

# The Orthodox Church

## History

Almost two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to earth and founded the Church, through His Apostles and disciples, for the salvation of man. In the years which followed, the Apostles spread the Church and its teachings far; they founded many churches, all united in faith, worship, and the partaking of the *Mysteris* (or as they are called in the West, the Sacraments) of the Holy Church.

The churches founded by the Apostles themselves include the Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Rome. The Church of Constantinople was founded by St. Andrew, the Church of Alexandria by St. Mark, the Church of Antioch by St. Paul, the Church of Jerusalem by Sts. Peter and James, and the Church of Rome by Sts. Peter and Paul. Those founded in later years through the missionary activity of the first churches were the Churches of Sinai, Russia, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, and many others.

Each of these churches is independent in administration, but, with the exception of the Church of Rome, which finally separated from the others in the year 1054, all are united in faith, doctrine, Apostolic tradition, sacraments, liturgies, and services. Together they constitute and call themselves the Orthodox Church.

The teachings of the Church are derived from two sources: Holy Scripture, and Sacred Tradition, within which the Scriptures came to be, and within which they are interpreted. As written in the Gospel of St. John, *"And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world could not contain the books that should be written"* (John 21:20). Much teaching transmitted orally by the Apostles has come down to us in Sacred Tradition.

The word Orthodox literally means right teaching or right worship, being derived from two Greek words: *orthos* (right) and *doxa* (teaching or worship). As the false teachings and divisions multiplied in early Christian times, threatening to obscure the identity and purity of the Church, the term Orthodox quite logically came to be applied to it. The Orthodox Church carefully guards the truth against all error and schism, both to protect its flock and to glorify Christ whose body the Church is.

An astonishing number of religious groups today claim to be the successors of the early Church. A yardstick for truth is needed by which to compare what the Church originally believed and practiced with what these groups proclaim. Certainly we all have the right to believe whatever we choose. But it is also just good sense to be acquainted with the options before we make our final choices.

It is our hope that this outline of our beliefs will help introduce you to the Christianity espoused and instituted by the Apostles of Jesus Christ. This is the yardstick of truth by which our choices in Christianity need to be measured.

## Teaching

**God the Father** is the fountainhead of the Holy Trinity. The Scriptures reveal the one God is Three Persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - eternally sharing the one divine nature. From the Father the Son is begotten before all ages and all time (Psalm 2:7; II Corinthians 11:31). It is from the Father that the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds (John 15:26). God the Father created all things through the Son, in the Holy Spirit (Genesis 1 and 2; John 1:3; Job 33:4), and we are called to worship Him (John 4:23). The Father loves us and sent His Son to give us everlasting life (John 3:16).

**Jesus Christ** is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, eternally born of the Father. He became man, and thus He is at once fully God and fully man. His coming to earth was foretold in the Old Testament by the prophets.

Because Jesus Christ is at the heart of Christianity, the Orthodox Church has given more attention to knowing Him than to anything or anyone else.

In reciting the Nicene Creed, Orthodox Christians regularly affirm the historic faith concerning Jesus as they say, *"I believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father; by Whom all things were made; Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end."*

**Incarnation** refers to Jesus Christ coming *"in the flesh."* The eternal Son of God the Father assumed to Himself a complete human nature from the Virgin Mary. He was and is one divine Person, fully possessing from God the Father the entirety of the divine nature, and in His coming in the flesh fully possessing a human nature from the Virgin Mary. By His Incarnation, the Son forever possesses two natures in His one Person. The Son of God, limitless in His divine nature, voluntarily and willingly accepted limitation in His humanity in which He experienced hunger, thirst, fatigue - and ultimately, death. The Incarnation is indispensable to Christianity - there is no Christianity without it. The Scriptures record, *"Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God"* (I John 4:3). By His Incarnation, the Son of God redeemed human nature, a redemption made accessible to all who are joined to Him in His glorified humanity.

**The Holy Spirit** is one of the Persons of the Holy Trinity and is one in essence with the Father. Orthodox Christians repeatedly confess, *"And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified."* He is called the *"promise of the Father"* (Acts 1:4), given by Christ as a gift to the Church, to empower the Church for service to God (Acts 1:8), to place God's love in our hearts (Romans 5:5), and to impart spiritual gifts (I Corinthians 12:7-13) and virtues (Galatians 5:22, 23) for Christian life and witness. Orthodox Christians believe the biblical promise that the Holy Spirit is given through chrismation (anointing) at baptism (Acts 2:38). We are to grow in our experience of the Holy Spirit for the rest of our lives.

**Sin** literally means to "miss the mark." As St. Paul writes, *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). We sin when we pervert what God has given us as good, falling short of His purposes for us. Our sins separate us from God (Isaiah 59:1, 2), leaving us spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1). To save us, the Son of God assumed our humanity, and being without sin *"He condemned sin in the flesh"* (Romans 8:3). In His mercy, God forgives our sins when we confess them and turn from them, giving us strength to overcome sin in our lives. *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (I John 1:9).

