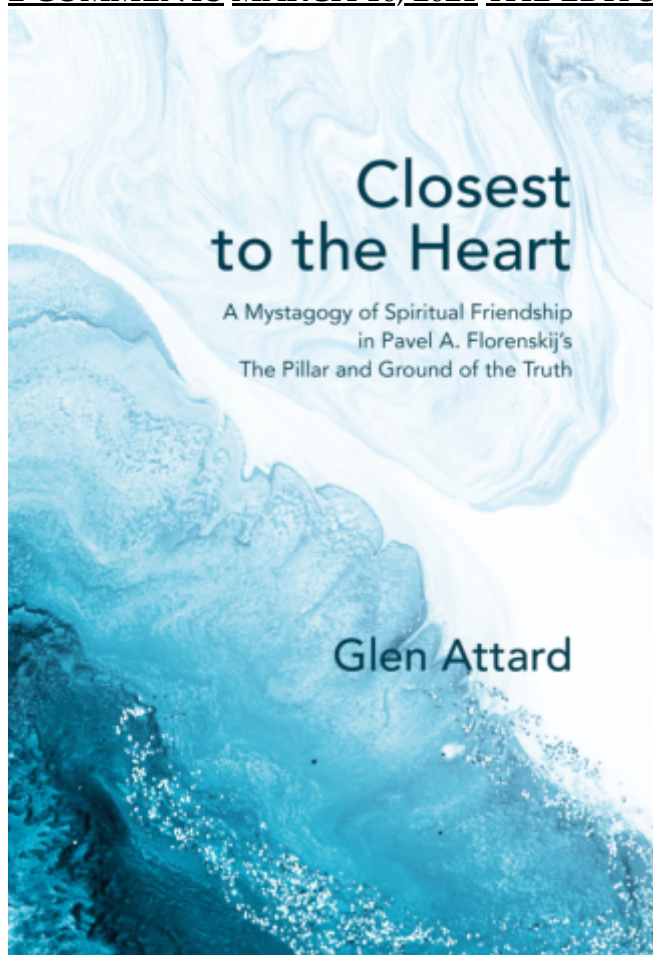


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PAVEL FLORENSKIJ'S MYSTAGOGICAL MANUAL OF ANTINOMIC FRIENDSHIP by Glen Attard O.Carm.

2 COMMENTS MARCH 16, 2021 THE EDITORS



First of all, a word of thanks to the editors of Orthodoxy in Dialogue for kindly inviting me to write this summary of my recently published volume, *Closest to the Heart: A Mystagogy of Spiritual Friendship in Pavel A. Florenskij's The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (Malta: Horizons, 2020), which explores the theme of friendship in Florenskij's life and works, specifically between 1904 and 1914. My primary intention in this work was to carry out as complete a literary-spiritual exegesis as possible of Florenskij's seminal text, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (1914, hereafter *Pillar*).

Being the first major volume to focus solely on Florenskij's ideas about and experience of friendship, first and foremost, I re-examine the *Pillar* from the point of view of Florenskij's claim in "To the Reader," "If I nevertheless do attribute some significance to my Letters, it is an exclusively preparatory one, for catechumens. These letters are intended to provide some sustenance for them until they are able to receive nourishment directly from their Mother's hand." I take this statement as an indication of Florenskij's mystagogical intention to outline for "catechumens" a spiritual journey in the faith which finds its culmination in the experience of ecclesial

friendship, as explained in the last two letters of the *Pillar*. In light of this claim, I start by presenting Florenskij as a mystagogue and argue in what way the *Pillar* is a mystagogical manual. Aware of the numerous controversial debates that have clouded the theme of friendship in Florenskij, I go back to his private letters to explore several of his friendships, starting with God, whom he "befriended" in July 1899 and ending with his wife Anna M. Giacintova, whom he married in August 1910. To

understand how Florenskij lives through these experiences and, simultaneously, how these are reflected in the *Pillar* and other contemporaneous works, I also cross-reference Florenskij's final version of his doctoral dissertation with earlier versions of the text (mainly the first version of the letters written in 1908), as well as other essays, private letters, poems, etc., that were written in the same timeframe, which help fill in certain gaps that are left open in the *Pillar*.

In some 652 pages, the most fundamental question that is tackled is: Why, according to Florenskij, is it worth our effort to strive for friendship, and why does this ideal seem to be more relevant today? Stemming from this question, further questions are posed: How does the mystagogical interpretative key, which Florenskij himself gives us in the *Pillar's* preface, colour and shape the rest of the text? What does this mystagogical preference say about Florenskij's outlook on his life's mission and work? What is the extent to which the *Pillar* can be used to argue about personal matters in Florenskij's life, in particular his friendships? More concretely, how did Florenskij live this ideal of friendship, especially in the formative period between 1904 and 1914, and did he reach this ideal that he so beautifully expounds in the *Pillar*?

Robert Slesinski, who wrote the Foreword to this study, very generously believes that "this hefty study helps fill an incredible void in Florenskij scholarship in the English-speaking world, in particular in North America, where a scholarly critical translation of Florenskij's *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* has been readily available to scholars for, indeed, virtually a generation." Another respected authority in Florenskij scholarship, Avril Pyman, agrees with Slesinski's assessment of my work, saying in the Afterword, "Accumulatively, [this work] points the way towards a fresh interpretation, much needed now in view of re-awakened but often partisan or not particularly well-informed interest in a possible revival of the rite of brother-making." In my assessment of Florenskij's worldview, not only do I build on the scholarly work of these two eminent authors, but also of two other European scholars, namely, Natalino Valentini and Lubomir Žák, whose invaluable work in Italy over the past decades has been monumental in making Florenskij's works known and studied in continental Europe. In fact, it was thanks to the impetus given to me by Žák in an interview that I conducted with him at the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome in 2010 that I was first inspired to pursue in depth the theme of friendship in Florenskij.

