

## The Divine Liturgy: Heaven on Earth

*“The entire Divine Liturgy – as both an image of the Kingdom which is to come as well as a real and actual participation in that Kingdom – is illuminated by the light of Christ.”*

### *Tradition*

Holy Tradition is the deposit of faith given by Jesus Christ to the Apostles and passed on in the Church from one generation to the next without addition, alteration or subtraction. Vladimir Lossky has famously described the Tradition as “the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.” It is dynamic in application, yet unchanging in dogma. It is growing in expression, yet ever the same in essence.

Unlike many conceptions of tradition in popular understanding, the Orthodox Church does not regard Holy Tradition as something which grows and expands over time, forming a collection of practices and doctrines which accrue, gradually becoming something more developed and eventually unrecognizable to the first Christians. Rather, Holy Tradition is that same faith which Christ taught to the Apostles and which they gave to their disciples, preserved in the whole Church and especially in its leadership through Apostolic Succession.

Etymologically, the Greek word is *παράδοσις*, and the Latin word is *traditio*. These mean: handing down, bequeathing, transmitting; handing over, transferring.

### *Holy Tradition in the Bible*

As understood by many protestants (especially those of the more evangelical tradition), Tradition stands in contrast to Scripture. However, there are number references in Holy Scripture to Holy Tradition. For example:

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:1-4; Note: In this instance, the oral word preceded the written word. Hence Holy Tradition).*

*Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book (John 20:30-31).*

*Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:25).*

*I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world (1 Corinthians 5:9-10; Note: Here Paul makes a reference to a letter written to Corinth before the letter we know today as 1st Corinthians. This letter is unknown to modern scholars).*

*Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you (1 Corinthians 11:2).*

*And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16; Note: The “epistle from Laodicea” is not available to us today is written form).*

*So then, brothers, stand firm, and cling to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter (2 Thessalonians 2:15).*

*Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us (2 Thessalonians 3:6).*

### *The Orthodox Church and Faith are “Traditional”*

All of the Orthodox faith is “traditional.” Everything – beliefs and practices, private and communal – is according to “tradition.”

Tradition – in Greek, παράδοσις, and in Latin traditio – means “that which is handed down.”

Our Orthodox Tradition – most properly referred to as “Sacred Tradition” – is that which has been “handed down” over 2,000 years, and indeed over 3,800 years from Abraham to Moses, to Jesus Christ, to the Apostles, to the holy fathers and mothers of the Orthodox Church.

Two important qualities of our Tradition are changelessness and consistency.

We speak of that which “Christ taught, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers maintain.” This is our Tradition, and there is no new tradition nor is there in evolving tradition in the Orthodox faith.

There is a misunderstanding among the contemporary convert Orthodox population, that there is “tradition with a capital ‘T’ and tradition with a lower-case ‘t’.” The implication is that the “capital ‘T’ traditions are unchangeable but that the lower-case ‘t’ traditions” are flexible or dispensable.

*Similarly, there are not “Greek” (Byzantine) versus “OCA” (Slavic) practices; All Orthodox have the same practices although not all Orthodox Christians regard them, or conform to them, equally.*

This is not correct; all Orthodox Tradition is consistent and unchanging. Within that Tradition there are dogmas and practices: these are constant and eternal.

The dogmas are the articles of faith – principally expressed in the Symbol of the Faith, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed – which are Divine, eternal, and immutable.

The practices are the actions that are our customary manner of actively living the Orthodox faith, which are likewise constant.

The dogmas are the criteria by which we measure our personal beliefs, and thus we can use to determine whether we have chosen to be Orthodox Christians. We recite the Creed, containing the dogmas, at our Baptism and Chrismation.

The practices are the manner in which we choose to actively live the life of an Orthodox Christian, and therefore we freely struggle to conform our personal life to them. As fallen human beings we

labor, battle, and wrestle *with ourselves* to increasingly adapt our daily lives to Orthopraxia (“right practice”).

**N**o Orthodox tradition – dogma or practice – can ever be dismissed or lessened or otherwise modified by any bishop, priest, or faithful person.

**A**t the same time, we hold ourselves more strictly (ἀκρίβεια) or with judicious economy (οἰκονομία) to the traditional practices of the Orthodox faith.

