

# Worshipping the Undivided Trinity: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

Written By Robert Miclean

Week 2: Apostolic authority in the Orthodox Church: Understanding the context in which Orthodox Faith and Doctrine developed and how the Church has continued to faithfully proclaim the Apostolic Faith for 2,000 years.

*Prayer...*

*Now is the moment I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing seen or unseen begrudge me making my way to Jesus Christ. Come fire, cross, battling with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil—only let me get to Jesus Christ! Not the wide bounds of earth nor the kingdoms of this world will avail me anything. 'I would rather die' and get to Jesus Christ, than reign over the ends of the earth. That is Whom I am looking for—the One who died for us. That is Whom I want—the One who rose for us (St. Ignatius, Letter to the Romans, ch. 5).<sup>1</sup>*

St. Ignatius of Antioch may have been among those first Gentile converts to Christianity whom Barnabas ministered to in the face of the persecution depicted in Acts 11:22-23: “The news about them reached the ears of the Church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to go to Antioch (see map). When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord in firmness of heart....” It was also in Antioch, you may recall, where the disciples were first called “Christians” as we read later in the passage (Acts 11:26). Ignatius, who later became bishop of the church in Antioch was subjected to a forced march to Rome, where he was martyred for his profession of the Orthodox Faith in 106 A.D.

Since the beginning, there has always been an Orthodox Church in Antioch. It is only in our own day that the numbers have greatly dwindled due to Moslem persecutions in the supposedly secularized Turkish state. Antiochian Orthodox, those present-day descendents of the church, which Sts. Peter and Paul, as well as Barnabas helped found, have moved their Patriarchate to the ancient church on Straight Street in Damascus, place of the restoration of Saul's sight after being blinded by the Lord and converted to the Christian Faith (Acts 9).

This leads me to my opening question: *Which came first: the inspired New Testament Scriptures or the Church, founded by Christ and His Apostles?*

Most Protestants assume that the New Testament Scriptures came first. The historical reality, however, is quite different. The Holy Scriptures were, in some cases, not written nor widely circulated in the Early Church until beginning in the middle of the second century. Even if they had had the Scriptures in hand, most Christians were illiterate in those days as were most of the people of the Roman Empire.

---

<sup>1</sup> St. Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans* in Cyril Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 105.

And more significantly, these Christians would *not* have presumed that they could correctly interpret the Scriptures and the Apostolic Faith on their own, that is, privately, individually. When it came to the Truth of the Apostolic Faith and correctly dividing the words of the Holy Scriptures, it was vital that the interpretation and application be in keeping with the ‘Tradition’ of the Church. This *charism* of interpretation belonged to those to whom it was entrusted by the Church—bishops, priests, monks, and lay theologians.

Additionally, there was also the question of *which* writings to include in the primary Canon of Scripture. The word, “canon” comes from the Greek, *κανων*, meaning “straight rod or measuring bar.” The Canon refers to the list of ‘accepted books’ of what was later called the New Testament Scriptures. By 130 A.D., each of the four Gospels as well as the 13 Epistles of St. Paul had been received as Apostolic teaching by at least some of the Church. Later, in some of the early canonical listings, however, the third Epistle of John, Hebrews, James, and the letters of Peter, were excluded. Elsewhere, because of the rampant rise in prophetic writings by sects and schismatics outside the Orthodox Church (see below), the Book of Revelation was suspect in some churches. The Gnostics, one of those sects, used language that for some was reminiscent of that found in the book of Revelation.<sup>2</sup>

Inversely, *The First Letter of Clement*, *the Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Didache* (see below) were in some places included in the early canonical listings of the New Testament Scriptures though they were of course eventually excluded from the final Canon as we have it today.

The process of canonization was slow and these books continued to be held in high esteem throughout the early Church as they are in the Orthodox Church today. In the case of *I Clement*, written in 96 A.D., it was so highly esteemed, that it was made part of the New Testament Canon in Egypt and Syria for a time. This is the writing of the same Clement who is referred to by St. Paul in Phil 4, where he writes:

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to a mutual understanding in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my true yokemate, to help them, for they have struggled at my side in promoting the Gospel, along with Clement and my other co-workers, whose names are in the Book of Life (Phil. 4:2-3).

