

On the Holy Canons and Canonicity

Fr. Joseph Copeland

It is often heard in the Orthodox Church that something is canonical or non-canonical; a church is canonical or non-canonical; a fast is canonical or non-canonical and so on. What does "canonical" mean and how does "canonicity" affect our Orthodox Faith?

In the 18th century St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain (Athos) compiled the collection of Church canons known as the Pedalion or Rudder. It is called this because it is understood that the sacred Canons of the Church steer the Church, the Ark of our Salvation, as a rudder (or pedalion in Greek) steers a ship through the tempestuous waters of life in this world.

St. Nikodemos writes, "A canon, according to Zonaras (in his interpretation of the 39th letter of Athanasius the Great), properly speaking and in the main sense of the word, is a piece of wood, commonly called a rule, which artisans use to get the wood and stone they are working on straight. For, when they place this rule (or straightedge) against their work, if this be crooked, inwards or outwards, they make it straight and right. From this, by metaphorical extension, votes and decisions are also called canons, whether they be of the Apostles, of the ecumenical and regional Councils or those of the individual Fathers, which are contained in the present Handbook [i.e., The Rudder]: for they too, like so many straight and right rules, rid men in holy orders, clergymen and laymen, of every disorder and obliquity of manners, and cause them to have every normality and

2

equality of ecclesiastical and Christian condition and virtue." [the Rudder, from the section "To Orthodox Christians Everywhere..." p. Liv]

St. Nikodemos goes on about the significance of the Holy Canons in the life of the Church: "*Deprive material creation of the canons (or laws) of the elements, and its orderliness is at once abolished; and with the abolishment of order, the whole universe vanishes. Deprive the Church of these sacred Canons, and disorder at once intrudes; and as a result of the disorder all its sacred decoration disappears.... So please accept this book with outspread hands, and accept this necessary scripture which comes next after the Holy Scriptures, all you churches of Christ.*" [the Rudder, from the section "To Orthodox Christians Everywhere..." p. Li- Liii]

It must be said that much if not most of what the Church believes and practices is not dealt with specifically in the sacred canons of the Church. The liturgical life with all of its rubrics (directions), the rules of fasting, the sign of the Cross, the form of vestments, technical directions for the design of iconography, hymnography, hagiography, architecture and much more are not included in the sacred Canons. That by no means implies that these elements of our Faith can be devised according to personal opinion or whim. St. Nikodemos writes, "*Note, however, that in order to understand the present Canons more easily, one ought to be acquainted with these axioms which are applicable to all the canons*", and he goes on to list 14 axioms, *a* through *n*, by which one understands what is canonical and whether some aspect of the Faith has canonicity. Axioms *h* and *m*

most directly address things not covered in the sacred Canons:

(h) That what is not explicitly stated must be judged and inferred from similar things stated in the canons. In this connection... consult the writings of individual Fathers, or rely on the discernment afforded by right reason.

(m) That whenever there is no canon or written law, good custom is to be followed when it has been sanctioned by right reason and many years' prevalence, and is not contrary to any written canon or law, so that it takes the rank of a canon or law...". [the Rudder, from the section "To Orthodox Christians Everywhere..." p. Lv]

In addition to these axioms of St. Nikodemos we have the testimony of all the Holy Fathers that all of sacred Tradition itself is the rule or Canon of the Faith. Everything that is included or excluded from the life of the Church must be measured against this "rule". The holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council stated this phronema, this holy mindset, in their summary statement of the fourth session of the Seventh Synod: "*But we, in all things holding the doctrines and precepts of the same our God-bearing Fathers, make proclamation with one mouth and one heart, neither adding anything, nor taking anything away from those things which have been delivered to us by them. But in these things we are strengthened, in these things we are confirmed. Thus we confess, thus we teach, just as the holy and ecumenical six Synods have decreed and ratified.*" [The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church, p. 540 as quoted by The Ecumenical Synods of the

Orthodox Church by Fr. James Thornton.]

In the final summary statement of the Seventh Synod they all cried out: "*So we all believe, we all are so minded, we all give our consent and have signed. This is the faith of the Apostles, this is the faith of the orthodox, this is the faith which hath made firm the whole world... For we follow the most ancient legislation of the Catholic Church. We keep the laws of the Fathers. We anathematize those who add anything to or take anything away from the Catholic Church...*

...Those, therefore who dare to think or teach otherwise, or as wicked heretics to spurn the traditions of the Church and to invent some novelty, or else to reject some of those things which the Church hath received (e.g., the Book of the Gospels, or the image of the cross, or the pictorial icons, or the holy reliques of a martyr), or evilly and sharply to devise anything subversive of the lawful traditions of the Catholic Church ... if they be Bishops or Clerics, we command that they be deposed; if religious or laics, that they be cut off from communion."

