



THE HOLY TRADITION

Christianity is a religion of tradition. Tradition is the living faith that was delivered once to the saints (*Jude 3*). It includes all of the elements of the Christian faith that was delivered by our Lord Jesus Christ to the disciples by its living in their hearts. It was this same faith that was delivered by the apostles to the believers that was living and active in their hearts through the Holy Spirit Who works in both those preaching and listening.

The Holy Tradition contains all of the elements of the Christian life and prepares for the believers the life of fellowship with Christ through the Holy Spirit. It includes:

1 – all the truths of the Christian faith, whether recorded in the divine Scriptures, or those in the Apostolic canons and teachings, the decisions of the holy canonical councils, and all the holy apostolic oral teachings present in the Church also recorded in the sayings and writings of the fathers.

2 – all the orders/rites of worship which the Church has clung to since its first generations.

Christianity then is not a philosophy or intellectual understanding which can be grasped by reading books. But rather it is spirit and life transferred from one heart to another by tradition.

I. TRADITION WAS THE WAY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST'S TEACHING:

Truly our Lord Jesus Christ chose His twelve disciples so that they would always accompany Him, listen to Him, and learn from Him. They would stay with Him night and day and accompany Him in all His journeys and preaching. They would hear Him while He would be teaching the people and heal all the sick. He would go into the synagogues and preach the gospel of the kingdom. Thus they continued to accompany Him, becoming His disciples more than three full years. It was the greatest theological school in the history of the world.

It was not the way of the Lord Christ in preaching to write a book but rather to prepare men in whom He planted the living faith. And after He would fill them with the power of the Holy Spirit, He would send them to captivate all the world with their sayings and teachings.

This is what our Savior did with His disciples. So after He prepared them and enabled them, He sent them to make disciples of others saying to 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...”** (*Matthew 28:19-20*)

Discipleship in the understanding of the Lord Christ is not as is in our generation a theoretical study that a person can find in schools and comprehend from books. Rather it was an everlasting, living discipleship, a strong relationship and a continuous fellowship.

Likewise, we read in many passages from the holy gospels that the Lord Christ taught in the Jewish synagogues and preach the gospel of the kingdom (review *Matt. 9:35; Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:15, 41; 13:32; 19:47; Acts 1:3*). In spite of this, the gospels do not mention the details of what He said in those synagogues. Is this because what He said there is not important or because we are not in need of it?! Certainly not...for all the words of the Lord are spirit and life, and we are in need of every word that He said. However, the evangelists did not record all of the words of the Lord because when they wrote the gospels they did not intend by them that they by any means invalidate these holy oral traditions which they spent their whole lives in delivering through them all the teachings of the Savior and establishing them in the hearts of the believers.

Likewise also, the holy gospels mention that our Lord Jesus came to Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom and saying: **“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”** (*Mark 1:14-15*). **What gospel was this? Was it not the teachings of His oral preaching.**

Likewise also, the gospels mentioned only brief sayings of the Lord and His teachings to His disciples in His appearances to them after His holy resurrection for forty days before His ascension to the heavens. But it was sufficient to say that He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures ... and that He “being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.” (*Acts 1:3*)

So the pure evangelists did not intend by any means to encompass all the sayings of the Lord in books that would make the believers in no need of the oral teachings. This is what the apostles spent their whole lives doing to deliver to the believers by its means all that they saw and heard and learned from the Lord, to Whom is the glory. It suffices that we record what our teacher John the Evangelist wrote in the end of his gospel when he says: “And 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*)

II. TRADITION WAS THE WAY OF THE APOSTLES’ PREACHING:

The disciples also were certain that tradition is the way of preaching. They went filled with the Holy Spirit witnessing to the truth in every place: “Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world” (*Romans 10:18; Psalms 19:4*). Their preaching through their sayings and deeds were all a witness to the truth. It was all a light that exposes and reproaches the fruitless deeds of darkness.

In this manner, twelve men simple and unarmed (from weapons), were able to attract the whole world and convert it to the faith in Christ.

Thus, Christianity is neither a philosophy nor merely highly moral teachings, rather it is spirit and life. Because of this the goal of our fathers the apostles was to transfer that spirit and that life inside the hearts. They were truly able to do that by their oral preaching and returned many to the faith. We read in the book of Acts that a simple short sermon by the apostle Peter supported by the power of the Spirit was able to cut through the hearts of the listeners and pierce them, and then they accepted the faith. On that day about three thousand souls joined the Church... “and the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” (*Acts 2:47*)

Tradition was the secret of the preaching’s power in itself following the example of Christ and the apostles. So if a pagan person saw a Christian, the influence of a good change from his character would leave an impression on him to a clear extent making his pagan companions say to him, “You must have met a Christian today”.

