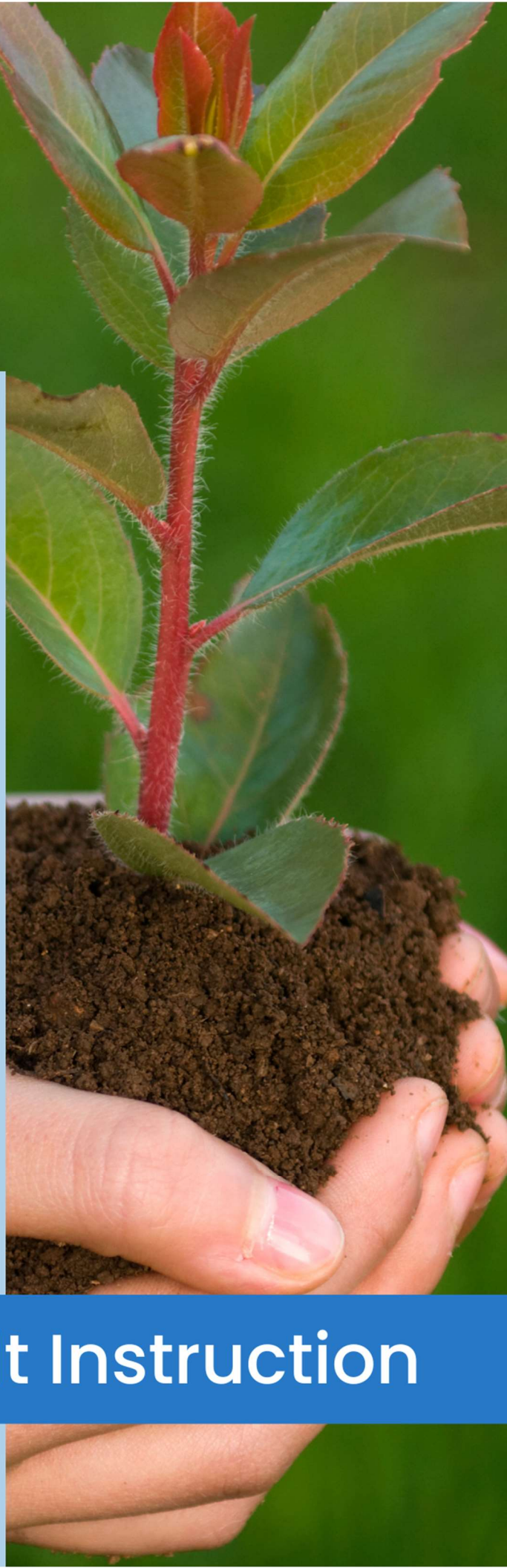


ESSENTIAL ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

A Manual for Adult Instruction

Departments of the Orthodox Church in America



Essential Orthodox Christian Beliefs

A Manual for Adult Instruction

Version 1.1 (July 6, 2023)

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June 6, 2023
06/005

To the clergy, monastics, and faithful of the Orthodox Church in America, beloved children in the Lord, and to all who might make use of the present work:

You have before you the fruit of the common labor of multiple Departments of the Orthodox Church in America, which in turn coordinated the work of numerous clergy, theologians, teachers, and qualified laypeople. The result of their work, *Essential Orthodox Christian Beliefs: A Manual for Adult Instruction*, comprises sixteen chapters that can be presented in a flexible manner. Using the Divine Liturgy as the framework for presenting the teachings of the Orthodox Church, this manual is a suitable resource for guiding inquirers, instructing catechumens, carrying out a program of mystagogy for the newly-illuminated, and confirming mature Orthodox Christians in a fuller understanding of our holy faith.

So many are the things “which Jesus did, were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (Jn. 21:25). The present volume claims neither to be a definitive catechism nor a complete replacement for previous resources. In fact, the present *Manual* is purposefully presented so as to work in concert with other resources, such as Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko’s series *The Orthodox Faith*. Moreover, there are plans to provide supporting materials, including multimedia materials, and to update this work on a regular basis.

It is my hope that this work, made available to all, free of charge, will serve for the upbuilding of the Orthodox Church in America, the healing and salvation of souls, and the hastening of the kingdom. And to our God, one in Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all the glory.

Yours in Christ,

+Tikhon
Archbishop of Washington
Metropolitan of All America and Canada

P.O. Box 675 Syosset, New York, 11791
516-922-0550 - metropolitan@oca.org - www.oca.org

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1.1 Revision of Chapter 11 to clarify positions on other Christian communities and non-Christians.

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Foreword

In writing and compiling this manual, we intentionally chose the Divine Liturgy to provide the basic educational structure. Although this work isn't *about* the Divine Liturgy, it provides the topics that you will learn as we encounter them throughout the Divine Liturgy. The Divine Liturgy, as Father Alexander Schmemmann wrote, is "the very center of the whole life of the Church, the sacrament of Christ's presence among us and of his communion among us."¹ Therefore, it is appropriate to allow the Divine Liturgy to be both experience and guide for us as we explore the teachings of Orthodox faith.

You will notice as you read through the text that each chapter has a unique voice and style of presentation. A variety of trusted teachers, scholars, and theologians, all members of the Orthodox Church in America, have contributed their chapters in their area of expertise. They bring their own experiences and perspectives to the text, but much like the Holy Scriptures which also was written by a variety of authors with different voices and writing styles, there is a common thread and message that runs throughout: God has revealed Himself and He has chosen a people to be His Bride.

There may also be some repeated themes or concepts in the various chapters. Naturally, certain concepts may be explained in a context which might seem to be repetitive but stated in a different way throughout the text. Use this as an opportunity to understand how the teachings of the Church are both interwoven and interdependent.

This effort is meant to be a work in progress, much like our own spiritual lives. We will continue to receive feedback and advice from trusted sources to make the text more effective for learning. Your teacher will instruct you on definitions and concepts that may not be explained in the text. This manual isn't meant to be an exhaustive source but will provide the foundation for your continued learning and growth. We encourage you to supplement your learning with other material at the recommendation of your teacher.

We are grateful to God for His mercies and to the generous donors who made this work possible.

Archpriest Thomas M. Soroka
Project Manager
Departments of the Orthodox Church in America

¹ Alexander Schmemmann, "Liturgy and Life: Lectures and Essays on Christian Development Through Liturgical Experience" (New York: Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, 1983), 26.

Chapter 1

Proskomedias: Blessed is the Kingdom

“We were created to live on earth unlike animals who die and disappear with time, but with the high purpose to live with God—not for a hundred years or so—but for eternity!”

—St. Innocent of Alaska¹

Proskomedias

Before every Divine Liturgy, the priest prepares gifts of bread and wine to be used during the Eucharist. The preparation ritual is called the Liturgy of Preparation, or proskomedias. The meaning in Greek is “offering”, indicating that it is our offering to God. God has blessed us with wheat and grapes, and we transform it into bread and wine, offering it back to God in thanksgiving. God then consecrates the bread and wine during the Divine Liturgy, returning it to us transformed.

The bread that is offered in the Eucharist is called prosphora, a special loaf whose preparation itself is filled with meaning. It is created using only wheat, yeast, water, and salt and is composed of two layers, representing the two natures of Christ, divine and human. It has a square seal on the top with the Greek letters IC XC (an abbreviation in Greek for Jesus Christ) and NIKA (meaning “conquers”). During the proskomedias, a portion of the loaf is cut out into a cube, and it is this inner part of the loaf, called the lamb, that is consecrated during the Divine Liturgy, and together with the red wine, will become the Body and Blood of Christ.



The Liturgy of Preparation includes blessing the prosphoron, cutting it on four sides to form a cube, piercing it with a spear, and reciting two verses from St. John’s Gospel (John 19:34-35). The wine is mixed with water in a chalice and blessed by the priest. The priest then cuts triangular particles from a second prosphoron in commemoration of the Theotokos, from a third prosphoron to commemorate the ranks of saints, from a fourth prosphoron for the living, and from a fifth prosphoron for the departed. Finally, the censer is blessed, the cover for the gifts is blessed, and then the gifts are covered.

Blessed is the Kingdom

The Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church begins with the following proclamation: “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit!” In

¹ St. Innocent of Alaska, *Indication of the Way into the Kingdom of Heaven: An Introduction to Christian Life* (Jordanville: Holy Trinity Publications, 2013), introduction.

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recognizing and calling this kingdom blessed, we acknowledge the reality of the King and of His reign. The beliefs of the Orthodox Church are firmly rooted in the confession that Jesus Christ is the King, the Messiah, the Anointed One of Israel. It is this King who is testified to in the Law of Moses, expected in the kingship of Israel, foreshadowed by the Temple built by Solomon, and foretold by the prophets. The original vocation of the first man Adam is fulfilled. The calling of Abraham to be the father of many nations and through whom the blessing of humanity is accomplished. Israel is elected to be a people chosen by God. And finally, the entirety of the Old Testament is fulfilled in the coming of the foretold Messiah. This confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and King is the foundation stone upon which the gates of Hades (Matt 16:18) will not prevail.

We seek here to sketch the high points of the Old Testament and how the Church sees its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. First, we will outline the importance of knowing and studying the Old Testament for a true understanding of Jesus Christ. Second, we will do a deep dive into the first few chapters of Genesis in order to grasp the problem facing mankind and the solution the Father sets forth. Following that deep dive, we will outline the development of some of these themes throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Finally, we will explore these themes by exploring the experience of Orthodox worship as exemplified in the divine services of the Church and the architecture and ornamentation of Orthodox temples.

The Scriptures of Israel

To simply begin our discussion with the topic of Jesus Christ as the center of our Orthodox faith is like joining a conversation midway through. The context of the beginning of the conversation is lost and incomprehension duly follows. Jesus Christ did not appear to mankind without a long introduction. This long introduction is seen in the history of God's interactions with mankind that are described in the Old Testament. These interactions are seen in the lives of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the giving of the Law and the form of the tabernacle to Moses, the institution of the priesthood given to Aaron and the tribe of Levi, the calling of the prophet Samuel, the installation of the shepherd boy David as King of Israel, the blessing of Solomon to build the Temple, and the raising up of prophets to warn and guide Israel. We must also not forget the importance of the Psalter as the prayer book of Israel or the importance of the distillation of wisdom found within the various books of Wisdom.

The Old Testament documents the preparation for the coming of the Christ. For it is in God's guiding, forming, and even rebuking of Israel that we begin to see the necessary outlines of who Jesus Christ is and what He fulfilled. For example, we would not understand the depth of the kingship of Christ without understanding the Davidic kingship and the previous chaos of Israel during the time of the Judges and the failures of King Saul. We would not understand the perfect sacrifice and high priesthood of Jesus Christ without the details of Leviticus or the failures of Hophni and Phinehas (1 Sam 2:12 - 4:11). Nor would we begin to comprehend the prophetic actions and words of our Lord without the long lineage of prophetic actions and voices of Nathan, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Amos, and many more. St. Paul refers to the Law as given to us as a

paidagogos, meaning a tutor or guardian, to Christ (Gal 2). The life of Israel, its institutions of priesthood, temple, law, and prophecy teaches, informs, and brings us to the feet of our Lord and Teacher, Jesus Christ.

Not only do the scriptures of Israel prepare and lead us to more fully understand Jesus Christ, but they are fulfilled and mystically unlocked by the Messiah. The preaching of the early Church was captured in the Book of Acts and underlines for us that in the life of Jesus Christ, especially in the events around his death and the holy resurrection, the scriptures find their fulfillment. What does it mean that the scriptures were fulfilled by Jesus Christ? In short, it means that in Jesus Christ, the communion which Adam and Eve had with God — but lost — is returned to humanity through Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, we receive the Kingdom of heaven, the remission of sins, and reentry into the garden of paradise. In Jesus Christ we find, for the first time, a truly human life lived in full communion with the Father. In Christ's truthful speech and acts, his rightly governed life free of sin, and his faithful adherence to the Father even to the point of death, even death on a cross, turns back the consequence of Adam and Eve's failures.



How are the Scriptures mystically unlocked? The confession of the Christian faith is that the true message of the Old Testament Scriptures is found within Jesus Christ. We see this clearly in the Apostolic preaching in the Book of Acts through the speeches of St. Peter, of the Protomartyr and Deacon Stephen, and of St. Paul (Acts 2, 7, and 13). The challenge is that Jesus is not immediately recognizable as the promised one. This is entirely the dynamic of the Gospels, that the light has come into the world, but it is not recognized or understood (John 1). St. Paul talks about this dynamic in his second epistle to the Corinthians (2 Cor 4:3-4). There he talks about a “veil” that remains over the eyes of the children of Israel in their reading of the Scriptures. They are blind to the Messiah because their reading of Moses and the prophets does not allow them to see Jesus Christ. It is only in turning with an open heart and mind to the Lord that the veil drops, and the form of Jesus Christ is discernible within the scriptures. It is like someone who is struggling deeply with a particular problem, and they have come up with no solutions until a suggestion comes that suddenly puts all things in a different light and now makes complete sense of the problem. Jesus Christ is the answer and fulfillment of Scripture that shines forth once one adjusts one's vision according to his teaching, life, death, and resurrection.

We see this very clearly in the account of the resurrected Christ walking on the road to Emmaus with Luke and Cleopas (Luke 24:13-35). As Jesus approaches them, they do not recognize him. As they discuss the events in Jerusalem, Luke and Cleopas display knowledge of the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ but do not understand their meaning. Jesus responds to their lack of understanding pointing to the necessity of the suffering of Christ and his entering into glory through an explanation

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based upon Moses and all the prophets. The unveiling of Luke and Cleopas' eyes is not fully accomplished until Jesus breaks bread and blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. With this movement, from the explanation of the scriptures to the table of sacrifice, which we also do in every Divine Liturgy, the eyes of Luke and Cleopas are opened. Christ is made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

With the advent of our Lord, the scriptures find their fulfillment. Our Lord provides the true context from which we are to understand the scriptures. This question of the nature of the veil covering the eyes of the Jews is not one of sloppy, ignorant, or lazy reading. The advent of our Lord and his working out of our salvation was a mystery prepared before the "foundation of the world." In the light with which He provides, we find ourselves able to see within the scriptures a new depth. In gaining and assimilating ourselves to the mind of Christ, we receive sight for the spiritual wisdom which can only be given to us through Jesus Christ. As our Lord tells us, he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17).



This approach to the scriptures sets the entire agenda for how the holy Fathers of the Church approached and interpreted the scriptures. Building upon the apostolic teachings of the New Testament, especially of St. Paul and St. John, the Fathers of the Church draw out for us deep spiritual truth from the Old Testament. They did not engage the Old Testament as a source of moral stories for our general edification or as a collection of a few obvious verses or prophecies which foretell the coming Messiah. Rather, the Fathers of the Church find within the entirety of the Old Testament the outline and content of Jesus Christ. They also discover the Theotokos, the Mother of

God, and her role in our salvation, as well as the glory of the Messianic age as found within the bosom of the Church. For the mystery of Jesus Christ is not simply a message of Jesus as Lord and King, but of the entirety of the court of our King, His Mother and the friends of God, the holy ones, the saints. Is this not deeply evident within the Book of Revelation? Or, as enshrined within the Church's use of Scripture as found in the Akathist to the Mother of God? We shall touch on some of these points in more detail below.

In the spirit of the Fathers, and in fidelity to their teaching, we will proceed with our sketching of the scriptures and their place in the Church with a deep dive into the loss of paradise in the sin of Adam and Eve. In attending to the specifics of how Adam and Eve fell, we can find in miniature the failure of Israel, and even of ourselves. We find in the failures of Adam and Eve a sketch of the basic reasons as to why God raised up priests, prophets, and kings in Israel. This in turn allows us to more fully understand Jesus Christ, the second Adam, as the king, the high priest, and the true prophet of the Most High God. It will also open our eyes to Orthodox worship's deep biblical roots.

The Fall of Humanity

It is an accepted truth that there is something wrong with humanity. War, violence, alienation, abuse, and especially the reality of death, underline for us the basic truth that something is genuinely and deeply off. Some seek for answers in the material order without reference to the invisible world. It is no surprise that they end up empty and vainly seeking after a goal or ethic for creation within evolutionary psychology. Others see that death is the end of all things and either resolve or dissolve into nihilism. And yet others seek to find some kind of meaning for mankind in the structures of society or of mankind. Perhaps ultimate meaning can be had through the pursuit of justice or through humanistic acceptance of the nihil but with a dash of resolve and creativity.

The Christian understanding of this basic incongruity of humanity is summarized in the book of Genesis. There we discover the fundamental problems afflicting humanity according to the Orthodox Church. In short, we have lost our purpose. We exist to commune with God. When we lost our way, all of creation was also bound up in our turn from God. The world itself was subjected to the chaos we introduced into our own souls (Rom 8:19–23).

The story of “the fall” in the Adam and Eve narrative is understood by the Orthodox Church differently than in the popular narrative. The alternative way of explaining the fall is that after God created Adam and Eve, he pointed out to them the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and told them to not partake. This arbitrary decision by God was a test for Adam and Eve. Once the sly and deceitful serpent entered the garden, it was simply a test of the desire of Eve to become God—or in other words, her own boss—that prompted Eve to taste the forbidden tree. After this had occurred, it was not hard for Eve to entice Adam. God finds out about the eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and he realizes he cannot abide their sin and has them immediately cast out of paradise to ensure that they cannot partake of the tree of life and live forever. The fall precipitates the wrath of God to also curse Adam and Eve with pain and suffering. The fall of Adam and Eve is basically a prideful breaking of the rules of God and the just consequences due to these acts. The only glimmer of hope is the promise to crush the head of the Serpent.

This common way of explaining the fall has some elements of truth from the Orthodox perspective. However, there is much in this way of telling the story that depicts God and this incident in a rather arbitrary and wooden way. It is arbitrary due to its shallow understanding of God. God appears as a petty and rule-obsessed tyrant. It is wooden in its unlyrical and opaque grasp of the depth of the meaning of the tree, its attraction to Eve, and in the consequences for Adam and Eve in their partaking. Within the Orthodox tradition, the understanding of the depth of the breaking of communion between man and God provides us with a very different picture of God, one more congruent with the rest of Scripture and the God we know as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The creation of Adam and Eve is a result of our loving God’s desire for communion. The end of God’s desire to create is to befriend humanity. All of creation is steadily

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made and declared good by God, but at the end of this work of creation, God declares “Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness (Gen 1:26).” Humanity, being made in the image and likeness of God, reflects the special status that humanity has within the cosmos. God further gives to humanity the responsibility and duty of having dominion over the world. Man exists in a special relationship to God - as the sole creature in creation made in his image and likeness and also as the leader and steward of the created order.

Where does God place this unique creation? He places man within a garden in order to tend and keep it. While it may not be obvious to our contemporary eyes, the garden God places Adam within is a garden temple. The orderly account of creation, which ends in the seventh day of rest, underlines for us the building up of the cosmos—not only for man but ultimately as a place for God to rest and rule.² The garden that Adam is placed in has many parallels to the later tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple. God walks in Eden as he does in the tabernacle; Eden and later sanctuaries must be entered from the east and are guarded by cherubim; the lampstand (menorah) in the Temple symbolizes the tree of life; the rivers within Eden are later echoed in the prophecy of Ezekiel about life giving waters flowing from a future Temple; and the gold and onyx mentioned in the creation account are used in Temple worship and especially on priestly garments. Adam’s role of stewarding this garden temple is to tend to this garden. The vocabulary used to describe this work are all echoed in the work of the Levites within the Temple sanctuary (Num 3:7–8; 6:26; 18:5–6).³ Adam and Eve’s tending is priestly and liturgical work. Why does God have them do this?



Adam is the one creature in creation made in the image of God. Man, in the divine image, stands within the garden as the *king*, *priest*, and *prophet* of the world. These three “roles” are not separate and distinct roles that Adam plays but are different ways of explaining Adam’s role within the created order. He is the king, as he is called to govern and steward the world. He serves as God’s representative within creation. He is—as a king—supposed to “concentrate the aims of all existing visible creatures in himself, [so that] he might through himself unite all things with God.”⁴ For man, being made of spirit and flesh, stands between the boundary between God and the world and mediates and leads all of creation to God.

² T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) 119–133. The theme of gods active in building creation as a temple for them to reside and reign in is a central theme in Mesopotamian mythology.

³ Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land*, 124.

⁴ Metropolitan Macarius as found in, Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2009), 141.

Because of this role, he also serves as the priest of creation, as he is the one who can “bless and praise God for the world.”⁵ As chief priest, he is called to “offer a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God on behalf of all those born of earth, thus bringing down upon earth the blessings of heaven.”⁶ Fr. Alexander Schmemmann describes the priestly office of mankind as the ability of man to bless God and thank Him for creation, because man, when rightly following God, is able to “see the world as God sees it and—in this act of gratitude and adoration—to know, name and possess the world.”⁷ Man is, in his very nature, a priest. Schmemmann further elucidates,

*[Man] stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God - and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him. The world was created as the “matter,” the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament.*⁸

Adam also is created to be a prophet. He is ordained to proclaim “the will of God in the world in word and deed.”⁹ Adam sits and directs creation as king. But having truly seen creation and directed accurate praise to the Creator, he serves as priest. It is as prophet that Adam names the creatures and proclaims the true reality of creation to creatures. To accurately direct, give thanks, and to proclaim the truth of reality—that is the work of Adam. With these sketches of man’s role within creation, we can now more adequately account for what went wrong in the garden of Eden.

Choosing the Creature Rather than the Creator

The fall of Adam and Eve is the result of their abandonment of their role in creation. As royalty, they were given the task of tending and caring for the garden temple. Adam and Eve failed to drive away the evil serpent who slithered into the holy sanctuary. This is amplified by their failure to exercise royal authority over the serpent and to reject its promptings. Instead of accurately understanding and relaying the truth of God, they fail to speak truth and therefore abandon their prophetic role in creation. In following the serpent and his deceitful take on reality, they are no longer able to offer up a sacrifice of praise towards God but choose the selfish path of autonomy.¹⁰ Therefore, they fail as priests.

⁵ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 68.

⁶ Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 141.

⁷ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 15.

⁸ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 15.

⁹ Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, 141.

¹⁰ Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 127.

Notes

The forbidding of eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not an arbitrary decree of a tyrannical God. Adam and Eve as seen in the tradition of the



Orthodox Church were brought into existence fully grown but still immature, untested, and weak in their wills.¹¹ They were to grow into a healthy exercise of discerning the created world. St. Maximus the Confessor suggest that, perhaps the creation of visible things was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because it has both spiritual reasons that nourish the mind and

a natural power that charms the senses and yet perverts the mind. Therefore, when spiritually contemplated, it offers the knowledge of the good, while when received bodily it offers the knowledge of evil.¹²

Rather than an arbitrary rule given by God, St. Maximus suggests that the entire created visible order is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Humanity was to grow into a true spiritual contemplation and use of it. To be able to accept it as a gift and to transform it through thanksgiving, through eucharistic living. Instead, we received it bodily and abused its true reality. Eve is deceived by the serpent's suggestion of becoming a God herself but also by the deceitful beauty of the fruit of the tree. She eats the tree for the sake of the tree itself. She embraces the bodily or worldly beauty of the fruit for her own selfish ends. The choice of taking from the forbidden tree is man's choice to love the world for itself.¹³ It is a rejection of the world as a gift. Fr Alexander Schmemmann summarizes it for us:

When we see the world as an end in itself, everything becomes itself a value and consequently loses all value, because only in God is found the meaning (value) of everything, and the world is meaningful only when it is the "sacrament" of God's presence. Things treated merely as things in themselves destroy themselves because only in God have they any life. The world of nature, cut off from the source of life, is a dying world. For one who thinks food in itself is the source of life, eating is communion with the dying world, it is communion with death.¹⁴

The movement away from God and the truth of his creation is the basic problem of Adam and Eve and therefore all of mankind. To exist in their natural state, as God made them, their desire would ultimately settle on God. This rightly ordered desire for communion with God would then have them rightly govern the world. They would rule as holy kings, priests, and prophets. Harmony would reign "between themselves and nature, between body and soul (no shame), between each other (one flesh), and between

¹¹ Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God, Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: The World Creation and Deification* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), 175–204.

¹² Staniloae, *Experience of God*, 175.

¹³ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 16.

¹⁴ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 17.

themselves and their creator.”¹⁵ Instead, Adam and Eve chose their own kingdom, their own selves to thank, and their own truth to proclaim. Violence, shame, injustice, and dissolution rush in. They no longer trust God and his word. They now fear Him and distrust his motives. They remove themselves from his presence. They even turn on each other, shifting blame and denying responsibility.

This dissolution shows itself in the curses from God, the recognition of their spiritual death and its ramifications. First, the snake is cursed as well warned of the enmity between the seed of the snake and the seed of woman, for the seed of woman will bruise the serpent’s head while the serpent will only harm the heel of the seed of woman. Following the snake’s curse, God turns to the relations between man and woman, who will now become occasions for “exploitative power”: Eve will “desire” Adam, and Adam will “rule over” Eve.¹⁶ They will now “approach the other from utilitarian rather than loving motives, seeing each other as tools to be used.”¹⁷ Men using women and women using men: “victims of pornography, machismo, abuse, misogyny, abortion, divorce...[or] seeking men for their money, power, and so forth.”¹⁸ The womb of women will now become painful; the source of life will now become a source of sorrow. For men, the source of life, the world, now is an occasion for great toil and work. Because they have abdicated their role in tending the garden, they are no longer able to stay, and the cherubim are placed there to guard the garden that they failed to guard.

Genesis: The Continued Reverberations of the Fall

The rest of Genesis plots the reverberations of this betrayal of Adam and Eve. Cain’s slaying of Abel is due to the refusal of Cain to give true sacrifice to God, so he ends up offering up the blood of his brother to his anger.¹⁹ Cain refuses to serve as a true priest, so he repeats the edenic fall. The building of the tower of Babel is an attempt to recreate Eden, a new garden temple that will reach into the heavens.²⁰ Again, they attempt to lord over creation without reference to God and so further dissolution comes with the dividing of tongues and the failure of the new garden temple. The wickedness and dissolution of mankind reaches its zenith in the account of Noah and the flood. A remnant is maintained by God in an ark, a floating miniature capsule of the created world. But it is not long after the return of man to the renewed earth that the sons of Noah abuse the fruit of the vine and transgress shameful boundaries with their father. An echo of the shameful nakedness of Adam and Eve but now taken to another level of dissolution.

We come to the calling of Abraham, and we encounter the beginning of the formation of Israel. Abraham is called from the land of Ur and is given a promised land wherein his

¹⁵ Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, *Holy People, Holy Land: A Theological Introduction to the Bible* (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), 31.

¹⁶ Dauphinais, *Holy People, Holy Land*, 35.

¹⁷ Dauphinais, *Holy People, Holy Land*, 35.

¹⁸ Dauphinais, *Holy People, Holy Land*, 35.

¹⁹ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis*, Section III.2 and III.3.

²⁰ Towers in those days were ziggurats, palace temples meant for the gods.

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descendants will bless the nations (Gen 12:1–3, 6–7). It is his descendants that will bless the nations. It is his descendant Joseph, who after being rejected by his brothers, saves them from famine in the land of Egypt. And so, the descendants of Abraham sojourn for some time in Egypt. The Book of Genesis ends with Joseph making the Israelites promise to bring his bones back to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is in the book of Exodus that God raises up his prophet Moses to bring Israel out of bondage in Egypt, to give them the Law and tabernacle for the right worship of God, and to lead them to the doorstep of the promised land.

A Kingdom of Priests

The book of Exodus is the story of God creating a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6). In line with the promise to Abraham, Israel must be brought out of the slavery of Egypt and led back to the promised land. They will not only accomplish this in a physical journey and conquest, but they will be shaped into a holy nation, a nation of priests, who will be able to speak and prophetically witness to the truth of God throughout the world. How will God accomplish this forging of a nation of priests?

The center of Exodus does not lie in the miracles of God wrought over the idolatrous Egyptians—though, it should be noted that the plagues are obvious echoes of the creation account in Genesis. The idolaters are the ones for whom creation rejects and overwhelms. Rather, the core of Exodus is the revelation of God to Moses and Israel on Mount Sinai. There God reveals the ways in which he will form his kingdom of priests. He will accomplish this through his Law, which instructs Israel in holiness, and through his tabernacle, where he will reshape the heart of Israel through worship.

The encounter with God on Mount Sinai is shot through with the Temple themes we saw in Eden. God dwells within his Temple wrapped in smoke and fire, signs of his power, holiness, and a lack of easy accessibility.²¹ God no longer walks in the garden with his perfect creation; rather He must teach and perfect mankind through his holy, but mediated, presence and guidance. As He had led Israel out of Egypt by a pillar of smoke and a pillar of fire, so as they approached Mount Sinai there was the presence of smoke and fire, signifying the presence of God (Ex 19:16–19, 24:15–18). God warns Israel that there are specific boundaries on this mountain in that only certain people will be allowed access to the top of the mountain. There is a three-part gradation of holy space.²² All people may come to the foot of the mountain and see the fire and smoke. Aaron, his two sons, and seventy elders are allowed part way up the mountain for a meal with God. Finally, only Moses was brought into the most intimate of places. The nearer one drew to God, the more intense was the holiness and stringent the requirements of access. This three-part access is repeated in the later tabernacle and Temple. The courtyard is open to all Israel. The first room of the Temple was open to Levitical priests. And, finally, the

²¹ These themes will attend almost every later theophany of God, e.g., Isaiah 6.

²² J. Daniel Hays, *The Temple and the Tabernacle: A Study of God's Dwelling Places from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 2016), 34–35.

holy of holies, was only accessed by the high priest. The rupture of communion requires a pedagogy and therapy of appropriate boundaries. Humanity cannot waltz into the presence of God but must approach God in the ways appropriate to their relationship.

