

Concerning the Tradition of Long Hair and Beards

The question of the appropriateness of long hair and beards is frequently put to traditional Orthodox clergy. A comprehensive article appeared in *Orthodox Life* concerning clergy dress in the J./F. 1991 issue. At this time we would like to address the topic of clergy appearance, i.e. hair and beards.

Anyone looking at photographs and portraits of clergy in Greece, Russia, Rumania, and other Orthodox countries taken in the early twentieth century will notice that almost without exception both the monastic and married clergy, priests and deacons, wore untrimmed beards and hair. Only after the First World War do we observe a new, modern look, cropped hair and beardless clergy. This fashion has been continued among some of the clergy to our own day. If one were to investigate this phenomenon in terms of a single clergyman whose life spanned the greater part of our century one would probably notice his style modernize from the first photographs up through the last.

There are two reasons given as an explanation for this change: it is said, "One must conform with fashion, we cannot look like peasants!" Or even more absurd, "My wife will not allow it!". Such reasoning is the "dogmatic" line of modernists who either desire to imitate contemporary fashion (if beards are "in," they wear beards, if beards are "out," they shave), or are ecumenically minded, not wanting to offend clergy in denominations outside the Orthodox Church. The other reason is based on a passage of Holy Scripture where Saint Paul states, *Both not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?* (I Cor. 11:14) In answer to the first justification, Orthodox tradition directly condemns Modernism and Ecumenism. It

is necessary however to deal in more detail with the argument that bases its premise on Holy Scripture.

Orthodox Christian piety begins in the Holy Tradition of the Old Testament. Our relationship to the Lord God, holiness, worship, and morality was formed in the ancient times of the Bible. At the time of the foundation of the priesthood the Lord gave the following commandments to the priests during periods of mourning, *And ye shall not shave your head for the dead [a pagan practice] with a baldness on the top; and they shall not shave their beard...* (Lev. 21:5), and to all men in general, *Ye shall not make a round cutting of the hair of your head, nor disfigure your beard* (Lev. 19:27). The significance of these commandments is to illustrate that the clergy are to devote themselves completely to serving the Lord. Laymen as well are called to a similar service though without the priestly functions. This outward appearance as a commandment was repeated in the law given to the Nazarene, *a razor shall not come upon his head, until the days be fulfilled which he vowed to the Lord: he shall be holy, cherishing the long hair of the head all the days of his vow to the Lord...* (Numbers 6:5-6).

The significance of the Nazarene vow was a sign of God's power resting on the person who made it. To cut off the hair meant to cut off God's power as in the example of Samson (see Judges 16:17-19). The strength of these pious observances, transmitted to the New Testament Church, were observed without question till our present times of willfulness and the apostasy resulting from it. Why, one might ask, do those Orthodox clergymen, while rejecting the above pious ordinances about hair, continue to observe the custom of granting various head coverings to clergy, a practice which also has its roots in the ancient ordinances of the Old Testament (cf. Ex. 24:4-6) and the tradition of the early Church (see Fusebius and Epiphanius of Cyprus concerning the miters worn by the Apostles John and

James)?

The Apostle Paul himself wore his hair long as we can conclude from the following passage where it is mentioned that "head bands," [Webmaster note: he then cites the Slavonic word using a special font. Consult the original article if needed.], and "towels" touched to his body were placed on the sick to heal them. The "head bands" indicate the length of his hair (in accordance with pious custom) which had to be tied back in order to keep it in place (cf. Acts 19:12). The historian Egezit writes that the Apostle James, the head of the church in Jerusalem, never cut his hair (*Christian Reading*, Feb. 1898, p.142, [in Russian]).

If the pious practice among clergy and laity in the Christian community was to follow the example of the Old Testament, how then are we to understand the words of Saint Paul to the Corinthians cited earlier (I Cor. 11:14)? Saint Paul in the cited passage is addressing men and woman who are praying (cf. I Cor. 11:3-4). His words in the above passages, as well as in other passages concerning head coverings (cf. I Cor. 11: 4-7), are directed to laymen, not clergy. In other passages Saint Paul makes an obvious distinction between the clerical and lay rank (cf. I Cor. 4:1, I Tim. 4:6, Col. 1:7, and others). He did not oppose the Old Testament ordinance in regard to hair and beards since, as we have noted above, he himself observed it, as did Our Lord Himself, Who is depicted on all occasions with long hair and beard as the Great High Priest of the new Christian priest hood.

In our passage noted previously, *Both not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?* (I Cor. 11:14) Saint Paul uses the Greek word for "hair." This particular word for hair designates hair as an ornament (the notion of length being only secondary and suggested), differing from [Gr.] *thrix* (the anatomical or physical term for hair). [1] Saint Paul's selection of words emphasizes his

criticism of laymen wearing their hair in a stylized fashion, which was contrary to pious Jewish and Christian love of modesty. We note the same approach to hair as that of Saint Paul in the 96th canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council where it states: "Those therefore who adorn and arrange their hair to the detriment of those who see them, that is by cunningly devised intertwinnings, and by this means put a bait in the way of unstable souls." [2]

In another source, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, we read the following concerning the Old Testament practice: "To an extent, hair style was a matter of fashion, at least among the upper classes, who were particularly open to foreign [pagan] influence. Nevertheless, long hair appears to have been the rule among the Hebrews (cf. Ezek. 8:3), both men and women" [3] (cf. Cant 4:1; 7:5). Thus we observe that cropped or stylized hair was the fashion among the pagans and not acceptable, especially among the Christian clergy from most ancient times up to our contemporary break with Holy Tradition. It is interesting to note that the fashion of cropped or stylized hair and shaved beards found its way into the Roman Catholic and Protestant worlds. So important had this pagan custom become for Roman clergy by the 11th Century that it was listed among the reasons for the Anathema pronounced by Cardinal Humbert on July 15, 1054 against Patriarch Michael in Constantinople which precipitated the Western Church's final falling away from the Orthodox Church: "While wearing beards and long hair you [Eastern Orthodox] reject the bond of brotherhood with the Roman clergy, since they shave and cut their hair." [!] [4]

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Endnotes

* *Webmaster note:* In the original article footnotes 2 and 3 were reversed in the text and footnotes.

1) Joseph Thayer D. D., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 354.

2) *The Rudder*, trans. by D. Cummings, p. 403.

- 3) A. C. Myers ed., *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, p.455
 - 4) N. N. Voekov, *The Church, Russia, and Rome*, (in Russian), p. 98.
- From *Orthodox Life*, Vol. 45, No. 5 (Sept-Oct 1995), pp. 41-43.