

Scripture, Tradition, and the Church

Fr. John Athanasiou

Scripture, Tradition and the Church are indissolubly linked and interdependent upon each other so as to vivify each by validating the whole in Christ.

The Bible is God's voice speaking to his people. However, the biblical message is, in reality, encapsulated in an anthology of writings. It contains books that range from historic to apocalyptic. It uses poetry, parables, psalms and prose to reveal truth. It also instructs through liturgies, epistles, wisdom literature as well as bearing witness to the incarnated, crucified and resurrected Son who manifested salvation to humanity. In short, the Bible is life - but how to unlock the meaning? The question that Philip asks, namely "do you understand what you are reading?"¹, and the Ethiopian's response of "how can I unless someone explains it to me"², is still apposite to the believing Church today.

The omnipotent and omniscient Christ gave to his people the Church as gift "par excellence" to provide understanding in the hearts of the faithful during historic time. As Jesus said "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak."³ Thus Truth not only reposes wisdom but grows the Church as the belief of the faithful in the risen Christ also grows towards theosis.

The Holy Spirit as sent by God acts, through Christ, as messenger and bridge between God and his people. Although the Church may refer to this gift as Holy Tradition, it is clear that the Spirit is the source of vivification, verification and ultimately the very validation of faith. Thus the Bible, Church and Spirit make the living God real in the heart of the faithful.

This essay will focus on the relationship that the Orthodox Church has, in the Spirit of Truth, with Holy Scripture. It will then focus on the response of the Church guided by the same Spirit to keep the message true thus allowing for real encounter with the resurrected Christ in the believing Church.

The Orthodox Church

Article nine of the Nicene creed declares "I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church". Orthodoxy refers to the whole and undivided Church of Christ. It follows that Orthodoxy is ecumenical in nature as well as being dynamic and inclusive of all peoples. The word "Church" has many meanings and stands as metaphor for many things. However, it is

simultaneously as body of Christ and as gathering of the faithful that we will consider it to mean in this essay. Thus, in Christ, the faithful who are initiated into the life of Christ through baptism and chrismation become the body of Christ and “the fullness of him who fills all in all.”⁴

The Church thus should not be viewed as a worldly or charitable organisation. It transcends time and exists in the continuous present, and as Mantizarides puts it:

The Church offers man the victory against time, the transcendence of death and participation in the eternal life of God.⁵

Orthodoxy, in short, hence means the fidelity and correct relationship to the rule of faith as well as confirming the mystery of that faith, whilst at the same time having a real encounter with the numinous Christ who reveals himself in his Church and his people.

The Bible

Sacred Scripture is the initiative of God to his people expressed in human language. It thus has a dual authorship in the human author as well the divine through inspiration of that person by God. Yet, it is the Church itself that gives canonicity to and settles the canon of the Bible thus making it the book of the Church.

The Orthodox Church regards the Septuagint as the inspired Word of God speaking to the Israelites in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God spoke to inspired individuals about his people. His revelation was thus towards preparing for the coming perfect revelation which was actualised in Christ. The New Testament, through Christ, offers humanity a new Covenant whereby all who follow him were promised eternal life. By Christ declaring himself as the catalyst in the divine plan of salvation, the Bible becomes accessible and relevant to all.

Of course, all teaching during the apostolic era, including the earthly ministry of Christ, was word of mouth. This oral tradition continued amongst his apostles until the need arose to write to the expanding Churches to provide instruction and guidance. The Gospel authors inspired by the Holy Spirit thus wrote what they each saw as being important to their own witness. Also, at that time, other writings began to emerge that were contrary to the Spirit of Truth necessitating the Church to define the canon of scripture. By settling the Canon of Scripture, the Church thus affirmed that it believed that in Christ there was accomplished the plan of God and put a stop to any notion of continuous revelation outside of the Church. It thus made plain that the Bible is the Book of the Church which could only be proclaimed in Power within the

Church. Hence the Church receives, interprets and responds to the Word of God and thus proclaims the Bible as the Book of the Church.

Of course, the Canon of Scripture was only part of the true revelation of Christ, as understood by the Apostles. The Apostles had unique experience of being present during the earthly ministry and thus were able to add their individual witness into the experience of the Church. In point, John concludes his Gospel by affirming that the works of Jesus were such that if everything was written, the "whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."⁶ Hence, the scope for oral tradition was vast and no Gospel can claim to be the full revelation of Christ.

