

Traditions

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS

Defining Tradition

No servant enters the Orthodox Church and stays within her very long before meeting a question that will, if we let it, shape his whole ministry: What is Tradition, and why does the Church keep speaking of it with such tenderness and such seriousness at once? For some who have come to us from other Christian places, the very word itself feels suspect. For some who have grown up inside the Church, the word has become so familiar that it has quietly lost its weight. We begin with what the Scriptures themselves mean by Tradition, we watch how the Apostles handed on what they had received, we learn to distinguish the Tradition of the Lord from the traditions of men, and we come at last to the vision the Fathers have always held: one living Tradition, with Scripture in its heart, passed from one generation to the next as the living life of the Church. We are not trying to defeat an argument here. We are trying to stand, as servants, inside the house in which we have been asked to teach, and to learn the shape of its walls.

What “Tradition” Means in the Scriptures

The English word tradition is heard today as something old, inherited, perhaps a little tired — a custom one keeps because it has always been kept. The word the Scriptures use is less tired and more living. It is *paradosis*, from the verb *paradidomi*: to hand on, to deliver over. It is the word St. Paul uses when he writes to the Corinthians, “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received” (1 Corinthians 15:3). It is the word a runner uses when the baton is passed from one hand to another: something placed into our hand on purpose, entrusted to us, meant to be carried to the next runner without being dropped.

Tradition in the Scriptures, then, is not a dusty inheritance. It is an active handing-on. Something alive is being placed into our hands — not simply information, but a whole way of life, a whole experience of the God who has revealed Himself to us. The Latin rendering of this Greek word is *traditio*, from which our English word comes; and even the Merriam-Webster dictionary preserves a fragment of the original sense, defining tradition as “the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction.”

The Fathers sharpen this definition and give it its full weight. Tradition is the handing-on not only of teachings but of the living out of those teachings:

- the worship,
- the sacramental life,

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- the shape of prayer,
 - the feasts and fasts,
 - the lives of the saints,
 - the reading of Scripture in the Church.

It is the embodiment of God's revelation through the lives of His people. It is, as one writer has put it, “the living out of the revelation of God by His people.” A servant who carries Tradition, therefore, is not carrying a museum. He is carrying a life.

“Concerning the teachings of the Church, whether publicly proclaimed or reserved to members of the household of faith, we have received some from written sources, while others have been given to us secretly through apostolic tradition. Both sources have equal force in true religion. No one would deny either source — no one, at any rate, who is even slightly familiar with the ordinances of the Church.” — St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit, ch. 27

The Tradition We Have Received — and How

When we open the New Testament and look carefully, we find that the Apostles themselves speak of Tradition as something with weight and authority. St. Paul does not hide it or apologize for it; he commends it. To the Thessalonians he writes, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). The Apostle carefully names two channels by which the teaching has come to them

- by word, which is the oral handing-on, and
- by epistle, which is what we now call Scripture

and he places both under one command: stand fast and hold.

He repeats the same note in the next chapter:

“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 he received from us” (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

And to the Corinthians he writes with evident warmth,

“Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions as I delivered them to you” (1 Corinthians 11:2).

A tradition handed on by an Apostle under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is not a human invention to be outgrown; it is, in the Apostle's own words, something to be kept.

How much, then, has been handed to us in this way? Our Lord, Jesus Christ, ministered publicly for approximately three years. It has been pointed out that if every event recorded in the four Gospels were laid end to end, the written record would cover perhaps eighteen days of those three years. St. John himself closes his Gospel with the admission that “there are also many other things that Jesus

did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). And after His Resurrection, the Lord remained with His disciples for forty days, “speaking of things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3) — forty days whose content is almost entirely absent from the written Scriptures. Many times we read in the Holy Gospels about our Lord Jesus Christ teaching the people in the synagogues, (Matthew 9:35; Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:15; 13:22; 19:47,) but the Holy Bible did not document any of these blessed teachings. Where did all these Divine teachings go? They did not vanish. They were handed on! Through the Liturgy, the sacramental life, the prayer of the Church, the discipline of the Apostles and it is still in our hands.

This is why St. John writes to his readers that there is much he would rather speak “face to face” than with “pen and ink” (2 John 12; 3 John 13–14). This is why St. Paul instructs Timothy: “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). Scripture itself bears witness to the existence and authority of Holy Tradition — not as a rival to the written Word, but as its living context, the air in which the written Word was first read and is still to be read.

Traditions of Men and the Tradition of the Lord

Because the word “tradition” can name more than one thing, the Lord Himself gives us a discipline for distinguishing. In the fifteenth chapter of St. Matthew, the Pharisees come to Him and ask, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” The Lord answers them not with a defense but with a correction: “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:2–3). In the parallel passage in St. Mark, He names the error plainly: “Laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men — the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do” (Mark 7:8).

