

**Book Review:**

ATTARD Glen

Closest to the Heart:

A Mystagogy of Spiritual Friendship  
in Pavel A. Florenskij's

‘The Pillar and Ground of the Truth,’

foreword by Robert F. Slesinski,

afterword by Avril Pyman

(Malta: Horizons, 2020), 652 p.

*C*losest to the Heart. *A Mystagogy of Spiritual Friendship in Pavel A. Florenskij's 'The Pillar and Ground of the Truth'* is a complex, creative and courageous academic work. It is also a genuine scientific contribution to spiritual theology that is particularly relevant to English speaking readers. As noted in the Foreword by Robert F. Slesinski, “The author of the present, hefty study—in-depth analyses abound throughout the volume—helps fill an incredible void in Florenskij scholarship in the English-speaking world...” (p. 11).

This 652 page-book, the fruit of a doctoral dissertation completed at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome in 2019, is complex because the life of Pavel A. Florenskij, his relationships, including his friendships and his writings, are complex. Notwithstanding this challenge, this study has meticulously explored the various dimensions of both the life of Florenskij and *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth* in a clear and concise manner offering the reader an insight into precisely how spiritual friendship is the key for interpreting this seminal work.

The first chapter presents Florenskij's so called mystagogical framework: it offers an overarching panorama and it lays the groundwork for understanding

the rest of the volume. It introduces the mystagogical framework of Florenskij's thought by focusing on three basic characteristics: Christian deconstruction, Contradiction and Mystical Union. The second chapter, with both its literary exegesis and analysis of the mystical elements of the *Pillar* and its exploration of the letters, offers an important insight into this work, namely that it has two inseparable structures: one that is linear and one that is concentric. By understanding this two-fold structure, the reader is lead to understand the dynamics that mark Florenskij's complex understanding of truth, namely antinomy and friendship. What is most interesting in the third chapter is how the author demonstrates the kenotic and transformative dimension of friendship in Florenskij's writings. Mutual friendship truly becomes a means of knowing God: each friend becoming a sign for the other of God's presence. The fourth chapter is perhaps the most challenging and original part of this book because it explores the friendship between Florenskij and Troickij and its eventual demise, while setting the context for how friendship can actually build up ecclesial communion.

Despite its complexity, this book never strays from its purpose: namely to show why spiritual friendship is worthwhile. In the end, it demonstrates the educative and mystagogical dimension of friendship: namely that friendship makes present a God who wants to be known and loved in return. The conclusion also makes this clear: "As a mystagogical journey, friends initiate each other into the Mystery of God's Love as they truly participate in a mystical union with God through each other" (p. 546).

*Closest to the Heart* is also creative. Scholarly studies on friendship in Florenskij's writings abound and these have been generously cited in this volume. One could ask: why another book on this topic? The creativity of this study is precisely in the fact that it explores the mystagogical dimension of spiritual friendship. As the author has pointed out, nobody, up to this point, has focused specifically on the mystagogical dimension of spiritual friendship. This study has also shown how this can be applied to a contemporary understanding of spiritual friendship.

Finally, writing this book was a courageous act. First of all, because its author had to take time to learn Russian in order to complete the work. This effort broadened his horizons in that he was able to read Florenskij in the original language and also to consult a significant number of Russian scholars. Secondly, this study has not shied away from focusing on controversial topics, for example, the rite of spiritual brotherhood.

In conclusion, this study makes excellent use of primary sources, referring always to the original language, including the use of some Russian texts of Florenskij that have never been translated into English. It offers new insights into *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* and also into the complex figure of Pavel Florenskij himself. It also has significant pastoral implications especially insofar as it answers the fundamental research question: “why is it worth our effort to strive for spiritual friendship?” As Avril Pyman notes in the Afterword,

Just as a new translation of an old classic can resonate in quite a new way for the contemporary reader, so a new, in-depth study of an established thinker can prompt a fresh reception of his or her thought. This is particularly true of Florensky, whose capacity for research into unchartered boundary regions where various disciplines overlap and interlock combine with a precise, workable approach to the rules by which each is governed. All-important, for the author of this new study, are the implications of love, of spiritual, sacramental closeness to another human being “in Christ,” which are contained in the “mystagogic” teachings of the Church. Florensky’s “mystagogy” is seen as an ongoing attempt to establish communication, to teach and learn and study “together” and to participate together in the sacraments (p. 569).

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