements of modern scientific methods. They were only warning against the idea that these methods alone were capable of discovering the sole and exclusive meaning of the word of God. The historical-critical method appeared to them as an indispensable instrument, but only for discovering what Origen would have called the literal meaning. *Inside* the letter, however, the new theologians claimed for the school of the Fathers the right and duty to seek out the Spirit, bolstered by the Pauline admonition, “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6).

This is not the place to present even in summary the profound research of the two Jesuits into the meanings of Scripture in patristic exegesis. We limit ourselves to underscoring the essential principle that they wanted to bring back front and center: the Fathers—like St. Paul and the New Testament before them—based themselves on the certainty of faith that all of Scripture speaks *per symbola* of the mysteries of Christ and the Church, not only the New but also the Old Testament. This did not at all give them, at least in line of principle, the right to give in to unbridled subjectivism. On the contrary: they were convinced that the spiritual meaning is truly contained in the letter, that it has a real existence, but that only the light of the Holy Spirit permits one to pass beyond the veil of the letter and see the riches hidden behind it. *Scripturae cum legente crescunt*, Gregory the Great admonishes: the understanding of the Scripture grows along with the growth in faith of the one who is interpreting it.

The letter, Origen teaches, contains the Spirit just as the humility of the body of Jesus conceals the dazzling glory of the divine Word. The eyes of the Spirit are needed to penetrate its opacity; eyes purified by faith in the Crucified and Risen One. There returns once

again, as for dogmatic theology, a call to the profound unity between exegesis and lived faith. And there also returns the conviction that the word of God, as the “body” of the Word, is a finite expression of the infinite depths of God, and therefore its meanings are inexhaustible. In a passage from his homilies on Numbers that has become famous, Origen interprets the tents of Israel, symbol of the eternal pilgrimage of the Church, through the meanings of Scripture:

[I]f someone has made some progress in knowledge and has acquired some experience in such matters, he really knows that when he has come to some idea and recognition of spiritual mysteries, his soul tarries there, as it were, in a kind of tabernacle. But when, on the basis of these things it has discovered, it again fathoms other things and advances to other understandings, it picks up its tabernacle from there, so to speak, and heads for the higher things. And there it establishes a seat for its mind, fixed in the stability of the meanings. . . . And in this way, always “striving for what is ahead,” the soul seems to advance by means of tabernacles, as it were. For there is never a time when the soul that has been set on fire by the spark of knowledge can sink into leisure and take a rest, but it is always summoned from the good to the better, and again from the better to the superior.<sup>14</sup>

*d. Scripture as the key to a unified understanding of history*

Let us take a step further. It has been said that the theologians were mainly interested in recovering the patristic principle according to which all of Scripture speaks of the mysteries of Christ and of the Church. This means that in the polysemy of the biblical text, the Fathers found the key for understanding all of the phases of universal history in a unified way in the light of the mystery of Christ, concealed in the history of Israel and revealed in the life of the Church. It was the recovery of this vision that was so urgent for our theologians, and in a particular way for Daniélou, who found in the biblical-patristic idea of typology the conceptual foundation for a real and proper theology of history: every salvific act of God is *typos*, a prefiguration of what God will do in the future, and is in turn prefigured in what he has already done in the past, in a logic of historical progression that tends toward eschatological fullness. The

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<sup>14</sup>Origen, “Homily 17” in *Homilies on Numbers*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 106.

exodus of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land, for example, is *eikòn*, an image of the passage of Christ, the true Moses, through the waters of death, but also of that immersion in the death and resurrection of Christ which takes place in sacramental mystagogy, of the mystical death and resurrection of the soul that passes from the slavery of the flesh to the freedom of the Spirit, and finally of the passage of the Church, the definitive Israel, from this world to the kingdom of God. Thus, that powerful unity among dogma, liturgical life, and spiritual life was rediscovered in the exegesis of the Fathers.

