

Tomáš Špidlík

A Theological Life

Karel Sládek



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CONTENTS

A Note from the Translators /7

Foreword /8

Introduction /10

A Theological Interpretation of the Life and Work of Tomáš Špidlík /12

The Family, and Spiritual Sonhood and Fatherhood /12

The Theologian with the “Spirit of Velehrad” /26

The Sources of Špidlík’s Wisdom /38

A Synthesis of the Spiritual Theology of the Christian East and West /45

The Holy Spirit and the Spiritual Life /45

The Eucharist as the Primary Source of Spiritual Life /54

The Influence of the *Philokalia* on Špidlík’s Spiritual Theology /62

Špidlík on Art: A Theological Last Will and Testament /75

Mysticism and the Theology of Beauty /75

Czech Art and the Theology of *Anamnesis* /88

A Spiritual-Theological Interpretation of the Films of Andrei Tarkovsky /97

Bibliography /108

About the Author /112

A NOTE FROM THE TRANSLATORS

Only three of the works of Tomáš Špidlík cited in this book have been translated into English. They are: *The Spirituality of the Christian East: A Systematic Handbook*, translated by Anthony Gythiel; *Prayer*, again translated by Gythiel; *The Art of Purifying the Heart*, translated by Liam Kelly.

All quotations from these works are taken from those translations. Quotations from all other works are our own translations.

In the footnotes, to help the reader, we have offered translations of the titles of works published in Czech or Italian. Subsequent short references to these works are based on that English translation.

Pavlina and Tim Morgan

FOREWORD

I came to know Tomáš Špidlík while studying philosophy and theology in Rome. I was already familiar with some of his work—I had read *Prameny světla* (Sources of light) and attended some of the lectures he had given in the Czech Republic on Slavic spirituality—but longed to meet him in person. So I called him at the Centro Aletti where he lived and worked, and he happily agreed to a meeting despite my being a complete stranger.

The day came. I rang the bell, passed through the lodge and took the lift up to Špidlík's room. The doors slid open and there was the man himself, come to meet me, wearing his inimitable smile. He wanted to know what I was doing in Rome, what I was studying, and listened attentively as I answered his gentle probing. He in turn told me about his travels, his thoughts on the state of the church and contemporary society in the Czech Republic from his perspective in Rome, and about the spirituality of the Christian East and the great interest some Orthodox theologians were showing in his work in the field of spiritual theology. More visits followed. He was particularly anxious to show me round the art studio and talk to me about the meaning of art, especially depictions of the divine-human face through which artists seek to express a human relationship to the sacred.

In the autumn of 2002, I was privileged to accompany Father Špidlík (as he was then) to Terni in Umbria where he was to speak at a conference entitled “Holiness and charity in the Christianity of East and West,” organised by the Community of Sant’Egidio. Among the Catholic and Russian Orthodox theologians taking part was Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, now patriarch of Moscow and all Russia. Ever the gentleman, Špidlík made a point of striking up conversations with all the speakers, making all he met laugh and smile with his gentle humour; ever the theologian, he never failed to make a profound, erudite, yet humble contribution to the various discussions. In his own lecture on “The Love of the *Starets*: Father Pio of Pietrelcina and Saint John of Kronstadt,” he pointed out the similarities in the way holiness manifested itself in these two men. On the final evening, I accompanied Father Špidlík

to the station and we sat on the platform talking around some of the themes that interested me as a student of theology. He listened very patiently, always able to come to the crux of whatever we were discussing, and gently pressed me to direct my research more to the matter of holiness than to disputes over the Filioque clause. The train arrived, I helped him on with his luggage, and he left for Rome. I felt calm, composed, and full of joy.

Whenever we met at the Centro Aletti, Špidlík would subtly ask me about my goals in life. If I stumbled over an answer, he would offer a story from his own experience which inevitably related to the questions I was asking myself at the time. The atmosphere was always imbued with humour, always friendly. He was an excellent mentor—truly a *starets* for our times.

My final two memories of Cardinal Tomáš Špidlík (as he became) are from after I had returned to the Czech Republic from my studies in Rome. I had been offered a place to continue my doctoral research at the Catholic Faculty of Charles University in Prague, and as I pondered over the subject of my thesis, I called Špidlík in Rome. He told me he would think about it and that I should call him back in a week's time. When we spoke again, he suggested I study the life and work of the Russian theologian Vladimir Solovyev. And so I did. My final face-to-face encounter with Špidlík took place at a meeting with the academic community in Prague attended by Pope Benedict XVI. Although we managed only the very briefest of conversations, I will never forget how he once again received me very warmly and with his ever-present smile.

In my heart, Tomáš Špidlík will always remain a holy man who had time for friends, was always interested in whatever they were doing and sought what was best for them. I hope this book will go at least some way towards expressing the enormous gratitude I feel for all he did for me.

