

INTRODUCTION

What is the Orthodox Church?

The Orthodox Church is the original Christian Church, established by our Lord Jesus Christ upon the foundation of the Apostles, Himself being the chief Cornerstone, and enlivened by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

In 1987, almost 2,000 evangelical Christians in various cities throughout the United States converted en masse to the Orthodox Church. Since that time several Protestant congregations have converted, as well as thousands of individuals. A Church known for its antiquity and adherence to tradition is now one of the fastest growing Christian groups in America. What is the attraction of Orthodoxy? Why are so many people leaving the religion of their upbringing to embrace this ancient faith?

In 1794, monks from the Valaam Monastery in northwestern Russia were sent as missionaries to Russian Alaska. There, for the first time, the peoples of North America heard the Christian Gospel in all of its apostolic fullness. There, for the first time, converts were baptized and the Eucharist was celebrated in what is now the state of Alaska.

Although Orthodoxy has been on this continent for two centuries, it remains little known. For many, it is simply an exotic, eastern version of Roman Catholicism. For others, it is mainly associated with Greek or Russian or Middle Eastern food festivals. A great many more Americans do not even realize that the Orthodox Church exists.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy in all of this is that many Orthodox Christians themselves do not know much about their faith. It is not unheard of for an Orthodox Christian to describe his faith as "Catholicism without the Pope."

There is, of course, a reason for this unfortunate situation. Although the first priests in North America came here specifically as missionaries, the vast majority of Orthodox Churches in the continental United States were founded by immigrants from Greece, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. For the most part, these Christians worshipped in the language of their mother country. This helped to insulate the community from the wider American society, and, as a result, insulated society from the treasures of the Church.

With the mass conversion of the "Evangelical Orthodox" in 1987, however, the cat was out of the bag. The Orthodox Church is experiencing a great renewal in this country. Not only are thousands of Americans turning to the Orthodox Church as their true spiritual home, many of those reared in the Church have rediscovered the rich treasure of Orthodoxy.

The reason for this renewal is clear: People are finding in Orthodoxy the fullness of the apostolic faith. Tired of following this new religious leader or that new fad, they are looking for a Church with deep, historical roots. They are also tired of having the doctrinal rug pulled out from under them by their own pastors and bishops. They are looking for a faith that does not change with the weather. People are also hungry for genuine worship, a real encounter with God and not merely a lecture or emotional pep-rally. Finally, people are looking for evidence of genuine sanctity. They want a religion that makes a difference in their lives, not just an interesting theological system.

The Orthodox Church is all of this and more, for She is nothing less than *the* Church, founded by our Lord Jesus Christ. Although the Orthodox Church judges the soul of no man, leaving judgment solely to God, She does claim that She, and She alone, is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church confessed in the Nicene Creed.

The claim of the Orthodox Church to be the one and only *true* Church is based upon four factors:

1. The Orthodox Church has maintained an unbroken historical continuity with the original Church founded by Jesus in Jerusalem.
2. The Orthodox Church has faithfully maintained the apostolic faith *once delivered to the Saints* (Jude 3), neither adding to nor subtracting from it.

3. The Orthodox Church faithfully worships God the Father in Spirit and in Truth, providing mankind with personal access to the life and grace of the All-holy Trinity.
4. The Orthodox Church has produced untold numbers of Saints throughout the centuries—persons who bear within themselves the uncreated grace of God.

Historical Continuity

Compared with European countries, the United States is a relatively young nation. For most of us, however, this fact goes unnoticed. Indeed, anyone who visits Philadelphia or Williamsburg gets a definite sense of American history. It is not until one travels to Europe and climbs around castles built centuries before Columbus' voyage or perhaps stays in an inn built decades before the American Revolution that one begins to realize just how young our own country really is.

It is much the same with religion. The typical American Christian has very little, if any, historical consciousness. He may know a few things about the history of his denomination, but it is not until he is confronted with a church of great antiquity that he begins to consider the origins of his own faith. When encountering the Orthodox Church, the Protestant Christian comes face to face with a form of Christianity three times as old as his own.

The origin of most Protestant denominations can be traced back to one or two founders. Thus, the Lutheran Church is traced back to Martin Luther, the Reformed Church to John Calvin, the Presbyterian Church to John Knox, the Methodist Church to the Wesleys (although they never actually left the Anglican Church), and the Churches of Christ to Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell. Although Baptist Churches cannot claim one founder, their history is traceable through the English Separatist Movement back to the Church of England. In every case, the trail stops dead in the sixteenth century with the Protestant Reformation.

