

Unit 2C: TRADITION

51: Unbroken Chain of Grace - The Apostolic Fathers and Apologists

Introduction

Lecture 4 in the first year of this E-Quip course, “Sources in Tradition” offered an extensive reflection on the meaning of Tradition in the Orthodox Church. Recall especially the words of Jarislov Pelikan in *The Vindication of Tradition* (Yale University Press, 1984): “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. And, I suppose I should add, it is traditionalism that gives Tradition such a bad name” (p. 82). Pelikan stressed that “the very concept of Holy Tradition cannot be defined until a specific tradition has been studied at some depth, in the details of its concrete historical development” (p. 52). This lecture considers briefly a few of those committed to the “concrete historical development” of Tradition in the early Church.

Pelikan applied his challenge to distinguish between Tradition and traditionalism to all Christian traditions. In *The Early Christians in Their Own Words* (Plough Publishing House, 1997) Eberhard Arnold, the Protestant founder of the Bruderhof community in Germany in 1920 accepted that challenge within his own communitarian perspective:

Who were the early Christians? There is no better way to find out than to read their own descriptions of themselves, as well as the portrayals left us by their Jewish and pagan contemporaries. . . . The early Church was an organic body of men and women gripped and driven by a spirit whose immediacy they felt in their daily lives. They expected the complete transformation of all things by the [Holy] Spirit, and as their own words show us, they strove for its fruits—love, purity of heart, peace and justice—with a single-mindedness we later-day Christians often lack (p. 98).

Unfortunately, Arnold’s words ring true for many Christians today, but hopefully not for those who are more than half-way through this three-year E-Quip course.

The term Apostolic Fathers applies to those early Fathers of the Church that had direct connection with the Apostles and with others who knew our Lord Jesus in the flesh. These Fathers were among those who contended "earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) even to the point of martyrdom. They ably transmitted the Holy Traditions entrusted to them to "faithful men ... able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2). In this undertaking, they not only preserved, copied and passed on the Scriptures, but in their pastoral care, also wrote instructions, epistles and homilies, of which alas only a few are extant. Nevertheless, these writings form an important bridge between the New Testament writings and that of the Apologists—those Christian writers of the latter part of the second century. This lecture will look briefly at the lives of (a few of) these Apostolic Fathers and Apologists—these important pioneers that represent an unbroken "chain of grace" from the Apostolic Church of the first century to the Catholic Church of the second century as described by Priest and Martyr Irenaeus.

As a contemporary Orthodox Christian theologian, David Bentley Hart, writes of the Apostolic Fathers in his insightful study, *The Story of Christianity: An Illustrated History of 2000 Years of the Christian Faith*:

These were the theologians who first enunciated the principles of Christian biblical exegesis, first attempted to establish and refine a Christian dogmatic vocabulary, and first employed the methods and the riches of Greek philosophy to deepen and clarify the Church's understanding of what had been revealed in Christ (p. 74).

Furthermore, David Bentley Hart reflects that the Apostolic Fathers wrote and preached "with a kind of speculative audacity that the theologians of later years, under the restrictions of more precisely defined dogma, found all but impossible" (p. 74). The resulting atmosphere of "spacious liberty" led to "an originality and

power of inspiration that could not endure indefinitely, but that still often feels more lively and immediate than the theology of later centuries” (p. 74).¹

Some Notable Apostolic Fathers

St Clement, Pope of Rome (c. 96) was one of the earliest of the Apostolic Fathers. Little is known of him. The Synaxarion records however, that he was born at Rome into a rich and renowned family and received a fine education as a result. Unimpressed by the surrounds of a rich lifestyle and pagan wisdom, and upon hearing news about Christ and His teaching, he set out to find the Apostles and to hear for himself their preaching. Other accounts say he came to Rome when Apostles Peter and Paul were there with Mark and Luke respectively. Suffice to say, he learned from these holy men personally. Apostle Paul consecrated Linus (67-79) first Bishop of Rome and upon the repose of Linus and shortly before his own sufferings and death, Apostle Peter ordained Clement, Bishop of Rome.

In about the year 94, Clement wrote two letters to the Church of the Corinthians, the first such writing outside the New Testament. The Corinthians had usurped apostolic authority by removing their legitimately appointed leaders without good cause. He urges them to restore them forthwith. This would show obedience to God by following the chain of divine command: God sent Christ who sent his Apostles who in turn appointed bishops and deacons. These therefore ought not to be removed lightly. Clement was sent into exile about 96 - 7 during a great persecution that broke out against Christians in 94. He reposed c. 99 and is remembered by the Church on 25 November.

