

What is Orthodoxy?

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ON THE FIRST SUNDAY of the Great Fast our Church celebrates the triumph of Orthodoxy, the victory of true Christian teaching over all perversions and distortions thereof—heresies and false teachings. On the second Sunday of the Great Fast it is as though this triumph of Orthodoxy is repeated and deepened in connection with the celebration of the memory of one of the greatest pillars of Orthodoxy, the hierarch Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica, who by his grace-bearing eloquence and the example of his highly ascetic private life put to shame the teachers of falsehood who dared reject the very essence of Orthodoxy, the podvig of prayer and fasting, which enlightens the human mind with the light of grace and makes it a communicant of the divine glory.

Alas! How few people there are in our times, even among the educated, and at times even among contemporary “theologians” and those in the ranks of the clergy, who understand correctly what Orthodoxy is and wherein its essence lies. They approach this question in an utterly external, formal manner and resolve it too primitively, even naively, overlooking its depths completely and not at all seeing the fullness of its spiritual contents.

The superficial opinion of the majority notwithstanding, Orthodoxy is not merely another of the many “Christian confessions” now in existence, or as it is expressed here in America “denominations.” Orthodoxy is the true, undistorted, unperverted by any human sophistry or invention, genuine teaching of Christ in all its purity and fullness—the teaching of faith and piety which is life according to the Faith.

Orthodoxy is not only the sum total of dogmas accepted as true in a purely formal manner. It is not only theory, but practice; it is not only right Faith, but a life which agrees in everything with this Faith. The true Orthodox Christian is not only he who thinks in an Orthodox manner, but who feels according to Orthodoxy and lives Orthodoxy, who strives to embody the true Orthodox teaching of Christ in his life.

*“The words that I speak unto you are spirit and life”*—thus the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to His disciples of His divine teaching (Jn. 6:63). Consequently, the teaching of Christ is not only abstract theory merely, cut off from life, but spirit and life. Therefore, only he who thinks Orthodoxy, feels Orthodoxy and lives Orthodoxy can be considered Orthodox in actuality.

At the same time one must realize and remember that Orthodoxy is not only and always that which is officially called “Orthodox,” for in our false and evil times the appearance everywhere of pseudo-Orthodoxy which raises its head and is established in the world is an extremely grievous but, regrettably, an already unquestionable fact. This false Orthodoxy strives fiercely to substitute itself for true Orthodoxy, as in his time Antichrist will strive to supplant and replace Christ with himself.

Orthodoxy is not merely some type of purely earthly organization which is headed by patriarchs, bishops and priests who hold the ministry in the Church which officially is called “Orthodox.” Orthodoxy is the mystical “Body of Christ,” the Head of which is Christ Himself (see Eph. 1:22-23 and Col. 1:18, 24 et seq.), and its composition includes not only priests but all who truly believe in Christ, who have entered in a lawful way through Holy Baptism into the Church He founded, those living upon the earth and those who

have died in the Faith and in piety.

The Orthodox Church is not any kind of “monopoly” or “business” of the clergy as think the ignorant and those alien to the spirit of the Church. It is not the patrimony of this or that hierarch or priest. It is the close-knit spiritual union of all who truly believe in Christ, who strive in a holy manner to keep the commandments of Christ with the sole aim of inheriting that eternal blessedness which Christ the Savior has prepared for us, and if they sin out of weakness, they sincerely repent and strive *“to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance”* (St. Luke 3:8).

The Church, it is true, may not be removed completely from the world, for people enter her who are still living on the earth, and therefore the “earthly” element in her composition and external organization is unavoidable; yet the less of this “earthly” element there is, the better it will be for her eternal goals. In any case this “earthly” element should not obscure or suppress the purely spiritual element—the matter of salvation of the soul unto eternal life—for the sake of which the Church was both founded and exists.

The first and fundamental criterion, which we may use as a guide to distinguish the True Church of Christ from the false Churches (of which there are now so many!), is the fact that it has preserved the Truth intact, undistorted by human sophistries, for according to the Word of God, *“the Church is the pillar and ground of truth”* (I Tim. 3:15), and therefore in her there can be no falsehood. Any which in its name officially proclaims or confirms any falsehood is already not the Church. Not only the higher servants of the Church, but the ranks of believing laymen must shun every falsehood, remembering the admonition of the Apostle: *“Wherefore, putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor”* (Eph. 4:25), or *“Lie not to one another”* (Col.

3:9). Christians must always remember that according to the words of Christ the Savior, lying is from the devil, who *“is a liar, and the father of lies”* (St. John 8:44). And so, where there is falsehood there is not the True Orthodox Church of Christ! There is instead a false church which the holy visionary vividly and clearly depicted in his Apocalypse as *“a great whore that sitteth upon many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication”* (Rev. 17:1-2).

