



Church's Tradition Continues Today

"A History of Salvation"

ἉΓΙΟΠΟΛΙΤΗΣ ΝΕΩΤ

Written by Dr. Medhat S. Ibrahim
Seminarian Deacon, Theological College, El-Mina, Egypt

The term "tradition" comes from the Latin word traditio. In theological terms it means any teaching or practice which has been transmitted from generation to generation throughout the life of the Church.

The Apostolic Tradition:

Church's Tradition during the Apostolic Age is a very important issue because most of our rituals depend on this tradition. The Apostolic tradition encompasses what the Apostles lived, saw, witnessed and later recorded in the Holy Books of the New Testament. The bishops and presbyters, whom the Apostles appointed as their successors, followed their teachings. Those who deviated from this apostolic teaching were cut off from the Church. They were considered heretics for they believed differently from the Apostles and their successors, thus separating themselves from the Church. This brings into focus the Church as the center of unity of all Christians. This is the ecclesiastical or ecclesiological characteristic of Tradition.

The Church is the image and reflection of the Holy Trinity since the three persons of the Holy Trinity live, dwell, and act in the Church. The Father offers His love; the Son offers His obedience; and the Holy Spirit His comfort. Only in the historical Church can we see, feel, and live the



St. Polycarp

presence of the Holy Trinity in the world today. In describing this reality St. Paul writes: *"So he came and proclaimed the good news: peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near by; for through Him we both alike have access to the Father in the one Spirit. Thus you are no longer aliens in a foreign land, but fellow-citizens with God's people, members of God's household. You are built upon the foundation laid by the Apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus Himself is the cornerstone. In Him the whole building is bonded together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him you too are being built with all the rest into a spiritual dwelling of God" (Ephesians 2:17-22).*

The unity of the Holy Trinity, being the fundamental reality in the Church and of the Church, also requires a real unity among all its members throughout all generations. All the members of the Church (those who are departed and those who still live on the earth) live in the bond of love and unity through the Holy Trinity. This truth is described by St. Peter: *"But you*



are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of the darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2: 9-10).

The Church was established as a historical reality on the day of Pentecost, with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles: *"While the day of Pentecost was running its course they were all together in one place, when suddenly there came from the sky a noise like that of a strong driving wind, which filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues like flames of fire, dispersed among them and resting on each one. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance" (Acts 2: 1-4).*

Only in this Church, where the Holy Trinity lives and acts constantly could the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, the very revelation of truth, as received and transmitted by the Apostles, abide and be sustained. Thus truth in its fullness does not exist outside the Church, for there is neither Scripture, nor Tradition. This is why St. Paul admonishes the Galatians that even if an angel from Heaven preaches another gospel to them, he must be condemned: *"If any man preaches any other gospel to you than that you have received let him be condemned" (1:8-9).* And he writes to his disciple St. Timothy to follow strictly the *"precepts of our faith" and the "sound instructions" be received from him and avoid "godless myths" (1 Tim. 4: 4-7).* He also admonishes the Colossians to avoid *"merely human injunctions and teachings" (2: 22),* and to follow the Lord Jesus Christ: *"Therefore, since*

Jesus was delivered to you as Christ and Lord, live your lives in union with Him. Be rooted in Him; be built in Him; be consolidated in the faith you were taught; let your hearts overflow with thankfulness. Be on your guard; do not let your minds be captured by hollow and delusive speculations, based on traditions of man-made teaching and centered on the elemental spirits of the universe and not on Christ. For it is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied, and in Him you have been brought to completion" (Colossians. 2: 6-8).

It is certainly clear, Church's Tradition includes all teachings and religious rituals that the Apostles gave to their successors orally through discipleship and Christian life day by day and these teachings and rituals were transmitted generation after generation without any adding or deletion to our day. It is not necessary to find for every teaching or ritual a verse or verses in the Holy Gospel as the Holy Gospel does not include whole disciplines of teachings and rituals but it offers us the faith that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God to have the eternal life through His Name (John 20:31). Therefore, the Church considers the tradition as the second source of Christian teaching after the Holy Bible. It is historically accepted that Christian teachings in the early Church were through tradition before writing of any Book of the Holy Gospel or Epistles.