I would like to dwell on this last aspect: one of the greatest results of the symbolic interpretation of Scripture conducted by the Church at the time of the Fathers was the emphasis on the profound connection between the communal liturgy and the spiritual life of the individual. Against a theology that had insisted solely on the efficacy of the sacramental sign—and too little on the meaning of the sign itself—Daniélou asserted the need to present again the mystagogical style of catechesis of the Fathers, who explained the relationship between the sacramental mysteries and Christian life precisely through the symbolic interpretation of the Bible. If the crossing of the Red Sea, for example, was understood just as much in a sacramental sense as in a spiritual and existential sense, it became very simple for the believer to understand the meaning of the liturgical event: it is an icon of the life lived, and vice versa, the spiritual life is nothing other than the maturation and manifestation of what is prefigured and *really* bestowed in the liturgical symbol. Bringing back to light the profound connection between the spiritual life and the sacramental life was not just coincidentally one of the goals that Daniélou set for himself already in his masterful monograph on the mysticism of Gregory of Nyssa, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*. In it he wrote:

The spiritual life as a whole for Gregory of Nyssa is nothing other than a mystery of death and resurrection. It is the realization of the very mystery of Baptism, which, according to the Pauline doctrine, makes us die with Christ in order to rise again with him. . . . The sacramental life is truly conceived of as mystagogy, as a progressive initiation that leads the soul from the slavery of the flesh to the summits of the mystical life. . . . Here the sacramental action marks the dependence of the mystical life on the objective action of Christ. It is the normal source of Catholic mysticism, which is a transformation of the soul and body of the Christian into the soul and body of

Christ dead and Risen. This parallelism is characteristic of Greek mysticism in general, which ignores the dissociation conducted in the West between interior life and liturgical life, and according to which the interior life is immersed in the liturgical life. This is a constant of Eastern theology.<sup>15</sup>

*e. The harmony between grace and nature*

Here we come to one of the most delicate points of our argument. It has been said that the return to the Fathers also meant seeking out a unified vision of salvation history, seen as having been ordained from all eternity to find its completion in the mystery of Christ, the Alpha and Omega of the cosmos and of history. According to the *Nouveaux*, the excessive outward focus into which a certain tendency of modern scholasticism used to read St. Thomas, had risked leading to an ever more self-sufficient understanding of human nature to such an extent that the grace of the Incarnation ended up appearing as something additional and accessory, without any “handhold” in an original openness of man. The result of this was a fundamentally *hamartio-centric* vision: the Word became flesh primarily in order to remedy the sin of man, and not to answer the desire to unite himself with God, a desire that he himself had always placed in the heart of his creature. De Lubac, on the contrary, asserted for the school of the Fathers, and in his view for St. Thomas himself, a dynamic connection between human nature and the divine life to which it is called by grace, according to the eternal plan of God. In other words, there does not exist nor has there ever existed a “pure” human nature. Man is not self-sufficient; it is only in communion with God that he finds his full realization, his beatitude: *vita hominis visio dei*, said Irenaeus of Lyons. It was a question of bringing the emphasis back to that *desiderium naturale videndi Deum* of which St. Thomas himself had spoken, and which the Greek Fathers, in a more biblical language, called *eikòn toù theou*, the image of God impressed in man. In other words, man is not truly himself, he is not fully realized until he has overcome his own finiteness; or, in the language of the Fathers, until he has been deified through grace. In this way, against an excessive hamartiocentrism, an idea so important to the

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<sup>15</sup>Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, 17, 38. Translation mine.

Fathers was again proposed, that of the paradoxical greatness of man, who although finite is called in Christ to be divinized: “God became man so that man might become God,” says a patristic adage that from Irenaeus onward was always repeated among the Fathers, especially those of the East.

It must not be forgotten in this regard that de Lubac was also and perhaps above all the author of a work like *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*. Unlike those who rejected modernity as a whole, with a radical and critical condemnation, he acutely felt the provocation coming from contemporary atheism. He too—like many of the thinkers of the Russian diaspora with whom he was in contact through Daniélou—felt that at the root of the contemporary trajectory lay a tragic mistake: the idea that between God and man there lies an incurable rivalry. If God exists, man is condemned not to exist truly. If man has full existence, God can no longer be God. Now, this rivalry is not Christian because the essence of the Christian proclamation is precisely the opposite: God lowered himself to the rank of man in order to elevate man to the rank of God. Here is another reason—and one of the most profound—to return to the Fathers. As Lossky loved to point out, in fact, the often apparently abstruse battles of the patristic era ultimately never had any aim other than this: to protect the real possibility of the divinization of man in Christ.<sup>16</sup> Man—as Maximus the Confessor wrote at the end of the golden age of the Fathers—becomes *katà chàrin* (by grace) all that God is *katà physin* (by nature). God became man to satisfy the infinite aspiration of human freedom, not to coerce it; to free man from the yoke of his finiteness, not vice versa. In this perspective, man’s non-self-sufficiency—the aspiration of man to be fulfilled in grace, its essential dependence on the gratuitous gift that God makes of his life in Christ—far from mortifying him, appears as the seal of his real greatness. Only in Christ does man truly become himself, rising to his true stature: “Christ reveals man to himself” precisely because by uniting him with God, Christ carries man beyond himself.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. Lossky, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l’Église d’Orient*, translated in Italian as *Teologia mistica della Chiesa d’Oriente*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1985), 5.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

