

CALLED FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT -

THE WRITINGS OF THE DISCIPLES OF THE APOSTLES

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The Holy Apostles, following the Lord's commandment, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19), travelled throughout the world and established Churches within which all could receive the Grace and Illumination of the Holy Trinity. In every Church they would ordain their successors who received the Grace and responsibility to follow in their footsteps, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery" (I Timothy 4:14). This gift of Apostolic Succession, which we see in the Holy Fathers of the Church, has continued within the Church until today. In their attempts to bring as many sheep into the Lord's Flock as possible, the writings of the Apostles' successors have filled the world with countless volumes that conveyed *the Faith of the Apostles* to all succeeding generations.

The theme of this Conference is "Called from Darkness to Light". These words of St. Clement of Rome (1 Clement 59:2) will form the nucleus of our discussions. We might say that these words, which are an echo of the Old and New Testaments, contain the essence of the Faith of the Holy Apostles. When our Lord appeared to St. Paul on the road to Damascus, He made an Apostle of the Gospel and sent him "to turn the people and the Gentiles from darkness to light" (Acts 26:18).

Our Fathers and Mothers of the Apostolic Church did not treat these words lightly and neither should we. During the next few days we will have an opportunity to examine what these words meant to those Christians of the Apostolic age. We will not be looking at this period in a scholarly or historical manner but in a way that will convey to us the consciousness of conversion or turning from darkness to light that should accompany every Christian all the days of his life.

If we take a quick look at the Gospels it will not be long before we realize how central to the Gospel is the belief that our Lord and Saviour is the Light of the world. Unfortunately there is a very destructive temptation that the devil reserves for Orthodox Christians. It is very easy to fall into a false sense of security, comfort and complacency that blinds us to the fact that we have not escaped the darkness totally. Yes we have been baptized and as members of the Body of our Saviour have been delivered from the hands of the enemy of mankind, the prince of darkness. What we forget is our vulnerability and that the enemy from which we fled is seeking to make us his slaves again.

Let us compare ourselves with the children of Israel who were liberated by the Paschal Lamb, our Saviour, from the hands of Pharaoh. They were led out of the land of Egypt. Their enemy was drowned in the Red

Sea and yet they were not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Were they saved so that they could be destroyed? That is a blasphemous thought. Our Lord desires the salvation of the sinner not his death.

Reading the Book of Exodus we see that although the children of Israel were saved from the hands of Pharaoh they still had to find their way to the Promised Land. They were led by our Saviour in this journey but followed by Amalek who continuously harassed them. The Light of our Saviour went before them but the darkness of Amalek went behind them waiting for the moment when they would turn their eyes from the light and fall into the clutches of darkness. Amalek, the enemy of the children of God, was not an enemy in the ordinary sense of the word.

In Exodus 17:8-17 when we read about the battle between Amalek and the People of God, we are told that Moses appointed Joshua to lead the army. In the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament the name Joshua is rendered as Jesus, the name of our Saviour. Also we are told that during the long battle there would be times when the forces of Amalek were victorious and times when the army led by Jesus ((Joshua) were victorious. The Children of Israel were victorious when Prophet Moses would lift up his hands and formed the sign of the Cross. When he would get tired and put his hands down, then Amalek was victorious. Moses was accompanied by Aaron and Or (Hur). When they noticed what was happening, Aaron and Or stood on each side of Moses and held up his arms. The account ends with the words: "The Lord will wage war with Amalek from generation to generation".

The Holy Fathers believed that this was not an ordinary battle. This encounter foreshadowed the eternal warfare waged between the Children of God and the forces of Satan. Victory was assured because the People of Israel were led into battle by Jesus while Moses upon the hill with his outstretched hands formed the sign of the Cross with Alpha (Aaron) and Omega (Or) on either side. Our Lord revealed to us that this warfare is eternal when He, through the mouth of Moses, proclaimed that this battle will be waged "from generation to generation".