On Mount Sinai, Moses is given the Law and the instructions for building the tabernacle (Ex 25–31). The instructions for building the tabernacle echo in very specific ways the creation account in early Genesis. There is the repetition of “then the Lord said” echoing “and God said”, the mention of gold, precious jewels (like onyx), and cherubim and, finally, the final instruction given to Moses is an echo of the final act of God in creation, God reminds Moses to keep the sabbath day of rest. Aspects of Eden are being restored.

What stood at the center of the holy of holies? The ark of the covenant. God commands Moses to build a gold box which will reside within the holy of holies. Within the ark will lie the Ten Commandments, the ten guiding points of God’s Law—a general summary of the beliefs and ethos of Israel (Ex 25:10–26). Alongside the Ten Commandments lie a jar of manna (Ex 16), Aaron’s staff (Num 17), and later, the teachings of Moses (Deut 31). The entire covenant of Israel can be summed up within the ten commandments. First, the correct relationship to God is paramount—worshiping the creator rather than the creature. From this correct worship flows the ethics of Israel. It is upon the two tablets of stone that God writes his Law in order for his priest kings to rightly teach the commands of God. Enshrined at the very heart of Israel’s worship is the correct understanding of God, creation, and mankind, which is a step toward remedying the falsehood brought into the garden.

God’s pastoral care for Israel is underlined by the presence of the jar, staff, and more teachings of Moses. It is of course completely in character for Israel in the midst of this revelation, at the very foot of the mountain of fire and smoke, for them to grow lax and turn to idolatry. And the route they take is to turn to Aaron, the future high priest of Israel, to make a golden calf and an altar and to worship it as the one who saved them from Egypt—yet another example of the constant temptation to turn to the creature rather than the creator. Moses, as their leader, corrects them and then turns back up the mountain towards God in order to make atonement, to mediate and intercede for the sinful damage wrought by the Israelites.

The need for reconciliation, or atonement, between God and Israel is also at the heart of the Temple. The cover of the ark was called an “atonement cover” which held two golden cherubim with wings overshadowing the cover (Ex 25:17–22). Here God tells Moses, “...above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.” These two cherubim again underline the holiness of God. They guard Eden as they guard the presence of God. Angelic attendants, called seraphim, will later attend the theophanies of God. “The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim



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(Psalm 98 [99]:1).” From the ark of the covenant God reigns. The throne of God is upheld by the golden footstool, the ark of the covenant.

We must more fully develop the “atonement cover.” Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter the holy of holiest and smear blood on the “atonement cover.”²³ On the footstool of God, between the cherubim, and above the Law of God, blood is smeared to cover the failure of Israel to live up to its Adamic vocation. The loss of Eden by Adam and Eve is slowly being restored via the condescension of God to mankind to bring them back into communion with himself. This will be continued in the Temple of Jerusalem once the promised land is won from the various tribes and within the possession of the kings of Israel.

We would be remiss in not mentioning many other aspects of the tabernacle and later Temple. The table with the bread of presence, upon which lie golden plates, and from which the priests eat the bread set there, perhaps an echo of Aaron and the elder’s meal on Mount Sinai.²⁴ Or, the golden lampstand, a tree-like oil lampstand which echoes the tree within the garden and also the burning bush from which God called and set aside Moses for his ministry.²⁵ Worship within the holy space of Israel, whether within the tabernacle or within the Temple, was accompanied by sacrifice, incense, the presence of angelic beings—even being woven into the curtains, which should be certain colors, gold, and precious jewels. The end of this worship, an echo of the paradise of communion with God, was to reform the hearts of Israel and to begin to outline for them the contours of edenic living. It is important to underline the emphatic message of God to Moses—that the worship of Israel was to be according to the pattern shown to Moses. The failure to worship God correctly was to corrupt the pattern and to worship God according to the dictates of humanity. Again, a repeat and echo of the age-old problem. Does one follow the way things have been made and dictated by God? Or, do we pursue our own goals and goods?

The end of Exodus outlines the construction of the tabernacle and the final resting of God with the descent and filling of the tabernacle with the glory of God. God has returned to his rightful throne among his people. Will Israel stick to the Law of God? Will she worship Him in holiness and in the pattern revealed to Moses? Will she speak truthfully and fully of the commands of God? Or, will she fail in her vocation to be a light to the world, the elect people of God, a kingdom of priests?

Prophets and Kings: Restoring Correct Worship

While Israel is given so many gifts, as Adam and Eve were, the presence of sin constantly threatens to master Israel. After the death of Joshua, the successor of Moses who actually led Israel into the promised land, the children of Israel fail to fully take the land promised to them and fall back into habits of idolatry. God raises up judges to lead and guide his people, especially in their battles with the various tribes left in the land. At

²³ Hays, *The Temple and the Tabernacle*, 40; Leviticus 16.

²⁴ Hays, *The Temple and the Tabernacle*, 43–44.

²⁵ Hays, *The Temple and the Tabernacle*, 44–48.

the end of this period Israel is left to do whatever is seen as right in each person's eyes (Judg 21:25). Chaos and violence reigns. Not only has Israel fallen into disarray but the priesthood has also fallen into disrepute. The sons of Eli sin against God and Israel in such a way as to nullify the sacrifice of the Lord (1 Kings 2:12–17). Their destruction in battle with the Philistines is also the occasion of the loss of the ark of the covenant (1 Kings 4–7). The sacred worship of Israel, the pattern as revealed to Moses, has been desecrated by her priests.

It is the failure of the priests of God which occasions the calling of Samuel, one chosen by God to serve in the tabernacle, act as a prophet seer, and to even lead Israel in battle. Samuel stands as a transitional figure from a broken and unfaithful Israel who, winnowed by the consequences of her sins, is brought into a renewed relationship with God. Unfortunately Israel desires a king, something given guidelines by Moses, which seems to indicate a desire to return to the idolatrous luxury of Egypt where the king multiplies horses, chariots, foreign wives, and gold and silver—all specific avenues of rejecting the boundaries of God. It is not wrong for Israel to have a king per se, as Adam was appointed as a king, but it was at this time seen by God to be a rejection of his rule for the sake of trusting in a human king to fight for Israel against their enemies.²⁶

The appointment of Saul as Israel's first king goes well at first. However, Saul falters by wrongly offering sacrifice to God and upon being rebuked shifts the blame towards the people (1 Kings 13). Later Saul's wrath is kindled to a boiling point against his son Jonathan, who acts with courage and faith in God compared to the nit-picky and self-absorbed path of Saul, coming inches away from imitating Cain (1 Kings 14). And, finally, Saul fails to complete the decree of the Lord to fully destroy Amalek, but instead keeps some of the spoils for himself. Another echo of Cain in his failure to rightly sacrifice (1 Kings 15). After these failures "God's spirit leaves him, an evil spirit torments him, the Lord no longer talks to him, he consults a medium, and finally ends up falling on his own sword."²⁷ The breakdown of worship leads the way to the absence of the Lord, the introduction of the serpent back into the garden, and to dissolution and death.

David, the shepherd king, is anointed to replace Saul. He stands in many ways as the opposite of Saul. In the places Saul failed, David triumphs, especially poignant is his constant adherence and plea to God for help. When David faces Goliath he faces a man wearing "scale armor," in other words, dressed like a snake.²⁸ David not only defeats



Goliath, but takes his head, an echo of the curse against the snake in the garden. David recaptures the lost ark, conquers Jerusalem, and reorganizes the priesthood. A lasting work of David is the placing of the ark-throne of Israel at Jerusalem. The right worship of God

²⁶ Leithart, Peter, *A House for My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000), 133.

²⁷ Leithart, *A House for My Name*, 139.

²⁸ 1 Kings 17:5; Leithart, *A House for My Name*, 142.

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undone by the priests of Israel and further damaged under the leadership of Saul has been restored.

The enthronement of David coincides with a renewal of covenant with Abraham for Israel now specified through the house and throne of David (2 Kgdms 7). David will not build a temple of worship for God, but his house, throne, and Kingdom will be established forever. As soon as all of these blessings flow, sin creeps in and the house of David is divided due to the sins of King David. However, the covenant made with David, the promise of his throne being forever, is upheld throughout the rest of the Old Testament. The renewal of Israel, her final restoration, will come through a descendant of David.

We have found in Moses, Samuel, Saul, and David the great themes of the garden. The revelation of worship to Israel is essential to her return to the paradise once known to Adam and Eve. However, the serpent casts a long shadow throughout the Old Testament. Israel fails to follow the commands of God. She falls into idolatry, chaos and violence erupts, worship is corrupted, houses are divided, and the Lord is forgotten. This pattern repeats itself throughout the life of Israel. The royal house of David stands as a promise and pinnacle but is never reunited. The Temple of God is defamed by the life and practice of the priests of God. The pattern of falling away also explains the constant raising up of prophets. During the dissolution of the united kingdom under Solomon and his sons, God called out Elijah and Elisha. During the captivity and exile of the divided kingdoms Jeremiah and Isaiah were God's voice to his people. And with the challenges that Israel faced upon her return to the promised land and the attempts to rebuild the Temple and restore her worship God spoke through Ezra and Nehemiah.

While it seems like Eden is ever so distant, the prophets of God maintain that God will be working to restore Israel to her God, that paradise will return, and that He will accomplish this through the house of David. In order to restore Israel and creation to the communion of God, the prophets speak of God's judgment by referring to the Law God revealed to Moses and the promises made to Abraham and David. It is in calling Israel to repentance that God promises to finally reveal Himself and to provide the great consolation to creation.

Jesus Christ the Messiah

"...He is God, as being Son of God, and is everlasting King, and exists as Radiance and Expression of the Father, therefore fitly is He the expected Christ, whom the Father announces to mankind, by revelation to His holy prophets; that as through Him we have come to be, so also in Him all men might be redeemed from their sins, and by Him all things might be ruled."

—*St. Athanasius the Great*²⁹

²⁹ St. Athanasius, *Discourse I Against the Arians* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Volume IV, Second Series, Chapters XII.49 and XII.50, 335.

Jesus Christ began his public preaching ministry after reading aloud these words from the great prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD. (Luke 4:18–19)*

It is the anointed one, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, whom the prophets foresaw and spoke of. It was He to whom they looked to heal and liberate them from the deserts of the dissolution brought upon themselves through their disobedience and waywardness. After the reading of the prophet, our Lord told those assembled that the fulfillment of this prophecy was present in his presence. God himself has visited his people. As our Lord indicated the fulfillment of Isaiah in his advent, let us follow the prophet Isaiah further and see how he describes the messianic time, the “acceptable year of the Lord” (Isa 61).

With the advent of the Messiah, God’s vengeance upon his enemies will mean a day of comfort and consoling for the mourners in Zion. Israel will be restored to its ancient inheritance, because God will turn ashes into glory, anoint his beloved with the oil of joy, and bedeck his bride in “garments of salvation” and a “robe of righteousness”. This joyful event will be the occasion of the rebuilding of “old ruins” and the repair of “ruined cities”. In fact, the prophet speaks of this time of salvation as a fruitful garden where the plant of Israel shines forth in glory.

This glorious restoration of Israel to the edenic state of things is also the time in which Israel’s election as a kingdom of priests comes to fruition, as the Messiah has brought the Gentiles into this paradise alongside Israel. The time of dissolution, shame, and alienation is past. The Messiah, the king, who is from the “root of Jesse” has blossomed forth and “the whole world is filled with the knowledge of the Lord (Isa 11).” Israel is in the messianic kingdom returned to being named “priests of the Lord” as the Gentiles turn to serve in this kingdom and become the new glory of Israel.

The Church is the new Israel, as St. Paul tells us in the book of Romans, chapters 9–11. Whomever has called upon the name of the Lord and entered the Church, whether Jew or Gentile, has access to the benefits of the Messiah. The deserts have become verdant gardens, the desolate cities have been returned to glory, God himself has dwelt with his people and delivered them from the depth of their servitude, just like in the days of Moses



when God led Israel out of Egypt and brought them to the promised land (Isa 11:15–16). The testimony of the Law, Psalms, and Prophets is the true inheritance of the Church. Worship of God continues as revealed in Jesus Christ. For it was ultimately Jesus whom Moses encountered on Mt. Sinai and whom Isaiah encountered on the throne. It is the same enthroned King, the foretold messiah of Israel, that we daily encounter in our prayers and regularly receive in the Eucharist in the temples of God.

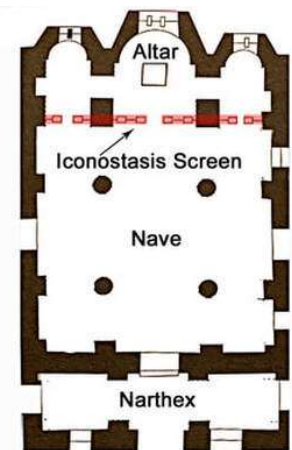
The Orthodox Temple: Returning to Paradise

*The church is an earthly heaven in which the super-celestial God dwells and walks about. It represents the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Christ: it is glorified more than the tabernacle of the witness of Moses, in which are the mercy-seat and the Holy of Holies. It is prefigured in the patriarchs, foretold by the prophets, founded in the apostles, adorned by the clergy, and fulfilled in the martyrs.*³⁰

The Orthodox temple is in continuity with Eden, the tabernacle of the desert revealed to Moses, and the Temple built by Solomon. It is where God “dwells and walks about” as St. Germanus tells us. It is within the temples of the Orthodox Church that Jesus Christ, crucified, buried, and resurrected, is revealed to God’s people. The Temple of Israel has not been abrogated but fulfilled in the advent of Jesus Christ. Our return to the paradise Adam and Eve had with God is made possible to Jesus Christ, who has made his presence and grace known to us specifically within the temple and rites of the Orthodox Church.

Not every Orthodox space of worship meets the ideal architectural form of an Orthodox temple. However, the ideal to be built and maintained by faithful Orthodox Christians is based around these deep biblical forms we have encountered. Rather than detailed lines of exegesis, we will explore how Christ has restored us to paradise by walking through a typical Orthodox church and pointing out different ways in which the temple fulfills Israel’s Temple and Law. As we walk through the church, we will also discuss significant liturgical actions and high points of the Divine Liturgy, the eucharistic rite of the Orthodox Church.

We enter an Orthodox church through the narthex. An Orthodox temple is built in a three-tiered manner. There is the narthex, which is the outer court, the nave, also called the inner court, and the altar, which is the holy of holies. This is an echo of the pattern of Israel’s Temple. The narthex is an in-between space. It is where the Church meets the world and provides a space for transitioning from the world into the depths of paradise. This is where the faithful take a moment to lay aside earthly cares, greet and venerate the friends of God, the saints, and light a few candles as they petition the saints or God Himself. Because this space is a



³⁰ Paul Meyendorff, *St. Germanus of Constantinople on the Holy Liturgy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 56–7.

transitional space, there are other significant liturgical actions held here. Catechumens, those who are enrolled to prepare for reception into the Orthodox Church, are enrolled within the narthex. This is where catechumens will receive prayers of exorcism, denounce Satan and all his pomp, and adhere to Jesus Christ by confessing faith in Him as “King and God”. The baptisms and application of Holy Chrism will be done within the nave. Another significant liturgical act is the rite of betrothal, wherein a man and woman are promised before God to be wed. The rite of crowning will, like the baptisms and chrismations, occur within the nave.

The nave of the Church is where the people of God gather for the rites of the faithful. This space is where the faithful lift up their prayers to God, attend to the hymns of the Church, prostrate before the saints and holy things of God, receive the various blessings of the priest, confess their sins to Almighty God, receive the absolution of their sins, and where the prophetic word of God is given to them via the preaching and teaching of the bishop. This is where Jesus Christ meets his people in their initiation into the Church via baptism and chrismation. It is within the nave that the priest will bring out the divine gifts, the holy Body and Blood of our Lord, to be given for the illumination and healing of the faithful. It is where Jesus Christ weds a man and woman, making them kings and queens of their homes in order to have a fruitful life of service to his creation.

We see the manifold ways in which the roots of Israel have born new fruit, through the life, cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For example, in the service of our Lord crowning a man and woman as husband and wife, we see how the dissolution brought about by Adam and Eve is turned back. The newly crowned couple’s life, grounded in the martyric witness of marriage, wherein the husband and wife are bound together through Christ-like love and sacrifice. We see in the rite of baptism an echo of the salvation wrought by God for Israel leading them through the Red Sea and crushing the pursuing army of Pharaoh. In chrismation, we see our Lord anointing his new royalty for service in the kingdom, an echo of the anointing of Israel’s kings. The continued presence and shepherding of God continue through the sacramental life of the Church. God leads his pilgrim people from the chaos of sin and the dissolution of death into the promised land of God’s eternal Kingdom.

Within the holy of holies is the altar upon which Jesus Christ is enthroned. The altar of an Orthodox Church has placed upon it many different items of great significance. The Temple of old centered and radiated from the ark of the covenant upon which God appeared to his people from between the two angels. If we recall, within the ark there lay the ten commandments, a jar of manna, the budding rod of Aaron, and the further works of Moses. Since the advent of Christ, all these things have found their fullness on the altar of Orthodox churches.

The ten commandments and the works of Moses are fulfilled within the Gospel book which lays upon the altar. Here, the fullness of God’s Law is revealed in the life and work of Jesus Christ as given to us by the four evangelists. It is in the reading of the Gospels and the subsequent preaching which make our Lord’s royal, priestly, and prophetic word known to us. St. Germanus describes the four gospel writers as

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characterized by four faces, each representing, in their different ways, the Son of God. Drawing on an earlier tradition, ultimately from the prophet Ezekiel, St. Germanus characterizes the gospel writers as four animals:

For the Gospel of John recounts His [Jesus'] sovereign, paternal, and glorious birth from his Father. The Gospel of Luke, being of priestly character, begins with the priest Zachariah burning incense in the temple. Matthew tells about His birth according to His humanity – “the book of the genealogy.” Therefore, this gospel is in the form of a man. And Mark begins from the prophetic spirit, which comes to men from on high, making the beginning say: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as it is written in the prophets: “Behold, I send my messenger.”³¹

It is through the proclamation of the Gospel, the reading as well as the preaching, that the royal, prophetic, and priestly ministry of our Lord is made clear and accessible to God's people.

The jar of manna being held within the ark of the covenant was a continual reminder of God's providential care for his people as they traversed the desert toward the promised land. In the Church, this is fulfilled in the continued feeding of God's pilgrim people from the altar upon which the holy sacrifice of our Lord is again and again offered to the faithful. St. Germanus refers to the altar as “the spot in the tomb where Christ was placed. On it lies the true and heavenly bread, the mystical and unbloody sacrifice. Christ sacrifices His flesh and blood and offers it to the faithful as food for eternal life.”³² He goes further telling us that the altar was “prefigured by the table of the Old Law upon which the manna, which was Christ, descended from heaven.”³³ On Orthodox altars, there stands within the tabernacle a vessel containing the sanctified gifts of our Lord's Body and Blood, which are drawn upon in order to care for those faithful who are sick and unable to attend the Divine Liturgy.

Beside the Gospel book lies a blessing cross which is used to bless the faithful. This is the true budding rod of Aaron, the first high priest of Israel. The Cross is the true fruitful tree which has brought salvation and joy into the world. At the back of the altar stands the seven branched candelabra which replicates the candelabra of the Temple and was a symbol of the tree of life.

We could continue making parallels and giving commentary from the Holy Fathers upon the many ways in which the Orthodox temple is the complete and fulfilled icon of the Old Testament worship. For it is in the rites of the Orthodox Church that the heavens are truly opened, and the Lord gives himself to his people under the various sacraments



³¹ Meyendorff, *St. Germanus*, 83.

³² Meyendorff, *St. Germanus*, 59.

³³ Meyendorff, *St. Germanus*, 59.

of the Church. Instead, we close with this Psalm that describes the joy of being in the temple of God.

One thing only have I asked of God, it alone shall I seek: to live in the Temple of God, all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of God, and to frequent his palace (Psalm 27:4)

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Chapter 2

The Kingdom of God and the World

The Kingdom of God

The Nature of the Kingdom

Both St. John the Forerunner and the Lord Jesus called Israel to repentance because the Kingdom of God was at hand and its arrival was imminent (Matt 3:2, 4:17). Israel had lived in increasingly agitated expectation of the arrival of God's Kingdom since their return from the Babylonian exile. The prophets had all proclaimed that after the exile the Day of Yahweh¹, the Day of the Lord, would come. In that day, God would finally destroy and neutralize all of Israel's foes, exalt Israel to a place of power and prominence in the earth, and make Zion the world's capital. The Messiah would rule the world from a glorious Jerusalem, a city made beautiful and invincible, and all the nations would flood into the Temple, bringing gifts and finally acknowledging Israel's God as the true God and Lord of the earth. Currently the kingdom, the power, and the glory belonged to the pagan nations and their kings. Soon, in the Day of the Lord, the kingdom and its power would belong to Yahweh alone.

When John proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was at hand, all believed that the power of the brutal Roman empire would soon collapse, and be replaced by the Kingdom of God, administered in military might by His Messiah. The *pax Romana* would be replaced by a messianic *pax Hebraica*. The kingdom, in their understanding, was definitely of this world.

Our Lord therefore had much to teach, and much to correct. In his many parables He took care to emphasize that the coming kingdom would not immediately overthrow the political or military status quo, but that the evil tares and good wheat would grow together in this age, and that the final destruction of evil from the earth would await the last day of judgment (Matt 13:30, 40–42). The kingdom would not arrive in this age as a eucatastrophe,² nor would blessing come to all Jews alike because they were the biological sons of Abraham. It would come only to those whose hearts were good and ready to receive it, just as seed only bears fruit when received by good earth (Matt 13:23). The kingdom was not coming with outward signs to be observed but was even then in their midst through the presence of Christ and his miracles (Luke 17:20–21). Rome's

¹The name "Yahweh" is used by some to represent the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (meaning four letters) יהוה (Yod Heh Vav Heh). It was considered blasphemous to utter the name of God; therefore, it was only written and never spoken, resulting in the loss of the original pronunciation. It is more common in English-language bibles to represent the Tetragrammaton with the term "LORD" (capitalized).

² The term is Tolkien's. "...a eucatastrophe is a massive turn in fortune from a seemingly unconquerable situation to an unforeseen victory, usually brought by grace rather than heroic effort."

<https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Eucatastrophe>

hegemony would be left undisturbed, for the kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36).

The kingdom came through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus. Israel set their hearts upon a glorified nation; the kingdom when it came consisted of a glorified Messiah, a king in whom Israel could find transfiguration and glory. Through his glorification, Christ entered and embodied the Kingdom, with all the immortal powers which would one day flood the earth in the age to come. In Christ, that new age had already come. In Him was the new aeon, the earth's *paliggenesia*, its regeneration and rebirth. With Christ's glorification the Day of the Lord had come, and Israel could enter it. The kingdom came as seed sown in this age. For the time being, it was small and seemingly insignificant; soon it would become a mighty tree, so that the birds of heaven would find shelter in its branches (Ezek 17:22–24; Mark 4:30–32).

Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...

The Church, though it sojourns on earth, therefore, lives in the Kingdom of God which is why each Orthodox Liturgy begins with a doxology blessing the Kingdom of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The supernatural powers of rebirth, forgiveness, and spiritual transfiguration, received in baptism, Eucharist, and in all the sacramental rites of the Church, are manifestations of the Kingdom. Since the disciples of Jesus now participate in this kingdom, they are made God's sons, his heirs, and they receive "the fulfillment of the Kingdom of heaven"³ every time they receive Holy Communion. Life in Christ involves our continual sharing in the power of the Kingdom, for which reason St. Paul wrote that "the Kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power" and in "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 4:20; Rom 14:17)—i.e., in a transfigured life.

This reality was early recognized by the Church Fathers. Late in the first century, St. Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthian Christians, describing their liturgical experience by saying that "a full outpouring of the Holy Spirit was upon you all." In their liturgical assemblies, the gathered Christians experienced the presence of the new aeon in the form of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The Church is therefore the manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth, for it is the presence of Jesus. As His Body and fullness (Eph 1:22–23), the assembled Church manifests the new aeon, the powers of the age to come. When the baptized disciples of Jesus gather together for the Eucharist, they become, in an exceptional and full manner, his Body, and Christ shines forth in their midst with all his power to forgive, heal, and transform. The Church is the presence of the future, the Kingdom of God here in this age in seminal⁴ form, representing that portion of the world which is even now in an ongoing state of transformation. That is why Philip's apostolic preaching was described

³ The phrase is found in the anaphora of St. John Chrysostom.

⁴ Like a seed planted in soil.

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as “the good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:12). St. Clement was reminding the Corinthians that through their sacramental gathering, their assembly, their *ekklesia*, or “church”, the Kingdom of God could be experienced in this age.

The Kingdom of God is therefore not of this world—i.e., it is not a kingdom like all the other kingdoms, presided over by an earthly king openly supported by military power and enforced taxation. God’s kingdom is not a country with borders to be guarded and secured, has no economy kept running by a workforce, no police, courts, or penal system as do all other kingdoms. It needs no diplomats to represent it, no treaties to sustain it,



no wars to protect or expand it. This is what Christ meant when He told Pilate at his trial that if His Kingdom were of this world then his servants would be fighting (John 18:36).

Christ rules His Kingdom from the Father’s right hand in heaven, transcendent above all the earth and its political and military machinations. His Kingdom rose when He rose to heaven, and unlike all earthly kingdoms (such as the Roman empire) it will never fall. Christians who are part of that kingdom have their citizenship in heaven (Phil 3:20) and belong to a kingdom safely beyond hostile human reach.

Israel in the first century did not know this about the Kingdom of heaven (although there were scattered hints in the prophets, such as Isaiah’s word that in the kingdom such formerly hostile nations as Egypt and Assyria would have the same status as did Israel (Isa 19:19–25)). Suffering under the brutal yoke of Rome, Jews longed for a kingdom that *was* of this world, and a messianic king that would spill Roman blood and destroy the Roman empire. They could not understand his parables correcting this mistaken view of the Kingdom of God, because that kingdom was not what they wanted.

In Jesus, God was bringing a new and different kingdom into being—and for Israel, an unwelcome one. Jesus was not the usual kind of king. He was a crucified king, a king who was glorified by being lifted up on the cross (John 12:23–24, 32–33), a king without a fighting army guarding a nation. This new kind of king, of necessity, brought a new kind of kingdom—and a new way of belonging to that kingdom.

Formerly, inclusion as part of God’s covenant people—and being heirs of God’s promised kingdom—was by circumcision, sabbath observance, and temple sacrifice. But the Kingdom was not built on national principles or a national foundation, but on spiritual ones, and so now inclusion as part of Israel was being reconfigured.

Circumcision, sabbath, and temple sacrifice characterized them as a nation, but now membership in God’s covenant people was through discipleship to the crucified king—i.e., through baptism.

After Christ had been crucified as their king, inclusion in the covenant people of Israel no longer involved circumcision, sabbath, or temple sacrifice (“works of the law”). Now

union with Jesus alone was required. After the cross and resurrection, Jews were invited to enter the Kingdom, a new transcendent, trans-national kingdom, through baptism and discipleship to Christ. If Christ were a king like any other king and His Kingdom were a kingdom or nation like any other, such a reconfiguration of membership in Israel would not have been required. But a crucified Christ changed everything. Now participation in Israel is through baptism, so that the Church is “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). The Church inherits Israel’s promises and destiny and enjoys the kingdom God promised to his people.

The Peace of God

In peace, let us pray to the Lord.

This Kingdom may be described and characterized as God’s peace, His *shalom*, His saving presence in the midst of a warring world. The Hebrew word *shalom*, usually rendered simply as “peace”, includes more than the simple absence of war or conflict. It includes prosperity, well-being, safety, security. Through the prophet Isaiah God promised that He would “extend *shalom* to [Jerusalem] like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream” (Isa 66:12). The image of an “overflowing stream” is not that of a peaceful lazy river, but a mighty torrent (the New English Bible renders this last “like a stream in flood”). Previously, Israel experienced drought, captivity, fear, and death, being alienated from God and at war with him through their rebellion. Now God had created peace, *shalom*.

The Lord Jesus promised this gift when He said to his disciples that in him, they would have peace. Though they were still in the midst of a warring world, a world in tumult and offering them nothing but tribulation, they need not fear, for He had overcome the world (John 16:33). St. Paul spoke of this peace when he wrote that “having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). Formerly we were alienated from God, living as rebels and children of wrath (Rom 5:10; Eph 2:3), but now through Christ we have been brought near to God. Christ Himself is our peace, for He has made peace through the blood of his cross (Eph 2:14; Col 1:20). If we remain in him, we remain firmly anchored in God’s *shalom*, His Kingdom, in which all conflict is overcome.

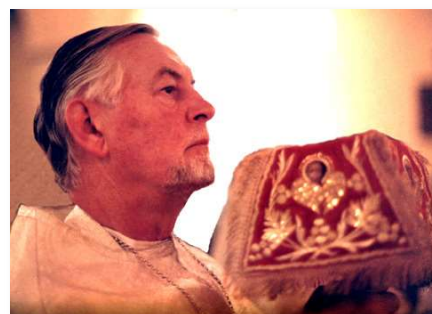
The Great Litany

That is why the Great Litany, the intercession which the Church makes for the world with all its needs, begins with the diaconal bidding “In peace let us pray to the Lord.” This bidding does not simply remind those praying that they should be of peaceful mind while they are praying, and not in a state of distraction or agitation. The peace of which the deacon speaks is the peace of Christ, and the deacon is here bidding the faithful to *pray as members of Christ’s Body*, for to be “in Christ” is to be “in peace”, since “He is our peace.”

