

THE PLACE OF TRADITION IN THE CHRISTIAN FAITH*

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It is not a secret that until only a few decades ago, it was almost unavoidable, when speaking of tradition in the Church, to see this facet of Christianity in direct comparison or even in contrast to Holy Scripture in order to define and defend its place within the entire Christian life. We all know today that this attitude was to a great extent a fatal result of the work of the Council of Trent in its endeavour to restrain the extremes of the Reformation. However such an approach did not allow a genuine understanding of the value and sacredness of tradition because it was a biased view, which unfortunately led to the erroneous concept of two distinct sources of divine revelation. This is why it was of immense theological significance that the Church in East and West came in our century to realise that one is not permitted to speak of *two* sources of revelation in Christian theology — namely Scripture *and* Tradition — but only of one unique source of truth and life, which is the Holy Spirit. Consequently, in formulating the title of this lecture as “The Place of Tradition in the Christian Faith”, we assume a genuinely theological attitude towards tradition, which will enable us accordingly to respect all spiritual dimensions of the issue at hand.

Strictly speaking, there are only two methods of studying tradition: either through a *phenomenological* or else through a *theological* analysis. The former is usually the synthetical method of all historical studies. The latter is the characteristic way of theology, which is defined not so much by theoretical principles, as in the case of philosophy, but rather by the moral postulates of Christian spirituality.

Since the Christian Church is a divine revelation in history, and even more so an incarnation of the living God in the concrete historical conditions, it is obvious that in our theological analysis of tradition we shall have to remember, and where necessary to use, also the phenomenological analysis.

I. The strictly theological presuppositions of tradition

The place of tradition in the Christian faith is basically dictated by four essential conditions:

- (a) The revelatory character of the Christian faith;

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- (b) The social character of the Christian faith;
 - (c) The unique and final character of revelation;
- and (d) The soteriological tension between history and eschatology.

Let us, therefore, elaborate upon each one of the mentioned factors in order to see clearly their deeper implications for our theme.

a) *The revelatory character of the Christian faith.*

Speaking of revelation in this context, we do not of course mean natural revelation, which may be the object of study for both history and philosophy. Rather, we mean the so-called supernatural revelation which, according to the words of St Paul, is "unto the Jews a scandal, and foolishness unto the Greeks" (I Cor. 1 : 23). When God speaks in order to be immediately heard and understood in His unique Lordship, it is evident that His word and revelation do not occur in vain. It is precisely in this divine expediency that we have to see the vital nerve of tradition in the Christian faith. In other words, for a Christian, the spiritual life could never be the product of radical individual struggle as was, for instance, the methodological beginning of philosophy for Descartes. It is, at any rate, a very basic teaching of Scripture that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10 : 17).

According to these observations, the Christian faith is basically the result of *communion* between two persons, which presupposes responsible commitment on both sides. There is, on the one hand, a Giver who knows and cares for the needs of the receiver; and, on the other hand, the receiver appreciates this providence of the Giver in recognising the obligation to live according to the demands of faith, while at the same time handing it over to other individuals. It is quite clear that in this highly responsible and providential relation we must see the original place of the ecclesiological concepts of *tradition* and *succession*. Tradition and succession are not simply related in the broader framework of divine economy: one is unthinkable without the other; in other words they constitute essentially correlative concepts. This is why one should wonder how certain forms of Protestantism could deify revelation in the spirit of *sola Scriptura* and simultaneously overlook the organic relation of tradition and (Apostolic) succession to the divine revelation.

(b) *The social character of the Christian faith*

When we mentioned above that the responsibility of the receiver of faith includes not only his commitment to live accordingly but also to hand over the revealed truth to other individuals, we basically expressed the social character of faith. This remark could, however, be understood as an indication of the missionary

character of the Christian faith, which is only the external aspect of the issue. The internal and deeper aspect of the social character of faith is given precisely in the Scriptural statement that "God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth" (I Tim. 2 : 4). This statement must not be understood in the spirit that no man should be excluded from salvation because this could also coincide with a possible individualism of salvation, whereby each individual can have an immediate way to God irrespective of his relation to his neighbour. Rather, the genuine spirit of the statement is the solidarity which faith creates among different generations and individuals. Yet this solidarity must by all means be conceived not simply as an undifferentiated mutuality or fraternal equality in the secular spirit of the French Revolutionary ideals. Such an understanding of solidarity would rather mean a negation of the social character of faith, which is given in the articulated communion of the faithful in which the model of the *remnant* plays a central role. Only in this context can we correctly evaluate the importance of the different gifts of the Holy Spirit and, more precisely, the different missions of the various ministries.

