

# Christianity and Orthodoxy

By Archimandrite Sergius

AS FAR BACK AS the earliest Apostolic times, Christ's disciples were known as those who "call on *the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (I Corinthians 1:2; cf. Acts 9:14, 21). From the very beginning, the Holy Apostles were persecuted as those who "teach in *the name of Jesus*" (Acts 4:18; cf. 5:28). They rejoiced when they suffered from persecution and violations "for His Name's sake" (Acts 5:41). In consequence of this, by the end of the first decade after the foundation of Christ's Church, "the disciples were called *Christians*" (Acts 11:26). This appellation was given to them first at Antioch, and probably by the local Gentiles, which implies that Christianity was no longer recognized as a Judaic sect, but as a distinct religious teaching.<sup>1</sup> Later, St. Cyril of Jerusalem observes, in his *Tenth Catechetical Homily* (Chapter XVI): "Jesus Christ, the Son of God, honored us to call ourselves Christians,"<sup>2</sup> whereas St. Athanasios the Great, in his *First Homily against the Arians* (Chapter II), states that "through *Christ* we are, and call ourselves, *Christians*."<sup>3</sup>

It seems that this name quickly acquired public recognition, since even in the last half of the first century, the Roman historian Tacitus, in his work *The Annals* (Book XV, Chapter XLIV), when discussing Rome's destruction by fire under the Emperor Nero, tells us that the Emperor blamed for this those "called by the people *Christians* [*christianos*]." Further on, he explains: "...the originator of that name, Christ [*Christus*], was sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, the procurator, under the reign of Tiberius."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, all subsequent persecutions by the pagan authorities against the disciples of Christ were under the banner of the struggle against *Christianity* as such. Referring to this fact, St. Peter the Apostle writes: "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; ...yet if any man suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf" (I St. Peter 4:14, 16). As we see from the extant testimonies of the Martyrs, Christ's Martyrs, when summoned to court, were accused specifically as Christians, which they professed themselves to be. The instance of the Holy Martyr Lukian of Antioch is rather typical. He suffered in one of the last persecutions of the early fourth century. Before breathing his last, he cried three times: "I am a Christian."<sup>5</sup>

However, as is well known, along with the external enemies of Christianity—Jews and pagans—various internal enemies—false teachers and heretics—appeared as early as the Apostolic times. They considered them-

---

THE VERY REVEREND SERGIUS, former Assistant Professor at the Theological Academy in Sofia, Bulgaria, is the spiritual Father of the Russian Convent of the Holy Protection in Sofia, which is under the jurisdiction of Bishop Photii of Triaditza, the sole Hierarchy of the True (Old Calendar) Orthodox Church of Bulgaria and himself a former Assistant Professor at the University of Sofia. Father Sergius was dismissed from his academic post when he refused to accept the New "Revised," or Papal, Calendar, on the occasion of its introduction into the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. He is rightly considered a confessor of the Faith by traditionalist Bulgarian believers. This essay was written in celebration of the Sunday of Orthodoxy, 1998.

selves Christians and surreptitiously replaced the Truth of Christ with an heretical fallacy. St. Paul refers to these people as “having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof” (II St. Timothy 3:5), and advises his disciple Timothy to turn away from such people. Likewise, St. John the Theologian writes: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us: for if they had belonged to us, they would no doubt have remained with us” (I St. John 2:19). He explicitly calls these people “antichrists” (2:18) and commands *True Christians* not to greet them or to receive them in their houses (II St. John 10-11).

During subsequent centuries, we observe the same clear-cut line of demarcation between *authentic* Christianity and *false* Christianity. For example, St. Justin the Philosopher (†166), a Christian apologist of the second century, notes in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* that, “there are such men confessing themselves to be Christians, and confessing the crucified Jesus to be the Lord and Christ, yet not teaching His doctrine, but that of the spirits of error.” St. Justin contrasts these false Christians with the “disciples of the true and pure doctrine of Jesus Christ” (Chapter XXXV).<sup>6</sup>