Thus, Apostolic tradition, through the Kerygma, is equally valid in revealing the Logos. As St Basil of Caesarea states:

Among the doctrines and teachings preserved by the Church, we hold some from written sources and we have collected others transmitted in an inexplicit form from apostolic tradition: They have all the same value.⁷

Hence it is the Church as gathering of the faithful and as the body of Christ that identifies the Word in the context of total revelation as inspired by Holy Tradition for reception by the Church. It accordingly follows that the Church itself can only be the sole authoritative interpreter of the Bible.

Holy Tradition

The total understanding of revelation is actualised within the Church by the Holy Spirit. The Church thus is founded on, as Lossky puts it, "a two-fold divine economy"⁸ which requires the work of both Christ and Spirit so theosis may be obtained. The Spirit is the light that opens hearts and illuminates the truth. Although the Church itself manifests truth, it is Tradition that "is the unique mode of receiving"⁹ that truth. Yet the Spirit does not reveal himself as person. He is mystery who communicates to persons individually marking them as members of the body of Christ.

Every transmission of faith involves the Holy Spirit. In this sense, the Spirit is messenger and message. It is the incarnate Word and the Spirit that provide reciprocity in the divine economy of the Son manifesting himself in the worshipping Church. Thus, the Spirit of Truth, by revealing the path of that truth, preserves yet, antinomically, clarifies the truth so the Church in power and truth has the ability to hear and receive Christ in the light of that revealed truth which revelation is ever increasing in accordance with the will of the Spirit.

The Spirit of Truth allows truth to be discerned wherever the truth is to be found. As Paul states "test everything, hold on to the good."¹⁰ Therefore, even apocryphal sources such as the 'Gospel of Nicodemus' can serve to add dimensions through the Spirit of Truth to hymnographers, iconographers and theologians alike. Consider the most powerful icon of the resurrection, namely, the descent of Christ into Hell. Apart from oblique references by Paul, such as 'Christ descending to fill all things,'¹¹ Scripture is generally silent about the period between the crucified and resurrected Christ. Yet the imagery, passion and emotion of Christ is made real through both icon and hymn as He descended into Hell to free the first man Adam and take mankind away from the finality of death. Hence the Spirit can wash writings that are non-canonical and legitimate aspects of and apportion them as her own and hence verifying them as truth. This is so as the Spirit of Truth is not ossified but living and dynamic. As Breck points out the ongoing hermeneutic function of the Spirit within the Church is,

That the risen Lord, through the Spirit-Paraclete is present within the community of faith, to guide both the composition and the interpretation of biblical writings, to make them a revelation of "Truth and life".¹²

Accordingly, Christ continues to speak and be active through the Spirit within his Church today. For as Chryssavivis puts it "ecclesiastical Tradition is always being created; the process never stops."¹³

The Interpretation of the Word

The Church has never regarded the Bible as a self-explanatory work. Although in the Bible, the Word of God became human language and the understanding of that word has occupied the Church since that time. St Maximus the Confessor explained the relationship between Bible and Church by the use of the metaphor of the light and lamp stand respectively. Perhaps such an image is limited in that the Bible, as the Book of the Church, would have to shine from within the stand and visible light, in any event, is only part of the light spectrum. Perhaps a better analogy would be the light globe with the Bible being the filament which is encapsulated by the glass that is the Church. The electrifying force of the Spirit acts on the filament to produce light that shines forth to penetrate the darkness. The difficulty of course is that each person uniquely responds to that light. How each person reacts to the light is again the saving function of the Holy Spirit, given at baptism, to allow each person to move towards the source of that light so as to be better illuminated.

In moving toward that source, it becomes increasingly apparent to protect the light itself from the sully of impurity of heresy as well as teaching others to see, not in a mirror darkly, but face to face,¹⁴ and thus moving towards understanding of God's saving plan. Individuals, as Sons

of Light,¹⁵ have throughout sacred history in the Orthodox Church expounded, explained, defended and otherwise bore true witness to the Word of God as they theologised to discern His Will.

From its beginning, the Church has struggled to find within the rule of faith the Word of God. Special men who had the spirit of truth and the vision of God not only received the message of God but interpreted it and transmitted that message for the benefit of the faithful. Thus, the purpose of the exegete was to undertake the theandric exercise of proclaiming the living Word by participation in the process of revelation by submitting to the Spirit in order to proclaim the Word in power.