We cannot dwell any further here on the details of a debate that, as is known, galvanized the world of Catholic theology for more than a decade, and is still alive today.<sup>18</sup> As a matter of fact, the Second Vatican Council, as well as the more recent pontifical Magisterium, has given many signs of approving the anti-extrinsicist Christocentrism of the *nouvelle théologie*. What is of interest here is rather to emphasize how deeply the fundamental thesis of *Surnaturel* is rooted in patristic theology, above all Greek. Ultimately, as has already been said, this is a matter of presenting intact once again, in its entire scope, the paradox that the Fathers had often described with amazement: the mystery of the vocation of man, the only finite

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<sup>18</sup>This explains why the war did not impede the birth of the “patristic movement” in France, but paradoxically facilitated it. The dramatic political situation, in fact, gave the French Jesuits that freedom of thought and action which they might not have been able to enjoy in less difficult times. It is no coincidence that with the end of the war, it did not take long for criticism and suspicion to inundate the editorial initiative of Daniélou and de Lubac, who were accused of wanting to undermine the foundations of traditional scholastic theology in the name of the return to the Fathers. Ultimately the French theologians were trying to bring about a renewal, but a renewal that was not intended to have anything subversive about it, all the more so in that it was made in the name of the most ancient tradition of the Church. But in a context like that of the first half of the twentieth century, characterized by the identification of one single school of thought with the Magisterium of Rome, the return to the Fathers could not help but appear as a protest movement. Or better: it was a protest movement against a theological exclusivity that was perceived as impoverishing, as well as being incapable of responding to contemporary challenges. Besides, the habit of considering scholasticism as the only rational approach to Christian truth made inevitable the mistrust toward what appeared to many as the return to a vague Platonizing mysticism in place of the scientific clarity of Thomistic Aristotelianism. The risk was felt of a theological pluralism that could easily slip into relativism. The Second Vatican Council, in any case, did justice to the work of rediscovering the Fathers inaugurated by Daniélou and de Lubac. It should suffice to think of the influence that this had on the ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium*. However, it should be stressed with equal emphasis—especially today—that the group of Fourvière in no way wanted to propose “the return to the Fathers” as opposed to the permanent value of Thomistic synthesis. The importance of the simple fact cannot be overestimated that all our *Nouveaux*, from de Lubac to Balthasar to Daniélou, were first (and constantly) formed at the school of Thomas Aquinas. Their intention—considered with that greater objectivity that only historical distance can give—was not to oppose “the Fathers” to the “*doctor communis*,” but to broaden and deepen the reading of Aquinas himself, in light of the whole tradition of the Church, prior and subsequent.

being in the universe made to contain the Infinite within itself. In his second homily on the Song of Songs, Gregory of Nyssa addresses human nature:

You know how much you have been honored by the creator above all creation. The sky did not become the image of God, nor did the moon, the sun, the beauty of the stars, nor any of the other things that appear. . . . Among all beings, nothing is so great as to be compared with your greatness. The entire sky is held in the hand of God, the earth and sky are contained in his fist. And nonetheless, he who is so great, he who holds all of creation in the palm of his hand, becomes entirely containable in you and dwells in you, and is not cramped in inhabiting your nature.<sup>19</sup>

In this regard, it is worth noting the interest with which—long before the publication of de Lubac’s *Surnaturel*—Daniélou describes the conception of the relationship between grace and nature that he had found in Gregory of Nyssa, a conception so different from the one dominating Catholic theology at the time. In his previously cited work he writes,

Here we are in the presence of a very particular conception, which in some ways is the reverse of that of Western theology. In this, we are presented with a “natural” man, to whom grace is added. As a result, the threat is that of an autonomous humanism, which excludes the supernatural. In Gregory’s perspective the reverse is true: what is original is the image of God, and it is instead the so-called “natural” man who is additional. It follows that the center of equilibrium is not all the same: it is the present life that is affected by a character of pronounced instability, because man aspires to return to the level of his true dignity, the life of paradise, which we would call supernatural. The necessity of life in the Spirit is front and center in this vision: it is only in it that man returns to his true equilibrium.<sup>20</sup>

*f. The Church as mystery of communion*

One cannot, in this regard, remain silent about the profound impact that the return to the Fathers had on the renewal of Catholic

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. *Gregorii Nisseni in Canticum Canticorum*, ed. Hermann Langerbeck (Leiden: Brill, 1960), II, 68.

