

SCRIPTURE, TRADITION AND THE DEPOSIT OF FAITH

by Fr. Victor E. Novak

"Let us look at the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached and the Fathers preserved" - St. Athanasius

THE FAITH ONCE DELIVERED

It is often said that Protestants accept the Bible as the only standard of revealed truth, while Roman Catholics consider the Bible and Tradition to be equal sources of divine revelation. But which view is correct? Or is there a third way? These are vital questions for all serious Christians, with enormous consequences for the individual and for the Church.

Anglican theologian Richard Hooker wrote, "Two opinions therefore there are concerning sufficiency of Holy Scripture, each extremely opposite unto the other, *and both repugnant unto truth*. The schools of Rome teach Scripture to be so insufficient, as if, except traditions were added, it did not contain all revealed and supernatural truth, which absolutely is necessary for the children of men in this life to know that they may in the next be saved. Others justly condemning this opinion grow likewise unto a dangerous extremity, as if Scripture did not only contain all things in that kind necessary, but all things simply, and in such sort that to do any thing according to any other law were not only unnecessary but even opposite unto salvation, unlawful and sinful" (The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book II, Chapter. viii; Works, ed. John Keble, Vol. I, pp 335 f., italics added).

The Holy Scriptures themselves speak of tradition. In fact, they speak of two types of tradition: apostolic tradition and the traditions of men. Christians are commanded by the Apostle Paul to "keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you" (I Cor. 11:2); while also warning Christians, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men" (Col. 2:8). Many texts of Scripture could be quoted that speak of apostolic tradition (Phil. 4:9, 2 Thess. 2:15, 2 Thess. 3:6, 2 Tim. 2:2), and others that warn against the traditions of men (Matt. 15:2-3, Mk. 7:9, Col. 2:8).

Likewise, an early Church Father, St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. AD 130-200), wrote, "It is not necessary to seek the truth among others, for it is easy to obtain it from the Church. That is because the apostles, like a rich man [depositing money] in a bank, lodged in her hands most lavishly all things pertaining to the truth. Therefore, every man, whosoever will can draw from her the water of life."

Regarding the traditions of men, another early Church Father, St. Cyprian of Carthage (martyred AD 258) wrote, "Custom without truth is simply the antiquity of error;" and St. Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150-215) warned about the danger of being like the Pharisees of Christ's day who "rebelled from the Law by introducing human teachings."

APOSTOLIC TRADITION

Christians are commanded to reject human tradition, but to embrace apostolic tradition. But what is apostolic tradition? *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says, "In the early Christian Fathers, tradition means the revelation made by God and delivered by Him to His faithful people through the mouth of His prophets and apostles...the tradition was first called 'apostolic', because delivered by the apostles to the Churches which they founded, and later also 'ecclesiastic', because delivered again in each generation by the Church's teachers to their people. Its substance was held to consist of the central facts and beliefs crystalized in the creeds of the great orthodox bishoprics. From the 3rd cent[ury] the tradition was sometimes expressly identified with the Gospel record contained in Scripture" (c. 1983, p 1388).

The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* describes how Eastern and Western Christendom originally held essentially the same understanding of apostolic tradition, but that Western Christendom drifted from the commonly held view in the centuries following the Great Schism of AD 1054:

“The Eastern Orthodox came to define tradition as the whole of the church’s witness, based on Scripture, but expressed chiefly in the seven ecumenical councils, the writings of the fathers, and liturgical worship... During most of the Middle Ages, the Western view differed only slightly, placing somewhat greater emphasis upon written Scripture as fundamental and an ever-increasing emphasis upon the papacy (rather than councils) as the normative spokesman of apostolic tradition. But in the fourteenth century the realization that certain doctrines...could not be proved even remotely from Scripture, together with theologians’ increased sophistication about their sources, inspired several of them to posit tradition as a separate, unwritten source, handed down by apostolic succession, especially through an infallible papacy. The Protestant revolt...transformed this view, despite protests, into the church’s official position at the Council of Trent: The truths and discipline of the gospel are contained in written Scripture and unwritten traditions given to the Church by Christ or the Spirit through the apostles, and both deserve equal respect” (Baker Books, c. 1984, p. 1105).

The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church describes the growth and finally the acceptance of the view that Scripture and unwritten tradition are equal sources of authority by the Roman Church. “In the Reformation era the relation of unwritten tradition to the Scriptural revelation was the subject of acute controversy between Protestants and [Roman] Catholics. As against the Protestant belief in the sole sufficiency of the Bible, the Council of Trent (Sess. iv. 8; 8 Apr. 1546) laid down that Scripture and tradition were to be received as of equal authority (*pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia*)” (p. 1389).

The Great Schism was caused by the ever increasing papal claims made by Rome; and once separated from the Eastern Churches the evolution and acceptance of dogmas that “could not be proved evenly remotely from Scripture” led to the Protestant Reformation of 1517. Reacting to charges made by the Reformers that a number of medieval beliefs and practices had no warrant in Scripture, the Roman Church finally officially adopted the novel teaching that Scripture and unwritten tradition are equal sources of authority at the Council of Trent in 1546.

Unfortunately, much of Continental Protestantism reacted too far in the other extreme and rejected all apostolic tradition except Scripture, with some anabaptists rejecting even that! For the first 1,000 years of Christianity there was essentially one Church. For more than four and a half centuries after the Great Schism there were two. But after centuries of increasingly serious doctrinal errors and ecclesiastical corruption, Western Christendom finally exploded in the 16th century. With the rejection of apostolic tradition and the acceptance of the “principle” of private interpretation of the Scriptures by many Protestants, confusion and sectarianism reigned, leaving Protestant Christianity with more than 25,000 competing and squabbling denominations today.

