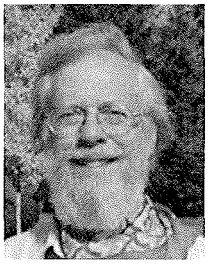
Tradition, Dogma and Doctrine in the Orthodox Church in America

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"Guard the deposit." 1 Tm 6:20

"Tradition is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church." Vladimir Lossky

In the first centuries of Christianity, there were no formal statements of doctrine or dogma, even if there existed various formulae expressing the faith, for example those recited by catechumens at their baptism. Some of these formulae became the basis of later formal statements of doctrine, although the Church Fathers were very reluctant to set out dogmatic statements of the faith. The Church began to formulate statements of dogma only in response to teachings that were not in accord with the broadly accepted body of faith. The first of these doctrinal definitions was made at First Ecumenical Council held in Nicea in 325. The Nicene Creed was elaborated in response to teachings of Arius and his followers that Christ was only human and not divine, the Son of God. The Nicene Creed was further developed at and following the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, to become the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, as it is still used in the Orthodox Church. Subsequent doctrinal statements were also made to clarify the body of the faith in response to erroneous teachings.

Any consideration of doctrine or dogma in the Orthodox Church must be set within the context of the nature and role of Tradition in the Church. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, in words that recall the language of the Ecumenical Councils, the Orthodox Patriarchs wrote to the English Non-Jurors:

> We preserve the Doctrine of the Lord uncorrupted, and firmly adhere to the Faith He delivered to us, and keep it free from blemish and diminution, as a Royal Treasure, and a monument of great price, neither adding anything, nor taking anything from it.[1]

For Orthodox Christians, the notion of living continuity of the Faith is summed up in the word "Tradition": "We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set," wrote John of Damascus, "but we keep the Tradition, just as we received it."[2]

What does an Orthodox mean by "Tradition"? A tradition is commonly understood to signify an opinion, belief or custom handed down from ancestors to posterity. Christian Tradition, in that case, is the faith and practice that Jesus Christ imparted to the Apostles and which, since the Apostles, has been handed down from generation to generation in the Church (cf. 1 Co 15: 3). But to an Orthodox Christian, Tradition means something broader than only formal dogmatic statements. Tradition includes the Bible, the Creed, the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Fathers, the Canons, the Liturgy and the service books, the holy icons – in fact, the whole system of doctrine, worship, spirituality, sacred art and Church government which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages. These aspects of Tradition are sometimes referred to as "the sources of the Faith". Orthodox see themselves as heirs and guardians to a rich inheritance received from the past, initially from the teachings of the Apostles as received from Christ Himself,

and Orthodox believe that they have the sacred trust to transmit this inheritance to future generations.

The Orthodox, while cherishing this inheritance from the past, are also well aware that not everything received from the past is of equal value. Among the various elements of Tradition, a unique pre-eminence belongs to the Bible, the Creed and the dogmatic definitions of the Ecumenical Councils: the Orthodox accept these as absolute and unchanging. Other aspects of Tradition do not have the same authority. The decrees of the Councils of Jassy or Jerusalem do not stand on the same level as the Nicene Creed, nor do the writings of an Athanasius, a John Chrysostom or a Symeon the New Theologian, occupy the same position as the Gospel of Saint John.

Nor is everything received from the past necessarily true. As one of the bishops remarked at the Council of Carthage in 257: "The Lord said, 'I am truth' (Jn 14:6). He did not say, 'I am custom'." There is a difference between "Tradition" and "traditions" and customs: many traditions which the past has handed down are of human origin and derive from particular circumstances – pious opinions or practices which may be more or less related to Tradition, but are not an essential or complete statement of the one Tradition, the fundamental Christian message.