St. Clement, Bishop of Rome (second century A.D.), and probably a disciple of the Apostle Paul himself, described this historical truth: *"The Apostles preached to us the Gospel received from Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was God's Ambassador. Christ, in other words, comes with a message from God, and the Apostles with a message from Christ. Both these orderly arrangements, therefore, originate from the*



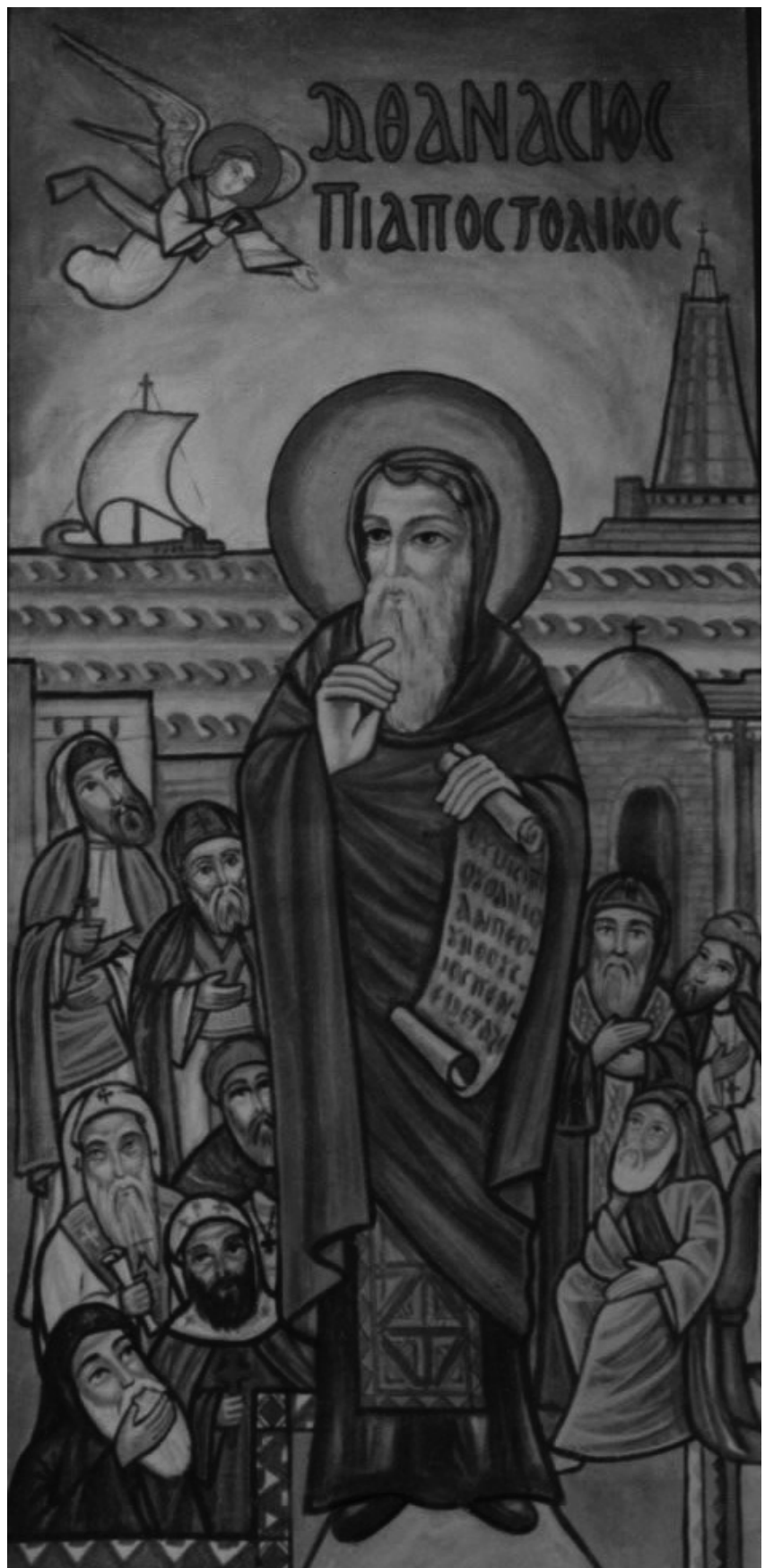
St. Athanasius

will of God. And so, after receiving their instructions and being fully assured through the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as confirmed in faith by the Word of God, they went forth, equipped with the fullness of the Holy Spirit, to preach the good news that the Kingdom of God was close at hand. From land to land, accordingly, and from city to city they preached; and from among their earliest converts appointed men whom they had tested by the Spirit to act as bishops and deacons for the future believers” (Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 42).

One can clearly see how the message of salvation originating from God the Father was taught by the Lord Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Holy Spirit, preached by the Apostles and was transmitted by them to the Church through the clergy they themselves appointed. This became the “unerring tradition of the apostolic preaching” as it was expressed by Eusebius of Caesarea, bishop of the fourth century, who is considered the “father” of Church history.

The Patristic Tradition:

It could be said that Tradition, as an historical event, begins with the Apostolic preaching and is found in Holy Scriptures, but it is kept, treasured, interpreted, and explained to the Church by the Holy Fathers, the





successors of the Apostles. Using the Greek term “Pateres Ecclesias,” the Fathers of the Church, this “interpretive” part of the Apostolic preaching is called “Patristic Tradition.” The Fathers, men of extraordinary holiness and trusted orthodoxy in doctrine, enjoyed the acceptance and respect of the universal Church by witnessing the message of the Holy Gospel, living and explaining it to posterity. Thus, Apostolic preaching or Tradition is organically associated with the Patristic Tradition and vice versa. This point must be stressed since many theologians in the Western churches either distinguish between Apostolic Tradition and Patristic Tradition, or completely reject Patristic Tradition.