Even in the Old Testament from the prophets of God we see that unfaithfulness to the True God frequently was represented by the image of adultery (see, for example, Ezek. 16:8-58, or 23:2-49). And it is terrifying for us not only to speak, but even to think that in our insane days we would have to observe not a few attempts to turn the very Church of Christ into a “brothel,”—and this not only in the above figurative sense, but also in the literal sense of this word, when it is so easy to justify oneself, fornication and every impurity are not even considered sins! We saw an example of this in the so-called “Living Churchmen” and “renovationists” in our unfortunate homeland after the Revolution, and now in the person of all the contemporary “modernists” who strive to lighten the easy yoke of Christ (St. Matt. 11:30) for themselves and betray the entire ascetic structure of our Holy Church, legalizing every transgression and moral impurity. To speak here about Orthodoxy, of course, is in no way proper despite the fact that the dogmas of the Faith remain untouched and unharmed!

True Orthodoxy, on the other hand, is alien to every dead formalism. In it there is no blind adherence to the “letter of the law,” for it is “spirit and life.” Where, from an external and purely formal point of view, everything seems quite correct and strictly legal, this does not mean that it is so in reality. In Orthodoxy there can be no place for Jesuitical casuistry; the favorite dictum of worldly jurists cannot be

applied: “One may not trample upon the law—one must go around it.”

Orthodoxy is the one and only Truth, the pure Truth, without any admixture or the least shadow of falsehood, lie, evil or fraud.

The most essential thing in Orthodoxy is the podvig of prayer and fasting which the Church particularly extols during the second week of the Great Fast as the double-edged “wondrous sword” by which we strike the enemies of our salvation—the dark demonic power. It is through this podvig that our soul is illumined with grace-bearing divine light, as teaches St. Gregory Palamas, who is triumphantly honored by the Holy Church on the second Sunday of the Great Fast. Glorifying his sacred memory, the Church calls this wondrous hierarch “the preacher of grace,” “the beacon of the Light,” “the preacher of the divine light,” “an immovable pillar for the Church.”

Christ the Savior Himself stressed the great significance of the podvig of prayer and fasting when His disciples found themselves unable to cast out demons from an unfortunate boy who was possessed. He told them clearly, “*This kind (of demon) goeth not out save by prayer and fasting*” (St. Matt. 17:21). Interpreting this passage in the gospel narrative, our great patristic theologian-ascetic, the hierarch Theophan the Recluse asks, “May we think that where there is no prayer and fasting, there is a demon already?” And he replies, “We may. Demons, when entering into a person do not always betray their entry, but hide themselves, secretly teaching their hosts every evil and to turn aside from every good. That person may be convinced that he is doing everything himself, while he is only carrying out the will of his enemy. Only take up prayer and fasting and the enemy will immediately leave and will wait elsewhere for an opportunity to return; and he really will return if prayer and fasting are soon abandoned” (Thoughts for Each Day of the Year, pp. 245-246).

From this a direct conclusion may be reached: where fasting and prayer are disregarded, neglected or completely set aside, there is no trace of Orthodoxy—there is the domain of demons who treat man as their own pathetic toy.

Behold, therefore, where all contemporary “modernism” leads, which demands “reform” in our Orthodox Church! All these liberal freethinkers and their lackeys, who strive to belittle the significance of prayer and fasting, however much they shout and proclaim their alleged faithfulness to the dogmatic teaching of our Orthodox Church, cannot be considered really Orthodox, and have shown themselves to be apostates from Orthodoxy.

We will always remember that by itself totally formal Orthodoxy has no goal if it does not have “spirit and life”—and the “spirit and life” of Orthodoxy are first and foremost in the podvig of prayer and fasting; moreover, the genuine fasting of which the Church teaches is understood in this instance to be abstinence in every aspect, and not merely declining to taste non-Lenten foods.

Without podvig there is altogether no true Christianity, that is to say, Orthodoxy. See what Christ, the First Ascetic, Himself clearly says: *“Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me”* (Mark 8:34). The true Christian, the Orthodox Christian, is only he who strives to emulate Christ in the bearing of the cross and is prepared to crucify himself in the Name of Christ. The holy Apostles clearly taught this. Thus the Apostle Peter writes: *“If when you do well and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is accepted with God. For even hereunto were ye called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow his steps”* (I Pet. 2:2-21). In precisely the same way the holy Apostle Paul says repeatedly in his

epistles that all true Christians must be ascetics, and the ascetic labor of the Christian consists of crucifying himself for the sake of Christ: *“They that are Christians have crucified the flesh together with the passions and lusts”* (Gal. 5:24). A favorite expression of St. Paul is that we must be crucified with Christ that we might rise with Him. He puts forth this thought in a variety of his sayings in many of his epistles.

You see, therefore, that one who loves only to spend time enjoying himself and does not think of self-denial and self-sacrifice, but continually wallows in every possible fleshly pleasure and delight is completely un-Orthodox, un-Christian. Concerning this the great ascetic of Christian antiquity, the Venerable Isaac the Syrian, taught well: *“The way of God is a daily cross. No one ascends to heaven living coolly (i.e. comfortably, carefree, pleased with himself, without struggle). And of the cool path, we know where it ends”* (Works, p. 158). This is that *“wide and broad way”* which, in the words of the Lord Himself, *“leadeth to destruction”* (Matt. 7:13).

This then is what is Orthodoxy, or True Christianity!

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