

«ΓΝΩΣΙΣ» (KNOWLEDGE) FROM THE HELLENIC SCHOOL MINISTRY

Hellenic «Παιδεία» (Education), Christian Thought and the Three Hierarchs

Dear youth and parishioners,

As all of us know, on January 30th, we will be celebrating the Feast of the Synaxis of the Three Hierarchs, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian and St. John the Chrysostom. The Three Hierarchs, who were contemporaries that lived between 329 and 407 AD, played such a great role in the events and developments of the Christian Church in the fourth century that the faithful for several centuries contended as to which one of the three was the most important. It was in the eleventh century, however, that the Church proclaimed their equality and set aside a special day of the year to commemorate all three. More information about this important feast can be found on the Archdiocese's website (<http://www.goarch.org/chapel/saints/408>). Most of us probably know that St. Basil and St. John the Chrysostom wrote the beautiful liturgies that we attend at the church throughout the year but maybe not that many understand why the Three Hierarchs are commemorated as the patron saints of the Hellenic (Greek) Letters and the Hellenic schools.

There is a great article by Demetrios J. Constantelos on this topic that can be found on the Archdiocese's website (<http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith8143>) and I encourage all of you to read. In case you don't have access to the Internet, please contact me and I will mail a hard copy to you. Using excerpts from this article we will highlight some very important points. Although questions concerning the relationship between Hellenic thought and Christian faith have never been absent from the history and experience of the Church and Hellenism, a synthesis and a balance was achieved in the fourth century thanks to the intellect of persons like the Three Hierarchs, Cynesios of Cyrene, Socrates Scholastikos and others.

A student of early Christianity soon discovers how often ideas from the wisdom of the ancient Greek compliment rationally some of those in the Gospels and the literature of the New Testament. Thinking rightly, reasonable assumptions, a dialogic approach to issues and problems that divide nations and communities; a search for a balance in the conflict between belief and reason; a sense of what is right and wrong; the principle that it is more ethical to be treated unjustly than treat anyone unjustly, as Socrates advised; the belief that each deed leaves its imprint in one's deepest inner self; the conviction that there is a correlation between right thinking and correct action, patient suffering and ultimate victory, knowledge and the overcoming of evil - these are some of the fundamental educational ideals of the ancient Hellenes. The Hellenes summed up all their educational ideas in two words: "know thyself". Also, whether in ancient or Christian Hellenism, Greek thinkers emphasized that there is an affinity between humanity and divinity. Both the Parthenon on the Acropolis of Athens, and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, the symbols of pagan and Christian Hellenism, remind us of the Divinity's presence in the Greek experience.

From the sixth century before Christ arose among the Greeks views which freed the gods of objectionable features attributed to them either by myths or by writers. Some philosophers emphasized the limits of human knowledge and human intelligence to penetrate the mystery of Divinity. According to Herakletos of Ephesos, for example, God is the universal Logos, the mind and law of the Cosmos. "All things came into being in accordance with the Logos." One must live according to this Logos, a common possession of all. In the fourth century, Plato (d. 347 BC) in his dialogue *Kratylos* has Ermogenes questioning Socrates whether it is logical to give names to the divinities, or divinity. The view that God has no name and that there is "an unknown" God gained ground to the extent that several Greek city-states had erected statues to the "unknown God" as the New Testament also mentions in the *Acts*.

In addition, Menander (342-290 BC) wrote: "By each of us there stands straightway from birth a kindly spirit-guide to lead us through the labyrinthine mysteries of life. And we must never think this spirit evil, nor filled with wickedness to harm our lives, but always hold God good in everything. Those who themselves turn base in character and complicate their lives exceedingly, when they have ruined all through heedlessness, declare and hold as cause this spirit-guide, and make him evil, becoming themselves". The formation of character, the making of the " *kalos kagathos anthropos* " (the good and virtuous person), was the ultimate purpose of education. And character is the result of some cardinal virtues. Aeschylos speaks of the *sophron, dikaios, agathos* and *euseves aner*, the man of self-control, justice, goodness and piety. It is character that differentiates the logical from the illogical animals. "Good breeding in cattle depends on physical health, but in human beings on a well-formed character," writes Demokritos. Man is "a miniature cosmos - a microcosm," in the words of the same philosopher, and he must live in conformity with the orders, beauty, harmony and laws of the cosmos.

It was in the light of these and several moral precepts and ethical standards of the ancient Greeks that early Christian Fathers like the Three Hierarchs saw in ancient Greek thought elements or germs of divine revelation. These fathers formulated the attitude of Orthodox Christianity toward the ancient Greek heritage. They became effective social reformers, defenders of Orthodox Christianity, and supporters of Greek learning. Christian Hellenism received its final form in the fourth and fifth centuries.

The educational ideal of the Three Hierarchs was the training of the human being into a cultivated person possessing faith in a core of values and a persistent effort to apply them in everyday life until the *ikon* of the god-man Christ, the *theanthropos*, is formed in him. An educated person is one who has developed a character and is thoughtful, kind and considerate; one who has a proper regard for the rights, the liberties and the privileges of his fellow men. An educated person is modest and unassuming, searching and inquisitive. He does not think of himself as the center around which mankind or his neighborhood revolves. He practices the ancient Greek wisdom "know thyself" (ΓΝΩΘΙ Σ' ΑΥΤΟΝ). He has learned to appreciate the heritage of the past in order to confront the present and contribute to a better future. The teachings of the Three Hierarchs derived from the Bible and the Greek classics, because the object of both is the formation of the perfect human person, indeed the salvation, the *theosis*, of the human being. The Greek philosophers emphasized virtue, spiritual freedom, character. The practice of philosophical training and asceticism was the elevation of the human to the godly, "*philosophia est omoiosis theoi kata to dynaton anthropos*" as Plato wrote. People like the Three Church Fathers brought together the best of antiquity with the best of the new faith. They brought about the synthesis of Hellenic-Christian civilization. And the reason why the Three Hierarchs reconciled the old heritage with the new faith is that the Christian community considered the achievements of the ancient Greek mind as propaedeutic (preparatory instruction) for the Christian faith, as providential and as a divine gift.

In order to understand the importance of the Greek heritage for Christianity one needs to understand first the impact of Hellenism on the era before and around the advent of Christianity. Long before the Byzantines established the acceptance of the Orthodox Faith as the only prerequisite for one to become a citizen of the Byzantine Empire, the Hellenes had declared that "Hellene is not a person of Hellenic descent but rather a person that has received Hellenic education". This facilitated the spread and the impact of Hellenism in the whole known world and, in addition to the Romans, many people in Asia and Near East like Syrians, Jews, Egyptians and Persians received Hellenic Education. Judaism also accepted Hellenism and by the middle of the second century the whole of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) was translated in Greek for the use of the Greek-speaking Jews. It is also well known that one of the two languages that the New Testament was written in was Greek.

In conclusion, it was Christianity's encounter with Hellenism that made the former a cosmopolitan religion. This relationship, not without periodic tensions, prevailed throughout the Byzantine millennium and centuries beyond. Long before modern anthropologists, philosophers, and theologians, Church fathers confirmed that culture is the outer garment of religion and religion is the heart of culture, that is the two are inseparable. In this manner, Hellenic heritage can be considered part of our Church's heritage

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