Clement, a disciple of both Sts. Peter and Paul and the second Bishop of Rome after Peter, was one of the Fathers of the Church who faithfully proclaimed the Apostolic and Orthodox Faith to yet another generation in the face of terrible persecution in a largely pagan culture.

The first published list of the New Testament Canon, as the Church came to accept it, was promulgated by St. Athanasius in 367. Also, a Council, thought to have been held in Rome in 382 gives a complete list of the canonical books of the New Testament as we have them today. Another important regional council in Carthage in 397 A.D. also lists the accepted books. And this council is later affirmed by the whole church in one of the Ecumenical Councils.

Why did the canonization process take four centuries to complete? Well, in part, the Orthodox Church, as has been said before, makes decisions concerning matters of Faith and

---

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 600f.

doctrine in a *conciliar* fashion. There was then and is now no ‘pope’ in the Orthodox Church to make unilateral decisions. Since the days of the Council of Jerusalem in A.D. 49, the Church has always met in council to make such important decisions, relying on the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit to guide it in the Truth.

As I have mentioned earlier, the Orthodox Church sees itself as an *organism*, the living and mystical representation of the Body of Christ in the world, filled with the Holy Spirit. There is no one person in the Orthodox Church, who makes all doctrinal decisions as is the case in the Roman Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople is referred to as the “first among equals.” His is a spiritual headship and position of honor, but he has no authority to make doctrinal decisions on his own or to enforce them upon the many sister Churches that make up the Orthodox Church. While Orthodox Christians respect the Pope, it is the Orthodox belief that Papacy, as it came to be exercised, destroys the organism that is the Church and instead replaces it with an ‘organization,’ a form of bureaucracy, the responsibility of which is then to carry out the decisions of the Pope.

The later canonization of Scripture for the Church meant this: that the oral Tradition of the Apostles and *those to whom the Apostolic Faith was entrusted by the Apostles* and then by the disciples of the disciples of the Apostles, became part of how we understand the Christian Faith. The descendents of the Apostles, the so-called “Fathers of the Church,” as they are referred to in the Orthodox Church, were used by God to guide the Church. By the power of the Holy Spirit God enabled them to discern truth from error in matters of Faith and doctrine—doctrines that were and are today central to the Christian Faith, such as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and that of the dual natures of Christ. For these things were not *explicit* in any written form in what we now know as the New Testament.

In fact, in the beginning the eyewitness accounts of the Apostles—passed down in oral form—were preferred over the reading of the accounts in the emerging canon of the New Testament Scriptures. This was a culture used to oral Tradition. The interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures had been passed down generation to generation in this fashion for more than a thousand years. Keep in mind that the scrolls would have only been brought out to be read in the course of the liturgical worship of the Church. There was no such thing at this time as “personal” or “private” reading—that is a much more recent phenomenon following the advent of the printing press and more ready access to books.

Certainly the Epistles and Gospel accounts were read as well. And as these words of the Apostles were read, the Church, already established through those bishops upon whom the Apostles had laid their hands and the bishops, presbyters (priests) and deacons they ordained, were able to discern the right interpretation of those Scriptures in keeping with the Apostolic and Orthodox Faith. Where error occurred, it was either soon corrected or, if it began to spread uncensored, a council was convened at either a local or, as in the case of the great Ecumenical Councils, made up of representatives from throughout the whole Church. In other words, there as and is accountability in teaching in the Orthodox Church.

Indeed, the first and second generations to come after the Apostles, those who had seen and touched Jesus and those who knew and walked with Him, those who had received the breath of

the Holy Spirit upon them at Pentecost or who *themselves* were among those at Pentecost became the disciples of the first Apostles. It was their responsibility to guard the faithful transmission and proclamation of the Apostolic and Orthodox Faith. They did this by evaluating all teaching against that of Holy Tradition.

