

HOLY TRADITION

and the
Traditions of Men

by
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Some fifty years ago, a group of Orthodox Christians in North America got together to organize a traditional Orthodox Christian parish. They were deeply disturbed by the non-Orthodox statements and actions of many "Orthodox" bishops and clergy who were of an ecumenistic/syncretistic frame of mind. Consequently, these Orthodox Christians wanted to have bishops and clergy who truly "followed in the footsteps of the Holy Fathers," who truly adhered to the faith of the Holy Seven Ecumenical Councils, who truly respected and observed the holy canons of the Church.

Hence, with the eager assistance of some traditionally-minded clergy, these Orthodox Christians found themselves Orthodox Christian bishops, and they began to organize their parishes under the pastoral care of these hierarchs.

But then something odd happened.

A significant number of old calendarist people who had come from abroad heard about the formation of these traditional Orthodox Christian parishes and began to attend services here.

Normally, this would be a welcome development. Both groups professed that they were against the heresy of Ecumenism/Syncretism. Both groups professed that they wanted to adhere to the Church's traditions. But here is where the problems appeared: Which traditions?

For example, the ecumenist/syncretistic "Orthodox" bishops and clergy had begun having joint prayers and giving communion to members of the Monophysite heresy (condemned by the Fourth Ecumenical Council).

Both groups — the traditional Orthodox Christians here in North America and the old calendarist faithful from abroad — agreed that this was definitely wrong and could not be condoned.

Then, another question arose: how frequently should Orthodox Christians receive holy communion? The traditional Orthodox Christians in North America pointed to the teachings of the Holy Fathers and to the holy canons of the Ecumenical Councils, which teach that the faithful should partake of

the Holy Mysteries as often as possible (unless they are under a specific *epitimion* which hinders them from doing so).*

The old calendarists, on their part, pointed to their modern tradition (which has no ancient patristic or canonical support) of receiving holy communion only three or four times a year!

Also, the traditional Orthodox Christians in North America believed that it is necessary and profitable for us to keep the Church's holy fasts, and also that we should receive holy communion as frequently as possible — *but the two disciplines are not in any way linked together*, as the holy canons of the Ecumenical Councils teach us (see, for example, Canon 66 of the Quinisext Council).

The old calendarists, on the other hand, pointed to their modern tradition (which has no ancient patristic or canonical support) of insisting that the faithful must fast from meat products, dairy products and oil for a number of days before receiving holy communion.

The traditional Orthodox Christians in North America believed that it is not the tradition of the Church to have "icons" of the Holy Trinity. In support of this teaching, they point to the witness of many, many Church Fathers and Saints, and also to the "Introduction" to the Minutes of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (A. D. 787), where there is an interview with the Orthodox Pope of Rome, Gregory II, who was asked: "Why do we *not* depict God the Father?" And Pope Gregory answers: "Because we have never seen Him." Also, the Pan-Orthodox Council of 1666 and the Constantinopolitan Council of 1780 specifically forbid the depiction of the Holy Trinity, and they point out that this depiction is an innovation from the Roman Catholic West.**

The old calendarists, on their part, retort — with no basis in fact whatsoever — that, if the Orthodox Christians in North America do not have "icons" of the Holy Trinity, they must therefore be "anti-Trinitarian" and "Freemasons"!

In fact, many such differences about what was traditional, or simply the "traditions of men" began to emerge between these two groups.

For example, on one occasion, while serving at a parish church in Athens, Greece some years ago, I mentioned in my sermon that, "You know, in America our women cover their heads when they come to church."

*See Canon 80 of the 6th Ecumenical Council, Canon 11 of Gangra, and Canon 2 of Antioch. See also our pamphlet, "The Kollyvades: Keepers of the Faith."

**See also our pamphlet, "The True Image of the Father."

It was as if I had said: "My beloved, I believe that the Turks are the most wonderful people in the world."

One woman — a Greek old calendarist, of course — came up to the north door of the icon-screen, pushed it open, and began to berate me loudly for sharing this bit of information (which, of course, comes directly from the holy Apostle Paul in I Corinthians II:5).

So much for "stand fast and hold the traditions ye have received" from the Apostles and the Saints!

All this, and more, is what prompted one of our faithful to say ironically, "Our traditional Orthodox parishes are turning into old calendarist parishes."

It is true that some of these issues had to do with matters that were secondary and of a pastoral nature, and were certainly not dogmatic. The problems arise only when simple believers take these local customs, these "traditions of men" and raise them to the level of dogma: "This is the way we do it in our village, and *only* this way is Orthodox."

People who have read the marvelous study by Saint Nectarius of Aegina concerning fasting in the ancient Church (*The True Vine*, #42) will understand immediately that a great deal of variation existed in antiquity as regards many pastoral issues.

Yet, with patience and love and a true pastoral approach to these matters, all these difficulties can be overcome, as it has been overcome in many of our parishes.

Patience and great diligence in spiritual reading can heal a multitude of such problems.

CANONS

6th Ecumenical Council Canon 80: If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, or any of those who are enumerated in the list of the clergy, or a layman, has no very grave necessity nor difficult business so as to keep him from church for a very long time, but being in town does not go to church on three consecutive Sundays — three weeks — if he is a cleric let him be deposed, but if a layman let him be cut off.

Council of Gangra Canon 11: If anyone shall despise those who out of faith make love-feasts and invite the brethren in honour of the Lord, and is not willing to accept these invitations because he despises what is done, let him be anathema.

Council of Antioch Canon 2: All who enter the church of God and hear the Holy Scriptures, but do not communicate with the people in prayers, or who turn away, by reason of some disorder, from the holy partaking of the Eucharist, are to be cast out of the Church, until, after they shall have made confession, and having brought forth the fruits of penance, and made earnest entreaty, they shall have obtained forgiveness; and it is unlawful to communicate with excommunicated persons, or to assemble in private houses and pray with those who do not pray in the Church; or to receive in one Church those who do not assemble with another Church. And, if any one of the bishops, presbyters, or deacons, or any one in the Canon shall be found communicating with excommunicated persons, let him also be excommunicated, as one who brings confusion on the order of the Church.