It is with this view of things in mind that we understand something to be "canonical": 1) Is it in accord with the sacred Canons of the Church? and 2) Does it have the witness of sacred Tradition as a whole?

Therefore, to be "canonical" means much more than just being able to point to a certain sacred Canon that affirms or condemns something. There is much that we believe,

experience and practice that is not mentioned in the sacred Canons. To be "canonical" is to be true to the whole of sacred Tradition that has been handed down to us in the sacred Scriptures, the sacred Canons and Creeds, the sacred writings of the Fathers, the sacred recording of the lives of the Saints (Hagiography), the sacred Liturgical life together with the Typikon and all the sacred service books that direct its function, the sacred Hymnography, the sacred Iconography, the sacred Architecture and everything that composes the Sacred Tradition of the Church.

If the sacred Canons do not address something but sacred Tradition which is articulated in the Typikon or the Triodion or any of the sources mentioned above provide the needed information then that is "canonical". It is according to the "rule" or "canon" of sacred Tradition.

As an example; " 'The rule of fasting', which is dependent on the Church's cycle of feasts and fasts, is contained in the Church's Typikon, chiefly in chapters 32 and 33, and is repeated in the appropriate places of the Divine service books, the Menaia and Triodion." [*The Rule of Fasting in the Orthodox Church* By Father Seraphim (Rose) of Platina] Fasting and marital abstinence are mentioned many times in the sacred canons but one must know the Tradition that regulates fasting to understand their significance. Many things the Canons do not address.

In the commentary to an answer by St. Timothy of Alexandria regarding marital abstinence St. Nikodemos

notes that it was customary that couples practiced sexual abstinence on all fasting days including the lenten seasons and Wednesday and Friday.

In his commentary on question #4 to St. Timothy of Alexandria he further states that married couples should abstain for three days before Holy Communion and refers to his interpretation of c. XIII of the 6th Council where he states that it is understood that marital abstinence and fasting go together in preparation for Holy Communion as they do during seasons of fasting. This is affirmed by many of the Fathers who have commented on such things up to our modern times.

Therefore, if fasting and marital abstinence are practiced together in preparation for Holy Communion, and as St. Nikodemos concurs in his commentary to question #13 to St. Timothy of Alexandria, that at least the day before Communion should be abstinent, then the day before Communion should be fasting as well.

St. Nikodemos points out in several places, notably his interpretation and commentary on c. LXIX of the Apostles, that "fasting" is understood, as it is recorded in the Triodion, to be as the fast during Great Lent, that is, vegetables only with one meal following the 9th hour, with fish, wine and oil allowed according to the customary rules.

Therefore, according to the Tradition Holy Communion is preceded at least the day before by fasting and marital abstinence. In our time especially expectations regarding

food have been mitigated (adjusted) by the holy Elders according to the circumstances and needs of the faithful, sometimes requiring more, sometimes less, but fasting and abstinence before Communion remains the rule.

Some spiritual fathers in our own time encourage their spiritual children on Saturday to have meat at morning and noon (this would include meat, dairy, fish, wine, and oil) and a lenten meal in the evening. Some say meat in the morning, dairy at noon and a lenten meal in the evening. Some may say dairy in the morning and noon and a lenten meal in the evening. Some would say fish morning and noon and a lenten meal in the evening. Some would prescribe a strictly lenten fast all day (on Saturdays and Sundays this would include at least two meals with wine and oil before the evening meal) for one or two or three days before Holy Communion (including sexual abstinence).

Sadly, in our time, until the early 1980's frequent communion was unheard of in secular parishes. In the late 70's and early 80's there was a big push to receive communion weekly or at least much more than just during the fasting seasons. Unfortunately there was no corresponding push to teach the traditional preparation of fasting and abstinence that prepares one for Holy Communion. We should want this to be corrected. To receive Holy Communion is the most awesome thing a human can do and there is a "canonical" way, a way that is supported by the canons and the rule of sacred Tradition that prepares us for such awesome participation in

something so powerful that it can either deify us or make us ill "even unto death" according to St. Paul.

If it is so important wouldn't the sacred Canons include all the details? No! They are but a part of sacred Tradition which altogether weaves the whole cloth of our Faith.

In summary: To be "canonical" is to be true to the whole of sacred Tradition that has been handed down to us in the sacred Scriptures, the sacred Canons and Creeds, the sacred writings of the Fathers, the sacred recording of the lives of the Saints (Hagiography), the sacred Liturgical life together with the Typikon and all the sacred service books that direct its function, the sacred Hymnography, the sacred Iconography, the sacred Architecture and everything that composes the sacred Tradition of the Church.

And all to the Glory of God!