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Fr. Alexander Schmemmann reminds us of this in his book *The Eucharist*. Concerning this bidding and this Great Litany, he writes,

Do we understand that this is not ‘simply’ the prayer of a man or a group of people, but the prayer of Christ himself to his Father, which has been granted to us, and that this gift of Christ’s prayer, of his mediation, of his intercession is the first and greatest gift of the Church? We pray in Christ, and he, through his Holy Spirit, prays in us, who are gathered in his name.⁵



Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemmann

To pray “in peace” is therefore to pray as a part of Christ’s Body, so that Christ Himself prays through us, offering acceptable prayer to his Father.

We should take time to remember that originally this litany and these prayers of intercession were not offered in their present position at the beginning of the Liturgy, but only after the catechumens had been dismissed. For these were the prayers of the faithful, of the royal priesthood, the baptized believers, the Body of Christ. Catechumens, being unbaptized, were not yet a part of that Body or that priesthood, and so they could not offer those priestly intercessions for the world.

It was for this reason that the Kiss of Peace or the holy Kiss was only given among the faithful after the catechumens had departed. As the *Apostolic Tradition* directs, the catechumen “shall not give the Peace, for their kiss is not yet holy.”⁶ It was only after the catechumens had been baptized and their kiss made holy that they were allowed to join the others in passing the Peace and offering the Church’s intercessions for the world as the prayer of Christ’s Body. It was only after the universal rise of infant baptism and the effective demise of the catechumenate that prayers and actions once done later in the Liturgy after the catechumens had left (such as the Great Litany) could be transferred to other places in the Liturgy and done anytime.

The first petition in the Great Litany asks for salvation for those who are assembled in peace. The deacon bids the faithful, “For the peace from above and for the salvation of our souls, let us pray to the Lord.” This again reveals the eschatological nature of the Kingdom of God, of our salvation, and of the peace which constitutes that saving kingdom. It is not a peace coming from the world, having its power and origin in political agreements, treaties, and the strength of armies to enforce them. Peace from below is indeed a political peace, and therefore is as fragile as human politics. The second of the Liturgy’s antiphons (from Psalm 146) warns us to “put not your trust in princes”, since as fragile human beings the peace they establish is as fragile as they are.

⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press), chapter 3.

⁶ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), chapter 18.

When his spirit departs, he returns to the earth and on that very day his plans—his agendas, his treaties, his peace—all perish.

But the peace that we experience is from God above, and the peace and salvation that He gives to us can never perish or suffer diminution. In praying for the peace from above, the Church confesses that it belongs to a kingdom which can never perish, and



which can never be troubled by the tribulation which reigns in this world. This petition confesses and exults in the unbreakable union that exists between Christ and His Church, between the Head and the Body. Wherever the Church sojourns on the earth, and under whatever political system, and in whatever trouble it may find itself, its peace remains serene and unbreakable, for it comes from above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

If the first petition of the Great Litany reveals the eschatological nature and eternal safety of the Church in this world, the next petition reveals the Church's concern for the world in which it lives and sojourns. In this petition, the deacon bids the faithful to pray "for the peace of the whole world, for the welfare of the holy churches of God, and for the union [i.e., the unity] of all." Though the Church remains safe and secure in God's peace, it is not unconcerned for the world or for the plight of its neighbours and fellow men. The Church's lot in this age is tied up with its fellow men, and the disasters which strike the world affect the Church as well.

The Church therefore begins by asking God to extend the peace that the Church experiences in saving fullness to the world as well, insofar as the world can receive it. The Church prays "for the peace of the whole world." It knows only too well how war affects all, slaying the young soldiers, killing old men and non-combatants, destroying crops and fields so that famine and hunger hurt everyone in the land. It therefore prays that the world may be spared such conflict according to God's mercy and will, even though it knows that in this age wars are inevitable.

And since the Church prays as Christ's Body and with the kind heart of the Master, its concern is universal—it does not pray only for the peace of those closest to it or for the peace of those it likes, but for the peace *of the whole world* (Petitions 3–8) That includes peace for nations and peoples that might be political enemies, such as Parthians nearby or barbarians far off. Christ loves all the world, and so the Church intercedes for everyone without distinction. This was also the practice of St. Paul, who taught his converts to "make entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (1 Tim 2:1–2). As well as desiring that men not be afflicted by the evils of war, Paul knew that political peace was a precondition for preaching the Gospel. Peace on earth was an advantage to the Church as it pressed on to fulfill its evangelistic mission.

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This concern for the affairs of the world includes a prayer “for the welfare of the holy churches of God,” for their stability, health, and good functioning. Foremost in this good health is the union of all the churches as they are maintained in their unity, holding the same faith in truth and love. Heresy, false teaching, selfish ambition, and angry egos can work to bring schism and to divide, and this would impede their mission and damage their salvation. Since the health and salvation of the world depend upon the Church in its midst (whether the world knows this or not), prayer for the world’s peace necessarily also must include prayer for the welfare and unity of the Church. Thus, even in the pre-Constantinian years the Church and the world were united in a kind of symbiosis. The good functioning of each was bound up together in a measure of mutual dependence. The gift of God’s peace to the Church was given to be shared with the world.

The World

The Biblical understanding of the world is two-fold. The term, in Greek *kosmos*, can mean either the world and all it contains as created by God, or the world in its present state of rebellion against God. It is important to distinguish which of these meanings the biblical authors intend.

An Object of God’s Love

The scriptures are quite clear that the world is an object of God’s love. The early chapters of Genesis reveal that God freely chose to create the world as an act of love, without any compulsion or necessity. Though the historical narrative Old Testament from Genesis to Nehemiah (i.e., from Abraham to the return from exile) is the extended story of the covenant people as the object of his special care, this narrative is set within a universal context. The early chapters of Genesis reveal Yahweh Elohim, the God of Israel, to be the creator of the entire world and all it contains, including all the Gentile nations not in covenant with him.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are universal in their scope. They narrate the creation of the man (in Hebrew the *adam*) and the woman⁷—i.e., the entire human race—as the special work of the Hebrew God. The story reveals Yahweh’s care for mankind even before men began to call upon the name of Yahweh in worship (see Gen 4:26). When mankind strayed and sinned, and rebelled even more, God decided to judge them for their rebellion by sending a flood to wipe them out—but only after taking steps to preserve righteous Noah and his family and through them preserving the entire human race. God further showed his patience by promising that although the intent of man’s heart was evil from his youth, He would nonetheless not again destroy the world (Gen 8:21). Thus, these chapters reveal God’s loving concern and solicitude for all the world, not just his chosen people.⁸

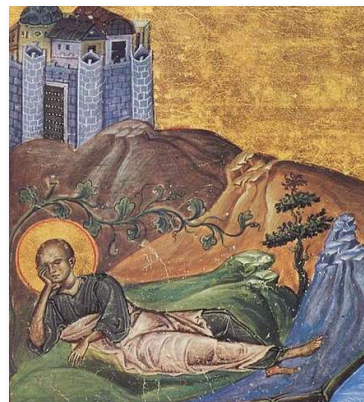
⁷ In Hebrew their names are *adam* and *chavvah*—i.e., “mankind” and “life”.

⁸ The lesson is clear regardless of the historicity of the stories.

We also glimpse God's universal love for his creation in other parts of the Hebrew scriptures. When Abraham is first called, God promises him that through his family all the families of the earth would eventually find blessing. The call of Abraham (and therefore the destiny of Israel) is set within a universal context and is intended to bring God's blessing and love to all the nations of the earth.

Perhaps the most astonishing revelation of this divine love is found in the tale of Jonah.

⁹ Having declared Yahweh's judgment against Nineveh and its imminent overthrow, as Jonah feared, the city repented, and God forgave them, changing his mind and not sending the threatened judgment. Jonah therefore sulks and sits down to watch what will happen next. God then sent a plant which instantly grew over Jonah to give shade, and then sent a worm to attack the plant so that it withered and provided no more shade. Finally, He sent a scorching east wind so that Jonah grew faint—and furious. God then asked him, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" Jonah retorted that he certainly did, "even to death." God then delivered his final line, and the lesson of the whole story:



You pity the plant for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?

In other words, God feels compassion for *all* that He has made—even for the brutal Gentiles of the hated Assyrian empire.

This strand of Old Testament universalism finds its culmination and fulfillment in the New Testament, for Christ came not just to save the chosen people, but to bring salvation to all the world. As said above, in Christ membership in the covenant people of Israel is offered to all the world, to anyone willing to repent and be baptized. In Christ, God creates a new people, a new humanity, one neither Jewish nor Gentile (Eph 2:15). In Christ, the blessing that God had promised to Abraham would come to all the families of the earth: "In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham came to the Gentiles" (Gal 3:14).

St. John is especially clear that it was the whole world—Gentile as well as Jew—that was the intended object of God's love and redemption. In the first words of his Gospel, John declared that the life of Christ was the light of men, not just the light of Jews (John 1:4). As many as received him, Jew or Gentile—were given the authority to become the children of God. In one of the most important passages in his Gospel, John declared

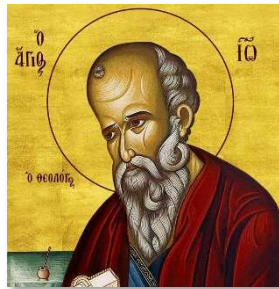
⁹ He is mentioned in the historical books of the OT only in 2 Kings 14:25, where he prophesies expansion for the northern kingdom—which made him a less than heroic character for those in the rival southern kingdom, the later post-exilic readers of the Book of Jonah.

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that “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believed in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The Father sent the Son so that the whole world might be saved (vs 17). Christ is therefore hailed by the Samaritans a “the Saviour of the world” (John 4:42).

In Imitation of the Father

Given this universal love, Christians are called to imitate the Father and love the world as well, loving even their enemies and praying for their persecutors that they may become true sons of their Father (Matt 5:44–45). The first and great commandment is embodied in the *Shema*, the fundamental Jewish confession: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one!”¹⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Deut 6:4–5; Mark 12:29–30). But this commandment has a flip side, a corollary, a second which is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18; Mark 12:31). That is, love for God is also expressed in love for neighbor, so that if one does not love one’s neighbour, one does not truly love God either.



St. John expresses this truth with his customary concision and force:

If someone says, ‘I love God’, and hates his brother, he is a liar, for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also (1 John 4:20–21).

Love, of course, is an action, not a feeling or an emotion, and so is always expressed in works. To love one’s neighbor one must visit him when he is distressed, give him water when he is thirsty, and feed him when he is hungry (see Matt 25:35–40). As St. John again asks us, “Whoever has the world’s goods and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17)

It is for this reason that the Church has always had an abiding concern to help the poor. The Church in Jerusalem cared for the widows among them from their earliest days (Acts 6:1–6), and when James and Peter and John extended to Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, recognizing, and blessing their work among the Gentiles, they took care to remind them to “remember the poor” (Gal 2:9–10).

Furthermore, this love for neighbor means that Christians must also be involved in the political process of the countries in which they live (to the degree that this is possible), helping to work for social justice and programs that will help the poor. Christians do not withdraw from the society around them, but work among their neighbors to do what good they can in the world. Learning lessons from our Byzantine past, Orthodox

¹⁰ That is, the only one for you.

Christians will seek to use government power for the uplifting and good of those in need.

Not only that, Christians will not remain heedless of environmental concerns. Love for the world involves not only care of its inhabitants, but also of the fabric of creation itself. The physical creation belongs ultimately to God, not to us, and we may not harm or misuse what does not belong to us. Christians will strive to be good stewards of the world and its resources.

A Rival to God

The scriptures are also quite clear that the world is a rival to God and a threat to the Christian's loyalty to God. For this reason, Christian moralists have always warned the faithful against the spiritual dangers which come from *the World, the Flesh, and the Devil*. By "the World" (usually capitalized) is meant not the planet and its inhabitants, but the systematic and ingrained preference for the things of the world over a preference for the things of God.

St. James warns in stark terms, with all the fire of an Old Testament prophet, of the dangers of preferring the world to God: "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). St. John offers his own warning:

Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world" (1 John 2:15-16).

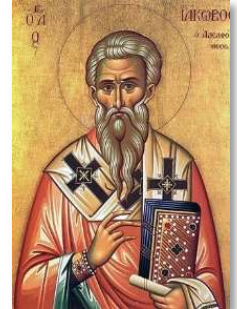
This brief Johannine list of all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes (i.e., a covetous desire to acquire and possess), and the boastful pride of life (i.e., the arrogance that ruthlessly competes, and struts, and shows off)—reveals that "the World" is complex and varied. What is common to all worldly elements is that each one seeks to claim and captivate the heart, to become an idol, and thus take the place of God in one's life. That is why St. Paul referred to greed as "idolatry" (Col 3:5), because the grasping desire to acquire means that those things have usurped the place of God in one's life. It is for this reason too that the Lord Jesus depicted wealth as "Mammon"—a divine rival to the true God (Matt 6:24).

There are dark aspects to some things in the world—or, perhaps more accurately, everything in the world is capable of great darkness. The lust of the flesh can present itself in the form of pornography in its many horrifying forms, as well as prostitution and human trafficking. The lust of the eyes with its desire to acquire can lead to many forms of fraud, lying, and theft as the desire to acquire money triumphs over the voice of conscience in comparatively mild crimes such as shoplifting, or more serious offences such as scams and identity theft.

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It can also lead to the oppression of workers, the sin so often and furiously denounced by the Old Testament prophets who rebuked the elites for enriching themselves by grinding the face of the poor (see Isa 3:15). St. James stood in this tradition when he warned,

Come, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields and which has been withheld by you cries out against you, and the outcry of those who did the harvesting reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you” (James 5:1–6).



The lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life can lead one to do terrible things.

The sin denounced by James is common to all cultures, whether agrarian or urban. We see this sin in the faces of all corrupt politicians, all lying and conspiring CEOs, all the elite with power and wealth who manipulate media and rulers to their own advantage. The figure of such elites is common in the Psalter, where Yahweh promises to judge them thoroughly and vindicate the helpless widow and orphan whom they have despoiled and trampled. It is common for such worldliness to hide itself behind a mask of respectability, affability, and even piety. In this age, this 1% is rarely called to account by the other 99%. “There are no pains in their death... they are not in trouble as other men” (Psalm 73:4-5). They indeed live luxuriously on the earth and lead lives of wanton pleasure.

Faced with this, one is tempted to say quietly to oneself, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence” (Psalm 73:13). The temptation to learn from worldly men and their prosperity, to abandon one’s integrity and faith for the sake of gain—in other words to become worldly—is very great, which is of course why the psalmists, prophets, and apostles denounce it so regularly.

Being a Sojourner

The alternative to becoming a friend of world is to recognize that one belongs to the age to come, and that here in this age we are sojourners and strangers, men and women just passing through this world on our way to the world to come. As sojourners, we abstain from the fleshly lusts which wage war against our souls and threaten to transform us into God’s enemies (1 Pet 2:11; James 4:4).

The world around us will challenge us if we renounce its way and choose a different way of living, correctly concluding that by our way of life and our choices we are judging and condemning them. Thus in 1 Peter 4:4 we read, “They [your former worldly friends] are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you.” The perception of the wicked and worldly that the righteous are a judgment

upon them (whether or not the righteous say anything) is very old. Thus, in Wisdom 2:12–19 we read,

Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he became to us as a reproof of our thoughts; the very sight of him is a burden to us, because his manner of life is unlike that of others. We are considered by him as something base, and he avoids our ways as unclean. Let us test him with insult and torture, that we may find out how gentle he is and make trial of his forbearance.

Worldliness is therefore not only a temptation. Avoiding it can be socially and sometimes even physically dangerous.

Christians are called to avoid such worldliness regardless of the dangers which such avoidance might bring. We must remember that such worldliness is indeed fading. We have a choice: *either* the pleasure of the world which is confined to this life, and which passes away, *or* the pleasures at the right hand of God which will never fail (Psalm 16:10). The Lord Jesus pointed out the inequality involved in the options: “What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36). The Faustian bargain proffered by the world is the fool’s bargain.

The apostles make this clear time and time again. St. John wrote, “The world is passing away, and its lusts, but the one who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17). St. Paul wrote, “The form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:31). Because of this, Paul gave more detailed advice about how the Christian was to live in this passing world. He said,

The time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep, and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice, and those who buy, as though they did not possess, and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it (1 Cor 7:29–31).

This last bit of Paul’s advice is the key to living as sojourners and strangers.

St. Paul means that whatever we do in this world—whether marrying, weeping, rejoicing, or buying—we must do realizing that we could leave this world at any moment, and we must therefore find our true rest and joy in the Kingdom, and not in anything in this world. We indeed take joy in marriage and in buying and in all the others gifts that God gives us in this age. But as we use the world, we must not make use of it as if all our joys were anchored in it. We must be prepared to leave them all in a moment’s notice, if Christ so wills. The significance of Paul’s words for those possibly facing martyrdom is only too plain, but it retains its significance for all Christians who know that here we have no continuing city (Heb 13:14).

In the world, but not of the World

This two-fold meaning of the world (the world created and loved by God and the world currently in rebellion against him) gives Christians their peculiar stance vis-à-vis the world. The world is loved by God, and yet it is the locus of rebellion and evil. We are

therefore called to love the world, and hate its rebellion—or, in more classic terms, “to love the sinner and hate the sin.”

Loving the sinner means that we identify with the world in its suffering and seek with all our might to alleviate it. We even identify with the world in its sinfulness, knowing that we also have the seed of corruption within us, and as repentant sinners we are saved by grace and God’s mercy. Hating the sin means that we are clear, forceful, and unambiguous in our denunciation of sin. We may not and in fact *cannot* know how the sinner will fare on the Day of Judgment, but we can know that their sin is wrong. The oft-quoted and misapplied dominical precept “Judge not” does not mean that Christians are to throw away their moral compass and render themselves incapable of knowing sin when they see it. For how else can they repent of their misdeeds?

Evil is a constant and a chilling reality in society, and Christians must never shrink from calling evil by its true name. Such plain speaking will, of course, come with a cost, especially in the woke cultures now found in the west. But the Church, through its leaders, must take up the prophetic mantle and speak the truth to power, regardless of the cost. Loving the sinner always involves naming the sin and calling the sinner to repentance—not in a spirit of judgmentalism or disdain, but in love. The Lord is patient and does not wish for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9). This cannot happen unless the Church speaks prophetically to sinners and calls them home to God’s forgiveness and mercy. The first word spoken by St. John the Forerunner, by Christ, and by St. Peter was “repent” (Matt 3:3, 4:17; Acts 2:38).

An Introduction to Prayer

What is needed to experience the Kingdom of God, to receive the peace of Christ, and to interact faithfully and fruitfully with the world is a prayerful heart. It is perhaps significant that in the Divine Liturgy, even before the people begin to praise God in the antiphons, they lift up their voices in prayer in the Great Litany.

There are, of course, heights which can be reached in prayer only after many years—heights which are mostly reached by those with leisure and solitude to devote to prayer as an uninterrupted practice—namely, monastics. For monastics, all is subordinated to prayer, and the ideal is continual ecstatic prayer, a communion which continues even during sleep. In the story told about how St. Pachomius received his prayer rule from an angel, Pachomius asked if the rule did not contain too few prayers. The angel replied, “I have ordained enough that the weak might conveniently fulfill the rule. The perfect have no need for a rule, since alone in their cells they pass their whole life in the contemplation of God.”¹¹ Here we will not attempt to describe such heights, but only offer a few introductory remarks.

For some, prayer consists of simply saying the words of a prayer, reading something from a page or saying something memorized. But true prayer begins by focusing upon

¹¹ Cited in Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press), chapter 3.

God, with the mind in the heart. One first brings oneself into the presence of God, and only then begins to speak words.

Our Approach to God

But if one is aware of the greatness of God, of his holiness and power, then one will know that, as Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) once wrote, “To meet God means to enter into the ‘cave of a tiger’...The realm of God is dangerous.”¹² Or, to vary the feline imagery and borrow the words of C. S. Lewis, “Aslan [a Christ figure] is not a tame lion.” As Aslan the lion once observed to a girl when she asked him if he ate girls, “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms.”¹³ God is not safe, and it is dangerous to trifle with him. To meet him safely we must approach him in the true and saving fear of God, a fear which is not servile, but is clean, and endures forever.¹⁴



Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom)

When we approach God in prayer, we will almost inevitably have an image or picture of him in our heads. Whether this involves the traditional child’s picture of an old man with a white beard or not is irrelevant. We must approach him knowing that all such images are inadequate and vain, and that God is above any image or even any concept of which we could conceive. The images will do us no real harm, provided we do not mistake them for the inexpressible and incomprehensible reality facing us as we approach him. We pray to him not as we imagine him, but as He knows himself to be.

We approach him with our *nous*. The word *nous* is sometimes translated “understanding” (thus Phil 4:7 RSV) or “mind”, but that translation savours too much of the cerebral and the intellectual. It means one’s awareness, one’s openness; it is with the *nous* that we experience another person. In prayer we stand before God¹⁵ with trembling and open hearts, recognizing that we stand before One before whom angels and archangels, the guardian cherubim and the fiery seraphim veil their faces in awe. This God is above us in heaven, He fills heaven and earth, and He prays within us by his Holy Spirit, enabling us to address the terrifying King of all as *abba*, father (Rom 8:26; Gal 4:6).

Our words may first come from a prayerbook, and we either read them from the book, offering them slowly with our hearts, or offer them without using a book, having memorized them. The advantage of the prayerbook is that it allows us to use the prayers of the saints as models and templates for our own. By praying them over and over, we gradually make them our own, and fill them with meaning from our own lives and experiences. The prayers of the saints in this way teach us, helping us to find the proper balance between familiarity and formality, reverence and intimacy. They teach us the

¹² Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, *Living Prayer* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishing, 1974).

¹³ C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1965), 11.

¹⁴ Psalm 19:9

¹⁵ Standing is the usual posture for prayer.

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proper amount of humility and contrition; they direct all thoughts away from an obsession with our private needs toward the needs of others. They teach us to balance praise for God with sorrow for our sins. The prayerbook thus becomes our school, the holy academy where we learn from the saints how to pray.

As we persevere in regular prayer, we will discover that we are subject to periods of spiritual dryness, times when it is difficult to pray and when we experience no emotional uplift from it at all. This is normal and is a part of the undulation which characterizes our physical lives as well as our spiritual lives. Counter-intuitive though it may appear, it is during the times of dryness that spiritual growth occurs, as we pray not because it is easy, but because we want to obey God, even when it is hard. For at these times, we pray not for any emotional reward that may come, but solely as an act of obedience and love. It is



Home Prayer Corner

therefore crucial to persevere in prayer at all times, especially during times when perseverance is difficult. It is only through those times that we begin to mature and put on spiritual muscle.

As well as prayer to God, our daily times of prayer will also include asking for the prayers of the Theotokos, our guardian angel, and the saints, especially our patron saint whose name we bear and with whom we have a special relationship. Prayer lifts us up to heaven, since we are one with Christ, and Christ abides in heaven, our intercessor at the right hand of the Father. We pray as members of his family, and so offer our prayers as part of that family. Family members

always pray for one another, and so it is that we ask

for the prayers of members of our heavenly family, trusting in their intercession. The prayerbooks contain examples of such prayers.

Our private prayers presuppose our membership in the Church, where we offer corporate prayer as members of the gathered Body of Christ. It is these gathered prayers which we offer as Christ's Body that constitute the foundation of all our life of prayer. During the week, we pray as members of the scattered Church, the assembly which has gathered the previous Sunday for the Eucharist and will again regather the following Sunday. It is because of the sonship that we received in baptism, and which is renewed every Eucharist that we are able to stand before God privately during the week and address him boldly as "our Father." When we gather together as the Church for the Eucharist, we actualize our salvation. It is this salvation that we live out in our prayers after we leave the assembly. Gathered or scattered, corporately or separately, we live a life of prayer as members of the Body of Christ.

As Orthodox Christians, we are "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God..." (Eph 2:19): members of the Kingdom of God and, therefore we have the privilege to stand before God and lift our personal and corporate prayers to

him, asking for his mercy, his peace, and the right ordering of our lives. Moreover, we are entrusted with this ministry as fellow citizens with the saints. Through our baptism we have access to him through Jesus Christ (Eph 2:17,18) so that with boldness we can pray at every Liturgy, “for the peace of the whole world...” interceding for all who have turned away from the God that loves them and who longs to grant them his peace.

Chapter 3

God, Jesus, and the Christian Life

The Three Antiphons

At the beginning of the Orthodox Divine Liturgy, three hymns called antiphons follow the Great Litany and precede the Little Entrance. Traditionally, antiphonal singing in the Orthodox Church consisted of two choirs singing, alternately, one or more verses from the Psalms. In modern Orthodox practice, especially in the Russian tradition, one choir generally sings the three Antiphons, with Little Litanies between them. The first two antiphons, “Bless the Lord, O My Soul” and “Praise the Lord, O My Soul” are taken from the Psalms (Psalm 102[103] and Psalm 145[146], respectively). As we will see below, the Psalms, of great importance to the life of the Church and to all Orthodox Christians, became the hymnbook of the Church, inherited from Judaism. The third antiphon consists of the Beatitudes, taken from the Gospels (Matt 5:2–12; Luke 6:20–26). The Beatitudes are considered to be the most concise form of the teachings of Christ, and have a prominent place in the Divine Liturgy, right before the procession of the Gospel book, called the Little Entrance.

In addition to the succession of antiphons and litanies, the “Hymn of Justinian” is sung after the second antiphon. Many know this hymn as “Only Begotten Son,” after its first three words. It was composed sometime in the 4th or 5th century and was spread and popularized by the Emperor Justinian (527-565 A.D.), who recognized its importance. The significance of this beautiful hymn is its affirmation of the Christological formula developed during the First Ecumenical Council (325 A.D.), including its description of Christ as the Only Begotten Son of the Father, taken from the Gospel of John (John 1:14, 1:18, and 3:16).

The text of the hymn is very specific, with each word rendering deep theological truths which are necessary to correctly ascribe to Jesus his identity, attributes and actions in the world:

Only Begotten Son and Immortal Word of God, Who for our salvation didst will to be incarnate of the holy Theotokos and ever virgin Mary, Who without change didst become man and wast crucified, O Christ our God, trampling down death by death, Who art one of the Holy Trinity, Glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit, save us!

How is it that such an understanding of God the Son came to be? What is the meaning of “Only Begotten?” And if Jesus is indeed the Only Begotten Son, what does this tell us about the Father?

The Living God

Very often the popular concept of God savors more of deism than of theism. In popular thought God remains confined safely in heaven, happily isolated from life on earth.

From this distance He can sometimes answer prayer, and we console ourselves with the thought that our beloved dead whom we mourn go to be with him in heaven when they die. But for all that God is not really involved in life down here on earth, however often we describe freak lightning strikes and floods as “acts of God.” God never judges or directs the affairs of history. He never really intervenes. He mostly just watches and waits.

In contrast to this is the biblical picture of God as “the living God,” the phrase which emphasizes Yahweh’s¹ power to act compared to the powerless idols of the heathen (Psalm 114[115]:1–8). The gods of the nations are dead, lifeless, unable to smite or to rescue, or to do anything. They can neither judge and strike down, nor restore and raise up. But Yahweh is the living God, the One who judges the wicked and rescues the righteous, who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry, who raises up those who are bowed down, who brings to ruin the way of the wicked (Psalm 145[146]:7–9).

The title “the living God” is Jewish code for God’s continual and powerful involvement in the world He has made, in contrast to the idols. Thus St. Peter confessed Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16); thus St. Paul reminded the Thessalonians that in their conversion they had “turned to God from the idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from the heavens” (1 Thess 1:9,10).



This God is not the deity of the deists, nor the God of the philosophers. He is powerful, active, saving, compassionate—and dangerous. Too dangerous, in fact, for most people, and so popular imagination cuts him down to size. Popular imagination confines him to heaven, chaining him to his celestial throne, denying him access to earth. Everything that occurs down here has only natural causes; everything must be explained by something—anything—other than the work of the living God.

Christian theology knows nothing of this little God. Our faith remains rooted in the living God revealed in Christ, who manifested his power through the cross and resurrection of his Son, and who continues to work among us through miracles and the sacramental life of the Church. The true and living God is not safe and not tame.² his very presence causes trembling: when Isaiah saw Him in the Temple, he declared himself undone; when St. John saw Him in a vision, he fell at his feet as one dead (Isa 6:5; Rev 1:17).

¹ The name “Yahweh” is used by some to represent the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (meaning four letters) יהוה (Yod Heh Vav Heh). It was considered blasphemous to utter the name of God; therefore, it was only written and never spoken, resulting in the loss of the original pronunciation. It is more common in English-language bibles to represent the Tetragrammaton with the term “LORD” (capitalized).

² Compare the Christological description of Aslan in C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (NY: Harper Collins, 1994), 80. “Safe? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

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This God existed before the world was made, and by his power brought all things into being. He is transcendent, above and beyond all created things—yet He fills all things—and is present in every atom of his creation. This is not pantheism, which declares that impersonal divinity is in everything and that therefore everything is divine. It might be described as “pan-en-theism”, which asserts that the personal and transcendent God is found in all that exists, so that no corner of the cosmos is bereft of his presence.

