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**Father Paul Florensky: Philosopher,  
Christian Thinker, Scientist and Musician**

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University named after A.S. Pushkin Russia**

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**Father Paul Florensky:  
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**Abstract**

The outstanding Russian philosopher Father Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) was a multifaceted personality. He was a philosopher, a theologian, a mathematician, a physicist, a chemist, an engineer, an inventor, a scientist, an electrician, astronomer, a musician, an art critic, a historian, a linguist, and a poet. Specifically, Florensky was a good musician; he played the piano and used to repeat: "Only Mozart protects from storms". Until the end of his days Florensky did not take off his monastic robes. In 1933 Pavel Florensky was arrested and sent to incarceration in the Far East; then he was transferred to a special-purpose camp, which was on the islands of the Solovetzky archipelago in the White Sea. In 1937 Father Pavel Florensky was shot in Solovki. During his years of imprisonment, Father Pavel Florensky constantly wrote letters to his wife and children of whom he had five. The family has kept these letters with great difficulty. In 1997, a book "Florensky's Letters from the Far East and Solovki" was published. This publication has been a sad monument to the era of Stalinism in Russia and the testimony of spiritual courage of this remarkable Russian scientist, Christian, philosopher, musician and man.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, theology, soul, memory

## Introduction

The outstanding Russian philosopher Father Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) was a multifaceted personality. He was a graduate of the Physics and Mathematics faculty at Moscow University (1904) and Moscow Theological Academy (1908). Pavel Florensky taught the history of philosophy at Moscow Theological Academy, received a priest title (1911), defended his master's thesis, and then produced a famous book "The Pillar and Ground of the Truth" (Moscow, 1914). From 1912 to 1917 he was the Editor of "Theological Messenger." In the 1920s, Father Pavel Florensky was an active participant of the construction of a socialist state. Since 1918 he was a member of the Commission for the Protection of Monuments of Art and Antiquities of the Trinity-Sergius Lavra. From 1921 to 1924, he was a Professor of the Department of Art Workshops, where he analyzed spatiality in works of art on the graphic faculty. From 1921 Pavel Florensky worked as a member of the Supreme Economic Council and a Commission researcher at the State Experimental Electrotechnical Institute (SEED); he also was an editor of "Technical Encyclopedia", which has published about 150 articles. At the same time, Father Pavel Florensky, as long as it was possible, continued working as a Christian thinker. At that time he created a number of significant philosophical and theological works, including: "The Temple Acts as a Synthesis of the Arts" (1918), "Iconostasis" (1922), "The Watershed of Thought" (1922), "A Reverse Perspective" (published only in 1967) and many other important works. Florensky was a good musician, who played the piano and used to repeat: "Only Mozart protects from storms"<sup>1</sup>. He was known for his great friendship with the distinguished Russian pianist Marina Yudina, with whom he often discussed theological, philosophical and musicological topics and jointly played music. Music was a particular theme in the works of Florensky, its counterpoint is present in many of his works. One of Florensky's notable statements about his mission is "*I think that my vocation is neither science and nor philosophy, but the music ... I see a part of myself and my life in it,...*"<sup>2</sup>. In addition to Mozart, Florensky's idols were Bach and Beethoven. In "The Memoirs of the Past Days" he wrote: "*I learned from Bach about what was sounded in my childhood ...*" and also: "*I heard in early Beethoven myself as an endlessly native titanic element*"<sup>3</sup>. Florensky's musical interests were wide, but in particular, he studied Russian Folklore with great interest. A serious scientific research was his work about folk songs of the Kostroma province<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Трубачёв С. Только В Моцарте...защита от бурь. П.А.Флоренский и М.В.Юдина// Музыкальная жизнь.1989.№13. С.19 (Trubachev S. Only in Mozart... protection against storms. PA Florensky and M.V.Yudina // Musical Life №14.1989.p.19).

<sup>2</sup>Трубачёв С.Музыкальный мир П.А.Флоренского// Советская музыка.1988.№8. С. 82 (Trubachev S.Musical world by Florensky // Soviet music.1988.№8.p.82).

