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# TRADITION

**T**radition is, basically, the spiritual teaching we have inherited from the Holy Apostles and Church Fathers. Tradition is divine, apostolic or patriarchal.

Divine tradition is that teaching given by Jesus Christ directly and by word of mouth to the Holy Apostles. It was not recorded in a book until later through the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup>. It includes the New Testament and the truths of faith.

Apostolic tradition, on the other hand, includes the teachings of the Apostles, their laws and the messages they handed down to their disciples and their immediate successors orally. What has been handed down is based on the divine tradition from which apostolic tradition derives its power. These teachings and this legacy, although not written in the Holy Scripture, conform to its teachings. They are never in contradiction with them and are considered to be the faithful testimony to the authenticity and true interpretation of the Divine proclamation, better yet, an aid to its understanding.

Apostolic tradition includes constitutions of faith which are derived from God and established by the Apostles; it also includes the seven Church Sacraments, enacted laws and liturgies established for the Church such as the Holy Liturgy.

Patriarchal tradition, however, is what the Holy Church has received from the dawn of its history from its Holy Fathers. It includes noble statutes based on the teachings of the Holy Apostles with respect to the interpretation of doctrines; exegesis of the Holy Scripture, organization of religious rites and enactment of laws, especially decisions taken by the holy synods and works of some Church Fathers, such as Patriarch Kyriakos (+817) and laws enacted by them.

## **How Ancient is Tradition<sup>2</sup>**

Tradition is more ancient than the recording of the Holy Scriptures. Several generations prior to the recording of the Holy Scriptures and according to the rules of the Old Testament, successors used to receive from their predecessors the belief in one God and they abided by what was known as the law of conscience. Moreover, worship of God and offering animal sacrifices were handed down from one person to another. The eldest son in the family was considered as its religious leader and also the chief in charge of its civil affairs. The believers used to verbally pass on stories of antiquity and historical events, such as the story of creation, the creation of man, man's fall, the chronicle of redemption, which included the history of early fathers, the call of Abraham and his temptation, the Covenant promises of God to Abraham and His offspring by passing the law of circumcision as a mark of this Covenant as well as other events that took place through the ages and were handed down generation after generation until the coming of prophet Moses who was divinely inspired to record these events. Moses was also given the Ten Commandments as written laws. He also recorded also all necessary laws, which he received from God.

Tradition kept being observed among people of the Old Testament, in spite of not having the laws recorded. This is clear as the Holy Scripture instructs people thus: "And you shall tell your son in that day, saying 'This is done because of what the Lord did for me when I came up from Egypt'" (Exodus 13:8). And "Ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you" (Deuteronomy 32:7). Undoubtedly, verbal teaching was extremely necessary, because the majority of people were illiterate.

In Christianity as well, tradition preceded the recording of the New Testament as the Lord Jesus never recorded his Gospel and did not hand it over in a written form. He preached the Gospel of salvation, calling people to repentance. It was by word of mouth that Jesus gave the Holy Gospel over to His Holy apostles and they, in their turn, kept it by heart as did most of His disciples did.

When the Lord Jesus sent His disciples into the world to preach the Gospel, saying: "Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). He did not command them to write this Good News, neither did He demand that it be kept unwritten. It was when some of the Apostles were asked to record what they had preached that the Holy Gospel was written down through the guidance of the Holy Spirit Who kept them free from fault or error according to the Lord's promise to them. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance, all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). The explanation of this truth could be found in what had been penned by Luke the Evangelist in the introduction to his Gospel, saying: "In as much as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed" (Luke 1:1-4).

#### Gospel and Tradition

The Holy Gospel which is the Gospel of salvation is a testimony to what the disciples of the Lord Jesus have seen and heard from Him. What was therefore written down in the Gospel was exactly what had been first preached verbally by the disciples. Having had the Holy Gospel recorded, the Holy Church attested to its authenticity, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and rejected apocryphal Gospels depending on the testimonies of the Holy Apostles, the righteous disciples and their venerable successors.

It goes without saying that the Christian Church came into being much earlier than the New Testament was recorded and that it had been established for a period of time during which only the Old Testament was recorded. The believers then had the Holy Gospel circulated among themselves by word of mouth and memorize it, later spreading it throughout the world. The first to pen the Holy Gospel was the Apostle Matthew in Aramaic in the year AD 39. The last book of the New Testament is the Book of Revelation which was written by John in Greek between AD 90-100.

It is true that tradition preceded the composition of the Holy Scripture, and that the Holy Church attested to the authenticity and validity of these books, yet they have derived their authority directly from the Holy Spirit Who spoke through the Prophets and Apostles, preserving thus the teachings and doctrines of the Church, inspiring Church Fathers, reminding them of all that had been said by Jesus Christ to His disciples, guiding them to the truth because he is the Spirit of Truth emanating from the Father.

The scholar Origen (185-253) has stated: "I have come to know the four Gospels through tradition, and I believe that they are unique." And Augustus (354-430) stated: "I would not have believed in the Gospel had I not been convinced by the voice of the Universal Church."<sup>2</sup>

As tradition is more ancient than the written Gospel, whoever receives the teachings of the Holy Gospel shall, no doubt, receive the divine and apostolic traditions spontaneously. No one can receive the Gospel,

yet reject tradition so long as the Gospel is considered as part of tradition. Both the Gospel and tradition form one entity and neither one can be dispensed with as each one completes the other.