**Salvation** is the divine gift through which men and women are delivered from sin and death, united to Christ, and brought into His eternal kingdom. Those who heard St. Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost asked what they must do to be saved. He answered, *"Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 2:38). Salvation begins with these three steps: 1) repent, 2) be baptized, and 3) receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. To repent means to change our mind about how we have been, to turn from our sin and to commit ourselves to Christ. To be baptized means to be born again by being joined into union with Christ. And to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit means to receive the Spirit Who empowers us to enter a new life in Christ, to be nurtured in the Church, and to be conformed to God's image.

Salvation demands faith in Jesus Christ. People cannot save themselves by their own good works. Salvation is *"faith working through love."* It is an ongoing, life-long process. Salvation is past tense in that, through the death and Resurrection of Christ, we have been saved. It is present tense, for we are *"being saved"* by our active

participation through faith in our union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is also future, for we must yet be saved at His glorious Second Coming.

**Baptism** is the way in which a person is actually united to Christ. The experience of salvation is initiated in the waters of baptism. The Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 6:1-6 that in baptism we experience Christ's death and resurrection. In it our sins are truly forgiven and we are energized by our union with Christ to live a holy life. The Orthodox Church practices baptism by full immersion.

Currently, some consider baptism to be only an "outward sign" of belief in Christ. This innovation has no historical or biblical precedent. Others reduce it to a mere perfunctory obedience to Christ's command (cf. Matthew 28:19-20). Still others, ignoring the Bible completely, reject baptism as a vital factor in salvation. Orthodoxy maintains that these contemporary innovations rob sincere people of the most important assurances that baptism provides - namely that they have been united to Christ and are part of His Church.

**New Birth** is receipt of new life. It is how we gain entrance into God's kingdom and His Church. Jesus said, *"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"* (John 3:5). From its beginning, the Church has taught that the *water* is the baptismal water and the *Spirit* is the Holy Spirit. The new birth occurs in baptism where we die with Christ, are buried with Him, and are raised with Him in the newness of His resurrection, being joined into union with Him in His glorified humanity (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4). The idea that being "born again" is a religious experience disassociated from baptism is a recent one and has no biblical basis whatsoever.

**Justification** is a word used in the Scriptures to mean that in Christ we are forgiven and actually made righteous in our living. Justification is not a once-for-all, instantaneous pronouncement guaranteeing eternal salvation, regardless of how wickedly a person might live from that point on. Neither is it merely a legal declaration that an unrighteous person is righteous. Rather, justification is a living, dynamic, day-to-day reality for the one who follows Christ. The Christian actively pursues a righteous life in the grace and power of God granted to all who continue to believe in Him.

**Sanctification** is being set apart for God. It involves us in the process of being cleansed and made holy by Christ in the Holy Spirit. We are called to be saints and to grow into the likeness of God. Having been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, we actively participate in sanctification. We cooperate with God, we work together with Him, that we may know Him, becoming by grace what He is by nature.

**The Bible** is the divinely inspired Word of God (II Timothy 3:16), and is a crucial part of God's self-revelation to the human race. The Old Testament tells the history of that revelation from Creation through the Age of the Prophets. The New Testament records the birth and life of Jesus as well as the writings of His Apostles. It also includes some of the history of the early Church and especially sets forth the Church's apostolic doctrine. Though these writings were read in the Churches from the time they first appeared, the earliest listings of all the New Testament books exactly as we know them today is found in the 33rd Canon of a local council held at Carthage in 318, and in a fragment of St. Athanasius of Alexandria's Festal Letter in 367. Both sources list all of the books of the New Testament without exception. A local council, probably held at Rome in 382, set forth a complete list of the canonical books of both the Old and the New Testaments. The Scriptures are at the very heart of Orthodox worship and devotion.

**Worship** is the rendering of praise, glory, and thanksgiving to God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All humanity is called to worship God. Worship is more than being in the "great-out-of-doors," or listening to a sermon, or singing a hymn. God can be known in His creation, but that does not constitute worship. As helpful as sermons may be, they can never offer a proper substitute for worship. Most prominent in Orthodox worship is the corporate praise, thanksgiving, and glory given to God by the Church. This worship is consummated in intimate communion with God at His Holy Table.

As is said in the Liturgy, "To Thee is due all glory, honor, and worship, to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen." In that worship we touch and experience His eternal kingdom, the age to come, and we join in adoration with the heavenly hosts. We experience the glory of fulfillment of all things in Christ, as truly all in all.

**Liturgy** is a term used to describe the shape or form of the Church's corporate worship of God. The word "liturgy" derives from a Greek word which means "the common work." All the biblical references to worship in heaven involve liturgy.