It is absolutely essential to question the past. Higher standards of scholarship, increasing contacts with Western Christians and the inroads of secularism and atheism have forced Orthodox in modern times to look more closely at their inheritance and to distinguish more carefully between Tradition and traditions. The task of discrimination is never easy. It is necessary to avoid both the error of the Old Believers (a sixteenth-century schism of the Church of Russia) and that of the "Living Church" (Church "reformers" supported by the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution of 1917): the one group fell into an extreme conservatism which admitted no change whatever in traditions and practices, the other into doctrinal compromises that undermined essential aspects of the faith. Often it is precisely the contact with the West that is helping Orthodox to distinguish more clearly what is indispensable in their own inheritance from what is cultural or contingent upon particular circumstances.

True Orthodox fidelity to the past must always be creative fidelity. True Orthodoxy can never rest satisfied with a barren "theology of repetition", which merely repeats accepted formulae without striving to understand what lies behind them. Loyalty to Tradition, properly understood, is not something mechanical, a passive and automatic process of transmitting the accepted wisdom of an era in the distant past. Orthodox must see Tradition from within, must enter into its inner spirit, must re-experience the meaning of Tradition in a manner that is exploratory, courageous and creative.

In order to live within Tradition, it is not enough simply to give intellectual assent to a system of doctrine; for Tradition is far more than a set of abstract propositions – it is life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit. Tradition is not only *kept* by the Church it *lives* in the Church. *The Orthodox conception of Tradition is not static but dynamic, not a dead acceptance of the past but a living discovery of the Holy Spirit in the present, the life of the Spirit in the Church.* Tradition, while changeless in its essentials (for God does not change), is constantly assuming new forms, which supplement the old without necessarily superseding them. Orthodox often speak as if the period of doctrinal formulation were wholly at an end, yet this is not the case. Many modern Orthodox theologians speak of "Living Tradition" to emphasise this point[3]. Perhaps in our own day new Ecumenical Councils will meet, and Tradition will be enriched by fresh statements of the faith.

This idea of Tradition as a living thing has been well expressed by Father Georges Florovsky:

> Tradition is the witness of the Spirit; the Spirit's unceasing revelation and preaching of good tidings ... To accept and understand Tradition we must live within the Church, we must be conscious of the grace-giving presence of the Lord in it; we must feel the breath of the Holy Spirit in it... Tradition is not only a protective, conservative principle; it is primarily the principle of growth and

regeneration... Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit and not only the memory of words.[4]

Tradition is thus the witness of the Spirit in our own times. In the words of Christ, "When the Spirit of truth has come, He will guide you into all truth" (Jn 16:13). It is this divine promise that forms the basis of Orthodox attachment to Tradition.

Within this general context, we can now address the specific questions before the Faith and Witness Commission.

What is dogma or doctrine in your tradition?

Although it is unlikely that all Orthodox would agree as to what constitutes the body of dogma or doctrine, most would accept that the major doctrinal statements of the Ecumenical Councils certainly constitute basic doctrine. The Nicene Creed contains most of these statements of basic doctrine. Examples of doctrine not contained in Creed are the title of Theotokos – Mother of God – given to the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus 431, and the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 concerning the veneration of icons. "Maximalists" within the Orthodox Church would include many liturgical and disciplinary practices as forming a part of the unalterable body of Tradition, but this view is rejected by most Orthodox theologians. This mode of thinking led to several schisms, including those of the Old Believers and of the "Old Calendarists", who do not accept the decision of a majority of the Orthodox Churches to adopt the Gregorian calendar for the celebration of the invariable feast days.

Many Orthodox theologians make a distinction between "dogma" and "doctrine". "Dogma" in this sense would consist primarily in the formal doctrinal statements of Ecumenical Councils as discussed above, while "doctrine" consists in widely accepted teachings, particularly those of the Fathers of the Church, which are nonetheless not the subject of formal definitions of the faith as the Nicene Creed. *Theologumena* are theological opinions which have less formal status than dogma or doctrine.

What are considered to be doctrinal statements?

