



The Refined Life of Observant Orthodox Traditionalism

Transcribed from a Sermon by
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What exactly is the observant life of an Orthodox traditionalist? We might approach this question by asking two other questions: first, “What constitutes ‘observance’ for the Orthodox Christian?”; and second, “What is Orthodox traditionalism?”

Observance is inseparable, in fact, from the issue of traditionalism. Following the teachings and instructions of St. Gregory Palamas, an observant Orthodox Christian is one who follows Holy Tradition: the laws of God, beginning with the Ten Commandments, the commandments of love set forth by Christ Himself (that is, to love God above all else and to love one’s neighbor as one loves himself), and the Sacred Canons of the Church. St. Gregory, in various writings, also tells us, in keeping with the consensus of the Fathers, that the traditions and customs that constitute the Holy Tradition of the Church must be observed *in toto*—not selectively and, as is usually the case today, with a self-serving application of the oft-made distinction between Holy Tradition and “traditions” with a small “t,” the latter supposedly a matter of choice and the former binding. While the distinction between Holy Tradition and certain ecclesiastical customs of an incidental kind, or small “t” traditions, can be useful, it is in fact unknown to the Church Fathers in their definitive and punctilious comments about Holy Tradition *per se*. Moreover, it assuredly has no application to inspired Canons concerning matters of faith and of



Saint Gregory Palamas

revealed doctrine. Indeed, at a universal or encompassing level, St. John Chrysostomos says of what has been handed down to us in the Church the following: “It is tradition, ask no more.” Observance also goes beyond the law and touches on our spiritual commitment, our loyalty to those who serve as our spiritual guides, our fidelity to the living Body of Christ (those who are our co-believers), and, of course, beyond that to all men and women, whatever their religion. Indeed, if we are called to be a separate and *sui generis* Christian “race,” the “New Israel,” it is for the purpose of also calling all others to participate in that to which we are separately and peculiarly called. These things, too, are part of the Holy Tradition which we are enjoined to observe.

As to the matter of traditionalism itself, there are those who quite wrongly believe that it is enough to be Orthodox: that a mere confession of Orthodoxy is the *sine qua non* of παράδοσις, or of receiving that which has been passed down from Christ, the Apostles, and the Fathers themselves, and that *Orthodox traditionalism* is a conceptual redundancy. This is faulty reasoning that is sadly meant, in most cases, to excuse one from all that follows on the confession of correct doctrine (ὀρθοδοξία); that is, from *all that is demanded by the requisite practice and observance of the Faith*, or orthopraxy (ὀρθοπράξια). Tradition is, in fact, an active process of direct engagement with life. It is a dynamic passing-on of the very empirical *experience of the Church*. Indeed, the term “traditionalism” describes that *inseparable bond between confession and practice*, which correctly captures the πληρότης τῆς πίστεως, or the “fullness of the Faith.” Any division between faith and works, confession and effort, and believing and living is what has, in fact, separated those who are Orthodox in name and confession from the True Orthodox faithful, the latter distinguished by the spirit of traditionalism underlying their witness. In the same way that they dismiss Orthodox traditionalism as conceptually redundant, the former also accuse True Orthodox Christians of pleonasm and tautologism, arguing that “Orthodoxy” is by its very definition “true.” However, only when one comes to understand that observance brings true belief and its application in practical action *together* does he come to see that there is a nominal Orthodoxy of mere confession and a True Orthodoxy *of essence* that entails the implementation of the truths of the Faith in *observance*. As the late Father Georges Florovsky observes, it is not enough, in claiming Orthodoxy, to recite a correct credal formula or to adhere to a correct theology; rather, one must attain to the φρόνημα τῶν Πατέρων, or the “mind of the Fathers,” through the dianoetic, noetic, and practical application of Orthodox Truth as a “theology of facts”; in short, one must make the Faith empirical by way of experiencing and living it. One must be *truly* Orthodox.