The Orthodox Church, in contrast, traces its history back to the first century Church of Jerusalem, founded by Christ Himself. The Church is fully conscious of this history. Indeed, She celebrates it, marking important events in Her history throughout the year with special celebrations.

This concern with history is an important element of the Orthodox Faith, for it underscores the fact that the Church is an historical community. When Christ ascended to heaven, He did not leave behind a system of philosophy or a school. He left His Church, which was a concrete, historical community there in Jerusalem. From Jerusalem, the Christian Gospel spread throughout the known world, and local Churches were created. All of these local Churches, however, sprang from and were dependent upon the original Church in Jerusalem for their faith and practice.

Christianity is not a philosophy; it is not a set of rules that one may follow on one's own. It is a life which can only be lived in community, in the Church that Christ Himself founded. Our Lord made it perfectly clear that this Church would overcome the gates of hell itself. So the question that faces the modern Christian is, "Which community is the authentic Church?"

The Orthodox Church of today does not imitate that original Christian community; She is that community. When the "Evangelical Orthodox" first began their pilgrimage from Evangelical Protestantism to Orthodoxy, they called themselves the "New Covenant Apostolic Order." They tried as best they could to make their communities like the Church they read about in the New Testament. As the years went on, however, they realized that imitation was not enough. They found that the Church they were trying to imitate still existed, and that authentic Christianity could be lived only within Her embrace.

The historical continuity of the Orthodox Church, therefore, is the first pillar of Her claim to be the one, authentic Church of Christ. Others may try to imitate the Church of the New Testament, some more closely than others, but no Protestant denomination can claim an organic unity with Her.

Apostolic Doctrine

Historical continuity by itself, however, is not enough to ensure that a community is the true Church. The Orthodox Church is the true Church of Christ not only because She can trace Her history uninterrupted back to the New

Testament, but also because She has faithfully maintained the authentic teaching of the Apostles, neither adding to nor subtracting from it.

The Roman Catholic Church can also claim an unbroken, historical succession from the time of the Apostles down to today, yet Rome has changed the teaching of the early Church on important issues and added strange doctrines of its own invention. For these reasons the Orthodox Church is not in communion with Rome, there being no unity of life without unity of faith.

In the eleventh century, the Church of Rome officially altered the Nicene Creed. This alteration had been refused by Popes until that time. When, however, the alteration was made official, the Church of Rome no longer confessed the same faith as the early Church.

Another difference between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches concerns the authority of the Pope. From the eleventh century on, the Papacy made increasingly bold claims to sovereignty over the entire Church, including the other patriarchs – claims *never* accepted by Eastern bishops and *never* affirmed by an Ecumenical Council. This trend reached its apex with the First Vatican Council (19th c.). This Roman council decreed as a dogma of the Roman Church that the Pope is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, in his official capacity as Pope.

The idea that any one individual in the Church is infallible is blatantly absurd. In the early Church, when problems arose over doctrine or discipline, the Apostles, and later the bishops whom they appointed, met together in councils to decide these issues.

In Acts 15 we read of the first Church council, which was held in Jerusalem. The question was raised whether gentile converts to Christianity should be circumcised. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas addressed the assembly, then James, the Bishop of Jerusalem, summed up the proceedings and issued a judgment with which all agreed. They announced their decision with the words, *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...*

No individual member of the Church can lay special claim to the Holy Spirit. Issues have always been decided by the whole body of the Church meeting in council. This spirit of collegiality (in Russian, *sobornost*) is the Church's safeguard against heresy, for many bishops have gone astray and taught heresy. Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople (5th c.) was deposed and condemned as a heretic by the Third Ecumenical Council. Pope Honorius of Rome (7th c.) was condemned as a heretic by the Sixth Ecumenical Council. Interestingly, until the eleventh century, when Papal claims began to snowball, all Popes had to affirm their allegiance to the Sixth Council and its condemnation of Pope Honorius as part of their oath of office.