In the Old Testament, God ordered a liturgy, or specific pattern of worship. We find it described in detail in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. In the New Testament we find the Church carrying over the worship of Old Testament Israel as expressed in both the synagogue and the temple, adjusting them in keeping with their fulfillment in Christ. The Orthodox Liturgy, which developed over many centuries, still maintains that ancient shape of worship. The main elements in the Liturgy include hymns, the reading and proclamation of the Gospel, prayers, and the Eucharist itself. For Orthodox Christians, the expressions "The Liturgy" or "Divine Liturgy" refer to the eucharistic rite instituted by Christ Himself at the Last (Mystical) Supper.

**Eucharist** literally means *thanksgiving* and early became a synonym for Holy Communion. The Eucharist is the center of worship in the Orthodox Church. Because Jesus said of the bread and wine at the Last Supper, "*This is my body,*" "*This is my blood,*" and "*Do this in remembrance of Me*" (Luke 22:19-20), His followers believe - and do - nothing less. In the Eucharist, we partake mystically of Christ's Body and Blood, which impart His life and strength to us. The celebration of the Eucharist was a regular part of the Church's life from its beginning. Early Christians began calling the Eucharist "the medicine of immortality" because they recognized the great grace of God that was received in it.

**Communion of Saints:** When Christians depart this life, they remain a vital part of the Church, the body of Christ. They are alive in the Lord and "*registered in heaven*" (Hebrews 12:23). They worship God (Revelation 4:10) and inhabit His heavenly dwelling places (John 14:2). In the Eucharist we come "to the city of the living God" and join in communion with the saints in our worship of God (Hebrews 12:22). They are that "*great cloud of witnesses*" which surrounds us, and we seek to imitate them in running "*the race set before us*" (Hebrews 12:1). Rejecting or ignoring the communion of saints is a denial of the fact that those who have died in Christ are still part of his holy Church.

**Confession** is the open admission of known sins before God and man. It means literally "*to agree with*" God concerning our sins. St. James the Apostle admonishes us to confess our sins to God before the elders, or priests, as they are called today (James 5:16). We are also exhorted to confess our sins directly to God (I John 1:9). The Orthodox Church has always followed the New Testament practices of confession before a priest as well as private confession to the Lord. Confession is one of the most significant means of repenting, and receiving assurance that even our worst sins are truly forgiven. It is also one of our most powerful aids to forsaking and overcoming those sins.

**Discipline** may become necessary to maintain purity and holiness in the Church and to encourage repentance in those who have not responded to the admonition of brothers and sisters in Christ, and of the Church, to forsake their sins. Church discipline often centers around exclusion from receiving communion (excommunication). The New Testament records how St. Paul ordered the discipline of excommunication for an unrepentant man involved in sexual relations with his father's wife (I Corinthians 5:1-5). The Apostle John warned that we are not to receive into our homes those who willfully reject the truth of Christ (II John 9,10). Throughout her history, the Orthodox Church has exercised discipline when it is needed, with compassion, always to help bring a needed change of heart and to aid God's people to live pure and holy lives, never as a punishment.

**Mary** is called Theotokos, meaning "God-bearer" or "the Mother of God," because she bore the Son of God in her womb and from her He took His humanity. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, recognized this reality

when she called Mary, "*the Mother of my Lord*" (Luke 1:43). Mary said of herself, "*All generations shall call me blessed*" (Luke 1:48). So we, Orthodox, in our generation, call her blessed. Mary lived a chaste and holy life, and we honor her highly as the model of holiness, the first of the redeemed, the Mother of the new humanity in her Son. It is bewildering to Orthodox Christians that many professing Christians who claim to believe the Bible never call Mary blessed nor honor her who bore and raised God the Son in His human flesh.

**Prayer To The Saints** is encouraged by the Orthodox Church. Why? Because physical death is not a defeat for a Christian. It is a glorious passage into heaven. The Christian does not cease to be a part of the Church at death. God forbid! Nor is he set aside, idle until the day of judgement.

The True Church is composed of all who are in Christ - in heaven and on earth. It is not limited in membership to those presently alive. Those in heaven with Christ are alive, in communion with God, worshipping God, doing their part in the body of Christ. They actively pray to God for all those in the Church - and perhaps, indeed, for the whole world (Ephesians 6:8; Revelation 8:3). So we pray to the saints who have departed this life, seeking their prayers, even as we ask Christian friends on earth to pray for us.

**Apostolic Succession** has been a watershed issue since the second century, not as a mere dogma, but as crucial to the preservation of the faith. Certain false teachers would appear, insisting they were authoritative representatives of the Christian Church. Claiming authority from God by appealing to special revelations, some were even inventing lineages of teachers supposedly going back to Christ or the Apostles. In response, the early Church insisted there was an authoritative apostolic succession passed down from generation to generation. They recorded that actual lineage, showing how its clergy were ordained by those chosen by the successors of the Apostles chosen by Christ Himself.