It is on the basis of all that I have said about observance and traditionalism that the Church Fathers, in unanimity (as though with one mind—*unus animus*) and with adamant resolve, tell us that Orthodoxy is not just about how we believe, but about how we walk, talk, dress, and conduct ourselves; and this not only in Church and in private, but in our worldly lives, in our work, and even in the entertainment and diversions which we allow ourselves. A correct confession of Faith without these things—and, assuredly, without strict, sincere fasting, without prayer (incessant inner prayer, moreover), and without adherence to the Sacred Canons and Divine Traditions of the Church (if not by their exactitude, at least in the *desire* for that perfect adherence and not in a spirit that seeks every reason to avoid perfect observance in the service of personal pleasure and unbridled worldliness)—is of no avail to us. We will be judged “where we are found,” as a spiritual axiom has it, and not by our words and pronouncements; i.e., we will be judged by our spiritual state, by our love for Holy Tradition and observance, by our love for our fellow man, and by our quickness to find fault in ourselves and not in others (another aspect of observance and one of the highest forms of self-denial). If we lie, slander others, justify ourselves at the cost of denigrating our brothers, and seek that which serves the self, we will have by nature deviated from the spirit of observance and will find ourselves inwardly estranged from the “Faith of our Fathers” (the Faith as it is transmitted in spiritual succession), however “exact” our confession and however much we may feign a certain public or “external” commitment to traditional observance. We will be, as the Desert Fathers tell us in a frequently-cited simile, like trees with beautiful leaves that, nonetheless, bear no fruit.

Having said what Orthodox observance is, and having commented on the attributes of the observant traditionalism of True Orthodoxy, I would like to comment in greater detail on the refined way of life that the truly observant Orthodox Christian can live, seeking therein, in this imperfect world, perfect transformation and union, by His Grace, with God (which constitutes salvation, as the Orthodox Church envisions it). In so doing, I do not mean to chastise anyone (for were I to do so, I would have to chastise myself first); nor are my critical comments offered in the rude spirit of condemnatory judgmentalism that, sadly, too often marks putative Orthodox traditionalism today. My purpose is to emphasize that, in seeking higher spiritual things with sometimes woefully immature zeal, we must constantly seek to *refine* ourselves, both spiritually and in our daily interactions with the world and with others. Never should we forget the centrality, in our observance of the Faith, of good manners; of obeisance to our spiritual (and, indeed, social and political) superiors; of a sense of decorum; and of the ability to rise above, first, our own pettiness

and, second, the smallness of our detractors, whether the meanness of the latter (or our own, for that matter) be motivated by jealousy, animus, demonic energies of one kind or another, or the tragic tactics of contemporary Church politics and the human foibles and deficits that often mar and stain the honor of service to the Church. If we seek refinement as a first step in our higher spiritual pursuits, we will not only avoid the crude and fetid weaknesses to which I have referred, but we will, in fact, find that, in the same way that the ills of the body and soul are often interconnected (sometimes, by God's Providence, in a positive way, at other times, because of our sins, in a negative way), so the external behaviors of the Christian often impede or enhance him in his search for virtue. Refinement can be *a path to enlightenment*: a first step, in the mundane realm, that can facilitate and foster spiritual growth.

Orthodox traditionalists have, for some curious reason, developed the perfidious idea that a genuine commitment to the Faith somehow makes them the “guardians” of that Faith, if not upholders and confessors of the Truth. Spouting with what is frequently disingenuous piety the admonitions and chastisements of the great Fathers and Confessors of Orthodoxy, but lacking the Grace and wisdom with which the Church Fathers utter such things, these unwisely zealous individuals create an image of crassitude and vulgarity that is wholly foreign to the refinement that characterizes the whole of the Orthodox Patristic tradition. Lacking charity, hospitality, and external social graces, they defile the very traditions that they imagine themselves to be defending. Worse yet, they often appoint themselves public procurators of the Faith, imagining that, before correcting themselves and acknowledging their own sins, they have the right—and *even responsibility*—to act as investigators and judges of the clergy, their fellow believers, and the various “heretics” and “defilers of the Faith” upon whom, as one Saint expresses it, they presumptuously believe that they have the right to “rain down fire” from on high. They frequently go beyond criticism, beyond the sharpness of words sometimes needed to correct the errant, and become contumelious critics of everyone, using crude, insulting, and rude language from the streets in the name of the Faith. This lack of refinement is one of the telltale signs of spiritual immaturity, of a lack of discernment and discretion, and of spiritual delusion. It is absolutely inconsistent with Orthodox observance and is characteristic of crass and uncouth behavior. It must be avoided if one wishes to pursue an observant Orthodox life.

