

INTRODUCTION TO THE ORTHODOX CHURCH:

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History:

Two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came to earth for the salvation of man, and founded His Church, through His apostles and disciples. In the years following, the apostles spread the Church and its teachings far and wide. They founded many local churches, all united in a common faith, manner of worship, and the partaking of the Mysteries (or as they are called in the West, the Sacraments).

The local churches founded by the apostles themselves include the bishoprics (later, 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 St. Peter. In later years missionaries founded 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 separated from the others in the Middle Ages, all remained throughout the centuries united in faith, doctrine, apostolic tradition, sacraments, liturgy, and services. Together they call themselves the Orthodox Church.

The teachings of the Orthodox Christian Church are derived from Holy Scripture and the rest of Sacred Tradition, the context within which the Scriptures were written and within which they are interpreted. As it says in the Gospel of St. John, *There are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written* (John 21:20). Much of the teaching and many of the practices of the Apostles were transmitted to later generations of Christians by means of oral Sacred Tradition.

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

It is our hope that this outline 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 Christian faith should be measured.

Teaching:

God the Father is the First Person and the source or fountainhead of the Holy Trinity. The Scriptures reveal that in the one God there are three persons or hypostases – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – sharing from eternity the single divine nature. From the Father the Son is begotten before all ages and all time (Psalm 2:7; II Corinthians 11:31); likewise, it is from the Father alone that the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally (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, out of supreme love, sent His Son to us in these latter times to grant us everlasting life (John 3:16).

Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, eternally born of the Father. He assumed flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and thus is at once perfect God and perfect man. His coming to earth was foretold in the Old Testament by the prophets. Because the person of Jesus Christ is at the heart of Christianity, the Orthodox Church gives more attention to knowing Him than to anything or anyone else.

In the Nicene Creed, Orthodox Christians affirm the historic faith concerning Christ the Saviour. The Creed states the following concerning Him:

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 sitteth 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.

The Incarnation refers to Jesus Christ's coming in the flesh. The eternal Son of God the Father assumed a complete human nature from the Virgin Mary. He was and is a single divine person, fully possessing from before the ages the entirety of the divine nature, and after His coming in the flesh fully possessing a human nature taken 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 accepted limitation in His humanity, in which He experienced hunger, thirst, fatigue, and, ultimately, death on the cross. The Incarnation is central to Christianity – there is no Christianity without it. The Scriptures state, *Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ hath come in the flesh is not of God* (I John 4:3). By His Incarnation, the Son of God redeemed and glorified human nature, making possible the deification of all who are united to Him.

The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity and is one in essence with the Father, from Whom He proceeds. In the Creed, Orthodox Christians confess, I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, Who proceedeth from the Father, Who together

with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified. The Holy Spirit is called the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4) given by Christ as a gift to empower the Church for service to God (Acts 1:8). It is the Holy Spirit that implants God's love in our hearts (Romans 5:5), and grants 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 at Baptism (Acts 2:38). The Christian life after Baptism consists primarily in growth in the experience of the Holy Spirit's grace.

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 for 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 from sin and death, the Son of God assumed our humanity and, being Himself 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; additionally, He gives us strength to refrain from sinning further. *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 we are delivered from sin and death, united to Christ, and brought into Christ's eternal kingdom. Those who heard St. Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost asked what they must do to be saved. The Apostle answered, *Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 2:38). Salvation begins with 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 should lead our life, to turn from our sin, and to commit ourselves to Christ. To be baptized means to be born again by immersion in water, and thereby to enter into union with Christ. And to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit means to receive the divine grace that empowers us to lead a new life in Christ, being nurtured in the Church and conformed to God's image. Since apostolic times, this gift has been granted through the anointing of the oil of Chrismation in conjunction with Baptism. 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. The term "saved" is sometimes used in the past tense since, through the death and Resurrection of Christ, the cosmic mystery of our Redemption has already been accomplished. It is sometimes used in the present tense, for we are always being saved through our life in Christ, by faith and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And it is sometimes used in the future tense, for our salvation is fully realized only at Christ's glorious Second Coming.