(c) *The unique and final character of revelation.*

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews indicates in his monumental prologue the mysterious manner in which God repeatedly and "in manifold ways spoke to our fathers by the prophets" (Hebr. 1 : 1), and yet His word did not lose its power through these various channels, but on the contrary became evident in its uniqueness and irrevocability by the incarnation of His Son.

The event of Christ signifies the ultimate revelation of God because, through His incarnation, He does not add an entirely new element to the pre-existing love of God for His creation, but He rather reveals — as the recapitulation of all — that "Christ is the same yesterday and today and to the ages" (Hebr. 13 : 8). It is in the same perspective that we must see the role of the Holy Spirit in the entire history of revelation. Thus we may say that the uniqueness and finality of the Christian revelation emerges from the very fact that in all stages of this mysterious process both the *subject* and the *object* of revelation is nothing else than the "nature" of the Trinitarian God. This is why the Apostle Paul could write "great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed in the world, received up into glory" (I Tim. 3 : 16).

(d) *The soteriological tension between history and eschatology*

The uniqueness and finality of revelation are expressed in the

qualitative catholicity of the Christian faith, which must be understood not as an achieved ultimatum but rather as a divine dynamism penetrating all space and time. The well-known four characteristics of the Church, handed down in the Nicene Creed and describing the Church as *one, holy, catholic and apostolic*, constitute various aspects of this divine dynamism. For, on the one hand, they signify the charismatic foundations of the Christian Church given from above and independently of human fragility, while, on the other hand, they define in the most decisive manner the ideals towards which every Christian struggle for perfection must be directed. It is precisely this soteriological tension between history and eschatology which characterises the Christian way between European materialism and Asiatic fatalism; and it is certainly not an unjust exaggeration to claim that only in this characteristically Christian perspective are the sacredness of the world and the majesty of God duly respected.

In this long and gradual process of the recapitulation of all created in Christ, the responsibility and role of the human being is very central and decisive. The endless chain of the various human generations is structured in such a mysterious way that not only is posterity dependent on its forefathers, but the latter are equally if not more dependent on their posterity for the real salvation of the entire human race. The best and most concise commentary on this mysterious order of revelation and salvation is given again by the Apostle Paul when he refers to the men and women of God from the very beginning up until his own time: "These also, one and all, are commemorated for their faith; yet they did not enter upon the promised inheritance, because, with us in mind, God had made a better plan, that only with us should they reach perfection" (Hebr. 11 : 39-40).

II. Tradition as the framework and result of the action of the Holy Spirit.

After all that we have said above, it becomes more clear that, within the plan of divine economy, tradition may, in many cases, be both a containing structure and at the same time the content itself. Precisely for this reason, many reformers in the entire history of the Christian Church, through their prophetic fury to purify old-fashioned structures, could not always avoid damaging the essence of faith itself.

We shall be able to follow this complexity if we study tradition in the context of the three main areas upon which the described four strictly theological presuppositions of tradition reflect in the most decisive way. These areas are:

- (a) the Canon of Scripture,
- (b) the sacramental ministry,
- and (c) the sacraments.

Before trying to examine the said relation in each of the above areas, it is necessary to state a basic observation concerning all three in the same way: their eternal validity has nothing to do with the mere historical conditions under which they received one form or another, but this validity must rather be identified with a religious commitment as such to a transcendental divine authority. Thus we may say that in this sense it becomes fundamentally irrelevant what, for example, the exact number is of the books of Scriptural Canon, or what the number is of the degrees of priesthood or the number of the sacraments. All this means that *time* as such cannot be an isolated factor, itself evaluating the significance of events occurring in time. This is why those who judge tradition merely according to its antiquity are fatally condemned to follow the secular patterns of *conservatism* or *revolutionism*. For the Christian faith, on the contrary, time is not a measure in itself but only the means through which God manifests the traces of His presence in His world. And when mathematical time becomes instrumental for divine revelation, its nature is accordingly changed into the theological *kairos*.