Another divergence from observance which has become a part of so-called traditionalism is the habit of inquiring into the personal lives of others. Refined, civilized people are taught from their childhood not

to stare at others in public, to mind to their own affairs, and not to be overly curious about the personal lives of others. Even the Church Canons advise us not to be overly curious about the “personal” failings of our Church leaders. Yet, in this age of the emergence of unrefined and ill-bred habits, not only are such standards of comportment ignored, but nosiness is widely accepted. Almost universally, people “Google” one another nowadays, trying to collect, in their voyeuristic perversity, information on others. And this is done in the Church, as well, as though some hypocritical “need to know” or the “right of the People of God” somehow negated the Lord’s message that such things should be of no concern to those whom He calls to “follow Me.” Psychologists and psychiatrists, *in the context of their professional duties and in the defined arena of their offices*, may have the right to pry into the personal affairs of others. But this, aside from entailing strict standards of confidentiality which, when violated, can lead to the suspension by state medical boards of one’s license to practice, is for the purpose of helping others and of curing their ills, and has nothing to do with prurient interest in the weaknesses and sins of one’s fellow man. The Christian is called to a different kind of therapy: that of covering the sins of others and of attending first and foremost to his own affairs, avoiding, as the Fathers advise us, the deadly sin of being overly curious about “our brother’s sins.” A sign of refined people is that they keep their private affairs to themselves and that they respect as sacred the privacy of others. This is also one of the marks of an observant traditionalist, despite the contrary behaviors that prevail among so-called traditionalists.

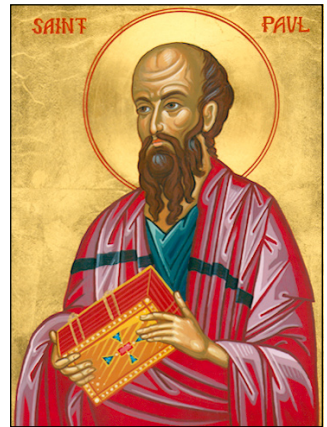
At a more mundane level, this forgoing refinement in behavior is accompanied by traits which observant Orthodox should pursue and cultivate, since they both support and reflect proper demeanor. An observant Orthodox Christian should constantly strive to live an enriching and elevated life, reading good literature, listening to uplifting music, enjoying good art, and pursuing intelligent conversation. This applies not only to spiritual reading, Church psalmody, Iconography, and spiritual discourse, but also to the secular realm. Though a crude kind of anti-intellectualism has surfaced—and wholly improperly and inappropriately—in the Church under the guise of Orthodox observance and traditionalism, it behooves us to refine the mind and the intellect (the dianoetic faculty) with the same care with which we seek to develop our noetic or spiritual faculties. There is, of course, nothing demonic or “worldly” about good literature, classical music, traditional folk music, uplifting and inspiring art (including even some of the more tasteful traditions of modern art), or dressing and grooming oneself in a style which, while avoiding the caprice of changing modes, excessive hair cutting and styling, and gaudy ornamentation, is attractive, dignified, classical, traditional, and modest

(in terms of avoiding the accentuation of the body in a cheap and vulgar way). Quite to the contrary, these things can help develop one's spiritual sensitivities. If there is anything demonic to be said about them, it is that demonic blindness can lead one to imagine that they are somehow evil or inappropriate, since their contribution to the refinement of the soul is so direct and indisputable, both from the psychological and spiritual standpoint. To be sure, attendance at concerts and dignified, sober entertainment are not evil; they can be beneficial to the soul. This is also true of other social activities, such as preparing and enjoying good meals, setting a proper table where they can be enjoyed, and engaging in social conversation in settings that are elevating and formal. These things are not invitations to gluttony and worldliness, but are, in fact, means by which these sins can be checked and monitored. An observant life in the Orthodox tradition calls us to raise ourselves up and to become noble, not only in spirit, but in our daily comportment and activities.