The Apostle Paul echoes the warning in the letter to the Colossians: “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:8). There are traditions, and there are traditions. A tradition that would lay aside the commandment of God in order to maintain a human preference is a tradition of men, and the Lord rebukes it. A tradition handed down “from the Lord” through the Apostles and kept in the Church by the Holy Spirit is the Tradition of Christ, and we are to hold fast to it.

This discipline is not given to make us suspicious of everything we have received; it is given to help us know why we have received what we have received. The servant learns to ask of any usage in the Church: is this from the Lord, through the Apostles, in the life of the Church? Or is this a habit of our own time, a preference of our own culture, attached to the Gospel but not part of it? A shepherd who cannot tell the two apart will either cling to what must be let go or let go of what must be kept. Either one is a wound to the flock.

Scripture Itself Bears Witness to Holy Tradition

It is worth noticing how often the Scriptures themselves reach outside themselves and acknowledge what has been handed down orally. In the Old Testament the tradition of sacrifice is already in place by the fourth chapter of Genesis, when Abel brings “the firstborn of his flock and of their fat” (Genesis 4:4) — no command to sacrifice has yet been recorded, yet the practice is already known. The priesthood and the tithe are handed on to us through the figure of Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18–20) and through the vow of Jacob (Genesis 28:22), centuries before the Mosaic law will codify them. Circumcision is handed to Abraham (Genesis 17:9–14) as an oral tradition that will mark a whole people. Joseph knows adultery to be wickedness (Genesis 39:7–10) long before any written law forbids it. The people of Israel know the Sabbath (Exodus 16:27–28) before Sinai.

The New Testament acknowledges the same reality. The epistle of Jude preserves for us the dispute of the Archangel Michael with the devil over the body of Moses, an account found nowhere in the canonical Old Testament but “handed down” in the memory of Israel and accepted, under the Spirit, by the Apostle: “Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you’” (Jude 1:9). Jude likewise preserves the prophecy of Enoch: “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all” (Jude 1:14–15). The book of Revelation preserves the tradition of Balaam's counsel to Balak — a detail not present in the Old Testament narrative of Numbers 22–25 in the exact form the Revelation reports it — as evidence of a known, received account within the people of God (Revelation 2:14).

The Scriptures, in other words, presuppose a larger living memory of the people of God within which they themselves were written and are rightly read. The Bible does not sit upon a table in the desert; it sits in the lap of the Church.

The Total Rejection of Holy Tradition

For radical theologians of the sixteenth century, (the Anabaptists,) every individual had the right to interpret Scripture as he or she pleased, subject to guidance of the Holy Spirit. The way was thus opened for individualism, with the private judgment of the individual raised above the corporate judgment of the Church. Thus the radicals rejected the practice of infant baptism as non-Scriptural. Similarly, doctrines such as the Trinity and the divinity of our Lord, Jesus Christ, were rejected as resting upon inadequate Holy Scriptural foundations. The radicals had no place whatsoever for Holy Tradition.

Sebastian Franck wrote in 1503: “foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory – of whom not one even knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of Antichrist.” (Alister E. McGrath, ‘Christian theology: an introduction’. Blackwell Publishers)

The Dual-Source Theory of Holy Tradition

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a different understanding of Holy Tradition from that noted above developed. “Tradition” was understood to be a separate and distinct source of revelation, in addition to Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture, it was argued, was silent on a number of points – but God had providentially arranged for a second source of revelation to supplement this deficiency: a stream

of unwritten Holy Tradition, going back to the Apostles themselves. This Holy Tradition was passed from one generation to another within the Church. This is a dual-source theory of theology: theology is based on two distinct sources, Holy Scripture and unwritten Holy Tradition. A belief, which is not to be found in Holy Scripture, may thus, on the basis of this dual-source theory, be justified by an appeal to an unwritten Holy Tradition.

This position was defended strongly by the Council of Trent, which was charged with defending the Roman Catholic position against the threat posed by the Reformation. Trent ruled that Holy Scripture could not be regarded as the only source of revelation; Holy Tradition was a vital supplement, which Protestants irresponsibly denied. “All saving truths and rules of conduct ... are contained in the written books and in unwritten traditions, received from the mouth of Christ Himself or from the apostles themselves.” Interestingly, however, the Second Vatican Council, (1962-65,) seems to move away from this approach, in favor of the “traditional interpretation of Holy Scripture” approach. (Alister E. McGrath, ‘Christian Theology: an introduction. Blackwell Publishers)

One Living Tradition: Scripture in the Heart of the Church

The Orthodox Church has never held either of the two extreme positions that have marked the history of Western thought. She has not held that Scripture stands alone in total rejection of Holy Tradition, where scripture be interpreted by any individual by the light of his own judgment; nor has she held that the Dual Source Theory of Holy Tradition which stands beside Scripture as a separate source of revelation, capable of introducing teachings for which the Scriptures do not vouch. Her vision has always been older and wider than either.

