

CIS Bulletin: Orthodox Christianity

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Introduction

Statistics: 225 members worldwide; 6 million in the United States and Canada.

First Orthodox Missionaries in North America: Russian Orthodox missionaries arrived on Kodiak Island in Alaska in 1794. (Most Orthodox Christians arrived in the United States between 1890 and 1924.)

Teachings of Orthodox Christianity

The Church: The Christian Church existed as one church for centuries. However, in 1054, the Church split (an event called The "Great Schism") for theological and political reasons, forming the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Orthodox Church in the East (hence the name, Eastern Orthodox Church).

The Orthodox Church believes it was founded by Jesus Christ and is the Church described in the New Testament. It insists that it alone has continued in "undiminished and unaltered faith and practice," hence the name "orthodox" which means "correct teaching." Only the Orthodox Church maintains the true Apostolic Faith (teaches what the apostles taught). One Orthodox writer summed up the Church's position: "Orthodoxy has maintained the New Testament tradition, whereas Rome has often added to it and Protestantism subtracted from it." In many countries, the Orthodox Church has aligned itself with the government, such as in Russia and Romania. This has led to government resistance when other Christian churches have sought to build churches or spread their faith.

The Orthodox Church has two distinctive features: (1) its changelessness; (2) its sense of living continuity with the Church of the early apostles.

Orthodox Christians believe their Church is the authentic and genuine Church or Body of Christ in the world today. They believe their Church is the "true Church of Christ" because "it can show historically that it was founded by Christ and has maintained a living connection over the centuries with that early Church." It "is the true Church of God on earth and maintains the fullness of Christ's truth in [unbroken] continuity with the Church of the apostles."

The Orthodox Church is divided as follows:

- Ancient Patriarchates: Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch. Rome, one of the original patriarchates (area under authority of a bishop), split in 1054 when the Pope insisted on primacy of jurisdiction (authority). Today, Constantinople has primacy of honor, but not of jurisdiction, over the ancient patriarchates. None of the patriarchs (bishops) has authority of any other patriarch.
- National Orthodox churches are churches of Russia, Cyprus, Sinai, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Albania, Georgia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Greece.
- Missionary churches are churches of Korea, Uganda and Kenya, Australia, Western Europe, China, South America, and North America.
- Churches in the Diaspora are the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America, the Orthodox Churches in the U.S.A., and churches in Japan, Finland, China, and Macedonia.

An Ecumenical [Church-wide] Council is the highest authority of the Orthodox Church. Only an Ecumenical Council can make changes in church teachings. The last (Seventh) Ecumenical Council was held in Nicea in 787 A.D. Orthodox Christians hope another Ecumenical

Council will be held someday.

The Nicene Creed: Orthodox Christians accept the Nicene Creed as originally adopted; it is recited in every Orthodox liturgy. They reject the Roman Catholic Church's insertion of the words "and from the Son," called the "filioque" clause (from the Latin for "and the Son"), after the words, "And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father." The addition states that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Orthodox Christians believe only Ecumenical Councils can change creeds and also that the Roman addition is theologically untrue.

The Trinity: Orthodox Christianity accepts the doctrine of the trinity. Each of the three persons of the trinity are unique and distinct, but are one: one God, one substance.

The Bible: The Bible is the written word of God. Orthodox Christians recognize 49 books in the Old Testament, including 10 Apocryphal books, and 27 books in the New Testament. The Apocryphal books may be read for personal edification but are not authoritative for doctrine.

The purpose of the Bible is not to teach science, but theology, to reveal God and His will to us. The Bible is inerrant (without error) when it reveals who God is; it is not inerrant when it speaks of geology or biology. The Orthodox Church is the divinely inspired interpreter of the Bible.

Icons: Icons (from the Greek word meaning *image*, Col. 1:15) are paintings, frescoes and mosaics of Christ, Mary, the apostles and saints of the Orthodox Church. Famous icons include a nativity scene, the crucifixion, Mary (the Mother of God or *Theotokos*) holding the infant Jesus, and the death of Mary. They are to be venerated, but are not worshipped. They remind the worshippers that they are always surrounded by God and the great saints of the church.

For the first 700 years, Christians depicted Christ in symbols (fish, lamb) or letters (IHS). The Trullan Synod, held in Constantinople in 692 A.D., stated that using symbols or letters to represent Christ was wrong, that He was God become man and should be represented as such. Icons are painted to show both Christ's human and divine natures. Orthodox icons depict His divine nature through exaggeration such as large eyes, nose and hand.

Icons are found in churches and in homes of Orthodox Christians. Orthodox Christians believe they can acquire the true likeness of God and become living icons of Christ in the world today through their constant openness to the Holy Spirit.

Salvation: Human beings have been given free will to say "yes" to God and receive eternal life in heaven or "no" to God and live forever in hell.

Life after Death: The Orthodox Church teaches that a person is judged immediately after death and experiences a foretaste of the punishment or reward that will be received in its entirety in the resurrection of the dead at the Final Judgment at the Second Coming of Christ. There can be no moral improvement or repentance after death.

Prayers for the Dead: Orthodox Christians offer prayers for the

dead in their worship liturgy and in personal prayers. They reject the idea that a person can be prayed out of hell into heaven, because a person's destiny is fixed at death. Repentance and belief must be made in the present life. Prayers for the dead are to invoke God's mercy and comfort upon the deceased. Orthodox Christians also believe the dead pray for them.