Aside from these general traits that the observant Orthodox traditionalist should cultivate, there is a very specific activity which all Orthodox—if not the heterodox population, as well—should avoid as destructive to a refined way of life. It behooves even a *marginally civilized* individual to avoid the “public life” of the Internet, a wonderful contemporary tool for intellectual resources, if rightly used, but an increasingly obscene and depraved public platform for discussion that is destroying minds and souls. On the Internet, one sees letters of condemnation, open attacks, references to matters that even two decades ago would have never have been mentioned—let alone discussed—in polite circles or in public, but which are now approached as though they were matters of perfectly upright concern. One encounters opinions expressed by persons who, were they under peer review or scrutiny, would, much to the benefit of society, never be heard. Individuals with no intellectual gifts whatsoever, no spiritual learning, and mediocre educational credentials, puffed up in their fantasies, put forth ideas that mislead their readers, introducing into the supposed body of knowledge, unfortunately, nonsense, inane speculation, and idiosyncratic personal views seldom worthy of a second thought, often while challenging sober spiritual voices or trained and competent scholars. Yet other contributors to the sewer of Internet gossip are beset by lascivious interests in the lives and affairs of others (Internet voyeurs and gossips); the mentally ill, sociopaths, borderline personalities seeking an identity in the relative anonymity of online “life,” and bored misfits, who can assail others with impunity in the fantasy world of cyberspace, hold court in various forums and lists, violating the protocols of civilized behavior and returning anyone who indulges or shares their mental and social deficits to the primitivism of what Darwinians would call pre-so-

cial simianity. One cannot imagine the possibility of being an observant Orthodox traditionalist and participating in such things. Those who do, whether out of pathological interests or proclivities, or because they are addicted to the religious pornography of the Internet, are slowly destroying their Orthodox consciences and confirming arguments for the social devolution of man.

At the level of confession, the deontic dimensions of living a life of observant traditionalism within Orthodoxy—both with regard to what one “should” and “should not” do—must center on religious tolerance within the context of preserving the integrity of our Faith and seeing, as the Sacred Canons dictate, that we do not compromise it in any way with an admixture of extraneous beliefs. We must develop the ability to stand firmly for the Faith, unmoved and unaffected by sophomoric babble about “official” Orthodoxy (a product of the religious syncretism and the hokey, superficial, and worldly spirit of the ecumenical movement), unafraid to diagnose heresy for what it is, but, at the same time, ready to call those infected by heresy to correct belief, though without calling them heretics and without insulting them. We should treat unbelievers respectfully, enlightening them by our love and our proper behavior. Above all, we must at all times avoid inflammatory fundamentalistic language, condemning people to Hell, and dismissing the worth of those who believe differently than we. These are things foreign to the ethos of our Faith. In addition, we must be careful not to appear parochial and to preach provincial and reactive tribalism (passing as “triumphant ethnicity”) and exalt local ecclesiastical prerogatives borne of human pride (and, subconsciously, human inferiorities), thinking somehow that the weakness of our human affinities, which God allows to us by condescension, are of greater import than the catholicity of the Church. Finally, we should never express our opinions about True Orthodoxy and observance in a contentious manner; rather, in following the Apostles Paul’s advice to St. Timothy, we must with inexorable patience “not strive, but be gentle unto all men.”



The Apostle Paul

The refined life of Orthodox observance is not for those who are angry and aggressive, because we traditionalists must admit our weaknesses; it is not for those who would seek in the guise of traditionalism some path to importance or “special status”; and it is certainly not for those who feel that, in admitting, in their spiritual struggles, to being marred by

uncleanliness and imperfection, flawed by sin, and burdened with heavy consciences, they have lost, rather than gained (as they have). It is a life for those who wish to begin the divine ascent without prerogatives, pretensions, and presuppositions; for those who wish to prosper in spiritual pursuits by refining, first, their minds, bodies, thoughts, and personal desires; and for those who, by becoming good and decent people, have stepped up on the first rung of the ladder of Divine ascent towards transformation or *θέωσις*, held above the ground of sin and ego by humble submission to Church law, to Holy Tradition, and to the guidance of those who, however imperfect they themselves may be, call others to upright, moral, lofty, and observant external lives, that they might, by God's Grace, ascend the ladder of the heart to the essence of existence, which lies in the inner life of the spirit. In response to those who spurn, dismiss, ridicule, or even despise this observant life, let us respond with the very refinement by which we are called to True Orthodoxy: with silence in the face of slander and personal attacks, commitment in reaction to condemnation, and firm but gentle confession in answering the prattle and deceitful words of any who would justify innovation and the abandonment of all that has, for two millennia, produced holiness and transformation in God.



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