<sup>3</sup>Флоренский Павел, священник. Детям моим. Воспоминания прошлых дней. Москва, 1992. (Pavel Florensky, the priest. To my children. Memories of past days.Moskva,1992)

<sup>4</sup> Флоренский П.А. Несколько замечаний к собранию частушек Костромской губернии Нерехтского уезда // Соч. в 4 т. Т.I. – Москва, 1994. С.663-681 (Florensky P. Some remarks to the congregation couplets Kostroma province Nereht County // Col. in 4 b. v. I. Moscow, 1994. p.663-681).

Until the end of his days Florensky did not take off his monastic robes. "Did not absolve himself of monastic robes" was the basic crime he was accused of by the state law system in early thirties. In 1933 Pavel Florensky was arrested and sent to incarceration in the Far East, and then he was transferred to a special-purpose camp, which was on the islands of the Solovetzky archipelago in the White Sea. Before the 1917 revolution in Russia, Solovetzky Monastery was a religious center of the Russian North. It was founded in the 15th century to guard the northern borders of Russia. This is a powerful and beautiful architectural composition surrounded from all sides by the White Sea. In the past centuries, the Monastery has accumulated a unique library of ancient manuscripts. Now this collection is being kept in Russian National Library in St. Petersburg. Since 1933, Solovetzky Monastery was considered a major prison in the system of numerous Russian camps, known as the GULAG. Numerous prison camps in the 30-50 years in Russia were called GULAG, where thousands of innocent prisoners were killed. These were gloomy years of Soviet history. In 1937 Father Pavel Florensky was shot in Solovki. For many years the name Florensky was banned in the Soviet Union, as well as the names of I.Ilyin, S. Bulgakov, N. Berdyayev and many other thinkers who were expelled from Russia immediately after the revolution. Only at the end of the 20th century occurred the revival of the rich heritage of philosophical thought, which had been forcibly removed from the cultural space of Russia. Today, Florensky's creative work is comprehensively studied through conferences, articles, and dissertations.

### **Literature Review**

Florensky spent the last 57 months of his life in prison. During the years of imprisonment Father Pavel Florensky constantly wrote letters to his wife and five children. The family has kept these letters with great difficulty. In 1997 a book "Florensky's Letters from the Far East and Solovki" was published. This is the last work of Florensky, his "author's word". Florensky's Letters (there are more than a hundred) are interesting for studying in many aspects: firstly, as a literary work where there is a tie, a slowly developing plot and a tragic ending. Secondly, they tell about Florensky's activities as a scientist in the camp. Here he made eight scientific discoveries regarding the water-plants of the White Sea, geology and nature on the islands of the Solovetzky archipelago. Thirdly, Florensky's letters show the strength of this man's spirit, his connection with the universe and with God. His spirit was stronger than the destructive power of the camp.

These are unique documents showing the diversity of Florensky's individual force of spirit, professionalism as a scientist, and great love for his family. The following are excerpts from these letters:

*"In all people there are his sorrows and his cross. Therefore, do not grumble to yours. During this time I saw a lot of grief around... As I*

*arrived in the camp I was looted and sat under three axes ... All things are going hopelessly difficult, it is not necessary to write"*<sup>5</sup>.

This was the first letter sent to his wife from Solovetzky camp. The power of his spirit and his faith in God helped Florensky overcome the destructive existence of the camp. Letters to his family became a beacon of salvation for him.

As a prisoner, Florensky worked at the biological station. He studied water-plants of the White Sea, which can be used in the production of iodine, paints, agar-agar and other important products for the Soviet State. In other letters, Florensky described in detail his observations on the ecology, biology, and geology of the Solovetzky Islands. The letters include numerous examples of Florensky's drawings. There are pictures with detailed description of the water-plants with the scientific name in Latin.

A special tone is kept in the letters to his children; to each of them he uses the words of an interlocutor and teacher. They had correspondence lessons in different subjects, such as Biology, Mathematics, Literature, Music, Mineralogy, and Geography. It was his hope that through such communication, his children would "*Let my thoughts develop in you*"<sup>6</sup>. The following is a fragment of a letter to his daughter Anna:

*"I have long lived in the belief that nothing is lost in the world, neither good nor bad, and sooner or later it manifests itself ... That is why, in spite of our disunity, I still rely on persuasion and sense and not for the futility of my work"*<sup>7</sup>.

