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Independent Catholic Orthodox Mission

Apostolic Tradition

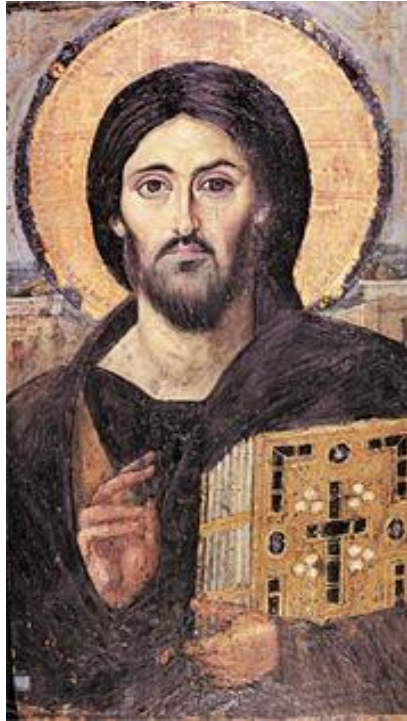
Sacred Tradition and The Scriptures

Is Scripture the sole rule of faith for Christians? Not according to the Bible. While we must guard against merely human tradition, the Bible contains numerous references to the necessity of clinging to apostolic tradition.

Thus Paul tells the Corinthians, **"I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the *traditions* even as I have delivered them to you"** (1 Cor. 11:2), and he commands the Thessalonians, **"So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the *traditions* which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter"** (2 Thess. 2:15). He even goes so far as to order, **"Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the *tradition* that you received from us"** (2 Thess. 3:6).

To make sure that the apostolic tradition would be passed down after the deaths of the apostles, Paul told Timothy, **"[W]hat you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also"** (2 Tim. 2:2). In this passage he refers to the first four generations of apostolic succession—his own generation, Timothy's generation, the generation Timothy will teach, and the generation they in turn will teach.

The early Church Fathers, who were links in that chain of succession, recognized the necessity of the traditions that had been handed down from the apostles and guarded them scrupulously, as the following quotations show.



Pope Clement I

"Then the reverence of the law is chanted, and the grace of the prophets is known, and the faith of the Gospels is established, and the tradition of the apostles is preserved, and the grace of the Church exults" (*Letter to the Corinthians* 11 [A.D. 80]).

Papias

"Papias [A.D. 120], who is now mentioned by us, affirms that he received the sayings of the apostles from those who accompanied them, and he, moreover, asserts that he heard in person Aristion and the presbyter John. Accordingly, he mentions them frequently by

name, and in his writings gives their traditions [concerning Jesus]. . . . [There are] other passages of his in which he relates some miraculous deeds, stating that he acquired the knowledge of them from tradition" (fragment in Eusebius, *Church History* 3:39 [A.D. 312]).

Eusebius of Caesarea

"At that time [A.D. 150] there flourished in the Church Hegesippus, whom we know from what has gone before, and Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, and another bishop, Pinytus of Crete, and besides these, Philip, and Apollinarius, and Melito, and Musanus, and Modestus, and, finally, Irenaeus. From them has come down to us in writing, the sound and orthodox faith received from tradition" (*Church History* 4:21).

Irenaeus

"As I said before, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although she is disseminated throughout the whole world, yet guarded it, as if she occupied but one house. She likewise believes these things just as if

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she had but one soul and one and the same heart; and harmoniously she proclaims them and teaches them and hands them down, as if she possessed but one mouth. For, while the languages of the world are diverse, nevertheless, the authority of the tradition is one and the same" (*Against Heresies* 1:10:2 [A.D. 189]).

"That is why it is surely necessary to avoid them [heretics], while cherishing with the utmost diligence the things pertaining to the Church, and to lay hold of the tradition of truth. . . . What if the apostles had not in fact left writings to us? Would it not be necessary to follow the order of tradition, which was handed down to those to whom they entrusted the churches?" (ibid., 3:4:1).

...

"It is possible, then, for everyone in every church, who may wish to know the truth, to contemplate the tradition of the apostles which has been made known throughout the whole world. And we are in a position to enumerate those who were instituted bishops by the apostles and their successors to our own times—men who neither knew nor taught anything like these heretics rave about.

"But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the successions of all the churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here the successions of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, that church which has the tradition and the faith which comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles.

"With this church, because of its superior origin, all churches must agree—that is, all the faithful in the whole world—and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained

the apostolic tradition" (ibid., 3:3:1–2).

Clement of Alexandria

"Well, they preserving the tradition of the blessed doctrine derived directly from the holy apostles, Peter, James, John, and Paul, the sons receiving it from the father (but few were like the fathers), came by God's will to us also to deposit those ancestral and apostolic seeds. And well I know that they will exult; I do not mean delighted with this tribute, but solely on account of the preservation of the truth, according as they delivered it. For such a sketch as this, will, I think, be agreeable to a soul desirous of preserving from loss the blessed tradition" (*Miscellanies* 1:1 [A.D. 208]).