This is the warfare that confronts us even though through the Holy Baptism Pharaoh was drowned and we became Children of God. We find ourselves in the Sinai Desert forgetting the Promised Land and remembering the "onions of Egypt". Without realizing it, we are backsliding and in danger of falling into the realm of darkness.

The first Christians were fully aware that they had been saved from the prince of darkness and had received the light of Christ. They knew that as long as they had the Light of Christ, they had Life in Christ. An early Christian Cross had the words Fos (Light) and Zoe (Life) inscribed horizontally and vertically. Taking up the Cross of the Saviour, they would find both Light and Life.

In the Holy Gospels we find two teachings of our Lord that at first may seem contradictory; "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12) and "Ye are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). It is our Lord and Saviour Who is truly the "Light of the world". This Light of Divinity is bestowed upon all those who become members of the Body of Christ. It is Christ himself who enters our soul and as St. John Chrysostom says, "kindles the light" (On Matthew 15:11). Our Lord is "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh unto the world" (John 1:9).

If we look carefully at The Gospels and many references to the "Light of Christ", we will realize that this forms an essential part of our Lord's teachings. We are not dealing with figurative expressions. Evidence of

this is the manner in which we find these same teachings of our Saviour repeated over and over again in the Epistles of the Apostles and in the writings of those Saints who succeeded the Holy Apostles.

St. Paul exhorted the Ephesians; "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8). St. Peter reminds the faithful of the blessings that they received; "ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). St. John counsels us; "He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now" (1 John 2:9).

This light is a conscious light that transforms the whole existence of the believer. This transformation makes every Christian a Godbearer. During the next three days while we are reading and studying the word of God as proclaimed in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers let us pray that we will receive that Grace which will "transfigure us from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18).

The expansion of the Christian Faith was rapid and far-flung. It penetrated Mesopotamia to Edessa and Arbela and reached as far as Britain. Christians were to be found on the Rhone in Gaul, and even on the Rhine. The Dalmatian coast was beginning to be missionized. The Church was taking root in North Africa, Cyrenaica, and interior Egypt as well as growing in Greece, Syria, Asia Minor and Italy. The spread of the Gospel was centred in the cities but gradually spread into the rural areas.

Although the church was established on a local basis, led by a single bishop aided by his council of presbyters and deacons, the consciousness of the Catholicity of the Faith was not diminished. This is especially evident in the Epistles of St. Clement of Rome, St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Polycarp of Smyrna. Each Church was the Church of Christ and also a part of the whole Church. The bishop, as the successor of the Holy Apostles, became the centre of the Church's life, the living witness and guardian of its faith. The Epistles of St. Paul to St. Timothy and to St. Titus clearly show us that St. Paul had ordained them to head the Churches of Ephesus and Crete.

The bishop was the living centre of the Apostolic tradition. He was a prophetic as well as a sacramental person; and nothing more clearly reveals the second century attitude toward the episcopate than the description the Smyrneans give of their martyred bishop, Polycarp; he was "an Apostolic and prophetic teacher" (Martyrdom of St. Polycarp 16:2).

In these early years the Bible of the Church was the Greek Old Testament known as the Septuagint. The Christian Gospel was proclaimed as the fulfilment of the revelation found in the Old Testament. That which was foreshadowed in the Law and the Prophets has now come to pass in the Christ. Christian preaching which was founded on the Old Testament and on the living tradition of the Gospel of our Saviour, passed from mouth to mouth. This feeling for personal witness was very strong in the Early Church. Papias, *circa* 70 A.D., for instance, records his disdain for books and his preference for "the living and abiding voice".

Christians of the first centuries lived under the constant shadow of Roman attempts to eradicate the Faith. These endeavours not only did not have the desired effect but became the occasion for the Church to be nourished with the blood of the martyrs.