St. Irenaeus wrote: “For the Orthodox Christian, there is one Tradition, the Tradition of the Church, incorporating the Holy Scriptures and the teaching of the Fathers. This is the preaching of the truth handed down by the Church in the whole world to Her children” St. Athanasius the Apostolic, the great “Pillar of Orthodoxy,” gave the most appropriate definition of the Church’s Tradition: *“Let us look at the very tradition, teaching, and faith of the catholic Church from the very beginning, which the Logos gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers preserved. Upon this the Church is founded.”* In retrospect, Tradition is founded upon the Holy Trinity, it constantly proclaims the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is found within the boundaries of the Christian Church, and it is expounded by the Fathers.

Evidences of Existence of Tradition:

The Lord Jesus Christ followed the oral discipline in teaching that was common among Jewish Rabbis during His time on earth. So the Lord instructed disciples through living teachings that means the teachings acquired during living discipleship and so He told His disciples to go everywhere in the world to disciple and teach

what He taught them (Matthew 28:19&20). Likewise, St. John the Beloved said *“that which we have seen and heard we declare to you that you also may have fellowship with us and truly our fellowship is with the Father and His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 3 &4).*

Our Apostles themselves when they founded churches declared and ministered with the Holy Gospel orally. They set their successors and those set their successors and so on and each generation declared the Christian teachings orally in perfect honesty. And so St. Paul said to his disciple St. Timothy *“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2).* The three words (heard, commit, teach) mean tradition in its perfect meaning. Eusebius of Caesarea wrote: “our apostles ministered with the mysteries of Kingdom of Heaven without writing many books but through the living fellowship and discipleship”.

All believers accepted the faith through ministry and hearing of teachings of the Apostles and so we read about believing of Eunuch of Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia and Cornelius through hearing of teaching by St. Philip and St. Peter.