Allow me to pause here for a moment and clarify what the Orthodox call “Holy Tradition:” For the Orthodox Holy Tradition includes the whole of the Orthodox Christian Faith, including, the Holy Scriptures, the Nicene Creed, the Councils of the undivided Church, the Canons of the Church, and the worship and prayers of the Church. Holy Tradition, understood so, reminds us, once again, that the Church is an organism; it is the Body of Christ, who is its head. In many Orthodox churches, the icon of Christ Pantocrator (‘ruler of all’) covers the central dome of the church or is placed above the main entrance to the nave of the church. In either case, only Christ’s head and shoulders are shown, indicating that His Body is the people of the church (see icon/mosaic from Hagios Loukas Monastery, Greece).

Now “Tradition” is one of those easily misunderstood words in the West. America is a land that, for some, symbolizes the rejection of Old World ‘traditions’ and the embrace of all things new. After all, to immigrate to America, we all had to give up, in some sense, the traditional lives of our forebears in whatever country we derive our ethnic heritage.

But, the Bible makes a distinction between the ‘traditions of men’ and Tradition with a capital “T.” Tradition with a capital “T” refers to the Orthodox interpretation of the Faith, which was being handed down faithfully from generation to generation after the Apostles—guarding and proclaiming the Gospel and Apostolic Faith against pagans, heretics, and schismatics alike.

Regarding the traditions of men that are made into doctrines, Jesus soundly condemns them as we see in Matt. 15:8-9. Jesus quotes Isaiah against the Pharisees, saying: “*These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines (didaskalia) the commandments of men.*” But Jesus was not critical of the Law of Moses for as He put it, “*I did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it.*” He quotes frequently from the prophets and taught in the synagogues. Rather, Jesus condemned the hypocrisy of the Scribes and Pharisees, who made their customs into doctrines while ignoring what Jesus calls “*the weightier matters of the Law: justice and mercy and faith.*” He goes on to say, “*these you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.*” (Matt. 23:23).

St. Paul uses a different word in the Greek to describe Tradition in the sense of faithfully passing on the understanding and faithful interpretation of the Gospel and the Apostolic Faith to the next generation of the Church. That word is “paradosis.” As found in II Thes. 2:15 it means, “*The tradition of teachings, handed down from one generation to another.*” II Thes. 2:15 reads, “*Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word (orally) or our epistle.*” These are not vain teachings of men, but the inspired words and illumination given to the Apostles by the Holy Spirit—the true Faith. Significantly, some Protestant translations of the Bible (such as the NIV) reflect a bias against Tradition with a capital T, that is, paradosis. They use “Tradition” in only negative ways, and refer to paradosis as mere teachings. But this is a wrong translation since it leaves no place for paradosis, the

faithful transmission of the Apostolic Faith, the keeping of which was incumbent on the infant Church so that future generations could know the Truth of God's word understood correctly.

I have already referred to the great number of heretics and heresies, schismatics and cults, which were continuously threatening the infant Church. In the midst of such threats, as well as those from pagans who before 325 were actively persecuting Christians, the Church relied on the Holy Spirit to defend the Faith by further defining that Faith.

**We'll now turn our attention to one of these heresies—Gnosticism. Understanding the threat that Gnosticism posed to the infant Church will help us understand the authority which God imparted to the Orthodox Church since the beginning to refute such heresies and how He worked through His Church to preserve the Orthodox Faith to our own day.**

The Gnostics claimed to possess the *secret* knowledge of God and of the origin and destiny of humankind by which redemption could be achieved. The function of Christ then was to bring the “gnosis,” the *enlightenment* from the supreme God. Their name, in fact, derives from the Greek word, *Gnosis* (γνῶσις) or knowledge. Sounds reasonable enough perhaps: Jesus revealed the Father to us and, as the *Song of Simeon* (Lk. 2:29-32) proclaims, He is the “light that enlightens the Gentiles.”