Things were not much better in Rome however. While the Roman Church remained united due to the ever increasing power of the papacy, theological controversy continued to erupt. If Scripture and unwritten tradition are equal sources of Christian truth, how does one know what tradition consists of? No one could be sure due to the very fact that it is unwritten! The disputes between various theologians, theological schools and religious orders became so serious that Pope Pius IX finally sought to settle matters by declaring “I am tradition”, and during his pontificate the First Vatican Council met in 1870 and declared the dogma of Papal Infallibility. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* describes the final result of the Tridentine doctrine of Scripture and unwritten tradition being equal sources of truth in this way: “Vatican I completed this line of thought when it declared the church’s teaching office to be centered in an infallible papacy” (p. 1105).

The Council of Trent declared Scripture and unwritten tradition to be equal sources of authority. Reacting against this novel claim, much of protestantism rejected the clear Scriptural teaching on apostolic

tradition, leading to the private interpretation of Scripture (also condemned in Scripture), which has resulted in sectarianism and ever increasing divisions among Christians.

But if tradition is “unwritten” how can anyone ever be sure of what it is? The answer is that *apostolic tradition* is not “unwritten.” Tradition means what is handed down or handed over. At one time, the entire deposit of faith was unwritten apostolic tradition, but that is no longer the case. The Church existed for as much as a decade before the first book of the New Testament was written, and for more than six decades before the last Gospel was penned. During that time the Faith was handed down orally. When the evangelists finally did write their Gospels they simply wrote down what they had been teaching orally for years. The Church Fathers record that St. Mark was the scribe of the Apostle Peter and that he wrote his Gospel from what he heard St. Peter preach and teach. St. Paul and the other apostles had been preaching and teaching long before they wrote their epistles, and their letters reflect the faith that they had long been proclaiming orally.

Many things Christians believe and do date back to the earliest Church, but are not specifically commanded in Scripture. However, these beliefs and practices can be found in the writings of the Church Fathers and in the universal practice of the Catholic Church. While they are not commanded in Scripture, they have always been accepted and universally used, do not contradict the letter of Scripture, conform to its spirit, and are part of the apostolic tradition.

St. Basil the Great writes, “For instance, who has taught us in writing about the sign of the cross...to turn to the east in prayer...to invoke the Holy Spirit at the Eucharist when the bread and the cup of blessing are displayed?” (On the Holy Spirit). The origins of these practices are found in the unwritten life of the earliest Church and are not commanded in the Scriptures, yet they are part of apostolic tradition and can now be found without dissent in the writings of the early Church Fathers and the universal practice of the primitive Church.

The great Caroline divine, Archbishop John Bramhall (1594-1663) of Armagh writes, “We receive not your [late Roman] upstart suppositious traditions, nor unwritten fundamentals; but we admit genuine, universal, Apostolical traditions; as, the Apostles Creed, the perpetual Virginity of the Mother of God, the anniversary Festivals of the Church, the Lenten Fast... We believe Episcopacy...may be proved out of Scripture without Tradition; but to such as are froward, the perpetual practice and tradition of the Church renders the interpretation of the text more authentic, and proof more convincing” (Answer to M. De La Miltiere, Oxford, p. 53).

These teachings are “unwritten” only in the sense that they are not commanded in the Bible, but they are, “derived from the Apostles, *and delivered unto us by the manifest testimony of the primitive Church*, being agreeable to the Holy Scriptures” writes Archbishop Bramhall (Schism Guarded, Oxford, p. 382, italics added).

Writing at the command of King Charles I, the Royal Martyr, to clarify the position of the Anglican Church and confute it’s opponents, Bishop Francis White (1564-1638) of Ely wrote, “REFORMED [meaning Anglican] Churches reject not all Traditions, but such as are spurious, superstitious, and not consonant to the prime Rule of Faith, to wit, the Holy Scripture. Genuine Traditions agreeable to the Rule of Faith, subservient to piety, consonant with Holy Scripture, derived from Apostolical times by a successive current, *and which have the uniform testimony of pious Antiquity*, are received and honoured by us. Now such are these which follow: The historical tradition concerning the number, integrity, dignity, and perfection of the Books of Canonical Scriptures, The Catholic exposition of many sentences of Holy Scripture, The Holy Apostles’ Creed, The Baptism of Infants, The perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, The religious observation of the Lord’s Day and of some other Festivals, as Easter, Pentecost, etc., Baptizing and administration of the Holy Eucharist in public assemblies and congregations, The Service of the Church in a known language, The delivering of the Holy Communion to the people in both kinds, The superiority and authority of Bishops over Priests and Deacons in jurisdiction and power of Ordination, etc.” (A Treatise of the Sabbath day, italics added).

Dr. Martin Luther in his struggle to reform the Church in Germany stressed Sola Scriptura in his debates with Roman theologians who were teaching that Scripture and their unwritten “traditions” were equal sources of authority, but he did not reject the universal testimony of the Church. Far from it. In his conflict with the Zwinglians who denied the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar, Luther strongly endorsed authentic tradition: “This testimony of the universal holy Christian Church, even if we had nothing else, would be a sufficient warrant for holding this article [on the Real Presence] and refusing to suffer or listen to a sectary, for it is dangerous and fearful to hear or believe anything against the unanimous testimony, belief, and teaching of the universal holy Christian Churches, unanimously held in all the world from the beginning until now over fifteen hundred years.”