The evidences of tradition in the apostolic writings include

(1) St. John the Beloved said *“And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30-31).*

(2) Holy Books of the Gospel don’t contain all the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ as St. John said *“I had many things to write but I do not wish to you with pen and*



ink. But I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face” (3 John 13 & 14).

(3) St. Luke said *“To whom he also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the Kingdom” (Act 1:3).* But not one of the evangelists recorded these things.

(4) The Apostles sent St. Paul and St. Barnabas to declare the decision of the Council of Jerusalem to the believers *“It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas who will also report the same thing by word of mouth” (Acts 15: 25-27).*

(5) St. Paul said *“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread (1 Corinthians 11:23).*

(6) Also, St. Paul said *“And the rest I will set in order when I come” (1 Corinthians 11:34).*

(7) St. Paul ordered his disciple Titus bishop of Crete *“For this reason I left you in Crete that you should set in order the things that are lacking and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you” (Titus 1:5).*

(8) St. Paul said to the Philippians *“The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me these do and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:9).*

(9) St. Paul encouraged his disciple St. Timothy saying *“Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13).*

(10) Also, to the Thessalonians, St. Paul said *“Therefore, brethren stand fast and hold the traditions which you*

were taught whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). So traditions are equal to the writing books.

(11) *“But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which have received from us” (2 Thessalonians 3:6).*

(12) St. Paul praised the Corinthians because they kept the tradition *“Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you” (1 Corinthians 11:2).*

(13) St. Paul told the Ephesians priests *“I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).* You should note that these words were not mentioned in any Holy Book of the Holy Gospel so from where did St. Paul obtain these words? And the word “remember” denotes that this saying was common.

Our Apostolic Fathers in their writings support traditions that they had from the Apostles:

(1) Eusebius of Caesarea wrote that St. Ignatius during his trip to martyrdom used to support the Churches encouraging them to commit themselves to the traditions of the Apostles.

(2) Papias the disciple of St. John the beloved wrote: “what was to be got from books was not as profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice”.

(3) St. Polycarp the Martyr commanded the Philippians to commit themselves to the traditions of the Apostles against the heretics.

Universality and Timelessness of Tradition:

Another characteristic, that the Tradition of the Church is universal in space and time. Indeed, the Church with all



her members, always, from the time of her inception until the end of time, accepts and teaches everywhere the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This does not mean that the Church and Her Tradition move within numerical, geographical or chronological limits. The Church and Her Tradition, although they live in history, are beyond history. They have eternal value, because the Lord Jesus Christ, the Founder of the Church, has no beginning and no end. In other words, when the universality of the Church Tradition is mentioned, it refers to the gift of the Holy Spirit, which enables the Church to preserve until the end of time the Apostolic truth unadulterated, unbroken, and unaltered.

This is true because Tradition expresses the common Orthodox mind of the whole Church against all heresies and schisms of all times. In other words, Tradition is a gift of the Holy Spirit, a living experience, which is relived and renewed through time. It is the true faith, which is revealed by the Holy Spirit to the true people of God. Tradition, therefore, cannot be reduced to a mere enumeration of quotations from the Holy Scriptures or from the Fathers. It is the fruit of the Incarnation of the Word of God, His crucifixion and resurrection as well as His ascension, all of which took place in space and time. Tradition is an extension of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ into the life of the Church. According to St. Basil, it is the continuous presence of the Holy Spirit: *“Through the Holy Spirit comes our restoration to paradise, our ascension into the kingdom of heaven, our return as adopted sons, our liberty to call God our Father, our being made partakers of the grace of Christ, our being called children of light, our sharing in eternal glory, and, in a word, our being brought into a state of a ‘fullness of blessing’ (Rom. 15: 29), both in this world and in the world to come...”*

This description by St. Basil gives the true “existential” dimensions of the Holy Tradition of the Church. For the Orthodox, therefore, Tradition is not a static set of dogmatic precepts, or the uniform practices of the liturgical ritual of the Church. Although Church Tradition includes both doctrinal and liturgical formulas and practices, it is more properly the continuous transfiguration of the people of God, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit, as experienced in the daily life of the Church. This does not mean that Tradition is something abstract and theoretical or that it ignores the daily needs of human nature. On the contrary, the “rule of faith” becomes every day the “rule of worship.” Doctrine, prayer, moral guidance, and liturgical practices are indispensable parts of Holy Tradition.