Baptism is the means by which a person is actually united to Christ. The experience of salvation is initiated in the waters of Baptism. The holy Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 6:1-6 that in Baptism we become sharers of Christ's death and resurrection. In Holy Baptism, our sins are completely forgiven. It is in Holy Baptism that we put on Christ (Gal. 3:27), being made conformable to His death (Phil. 3:10); that is, we must die together with Christ to sin. By this union with Christ, we are given the grace to lead a holy life. The

Orthodox Church practices Baptism by full immersion. The very word “baptize” (baptizein) in Greek is linked etymologically with the word “dip” (baptein). Both carry the idea of plunging or sinking something into the water.

Some non-Orthodox consider Baptism to be only an “outward sign” of belief in Christ. Such a notion has no historical or biblical justification. Others reduce Baptism to mere perfunctory compliance with Christ’s command (cf. Matthew 28:19-20). Still others, ignoring the Scripture completely, reject Baptism as a vital factor in salvation. The Orthodox Church maintains that all such innovative notions deprive Baptism of its most fundamental significance: namely, that it is the means by which believers in Christ are united to Him and become part of His Church.

New Birth is a term used to describe the beginning of the new life in Christ that follows Holy Baptism. It is entrance into God’s Church and His kingdom. Jesus taught, Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5). The water here is the water of Holy Baptism and the Spirit is the Holy Spirit. In Baptism we die with Christ, are buried with Him, and are raised with Him in the newness of His Resurrection, being united with Him in His glorified humanity (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4). The idea of being “born again” in a religious experience disassociated from Holy Baptism is a recent innovation and has no biblical basis whatsoever.

Justification is a word used in the Scriptures to convey the understanding that in Christ we are forgiven and actually made righteous in our life. Justification is not a once-and-for-all, instantaneous, magical change of condition guaranteeing eternal salvation, regardless how wickedly a person might live afterwards. Neither is it an automatic alteration of juridical status before God, rendering an unrighteous person forever righteous in God’s eyes, regardless of his subsequent sins. Rather, justification is a living, dynamic, day-to-day reality for the one who follows Christ. It is continuous repentance, ongoing divine forgiveness, and gradual approach to perfection. The Christian actively pursuing a righteous life in the grace and power of God is by grace made just (i.e., righteous), attaining the divine virtues in actuality.

Sanctification means “being set apart for God.” Sanctification means the process of our cleansing and being made holy (sanctified) by Christ in the Holy Spirit. We are called to be saints (i.e., holy) and to grow into the likeness of God. Having been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, we actively participate in sanctification by our labors in piety. We cooperate with God and we work together with Him, that we may know Him and become by grace what He is by nature. Thus, as we are sanctified, we become illumined; that is, we have Christ living and dwelling within us in a perceptible manner. The ultimate goal of the spiritual life is deification – to become partakers of the divine nature (II Pet. 1:4).

The Scriptures are the divinely inspired word of God (II Timothy 3:16), and are 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 prophets. The New Testament records the birth and

life of Jesus Christ and contains the writings of His apostles. It also includes some of the history of the early Church and especially sets forth much of 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 are found in the 33rd Canon of a local council of the Orthodox Church held at Carthage in 318, and in St. Athanasius of Alexandria's Festal Letter in 367. Both sources list all of the books of the New Testament without exception. Another 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; indeed, to worship is the most distinctive of human activities. True worship is more than being filled with awe by the "great outdoors," or listening to a sermon, or singing a hymn. God can be known to a very limited degree from His creation, but such knowledge, or the feelings it evokes, does not constitute true worship. And as helpful as sermons may be, they are not worship or a substitute for it. Orthodoxy is, as we have explained, precisely true worship – divinely ordained and profoundly God-befitting. 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 Christ in the Mystery of His Body and Blood, the Holy Eucharist.

In the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church we chant, "Unto 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 God's eternal kingdom, the age to come, and we join in adoration with the heavenly hosts. We experience the glory of the fulfillment and elevation 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" is derived from a Greek word that means "the common work." Thus all biblical references to worship in heaven involve liturgy, that is, the common work of the angels and saints worshipping before the throne of God.

In the Old Testament, the Lord ordained a liturgy, or specific pattern of worship for His sanctuary. 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 organically over many centuries, still maintains its ancient contours of worship. The main elements of the Liturgy include hymns, the proclamation of the Gospel, prayers, and the Eucharist itself – the Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ. Thus, for Orthodox Christians, the expressions "The Liturgy" or "Divine Liturgy" refer particularly to the eucharistic rite instituted by Christ Himself at His Mystical (Last) Supper.

