

“And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book.” (Jn 20:30)

✠ Lecture II: Benefits of Holy Tradition ✠

Our Lord Jesus Christ preached and taught the people leaving to them His Divine words as spirit and life (**Jn 6:63**). This life was committed by the Apostles to the Church together with whatever they learned and received from the Lord Jesus Christ after His resurrection. However, they did not record all this in writing; they rather **left it vivid in the Church life**. It can thus be said that Holy Tradition is the Church life or the living Church. The following are some of the benefits of Holy Tradition:

I) The New Testament Books:

The Church witnessed a process of decision-making, in which limits were laid down to the New Testament – a process known as *‘the fixing of the canon’*. The word *‘canon’* derives from the Greek word *‘Kanon’* meaning *‘a rule’* or *‘a fixed reference point’*. The *‘canon of Scripture’* refers to a limited and defined group of writings, which are accepted as authoritative within the Church. The term *‘canonical’* is used to refer to scriptural writings accepted to be within the canon. The basic principle used in drawing up the canon has been that of **recognition** rather than the imposition of authority. The Church did not create the canon; she acknowledged, conserved and received Canonical Scriptures on the basis of the authority, which was already inherent to them. **Holy Tradition was the foundation upon which the canon of the New Testament was established.**

Many years have elapsed since the Pentecost (the birthday of the Church) until the writing and gathering of the Holy Books of the New Testament. During these years Holy Tradition played a major role in transmitting the faith and in the discernment of the apostolic writings from the heretical ones. The first complete listing of New Testament Books as we have them today did not appear until over 300 years after the death and resurrection of our Lord; the first complete listing was given by St. Athanasius in his Paschal letter in A.D. 367. Imagine it! If the writing of the New Testament had been begun at the same time as the U.S. constitution, we wouldn’t see a final product until the year 2076! (A. James Bernstein)

- The point is that Holy tradition is **older** than the written Holy Scripture of the New Testament and that the New Testament recognition was actually **a product** of Holy Tradition.

II) The Correct Interpretation of Holy Scriptures:

The early Church was confronted with a major challenge from a movement known as Gnosticism. This diverse and complex movement, not dissimilar to the modern New Age phenomenon, achieved considerable influence in the late Roman Empire. The basic ideas of Gnosticism do not concern us at this point; what is of relevance here is that Gnosticism appeared very similar to Christianity. For this reason, many early Christian writers viewed it as a major challenge. Furthermore, Gnostic writers had a tendency to interpret New Testament passages in a manner that dismayed Christian leaders, and prompted questions about the correct manner of interpretation of Scripture.

In such a context, an appeal to Holy Tradition became of major importance. St. Irenaeus insisted that the Apostolic Church faithfully preserved the *‘rule of faith’*, and that it had found its expression in the Canonical Books of Holy Scripture. The Church had faithfully proclaimed the same Holy Gospel from the time of the Apostles until the present day. The Gnostics had no such claim of continuity with the early Church. They had merely invented new ideas, and were improperly suggesting that these were *‘Christian’*. Tradition came to mean *‘a traditional interpretation of Scripture’* or *‘a traditional presentation of the Christian faith’*, which is reflected in the creeds of the Church and its public doctrinal pronouncements.

St. Tertullian adopted a related approach. Heretics, he observed gloomily, can make the Holy Scripture say more or less anything they like. For this reason, the Holy Tradition of the Church was of considerable importance, as it indicated the manner in which Holy Scripture had been received and interpreted within the Church. **The right interpretation of the Holy Scripture was thus to be found where true Christian faith and discipline had been maintained.** St. Athanasius took a similar view; he argued that Arius' mistakes would never have risen if he had remained faithful to the Church's interpretation of the Holy Scripture. **Holy Tradition was thus seen as a legacy from the apostles, by which the Church was guided and directed toward a correct interpretation of the Holy Scripture.** It was seen as a means of ensuring that the Church remained faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, instead of adopting idiosyncratic interpretation of the Holy Scripture. (Adapted from '*Christian Theology: an introduction*' by Alister E. McGrath. Blackwell Publishers)

- The point is that Holy Scripture presupposes Holy Tradition, not as an addition, but as a milieu in which it becomes understandable and meaningful. This is especially obvious in the case of the Old Testament for the early Church understood it through a type of interpretation received from the Apostles and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (**Lk.24: 25-27**) by which symbols of the Old Testament were revealed (**Mt 12:40; Lk 11:30; Jn 3:14-15; 1Cor 10:1-6; 1Pet 3:20-21**).

III) Liturgical Worship:

In the New Testament we have broadly speaking, four literary genres: Holy Gospel, historical narrative (Acts), epistle, apocalyptic / prophetic (Revelation). The Holy Gospels were written to testify of our Lord Jesus Christ's Incarnation, Life, Death and Resurrection. The Holy Book of Acts recounts the history of God's people and shows God's providence in the midst of it all. The epistles were written primarily to answer specific problems that arose in various Churches; thus, things that were assumed and understood by all, and not considered problems, were not generally addressed in any detail. Matters of worship were only dealt with when there were related problems (**1Cor 11-14**). The Holy Book of Revelation was written to show God's ultimate triumph in history.