In this context, the Ecumenical Councils are an integral part of the ongoing Tradition of the Church and are of great importance. The first Council Synod of the Church was the Apostolic Synod, which took place in Jerusalem in 51 A.D. Later, bishops used to meet either locally, or on the “ecumenical” or universal, the all-encompassing level of the universal Christian church in order to discuss and solve serious dogmatic and canonical issues which had arisen. The Orthodox Church accepts the following three Ecumenical Councils: The Council of Nicea in 325, which discussed and condemned Arianism, the Council of Constantinople in 381 which principally condemned Apollinarianism and the Council of Ephesus in 431, which condemned Nestorianism.

These Ecumenical Councils became instruments for formulating the dogmatic teachings of the Church, for fighting against heresies and schisms and promoting the common and unifying Tradition of the Church which secures her unity in the bond of love and faith. Although convened by



the emperors, the Church Fathers who participated came from almost all the local dioceses of the Roman Empire, thus expressing the faith and practice of the Universal Church. Their decisions have been accepted by the clergy and the laity of all times, making their validity indisputable. The Fathers followed the Scriptures as well as the Apostolic and Patristic Tradition in general, meeting under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. St. Constantine the Great, who convened the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea, wrote that: *"... the resolution of the three hundred holy bishops is nothing else than that the determination of the Son of God, especially of the Holy Spirit, pressing upon the minds of such great men brought to light the divine purpose."*

(Socrates, Church History, 1:9).

Thus, the Ecumenical Councils and also some local council, which later received universal acceptance, express the infallible teaching of the Church, a teaching which is irrevocable. In sum, the Ecumenical Councils, together with the Holy Scriptures and the Patristic writings, are the universal voice of the Church. The position of the Ecumenical Councils in the Church and their universal authority is enhanced by the fact that they issued not only dogmatic definitions of faith, but also formulated important canons of the Church which concern Orthodox spiritual life and help the individual in the growth of his life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is interesting to emphasize another form of the Synodical system, which accentuates the importance of Tradition: the Eucharist itself. In the Eucharist, all Orthodox Christians meet together and in absolute agreement, in doctrine and practice witness the presence of the Holy Trinity on the altar of the Church. The bishop and the priest pray to God the Father to send the Holy Spirit and transform the bread and wine into the very body and blood

of the Lord Jesus Christ. All the faithful present are called to receive Communion and become active members of the Body of Christ. In the Divine Liturgy, as it was instituted by the Lord Himself, the entire Church meets every day to proclaim and live the oneness and the unity of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the Orthodox Divine Liturgy, we see all the history of Tradition embodied in the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Eucharist shows that Tradition is a dynamic way of life unfolding continuously in the liturgical framework of the Church. By participating in the Eucharist, we proclaim our Tradition as living and active members of the Church.

Thus, the Tradition of the Church is a living reality, which the Orthodox Christian must live daily in a mystical way. By adhering to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, the Ecumenical Councils, and the Patristic writings, by observing the canons of the Church, by frequently participating in the Eucharist, where Tradition becomes an empirical reality, we are members of the Body of Christ and are led to the "contemplation of God" as St. Neilos wrote. Indeed, it is true what St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote "The man's life is a strenuous and endless ascent towards God, that is, deification (*theosis*)".

Orthodox Tradition, therefore, is not a dead letter, a collection of dogmas and practices of the past. It is the history of salvation. It is the life of the Holy Spirit, who constantly illuminates us in order for all Orthodox Christians to become sons and daughters of God, living in the Divine light of the All-blessed Trinity. ✠