Let us now examine more closely the notion of tradition in relation to the said three areas of the Christian Church.

(a) The Canon of Scripture

It is a widely known fact that Scripture for our Lord and His disciples was only the Old Testament. Jesus Christ has established the relation of His own teaching to the Old Testament by filling old structures with new spirit. This was the meaning of His characteristic sermons on the Mount of Olives where the Lord repeatedly contrasts the old and the new: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old ... But I say to you" (Matt. 5 : 21-22). From this historic event we are entitled to say that, for the first decades of the Christian Church, Scripture was the Old Testament, while the entire characteristic Christian teaching was only an oral tradition. During the formation of the New Testament Canon in later years, it became evident that only a small part of the vast oral tradition could be identified within books in the form of Scripture. The same development from a broader spiritual context to a narrower Scriptural literature had also taken place in the life of Israel. The historical process of the formation of the Scriptural Canon by no means allows one to believe that the word of God in the Old or New Testaments was written in systematic form as an exhausting code of

religious truth. On the contrary, the variety of the divinely-inspired authors, together with the variety of the historic reasons and conditions which caused the composition of the individual books in the Old and New Testaments, are clear indications that only a small yet distinct part of divine revelation could be preserved in writing. This situation permits us to believe that it is quite possible for several parts of the written revelation to have been lost before the formation of the Scriptural Canon. Most enlightening on this point is the famous passage of the Apostle and Evangelist John according to which “there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21 : 25). The consolation for the loss of the greater part which “the world itself could not contain in books” is given forever by the same Evangelist in a similar passage where he states that: “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 : 30-31). It is clear from these remarks that in the final analysis all the meaning of Scripture and tradition is that man receives all necessary elements of divine revelation in order to believe in God and be redeemed.

Following the studies of modern exegetical scholarship, and particularly those of the so-called historico-philological method, we do not need to fear the distinction within the Scriptural texts of different kinds of inspiration and, accordingly, of different theological value of individual texts within the Holy Writings. Without being pedantic or even destructive to the organic unity of Holy Scripture in seeking the “canon within the Canon”, as do many liberal theologians, we may accept the fact that much information in Holy Scripture has no immediate theological value, and we understand as such not only the so-called “*dicta aliorum*” but also many other truths of moral or scientific character.

Bearing in mind all the above, one has to realise that the last criterion by which all the mentioned distinctions may be judged is not Scripture alone, nor a person alone, and nor again a concrete principle of divine revelation. The real and infallible criterion for such a judgment is the Holy Spirit itself. And although the Holy Spirit “breathes where it wills” (John 3 : 8), one is absolutely certain of its presence only within the communal life of the Church¹. For the bearer of the Holy Spirit is by definition the whole Body of Christ, namely the Church, and in the final analysis the whole Church is *tradition*. Only within the boundaries of the Church does

the faithful have the sense of security, that is the feeling of being in the continuity of genuine tradition. Thus the German theologian F. Mussner is right in stating the following:

The Church developed a comprehensive tradition not as a result of her establishment in the world, but because she became aware of her historical character, and felt the need to preserve the identity of her essence in the historical process.²

From all these reflections, it becomes evident that tradition is not so much a treasury of structures and forms but rather a living current of life, a way of existing, thinking and feeling. Tradition in the Christian Church is the endless *communion of saints* as initiated by God Himself and inherited by each faithful in humility and gratitude. Tradition in this perspective is *natura naturans* and not *natura naturata*, to use an appropriate philosophical terminology. Even more appropriate, however, that this philosophical terminology is the theological language of the Orthodox liturgy. Shortly before the consecration of the Holy Gifts, we confess to our Lord that: "You are the one Who offers and is offered, Who receives and is shared, O Christ our God".³ After such a deep theological recognition of the identification of Christ with His whole Body which is the Church, we are entitled to call tradition Christ Himself. Perhaps this was also the intention of the Latin Church Fathers who named the Church *Christus prolongatus*.

