

# Scripture and Tradition: An Orthodox Point of View

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## I.

The *Large Catechism* of the Russian Orthodox Church opens with chapters on "Divine Revelation" and on "Holy Tradition and Holy Scripture." The question is asked: "In what manner is divine revelation propagated among men and preserved in the true church?" The answer is: "In a twofold manner, first by Tradition and then by Scripture." Now, Tradition is described in the following sentence, "The true believers transmit to each other — and one generation to the other — by word and example, the teaching of faith, the law of God, sacraments and holy rites." The keeper of tradition is the church. "All true believers, united by the sacred tradition of faith, jointly and in succession, constitute the church," which is the "pillar and foundation of truth." Tradition as a method of preserving divine revelation has the priority in time.

There was no Scripture before Moses. Christ himself instructed his disciples orally by word and example, and so did the apostles in the beginning. The Scripture was given in order to fix revelation in precise terms for future times. Then follows the description of the biblical canon. The Old Testament books are numbered according to the Hebrew canon, with a reference to Cyril of Jerusalem and Athanasius. The Holy Tradition is complementary to Holy Writ in the sense that it directs the right understanding of Scripture, the right administration of the sacraments, and the preservation of sacred rites in the purity of their original institution. Tradition must be kept in so far as it is in conformity with the divine revelation and the Holy Scripture.

In the later sections of the *Catechism* where it speaks of the church, the infallibility of the church is professed and acknowledged, as she is given and promised the guidance and assistance of the Holy Spirit. It should be added that in the whole course of the *Catechism* abundant references to Scripture are given, and proof-texts are quoted. References to tradition are comparatively rare. The most important of them are precisely in the chapter on tradition itself: a quotation from St. Irenaeus and a lengthy

passage from St. Basil's *On The Holy Spirit*, chapter 27.

The *Large Catechism* is not a "symbolical book" in the technical sense, as the term is used in the West. Yet, it is an authoritative exposition of Orthodox faith, approved by the Holy Synod of the Russian Church and intended for the general instruction of believers. It was drafted by the greatest Russian theologian of the last century, Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow. It is safe, therefore, to take the statements of the *Catechism* as the starting point of presentation of the Orthodox conception of Scripture and Tradition, in their essence and in their mutual relationship

The term tradition is used in the *Catechism* only in order to clarify the manner of propagating and preserving divine revelation. It is the *paradosis*, the handing down of what God chose to disclose and communicate to men. It is not a particular "source" of truth or doctrine. Revelation is adequately recorded in Scripture. But Scripture is, as it were, "stored" or "deposited" in the church. On the other hand, tradition is equated with the mind and continuous memory of the church. And in this sense it is the guiding principle and criterion of scriptural interpretation. Accordingly, tradition does not and cannot add anything to Scripture, but only elicits what is contained in Holy Writ and puts it in the right perspective. The Scriptures "belong" to the church, are committed to her and not to individual believers. A faithful guide is required for true exegesis. The church catholic is that guide. Or in other words, Scripture is given and preserved in tradition. Tradition and Scripture are inseparable.

## II

This approach to the problem of Scripture and tradition is itself traditional. In fact, it was the approach of the ancient church. St. Irenaeus and St. Basil were appropriately quoted in the Russian *Catechism*. The problem of correct exegesis was a burning issue in the ancient church during the struggle and contest with heresies. All parties in the dispute used to appeal to Scripture. Moreover, at that time exegesis was the main, and even the only,

theological method, and the authority of Scripture was sovereign and supreme. The orthodox leaders were bound to raise the hermeneutical question: What was the principle of interpretation? Now, in the second century the term "Scripture" still denoted primarily the Old Testament. It was in this same century that the authority of the Old Testament was sharply and radically challenged, and actually rejected, by Marcion. The unity of the Bible had to be proved and vindicated. What was the basis and the warrant of a Christian and christological understanding of "prophecy," that is, of the Old Testament? It was in this historic situation that the authority of tradition was first invoked.

Scripture belonged to the church, and it was only in the church, within the community of right faith, that Scripture could be adequately understood and correctly interpreted. Heretics, namely, those outside of the church, had no key to the mind of the Scripture. It was not enough simply to quote scriptural words and texts (the "letter"). Rather, the true meaning of Scripture, taken as an integrated whole, had to be grasped and elicited. In the admirable phrase of St. Hilary of Poitiers, "scripturae enim non in legendo sunt, sed in intelligendo." The phrase was also repeated by St. Jerome. One had to grasp in advance, as it were, the true pattern of scriptural revelation, the great and comprehensive design of God's redemptive providence (the *oeconomia*), and this could be done only by an insight of faith. It was by faith that the witness to Christ could be discerned in the Old Testament. It was by faith that the unity of the tetramorphic gospel could be properly ascertained.