Eucharist literally means thanksgiving and early became a synonym for Holy

Communion. The Eucharist is the focal point of worship in the Orthodox Church. 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 exactly as He taught in this respect and do as He commanded. In the Eucharist, we partake mystically of Christ's Body and Blood, which impart His life and strength to us. In so doing, we become united to Christ not only spiritually, but even physically. The celebration of the Eucharist was a regular part of the Church's life from its beginning. Early Christians called the Eucharist "the medicine of immortality" because they recognized the great grace of God that it conveyed.

The 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 our common faith, by Baptism and our shared Christian life, and in the Eucharist we come unto the city of the living God and join in communion with the saints in our worship of God (Hebrews 12:22). The saints 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). To reject or ignore the communion of saints is to deny the fact that those who have died in Christ are still part of his holy Church – that they are the glorified part, the spirits of just men made perfect (Heb. 12:23).

Confession is the open admission of our sins before God and man. It means literally to agree with God concerning our sins, to fully acknowledge them. St. James the Apostle admonishes us to confess our sins to God before the elders (presbyters), or priests, as they are often 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 a most significant means of repenting, whereby we receive assurance that, if our repentance is deep and our intention to amend ourselves is earnest, even our worst sins are truly forgiven. It is also the context in which we receive counsel as to how our chief ills may be healed, and it is a powerful aid helping us to forsake and overcome sin.

Ecclesiastical 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. Church discipline often involves exclusion from 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 even to receive into our homes those who willfully reject the truth of Christ (II John 10). Throughout her history, the Orthodox Church has exercised such discipline, tempered by compassion, when it was needed to effect a change of heart in God's people and to assist them in leading pure and holy lives. Ecclesiastical discipline is never mere retribution, but is primarily therapeutic in nature.

The Virgin Mary is called the *Theotokos*, meaning the “God-bearer” or “Mother of God,” because she bore the Son of God in her womb and from her the Son of God took His humanity. The blessed Elizabeth, mother of Saint John the Baptist, acknowledged this when she called Mary, the Mother of my Lord (Luke 1:43). Also, the Virgin Mary said of herself, *All generations shall call me blessed* (Luke 1:48). Therefore we, the Orthodox, in our generation, ever rejoice to call her blessed. The Virgin Mary led a chaste and holy life, and we honor her highly as our model of holiness, the first of the redeemed, the Mother of the new humanity in her Son. It is bewildering to the Orthodox that many who profess to be Christians never extol the Virgin Mary as blessed nor honor her who bore and raised on earth God the Son.

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 on earth. Those in heaven with Christ are even more alive than we, for they are in constant, intimate communion with God. Worshipping God continuously, they fulfill a supremely important role in the body of Christ. They actively pray to God for the whole Church – and perhaps for the whole world (Ephesians 6:8; Revelation 8:3). So we “pray” (i.e., beseech) the saints who have departed this life, asking their prayers, even as we “pray” (beseech) Christian friends on earth to pray for us.

The saints are revered as men and women who were glorified by God and who became, with God’s help, terrible to the enemy, the devil, and benefactors to those advancing in the faith – but not as gods themselves. They are the servants of God who were given boldness of spirit in return for their love of Christ.

Apostolic Succession has been crucial from the beginning for the preservation of the integrity of the true Faith and Church. False teachers early appeared, insisting they were authentic representatives of the Christian Church. Claiming authority from God by appealing to special revelations, some of these heretics invented lineages of teachers, their predecessors, supposedly going back to Christ or the apostles. In response, the early Church insisted that there was indeed a true and authoritative Apostolic Succession passed down from generation to generation in her. It recorded that actual lineage, to show that its clergy were ordained by the bishops chosen as successors by the Apostles, who were in turn chosen by Christ Himself.

Apostolic Succession is an indispensable factor in preserving Church unity. The bishops and clergy in the succession are accountable to it, and are responsible to ensure that 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 – only perfect fidelity to the received tradition of the Church and her Apostolic Succession can. Today’s critics of Apostolic Succession are those who stand outside it and arbitrarily identify with the early Church only, while denying the continuity of Christ’s

Church and truth throughout all the centuries. The burgeoning number of denominations in the world can be accounted for in large measure by their rejection of Apostolic Succession.

Councils of the Church: A monumental conflict (recorded in Acts 15) arose in the early Church over legalism, that is, the keeping of Jewish laws by the Christians as the 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 in the Church. There have been hundreds of such councils – local and regional – over the course of history, as well as seven councils specifically designated Oecumenical, which is to say, considered to apply to the whole Church. Confessing that the Holy Spirit has spoken through the Oecumenical Councils, the Orthodox look particularly to them for authoritative teaching in regard to the faith and practice of the Church. The Orthodox do not believe that one bishop alone, such as the Pope, can dictate to the Church what to believe.

Creed is a word that comes from the Latin *credo*, “I believe.” Since the earliest days of the Church, creeds have been employed as brief, living confessions of what Christians believe – not as formal, academic pronouncements. Such confessions of faith appear as early as the New Testament, where, for example, St. Paul quotes a creed to remind Timothy that, God...was revealed in the flesh and so forth (I Timothy 3:16). The creeds were approved by Church councils, usually with a view to providing concise statements of divinely revealed Christian truth in the face of heresy. The most important creed of Christendom is the Nicene Creed, the product of two Oecumenical Councils in the fourth century. Drawn up in the midst of the Church’s life-and-death struggle with the heresy of Arianism, which denied Christ’s full divinity, it contains the essence of New Testament teaching about the Holy Trinity, guarding those life-giving truths against those who would reduce Jesus Christ to a created being, rather than God in the flesh. The creeds give us a sure interpretation of the Scriptures and refute those who would distort them to support their own religious fantasies. Called the “Symbol of faith” and utilized in many of the services of the Church, the Nicene Creed constantly reminds the faithful of the most central teachings of Orthodox Christianity.

Spiritual Gifts: When the New Testament Church was first established, God poured out His Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and their followers, giving them spiritual gifts for the building-up of the Church and to help them serve one another. Among the specific gifts of the Spirit mentioned in the New Testament are: apostleship, prophecy, evangelism, pastoring, teaching, healing, helps, administrations, knowledge, wisdom, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. These and other spiritual gifts are recognized in the Orthodox Church. The need for each of them in particular has varied with the times. The gifts of the Spirit are most abundantly in evidence in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church and in the lives of the saints.

The Second Coming : Amid current speculation in some corners of Christendom in

connection with the Second Coming of Christ and how it may come to pass, the Orthodox Church maintains a sober reticence. The Orthodox Church confesses with conviction that Jesus Christ “will come again to judge the living and the dead,” and that His “kingdom shall have no end,” but it does not attempt to predict with exactitude God’s prophetic schedule. Rather, it encourages the Christian people to put their lives in order so that they may meet the Lord confidently 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; and it is the abode of God Himself, as 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 physical place billions of light years away in a nebulous “great beyond.” For the Orthodox, heaven is an immediate part of Christian life and worship. The very architecture of an Orthodox Church building is designed so that the building itself conveys and actually 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), being 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, a concept repugnant to most modern people, is real. The Orthodox Church understands hell, or rather, Hades, as a place of eternal torment for those who willfully reject the grace of God. If we have rejected God in this life, His fiery presence in the next life will be terrible. Our Lord once said, If thy hand causeth thee to sin, cut it off. It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands, to be cast into Gehenna, into the fire that never shall be quenched – where their worm doth not die, and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:44-45). He challenged the religious hypocrites of His day with the question: *How can ye escape the condemnation of Gehenna?* (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). God wishes all men to be saved, but man freely chooses hell, by rejecting God’s love and mercy, by rejecting His truth and sanctification. And so the day of judgement is coming, and there is a place of punishment for those who have hardened their hearts against God. It does make a difference how we lead the present life. Those who of their own free will reject the grace and mercy of God will forever endure 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).

Some Contemporary Issues

Ecumenism: The Ecumenical Movement takes as its guiding principle the Protestant

view of the Church. Protestants generally hold that there is no single truth and no single visible Church, but that each of the many Christian denominations possesses a part of the truth, and that these relative truths can, by means of dialogue, lead to the One Truth and the One (supposedly invisible) Church. One way 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 (I Tim. 3:15), which was given to her on the day of Holy Pentecost.

For the Orthodox, joint prayer and Communion at the Liturgy are 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, saying, "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 – the Body of Christ – express by the common Eucharist the fact that they share one faith, one Lord, one Baptism (Eph. 4:5). Apart from the shared Eucharist expressing a common faith, there is no Church. To condone persons of disparate belief communing together would be to admit that all those partaking belong to the One Apostolic Church, whereas the realities of history even of our time unfortunately make clear the deep and very real dogmatic and ecclesiastical divisions of the Christian world.