<sup>20</sup>Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, 84.

ecclesiology. It must be said that this was the focus of an older and larger intellectual movement than the restricted circle of Fourvière. We will limit ourselves here to recalling some of the names among those who contributed most, through the study of patristic ecclesiology, to this renewal. First of all must be mentioned, in the nineteenth century, the name of Johann Adam Möhler, whose influence on theology after him was incalculable, to such an extent as to be noticeable even in Russian Orthodox authors like Chomiakov. In the twentieth century, the names of Charles Journet, Gustave Bardy, Hugo Rahner, and Yves Congar stand out. All of these have in common the return to a more mystical and less legalistic vision of the Church: the Church is above all *koinonìa*, mystery of communion. The Church is the mystery of the Body of Christ built up by the Father in the Holy Spirit.

The group of Jesuits of Fourvière took their place in this already extant current of thought. De Lubac, in particular, published in 1944 one of his most important studies of ecclesiology, *Corpus Mysticum*. In it the Jesuit theologian, employing the symbolic theology used in the first millennium, put the connection between Eucharist and Church again at the center. The Eucharist and the Church are symbols of each other, and both are symbols of the physical body of Christ. In the ancient Church, until the Middle Ages, the Eucharist was called the mystical body of Christ. The physical body of Christ was its “type,” while the Church was called the real body, because what was more real, in the ancient conception, was not the means, which is still an image (*eikòn*), but the eschatological end toward which the economy of salvation tends: the total Body of Christ, the Church. With this, de Lubac did not at all intend to overturn traditional theology. He was simply trying to restore to moderns the awareness of the profound affinity that exists between the Church and the Eucharist, reacting to the individualistic reduction into which Catholic sacramental doctrine had often slipped. The Eucharist is—to use a splendid expression of Augustine cited by de Lubac—*dulcis esca unitatis*, and exists for no other reason than for building up the unity of the Body of Christ. It was a matter of restoring prominence to what the Byzantine liturgy proclaims with a beautiful play on words: the Eucharist is *Koinonìa tôn agìon*, the communion of the saints and at the same time communion in the holy gifts; the communion of the saints that is realized through communion in the gifts.



It would take too long to reconstruct in detail the extraordinarily rich implications that the recovery of the patristic perspective had on Catholic ecclesiology in the twentieth century, which has been said to be “the century of the Church.”<sup>21</sup> In any case, the effects of this movement can be seen in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*. No less a historian than Charles Pietri has written that “the constitution reveals itself to be so deeply impregnated with images from ancient Christian literature as to reflect its spirit even when it does not explicitly cite the texts.”<sup>22</sup>

*g. The universality of Christianity*

Finally we must recall another characteristic that the Fourvière group admired in the Fathers: the sense of universality, of the “catholicity” of Christianity in a world in which it was quantitatively marginal. Already in 1937, among the reasons that justified the editorial adventure of *Sources Chrétiennes*, Fontoynt put in first place the fact that “the Greek Fathers provide the only example of a spirit that has the power to win over to the faith an entirely pagan world.”<sup>23</sup> It is therefore clear that the “knights of Hellenism” were attracted to the Fathers in part because they felt themselves immersed in a scenario that was increasingly similar to that of pagan antiquity. They admired the ability of the Fathers to speak to the men of their time, their courage in taking the risk of using their categories and schemes of thought, in order to transfigure them from the inside, strengthened by the intuitive discernment that came to them from their experience of the mystery of Christ present in the Church: the unsurpassed example of what today we call “Christian inculturation.” It is no accident that one of the authors most studied was Gregory of Nyssa, the most refined of the Greek Fathers from the speculative point of view. In the great Cappadocian, Balthasar and

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. A. di Berardino, “Lo sviluppo degli studi patristici,” in *La Teologia del XX secolo*, vol. 1, *Prospettive storiche*, ed. Giacomo Canobbio and Piero Coda (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 2003), 328.