Apostolic succession is an indispensable factor in preserving Church unity. Those in the succession are accountable to it, and are responsible to ensure all teaching and practice in the Church is in keeping with Her apostolic foundations. Mere personal conviction that one's teaching is correct can never be considered adequate proof of accuracy. Today, critics of apostolic succession are those who stand outside that historic succession and seek a self-identity with the early Church only. The burgeoning number of denominations in the world can be accounted for in large measure by a rejection of apostolic succession.

**Councils of the Church:** A monumental conflict (recorded in Acts 15) arose in the early Church over legalism, the keeping of Jewish laws by the Christians, as means of salvation. "*So the apostles and elders came together [in council] to consider the matter*" (Acts 15:6). This council, held in Jerusalem, set the pattern for the subsequent calling of councils to settle problems. There have been hundreds of such councils - local and regional - over the centuries of the history of the Church, and seven councils specifically designated *Ecumenical*, that is, considered to apply to the whole Church. Aware that God has spoken through the Ecumenical Councils, the Orthodox Church looks particularly to them for authoritative teaching in regard to the faith and practice of the Church.

**Creed** comes from the Latin *credo*, "I believe." From the earliest days of the Church, creeds have been living confessions of what Christians believe and not simply formal, academic, Church pronouncements. Such confessions of faith appear as early as the New Testament, where, for example, St. Paul quotes a creed to remind Timothy, "*God...was revealed in the flesh*" (I Timothy 3:16). The creeds were approved by Church councils, usually to give a concise statement of the truth in the face of the invasion of heresy.

The most important creed in Christendom is the Nicene Creed, the product of two Ecumenical Councils in the fourth century. Delineated in the midst of a life-and-death controversy, it contains the essence of New Testament teaching about the Holy Trinity, guarding that life-giving truth against those who would change the very nature of God and reduce Jesus Christ to a created being, rather than God in the flesh. The creeds give us a sure interpretation of the Scriptures against those who would distort them to support their own religious

schemes. Called the "symbol of faith" and confessed in many of the services of the Church, the Nicene Creed constantly reminds the Orthodox Christian of what he personally believes, keeping his faith on track.

**Spiritual Gifts:** When the young Church was getting under way, God poured out His Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and their followers, giving them spiritual gifts to build up the Church and to serve each other. Among the specific gifts of the Spirit mentioned in the New Testament are: apostleship, prophecy, evangelism, pastoring, teaching, healing, helps, administrations, knowledge, wisdom, tongues, interpretation of tongues. These and other spiritual gifts are recognized in the Orthodox Church. The need for them varies with the times. The gifts of the Spirit are most in evidence in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church.

**Second Coming:** Amid the current speculation in some corners of Christendom surrounding the Second Coming of Christ and how it may come to pass, it is comforting to know that the beliefs of the Orthodox Church are basic. Orthodox Christians confess with conviction that Jesus Christ "will come again to judge the living and the dead," and that His "kingdom will have no end." Orthodox preaching does not attempt to predict God's prophetic schedule, but to encourage Christian people to have their lives in order so that they might be confident before Him when He comes (I John 2:28).

**Heaven** is the place of God's throne, beyond time and space. It is the abode of God's angels, as well as of the saints who have passed from this life. We pray, "*Our Father, who art in heaven.*" Though Christians live in this world, they belong to the kingdom of heaven, and that kingdom is their true home. But heaven is not only for the future. Neither is it some distant place billions of light years away in a nebulous "great beyond." For the Orthodox, heaven is part of Christian life and worship. The very architecture of an Orthodox Church building is designed so that the building itself participates in the reality of heaven. The Eucharist is heavenly worship, heaven on earth. St. Paul teaches that we are raised up with Christ in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6), "*fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God*" (Ephesians 2:19). At the end of the age, a new heaven and a new earth will be revealed (Revelation 21:1).

**Hell**, unpopular as it is to modern people, is real. The Orthodox Church understands hell as a place of eternal torment for those who willfully reject the grace of God. Our Lord once said, "If your hand makes you sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched - where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:44-45). He challenged the religious hypocrites with the question: "How can you escape the condemnation of hell?" (Matthew 23:33). His answer is, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17). There is a day of judgement coming, and there is a place of punishment for those who have hardened their hearts against God. It does make a difference how we will live this life. Those who of their own free will reject the grace and mercy of God must forever bear the consequences of that choice.

**Creation:** Orthodox Christians confess God as Creator of heaven and earth (Genesis 1:1, the Nicene Creed). Creation did not just come into existence by itself. God made it all. "*By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God*" (Hebrews 11:3). Orthodox Christians do not believe the Bible to be a science textbook on creation, as some mistakenly maintain, but rather to be God's revelation of Himself and His salvation. Also, we do not view science textbooks, helpful though they may be, as God's revelation. They may contain both known facts and speculative theory, but they are not infallible. Orthodox Christians refuse to build an unnecessary and artificial wall between science and the Christian faith. Rather, they understand honest scientific investigation as a potential encouragement to faith, for all truth is from God.