Abortion is the termination of a pregnancy by taking the life of a baby before it comes to full term. The Scriptures teach, *For Thou hast formed mine inward parts; Thou hast 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.

Sects: The word "sect" has several meanings. The usage which we wish to explain here designates a group of people who hold as religious doctrine one or more teachings which deviate from the tradition of the historic Church as revealed by Jesus Christ, established by His Apostles, and guarded by the seven Oecumenical Councils of the Church. A sect usually forms around an individual who proclaims a heresy as truth. The error itself assures the separation of the group from historic, i.e., Orthodox Christianity. Many sects claim the Bible as their basis, but they alter the historic interpretation of Scripture in order to advance their own ideas. Sects may do some good things (e.g. care for the poor, emphasize the family) and thus appear, at least to casual observers, to constitute a part of true Christianity. St. Paul's counsel on sects is: *From such withdraw thyself* (I Timothy 6:11). The danger of the sect is that it separates its members from the full life of Christ and the Church, where the blessings and grace of God are preeminently found. The various non-Orthodox denominations are, properly speaking, sects.

Marriage in the Orthodox Church is a lifetime commitment. It is not an exchange of vows to be thrown off at will or even the establishment of a mere 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.

Chastity: Orthodox Christianity holds fast to the biblical teaching that sexual intercourse is reserved for marriage. Sex is a gift of God to be 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 affects our relationship with God, ourselves, and others. Its context and use determine whether it is blameless or whether it is being perverted and abused as an instrument of sin, causing great damage to us and others. St. Paul writes, *Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you and Whom ye have from God, and that ye are not your own? For ye were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body* (I Corinthians 6:19, 20).

The Orthodox Church holds that the highest form of Christian life entails dedication of one's virginity to God. This way of life is called monasticism and has existed in one form or another since apostolic times. St. Paul expounds on the superiority of the monastic life in his first letter to the Corinthians, saying, *He that is unmarried, careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but he that is married careth for the things of the world, how he may please his wife* (I Cor. 7:32-33). Monks and nuns dedicate their whole being to God and spend their lives in continual prayer and striving after virtue. Monasteries provide a living example of leading the life of the Gospels to the fullest, and are a source of strength and encouragement to people living in the world. Monasteries are also the centers of church culture, for much of the poetry, music, art, and literature of the Church was composed in monasteries.

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). In the Old Testament, the most severe strictures are imposed upon homosexual activity, with nothing short of the death penalty being imposed. Thus, the people of God were taught how grievous is homosexual sin (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13). In the Old Testament normal, heterosexual intercourse is understood as not only a way of expressing a loving relationship, but also as a divinely appointed means 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 homosexuality as unnatural. Homosexuals are included elsewhere among the immoral persons who, St. Paul says, deserve judgement by God (I Timothy 1:10). There is not a single example in all of the New Testament of approval, acceptance, or even tolerance of homosexuality. Throughout Orthodox Christian history, this disapproval has continued unrelaxed. In the patristic era rejection of homosexuality was seen as a mark of Christian

ethical superiority to the wanton way of life characteristic of the heathen. However, it is important to note that Patristic and scriptural censure of homosexuality are directed against the practice of homosexuality, not against the fact of such desire itself. The Orthodox Church does not condemn the person who keeps this unnatural propensity in check, and ministers to homosexuals who wish to find release from this perverse inclination.

The Church Building

Orthodox church buildings generally assume one of several forms that have a particular mystical significance. The most common shape is oblong or rectangular, in imitation of the form of a ship. As a ship under the guidance of a master helmsman conveys its passengers through 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 worshippers' abandonment of the darkness of sin (symbolized by the west – where the sun sets) and approach to the light of truth (symbolized by the east – where the sun rises). Orthodox churches are often covered by one or more domes, representing heaven.

Internal Arrangement The interior of an Orthodox church is divided into several parts. The first is the narthex, a wide corridor or vestibule wherein Catechumens in ancient times received instruction while preparing for Baptism, and also where Penitents excluded from Holy Communion stood. Sometimes small churches lack a narthex.

The main body of the church is the nave, commonly separated from the sanctuary (altar) by a partition with doors, called the templon or iconostasis (icon screen). The walls of the nave are decorated with icons and murals, before which may hang oil lamps. Especially noticeable in traditional Orthodox churches is the absence of pews. The Fathers of the Church deemed it disrespectful for anyone to sit during the Divine Services (except at certain moments of instruction or psalm reading). The absence of pews provides open space for the many bows and prostrations typical of Orthodox worship, especially during Lent, the penitential season that precedes Pascha, the bright feast of Christ's Resurrection.

At the extreme eastern end of the church is found the altar or sanctuary, flanked by two rooms, the sacristy and the vestry.

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, and they are also found in prominent places elsewhere in 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. The icons are censed by the clergy and carried in processions. Considering the obvious importance of holy icons, the following questions arise concerning them: What do these gestures and actions

mean? What is the significance of icons? Are icons not idols, which are prohibited by the Old Testament?

Icons have been used for prayer since the first centuries of Christianity. Sacred Tradition tells us, for example, of the existence of an icon of the Savior made during His lifetime and of icons of His Holy Mother made soon thereafter. The walls of the ancient catacombs are covered with frescoes of Christ and the saints, attesting to the early Church's clear understanding of the importance of icons. This understanding has never changed, for it is derived from the Church's 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, inasmuch as Christianity is the revelation of the God-Man not only as the Word of God, but also as the Image of God; for, as St. John the Evangelist explains, *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:14). *No one hath ever seen God; only the Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath made Him known* (John 1:18), the Evangelist proclaims. That is, in Christ the Image or Icon of God the Father is revealed. *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 person, the Image of the Father. When St. Philip asked Jesus, *Lord, show us the Father*, He answered him: *Have I been with you so long, and yet thou dost not know Me, Philip? He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father* (John 14:8-9). Thus as the Son is in the bosom of the Father, after the Incarnation He remains consubstantial with the Father, according to His divinity being the Father's Image, equal in honor to Him, yet visible in the flesh and thus depictable.

The truth expressed above forms the foundation of Christian pictorial art. Use of the image (or icon) does not contradict central Christian teaching; rather, it is intimately connected with it. From the very beginning, the Good News (i.e., the Gospel) was brought to the world by the Church both by word and image.

St. John of Damascus, an eighth-century Father of the Church, who wrote at the height of the iconoclast (anti-icon) controversy, explains that since the Word of God has become flesh (John 1:14), the race of man is no longer in spiritual infancy; we have matured, been given by God the power of discrimination, and understand what can be legitimately depicted and what is undepictable. Since the Second Person of the Holy Trinity appeared in the flesh, we can portray Him and reproduce for contemplation the image of 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, express the teaching of the Church in conformity with the word of Holy Scripture. Following the teaching of the Seventh Oecumenical Council, the icon is understood not as simple art, but as a visible parallel to Holy Scripture, “for if the icon is shown by Holy Scripture, Holy Scripture is made incontestably clear by the icon” (Acts of the Seventh Oecumenical Council, Session Six). Thus, as the word of Holy Scripture is an image, so the image is also a word.

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 the icon of Christ because of the nature of the wood or the paint. Rather, through the inanimate image of Christ we honor the living Christ Himself as God Incarnate. Again, when we venerate the icon of the Blessed Virgin we honor her as the Mother of the Son of God; and when we venerate the icons of the saints we honor them as God’s friends who struggled against sin, imitating Christ by allowing their blood to be shed for Him and following in His footsteps. We gaze upon the depictions of their exploits and sufferings in order to sanctify ourselves through noetic contemplation 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 living 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 A prominent feature of most Orthodox churches is the iconostasis, a screen before the altar consisting of one or more rows of icons and broken by a set of doors in the center (the Beautiful or Royal Doors) and a door at each side (the Deacon’s Doors).

The Altar The altar, which lies beyond the iconostasis, is set aside for the clergy and their assistants, and normally persons not consecrated to the service of the Church are forbidden to enter it. Occupying the central place in the altar is the Holy Table, which represents the Throne of God, with the Lord Himself invisibly present there. The Holy Table also represents the Tomb of Christ, since His Body (the Holy Eucharist) is kept there.

Conclusion

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 established by the holy apostles and has maintained unbroken the apostolic succession of the episcopacy through the Laying-on of Hands. This, then, is the Orthodox Church – Christ’s One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

Based on:
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