

## **What is Orthodoxy? (Peter A. Botsis)**

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### **I. What is Orthodoxy?**

According to saint Anastasius the Sinaite, one of the earliest fathers of the Church, "Orthodoxy is a true conception about God and creation." Orthodoxy, i.e. right belief, is the truth itself. According to the confession of Christ Himself ("*I am the way, the truth, and the life*"), He is the truth incarnate. We can find and can know the truth only in the person of Christ; therefore we can be saved only in Christ.

According to the afore-said, Orthodoxy - Truth - is identified with Christ, Who is the Eternal Truth. And due to the fact that God the Trinity is the source of truth, His mode of existence is also truth, the fundamental and eternal Orthodoxy, which men have been called to follow in their own lives.

After man's fall, he lost God's Grace, i.e. he fell from communion with God, the Truth. The descendants of the first Adam, in order to restore communion with God, must come into communion with the new Adam, i.e. Christ. Man's salvation is possible only in Christ.

Orthodoxy is the holy tradition of our Church, the truth about God, man, and the world that was delivered to us by God Incarnate Himself. Orthodoxy is the right faith and right worship of God. Orthodoxy is the pure Christianity, the real Church established and preserved by Christ for the salvation of mankind.

But what is the truth that Christ offered us? And where does this truth remain unadulterated, pure, and unconfused?

The answer is found in the Holy Bible, where the Church itself is called "*the pillar and ground of the truth*" (I Tim. 3.15).

Man comes to truth, i.e. to Christ (incarnate Orthodoxy) only in His body, the Church. Man's redemption, his return to and union with God and his final salvation take place only in the Church. The Church was founded in the world because only in it can man find again his real existence and communion with God and the rest of the world. Man thus finds in the Church the meaning of life, his destiny, and moreover real communion with other men and the rest of creation. According to the apostle Paul, the Church is "*His body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all*" (Eph. 1.23).

The salvation that Christ granted to us through His Crucifixion and Resurrection, is continued in the Church. That is why St Augustine called the Church “Christ extended into the ages”. That means that **the Church is Christ**, Who, even after His Resurrection and Ascension, continues saving the world in the Holy Spirit. Humanity continuously finds God in the body of Christ, in the Church. “That is why we cannot separate Christ from the Church. There can be no Church without Christ and there can be no Christ outside the Church, i.e. there can be no truth and consequently no salvation. The truth that exists outside the body of Christ, the Church, is like gold dust in the mud. It is nothing else than sporadic beams of divine presence within the condition of fallen man and his inability to rise and be saved”[1].

Christ as entire truth - Orthodoxy - leads us to our salvation through His Church. Therefore, the Church is the foundation of the truth. If one wants to know Christ authentically, in His catholicity and fullness, one must necessarily resort to the Church. “Outside the Church, even in the so-called “Christian” heresies, the inability to find the whole Christ excludes the possibility of salvation”.[2] The utterance, therefore, of saint Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, that “outside the Church there is no salvation,” is not an exaggeration. “Without the Church we cannot know Christ. Likewise, without the Church we cannot understand the Holy Scriptures, that is her Bible, her own possession and tradition. But it is also true that, in order to know Christ in the Church, the Church existing here and now must express the true Christ in His fullness. Otherwise the true Christ remains unknown and inaccessible and man remains outside salvation, which is the exact condition found in the various heresies. Only in the true Church does man authentically meet Christ and is saved”.[3]

The Church, according to one of the holy Fathers, is “the gathering of the Orthodox people.” It is possible to think of the Church without Orthodoxy; and within this framework we can understand the Church as tradition, which is a divine process and dynamic movement of God in History. The Romanian theologian Dimitri Staniloae says that, “Orthodoxy is a living condition, the ceaseless life of the Church.”

“The Church always considered it her highest responsibility and obligation to maintain, in the Holy Spirit, the apostolic faith unadulterated and unfalsified. If the Church had not remained faithful to the truth of her existence, she could not have remained faithful to herself and retained her identity. The contents and the substance of the Church is Orthodoxy.”[4]

This responsibility of the Church to maintain the truth through tradition is not something abstract. The Church takes care that each of her children remains in the truth, in “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxis” (right-believing and right-doing).