Church history is a messy business. It is full of heresies and schisms. Sometimes these issues took centuries to resolve. The Orthodox Church makes no attempt sweep this under the rug. There is no attempt to pretend that Nestorius was not Patriarch of Constantinople; he was, and he was a heretic. The point is, however, that he was deposed from office and his teachings condemned.

The Orthodox Church teaches the same things today that it did in the year 1000, the same things it taught in the year 100; there is a perfect continuity of faith and life. This is easily contrasted not only with the novel teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, but with the doctrines of the various Protestant denominations. All Protestant sects have changed considerably since their founding. Many denominations do not even teach the same things they taught fifty years ago, much less four hundred years ago. It is safe to say, for example, that John Wesley would not recognize much of what goes on today by the name of Methodism.

E. Y. Mullins, one of the most prominent Baptist theologians of this century, once said that theology had to be reinvented every generation. This is absolute nonsense. The Apostle Paul warns of those who would change the message of the Gospel and clearly commands us: *Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle* (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

The Orthodox Christian is not free to believe whatever he wants to believe or interpret the Holy Scripture in whatever way strikes his fancy. Nor are bishops free to teach whatever they want. All are called to accept and live by the apostolic tradition, which has been handed down uncorrupt from the first century until today.

Right Worship

The word *Orthodox* means both right belief and right glory or worship. For the Orthodox, worship and doctrine are inseparable. The proper worship of God must be rooted in a proper understanding of Who He is. Conversely, a flawed understanding of God will inevitably lead to improper worship, which insults rather than glorifies the All-holy Trinity.

When God gave the Law to Moses for the People of Israel, He not only gave the Ten Commandments as an ethical guide, He also gave very specific instructions as to how He was to be worshipped. Failure to follow those rules could have terrible consequences, as Korah and his followers discovered when they “illegally” offered incense. The ground opened up and swallowed some, while others were consumed by fire from heaven:

And Eleazar the priest took the brazen censers, wherewith they that were burnt had offered; and they were made broad plates for a covering of the altar: to be a memorial unto the Children of Israel, that no stranger, which is not of the seed of Aaron, come near to offer incense before the Lord; that he be not as Korah and as his company: as the Lord said to him by the hand of Moses (Numbers 16:39-40).

The “ministers” of the Old Testament were not set apart to minister to the people, but to God, Who was objectively present in the tabernacle and, later, the temple. This concept of ministry was adopted by the New Testament Church, which was, after all, composed at first entirely of Jews. The early Church adopted, with appropriate changes, the Jewish liturgical day, beginning at sundown, set times of prayer (Acts 2:42), the yearly calendar of fasts and feasts (Acts 20:16), and, most importantly, the belief that worship is a sacrifice directed toward God (Hebrews 13:15).

Since the time of the Protestant Reformation, however, the idea of worship as a sacrifice and ministrations unto God has been gradually replaced with the notion of congregation-centered worship, where the clergy minister to the people rather than to God. The result is a plethora of “worship services,” which range from dry lectures to variety show productions to religious pep-rallies.

The basic pattern of Orthodox services, on the other hand, has not changed substantially since their inception. To be sure, as the Church went from a persecuted sect to a legalized religion and finally to the official religion of the Roman Empire, the services became more elaborate and complicated. It is only natural that the services conducted in a great cathedral like that of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople would be more elaborate than those conducted in secret in a believer’s living room in Judea. However, the basic structure remained the same. The Divine Liturgy celebrated in an Orthodox Church today is structurally the same service as that described by St. Justin the Philosopher in the year 150:

*And on the day which is called the Sun’s Day there is an assembly of all who live in the towns or country; and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president gives a discourse, admonishing us and exhorting us to imitate these excellent examples. Then we all rise together and offer prayers; and, as I said above, on the conclusion of our prayer, bread is brought and wine and water; and the president similarly offers up prayers and thanksgivings (literally “eucharists”) to the best of his power, and the people assent with Amen. Then follows the distribution of the Eucharistic Gifts and the partaking of them by all; and they are sent to the absent by the hands of the deacons (*Apology I*).*

The Church is first and foremost a worshipping community, gathered around the Table of Her Lord, offering to Him in sacrifice the substance of Her life on earth (bread and wine) and receiving these Gifts back from Him as the Body and Blood of Christ. St. Nicholas Cabasilas sums up the importance of the Church’s worship:

It appears therefore, that to worship God in Spirit and in Truth (John 4:24) and to offer Him pure homage is an effect of the Holy Table. From this mystery, therefore, we obtain the gift of being

Christ's members and thus of being like Him. While we were dead it was impossible to offer homage to the living God. But unless we constantly feast at the Banquet it is impossible to be alive and to be released from dead works. Just as *God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in Truth* (John 4:24), so it is fitting that those who choose to worship the Living One should themselves be living, for, as He says, *He is not God of the dead, but of the living* (Matthew 22:32) (*The Life in Christ*).