But the Gnostics went further in their heterodox interpretation of the Scriptures, ignoring the teachings of the Orthodox Church, which had received her orthodox interpretation of the Gospel message from the Apostles themselves. The Gnostics asserted that only certain men and women possessed the “divine spark” or “seed” of Divine spiritual substance. Through “gnosis” and the “correct teachings” of Christ and the Apostles, as they interpreted them, humankind could be liberated from the evil which all matter is and become truly “spiritual.”<sup>3</sup>

Regarding all matter and flesh as evil, the Gnostics consequently taught that there was a distinct difference between the creator god, also called the *Demiurge*, and the Supreme or Divine God who sent Jesus. As discussed in chapter 5, since Gnostics regarded all matter as evil, they dismissed the Orthodox Catholic teaching of the Faith and the emerging Canon of Truth we now call the Nicene Creed, e.g., Jesus is God's Son, “and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” Based on their reading and interpretation of the plain sense of Scripture, they denied Jesus' death since Jesus, according to their beliefs, did not truly come “in the flesh.” They denied the Incarnation.

For the Orthodox, the Incarnation is the *beginning* of man's redemption because in becoming man, Jesus became what St. Paul and the early Fathers call “the second Adam.” He sanctified every stage of human existence from cradle to grave. He was then resurrected and ascended that we who put our trust in Him may go to be with the Holy Trinity forever.

---

<sup>3</sup> See also *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, pp. 383-385.

In many of the Gnostic sects there was a dramatic feminization of God, likening Him as the great Mother of sorts who gives birth not only to the spiritual Jesus but also to the *Demiurge*, the evil creator-god who would be Jesus' "brother" (*Adversus Haereses*, I.11.1).<sup>4</sup>

One dynamic Gnostic church leader who claimed to be part of the Orthodox Church, Marcion (mid- 2<sup>nd</sup> century), asserted forcefully that the Christian Gospel was wholly about Love to the exclusion of the Law. This led him to reject the Old Testament completely and to distinguish between the Jewish God and that of Christians. Marcion argued that the God of the Old Testament was "fickle, capricious, ignorant, despotic, and cruel. Utterly different was the Supreme God of Love whom Jesus came to reveal."<sup>5</sup> And this teaching is not so different from what some people assert about God in our own day.

It is easy to see even from this brief summary of Gnosticism why unity in the Orthodox Faith was so paramount for the Early Church's witness to the Gospel in a pluralistic pagan world *not altogether unlike our own day*. The Orthodox faith had to be guarded from heresy, and the Truth needed to be handed down by the Apostles to the bishops they appointed to continue the work of proclaiming the Good News and building up the Church by making disciples. Thus, the early Fathers vigorously strove to present a single, united proclamation of the Jesus whom their predecessors, the Apostles, knew so that the whole world could come to know the *real* Jesus and the fullness of God's revelation to mankind. The Orthodox were the "guardians of truth" and for that reason they were targeted both by the pagan rulers and the heretical sects, both of whom rejected the revealed Truth, which had been held since the beginning.

### *St. Irenaeus of Lyons, c. 130-c. 200*

In the midst of such external and internal threats, God raised up faithful defenders of the Orthodox Faith. One such early Church Father was 2<sup>nd</sup> century St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-200). Allow me to share with you a little about St. Irenaeus. His own story is a further demonstration that the Orthodox Faith was indeed being passed down from one generation to another just as the Apostles instructed their spiritual children.

Remember back for a moment to the time when you were a child. Was there someone in your life who you really looked up to, a favorite teacher, priest, pastor, neighbor, or friend? Can you recount anything that you remember hearing from that person that has stuck with you and made an impact on your life?

For Irenaeus, this person was Polycarp, bishop of the church in Smyrna in Asia Minor who was martyred at the age of 83 in 156 A.D. Church historian, Eusebius, writing in the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century, describes the personal reminiscences of Irenaeus, who vividly recalled his childhood and the hero he looked up to, Polycarp. Irenaeus can remember sitting at the feet of Polycarp and recounts some of Polycarp's sermons as well as Polycarp's connection, in turn, to the Apostle John, who had disciplined him.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Early Christian Fathers, p. 362.

<sup>5</sup> The Oxford Dictionary, p. 1034.

<sup>6</sup> Richardson, p. 347.

If it were not for the writings of Irenaeus it is very likely that the successors to the Apostles, the bishops of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries who finalized the Canon of the New Testament Scriptures, would have been less sure about the authority and authorship of the fourth Gospel. For in the midst of continued anxiety over Gnosticism, the inclusion of the fourth Gospel was being questioned by *some* because of its focus on the *Logos*, which is often translated as “the Word” in English, but which literally has the sense of “God’s creative power in governing the universe.”