**T**raditional practices range from those absolutely essential for salvation – Prayer, Fasting, and Almsgiving – to those seemingly (yet falsely) assumed to be of mere cultural significance – sign of the Cross, veneration of icons, prostrations and bows, head coverings (veil, scarf), manner of dress (clothing).

**T**he traditional practices are changeless and consistent throughout the ages. Adherence to them varies from person to person, waxing and waning over the time of our lives.

**A**dhering to these practices does not guarantee salvation and life in the Kingdom of heaven.

**I**gnoring these practices does not decisively lead to eternal suffering in Hell.

**O**n the other hand, conforming to these practices enables us – helps us – to acquire the Holy Spirit, and acquisition of the Holy Spirit is the only way to attain salvation and eternal life.

**T**o use a metaphorical example, whether I am dieting or not does mean that I am losing or gaining weight. But if I wish to lose weight, I must diet and exercise properly.

## *The “Sign of the Cross”*

### MAKING THE SIGN OF THE CROSS



With the Right hand, place the Thumb, First and Second finger together. This represents the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – One God.

The last two fingers are placed to the palm of the hand. This represents the two natures of Jesus Christ, both fully human and fully Divine, who came down to earth (2 fingers placed in palm) for the salvation of mankind.

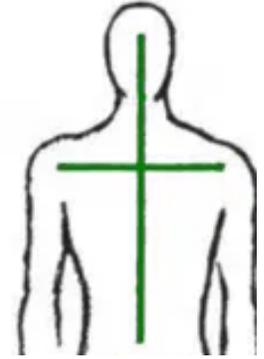
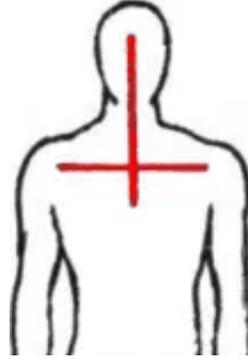
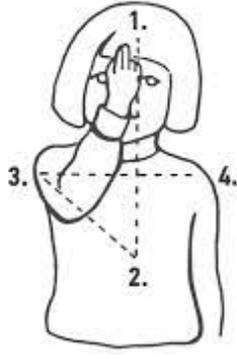
With the Right hand in this position:

- . Touch the forehead first. Then,
- . Touch the center of the chest. Then,
- . Touch the right shoulder. Then, lastly,
- . Touch the left shoulder.

The significance of this action is blessing one’s self in the name of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It is the physical action of dedicating one’s entire being to the Will of God. Often the crossing is accompanied with the words, “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”.

The movement of the hand in the Orthodox Tradition can also be thought of as a personal prayer that is aligned with the wisdom and the teachings of the Apostles, Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; and, Luke 10:27, “I will love the Lord my God with all of my mind (touch the forehead); all of my soul (touch the center of chest); all of my strength (touch the right shoulder); and, all of my heart (end on the heart)”.

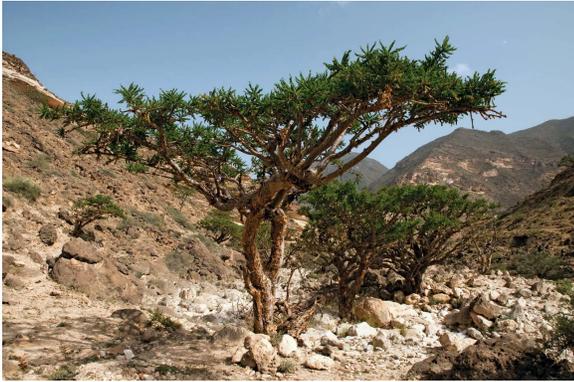
Orthodox Christians end the sign of the Cross over their heart.



*Incorrect*

*Correct*

## *Incense*





### *Veneration of Icons*

When we approach an icon, we “greet” (ἀσπάσωμεν) the Lord, His Mother, or His Saint(s), we do so with a kiss (ἀσπασμός). Only if an icon is out of reach to be kissed, we may touch it piously with our fingers configured as though we were making the Sign of the Cross.

Veneration (in Greek, προσκύνησις, and in Latin veneratio) is the manner of showing great respect and love for someone (or something) holy. It is to treat something or someone with reverence, deep respect, and honor.