Origen

"Although there are many who believe that they themselves hold to the teachings of Christ, there are yet some among them who think differently from their predecessors. The teaching of the Church has indeed been handed down through an order of succession from the apostles and remains in the churches even to the present time. That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition" (*The Fundamental Doctrines* 1:2 [A.D. 225]).

Cyprian of Carthage

"[T]he Church is one, and as she is one, cannot be both within and without. For if she is with Novatian, she was not with [Pope] Cornelius. But if she was with Cornelius, who succeeded the bishop Fabian by lawful ordination, and whom, beside the honor of the priesthood the Lord glorified also with martyrdom, Novatian is not in the Church; nor can he be reckoned as a bishop, who, succeeding to no one, and despising the evangelical and apostolic tradition, sprang

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from himself. For he who has not been ordained in the Church can neither have nor hold to the Church in any way" (*Letters* 75:3 [A.D. 253]).

Athanasius

"Again we write, again keeping to the apostolic traditions, we remind each other when we come together for prayer; and keeping the feast in common, with one mouth we truly give thanks to the Lord. Thus giving thanks unto him, and being followers of the saints, 'we shall make our praise in the Lord all the day,' as the psalmist says. So, when we rightly keep the feast, we shall be counted worthy of that joy which is in heaven" (*Festal Letters* 2:7 [A.D. 330]).

"But you are blessed, who by faith are in the Church, dwell upon the foundations of the faith, and have full satisfaction, even the highest degree of faith which remains among you unshaken. For it has come down to you from apostolic tradition, and frequently accursed envy has wished to unsettle it, but has not been able" (ibid., 29).

Basil the Great

"Of the dogmas and messages preserved in the Church, some we possess from written teaching and others we receive from the tradition of the apostles, handed on to us in mystery. In respect to piety, both are of the same force. No one will contradict any of these, no one, at any rate, who is even moderately versed in matters ecclesiastical. Indeed, were we to try to reject unwritten customs as having no great authority, we would unwittingly injure the gospel in its vitals; or rather, we would reduce [Christian] message to a mere term" (*The Holy Spirit* 27:66 [A.D. 375]).

Epiphanius of Salamis

"It is needful also to make use of tradition, for

not everything can be gotten from sacred Scripture. The holy apostles handed down some things in the scriptures, other things in tradition" (*Medicine Chest Against All Heresies* 61:6 [A.D. 375]).

Augustine

"[T]he custom [of not rebaptizing converts] . . . may be supposed to have had its origin in apostolic tradition, just as there are many things which are observed by the whole Church, and therefore are fairly held to have been enjoined by the apostles, which yet are not mentioned in their writings" (*On Baptism, Against the Donatists* 5:23[31] [A.D. 400]).

"But the admonition that he [Cyprian] gives us, 'that we should go back to the fountain, that is, to apostolic tradition, and thence turn the channel of truth to our times,' is most excellent, and should be followed without hesitation" (ibid., 5:26[37]).

"But in regard to those observances which we carefully attend and which the whole world keeps, and which derive not from Scripture but from Tradition, we are given to understand that they are recommended and ordained to be kept, either by the apostles themselves or by plenary [ecumenical] councils, the authority of which is quite vital in the Church" (*Letter to Januarius* [A.D. 400]).

John Chrysostom

"[Paul commands,] 'Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word or by our letter' [2 Thess. 2:15]. From this it is clear that they did not hand down everything by letter, but there is much also that was not written. Like that which was written, the unwritten too is worthy of belief. So let us regard the tradition of the Church also as worthy of belief. Is it a tradition? Seek no further" (*Homilies on Second Thessalonians* [A.D. 402]).

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Vincent of Lerins

"With great zeal and closest attention, therefore, I frequently inquired of many men, eminent for their holiness and doctrine, how I might, in a concise and, so to speak, general and ordinary way, distinguish the truth of the Catholic faith from the falsehood of heretical depravity.

"I received almost always the same answer from all of them—that if I or anyone else wanted to expose the frauds and escape the snares of the heretics who rise up, and to remain intact and in sound faith, it would be necessary, with the help of the Lord, to fortify that faith in a twofold manner: first, of course, by the authority of divine law [Scripture] and then by the tradition of the Catholic Church.

"Here, perhaps, someone may ask: ‘ If the canon of the scriptures be perfect and in itself more than suffices for everything, why is it necessary that the authority of ecclesiastical interpretation be joined to it?’ Because, quite plainly, sacred Scripture, by reason of its own depth, is not accepted by everyone as having one and the same meaning. . . .

"Thus, because of so many distortions of such various errors, it is highly necessary that the line of prophetic and apostolic interpretation be directed in accord with the norm of the ecclesiastical and Catholic meaning" (*The Notebooks* [A.D. 434]).

Pope Agatho

"[T]he holy Church of God . . . has been established upon the firm rock of this Church of blessed Peter, the prince of the apostles, which by his grace and guardianship remains free from all error, [and possesses that faith that] the whole number of rulers and priests, of the clergy and of the people, unanimously should confess and preach with us as the true declaration of the apostolic tradition, in order to please God and to save their own souls" (Letter read at fourth session of III

Constantinople [A.D. 680]).