Enlightened individuals thus saw God working out the economy of salvation within the created order in historical time and within the Church. They recognised the Bible as a continuation of salvation history that offered the power to enter into communion with God the Father, through God the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it was vital to ensure that right belief did not degenerate into idolatry or bibliolatry. Proper witness meant preserving the full faith as revealed to them by the Spirit as well as ongoing revelation given to them.

Thus, to meet the living Christ was the purpose of their efforts. The difficulty was how to discern and separate the Voice of the Word from their own preconceptions about the message of God. Further, how was the language of the Bible to be understood as a proper understanding of the text is the parent to the interpreted meaning. Therefore, it was necessary for the Church to develop hermeneutics to arrive at the living Word.

One of the first things that struck the Fathers was the conviction that there is an ontological relationship between the Old Testament and the New which is actuated in Christ. Thus, the Bible could be viewed as promise and fulfilment and as type and antitype.

Further, the Fathers saw God and his Church as being inextricably linked. As St Cyprian stated, "One who no longer has the Church as Mother cannot have God as Father". Thus, theologising can only be done within the Church and any person outside the Church thereby creates their own theology. To see the Bible as the Word of God meant it also had to be treated as being uniformly inspired and, as such, given the consistency and constancy of the voice of God, it meant that the Bible had to be read in such a way that it did not provide any contraindications to that principle. Further, as all biblical passages are not uniformly penetrable of meaning, they concluded that scripture had multiple interpretations which through the Spirit of Truth revealed more and more meaning to them. Indeed, the same St Cyprian noted that

scripture had at least four senses, namely the literal, the allegorical, the tropological and the analogical that give different pathways in the text to meaning.

Thus, the Church approached the Bible with "Phronema" that viewed the Bible as the gift of God to be interpreted in faith as part of the ministry of the Church in accordance with previous witness as inspired by the Spirit.

Indeed, the way the Bible was interpreted has always been at the forefront of the mind of the Fathers who saw no ready agreement of methodology. Some sought real meaning through allegory to arrive at the true meaning, provided that the meaning arrived was in concordance with the rest of scripture. Others saw the literal and historic meaning of the text as offering the appropriate path to truth. Thus, to them *akrivia*, *sunkatabasis* and *theoria* were important hermeneutics to truth. Others sought a balance between faith and reason and between the experiential and discursive dimensions of theology to move towards the message of the Word.

The point, however, of exegesis was and still is to participate in the Grace of God by coming to a vision of God. Thus, the living could be experienced in the Church. The enlightened person can thus move from the interpretative level to a transformative level and go from a "hearer of the Word" to a "doer of the Word"¹⁶ and grow as image and as likeness of God.

The Manifestation of Scripture

The Bible is but one of several of ways the Word of God is made manifest within his Church. These manifestations are related to the Bible and should be understood as such. The Church, be lived, must be lived corporately through the liturgy. It has been estimated that in the Divine Liturgy, without the Lord's prayer, Epistle or Gospel reading, there are "98 quotations from the Old Testament and 114 from the New."¹⁷

It is in the liturgy that Christ becomes present and this presence is preceded by and invoked by the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit preceded the incarnation of Christ¹⁸ the Holy Spirit changes the gifts to the living body and blood of Christ in the Holy anaphora and epiclesis during the liturgy. Further, after communion the faithful proclaim:

We have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly spirit, we have found the true faith, we worship the undivided Trinity, the Trinity has saved us.¹⁹

This Divine Liturgy, through the Spirit, makes Christ present and acknowledges the second coming as a reality. The Holy Eucharist is the sacrament and centre of Church life. It is the epicentre of living faith and crowns all doctrine, and together with the Epistle, Gospel and prayer is total living worship and the instance of Sacred Scripture in action.

The Manifestation of Dogma

The Bible is a valued book and various people have taken diverse things from it in different ways to justify their position. The Church, described by Lossky as a "new reality" and "a body more perfect than the World"²⁰ saw the need to protect the Bible from attacks of heterodox to alter the true message given to the Church. The Church has had to defend the rule of faith against various heresies over historic time. For instance, Epiphaneus of Salamis, a monastic, in his work the "Panarium" (circa 380) described some eighty heresies and deviations against true orthodoxy. These challenges were met by the convening of Ecumenical Councils. There are seven Ecumenical Councils recognised by the Church. John II the Metropolitan of Russia (1080 - 1089) saw these seven Councils as being the seven pillars of faith of the Divine Word upon which was erected the Catholic and Ecumenical Church.