## **Some Contemporary Moral Questions**

**Ecumenism:** One has to welcome rejection of the age-old separation of Christians, but only if this is done with the objective of disclosing the treasures of Orthodoxy, to bring those who have fallen away from the Church back to unity in Orthodoxy.

The attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad toward ecumenism has always been of a sober, strictly Orthodox character, in accordance with the teachings of the Holy Fathers. The outlook of our Church was particularly well defined in a statement issued on December 31, 1931, when the Russian Church Abroad appointed its representative to the Committee for the Continuation of the World Conference on Faith and Order: "Preserving the Faith in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Synod of Bishops confesses that the Church has never been divided. The issue lies only in who does and who does not belong to Her. Moreover, the Synod of Bishops fervently welcomes all attempts by the heterodox to study the teaching of Christ about the Church, in the hope that through such investigation, especially with the participation of representatives of the Holy Orthodox Church, they will eventually arrive at the conviction that the Orthodox Church, which is the 'pillar and the ground of truth' (I Timothy 3:15), has fully and without any adulteration retained the doctrine taught by Christ the Savior to His disciples."

The Ecumenical Movement takes as its guiding principle the Protestant view of the Church. Protestants hold that there is no single truth and no single visible Church, but that each of the many Christian denominations possesses a particle of the truth, and that these relative truths can, by means of dialogue, lead to the One Truth and the One Church. One of the ways of attaining this unity, as perceived by the ideologues of the Ecumenical Movement, is the holding of joint prayers and religious services, so that in time communion from a common chalice (intercommunion) may be achieved.

Orthodoxy can never accept such an ecclesiology. It believes and bears witness that there is no need to assemble particles of the truth, since the Orthodox Church is the repository of the fullness of the Truth, which was given to Her on the day of Holy Pentecost.

For the Orthodox, joint prayer and Communion at the liturgy is an expression of an already existing unity within the bounds of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. St. Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd century) concisely expressed this: "Our Faith is in accord with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist confirms our Faith." The Holy Fathers of the Church teach that the members of the Church comprise the Church - the Body of Christ - because in the Eucharist they partake of the Body and the Blood of Christ. Outside the Eucharist and Communion there is no Church. Communing together would be an admission that all those receiving Communion belong to the One Apostolic Church, whereas the realities of Christian history even of our time unfortunately point out the deep dogmatic and ecclesiastical division of the Christian world.

**Abortion** is the termination of a pregnancy by taking the life of the baby before it comes to full term. The Scriptures teach, "*For You have formed my inward parts; You have covered me in my mother's womb*" (Jeremiah 1:5). When a child is aborted, a human being is killed. For the Christian, all children, born or unborn, are precious in God's sight, and are a gift from Him. Even in the rare case in which a choice must be made between the life of the child and the life of the mother, decision-making must be based upon the recognition that the lives of two human persons are at stake.

**Cults:** The word "cult" has several meanings. The usage to which we refer designates a group of people who focus on a religious doctrine which deviates from the tradition of the historic Church as revealed by Jesus Christ, established by His Apostles, and guarded by the seven Ecumenical Councils of the Church. A cult usually forms around an individual who proclaims a heresy as truth. The error itself assures the separation of the group from historic Christianity. Many cults claim the Bible as their basis, but they alter the historic

interpretation of Scripture to persist in their own idea. Cults may do some things that are good (e.g. care for the poor, emphasize the family) and thus at least appear, to casual observers, to be part of true Christianity. St. Paul's counsel on cults is: *"From such withdraw yourself"* (I Timothy 6:5). The danger of the cult is that it removes those in it from the life of Christ and the Church, where the blessings and grace of God are found. All cults die; the Church lives on.

**Marriage** in the Orthodox Church is forever. It is not reduced to an exchange of vows or the establishment of a legal contract between the bride and groom. On the contrary, it is God joining a man and a woman into *one flesh* in a sense similar to the Church being joined to Christ (Ephesians 5:31, 32). The success of marriage cannot depend on mutual human promises, but on the promises and blessing of God. In the Orthodox marriage rite, the bride and groom offer their lives to Christ and to each other - literally as crowned martyrs.

**Divorce:** While extending love and mercy to those who have divorced, the Orthodox Church is grieved by the tragedy and pain divorce causes. Though marriage is understood as a sacrament, and thus accomplished by the grace of God, and permanent, the Church does not deal with divorce legalistically, but with compassion. After appropriate pastoral counsel, divorce may be allowed when avenues for reconciliation have been exhausted. If there is a remarriage, the service for a second marriage includes prayers offering repentance for the earlier divorce, asking God's forgiveness, and protection for the new union.