Now, this faith was not an arbitrary and subjective insight of individuals; it was the faith of the church, rooted in the apostolic message or *kerygma* and authenticated by it. Those outside of the church, that is, outside of her living and apostolic tradition, failed to have precisely this basic and overarching message, the very heart of the gospel. With them Scripture was an array of disconnected passages and stories or of proof-texts which they endeavored to arrange and re-arrange according to their own pattern, derived from alien sources. They had "another faith."

### III

This was the main method and the main argument of Tertullian in his passionate treatise *De praescriptione*. He could not discuss Scriptures with heretics, with those outside the communion of apostolic faith. For they had no right to use the Scriptures: the Scriptures did not belong to them. They were the possession of the church. Tertullian emphatically insisted on the priority of the "rule of faith." It was the only key to the Scriptures, the indispensable prerequisite of authentic biblical interpretation. And this rule was apostolic; it was rooted in and derived from the original apostolic preaching. The New Testament itself had to be taken in the comprehensive context of the total apostolic preaching, which was still vividly remembered in the church.

The basic intention of this appeal to the apostolic "rule of faith" in the early church is obvious. When Christians spoke of the "rule of faith" as apostolic, they did not mean that the apostles had formulated it. What they meant was that the profession of belief which every catechumen recited before his baptism did embody in summary form the faith which the apostles had taught and had committed to their disciples after them. This profession of faith was the same everywhere, although the actual phrasing could vary from place to place. It was always intimately related to the baptismal formula itself (Cf. C. H. Turner). Apart from this "rule" the Scriptures could only be misinterpreted, contended Tertullian and St. Irenaeus a bit earlier.

The apostolic tradition of faith was the indispensable guide in the understanding of Scripture and the ultimate warrant of right interpretation. The church was not an external authority which could be the judge over Scripture, but was rather the keeper and guardian of that divine truth which has been stored and deposited in Holy Writ. The "rule of faith," of which the early church fathers spoke, was intimately related to the sacrament of Christian initiation. It was the "rule" to which believers are committed (and into which they were previously initiated) by their baptismal profession. On the other hand, this "rule" was nothing other than the "truth" which the apostles had deposited in the

church and entrusted to her, to be continuously handed down by the succession of accredited pastors, under the abiding guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The image of the church as a "treasury of truth" comes from St. Irenaeus. The treasure is indeed the Scripture, but also the living faith by which the mystery of the Scripture is assessed. Tradition in the early church was, first of all, a hermeneutical principle and method. Scripture could be rightly and fully comprehended only in the light and in the context of the living apostolic tradition, which was an integral factor of Christian existence. It was so not because tradition could add anything to what has been manifested in the Scripture, but because it provided that living context, the comprehensive perspective, in which alone the true intention and the total design of the Holy Writ, and especially of the divine revelation itself, could be adequately grasped and acknowledged. The Christian truth was, in the phrase of St. Irenaeus, a "well-grounded system," a *corpus veritatis*, or a "harmonious melody." And it was precisely this harmony that could be apprehended by faith alone. The apostolic tradition, as it was maintained and understood in the early church, was not a fixed core or complex of binding propositions, but rather an insight into the meaning and power of the revelatory events, of the revelation of the "God who acts" and has acted.

#### IV

The situation did not change in the fourth century. The dispute with the Arians was centered again in the exegetical field, at least in its early phase. The Arians and their supporters had produced an impressive array of scriptural texts in defense of their doctrinal position. They wanted to restrict theological discussion to the biblical ground alone. Their claim had to be met precisely on this ground. Their exegetical method was much the same as that of the earlier dissenters. They were operating with selected proof-texts, without much concern for the total context of revelation. It was imperative for the orthodox to appeal to the mind of the church, to that "faith" which had been once delivered and then faithfully kept. This was the chief concern and the

usual method of the great Athanasius. In his arguments he persistently invoked the "rule of faith," much in the same manner as it had been done by the fathers of the second century.