True Sanctity

Historical continuity, apostolic doctrine, and right worship are central to the claim of the Orthodox Church to be the authentic Church of Christ. These elements mean little, however, if lives are not changed, if men and women are not conformed to the image of Christ. In other words, the proof is in the final product. Archimandrite Vasileios of the Iveron Monastery on Mt. Athos writes:

In the same way, faithfulness to the tradition and the dogmatic teaching of the Church means not only that the right formulations of terms are not altered, but also that our lives are altered and renewed by the truth and regenerative power latent in those terms. Then man acquires senses and is able to see; he becomes conscious of the deeper meaning and value of the Orthodox faith as a force in life (*Hymn of Entry*, p. 19).

Since the first century, the Orthodox Church has produced countless thousands of true Saints. It is important to note, however, that a Saint is not simply a nice, moral person. It is not necessary to be a Christian in order to be a morally upstanding citizen. Mormons are some of the nicest, most moral people you could ever meet, but they are not Christians. A Saint, on the other hand, is one whose life has been totally transformed by the uncreated grace of the Holy Trinity into the likeness of the Son of God.

St. Nectarios of Pentapolis was born to a poor, Greek family but quickly rose to the rank of metropolitan in the Church of Alexandria, Egypt. Known for his strict asceticism and his love for the poor and downtrodden, he was well loved by the common people. This, however, aroused great jealousy on the part of the other clerics in the Patriarchate. They embarked on a smear campaign against him, and he was fired from his position. Even after he returned to Greece, his enemies did not leave him alone, stirring up trouble and false allegations against him wherever he went.

After many years at the helm of the Rizarios School in Athens, he moved to the island of Aegina and founded a women's monastery. Even in old age, however, his enemies did not leave him alone. He continued to have problems with Church officials, and at one point he was visited by a civil prosecutor who made the absurd claim that he was keeping a harem and dumping the bodies of his bastard children down a well.

Through all of these trials and persecutions, however, God was refining the soul of His servant as gold is purified in a fire (cf. 1 Peter 1:7). St. Nectarios became so humble, so utterly dependent upon His Creator, that the uncreated grace of God literally overflowed his frail body. He was known to be clairvoyant, and many sought his prayers, knowing that *the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much* (James 5:16).

St. Nectarios died in an Athens hospital in 1920. The nun and nurse who were attending him removed his woolen undershirt and carelessly tossed it onto the bed of a paralytic. The paralyzed man immediately stood up and began praising God. The next day, at the first public viewing of his body, the crowd was amazed to see that his face was exuding a sweet-smelling myrrh.

Six months later his coffin was opened while work was being done to the grave. St. Nectarios' unembalmed body had remained uncorrupt and continued to exude myrrh. Like the bones of the prophet Elisha that brought a dead man to life (2 Kings 13:21), the body of St. Nectarios became a source of healing and spiritual power. God's power and majesty are manifest in His Saints even in death.

A Saint, therefore, is not simply a good person. A Saint is one whose life has been so transformed by the grace of God that he or she radiates that grace to those around. A Saint is one who has attained, insofar as it is possible in this life, the likeness of God within himself. In the final analysis, a Saint is the living embodiment of the history, doctrine, worship, and ethical life of the Church.

The life of a true Saint of God such as St. Nectarios is easily contrasted with what so often passes for “spirituality” in our society. Ours is a generation which seeks after signs and wonders (cf. Matthew 12:39) and places tremendous emphasis on religious “experiences.” Yet, outside the Church there are very few genuine yardsticks against which one can measure these experiences. The devil often appears as an angel of light (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:14); so how is one to know if an experience or spiritual “technique” is helpful or harmful?