**Pre-Marital Sex:** The Orthodox Christian faith holds to the biblical teaching that sexual intercourse is reserved for marriage. Sex is a gift of God to be fully enjoyed and experienced only within marriage. The marriage bed is to be kept *"pure and undefiled"* (Hebrews 13:4), and men and women are called to remain celibate outside of marriage. Our sexuality, like many other things about us human beings, affects our relationship with God, ourselves, and others. It may be employed as a means of glorifying God and fulfilling His image in us, or it may be perverted and abused as an instrument of sin, causing great damage to others and us. St. Paul writes, *"Do you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body"* (I Corinthians 6:19, 20).

**Homosexuality:** Although there is much more open discussion about homosexuality in the twentieth century than in previous times, there is definite reference to it in ancient writings. The frequently used synonym, sodomy, comes from the apparent homosexual activity among men of Sodom (Genesis 19), and the severity of strictures set forth in the Holiness Code, with nothing short of the death penalty being imposed, suggested that the need for discipline must have been great, (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13). The Old Testament understood normal sexual intercourse as not only a way of expressing a loving relationship, but also as a divinely appointed way of procreating new life.

In the New Testament, St. Paul condemns male prostitutes and homosexuals (I Corinthians 6:9-11). In the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans (Romans 1:24-32), he also judges it as unnatural. Homosexuals are included elsewhere among the immoral persons who, St. Paul says, deserve judgement by God (I Timothy 1:10). There is no example in all of the New Testament of approval, acceptance, or even tolerance of homosexuality.

Throughout Christian history, this disapproval has continued to be the case. In the patristic era freedom from homosexuality was seen as a mark of the Christian's ethical superiority to the wanton way of life that converts had left. Patristic thinking, like scriptural references, was directed to the practice of homosexuality, not to the desire itself. The Orthodox Church does not condemn the person who keeps this propensity in check, and ministers to homosexuals who wish to struggle with this inclination.

## **The Church Building**

Orthodox churches generally take one of several shapes that have a particular mystical significance. The most common shape is an oblong or rectangular shape, imitating the form of a ship. As a ship, under the guidance of



a master helmsman conveys people through the stormy seas to a calm harbor, so the Church, guided by Christ, carries us unharmed across the stormy seas of sin and strife to the peaceful haven of the Kingdom of Heaven. Churches are also frequently built in the form of a Cross to proclaim that we are saved through faith in the Crucified Christ, for Whom Christians are prepared to suffer all things.

Almost always Orthodox churches are oriented East - West, with the main entrance of the building at the west end. This symbolizes the entrance of the worshipper from the darkness of sin (the west) into the light of truth (the east).

On the roof of Orthodox churches are usually found one or more cupolas (domes with rounded or pointed roofs). A peculiar feature of Russian Orthodox churches is the presence of onion-shaped domes on top of the cupolas. This shape reminds believers of the flame of a candle, burning upward to heaven.

Every cupola is crowned with a Cross, the instrument of our salvation. In the Russian Church, the most common form is the so-called three-bar Cross, consisting of the usual crossbeam, a shorter crossbeam above that and another, slanted, crossbeam below. Symbolically, the three bars represent, from the top, the signboard on which was written, in Hebrew, Latin and Greek, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews (John 19:19); the main crossbeam, to which the hands of Jesus were nailed; the lower portion, to which His feet were nailed.

The three-bar representation existed in Christian art from the very early times in Byzantium, although usually without the bottom bar slanted, which is particularly Russian. The origin of this slanted footbar is not known, but in the symbolism of the Russian Church, the most common explanation is that it is pointing upward to Paradise for the Good Thief on Jesus' right and downward to Hades for the thief on His left (Luke 23).

### **Internal Arrangement**

The interior of an Orthodox church is divided into several parts. The first is the Narthex (Vestibule; Lity - Greek; Pritvor - Russian), in ancient times a large, spacious place, wherein the Catechumens received instruction while preparing for Baptism, and also where Penitents excluded from Holy Communion stood.

The main body of the church is the Nave, separated from the Sanctuary (Altar) by an icon screen with doors, called the Iconostasis (Icon stand). The walls of the Nave are decorated with Icons and murals, before many of which are hanging lit lamps (lampadas). Especially noticeable in traditional Orthodox churches is the absence of any pews. The Fathers of the Church deemed it disrespectful for anyone to sit during the Divine services (except at certain explicit moments of instruction or Psalm reading) and the open spaces were seen to be especially conducive to the many bows and prostrations typical of Orthodox worship.

At the extreme Eastern end of the church is found the Altar (or Sanctuary), with two rooms - the Sacristy and the Vestry - at either side, separated from the Nave by the Iconostasis.

