

Holy Tradition

One of the distinctive characteristics of the Holy Orthodox Church is its changelessness, its loyalty to the past, its sense of living continuity with the ancient Church. This idea of living continuity may be summed up in one word: Tradition. As St. John of Damascus says, We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set, but we keep the Tradition, just as we received it [On the Holy Icons, II, 12]. To an Orthodox Christian, Tradition means the Holy Bible; it means the Creed; it means the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils and the writings of the Fathers; it means the Canons, the Service Books, the Holy Icons, etc. In essence, it means the whole system of doctrine, ecclesiastical government, worship and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages [Timothy Ware, The Orthodox Church, p.204].

We take special note that for the Orthodox, the Holy Bible forms apart of Holy Tradition, but does not lie outside of it. One would be in error to suppose that Scripture and Tradition are two separate and distinct sources of Christian Faith, as some do, since there is, in reality, only one source; and the Holy Bible exists and found its formulation within Tradition.

As Orthodox, however, while giving it due respect, we realize that not everything received from the past is of equal value. The Holy Scriptures, the Creed and the dogmatic and doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils hold the primary place in Holy Tradition and cannot be discarded or revised. The other parts of Holy Tradition are not placed on an equal level, nor do they possess the same authority as the above. The decrees of the Councils since the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) obviously do not stand on the same level as the Nicene Creed, nor do the writings of, for example, the Byzantine theologians, hold equal rank with St. John's Gospel.

Here we must also distinguish between Tradition and traditions. At the Council of Carthage in 257, one of the Bishops remarked, The Lord said, I am Truth. He did not say, I am custom [The Opinions of the Bishops on the Baptizing of Heretics, 30]. Many traditions that have been handed down are merely cultural variations, theological or pious opinions, or simply plain mistakes. [One need only recall the whole problem of the reform of the Russian liturgical books under Patriarch Nikon and the ensuing Old Believer schism to see the truth of this.]

Orthodox loyalty to Tradition [the things of the past] is not something mechanical or lifeless, however. Tradition is a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit, as Bishop Kallistos affirms. Tradition is not only kept by the Church it lives in the Church, it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church [The Orthodox Church, p.206]. Thus Tradition must be seen and experienced from within. Tradition is a living experience of the Holy Spirit in the present. While inwardly unchanging (since God does not change), Tradition constantly assumes new forms, supplementing the old, but not superceding it.

Our Lord tells us that when the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth (John 16:13) and this promise forms the basis of Orthodox respect for Holy Tradition. Thus, as Fr. Georges Florovsky expresses this idea: Tradition is the witness of the Spirit; the Spirit's unceasing revelation and preaching of good things.... To accept and understand Tradition we must live within the Church, we must be conscious of the grace-giving presence of the Lord in it; we must feel the breath of the Holy [Spirit] in it.... Tradition is not only a protective, conservative principle; it is, primarily, the principle of growth and regeneration.... Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words [Sobornost: the Catholicity of the Church, in The Church of God, pp. 64-5].

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