This concept of tradition as a living body extended through the ages enables us to see also some other aspects in the general evaluation of the phenomenon of tradition within the Christian Church. Just as in the organism of the body we distinguish, within the general biological life, various individual lives of the different parts of the body, so also do we distinguish within the entire Tradition (with capital "T") many kinds of tradition (with small "t"), such as for example dogmatical, liturgical, pastoral and so on. Although all these kinds of tradition do not have the same importance and theological value, nonetheless each one of them, in the way and for the purpose that they function within the life of the Church, deserve the same respect and acceptance. The authority of the Church, on the one hand, and the organic unity of Christian life, on the other, oblige us accordingly to appreciate all elements of tradition in the particular role of each. This is why we are not allowed, for example, to classify doctrinal teachings into dogmas of first or second class, nor to evaluate different parts of Scripture as more or less necessary. The whole Christian tradition as a body purifies itself through the centuries and allows the elements no longer useful to die off, so

that it is not necessary for some individuals to undertake violent actions towards the end of a renewal.

After all the above, one could pose the question: does this panoramic view of tradition not imply a dangerous levelling of all elements of Christian life, and above all a confusion between Scripture and tradition? What is the difference between the Scriptural Canon and the rest of the Christian literature? There is no doubt that Scripture is the heart and concentration of divine revelation, but its sacredness and message are always guaranteed by the authority of the Church as the endless ocean of life in the Holy Spirit. Outside the traditional context of Church communion, Scripture is not the word of God but the compilation of the writings of various persons and times — at least a strange, incomprehensible book.

(b) *The sacramental priesthood*

Although through the sacraments of the so-called Christian initiation all members of the Church share in the general priesthood initiated by Jesus Christ (cf. Peter 2 : 9), the Church very soon established a distinct sacramental priesthood following, as New Israel, the example of the Old Israel.

We have mentioned above that, because of the deep social character of faith, the model of *the remnant* was decisive throughout the entire divine economy. The meaning of the remnant is not to oppose a distinct group to the whole but on the contrary to provide a concrete and highly responsible instrument for the education, cultivation and sanctification of the whole. In this sense had God elected the twelve tribes of Israel as *the chosen people* in order to lead to salvation the whole of mankind, and in this same sense did Christ elect His twelve disciples as the foundations of the Church in which He alone is the cornerstone (Matt. 21 : 42).

The existence, therefore, and proper function of the ordained priesthood in the midst of the people of God belong to the essential characteristics of the Church structure. This priesthood which in itself is structured in various degrees has its theological legitimacy and soteriological importance in the sacramental fact that it relates, through an unbroken link, directly to the college of the twelve Apostles. This is the so-called “Apostolic succession”, which is guaranteed not only by the historical *laying on of hands* — which is the external aspect of the sacrament — but predominantly also through the free and obedient acceptance of “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Since, however, we mentioned the various degrees of priesthood, we must add that the fullness of its spiritual power and mission is handed down only to the Bishop. He assumes, in the midst of the Eucharistic congregation, the place of Jesus Christ Himself in order to be the visible head of His commun-

ity. According to the Church Fathers, the Bishop stands “in the image and place of Christ”. This, of course, by no means contradicts the basic belief and truth that the whole Church stands in the succession of the Apostles, and it is precisely for this reason that the whole Church is called apostolic. The central and particularly distinct place of the Bishop in the Church does not allow him to become an arbitrary monarch because *two* very basic moral and canonical factors define his life and behaviour. Firstly, the already mentioned absolutely *Christocentric character* of his office, guaranteed through the awful oaths in the form of public confession during his consecration, and secondly his participation in the administration of the whole Church through the *holy synod*.⁴ Both structural institutions, namely the Bishop’s office and the holy synod, are directly related, within the whole complex of Christian tradition, to the category of the *Church Fathers*. An organic extension of the theologically distinct order of Church Fathers is the spiritual father for every faithful, which is indispensable in the form of a “geron” or “staretz”. For the Church does not provide for the individual faithful a book — not even the Holy Scripture — because every book may always be misinterpreted. This is why the Church has always underlined the pastoral significance of providing, for the congregation as well as for the individual, the so-called *viva vox Apostolorum* in the person of concrete and officially designated shepherds and teachers. In this context, it is very important to remember that, besides the Scriptural Canon and the various Creeds, a third means by which the Church endeavoured to save its continuity and spiritual identity were the so-called “episcopal lists”.