In the third century, the ecclesiastical writer, Clement of Alexandria, states that, unlike beasts of burden, which labor out of fear, “those who call themselves orthodox (ὀρθοδοξασταί) should do good deeds in full consciousness of what they do” (*Stromata*, I, 9).<sup>7</sup> This is the first occasion in ancient Christian writings that we encounter the term “orthodox,” whereby we specifically denote our Holy Faith today. [Incidentally, let us point out that the Slavonic word for “Orthodoxy,” “Православне,” does not convey precisely the meaning of the Greek word “ὀρθοδοξία.” The Greek word consists of the adjective “ὀρθός” (“right” or “true”), the root “δοκ” and the ending “σία.” The noun with the same root, “δοκ,” derives from the verb “δοκέω” (to “think,” “consider,” or “look upon”). It is for this reason that the primary meaning of δόξα is “thought” or “opinion”; hence, the secondary meaning: “to hold a good or bad opinion of somebody,” “fame,” or “ill will.” (See M. Bailly, *Dictionnaire Grec-Français*, Paris, 1910, pp. 528, 531-532). Therefore, in view of the primacy and original meaning of the word “δόξα,” “ὀρθοδοξία” is properly translated as “right thinking” or “right opinion,” not “true glory,” as the Slavonic would suggest.]

After the fourth century, the term “Orthodoxy” is most often used in the writings of the Holy Fathers of the Church to signify the true doctrine of Christ, as opposed to heretical teachings. St. Athanasios of Alexandria, who is frequently called the “Father of Orthodoxy,” writes in his *History of the Arians* (Chapter LXXVIII): “The Arians, usurping the magnificent name of the Saviour, like pagans desecrated the whole of Egypt by forcibly introducing there the heresy of Arios. For Egypt was the only place at that time which had preserved the competency of *Orthodox doctrine* (τῆς ὀρθοδοξίας).”<sup>8</sup> In another of his writings, *On Definitions*, St. Athanasios defines the true Christian as one of orthodox or “correct” belief: “The Christian is a true spiritual home of Christ, which is built on good deeds and *right doctrines* (δογμάτων ὀρθῶν).”<sup>9</sup>

According to the historian Gelasios of Cyzicus (*Church History*, II, 33), the First Ecumenical Synod in Nicæa, which condemned the heresy of Arios, circulated in 325 A.D. “a Synodal Epistle...to the Holy Churches of God in the whole subcelestial world—to the clergymen and laymen of the

Orthodox Faith (τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου πίστεως).”<sup>10</sup> In reference to the same Synod in Nicæa, St. Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople, observes, in his treatise *On the Heresies and the Synods* (Chapter XIV), that “...after the detailed dogmatic elucidation and investigations that took place there, the doctrine of the Orthodox (τὸ δόγμα τῶν ὀρθοδόξων) was reconfirmed with even greater power.”<sup>11</sup>

In reference to the Second Œcumenical Synod (381), Blessed Theodoret explicitly cites, in his *Church History* (V, 9), the title of the Synodal Epistle sent by the “Holy Synod of the *Orthodox Bishops* (τῶν ὀρθοδόξων ἐπισκόπων) who had assembled in the great city of Constantinople...”<sup>12</sup>

The great defender of Orthodoxy against the Nestorian heresy in the fifth century, St. Cyril of Alexandria, in one of his epistles to Nestorios, exhorts the latter to call the Holy Virgin the “Mother of God” and thus, by the “preservation of *right thinking* (ὀρθήν...δόξαν), to serve the common faith in peace and concord.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, in a letter of defense against his accusers, St. Cyril writes: “I have set forth the doctrine of the *true faith* (τῆς ὀρθῆς πίστεως) to those who were tempted by the interpretations of Nestorios.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in the eighth century, the great Church hymnographer, St. John of Damascus, in his dogmatic *Theotokion* (in the third tone) against the heresy of Nestorios, beseeches the Most Holy Virgin to intercede before Jesus Christ our Lord and “...to save the souls of those who confess her as Mother of God in an *Orthodox way* (ὀρθοδόξως).”

St. Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, a great Confessor and a champion against the Eutychian heresy of the Monophysites, writes to St. Leo, Pope of Rome: “...As we witnessed the way that the *Orthodox faith* was violated and the heresies of Apollinaris and Valentinus were revived by Eutyches, it became necessary to declare this in order to preserve the people.”<sup>15</sup>

At the Fourth Œcumenical Synod in Chalcedon (451), as witnessed by the Acts of the Synod, when the epistle of St. Leo the Pope against the teaching of the Monophysites was read, the honorable Bishops exclaimed: “This is the Faith of the Fathers, this is the Faith of the Apostles.... This is the way the *Orthodox* (οἱ ὀρθόδοξοι) believe. Anathema to those who do not believe in this way.... We, *the Orthodox*, think thus....”<sup>16</sup>

The Fathers of the Sixth Œcumenical Synod, convened in Constantinople in 680 against the Monothelite heresy, stated: “For a long period of time, this Synod has investigated the issue of our pure Christian faith..., and the dissension regarding *Orthodoxy* (περὶ τῆς ὀρθοδοξίας) that had somehow arisen was overcome by relying on the dogmas of truth”<sup>17</sup> (“τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως τὴν ἀλήθειαν...τὴν ὑγιῆ ὀρθότητα τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως”).