St Clement's appeal to the Corinthians remains remarkably apposite for us today:

¹ Hart's view may be overstated, however, as much writing in this period is hardly either speculative or audacious. The primary challenge to Christian Orthodoxy in the second century was Gnosticism and the Apostolic Fathers resisted this contagion by an emphatic defence and transmission of the genuine and verifiable Apostolic Teaching. Speculative theology is perhaps more a hallmark of some 3rd century Alexandrian teachers, which is the remit of the next lecture (52).

While we are on earth, let us repent. For we are like clay in a workman's hands. If a potter makes a vessel and it gets out of shape or breaks in his hands, he moulds it over again; but if he has once thrown it into the flames of the furnace, he can do nothing with it. Similarly, while we are in this world, let us, too, repent with our whole heart of the evil we have done in the flesh, so that we may be saved by the Lord while we have a chance to repent. For once we have departed this world we can no longer confess there or repent any more. . . . For I tell you that 'he who is faithful in very little, is faithful also in much.' This, then, is what He means: keep the flesh pure and the [sacramental] seal undefiled, so that we may obtain eternal life (*Second Letter to the Corinthians*, 8; quoted by Joanna Manley, *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox*, Monastery Books, 1984, p. 636).

The Hieromartyr Ignatius of Antioch, "the God-Bearer" (c. 35-107) was the third Bishop of Antioch after Evodius (disciple from amongst the seventy) and the Apostle Peter. Like Polycarp, Ignatius was a disciple of the Apostle and Evangelist, John the Theologian. Tradition (*Synaxarion*) has it that he was the little boy that our Lord Jesus called and set before him in his admonition of his disciples (Mt 18:3 AV).

In the year 107, during the reign of the emperor Trajan, a denunciation was made to him against Bishop Ignatius that, among other charges, Ignatius openly confessed Christ. On hearing of this charge against him, Saint Ignatius himself came voluntarily before the emperor, in order to avert further persecution against the Christians in Antioch. He was taken away to Rome to be devoured by wild beasts. On his journey to Rome he wrote or dictated seven epistles. Four were written at Smyrna and sent to the Churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, and Tralles and to Rome. In his Epistle to the Roman Christians, Ignatius begs them to do nothing to prevent his act of martyrdom for Christ but rather to assist him with their prayers that God might strengthen him "to imitate the Passion of my God" (*Romans 6*). He wishes to become the "wheat ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ" (*Romans 4*). Before going to his fate he prayed fervently that persecution

against Christians might cease. Providentially, the emperor, Trajan, upon hearing about the martyr's great courage in the face of imminent martyrdom was so impressed that he ceased the persecutions of Christians.

At Troas, St Ignatius wrote three letters to the Churches of Philadelphia and Smyrna, with a short personal one to the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp. All these epistolary letters were preserved and became widely known in the early Church. His *Letter to the Romans* in which he extols the virtue of martyrdom was an inspiration during great persecution, and remains an inspiration to us today. St Ignatius wrote: "Even now, as a prisoner, I am learning to forgo my own wishes. . . . Let me imitate the Passion of my God. If anyone has Him [i.e. Christ] in him, let him appreciate my longing and my plight" (*Letter to the Romans*, 5, 6; quoted by Manley, p. 678).

The other six letters are concerned mainly with Church unity which he argues is focussed in the bishop, the vanguard against schism and heresy. The Church commemorates St Ignatius the God-Bearer on 20 December.

Hieromartyr Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, (c. 69-156) was born and lived in the city of Smyrna where he was bishop at the time Ignatius passed through on his way to martyrdom in Rome. He also knew Irenaeus who reports that Polycarp was a disciple of Apostle John the Theologian. Polycarp's love and espousal of apostolic teachings together with his typically apostolic aversion for heresy is preserved in a letter of Irenaeus to his friend Florinus, which Eusebius cites in his "Ecclesiastical History" (V, 20):

I was still very young when I saw thee in Asia Minor at Polycarp's ... but I would still be able to point out the place where Blessed Polycarp sat and conversed, - be able to depict his walk, his mannerisms in life, his outward appearance, his speaking to people, his companionable wandering with John, and how he himself related, together with other eye-witnesses of the Lord, - those things that he remembered from the words of others and in turn told what he heard from them about the Lord, His teachings and miracles ...

Through the mercy of God to me, I then already listened attentively to Polycarp and wrote down his words not on tablets, but in the depths of my heart ... Wherefore, I am able to witness before God, that if this blessed and apostolic elder heard something similar to thy fallacy, he would immediately stop up his ears and express his indignation with his usual phrase: 'Good God! That Thou hast permitted me to be alive at such a time!