The Divine Liturgy: Prior to entering the nave (where the pews are), it is customary for Orthodox Christians to light candles which are placed in sand containers in the vestibule of the church. The vestibule represents the world and the candles are reminders that Christians are the light of Christ in the world. Many Orthodox Christians will kiss a Bible in the vestibule before entering the nave. The Sanctuary, behind a screen-like partition at the front of the nave, symbolizes heaven. Only priests are permitted to enter the Sanctuary through the center or Royal Doors of the partition. Deacons, who assist the priests, go through side doors into the Sanctuary. The prothesis (explained below) is conducted in this area.

English is increasingly used in Orthodox churches in the United States.

The normal Sunday service in the Orthodox Church is the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (349-407), Archbishop of Constantinople. It has three main parts.

- **Prothesis or liturgy of preparation.** During this time, the priest puts on his vestments, prays for the members of the church and prepares the bread and wine for the Eucharistic sacrifice.
- **Synaxis or liturgy of the Word.** This part includes prayers, hymns, a reading from the Epistles by a lay person and a reading from the Gospel book (the Gospels) by a priest who brings out the Gospel book, holds it high and says, "Wisdom. Let us pay attention." Afterwards, the priest preaches a sermon.

Burning incense is an important part of the liturgy and represents prayers offered to God.

- **Eucharistic Offering.** This is the main part of the liturgy. It includes prayers and hymns, recitation of the Nicene Creed, the offering, prayer for the descent of the Holy Spirit, and receiving of the Eucharist or Communion. Worshippers go to the altar to receive the Eucharist.

Consecrated wine and bread are kept in the tabernacle on the altar table. Orthodox Christians make the sign of the cross (with the two largest fingers held together with the thumb as a symbol of the trinity; the other two fingers are held to the palm symbolizing the two natures of Jesus – divine and human) when passing before the altar. A votive light is suspended above the tabernacle. The Gospel book is also kept on the altar table.

Sacraments: The Orthodox Church has seven main sacraments, but do not limit the number to seven as does the Roman Catholic Church. Orthodox theologians also speak of love, prayer, icons, monasticism, the Church itself, all of life, etc. as sacraments. Through the sacraments, God shares His life with us, redeems us from sin and death and bestows on us the glory of immortality, according to Orthodox Christians. Sacraments are personal encounters with Christ.

- **Baptism** is the sacrament of initiation into Christ and into the Church. Infants are baptized as are adult converts by being immersed in water three times – once in the name of the Father, once in the name of the Son, and once in the name of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is for the remission of sin and symbolizes burial, resurrection and new birth in Christ. Baptism restores in an individual the image of God which had been obscured by sin.
- **Chrismation** occurs immediately after baptism. The priest anoints parts of the body with holy oil (chrism), marking them with the sign of the cross, and repeating, "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit." Chrismation is seen as a personal Pentecost and brings the individual into the church.
- **Holy Eucharist** (from the Greek word for *thanksgiving*) is a central ritual of Orthodox worship and the most important

sacrament. Families may bake loaves of bread to be used in the liturgy. The priest places the loaf on the altar, symbolizing God accepting the gift. The congregation kneels when the priest elevates the bread and wine at the altar, changing them into the literal Body and Blood of Christ by the Holy Spirit. All baptized Orthodox receive the bread and wine as His Precious Body. Orthodox Christians are encouraged to fast on the morning before receiving the Eucharist.

A seal is stamped on the bread before being baked (or wafer if used). On the seal are the letters IC, XC, NIKA, the Greek abbreviation for JESUS CHRIST CONQUERS. The loaf is cut into several pieces representing the Virgin Mary, angels, prophets, apostles and saints of the Orthodox Church.

As the Eucharist is given to an individual, the priest says, "The servant of God . . . (name) receives the holy and precious Body and Blood of our Lord for the forgiveness of sins and unto life everlasting."

The sacraments of baptism, Chrismation and Holy Eucharist are sacraments of initiation in the Orthodox Church. Receiving all three, the newly baptized infant or adult becomes a full member of the church.

- **Penance** is the act of confessing sin, expressing sorrow for having sinned and receiving God's forgiveness through the priest's prayer of absolution.
- **Marriage** symbolizes a man and a woman becoming one spirit and one body through the Holy Spirit. During the ceremony, the priest places crowns on the heads of the bride and groom, symbolizing God's matrimonial blessing, martyrdom, and membership in God's kingdom. The ceremony also includes the "common cup," symbolizing the couple's total sharing of life.
- **Holy Unction** involves prayer for spiritual and physical healing. Through anointing with oil, a person's sufferings are united with those of Christ, and sins are forgiven. Many Orthodox are anointed during Holy Week in preparation for Easter.
- **Holy Orders** is the sacrament for the ordination of the 3 orders of the clergy (deacon, priest and bishop). It is celebrated by a bishop, affirmed by the local congregation and enables the new clergy to continue the unbroken ministry of Christ in the Church.

Priests may marry in the Orthodox Church; monks do not. Bishops are selected from among monks.

The Orthodox Church Year: Easter is the most important of the calendar of feasts and fasts that make up the Orthodox church year. All other feasts, fasts and festivals flow to and from it. The liturgical year begins September 1. Twelve "Great Feasts" are held during the year: five for Mary and seven for Christ. Mary's birth (September 8), the Annunciation when Mary was told she was chosen to be the mother of Christ (March 25), and her death (August 15) are also important days in the Orthodox church year. Saints are also honored, including Mary's parents. Lent is an important time for fasting, prayer, study and worship. A Christmas fast is held for 40 days – from November 15 to December 24.

Some Orthodox Christians used different calendars, which leads to Christmas and Easter being celebrated on later dates than those in the West.

For more information on Orthodox Christianity or other faith, or to schedule an interfaith conference or pulpit supply, call or write:

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