(c) *The Sacraments*

In order to be able to appreciate correctly the theological relevance of the sacraments as central constants of tradition in the Christian faith, we must basically recall the definition of faith given by St. Paul: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 1 : 11).

It is precisely in the spirit of this definition that the sacraments are tangible signs of invisible power and grace. They are the sacramental yet real foretaste of the Age to Come in the historic present.

In speaking of the sacraments, we must not forget their organic relation to the word of God, not only as sacraments of Christ but also as sacred *actions* identical with the soteriological *message* of the Gospel. With the exception of the Holy Eucharist, all other Christian sacraments have been transmitted from our Lord simply by word and not by action.⁵

It is of the essence of God’s works that His word is at the same time action, and His actions are the most eloquent kind of word.

The first and most elementary revelation of this ontological identity of the two in God's relation to His creation is given, as we remember, already in Genesis where we read that whatever God said was simultaneously created. In the same way God's message is always given throughout the various phases of divine economy as a sacramental transmission that is tradition, irrespective of whether this is an oral order or a silent action.

After all this, we could characterise the whole of God's creation as *creatura verbi*. There is no doubt that the same genuinely theological term can be applied in a more particular way to the Church. This is why the German theologian Otto Semmelroth has called the Church "the original sacrament".⁶ Given all these implications of the sacramental structure of the Church, one must realise that the sacraments are the most representative witness of God's presence in the concrete form of life in the Church. The sacraments as distinct charismatic actions of God for the salvation of the believers are at the same time the most effective guarantee for a creative reconciliation between *continuity* and *discontinuity*, which by definition occur in the life of the Church as gradual transfiguration of the created world into the kingdom of God. In other words, the sacraments are the means by which God allows His Church to remain identical, which means faithful to its origins to the absolute degree in spite of the historical changes, and at the same time to rejoice in the unforeseen miracles that the Holy Spirit works through fragile instruments.

A word of conclusion

The correspondence between the strictly theological presuppositions of tradition as mentioned in the first part, and the three areas of their reflection in the life of the Church referred to in the second part, is of such significance that it becomes the most decisive criterion for the authenticity of the Christian faith. The more the mentioned presuppositions define and penetrate individual action and communal activity in the Christian world, the more Church life is expressed as tradition.

In such a strictly theological perspective, tradition is not just a way of handling matters of major or minor importance, but rather the spirit which leaves its creative traces through all possible expressions. In this sense, for the Christian Church, tradition is not merely a method nor a system of principles in the form of doctrine. Tradition, for the Christian Church, is Jesus Christ Himself who stated that "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14 : 6). In other words, the Christian faith is traditional to the degree that it is the new life that makes all things new in Christomorphic obedience, humility and gratitude. Tradition, therefore, is an endless eucharist that detaches the individual from its isolation and embodies it to the broader soteriological context of God's

uncreated grace already within the conditions of the created and perishing world?

NOTES

- 1 This basic conviction establishes what is called the infallibility of the Church. See S. Harkianakis, *The Infallibility of the Church in Orthodox Theology* (Athens, 1965 [in Greek]).
- 2 F. Mussner, "Tradition", in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg, 1965) 10, 291.
- 3 Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom.
- 4 Cf. Archbishop Stylianos, "The Bishop in the Church", in *Voice of Orthodoxy* 5, 5 — 6 (1984). See also J. Karmiris, *The Orthodox Doctrine of the Church* (Athens, 1964, [in Greek]) p. 40.
- 5 Cf. S. Harkianakis, *The Infallibility of the Church*, p. 49f.
- 6 See his famous work, *The Church as Original Sacrament*, (Frankfurt a.M. 1953 [in German]).
- 7 Cf. J. Ratzinger, "Tradition", in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg, 1965) 10, 293.