Part of the theologian’s task is to speak of God and to describe him. The task is an impossible one, for God surpasses all description, all thought, all imagination, and every category we might conceive, including the binary categories of being and non-being. That is why the theologian known as (Pseudo) Dionysius in about the fifth or sixth century strained the limits of language in an attempt to describe the indescribable. The proper response to an encounter with the living God is mute wonder and ecstatic adoration. Yet the Church must still teach about this Lord, and so theologians have done their best to find words that are the least inappropriate to describe God. No one can describe him accurately; the best we can do is to use words which, whatever their inadequacy, offer the least distortion, all the while knowing that God remains above such descriptions. An apophatic approach³ may be best for solitary mystics, but life on earth and the Church’s mission demand the use of a cataphatic approach⁴ as well. Thus, a number of terms are used to describe the living God.

One of these terms is “omnipotent”, or all-powerful. This means that whatever God chooses to do, He has the power to accomplish. There is no task that He chooses to undertake which might prove too much for him. But here a note of clarification must be offered—divine omnipotence does not mean that God can somehow do things which are intrinsically impossible, such as making two plus two equal five, or giving free will to men while simultaneously withholding it. As someone once wrote, “Meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning because we prefix to them the two other words ‘God can’... Nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk about God.”⁵ Or, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, “Nothing which implies contradiction falls under the omnipotence of God.”⁶

God is also omnipresent. God’s transcendence (in biblical terms, his throne in heaven) does not imply that He is distant from any part of his creation. He is no closer to those on mountaintops than He is to those underground. He is not spatially closer to those in church than He is to those in the trenches of war. One draws near to him through repentance and faith, not through physical movement. That is why St. Paul affirmed that in him we live and move and have our being, and that He is not far from anyone (Acts 17:27–28). God is everywhere. We approach him with our heart, not with our feet.

³ Describing what God is *not*

⁴ Describing what God *is*

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (NY: Harper Collins, 1996), chapter 1.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 25, article 4.

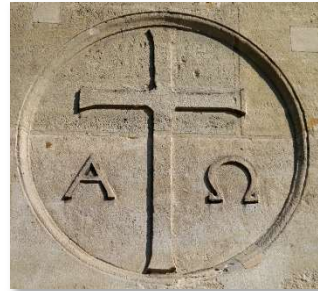
Christian theology confesses that God is also invisible, and that the visible appearances of God in the Old Testament, such as when God was seen on Mount Sinai, by Isaiah in the Temple, and by Ezekiel by the river Chebar (Ex 24:9–10; Isa 6:1; Ezek 1:26–28) were theophanies. In those appearances, God was condescending to human weakness, appearing to Israel in human form (Ezek 1:26) so that Israel might more easily communicate with him. But strictly speaking, God has no body, no parts, no form. He is invisible, so that no one has ever seen him or ever can see him (John 1:18; 1 Tim 6:16). He can appear to us in a vision (e.g., Dan 7:9; Rev 4:2–3), but the reality is higher and more transcendent than the vision. Being above every category and conception and filling all things, God cannot be seen. He is incomprehensible, not just to men and angels, but in Himself.

God is also eternal, and not subject to time as we are. He does not move from the past into the present and then into the future but exists above the limitations of time and space. This does not mean that in his dealings with us He does not respond to us in the moment and deal with us where we are. In his condescension, the One who is eternal and beyond time, the One for whom there is no past, present, or future, but who lives above the flow of time, stoops down to speak with his creatures who *do* live within the flow of time and who experience change.

We see these time-conditioned interactions in the scriptures: God announced to Nineveh that He would destroy them for their sins, and then “changed his mind” after they repented (Jonah 3:10). This does not mean that God was somehow surprised at their repentance, as if He did not know beforehand what would happen. But God dealt with them where they were and responded to their actions accordingly. We are children of time, and experience things sequentially within the flow of time, not knowing what the future will bring. In order to have a relationship with us, God speaks to us where we live within this flow of time, even if He knows all that will happen before it does.

Furthermore, God is immutable, and not subject to change. This means that God is not affected and limited by external circumstances. Things impact us and cause us to change—either to grow or to decline. We are usually passive in our lives, in that disasters can hurt us and make us sad or bitter and successes can cause us to cheer up and increase in happiness. Our moods and life exist in this state of flux and change, as we are at the mercy of things in the world around us. God is not like this at all. He is not at the mercy of circumstances, and there is nothing passive in him; in Himself He cannot be made depressed or more cheerful.

Despite this, God condescends to us in our weakness. That is why in the Scriptures we read of God becoming angry when Israel sinned by worshipping Baal-Peor, and of God calming down when Phineas stood up to punish Israel’s sin (Num 25:3, 11). This



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anthropopathic⁷ way of speaking about God was the only one possible if Israel was to have a relationship with the changeless God.

Finally, we note that God's essence is different from his energies. By God's essence is meant God as He is in Himself; by his energies is meant how we experience God. The distinction between his essence and his energies preserves the transcendent nature of God while at the same time declares that we can really know and experience him, for his essence is present in his energies.

In all these theological descriptions the Church does not seek to define God or fully describe him, for it knows this is an impossible task. Rather, these cataphatic terms are attempts to safeguard the nature of the living God from distortions and from understandings that are unworthy of him. Each Christian encounters the living God in humility, approaching him with fear and love and trembling. God is only known by us because in his compassion He allows Himself to be known and experienced.

Jesus

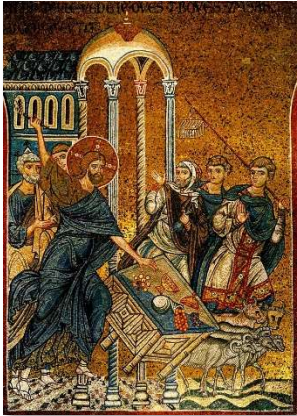
In the same way that popular thought has sought to tame, sanitize, diminish, and render the living God safe and harmless, the Jesus of history has been similarly dealt with. Just as the everlasting Father and Judge has become in many people's minds an indulgent grandfather and a kind but ineffectual senior citizen, so Jesus, the Son of Man, has been transformed in the popular mind as an affirming, inclusive, non-judgmental teacher of love, a flowered guru, one in a long line of human teachers. The Jesus revealed in the New Testament and described in the hymns of the church, however, is nothing like this modern substitute. The Jesus of the hymn "Only Begotten Son", and the Jesus of the scriptures and of the councils is not a mere human teacher but the divine Son, who has unique and specific activities in the world.

The New Testament reveals his compassion clearly enough. Jesus is the One who taught his disciples to pray for their enemies and to forgive. He refused to call down fire upon the Samaritans when, in defiance of all the sacred norms of Middle Eastern hospitality, they refused to receive him as He traveled (Luke 9:53–56). In gentleness, He welcomed children and infants, taking them in his arms and blessing them when his disciples would have sent them away (Luke 18:15–16). He prayed that God would forgive those who were crucifying him (Luke 23:34).

There is more than enough Gospel material to justify the common picture of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." But this picture is only half the Gospel picture. If Jesus was meek and mild, He also walked the earth with a sovereign stride, utterly aware of his divine authority and dignity as the Son of God. He knew that He possessed authority to forgive sins and He walked on the sea as easily as other men walked on the road. More than that, He knew that He had the authority to pass along his miracle-working authority to others, such as the apostles, and He sent them out with instructions to cleanse lepers, cast out demons, and raise the dead as easily as anyone else would send out a friend with

⁷ The use of limited human language to describe God's actions.

instructions to pick up their mail while they were out (Matt 10:8). He took it for granted that it was his word and decision alone that would one day determine the eternal fate of every living person (Matt 7:22–23, 25:31–46). In the words of G. K. Chesterton, Jesus was “a being who often acted like an angry god—and always like a god.”⁸



Christ’s anger, reminiscent of the anger of Yahweh in the Hebrew scriptures, was at least as obvious as his compassion. He cast the money changers out of the Temple, driving out their animals with a whip of cords (Mark 11:15; John 2:15). He denounced the Pharisees with a tremendous tongue-lashing, calling them a brood of vipers, hypocrites, blind guides, and fools, and when Law-experts heard this and protested that by saying this He was insulting them too, He did not qualify or relent, but turned on them also, saying, “Woe to you lawyers, as well!” (Matt 12:34; 23:15–16; Luke 11:45). He told those who were his foes that they were children of the devil, and by his imprecation sank unbelieving

Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum into the depths of Hades (John 8:44; Matt 11:21–23)—an angry God indeed!

This double Gospel picture is confirmed by the vision that St. John had in later decades when Christ appeared to him in glory with messages for seven churches in Asia Minor. For some churches, Christ had only words of encouragement and compassion. For others, He had words of stunning rebuke. He told the Ephesian Christians that they must repent, or He would remove their church entirely; to the Smyrnaean Christians, He said that if they did not repent, He would make war against them with the sword of his mouth (i.e., would utter judgments destroying them). To a false prophetess in Thyatira, He said that if she did not repent, He would cast her upon a bed of sickness and kill her children (i.e., her followers) with pestilence. To the lukewarm Christians of Laodicea, He said that unless they repented, He would vomit them out of his mouth (Rev 2:5, 16, 22, 23, 3:16).

The Gospel picture of Jesus includes therefore promises of unimaginable glory and reward as well as threats of terrifying retribution. The Jesus of the Law walked the land with sovereign authority, healing all who came to him—opening blind eyes, raising the dead—and demanding complete submission, saying that no one was worthy of him unless they preferred him even to their families and their own lives (Luke 14:26).

Although Jesus answered to the title “Son of David,” which was a messianic title (Matt 22:42, 15:22; Mark 10:47), his preferred title was “Son of Man,” doubtless because the title “Son of David” or “Christ/Messiah” contained too many military and political connotations in the popular mind.

⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), chapter 9.

Notes

The title “Son of Man” originally simply meant “a human being,” which is its meaning in Psalm 8:4 and Ezekiel 2:1. It was used in Daniel 7:13–14 to refer to the people of Israel as the image of a human being to contrast them with the brutal animal-like kingdoms that oppressed them (such as Babylon and its successors, which were compared to a lion, a bear, and a leopard). The human being/son of man was brought near to God and received from him tremendous authority. This was an image of Israel being glorified and saved from foreign domination, when “the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people, the saints of the Most High” (Dan 7:27).

The image very quickly came to be an image not of the saints of the Most High, but of the Messiah who would bring them dominion. (The Book of Enoch, for example, uses the title “Son of Man” as a title for the Messiah.) Jesus adopted the title for Himself, for it spoke of his authority and of his glorious destiny as the Messiah at the Father’s right hand but was free of the military associations surrounding the title “Messiah”.

The New Testament picture of Jesus is therefore one of divine authority. Jesus claimed this divine authority as his own, and in fact asserted his full divinity, saying that He was “one with the Father” and that He was the eternal “I am” who revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush (John 10:30, 8:58; Ex 3:14). The Church would, in the coming centuries, confess both his full humanity and his full divinity, combined in one Person, the divinity and humanity existing together “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.”⁹

Thus, through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, Jesus, the Son of Man, brought salvation. Those uniting themselves to him through faith and in baptism became part of his Body the Church. In the Church, the gathering of his disciples, the new aeon, the age to come, is manifested and actualized. In his presence among his assembled disciples, the powers of the coming age are now at work. his disciples are given a new and eternal life, experiencing the power of the age until now in this world. As such, they are different from those not yet united to Christ and are called by Christ to reveal him by living differently than other men.

The Christian Life: Living the Beatitudes

The life of the Christian worshipping the living God and following Jesus may be summed up in the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes form the prolegomena¹⁰ to the Sermon on the Mount in the same way that the Ten Commandments formed the introduction to the entirety of the Law. The contrast between Law and Beatitude is intentional: the ten commandments gave instructions for regulating the life of the theocratic community, but Christ bestows blessing in the coming kingdom. The former found its context in the national life of Israel in this age, whereas the latter finds its context in the eschatological

⁹ From the “Chalcedonian definition” which repudiated the notion of a single nature in Christ. Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451.

¹⁰ Introduction

reversal coming with the Kingdom of God. The former demands obedience: the latter assures reward for those who have served Christ. The difference here is the difference between the Law and the Gospel.

The reward promised in the Beatitudes consists of blessing in the age to come. The word usually rendered “blessed” is the Greek *makarios*, a word used in classical Greek to denote the happiness of the gods. In Christ’s day, the world looked at those poor, bedraggled souls who followed him, and thought them to be deluded, pitiable, and pathetic—a bunch of fools rightly to be met with disdain and a sorry shake of the head. This is what the Pharisees thought of Jesus’ disciples, writing them off and saying, “This rabble which does not know the law is accursed” (John 7:49).

In response to such denunciation, Christ assured his followers that they were not accursed, but blessed. A tremendous reward awaited them in the coming kingdom. The rich who despised them and who rejected Jesus will one day hunger and howl,¹¹ but not his disciples. They will be filled and will laugh. On that blessed day of vindication, anyone might envy their fate. his disciples therefore must persevere in their faith despite the persecution their faith brought upon them. Their reward will be great in the age to come.



But to live the eschatological life of the age to come and inherit those rewards, Christ’s people must live differently than those around them. They must imitate the Lord. This imitation is described in the Beatitudes in a series of word pictures.

The first of the word pictures portrays someone who is poor in spirit. This referred to a certain class of people found in the Psalter, the *anawim*, the afflicted, the humble, those oppressed and helpless before the rich and powerful of the world who crushed them (Psalm 9:18, 36:6, 72:2). These poor had no recourse to earthly help, so they placed all their hope in God, looking to him for rescue and vindication. It was these hopeless and helpless, these afflicted ones, these *anawim*, that God promised that He would one day vindicate; these are the Lord’s disciples.

However, to be poor in spirit means more than finding in God our hope of vindication. It also means despairing of saving ourselves and in finding in ourselves the strength we need. We are all weak. The poor in spirit acknowledge this and realize that without Christ, they can do nothing.

Christ also portrays those who follow him as those who mourn—that is, those who sorrow because their hard life is lived within a vale of tears. Such mourning is not pathological, it is simply a recognition that all is vanity, as the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us in his brief twelve-chapter treatise. This Beatitude proclaims that it will not always be

¹¹ See the Lukan version of the Beatitudes in Luke 6:20–26.

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so. Grief will not have the final word, nor will mourning last forever. If we follow Christ, our final state will be one of joy, not grief, and the mourning will give way to dancing and to laughter (Psalm 30:11; Luke 6:21).

Christ's disciples are also characterized as the meek. The English word "meek" is not a happy word. It conjures up images of spinelessness, moral timidity, cringing subservience, and pathological faint-heartedness. No sensible and responsible parent would raise their child to be meek. Meek people are not psychologically healthy or able to withstand the rigors of life. This is not, of course, what the Greek word used here means. That word is *praus*, and it was the word used in the Septuagint Greek to describe Moses in Numbers 12:3. One recalls that Moses suffered from none of the timidity or cringing subservience usually associated with the English word "meek". Moses stood defiantly before Pharaoh, head of the world's greatest power, and boldly demanded that he let Israel go. Moses, after descending Mount Sinai with the Law of God in his hands, discovered Israel indulging in an orgy of idolatry around a golden calf. He broke the tablets of the Law, ground the golden calf to powder, threw it into the local water source and made Israel drink it. He then called upon volunteers to slaughter the apostates (Num 32). This does not sound at all like pathological faint-heartedness.

The Greek word indicates self-control, and the word is used to describe wild animals which have been tamed and domesticated so that they may be useful to man. A man who is at the mercy of his passions (such as uncontrolled anger) is not *praus*; a man who can control his impulses is. Christ is described as *praus* in Matthew 11:29. St. Paul commends this characteristic as a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23; St. Peter praises a *praus* and quiet spirit when found in wives in 1 Peter 3:4 as something very precious in God's sight. Perhaps a better translation might be "gentle". In a rough and tumble world, one might be tempted to push back aggressively, fearing that "nice guys finish last." But Christ bids us be gentle and promises that such gentle souls will inherit the earth.

The next Beatitude commends the merciful. Long familiarity with our Lord's words and Christian teaching generally have desensitized us to how revolutionary this teaching originally was. The world in the time of Jesus did not value mercy. Whatever rhetoric might occasionally be used in grand speeches by the powerful, at the end of the day mercy was equated with weakness. Rome could not afford to be seen as merciful.

This made Christ's teaching even more astonishing (and politically dangerous) to ancient ears, for He consistently counseled such mildness in a way that struck men as perverse and criminally naïve. If a person delivered a public insult to you by slapping you across the face, you were to do nothing except offer him the other cheek for a second slap. If a man sued you and took your shirt, you were to let him have your coat too, as a kind of unforeseen gift. If a Roman soldier insisted on enforcing the letter of the law for those occupying a country and compelled you to carry his pack one mile, you were to carry it for another mile after that. For Christ's disciples, the offering of mercy and forgiveness for offences were not to be occasional acts of moral heroism, but a way of life.

The disciple of Jesus must also be clean of heart (usually rendered as “*pure* of heart”). The Greek word is *katharos*. The word *katharos* has a slightly different feel and nuance than the Greek word for “pure” (*agnos*). The word *katharos* is used to describe the clean water used in the Law’s rites of purification (Heb 10:22), the clean linen shroud in which Christ was buried (Matt 27:59), and the clean state of those who have just bathed (John 13:10).

Our Lord’s words in this Beatitude have this concept of ritual cleanness as their background and were intended as a polemical response to them. Christ Himself had little time for the Pharisees’ obsessive concern with possible ritual contamination (Mark 7:5), and He blamed them for combining such outward scrupulosity with blindness toward the inner state of the soul. Like the hypocrites they were, they were careful to cleanse the outside of the cup and the plate, while inside their souls were full of extortion and greed (Matt 23:25).

In contrast to this disparity between outer ritual cleanness and inner spiritual filth, Christ focused entirely upon the inner state. It was the clean *of heart* who would see God and be able to truly approach him in worship. Approaching him in a state of ritual cleanness while one’s heart was unclean was useless and worse than useless. If one cleansed one’s heart of stain, one could confidently approach God. Indeed, the sight of him was guaranteed.

In these Beatitudes, Christ also commended the peacemaker. In our modern culture, the idea of a peacemaker inevitably conjures up pictures of a third-party diplomat trying to reconcile warring groups. But that is not the picture that would have been imagined by our Lord’s original hearers in the first century. In that day, the peacemaker pictured by our Lord was the aggrieved party who strove for peace and forgiveness rather than for retaliation for wrongs suffered and justice that was owed. Third party diplomats were few and far between; most quarrels involved only two combatants.



Making peace therefore involved offering forgiveness—or at least shelving the justice owed to wrongs suffered. The peacemaker of this Beatitude was the suffering party in a quarrel who refused to prolong the quarrel, and who preferred peace and reconciliation to justice. In a world in which forgiveness was rarely considered, such an irenic and forgiving spirit was hardly ever seen. In most quarrels and wars, the victorious crushed their foe and pressed their advantage; the vanquished pulled from the wreck whatever they could and hoped that the day would come when they could take their revenge. In this Beatitude, Christ undercuts such miserable moral mathematics and such dubious diplomacy, and bids both parties of the quarrel to stand down.

Christ also commends his disciples when they were persecuted for righteousness’ sake. This Beatitude overflows into the next one: “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be

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glad, for great is your reward in heaven.” The term righteousness is a kind of theological code for God’s work through Jesus of Nazareth. The term righteousness denotes God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises, his reliable fulfilling of what He had said through his prophets that He would do to restore his people. Christians believe that God fulfilled his prophetic promises through the life and work of Jesus the Messiah, so that through him God fulfilled all righteousness and kept his promises to his people. Therefore, those who were persecuted for righteousness’ sake were those who were persecuted for their faith and discipleship to Jesus. Living eschatologically and with a different spirit than everyone else lives will inevitably bring down upon oneself hostility and persecution. Christ bids his disciples to be strong, to be calm, and to carry on.

The Christian Life: Living in the Resurrection with the Saints

The salvation which Christ brings consists of our experience in this age of the new aeon with all its powers. This means that Christians participate even now in the power of Christ’s Resurrection as the pledge of their own. Because Christ rose from the dead and trampled down death by death, we can look forward to the coming resurrection with joy, for we already partake of that future reality.

This truth can be obscured if Christian faith is seen as a series of laws and obligations rather than as our union with Christ. In the early Church, Christians knew themselves to be already in possession of the new and eternal life. As Schmemmann wrote,

The Eucharist is the actualization of the new aeon within the old, the presence and manifestation in this age of the Kingdom of the Age to Come. The Eucharist is the *parousia*, the presence and manifestation of Christ. By participating in his Supper, Christians receive into themselves his Life and his Kingdom i.e., the New Life and the New Aeon.¹²

This explains the prominence of Christ’s Resurrection in the Church. The icon of the Resurrection of Christ stands at the eastern end of the church building, which is the intended focus of the entire praying assembly. The name “Sunday” is in Greek “the Lord’s Day” (*kyriaki*) and is thematically devoted to the Resurrection;¹³ Friday’s theme is devoted to the cross. However, *every* day is filled with the power of the Resurrection; *every* day is the Lord’s Day. Thus, Ignatius of Antioch wrote that Christians were those “living in accordance with the Lord’s day,”¹⁴ and Origen wrote that “the perfect Christian...dwells always in the Lord’s day.”¹⁵ In baptism, a Christian has died and been raised with Christ, and now lives by the power of his Resurrection. The weekly commemoration of Christ’s Resurrection is not simply an historical remembrance of one

¹² Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966), Chapter 2.

¹³ In fact, the Russian term for Sunday is “Resurrection” (Voskresenie/Воскресенье).

¹⁴ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter of Ignatius to the Magnesians*, chapter 9.

¹⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, chapter 8.

event of his career. It is a celebration of the very nature of the Church and of our salvation.

It is because the Church lives in the new aeon and the power of the Resurrection that she rejoices in her saints. Just as it is tragically possible to regard Christianity as a system of law and rule-keeping by which we earn our salvation, so it is possible to regard the saints as mediators by whom we draw near to God, and by whose prayers and relics we are brought from a profane state to a state of sanctification. This was not the approach of the early church. They rejoiced in martyrs and venerated them not because they needed mediators to sanctify them, but because the martyrs were witnesses of their already-accomplished salvation in Christ. In the early Church, therefore, the martyrs were invoked along with all the departed Christians, since all the departed stood in the presence of the glorified Lord. Schmemmann again,

... the early church knew nothing of our distinction between canonized saints and 'ordinary' members of the Church. Holiness pertained to the Church and all those who constituted the Church were holy because they were members of a holy people. The setting apart of the bodies of the martyrs for special liturgical veneration was rooted not in any specific opposition of holy to non-holy, but in the early Church's faith that Christ was revealed in the martyr in a special way, bearing witness through the martyr to his own power and victory over death... The body of a martyr was therefore a pledge of the final victory of Christ... [Later], the emphasis in the cult of saints shifted from the sacramentally eschatological to the sanctifying and intercessory meaning of veneration.¹⁶

The Church therefore relies upon the prayers of the martyrs and heavenly saints as she does upon the prayers of all her members. To quote Schmemmann yet again,

The supplication ora pro nobis (Pray for us) in the graffiti of the catacombs was addressed to all the faithful departed in the communion of the Church.¹⁷ The saints and martyrs stand at the head of a body in which everyone supports everyone else, united in a fellowship of mutual prayer. They are our exemplars, our inspiration, our teachers. Their stories and martyric exploits are told and celebrated in the Church "for the training and preparation of those who will do so [i.e., fight in the contest] in the future."¹⁸

The Christian Life: The Psalter as Hymnbook

As the Church sojourns in this age, alive with the light of the Resurrection and the age to come, it sings to God a hymn of praise. Despite the immense amount of hymnography in the services of Vespers and Matins, the backbone of the Church's hymnbook remains the Psalter.

The Psalter entered the Church's liturgical life from Judaism. Though there were always non-psalms compositions sung in the Church (compare St. Paul's counsel to speak to

¹⁶ Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 186–7.

¹⁷ Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology*, 187.

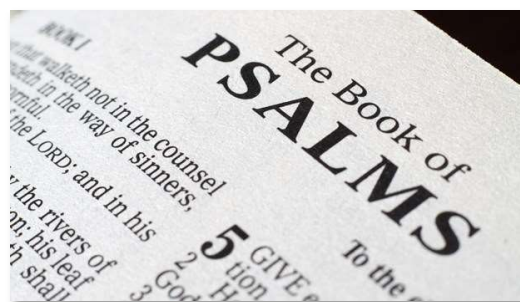
¹⁸ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, chapter 18.

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one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in Ephesians 5:19), psalms have predominated. The monastics were especially fond of the Psalms and made the sequential chanting of the Psalms their main preoccupation. (Thus St. Augustine's remark that "love of psalmody gave birth to monasticism").

When processions were held in the church (such as on "station days," when the congregation marched in slow procession through the town to the church where the Liturgy was to be held), they sang psalms. (These later were incorporated into the Liturgy as the first three antiphons). Psalms were also chanted in between the various lections in church, so that the long periods of listening to the readings were broken up by the people standing to sing the Psalms. Certain Psalms came to be used as characteristic of certain services, such as Psalm 141 for Vespers (with its verse "Let the lifting up of my hands be as an evening sacrifice), and Psalm 63 for Matins (with its verse "In the early morning (*orthros*) I meditate upon You"). So reflexive was the use of Psalms that one might also say that hymnody in the church meant psalmody.

Psalms occupied such an undisputed place in the Church's hymnbook that when non-psalmonic hymns first came to be used in abundance in the Liturgy, many monks objected to it. For them, the hymns of the Church were unwelcome rivals to the Psalms. But eventually the Church came to accept non-psalmonic hymnody, and later, monks such as those in the Studion monastery in Constantinople were in the forefront of their composition.



Current Orthodox liturgical praxis represents a fusion of the cathedral rite used in the cities and the monastic practice used in the deserts. Psalms are still chanted in sequence in the services of Vespers and Matins, but they are incorporated into a structure replete with hymns. The current system calls for the chanting of one *kathisma*¹⁹ each day during Vespers and two *kathismas* during Matins each day so that the entire Psalter recited in the Divine Office once per week.

The sequential chanting of the Psalter, though a staple of monastic piety, can be easily done by anyone, regardless of whether the monastic system of daily chanting of *kathismas* is used. One can, for example, chant a Psalm as part of one's daily prayer rule (though one might want to divide Psalm 119 according to the system of monastic chanting, since it is very long).

The Psalter offers the Christian a comprehensive collection of prayers for all occasions, moods, and situations. It includes prayers of thanksgiving, prayers for help, laments,

¹⁹ A *kathisma* (or "session") is a division of the Psalter arranged for chanting. There are a total of twenty *kathismas* (or more properly, "*kathismata*") in the Psalter, and each *kathisma* is further divided into three *stases* or *antiphons*.

complaints, as well as a devotional recounting of Israel's history for the lessons that can be learned from it. The Psalter is rooted in Israel's historical experience, with Jerusalem as its capital and the surrounding Gentile nations representing a perennial threat. Many Psalms exult in Jerusalem's glorious destiny as the city protected by God and as the city from which the Messianic king of David will rule over the nations. A devotional Christian usage of the Psalter will therefore demand a transposition of various figures.

For example, the Davidic king reigning from Jerusalem may be understood typologically by Christians as Jesus, the Son of David, ruling from heaven, with the earthly Zion understood as the heavenly city of God (Heb 12:22–24). One's enemies—whether national or personal—may be understood as one's spiritual foes, the demons (Eph 6:12). The animal sacrifices may be understood as the Church's spiritual Eucharistic sacrifice and communion with God. With this transposition of reading from the Old Covenant to the New, a Christian can easily make the Psalter his or her own prayer book, chanting its psalms as prayer to God.

Conclusion

The wisdom of the Divine Liturgy is that in the beginning, the Antiphons present to the Orthodox worshipper the essential truths about God and his Son; immediately after this, we hear the words of Christ and the teaching of his apostles in the scripture readings. Therefore, we are first reminded Who it is that we worship, and then instructs us on our response—our marching orders. We hear of God's "benefits" in the Antiphons, such as healing, love, mercy, and justice, and are taught to therefore "Bless the Lord." We are told to rely only on God, and not men, for our salvation. We are taught who Jesus is and what his place is in the world. We are asked to be meek, peaceful, and merciful children of God, hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Then we receive the words of Christ in the Gospel and of his apostles in the Epistle. In response to the glory and majesty of the God we sing about, we are called to live, along with the saints, lives of prayer, worship, and service, waiting for our redemption.

Chapter 4

Worship

"O, come let us worship and fall down before Christ..."

In the early centuries of the Church, the procession with the Gospel book into the altar was the first movement of the Divine Liturgy. For a period, in Constantinople and in old Rome, the bishop, the clergy, and the faithful would process to a church for Divine Liturgy. Arriving at the church where the Liturgy was to be celebrated, the bishop, with the Gospel, and clergy would process into the altar and the people into the nave singing "O, come let us worship and fall down before Christ..." When the Gospel had been placed on the altar and the people were gathered in the nave, worship began.

We no longer process to the church for the Liturgy, and the Little Entrance is no longer at the very beginning of the Divine Liturgy, but occurs after the Great Litany, the 3 antiphons and the Little Litany. Nonetheless, the theological significance of the Little Entrance remains. As the Gospel book is lifted up by the deacon before the royal doors and the priest prays that the holy angels might accompany the faithful as they enter into worship, we are reminded that "He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things" (Eph 4:10). Christ, the Incarnate God, has become our eternal High Priest, has entered the tabernacle not made by hands and abides *for us* in the presence of God. "Christ, then, is the celebrant of the Liturgy in which we participate when we come to Church. He brings us up into heaven with him so that we may eat and drink with him – may feed on him – in his Kingdom."¹

But what does it mean, for us and for God, that we seek communion with Christ, that we *worship*?

