

“We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what deeds You did in their days, in days of old.” (Ps 44:1)

✠ Lecture I: Holy Tradition ✠

✠ Definition:

“Tradition is the handing down **orally** of customs, beliefs, stories, etc... from generation to generation” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*).

“The word ‘*Tradition*’ comes from the Latin *Traditio*, which is a translation of a Greek word used frequently in the Scriptures, *Paradosis*. Translated literally, this word means something that is handed on from one person to another, in the same way that a baton is handed over in a relay race. Something that is ‘traditioned’ is passed on from one person or group of people to another. **Tradition means an experience, an entire life** – not simply a series of teachings, but the living out of those teachings that have come from God who has revealed Himself to us. Tradition is the living out of the revelation of God by His people” (*What We Believe*, by Fr. Daniel Anderson. 1997, Conciliar Press).

✠ Holy Tradition in the Old Testament:

Almost two thousand years had elapsed since the creation of Adam and Eve until the written Law was given to Moses the Prophet. During this long period of time Tradition was the **only** source of knowledge about God and His commandments. This Holy Tradition was being transmitted faithfully from one generation to the other and the long life span of the Patriarchs was certainly a plus. During this period, holy men and women (Abel, Enoch, Methuselah, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Melchizedek, Lot, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Rachel, etc...) pleased God with their righteous lives and have been considered as examples for us to learn from and follow. (**Heb 11:1-29; 1 Pet 3:1-6**) Even after Holy Scriptures came to existence, God emphasized the role of Holy Tradition as He commanded the fathers to hand over **verbally** the teachings and stories they knew to their children (**Ex 13:14-16; Deut 4:9**). This is also evident from the words of King David, “We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what deeds You did in their days, in days of old.” (**Ps 66:1**)

✠ Examples:

- **(Gen 4:4)**

It is mentioned that Abel offered to God a sacrifice from his best sheep and St. Paul said, “By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.” (**Heb 11:6**) Now Abel lived 14 centuries before the written commandments. So, where did he get that faith? How did he learn about offering animal sacrifices? Surely from his father Adam who received it from God Himself. (**Gen 3:21**) Notice that Cain who violated the Holy Tradition of offering animal sacrifices was refused. (**Gen 4: 5**) In the same manner, our fathers Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and also Job knew the offering of animal sacrifices and building altars through Holy Tradition before the Written Law. Moreover, they even distinguished the clean animals from the unclean ones (**Gen 8:20**)

- **(Gen 9:3-6)**

Humans were created vegetarians (**Gen 1:29**) and God’s permission to eat meat was verbally spread. Also, the punishment of the killers by the death was spread by Holy Tradition before the written Law.

- **(Gen 14:18-20)**

We read about Melchizedek being called the priest of God and about Abraham giving him the tithe. How did they know about the Priesthood and the commandment of giving the Tithe? In the same manner, Jacob said to God, “and all You give me I will surely give a tenth to You.” (**Gen 28:22**) Remember that there were no written commandment at the time and the only explanation is Holy Tradition.

- **(Gen 17:9-14)**

God gave our father Abraham the commandment of circumcision and it spread by Holy Tradition from generation to the next.

- **(Gen 28:17-18)**
Our father Jacob called the place where he saw his dream ‘*the house of God*’. He also took a stone, set it up as a pillar and poured oil on it. How was he familiar with the term ‘*house of God*’ and how did he know about the consecration of the houses of God by pouring oil? Again, only the existence of Holy Tradition explains this.
- **(Gen 39:7-10)**
Joseph the Righteous knew that adultery was ‘*a great wickedness*’ through Holy Tradition long before Moses the Prophet wrote the seventh commandment.
- **(Ex 16:27-28)**
The commandment of keeping the Sabbath was known and was transmitted through Holy Tradition because it was not documented until two months after the above incidence. **(Ex 20)**