The significance of the Councils is that their decisions became binding upon all the Church which does not tolerate deviation from the truth. Once a dogma had been pronounced it was either fully accepted or anathematisations occurred to those who did not. The Synodicon of Orthodoxy declared at the seventh Ecumenical Council acknowledges that Orthodoxy,

Is the faith of the Apostles, this is the faith of the Fathers; this is the faith of the Orthodox, this faith sustains the world.²¹

The Church of course was on occasion adversely influenced by what was mistakenly seen as truth. For instance, the case of St Maximus the Confessor is in point. He stood almost isolated in his defence against the two wills of Christ. He suffered torture and exile rather than agree with the majority view. His theoria prevailed and monotheletism was condemned as heresy at the Sixth Ecumenical Council. Further, in 726 Leo III began his attack on icons and their defendants. That position was corrected by the Seventh Ecumenical Council. The points from the above examples is that once the Holy Spirit moves within the Church through an Ecumenical Council, then that decision becomes binding on the Church, as decisions made are not only seen as good by the human participants but also declared by the Holy Spirit as well.

Iconography

Icons or images are also validated by Holy Scripture. The Bible is itself venerated as icon and is incensed, kissed and processed around the Church. Portrait Icons in the Church representing communion of the Saints are venerated as is the life-giving cross. Even the Church building is seen as an icon of the heavenly kingdom used to celebrate the Word of God. Without the Bible as Word and as Icon, as manifested in the Holy Spirit, the fullness of the Church could not be realized.

Conclusion

Sacred Scripture without the Holy Spirit is merely a dead story. Without the Holy Spirit professing the Word, the Word is incomprehensible. God without the Logos is transcendent and prescriptive and descends into legalism and judgment. The Church without Christ ceases its theandric function. Thus, Scripture in Tradition, which is pronounced in power in the Church, allows for the continuous present and for man to move towards theosis. It is the Spirit of Truth that breathes life into the Church in love. Thus, God can speak to the prophets now, God can speak to the Church Fathers now, and he can speak to me now.

Declaring time as continuous present is the real meaning of Tradition. The Orthodox Church, by placing the Bible as the epicentre of faith experience, allows a face to face encounter with the living Christ - whether corporately as in the Divine Liturgy or in private prayer. In the Church, the risen Christ lives and rules and meets each person. As Chryssavivis puts it,

Doctrinal theology, scripture, synodal decrees, spirituality, moral rules, worship, art and architecture are not understood by the Fathers as separate and compartmentalised, but rather as constituting a single whole inspired by the Holy Spirit and making up the living Tradition of the Church.²²

Therefore, to seek true meaning within that living tradition is the hermeneutic that leads to understanding today. Holy Scripture as manifested allows the believer to move towards God. This manifestation is by the Holy Spirit who, whilst not declaring himself, declares and continues the truth of God's word to his Church.

ENDNOTES

1 Acts 8:31

2 Acts 8:32

3 Jn 16:12-13

4 Eph 1:23

5 Georgios J Mantzarides, *Orthodox Spiritual Life*. Translated by K Schram, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Mass. 1994, p. 47

6 Jn 21:25

7 J. Meyendorff, *Living Tradition, Orthodox Witness in the Contemporary World,* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1978) p. 16

8 V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*. Ed J E Ruckson and T Bird, (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1985) p. 156

9 Ibid, p. 151

10 1 Thess 5:21

11 Eph 4:9-10

12 J Breck, *Scripture in Tradition: The Bible and its interpretation in the Orthodox Church*. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001) p. 18

13 J Chryssavyis, *The Way of the Fathers: Exploring the Patristic Mind*. Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, Thess., 1998, p. 30

14 1 Cor 13:12

15 Jn 12:36

16 James 1:22-23

17 T Ware, *The Orthodox Church*. Penguin, 1997, p. 201

18 Luke 1:35

19 *The Liturgy of the Orthodox Church*. Translated by Archbishop Kallemaleu

20 V Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1985) p. 156

21 Mantzarides, Georgios J. *Orthodox Spiritual Life*. Translated by K Schram, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Mass., 1994, p. 6

22 J Chryssavyis, *The Way of the Fathers: Exploring the Patristic Mind*. Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, Thess., 1998, p. 68

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