

SYNDESMOS East-West Youth Exchange

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TRADITION AND HABITS / MODERNITY AND HERESY

IS EVERY HABIT A TRADITION? / IS EVERY INNOVATION A HERESY?

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« Antiquitas sine veritate vetustas erroris est ».
(St Cyprien, *Epistula*, 74).

« In evangelio Dominus, ego sum, inquit, veritas.
Non dixit, ego sum consuetudo ».
(St Augustin, *Sancta Scriptura*, 136).

First of all, I should like to address a few words of thanks from this place to the organizers of this important East-West Youth Exchange, one which is very important for youth, as well as the organising Committee of SYNDESMOS, who included me among the speakers at this conference. I would like to thank also the members of the Regional Committee of SYNDESMOS in Russia for this magnificent meeting and their warm *philoxenia*.

The subjects to be discussed during our weekly youth meeting are of permanently topical interest, including issues with a direct bearing on our way of life and associated with the greatest challenge which the Church has faced and continues to face, none other than the relationship between her message and the world, including all the various cultural contexts within it. These issues are of especial interest to the young people, who strive insistently for some revelation of what the future holds in store, and thus the subject of this meeting constitutes a key dimension in the challenges we face today.

A word of clarification here. The world is incessantly changing. The forms of this world come and go, because they are transitory, subject to decay, to corruption. This is why the world is in need of constant renewal, reforms or innovations — and herein precisely lies

the problem we are examining — and tends ideologically and obsessively towards this perspective of constant alteration, because its ideas are bound to the relative, just, indeed, as is the world itself. And if we, the Christians, the ecclesiastical body, in our meeting with the world, ourselves adopt the ideological crutches used by the world, we shall never emerge from the endless cyclical process which has now turned our lives into an impasse, brought about by the Fall and by our estrangement from God. It is only to the Theology of the Church that we can turn here for answers. Let us endeavor to proceed in this perspective, just as the Fathers of the Church did before us, because the 20th century, the century which is now waning, has been a century of philosophical and ideological satiety, but has also witnessed the bankruptcy of the practices which have corresponded to those philosophies and ideologies.

In order to make it easier for you to follow the subject, I have divided the content of this lecture into three parts : A) The discernment of Tradition, B) Habits and Tradition, and C) Tradition and Modernity.

A) THE DISCERNMENT OF TRADITION

The concept of Tradition as event, which constitutes a vital area for the Church and her life, has assumed in recent times a new form, one which makes it appear somewhat different from that which was experienced by the Prophets, the Apostles, the Saints and the Fathers of our Church. The main characteristic of this new form is its divorce from its natural position, its assumption of independent status, its objectification. And, in fact, its natural position is the Revelation. For indeed, Tradition is associated with the fact, the event of Revelation. In other words, the question of Tradition is a central dimension of the Revelation.

However, at this point a difficulty arises, stemming from the mistaken perception that Revelation has two Sources, the Holy Bible and Holy Tradition. This is what we were all taught, more or less, at school, at theological seminary, at university, even though this perception is demonstrably a teaching of the western Scholasticism which, owing to our own theological decadence or weakness, has affected us decisively in recent years. And

thus those who approach the event of Tradition do so in an autonomous and objectified manner, which may very easily lead to misinterpretations and, principally, to mistaken ways of life within the Church, ways of life which even claim the authority of the Church's habit or practice, thus corrupting the ontological and eschatological content of Tradition.

If we accept Tradition as one of the sources of Revelation, then Revelation too is a reality closed and objectified, a totality of objective truths, which man *must* accept if he is to be a good Christian and to be rewarded by God ; if he refuses to accept them, he must expect to be punished. It is against this perception, which objectifies God, that the current/tide of atheism in the West was a reaction. Therefore, the atheist movement was a *healthy* reaction of the body, but in an *erroneous* way. Without the necessary theological conditions, it reacted to one mistake with another, i.e. in the face of the corruption of Revelation by the western Scholasticism it responded by rejecting the Revelation itself.

We are looking here at two opposite deviations. The touchstone by which these deviations are judged lies in the Fathers of the Church, who, even before this ideological tug of war began, were preserving Revelation and Tradition with their life and experience, demonstrating to us empirically how these should be understood. It is not our intention to present here the rich patristic theology concerning the subject of Revelation ; the time at our disposal is too limited and, in any case, it is not the subject on which we are speaking. We shall merely refer to it insofar as it is related to Tradition and the extensions of Tradition, mainly in relation to the controversial subjects of habits, innovation and modernity which are the topic of this lecture.

