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The Relationship between Tradition and Innovation in Romanian Orthodox Dogmatic Theology and the Place of Dogma in this Regard

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Abstract

The recent years have highlighted with great pressure the need for Orthodox theology to come up with fresh, creative and living thinking, for deepening the profound meanings of its dogmas in response to the spiritual and cultural interrogations, fears and needs of the present times. The Romanian theology takes over the theological hermeneutics, checked in the early Church, as balance, paradoxical and comprehensive formulas. Through them the Church may take into account the unilateral positions that have arisen or may arise anytime. These comprehensive or paradoxical formulas have the gift to take some unilateral meanings of faith, and fit them into a unified vision. Thus Orthodox theology is aware of its values but also of its responsibilities in a time of growing manifestation of the complex phenomenon of secularization.

Keywords

Romanian theology, Tradition, innovation

*The Relationship between Tradition and Innovation...***I. General considerations**

The theme of the Symposium of the International Association of Orthodox Theologians Dogmatist draws everyone's attention on the importance of tradition and dogma in expressing the theological values in every time and place. It is common to say that Orthodoxy is generally regarded as the Church of Tradition which supports and invigorates its entire consciousness, thought, expression and life. Thus it becomes contemporary not only with the Apostles' era but also with all ages that separate us from that time therefore with our times.

Romanian Orthodox Theology gave Tradition a special importance regarded in a double sense. First it was understood in a very broad sense, as the whole saving work that Christ did for the salvation of humanity and forwarded to His apostles. "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you" (1 Cor., 11:23) or "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

Secondly, Tradition means the actual way to convey the divine revelation in the history of the Church (cf. I Tim. 6, 20). This does not mean that it is a mere, distant and cold transmission of a thought hoard, in an exterior way, but it is a sequence in which at the same time the Church continues and renews the faith from the beginning. John's Gospel assures us of this work such: „Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, [that] shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come" (John 16,13).

The Holy Scripture itself testifies the fact that besides the ones written in it, there are other things, realities, events and facts that are not written down in it, but are related to those which Scripture testifies. The same evangelist John testifies that in addition to his writings some other things exist, that were done by Jesus Christ and were unrecorded in writing (cf. John 20, 30, 21, 25). These written apostolic testimonies prove that before the written gospel there was an oral proclamation, which was known, accepted and witnessed or experienced in the early church, having the same value with the written Gospel. St. Paul the Apostle clearly states this when he says: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle." (II Thessalonians 2, 15). In fact,

“Tradition context is the context of salvation history, meaning that the apostles, their disciples and their successors are placed in the work of the Holy Spirit inside the Church. The Orthodox Church gave great importance to the role of tradition transmission and to the factors working together: the apostles, preachers, bishops, fathers and community.”¹

The New Testament is the first tradition that was recorded in writing, witnessing the whole wealth of the revelations that culminated in Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnated. Being kept in writing, this Apostolic Tradition becomes normative for all Christian thought and life. The great Fathers of the Church and the ecumenical councils agree with the normative and binding character of the New Testament tradition. There we can find the synthesis experience of Christian communities in Jerusalem and other communities from the early apostolic church.

Tradition has a close link with Scripture as the first apostolic tradition recorded in writing, and with the Church and the Holy Spirit, present and active in it².

¹ Ion Bria, *Dicționar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, ediția a II-a, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București 1994, p. 403