<sup>22</sup>Charles Pietri, “L’ecclésiologie patristique et *Lumen gentium*,” *Le Deuxième Concile du Vatican (1959–1965)* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1989), 511–37, at 516.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Fouilloux, *La collection “Sources chrétiennes,”* 67.

Daniélou found an admirable balance between the impartiality with which he made use of the profane philosophical and rhetorical culture of his time, and his critical capacity to transfigure it in the light of the experience of faith. It was therefore necessary to revive in the Catholic mind the awareness of the cosmic impact of the event of Christ, which is still so well expressed, for example, in the Eastern Paschal liturgy. In *Catholicisme*, de Lubac reiterated the patristic idea of the mystery of Christ as the occurrence of universal salvation, and brought back to light the cosmic vocation of the Church. He recovered the idea—so dear to Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor—of God’s unified plan for humanity, considered as a single whole, as a totality. Rebelling against an individualistic conception of Christian salvation, de Lubac defended its universal ontology: the whole Christ in everyone, as the Fathers used to say, is God’s plan for the world, and history is the place in which this plan is progressively being realized, in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

#### *h. Ecumenical value*

Tying together what has already been said, I should try now to point out the ecumenical significance of all that has been explained above. One could spend a long time, for example, on the profound influence that the intellectual environment of the Russian diaspora, linked to the Institut de théologie orthodoxe Saint-Serge of Paris, had on Daniélou. It is well known that the French cardinal told Olivier Clément that if he had not met Nikolai Berdyaev, he would certainly have lost his faith. And just as well known is the deep friendship Daniélou enjoyed with Myrrha Lot-Borodine beginning in the 1930s. But I do not believe that it is in this direction that the ecumenical value of the events of those years is to be sought. Rather, deeper reflection is needed in reviewing the stages of the contacts, friendships, and mutual influences.

The birth of the collection *Sources Chrétiennes* and the connected rediscovery of the spirituality of the Fathers opened the eyes of many in the Catholic world to the extraordinary riches of the Christian tradition of the East. In a 1945 letter to de Lubac, Daniélou reports a significant judgment offered to him by Clément Lialine of the Benedictine abbey of Amay-Chevetogne: “Dom Lialine and Dom Rousseau insist on the importance of *Sources* and of the work of

the Greek Fathers for creating in the bosom of the Catholic Church a current of Eastern theology that would obtain much more from rapprochement with the Orthodox than from any sort of uniatism.”<sup>24</sup>

This note from Daniélou is doubly valuable: first, it shows that the “ecumenical” intent was not at all the main goal of Daniélou or de Lubac when they launched the publication of the series of Greek Fathers—so much so that for the most part others had to remind them of this aspect. Second, they were nonetheless fully aware of the ecumenical importance that this enterprise could have, if it were to succeed. In a formative document written in 1942, Daniélou lists the different kinds of readers to whom the new collection was addressed. They included “those souls for whom the rupture of Christian unity is a source of continual suffering” and who “see the return to an age in which unity was not yet broken as a means for restoring it.”<sup>25</sup>

On closer inspection, the ecumenical significance that Daniélou and company attributed to *Sources Chrétiennes* and to the return to the Fathers is much more profound and ambitious than it might seem. Until then, the importance of the Fathers of the Church of the first millennium in the dialogue with the Orthodox world was limited exclusively to the apologetic use of texts pertaining to the dogmatic problems that divide Rome and Orthodoxy: the Filioque and the Petrine primacy. Instead, what Fontoynt, Daniélou, de Lubac, and Mondésert were looking for in the Greek Fathers was at the same time both less and much more: in returning to the Greek Fathers, they intended to generate within Catholic culture a movement of reappropriation of the spiritual roots that are just as much those of the Orthodox Church of the East as they are of Roman Catholicism. The Fourvière theologians had no apologetic interest whatsoever. In the return to their own origins, they were seeking renewal of self, not the adulation of others. In addition to a detailed scholarly reconstruction, anyone who reads *Platonisme et théologie mystique*, Daniélou’s study on the mystical theology of Gregory of Nyssa, the work of de Lubac on the exegesis of Origen, *Histoire et Esprit*, or Balthasar’s monograph on Maximus the Confessor, *Kosmische Liturgie*, will above all feel—vibrating between the lines—the enthusiasm

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 101.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

of the explorer, the joy of the pioneer who finds a vein of gold ore in an abandoned mine; the joy of the woman in the Gospel story who finds the lost drachma, which had always been right there in her home.