The vision of the Fathers is that of one living Tradition, within which the Scriptures have their home. Scripture is at the heart of this Tradition; but around Scripture, breathing the same Spirit, are the Divine Liturgy in which the Scriptures are first read, the Creed in which their great confession is summarized, the sacramental life in which their promises are met, the feasts and fasts by which their seasons are kept, the Canons by which their discipline is maintained, the lives of the saints in which their word becomes flesh, and the writings of the Fathers by which each generation is helped to read them well. Remove the Scriptures, and Tradition loses its heart. Remove the Tradition, and the Scriptures are torn out of the only context in which they were ever meant to be read.

“For the Orthodox Christian, there is one Tradition, the Tradition of the Church, incorporating the 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.” — attributed to St. Irenaeus of Lyons

“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.” — St. Athanasius the Great, Letter to Serapion on the Holy Spirit

Pope Shenouda III gathered the same teaching for his own generation of Coptic servants: “New issues

arise in each generation that require the opinion of the Church so that people do not get confused. The Church, therefore, gives the opinion of religion on these matters through her authority of teaching and legislation by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Through successive generations the Church teaching in a certain generation turns into Tradition inherited by the following generations.” Tradition, in this sense, is not static. It is not a fossil to be dusted. It is the ongoing life of a living Body that breathes the same Spirit who spoke the Scriptures and who still speaks through the councils and Fathers of His Church.

Living Inside the Tradition

What does it mean, then, for us — servants standing in our own generation — to live inside the Tradition of the Church? It means, first, that we do not stand alone. We are not the first to read these Scriptures, to sing these hymns, to bow before this altar. A great cloud of witnesses has stood where we now stand, and they have left us their reading, their prayer, their lives. We are free to drink from this well. Humility opens it; pride closes it again.

It means, second, that the Tradition is to be lived and not merely discussed. The Fathers did not consider themselves to have understood Tradition because they could argue for it; they considered themselves to have understood Tradition because they were shaped by it. A servant will know the Tradition of the Church chiefly by standing often in the Divine Liturgy, by praying the Agpeya, by keeping the fasts with his parish, by reading the Scriptures in the order the Church reads them, by sitting at the feet of the Fathers in their writings, by confessing honestly, by communing frequently, and by letting all of this slowly reshape the interior of his life. Argument is not the first way the Tradition is learned. Worship is.

It means, third, that we serve with great tenderness when we meet brothers and sisters for whom “tradition” is a difficult word. Many of them have known only the distorted versions of it and have understandably recoiled. Our task, as servants, is not to win an argument but to open a door. We do that best not by quoting paragraphs at anyone, but by letting them meet the Tradition where it actually lives — in the Liturgy, in the silence of the Eucharistic altar, in the patience of the fasting Church, in the face of a father who prays.

And it means, finally, that we carry a great treasure with a great seriousness. The baton has been placed in our hand. It was placed in St. Paul's hand; he placed it in Timothy's; Timothy placed it in others who were “able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). We stand now in that long line. May we run our leg of the race faithfully, and may we hand on, undropped, what we have received — that the generation of our own children may receive it, and the generation after them, until the Lord comes.



Review Questions

1. True or false? The transition of man comes before that of God. (A: False)
2. Should the Traditions only be taken from Scripture? (A: No, they are also passed

down by the Apostles.)

3. True or false? We believe in the dual source theory of Holy Tradition. (A: True)
4. What did the Council of Trent believe? (A: Trent ruled that Holy Scripture could not be regarded as the only source of revelation.)
5. Where does “Tradition” come from? (A: The word ‘Tradition’ comes from the Latin ‘Traditio.’)



Books & References

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:2; 15:3 • 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6 • 2 Timothy 2:2 • Matthew 15:2–3 • Mark 7:8 • Colossians 2:8 • Jude 1:9, 14–15 • Revelation 2:14 • Genesis 4:4; 14:18–20; 17:9–14; 28:22; 39:7–10 • Exodus 16:27–28 • John 21:25 • 2 John 12 • 3 John 13–14 • Acts 1:3

Further Reading:

St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit, chapter 27.

- St. Athanasius the Great, Letter to Serapion on the Holy Spirit.
- St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, Book III.
- Pope Shenouda III, Comparative Theology.
- Fr. John Whiteford, Sola Scriptura: An Orthodox Analysis of the Cornerstone of Reformation Theology (Conciliar Press, 1996).
- Fr. Daniel Anderson, What We Believe (Conciliar Press, 1997).
- Alister E. McGrath, Christian Theology: An Introduction (Blackwell Publishers).
- <https://cdn.suscopts.org/files/messages/lectures/holylecture1.pdf>
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Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.