

# Tomáš Špidlík

A Theological Life

Karel Sládek



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## 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.