*Veneration is absolutely distinct from worship* (in Greek, λατρεία, and in Latin adoratio): worship is the reverence and adoration offered to a divine being; we confess our belief in “One God” thus in one, singular *divine being*. We worship God, and God alone.

The “holy kiss” is an action firmly rooted in Orthodox Tradition. When we enter into an Orthodox church we customarily kiss in veneration the icons in the narthex. We then proceed into the sanctuary and kiss the icon in the center. Following this, we kiss the icon of Christ, then the icon of the Theotokos, before the iconostásion. We may additionally continue in a clockwise direction to venerate the Crucifixion, and other icons on the walls of the sanctuary.

Our act of veneration includes both a kiss and also a “prostration.” To make a prostration we place our body in a reverential position of obeisance (obedience). A prostration may be by bowing – involving the upper part of the body bending down, even to the extent of touching the ground – or it may be a complete bending of the whole body down to the ground.

This shows love and respect. The faithful may also kiss the Priest’s right hand from time to time. This, too, is an act of veneration. The people are venerating the High Priesthood of Christ, of which the parish priest is simply a participant.

In practice, we venerate an icon as follows:

**M**ake two metánoias: cross yourself and bow, and again cross yourself and bow,

**K**iss the icon,

**M**ake one metánoia: cross yourself and bow a third time.

We might also light a candle and place it before the icon, and we customarily offer a brief, quiet prayer – perhaps reciting the Troparion of the Saint.

When we venerate an icon we kiss only the foot or hand, but never the face of the Lord, the Theotokos, or the Saint. We might also kiss near the figure.

We also venerate – kiss – the right hand of a bishop or priest whenever they bless us. In doing so, we are not sowing honor to the man but to Christ, the one and only High Priest, Whom the man has been ordained – set aside and consecrated – to represent as a “living icon.”

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*The Inner Meaning of Tradition – “Guard the deposit” (1 Timothy 6:20).*

*“Holy Tradition: The Source of the Orthodox Faith” by Bishop Kallistos Ware*

Orthodox history is marked outwardly by a series of sudden breaks: the capture of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem by Arab Mohammedans; the burning of Kiev by the Mongols; the two sacks of Constantinople; the October Revolution in Russia. Yet these events, while they have transformed the external appearance of the Orthodox world, have never broken the inward continuity of the Orthodox Church.

The thing that first strikes a stranger on encountering Orthodoxy is usually its air of antiquity, its apparent changelessness. He finds that Orthodox still baptize by threefold immersion, as in the primitive Church; they still bring babies and small children to receive Holy Communion; in the Liturgy the deacon still cries out: “The doors! The doors!” — recalling the early days when the church’s entrance was jealously guarded, and none but members of the Christian family could attend the family worship; the Creed is still recited without any additions.

These are but a few outward examples of something which pervades every aspect of Orthodox life. Recently when two Orthodox scholars were asked to summarize the distinctive characteristic of their Church, they both pointed to the same thing: its changelessness, its determination to remain loyal to the past, its sense of living continuity with the Church of ancient times (See Panagiotis Bratsiotis and Georges Florovsky, in *Orthodoxy, A Faith and Order Dialogue*, Geneva, 1960). Two and a half centuries before, the Eastern Patriarchs said exactly the same to the Non-Jurors:

*“We preserve the Doctrine of the Lord uncorrupted, and firmly adhere to the Faith he delivered to us, and keep it free from blemish and diminution, as a Royal Treasure, and a monument of great price, neither adding anything, nor taking anything from it” (Letter of 1718, in G. Williams, *The Orthodox Church of the East at the Eighteenth Century*, p. 17).*

This idea of living continuity is summed up for the Orthodox in the one word Tradition. “We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set,” wrote John of Damascus, “but we keep the Tradition, just as we received it” (*On Icons, II, 12 (P. G. XCIV, 1297B)*).

Orthodox are always talking about Tradition. What do they mean by the word? A tradition, says the Oxford Dictionary, is an opinion, belief, or custom handed down from ancestors to posterity. Christian Tradition, in that case, is the faith which Jesus Christ imparted to the Apostles, and which since the Apostles’ time has been handed down from generation to generation in the Church (Compare Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3).