Worship

God and Worship

The most important thing one can say about worship is that God doesn't need it. God is the source of all life, beatitude, and joy, the One who is without beginning, who is changeless, and who is never moved by necessity or need. We worship because we need to worship, not because God needs it. God is self-sufficient; He doesn't need anything.

Though this might be taken for granted by many now, it was not the way the ancients thought. In the ancient Near East, for example, men lived with the gods in a kind of symbiotic relationship—they took care of the gods' needs, offering sacrifice and tending

¹ Hieromonk Herman (Majkrzak) in "The Little Entrance in History, Interpretation and Practice," 21. Academia.edu. Accessed 9/6/2022.

https://www.academia.edu/33404689/The_Little_Entrance_in_History_Interpretation_and_Practice. The entire paper is a well-written and clear explication of the Little Entrance for those who would like to learn more.

their temples, and the gods in turn took care of them, blessing their crops, and giving them prosperity and peace. Each needed the other. In fact, in the creation stories of the ancient Near East, the gods created mankind to do the work they no longer wanted to do. And in the ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh* (which contains the story of the Flood also recounted in the Book of Genesis) it is said that when a sacrifice was finally offered again after the Flood, the gods swarmed around it like flies, hungry because no sacrifices were offered during the time of the Flood.

It was otherwise for the God worshipped by Israel and the Christians. The whole notion that God needs our worship and our sacrifices is decisively and derisively dismissed in such works as Psalm 50. In this Psalm, Yahweh² speaks to his people and declares He does not need their sacrificial animals: “For every beast of the forest is Mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is Mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?”

Here God ridicules the idea that He is enriched by sacrifice or that He could need anything from men. The rebuke is wry to the point of sarcasm: if God really wanted meat, He would hardly wait to be served it by Israelite priests! What He really wants from his people is not meat, but gratitude and righteous relationship: “Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and You shall glorify Me” (vs 14–15).

This demand for righteousness of life is all-important—so much so that if it is lacking, God not only doesn’t need our worship, but more than that, He will not accept it. When Israel practised injustice with the rich grinding the face of the poor, the prophetic rebuke was stunning. God thundered to Israel,

What to Me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of be-goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they have become a burden to Me, I am weary of bearing them” (Isa 1:11–14).

One could scarcely get further away from the concept of a divine-human symbiosis that governed notions of religion in the pagan world. Worship is important not because *God* needs it, but because *we* do.

Yet our worship must be the offering of a righteous life, a life itself offered in love to God. If we withhold our love from God and turn our backs on him, if we walk in a way He hates and live lives of unrighteousness, our worship is not acceptable to him. In biblical thought, sacrificial worship and ethical living are inseparable, and the former

² The name "Yahweh" is used by some to represent the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (meaning four letters) יהוה (Yod Heh Vav Heh). It was considered blasphemous to utter the name of God; therefore, it was only written and never spoken, resulting in the loss of the original pronunciation. It is more common in English-language bibles to represent the Tetragrammaton with the term "LORD" (capitalized).

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must flow from the latter. Otherwise, our sacrifices will be spurned as the offerings of hypocrisy. They will not result in our drawing close to God and our union with him, but in our condemnation.

This was the consistent message of the prophets:

Has Yahweh as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying Yahweh's voice? Behold, to obey is better than to sacrifice!" "Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? He has showed you, O man, what is good: and what does Yahweh require of you, but to do justice and to love loyalty, and to walk humbly with your God?" (1 Sam 15:22; Mic 6:6, 8).

To worship him truly we must first love him and show our love in humble obedience and righteousness. Otherwise, our worship is a sham.

Man and Worship

Human beings were created to run on transcendence in the same way that cars were first designed to run on gasoline. Pouring other liquids into the gas tank (such as lemonade), while it might be cheaper than gasoline and thus tempting to use as a substitute, would not work, because its use would be contrary to the way the car was designed to function.

To say that human beings were designed to live transcendently means that we were created to be worshippers. This is one of the things which separates human beings from the animals—animals do not worship as human beings do. That is not to say that animals have no relationship with God. The psalmist tells us that the lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God (Psalm 104:21), but this relationship does not include voluntary acts of worship, acts which can be given or withheld. Human beings, alone in the visible creation, were created to offer free and voluntary worship to the Creator.

It is when human beings reach up to God in worship, gratitude, supplication, and love that the rest of our lives can exist in harmony. We were created to be upwardly and dynamically open to God, open to the constant infusion of his life within us, participating in his power and energies. This happens when we turn to him in worship. When we do not do this, He cannot pour his life into us, and we wither up and die. Turning from God and refusing to worship results in our death—not because God will kill us if we refuse to worship, but because it is only through worship that his life is continuously given to us. A flower only lives when it is rooted in the soil and open to the sun. If it pulled up its roots or refused the sunlight, it would wither and die. It is the same with us.

This has always been the teaching of the Church. St. Augustine once wrote in his *Confessions* that “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”³ Rather more recently Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote in his *For the Life of the World* that “All rational, spiritual, and other qualities of man, distinguishing him from

³ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1, see <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110101.htm>

other creatures, have their focus and ultimate fulfillment in this capacity to bless God... “*Homo sapiens*”, “*homo faber*” ...yes, but first of all, “*homo adorans*”.”⁴

This means that the refusal to put God in the center of our life by worshipping him can only lead to inauthentic human life and ultimately, spiritual death. Man as *homo sapiens*, who puts the search for wisdom and knowledge at the center of his existence, man as rationalist, cannot satisfy the human heart or lead to life. Man as *homo faber*, the builder, the manufacturer, who puts the building of monuments, tools, technology at the center of his existence, man as empire-builder, cannot satisfy. It is only when man knows himself to be *homo adorans*, the worshipper, the creature that finds its freedom and joy in God, that true peace and true life can be found and the world experience harmony.



It is because the human race has turned from the living and true God and, as a race, has refused to worship him that troubles befall us. Being created for transcendence, we will worship *something*, even if not the true and living God. We will not live like the animals, eating, breeding, and dying, worshipping nothing at all. If we refuse to worship the living God, we will find other substitutes for him.

This is why St. Paul spoke at length about the fundamental problem in the Gentile world being one of idolatry (e.g., Rom 1:18–23). Mankind is a race of idolaters, and therefore we experience spiritual death. We refuse to worship the true God and exchange his glory for the fading glory of something else, anything else, things that cannot save or give life. That is the ultimate and true cause of the wars and the crime that constantly afflict our planet. We are at war with the true God, and therefore are at war within ourselves and with one another. Having refused to worship God, nothing else in our existence works as it was designed to.

The idols currently worshipped in the secular West are not the physical idols worshipped in the religious society of (say) ancient Rome—or present-day India. Whatever we choose to make ultimate in our life is our idol, which is why St. Paul defined covetousness as idolatry (Col 3:5). The most favoured idols worshipped in the secular West today are wealth, health, and sexual pleasure. In the tradition of the Bible, worshipping the true God involves renouncing and shunning all idols, and turning to find our true life, peace, and joy in God alone.

That is, worshipping God involves constant repentance, and continually turning away from the idols that lay claim to our affections and priorities and clinging to God as our

⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 15.

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only source of life. In this fallen world, false idols clamour for our attention and devotion, and true spirituality consists of continually turning away from their siren call and turning again and again to the true God. Man must worship this true and living God if he is to find life and live in harmony with himself, with others, and with the world around him. True worship is thus built upon the foundation of repentance and inner vigilance.

Individual and Corporate Worship

Because human beings are social animals as well as individuals, worship has both individual and corporate components. That is, one can worship God when alone, and can also worship God as part of a group.

Personal Worship

Worship as an individual involves offering personal prayer. Christ stressed that such prayer must studiously avoid being done for show, for the real purpose of exciting the admiration of those who might be watching. For this reason, He said that rather than pray one's personal prayers in public under the watchful eye of those passing by, his disciples should offer their personal prayers in privacy, far from the possibility of watchful eyes and applauding hands. He instructed his disciples, "When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt 6:6).

The word here rendered "room" is the Greek *tameion*, and means not just any room but a hidden, secret room, a storeroom in the inner recesses of the house. Christ was saying that his disciples should take care not to be seen praying their personal prayers, lest they earn the applause of others and thereby forfeit their reward from God.

The importance of such personal prayer may be gauged by the abundance of prayerbooks containing such prayers, and the Church's expectation that the pious Orthodox Christian will pray both in the morning and the evening. Usually, such prayer is offered at one's icon corner, a place selected and dedicated to prayer, and containing such things as one's Bible, prayer rope, or other devotional aids. Reading the Scriptures (including chanting the Psalms) usually accompanies such prayer as part of one's discipline and prayer rule.

Yet even when we are alone in our prayer corner, we are still members of Christ's Body, praying the "Our Father", not the "my Father." The prayers we use are taught us by the Church, and we pray privately at home because we have first prayed as a body in Church. That is why the prayerbooks for personal use consist of prayers gathered from the corporate services of the Church. Both our private prayers and our corporate worship constitute a single offering of our life to God.

Corporate Worship

Worship also includes corporate prayer as part of a larger group. In Israel, God appointed set times for such corporate gatherings. Though one could come to the

central shrine where the ark was situated and offer sacrifice any time, the Torah mandated that all Israelite males must gather at the shrine three times a year, for the feast of Passover, for the feast of harvest (or the Feast of Weeks/ Pentecost), and for the feast of the ingathering (or the Feast of Booths; see Lev 23:14–17). These gatherings foreshadowed the weekly gatherings of Christians on the Lord's Day, when they would gather together for the Eucharist as the Body of Christ.

The Hebrew term for a gathering or an assembly (for whatever purpose) is *qahal* (compare its use in Num 22:4; Deut 9:10). It is translated in the Greek Septuagint as *ekklesia*, (and in English often as “church”). The word *ekklesia*, however, doesn't necessarily imply the gathered community of Christians, or even a religious gathering at all. In Acts 19:41 the term denotes a gathering for civil purposes, as when many angry citizens gathered to protest the work of Paul in a kind of town-hall protest meeting. When used of Christians (e.g., Rom 16:5) it refers to the assembling of all the Christians at an agreed upon location for the purpose of prayer and (on Sunday) for the Eucharist. A “church” is by definition “a gathering, an assembly”, the result of what happens after people gather and assemble.

After becoming a convert to the Christian faith through baptism, one was expected to gather with them for worship every Sunday, to be present at the Lord's assembly. The Lord Jesus pledged his presence there among them, even if the assembly consisted of a small group of two or three people (Matt 18:20). It is this presence of Christ that constitutes the essence of the Church, and what makes a gathering of Christians to be “church”.



From the earliest days, these Sunday gatherings consisted of listening to the apostolic teaching, mutual sharing, breaking bread (i.e., the Eucharist), and the prayers (see Acts 2:33). By the end of the first century the eucharistic sharing of the Lord's Body and Blood had become detached from its original context as a full meal or supper, and was held in the early morning, while fasting before the first meal of the day. It was later in the day, after the workday had concluded, that the Christians were re-assemble for a love feast, the *agape* meal.

The structure of the Eucharist was recorded by St. Justin Martyr in his first *Apology* (chapters 65–67). Its main elements were,

1. the reading of the Scriptures
2. an instruction explaining its meaning
3. intercessory prayers for all the world
4. the exchange of the kiss of peace among the Christians
5. the prayer over bread and wine

6. the partaking of the bread and wine as the Body and Blood of Christ

Different groups of people had different assigned tasks in this gathering, with bishops and deacons, for example, each having their distinct roles. In its essential form, this is still the underlying structure of the Divine Liturgy to this day.

Weekly participation in this gathering defined a person as a part of the Christian people, “the Church”. No one who deliberately and voluntarily absented himself or herself from this gathering was considered a Christian. A Christian was defined, both by the Church and (in the early days) by the Roman state as well, not as someone who *believed* certain things about God or Christ, but as someone who *joined in gathering for the Eucharist*. A Christian was, by definition, a worshipper, someone who gathered with other Christians to worship Christ. That is why if someone betrayed the Christian faith through their behaviour and was clearly no longer a disciple of Jesus, they were excommunicated—i.e., excluded from the eucharistic gathering.

The Christian was one who centered his entire existence upon Jesus Christ and lived to worship him. This was done privately, whether at home or on the road, and in the gathered assemblies of the Christians as God’s *ekklesia*. It was through this constant worship of God that God poured his life and power into his redeemed creature, bringing salvation and joy.

Worship: Spiritual and Physical

This worship had a physical component to it, since the worshipper is an amalgam of flesh and spirit. If human beings were only spirit, like the angels, and consisted only of mind and intellect, worship would have no bodily components, but would be the bodiless adoration of the invisible God, a mind seeking the Mind. But in fact, humans are amphibious. Just as amphibians live in both water and on land, so human beings live both in the world of the physical senses and the world of the spirit. Therefore, our worship partakes of both qualities, and is both spiritual and physical.

The spiritual component is the more obvious one to us moderns. Prayer and worship mean not simply reciting syllables, which we may or may not understand. It involves the understanding, the *nous*, the inner capacity for receptivity and relationship. At times the Greek word *nous* is somewhat misleadingly translated as “mind”, giving the impression of an entirely intellectual component. But the *nous* involves more than just the intellect. It includes the interior ability to absorb and receive.

That is why worship must be conducted in a language which is understood, so that the words uttered are expressions of the relationship between the worshipper and the Lord. For this reason, St. Paul insisted that words openly spoken in an unknown tongue in the congregation be interpreted and translated (see 1 Cor 14:13–19).

Ultimately our prayers are spiritual, the fruit of the Spirit within us, praying within and causing us to cry out “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:26–27; Gal 4:6). They are not solely our

own creation and work, but the combination of the Spirit's work within and our own yearning after God.

But our prayers and worship have a physical component to them as well, since what we do with our bodies affects and souls and spirits also. We stand for prayer and worship, though one can pray upon one's knees or can prostrate if one's prayer is fervent (compare Matt 26:39; Acts 20:36). In prayer one usually lifts up one's hands and eyes to God (The gesture of clasped hands dates from feudal times and was the gesture of offering fealty to one's liege lord.)

Similarly, one can make deep bows from the waist (in Russian a *poklon*) or even a prostration as one offers prayers (as often done by monks as part of their prayer rule). One also makes the Sign of the Cross at the conclusion of prayers which finish with a mention of the Holy Trinity.

Such physical actions are bodily prayers, as one worships God with the body as well as the mind. The whole person, the inner self and the outer self, is involved in lifting oneself up to the Lord. It is this principle which is fully and savingly expressed in the sacramental mysteries and rituals of the Church. The Church uses physical things such as water, bread, wine, and oil, things made Spirit-bearing by the command and authority of Christ, to produce spiritual results. Salvation involves sacraments because all life is sacramental, consisting of physical things charged with spiritual significance and power.

The Liturgical Year

The Creation of the Church Calendar

The Church's liturgical worship is spread throughout the year, finding expression in the use of a calendar to regulate the observances of the Church's feasts. This is because Christian worship is corporate as well as private, and so if Christians will celebrate (for example) Christ's birth, they must first agree upon which date that celebration will take place. If Christian worship were merely individual, then different individual Christians might choose to celebrate Christ's birth on differing days, with no loss. But since our worship is corporate, a calendar becomes necessary if feast days and other special occasions are to be kept.

At first there was no such thing as a liturgical year, and no specifically Christian calendar, so that no calendar can claim apostolic provenance or authority. The apostles simply mandated the gathering together of all the baptized in a weekly *qahal* or *ekklesia*. It was on this day that all the Christians within a given locale (be it small hamlet or larger town) would meet (ideally in one place) to hear the Word and offer the Eucharist. This gathering anticipated the age to come and was the Christians' weekly experience of the power that would flood the world in that age to come. There was, in other words, an eschatological dimension to the Christians' sacramental gathering. This eschatological gathering was the sole "Christian calendar" known to the apostles.

Very soon, however, martyrdoms began to multiply. The local church would treasure and celebrate their local martyrs, meeting on the anniversary of his or her martyrdom to

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rehearse those glorious events and celebrate the Eucharist (ideally, over the grave of the martyr). These annual celebrations of the martyred saints became the next layer of celebrations added to the apostolic gatherings on Sunday. As the stories of the martyrs became more widely known, the feast of the martyr might be celebrated not just by the community in which the martyr had lived and died, but by other church communities as well.

Around this time, in the second century, the Church began to also celebrate annually the death and resurrection of Christ. Some churches (like those in Asia Minor) celebrated this feast on the 14th day of the month of Nisan,⁵ the day when Christ was crucified, regardless of whether or not that day fell on a Sunday. Many other churches, such as those of Rome, celebrated this feast always on a Sunday, regardless of whether that day was the 14th of Nisan.

Such diversity of calendar and practice was not considered problematic by those such as St. Irenaeus, who urged the bishop of Rome to relax and not break communion with those who celebrated it on the 14th of Nisan as he was tempted to do.⁶ But after the Council of Nicaea in 325, such diversity was becoming pastorally problematic to the perception of the Church's unity in the eyes of the world, and a formula was agreed upon: the feast of Pascha would be celebrated by all churches on the Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. Those insisting on the date of the 14th of Nisan (the so-called "Quartodecimans" or "fourteeners") now had to conform or leave.

Soon other feasts were added, such as the feast of Epiphany—i.e., the "manifestation" of Christ's glory, seen at his birth, at his revelation to the Magi, at his baptism, and at his miracle of turning water into wine. This feast was held on January 6. Eventually the West decided to commemorate Christ's birth on December 25, drawing the events of his birth and the visit of the Magi away from its original feast in January to the new one in December.

Feasts were added at different times and in different places. Eventually certain calendars came into wide-spread use, so that today all the Orthodox world uses the same Church calendar for feasts. This calendar contains a number of saints' days, commemorating various saints (usually one or more per day), and a number of feasts celebrating events in the life of Christ and the life of Mary the Theotokos.

The Twelve Great Feasts

In Orthodoxy today, there are feasts of the Lord and feasts of the Theotokos.

The feasts of the Lord are: the Elevation of the Cross (commemorating the finding of the true Cross in the fourth century), Nativity (celebrating his birth), Theophany

⁵ Using an ancient calendar system, the first day of Nisan was the day after the first new moon after the spring equinox, corresponding, roughly to the end of March into April.

⁶ Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith: Church History*, Vol III, "The Quartodeciman Controversy." Accessed 10/14/2022. <https://www.oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/church-history/second-century/the-quartodeciman-controversy>

(celebrating his baptism), Palm Sunday (celebrating his final entry into Jerusalem), the Ascension (celebrating his glorification in heaven 40 days after his Resurrection), Pentecost (celebrating his pouring out the Spirit upon his Church 50 days after his Resurrection), and his Transfiguration.

The feasts of the Theotokos are: the Nativity of the Theotokos (celebrating her birth), the Entrance (celebrating the first time she entered the Temple as a small child), the Meeting (celebrating the encounter with Simeon and Anna in the after Jesus was born), the Annunciation (celebrating the announcement of Gabriel to her that she was chosen to be the mother of the Messiah), and the Dormition (celebrating her “falling asleep” in death).

These feasts are twelve in total. There are other feasts as well, but these are especially important to the Church’s liturgical life. A close reading will reveal that some of the feasts are attached to the solar calendar (and therefore are celebrated on the same date every year), while some are part of the Paschal cycle, which is dependent upon the date of the full moon after the spring equinox.

The names and dates for the twelve great feasts are:

1. Theophany – January 6
2. Meeting – February 2
3. Annunciation – March 25
4. Palm Sunday – one week before Pascha
5. Ascension – 40 days after Pascha
6. Pentecost – 50 days after Pascha
7. Transfiguration – August 6
8. Dormition – August 15
9. Nativity of the Theotokos – September 8
10. Elevation of the Cross – September 14
11. Entrance of the Theotokos – November 21
12. Christmas – December 25

It will be noted that Pascha itself is not a part of the Twelve Great Feasts, since it is considered too important to be one feast among many. Rather, it is regarded as the Feast of Feasts, the source of everything else.

Fasting Periods

As well as the feasts, there are four fasting periods during the liturgical year:

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1. the Great Lent, beginning 40 days before Pascha, with a pre-Lenten series of Sundays preceding it
2. the Fast of Sts. Peter and Paul (or the Apostle's Fast), beginning a week after Pentecost and ending with the feast of Peter and Paul on June 29
3. the Dormition fast, beginning August 1 and ending with the feast of the Dormition on August 15
4. the Nativity fast (sometimes called "Advent", a western liturgical term), beginning November 15 and ending 40 days later with the feast of Christmas

The fasts are of varying strictness, with Great Lent being the strictest of all. They are also of varying lengths: the Great Lenten fast is 40 days long, plus Holy Week after that; the Nativity Fast is 40 days long; the Dormition fast is two weeks long; and the Apostle's fast is of varying length, dependent as it is upon the varying date of Pentecost (since the date of Pentecost depends upon the date of Pascha which varies each year according to the date of the full moon).

Regarding the Apostle's Fast: after Pentecost there is a fast-free week when fasting is disallowed, so that the Apostle's Fast cannot begin until after that fast-free week is over. But regardless of when the Apostle's Fast begins, it must end with the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul on June 29, which means that some years that fast is very long, while other years it is very short. That is why most parishes offer a church calendar to their faithful, so that such things can be easily learned. Experienced Orthodox, upon receiving their new calendar in January, usually immediately look up the month of June to see how long the Apostle's fast is going to be that year!

The liturgical year therefore consists of an alternating series of fasting and feasting, the former being a preparation for the latter.

Old Calendar and New Calendar

Often there is some confusion about the dates of the Church's feasts due to the question of Old vs. New Calendar. Many of those using the Old Calendar, for example, believe that "Orthodox Christmas" is on January 7, because that is the secular date on which that feast is celebrated by those using the Old Calendar.

What is the Old Calendar? The Old Calendar was the secular calendar used in Europe from the time of Julius Caesar (hence it is sometimes called the Julian calendar) until fairly recently. Calendars are difficult things to work out precisely, since they require knowledge of astronomy. The old Julian calendar was only a bit "off" in its astronomical calculations, but with the passing of centuries it grew ever more "off" and inaccurate to the point where it is now 13 days off. If not adjusted and corrected, eventually December 25/ Christmas would be held in the spring or summer. People in society agreed that changes to the calendar needed to be made.

The only people having the astronomical skill to make the changes and correct the calendar were those of the universities of Europe. Eventually they produced a more

accurate calendar. Since the universities did their work when Pope Gregory was ruling the Roman Catholic Church and influencing the Catholic universities of Europe, the new calendar was sometimes called the Gregorian calendar. One by one the countries of Europe and beyond accepted the new revised calendar and used it for their daily life.

The question, of course, was what the Church should do with its own feasts. It was used to celebrating Christmas (i.e., December 25) on what was now January 7. Now that the calendar had been adjusted so that Christmas/ December 25 was now accurately found at the end of December, should the Church adopt the secular calendar as the basis for its own feasts? That is, should the Church cling to an old secular calendar that was acknowledged to be no longer accurate as the basis for its own ordering of feasts? Or should it use the new corrected calendar as the basis for its ordering of feasts?

In this question of “church calendar” it is important to realize that the Church’s concern is with feasts, not with astronomy. Theologians lack the necessary skill to adjust a calendar, and it is not their job. The Church’s job is to decree when it will celebrate (for example) Christmas. It has decided that it will celebrate Christmas on December 25. Determining exactly *which* day is December 25 is not the task of the Church, but of the astronomers with the skill to produce accurate calendars.

In other words, the Church calendar is *a grid* that it places over the secular calendar, to decide which feast will be celebrated on which day. It is a confusion of tasks to suggest that the Church’s job is to decide which calendar is more accurate; that is the job of the astronomers.

The Church, in fact, never committed itself to a single secular calendar, but placed its festal grid over whichever secular calendar was in use. No Council, for example, mandated the use of the older Julian calendar, including the Council of Nicaea. That Council simply said that all Christians should celebrate Pascha on the same date, and that the formula for determining that date was that it should be on the first Sunday after the full moon after the spring equinox.

Some churches use the Old Calendar (e.g., Russia, Ukraine, and Serbia), while others use the New Calendar (e.g., Constantinople, Greece, and Antioch). This means that, for example, Orthodox Christians in Greece celebrate Christmas/ December 25 on the secular date of December 25, while the Orthodox in Russia celebrate Christmas/ December 25 on the secular date of January 7. Note: both groups know that Christmas is celebrated on December 25. The disagreement centers upon exactly when it is December 25. No Orthodox Church asserts that the date for Christmas is January 7. And all Orthodox use the new Gregorian calendar in their secular lives, because that is what society around them does.

It is important to remember that all of this concerns only the solar calendar, which regulates the fixed days of celebration. Because of the importance of Pascha, for the sake of unity, even the churches using the new Gregorian calendar still keep to old Julian calculation for Pascha (i.e., the Julian date for the spring equinox), so that whatever calendar is used to keep the feasts such as Christmas and Theophany, all Orthodox

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churches will keep the same Paschal cycle, using the same dates for Great Lent, Pascha, and Pentecost. When the Holy Fire descends each year in Jerusalem on Holy Saturday, this is the date used by all the Orthodox.

The question of which secular calendar is preferable and over which one the Church will place its festal grid is one of comparatively minor significance. In the OCA, for example, some congregations use the Old Calendar and some use the New, with no loss of love or unity.

However, not all who use the Old Calendar agree that the question is of minor significance. Some who use the Old Calendar regard use of the New Calendar as very significant, indeed, in that they regard it as a form of compromise with the World, motivated by extreme ecumenism (since we celebrate Christmas as the same date as the western churches), and a sign of apostasy. These people are called “Old Calendarists”. This can be a bit confusing, since not everyone using the Old Calendar is an “Old Calendarist” who believes the use of the New Calendar is a sign of apostasy. The schism between Old Calendarists and the rest of the Orthodox Church remains. Ultimately the issue separating them is not about calendar itself, but about the Orthodox Church’s relationships with those outside.

The Liturgical Week

Every day in the week has its own liturgical theme, some of them tied to the life of Christ. Thus, Sunday focuses upon the theme of Christ’s Resurrection, while Friday focuses upon the theme of his Cross. Saturday, the Sabbath, recalls the time when Christ rested in the tomb, and so the theme for that day focuses upon the departed who rest in the tombs.

The days and their respective themes are:

Sunday – the Resurrection of Christ

Monday – the angels

Tuesday – St. John the Forerunner

Wednesday – the passion of Christ/ His betrayal; also, the Theotokos

Thursday – the apostles and St. Nicholas

Friday – the Cross

Saturday – the departed and the martyrs

As in Judaism, the liturgical day begins with the previous evening, so that (for example) Saturday evening Vespers focuses upon the resurrection of Christ, as do the services on Sunday morning. Sunday evening, however, belongs liturgically to Monday, and so focuses upon the angels, as do the services on Monday morning. (Fasting, one notes, is ascetical, not liturgical, and is counted from midnight to midnight.)

These themes are reflected in the liturgical hymns written for the days of the week, especially for the services of Vespers and Matins found in the Octoechos, the book containing the hymns for the eight tones.

The Liturgical Day

Each day, especially in monasteries, is punctuated by periodic prayer. The notion of stopping to pray throughout the day is as old as the *Didache* (chapter 9)⁷ in the late first century, which suggests that Christians stop and say the Our Father three times a day. Eventually set services were produced, centering upon fixed units of three psalms.

In this system one could pray at the first hour of the day (6.00 a.m.) using the set psalms and prayers; then again at the third hour of the day (9.00 a.m.) using different psalms and prayers; then again at the sixth hour (noon), then again at the ninth hour (3.00 p.m.). Vespers (from the Greek word meaning “evening”) would be prayed at sunset, and then one would pray again before retiring (so-called “Compline”, from the Latin “completorium”, the service which completed the day). Then after a sleep one would arise in the wee hours of the morning to pray for a long time and chant Psalms. That service is called “Matins”—i.e., the morning service.

In this system one stops to pray seven separate times, hearkening back to the Psalm verse which says, “Seven times a day do I praise You” (Psalm 119:64). In its original context, “seven times” was simply short-hand for “often and continually.” These services are known as “the Hours” or “the Divine Office”.



In practice, because of the difficulty of stopping one’s activities so often, the services are often gathered together into two separate groups and prayed in the morning and in the evening. Thus, some monasteries meet in the morning, when they pray the Third and Sixth Hours and then the Divine Liturgy, all without a break. Then they meet again later in the afternoon, when they pray the Ninth Hour, Vespers, Matins, and the First Hour. Compline is prayed privately and separately by the monastics in their cells.

Such a combination of different services into one longer service is done in parishes as well at times of feasts. For example, at Christmas time, all the Hours are combined into one service called “the Royal Hours”.

One does wonder a bit about the practice of combining the separate services into one long service, given that the original purpose of the services was to punctuate the hours of the day with prayer, stopping to pray every few hours, and sanctifying (for example)

⁷ Also known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, it is one of the earliest Church documents. The first 6 chapters are titled “The Two Ways: The Way of Life, and the Way of Death.” The second and third parts contain instruction for the Eucharist, fasting, prayer, matters of church organization, apostles and teachers, prophets, bishops, and deacons.

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the Sixth Hour of noon by praying at that time. Time cannot be sanctified in advance, for that is what “time” means. The author of the *Didache* intended his readers to stop three times throughout the day to say the Our Father and thus offer those various times to God. Stopping only once to say the Our Father three times in a row would not have served the same purpose. It is apparent, then, that practicality sometimes takes precedence over principle. But it is a good thing to remember God as often as one can, stopping to offer prayer. The Our Father, for example, is short enough to be said often throughout the day. It is a very portable form of worship.