### **Holy Icons - Theology in Color**

One of the first things that strikes a non-Orthodox visitor to an Orthodox church is the prominent place assigned to Holy Icons. The Iconostasis is covered with them, while others are placed in prominent places throughout the church building. The walls and ceiling are covered with iconic murals. The Orthodox faithful prostrate themselves before Icons, kiss them, and burn candles before them. They are censed by the clergy and carried in processions. Considering the obvious importance of the Holy Icons, then, questions may certainly be raised concerning them: What do these gestures and actions mean? What is the significance of Icons? Are they not idols or the like, prohibited by the Old Testament?

Icons have been used for prayer from the first centuries of Christianity. Sacred Tradition tells us, for example, of the existence of an Icon of the Savior during His lifetime (the "Icon-Made-Without-Hands") and of Icons of the Most Holy Theotokos immediately after Him. Sacred Tradition witnesses that the Orthodox Church had a clear understanding of the importance of Icons right from the beginning; and this understanding never changed, for it is derived from the teachings concerning the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity - Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The use of Icons is grounded in the very essence of Christianity, since Christianity is the revelation by God-Man not only of the Word of God, but also of the Image of God; for, as St. John the Evangelist tells us, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

"No one has ever seen God; only the Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known" (John 1:18), the Evangelist proclaims. That is, He has revealed the Image or Icon of God. For being the brightness of [God's] glory, and the express image of [God's] person (Hebrews 1:3), the Word of God in the Incarnation revealed to the world, in His own Divinity, the Image of the Father. When St. Philip asks Jesus, Lord, show us the Father, He answered him: Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father (John 14:8-9). Thus as the Son is in the bosom of the Father, likewise after the Incarnation He is consubstantial with the Father, according to His divinity being the Father's Image, equal in honor to Him.

The truth expressed above, which is revealed in Christianity, thus forms the foundations of Christian pictorial art. The Image (or Icon) not only does not contradict the essence of Christianity, but is unfailingly connected with it; and this is the foundation of the tradition that from the very beginning the Good News was brought to the world by the Church both in word and image.

St. John of Damascus, an eighth-century Father of the Church, who wrote at the height of the iconoclastic (anti-icon) controversies in the Church, explains that, because the Word of God became flesh (John 1:14), we are no longer in our infancy; we have grown up, we have been given by God the power of discrimination and we know what can be depicted and what is indescribable. Since the Second Person of the Holy Trinity appeared to us in the flesh, we can portray Him and reproduce for contemplation Him Who has condescended to be seen. We can confidently represent God the Invisible - not as an invisible being, but as one Who has made Himself visible for our sake by sharing in our flesh and blood.

Holy Icons developed side by side with the Divine Services and, like the Services, expressed the teaching of the Church in conformity with the word of Holy Scripture. Following the teaching of the 7th Ecumenical Council, the Icon is seen not as simple art, but that there is a complete correspondence of the Icon to Holy Scripture, "for if the Icon is shown by Holy Scripture, Holy Scripture is made incontestably clear by the Icon" (Acts of the 7th Ecumenical Council, 6).

As the word of Holy Scripture is an image, so the image is also a word, for, according to St. Basil the Great (379 AD):

By depicting the divine, we are not making ourselves similar to idolaters; for it is not the material symbol that we are worshipping, but the Creator, Who became corporeal for our sake and assumed our body in order that through it He might save mankind. We also venerate the material objects through which our salvation is effected - the blessed wood of the Cross, the Holy Gospel, Holy Relics of Saints, and, above all, the Most-Pure Body and Blood of Christ, which have grace-bestowing properties and Divine Power. Orthodox Christians do not venerate an Icon of Christ because of the nature of the wood or the paint, but rather we venerate the inanimate image of Christ with the intention of worshipping Christ Himself as God Incarnate through it.

We kiss an Icon of the Blessed Virgin as the Mother of the Son of God, just as we kiss the Icons of the Saints as God's friends who struggled against sin, imitating Christ by shedding their blood for Him and following in His footsteps. Saints are venerated as those who were glorified by God and who became, with God's help, terrible to the Enemy, and benefactors to those advancing in the faith - but not as gods and benefactors themselves. They

were the servants of God who were given boldness of spirit in return for their love of Him. We gaze on the depiction of their exploits and sufferings so as to sanctify ourselves through them and to spur ourselves on to zealous emulation.

The Icons of the Saints act as a meeting point between the living members of the Church [Militant] on earth and the Saints who have passed on to the Church [Triumphant] in Heaven. The Saints depicted on the Icons are not remote, legendary figures from the past, but contemporary, personal friends. As meeting points between Heaven and earth, the Icons of Christ, His Mother, the Angels and Saints constantly remind the faithful of the invisible presence of the whole company of Heaven; they visibly express the idea of Heaven on earth.

## **The Iconostasis**

The most prominent feature of an Orthodox church is the Iconostasis, consisting of one or more rows of Icons and broken by a set of doors in the center (the Holy or Royal Doors) and a door at each side (the Deacon's Doors).