Apostolic tradition was long ago recorded in the Holy Scriptures, the writings of the Fathers, the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, the Creeds, and the liturgical worship of the Church, and has been handed down to all Christians and is accessible to all.

THE GREAT SCHISM AND ANGLICAN REFORMATION

What many Christians do not realize is that the Great Schism was not really a cleavage between Eastern and Western Christendom. It was a schism of the Roman Patriarch from union with the four other ancient Patriarchates (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem) of the Church; and not all Western Christians fell away in the schism. For instance, a Benedictine monastery remained on Mount Athos until vocations from the West finally dried up two centuries later. Most importantly, Ecclesia Anglicana, the Anglican Church, remained committed to the Orthodox Faith. This led to the Bishop of Rome blessing William, the Duke of Normandy, to invade England, seize the throne and force the Church there into submission to the Roman See. The Norman invasion took place in 1066, and after conquering the country William replaced all but one of the native British bishops with Normans. For the next four and a half centuries the English Church maintained an uneasy, sometimes beneficial and sometimes stormy, relationship with the See of Rome.

In 1534 the Anglican Church was finally able to renounce papal supremacy and end centuries of papal control that had been uncanonically established by force of arms. Convocation, the governing body of the Church of England, declared that “the Bishop of Rome hath not, by Scripture, any greater authority in England than any other foreign bishop.” Thus began the English Reformation. The English Reformation was very different from what was happening on much of the Continent. In England the Reformation was not a revolution, but a real movement of reform carried out by the bishops themselves. No new Church was founded; the ancient Anglican Church was simply cleansed and reformed in light of the Word of God and the primitive Church.

In 1562, Anglican Bishop John Jewel wrote, “We have returned to the Apostles and the old Catholic Fathers. We have planted no new religion, but only preserved the old that was undoubtedly founded and used by the Apostles of Christ and other holy Fathers of the primitive Church.

Likewise, in 1563, Queen Elizabeth I said, “We and our people - thanks be to God - follow no novel and strange religions, but that very religion which is ordained by Christ, sanctioned by the primitive and Catholic Church and approved by the consentient mind and voice of the most early Fathers.”

Bishop John Pearson (1613-1686) taught, “Search how it was in the beginning; go to the fountainhead; look to antiquity.” And the saintly Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711) said, “I die in the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Faith, professed by the whole Church, before the disunion of East and West.”

Bishop Charles Edward Cheney, a 19th century Reformed Episcopal bishop, described the Anglican position this way: “If I build my house, I will consult an architect. The architect will present me with the latest style, the most modern ideas. But our Church has done exactly the opposite and presented the earliest ideas. Why? Because the water very near the fountainhead is the purist...I do not believe a thing

is better simply because it is old. But in Christianity, the nearer I get to Christ's own day, the more assured I can be."

APOSTOLIC TRADITION IN ANGLICANISM AND EASTERN ORTHODOXY

There have been friendly and warm relations between the Eastern Orthodox and Anglican Churches for centuries, but for more than a century now there has been regular dialogue at the highest levels. The Dublin Agreed Statement of 1984, was the result of eight years of discussions between leaders of Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism; "important agreements" were reached between the two Communion "on the mystery of the Church, on faith in the Trinity, on prayer and holiness, and on worship and tradition" (Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue, c. 1985, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press).

The Dublin Agreed Statement says, "Both Anglicans and Orthodox see in their fidelity to tradition a mutual bond, and a strong incentive to closer co-operation in witness and service to the world" (ibid, p. 30). The Agreed Statement goes on to say, "We agree likewise in our view of the fundamental relationship between Scripture and tradition: they are not two sources, but correlative. We agree that the Church cannot define dogmas which are not grounded both in Scripture and in tradition. We agree that the mind of the Fathers is of lasting importance for our understanding of the Christian faith...both our delegations accept that there exist freedom and variety within the one tradition of the Church" (ibid, p. 43).

Anglicanism, when it is true to itself, is Western Orthodoxy; and that was recognized to a significant degree in The Dublin Agreed Statement of 1984: "Our divisions do not destroy but they damage the basic unity we have in Christ, and our disunity impedes our mission to the world as well as our relationships with each other. Anglicans are accustomed to seeing our divisions as within the Church: they do not believe that they alone are the one true Church, but they believe that they belong to it." The Orthodox, "see Anglicans as brothers and sisters in Christ who are seeking with them the union of all Christians in one Church" (p.11).

APOSTOLIC TRADITION EXPRESSED

Now, let us look at the various forms in which the apostolic tradition is expressed: Holy Scripture followed by the Ecumenical Councils, the Creeds, the Church Fathers, Liturgical Worship, and even, though in a lesser degree, in the Canons and Religious art (iconography) of the Church.

THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

The Christian Church is a Scriptural Church. The Bible is the supreme expression of God's revelation to mankind, and Christians must always be people of the Book. Fr. Carroll Simcox, a former editor of *The Living Church* magazine, while speaking at the great St. Louis Church Congress in 1977 said, "Anglicanism when true to itself is Biblical Catholicism. Whatever is received, believed, taught, and enjoined...as essential doctrine or as Christian morality must be rooted and grounded in Holy Scripture."

