

Thus says the Lord: “Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls.” (Jer 6:16)

✠ Lecture III: Tradition & Orthodoxy ✠

For a long time some western writers looked at “Holy Tradition” as a blind obedience to the past and a mechanical transmission of a passive deposit. In their point of view, Holy Tradition is a precise catalogue of a set of ancient doctrines, canons and rites, or it is a museum for antiquity. Therefore, the Traditional Church, in their view, seems to be a solid obscurant and retrograde one, attached to what is old simply for its antiquity.

✠ The True Meaning of Holy Tradition:

The word “Tradition”, in Greek, as it is mentioned in the New Testament, is “*Paradosis*” which does not mean “Imitation”. Its cognate verb is “*Paradidomi*” which means, “handing over or delivering by hand.” The closely associated verb is “*Paralambano*”, which means, “receiving or taking something”. Thus, the word “Tradition” does not mean “imitation of the past”, but it means biblically “delivering a deposit and receiving it”. A generation delivers the Faith and the next receives it. (As it was, and shall be, from generation to generation, and unto the ages of all ages, Amen. *The Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil*).

“Traditional Theology can also denote a dead theology, if it means identifying traditionalism with simple repetition. Such a theology may prove incapable of recognizing the issues of its own age, while it presents yesterday’s arguments to confront new heresies. In fact, **dead traditionalism cannot be truly traditional**. It is an essential characteristic of patristic theology that it was able to face the challenges of its own time while remaining consistent with the original Apostolic Orthodox Faith. Thus simply to repeat what the Fathers said is to be unfaithful to their spirit and to the intention embodied in their theology” (John Meyendorff, “*Living Tradition*”. St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978).

+ The Essence of Holy Tradition:

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not deliver a written document to His disciples and Apostles, but rather He prepared them to follow Him and to accept His dwelling within their hearts. They heard Him teach, followed Him everywhere, saw Him praying, comforting the people, treating the sinners kindly, healing the sick, and giving life to the dead. They saw Him celebrate the last supper and He granted them peace after His Resurrection. In the end, He sent them His Holy Spirit not only to remind them of His own words and help them follow His example but rather to attain unity with Him. This is the essence of Holy Tradition, “**The unity with our Lord Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.**”

The Apostles received Holy Tradition and delivered it to their disciples by the Holy Spirit who bears witness to our Lord Jesus Christ within the life of the Church and unites her with the Savior. In other words, the action of transmission is realized not only by the Apostles’ writings, but also by the Holy Spirit who guided their feelings, attitudes, worship, behavior and preaching. He granted them the new life, that is, “the life in our Lord Jesus Christ”. It is by the action of the Holy Spirit that the “Tradition of Christ” is preserved in the Church life through the successive generations, as He always lives and acts in the Church yesterday, today and tomorrow inspiring her life and making it a continuity of faith and love, not a mechanical repetition of the past.

Thus, Holy Tradition is the living stream of the one life of the Church, which brings up the past with all its aspects as a living present, and extends the present toward tomorrow without any deformation.

✠ Holy Tradition in the Apostolic Age:

The Apostles revealed that one of the sources of the authority of their apostleship was the Holy Tradition they had received through their discipleship to our Lord Jesus Christ. They were **eyewitnesses** to the events of His life and His saving deeds.

- St. John states, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (**1Jn 1:1**). In his Holy Gospel he says, “He who saw it has borne witness.” (**Jn 19:35**)
- St. Peter talked about the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ (**Mt 17**) saying; “We heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.” (**2Pet 1:18**)
- St. Luke pointed out that “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (**Lk 1:2**) delivered to him the accounts of the events of our Lord’s life.
- When the 11 Apostles wished to fill the place of Judas, they determined to choose one “of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when He was taken up from us – one of these men must become with us a witness to His resurrection.” (**Acts 1:21-22**)

The eye witnessing was not sufficient to set the Apostolic Tradition; the Holy Spirit who guides the life of the Church, reveals the truth and gives her unity with God in our Lord Jesus Christ founded it. St. Paul was not an eyewitness of these events, but he received a special commission to apostleship. By the Holy Spirit he received the Holy Tradition from the disciples **as if** it was given to him from God directly.