Polycarp visited Rome when Anicetas was Pope (c. 154) in an attempt to settle a dispute (albeit unsuccessfully) between Rome and the Churches of Asia Minor over the date of Easter, but he did achieve a limited reconciliation through an agreement to differ. He also wrote a letter to the Church in Philippi in Macedonia. This epistle, a general exhortation to true Christian living and faith, was in response to that Church's request for the delivery of a letter to Antioch and for copies of the letters of Ignatius.

Polycarp's arrest, trial and martyrdom during the reign of emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180), are recounted in an epistle of "the Christians of the Church of Smyrna to the Church at Philomelium" and to "all colonies of the Holy Catholic Church everywhere." This letter was intended to be read in memory of Polycarp throughout all the Churches and is evidence of the celebration in the early Church of the day of one's martyrdom as 'birthday' into the heavenly Kingdom (*Mar 18*). The account likens Polycarp's martyrdom to the Passion of our Lord. There is an upper room, a meal (albeit with his enemies); the ass he rides to see the Proconsul and his prayer before the pyre is lit. The Church commemorates the martyrdom of Polycarp on February 23.

Justin Martyr (c. 165) was born and grew up in Nablus, Palestine of pagan Greek parents early in the second century. From childhood he displayed a love of knowledge and a strong desire to know the Truth which he sought in Greek philosophy. Suffice to say, the Stoics, Aristotelians, Pythagoreans, or the Platonists did not convince him of the knowledge of God or of everlasting Truth.

It was while strolling by the sea in Ephesus pondering about where to seek out the Truth, that he met an old sage, who imparted to him the Christian Faith. The sage related to Justin how God had promised through the Old Testament prophets to come down to earth in flesh to suffer and die for the salvation of mankind. Jesus Christ was the fulfilment of these prophecies. Justin also became impressed by the fearless way in which Christians faced martyrdom.

For I myself, too, when I was delighting in the doctrines of Plato, and heard the Christians slandered, and saw them fearless of death, and of all other things which are counted fearful, perceived that it was impossible that they could be living in wickedness and pleasure. For what sensual or intemperate man, or who that counts it good to feast on human flesh, could welcome death that he might be deprived of his enjoyments, and would not rather continue always the present life, and attempt to escape the observation of the rulers; and much less would he denounce himself when the consequence would be death? (*Second Apology of Justin for the Christians Addressed to the Roman Senate* - Chapter XII.)

Justin thereafter went to see the bishop of Ephesus and was soon baptised (between the years 133 and 137). His earlier acquired talents and knowledge of Greek philosophy he now applied to preaching the Gospel among the pagans as he journeyed throughout the Roman Empire. He also opened up a school, where he preached Christian philosophy and defended the truth of the Christian Faith.

The written works of Justin included an “Apologia” (Apology) in defence of Christians condemned to execution for their Faith in about the year 155, when the emperor Antoninus Pius (138-161) started a persecution against Christians. Remarkably, this Apology persuaded the emperor to cease the persecution. In the year 161, soon after Marcus Aurelius (161-180) ascended the throne, Justin addressed a second shorter Apology to the Roman Senate. His work “Dialogue with Trypho the Jew” gives an account of a debate at Ephesus with the Rabbi Trypho.

Here Justin demonstrates the veracity of the Christian faith on the basis of the Old Testament prophecies.

Many pagans were converted to the Christian faith by his preaching. Intrigue at Rome saw many false accusations against him before the Roman court. Upon his refusal to sacrifice to the idols he was tortured and died a martyr's death (+ 166). His relics rest in Rome. The Church commemorates his Feast Day on 1 June.

Hieromartyr Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 135-200) was a Greek born in Asia Minor into a Christian family. He is regarded by many as the most important and influential theologian of the second century who tells us that early in his youth he learned from Polycarp, a disciple of Apostle John. It is likely that he also learned from Justin the Philosopher in Rome and soon went to Gaul in France. Some accounts say that he was sent there by Polycarp at the written request of the Christians of southern France.

In 177 violent persecution flared up against the Christians in Lyons and Vienne and many were imprisoned. Simultaneously, there arose controversy over the teaching of Montanus, a controversial early Christian prophet who led a charismatic revival movement in Asia Minor. In response, Irenaeus was sent by his bishop, Pothinus, with letters from the imprisoned confessors "to the churches of Asia and Phrygia" and with one to Eleutherius the Pope of Rome (177-190). In his absence Bishop Pothinos and many of the faithful were martyred, so Irenaeus was chosen a year later in 178 as the new bishop of Lyons.