The goal of the apostles was to preach Christ and to present Him living in their lives. Their goal was not to write, the proof being that the majority of them while pillars of Christianity did not write anything at all. They did not write, not out of inability, but rather because they knew that the fundamental way of preaching was tradition – delivering the living faith directly to people. Evangelizing is not documenting the faith with paper and ink as much as it is the entrance of the faith living in the hearts.

Therefore, each of the New Testament Scriptures, some of which could be read in a few minutes, by no means cover the extent of the apostles’ preaching. This was due to the fact that their goal was to deliver the Holy Tradition into the hearts of the believers and not to write extensively. There are multiple examples of which we will only mention some.

Our teacher John the apostle in his epistles says: “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” (*2John 12*); “I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face” (*3John 13,14*).

They did not intend to record all of the Church orders and rites specific to the organization of worship in their writings but relied upon its direct delivery to those churches. Our teacher Paul the apostle says in *1Corinthians*: “And the rest I will set in order when I come” (*1Cor. 11:34*).

In the epistle to the Hebrews he informs them that he will deliver to them the orders specific to baptism and the laying on of hands and does not write anything about the details but says: “And this we will do if God permits.” (*Hebrews* 6:2, 3)

St. Paul commands the people of Philippi: “The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do...” (*Philippians* 4:9).

He also commanded his disciple Timothy: “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me...” (*2Tim.* 1:13). Then he orders him to deliver those correct teachings which he heard from him to faithful people who would be able to teach others also saying: “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (*2Tim.* 2:2).

Likewise, the apostle Paul commands the people of Thessalonica to not only adhere to the traditions saying: “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word (orally) or our epistle” (*2Thess.* 2:15), but also to withdraw from any one who does not behave according to the tradition saying: “But 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” (*2Thess.* 3:6).

When he wrote his first epistle to the people of Corinth, he praised them for their keeping the traditions as he had delivered it to them saying: “Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you” (*1Cor.* 11:2). [It is clear that he is speaking about the oral traditions because he had not previously written an epistle to them before this first epistle of his.]

At this point some would object to tradition supposing that Christ had taught His rejection of it and rebuked the Jews for their adherence to it saying: “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?” (review *Matt.* 15:1-12).

Actually the Lord Jesus Christ did not deny tradition in general but denied the exclusive traditions of the scribes and Pharisees which they devised contrary to God’s commandments to serve their own particular desires and personal interests. There is a difference between the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees which is what people put forth against God’s commandment, and the Christian tradition which our Lord Jesus Christ laid down Himself and the transmission of his saintly apostles and the pure fathers of the Church.

The tradition of the Church is God’s commandments as the Church delivered them to us and commanded us to preserve them and circulate them generation after generation with the utmost accuracy and honesty because it is the living faith delivered once to the saints. For any tradition to be accepted as a sound tradition it must have the following characteristics:

- 1 – Its agreement and lack of discrepancy with the Holy Bible.
- 2 – Its agreement with the other accepted apostolic traditions without doubt.
- 3 – Its being known and accepted from the beginning in all Churches founded by the apostles.
- 4 – That it be unanimously testified to by all the fathers of the Church in all generations.

If at any time a tradition appeared that did not satisfy one of these conditions, the Church vehemently refuses and dismisses it and separates those who adhere to it.

III. TRADITION WAS THE WAY OF GOD FROM THE VERY BEGINNING OF CREATION IN DELIVERING HIS COMMANDMENTS AND KEEPING THEM:

Humankind lived from the beginning of creation even until the coming down of the written law, a period of more than one thousand years, and it had all of its knowledge about God by way of oral tradition only. Oral tradition was the only source for the knowledge of divine law. Adam received it from God and he delivered it to his offspring and it was transmitted in their generations by tradition generation after generation.

At that time there appeared the patriarchs, the saints Adam, Abel, Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, etc... They pleased the Lord by their deeds and worshipped Him

according to His will and in accordance with His teachings that they received from Him and circulated it in their generations by transmission. They learned the sacrifice of blood, practiced offering it, knew the altar, and offered their sacrifices on it...and understood that the redemption is the only way to salvation. They died on the hope of the Messiah's coming, the true Savior, the Seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent (*Gen. 3:15*).

Joseph must have been able to overcome the temptation of sin with Potiphar's wife by having learned the tradition of purity and chastity from his father. Thus, he cried out in her face saying: "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (*Genesis 39:9*) In this way Joseph became the greatest example of chastity and purity for youth in all generations.

Likewise also the commandment of keeping the Sabbath was known before the descent of the written law... thus Moses commanded the people not to gather manna on the seventh day because it is a **Sabbath to the Lord** and they should rest on it. God rebuked those who went out to gather the manna on the Sabbath day saying: "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?" (*Exodus 16:28*) Those laws were oral known by tradition, because the written law of keeping the Sabbath came two months after that. It was mentioned in chapter 20 in the book of *Exodus*.

In the same manner the oral tradition continued as the only source of the divine teaching and the only tutor for the human conscience over **the thousand years**... and when the effect of tradition weakened in many of the nations as a result of the deviation of the human soul towards evil, the hardening of hearts by the sin, and the crookedness of thought, it was necessary for the written law to come down to manifest and clarify the landmarks of the divine natural law engraved in the hearts of humans and the features which they distorted by their wickedness and impurity. In this way, the written law participates with the oral law in enlightening the human thinking and rectifying the community's religious conscience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLY TRADITION

The Church cannot at all do without its holy tradition which it received from the Lord and preserved it in its generations. It is the source of our living faith and the secret of its power and unity over the extent of the ages.

The apostolic Church tradition is the keeper of the Church's living legacy because: **first, it is that which witnesses to the Holy Bible and secondly, explains the Holy Bible to us. In the lesson about the Holy Bible, there will be more details about this. But in addition to this, the holy tradition preserved for us the Orthodox faith.**

By way of tradition, we received the faith living and pure, and the fathers of the Church, by way of their knowledge of the sound Apostolic faith, were able to isolate every strange teaching and invalidate it in the councils, whether local or ecumenical, preserving for us the Apostolic faith pure as they received it, recording it in the Creed, the declarations of faith, and the decisions of those canonical councils. So how were they able to differentiate those strange teachings and refute them unless the true faith had truly been present, clear, and known through holy tradition thus establishing it in those councils?

Actually, it is as St. Irenaeus, one of the fathers of the 2nd century A.D. and disciple of St. Polycarpus, said: "The apostles made the Church a plentiful treasure house of the truth, and they delivered wholly to it all that pertains to it" (his commentary on *2Tim. 1:14*). Also as St. Basil said in the 4th century: "The beliefs and preaching preserved in the Church, some of them taken by the written teaching and some of them which we have received in detail from the tradition of the apostles, both matters have potency in worship" (his commentary on *2Thess. 3:6*).

Likewise, tradition: **explained to us the rites of the Church and all the details of the order of Christian worship.** The Apostolic tradition explains to us the:

1 – **Glory of the day of Sunday** and how it became our principal weekly feast because its glory exceeded the glory of Saturday. Truly there are numerous indications in the Holy Bible that demonstrate the appearance of the glory of Sunday, however there is not found one clear Biblical passage that demonstrates that Sunday in Christianity is the new Sabbath and that it is the day consecrated for Christian worship... However we knew that by way of the apostolic tradition and the unanimity of the Church from the beginning in sanctifying the day of Sunday and freeing it from all the worldly labor and its consecration for general worship in the Church.

2 – **Details of practicing the rites of the sacraments in the Church** – the measures that should be taken for catechumens, steps of practicing the sacrament of baptism, necessity of baptizing infants, preparation and anointing with the Holy Myron, repentance and confession, the Eucharist, unction of the sick, holy matrimony and monogamy, and the priesthood.

3 – Like it are **the rites specific to the Church** and its structures, divisions, content, vessels of service in it, various orders ... and the rites of the prayers, fasts, prostrations, and feasts, and likewise the Church readings in the various divisions of the year...etc.; facing the east in all of our prayers; the rite (way) of making the sign of the cross and the power that we draw from constantly practicing it; placing the icon of the cross in the place of honor and pride and the preeminent position whether in our churches, our homes, or our bodies, the rite of the ceremony of praying over the departed before their burial and holding remembrances for them, etc...

Surely, all the rites of the Church have their roots in the apostolic tradition and in the orders of the early fathers of the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit who laid down these orders and documented them according to what they received from the teachings of the apostles. If the Lord wills, we will go into more detail about these rites when their respective lessons are given.

THE MEANS THAT PRESERVED FOR US THE HOLY TRADITION

After it is shown to us how the Holy Tradition is the living faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and that it encompasses all the Church's relationship with His blessed Person and all the divine rites related to worship will we be able to comprehend the level of pride of the Church fathers in its holy traditions and their strong avidity for delivering it without distortion or change from generation to generation, because it is the living faith in Himself. Furthermore we will be able to know how the holy tradition came to us clear of every fault.

First: Because the Church in itself is represented by its teachers, it preserved the divine teachings and what the apostles handed down. It was able to do this by way of the lineage of apostolic succession and succession of bishops in it. Since the order of Christian priesthood has the utmost link to this Holy Tradition, it is steadfast and founded by God for practicing, preserving, and spreading it because the traditions as we said encompass all the faith of the Church and all its rites.

One famous quote about this is that of St. Irenaeus from the fathers of the 2nd century A.D. who gives an account of St. Polycarpus the Apostolic saying: "I am able to describe the very place in which the blessed Polycarp sat as he discoursed, and his goings out and his comings in, and the manner of his life, and his physical appearance, and his discourses to the people, and the accounts which he gave of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord. And as he remembered their words (the words of the apostles), and what he heard from them concerning the Lord, and concerning his miracles and his teaching, having received them from eyewitnesses of the 'Word of life,' **Polycarp related all things in harmony with the Scriptures. These things being told 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**" (*History of the Church*, Eusebius, book 5, chapter 20:6-7).

St. Irenaeus also explains how the Church preserves its traditions unadulterated and pure saying: “True knowledge is [that which consists in] the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that Church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither receiving addition nor [suffering] curtailment [in the truths which she believes]; and [it consists in] reading [the word of God] without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the Scriptures, both without danger and without blasphemy; and [above all, it consists in] the pre-eminent gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, and which excels all the other gifts” (*Adver. Haer.* IV, 33-8, II, 11).

Second: The Sayings and Writings of the Early Fathers of the Church– in particular, the Apostolic Fathers in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. and likewise the fathers of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries A.D. due to their proximity to the apostolic age and their including in their writings the sayings and teachings of the apostles that circulated in the Church by the oral tradition.

In order to be certain of the extent of the zeal of these fathers in making sure their writings whether doctrine, commentary, admonition, contemplative, etc... contain the sayings of the apostles, we mention here what St. Clement, the dean of the Theological School in Alexandria in the 2nd century A.D., says in the introduction of his book (*Stromata*) saying: “This work is not a writing artfully constructed for display; but my notes are stored up for old age, as a remedy against forgetfulness; an image without art, and a rough sketch of those powerful and animated words which it was my privilege to hear, as well as of blessed and truly remarkable men (speaking of the successors of the apostles who he met)...” then says, “These men, preserving the true tradition of the blessed doctrine, directly from the holy apostles, Peter and James and John and Paul, the son receiving it from the father, have come by God's will even to us to deposit those ancestral and apostolic seeds” (*History of the Church*, Eusebius, book 5, chapter 11:3, 5).

For this reason we take pleasure in the sayings of the saintly fathers of the Church and their writings because they are actually documentation of the teachings of the Lord Himself as He delivered them to His saintly apostles.

Third: The Writings of the Early Church Historians such as Eusebius, Socrates, and Sozomen who were ardent in recording the details of the history of the early Church. Their historical writings included many of the sayings and writings of the Church fathers who preceded them. From this is shown the importance of this history in that it delivered to us many of the writings of the saints of the Church that had been lost in the ages of severe persecution. Through this, history preserved for us a living, ecclesiastical, apostolic legacy.

Fourth: The Definitions and Canons of the Holy Councils: Whether the local councils held in the first four centuries or the three ecumenical councils which were held to investigate problems or to refute innovations and heresies, it was able to give solutions to the problems in accordance with the apostolic teachings steadfast in the Church. The canons of the holy councils are added to the living legacy of the Church and considered as keepers of the apostolic tradition sound from every attempt of the heretics and is rightly the apostolic legacy from the angle that it is a written definition of the oral apostolic faith.

Fifth: The Prayers of the Church and its Rites:

It is rightly numbered as one of the important means which preserved for us the ecclesiastical tradition. For example, all of the ancient liturgies in addition to what the apostles themselves laid down (if not in detail as in the Liturgy of Saint Mark... then altogether in all of

the liturgies which the early fathers of the Church laid down) are in accordance with the apostolic tradition. In addition to this, the ancient liturgies, whether specific to the sacraments of the Eucharist or baptism, or the liturgy of the *Laqqan* and the prayers specific to consecration of the orders of the priesthood, are all considered a rich ecclesiastical legacy documenting these rites and preserving the apostolic tradition recorded in them.

Reference:

The Holy Tradition by Fr. Shenouda Maher Ishak

QUESTIONS:

- 1) Please give examples of how our Lord Jesus Christ's way of preaching was by tradition.
- 2) As was mentioned, Christianity is a religion of tradition and discipleship. Please give at least one verse from St. Paul's epistles that teach this principle.
- 3) What are the means by which the Holy Tradition has been delivered to us?
- 4) Explain at least one teaching/practice in the Old Testament that was passed by tradition before it was written in the Mosaic Law.