Significant in this sense is the list of titles of the first ten volumes of *Sources Chrétiennes*, published from 1942 to 1946. These texts were for the most part unknown in the West, except to the restricted world of specialists: *Life of Moses* and *Creation of Man* by Gregory of Nyssa, *Protrepticus* by Clement of Alexandria, *Explanation of the Divine Liturgy* by Nicolaus Cabasilas, the one hundred *Chapters on Spiritual Perfection* by Diadochus of Photike, *Homilies on Genesis* by Origen, *Spiritual Paradise* by Nicetas Stethatos, *Centuries on Charity* by Maximus the Confessor, and the *Letters* of Ignatius of Antioch.

What leaps to the attention is the fact that most of these are Eastern classics of spirituality and mystical theology, and not the dogmatic works that had been the sole focus of interest in the West during the previous centuries. This bears witness to a dispassionate interest in the Fathers *for their own sake*, for what they have to teach us and not what can be found in them for the defense of one's apologetic positions. Some of these authors, moreover, like Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, are part of the common tradition of the undivided Church. Others, like Nicetas Stethatos or Nicolas Cabasilas, belong instead to the exclusive tradition of the Byzantine Church. And nevertheless they were presented as masters of Christian spirituality, masters who had and have a great deal to teach to the West. Among these, the name Nicolas Cabasilas stands out. Presenting this Byzantine author of the fourteenth century as a *source*, on par with the great Fathers of the Church, was a decision that at the time was not only courageous, but almost reckless. Cabasilas was recognized as a simply unsurpassable example of that unity between liturgical life and mystical life which Daniélou and de Lubac sought to promote so ardently.

In this regard, it is undeniable that Myrrha Lot-Borodine exercised a direct influence on Daniélou, who cites her studies on Byzantine sacramental mysticism a number of times in *Platonisme et théologie mystique*.<sup>26</sup> To tell the truth, many of the themes that we have pointed out so far can easily be found in the main works that the Russian Orthodox theologians of the diaspora were publishing in France

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<sup>26</sup>See especially page 38.

during those years. I do not believe that it is my task, as mentioned before, to enter into a detailed analysis of the reciprocal influences. But I would like to give at least one more example, the most evident. In 1944 (contemporaneously with *La Vie de Moïse*), Lossky's most prominent work, *Essai sur la théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*, was published. If one reads the first pages of this work—which Daniélou in his writings demonstrates to have known thoroughly—one will find expressed with great power the principle of the indissolubility of mystical life and dogmatic theology that has been examined here. As for apophaticism, the conception of the relationship between grace and nature, the importance of the theme of divinization, and eucharistic ecclesiology: I believe that it is superfluous to emphasize their significance in contemporary Orthodox theology.

To conclude, it would perhaps be helpful to finally mention the “great absence” from our list of the achievements of *Sources Chrétiennes*, an absence that has likely surprised any reader well acquainted with de Lubac, Daniélou and company: Christocentrism. This omission is indeed well-pondered—we might say, in fact, that the central conviction of the circle of Fourvière was the attempt to find in the Fathers the key for a unified vision of the whole of reality entirely grounded in the mystery and person of Jesus Christ. All that was mentioned above deals with this primary inspirational moment: in Jesus Christ we receive not just the “salvation of our soul,” as de Lubac would say, but also a cosmic transfiguration, a new understanding of the whole that is able to fulfill every man's thirst for Truth.

In a moment of rapid and dramatic change—let us not forget the historical circumstances in which *Sources Chrétiennes* was born—the group at Fourvière intended to bring about neither revolution nor fragmentation in Catholic theology. Rather, their aspiration was the opposite: they wished to bring about a renewed and truly unified vision thereof. Any separatist tendencies in theology threatened, in their opinion, the capacity of the Church to speak to contemporary man and feed the contemporary believer. The Jesuits of Fourvière wanted theology to speak the language of spirituality and spirituality to speak the language of theology; they wanted biblical exegesis to have its roots in mysticism and mysticism to have its roots in well-founded biblical exegesis; they wanted theology, Scripture and liturgy to illuminate and fructify each other; finally, they wanted to overcome the individualist and spiritualist tendencies so prevalent in modern piety. The Fourvière theologians sought to achieve this uni-

fication through a renewal of the mystical ecclesiology of the Fathers, who all looked to that which unites the entire cosmos: the face of Jesus Christ.—*Translated by Matthew Sherry.* □

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