As suggested, most Orthodox would agree that only the major doctrinal statements of the Ecumenical Councils, in particular the Nicene Creed, can truly be considered doctrinal. Other decisions of Ecumenical Councils, often organisational or disciplinary in nature, should thus be seen as significant statements reflecting the values and needs of the times, but not valid universally or for all time. For example, the use of the Julian Calendar was accepted by an Ecumenical Council, but this decision should be seen as one deriving from custom, valid at the time that the decision was taken, but not binding for all time.

The Orthodox Church accepts as Ecumenical Councils only the first seven councils, the last of which was held in 787, because these councils brought together representatives of the entire Church then in communion, both East and West.[5] Councils of the Eastern Churches held after 787 do not have the same ranking as the first seven councils. This includes certain councils which made major doctrinal statements, such as the councils of Constantinople held in the mid-fourteenth century, which affirmed the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas concerning the distinction between the divine essence and divine energies. Even these major theological statements are not considered "dogma" in the same sense as the articles of the Creed.

Who can make doctrinal statements?

Most Orthodox would maintain that dogmatic statements can be made only by an ecumenical council and require the acceptance of the faithful before they can truly be considered as forming part of the body of the Faith. Orthodox have never regarded any individual, be he patriarch or saint, any meeting of individuals, be they patriarchs or bishops, as having unequivocal authority to make dogmatic statements. Dogma is a reflection of the Holy Spirit in the Church and must, in some fashion, be accepted by the entire Church. Infallibility resides in the Church as whole as the Body of Christ vivified by the constant and renewing presence of the Holy Spirit, not in any individual or group.

There are many examples of councils whose decisions were subsequently rejected by the faithful and never became part of the body of the Faith. Some of these include the so-called "Robbers' Council" held in 449, which accepted a monophysite Christology, and the Council of Ferrare-Florence in 1438-1439, at which almost all the Orthodox representatives accepted the Latin doctrines of the Procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son and of purgatory. The faithful refused these doctrines and, in fact, rejected the re-establishment of unity with the Latin Church agreed upon at Ferrare-Florence.

Today, it is not clear what body, what council, could properly make dogmatic statements: Would this be a council bringing together only the Orthodox Churches in communion with the Church of Constantinople, or some wider body, which could include, for example, the Church of Rome, and also the Oriental Orthodox Churches? Whatever council or body of the Church would be involved, Orthodox would hold strongly to the principle that dogmatic decisions must be received by the entire Church before they can be considered definitive.

Any move towards a dogmatic statement would be taken as most serious within the Orthodox Church and would inevitably provoke a major discussion of the basic principles involved. As we have emphasized, most Orthodox consider that the essential statement of faith is contained in the Nicene Creed, to which can be added only a few other dogmatic statements made by Ecumenical Councils.

What is the relationship between doctrine and revelation?

Doctrine, or rather dogma, is the formal expression of truths contained in revelation; there can be no conflict between dogma and revelation; all dogma must be grounded in revelation, which is the inspired word of God addressed to humanity. In this sense, dogma may be seen as the expression of fundamental eternal truths found in divine revelation.

However precise the language of dogmatic statements may be or appear to be, Orthodox would affirm that human language can never fully express the divine nature, which remains a mystery that can be experienced in faith and love rather than grasped intellectually. In the words of the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom:

> It is proper and right to sing to You, bless You, praise You, thank You and worship You in all places of Your dominion; for You are God ineffable, beyond comprehension, invisible, beyond understanding, existing forever and always the same; You and Your only begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit.

1. Letter of 1718, in G. Williams, *The Orthodox Church of the East in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 17.

2. *On Icons*, 11, 12 (PG 94, 1297B).

3. See, for example, Sergius Bulgakov et al., *Living Tradition: Orthodoxy in the Modern World* (Paris, 1937), and John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition: Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978).

4. "The Catholicity of the Church", in *Bible, Church, Tradition*, pp. 46-7.

5. The Churches of Assyria (Persia) and the "Pre-Chalcedonian" or Oriental Orthodox Churches were no longer in communion with the Byzantine and the Latin Churches after the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451.

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