Here is a fragment of a letter to his son Michael:

*"Dear Mick! How much I would like to be with you to teach you to correct and work to build knowledge that you do not waste time in vain, and prepare yourself for future serious work ... Here in the woods there are many partridges and grey hen, and on the sea there are many white swans. The silver fox darts beneath the feet like a dog, climbing up the Kremlin, roams in the streets and is not afraid of people, eating just from hands ..."*<sup>8</sup>.

Florensky wrote the last letter to his mother on 19 June 1937. Letters by Father Pavel Florensky addressed to his family from imprisonment are hymns to humanity, love and kindness. The letters are bright and beautiful; they embrace the universe, where the center is a man and his soul. These messages of wisdom and humanity from prison continued later in life through the lines of Florensky's children. The Father's words were realized. The

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<sup>5</sup>Флоренский П.А. Письма с Дальнего Востока и с Соловков // Соч. в 4т. Т.IV.Москва, 1998/ Предисловие :« ...И мои мысли пусть развиваются в вас...» С.15 ( Florensky P. Letters from the Far East and from Solovki // Col. in 4 b. v.IV. Moskva, 1998 / Foreword: "... And let my thoughts develop in you ..." .p15).

<sup>6</sup>idem. p.1

<sup>7</sup>idem.p.677

<sup>8</sup> idem.p.576-577

tragic life of Father Pavel Florensky found its embodiment in abundant ideas, which today continue to live and excite creative reflection.

## Methodology

In this article, for the first time, an analysis of Florensky's letters is given. We went on the path of studying the private to the common. We tried to comprehend the object in the context of that time and worldview of the era. We used the methodology of hermeneutics, where the theory of the interpretation of the text is closely related to the science of comprehension of meaning. The well-known scholar Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) created the science of the spirit, the scientific knowledge of the individual, and the interpretation of written monuments. These ideas were the guiding principles for this study of Florensky's letters.

## Findings/Results

The publication "Florensky's Letters from the Far East and Solovki" (M.1997) has become a sad monument to the era of Stalinism in Russia and a testimony of spiritual courage found in this remarkable scientist, Christian thinker, philosopher, musician and man. The interpretation of the "last word" of Florensky can be further developed and reveal other meanings of this extraordinary personality.

## Discussion

The famous Russian painter Mikhail Nesterov portrayed Pavel Florensky and his friend Sergei Bulgakov (figure 1). The picture is called «Philosophers» and was created in 1917. In 1922 Bulgakov and 200 other scientists were expelled from Soviet Russia. Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944) was a prominent representative of the Russian religious philosophy and the creator of the Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, where he established his philosophical school. Through interactions with his friend and contemporary Florensky, Bulgakov offers the following conclusion:

*"In Florensky there lived an extraordinary sense of the Country and Russia... He was suggested a choice between Solovki and Paris but he chose ... Homeland, although it was Solovki. He wanted to share his fate to the end with his people. Father Pavel could not and did not want to become an emigrant ... He and his fate are the glory and the greatness of Russia, and at the same time, the greatest of her crime"<sup>9</sup>.*

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<sup>9</sup>Булгаков Сергей, протоиерей. Отец Павел Флоренский // Собр. соч. Т.I. Статьи по искусству. Париж, 1985. С.15-16 (BulgakovSergius, archpriest. Father Paul Florensky // Coll. Op. v.I. Articles on art. Paris, 1985.p.15-16).

**Figure 1.** Michail Nesterov (1862-1942). «Philosophers» (Father Paul Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov).1917



Source: *Encyclopedia. Russian painting XIV-XX centuries. Moskva, Olma-Press, 1999/Nesterov Mikhail Vasilyevich, p.202-203.*

## Conclusion

“Florensky’s Letters from the Far East and Solovki” are addressed to the people close to him, and thus they are of an intimate nature. At the same time, however, they contain capacious philosophical categories that matter today. These are the Memory of the Heart, the Memory of the Kind, and the Memory of Culture. In the 21st century, these spiritual landmarks are very important.

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Col. in 4 b. v.IV. Moskva, 1998 / Foreword: "... And let my thoughts develop in you ..." S.3- 716)/.