In like manner, the Fathers of the last, the Seventh, Œcumenical Synod, which was assembled in Nicæa, in 787, against the heresy of the Iconoclasts, after confirming the decisions of the six previous Œcumenical Synods, stated, in the first act of the Synod, that according to ancient tradition, delivered through the Holy Apostles and their successors, the Holy Fathers, “...those who are converted from some heresy to the *Orthodox* (ὀρθόδοξον) confession and the Tradition of the Œcumenical Church should deny in writing their [former] heresy and confess in writing *the Orthodox Faith* (τὴν ὀρθόδοξον πίστιν).”<sup>18</sup>

A liturgical service for the recanting of their heresies by those “who come back to the *Orthodox* (ὀρθόδοξον) and true faith” was composed in the

ninth century by St. Methodios, the Patriarch of Constantinople. During his time, a perfect peace settled over the Church of Christ, after the reign of tumultuous heresies, over which Orthodoxy finally triumphed. An anonymous hagiographer, himself St. Methodios' contemporary, cites the restless labors of the latter, by which he struggled "to abolish heresy from his flock as a plague and to implant a firm and *Orthodox faith* (ὀρθόδοξον πίστιν) in every soul."<sup>19</sup> It is thus quite natural that the feast of the triumph of Orthodoxy over heresy, which was introduced into the Church in 842 through the initiative of St. Methodios the Patriarch, was called the "Feast of Orthodoxy," "ἑορτὴ τῆς ὀρθοδοξίας," which has been celebrated annually, even to the present day, on the First Sunday of Great Lent: *The Sunday of Orthodoxy*.

Therefore, the Feast of Orthodoxy is like a stamp that seals and confirms the dogmatic activity of the Church of Christ as Orthodox, in her struggle against heresy. It was, furthermore, during the epoch that led up to this feast that St. John of Damascus wrote a famous treatise, in which he systematically presents the doctrine of the Church, expressed in her struggle against heresy during the age of the Œcumenical Synods and as it was clarified by the Holy Fathers. He has rightly called this major treatise of his "A Precise Exposition of the *Orthodox Faith* (τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως)."<sup>20</sup>

In this way, the Church of Christ that struggled for the triumph of Orthodoxy against heresy came to be called the *Orthodox Church*. This accentuates the fact that it is the lawful inheritor and faithful protector—both in letter and in spirit—of the true teachings of Christ and the Apostles; i.e., of the Orthodox faith, elucidated by the Holy Fathers and confirmed by the Seven Œcumenical Synods. Since the truth is only one, just as only one straight line connects two points—man and God—, all other religious communities, which have deviated from the Orthodox Church of Christ, must not be called "Orthodox," but should be characterized as "heterodox" ("thinking differently"), by virtue of having distorted the Gospel of Christ and joined to it "another gospel" (see Galatians 1:6). Such is the confession of the Roman Catholics, who fell away from Orthodoxy, initially, because of the arbitrary act of adding the expression "and from the Son" (*Filioque*) to the eighth article of the Nicæan-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith (Creed) and, later, on account of a number of innovations of more or less importance, introduced throughout the centuries and even up to our own time.

By the same token, the Protestant confession, encompassing all of its innumerable denominations, also betrayed Orthodoxy, following still a different path. It denies, in principle, the authority of Holy Tradition, of the Œcumenical Synods, and of the Holy Fathers, acknowledging, instead, the ascendancy of the human mind and personal interpretation.<sup>21</sup>

Attempts to minimize the apostasies of the heretics by dismissing them as deviations motivated by human ambition, or "mistakes on both sides," are entirely irrelevant. In fact, there may well have been some practical and tactical mistakes on both sides, caused by human pride and a craving for power. However, such human weaknesses and acts neither justify false teachings nor obfuscate the objective truth of Orthodoxy. Despite common human fallibilities of all kinds, the whole body of the unorthodox denominations will prove false; while Orthodoxy will shine ever brighter, and will attract, by this, all *True Christians*. For Orthodoxy has from the very beginning preserved the Divine, soul-saving truths of Christianity and was called by the Divinely in-

spired Apostle of the Nations, “the pillar and ground of the truth” (I St. Timothy 3:15). St. Isidore the Pelusian (fifth century), a man of wise and keen mind, after having proved that the love of power is the cause of multifarious heresies, observed: “...but if it were removed from men, then there would be good hope that all, unanimously and in an *orthodox way* (ὀρθοδόξως), would gather around the Divine Gospel” (Book IV, Letter 55)<sup>22</sup>.