² See on different aspects of the apostolic tradition at: Dumitru Stăniloae, *Sfânta tradiție. Definierea noțiunii și întinderii ei*, in “Ortodoxia”, XVI, 1964, n. 1, p. 47-109; Dumitru Stăniloae, *Noțiunea dogmei*, in “Studii Teologice”, XVI, 1964, n. 9-10, p. 533-571; Dumitru Stăniloae, *Unitate și diversitate în Tradiția Ortodoxă*, in “Ortodoxia”, XXII, 1970, n. 3, p. 333-346; Dumitru Stăniloae, *Caracterul permanent și mobil al tradiției*, in “Studii Teologice”, XXV, 1973, n. 3-4, p. 149-164; Dumitru Stăniloae, *Concepția Ortodoxă despre tradiție și dezvoltarea doctrinei*, in “Ortodoxia”, XXVII, 1975, n. 1, p. 5-14; Dumitru Stăniloae, *Sfânta Scriptură și tradiția apostolică în mărturisirea Bisericii*, in “Ortodoxia”, XXXII, 1980, n. 2, p. 204-220; Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, ediția a III-a, București 2003, p. 53-72; Isidor Todoran, *Sfânta Tradiție și tradiția bisericească*, in “Mitropolia Ardealului”, VII, 1962, n. 9-12, p. 678-685; Nicolae Chițescu, *Scriptură, Tradiție, tradiții*, in “Ortodoxia”, XV, 1963, n. 3-4, p. 363-423; Ion Bria, *Tratat de Teologie Dogmatică și Ecumenică*, Editura „România creștină”, București 1999, p. 69-76; Ion Bria, *Sfânta Scriptură și Tradiția*, in “Studii Teologice”, XXII, 1970, n. 5-6, p. 384-405; Dumitru Popescu, *Iisus Hristos, Pantocrator*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București 2005, p. 56-74.

*The Relationship between Tradition and Innovation...***II. Tradition - confessing the culminating revelation in Jesus Christ and its relation to the Scripture**

The supreme revelation of God in Jesus Christ is embodied in the key stages of the saving work of the Son of God incarnate, beginning with the Incarnation and culminating in the resurrection and ascension of the risen Lord. It flourishes effectively with Pentecost event, and thus the foundation of the Church. Both through Scripture and Tradition, as evidence of divine revelation, the believer enters into dialogue with the person of the Saviour, and has the experience of love, life and salvation that Christ brought to all people. The words of Scripture refer to an addition by confessing the Tradition and in turn Tradition is permanently based on the testimonies of Scripture (see in this regard: John 20:30; 21, 25, II Thessalonians 2, 15, etc.). The content of the Apostolic Tradition is the Scripture content applied essentially to the human life or Jesus Christ's life transmitted in people's lives through the sacramental structure of the Church.

“The tradition as a richer explanation of the same Christ cannot separate from His receiving as unchanged content of Tradition, the same flow of grace, or the receiving of same person in His Church through the Holy Services and explanatory word about him.”³

Tradition means the permanent transmission of the Same Christ in the Church, Who is entirely revealed, incarnate, crucified and risen. Through tradition the same Christ is communicated and His state is of perfect humanity. He wants people to share His state and to become similar to His deified human image. Therefore tradition transmits us the eschatological Christ. The Scripture repeatedly gives testimony about this reality.

“Along the generations in history the content of Scripture continually becomes alive, present, efficient and dynamic in all its integrity only by tradition. In this sense it complements the Scripture. Without it the scripture or revelation do not update all their efficiency or their continuous effectiveness. Without it we cannot penetrate and live the content of Scripture.”⁴

St. Paul gives us the most convincing example, on this close relationship between Tradition and Scripture. He considers his oral preaching

³ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică...*, I, p. 61.

⁴ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică...*, I, p. 62.

when he wants to send a letter to a particular Christian community, founded by him, for a deeper, more nuanced and complex understanding of his teaching that he passed them in writing. His oral sermon was kept as tradition and through tradition. "Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered [them] to you." (I Corinthians 11, 2). „For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;" (I Corinthians 15, 3, see also: II Thessalonians 2, 15). This apostolic doctrine shared by the Apostles has a unique value for the faith and life of the Church, remaining a permanent pattern or rule of faith and life that cannot be changed or replaced. „But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you." (Romans 6, 17). The word of Scripture has an exceptional value and is a clear and safe testimony of the Revelation communicated by the Holy Spirit. It always has to be understood and expressed, not only theoretically, but practically, that is applied or translated into the lives of believers. Therefore, we can speak of Scripture dynamism that is reflected made practical through the Apostolic Tradition. Accordingly, tradition explains the intrinsic dynamism of Scripture and its essential task.