Internally, the life of the Church in the first centuries was disturbed by two important movements Gnosticism and Judaism. Gnosticism is older than Christianity. It represents the fusion of Oriental and Greek ideas into various elaborate systems whose aim is to acquire "gnosis" or knowledge of the divine based on revelation. Gnosticism depended upon a theology that was very different from the faith of the Church the dualism of matter and the spirit. That the body was basically evil, and in no sense the creation of a good god, was a central tenet. One serious consequence that followed from the Gnostic disparagement of the body was that they were forced to deny the incarnation of our Lord. Jesus only "appeared": He did not genuinely take on human flesh. These Gnostics came to be known as "Docetics" from the Greek word *dokeo* which means appear.

The early Church combated these errors and the true faith was common to all. We see this in the various documents that echo the baptismal creeds of the local Churches. When in the Holy Creed we confess to believe in "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church", we are expressing our belief that only by being united to the Faith of the Holy Apostles can we be members of the Body of Christ. The Church is Apostolic because our Lord established it on the Faith of the Apostles. As long as we maintain the Apostolic Faith we will find ourselves among the Holy Apostles. We should not live under the misconception that the Faith and the Preaching of the Holy Apostles ended with the conclusion of their earthly life. Let us not imagine for even one moment that the first Christians did not have the same beliefs as we have.

Within the totality of the written word of God and in the period immediately following the Books of the New Testament, the Church has the writings of the "Disciples of the Apostles". These writings today are known as the writings of the "Apostolic Fathers". This term was not known in the early Church and is a creation of modern non-Orthodox theology but we can use it to describe these writings as given to us by Saints who had personally known the Holy Apostles.

St. Irenaeus, a disciple of St. Polycarp, in his book "Against Heresies", refers to these saints as "elders" (IV,30,1-31) or "Disciples of the Apostles" (IV,32,1). The term "elder" or "presbyteros" is used frequently in Holy Scripture to refer to those men ordained to be shepherds of the Church. The English word "priest" is derived from the Greek "presbyteros". As we see from the following New Testament passages, the Apostles also used the term for themselves.

"Let the elders that rule well be counted
worthy of double honour, especially they who
labour in the word and doctrine"
(I Timothy 5:17)"

The elder unto the elect lady and her
children, whom I love in the truth; and not I
only, but also all they that have known the
truth"

(II John 1:1)

"The elders which are among you I exhort, who
am also an elder, and a witness of the
sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of
the glory that shall be revealed"

(I Peter 5:1)

There were many Elders who guided the Church during the years following the time of the Holy Apostles. The names of most of them are not preserved and only a few writings have been passed down to us. During the second and third centuries the writings of the Elders or Disciples of the Apostles were held in great esteem; some writings were read in some Churches during the services and were included in the Canon of the New Testament. The Shepherd of Hermas was read in the Church of Rome, the First Epistle of Saint Clement was read in the Church of Corinth, and the Epistle of Saint Barnabas was read in the Church of Alexandria. The disciples of the Apostles passed on the Apostolic tradition to which St. Paul refers; "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our Epistle" (III Thessalonians 2:15) and they became the guardians of this Divine treasure".

We should not believe that the value of these great saints is to be found exclusively in their writings. It was through their life and in many cases through their martyric death that the Apostolic tradition was passed on to the future generations of Christians. A careful study of their writings will lead the reader to understand that they are the product of those who lived the Life in Christ and that for this reason they are held in such high regard by the Church. These writings are an echo of the voice of the Holy Apostles and in many instances they offer us an opportunity to come to a better understanding of what we are taught in Holy Scripture.

The following passage from Eusebius', *The History of the Church* (37, 1), is significant in that it shows the great respect the early Church had for the successors to the Apostles:

"Among the shining lights of the period was Quadratus, who according to the written evidence was, like Philip's daughters, eminent for a prophetic gift. Besides them many others were well known at the time, belonging to the first stage in the Apostolic succession. These earnest disciples of great men built on the foundations of the Churches everywhere laid by the Apostles, spreading the message still further and sowing the saving seed of the Kingdom of Heaven far and wide through the entire world. ...As it is impossible for me to enumerate by name all who in the first succession from the Apostles became pastors or evangelists in the Churches of all the known world, I have naturally included in my account the individual stories only of those whose transmission of the Apostolic teaching can still be studied in their writings."