First of all, etymologically the word **Revelation** means or offers a starting point for a perspective on Tradition. The word refers to an “uncovering” or “revelation/manifestation”. Through his Revelation, God discloses to man, insofar as this is possible, His own Self at the moment of Creation, the true nature of man and of the creation, of the world. This is also declared by the word “truth”, in Greek “a-litheia” (aj-lhvqeia), meaning that whatever following the Fall was lost in oblivion “lethe” (lhvqh) is now returning to the light. In other words, God reveals to man whatever is related to the meaning and purpose of his existence.

And this is precisely what Tradition aspires to do : to keep this perspective alive for man up until the end of time.

Revelation does not consist exclusively of the Old Testament or the Holy Bible. Not only the Prophets and Apostles but also all the Fathers of the Church together live and experience in the same way the Revelation and all of them expand its understanding and acceptance by man. Enriching Tradition with the truth of Revelation, the Fathers gave it a *healthy* content and *correct* orientation. This is why they by no means excluded the idea of progress and strove in the Holy Spirit to interpret the truths apparent in the Scriptures so that they themselves might be enlightened, so that they might shepherd the Church and the problems of their time be resolved.

There now appears a more profound dimension of Tradition and the way in which it operates within History. The Logos of God transforms everything into His own Body. Thus God manifests himself as living and acting in each period of History and thus the world is saved. Consequently, the Revelation of God, the Tradition of the Church and the salvation of the world are facets of one and the same reality. Tradition is the attempt down the centuries to preserve the integrity of Revelation and Truth, to preserve the initial event of the manifestation of God to the world and to man during and immediately after the Creation.

These elements determine a certain method, albeit not an exhaustive one, of presenting Tradition. What is significant and important, however, is that instead of studying, analyzing and confronting Tradition in a scholastic manner, i.e. as an objective reality, *we should*, in some way, *contribute* to the Tradition. This might be done by attempting to find, within the light cast by Christ, the revealed Logos of God, the meaning of our life today (why do we live ?/why do we exist ?), the meaning of the various situations and conditions in which we find ourselves. Our world is suffering from a lack of orientation and meaning. The liberal humanistic sciences such as philosophy, literature, theatre and art, speak of the “paravlogon”, the “un-reason-able, the “absurd”. Yet by manifesting the “logos”, the “reason” of our existence and the hidden “logos” of beings as creatures of God, *we are called upon to endow this life with orientation and meaning*. The

Logos of God is also the *logos* of Tradition ; when it sounds, it illuminates, liberates, orients and redeems our life. Thus Tradition passes on the *logos* of a *Person* who is addressed in a personal way to the man of each era and helps him to enter into true existence and life, releasing him from loss/fall and oblivion/forgetfulness.

From this perspective the Christian life or the ecclesiastical life becomes intelligible and is experienced as the response of man to the summons of God : faith as a relationship of love, prayer as a dialogue, the sacraments of the Church as the true meeting in time of summoner and summoned. And Tradition, the common fruit and place of this meeting, the exclusive herald which conveys this summons of God, (always) in the proper manner and with the proper orientation. Moreover, Tradition is in reality (in the last analysis) the body, the historical flesh in which God is both hidden and offered to the world, and for that reason it possesses an urgent, transforming dynamism which distinguishes it from traditionalism and conservatism. Tradition has nothing to do with either of these.

Nevertheless, precisely these two forms of conduct, traditionalism and conservatism, are the characteristics of a phenomenon of our time which goes by the name of Fundamentalism. This is the blind and often naive acceptance of the literal infallibility of the Holy Bible (one of the two sources of Revelation for Catholics, and the only source for Protestants), which entails the denial of History and of any form of cooperation between God and man in the fulfillment of Revelation. And the singular, extravagant thing is that the Holy Bible has been transformed into something it never claimed to be : a global textbook on History and science. This is why wherever Fundamentalism rears its head all support automatically vanishes for the presentation of Holy Tradition as an open horizon and a channel of communication with the past and future. Precisely because Tradition without extension forwards, without enrichment, without a daring attempt to manifest the truth, without homogeneity and constant interpretation, without personal interpretation, without personal acquaintance, without anxiety, ceases to be true and sincere Tradition.

B) HABITS AND TRADITION

We have already agreed on the importance of not becoming mere spectators or objective analysts, but instead participating and contributing to Tradition. This contribution, both as individual members and as the ecclesiastical body, in a particular place and time, is connected with the other parameters introduced by the theme we are examining : habit, modernity or innovation of any kind.