He helped also to settle the Quartodeciman controversy between the churches of Rome and Asia Minor concerning the date of celebration of Pascha. In the Church of Asia Minor was preserved an old tradition to celebrate Pascha on the 14th day of the month of Nisan, regardless of what day of the week this occurred. Pope Victor (190-202) forcefully demanded uniformity, by threats of excommunicating those churches of Asia that did not conform to Roman practice. Paradoxically, both sides claimed apostolicity of traditions. Irenaeus wrote to the Pope, urging him not to excommunicate those who were "following a tradition of ancient custom." He also

pointed to the fact that Polycarp had during his days successfully negotiated with Pope Anicetus (c. 154-c. 166) a truce between both sides.

Irenaeus' main contributions to posterity were his written defence and exposition of apostolic Christianity in his refutation of Gnostic heresy. The Gnostics claimed to possess secret esoteric knowledge passed to them by the apostles. They espoused a supreme God totally transcendent of this world who had no part in its creation. This world rather was the work of a lesser deity, a Demiurge, which some Gnostics identified with the God of the Old Testament. Hierarchies of divine beings existed between this world and the supreme God, through which a soul must pass (if they knew how) upon exiting this life. This secret knowledge was entrusted to them by the Apostles. Some claimed this to be a secret set of passwords. There were varying versions of this heresy, to which Irenaeus turned his detailed attention invalidating them one by one with his intimate knowledge of apostolic teachings and practice. He once said, "Merely to describe such doctrines is to refute them."

He challenged the Gnostics' claim to secret apostolic traditions. If the apostles had any such teachings to pass on why would they not have entrusted it to the legitimate bishops of the churches they established. The fact was that none of these ideas were taught by any of the bishops or churches and instead, all the churches though scattered throughout the world all preached, taught and practised the same things "openly:"

For if the apostles had known hidden mysteries, which they were in the habit of imparting to 'the perfect' apart and privily from the rest, they would have delivered them especially to those to whom they were also committing the Churches themselves. (*AH 3:3:1*)

Irenaeus argued from tradition deliberately, because the heretics did not accept the Scriptures:

When, however, they are confuted [i.e. refuted] from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same Scriptures, as if they were not correct, nor

of authority, and [assert] that they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of tradition. (AH 2:1)

Irenaeus was also one of the first to treat the Old and New Testaments as one. He argued for the fulfilment of the Old in the New. Christ is "He whom the prophets foretold." In this, of course, he also stood against the Gnostics who disparaged the Old Testament with its demiurgic deity. His arsenal against the Gnostics also included a highly influential interpretation of St. Paul's Adamic Christology in which he characterised the Incarnation as a recapitulation (*anakephalaiosis*) of the whole of humanity in Christ, body and soul, thereby liberating both it and the cosmos from sin and death. His narrative of the fall and the restoration of humankind and its eschatological perfection in Christ (theosis) sees salvation as a dynamic historical process for humanity from a troubled childhood to a glorious final maturity.

Along with extracts from letters, only two major works survive: *Refutation and Overthrow of Knowledge Falsely So-called*, termed *Against the Heresies* by Eusebius (EH 3:23:3); and *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*. The letter extracts aforementioned are preserved in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*: that to Florinus, entitled *On the Sole Sovereignty or That God is not the Author of Evil* (EH 5:20:1, 4 - 8); the letter to Pope Victor (EH 5:24:11 - 17); and the title of a letter to Blastus, *On Schism* (EH 5:20:1). Other works mentioned by Eusebius are a treatise *On the Ogdoad* for his friend Florinus, when he erred towards Valentinian teachings (EH 5:20:1); another treatise: *Concerning Knowledge*, against the Greeks (EH 5:26); and "a little book of various discourses in which he mentions the Epistle to the Hebrews and the so-called Wisdom of Solomon" (EH 5:26).

The life and theology of St Irenaeus has been comprehensively explored by Father John Behr in *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Father John points out that Irenaeus stands "at the very foundation of all the diverse forms of Christianity we see today [and] must be read with all due diligence and seriousness, whether one regards his work negatively or positively" (p. 1). Furthermore, in setting out "for the first time, a fully articulate account of 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy'," Irenaeus has also provided for the first time "an account

of the 'canon' or 'rule' of truth not as a list of abstract doctrines supposedly given as an apostolic deposit, but as the coherence of the Scriptures (that is, the 'Old Testament') seen as a mosaic of Christ as preached by the apostles" (p. 205).

Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (c.160-225), a North African lawyer and theologian, was born at Carthage into a pagan Roman family. Jerome wrote of him thus:

Tertullian, a presbyter, the first Latin writer after Victor and Apollonius, was a native of the province of Africa and city of Carthage, the son of a proconsular centurion: he was a man of a sharp and vehement temper, flourished under Severus and Antoninus Caracalla, and wrote numerous works ... After remaining a presbyter of the church until he had attained the middle age of life, Tertullian was, by the envy and contumelious treatment of the Roman clergy, driven to embrace the opinions of Montanus, which he has mentioned in several of his works under the title of the New Prophecy....He is reported to have lived to a very advanced age, and to have composed many other works which are not extant." [*Catalogus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum*]

This in essence is the life of Tertullian; born a pagan, an adult convert and subsequently ardent advocate of the Christian Faith and Catholic Church, who towards the end of a brilliant career, for whatever reason, began "to embrace the opinions of Montanus" (*Jerome*). A formidable advocate, Tertullian wrote in Latin and came to be known as the father of Latin, Western theology—"an apologist who never apologised." More than thirty works are attributed to his pen. They may be categorised as apologetic, dogmatic (anti-heretical), practical and ethical works.

Among his apologetic works is his *Apology* in which, like in Justin's *Apologia*, he argues in defence of Christians against their unjust persecution for being Christians. It was in this work that he coined the famous phrase, "the blood of Christians is seed (of the Church)" (*Apology 50*). In seeking to explain the Eucharist and the love Christians bore for each other, the words of Tertullian set a challenge both to Christians and to non-believers, in his own time and today:

We are a united body. We are bound together by a common religious conviction, by one and the same divine discipline and by the bond of common hope. We form a permanent society and come together for communal gatherings as if forming an army around God and besieging him with our prayers. This is the kind of force in which God rejoices (*Apology*, 39)

Tertullian's dogmatic works rallied chiefly against Gnosticism. The best known of such works is his *Prescription of Heretics* in which he takes the same line as Irenaeus, i.e. that of Holy Tradition. He goes a step further than Irenaeus though in not only exposing the heretics' disdain of Scripture but by denying them the right to use the Scripture which rightly belongs to the Church.

His ethical works were concerned mainly with Church discipline. These works form two groups: the earlier Catholic works and the later Montanist works. He is consistently a strict disciplinarian throughout these works. What attracted him perhaps to Montanism were neither its prophetic gifts nor the heightened expectation of the end but rather its stricter moral code. In his earlier Catholic work *On Repentance* he left room for a "second repentance" (Chapter VII) for serious sins committed after baptism. However, in his Montanist work *Modesty*, he took a stricter line in reaction to an edict issued by the Bishop of Carthage:

The *Pontifex Maximus*—that is, the bishop of bishops—issues an edict: "I remit, to such as have discharged (the requirements of) repentance, the sins both of adultery and of fornication." O edict, on which cannot be inscribed, 'Good deed!' And where shall this liberality be posted up? On the very spot, I suppose, on the very gates of the sensual appetites, beneath the very titles of the sensual appetites. There is the place for promulgating such repentance, where the delinquency itself shall haunt. There is the place to read the pardon, where entrance shall be made under the hope thereof. (*Modesty* 1)

Conclusion

This brief consideration of the lives and theology of six Apostolic Fathers and Apologists is only a start in understanding both these early Christians and Tradition. Clearly, they viewed their lives, their preaching and their writing as a unity that advanced Tradition in the Church. Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev's reflections about Origen (c. 185-c.254), as he was seen by one of his students, St Gregory Thaumaturgus, offer a fitting conclusion to this lecture and an introduction to the next:

[St Gregory gives us] interesting facts about Origen's pedagogical method. His basic concern was to inculcate in his students a taste for independent reflection on the material they studied. Origen understood perfectly well that this task was not to impart a certain sum of knowledge but to teach his students to independently answer questions that might arise during the study process. . . . Gregory testifies to the profound influence that Origen's personality exerted on him: 'He also wounded me by the sting of friendship, which is not easily withstood, sharp and most effective, by the sting of a kind and affectionate disposition toward me, which was reflected in the very tone of his voice when he addressed me and conversed with me. . . . Like a spark that fell into my soul, love was kindled and set on fire—my love for both the Holy Word, who is most worthy of our love and who is his ineffable beauty is more attractive than anything else, and for this man his friend and herald (*Orthodox Christianity: Volume 1: The History and Canonical Structure of the Orthodox Church [St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011], p. 37*).

Although Origen's theology and writings are not clearly understood today, Metropolitan Hilarion has noted that he was "the most significant church writer in the Christian East of the third century" (p. 36). His life and work feature in the next lecture. We do well to follow his quest for "independent reflection" in the midst of "the sting of friendship." Honest prayerful enquiry is no enemy of Holy Tradition.