The writings of the disciples of the Apostles are of a pastoral character seeking to guide their readers along the Apostolic path. For this reason they are closely related in content and style to the Epistles of the

Apostles. Although they were authored in different regions of the Roman Empire, such as Rome, Syria and Asia Minor, nevertheless they present a unity in belief. Common to all these writings is their eschatological character. The second coming of Christ is regarded as imminent and the faithful had to live their lives in preparation for the Day of the Lord. On the other hand, the memory of the person of our Lord and Saviour is still vivid in their minds. These authors convey the belief that they are awaiting the return of the Lord Who until recently was with them.

Within these writings we will find recorded the struggles of the Apostolic Church. There were many enemies that lurked waiting for an opportunity to tear the faithful from the flock. The enemies of Christ were to be found both inside and outside the Church. On the outside there were the Romans and the Jews who in many ways sought to destroy the faith of these early Christians. On the other hand there was the danger that those within the Church would be infected with the deadly disease of the heresy of the Gnostics that at that time had reared its ugly head. Added to these enemies the early Church had also to confront various misunderstandings among the faithful that at times would shake the local Churches with the force of an earthquake.

The heresy of the Gnostics was difficult to combat because many of its adherents pretended to be Christians so that they could spread their heresy within the Church. They claimed to have a secret and superior knowledge that was contained in Gospels and other sacred writings not known to ordinary Christians. The fact that there was a great variety of Gnostics, each group teaching something different, also made it very difficult to combat this heresy. The struggle against Gnosticism was initiated by the Apostles themselves and we see their struggle continued by their successors. The myths and secret revelations that the Gnostics used to support their heresies were attacked vigorously by the Apostles as we see in Saint Paul's exhortation to Saint Timothy: "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of knowledge (gnosis in Greek) falsely so called" (1 Timothy 6:20). We can be sure that Saint Timothy gave the same advice to the Elder who succeeded him.

Within the writings of the disciples of the Apostles we find the immediate continuation of the New Testament. Here we experience the transmission of both the teachings of our Lord and Saviour and the Grace of Holy Pentecost from the Holy Apostles to the future generations of Christians. The Elders who succeeded the Holy Apostles faithfully passed on the Gospel as taught by the Holy Apostles. When we become familiar with the history of the Church of this postapostolic period and study the writings of the Disciples of the Apostles, we are led to understand better how the Holy Spirit worked and works within the Body of Christ. We see the continuation of Pentecost in the Church and are liberated from the Protestant mentality that effectively sees no Church in the years that followed the Holy Apostles. Furthermore, the apostolic nature of these writings aids us in the interpretation of Holy Scripture and brings us closer to the mind of the Holy Apostles.

The writings of the Disciples of the Holy Apostles are a significant aid in understanding the Old Testament that prepared the Israelites for the day of the Lord when He would bring forth a New Covenant. Within the Gospels we find the announcement that with the Nativity of Christ the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven was initiated, "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the Kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it" (Luke 16:16). Our Lord interpreted the Scriptures of the Old Testament and revealed to those who sought after the Kingdom of Heaven that these Scriptures spoke of Him and His Kingdom; "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad...Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:56 58). Elsewhere, speaking about

Himself, He said: "Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?" (Matthew 21:42).

This same interpretation of the Scriptures of the Old Testament was continued by the Apostles in their efforts to bring the Hebrew nation to accept their inheritance: "And he (St. Paul) went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8). The words of Saint Stephen to the Jews of Jerusalem at the time of his martyrdom are an excellent example of the Apostolic exegesis of the Old Testament. In the writings of the Disciples of the Apostles we find an unbroken continuation of manifesting the revelation of the Old Testament to show us that it was the Word of God leading and preparing His people for the day when they would see Him in the flesh.