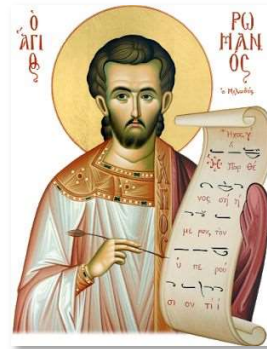
Conclusion

As God’s children, Christians draw their entire purpose and life from God. We know that continuing to live means continuing to make worship the foundation of everything else. In this life we strive to make all that we say and do an offering to him. As members of His Church, as the royal priesthood, as the lynchpin of creation, we are called to be the voice of all visible creation, giving thanks to God on behalf of all. As his priesthood, we offer the world back to him, beginning with ourselves, as incorporated members of the Body of Christ. Christ alone offers the full, true, and acceptable worship. It is because we are in him, and are his Body, that our worship also partakes of that fullness, that truth, and is accepted by the Father.

Chapter 5 The Communion of Saints in the Orthodox Church

Troparia and Kontakia are types of Orthodox hymns consisting of one or more stanzas that are sung as the thematic hymn of the day, or for the life of the saint being honored. Both are part of the daily divine services, and they change each day, depending on what event or person is being commemorated. There is an historical difference between these two types of hymns,¹ but on a practical level, the difference is the location in which they appear in the service. The Troparion is chanted at the end of Vespers, where it serves as the dismissal hymn, and at the beginning and the end of Matins. The Kontakion is chanted in the middle of Matins, in the Canon. Both are sung in the Divine Liturgy immediately following the Little Entrance.²

Troparia have a long history in the church. It is probably the earliest type of hymnography, other than the Psalms, dating from the first century.³ As early as the 5th century, there were already collections of troparia, such as those described in the biography of the Syrian monk and hermit Auxentios.⁴ Kontakia were originally verses from longer hymns that were in use in Syria by the 6th century. It is believed that Romanos the Melodist introduced the kontakia into the Liturgy.



Each day of the church year has at least one, if not multiple, troparia and kontakia. Generally, there are troparia and kontakia for the 12 major feast days, plus Pascha, for the saint or saints of the day, and eight Resurrectional Troparia according to the eight tones (octoechos).⁵ Those of the feast days are often well-known by the faithful. The most famous troparion is surely the joyous Paschal Troparion: “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.”

Each saint has his or her own troparion and kontakion. Troparion of the Theotokos are called Theotokion, which are sung at almost every Orthodox service, not just at the Divine Liturgy. Many Orthodox Christians know the troparion of their patron saint, and each parish sings the tropar of their church’s patron saint at every Divine Liturgy. Since the saints seem to be so important, and are honored in every Divine Liturgy, multiple

¹ The distinction between the troparia and kontakia is rooted in their different historical development. Kontakia are a vestige of a longer hymn now called an “akathist”.

² On Sundays, it is possible that several troparia and kontakia are sung.

³ Elena Kolyada, “A Concise Glossary of the Genres of Eastern Orthodox Hymnography,” *Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music*, Vol. 4 (1), Section III: Miscellanea, 198–207.

⁴ Unfortunately, this early collection of troparia has not been preserved.

⁵ Octoechos means eight tones in Greek, and is a system used in Orthodox church music. Each week has one tone for the services, and they are cycled through every eight weeks. Saying that a certain tone will be used indicates that one of eight melodies will be used for a hymn, psalm, or verse.

questions come to mind: how do we view the saints to whom we sing? What is their place in the life of the ordinary Orthodox Christian? Why is it essential that we honor them? Will we see them in the resurrection?

The Resurrection of Christ

The life and glory that the saints in heaven now enjoy are rooted in the Resurrection of Christ, which was not a mere resuscitation (like that experienced by Lazarus, who eventually died again), but a passage to immortal life. Through his death and resurrection, Christ trampled down death through the power of the Father, which resides in him as the only begotten Son. He is therefore the source of life and glory, and through our baptismal union with him, that life-giving power now flows into us as well, so that we now share his resurrected life (Rom 6:4, 8:11). That is why St. Paul declared that Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light (2 Tim 1:10). The saints—that is, all baptized Christians who live out their faith in Christ—share Christ’s resurrection glory (Rom 8:30, 2 Cor 3:18).

The Resurrection of Christ is the foundation of our faith, which is why the Icon of the Resurrection⁶ adorns the far east wall of every Orthodox church. When we stand in church, our eyes focus upon His Resurrection and upon the life that flows from him. That is why Christians do not fear death, for even now we share the immortal and eternal life of Christ, so that our death will not mean our destruction, but merely our stepping closer to Christ (2 Cor 5:8, Phil 1:23). Because Christ shares His Resurrection victory with us, we now live in a death-free zone.

We find this emphasis on the Resurrection in our hymns as well as our icons. Every Sunday commemorates the Resurrection of Christ in the weekly hymnic cycle,⁷ and the troparia and kontakia hymns sung on that day concern Christ’s Resurrection. Yet the resurrected glory of Christ is not his alone; He shares it with all his people. That is the reason the saints live in heavenly glory. It is also the reason we can speak to them. Because we are one with Christ, we are also one with everyone else who is one with him. Death cannot separate us from him, and so it cannot separate us from one another either, for Christ has abolished death. This unity of all the Christians with one another in the risen Christ is what is meant by the term “the communion of saints.”

Who are the Saints?

The term “saint” is a translation of the Greek *agios*, meaning “holy one.” Strictly speaking, only God is holy, which is why one of his titles in the Bible is “the Holy One” (Isa 1:4; 2 Kings 19:22; Psalm 71:22). Yet God shares his holiness with others, so that the angels are also called “holy ones” (Zech 14:5). And, more astonishingly, He shares his holiness with us sinners as well, so that we Christians are also his holy ones or saints.

⁶ Or, more precisely, of Christ’s “harrowing of Hades.”

⁷ Just as every Monday commemorates the angels, every Tuesday St. John the Baptist, and every Friday the Cross.

Thus St. Paul referred to the Christians of Rome as saints (Rom 1:7) as well as the Christians of Corinth (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), of Ephesus (Eph 1:1), of Philippi (Phil 1:1), and of Colossae (Col 1:1). The Orthodox Church continues this practice at each celebration of the Liturgy when the priest summons the faithful to partake of the holy Body and Blood of Christ by saying, “The holy things are for the holy!” In saying this, the priest is not summoning to Communion only those present who have been especially well-behaved during the previous week, but all the members present.⁸ Because they are holy, they are summoned to come forward and partake of the holy Gifts. Yet even here, the Church does not forget that this holiness is a gift from Christ, for the faithful reply to this summons, “One is holy, one is the Lord—Jesus Christ—to the glory of God the Father!”—that is, only one, the Lord Jesus, is truly holy in Himself, and our own holiness comes solely from him.

Therefore, all devout baptized Christians are saints, partakers of the Lord’s gift of holiness, and on a journey to the Kingdom of God. Yet some Christians manifest holiness in a particularly extraordinary way, so that they can be examples for the rest of us. It is these Christians that the Church refers to by the official title “Saint”. Put differently, all devout Christians are holy, but some of them have been chosen by the Church to be exemplars worthy of universal attention and imitation.

Saints with a capital “S”

There is immense variety inherent in holiness, so different saints were canonized for varied reasons. Some (like St. Cyril of Alexandria) were canonized for their theological acumen and courage in proclaiming the truth in the face of error. Others (like St. Seraphim of Sarov) were canonized for their quality of life and the intensity of their prayer. Others still (like St. Constantine the Great), were canonized out of gratitude for their help to the Church and their vision of the future. Not all shared the same degree of theological acuity, or the same peaceful and loving spirit. But all had something worthy of admiration and imitation, and so all eventually found a place in the Church’s calendar.

Local Saints

The process whereby certain Christians are chosen by the Church to become “Saints” (with a capital “S”) is known as glorification or canonization. The process has varied over time. Sanctity is self-authenticating, so that people know true holiness when they experience it. For this reason, the saints of the earliest days of the Church did not need to undergo an “official” process of ecclesiastical investigation and canonization. The Church knew that Peter, Paul, and the other apostles were Saints without any such process.

It was the same for the saints who died for their faith. The celebrations of their deaths were local affairs, with usually only the local church commemorating the martyrdom of their members. Thus, the Church in Smyrna would keep the feast of the martyrdom of

⁸ In the early church, all non-communicants such as the catechumens were dismissed after the first part of the Divine Liturgy, so that only communicants were present for Holy Communion.

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their bishop Polycarp (d. 155 A.D.), while the Church in Thessalonica would not necessarily do so. Rather, the Thessalonians kept the feasts of their own local martyrs.

Thus, in the earliest years of the Church's life, there was no single universal calendar. Rather, each church kept the common calendar, containing feasts such as Pascha and Pentecost, and added to it local variations for their own martyrs. Often the Christians of the local church would meet at the grave of their martyrs to read the story of their final contest and to celebrate the Eucharist over their relics. The holiness of the martyrs, in particular, and their status as those who dwelt with Christ in heaven, were never in doubt, so they were regarded as "capital 'S' saints" as soon as they were martyred.

Universal Veneration of Local Saints

Eventually, as the Church's rise to Byzantine power necessitated greater cooperation and coordination between the local churches, the feast of one local church's martyr would be celebrated in neighbouring churches as well, so that the cult of a local martyr grew and spread to other churches and locations. Regular meetings of bishops in a particular region helped to bring about this coordination. The creation of a universal calendar of saints and church feasts (including a universally agreed upon date for celebrating Pascha⁹) became pastorally necessary, so if one church celebrated its martyr's feast, other churches would as well.



The process of canonization then became more formal. To canonize someone, the bishops of an autocephalous church meet in synod to agree upon the canonization of a saint and to put the Church's seal on their already-existing veneration. In doing this, the bishops are not "making" the person a saint, but simply recognizing their sanctity and declaring to their faithful that this

person is indeed holy, is in heaven, is worthy of imitation, and that their prayers can be invoked liturgically. The saint then officially has his or her own feast day, liturgical prayers dedicated to him or her¹⁰, and can be the subject on an icon.¹¹ The bishops, therefore, in their act of canonization, simply respond to the groundswell of support and devotion already present among the faithful.

These acts of canonization are still local in character in that it is the task of the synod of bishops of an autocephalous church to undertake such canonization—usually the

⁹ Some local churches in Asia preferred to celebrate Pascha always on the 14th of Nisan, which did not always fall on a Sunday.

¹⁰ Including their own troparion, kontakion, verses for the "Lord I call," for the canon of Matins, and the Praises.

¹¹ It is probable that icons of certain saints had informally appeared before the official canonization.

bishops who have possession of the saint's relics. Thus, for example, St. Herman of Alaska, although he was Russian and part of the Russian Church, was canonized by the autocephalous Orthodox Church in America because it was this autocephalous church which possessed his relics in Alaska. On the other hand, the canonization of St. Patriarch Tikhon, although he was the first bishop of the American diocese (later The Orthodox Church in America), was canonized by the Russian Church because he was in Russia when he died. Thus, the Russian Church retained possession of his relics.

The decrees of one autocephalous church concerning its newly canonized saints do not have canonical power outside of that church. The fact that Herman of Alaska is recognized as a saint by the Orthodox Church in America cannot compel (for example) the autocephalous Church of Greece to recognize him as a saint. To this degree, the canonizations remain local affairs. But given the unity of the autocephalous churches, the canonizations of one church *are* recognized by the others—not by force of canonical law, but because in general, all the churches can recognize a saint when they see one.

How Do the Saints Help Us?

The intercession of the saints has been sought and invoked in the Church from almost the very beginning of its history—i.e., from the time that the Church began to produce martyrs, which happened very early indeed.¹² It had always been the view in Israel (and therefore in the Church) that those in heaven somehow can see what transpires on earth and are praying for us.

Thus, for example, we read in 2 Maccabees 15:12f that the martyred high priest Onias “was praying with outstretched hands for the whole body of the Jews.” Moreover, he was joined in his intercession by a man “distinguished by his gray hair and dignity and marvellous majesty and authority.” Onias revealed in the vision that “This is a man who loves the brethren and prays much for the people and the holy city—Jeremiah the prophet of God.”

This view continued into New Testament times and lay behind our Lord's words that those in heaven rejoice over the repentance of a single sinner on earth (Luke 15:7)—for how else could they know of the sinner's repentance unless earth somehow lay open to the gaze of those in heaven? The same view also undergirds the image found in Hebrews 12:1, which uses an athletic race to portray the Christian struggle. We on earth are running the race of faith, cheered on by a “great cloud of witnesses” observing us from the heavenly stands. We see also in the Book of Revelation¹³ that the saints know what is happening on earth while they are in heaven.

Therefore, the saints in heaven are not separated from us here, still struggling on earth. There are not two churches—the Church Triumphant (in heaven), and the Church

¹² St. Ignatius of Antioch, for example, was martyred about 107 A.D., shortly after the death of the Apostle John.

¹³ Rev 6:9–11, 16:4–7.

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Militant (on earth). There is just one single Church, whose members share unity in Christ and pray for one another. Therefore, in the Divine Liturgy we say,

We offer unto Thee this reasonable worship for those who have fallen asleep in the faith: ancestors, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, ascetics, and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith, especially for our most, most pure, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, for the holy, Prophet, Forerunner, and Baptist John, the holy, glorious, all-laudable apostles, and all Thy saints, at whose supplication look down upon us, O God.

Intercession of the Saints

Our invocation of the saints' prayers finds its context in this vast network of mutual love and intercession. The saints are already praying for us because we are part of the Church. Yet love is specific—as specific as friendship, and so as friendship grows between us and a particular heavenly saint, we enjoy that saint's particular intercession as well. We have our own patron saint, on whose love and intercession we rely, just as we also rely upon the love and prayers of our Christian friends on earth. But our heavenly friends, because they are closer to Christ, have a more powerful prayer than our friends on earth. This is why the Church has always invoked the prayers of its martyrs. If, for example, the prayers of Polycarp for his flock in Smyrna had power while on earth, how much more power will his prayers have now that he is in heaven close to the throne of God?

One sometimes hears that the saints in heaven do not provide any help for us except for the help of intercession, and that they do not help and heal us themselves, but only pray for Christ to heal us. It is doubtful if such a dichotomy can be sustained. For Christ sent his apostles out to heal (Matt 10:8), and it is recorded that they did indeed heal the sick (Mark 6:13). So, who healed those people—the apostles or Christ? Obviously, both! One could say, "The apostles healed by the power of Christ" or one could equally well say, "Christ healed through his apostles."¹⁴

The saints, then, do hear us and heal us, for it is Jesus Christ who heals through them. Hymns to the saints (such as akathists) are all part of our ultimate praise to Jesus. We love the saints because they are his friends, and we praise them for their help, because this powerful help comes ultimately from Christ. And the saints themselves are the works of Christ, the divine Author. That is why at the feasts of the saints we praise Christ by saying, "God is wonderful in his saints!"

The Place of the Theotokos in the Communion of Saints

Among the saints, Jesus' mother Mary, called the Theotokos¹⁵ occupies a special place. We see this in the Church's anaphora, cited above: we pray for all the saints, but "*especially* for our most holy, most pure, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary." At every Dismissal of the church's services, we invoke the intercession of the saints, but she stands at the head of the list, as the crown of the

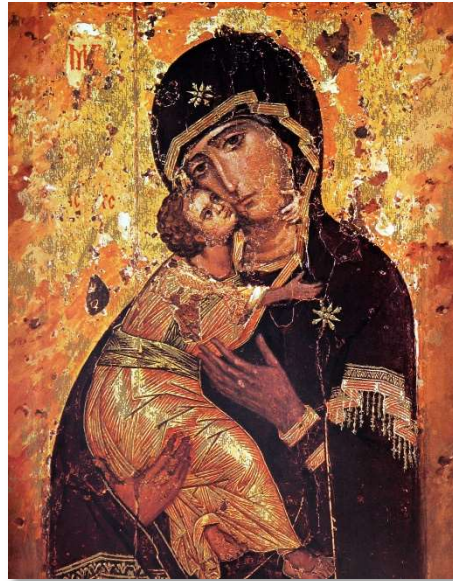
¹⁴ That is why when Peter healed a man by the laying on of hands, he said to the person, "Jesus Christ heals you" (Acts 9:34).

¹⁵ Theotokos is a Greek term meaning God-bearer or Birth-giver of God (Jesus).

communion of saints. That is why we say, “May Christ our true God, *through the prayers of his most pure Mother*; of the holy, glorious and all-laudable apostles, of the holy and righteous ancestors of God, Joachim and Anna and of all the saints have mercy upon us and save us, for He is good and loves mankind.” We ask Christ to bless us through the prayers “of all the saints,” but our first thought is of “his most pure Mother.”

The Theotokos, our pre-eminent Saint

The Church’s devotion to the Theotokos eclipses its love for any of the other saints. Though she remains firmly anchored in the communion of the saints, in a sense she is in a category all by herself. Her image is the only saint found in every iconostas in every Orthodox Church, where it occupies a place of honor next to the icon of her Son. The Church sings her praises in many ways. A cycle of feasts, comparable to those of Christ, is found throughout the Church’s calendar: the feast of her Nativity on September 8, her Entrance into the Temple on November 21, her Meeting with Saints Simeon and Anna in the Temple on February 2, her Annunciation on March 25, and her Dormition or falling asleep in death on August 15. Specific prayers to the Theotokos are found in every Divine Liturgy, and in every Vespers service. In any Orthodox prayer book, several prayers are offered to her in daily morning and evening prayers. These all witness to her importance in the life of the Orthodox Christian.



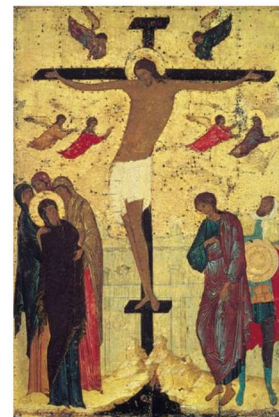
Our love for the Mother of God is based upon two things, which find expression in a word uttered by her and her Son. First, we love her because she gave her assent to the incarnation of the eternal Logos. Upon being told by the Archangel Gabriel that she had been chosen to give birth in nine months to the Messiah by the power of the Holy Spirit, she responded by agreeing to this, despite the personal cost to her reputation when it was found she was pregnant out of wedlock. It was her assent, “Be it unto me according to your word” (Luke 1:38) that allowed the divine Word to enter time and space through her body, uniting human nature to Himself.

By her freely given assent, she became the anchor of our faith,¹⁶ and all that the Savior later accomplished for our salvation was built upon her prior assent. Our gratitude to Christ as our King and Savior also involves our grateful recognition of her part in the divine plan of salvation. She became the bush which burned with the fire of divinity and yet was not consumed (Ex 3:2). She became the living ark which contained the divine presence (Ex 25:22).

¹⁶ In the Vespers service, the Tone 1 verses on “Lord I call”

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This means that Mary is unique among all the other members of the Church and of the communion of saints. Like all the other saints, she cries out, “My Lord and my God!” But unlike all the other saints, and like every mother, she also cries out, “My own child!” Alone of all her sex, she gave birth to her Creator. The abundant outpouring of hymnography praising her and celebrating this represents the Church’s ongoing attempt to absorb that single astonishing fact.



Secondly, our love for the Theotokos is also based upon her love for us. When He hung on the Cross, Christ saw both his mother and his beloved disciple (i.e., his close friend John) standing there together. He said to his mother, “Woman¹⁷, behold your son.” And then to John, “Behold your mother” (John 19:26-27). Through these words Christ committed his mother into the care of his close friend since she had no other children to look after her, and from that hour, John took her into his own home.

These words have a deeper meaning: John the beloved disciple represents all the disciples of Jesus, and in giving Mary into the care of John as his mother, He was committing Mary into the care of His Church and thereby making her the mother of all the faithful. Mary’s maternal love for her Son overflows into her love for all her Son’s disciples. She loves us all for his sake, caring for us as a mother cares for her own children, and praying for us. We love her therefore, because by her prayers and intercession, she constantly proves herself to be our protector, our nourisher, the one who rescues us from affliction, and who prays for our repentance and forgiveness when we err and sin. That is why every Vespers and Matins service ends with the Church invoking her rescue and help: “Most holy Theotokos, save us!”—i.e., rescue us out of all our distress. As one of the entrance prayers says,

O blessed Theotokos, open the doors of compassion to us whose hope is in you, that we may not perish but be delivered from adversity through you, who are the salvation of the Christian people.

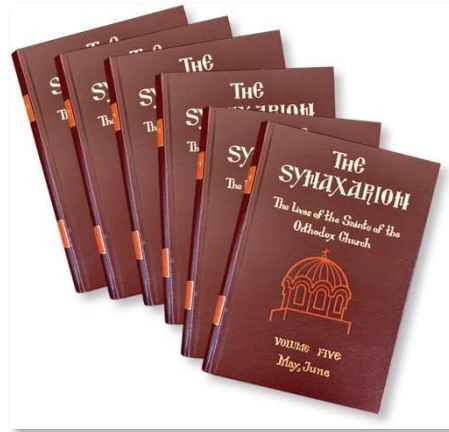
The Lives of the Saints

The hymns of the day which are sung at the Divine Liturgy usually include hymns to the saints of the day (who are also commemorated by name at the final dismissal). One finds the stories of the lives of these saints in a book called the *Synaxarion*, so-called because the stories of the saints were read at a *synaxis*, an assembly when the monks came together for Matins. The project of collecting stories of the saints began very early in the Church. Simeon Metaphrastes began a compilation of saints’ lives in the tenth century, and the project continued to develop after that. It is now contained in a collection of books, usually twelve in number, one volume for every month of the year. Each volume contains the stories of the saints who are commemorated that month.

¹⁷ Or, in more modern English, “Madam.” The term is not as rude as it might appear in English; but is a formal form of address. Compare Luke 12:14, where Christ addresses someone as “man”—in modern English, “sir.”

These stories offer a unique combination of history, sermon, and tradition, all mixed together for a popular audience. In the words of the introduction to our present *Synaxarion* written by Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos monastery of Mount Athos, “The *Synaxarion* is like a great river, whose rushing water carries along mud, stones, branches, and a little of everything they have met with on their way, regardless of its value, but whose stream is life-giving.”¹⁸

No one should imagine that veneration of the saints necessitates believing that St. George fought with an actual dragon or that St. Simeon was one of the translators of the Septuagint, still alive when he met the Holy Family in the Temple 270 years later. The stories in the *Synaxarion* are not offered merely as historical facts, but as a way of glorifying a saint whom the people love, and of holding up their virtuous lives for imitation. In the Byzantine hagiographical tradition, each story of the saint begins with the title, “The Life and Conduct (in Greek, the *bios* and *politeia*) of Saint N.” Note that with the latter word, *politeia*, the hagiographer’s concern is with how the saint lived in such a way as to glorify God. He wrote not as an historian, but as a pastor, with the sanctification of his readers as his main goal. The *Synaxarion* therefore serves two main purposes: that of praising the saint (and thereby recognizing God’s grace and power in his life), and that of offering an example to the faithful who read about his life.



First, reading the lives of the saints is our way of praising them, and thereby of integrating them into our lives today. The saints are not simply figures in history with no current relevance to our lives (like Julius Caesar or Napoleon), but fellow members of our parish family. As we ask for their prayers, we nourish and maintain our connection with them. St. John Chrysostom, for example, is not simply a bishop who lived a long time ago in Antioch and Constantinople. He is our friend who loves us and prays for us, whose writings we read, and whose liturgy we celebrate. Like all friends, he is a part of our life. Without the readings from the *Synaxarion*, the saints would retreat from us into the distant mists of history. And without the stories of the saints, the Church would have fewer examples of righteous living. Moreover, our own lives would be all the poorer without our friends who pray for us in heaven, cheering us on as part of the great cloud of witnesses. Our hymns to them in the church services and the stories of their exploits preserve a place for them in our hearts.

Second, the saints offer us examples of how we are to live. We need such examples of heroism and sanctity. Christians need Christian exemplars, people to imitate who model what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. In this way, we may consider the saints as

¹⁸ Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, *The Synaxarion, Volume 1*, trans. C. Hookway (Ormylia: Holy Convent of the Annunciation of our Lady, 1998), xix.

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Christian celebrities—men and women who by their *politeia* reveal what is truly valuable in life and how we should then live.

We see this approach to the saints as early as the Second Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 A.D., which set its seal on the restoration of icons in the church. A previous iconoclastic council had declared that it was useless to paint icons of the saints. Christians, they argued, did not need to see the fleshly faces of the saints; they merely needed to imitate their virtues. In answer to this argument, the Second Council of Nicaea replied,

*We do not praise the saints, nor do we represent them in painting because we like their flesh. Rather, in our desire to imitate their virtues, we re-tell their life stories in books and depict them in iconography, even though they have little need to be praised by us in narratives or to be depicted in icons. Yet, as we have said, we do this for our own benefit. For it is not only the sufferings of the saints that are instructive for our salvation, but also this very writing of their sufferings.*¹⁹

According to this ancient approach to the saints' lives, these stories have benefit for us because they "are instructive for our salvation." As we hear the stories of the saints' exploits, their courage, serenity, wisdom, and holy defiance, we gain knowledge of how we are to act when faced with similar challenges. What mattered to the saints was not "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," but "the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matt 6:33), and by taking the saints for our heroes, we also accept their approach to what our life goals should be.

Icons of the Saints

Orthodoxy today is impossible to imagine without its icons. Indeed, the service commemorating the restoration of icons in the Church is not called "the Triumph of Iconography," but "the Triumph of Orthodoxy." One sees how apt the title is after walking into Orthodox churches where the entirety of the interior walls is covered with icons. The verbal image of Hebrews 12:1, about being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, has become a visual image.

Church interiors were of course not always so adorned. But the Church has always maintained a tradition of sacred art. One sometimes encounters the view that first century Judaism was steadfastly opposed to images and was iconoclastic, and that therefore apostolic Christianity inherited this Jewish antipathy to images. It is not so. First century Judaism used images of some kind (witness the images of the synagogue preserved in the Dura Europos synagogue in Syria²⁰), and the church used images in its funerary art. Given the church's persecuted state in the first two hundred or so years of

¹⁹ Daniel J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 125–126.

²⁰ P.C. Finney, *The Invisible God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 100. "Before 1932, the complete absence of figural art from pre-Byzantine Judaism was taken as a sign that the so-called normative form of this ancient religion was strictly aniconic. Then came Dura. The discovery of the synagogue with its rich complement of biblically inspired wall paintings forced a re-evaluation."

its existence and the comparative poverty of its members, it is not surprising that few artistic artifacts should survive from that period. Art was expensive to produce, and furthermore, Christians had every reason not to advertise their presence to the persecuting state. Accordingly, much of its art was symbolic, or at least capable of other interpretations: in one image, for example, a pagan might see a simple shepherd, while a Christian looking at the same image would see the Good Shepherd, Christ. Despite the paucity of evidence, what survives confirms that Christians were never opposed to the use of images.



This is hardly surprising, given that Christ Himself was described by St. Paul in Colossians 1:15 as the *eikon*, the image of the invisible God. In the Incarnation, the invisible God whom no one had seen or could see became visible in the man Jesus Christ (John 1:18). Thus, iconography became one more way of proclaiming the good news of the incarnation. As the *kontakion* for the first Sunday of Great Lent says,

No one could describe the Word of the Father, but when He took flesh from you, O Theotokos, He accepted to be described, and restored the fallen image to its former state by uniting it to divine beauty. We confess and proclaim our salvation in word and images.

The journey from minimal adornment in the early church to our present rich adornment of the Church temples was a long one, leading through the fires of the iconoclastic revolt. The time leading up to the revolt provided those opposed to images with certain ammunition, such as the action of St. Epiphanius when he became incensed upon seeing a curtain in church bearing an image of Christ or a saint and indignantly tore it down.²¹ One hears of other later abuses as well. Icons were sometimes used as sponsors at baptism, and some priests would rub off the paint from an icon and mix it with the Holy Gifts for Communion. Other clergy would serve the Liturgy on an icon, rather than on an actual altar.²² It was abuses of these kinds that provoked or at least furthered the iconoclastic revolt, so that they threw out the iconic baby with the bathwater of iconic abuse. Eventually, however, the older apostolic acceptance of Christian art prevailed, as icons were restored to the church through the tireless work of their defenders and the help coming from a sympathetic State.

The iconoclastic revolt did, however, provide a valuable service for the Church, in that it led it to sustained theological thought regarding icons and the theology undergirding them. For the Orthodox, icons are not simply decorations on walls. And they were not simply visual stories, the “books of the illiterate,” though they did of course function in

²¹ St. Jerome, *Letter 51*.

²² Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 128.

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that way too. Icons were sacred windows into heaven, portals to a higher reality, and means of communing with the saints portrayed on them.

The principle here was that the veneration offered to an image passed to its prototype, so that the veneration offered to (for example) an icon of St. Paul passed to St. Paul himself. In kissing an icon of St. Paul, we are not venerating wood and paint, but the apostle. But though this may sound a bit technical and difficult, it is a principle we see in action around us all the time.

For example, when a soldier about to go into battle kissed a photo of his sweetheart before leaving the trenches and going up over the top, he was not showing love for the paper the image was on, but for his sweetheart. Other less happy examples can also be found. When the Communists destroyed the churches of Russia by shooting out the eyes of icons, throwing them down and trampling them, they were not showing their hatred for artwork, but for Christ and his saints. The veneration (or in this case, the lack of it) passed to its prototype.

Ultimately, the reason the Church has many icons on its walls is the same reason that your grandmother has many photos on hers: love for family. Grandma's house has many photos of her husband, children, nephews, nieces, and grandchildren because these are her family, and the human heart finds comfort in the sight of the faces it loves. It is the same with the Church—the icons are not merely pictures of historical figures, but members of our family in Christ, a family stretching back over centuries and around the world. And the saints are not dead but alive, and through our prayerful connection with their icons, they are active in our lives even now. The Church's iconography is an expression of its love for family and its determination to keep the saints we love in our lives.

The Relics of the Saints

It is safe to say that the secular world which sometimes appreciates the Church's icons has little appreciation for its relics. Relics seem to form the line in the sand, separating those animated by the spirit of the age from those animated by the tradition of the Church.

Antipathy to relics goes back a long way. The "Thirty-nine Articles" of the Church of England at the time of the Reformation declared, "The Romish Doctrine concerning...Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God."²³ The Anglican Divines were of course reacting to medieval Catholicism, but it is doubtful that their attitude to the modern Orthodox Doctrine concerning the adoration of images and relics would have been much different.

²³ Article XXII. By "fond" was meant "foolish."

Those Protestants were not the only ones who found the veneration of relics repugnant. This was the universal view of the ancients as well. Pagan Romans as well as Jews regarded contact with the bones of the dead as defiling, and as bringing ritual contamination. Touching a corpse or the bones of the dead rendered the person ritually unclean and so temporarily unable to offer sacrifice or to take part in a religious rite. That is why they took care to bury their dead outside the city, where the possibility of such ritual contamination was minimized. This was not simply a theological opinion, but a deeply felt visceral reaction.

This tradition reveals the great abyss separating paganism from early Christianity. The pagans (and Jews) took great care to avoid contact with the remains of the dead. Christians took great care to collect and treasure the bones of its saints. Indeed, the bones and remains of the martyrs were not regarded as defiling, but as *sanctifying*. That is why the Christians would keep the feast of their martyrs over their very bones, for they felt that such contact brought the blessing of God. Even today, every Liturgy is served over the bones of the martyrs, for a tiny fragment of their relics is sewn into the back of the antimimension over which the Liturgy is celebrated.²⁴

This love for the relics of the saints began quite early and has a stronger history even than that of iconography. Thus in 155 A.D., the Christians were keen to collect the relics of the newly martyred bishop Polycarp so that they might venerate them. In the story of his martyrdom we read,

Later on [after the cremation of Polycarp's body by the Romans] we took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold and deposited them in a suitable place. There, when we gather together as we are able, with joy and gladness, the Lord will permit us to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom in commemoration of those who have already fought in the contest, and also for the training and preparation of those who will do so in the future.²⁵

From this we see that already in the mid-second century the Church had a firm tradition of venerating the relics of its saints. As the author of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* wrote, this love for the martyrs offered no rival to their love for Christ, "for we worship this One who is the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord, as they deserve, on account of their matchless devotion to their own King and Teacher."²⁶

The principle behind the Church's veneration of relics undergirds all of its sacramental theology. That is to say, by the power of the Spirit of God, matter can become spirit-bearing. This principle was foreshadowed in the Old Testament, when the bones of



²⁴ The antimimension is the cloth spread out on the altar table before the Gifts of bread and wine are placed upon it and the Eucharist itself is celebrated there.

²⁵ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, chapter 18.

²⁶ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, chapter 17.

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Elisha brought life to someone who had recently died (2 Kings 13:20–21). It is seen more fully in the New Testament, when even handkerchiefs and aprons which had touched the body of St. Paul became charged with divine power so that the sick were healed and demons were cast out (Acts 19:11,12). If mere cloths which had come into contact with St. Paul could become vehicles of healing, how much more the body of the apostle himself!



Tomb of St George

Relics of the saints were not as plentiful as their icons, for obvious reasons. The early church had a reluctance to divide up the bones of the dead but wanted to keep the body of the departed saint whole—as an Empress discovered to her disappointment when she asked the bishop of Rome for a fragment of the relics of Peter. The bishop of Rome declined, saying that it was “not their custom.” But demand for relics grew, and eventually the Church overcame the Roman reluctance to divide the bones of its saints.

Today’s relics are usually a small fragment of the saint’s bones, preserved with honor in a reliquary, a little chest set out for veneration at certain times. These relics are considered to be sources of blessing. Sometimes the faithful find miraculous healing from venerating them, as they ask for the prayers of the saint.

Encountering a relic means encountering the saint himself, who by the grace of God is not separated from his relics. The Church’s understanding of the union of the saint with his relics reveals the abyss separating the Church from the modern secular world. In the secular realm, a body has no significance after death. Often it is cremated, and not even present at the funeral of the deceased. Like the pagans of old, modern secularists regard the immaterial soul as alone possessing true personhood. After death, the body is discarded as easily as one discards an envelope after taking the letter enclosed in it. The envelope (or the body) is not longer of any use; only the letter (or the soul) matters.

This is contrary to the thought of both the Old and New Testaments. The human person consists of an amalgam of body and soul, which together constitute the human person. The body does not lose its personhood after death—which is why the soul of the saint still recognizes his own body²⁷ and has a connection with it. That is also why those coming to visit the relics of Peter in Rome in the early church did not say that they were visiting *his* relics but visiting *Peter*.

The Church’s use of relics witnesses to its eschatological nature, which is also revealed through its most honoured members, the martyrs. The saints live by the power of Christ’s Resurrection, and in some measure already partake of the age to come. The powers of that age already seep into this age through the heroism of the martyrs and

²⁷ Thus St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his work *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.

remain among us through their relics. The relics witness to the truth that death is not the end. Death has been changed by Christ, and made a doorway into life, sanctification, and joy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the veneration of the saints is a vital component of the Orthodox Christian Tradition. They are so important to the Orthodox way of life that we commemorate multiple saints every day in our prayers and in our services. Even from the very founding of Christ's Church, the apostles and disciples considered the remains of departed saints (bodily remains or even their clothing) to be holy and of immense value. They collected them, used them to affect physical healing, and even served the Eucharist over them (or their tombs). Today, every altar in every church contains the relics of at least one saint. Our love for and commemoration of the saints continues to this day, as we seek out even modern exemplars of Holy Orthodoxy from every place who one day may be commemorated as a saint. And for those who are, we pray for their help precisely because they have already completed the race that we strive so diligently to finish. In fact, it should be the goal and hope of every Christian to become holy and to be recognized as a saint of Christ. The Church teaches us the way to achieve this goal: through our cooperation with Christ and by our ascetical efforts, humility, and love for Christ and His Church.

Chapter 6

The Holy Trinity

Having entered with Christ into the heavenly places in the Little Entrance, having asked mercy of the Saints remembered on that day, we conclude, as we stand with them before God, with the Trisagion prayer, “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us.” We bow down in worship before the creator of all that is and submit ourselves to the One revealed to us in Jesus Christ as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This participation with the Saints in the worship of the Holy Trinity is made more dramatic on those feasts (Pascha, all the days of Bright Week, Pentecost, Nativity, Theophany, Lazarus Saturday, and Holy Saturday) and at every baptism, when we sing, instead of “Holy God,”¹ “As many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.” We are called back each time to God's gracious gift of new life in him through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Father

The Primacy of the Father

For the Orthodox, discussion of the Holy Trinity must begin with the Father. He is the principle of unity within the Trinity: the Son is divine because He is the Son of the Father, eternally begotten by him; the Holy Spirit is divine because He is the Spirit of the Father, eternally proceeding from the Father and resting in the Father's Son. Though Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all co-equal and co-eternal, the Father is the *aitia*, the cause of the Son and the Spirit, not in terms of time (as if the Son and Spirit came into being after the Father), but hypostatically, in terms of their personhood. The fathers referred to this as “the monarchy” of the Father.

We see this primacy of the Father asserted in the creed. The Nicene Creed begins by declaring, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty.” That is, there is only God—viz. the Father almighty. But the Father is not alone. He has with him his only-begotten Son and Word, begotten of the Father before all ages, *homoousios*² with the Father, sharing his *ousia*, his essential divinity. Also, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father—i.e., He was not created by him as were the angels but has his hypostatic existence from the Father's own being. Thus, the Creed proclaims the Trinitarian nature of God, while asserting the hypostatic primacy of the Father.

The Father may also be identified with the God of the Old Testament, the One worshipped by Israel (The Creed also hints at this when it declares that the Father is the “Maker of heaven and earth”). The God of Israel, worshipped by them under the names

¹ Also called The Trisagion.

² Of the same (*homo*) essence (*ousia*).

of Yahweh³ and Elohim, had his “house” or temple in Jerusalem. This temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. but rebuilt after the exile and enlarged later still by Herod the Great. This temple was still the Temple of Yahweh. Jesus referred to it as “my Father’s house” (Luke 2:49). The Temple of Yahweh was the Temple of Jesus’ Father. The Father, therefore, was Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament.

The Self-Revelation of Yahweh in the Old Testament

Since the days of Marcion in the second century, it has been common for some people to contrast the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament, to the disadvantage of the former. These people assert that Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, was angry, vindictive, and warlike, while the Father, the God of the New Testament, is kind, patient, forgiving, and loving. Marcion drew the obvious conclusion from this dubious comparison and asserted that the Father was not the God of the Old Testament, and that Christ came to reveal an entirely different deity from the angry God known to Israel.

The Church quickly disowned Marcion and asserted that the God known in the Old Testament was indeed the Father revealed by Christ. Yet even with this denial, some Christians still cling to the caricature of the Old Testament God as one of wrath and angry intransigence, compared to the loving God of the New Testament. It is therefore important to examine the portrayal of Yahweh Elohim in the Old Testament. When we do so we shall see that his character is precisely that of the Father, and of Jesus, the Father’s Son.

The Old Testament begins with a series of stories ascribing the creation of the world and all the world’s people to Yahweh, the tribal God of Israel. The other creator gods of the pagan nations are entirely side-lined, discounted, and cast out of the narrative, deprived of their divine status by being ignored by the biblical narrator, their claims to creating and governing the world being disallowed. Yahweh alone is the creator and sustainer of the world, the One who cares for all that He has made.

Thus, Yahweh is first revealed as having a caring relationship with everyone in the world, even though they were not part of his chosen covenant people. St. Paul would later stress this, by declaring to the Lycaonians, “In past generations [the living God] allowed all nations to walk in their own ways, yet He did not leave Himself without witness, for He did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with good and gladness” (Acts 14:16–18). God’s self-revelation to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not erase or supplant his care and solicitude for all men.

When God did later reveal Himself to Moses and call his chosen people out of Egypt to enter into covenant with them and fulfil his promise to give them the land promised to Abraham, He revealed even more of his heart through the Law that He gave them. For

³ The name "Yahweh" is used by some to represent the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (meaning four letters) יהוה (Yod Heh Vav Heh). It was considered blasphemous to utter the name of God; therefore, it was only written and never spoken, resulting in the loss of the original pronunciation. It is more common in English-language bibles to represent the Tetragrammaton with the term "LORD" (capitalized).

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the Torah given at Sinai was not simply a collection of legislation; it was a manifestation of the divine character. God was holy, and He expected his people to be holy also and strive to imitate him in their daily lives (Lev 11:44–45).

Divine Holiness

What was this divine holiness that the people were called to imitate? Here we focus upon four things: God’s concern for the poor and oppressed; his righteous anger at sin and at oppression; his patience and compassion; his concern for the whole world.

Yahweh’s concern for the poor is expressed in many passages—a concern which shines all the more brightly, given how the plight of the poor was largely ignored in the ancient world and poor people treated like mere human ballast. In contrast, Yahweh commanded his people not to take full benefit from the fields they worked, but to use them to help the poor. Thus Leviticus 19:9 reads, “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner.” We also find a similar order in Leviticus 25:35 which reads, “If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him. Take no interest from him or increase but fear your God that your brother may live beside you.”

This concern for the poor extended even to concern for the preservation of their dignity. In Deuteronomy 24:10–11 we find this command, “When you make your neighbour a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to fetch his pledge. You shall stand outside and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you.”

This concern for the weak even extended to animals. In Deuteronomy 22:6–7 we read,

If you happen to come upon a bird’s nest along the way, in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs in it, and the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young; you shall certainly let the mother go, but the young you may take for yourself, in order that it may go well for you and that you may prolong your days.

This is of a piece with Yahweh’s concern for oxen in Deuteronomy 25:4 where He commands that they be allowed to eat while working at threshing, and not go hungry.

More than this, Yahweh shows his concern even for inanimate flora. In Deuteronomy 20:19–20 Yahweh forbids use of a scorched earth policy in warfare. “When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them. Do not cut them down. Are trees of the field people, that you should besiege them?” While some may detect an economic motive for preserving birds and trees, the compassion of God for all his creation cannot be excluded.

Yahweh’s righteous anger at sin and oppression is a direct fruit of his compassion for the poor and the helpless. The rich and powerful, then as now, ground the face of the poor, despoiled and murdered them, leaving orphans and widows in their wake in a long trail of destruction, and it was Yahweh’s love for the orphans and widows that provoked his

wrath against their oppressors. We see this righteous anger especially in the words of the prophets.

Thus, Amos thunders against the rich with Yahweh's voice,

For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes—they that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted... Behold, I will press you down in your place, as a cart full of sheaves presses down. Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain his strength, nor shall the mighty save his life (Amos 2:6–7, 13–14).

Here Yahweh shows Himself a protector of the poor, and a mighty avenger of those who destroy them.

Yahweh's patience and compassion are seen time and time again through the Hebrew Scriptures. His patience with Israel in the wilderness when they openly repudiated and defied him by worshipping the golden calf at Sinai was so proverbial that it was memorialized in psalms such as Psalm 78 and Psalm 106. Even later when they inherited the Land and turned to idols, God was patient, warning them over and over through the prophets to turn back and save their lives.

Yahweh's heartbreak is seen in such passages of Isaiah 5:1–4, the Song of the Vineyard:

Let me sing for my beloved a love song concerning his vineyard: my beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?



Yahweh's frustration can be clearly seen here, especially in the almost pathetic cry, "What more was there to do that I have not done?" He had lavished every care to provide and protect his people and wanted only the fruits of righteousness and devotion in return. But they refused, producing injustice and turning from him to other gods. This went on for centuries, as God continued to wait for their repentance before finally sending judgment. And even then, He judged only with pain and reluctance. As He said through Ezekiel, "As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live! Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezek 33:11).

Yahweh's concern for the whole world is also revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is glimpsed faintly in passages such as Amos 9:7, which speaks of Yahweh's guiding other nations as He guided Israel. "Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines

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from Caphthor and the Syrians from Kir?” But it is found in unmistakably loud tones in the Book of Jonah.

The story of Jonah’s adventures is told for the sole purpose of enlarging the hearts of his people to include the Gentiles—a very tall order in post-exilic Israel, when Israel was suffering under a foreign yoke. The story recounts how Jonah was sent to announce Yahweh’s imminent judgment on Nineveh, and how the Ninevites repented after Jonah proclaimed their doom.

Nineveh was the capital of the brutal Assyrian Empire, known for its ruthlessness and cruelty. Nineveh’s fall was announced by the prophet Nahum, who ended his prophetic diatribe with the rhetorical question to Nineveh, “Upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?” In the story of Jonah, however, Nineveh repented and was not destroyed—much to the distress of Jonah, who feared all along that they might repent and escape justice.

Yahweh gently rebukes Jonah for his hard heart and his determination to see the godless Gentiles destroyed. After causing a plant to miraculously spring up to provide needed shade and then suddenly causing it to die, He asked Jonah if he was angry that the plant died. When Jonah replied in the emphatic affirmative, (“angry enough to die!”), Yahweh retorted as follows,

You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:9-11)

In other words, Yahweh has pity upon all the peoples of the world—even upon ruthless and terrible Nineveh.

This is the character of Yahweh, revealed in the Old Testament—kind, just, patient, and compassionate. It is the character of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, equally revealed in the New. And this was the character of Jesus, for to see Jesus was to see his Father also (John 14:9).

The Son

The Ministry of Jesus as the Revelation of the Trinity

It is through Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, that God is revealed as Trinity. The Old Testament did not reveal God as Trinity, preoccupied as it was with the overwhelming task of instilling monotheism securely within the heart of Israel. To have proclaimed God as three would have impeded this pedagogical task. The urgent need to teach Israel the truth of monotheism superseded all else. The revelation of God as Trinity would have to wait until this prior foundation had been laid.

The revelation of God as Trinity began with the revelation of the man Jesus as having divine authority and status. Modern Orthodox might begin with the assumption of his

divinity, since we routinely refer to him as “Christ our true God.” A reading of the New Testament must start at the other end, with the assumption that Jesus (“Yeshua bar-Yosef” to his contemporaries), was a man like them (in later Chalcedonian parlance, “*homoousios* with us as regards his manhood”). That is why St. Paul referred to him almost reflexively as “the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). Like other men in Israel, Jesus referred to the Father as his God (John 20:17), and like other men, as a child He grew in size as well as favour with God, learning Torah and pleasing him by his life (Luke 2:52).

It was this man who said and did things no other man ever said or did. It was not only that He manifested serene authority over the untameable sea, over demons, and even over death and corruption itself—things that only God could do (Mark 4:39–41, 5:1–15; John 11:38–44). It was also the extraordinary claims He made for Himself—claims that would have sounded bizarre if made by anyone else.

The Case for the Divinity of Jesus

For example, Jesus claimed the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:5–12)—an authority that everyone knew that only God possessed. Given that God had said He would never share his glory with another (Isa 42:8), Jesus’ authority to forgive sins argues strongly for his divine status.

Jesus also claimed that at the end of the age He would be seated on a throne and that everyone in the world would be gathered before him, and that He personally would



determine their eternal destiny—and that on the basis of their responses to him! He further claimed that it was He alone that would open or close the door into the Kingdom of God on the Day of Judgment (Matt 25:31–46, 8:21–23).

He claimed that He was the Lord of the sabbath with authority to determine what could be done on the sabbath day, and that shared his Father’s exemption from resting on the sabbath (Mark 2:28; John 5:17). This was especially scandalous in Jewish eyes, given the supreme importance of the Sabbath, and constituted a claim to be equal with God—as his foes instantly recognized (see John 5:18).

Such claims of equality with God, though scandalous and regarded as blasphemy, were routinely made by Jesus, and in explicit terms. When He declared, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) and the Jews responded by taking up stones to stone him for blasphemy, Jesus did not back down, or explain that they had misunderstood him. Instead, He justified it with an *a fortiori* argument from the Psalms: if the unbreakable Scriptures had described Israelite judges as “gods” (Psalm 82:6), how much more did He have the right to the title of “Son of God” since the Father had consecrated him for his work and sent him into the world? (John 5:31–36).

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Indeed, on another occasion Jesus claimed, “Abraham rejoiced to see My day,” and when his hearers balked at the notion that He could be somehow old enough to have seen Abraham, He replied, “Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am!” (in Greek, *ego eimi*).

This last utterance included use of the divine Name which Yahweh used when He revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush. When Moses asked Yahweh to tell him his Name, Yahweh replied, “I am who I am. Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I Am’ has sent me to you” (Ex 3:13–14). In the Septuagint, the divine name “I am who I am” is rendered, *ego eimi ho on*. Jesus was here laying claim to the divine Name of “I Am” by which Yahweh identified Himself to Moses. It was a clear assertion of equality and identity with Yahweh. Jesus’ hearers immediately understood this and picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy (John 8:56–59).

As was once pointed out,⁴ anyone making such claims could only be liar, a lunatic—or perhaps the Lord. Jesus’ adversaries opted for a combination of the first two, declaring that He was “a Samaritan” and “had a demon” (John 8:48). Jesus’ disciples opted for the latter and acknowledged his claims to divinity. John’s Gospel opens with a bold assertion of his divinity, with the words, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”⁵ (John 1:1), and it climaxes with the confession of Thomas to Jesus “My Lord and my God!”⁶ (John 20:28). John was in no doubt that the man Yeshua bar-Yosef was also Israel’s God in the flesh.

The Apostolic Testimony to the Divinity of Jesus

The apostolic conviction of the divinity of Jesus is found throughout the epistles of the New Testament. St. Paul, for example, spoke of the pre-incarnate Word as being “in the form of God” and as “not counting equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptying Himself, taking the form of a servant, and being born in the likeness of men.” (Phil 2:6–7).

In his letter to the Colossians, he described Jesus in these terms,

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation [i.e., having the privilege of primogeniture, the heir of all things]; for in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together... For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell (Col 1:15–19).

Indeed, Paul did not hesitate to describe Jesus as “our great God and Saviour” in Titus 2:13.⁷

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), chapter 3.

⁵ Greek *theos en ho logos*. The entire verse could also be translated, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with the Divine One, and the Word was divine.”

⁶ Greek *ho kurios mou kai ho theos mou*—the definite article for God indicating full divinity—the God.

⁷ The point stands even if the Epistle to Titus was not written by St. Paul.

In the centuries to come theologians would struggle to express these Christological affirmations in a consistent way, using the more precise terms of Hellenistic philosophy, along the way drafting their own unique technical vocabulary with such terms as “*hypostasis*”, “*physis*”, and “*ousia*”. But even here in the New Testament all the basic ingredients for the final Christological product may be found—the declaration that the man Jesus of Nazareth, a man in every way like us, is also the true God of Israel in the flesh.

The Holy Spirit

The Spirit of God in the Old Testament

In the Hebrew Scriptures the Spirit of God is seen in Yahweh’s acts of power: the Spirit of Yahweh came mightily upon Samson, and he tore apart an attacking lion as one tears apart a young goat (Judg 14:6). The Spirit of Yahweh fell mightily upon Saul when he approached Samuel and his prophets so that Saul also stripped and fell down among them in ecstasy and prophesied for a day and a night (1 Sam 19:23–24). The Spirit of God enabled craftsmen such as Bezalel and Oholiab to produce beautiful work building the Ark and its furnishings (Ex 31:1f). It was the Spirit of God that filled the prophets and enabled them to receive the words of Yahweh.

The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*, which is also the word for breath and wind (compare its various uses in passages such as Ezekiel 37, where it means all three). *Ruach* is therefore associated with life, based on the observation that when moving air ceases to flow from a body, the person is dead. A person’s *ruach* is his life; when his *ruach* departs, he dies.

We find this identification of *ruach* with life in such passages as Psalm 104:29–30 which describes the death of life in the winter and its renewal in the spring. There the psalmist says, “When You [Yahweh] take away their *ruach*, they die and return to the dust. When You send forth Your *ruach* they are created and You renew the face of the ground.”⁸ God’s *ruach*, his Spirit, is therefore the principle of his life, and it is through the action of his *ruach* that God acts with power to create and strengthen the world. Because this *ruach* is the *ruach* of Yahweh, the Holy One, St. Paul used the term “the Spirit of holiness” to describe him (Rom 1:4), as well as the more usual term “the Holy Spirit”.

⁸ This is, I suggest, what was originally meant by Jesus’ word that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father.” The Greek of Isaiah 57:16 which speaks of God’s spirit “proceeding” from him refers to God’s acts of creation.



The Spirit of God in the New Testament

It was this Holy Spirit that Christ promised his disciples that He would soon send upon them during his last night with them. The Spirit had been among them and in their midst during Jesus' ministry when He did his works of power, but soon the Spirit would not just be *among* them, but *in* them (John 14:17).

When the Spirit came, He would teach them all they needed to know and bring to remembrance the words Jesus spoke, enlightening the apostles to know their

true meaning and to glorify Jesus (John 14:25–26, 16:14). This was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when Jesus received the Spirit from the Father and poured him out upon his waiting Church (Acts 2:1–4, 33).

It is clear from other New Testament references to the Spirit that the Spirit is not an impersonal power or influence (like magnetic force or electricity), but a person. One can grieve the Spirit by sinful acts (Eph 4:30), and one can lie to the Spirit (Acts 5:3)—actions which presuppose interactions between persons. Thus, in the Book of Revelation the Spirit speaks, offering a blessing to those who die in the Lord, (Rev 14:13), and that book closes with a double invitation from the Church, the Bride of Christ, and from the Spirit, as both invite the hearer to “come” to salvation (Rev 22:17). That is why in Christ's final words to his disciples He referred to the Spirit as someone whom He would send and who would perform various tasks when He came. The Spirit was a person, distinct from the Father and the Son.

That Spirit is the Spirit of the Father (see Matt 10:20), for He is the Spirit of Yahweh. But because Christ received the Spirit from the Father and poured him out upon His Church, the Spirit is also the Spirit of Christ (see Rom 8:8; Gal 4:6).

The Holy God as Trinity

The concept of God as Triune is nowhere explicated in the New Testament, because the New Testament is not a handbook of systematic theology, but a collection of memoirs and letters. Nonetheless, the ingredients of the apostolic teachings which would later be combined into a coherent whole in the doctrine of the Trinity are all there.

These are: the teaching that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct from one another; that all three are divine, and that there is only one God. The doctrine of the



Holy Trinity as taught by the Church is simply the result of gathering these separate teachings into a single consistent whole.

We can see this adumbrated in the baptismal formula Christ gave His Church when He commanded that they baptize converts in the name (note the singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). These three would hardly have been gathered together under one head and in one name unless all three had been equal and divine.

In the earliest days of the Church the combination of these teachings into a doctrine of God as three and one was pastorally unnecessary. The Church knew that Jesus of Nazareth was God (compare St. Ignatius of Antioch's reference to him as "Jesus Christ our God" in his letter to the Ephesians⁹), and yet still confessed a belief in one God. It was only when some within the Church began to produce erroneous understandings of the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that a more systematic presentation became necessary. The Church is a fellowship of worshippers, not of analysts; it only undertakes examination of such complex questions when compelled by the necessity of refuting error.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has an experiential aspect. We find God the Father above us in heaven, ruling the cosmos and receiving our prayers. We find God the Son in our midst, offering mankind union with Himself through baptism, and so also union with his Father with whom He is one. We experience God the Spirit within our hearts. The Holy Trinity is not an abstract doctrine; it is the constant and saving experience of the Church.

Baptism and the Holiness of God

"As many as have been baptized into Christ..."

What Baptism Does

The truth of the Trinitarian nature of Israel's God was revealed through the incarnation of the Word, and the Word became incarnate that sinful creatures could partake of the saving holiness of God. In the words of St. Peter, we are called to become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4); in the words of St. Paul, though Christ was rich, He "became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Our salvation, our divinization, our enrichment was the purpose of his incarnation.

Through the Trinitarian action of God, and by his grace, we become what Christ is by nature so that now He has become the first-born among many brothers (Rom 8:29). God's holiness is not simply a goal for which we strive; it is God's present gift to us. We

⁹ St. Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, the greeting.

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are already holy, and are called to become what we are, realizing ever more fully our sanctification. God is holy, *agios*, and through our incorporation into his Son by the power of the Spirit, we have also become *agioi*, “saints” (compare 1 Cor 1:2; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2). That is why the eucharistic celebrant invites the faithful to come to receive Holy Communion by saying, “The holy things for the holy!” The faithful communicants are holy and are therefore called to receive the holy eucharistic gifts.

This gift of holiness and incorporation into Christ takes place in baptism.

The History of Christian Baptism

The Christian sacramental mystery of baptism has a long Jewish pre-history. Judaism knew of periodic immersions for the removal of ritual impurity (such as were required after menstruation or after touching a dead body; Leviticus 15:19; Numbers 19:19). After the exile when the phenomenon of Gentiles wishing to convert to Judaism became more common, a way to receive such converts or proselytes was needed. This conversion ritual included (as well as circumcision for the men) an immersion in water to wash away the stain associated with the Gentile world. The immersion came to be known a “proselyte baptism.”

It was, it has been suggested, this ritual act that St. John the Forerunner chose as the sign for his fellow Jews who accepted his message calling them to repentance. John proclaimed that Israel must repent if they were to be ready for the imminent coming of the Messiah, and he required that Jews who repented signify their repentance by undergoing the baptism normally given to Gentiles upon their conversion. The application of proselyte baptism to Jews was controversial to say the least, since it seemed to imply that Jews were no better off than Gentiles, and so John experienced opposition from those who questioned his authority to administer such a baptism to Jews (see John 1:19–28). Such baptisms were a prominent part of his ministry, so that he became popularly known as “John the Baptizer” (thus in Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.5).

The ministry of Jesus grew out of John’s ministry, since Jesus was baptized by John. Accordingly, Jesus also used baptism as a sign of acceptance of his message (compare John 3:26, 4:1–2). It was not until Jesus had been glorified after his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension that the baptism administered in His Name conveyed the Holy Spirit (John 7:37–39). Thereafter the baptism administered by the Church effectively bestowed such spiritual power.

Baptism in the Church

Baptism is the divinely-ordained method of becoming a disciple of Jesus. It incorporates the convert into Christ, establishing a union between the Lord and the new convert. And since Jesus had been crucified, buried, raised, and glorified to sit at the Father’s right hand, the convert also experiences those spiritual realities through his union with Christ. That is why St. Paul taught that to be baptized into Christ was to be baptized into his

death (Rom 6:3)—and not just his death, but all of the experiences He underwent on behalf of us for our salvation.

Thus, in Galatians 2:19, St. Paul speaks of us being “co-crucified” with Christ (Greek *sustauroō*); in Romans 6:4 of us being “co-buried” with him (Greek *sunthapto*); in Colossians 2:12 of being “co-raised” with him (Greek *sunegeiro*); in Romans 8:17 of being “co-glorified” with him (Greek *sundoxadzō*); and in Ephesians 2:6 of us being made to “co-sit” with him in the heavenlies (Greek *sunkathidzō*). Thus, through our union with Christ, the powers of his death to sin and of the new life of his resurrection, and of his heavenly glory are all given to the new convert through baptism, the time when the union of convert with his Lord is established.