Here the touchstone and the criterion are that whatever occurs in human life should find its fulfillment in the perspective of Tradition. Or rather, that whatever happens in our life should be the fruit of the Holy Spirit. « Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God » (1 Cor 10, 31), says St Paul. This way of life, this lifestyle, both continues and creates Tradition. In other words, everything which is received and transformed into His Body. Thus every personal or collective initiative which is carried out in the form of modernity or innovation or in the form of the introduction to the Church and its Tradition of a new habit or practice, when it is carried out in this way and in this disposition, makes for the fulfillment of the members of the Church and contributes to the Tradition.

From this perspective we can speak of the habits and practices as a transformation of human life and thought, as a blessing and elevation of life to the point where created human nature becomes the garb and manifestation of uncreated divine truth. These, transformed, are incorporated into the flow of Tradition and function as the manifestation of the truth, as is the case with the hymnography, the icons, the ecclesiastical services, the calendar “*adding* enrichment” with new saints, etc.

In other words, the eternal entrance into the world of divine life, by means of the Church and her Tradition, has brought about a transformation and made the habits and customs of men more Christian. From this point of view we can interpret with relative clarity many of the realities, e.g. of Byzantium, of the Russian people of the country where we are situated at this moment, of the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans who lived under the Ottoman Empire, or of all the other Orthodox peoples at all the moments of their historical life. This cultural harvest has always been the great wealth of the Orthodox people of God. A classic example of this is Dostoevsky, who expresses, in this country but in another age, the model for the renewal (*kainismo*;) of Orthodox Tradition, something of vital interest to

all of us, when we can decipher it, and provides a response in another way to the subject under examination. It is the people of God which creates and contributes to Tradition.

However, while most Orthodox are agreed in their recognition of this richness, there are not a few who, wishing to enjoy the fruit, strive to uproot the tree which nurtures that fruit. This observation is related to the great problems created here in connection with self-consciousness and the future of our peoples, in the perspective of the reception and transformation of new elements into Tradition.

In this sense, whatever habit is not the fruit of the Holy Spirit cannot be Tradition, even if it has clad itself externally in some ecclesiastical or traditional shape. For then Tradition is transformed into the merely traditionalism, from life into idol, from spirit into dead letter, from love into law, from freedom into compulsion, from theology into moralism, from interpretation of the world and of man into ideology, in a word, from young bride into withered mummy, precisely because its assumption of autonomy has had as a direct result its assumption of absolute status and thus its alienation.

It is a commonplace that within the Church Tradition can all too easily, if we are not so careful, be understood and function as mere conservatism, in which case we see only the fruit — not the roots and the trunk — and the fruit dried and withered, incapable of giving nourishment and this fact constitutes a burden... Here too we have an opportunity to say that usually, when we speak about Tradition, we are thinking of something static, something identified more or less with dogged attachment to the past, conservatism, as we said, resistance to progress ; we are thinking of the refusal to change, the fossilization of the models handed down from the past, the elevation of whatever is old to a position of authority. There is no space here for a new ethos, a new habit to make its way in, even one bringing new life to the Church, since its rejection is certain *a priori*. However, we now know that Tradition is new life — and as such open to anything —, it is not conservatism and the preservation of institutions and concepts. Tradition becomes the measure of the people and their habits, and never vice-versa. It enriches the new with the treasures of the old, and reinvigorates the old with the vital juices of the new.

At this point, after what we have said above, a question arises for all of us. Can we take such initiatives and introduce new habits into the Church, but which will be the fruit of the Holy Spirit into our life and respond to the demands of the world, the human thirst for life ? If so, the things we propose will really be and become Tradition. But if not, the habits we propose will be identified with the corruption of the world and one day will become

relative and will disappear. They will never become Tradition. And then the freedom granted by the grace of God will be replaced by the law of power, the life of Tradition will be replaced by the sovereignty of habit and selfless love by the advisability of fanaticism.

C) TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Let us now examine the final aspect of the subject, concerned with Tradition, modernity and heresy. Over the last century the ecclesiastical body of the Orthodox Church has been characterized by a spiritual decadence, a theological decline. Various factors have led to this, factors which require study, discussion and analysis in depth. Nevertheless it is important that we emphasize here that this fact is a basic reason for the emergence of calls and demands for modernity in the life of the ecclesiastical body, manifesting themselves as a need for renewal, changes, innovations or reforms.

In situations where the ecclesiastical body lacks the experience and enlightened knowledge of the issues, both conservatism on the one hand and changes or innovations on the other are, of course, very dangerous. I suggest that we examine this point, which lies at the heart of our topic, through an analysis of the attitudes to Tradition in Roman-Catholicism and Protestantism, which are the main sources of influence on the Orthodox Tradition.

