

ST. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR (+662): THE COURAGEOUS SIMPLE MONK WHO 'FACED DOWN' THE 'SLICK ORTHODOX GOLIATHS' OF HIS DAY

by

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The primary and original meaning of “orthodoxia” is “right thinking” or “right opinion”. After the fourth century, the term “Orthodoxy” signified the correct (true) doctrinal belief in Christ.

The first Ecumenical Council was held in Nicaea during the reign of Constantine the Great in A.D. 325 and was assembled against Arius, who was blaspheming that the Son and Logos of God was not of the same essence as the Father (or, as the Greek has it, coessential with the Father), and that consequently He was not a true God, but, on the contrary, a creature and ‘ctisma,’ a Greek word meaning ‘something built’.¹

After several years’ guidance by the Holy Spirit, the first Ecumenical Council delivered the “sacred Symbol of our Faith which is well known to all and in which it proclaimed the Son and Logos of God to be a true God coessential with the Father”.² Please note particularly the words “which is well known to all”. The Council did not proclaim any new dogma. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it confirmed what the Scriptures revealed and its ‘proclamation’ represented the ‘Mind’ of the Holy Fathers of the Holy Orthodox Church on this matter. Its decision did not set a new precedent in the manner in which our western society is accustomed to analysing United States state and federal appellate court decisions.

The Symbol proclaimed that the “catholic and apostolic church” anathematizes those who denied it. Theodore of Jerusalem labeled the Symbol the “correct confession of faith”; St. Damasus I, bishop of Rome, a “wall thwarting the weapons of the Devil”. “And, in general, it is called by all the Church the characteristic standard and the banner of Orthodoxy (emphasis supplied), by means whereof they, as true soldiers of Christ (emphasis supplied), can be distinguished from the enemies of Christ and from those who, though hypocritically professing the name of Christ, are in reality, sham brethren and misbelievers.”³

“Whosoever, therefore, shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in the Heavens. And whosoever shall deny me before men will I also deny before my father which is in the Heavens.”⁴

Orthodox meant what was right thinking, right believing, truly Christian versus what was falsely Christian, deviational, heretical, the antichrist. To be Orthodox then, is to be a

right thinking, right believing, nondeviating true Christian as traditional by the ‘Mind’ of the Holy Fathers of the Church is confirmed by the first Seven Ecumenical Councils and accepted by the Church throughout the ages.

As Orthodox, we owe allegiance to the Lord’s Truth, nothing less, nothing else. If the overwhelming majority of other orthodox ‘jurisdictions’ are adopting revisionistic courses inconsistent and contrary to the teachings of the Holy Fathers of the Church, our duty is clear– we must shun these revisions and hold to the straight path of Orthodoxy. I have put Orthodoxy in lower case in the example of such revisionistic jurisdictions to indicate the absence of the Royal Path.

But you say– they are many and we may be few, so few... Remember the Saviour’s words: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”⁵

Numbers are irrelevant. Is it possible for the vast majority to be wrong? Certainly. Let us recall such an era where one of the greatest Orthodox Saints was persecuted by all five of the ancient patriarchate sees. He faced their hierarchical armada alone as a monk not even entitled to celebrate the Holy Mysteries. That great Saint was St. Maximus the Confessor (+21 January 662).

All the ancient patriarchal sees of the East had acceded to a compromise confession of our Lord’s Incarnation put forward by the Monothelites that also confessed His divine and human natures had but one will, the divine– simply, a variant of the heresy of Monophysitism. Maximus, a simple monk, not even ordained as a hieromonk, meaning he could not celebrate the Mysteries, refused to go along with this compromise, to enter into communion with the “official church hierarchy”. The exact details of his encounters with his tormentors and torturers are too extensive to give here. We will concentrate on his courage and conviction, his ‘stand and deliver’ in the face of fire and his staunch upholding of Holy Orthodoxy no matter what... His is the highest example of true Orthodoxy. Christ expects no less of all of us. Will we measure up?

St. Maximus the Confessor:

The official hierarchy sent a delegation to interrogate him announcing they had been sent by the Patriarch of Constantinople. They reminded Maximus that Byzantium (Constantinople), Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem were all in unity on this compromise issue. What ecclesiastical power! All five patriarchates including the Mother Church of Jerusalem. How could their ecclesiastical decisions on this issue be ‘wrong’? How could one simple monk be right as opposed to them? (And yet he was.)

St. Maximus refused to change his position maintaining that their confession must adhere to the “true and saving confession of the Faith” for which Christ called Peter blessed and declared He would found His Church upon it.⁶ Apparently, they had misrepresented Rome’s position. It was maintaining Orthodoxy.⁷

The Saint was saying that their strength in unity needed to correspond to the “true and saving confession of the faith” - it had to be divine Truth!

Some time later during his last interrogation by the Byzantine authorities, the Saint still refused to enter into communion with the Throne of Constantinople. It is fitting we close this discussion with it:

...they have excommunicated themselves from the Church many times over and accused each other of erroneous thinking. In addition to having excommunicated themselves from the Church, they have been deposed and deprived of the priesthood at the local council which took place recently in Rome. What Mysteries, then, can they perform? Or what spirit will descend upon those who are ordained by them?

“Then you alone will be saved, and all others will perish?” they objected.

To this the Saint replied,

When all the people in Babylon were worshipping the golden idol, the Three Holy Children did not condemn anyone to perdition. They did not concern themselves with the doings of others, but took care only for themselves, lest they should fall away from true piety. In precisely the same way, when Daniel was cast away into the lion’s den, he did not condemn any of those who, fulfilling the law of Darius, did not wish to pray to God, but he kept in mind his own duty, and desired rather to die than to sin against his conscience by transgressing the Law of God. God forbid that I should condemn anyone or say that I alone am being saved! However, *I shall sooner agree to die than to apostatize in any way from the true Faith and thereby suffer torments of conscience.* (emphasis supplied)

“But what will you do,” inquired the envoys, “when the Romans are united to the Byzantines? Yesterday, indeed, two delegates arrived from Rome and tomorrow, the Lord’s day, they will communicate the Holy Mysteries with the Patriarch.”

The Saint replied,

Even if the whole universe holds communion with the Patriarch, I will not communicate with him. For I know from the writings of the holy Apostle Paul: the Holy Spirit declares that even the angels would be anathema if they should begin to preach another Gospel, introducing some new teaching (emphasis supplied).⁸

The Apostle Paul to the Galatians:

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:

Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.

As we said before, so say I now again. If any man preach any other gospel unto you than ye have received, let him be accursed.

For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.

But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.

For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.⁹

Holy Orthodoxy demonstrated that this simple unordained monk was the Orthodox one:

When the Sixth Ecumenical Council was finally convened, among those condemned for heresy were four Patriarchs of Constantinople, one Pope of Rome, one Patriarch of Alexandria, two Patriarchs of Antioch and a multitude of other Metropolitans, Archbishops and Bishops. During all those years, that one simple monk was right, and all those notable bishops were wrong.”¹⁰

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ *The Rudder (Pedalion)*, Concerning The First Holy Ecumenical Council, **Prolegomena**, p. 155.

² *id.*

³ *id.*, p.159.

⁴ **Matt.** 10:32-33

⁵ **Matt.** 18:20

⁶ see Father Christopher Birchall (tr.), *THE LIFE OF OUR HOLY FATHER MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Massachusetts, 1982, p.14.

⁷ *id.*, p. 61.

⁸ *id.*, pp.37-39.

⁹ **Gal.** 1: 6-12

¹⁰ Birchall (tr.), *op.cit.*, p.62.