These Holy Fathers of the Apostolic days lived within our Lord's shadow. Tradition tells us that Saint Polycarp, a disciple of Saint John the Theologian, was the child our Lord held in His arms: "And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:2). Saint Irenaeus was a disciple of Saint Polycarp and the spiritual experiences of one generation were passed on to the succeeding one. Reading the writings of these Holy Apostolic Fathers will profit us in two ways. We will benefit not only from the Grace that the Saint has received from God, but through the Saint we will be brought closer to the Apostles themselves.

At the time of his Martyrdom, St. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, confessed that he had been a Christian for eighty-six years. Our earliest testimony to St. Polycarp is contained in the letters that St. Ignatius addressed from Troas to the Church in Smyrna and to St. Polycarp. These letters give us a glimpse of the turmoil caused by that branch of Gnosticism known as Docetism. In this correspondence between the two Saints we see the love they had not only for their flock but for the whole Church. St. Ignatius was older than St. Polycarp and he sought to advise him about the dangers of these heretics and also aid him in instructing his flock.

When St. Ignatius told St. Polycarp; "I am guarding you in advance against beasts in human form, whom you must not only receive but, if possible, not even meet" (Smyrnaeans 4:1). When we examine the manner in which the Saints dealt with the heretics, we are amazed at their God-given wisdom. St. Ignatius does not advise the younger bishop and the Smyrnaeans simply to avoid the heretics but also asks that they "pray for them, if somehow they may repent" (Smyrnaeans 4:1).

We are presented with the image of two brothers labouring in their Father's fields. Both are anxious to bring forth the best harvest, helping each other in their individual tasks. St. Polycarp and St. Ignatius did not see themselves as rivals. There was no competition for who would have the greater diocese. They loved not only each other but the flock with which they had been entrusted. It is as if we are observing two brothers who not only love each other but equally love their brother's children. St. Ignatius says to St. Polycarp, "In everything I am devoted to you I and my bonds which you loved" (Polycarp 2:3).

Before us we see two brothers. One knows that he will not be in this world much longer and he asks his brother to look after his children who will soon be orphaned. St. Ignatius is comforted by the prayers and love of St. Polycarp. He is now free to look forward to that blessed day when, as he says, he "will attain to God" and "at the Resurrection I may be found to be your disciple" (Polycarp 7:2). How can anyone remain unmoved after beholding this image of love that does not seek its own? In one sentence St. Ignatius is

advising St. Polycarp; in the next he is praying to God to be found a worthy disciple of St. Polycarp. He then asks St. Polycarp to summon a council and elect a new bishop for the widowed see of Antioch: "A Christian has no authority of his own but spends his time for God. This is God's work, and yours as well when you complete it, for I am confident that by Grace you are ready to do the good deed appropriate to God. Since I know your fervour for the truth, I exhort you with only a few lines" (Polycarp 7:3).

The Christian love which bound together the local Churches is evident from what we know about St. Ignatius and St. Polycarp. It is clear from his letter to the Philippians and from his making a collection of St. Ignatius' correspondence (Philippians 13). Not long after St. Ignatius' departure from the Middle East, St. Polycarp wrote his letter to the Philippians in answer to several requests from them. One of these had to do with the collection of copies of St. Ignatius' letters. Another concerned an unfortunate incident that had recently occurred in the Church at Philippi. One of its presbyters, named Valens, and his wife, had become involved in certain dishonest money matters, and had been excommunicated. St. Polycarp desires the repentance of Valens and asks the Philippians not to "consider such people as enemies, but bring them back as weak and erring members" (Philippians II:4b).