**B**ut to an Orthodox Christian, Tradition means something more concrete and specific than this. It means the books of the 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 — in fact, the whole system of doctrine, Church government, worship, and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages. The Orthodox Christian of today sees himself as heir and guardian to a great inheritance received from the past, and he believes that it is his duty to transmit this inheritance unimpaired to the future.

**N**ote that the Bible forms a part of Tradition. Sometimes Tradition is defined as “*the oral teaching of Christ, not recorded in writing by his immediate disciples*” (*Oxford Dictionary*). Not only non-Orthodox but many Orthodox writers have adopted this way of speaking, treating Scripture and Tradition as two different things, two distinct sources of the Christian faith. But in reality there is only one source, since Scripture exists within Tradition. To separate and contrast the two is to impoverish the idea of both alike.

**O**rthodox, while reverencing this inheritance from the past, are also well aware that not everything received from the past is of equal value. Among the various elements of Tradition, a unique pre-eminence belongs to the Bible, to the Creed, to the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils: these things the Orthodox accept as something absolute and unchanging, something which cannot be cancelled or revised.

**T**he other parts of Tradition do not have quite the same authority. The decrees of Jassy or Jerusalem do not stand on the same level as the Nicene Creed, nor do the writings of an Athanasius, or a Symeon the New Theologian, occupy the same position as the Gospel of Saint John.

**N**ot everything received from the past is of equal value, nor is everything received from the past necessarily true. As one of the bishops remarked at the Council of Carthage in AD 257: “*The Lord said, ‘I am truth.’ He did not say, ‘I am custom’*” (*The Opinions of the Bishops On the Baptizing of Heretics, 30*).

**T**here is a difference between “Tradition” and “traditions:” many traditions which the past has handed down are human and accidental — pious opinions (or worse), but not a true part of the one Tradition, the essential Christian message.

**I**t is necessary to question the past. In Byzantine and post-Byzantine times, Orthodox have not always been sufficiently critical in their attitude to the past, and the result has frequently been stagnation. Today this uncritical attitude can no longer be maintained. Higher standards, of scholarship, increasing contacts with western Christians, the inroads of secularism and atheism, have forced Orthodox in this present century to look more closely at their inheritance and to distinguish more carefully between Tradition and traditions.

**T**he task of discrimination is not always easy. It is necessary to avoid alike the error of the Old Believers and the error of the “Living Church:” the one party fell into an extreme conservatism which suffered no change whatever in traditions, the other into a Modernism or theological liberalism which undermined Tradition.

Yet despite certain manifest handicaps, the Orthodox of today are perhaps in a better position to discriminate aright than their predecessors have been for many centuries; and often it is precisely their contact with the west which is helping them to see more and more clearly what is essential in their own inheritance.

True Orthodox fidelity to the past must always be a creative fidelity; for true Orthodoxy can never rest satisfied with a barren “theology of repetition,” which, parrot-like, repeats accepted formulae without striving to understand what lies behind them.

Loyalty to Tradition, properly understood, is not something mechanical, a dull process of handing down what has been received. An Orthodox thinker must see Tradition from within, he must enter into its inner spirit. In order to live within Tradition, it is not enough simply to give intellectual assent to a system of doctrine; for Tradition is far more than a set of abstract propositions — it is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit.

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 conception of Tradition is not static but dynamic, not a dead acceptance of the past but a living experience of the Holy Spirit in the present.

Tradition, while inwardly changeless (for God does not change), is constantly assuming new forms, which supplement the old without superseding them. Orthodox often speak as if the period of doctrinal formulation were wholly at an end, yet this is not the case. Perhaps in our own day new Ecumenical Councils will meet, and Tradition will be enriched by fresh statements of the faith.

This idea of Tradition as a living thing has been well expressed by Georges Florovsky: “*Tradition is the witness of the Spirit; the Spirit’s unceasing revelation and preaching of good tidings ... 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 Ghost 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*, edited E. L. Mascall, pp. 64-65. Compare G. Florovsky, “*Saint Gregory Palamas and the Tradition of the Fathers*” in the periodical *Sobornost*, series 4, no. 4, 1961, pp. 165-76; and V. Lossky, “*Tradition and Traditions,*” in *Ouspensky and Lossky, The Meaning of Icons*, pp. 13-24. To both these essays I am heavily indebted).