Only the "rule of faith" allows the theologian to grasp the true intention of Holy Scripture, the *scopos*, the genuine design and intent of the revelation. The "scope" of the faith or the Scriptures was precisely their credal core, which was condensed in the "rule of faith," as this had been handed down and transmitted "from fathers to fathers." In contrast, the Arians had "no fathers" to support their doctrinal claims. Their blasphemy was a sheer innovation totally alien to apostolic tradition and to the overarching message of the Bible. St. Athanasius regarded this traditional "rule of faith" as the norm and ultimate principle of interpretation, opposing "the ecclesiastical sense" to "the private opinions" of the heretics. Indeed, for him Scripture was an adequate and sufficient source of doctrine, sacred and inspired. Only it had to be properly interpreted in the context of the living credal tradition, under the guidance and control of the "rule of faith."

Moreover, this "rule" was in no sense an extraneous authority which could be imposed on the Holy Writ. It was, in fact, the same apostolic preaching which had been deposited in writing in the books of the New Testament. But it was, as it were, this preaching in *epitome*. Sometimes Athanasius described the Scripture itself as an apostolic *paradosis*. In the whole discussion with the Arians there is no single reference to any "traditions" in the plural. The only appeal is to Tradition. "Let us look at that very tradition, teaching and faith of the catholic church from the very beginning, which the Lord handed down, the apostles preached and the fathers preserved. Upon this the church is established." (St. Athanasius, *ad Serap.*, T. 28). Thus, he teaches that "tradition" is even more than apostolic; it is dominical coming from the Lord Himself.

The first reference to "unwritten traditions" is to be found in the famous treatise of St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*; And, at first glance, it may seem as if St. Basil admitted a double authority and double standard — unwritten traditions alongside of the

Scriptures. The fact is however, that he is far from doing so. His terminology is peculiar. His main distinction is between *kerygmata* and *dogmata*. In his phraseology, *kerygmata* are precisely what in the later terminology was denoted as doctrine, that is, formal and authoritative teaching and ruling in matters of faith or the public teaching. On the other hand, *dogmata* are the total complex of "unwritten habits" – in fact, the total structure of liturgical and sacramental life. These "habits" were handed down, says St. Basil, *en mysterio*. It would be a flagrant mistranslation if we took these words to mean "in secret." The only accurate rendering is: "by way of mysteries." This means, under the form of rites and liturgical usages. Indeed, all the examples which St. Basil cites in this connection are ritual and symbolic. These rites and symbols are means of communication. In a sense they are extra-scriptural. But their purpose is to impart to the candidates for baptism the "rule of faith" and prepare them for their baptismal profession of faith. St. Basil's appeal to these "unwritten habits" was no more than an appeal to the faith of the church, to her *sensus catholicus*. He had to break the deadlock created by the obstinate and narrow-minded pseudo-biblicism of his Arian, or Eunomian, opponents. And he pleaded that, apart from this "unwritten" rule of faith, expressed in sacramental rites and habits, it was impossible to grasp the true intention of the Scripture.

## V

To conclude this brief excursus on the ancient tradition we should mention St. Vincent of Lerins and his famous *Commonitorium*. Sometimes it is asserted that Vincent admitted the double authority of Scripture and Tradition. Actually he held the opposite view. Indeed, the true faith could be

recognized, according to Vincent, in a double manner, *duplici modo*, that is, by the authority of the divine law (i.e. Scripture) and by ecclesiastical tradition. This does not imply, however, that there are two sources of Christian doctrine. The "rule" of Scripture was for St. Vincent "perfect and self-sufficient." Why then was it imperative to invoke also the "authority of ecclesiastical understanding," (*ecclesiasticae intelligentiae auctoritas*)? The reason is obvious: Scripture was variously interpreted and twisted by individual writers for their subjective purposes. And to this confusing variety of discordant interpretations and private opinions, St. Vincent opposes the mind of the church catholic (*ut propheticae et apostolicae interpretationis linea secundum ecclesiastici et catholici sensus normam derigatur*). Thus tradition for St. Vincent is not an independent instance nor a complementary source of doctrine. It is no more than Scripture being interpreted according to the catholic mind of the church, which is the guardian of the apostolic "rule of faith." St. Vincent repeats and summarizes the continuous attitude of the ancient church on this matter. Scripture is an adequate source of doctrine: *ad omnia satis superque sufficiat*. Tradition is the authentic guide in interpretation, providing the context and perspective in which Scripture discloses its genuine message.

The Orthodox Church is faithfully committed to this ancient and traditional view on the sources of Christian doctrine. Scripture is an adequate source. But only in so far as it is read and interpreted in the church which is the guardian both of the Holy Writ and of the total apostolic *paradosis* of faith, order and life. Tradition alone allows the church to go beyond the "letter" to the very Word of Life.

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