Fr. Simcox was simply echoing the Church Fathers. St. Athanasius wrote, "The holy and inspired Scriptures are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth" (Against the Heathen). St. John Chrysostom said, "Regarding the things I say, I should supply even the proofs, so I will not seem to rely on my own opinions, but rather, prove them with Scripture, so that the matter will remain certain and steadfast" (Homily 8 On Repentance and the Church). In his famous *Catechetical Lectures*, St. Cyril of Jerusalem taught, "For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell you these things, give not absolute credence, unless you receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on the demonstration of the Holy Scriptures." And in his *Commonitorium*, St. Vincent of Lerins writes, "the canon of Scripture is complete, and is in itself

abundantly sufficient.” Finally, St. Augustine of Hippo reminds us that, “the established authority of Scripture must outweigh every other” (Reply to Faustus the Manichean).

The Holy Scriptures are the supreme expression of God’s revelation to mankind, the chief part of the apostolic tradition. The Anglican-Orthodox Moscow Agreed Statement of 1976 says: “The Scriptures constitute a coherent whole. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative witness to God’s revelation of Himself in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word and in the whole history of salvation, and as such expresses the Word of God in human language.

“We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church. Our approach to the Bible is one of obedience so that we may hear the revelation of Himself that God gives through it” (ibid, , Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue, pp. 50-51).

Recognizing that the Holy Scriptures are the supreme expression of God’s revelation and therefore the chief part of the apostolic tradition, Anglicanism affirms with the Church Fathers that “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation (Article VI, Thirty-nine Articles).” The Anglican Church does not say “all things”, but “all things necessary to salvation.” With the Moscow Agreed Statement, Anglicans, “know, receive and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church.” Dr. E.B. Pusey, the Great 19th century Anglican theologian wrote, “What is matter of faith must be capable of being proved out of Holy Scripture; yet not according to the private sense of individuals, but according to the uniform teaching of the Church” (The Rule of Faith, p. 36).

THE CHURCH: A WITNESS AND KEEPER OF HOLY WRIT

Although, “The holy and inspired Scriptures are fully sufficient for the proclamation of truth” as St. Athanasius says (Against the Heathen); St. Vincent of Lerins reminds Christians that, “because of the very depth of Scripture all men do not place one identical interpretation upon it. The statements of the same writer are explained by different men in different ways” (Commonitorium).

The Church preceded the New Testament and set its canon. The Bible is the Church’s book; and as Article XX of the Thirty-nine Articles says, “the Church be a witness and keeper of Holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not enforce anything to be believed for necessity of salvation.”

In his famous *Commonitorium* (AD 434), St. Vincent of Lerins (France) gives us a detailed explanation as to why although “the canon of Scripture is complete, and is in itself abundantly sufficient,” to it must be joined the interpretation of the Church. St. Vincent also describes in detail how to properly interpret the Holy Scriptures:

“I have therefore continually given the greatest pains and diligence to inquiring, from the greatest possible number of men outstanding in holiness and in doctrine, how I can secure a kind of fixed and, as it were, general and guiding principle for distinguishing the true Catholic Faith from the degraded falsehoods of heresy. And the answer that I always receive is to this effect; that if I wish, or indeed if anyone wishes, to detect the deceits of heretics that arise and to avoid their snares and to keep healthy and sound in a healthy faith, we ought, with the Lord’s help, to fortify our faith in a two-fold manner, firstly, that is, by the authority of God’s Law [Scripture], then by the tradition of the Catholic Church.

“Here, it may be, someone will ask, Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and is in itself abundantly sufficient, what need is there to join to it the interpretation of the Church? The answer is that because of the very depth of Scripture all men do not place one identical interpretation upon it. The statements of the same writer are explained by different men in different ways, so much so that it seems almost possible to extract from it as many opinions as there are men...Therefore, because of the intricacies of error, which is so multiform, there is great need for the laying down of a rule for the exposition of Prophets and Apostles in accordance with the standard interpretation of the Catholic Church.

“Now in the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold THAT WHICH HAS BEEN BELIEVED EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS AND BY ALL.

“That is truly and properly ‘Catholic,’ as is shown by the very force and meaning of the word, which comprehends everything almost universally. We shall hold to this rule if we follow universality, antiquity, and consent. We shall follow universality if we acknowledge that one Faith to be true which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is clear that our ancestors and fathers proclaimed; consent, if in antiquity itself we keep following the definitions and opinions of all, or certainly nearly all, bishops and doctors alike.

“What then will the Catholic Christian do, if a small part of the Church has cut itself off from the communion of the universal Faith? The answer is sure. He will prefer the healthiness of the whole body to the morbid and corrupt limb.

“But what if some novel contagion try to infect the whole Church, and not merely a tiny part of it? Then he will take care to cleave to antiquity, which cannot now be led astray by any deceit of novelty.

“What if in antiquity itself two or three men, or it may be a city, or even a whole province be detected in error? Then he will take the greatest care to prefer the decrees of the ancient General Councils, if there are such, to the irresponsible ignorance of a few men.

“But what if some error arises regarding which nothing of this sort is to be found? Then he must do his best to compare the opinions of the Fathers and inquire their meaning, provided always that, though they belonged to diverse times and places, they yet continued in the faith and communion of the one Catholic Church; and let them be teachers approved and outstanding. And whatever shall find to have been held, approved and taught, not by one or two only but by all equally and with one consent, openly, frequently, and persistently, let him take this to be held by him without the slightest hesitation” (Commonitorium, AD 434).

The Church is “a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ.” The Bible is the Church’s book, and is to be interpreted according to apostolic tradition; but the Church is not above the Holy Scriptures and may not “decree anything against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of salvation” (Article XX). The teachings of an individual Church Father, Saint, Doctor, Reformer, theologian, clergyman, teacher, or writer must be evaluated in light of the Vincentian Canon: what has been believed everywhere, always and by all in the undivided Church.

