

**November 13, 2005**  
**Saint John Chrysostom**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the several places where St. Paul speaks of the Apostolic Tradition, perhaps none is more striking than a disciplinary section of 1 Corinthians, where he describes the Lord's Supper: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (11:23-26).

My attention is drawn to this text because it suggests a dimension of "tradition" not quite so clear in other Pauline passages. If we did not have this text, we might suppose that by "traditions" Paul always intended to mean matters of doctrine and behavior, the sorts of things that later theology called "faith and morals."

Pauline texts of this sort are easy to discern. For instance, the Apostle wrote of the place of tradition in doctrine in that same epistle, where he documented the Lord's resurrection by an appeal to the testimony of eyewitnesses (15:5-8). He had received and transmitted this testimony by way of tradition (15:1-3).

In other passages Paul speaks of the importance of tradition in Christian ethical teachings. Thus, in reminding the Thessalonians of their moral obligations, he refers to his earlier instructions, both oral and written (1 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 4:1-2; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15; 3:10).

What I find so special about Paul's reference to tradition in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 is that it involves something more than plain instruction. It includes what, for want of more adequate terms, what may be called rite and sacrament. "I received from the Lord," he says, "what I also delivered to you." Just what did he receive from the Lord and hand on to the Corinthians? It was the enactment of the Communion rite itself. And how did Paul hand it on to the Corinthians? By celebrating it with them.

That is to say, the rite of the Lord's Supper, in this text, is what Paul has received and handed on. Thus, the Apostolic Tradition includes handing

on the Body and Blood of Christ in a specific and inherited ritual. This rite is called the breaking of the bread" within the communion and teaching of the Apostles. Recall Luke's description: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and communion, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." It is clear in this text that the Apostolic Tradition is not just a set of teachings. It includes also a context of communion and sacramental worship.

It is the sacraments, after all, that give identifying form to the Church. First of all, there is Baptism in which actual membership in the Church is handed on. Paul writes a bit later in 1 Corinthians: "For in one Spirit we were all *baptized into one body*" (12:13).

Why are we baptized? What is the immediate and very practical result of our joining the Church through Baptism? We are enabled to receive the Lord's body and blood in Holy Communion. In theology's strictest sense, we are baptized in order to partake of the Lord's Supper, in which the one body of the Church is formed. Paul wrote earlier in that same epistle: "The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (10:16-17). Without Baptism, therefore, and the Lord's Supper, there is no Church.

In this context, then, what is the Apostolic Tradition? It is the handing on, through sacraments and catechesis, of the very identity of the living body of the Church in the Holy Spirit. It is the Church herself, shaped and enlivened by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which is the object of the Tradition. This transmission takes place in what Luke calls "the apostles' teaching and communion . . . the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

Sacred Tradition, then, is not simply an inherited body of propositional truths. What we transmit in the Apostolic Tradition is not just a dogmatic and ethical corpus. What is handed on is the living, Spirit-bearing Christ Himself, forming His People. We hand on the full reality of the Church, embodied in her sacraments. Membership in the Church is "handed over" when we plunge the catechumen in the saving waters of Baptism. The Apostolic Tradition takes place at that point where the Body and Blood of Christ are "handed over" to those who receive the Sacred Mysteries in faith.

**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phrii@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)

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