- He asserts, “Paul, an apostle not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father...” (**Gal 1:1**). He also says, “I received (**Paralambano**) from the Lord (**apo tou Kyriou**) what I also delivered (**paradidomi**) to you” (**1Cor 11:23**). It has been argued that the use of the preposition “**apo**” in the phrase “*from the Lord*” indicates the transmission of the information through one or more intermediaries, whereas “**para**” with the genitive would have ruled out such mediation. St. Paul received many direct visions and revelations, but the Lord Jesus Christ, through the Church, delivered the Eucharist to him.

The Holy Tradition that the Apostles received from our Lord Jesus Christ and was deposited unto the Church was in its essence “**the new life in the Lord Jesus Christ**”, or the unity with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. In other words the Apostolic Tradition was not a static deposit, but it bears within itself the continuity of the Pentecost in the Church as a whole and in every living member.

Through the Apostolic Tradition not only does the Christian community practice this new life by the Holy Spirit, but also every member of the Church accepts a personal relationship with God without isolation from the Universal Church. Through this point of view we also look at our Holy Tradition (in its essence) **as a spiritual gift having its mutual effect upon the offerer and the receiver.**

- St. Paul wrote to the Romans saying, “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift ... that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me” (**Rom 1:11-12**).

In this effect St. Augustine says, “Because for you I am a Bishop, with you I am a Christian”. He deeply felt that he was appointed by God to deposit this Holy Tradition to the people as a Bishop, and at the same time he practiced this Holy Tradition with them as one of them; as a fellow Christian.

✠ The Traditional Believers:

Believers play an essential role in preserving Holy Tradition alive, by practicing it in their daily life and their worship. For Traditional Church life cannot be transmitted through books but through practice and life. Every true believer represents a living stone of the Spiritual temple of God. He/she is laid on other previous living stones, i.e. receives the Traditional life of the Church from the past generation, and at the same time he/she bears other living stones, i.e. deposits this life into the life of future generations. Thus, the believer becomes a member of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ, who transmits her Traditional life by living it daily.

Now, we can define the “Traditional Believers” not as those who study accurately the Church canons and acknowledge the details of the rites or recite the Church hymns etc... but rather who discover their unity with God in our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit through preserving and practicing the Church canons, rites, hymns, etc...

✠ Holy Tradition & the 21st Century Church:

Someone may assume that “Tradition” means “Conservation” and “Solidification” as if any development in the life of the Church is forbidden. In our Orthodox point of view, Holy Tradition is the life of the Church throughout the history, which is guided and renewed by the Holy Spirit.

Bulgakov says, “Tradition is not a book which records a certain moment in the development of the Church and stops itself, but a book that is always written by the Church’s life. Tradition continues always and now not less than formerly, we live in Tradition and create it. Nevertheless, the sacred Tradition of the past exists for us as present living in our lives and consciousness”

Holy Church Tradition does not put the voice of the past in the place of the voice of the present; in it the past does not kill the present but gives it full force. Holy Tradition must be creative and at the same time conservative. There is no contradiction between these two elements but they are essential and are indispensable to each other. **Holy Tradition cannot be conserved unless it continually matures.** This maturation takes place on the shoulder of the past. “Conservatism” and “Maturation” are two facets of the same process, which we call Holy Tradition. It is noteworthy to say that this development of the life of the Church is realized **not by the acts of individuals** but the act of the Church, as a witness of the Holy Spirit who lives in The Church, and without declination from her apostolic and patristic mind.

The Church and Holy Tradition are but two aspects of the life of faith. They are inseparable; we cannot know one of them without the other. By Holy Tradition the Church acknowledges her Bridegroom and accepts His mysteries. By Holy Tradition we discover the Holy Gospel, accept it, preserve it, live its rule and preach it. By Holy Tradition we recognize the Sacraments, the Liturgies, hymns, rites, etc... By Holy Tradition we meet with the Saints and Fathers, discover their lives in our Lord Jesus Christ, their writings, take the blessing of their prayers and enjoy our fellowship with them in our Lord Jesus Christ. By Holy Tradition we understand the Church canons, come in touch with the holy councils and their work. In brief, we say that Holy Tradition is the core of the Church, and **without Holy Tradition the Church cannot exist**, cannot practice her apostolic life, her continual renewal, her unity, nor live with her genuine characteristics.

* This lecture was adapted from ‘*Tradition & Orthodoxy*’ by Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty.