

## THE ORTHODOX CHURCH AND ITS TRADITION IN A DIALOGUE WITH THE CONTEMPORARY LUTHERAN CHURCH

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### **General definition of Orthodoxy.**

*Orthodoxy* could be best defined as a way of life which has an experiential approach towards "Faith" and "Doctrine". As such, Orthodoxy is rooted in the Bible, in the faith, and in the written doctrine which is constantly enriched by the living commentaries of the lives of the Saints of her past and the present time. So, Orthodox faith is constantly enriched by the theological speculations of the Fathers and Teachers of its Church, and by the decrees of its various Councils. We should point out as well that the Orthodox Church is a "historical" Church, a Church whose her history has no break with the past. We believe that one can rightfully say that it is the Church that is most faithful to the Commandments of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ as these were formulated in the Bible.

### **The Sources of Faith of the Orthodox Church.**

The Sources of the Orthodox Christian faith and doctrine, are: 1) "The Holy Bible" and 2) It's so called "Sacred Tradition". Unlike Protestantism, which professes a kind of dichotomy between the Bible (considered as the unique revealed word of God), and the tradition of the Church (considered as secondary and even negligible in most of its dimensions), the Orthodox Church holds the position that the Tradition of the Church actually includes the Bible. In the Bible made its appearance by the Christian Tradition. But let me explain this position more fully.

We, the Orthodox, believe that the tradition of the Church is the animation of the Church in actuality, a life impregnated by the Holy Spirit. For we consider that the Church is the living Body of Christ, and that it has, a part of its historical dimension (that is, its human members), an internal life, too.

This “reality” cannot be seen or approached but by the eyes of faith. In this sense, we distinguish between an inner force, which guides the Church’s History, and a spirit which inspires it; this force and spirit is the Holy Spirit of God, and its outward manifestation in the human realm.

But let me be even more precise and try to develop even more the meaning we attribute to what we call *Sacred Tradition*. The teachings of our Lord proclaimed by the Apostles were handed down to the apostolic community. This faith, once handed down to the Saints, continued to “be vivid” within the Christian community that succeeded the Apostolic times. So, our basic doctrinal position is that there is a living continuity between the apostolic community of the early Church and the community that succeeds it, and that the same faith, teachings, doctrine, and Christian life continue to be present and to be perpetuated throughout the history of our Church.

For us it is exactly in that sense that the Church of Christ continues to be “apostolic”, that is, by being in a living continuity with its early Christian “apostolic Community”, in other words, with its former way of life and faith. Thus, if we are to define the “Sacred Tradition” within the scope of our proper Dogmatic (i.e. Doctrinal) conception, we could say that it is this very life of our “living” Church which was, is and will forever be in a living continuity with our Dogmatic origins.

This living continuity consists in the preservation of the same belief, doctrine, and way of life throughout our Church’s history, because the Church for us continues to be apostolic when remaining in a living continuity with its “Holy tradition”.

As I believe that I have made myself clear as to the question why, for us, the life of the Church is seen in terms of its living continuity of its Christian origins, let me develop a bit further this central doctrinal position that separates our own Church from Lutheran Church, this time calling upon the New Testament itself.

By the end of the first century of our Christian era the major teachings of Christ and the facts regarding his life and saving work were added to the Christian Scriptures. Thus, they became part of what was at that time called the *Canon* of the Bible (the forty-nine books of the Old Testament, and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament). However, as the Apostle John (21: 25)<sup>1</sup> informs us, many of our Lord’s teachings and deeds were not included in this Christian Bible. They were although, indeed, transmitted by remaining a part of the life of the Christian Church, through the inheritance of the apostolic community that was perpetuated through its history.

As we believe that our exposition concerning our Doctrinal point about the necessity or respect of the “Sacred Tradition” and our argumentation on its behalf is quite satisfactory presented let us now turn to another dogmatic difference we have that separates us (Orthodox) and Protestants.

### **3. Our Doctrinal position about God: the mystery of the Transcendence, but, at the same time, Presence of “God”.**

We, the Orthodox, believe that God is at the same time *immanent* and *transcended*. The theological explanation we give regarding this statement is the following:

Although God is totally transcendent, far out, and out of reach in His essence (speaking with reference to knowledge), He is present to us through His energies (operations, activity) which “descend toward us”. By that we mean that God's activities are “being carried out” —that they are being “accomplished”— through us and by us, when we are being worthy to become His receptacle. And that is why we call our doctrine and our Church “experiential”.

This is a doctrinal point that was clarified<sup>2</sup> by of our Church Father St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) and constitutes an official dogmatic point that is “unique” to us, that distinguishes us from all the Other Christian Confessions.

Our Christian God, then, is not a philosophical concept. Most of our theologians avoid defining Him in a philosophical way, but I believe, that if we wanted to express this doctrine in philosophical words, we could say that, for Orthodoxy, God is a source of action; an action operated by the Holy Spirit that is manifested continuously in this world by (or through) the pious people; by the “true believers of our Lord’s commandments”, those who that are pious, ascetic, and thus dedicated to Gods will<sup>3</sup>.

We believe that our “Church Fathers and Theologians” are not simply educated people, “they are people inspired by the Holy Spirit”. Thus, our Christian God is not a “God exiled in heaven”; He is a source of action being operated through them.

### **4. The Sacrament of the Holy Communion.**

In the Orthodox sacramental language, the Sacrament of the Holy Communion is called “Holy Eucharist”. «Εὐχαριστῶ» in ancient Greek means “I thank”. By this denomination, we give to this Sacrament, we are expressing our gratitude towards our Lord, and we thus accentuate the fact that all people ought to have

a share of it, or let me express my idea better, that all people should and can be adequate to have a share of it.

The origin of this sacrament is traced back to the Last Supper during which our Lord himself instructed His Disciples to offer bread and wine in His memory<sup>4</sup>. As we have just argued, the “Holy Eucharist” is an event performed in its full dimension only by the Orthodox worship tradition. In it, the Church gathers to remember and celebrate the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ, as it was asked by Him to do. But what is the most important of all, is that, through and with it, the whole Church participates in the mystery of the Salvation gratified to us by Jesus Christ our Lord. It is the greatest gift of God to the people: to have the chance to participate in the divinity of his Son; to have the Lord’s power and grace in them as an antidote of mislead convictions, as a vehicle of spiritual progress and illumination, as a weapon to overcome passions that arise from the “flesh”, and finally, even as a “medication” for bodily dysfunctions. Why one should then be deprived of that Holy Grace, of this Holy Sacrament which constitutes the ESSENCE of what our Lord Jesus commanded for us to continually bring into being?

### **5. The Canon Law System.**

The Orthodox Church has put in an order a Canonical (legal) system which constitutes a mine of information concerning the doctrine of the Church. These holy Canons apply faith (and the moral principles of Christianity based upon Belief) to concrete, temporal, and historical situations. They constitute an example of the intention of the Church to always re-express its teaching and re-adjust its dogmatic-politic strategy according to contemporary needs. However, the Orthodox priests have the liberty not to stick even upon these aforementioned Canons and to judge in each case by Divine “*Economy*” (that is, according to the particular circumstances), especially while performing the Sacrament of the Holy Confession which leads to the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

### **6. Our worshipping tradition.**

A point that can also be taken as a doctrinal difference between our Church and Lutheran Church is the worshipping (honoring) of the Holy Icons. Let me recall that the defense of the doctrine of the icons was determined by the Seventh Council (787) on the doctrinal basis that the Son of God became man, and thus, he can be depicted in His Humanity.

## 7. The role of Women in the Orthodox Church.

The priesthood is forbidden by Our Church to women by the clerical law. But what should be stressed here is that the Orthodox women have never claimed the right to become Priests. In our tradition, in a way, women are becoming conscious of the role of the seculars is clerical as well. And that in any case, according to the dictates of Apostel Paul: «Θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι, ὅτι παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἡ κεφαλὴ ὁ Χριστός ἐστι, κεφαλὴ δὲ γυναικὸς ὁ ἀνὴρ, κεφαλὴ δὲ Χριστοῦ ὁ Θεός» (“I want <all of> you know that the Head of every Man is <our> Lord, that the Head of Woman is Man, <and that> the Head of Jesus is God”)<sup>5</sup>. For what need should Orthodox women revolt against this commandment? They are in all other ways taken for full members of the Church: There are many women theologians in the Orthodox Universities of Theology all over the world. Women participate in all sorts of love and solidarity actions organized and executed by our Church and even inspire the Reverent clerical members of taking such actions or of how to direct the Church’s missionary goals. Now, as well the ancient office of «διακονισσῶν» (sacristans) is beginning to be realized<sup>6</sup>. I do not believe that any woman that is a true believer of our Lord and wants to respect His Commandments would be opposed to what I am saying here.

## 8. “General priesthood” and “particular priesthood”.

We, the Orthodox, do not emphasize so very often the notion of “general priesthood”. For the Lutheran Church, as we understand it to be, the priests do not occupy a “certain special rank”. In other words, in contrast to us, Lutherans believe that the priesthood is not a special vacation with somebody chosen by God. That by the Sacrament of consecration at the time of our baptism we all get “sealed” and we are all interpenetrated in the same way by the Holy Spirit<sup>7</sup>. On this particular quasi doctrinal point, we follow the Old Testament that says that, according to Aaron’s family, the “particular-case priesthood” was unquestionable and that those who doubted it were punished by God in an exemplary way.

## Conclusion.

As a United, Common and widespread Orthodox church we get a call to every person upon earth, no matter race, gender, color or religious conviction, to Join Us. And by their personal ethics and Spiritual effort and solidarity (and of

course ours as well) to make our world worthy one day to fulfill God's will to destroy Evil once for all, and do so that the Grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ, be within us all.

The True Religious Conviction was defined by our Lord. He said it, not only by words; he showed it to us too by his example, by his way of life and by the way of His death.

There where all people agree, the Truth of God and our Lord is to be found: In the realization of our Apostle Paul's vision. In the realization of THE "ECUMENICAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH".

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<sup>1</sup> «ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ ὅσα ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, ἅτινα ἐὰν γράφηται καθ' ἓν, οὐδὲ αὐτὸν οἶμαι τὸν κόσμον χωρῆσαι τὰ γραφόμενα βιβλία» (However, many of the things done by Jesus remain unwritten, for if one was to write down each and every one of them, I consider that the whole world would not be big enough so as to hold <the quantity of> the books that would be written).

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term “clarified” and not “introduced”, because it had always been and still is a common experience of all the true believers of our Church and not only of the monks. On this subject a very interesting text for one to read is that of Nikolaos Kavassilas (1320-ca. 91-63), *Περὶ τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ ζωῆς* (*On the life in Christ*), MPG 150, 493-725.

<sup>3</sup> And this has nothing to do with their color, race, and not even with the particular religious convictions they serve. But it still remains that the true religious conviction was defined by our Lord, it is only one and Unique, and cannot but be Unique and One.

<sup>4</sup> Luc. 12, 15: «καὶ εἶπε πρὸς αὐτούς· ἐπιθυμία ἐπεθύμησα τοῦτο τὸ πάσχα φαγεῖν μεθ' ὑμῶν πρὸ τοῦ με παθεῖν» (and he said to them: by desire I am led to wish, this very Easter, to Eat with you before undergoing the Passion).

<sup>5</sup> A Cor. 11.3: “Θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ὅτι παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἡ κεφαλὴ ὁ Χριστὸς ἐστὶ, κεφαλὴ δὲ γυναικὸς ὁ ἀνὴρ, κεφαλὴ δὲ Χριστοῦ ὁ Θεός. I want <all of> you to know that the Head of every Man is <our> Lord, that the Head of Woman is Man, <and finally> the the Head of Jesus is God).

<sup>6</sup> More precisely, the Patriarchate of Alexandria has decided to proceed to the reification of this office.

<sup>7</sup> Ανδρέα Θεοδώρου, «ΠΙΣΤΕΥΩ ΕΙΣ ΕΝΑ ΘΕΟΝ», εκδ. Αποστολικῆς Διακονίας, 1997, σελ. 172-178.