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Holy Tradition vs. Sola Scriptura: The Witness of the Liturgy (1) (Pedro O. Vega)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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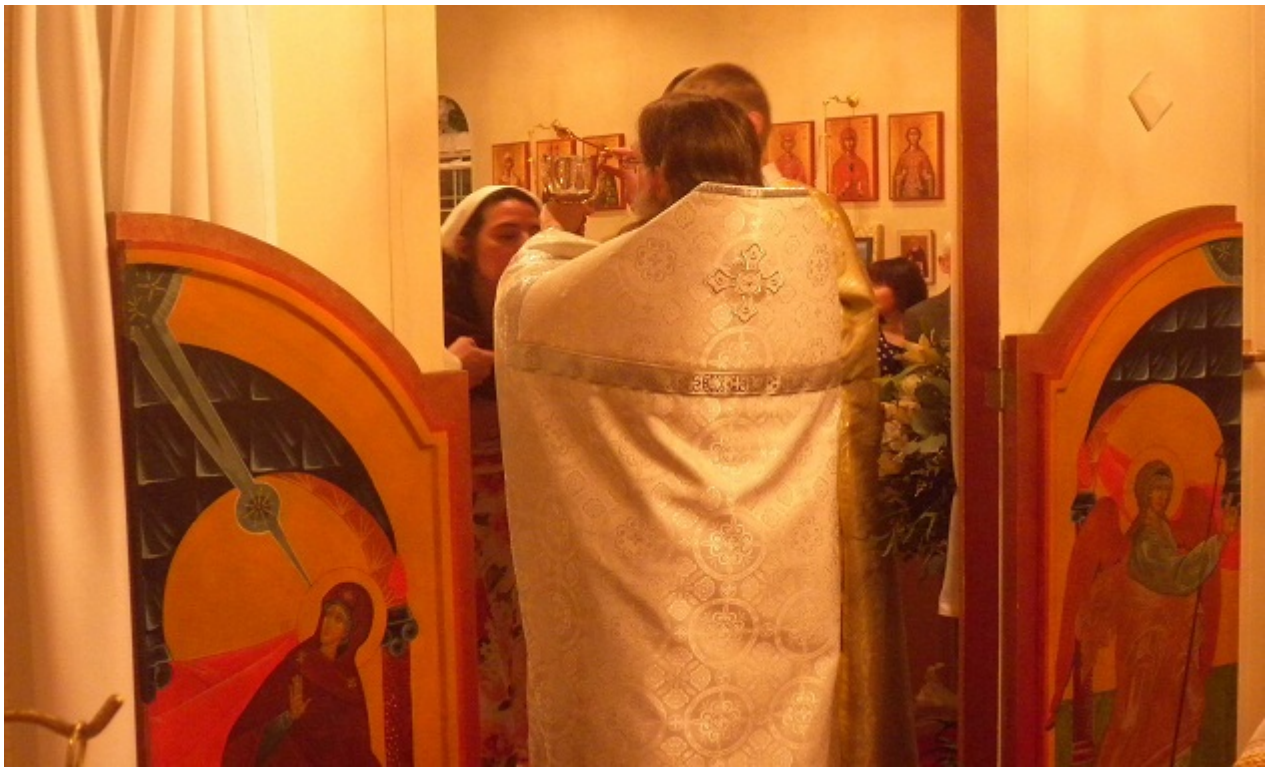
Since the Reformation, the polemics between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism have centered on the role of the Bible as the only rule of faith for the Church over and against any notion of Bible and Tradition as being the normative rule of faith. In recent years, the debate has taken the same popular note that it once had during the Reformation. Roman Catholic apologists such as Karl Keating (director of Catholic Answers) and Patrick Madrid frequently square off against Reformed Protestant apologist James White (director of Alpha & Omega Ministries) in a battle for the mind, the heart, and, ultimately, the soul of their listeners and readers.



Orthodox Christians may assume that Roman Catholic apologists represent the Orthodox position in Western polemics. This is due, in part, to the absence of Orthodox Christian apologists from this debate. The purpose of this article is to

provide an Orthodox perspective on the matter of Sola Scriptura, that is, the Protestant tenet that the Bible alone is sufficient as the rule of faith of the Church. At the same time, we will seek to restate the Patristic framework Orthodoxy assumes when speaking of Holy Tradition, which is not normally present within Roman Catholic apologetics. This framework is provided by the Divine Liturgy of the Church.

This framework centers on the role of the Liturgy as the «container» of Tradition, as something that owes its very existence to Tradition. In other words, the Liturgy—the Eucharist in its core actions—is the proof for the existence of an extrabiblical Christian belief that was binding for all the Churches which called themselves Christian, Orthodox, and Catholic, and which assert a historical continuity with the New Testament Church. We will discuss the important implications the Liturgy has on the Protestant claims of the sufficiency of the Bible.

Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi

Lex orandi, lex credendi is a tenet of the early Church that nowadays is often used as a cliché. But what did it mean then? What does it mean to say that the law (or rule) of prayer is the law (or rule) of belief? The answer lies in what Orthodox Christians call the Divine Liturgy.

First, we will define what liturgy means, what is its origin, and what its basic form, or shape, consists of. Once we organize and briefly analyze the data, we will then proceed to formulate some conclusions and, hopefully, state a definition of Holy Tradition from the Orthodox perspective. From there we will examine the theological implications of our findings upon doctrine and the notion of Sola Scriptura.

Liturgy Defined

Etymology

Liturgy is derived from the Latin liturgia and the Greek leitourgia (a compound word: leitos + ergon), meaning «public duty» or «public worship.» The word and its cognates can be found in the New Testament (cf. Acts 13:2).

Working Definition

Dom Gregory Dix,[1] perhaps the foremost liturgist of this century, defines liturgy as follows:

‘Liturgy’ is the name given ever since the days of the apostles (Acts 13:2) to the act of taking part in the solemn corporate worship of God by the ‘priestly’ society (1 Peter 2:5) of Christians, who are ‘the Body of Christ, the church’ (Ephesians 1: 22-23). ‘The Liturgy’ is the term which covers generally all that worship which is officially organised by the church, and which is open to and offered by, or in the name of, all who are members of the church. It distinguishes this from the personal

prayers of the individual Christians who make up the church, and even from the common prayer of selected or voluntary groups within the church, e.g. guilds or societies. In the course of time the term the Liturgy has come to be particularly applied to the performance of that rite which was instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself to be the peculiar and distinctive worship of those who should be 'His own' (John 13:1); and which has ever since been the heart and core of Christian worship and Christian living—the Eucharist or Breaking of Bread.[2] Thus, whenever we speak of liturgy and liturgical in this essay, we do so under the light of the above definition.

Nature of the Protestant Problem

We all participate in corporate prayer. Every Sunday we go to our respective houses of worship to do just that: worship. Yet, very seldom do we stop to think of the origin and the meaning of the actions we perform within the context of public, corporate worship.

This is especially true of so-called low church Protestant Christians. There is little or no connection between the way that these Christians worship every Sunday (or every quarter) and the way the early Church worshipped and prayed. If the question occurs to them at all, they might answer that it is the spirit that matters in their current worship circumstance. Ancient ritual can be safely dismissed, without further thought, as dead letter and empty tradition. It is at this spiritual and, ultimately, individual level, however, that Protestant Christians experience their affinity with the worship of the early Christians.

John Calvin represented the faction of the Reformation which most rapidly did away with Catholic liturgical trappings (cf. The Second Helvetic Confession, chapter XXVII, Of Rites, Ceremonies, and Things Indifferent). Calvin's liturgy itself was a modification of another Reformed order of worship previously created by Martin Bucer. Calvin published his order of worship in French at Strasbourg. He titled the work La Forme des Prières Ecclésiastiques. It is said that Calvin's Institutes created the most international form of Protestantism; due credit should also be given to his order of worship, which is essentially preserved in every low church Protestant community to this day. It also heavily influenced other Protestant traditions, particularly that of the Church of England.

Much can be said of the Protestant break with the Roman Catholic past. The liturgical and moral excesses of the medieval Church are well known and do not need to be revisited in this article. It can also be argued that the medieval Roman innovations were themselves real breaks from the faith and practice of the early Church. That is another subject unto itself. Suffice to say that the Reformers felt justified in making the changes they did to the order of Christian worship. Influenced by the humanist battle cry Ad fontes! and permeated with the spirit of

Nominalism, the Reformers set out on a quest to restore the authentic faith, worship, and practice of the early Church.

However, Protestant worship services have much in common with the Latin Mass against which they reacted. Dix, in fact, sees the Protestant worship services as a subdivision of the Western Catholic liturgical rite. Dix writes:

Elsewhere in the West, as a consequence of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, there has arisen what from our point of view must be considered the 'fourth crop' of local variants of the basic Western type, in the rites of the Reformed bodies. It is true that those who use them do not, as a rule, think of them in this way. Their compilers were far more concerned to follow what they regarded as 'scriptural warrant' than anything in the liturgical tradition against which they were in revolt. But the Reformers themselves thought largely in terms of the Western tradition within which they had been trained. In consequence, their rites all reveal under technical analysis not 'primitive' characteristics at all, nor anything akin to the special Eastern tradition, but a marked dependence on the basic Western liturgical tradition at a particular stage late in its development.[3] The Reformed Protestant problem is this: Though the Reformers set out to restructure their worship ritual according to what they perceived had scriptural warrant, their final product resembled more a truncated late medieval Latin Mass than anything else that could be called primitive Christian corporate worship. Proof of this discrepancy is found by way of contrasting the Reformed orders of worship with the ancient texts of the earliest Christian liturgies available to us.