- It is well known historically that the Roman-Catholic love of Tradition was identified, for various reasons (some of which we examined in the beginning of this lecture), with *conservatism*. However, conservatism has been shown to be inadequate, especially within the contemporary, pluralistic reality. Conservatism remains inert in the face of the corruption of time, it is opposed to life itself. It traps the Church in the past and fetters its mission of renewal in the present. The dead are not resurrected in the communion of the present, while the living are trapped in the communion of the past. Thus the domination of the past is confirmed and made permanent, while the importance of present and future is suppressed. Love and hope, as virtues of the present and future, are subjected to a dead faith, which loses its eschatological orientation and is reduced to mere ideology.

• On the other hand, within Protestantism the dominant characteristic is the fact that *modernity* and *innovation* are profoundly averse to the corruption of time and cannot accept it within the present as an element of life. The faithful are divorced from the past and live an unanchored, rootless existence in the present. The dead are absent from the communion of the present, while the living make extempore plans for a communion of the future. Thus unceasing change becomes the rule, anything of duration is regarded as tedious. Faith loses its historical fulfillment, while hope and love are reduced to merely individual emotions. This phenomenon first appeared within the atmosphere of Protestantism. It was here that the view was propounded, as we all know, that the Church must be in a constant state of reform : « *Ecclesia semper reformanda* ». If the Church does not reform herself, she cannot preserve her identity. Yet Protestantism, which denies historical Tradition, does not lead to an organic development, but to the essential alienation of the Church.

But let us look at the state of our own house. It is a matter of proven historical fact that Orthodox Christianity has declined into a state of fossilization, in which the refusal to make any change or innovation is identified with insistence on Tradition (of the past) and thus with conservatism. On the other hand, in reaction to this conservatism, there are some who hurl themselves into a frenzied progressivism, competing with the Western Christians to see who can be more progressive. This lack of balance reminds us of the pendulum state of the Orthodox Christians today, with their unalloyed and pure imitation of the Western Christians of advanced societies. They move back and forth between conservatism and progressivism, pursuit of the one true way and liberalism, fossilization and reform, fundamentalism and modernization, regression to the past and technocracy, moralism and permissiveness, rejection and identification to the world. VI. Lossky notes that the conservative stance should not be regarded as ensuring redemption, nor is every heresy an innovation.

In the face of this situation of “the swinging of the pendulum” of the ecclesiastical body, and also the powerful pressure of the events and changes occurring in the world, what should be done ? Here we must make an observation which provides a useful response.

The Church is “in the world” but “not of the world”. This is a vital truth for the self-consciousness of the ecclesiastical body (all of us) which is called on to seek ways of ensuring this “not of the world” is preserved (and this is Tradition !), without allowing the quality of “in the world”, i.e. her relationship with the world, to cease to be valid, in order that she can receive/engage with the world and transform it into the Body of Christ. The

relationship between Church and world is consequently always a dialectical one, positive and at the same time critical, a paradoxical and *antinomical* “love-hate” relationship until the Second Coming, when the *mode of being* of the Church and of the World will become identified in the Kingdom of God. It is thus important to see what bridges can exist between the Orthodox Tradition and the world with all its derivatives, which (*world*), as something acquired and created, in order to preserve itself constantly puts forward the demand for renewal and eternal change, precisely because it is subject to decay and corruption.

Consequently what is desired is for the Orthodox Tradition not to be cut off from the world, but neither to be identified with the form of the world to a dangerous extent, dangerous to the eschatological and redemptive purpose of the Church. As for the particular theme we are examining, that of modernity, of innovations, of changes or of reforms of whatever kind, the Orthodox Church has always adopted a positive and receptive attitude. And this is because man as the image of God is called upon to be creative, a transformer of the nature made glorious in him, making use of his freedom, the main feature of the divine existence bestowed upon him.

But what should we do with innovations of whatever kind? Accept them or reject them as heresies? At this point precisely Tradition returns as the decisive criterion for each innovation. Each innovation is much more welcome within the Church than any desire for conservatism or fossilization, despite the apparently contrasting phenomena of today. This is attested to by the History of 2000 years and more, precisely because Tradition is open by definition to the future. For example, the parish, the services, the divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom as compared with the New Testament, monasticism, the term “*homoousios*” (ὁμοούσιος)-consubstantial), the canonical systems (metropolitan, autocephalous, patriarchal, etc.), the icon, all these were at one time innovations in the Church. It is enough that they should represent a need for redemption of the ecclesiastical body and be the fruit of the Holy Spirit, as we said before in the case of habits and practices. And one special example. The supporters of the Arian heresy denounced the Orthodox as innovators because they used the term “*homoousios*”, which is not to be found in Holy Bible or in Tradition. But the innovation of the Orthodox in their use of the term “*homoousios*” represented the correct interpretation of Revelation and the relevant experience of the Church, even though the term itself was a novelty.