Karel Sládek, June 2018

INTRODUCTION

Cardinal Tomáš Špidlík SJ (1919–2010) was a distinguished Czech priest and theologian who left a significant mark on the history of the universal Church. His work gained broad respect during his lifetime—and has continued to do so since—as witnessed by the many awards and commendations he received for his contributions to the fields of theology, ecumenism, and culture and the arts. His books are much in demand from Christians of both East and West but have also gained respect among the wider academic community and in the world at large.

The interpretative lens for this particular contribution to the growing literature on Špidlík's life and work is theological. Although the book sketches out the main events that punctuated Špidlík's life, it is not a classical historiography or biography, but a spiritual-theological interpretation of how his theological research was shaped by his life experiences, and vice versa.

Špidlík's principal focus was spiritual theology, in particular a systematic exploration of the relationship between human beings and the triune God on the basis of the human experience of divine revelation. The twin sources of that revelation are Scripture and Church tradition, which for Špidlík meant the tradition of both Western Christianity, especially his own Jesuit spirituality, and the Eastern Church, where his particular interest lay in the Russian religious thinkers.

It will become clear how his growth in wisdom and his profound knowledge of Scripture and of the traditions of the Christian East and West influenced the choices he made both in his life and in his work as a theologian, which were in large part one and the same thing. The approach here is therefore both deductive and inductive. We will show how the theological foci that formed and informed Špidlík's spiritual life, and the inspiration which followed, contributed to the synthesis of his personal and theological life. This synthesis led Špidlík to a new reading of Christian tradition, a tradition he was able to further enrich by means of a "hermeneutic spiral," a constant listening to the Spirit and deepening of his faith. His lifelong work culminated in a series of reflections on the theology

of beauty and in giving form to the spirituality of the Centro Aletti where he lived and worked for the final years of his life.

The book is divided into three sections: first, a theological interpretation of Špidlík's life and work; next, an exploration of his theological synthesis of the spirituality of the Christian East and West; and finally, a review of his theological "last will and testament" concerning the theology of art. Individual chapters were written up gradually from the fruit of various lectures and academic colloquia, and then collected, collated and ordered thematically to form the present volume. Some sections have already been published in Czech in edited monographs and other scholarly works. This work collects the various pieces to form a more complete picture of Špidlík's theological legacy.

Tomáš Špidlík's theological output was vast and very broad and what we are now seeing represents only the initial reflections on that legacy—the first swallows of summer. The intention here is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of Špidlík's theology or to pass comment on what others have written about it, but simply to present the more significant lines of his thinking as they developed throughout his life. The sources cited are those of Špidlík's works which deal with the issues addressed in the individual chapters; a more detailed analysis of his entire oeuvre must wait another day.

A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF TOMÁŠ ŠPIDLÍK

Tomáš Špidlík constantly evaluated his life in light of both the will of God and his own theological reflections, and saw every encounter as an opportunity to consider very carefully the direction his life and his theological research were taking.

In this opening chapter, we will seek a theological interpretation of Špidlík's life by exploring the connections between his life experience and his theological work in three areas: first, how his views on the spirituality of the family grew out of his relationship with his own parents; secondly, how his time at Velehrad in Moravia—a time he saw very much as God's providence and spiritual guidance—prompted him to seek a deeper understanding of the spirituality of the Christian East; and finally, how he reflected on wisdom in many of his writings.

THE FAMILY, AND SPIRITUAL SONHOOD AND FATHERHOOD

Špidlík was born on 17 December 1919 in Boskovice, Czech Republic. After passing his grammar school exams in 1938, he studied Latin and Czech literature at the Faculty of Arts at Masaryk University in Brno. In 1940, he entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus in Benešov, but soon moved to Velehrad, where during the war years he would complete his studies in philosophy and go on to teach Czech and Russian language at the grammar school.

After the war, he continued his theological studies abroad, first in Maastricht, and then from 1951 onwards in Rome at the Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies and the Pontifical Nepomuceno Seminary (the old Bohemian seminary), where he became spiritual director to the seminarians.

Špidlík, His Parents, and His Theology of Family

Špidlík wrote and spoke on the spirituality of the family in numerous articles, sermons, interviews and public lectures, and no theological interpretation of his life would be complete without noting how his thoughts on the subject reflected his own experience of family—both his blood family and his spiritual family, the Society of Jesus.

From his early works offering practical and pastoral advice on marriage and family life, Špidlík moved on to deeper, spiritual-theological and often mystical reflections which sought links between the spirituality of familial relationships—husband and wife, father and mother, parent and child, brother and sister—and the mystery of the relationships within the Holy Trinity.

