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The Holy Tradition

What is Tradition? Is it merely something we cling to for the sake of legitimacy, staunch conservatism, or some other unknown reason, or is it rather a deep, integral component of Christianity?

Tradition is the spirit and life of the One, Only, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, passed down to us from Christ through the saints.¹ Holy Tradition contains the entire truth of our Faith – from Scriptural, Canonical, Synodical, Liturgical, Ritual, and Patristic foundations – and the entire expression of our Faith – directing the Church’s doctrinal tenets, ritual practices, liturgical texts, and mode of worship.

Archbishop-Elect Daniel Findikyan of the Armenian Orthodox Church explains: “Each Rite is an integrated system of worship having its own rules and its own inner logic representing the official expression of the totality of that Church’s Christian faith.”² The Church preserves for us this Holy Tradition through its Rites: for example, certain Rites, like immersion three times in Baptism, consecrating Sunday as the Lord’s Day, and signing the Cross, are Rites that have Apostolic roots and are reinforced, preserved, and explained by the Fathers.³

Tradition was the way God taught His people in the Old Testament. There was a period of roughly 1,000 years before the Israelites received the written Law! How did the Israelites know the Law during this time? Was it not through Oral Tradition, which was passed down from one generation

¹ Jude 3; see St. Athanasius the Apostolic, *Letter to Serapion*, 1:28

² Archbishop-Elect Daniel Findikyan (Armenian Orthodox Church)

³ See St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* Chapter 27; Tertullian, *De Corona*, 3.3; Fr. Shenouda Maher Ishak, *Sunday, The Lord’s Day*, Chapter 1; F.E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Ante-Nicene church*, pp. 98-101

to another? How did Joseph know he would be committing a sin when Potiphar's wife approached him, so that he cried out: "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"⁴ He clearly had received the teaching of purity and chastity from his fathers before him. It was only out of necessity, because of the weakness of man, that the Law was written down. But it is very clear that Oral Tradition was central to the life and teaching of our Old Testament fathers.⁵

Holy Tradition was our Lord's pedagogy. Christ Himself, to Whom is the glory, did not need to write to teach us the ways of salvation,⁶ but rather, He gathered disciples unto Himself and established in them the Faith⁷ through their living with Him day and night, witnessing His ministry, life, and teaching firsthand. As the true Sower, He scattered his seed and the disciples, being that good ground and foundation, continued His work faithfully as He commanded them: "Go therefore and *make disciples* of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all things that I have commanded you..."⁸ Simply put, there is no Christianity without Tradition, and no transmission of that Tradition without discipleship.

This discipleship, of which Christ speaks, is different from any other schooling. It is a way of life, based primarily on direct contact and verbal teaching, and is supplemented by continuous fellowship and a strong relationship with a doctrinally sound and faithful teacher. In the words of one of my teachers: "The greatest theological college ever was Christ and His Disciples"⁹ (and then the Catechetical School of Alexandria, duh!). How true are these words! The disciples spent

⁴ Genesis 39:9

⁵ Even after the Holy Scriptures were written, the role of Holy Tradition being passed down orally was integral, and even emphasized by God Himself (see Exodus 13:14-16; Deuteronomy 4:9; Psalm 66:1).

⁶ See Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St. Basil, The Anaphora

⁷ Matthew 16:18

⁸ Matthew 28:19-20

⁹ Deacon Antonios the Shenoudian

every minute that they could with our Lord for three years, and the fruits of their training are clear.¹⁰ They drank from the fountain He delivered to them and were therefore able to deliver from that same fountain to their own disciples. Like them, we do not learn the Faith in an informational way – rather, we *receive* the Faith, from teachers who have themselves first received it. And Faith is not only doctrine, but also a way of life, a way of thinking, speaking, behaving, etc. Your Faith naturally shapes your life: what you believe shapes how you live, and this is a natural process that cannot be controlled by volitional effort.

Being the teaching of Christ Himself, Tradition is clearly seen throughout the New Testament. St. Paul says to St. Timothy: “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us.”¹¹ What is this pattern of “sound words,” but the Tradition which St. Paul received and delivered to his disciple St. Timothy. St. Paul, being a pastoral father, reiterates this point of learning and receiving sound Tradition to the Phillipians when he says, “The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, *these do*, and the God of peace will be with you.”¹² The Apostles preferred direct contact to deliver that teaching and Tradition: “Having many things to write to you, I did not wish to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full.”¹³

It is our Christian duty to pass on this Tradition **unchanged**, as St. Paul so poetically says: “You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of

¹⁰ See Matthew 7:15-20

¹¹ 2nd Timothy 1:13

¹² Phillipians 4:9

¹³ 2nd John 12

stone but on tablets of flesh, *that is*, of the heart.”¹⁴ St. Paul commands us again to “stand fast to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or by epistle.”¹⁵ And it must be **sound doctrine** that we receive through the Church and our Fathers, and this is why St. Paul teaches us to “continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, **knowing from whom you have learned them**...”¹⁶ He instructs us elsewhere to “withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he receives from us.”¹⁷ St. John also teaches us the same: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”¹⁸ St. Peter warns us about this as well: “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers **among you**, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies...”¹⁹