Every change tends to lead to a status of autonomy in relation to what has gone before, every innovation in the name of modernity and modernization may bring deviation and lead to heresy. Let us remind ourselves here that heresy means a “selection from the whole”, and consequently is a fragmenting event and thus abolishes catholicity and, by extension, unity, the two constituent characteristics of Tradition. It also means deviation from the eschatological course of the ecclesiastical body, and thus alienation of Revelation and total abolition of the perspective of Tradition, which wishes to preserve the opening to the future and to the eschata and to prepare by acceptance/reception and transformation for the coming of the Lord (see Ap 22, 20).

Here, in order to contribute to better understanding of the subject, I would like to make use of a term from contemporary theology, which we owe to the famous modern theologian Fr. Alexander Schemann. It is the term “Eonism” (aijwnismov), “Secularism” and means the mentality of those people who, while believing in God, do not make him the “centre of their life” (Abbot Dorotheos), with the result that they move in a “*heterocentric* perspective”, trapped in the form “of this world” (Jn 18, 36-37), and adopting spurious glorifications of this world (*worldly eschatology*).

Every innovation which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and *homocentric* with Tradition is acceptable and even desirable, because it responds to a redemptive need of our age. Yet when it functions as a *spurious glorification* “of this world”, then it ends by becoming *Eonism*, which constitutes in practice a “creeping heresy” within the bosom of the Church, and by its very nature very hard to identify. This finally is why Tradition, for habits and innovations, for practices and for modernity, is the sign of progress in all the new steps taken of whatever kind by each age and each new generation.

RENEWAL (*KAINISMOS*) OF ORTHODOX TRADITION

To summarize, it would be constructive to recapitulate what we have said in order to make the purpose of this lecture more clear. The concepts of Tradition and renewal or modernity are not in contradistinction to one another, since Tradition is understood as the « walk[ing] in newness of life » (Rm 6,4). And this “walking” means movement forward, not stasis, not going backwards. Thus tradition and renewal are not two different things, but

renewal here is the empirical experience and manifestation of Tradition in the present. Without renewal, the dynamic and ever new revelation becomes passive, irrelevant, a dead letter, without any message, without the prophetic spirit.

There is no disputing that at times Tradition is seen as a stubborn adherence to the past, while at other times, employing the pretext of the “new” element in Tradition, innovations are attempted, for the significance of the future is over-emphasized at the expense of the past. In this way, although Tradition contains the “new in Christ”, when it is regarded as static there occurs a clash between the sterile adherence to what we have inherited from the past, and progress. For this reason a number of questions are raised concerned with the way in which Tradition operates. A number of relevant questions were cited at the frontispiece of our lecture. We could formulate several others. How, for example, can the continuity and homogeneity of Tradition be preserved within the process of renewal ? Is it possible for renewal to become a catalytic element in Tradition, while insistence on the past heritage becomes an obstacle to renewal ?

These questions are of vital significance, if we bear in mind an observation which is a key to the interpretation of our subject. *The difference between ultra-conservatism and schism or heresy is not great and the road uniting them is neither narrow nor difficult to travel...* Only thus can we see more clearly, why it is possible when someone invokes Tradition for him to follow the path of ultra-conservatism or the path of innovation... It is now clear that the subject we are examining is not so simple as it appears ; it is a huge and complex subject for both East and West. This is why it was worth the effort of examining it comprehensively and trying to tackle the questions it raises, at a time of such decisive significance for the progress of the ecclesiastical body and an era of so many challenges to our faith.

Epilogue

The saints of our Church down the ages have been the living vessels and witnesses of the Tradition of the Church in its central stream, the liturgical life, but with all the wealth of the ascetic and spiritual life which flows along the same course. The saints express and reflect the whole Tradition, the one Tradition always and everywhere the same, to which it makes no difference if its agents are monks, priests or laymen. It is this Tradition « which has been believed everywhere, always and by everyone [*Id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*] » (St Vincent of Lerin). It is Tradition which is identified with the life of the Church.

Each habit, each, traditional practice and each innovation, when it is baptized in this river, is judged, received and transformed. And when it is transformed it contributes to the renewal (*kainismo*;) of Tradition, it becomes Tradition. If however it does not pass through the ...Jordan, then it is transformed into Eonism and serves the corruption of the world which has rendered itself autonomous. It thus depends on us how far we are inclined to follow with freedom the course of the saints, both in our human habits and practices and in our innovations...

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