

Serbian Orthodox Traditions

On Some of the Customs and Traditions of the Serbian People and the Serbian Orthodox Church

Tradition may be seen as the offshoot of religious belief, while custom, if practiced for a long time, eventually becomes law. Even established traditions should not be taken at face value; one must be on guard to see that the offshoot does not strangle the tree from which it came into existence. A healthy tradition is one that supports and enhances its basis of faith. This is the tradition we must continue to nurse and develop.

Custom may also be seen as an expression or symbol of a highly meaningful substance. Here again the same may be said, for there is a strong possibility that the custom could replace the substance. For example, there are many people who practice making the sign of the Cross simply as a mannerism, without ever thinking about the meaning associated with the Cross itself. Such mannerisms of prayer cannot stand for prayer itself.

The customs and traditions which serve life, contribute to it, and build it, are the institutions which should be maintained and upheld. The culture of a people can be seen and understood as the flower on the branches of that peoples' particular tradition. It is that "flower" which distinguishes that certain group of people from among all others. That kind of tradition has registered itself for the posterity of that people, and as such becomes the treasure which is guarded and transferred to the generations to come.

In the life of the contemporary world, whether that of large or small nations, one often hears the word "democracy" in regard to political life. Democracy is a product of Hellenic culture, as the Greek words that make up our word indicate: *demos*, "the

people," and *kratos*, "power" or "rule." Thus democracy means "the rule of the people." This principle became one of the beams upon which present civilization rests, bequeathed to us by the tradition of ancient Athen's political life.

As far as our faith is concerned, Holy Tradition stands next only to Divine illumination and inspiration. Besides the Holy Cross and the Holy Icons, there are many other practices in the life of the Church which are part of Holy Tradition. In fact, devoid of Holy Tradition church life itself becomes divorced from the true Church itself. As far as the political concept of democracy is concerned, one may conclude that this concept, where the personality of man is given full place within society, rests upon the reality of life itself. The uniqueness and irreplaceability of human personality becomes the foundation of democracy.

Church Tradition is a confirmation of the message of the Four Gospels as well as the rest of our biblical beliefs. Here God is the Creator of the world, and a creative center, while man is created in the image of God. Nothing in the world is created in the image of God except man; therefore, the personality of man is a creative agent in the world, and as such remains above the world. All customs and traditions are tailored accordingly.

Ancient peoples such as Jews and Greeks guarded their customs and traditions because they had proven to be a positive force in their lives throughout the millennia of their existence. Their customs and traditions not only served to identify them, but became synonymous with their very names.

Besides its Tradition and customs, the Serbian people have their religious as well as national holidays. The whole of our life as a people is closely connected with these holidays. Renouncing or forgetting these days would be tantamount to renouncing one's ethnicity. All of this testifies to one thing, namely, that this way of life did not originate with our generation or with those some few generations before us; neither will it end with our generation. If nothing else, the positive customs and traditions which developed in the life of a people throughout history proves this point. On the other side, if it happens that a people begins to doubt the value of its customs and traditions and begins to divorce itself from them, it signals through its history a crisis in the life of that people.

In a broader sense of custom and tradition, one can also include language, alphabet, and even history itself. A person who leaves his country and people will miss the presence of his or her language and, in our case, alphabet. After that follow the national holidays, and then the family religious ones. One may also include here the tradition of personal names which are typically Serbian: male names like Mile, Rade, Bosko, and Mirko; female names like Dusanka, Zorka, Radojka, Smilja, and so on. Together with this are the many small but important customs we grew up with. We hardly noticed them while we were at home, but now that we are away we miss them. The Serbian people do not necessarily celebrate their personal birthdays; instead we celebrate *Krsno Ime*, or *Krsna Slava*. The Slava is a unique holiday of the Serbian people; it is both a religious and an ethnic institution, with its beginning at the time long ago when Serbs accepted the Christian faith.

The Tannenbaum, or Christmas tree, of German origin, became universal as far as western civilization is concerned, but we still prefer our Serbian *Badnjak*.

Vidov Dan is the most important of Serbian national holidays. It is a holiday which holds all the content of Serbian history, preserving our past, present and future. Then there are the traditions and customs surrounding the festivities of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Finally, let us also not forget *Djurdjevdanski Uranak*.

For the Serbian people of the *diaspora* living today in all the major countries of the world, the Serbian Orthodox Church is the central place where Serbs may celebrate their holidays, thus preserving their faith, customs, and traditions.