Some may say: “How can we discern what is sound doctrine from heresy?” St. Athanasius the Apostolic answers this question beautifully, giving us the simple definition of Holy Tradition:

“But, beyond these sayings, let us look at the very tradition, teaching, and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept. Upon this the Church is founded, and he who should fall away from it would not be a Christian, and should no longer be so called.”²⁰

Here, St. Athanasius very clearly asserts that Tradition is based on those three things, and that this is the only way the Church has survived. It is what Our Lord delivered to his holy disciples, who in turn preached to all nations after the glorious day of Pentecost, and their disciples preserved from one generation to the next, through the lineage of our faithful Fathers to this very day. The

¹⁴ 2nd Corinthians 3:2-3

¹⁵ 2nd Thessalonians 2:15

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 3:14

¹⁷ 2nd Thessalonians 3:6. Note the inseparable relation between ethics and doctrine.

¹⁸ 1 John 4:1

¹⁹ 2 Peter 2:1

²⁰ St. Athanasius the Apostolic, *Letter to Serapion*. 1:28

sound doctrine came to us from Christ, through His disciples, who passed it on to their spiritual sons and daughters, equipping them to be the next generation of Christians, able to keep and defend their Faith. The Coptic Orthodox Church is founded on this Tradition, tracing her Apostolicity to St. Mark,²¹ and not only Coptic Orthodoxy, but also Christianity generally, is Tradition-bound and strongly committed to discipleship.

It is through Tradition that our Orthodox Faith is preserved. To be a Christian in the early Church, one was not free to worship as he wished, but according to the Tradition of the Apostles: "...And he who should fall away from it would not be a Christian and should no longer be so called."²² There was no permissible deviation from this way. St. Paul commends the people of Corinth for keeping this Tradition, when he says: "Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you."²³ Origen the Great, in the third century, says:

Although there are many who believe that they themselves hold to the teachings of Christ, there are yet some among them who think differently from their predecessors. The teaching of the Church has indeed been handed down through an order of succession from the apostles and remains in the churches even to the present time. That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition"²⁴

This Apostolic Tradition, first and foremost, establishes what Scripture is for us, and secondly, *explains* that Scripture to us! Another one of my teachers always tells us: "When you read the Scriptures, you must have the Bible in one hand and the liturgical texts and the writings of the

²¹ See H.H. Pope Shenouda III, *The Beholder of God Mark the Evangelist, Saint and Martyr*, p. 62; Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St. Basil, Commemoration of the Saints and list of Departed Patriarchs

²² St. Athanasius the Apostolic, *Letter to Serapion*, 1:28

²³ 1st Corinthians. 11:2

²⁴ Origen the Great, *De Principiis*, 1:2

Fathers in the other.”²⁵ St. Irenaeus of Lyons gives a very moving discourse about his encounters with his teacher St. Polycarp, disciple of St. John the Beloved: “...These things being told to me by the mercy of God, I listened to them attentively, *noting them down, not on paper, but in my heart*. And continually, through God’s Grace, I recall them faithfully.”²⁶ St. Irenaeus faithfully learned from his teacher all that had been passed down to him and was therefore able to deliver that same teaching to his own disciples and in his own writings. This same spirit was preserved by the fathers throughout the subsequent centuries: St. Gregory of Nazianzus, best friend of St. Basil the Great, says around the year 380 A.D.:

“My sheep hear my voice, which I have heard from the oracles of God, which I have been taught by the Holy Fathers, which I have taught alike on all occasions, not conforming myself to the fortune, and which I will never cease to teach; in which I was born, and in which I will depart.”²⁷

Now, how do we recognize what is sound Tradition? Where does this accepted Tradition come from? Tradition is extrapolated from many sources – 1) Scripture, 2) the writings and teachings of the early Church Fathers, 3) the writings of early historians such as Eusebius, Josephus, or Sozomen, 4) the definitions and Canons of the Holy Councils, like the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, and 5) the many liturgical prayers, like the Tadakias and Psalis, which were written and continue to be written from the time of the apostles even until today.

For anything to be accepted as Tradition, it must have certain characteristics:

1. Apostolicity – its agreement with other Apostolic Traditions;
2. Orthodoxy – sound Doctrine and lack of discrepancy with the Holy Scripture;

²⁵ Fr. Athanasius Farag

²⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5 Chapter 20

²⁷ St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 33.15

3. Antiquity – being well-known and accepted by the Fathers beforehand; and
4. Catholicity – known and accepted by all Orthodox Churches.

Simply put, Holy Tradition is only taught through true discipleship to Christ, the Church, and those in whom we see Christ, and from whom we receive His teaching and His way.²⁸

Let us learn from our forefathers and live an authentic sacramental and ecclesiastical life through discipleship, education, and liturgical participation, in humility and love.

To Him is due all glory.

²⁸ See St. Gregory the Wonderworker, *Panegyric*, 9 (speaking about his teacher Origen): “...he incited us much more to the practice of virtue, & stimulated us by the deeds he did more than by the doctrines he taught...”