“Every Christian within the Church must not only simply believe, but believe in one

God; not only believe in a supreme and invisible power, but in God the Trinity, Who revealed Himself in Christ. Likewise, he must not simply love, but love his God by loving his fellow man. The Church is obliged to maintain this orthodoxy of faith and life and to communicate it to the world through her mission and witness.”[5]

Having the above in mind, we can easily understand why the Church rejected all those who tried to falsify or refused to accept the truth of the Church, those who tried to add to or omit something from the Truth, which is Christ Himself. The Church rejected them as heretics not because she lacked love for men, but, on the contrary, because of excessive love for them, for outside the Church, far off the truth, there is no salvation. The Church cannot compromise or sacrifice the truth and the orthodox faith, because she will lose her identity and catholicity. “The Christian of every age must accept everything that Christ revealed and that His body (the Church) delivers. He must accept the whole truth and not a “minimum” of it. The catholicity and orthodoxy of the Church are preserved only in the fullness and wholeness of faith. The Church is catholic inasmuch as it is orthodox, because only then does she preserve the fullness of the truth in Christ.”[6]

Nowadays, of course, we are used to simplifying things and to being indifferent to the Truth of the Church. Being superficial and frivolous, we give attention to outer forms and we claim that it is enough if there is a common acceptance of a basic faith, and everything more is useless. Doctrines and canons are made by men and they must be put aside “for love’s sake”.

“Doctrines, however, as rules of faith do not destroy the unity of the Truth. They create the boundaries of Orthodoxy, of the Church, so that the Church, as Orthodoxy, can be distinguished from heresy.... For the Church, the foundation of faith is one: the fullness of truth in Christ.”[7]

For the Church, therefore, one thing is needful: to retain the truth unadulterated, as she received it. For this purpose the Church mobilized all her powers to fight against heresy, which was her most threatening enemy. The persecutions never threatened the Church’s unity or maintenance of the truth. On the contrary, they sometimes helped her gather her powers. However, heresy many times caused her trouble. For heresy, which is nothing but removal from the truth, threatens the Church’s own hypostasis and existence, it threatens the Truth, by threatening to sever the Truth and to divide Christ. But a Christ Who is not entire and undivided, Who is not the whole, “incarnate truth”, is not the Christ that saves. Heretics did not reject the whole truth, they did not refuse Christ, but they did not accept Him entire, but only a part of Him. Arius e.g., did not refuse Christ’s humanity but he refused His divinity. Others accepted His divinity and refused His humanity. But none of them accepted Christ entire and undivided.

“The truth of the Church is fullness, a unity that must always remain undivided and unsevered. Heresy, however, tries to subject the truth of the ecclesiastical tradition to the criteria of fallen man. For the heretic renders himself judge and criterion of the revealed truth. For this reason, most heretics of every era are rationalists. A heretic (who becomes a heretic because previously he has been affected by pride, which fills him with confidence in his own reason and thought) cuts himself off from the life-giving, Divine Grace and attempts to be saved by his own power, by his own self-made “truth”, not by the God-given Truth. Heresy unavoidably leads to a humanistic religiousness.”[8]

So the struggle of all the holy Fathers against the different heresies aimed at retaining the truth completely – which is an indispensable presupposition for salvation – in order to keep every man in the Ark of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. We could say that this struggle is their greatest offering to the Church. That is why they never consented to co-exist with heretics in a “minimum” of faith and to be satisfied with holding a part of the truth, but they struggled to keep it whole and undivided, for only then could they stay within Truth and obtain their salvation. The method, nowadays, in which differences are not mentioned and common points are emphasized, was never accepted by the Fathers as a starting-point for theological disputes with heresies. On the contrary, they constituted Ecumenical Synods and they struggled not for a “minimum” of faith, not to find out what is common between them and the heretics, but rather to mark out what separates, what teachings of the heretics sever the truth and, consequently, the unity of faith. Otherwise, if the Church were indifferent to retaining the faith and the tradition, as she received them, pure and unadulterated, then it would not be the Church of Christ, His Body, but a human organization or a political ideology, striving for political or humanistic purposes, and not in anyway related to Christ, His sacrifice on the Cross, and to salvation.

### FOOTNOTES

- 1) G. Metallinos. “What is Orthodoxy?”, Athens, 1980, p.19.
- 2) G. Metallinos. Ibid, p.19.
- 3) G. Metallinos. Ibid, p.19.
- 4) G. Metallinos. Ibid, p.19.
- 5) G. Metallinos. Ibid, p.20 – 21.
- 6) G. Metallinos. Ibid, p.21.
- 7) G. Metallinos. Ibid, p.21.
- 8) G. Metallinos. Ibid, p.23.

(From the book “What is Orthodoxy?” by Peter A. Botsis)