The life of the Holy Trinity . . . is reflected in the life of the Church, and the life of the Church . . . is reflected in marriage. In the economy of salvation, after a descent there follows an ascent: from marriage, through the Church, to participation in the divine life of the Trinity.¹

Here is the essence of Špidlík's spirituality of the family. It is based on the revelation of the Holy Trinity, who descends to the human person—father, mother, child—in order to lift that person up into the sacramental life of the Church. We will begin, however, from the opposite, human perspective, from Špidlík's own experience of family, beginning with his recollections of childhood.

My mother had much to do and largely entrusted me to the care of my sisters, each of them older than me, one by five years and the other by six. They would take me outside where they would chat with other girls, leaving me to play in the middle of the street like some lonely little man.²

Špidlík had an eventful childhood but managed to survive a near drowning, a ferocious attack by a pig, and on one memorable occasion a close shave with a speeding carriage. Later in life he would reflect on these dramatic and sometimes amusing events:

Over the course of my life I have encountered many unexpected dangers, but God has always saved me from them—sometimes in ways that were more unexpected than the events themselves.³

1) Tomáš Špidlík, *My v Trojici* [We in the Trinity] (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2000), 93.

2) Tomáš Špidlík, *Duše poutníka. Tomáš Špidlík v rozhovoru s Janem Paulasem* [Soul of a pilgrim: Tomáš Špidlík in conversation with Jan Paulas] (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 2004), 17.

3) *Ibid.*

His experience of the care and protection of God through his childhood years strengthened his faith in providence and guidance. When in the wisdom of old age he thought about his parents, he was able to love and understand them with all their strengths and desire for holiness, but also with their inner struggles and shortcomings. He had especially painful memories of his father, who had an “unfortunate” relationship with the rest of the family: “He was always snapping at us, and we little ones would run away from him.”⁴ Špidlík’s mother cared for her husband throughout his long illness; he in return offered little but “harsh words of admonition.”⁵

Špidlík tried hard to understand his father and accept his many weaknesses, including a difficult personality caused to some extent by an excessive idealism for which he blamed everyone but himself. He was particularly affected by the Great War, after which he fell out of love with the Church and would criticise Špidlík’s mother for her acts of religious devotion. He once visited Tomáš in the novitiate with a view to tempting him back to their smallholding, but burst into tears when he realised that his dream of handing down to his son everything he had spent his life working for had come to nothing.

Špidlík recognised both the good he had received from his parents and his own struggles against similar temptations. He knew he had inherited his father’s tendency to feel misunderstood, and his idealism, but this was always balanced by what he had learned from his mother: “I see clearly now that my mother’s whole approach to life can be summed up in a single word: pilgrimage.”⁶ Špidlík’s mother was indeed a true pilgrim. A deeply religious person, she saw the whole of life as a journey and loved going on pilgrimages. This view of life as a journey, a spiritual pilgrimage, with unpredictable twists and turns but the sure hope of salvation, would become one of the principal motifs of Špidlík’s life. The best-known biography of his life and work is called *Duše poutníka* (Soul of a pilgrim).

Špidlík’s experience of childhood and his understanding of himself as his parents’ son are intimately connected with his theological

4) Ibid., 18.

5) Ibid., 20.

6) Ibid.

reflections on the family. This was a mutually enriching process—his experiences provided the basis for his reflections, which in turn and in retrospect helped him understand his experience of family.

Špidlík's primary theological focus was the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In his vision of the family, the different expressions of the persons of the Holy Trinity are revealed, symbolically, in the various roles of the family members: father, mother, children.

The father is indeed a natural image of God the Father: he is the source of all initiative, directing everyone's labour and their attitudes. Children generally do what they see their parents doing, and are therefore an image of the Son of God; the mother is the love that holds everyone together and is therefore a reflection of the Holy Spirit.⁷

Elsewhere, he considers the same idea but with a different outcome:

The father of the family is an image of God the Father; the mother is an image of the Son; the children, born out of the love between the father and the mother, are an image of the Holy Spirit.⁸

Špidlík goes on to appeal to John Chrysostom, for whom the division into the sexes was clearly an initiative of God, unlike other divisions, which are caused by sin. The creation of man and woman was immediately followed by the spiritual union of marriage, which thus becomes a reflection of divine love. Vladimir Solovyev saw the state of being in love, especially young love, as an image of the love of God; likewise, Špidlík considered "the other person [in a relationship] worthy of complete respect, while being aware that one's own development depends on a faithful and intimate relationship with that person in an indissoluble union."⁹

Marriage therefore reflects a higher reality, it is sacramental: married partners sanctify each other. If married life is to reach its full "Trinitarian" potential, a couple will need to fast and pray. Sexual

7) Tomáš Špidlík, *K vyšším věcem jsem se narodil* [I was born for higher things] (Prague: Alverna, 1991), 185.

8) *We in the Trinity*, 85.

9) *Ibid.*, 83.