THE SEVEN GENERAL OR ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

The doctrinal definitions of an Ecumenical Council are infallible. When a General or Ecumenical Council is held, the bishops from all across the Catholic Church come together to state what they have always believed in their local Churches. These conciliar declarations must later be ratified by their acceptance throughout the Catholic Church. Thus, the whole Church can declare authoritatively what has been believed in the Church everywhere, always and by all. No new doctrine is established, but the Catholic doctrine is explained authoritatively.

It is interesting to note that the fifth century Vincentian Canon does not say a word about the Bishop of Rome or papal authority, but it does speak about the authority of General (Ecumenical) Councils. Eastern Orthodox theologian Fr. Michael Azkoul writes, “The Christian Faith may be handed down in the churches through the episcopate, but when it is challenged by heretics, some people, even bishops, are not always able to distinguish as the Latin Father, St. Vincent of Lerins (France) says, between Orthodoxy and ‘the degraded falsehoods of heresy.’ Thus, he sought in his famous *Commonitories* (chapters 3-4) to lay down a ‘rule’ or ‘canon’ by which to make such a determination” (The Teachings of the Holy Orthodox Church, Dormition Skete Publications, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, c. 1986, p.17).

Fr. Michael Azkoul continues, "The 'catholic and universal doctrine' remains, St. Vincent adds, 'one and the same through all successive ages in the uncorrupted tradition of truth' (ch. 24). The Holy Spirit lends the Church His presence, but also such checks and balances - especially the Holy Bible or 'the divine oracles' and the Holy Fathers or 'the harps of the Spirit' - so as to prevent deviation from His will" (ibid, p. 21).

There have been seven General or Ecumenical Councils in the history of the Church, the first in AD 325, and the last in AD 787. There also have been many regional, provincial and local (diocesan) councils or synods held throughout the Church's long history. In fact, diocesan synods are generally held annually. However, while the doctrinal decisions of an Ecumenical Council are considered authoritative, binding, and infallible, those of lesser councils or of individual bishops, including the Bishop of Rome, are always liable to error; but if their decisions are accepted by the rest of the Church, then they come to acquire Ecumenical authority similar to doctrinal statements of an Ecumenical Council.

How many General or Ecumenical Councils does the Anglican Church accept? The Anglican Church accepts all seven Councils. The first four Councils dealt with critical issues relating to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and to christology, and are generally considered to be the most important. St. Gregory the Great, the man who commissioned St. Augustine (of Canterbury) as the leader of a mission team to England, likened the first four Councils to the four Gospels. Because St. Gregory the Great played such an important part in the re-evangelization of England, his teaching on the four Councils sank down deep in the English psyche. The fifth and sixth Councils dealt with clarifying certain christological teachings of previous Councils; and the seventh Council met over controversies regarding the use of religious art (iconography) caused to a great degree by the rise of Islam.

Although there is a great deal written about the first four General Councils in Anglican literature over the centuries, the Anglican Church accepts all seven. The fifth and six Councils are recognized in the Book of Homilies (e.g., the homily 'Against the Peril of Idolatry'), an official formulary of the Anglican Church, and the controversial seventh Council has been accepted as well. The seventh Council was not controversial because of its condemnation of iconoclasm and teaching regarding the use of religious art, but because of a mistranslation of the Greek decrees into Latin.

Anglican theologian Dr. Peter Toon writes, "Little was known of it [the seventh Ecumenical Council] in the West in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and where it was known, it was known in a misleading translation - e.g., *proskunesis* was rendered *adoratio*, which meant that the fine distinction of meaning in the Greek text between genuine worship (*latreia* - adoration) of God as God and veneration (*proskunesis*) of icons of Jesus, the Angels and the Saints was lost in translation!" (Yesterday, Today and Forever).

The Dublin Agreed Statement of 1984 says, "The decrees of the Seventh Ecumenical Council were not properly understood in the West owing to the unfortunate translation of the Greek Word *proskunesis* (veneration) by the Latin word *adoratio* (worship). The subsequent uncontrolled development of visual imagery later in the Middle Ages in the West led to strong reactions, above all at the time of the Reformation...In fact a distinctive Anglican tradition of religious art developed. During the last hundred years increasing contact with the Orthodox Churches and a fuller knowledge of their tradition have brought new light to this question.

"In the light of the present discussion the Anglicans do not find any cause for disagreement in the doctrine stated by St. John of Damascus: 'In times past, God, without body and form could in no way be represented. But now since God has appeared in flesh and lived among men, I can now depict that which is visible of God. I do not venerate the matter, but I venerate the creator of matter, who became matter for me, who condescended to live in matter, and who through matter accomplishes my salvation; and I do not cease to respect the matter through which my salvation is accomplished'" (pp. 38-39).

A question is sometimes raised about Article XXI of the Thirty-nine Articles: "And when they [General or Ecumenical Councils] be gathered together, (forasmuch as they be an assembly of men, whereof all be not governed by the Spirit and Word of God) they may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God." This Article is not speaking of the seven Ecumenical Councils that have universal acceptance in the Catholic Church. In addition to these seven Councils others have met, declared themselves to be Ecumenical Councils, and issued decrees, but their authority was never recognized by the universal Church. Such councils met in antiquity before the Great Schism, and were later denounced as false or robber councils. Western Councils that met between the Great schism and the Reformation, though they called themselves Ecumenical, are only received by the Anglican Church as regional Councils, with post-Reformation Councils (Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II) having no authority whatsoever.

