

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 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 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 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 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 councils, 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 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 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 Christ. All the faithful present are called to receive Communion and become active members of the Body of Christ. In the liturgy, as it was instituted by the Lord Himself, the whole Church meets every day to proclaim and live the oneness and the unity of faith in Jesus Christ. In the Orthodox liturgy, we see all the history of Tradition embodied in the body and blood of 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 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.