Tradition is the witness of the Spirit: in the words of Christ, “*When the Spirit of truth has come, he will guide you into all truth*” (*John 16:13*). It is this divine promise that forms the basis of the Orthodox devotion to Tradition.

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## Tradition in the Orthodox Church George Bebis, Ph.D.

### *Terminology and Meaning*

The term “tradition” comes from the Latin *traditio*, but the Greek term is *paradosis* and the verb is *paradido*. It means giving, offering, delivering, performing charity. In theological terms it means any teaching or practice which has been transmitted from generation to generation throughout the life of the Church. More exactly, *paradosis* is the very life of the Holy Trinity as it has been revealed by Christ Himself and testified by the Holy Spirit.

The roots and the foundations of this sacred tradition can be found in the Scriptures. For it is only in the Scriptures that we can see and live the presence of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Saint John the Evangelist speaks about the manifestation of the Holy Trinity:

*“For the Life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us” (1 John 1:2).*

The essence of Christian tradition is described by Saint Paul, who writes:

*“But now in Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far apart from us have been brought very close, by the blood of Christ. For He is peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in His own person the hostility caused by the rules and decrees of the Law. This was to create one single man in Himself out of the two of them and by restoring peace through the Cross, to unite them both in a single body and reconcile them with God. In His own person He killed the hostility. Through Him, both of us have in one Spirit our way to come to the Father” (Ephesians 2:13-14).*

He also makes clear that this Trinitarian doctrine must be accepted by all Christians:

*“If any man preach any other gospel to you than you have received (parelavete) let him be condemned” (Galatians 1:8-9).*

Speaking about the Holy Eucharist, which is a manifestation of the Holy Trinity, he writes:

*“For I have received (parelavon) of the Lord that which I also delivered to you” (paredoka) (1 Corinthians 11:23).*

Again speaking about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Saint Paul writes:

*“For I delivered to you (paredoka) first of all that which I also received” (parelavon).*

Finally he admonishes:

*“Brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions (tas paradosis) which you have been taught, whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15).*

The sole source and cause and principle of the Trinitarian unity is the Father Himself (*cf. Ephesians 4:4-6*).

### *The Apostolic Tradition*

Theologians call this teaching of the Scriptures “the Apostolic Tradition.” It encompasses what the Apostles lived, saw, witnessed and later recorded in the books of the new Testament. The bishops and presbyters, whom the Apostles appointed as their successors, followed their teaching

to the letter. Those who deviated from this apostolic teaching were cut off from the Church. They were considered heretics and schismatics, for they believed differently from the Apostles and their successors, thus separating themselves from the Church. This brings into focus the Church as the center of unity of all Christians. This is the ecclesiastical or ecclesiological characteristic of Tradition. The Church is the image and reflection of the Holy Trinity since the three persons of the Holy Trinity live, indwell, and act in the Church. The Father offers His love, the Son offers His obedience, the Holy Spirit His comfort. Only in the historical Church can we see, feel, and live the presence of the Holy Trinity in the World. In describing this reality Saint Paul writes:

*“So he came and proclaimed the good news: peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were nearby; for through him we both alike have access to the Father in the one Spirit. Thus you are no longer aliens in a foreign land, but fellow-citizens with God’s people, members of God’s household. You are built upon the foundation laid by the Apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus Himself is the cornerstone. In him the whole building is bonded together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you too are being built with all the rest into a spiritual dwelling of God” (Ephesians 2:17-22).*

The unity of the Holy Trinity, being the fundamental reality in the Church and of the Church, also requires a real unity among all its members. All the members of the Church live in the bond of love and unity through the Holy Trinity. This truth is described by Saint Peter:

*“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of the darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2: 9-10).*

This Church was established as a historical reality on the day of Pentecost, with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles:

*“While the day of Pentecost was running its course they were all together in one place, when suddenly there came from the sky a noise like that of a strong driving wind, which filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues like flames of fire, dispersed among them and resting on each one. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them power of utterance” (Acts 2: 1-4).*