Closest to the Heart is divided in two parts. The first analyses Florenskij's mystagogical rudiments, while the second constructs a mystagogy or a spirituality of friendship.

While the process of preparing the groundwork for this study actually started by studying the *Pillar* from a literary point of view, it became evident that the worldview that is expounded herein reflects a dynamic in Florenskij much wider than this one text. So, the first part of my work explores, first, the mystagogical characteristics of Florenskij's thought processes; seeing how and what kinds of links he makes between different fields of knowledge.

In the first chapter, I argue that there are three paradigmatic dynamics in Florenskij's mystagogy, all of which are characterised by an antinomic nucleus: (a) a concept is deconstructed through a variety of linguistic and conceptual "tools" so that it is reconstructed in a more nuanced manner, I refer to this as Christian Deconstruction; (b) not only is a concept described by what it is, but also by what it is different from, or contradictory to; and (c) most importantly, any exploration of the mind must lead to an interior, spiritual search and, eventually, mystical union of the soul with God which is necessarily accompanied by an outer, lived, concrete experience with "the friend" in the Church.

The second chapter, then, explores how these three mystagogical dynamics are operated in the *Pillar*. Pedagogically, the chapter starts from the outer layers of the book—its intended physical appearance, its history, its title, and its explicit mystagogical aim—and works its way into the inner layers, i.e., its dialectical method, its dual structure, the relevance of its lyrical narratives to the wider theology of the book, and its Pythagorean symbolism (given that Florenskij had originally intended to work on

Iamblichus' *Theology of Arithmetic* for his doctoral dissertation). Finally, the chapter closes by homing in on the last two letters of the *Pillar*, which deal with friendship and jealousy, and which constitute the literary and spiritual climax of this book.

Based on the literary exegesis of part 1, in which the primary text (*Pillar*) is deconstructed down to its essence, the second part then reconstructs Florenskij's mystagogy of friendship in terms of its two main theological dimensions: Christ and the Church. Both chapters in part 2 follow the same structure: first, concrete experiences of friendship are explored in light of one predominant theological category (namely, Christ in the third chapter and the Church in the fourth chapter); second, mirroring these experiences, a theology or spirituality of friendship is defined and discussed according to its different Christological and ecclesiological qualities.

Hence, in the third chapter I start by exploring young Florenskij's relationship with God as well as with his aunt Julja and Aleksandr El'čaninov. Then, having moved to Moscow, I explore his relationship with Andrey Belyj, Sergej Troickij, *starcy* Antonij Florensov and Isidor Gruzinskij, and finally his wife Anna Giacintova. I argue that (a) all of Florenskij's significant friendships named here are characterised by a certain intensity of thought and feeling, this is what makes them significant to study, (b) that, in relation to these specific friends, his private letters and poems reveal increasing references to Christ, thus showing Florenskij's intention to live the most important friendships in his life not alone but "before God," and (c) that, as special as his friendship with Troickij might have been, it was, in actual fact and (to some extent) unexpectedly, with his wife (who could not have been any more different than him) that he eventually found the concrete context wherein to live the ideal of friendship that he expounds in the *Pillar*. In particular reference to Troickij, I explore the start of their friendship during their studies at the Moscow Theological Academy, the undisputable awe with which Florenskij was struck, and the ideals that were discussed between them. I hence show why it is relevant to our knowledge of Florenskij at this time as well as the text of the *Pillar* that he adopts both an emotional but also a Christological-ecclesiological language to speak about his friendships, especially with regards to Belyj, Troickij, and then his wife. After the turbulent years between 1907 and 1910, I conclude that it was the friendship with his wife, and his love and total dedication to their children, that eventually settled Florenskij down in his quest for the ideal friendship. The chapter, then, continues by theologically discussing friendship as (a) an antinomic union, (b) a union that truly leads to the knowledge of God, (c) a kenotic union, (d) a transformative union, and (e) a jealous union.

Assuming that his friendship with Troickij was certainly the one that affected him the most during the period under study, being also the anonymous addressee of the *Pillar*, the fourth chapter opens by exploring in much greater depth five possible reasons why his friendship with Troickij might have broken down and what effects this had on Florenskij's experience of the Church. Most importantly, historically speaking, I answer once and for all the question of whether they celebrated the rite of brother-making together. As it turns out, this is confirmed in two of Florenskij's private letters which have been published in Andronik Trubačev's second volume of *Путь к Богу: Личность, жизнь и творчество священника Павла Флоренского* (*Path to God: Personality, Life and Work of Priest Pavel Florensky*). However, contrary to Pyman's argument in her biography, because, to my knowledge, any harder evidence is lacking, I think we cannot know exactly when, where, or how it was celebrated. Nonetheless, in view of having confirmed the celebration of the rite between them, I argue that it must be remembered that Florenskij's search for his friendship with Troickij takes place contemporaneously to his search for his place in the Orthodox Church. In fact, it is in the context of this dual search that his friendship with Troickij eventually broke down only to be temporarily replaced by Vasilij M. Giacintov, and eventually led to him marrying Anna. The whole set of events must surely be linked in view of this one overarching ecclesial search. Undoubtedly, the end of his friendship with Troickij shattered him on many levels, and the sporadic additions made in letters 11 and 12 of the *Pillar* after the first version was presented in 1908 but before it was eventually printed in 1914, shed some light on Florenskij's interior state during this turbulent time. I also argue that while