THE CREEDS

The Nicene Creed is authoritative because it was produced by two Ecumenical Councils, Nicea in AD 325 and Constantinople in AD 381, the Apostles' and Athanasian Creeds are authoritative because they have been accepted as orthodox by the whole Catholic Church, East and West. Article VIII of the Thirty-nine Articles says, "The Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and that which is called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Scripture."

The Anglican Church considers the Nicene Creed to be the most important of the three Creeds, reciting it at every Sunday and holy day celebration of the Holy Eucharist. While the Apostles' Creed is usually used at the Divine Office, the Nicene Creed may be used in its place. The Athanasian Creed may replace the Apostles' Creed at Morning Prayer on Trinity Sunday and on certain other feasts.

THE CHURCH FATHERS

The Ecumenical Councils and the Church Fathers go together. There are Greek Fathers, Latin Fathers, Syriac Fathers, Celtic Fathers, Slavic Fathers, and Fathers from other ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, but they are all Fathers of the Church. While they were great theologians, their greatness is not in their originality. They were not original thinkers, promoting personal views in doctrine and private interpretations of Scripture. They witness to the faith that has been believed "everywhere, always and by all." No teaching of the Church originates with them, but they sought to faithfully teach and pass on what they had received. They did not draw "on their own resources," St. Maximus the Confessor writes, "but learned these things from the Scriptures and charitably taught us" (Theological and Polemical Works). They did not "invent new ideas as our opponents charge," St. Maximus continues, but affirm "the statements of the [earlier] Fathers" (ibid).

Although holy and learned, the Church Fathers are not infallible. They sometimes disagreed with one another and sometimes were in error. St. Vincent of Lerins wrote, "he must do his best to compare the opinions of the Fathers and inquire their meaning,...And whatever he shall find to have been held, approved and taught, not by one or two only but all equally and with one consent, openly, frequently and persistently, let him take this as to be held by him without the slightest hesitation" (Commonitorium).

That this is also the position the Anglican Church is abundantly clear. The Convocation that adopted the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion also passed a canon directing clergy: "to be careful that they never teach ought in a sermon, to be religiously held and believed by the people, except what is agreeable to the doctrine of the Old and New Testaments, and what the Catholic Fathers and ancient bishops have collected out of the same doctrine."

In his book, *The Anglican Spiritual Tradition*, Bishop John Moorman of Ripon writes, "As far back as 1549, when the first English Prayer Book was produced, the compilers gave as their authority 'the ancient fathers' to whom they refer over and over again... The writers were all familiar with the patristic texts, and regarded 'antiquity as the best Expositor of the Faith'. Writing of the seventeenth century Dean

Addleshaw says: 'The Anglicans are thinking and working the whole time in terms of patristic thought, more especially that of the Greek fathers'; and as trade with the East expanded, so grew closer communication with the Orthodox Church... Episcopacy, Creeds, a written Liturgy, a regular use of the sacraments, a dignified appearance of churches and ministers, all these had come down from the distant past and were accepted and approved by the early Christian writers, of both East and West. A Church which clung to these things could well claim to be in continuity with the apostles" (Templegate Publishers, c. 1983, pp. 105-106).

THE LITURGY

It has been sometimes said that the Anglican notion of tradition is little more than the Bible and the Prayer book. While that is not completely true, there is a lot of truth to it. Attend an Anglican church and get to know the historic Book of Common Prayer and a visitor will soon learn what Anglicans believe. How? Because the liturgical life of the Church expresses the faith of the Church. *Lex orandi lex credendi*, the rule of worship is the rule of belief. In a very real way the liturgical rites of the Church express and teach the faith of the Church. The historic Book of Common Prayer contains the primary worship services of the Anglican Church, including the Eucharistic Liturgy, the rites for the administration of the Sacraments, the three Creeds, the Divine Office, a lectionary for reading the Holy Scriptures, the Decalogue, ancient Collects and prayers, two Offices of Instruction, and a Catechism. What is more, the Anglican Usage of the Western Rite has been authorized for use in both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, giving it Ecumenical (universal) recognition in Catholic Christendom. The same cannot be said for the *Novus Ordo* of the Roman Church.

Bishop Kallistos Ware writes, "The inner Tradition 'handed down to us in a mystery' is preserved above all in the Church's worship. *Lex orandi lex credendi*: our faith is expressed in our prayer. Orthodoxy has made few explicit definitions about the Eucharist and the other Sacraments, about the next world, the Mother of God, the saints, and the faithful departed: our belief on these points is contained mainly in the prayers and hymns used at services" (The Orthodox Church, Penguin, c. 1993, p. 205). These words apply equally to Anglicanism.

CANON LAW

The doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils possess an absolute and unalterable validity because doctrinal definitions deal with eternal truths. Church canons on the other hand deal with the earthly life of the Church where conditions are constantly changing, and the canons therefore do adapt to changing needs and conditions of the Church.

While the canons do adapt organically as the conditions and needs of the Church change, they also demonstrate the unchanging and unchangeable nature of the Catholic Church itself: that it is made up of national and regional Churches bound together by a common doctrine, ministry and sacraments; that it is episcopal and conciliar in government; organized into dioceses and parishes, and more. This is all part of the apostolic tradition.

ICONOGRAPHY (RELIGIOUS ART)

Religious art has been used by Christians from the very beginning of the Church as can be seen in the ancient catacombs. Rather than mere decorations for churches and homes, religious art (iconography) has a christological foundation. As explained by the seventh Ecumenical Council, God can now be depicted because He has appeared as a man. Depictions of the Son of God actually demonstrate the Church's faith in the Incarnation, a fundamental dogma of Christianity.