Brief as it is, St. Polycarp's letter gives us the measure of the man. He was simple, humble and direct. There was nothing pretentious about him. His Greek is without the faintest touch of rhetoric. He was familiar with the Christian writings and his letter is a veritable mosaic of quotation and allusion to them. We find many passages that echo St. Clement of Rome. Modern critics are fond of calling him "unoriginal." It is true and this is because he is only concerned with the Faith as it was delivered by the Apostles.

He treats heresy uncompromisingly. Any deviation from the norm of "the Faith once delivered" provokes him to strong language. "Everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh is antichrist, and anyone who does not confess the testimony of the Cross is of the devil" (Philippians 7:1). St. Irenaeus reports that while in Rome St. Polycarp converted many heretics. On one occasion when St. Polycarp met Marcion, the arrogant heretic asked the Saint if he recognized him. St. Polycarp answered "Of course, I recognize the firstborn of Satan" (Against Heresies, III,3:4).

If he appears harsh and unyielding with offenders against the truth, St. Polycarp can be gentle and compassionate with human failings in the moral order. Reading the letter to the Philippians, we are made aware that St. Polycarp is following in the footsteps of St. Paul who struggled so much to strengthen the faith of these Christians. He is not referring to something that happened in times immemorial. He reminds them of the words of St. Paul, who "when he was among you, face to face, with men of that day, taught accurately and authoritatively the word of truth and who, when he was absent, wrote you letters" (Philippians 3:2).

The references to the order of widows is evidence of monasticism in the early Church. Widows were exhorted to "pray constantly" and were reminded that "they are an altar of God" (Philippians 4:2). St. Polycarp with his admonition concerning fasting shows us that fasting was a significant part of the struggle against the darkness during these first years of the Church. St. Polycarp often uses the words "perseverance" and "endurance" exhorting the Philippians to strive to reach their "due place beside the Lord" (Philippians 9:2).

St. Polycarp struggled all his life to nourish and protect the trust that our Saviour placed in his hands. He travelled to Rome and sought to solve a difference that had arisen in the Church about the proper date to

celebrate Pascha. He spent a long time with Anicetus, the Bishop of Rome. Though they were not able to find a solution to the problem, St. Polycarp left Rome on the best of terms. The bond of love was not broken.

When the Proconsul Statius Quadratus ordered St. Polycarp: "Swear and I shall release thee; revile Christ!" he replied: "For six and eighty years I have been serving Him, and He has done no wrong to me; how, then dare I blaspheme my King Who has saved me!" (9:3). When his torturers were on the point of fastening him with nails, he said: "Leave me just as I am. He who enables me to endure the fire will also enable me to remain on the pyre unbudging, without the security afforded by your nails" (13:3). "*The Martyrdom of St Polycarp*" is the oldest narrative of a martyrdom after that of St. Stephen. This document is also the earliest evidence we have of the significance of Holy Relics: "We afterwards took up his remains, more precious than costly stones, and interred them in a decent place. There the Lord will permit us, as far as possible, to assemble in rapturous joy and celebrate his martyrdom the day of his birth!" (18:2).

The prayer of St. Polycarp as he is about to be martyred reflects the prayers of those countless martyrs throughout the ages:

O Lord Almighty God, Father of Your beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ, through Whom we have received the perfect knowledge of you, God of angels and hosts and of all creation and of the whole race of saints who live under Your eyes! I bless You, because You have seen fit to bestow on me this day and this hour, that I may share, among the number of the martyrs, the cup of Your Anointed and rise to eternal life both in soul and in body, in virtue of the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be accepted among them in your sight today as a rich and pleasing sacrifice, such as You the true God that cannot utter a falsehood have prearranged, revealed in advance and consummated. And therefore I praise You for everything; I bless You, I glorify You through the eternal and Heavenly High Priest Jesus Christ, Your beloved Son, through Whom be glory to You together with Him and the Holy Spirit, both now and for the ages to come. Amen (14).

May the prayers of these Saints whose writings we have before us help us to receive the Light of Christ so that we may one day reach that joy that our Lord has prepared for those who love Him.