There are many texts in the Holy Gospel indicating that the Holy Apostles did not record in the Gospel every saying of the Lord Jesus nor every deed done by Him. A conspicuous evidence of authenticity of this is what the Apostle John said at the conclusion of his Gospel: "This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24). He also said: "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:30).

Many other verses uttered by Jesus and many other deeds done by Him, but never mentioned in the recorded Gospel, have become part of the divine tradition, such as what the Lord had revealed to his disciples for forty days after His Resurrection and until His Ascension into Heaven as shown in the Book of Acts: "To whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). The Book of Acts, however, makes no mention of anything about these matters, and had none of these teachings recorded in it. We are quite certain, however, that these teachings were orally conveyed to the believers who memorized, circulated and passed them on generation after generation.

### **Apostolic Tradition**

Some apostles and disciples penned the Holy Gospel and some others wrote epistles which were joined to the New Testament. Those books, however, did not include all what they had preached to the world and all that had been said or done by the Lord Jesus throughout his divine economy in the flesh. Some other apostles and disciples never recorded anything, but these were never preached verbally. Some of them wrote books, but we never had these books included in the New Testament, Yet, we did have some of their teachings conveyed to us through tradition. We have received from early Church Fathers the laws attributed to the apostles and the rules they established for the structure of the Church. We did also receive the valuable doctrines they had verbally handed over to the Church, but never recorded in the New Testament. Nevertheless, these teachings have been practiced by the Church ever since the dawn of its existence, such as the observance of Sunday instead of the Hebrew Sabbath, the baptism of children and other verbal teachings. The Apostle John said in one of his epistles: "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" (II John 12 & III John 13, 14).

This teaching which has been handed down by word of mouth by the Apostles to the Church is the verbal apostolic tradition which could be an explanation of truths of the faith, an elucidation of the good doctrines, an interpretation of the teachings of the Lord or an arrangement of one of the worship rituals and the like.

Having been inspired by the Holy Spirit to complete whatever might be needed for the organization of the Holy Church in accordance with the requirements of time, such as the establishment of the office of deacons in the Church, the election and appointment of the seven deacons to care for the Church (Acts 6:1-8), the convocation of Synods, such as the Synod of Jerusalem (AD 51), and taking decisions they considered to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostles and disciples wrote: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us" (Acts 15:28). Moreover, the working of the Holy Spirit is apparent, especially at the election of bishops and sending them away to minister, as quoted in the Acts of the Apostle: "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said: 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent *them* away" (Acts 13:2).

The Holy Spirit's role in the organization of the Church was not surprising to the apostles for the Lord had formerly told them about it saying: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth has come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12-13). So this guidance to all truth encompassed not only what had been written down in the Holy Scripture but the teaching and arrangement as well which the disciples had become capable of understanding and bearing after the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them. All this conforms with the teaching of the Scripture, yet has never been recorded in it. It was passed on verbally by the Fathers; and the Apostle Paul commands his disciple Timothy in this regard, saying: "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit these to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (II Timothy 2:2). And he says to the Thessalonians: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word, or our epistle" (II Thessalonians 2:15). And in relation to the Apostle Paul's explanation of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist to the Corinthians, he elucidates the fact that the apostolic tradition is based on the divine tradition by saying: "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the *same* night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke *it*, and said, "Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you" (I Corinthians 11:23). And the Apostle Paul concludes by saying: "And the rest I will set in order when I come" (I Corinthians 11:34).

### **Patriarchal Tradition**

With such words, the Apostle Paul defers explanation of some organizational or liturgical matters until going to meet them. These matters which he conveyed face to face, and which the Church circulated and passed through tradition generation after generation, have been kept intact by the Holy Spirit up to the present date and have been practiced by the Universal Church in different languages and in the contexts of different local civilizations.

Patriarchal tradition is also based on apostolic tradition in relation to liturgical regulations and canon laws. And both traditions are based on Divine tradition in terms of admitting the authenticity of the Holy Scripture and truths of faith.

Ever since the dawn of Christianity, tradition has always occupied a sublime position in Christian apostolic Churches. In the chronicle of Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>3</sup>, the following was written about the Martyr Saint Ignatius the Illuminator (+ 107), the disciple of the Apostle John and Bishop of Antioch: "History reports that he was sent from Syria to Rome, and became a prey to the beasts because of his testimony to Christ. And throughout his trip in the middle of Asia, he was kept under strict military guard. He used to empower churches in different cities wherever he stayed through homilies and advice, encouraging believers to stick to the traditions of the apostles. Moreover he found it necessary that these traditions be supported by written proofs and by giving these traditions a fixed form for guaranteeing their intactness."

Source:

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1. Patriarch Ephrem Barsoum I, *Alhak Alkanoni*, chps. 22 & 23. Art. 112-120.
2. Habeeb Jerjis, *The Orthodox Rock, Egypt* (1961), p.125.
3. Eusebius of Caesarea, *History of the Church*, trans. by Rev. Father Mark David, Cairo ed. (1960), 3 vol., ch. 26, p. 151.