III. The dynamism of the relationship between Tradition and the Church

There is a close relationship not only between Scripture and tradition, but also one between Tradition and the Church, through the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit.

“Apostolically explaining the Scriptures content or its first full and authentic explanation basically coincides with the implementation of its content and making it part of the human life by the Church foundation. It also coincides with the specification of its hierarchical and sacramental structures, based on Lord’s indications and that correspond with multiple devotions of Christ’s power according to the needs of the believers. It also considers specifying its ways of spiritual life and worship. The content of the Apostolic Tradition is essentially the content of Scripture applied in human life or passed into it through the Church. There-

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fore the Church keeps the Scripture applied through tradition, always new and yet always the same.”⁵

The role of the Church is overwhelming regarding the manifestation of Jesus Christ’s life in it, which must be shared with all people. The fact that Christ is present in the Church gives it the dynamic motivation to let Him being extended to more and more people, and His Spirit to embrace the whole creation. The Church has in its heart Christ Who ascended to heaven, through the Holy Spirit.

“The Church carries Christ in it because the Spirit of Christ continually irradiates it. Christ – the full revelation in his permanent work in the Church through the Spirit is the tradition as identity of the same work beginning from the Apostles. The Christian tradition cannot exist without the Church, because without it the revelation does not become permanent in its work through the Spirit.”⁶

Church is a treasure of great theological and spiritual richness, as it includes in its conscience all that God has revealed and shown for the human destiny in Jesus Christ. It contains the way of the whole of humanity, to complete fulfilment in the kingdom of God.

The path of humanity is shown concretely through the tradition of the Church. It means the transfer of divine life through the Holy Spirit in humanity, ontologically and objectively the restored through the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

“The Church lives Christ through the memory, the present bond and the eschatological expectation and preparation. The Church is traditionally a bridge between the past and the future ... It is living tradition, practiced tradition or full revelation continuously lived. The Church reads the Scripture about Christ’s life and holds the apostolic teachings on Him, being aware of her duty to faithfully keep in mind Jesus’ redeeming deeds. She practices the mysteries to meet current with the same Christ and forward

⁵ D. Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică...*, I, p 61, see also: D. Stăniloae, *Concepția Ortodoxă despre Tradiție...*, p. 9 sq; D. Stăniloae, *Sfânta Scriptură și Tradiția apostolică...*, p. 211; D. Popescu, *Iisus Hristos, Pantocrator*, p. 59; I. Bria, *Tratat de Teologie Dogmatică și Ecumenică*, p. 72-73.

⁶ D. Stăniloae, *Concepția ortodoxă despre tradiție...*, p. 8.

in hope to Christ who will appear again in glory at the end, when we arrived at the resurrection.”⁷

In this dynamic shift from the knowledge of Christ indicated by the Scriptures to Christ who comes into people’s hearts by the Holy Spirit and to Christ as eschatological Lord of history, the Church makes her part through theology and always specifies His new values and meanings. This is achieved by extending the dogmas of the Church, as their continuous explanation, according to her needs in every time and context.

IV. Tradition and innovation in the work of the Church and the place of the dogma from this point of view

Tradition is not a hoard of abstract and theoretical thinking and life, which just need to be preserved, defended and viewed in the light of the past. There is neither just a place that would deplete everything it has to say to theology and Christian life. On the contrary, tradition is a living and timeless treasure, which includes not only the past but also the present and future. It includes not only a historical future of the mankind, but an eschatological one too. Tradition is not only a constant aspect, which reveals universally valid doctrinal elements. It has a dynamic aspect, given by the very meaning of Revelation in Christ, that both Scripture and Holy Tradition bear witness. The fullness of Revelation, on the one hand, and the inexhaustible richness of the mystery of salvation in Christ, on the other hand, cannot be presented fully and completely by a few words, limited in their etymological meaning. In other words, the mystery of salvation continuously lived by the Church and in the Church cannot be exhaustively expressed by any words, metaphors or formulas.