Low church evangelical Protestantism, especially that American Protestantism still struggling to remain faithful to the insight of the classical Reformers, faces a dilemma. The dilemma is, ironically, the Reformers' own creation.

Let us not forget the Reformers lived at the dawn of critical historiography as a scientific discipline. Much of the Protestant critique was based upon the work of the Roman Catholic philosopher and humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam. It was he who advocated a full critical reading of the ancient sources. He also produced the first critical Greek edition of the New Testament. By using comparative analysis, he debunked the historicity of long authoritative pro-papal documents such as the Gratian Decretals.

The Reformers used these developments to their advantage. Luther's discovery that the New Testament said, «Repent, change your hearts, change your ways!» versus the Latin Vulgate's rendition «Do Penance!» is a classic example of the superior scholarship inaugurated by Erasmus under the motto Ad Fontes! Yet, we fail to see a similar Protestant advance in the field of Liturgics.

This is due to four things: (1) Protestantism's lack of interest in ascertaining the existence of the historical Liturgy; (2) the lack of manuscript tradition in which to

work at the time; (3) the belief that an appeal to Sola Scriptura superseded any other appeal to Liturgy as a doctrinal medium; and (4) just plain apathy. The Reformers felt free to recast public worship according their particular view of scriptural warrant. Curiously, when it came to the Liturgy, the Reformers fell short of the Ad Fontes! ideal.

This takes us back to the Protestant problem: Their worship is, in one way or the other, a modified version of the late medieval Latin Mass. Only the Quakers carried the Protestant recasting of the Liturgy to its logical end: Their worship was devoid of any outer form and relied solely on the illumination of the individual worshipper. If the rest of Protestantism failed to reach this logical end, they did so because of a vague feeling of the very human (and Christian) need for communal worship.

Ad Fontes!

To say that the Orthodox Church holds the Liturgy in the highest esteem is an understatement. The Liturgy is the basis for Orthodox theologizing when it comes to Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and almost every ancillary -ology in the Church. Theology without Liturgy is falsely so-called, according to Orthodox Christian teaching.

Orthodox Christianity's high regard for the Liturgy does not derive from a merely antiquarian interest. Nor is it an attempt by the Church to establish a historical continuity with the past by mere imitation of ritual or gestures. The Orthodox Church holds the Liturgy in the highest esteem because the New Testament Church and the Church of the Fathers held the Liturgy in the highest esteem. And the New Testament Church and the Church of the Fathers held the Liturgy in the highest esteem on account of its origin, its purpose, and its function.

The Liturgy in the Bible

That the Christians in the New Testament Church worshipped together, no one denies. Thus in Acts 2:42,46 we find:

> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers…And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (RSV)

The verse does not tell us much about the how of New Testament Christian worship, but it does give us two tantalizing hints: (1) there is something Jewish about it (Temple worship), and (2) there is something Christian about it (the Breaking of the Bread).[4] The closest that the New Testament gets to talk about the actions involved during Christian worship (and the earliest reference) is in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, verses 23 to 26:

«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 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.»

C.P.M. Jones[5] endeavored to sketch the Corinthian liturgy from an in-depth study of St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians:

«It is a plenary session and may not begin until all are assembled. It is a real meal, to which (or at least the well off) all contribute food and drink. It opens with the customary Jewish blessing of God over the bread, which is then broken in pieces and distributed to all, probably with words of interpretation or distribution identifying the bread as the Body of Christ.…By this the gathering is constituted as the Body of Christ. The meal continues, and at the end the 'cup of the blessing' is produced and thanksgiving is said before all drink of it. It would seem that during that thanksgiving the death of the Lord , the risen, victorious ever-present Lord of the community, is proclaimed 'until he come.'»

1. Dom Gregory Dix was a British Anglican Benedictine. Vital dates unavailable. 1901 -1952
2. Dix, The Shape of the Liturgy, p. 1.
3. Dix, 10.
4. This author does not deny the Jewishness of the bread-breaking ritual itself. However, the Breaking of the Bread was, by Luke's time, already a Christian action, a uniquely Christian function (cf. Jerome Biblical Commentary, 45:24). John Calvin himself understood it as a uniquely Christian function, too. He refers to it as the breaking of the mystical bread in his discussion on the fourth commandment (cf. Institutio, 2.8.32).
5. The Rev. Canon C.P.M. Jones, was, at the time of the writing of this article, Principal of Pusey House, Oxford University (cf. Jones et al, eds, The Study of Liturgy, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, «The New Testament,» p. 150).