A typical Iconostasis consists of one or more tiers (rows) of Icons. At the center of the first, or lowest, tier, are the Royal Doors, on which are placed Icons of the four Evangelists who announced to the world Good News - the Gospel - of the Savior. At the center of the Royal Doors is an Icon of the Annunciation to the Most Holy Theotokos (the Mother of God), since this event was the prelude or beginning of our salvation. Over the Royal Doors is placed an Icon of the Mystical Supper (the Last Supper) since, in the Altar beyond, the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist is celebrated in remembrance of the Savior Who instituted the Sacrament at the Last Supper.

At either side of the Royal Doors are always placed an Icon of the Savior (to the right) and of the Most Holy Theotokos (to the left). On either side of the Royal Doors, beyond the Icons of the Lord and His Mother, are two doors - Deacon's Doors - upon which are depicted either saintly Deacons or Angels - who minister always at the heavenly Altar, just as do the earthly deacons during the Divine services. In our church, on the left Deacon door, is placed an Icon of the Good Thief, the first to enter Paradise. Other Icons of particular local significance are also placed in the first row of the Iconostasis, for which reason the lower tier is often called the Local Icons.

Ascending above the Local Icons are three more tiers of Icons. Immediately above the Icon of the Mystical Supper is placed an Icon of the Savior in royal garments, flanked by His Mother and John the Forerunner and an array of other saints, included the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, the Apostles Peter and Paul and bishop saints and martyrs. This tier is called the Deisis (prayer), since all in this tier are turned to Christ in supplication. The tier immediately above this contains Icons of the principal Feasts of the Lord and of the Theotokos.

The top row contains the Old Testament Prophets - in the midst of which is the Birthgiver of God with the Divine Infant Who is from everlasting and Who was their hope, their consolation, and the subject of their prophecies. At the very top of the Iconostasis is placed the Holy Cross, upon which the Lord was crucified, effecting thereby our salvation.

## **The Altar**

The Altar, which lies beyond the Iconostasis, is set aside for those who perform the Divine services, and normally persons not consecrated to the service of the Church are not permitted to enter. Occupying the central place in the Altar is the Holy Table, which represents the Throne of God, with the Lord Himself invisibly present there. It also represents the Tomb of Christ, since His Body (the Holy Gifts) is placed there. The Holy Table is square in shape and is draped by two coverings. The first, inner covering, is of white linen, representing the winding-sheet in which the Body of Christ was wrapped. The outer cloth is made of rich and bright material, representing the glory of God's throne. Both cloths cover the Holy Table to the ground.

## A Final Note

These, briefly, are some of the characteristics of the Orthodox Church. The Church is One, since our Lord Jesus Christ founded only one Church. It is Holy through its sanctification by its Founder and Head, Jesus Christ, and through the operation of the Holy Spirit. It is Catholic, since it is universal, and knows no limitations of place or time. It is Apostolic since it was founded by the Holy Apostles and has maintained unbroken the apostolic succession through the Laying-on of Hands. This is the Orthodox Church - the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

For those desiring to learn more about the Holy Orthodox Church we recommend the following literature:

1. *The Orthodox Church* by Timothy Ware. A clear, detailed introduction to the Orthodox Church, written for the non-Orthodox, as well as for Orthodox believers. Part One describes the history of the Eastern Church over the last 2,000 years and particularly its life in 20th century Russia. Part Two explains the beliefs and worship of the Orthodox today.
2. *The Church Is One* by Alexei Khomiakov. An excellent essay on the nature and faith of the Orthodox Church.
3. *The Faith We Hold* by Archbishop Paul of Finland. This book was written "to describe Orthodoxy from the inside to those outside." It deals with the Orthodox faith in its most basic elements in three main sections: doctrinal, liturgical, and spiritual, revealing with remarkable simplicity and directness its message of salvation for all mankind.
4. *How Does Orthodoxy Differ from the Western Denominations?* by Metropolitan Anthony, founder of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. Translated from the Russian, this brochure is an excellent treatment of the spiritual and moral differences between East and West caused by the divergent theologies which developed.
5. *Orthodox Spirituality* by a monk of the Eastern Church. This classic covers the historical development of Orthodox spirituality, its essentials, the Baptizing Christ and Christ our Passover.

These and other fine books on the Orthodox Church may be ordered from the following sources:

1. Holy Trinity Monastery Bookstore Jordanville, New York 13361, (315) 858-0940
2. Light & Life Publishing Co. 4818 Park Glen Rd. Minneapolis, MN 55416, (612) 925-3888

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For more information on the Orthodox Church, please contact:

St. Vladimir Orthodox Church  
Ann Arbor, MI  
(734) 475-4590  
[www.stvladimiraami.org](http://www.stvladimiraami.org)  
[stvladimiraami@yahoo.com](mailto:stvladimiraami@yahoo.com)