In addition, religious art serves as holy reminders to Christians. St. John of Damascus writes, "Just as in the Bible we listen to the word of Christ and are sanctified...in the same way through painted icons we behold the representation of his human form...and likewise are sanctified" (On Holy Icons III).

The Seventh ecumenical Council teaches, "The more frequently they (icons) are seen, the more those who behold them are aroused to remember and desire the prototypes and to give them greeting and veneration of honour; not indeed true worship which, according to our faith, is due to God alone."

In his exposition of the Church catechism, Anglican Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711) prays, "give me grace to pay religious, suitable veneration to all sacred persons or places or things which are thine by solemn dedication and separated for the uses of divine love, and the communications of thy grace, or which may promote the decency and order of worship, or the edification of faithful people" (The Practice of Divine Love).

Apostolic tradition is made up of the Holy Scriptures, the ancient Creeds, the dogmatic teachings of the seven Ecumenical Councils, the consensus of the Fathers of the Church, the Liturgy of the Church, and even the canons and artwork of the Church. Apostolic tradition has been handed down to all Christians and is accessible to all. There are not two sources of revelation, Scripture and tradition, but only one containing all. The various aspects of apostolic tradition can be distinguished but they cannot be separated or contrasted, for they make up a coherent whole, with each part being understood in light of the rest.

TRADITION AND CUSTOM

There is a great difference between apostolic tradition and traditional customs, sometimes called "little 't' traditions." Customs, or little "t" traditions are "adiaphora" - things indifferent. Sometimes customs become so ingrained that they are taken as apostolic tradition and become causes of needless controversy, division or ecclesiastical stagnation.

Bishop Kallistos Ware writes, "Not everything from the past is of equal value, nor is everything received from the past necessarily true. As one of the bishops remarked at the Council of Carthage in 257: 'The Lord said, I am truth. He did not say, I am custom.' There is a difference between 'Tradition' and 'traditions': many traditions which the past has handed down are human and accidental - pious opinions (or worse), but not part of the one Tradition, the fundamental Christian message...The task of discrimination is never easy" (ibid, p. 197).

Speaking of these traditions or customs, Article XXXIV of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion says, "It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word." But also warns, "Whosoever, through his private judgement, willingly and purposely, doth openly break the Traditions and Ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, (that others may fear to do the like) as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church..."

APOSTOLIC TRADITION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOCTRINE

Apostolic tradition is "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3,). It is the deposit of faith that St. Paul instructed St. Timothy to "guard" - "O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge - by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith" (I Tim. 6:20-21).

St. Athanasius of Alexandria, the opponent of Arianism and the champion of the Faith of the Council of Nicea, wrote to Bishop Serapion saying, "In accordance with the Apostolic Faith delivered to us through the tradition of the Fathers, I have delivered the tradition without innovation, without adding anything extraneous to it. What I learned, I have written, keeping in mind always the Holy Scriptures."

Likewise, St. Sophronios of Jerusalem, in his *Synodal Epistle*, read during the eleventh session of the sixth Ecumenical Council, wrote, "An apostolic and ancient tradition has prevailed in the Holy Churches throughout the world so that those who are consecrated into the hierarchy of the Church sincerely refer everything they think or believe to those who have been bishops before them...All their activity would be pointless if any change were to be made in their faith."

"We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set," wrote St. John of Damascus in his book *On Icons*, "but we keep the Tradition, just as we received it."

The Canon of St. Vincent of Lerins, already quoted from his *Commonitorium*, was the rule of the undivided (pre-AD 1054) Church, and remains the rule in Anglicanism and Eastern Orthodoxy today: "Now in the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold THAT WHICH HAS BEEN BELIEVED EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS AND BY ALL." Since the division of Christendom at the beginning of the second millennium of Christianity, this means the consensus of the first millennium: the teachings of the undivided Church.

The Catholic faith is changeless, and the bishops and priests of the Church are to be stewards of the deposit of faith, the faith once for all delivered to the saints, keeping and teaching the apostolic tradition, neither adding anything to it, nor taking anything away from it.

Unfortunately, a different direction was taken in Western Christendom after the Great Schism. The Great Schism was caused by a novel teaching coming from Rome - that of papal supremacy. Once this doctrine was added to the faith in the West, a precedent was set, and the doctrine of the Roman Church continued to evolve and to grow. Soon other new dogmas were added, such as a punitive purgatory, supererogation, and indulgences. As the doctrine of the Roman Church continued to evolve, the Church drifted farther and farther from the consensus of the first millennium and grew more and more in conflict with the Holy Scriptures.

There were those who resisted the idea of the development of doctrine in the West. St. Albert the Great reminded the Church that, "Development is the progress of the faithful in the faith, not of the faith within the faithful." In his famous *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas opposed the notion of the Immaculate Conception, a novel theory that had begun to be promoted in his day by the Franciscans. Echoing St. Augustine of Hippo, Aquinas wrote regarding the source of Christian truth: "It should be noted that though many might write concerning Catholic truth, there is this difference that those who wrote the canonical Scripture, the Evangelists and Apostles, and the like, so constantly assert it that they leave no room for doubt. That is what he means when he says 'we know his witness is true.' Galatians 1:9, 'If anyone preach a gospel to you other than that which you have received, let him be anathema!' *The reason is that only canonical Scripture is a measure of faith.* Others however so wrote of the truth that they should not be believed save insofar as they say true things" (Commentary on the Gospel of John; italics added).