Interestingly, none of these literary types present in the New Testament has worship as a primary subject, nor were any of them meant to give details about how to worship in Church. In the Old Testament there are detailed, though by no means exhaustive, treatment of worship in Israel: Holy Book of Exodus, Holy Book of Leviticus, and Holy Book of Psalms. In the New Testament there are only the meagerest hints of the worship of the early Christians. Why is this? Certainly not because they had no order in their services – liturgical historians have established the fact that early Christians continued to worship in a manner firmly based upon the pattern of Jewish worship, which they inherited from the Apostles.

However, even the few references in the New Testament that touches upon the worship of the early Church show that early Christians worshiped liturgically, as did their fathers before them: they observed hours of prayer (**Acts 3:1**); they worshiped in the temple (**Acts 2:46; 3:1; 21:26**); and they worshiped in synagogues (**Acts 18:4**). (Adapted from '*Sola Scriptura*' by Fr. John Whiteford. Conciliar Press 1996).

One of the most important elements of the Christian Tradition is the fixed form of worship, usually known as '*Divine Liturgy*'. In recent years there has been a rediscovery of the fact that Christian theologians pray and worship, and that this devotional context shapes their theological reflections. This point has been appreciated since the first centuries of Christianity. The tag '**The way you pray determines what you believe**', expresses the fact that theology and worship interact with each other. What Christians believe affects the manner in which they pray and worship; the manner in which Christians pray and worship affects what they believe.

Two controversies within the early Church, centering on Gnosticism and Arianism, illustrate the importance of this point particularly well. On the basis of their radical dualism between the ‘*physical*’ and the ‘*spiritual*’, the Gnostics argued that the matter was inherently evil. In refuting this position, St. Irenaeus pointed to the fact that bread, wine, and water were used in the Christian Sacraments. How could they be evil, if they were given so prominent position in Christian worship? Arius argued that our Lord Jesus Christ was supreme amongst God’s creatures. His opponents, such as St. Athanasius, retorted that this Christology was totally inconsistent with the way in which Christians worshipped. St. Athanasius stressed the theological importance of the practice of praying to our Lord Jesus Christ and worshipping Him. If Arius was right, Christians were guilty of idolatry, through worshipping a creature, rather than God.

(Adapted from ‘*Christian Theology: an introduction*’ by Alister E. McGrath. Blackwell Publishers).

IV) Rite of Liturgical Worship:

Rite is an essential element of the liturgical, family and personal worship, for it means the participation of the body and spirit in worshipping God. The rites we received by Holy Tradition are not accidental in the Church’s life. In their symbolic meaning they are more than an expression that bring the senses and mind to the realities of faith. They are real entrance to the mystery of worship, and a declaration of the living truth that abides in the Church.

For instance, by the Church hymns, we practice the new heavenly song in our Lord Jesus Christ. By these hymns, we not only taste a musical art, we also practice the heavenly life. Through the Church building and all its contents, we do not acknowledge merely an art of architecture or precious antiquity, but we receive living Holy Traditions. The building is a living icon of the heavenly Church, which expresses accurately the Church Faith.

Thus in every kind of Christian art, we meet with the spirit of Holy Tradition; iconology offers us the life of the Church through the Holy Spirit, and explains the life of faith in the Orthodox concept. For we neither see icons as visual aids to worship nor religious decorations of the Church, but we taste in them our living faith in heavenly things and our love and unity with the saints in Jesus Christ. (*Tradition & Orthodoxy* by Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty. St. George Church, Sporting, Alexandria)

V) Doctrinal & Theological Rules of Faith:

Many things that we believe and accept as rules of faith are **not explicitly mentioned** in the Holy Scripture but are transmitted to us through Holy Tradition:

- The term ‘*Trinity*’ is not mentioned in any of the Holy Books, but the faith in the Trinity is rooted in all of us through the Holy Tradition of the Church.
- The term ‘of the same substance’ (*homoousios*) which is used to declare our faith concerning the person of our Lord Jesus Christ is not mentioned in Holy Scriptures.
- The observance of Sunday as the Lord Jesus Christ’s Day instead of Saturday and facing the East while praying is not explicitly mentioned in Holy Scripture but is known through the Holy Tradition.
- The doctrine of monogamy is also known through Holy Tradition.
- The practice of infant baptism is not explicitly mentioned in Holy Scripture. Likewise, the practice of praying for the departed.
- Drawing the sign of the cross and saying, ‘*In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen*’ is known through Holy Tradition.
- The fact the right thief was actually the one who went to paradise is known through Holy Tradition. (This is just an example of Holy Tradition and its not considered of major theological significance).