

Orthodoxy through the Past and into the Future

Gospel: John 1:43-51 AV: *The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me. Now Philip was of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see. Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.*

"(Moses) choosing
rather to suffer affliction with the people of God,
than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season."
(Hebrews 11:24-25 AV)

What could the Orthodox faithful think about this Sunday of Orthodoxy? Many people on this occasion think about confessionalism and elevating the position of

the Orthodox denomination among other Christian denominations. Religions are in general divine paths on which God descends to man and man ascends to God. The question of Religions is a matter larger than our talk today in these blessed moments. It is with no doubt that all Religions help people to practice good ethical conduct, act consciously, and live in peace and social harmony. This especially applies to the Religions that believe in the one living God. They are all like "threads in the grip of God which man uses to relate to the Almighty."

Christianity however, remains the deepest divine revelation and draws the shortest path leading to heaven. Orthodoxy has kept the Christian Tradition intact. Among the various Christian denominations, She affirms to be the most secure and the easiest path. Christian Education in History has undergone many trials and tribulations. Many human elements filtered in, and also many human trends tampered with it. Orthodoxy however kept the faith pure throughout History, and handed it on from one generation to another, and this is what we call Tradition.

Tradition does not at all mean traditions, old history or inherited teachings. Tradition specifically means the transmission of teaching from one generation to another. God is the God of our Fathers. Tradition means movement and not inheritance. Tradition ceases if it is not transmitted. Freely it was given and freely delivered. Tradition is not just a collection of teachings. It is the movement of the Holy Spirit in the Church to hand down the one Faith. In other words, Tradition is a deposit similar to the talents that the Lord taught us not to bury.

When Orthodoxy emphasizes the importance of Tradition, She proclaims its reliance on the teaching of the Fathers transmitted to us, and on the importance of handing down their teachings to coming generations. Tradition in Orthodoxy is not a museum, but a mission. The season of Tradition is the valuable past and the future, which is equally important and valuable.

Orthodoxy, being the pure Christian Tradition, means the Right Teaching that is in agreement with the Faith of the Fathers. Orthodoxy also means Evangelism, which is as important as the aforementioned meaning. Right Doctrines is one side of the coin and evangelism is the other. The Right Faith is the right foundation for evangelism. Evangelism is the natural extension and dynamism of Right Faith.

The missionary spirit is not an additional activity in the life of the Orthodox Church. The desire to transmit the Truth and Tradition to others is not just some church occupation, but evangelism is the true sign that the Body of Christ (the Church) is alive and growing, persisting and moving forward. The absence of evangelism does not disable the life of the Church. It however points to a truth: that the faith is corrupted and the truth is deviated in that church. In the Gospel of today, Philip met Christ, and then he looked immediately for Nathaniel. When he found him, he said: "We have found Him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write." Whoever meets Christ will instantly turn to be His apostle. Christ Himself said to His disciples that He sent them as "Light of the world and Salt of the earth." Orthodoxy is the assurance of evangelism. And correct evangelism is the sign of true Orthodoxy. Thus the Apostle Paul says, "Woe is unto me if I do not preach" (1 Cor. 9:16).

Orthodoxy emphasizes that the Church is the living Kingdom of God on earth. The Church is not an establishment or an organization. The Church according to the Tradition of Orthodoxy is the oasis of the world. She is the leaven that will leaven the whole lump. The Church is in dialogue with the outside world, but not as a separate party. The world is part of the church as yet unleavened. The world was created by God to become "One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church." In other words, the faithful in the world have to incarnate Christ and build his Holy Body in the world. The world then is our target and our mission. It is a deposit in our charge to make the whole world one church.

In the Sunday of Orthodoxy, a quick look at our wide world gives us a clear idea that we are still at the beginning. The world needs us so much. The Church enters into a dialogue and relationship with the outside world first, in an action of leavening and christening. Evangelism is the link. Evangelism is accomplished by continuous dialogue in a loving, faithful, and serious way towards others. Other Religions, atheism, and all other colors are in great need of our faith. Mission in Orthodoxy was never, and will never be an expansion, dominance, "conquest" or hegemony. Evangelization is a light, a gift, and guidance. The Church is not an establishment whose goal is to expand. The Church is the Truth that begs to spread. Everyone who receives it keeps it as a treasure in himself and has the duty to make it spread. The history of missions and evangelism in Russia in the first millenium after Christ testify that the first converts to Christianity went immediately to preach to others.

Evangelism is accomplished in many ways. The first is the external way, mentioned above as mission to the world. The second is the internal way, within the Church. St. John of Kronstadt dreamt in his childhood about going to the land of China to evangelize. But when he entered the theological school to prepare himself for this mission, he discovered that his parents and neighborhood were in bad need of evangelism. Internal evangelism is important. A good percentage of the faithful have superficial faith. Those faithful received the Faith in its exterior forms and not as being the essence of their life. The Orthodox Church Herself is in utmost need of preaching and teaching Her children. This could happen through preaching sermons and Christian Education, pastoral life, and by making the sacraments of the church more concrete in their life. Internal evangelism is important for the personal life of the faithful. We have to transmit the Faith as the Tradition taught us, that is as being life and depth, knowledge of self and passionate love of God. The Monastic Tradition and our pastoral examples that transmitted to us the Tradition emphasize today the great need to "go to the depth" in our inner pastoral and ascetic evangelism.

This inner evangelism is important among churches and Christian denominations. Throughout history, human factors and motives have split the Body of Christ into pieces. Dialogue is a mission, and is faithful to the basics of Orthodoxy. Working on the rapprochement of the denominations is a natural action of true Orthodoxy. The dialogue among churches is not just a necessity, but it is also a duty and faithfulness to Orthodoxy.

What should an Orthodox Christian think about in the Sunday of Orthodoxy?

Orthodoxy is not a wall of separation or high pulpit from which we address the others. Orthodoxy is meek. An Orthodox believer does not have any special privilege in being Orthodox. His duty however is to transmit it. The talent came to us as a gift and no one has the right to exploit or even use it for trade.

We often restrict our relationship with God to simple ethical conduct. For example it is a sin if we make eating meat lawful on a fasting day, or be angry once, etc. Yes, All these are sins. But the most important sin we ignore, is not to preach. We would be burying the talent we have received. Those sins hurt our relationship with God. The burying of our talent separates us from Him. All the divine commandments are summarized in one word, to love. The goal of the law is love. The goal of ethics is to passionately love the Divine Lord. And love demands that we include others. The knowledge of God is to love Him. His love leads us to preach about Him. The Kontakion of this Sunday says that the incarnation of the Son of God and the regaining of our image being in the likeness of the divine beauty make us confess salvation (know), and tell and announce it (preach) by word and deed together.

What is our role in this mission? What does the return of the Sunday of Orthodoxy each year remind us of? The epistle of today remind us of all those who were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection:

And others had trials of cruel mockings and scourgings, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They suffered everything for this Tradition and for the Orthodox Faith, before and after Christ. St. Paul the Apostle remembers them as examples of those who sacrificed themselves in order to transmit the deposit, starting from "(Moses) who choose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." (Hebrews 11:24-25 AV).

Orthodoxy is a passionate love, and the mission of every faithful Christian is not to exploit it but to serve it. The Orthodox privilege of the faithful is to carry it and transmit it and heir duty is to choose it instead of enjoying the pleasures of sin for a season. This temporal pleasure, isn't it the reason that hindered us from knowing our faith in the past and from preaching it in the future? The labor of evangelism is the joy of today's feast. Give us O Lord to die everyday for You, and preach Your name. May all the peoples of the earth return to the Lord, making all to know You truly.

Amen.