“Thus Christian tradition means not only a continuous experience of the mystery of salvation at the same level of spirituality, but also an advance in experience and understanding. This however does not mean crossing over the mystery of living in Christ or the mystery of salvation and perfection in Him. Tradition means not only a *living memory* of the Church always re-lived, but the transcendence toward the eschatological goal and an advance in transparency of the divine reality continuously

⁷ D. Stăniloae, *Concepția ortodoxă despre tradiție...*, p. 9.

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lived in the Church. This results inevitably in language enrichment and a continuous nuance and diversification. The language becomes able to increasingly and finely express the mystery of the spiritualizing and saving work of Christ's Spirit."⁸

On the one hand, this was the motivation for the church to formulate and clarify the truth of faith revealed by God in dogmas, especially when it was misinterpreted or challenged, as it happened in the first eight centuries of Christianity. On the other hand the importance of the Church theology is thus showed to always deepen these dogmas, to understand them, highlight, shade and defend them when they are challenged at any time. A wide field of expression opens in front of theology regarding its presence and mission in the Church and in the world. The content of dogma is infinite and antinomically and paradoxically expressed. It has always been revealed and made accessible to the faithful for their salvation. The theologians' way of expression must be inspired by the great Fathers of the Church, who never broke the explanation of dogma from the climactic revelation in Jesus Christ or from the challenges coming from the heresies and the cultural and philosophical phenomena.

Through this mission the dogma becomes a factor of innovation and actuality for the Church's life⁹. We can see this from the way the Church acted on the dogma of the Holy Trinity, which existed from the beginning, but in a more general form, which could give rise to some interpretations.

“The church knew in general, based on Scripture and the confessions of the baptism that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all equal and united, but they should not be confused among themselves. This general expression gave some people the possibility to emphasize the difference between the three Divine

⁸ D. Stăniloae, *Concepția ortodoxă despre tradiție...*, p. 11.

⁹ Isidor Todoran, *Sfânta Tradiție și tradiția bisericească*, in Pr. prof. dr. Isidor Todoran, *Scriseri alese, volum omagial*, Cluj Napoca 2006, p. 334: “In its inner richness sometimes tradition puts more and more light, explains and updates, as necessary, new issues left unexplored. Its development is only carrying the same content of Revelation and it remains unchanged in the sacred tradition, representing its dynamic aspect. Meanwhile, in addition to what might be called explanations and updates and also due to the time requirements that pervades life of the Church, tradition allows and even encourages emergence of new comments, processing, explanation and systematization of doctrinal heritage in order to deepen its understanding and obviously its properties.”

Persons in such a way as to consider the Son and the Holy Spirit subordinated to the Father. However other people stressed their unity so much that they no longer made any distinction between them. The Church, fighting against these unilateral exaggerations through the confessions set at the local councils, emphasized each time especially the opposite side of the tendency to be fought.”¹⁰

Thus the dogma becomes not only a missionary factor, but a renewal factor of the Church work in preaching and defending the dogmas of the saving faith. The renewing character of dogma occurs when it is formulated by the Church and also when it becomes a ferment of new life. It is timeless and current, primarily because it has a strong basis in revelation, and, secondly, because it is made, kept, explained and defended by the Church. Through its dogmatic consciousness the Church highlights her ability to always stay faithful to her Founder, but also to give testimony in every place and time of the richness of her faith in response to the needs of the Church in every time. In this way, she expresses the dynamic aspect of tradition that it is contemporary with every age. The Church life as tradition always runs in a specific historical, geographical, cultural and social setting. But in its walk through history it always keeps its identity, although it may receive formal aspects that can be distinguished from one epoch to another. The apostolic tradition gives the ecclesial body the ability to constantly innovate through the power given by Christ through His Holy Spirit.