Only in this Church, where the Holy Trinity lives and acts constantly could the teaching of Christ, the very revelation of truth, as received and transmitted by the Apostles, abide and be sustained. Thus truth in its fullness does not exist outside the Church, for there is neither Scripture, nor Tradition. This is why Saint Paul admonishes the Galatians that even if an angel from heaven preaches another gospel to them, he must be condemned:

*“If any man preach any other gospel to you than that you have received (parelavete) let him be condemned” (Galatians 1:8-9).*

And he writes to his disciple Timothy to follow strictly the “precepts of our faith” and the “sound instructions” he received from him and avoid “godless myths” (1 Tim. 4: 4-7). He also admonishes the Colossians to avoid “merely human injunctions and teachings” (2: 22), and to follow Christ:

*“Therefore, since Jesus was delivered to you as Christ and Lord, live your lives in union with Him. Be rooted in Him; be built in Him; be consolidated in the faith you were taught; let your hearts overflow with thankfulness. Be on your guard; do not let your minds be captured by hollow and delusive speculations, based on traditions of man-made teaching and centered on the elemental spirits of the universe and not on Christ. For it is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied, and in Him you have been brought to completion” (Colossians 2: 6-8).*

This teaching or Apostolic Tradition was transmitted from the Apostles themselves to their successors, the bishops and the presbyters. Saint Clement, Bishop of Rome (second century A.D.), and probably a disciple of the Apostles himself, described this historical truth:

*“The Apostles preached to us the Gospel received from Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was God’s Ambassador. Christ, in other words, comes with a message from God, and the Apostles with a message from Christ. Both these orderly arrangements, therefore, originate from the will of God. And so, after receiving their instructions and being fully assured through the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as confirmed in faith by the word of God, they went forth, equipped with the fullness of the Holy Spirit, to preach the good news that the Kingdom of God was close at hand. From land to land, accordingly, and from city to city they preached; and from among their earliest converts appointed men whom they had tested by the Spirit to act as bishops and deacons for the future believers” (Letter to the Corinthians, ch. 42).*

One can clearly see how the message of salvation originating from God the Father was taught by Jesus Christ, witnessed to by the Holy Spirit, preached by the Apostles and was transmitted by them to the Church through the clergy they themselves appointed. This became the “*unerring tradition of the Apostolic preaching*” as it was expressed by Eusebius of Caesarea, bishop of the fourth century, who is considered the “*father*” of Church History (cf. Church History, IV, 8).

### *The Patristic Tradition*

From what has been said so far, it can be seen that there is no theological distinctions or differences or divisions within the Tradition of the Church. It could be said that Tradition, as an historical event, begins with the Apostolic preaching and is found in Scriptures, but it is kept, treasured, interpreted, and explained to the Church by the Holy Fathers, the successors of the Apostles. Using the Greek term *Pateres tes Ecclesias*, the Fathers of the Church, this “interpretive” part of the Apostolic preaching is called “Patristic Tradition.”

The Fathers, men of extraordinary holiness and trusted orthodoxy in doctrine, enjoyed the acceptance and respect of the universal Church by witnessing the message of the Gospel, living and explaining it to posterity. Thus, Apostolic Preaching or Tradition is organically associated with the Patristic Tradition and vice versa. This point must be stressed since many theologians in the Western churches either distinguish between Apostolic Tradition and Patristic Tradition, or completely reject Patristic Tradition.

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” (cf. *Saint Irenaeus, Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*,

98). Saint Athanasius, the Great “Pillar of Orthodoxy,” who was bishop of Alexandria during the fourth century, gives the most appropriate definition of the Church’s Tradition:

“Let us look at the very tradition, teaching, and faith of the catholic Church from the very beginning, which the Logos gave (edoken), the Apostles preached (ekeryxan), and the Fathers preserved (ephylaxan). Upon this the Church is founded (tethemeliotai)” (*cf. Saint Athanasius, First Letter to Serapion, 28*).

In retrospect, Tradition is founded upon the Holy Trinity, it constantly proclaims the Gospel of Christ, it is found within the boundaries of the Christian Church, and it is expounded by the Fathers.

### *Universality and Timelessness of Tradition*

Another characteristic still needs to be added, namely that the Tradition of the Church is universal in space and time. Saint Vincent of Lerins, a bishop and writer in France during the fifth century, writes that “we must hold what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all” (Common, 2). 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 (phronema) of the whole Church against all heresies and schisms of all times.