From our foregoing historical review, it logically follows that Orthodoxy is not just *one of the many forms of Christianity*, along with the legitimate existence of other, non-Orthodox forms of Christianity; *our Orthodox Faith is Christianity itself, in its most pure and one and only authentic form*. When juxtaposed to Orthodoxy, all of the rest of the so-called Christian denominations are essentially alien to true Christian—that is, *Orthodox*—spirituality and the essence of the Faith.

Until this very day, the Orthodox Church has remained the only lawful inheritor, protector, and confessor of the true teachings of Christ, the Apostles, and the Holy Fathers, as they are confirmed by the Seven Œcumenical Synods and sealed by the celebration of the Feast of Orthodoxy. That is why the Patriarchs of the East wrote in 1723, in their “Epistle on the Orthodox Faith,” the following words: “The dogmas and the doctrines of our Eastern Church, examined already in ancient times, *were correctly and piously set forth and confirmed by the Holy and Œcumenical Synods*; we are not permitted to add or remove anything from them. Thus, those who wish to be in concord with us on the Divine dogmas of the Orthodox Faith need simply follow and humbly obey, without further examination or inquiry, what is *set forth and decreed by the ancient tradition of the Fathers and confirmed by the Holy and Œcumenical Synods*, since the time of the *Apostles* and their successors, *the Divine Fathers of our Church*.”<sup>23</sup>

That great Saint of our Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the venerable Metropolitan Clement (Drumev) of Tirnovo—Confessor, champion, and Martyr for Orthodoxy—, during the time of Stambolov’s dictatorship, said, in a famous sermon delivered on the Sunday of Orthodoxy in 1893: “The true Faith of Christ is not, and cannot be, anything else but *our pure, Holy Orthodox Faith*.... Our Orthodox Faith is *the true word of God, the pure truth of God, the great power of God*—power that is both invincible and beneficial to all true believers.”<sup>24</sup>

---

1. Bishop Michael, *Commentary on the Epistles*, Vol. I (Kiev, 1897), p. 279 [in Russian].

2. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* [PG], Vol. XXXIII, Col. 681.

3. *Ibid.*, Vol. XXVI, Col. 16.

4. This reference from Tacitus’ *The Annals* can in no way be considered a subsequent Christian addition, since, as the citation itself confirms, he was a pagan writer who expressed unrestrained hostility towards Christians. He calls them “hateful because of their dishonor (*per flagitia invisos*)” and characterizes Christianity as “a pernicious superstition (*exitiabilis superstitio*).” Such expressions are typical of the spirit of a hardened pagan and pessimist like Tacitus.

5. *Lives of the Saints*, October 15 (Old Style).

6. PG, Vol. VI, Col. 549.

7. *Ibid.*, Vol. VIII, Col. 744.

8. *Ibid.*, Vol. XXV, Col. 788.

9. *Ibid.*, Vol. XXVIII, Col. 549

10. *Ibid.*, Vol. LXXXV, Col. 1340.

11. *Ibid.*, Vol. XCVIII, Col. 52.
12. *Ibid.*, Vol. LXXXII, Col. 1212.
13. *Ibid.*, Vol. LXXXII, Col. 41.
14. *Ibid.*, Vol. LXXXVII, Col. 59.
15. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, Vol. LIV, Col. 744.
16. Mansi, *Amplissima Collectio Conciliorum* (Paris—Leipzig, 1901), Vol. VI, Col. 957.
17. *Ibid.*, Vol. XI, Cols. 246, 280.
18. *Ibid.*, Vol. XII, *Actio prima*.
19. *PG*, Vol. C, Cols. 1257, 1300.
20. “Ακριβής ἔκθεσις τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως.”
21. Archbishop Seraphim (Sobolev), *The Distortion of Orthodox Truth in Russian Theological Thought* (Sofia, 1943), p. 213 [in Russian].
22. *PG*, Vol. LXXXVIII, Col. 1108.
23. *Orthodox Christian Catechism* (Sofia, 1930), pp. 210-211 [in Bulgarian].
24. *Spiritual Culture*, Nos. 20-21 (1924), pp. 155, 163.