In contemporary the theology's mission is not only to keep what it received as historical heritage, but also to explore in the present the mysterious depths of the Church's faith teaching. By doing this, it should always keep the tradition spirit. That means not to remain trapped only in the past, but to meet the needs of today's believers and the Church in general. To fulfil this mission, the theologians must be deeply anchored in the consciousness of faith, worship and mission of the ecclesial Body, which will give them the framework and the prospect of a new approach in our time. The consequences of such work will soon appear both internally in the Orthodox Church and also in terms of the relationship of Orthodoxy with other Christian denominations and even in its dialogue with the secular culture of our time. It is a necessary and gratifying fact that

¹⁰ D. Stăniloae, *Autoritatea dogmei*, in “Studii Teologice”, XVI, 1964, n. 9-10, p. 553.

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“Orthodoxy began to open, through its newer theology to the experiences and explanations of the Christian mystery necessary for the spiritual level of today Christians. Through it the Christian churches began to remove many of the obstacles that stood in the way of their propinquity. Thus they submit to the state in which they can seek together the new expressions of Christian mystery corresponding to the contemporary believer, but integral with early church phrases.”¹¹

The terminology of the Orthodox theology cannot ignore the terminology indicated by the apostolic tradition of the early church and by the ecumenical councils which achieved a work of terminology elaboration with a permanent value. The present Orthodox theology has the call to make the content expressed by faith in the past understandable and credible to the present. It also has to try to widen the phrases of the past, which expressed the faith of the Church with new idioms, metaphors and thoughts, bringing an increase of understanding, novelty and actuality to the same faith forever (cf. Jude 3). This effort is not easy, but the need to undertake it is a real mission and a full responsibility of today theology.

VI. Conclusions

The problem of the theological terminology in contemporary Orthodox thinking grew with increasing acuity since the second half of the last century. The recent years have highlighted with greater pressure the need for Orthodox theology to come up with fresh, creative and living thinking, for deepening the profound meanings of its dogmas in response to the spiritual and cultural interrogations, fears and needs of the present times.

Such an approach cannot come out of nowhere and lead to nowhere. On the contrary, Orthodoxy has a special ethos, richness and beauty that should be pointed out and always highlighted and a wealth passed down through the ages. It has, however, a method of working that was indicated by the living Tradition of the Church, as a permanent memory of the applied or lived faith, through the Holy Spirit in the Church. The thinking and theology of the Church Fathers are unavoidable milestones in this work of theological deepening and expression.

¹¹ D. Stăniloae, *Concepția ortodoxă despre Tradiție...*, p. 13.

The Apostolic Tradition has a stable and dynamic dimension by which it remains permanently identical to itself, on the one hand, and that makes it alive through the *oikonomia* of the Church and the power of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand. From this dynamism it results the need or legitimacy of resorting to new words, metaphors or formulation for expressing the same mystery of salvation, lived by people in the church and the world. The new formulation of the mystery of faith must, however, always be verified in the light of theological synodal terminology. This test helps us stay in the theological richness and fullness of the faith always expressed in the living Tradition of the Church.

The Orthodoxy did not hesitate to recognize that there is a deepening and implementing creative tradition, developing other new teachings, which are closely related to the old ones, such as: the ways of manifestation of the Holy Spirit, the uncreated divine energies, the ontological aspect of salvation, Theotokos and Saints worship etc. Some Orthodox theologians called these teachings *theologoumena* but the theological and religious consciousness has always perceived them as being on the same level as the dogmas proclaimed by ecumenical councils and perceived by the Church by consensus.

The Romanian theology had the intention to take over the theological hermeneutics, checked in the early Church, as balance, paradoxical and comprehensive formulas. Through them the Church may take into account the unilateral positions that have arisen or may arise anytime. These comprehensive or paradoxical formulas have the gift to take some unilateral meanings of faith, and fit them into a unified vision. Thus Orthodox theology is aware of its values but also of its responsibilities in a time of growing manifestation of the complex phenomenon of secularization. In such a post-modern era the problems of language, understanding and re-signification are increasingly important and the theological thought cannot ignore them.