*Without the proper apostolic context and interpretation*, this was, for some, too reminiscent of the Gnostic beliefs about Jesus. Irenaeus, who battled against the Gnostics, dispels any doubts about the Gospel. He tells us in his well-preserved writings that he has first-hand knowledge that “John, the disciple of the Lord, who had also lain on his breast, himself published the Gospel, while he was residing at Ephesus in Asia.”

Irenaeus is one of those Fathers who forms a bridge of continuity between the Apostolic and the sub-Apostolic age. He was made Bishop of the Church in Lyons (Gaul) after returning as emissary from delivering letters to the Bishop at Rome. His bishop and much of the Church had been butchered under fierce persecution while he was away. His theological writings grew out of his work as a missionary and pastoral bishop in a sea of *Gnosticism* and amidst much persecution.

Irenaeus asserts that all the writers of the Gospels “*handed down to us that there is one God*” (contra the Gnostics), “*maker of heaven and earth, proclaimed by the Law and the Prophets, and one Christ the Son of God.*” Irenaeus states emphatically,

...If anyone does not agree with them (those who keep to these sound doctrines) he despises the companions of the Lord, he despises Christ Himself, he even despises the Father, and he is self-condemned, resisting and refusing his own salvation, as all the heretics do (*Against Heresies*, III.1.1-2).<sup>7</sup>

For the Orthodox, the preservation and proclamation of the fullness of the Truth of Jesus Christ matters for our salvation. To be saved, one needs to know the true Jesus. And it is the Orthodox conviction that anything less is not the fullness of the Apostolic Faith.

Jesus Christ is the second Adam. Christ alone reclaims and redeems humankind and all creation *beginning* with His Incarnation. Irenaeus explains it this way:

For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally molded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life; so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation (*Against Heresies*, III.18.7).

Irenaeus repudiates the Gnostic separation of the divine and human persons of Jesus and emphasizes the unity of the God-man, what would come to be called in Church Christology the “dual natures” of Christ as *both* God and man (show Orthodox signing of the cross). Taking the

---

<sup>7</sup>Richardson, p. 370.

Gospel of John to heart, Irenaeus asserts that only if the eternal Word (*Logos*) entered fully into human life could the redemption of humanity been fully accomplished.<sup>8</sup> Christ was no ghost, as the Gnostics asserted. The humanity of Christ had to be the same as that which He came to save and yet, unless it was God who had freely given salvation, we could never be sure of Christ's work of redemption—hence Jesus Christ must be both man and God.

*Conclusion:*

So now we are *beginning* to see how God worked in the Orthodox Church in the first centuries of the Church and why Apostolic authority and continuity was so important in proclaiming the truth of the Gospel in the pagan world.

This continuity with the Apostles has continued in the Orthodox Church to our own day. No Orthodox Christian has the right to interpret the Scriptures or the Apostolic Faith contrary to how it has been passed down and remain a communicant in the Orthodox Church. While doctrines have developed further from what they were in the beginning, the Faith has not changed nor contradicted that which was revealed to earlier generations. Indeed, we have come to understand the living Faith in an ever deeper way over the 2,000 years of Orthodox Church history as it has been prayed, proclaimed, defended, and lived by generation upon generation by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit.

Figuratively speaking, the Orthodox Church has been compared to the bud of a flower. In the first centuries of the Church while the Apostolic Faith was being defended and explained, the bud began to open. In our own day, the bud has opened and flowers perpetually without withering, continuing to disseminate its beauty and fragrance as the Lord intended.

God continues to work today in His Body, the Church, just as He has since the beginning. As we will see next week, the Councils of the undivided Church, which extended through the first 8 centuries of Church history, further clarified much of what faithful Christians today may often take for granted, such as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

I will close with the words of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian saint, Fr. John of Kronstadt:

*The Church is one and the same with the Lord—His Body, of His flesh and of His bones. The Church is the living vine, nourished by Him and growing in Him. Never think of the Church apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, from the Father and Holy Spirit.*

---

<sup>8</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *The Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 147.