It is important to emphasize both the temporality as well as the timelessness, two fundamental aspects of Holy Tradition. The late Fr. Georges Florovsky wrote that:

*“Tradition is not a principle striving to restore the past, using the past as a criterion for the present. Such a conception of tradition is rejected by history itself and by the consciousness of the Orthodox Church. Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words. Tradition is a charismatic, not a historical event” (“The Catholicity of the Church” in Bible, Church, Tradition, p. 47).*

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 Saint 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' (Romans 15: 29), both in this world and in the world to come.*" (Saint Basil of Caesaria, *On the Holy Spirit, XV*).

### *Tradition and traditions*

This description by Saint 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 metamorphosis, 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. Some theologians speak about traditions with a small “t,” as being the written or unwritten practices of the daily Christian life, in contrast with Tradition with capital “T,” which encompasses the basic doctrines of revelation and our salvation in Christ.

This type of distinction is rather misleading. Tradition and traditions are the integral parts of the life of the Church and they express the totality of the Christian way of life which leads to salvation. The doctrine of incarnation, the historical truth of the crucifixion and resurrection, the Eucharist, the sign of the cross, the threefold immersion in the baptismal font, the honor and respect due to the Virgin Mary and to the saints of the Church, are all important for the Christian, who wants to find himself in the “perimeter” of salvation in Christ. This is what the Church has taught through the centuries. “*Therefore we must consider the Tradition of the Church trustworthy,*” Saint John Chrysostom writes, “*it is Tradition, seek no more*” (*Second Letter to Thessal.: Homily*).

### *The Ecumenical Councils*

As has already been noted, the authority, the power, and the impact of Tradition are found in the Scriptures and the Patristic teaching as a total and unified expression of the revelation of the Holy Trinity in the world. Christ, as the ultimate and supreme Teacher, Shepherd and King, exercises His authority in the Holy Spirit through the Apostles and their successors. The Apostles, their successors and the whole people of God are the Body of Christ extending throughout the ages. “There is no private teaching save the common doctrine of the Catholic Church,” wrote Saint Maximos the Confessor (seventh century; Migne PG, 90, 120C). In the reply to Pope Pius IX in 1848, the Eastern Patriarchs wrote that “the Defender of the faith is the very Body of the Church, that is the people, who want their faith kept constantly unvarying and in agreement with the Fathers.” Thus the clergy and the laity are both responsible for the preservation of the authentic and genuine Holy Tradition in and through the life of the Church. In this context, particularly, the Ecumenical Councils of the Church, and more generally, the Local Councils of the Church are of great importance. The first Council Synod of the Church was the Apostolic Synod, which took place in Jerusalem in AD 51. Later, bishops used to meet either locally, or on the “ecumenical” or universal, the all-encompassing level of the universal Christian empire, the oikoumene, in order to discuss and solve serious dogmatic and canonical issues which had arisen.

The Orthodox Church accepts the following seven Ecumenical Councils:

The Council of Nicea in AD 325, which discussed and condemned Arianism.

The Council of Constantinople in AD 381 which principally condemned Apollinarianism.

The Council of Ephesus in AD 431, which condemned Nestorianism.

The Council of Chalcedon in AD 451, which condemned Monophysitism.

The Second Council of Constantinople, in AD 553, which condemned Origen and other heretics.

The Third Council of Constantinople in AD 680-81, which condemned Monothelitism.

The Second Council of Nicea, in AD 787, which condemned Iconoclasm.

The Orthodox Church also assigns ecumenical status to The Council in Trullo in AD 692, which took place in Constantinople. Eastern bishops took part in it, and they passed disciplinary canons to complete the work of the Fifth and the Sixth Ecumenical Councils and, thus, it is known as the Fifth-Sixth (Quinisext or Penthekti).

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. Saint 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).*

In the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, it was stated that:

*“The Fathers defined everything perfectly; he who goes against this is anathema; no one adds, no one takes away” (Acta Concil. II, 1).*

Sabas, the bishop of Paltus in Syria in the fifth century, speaking about the Council of Nicaea said:

*“Our Fathers who met at Nicea did not make their declarations of themselves but spoke as the Holy Spirit dictated.”*

“Following the Fathers” becomes a fixed expression in the minutes and the declarations of the Ecumenical Councils as well as of the local ones. 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.