✚ **Questions To Ponder:**

- Many times we read in the Holy Gospels about our Lord Jesus Christ teaching the people in the synagogues **(Mt 9:35; Mk 1:21; 6:2; Lk 4:15; 13:22; 19:47)**, but the Holy Bible did not document any of these blessed teachings. Did all these Divine teachings just vanish?
- It has been said, that all that is written in the Holy Gospels cumulatively, would only cover 18 days in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. His ministry was approximately 3 years (3 x 365=1095 days). What about the missing 1077 days? Where are the writings of over 99% of His ministry?
- It is written that our Lord Jesus Christ remained with His disciples 40 days after His resurrection “speaking of things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” **(Acts 1:3)**. But the Holy Book of Acts doesn’t reveal what our Lord said. Does this mean that we have no access to these things pertaining to the Kingdom of God?
- St. Jacob wrote only one short Holy Epistle that probably took one hour of his time, St. Jude left us a very short Holy Epistle that might have taken half an hour to write, and St. Peter left us two short Holy Epistles. Where are the rest of their blessed teachings? Where are the teachings of the rest of the Apostles?

✚ **Holy Tradition in the New Testament:**

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not write a book, He did not document His blessed teachings on paper, but He chose His disciples who accompanied Him day and night. They absorbed His teachings and learned directly from Him. He sent them to teach the whole world and to make disciples of all nations, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” **(Mt 28:19)** Making disciples is based primarily on **direct contact** with the person and on **verbal teaching**:

- St. Paul said to his disciple Timothy, “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me.” **(1 Tim 1:13)**
- St. Paul said to the Philippians, “Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us as a pattern” **(Phil 3:17)**
- He also said, “The things which you learned and received and **heard** and **saw** in me, these do.” **(Phil 4:9)**
- And to the Corinthians, St. Paul said, “For in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me.” **(1 Cor 4:16)**
- St. Paul also said to his disciple Timothy, “The things which you have **heard from me** among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” **(2Tim 2:2)**

→Christianity is, therefore, a religion that is Tradition-bound and is strongly committed to discipleship. No wonder, then, that the Apostles preferred verbal teaching to the written one:

- St. Paul said to the Corinthians, “You are manifestly an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but in tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.” **(1 Cor 3:3)**
- St. John said, “Having many things to write to you, I did not wish to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full.” **(2 Jn 12)**
- Also, “I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face.” **(3 Jn 13)**
- St. Paul said to the Corinthians, “The rest I will set in order when I come.” **(1 Cor 11:34)**
- St. Paul said to his disciple Titus, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking.” **(Tit 1:5)**
- The Apostles wrote to the Gentiles saying, “We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will report the same things by word of mouth.” **(Acts 15:27)** So even though they wrote a letter they sent two men in order to convey the same message verbally.
- St. John said, “And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” **(Jn 21:25)**
- St. Peter said, “I have written to you briefly.” **(1 Pet 5:12)**

✚ Examples:

- **(Mt 2:23)**
St. Matthew quoted a prophecy about our Lord Jesus Christ that was not written in any of The Old Testament Holy Books but was transmitted from one generation to the other through Holy Tradition.
- **(Acts 20: 35)**
St. Paul quoted the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” which are not written in any of the four Holy Gospels but were known by Holy Tradition. Also **(1Cor 7:10; 9:14)**
- **(2 Tim 3:8)**
St. Paul mentioned the names of the two Egyptian magicians who resisted Moses the Prophets. These names are not mentioned in the Old Testament but were known by Holy Tradition.
- **(Heb 12:21)**
St. Paul described how the people received the Law and how the mountain was blazing with fire. Then he wrote, “Moses said, I am exceedingly afraid and trembling”. These words ascribed to Moses the Prophet are not mentioned in the Old Testament.
- **(Jude 9)**
St. Jude mentioned the dispute between Archangel Michael and Satan regarding the body of Moses the Prophet. None of this was mentioned in the Old Testament but again was known through Holy Tradition.
- **(Jude 14-15)**
St. Jude mentioned a prophecy by Enoch not written in the Old Testament but was known by Holy Tradition.
- **(Rev 2:14)**
Our Lord Jesus Christ quoted from Holy Tradition when He explained the details of Balaam’s perversion, which are not stated in **(Num 23-24)**. It was only mentioned that the children of Israel committed sexual immorality, but it was not mentioned that it was due to Balaam’s advice to Balak. Also **(2 Pet 2:15)** and **(Jude 11)** quoted the same from Tradition.

* This lecture is adapted from, ‘*Comparative Theology*’ by H.H. Pope Shenouda III.