Unfortunately, these voices largely went unheeded, leading to an explosion in 1517. Later, the Council of Trent justified the innovations that had entered the Western Church after the Great Schism and opened the door for further doctrinal development by declaring that Scripture and unwritten tradition were equal sources of authority.

Even after the Reformation there were voices in the Roman Church warning against the trajectory that the Church was on. St. John of the Cross, the great Spanish Carmelite mystic and reformer, wrote that after the apostles passed away, "there are no more articles to be revealed to the Church about the substance of our faith" (Ascent of Mount Carmel). Later, a revival of Augustinian theology and Gallicanism (the concept of national Churches and conciliarism) began, centered around the Cistercian monastery of Port Royal in France. St. Augustine had taught, "the true and right Catholic faith" is taken, "not from the opinions of private judgement, but from the witness of the Scriptures; it is not subject to the fluctuations of heretical rashness, but grounded upon Apostolic Truth" (Sermon XXXIV). And he reminded the Church:

“Neither dare one agree with Catholic bishops if by chance they err in anything, but the result that their opinion is against the canonical Scriptures of God” (De unitate ecclesiae).

Sadly, St. John of the Cross was persecuted by his own religious order, and while he did finally have some success in reforming the Carmelites, his teaching about the deposit of faith went unheeded. Likewise, the Augustinian revival was opposed by the Jesuits, condemned by Rome, and literally crushed, leaving the notion of the development of doctrine triumphant. In 1854 the Immaculate Conception was declared by Pope Pius IX to be a dogma necessary for salvation. Sixteen years later the Bishop of Rome was declared to be infallible by the first Vatican Council.

Rather than contending for the faith once for all delivered to the saints, Roman Catholicism is constantly evolving. Even today there are many voices in Rome calling loudly for Our Lady to be declared “co-redemptrix” and “mediatrix of all graces.” Cardinal John Henry Newman, in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, sought to explain Roman Catholic teachings that could not be proven from Scripture or found in antiquity. He taught that all living things develop, and the new teachings were the logical consequences of this development, making explicit that which was implicit.

Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism strongly disagrees. “However, this theory [doctrinal development] has no patristic support. The Fathers never taught that the Christian Faith evolves so that the Church today does not believe exactly what the Apostles gave to our first century ancestors to hold and pass on to succeeding generations. There is only one kind of “development of dogma” for the Orthodox Church: the accumulation of formulations or definitions which clarify and defend the unchangeable Apostolic Tradition.

“Moreover, the reason for these new definitions of ‘the faith once delivered to the saints’ was not philosophical speculation, the reception of foreign ideas, unexpected revelations, but a response to the challenge of heretics” (Azkoul, *ibid*, pp, 10-11).

In his famous treatise, *The Three Religions: Protestantism, Romanism and Catholicism*, the holy Anglican Bishop, Charles Grafton, explains and contrasts the “Rule of Faith” of Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and Catholicism, showing the error of the Roman concept of the development of doctrine.

Bishop Grafton writes, “The third Rule is that of Catholicism. The word ‘Catholic’ means universal. A Catholic believes that the Holy Ghost descended at Pentecost to abide permanently in the Church. He came, not to reveal new truths, but to lead the Apostles into all truth; by bringing to their remembrance all things Christ had told them, and enlightening them to the full understanding of His Gospel.

“They were enabled to say, ‘We have not shunned to declare unto you the whole counsel of God.’ The Faith, thus once delivered, has been preserved by the Apostolically-descended churches throughout all the ages. What the whole Church has, from the beginning, held and taught, and holds today, that we know must be the mind of Christ. For we cannot suppose that a Divine Teacher would have so badly taught His doctrine, and that the Holy Ghost so failed in His office of preserving it, as that the whole Church should go, on points essential, radically wrong.

“We find this teaching authoritatively declared in the universally-received Ecumenical Councils, guarded by the Creeds, set forth in action in its Apostolically-descended governments, witnessed by the Sacraments, and by the common consent of undivided Christendom” (The Works of the Rt. Rev. Charles C. Grafton, Vol. 8).

Unfortunately, the erroneous belief in the “development of doctrine” has given liberal-modernists and other innovators in Rome, the Anglican Communion and even in Eastern Orthodoxy an excuse to support and promote such heresies as the “ordination” of women and same-sex “marriage”, as well as liturgical experimentation, and doctrinal, moral, ecclesiastical and spiritual compromises that undermine the apostolic tradition. At the same time, it has given many “Traditionalists” (Roman and Anglo-papalist) falsely so called, an excuse to embrace every innovation that came into the Church after the Great

Schism, to add dogma after dogma to the deposit of Faith which Scripture says “was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), and to hold and teach doctrines that “could not be proved even remotely from Scripture” or shown to be held universally in antiquity. As it has been said, if at the beginning of the third millennium of Christianity, Christians are to overcome the divisions of the second millennium, they must return to the consensus of the first millennium - to the faith of the undivided Church.

“Now in the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold THAT WHICH HAS BEEN BELIEVED EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS AND BY ALL” - The Canon or Rule of St. Vincent of Lerins (AD 434). To this Rule, every faithful Anglican can say, Amen!

+ + +

Scripture citations from: The Holy Bible, New King James Version; c. 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

c. 2011, Rev. Victor E. Novak. Fr. Novak is the rector of Holy Cross Anglican Church in Omaha, Nebraska, and a priest of the Diocese of Mid-America of the Reformed Episcopal Church/Anglican Church in North America. His parish website is: www.holycrossomaha.net He can be reached by phone at: (402) 573-6558; or by e-mail at: venovak@hughes.net