Are the Ecumenical Councils of the Church the only infallible and correct instruments in proclaiming and implementing the faith of the Church? Certainly, no bishops by themselves, no local churches, no theologians can teach the faith by themselves alone. The Ecumenical Councils are among the most important means which inscribe, proclaim, and implement the faith of the Church, but only in conjunction with Scripture, and the Tradition. The Ecumenical Councils are an integral part of the ongoing Tradition of the Church. Thus, the Orthodox Church claims that she has kept intact the faith of the first seven Ecumenical Councils.

### *Other Councils and Confessions of Faith*

There are also other means of re-affirming the universality of the Orthodox faith. There are, for instance, Councils which were convened during the fourteenth century in Constantinople dealing with the Palamite controversy, that is, the teaching of Gregory Palamas concerning the distinction between divine essence and divine energy. These councils are accepted as having ecumenical status. There are the writings and Confessions of Faith written by great teachers of the Church during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Examples might include the letter of Mark of Ephesus (1440-1441) to all Orthodox Christians; the correspondence of Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople with the German Reformers (1573-1581); the council of Jerusalem (1672) and the Confession of Faith by Patriarch Dositheos of Jerusalem (1672), and the writings of Saint Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain, who published the Rudder, a book of great canonical and theological importance (1800). Also to be included are the encyclical letters of the Ecumenical patriarchate and the other Orthodox patriarchates dealing with important and significant issues of the Church. A collection of most of these Orthodox documents with ecumenical importance has been made and published by Professor John Karmires, a distinguished Orthodox theologian in Greece. There is still no English translation of this important collection.

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. Not all these canons have the same value today as they had when first written; still, they are like compasses which direct our lives toward a Christian lifestyle and orient us towards a high spiritual level. Canons which concern our moral life, fasting, and Holy Communion are indeed important for our daily life as good Orthodox Christians.

### *The Living Tradition of the Eucharist*

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. Saint Gregory Palamas writes the following in connection with the Holy Eucharist:

*“We hold fast to all the Traditions of the Church, written and unwritten, and above all to the most mystical and sacred celebration and communion and assembly (synaxis), whereby all other rites are made perfect.” (Letter to Dionysius, 7).*

This emphasis on the 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.

Of course, to live according to the Traditions of the Orthodox Church, to participate, fully, in the life of Tradition is not an easy task. We need the imparting of the Holy Spirit, in order to live in a mystical and mysterious way the life of Christ. As Saint Gregory Palamas wrote:

*“All those dogmas which are now openly proclaimed in the Church and made known to all alike, were previously mysteries foreseen only by the prophets through the Spirit. In the same way the blessings promised to the saints in the age to come are at the present stage of the Gospel dispensation still mysteries, imparted to and foreseen by those whom the Spirit counts worthy, yet only in a partial way and in the form of a pledge” (Tomos of the Holy Mountain, Preface).*

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” to repeat a beautiful expression of Saint Neilos (fifth century). Saint Gregory Palamas, in summing up the Patristic doctrine of Christian life, suggests that the ultimate purpose of man’s life is theoptia, that is, seeing God (*In Defense of the Hesychasts, 1, 3, 42*) or to use Saint Gregory of Nyssa’s words, man’s life is a strenuous and endless ascent towards God, that is, deification (theosis) (*On the Life of Moses, ed. by W. Jaeger, 112ff.*).

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.

#### Suggestions for Further Reading

G. Florovsky, Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View, Belmont, Mass., 1972.

V. Lossky, “Tradition and Traditions”, in In The Image and Likeness of God, ed. J.H. Erickson and T.E. Bird, Crestwood, N.Y., 1974, pp. 141-168.

J. Meyendorff, “The Meaning of Tradition,” in Living Tradition, pp. 13-26.

G.S. Bebis, “The Concept of Tradition in the Fathers of the Church,” Greek Orthodox Theological Review, Spring 1970, Vol. XV, No. 1, pp. 22-55.

C. Scouteris, "Paradosis: The Orthodox Understanding of Tradition," *Sobornost-Eastern Churches Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 30-37.