Let us consider one of the most controversial forms of contemporary religious experience: holy laughter. Holy laughter is a nationwide religious phenomenon that grew out of a Charismatic, Protestant revival in Canada known as the “Toronto Blessing.” During services people in the congregation begin laughing uncontrollably, even to the point of incapacitation. Occasionally some will drop to the floor on their hands and knees and begin to make animal noises such as barking like a dog. All of this is said to be done “in the Spirit.”

Holy laughter is highly controversial, even within Charismatic and Pentecostal circles. Nevertheless, practitioners come armed to the teeth with a slew of supporting Bible verses and the insistence that such experiences draw them closer to God. For many, the positive emotional impact of the practice is enough to confirm its “Christian” character.

For the Orthodox Christian, however, holy laughter is simply not an issue. He has at his disposal almost two thousand years of Church history and the detailed doctrinal teachings of the Church against which to measure such phenomena. In the services of Vespers, Matins, and the Divine Liturgy, he experiences true worship and communion with God and is able to intuit immediately when something is amiss or unseemly. Finally, he has literally thousands of Saints as examples of genuine sanctity.

The lives of the Saints are full of stories of people laughing uncontrollably or making animal noises. In all cases, the cause was demonic activity. Much of the holy laughter movement may be nothing more than mass hysteria, an explainable psychological phenomenon. Where spirits are involved in this movement, however, it is perfectly clear in the light of Church history, doctrine, liturgy, and the lives of the Saints that the spirits are demonic.

The Orthodox Christian makes this judgment on the basis of neither abstract theories nor his own limited, individual experience, but upon the corporate experience of the Church. When Treasury officers are trained to spot counterfeit money, they are shown only real currency. They learn to distinguish the genuine from the false because they learn the earmarks of the genuine currency so well. Such is the case with the Orthodox Christian.

* * *

History, doctrine, worship, and spirituality are all different aspects of the apostolic tradition. None is sufficient of itself without the others. Right belief without an organic, historical connection with the New Testament Church is merely to imitate the past without sharing in its ongoing life, to have *the form of godliness, but denying the power thereof* (2 Timothy 3:5). On the other hand, to have an unbroken historical connection without preserving the Apostles’ doctrine can only result in improper worship and false spirituality. Archimandrite Vasileios writes,

Only when we are conformed to Christ, recognizing Him by partaking in His life, do we “regain our proper stature,” our natural function and our freedom, as the Church and as persons. Ecclesiology and spirituality have the same basis: dogma. The Church is Christ, His Body living in history. It is summarized in each of the faithful, who is the Church in miniature. The personal consciousness of each of the faithful has an ecclesial dimension, and every problem for the Church is the problem of the personal salvation of each of the faithful (*Hymn of Entry, pp. 20-21*).

The Apostle Paul referred to the Church as *the pillar and ground of the truth* (1 Timothy 3:15) and as the Body of Christ, *the fullness of Him that filleth all in all* (Ephesians 1:23). The Orthodox Christian experiences this fullness. There is nothing in the Church that is lacking for his salvation.

Every day in Her liturgical gatherings—and especially on Sundays—the Church commemorates the lives of various Saints. The whole Church of Christ, both on earth and in heaven, gathers around the Throne of Glory to offer the Father true worship in Spirit and in Truth. The Divine Scriptures are read and explained; the unchangeable doctrines are expressed in hymns, and the lives of the Saints are given as examples to emulate. The faithful are then invited to the one Cup, which is communion with Christ Himself (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16).

What is the Orthodox Church? Above all, She is life in Christ, our participation in and through Him in the unending life of the All-holy Trinity. In the Church we are prepared for the life of the age to come not only by being taught the commandments of Christ but by actively experiencing His grace. St. Nicholas Cabasilas summed up the life of the Church in this way:

As nature prepares the fetus, while it is in its dark and fluid life, for that life which is in the light, and shapes it, as though according to a model, for the life which it is about to receive, so likewise it happens to the Saints. This is what the Apostle Paul said when he wrote to the Galatians, *my little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you* (Galatians 4:19)

. . . . For us, too, that Sun has graciously risen, the heavenly fragrance has been poured forth into the malodorous places, and the Bread of angels has been given even unto men.

This is the way in which we draw this life into our souls—by being initiated into the mysteries, being washed and anointed and partaking of the Holy Table... .O how great is His goodness! He crowns those who have been washed, and those who partake of His Banquet He proclaims victors (*The Life in Christ*).

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