That is why in baptism we are granted the forgiveness of sins, the gift of adoption to sonship, and the Holy Spirit. Christ is the true Son of the Father, and He shares his sonship with us—which involves the forgiveness of our sins, since Christ is sinless. Christ has received the fulness of the Holy Spirit, and so He pours the Spirit upon us when we are baptized. He shares his holiness with his Body through the union of the divine and heavenly Head with its earthly members.

We see this glorious reality described in many New Testament passages. Proleptically Christ spoke to Nicodemus of a new birth through baptismal water¹⁰ and the Spirit (John 3:1–8) and spoke openly of the time when those who believed in him would experience the fullness of the Spirit (John 7:37–39). In Acts 2:38 St. Peter invited his hearers to repent and be baptized, assuring them that if they did so they would receive “the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.” In Acts 22:16 Paul is invited by Ananias to “arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on His Name.” In Romans 6:1f, St. Paul declared that those being baptized into Christ would “walk in newness of life,” being united to Christ in his resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul spoke of baptism washing, sanctifying, and justifying the new converts. In Ephesians 5:26 he spoke about the reality of Christians being “washed in water and the Word” of the Gospel. In Titus 3:5 he described baptism as a “washing of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit.” The connection of physical baptismal immersion with these realities and baptism as the divinely-chosen instrument of their bestowal could hardly be clearer.

¹⁰ The larger context of Jesus being part of John’s baptizing movement makes the reference to the water as baptismal certain.

Notes

The Structure of Baptism

The baptismal service has several elements to it. The word “baptism” (Greek *baptisma*) is cognate with the Greek *bapto*, meaning “to dip, to immerse.” As seen above, baptism was a total immersion, such as was used in Jewish purification rites and proselyte baptism. Very quickly (if not from the outset) it also included the laying on of hands (compare Acts 19:6) and the anointing with oil (compare 2 Cor 1:21–22; 1 John 2:27). In Syria the anointing seems at first to have preceded the immersion (thus the homilies in the *Baptismal Instructions* of St. John Chrysostom), while in North Africa the anointing bestowing the Spirit came after the immersion (thus Tertullian in his *Concerning Baptism*). The baptismal ordo is less important than the fact that it is in the entire complex of baptismal rituals that the candidate receives the divine gifts of forgiveness, sonship, and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit.



Baptism, with its rites of immersion and anointing, brings the candidate from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to Christ (Acts 26:18), and it involves the total and permanent consecration of the candidate to Christ. After baptism, the candidate is to live a life of radical discipleship, considering that he or she no longer belongs to the “Gentile” world or this age, but was now a citizen of the Kingdom of God, and therefore a stranger and sojourner on earth (Phil 3:20; 1 Pet 2:11).

Requirements for Baptism

St. Paul reminds us of the character of this life of consecration: is our participation in the death and burial of Christ (Rom 6:3-4a). There is a cost and requirement in baptism, Christ Himself laid down these conditions. He said that anyone who did not renounce all that he had could not be his disciple. To be accepted as his disciple, one must be prepared to pick up their cross (Luke 14:27, 33) and follow him. The image of picking up one’s cross is a radical one, and one not often understood today in a culture which does not practice public execution by crucifixion.

In Jesus’ day, everyone knew what picking up a cross involved. The Romans were careful to intimidate and subjugate the populations over which they ruled, and one of their most effective ways of accomplishing this was by executing defiant rebels by crucifying them in public.

The condemned criminal would be scourged, and then forced to pick up his cross (i.e., the *patibulum*, the horizontal cross beam) and carry this out to the place of execution. He would then lay it down and be nailed or tied (or both) to the wood, his hands being affixed to the ends of the *patibulum* and his feet affixed to the bottom of the vertical pole onto which the *patibulum* was fixed. There he would remain night and day, until he died,

usually screaming for release. Death usually took days. Jesus' hearers knew that one who picked up his cross had been condemned and would soon be hanging from it in blood and pain.

It is therefore all the more stunning that Christ chose this image as the one which represented what He required of his disciples. Specifically, He declared that no one could be his disciple who did not love him more than life itself and who was not willing to die for him. Not every Orthodox Christian need die a martyr's death, but each must be willing to do so if necessary. One must be so dedicated to Christ that one is willing to be crucified rather than deny him.

Baptism is meant to initiate the candidate into this life of dedication to Christ. Of course, not all baptized Christians have this dedication to Christ, but the Lord's requirement for discipleship stands nonetheless. The Gospel declares that we may share the holiness and life of God, enjoying forgiveness, sonship, and the promise of eternal life if—and only if—we become such dedicated disciples of Jesus. That is the Gospel message; diluting it and watering it down, though it may pay dividends in this age, will bring no reward in the age to come when we must all stand before the dread judgment seat of Christ.

The Baptism of Infants

Though baptism is a sacrament of decision and conversion, the Church has always been prepared to baptize the infant children of dedicated believers if they are brought to the Church for baptism. Origen (d. ca. 253) said that this was an apostolic precept, and the *Apostolic Tradition*¹¹ allows for the baptism both of children able to answer for themselves and children too young to give such answers.

In those early days of the Church, infant baptism was quite rare, convert baptism being the norm. This was especially true in the western church, where there was more angst attending the premature deaths of unbaptized infants. It was less so in the east. In fact, St. Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390) suggested in his *Oration 40* that if an infant was in no danger of death, the baptism might be delayed until the end of their third year "when they may be able to listen and to answer something about the mystery (i.e., the sacrament); that, even though they do not perfectly understand it, yet at any rate they may know the outlines." Some people in the east in the fourth century remained catechumens throughout most of their lives, only choosing to be baptized when near life's end. Some Fathers (such as St. Gregory) advised against this, urging them not to delay baptism like this.

¹¹ Representing the liturgical tradition of Rome at the beginning of the third century

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But despite convert baptism being the norm, eventually infant baptism became the norm, and the catechumenate as an institution faded away, leaving only vestigial marks in the Liturgy. The challenge for the Church, and for Christian parents is to do their best to ensure that those baptized in infancy know what kind of life they were initiated into and live as dedicated disciples of Jesus, for baptism remains a sacrament of conversion. That is why questions about renouncing Satan and uniting with Christ are still addressed to the infant candidates, even though

they must now be answered by their sponsors on their behalf. A baptized person of whatever age is one who has left the World to follow Jesus, and who now belongs to the Kingdom of God. That is why it is so important that children baptized as infants be raised to become dedicated mature disciples. The temptation to baptize indiscriminately, regardless of the faith commitment of the parents or the actual chances of the infant being brought up as a true disciple of Jesus, should be resisted. Otherwise, we misunderstand the nature of baptism, and consequently, of the nature of Christian faith, and of the Church.

Conclusion

As Orthodox Christians we confess, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One in essence and undivided.” We believe that this is the same God who created the world and human beings and who continues to care for all that He has created; that made Himself known in a personal and immediate way to his disciples in the man Jesus Christ; and whose Spirit, poured out on the disciples at Pentecost, enlivens and renews all those who come to him in faith, through the sacrament of Baptism. Having become children of the light (Eph 5:8): participants by grace in the holiness of the undivided Trinity, in baptism we take up the cross and follow (Luke 9:23; Mark 10:21) trusting in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to perfect the work that has been begun in us.

Chapter 7 The Scriptures in the Orthodox Church

Every Divine Liturgy includes scripture readings, specifically the Epistle and Gospel readings of the day. Immediately prior to the reading of the Epistle, there is a short verse called the Prokeimenon, which is chanted several times with verses in between. The word in Greek means “that which precedes” and introduces the scripture reading. The Prokeimena are taken from the Octoechos, the book of the eight tones, using the particular tone of the day or week. Major feast days also have their own Prokeimena. The verse of the Prokeimenon is usually taken from the Psalms, such as, “Pray and make your vows before the Lord our God” (Psalm 76:11).

After the prokeimenon is chanted, the Epistle reading is read. The choice of epistle reading is fixed by the lectionary, which is a book that contains scripture readings appointed for Christian worship on a given day or feast day. The tradition of having appointed readings on a given day has its origin in the Jewish faith, where Torah readings for various occasions was contained in the Mishnah, which dates from about the 3rd century B.C. The epistle and gospel readings use a one-year lectionary cycle, which is different from other Christian traditions, which may use a two-year or a three-year cycle. Most Orthodox lectionaries include an epistle and a gospel reading for each day. The importance of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, cannot be overstated. This idea will be explored in the rest of this chapter.

The Centrality of the Scriptures

The Bible is, after the Cross, the most notable symbol of the Christian Faith—thus in modern western lands, oaths in court were always taken by placing one’s hand upon the Bible and then swearing by it that one would tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Swearing upon a Bible meant swearing by the Christian God. Trampling upon a Bible or burning it therefore did not denote simply disdain for a book, but one’s emphatic rejection of Christianity and the Church which proclaimed and preserved it. To burn a Bible was not merely burning a book which one intensely disliked; it was an act of iconoclasm, for the Bible functioned as an icon of the entire Christian Faith. That is why in Orthodox icons, bishops are depicted holding a book—the Gospel book from which they preached, for the task of bishops was to teach the Scriptures, and the Gospels form the crown of the Scriptures.

The Scriptures are at the heart of Orthodox Tradition and are central to the Orthodox faith. Concerning their importance, St. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote,

In regard to the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not the least part may be handed on without the holy Scriptures. Do not be led astray by winning words and clever arguments. Do not give ready belief unless you receive from the holy Scriptures the

proof of the things which I announce. The salvation in which we believe is proved not from clever reasoning, but from the holy Scriptures.¹

Or, more concisely, “The Bible is the main written source of divine doctrine since God Himself inspired it by His Holy Spirit.”²

The Creation of the Old Testament

Strictly speaking, the Bible is not one book, but many—not a single volume, but a library. The English word “Bible” comes from the Greek *ta biblia*—“the books” (plural). In this library we find books dating from before Christ (the Old Testament) and after Christ (the New Testament).



The writing, editing, and collecting of the Old Testament took place over many years. The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew, though some sections were written in Aramaic. It tells the epic story of Israel as the People of God, from the time of Abraham their forefather to the time of Christ. After a prologue which sets the story of Abraham and his descendants in a cosmic setting (Gen 1–11), the epic begins by narrating the call of Abraham and the story of the patriarchs, his sons Isaac and Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons, the progenitors of the nation of Israel. The story continues throughout the Pentateuch,³ narrating Israel’s sojourn and slavery in Egypt and their liberation by the mighty

hand of God, and the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. These five books end with Israel poised to enter the Promised Land.

The epic continues with the books of Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings,⁴ which narrate the story of Israel’s conquest and dwelling in the Promised Land, their apostasy, and final exile. The books of the prophets⁵ contain God’s word to Israel throughout this time, when He rebuked them for their apostasy and vainly tried to call them back to repentance and security. The prophetic books contain promises of judgment upon Israel for their impenitent idolatry; but also promises of God’s gracious restoration of Israel return to the Promised Land after their repentance. During this time sacred literature was produced by David, Solomon, and others, containing an outpouring of praise, penitence, and lament (the Psalms), as well as treatises containing a call to wisdom (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon). After the exile and Israel’s

¹ St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.17.

² Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith, Volume 1* (New York: Orthodox Church in America, 1981), 15.

³ The Pentateuch means the first five books, also called the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

⁴ In the LXX, 1–4 Kingdoms.

⁵ The books of the prophets include the 5 major prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and 12 minor prophets.

return to the Promised Land, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah narrate the story of their national life after the return. Other prophets continued to exhort Israel to faithfulness and courage during this difficult time (e.g., Habakkuk, Zechariah, and Malachi).⁶

The book of the prophet Malachi was written about 400 B.C., but of course literary production among the Chosen People did not cease at that time. Other works continued to be produced, such as 1 Esdras, Judith, Tobit, Sirach,⁷ and the pseudonymous Wisdom of Solomon. The stories of the adventures of the Maccabees also were written in several books. All of this literature formed the sacred inheritance of the people of God as they waited for the fulfillment of all that their prophets had promised, which they believed would be brought to fruition with the coming of the promised Davidic king who was to rule over a glorified nation—the Messiah.

The Place of the Old Testament in Jewish Life

This vast body of sacred literature assumed a renewed importance after the return from exile, when many scholars believe the books were edited and collected. It was then that Israel became truly the People of the Book and began to pore over their collected sacred literature with fervent interest and hope. These writings became not just a disparate group of scrolls from their long history, but a sacred category, “the Holy Scriptures.” During the time of Christ, the main religious function of the synagogue was to read, pore over, and interpret this literature, now collectively referred to as the Torah, since it was believed to be imbued with the same authority as found in the original revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Israel recognized this literature as not simply human literature and the works of men, but as the work of the Spirit of God, who lived among the people of Israel and inspired their prophets. Pious Jews therefore read and meditated on this Law, committing it to memory, and letting it fill the heart. Faithfulness to the Law was the key to a life of piety pleasing to God, who gave the Law to Israel. A true Jew not only visited the Temple and offered sacrifice there; he also mediated day and night upon the Law of God. This Law became all the more important as Israel was dispersed throughout the Roman world: a Jew living far from the Holy Land might not often visit the Temple, but he could always meditate and pore over the Law in the synagogue, however far from the Holy Land he might live. The Scriptures remained at the heart of his faith and life.

The Creation of the New Testament

The New Testament books were written in considerably less time than the books of the Old Testament. They were all written in Greek by the apostles of the first generation. Other books purporting to be written by the apostles but in fact were written by others in the second century were quickly recognized as non-apostolic and as the products of heretical groups living on the fringes of the apostolic church. These later books (such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of Judas*) were never seriously considered

⁶ Many scholars date the Book of Daniel to this time, others date it in the time of the Exile.

⁷ Sometimes called “Ecclesiasticus” because of its popularity in the Church, the *ekklesia*.

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by the Church as legitimately apostolic or true, or as possible candidates for reading in the liturgical assembly. These latter books were not so much “lost Gospels” (as is sometimes claimed), but “rejected Gospels,” for the Church had little trouble discerning their spurious nature.

The core of the New Testament collection was quickly recognized by the Church as belonging to its Tradition—i.e., the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; and the letters of Paul. Other New Testament books took longer to gain universal acceptance—books like 2 Peter and the Revelation. But by the end of the 4th century, the Church by and large had reached a settled consensus about the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as we now have them.



This consensus was all the more secure because it was not the result of a single council or gathering of bishops, but the slow and evolving consensus reached gradually by everyone over space and time. For there was then no real method of enforcement of a settled and definitive list or canon; each bishop, as head of the church in his own city or village, decided for himself what would or would not be read at the liturgical assembly on Sunday. If a bishop decided to read (for example) the *Apocalypse of Peter* at the Liturgy, there was little that the bishop of the next village, who rejected the *Apocalypse of Peter*, could do about it, apart from remonstrating with his neighbour and saying he thought that his decision was wrong. And bishops did remonstrate and discuss and talk, and eventually a solid consensus emerged. This consensus was not the result of any single gathering (which conceivably could err), but the result of years and decades of discernment and debate—and therefore much more likely to represent a true consensus of the entire Church.

The Authority of the Scriptures

The Church inherited from Israel their reverence for the Hebrew Scriptures and belief in its divine inspiration and in its abiding centrality and importance. This reverence for the Scriptures and belief in their divine reliability to teach truth is reflected in many New Testament passages. Thus, Christ says, “Assuredly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass away from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matt 5:18). The word here rendered “a jot” (or “iota,” the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet) refers to the Hebrew letter *yod*, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The word here rendered “tittle” is the Greek *keraiia*, a “horn,” which refers to the smallest stroke of the alphabet, a mark which changes one letter to another (in English, the equivalent would be crossing a letter “l” to change it to a letter “t”). Christ here therefore teaches that the Scriptures were authoritative down to the smallest part.

In John 10:35, Christ said in passing that “the Scripture cannot be broken,” meaning that it is reliable in its entirety and cannot be false in what it teaches. In 2 Timothy 3:16 St.

Paul wrote that, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God.” The words here rendered “given by inspiration” is the Greek word *theopneustos*—literally “God-breathed.” The image is one of God breathing out the words of Scripture from his own mouth. Paul’s understanding of the authority of Scripture is echoed by Peter, who wrote regarding the prophetic scriptures that “men spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21). The Jewish conviction that their sacred ancestral literature was the work of God thus found abundant confirmation in the words of Christ and in the writings of the apostles.

It also found abundant confirmation in the early Church. All of the Fathers—without exception—believed that the Scriptures (which now included the writings of the apostles—i.e., the New Testament) were ultimately the work of the Spirit of God and thus were completely reliable and true. As such, the scriptures read in the Church formed the *norma normata*, the standard by which all truth claims were to be judged. The words of other men might err and need to be judged by others, but the words of Scripture stood above such earthly tribunals. They represented the words of God Himself, given by the Holy Spirit to men.

Thus St. Justin Martyr wrote,

Neither by nature nor by human reasoning is it possible for men to know things so great and so divine, but such knowledge can be had only as a gift, which in this case descended from above upon the holy men, presenting themselves in a pure manner to the operation of the divine Spirit, so that the divine plectrum⁸ Himself, descending from heaven and using righteous men as an instrument like a harp or a lyre, might reveal to us the knowledge of things divine and heavenly.⁹

St. Augustine held the same view of Scripture’s authority. He wrote,

I have learned to hold those books alone of the Scriptures that are now called canonical in such reverence and honor that I do most firmly believe that none of their authors has erred in anything that he has written therein. If I find anything in those writings which seems to be contrary to the truth, I presume that either the codex is inaccurate, or the translator has not followed what was said, or I have not properly understood it.¹⁰

In summary, the Scriptures, as the written Word of God, are therefore somewhat like the incarnate Word of God—both are 100% divine and 100% human, and both entirely without sin or error.

What Authority is not

The authoritative nature of the Scriptures as the Word of God does not mean, however, that the words of Scripture were mechanically dictated by God to the human writers, so that these writers were simply passive instruments or stenographers. The Scriptures are

⁸ A plectrum was the pick used in playing a stringed instrument such as a harp or lyre.

⁹ St. Justin Martyr, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, chapter 8.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *Letter to Jerome*, 82.1.3.

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not a kind of “automatic writing” wherein God guided the hands of the biblical authors and they simply transcribed what was given them. Rather God used the insights, gifts, literary styles, and aims of the biblical writers for his purposes, so that the final product of their work was the true Word of God. The result is that the Word of God, entirely reliable in all that it means to teach, and completely without error. But it is also completely a work of its time, partaking of the culture and presuppositions of those to whom it was first addressed, that it might be fully understood by them.

This authoritative nature of Scripture does not mean that the cosmology or science contained within it partakes of this authority. The Scriptures authoritatively teach exactly and precisely what God intended them to teach, giving this teaching in the cultural and scientific idiom of that time. It was never intended to correct the cosmology or science of its day. Thus, for example, the ancients believed that the sun revolved around the earth, and the Scriptures are not concerned to correct this view, or teach the science discovered since the days of Galileo. The scriptural statements which speak of the sun moving around the earth (e.g., Josh 10:12-13; Psalm 18(19):5-6) must be understood as ancient poetry, a cultural condescension to the science of the day.

We must similarly regard statements in the Scriptures about the sky being solid (Gen 1:6-7; Job 37:18). The ancients believed that the sky was solid and that it kept the celestial sea above from falling upon the earth beneath, and the Scriptures reflect such a view. This does not mean that the Scriptures are in error, but only that they were not given to teach science. The Fathers therefore were not wedded to the science of the day, nor did they read the Scriptures as a textbook of science. They regarded the Scriptures as containing what would “be of use to us for our salvation.”

The Old Testament Canon

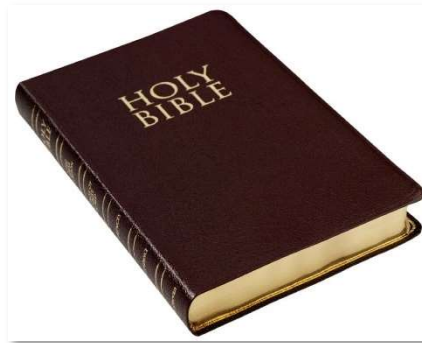
A quick comparison of the list of Old Testament books considered canonical¹¹ in the early Church and those considered canonical in modern Protestant churches will reveal some discrepancy. This has led some people to speak of “the Palestinian canon” (a shorter list of books considered canonical by the Jews of Palestine) and also “the Alexandrian canon” (a longer list of books considered canonical by the Jews of Alexandria), and to further assert that the early Christian Church opted for the longer Alexandrian canon. This handy shorthand, however, obscures some of the historical complexities of the question. One early list of authoritatively canonical Old Testament books was reported by Eusebius of Caesarea, in his *Church History*. He reports that Origen wrote: “There are twenty-two canonical books according to the Hebrew tradition, the same as the number of letters in their alphabet.”¹²

¹¹ Canonical means according to ecclesiastical norms determined collectively by the bishops and typically in a council. In this case, the canonical books of the bible are the list of those books the Church considers part of its bible.

¹² Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, 6, 25.1-2.

Over the course the 4th and 5th centuries, theologians and pastors such as St. Athanasius, St. Epiphanius, St. Gregory Nazianzus, St. Hilary of Poitiers, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine detailed their own lists of which books which they believed to be canonical. However, each list contained small variations and generally included between 22 and 24 books. For example, the St. Epiphanius excluded Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, but St. Gregory Nazianzus excluded those two plus Esther, Tobit, Judith, and Maccabees. Often books such as Sirach, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas were recommended as useful for the edification of the people but were not considered to be canonical. In addition, various canons of councils, such as Canon 85 of the Apostolic Canons (4th c.), Canon 60 of the Council of Laodicea (4th c.), and the Council of Carthage (5th c.) approved canonical lists that were determined by the bishops in attendance.

What are we to make of all this? The main concern of the Church, apparently, was not to produce a comprehensive and authoritative list for its reading members, but to exclude from their literary diet books that were harmful and heretical. Eusebius, for example, had three lists: books clearly canonical, books that were not canonical but still should be read, and books that clearly ought *not* to be read by the faithful.



In general, therefore, one might sum up the patristic approach to the Old Testament canon by saying that in general they recognized a more limited Hebrew canon, but still wanted to include other books as well. As one scholar said, “The church Fathers did not treat as canonical what they found in the Septuagint; what they treated as canonical came into the Septuagint.”¹³ The contents of the LXX have always been elusive, but it is likely that the Greek Bible used by the Christians included writings that were a part of this collection from the earliest Christian community, before their separation from Judaism in the first century A.D. “There is no evidence that their OT Scripture collection got bigger with time.”¹⁴

In other words, the Church always valued the larger literary corpus of Israel, even when it defined its own canon in terms of the shorter Hebrew canon, and it found a way to include the extra books in its liturgical diet. Presently the canon of the Orthodox Church includes the larger collection, including what is called the Apocrypha.¹⁵ In 1950, the Greek Church officially authorized this as its canon, including 2 Ezra (known as 2 Esdras in some English translations) and 3 Maccabees, with 4 Maccabees placed in an

¹³ Franz Jozef Stendebach, “The Old Testament Canon in the Catholic Church,” in Siegfried Meurer, ed., *The Apocrypha in Ecumenical Perspective*, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1991).

¹⁴ Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon, Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007) 206.

¹⁵ Or, by the Orthodox, the “anaginoskomena”—the books “that may be read” (from the Greek word *anaginosko*, to read).

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appendix. In 1956, the Russian Church authorized the same list but omitted 2 Esdras and 4 Maccabees.¹⁶

The issue of canon was therefore obviously not as crucial an issue for them as it later became at the time of the Reformation. The Reformers of the sixteenth century made a point of exalting the Scriptures as the sole authority in the Church (the principle of *sola scriptura*), and so not unsurprisingly, they needed a complete list of which books constituted scripture. The Fathers of the Church never considered Scripture to be the sole authority in the Church, and so for them the issue of a comprehensive canon was not as important. The issue was not one of inspiration, but fitness for liturgical reading in the liturgical assembly.

Christology

The issue for the Church regarding whether a book should be included on its canonical list was Christological: the Church did not ask “Is this book inspired?” but rather “Does this book reveal Jesus Christ?” In the liturgical assembly, the Church encountered Christ in both Word and Sacrament, and the books read at this assembly must promote this encounter. Christ, by accepting the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44-47) set his seal upon them, so that all these books somehow revealed him. The books of the New Testament also revealed him, since they were written by his apostles. But the books produced by the Gnostic groups of the second century, books like the *Gospel of Judas*, did *not* reveal him. Rather they offered a rival Christ, another Jesus (2 Cor 11:4), a Christ differing from the Christ preached by the apostles and worshipped in the churches. These books were therefore rejected as books which might be read in the liturgical assembly, for they were alien to the Church’s Tradition and did not reveal the Christ who manifested Himself in the Eucharist.

The Place of the Septuagint

The Septuagint (also referred to as “The Seventy” or numerically “LXX”) is the term given to the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek during the 3rd century B.C. The project took decades and was accomplished by several different translators. The project was somewhat controversial (could the words of God *be* translated? Would they not inevitably suffer a reduction of meaning in translation?), and stories were told of how God Himself helped the translators, so that Jews might read the new Greek version with confidence that it was as inspired as the original. The story goes that seventy-two Jews, six from every tribe,¹⁷ were recruited by Ptolemy II in Egypt for the purpose of producing a translation of the Law for use in his library in Alexandria. A later version of the story reports that the translators were sequestered in different rooms throughout the time of their work, and when the final product was examined after seventy-two days, it

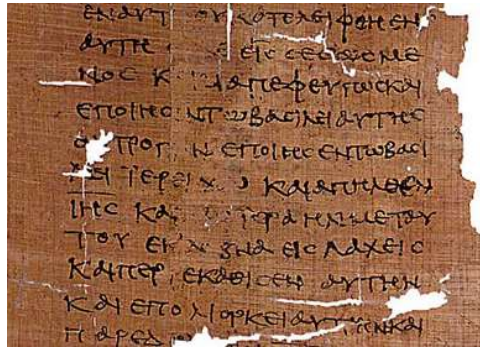
¹⁶ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, 210.

¹⁷ The change from seventy-two to seventy in the title “Septuagint” probably reflects a reference to the seventy elders who helped Moses and who received the Holy Spirit to equip them for their task (see Numbers 11).

was found that miraculously everyone had produced an identical translation! This legend was used to promote the new translation as one having divine approval.

The quality of translation within the entire Septuagint project varies considerably. The translation of some biblical books is very literal, while the translation of other books is loose and periphrastic. The lengths of the books differs from the present Hebrew version, sometimes dramatically: the book of Esther has an extra 107 verses, the book of Daniel three entire extra supplements, the book of Job is about one-sixth shorter in length, and the book of Jeremiah is about one-eighth shorter, with the material greatly transposed in order.¹⁸ Moreover, the translation of the book of Daniel produced such a garbled text that it was later rejected by the Church and was replaced with a translation by the second century Jewish translator Theodotion.

Since we do not possess the original Hebrew text from which the LXX translators were working, it is difficult to determine how accurate the translation is. Sometimes the current Hebrew text (the so-called “Masoretic” text) represents the original more accurately; sometimes the LXX preserves a more accurate original reading. This is most likely due to the variety of LXX translators.



Sometimes, the LXX version is at variance with citations of the Old Testament by New Testament writers. For example, Matthew’s Gospel cites a prophecy from Hosea 11 thus: “Out of Egypt I called *my son*,” and interprets this as a prophecy of God calling the Christ child home from Egypt after the flight from Herod (Matt 2:15). In the LXX this Christological reference vanishes, for it reads, “Because Israel was an infant, and I loved him and out of Egypt I called back *his children*.”

Other LXX translations were clearly motivated by a concern to clean up the Hebrew theologically and not simply to translate it accurately. Thus, for example, in Exodus 3:6 the Hebrew reads, “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid *to look at God*.”¹⁹ The author obviously felt this was theologically problematic, for it seemed to teach that one could see the invisible God. He therefore rendered it, “Moses turned his face away, for he was afraid *to look down before God*.”

Sometimes the alterations from the Hebrew were dictated by delicacy, and not theology. In the Hebrew version, Proverbs 5:15f dissuades husbands from marital infidelity with the exhortation to “drink water from your own cistern...Let her [i.e., your wife’s] breasts [Hebrew *dad*] satisfy you at all times; be intoxicated always with her love.”²⁰ This was a bit much for the Septuagint author, so that it became the much tamer and more sanitized, “Drink water from your vessels...Let her be considered your very own and be

¹⁸ Bruce Metzger, *The Bible in Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 17–18.

¹⁹ Revised Standard Version (RSV) translation.

²⁰ New American Standard Bible (NASB) translation.

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with you on every occasion, for while indulging in her love you will be increased immeasurably.”

Nonetheless, most of the time when the New Testament writers quote from the Old Testament, they cite the Septuagint text, and the Church used the Septuagint text when it launched out into the Gentile world to preach the Gospel to all nations. It is not hard to see why: at that time, Greek was the international *lingua franca*, understood by almost everyone. The Church therefore needed a Greek version of the Old Testament Scriptures for its use among the nations, and the Septuagint was ready at hand. In this sense, the Septuagint became the Old Testament of the early Church.

The average person in the Mediterranean world could not read Hebrew, and in fact most Christians of that time reading the Septuagint were unaware of the differences between the Septuagint and the Hebrew, and it is not quite clear they would have cared supremely even if they were aware. Scholars like Origen and Jerome knew of the difference and tried to grapple with it as best they could. It is significant that when Jerome came to produce his own version, he consulted and worked from the Hebrew, calling it “the Hebrew truth” and did not simply work from the Septuagint. The statement therefore that “the Septuagint is the Old Testament of the early Church” is true *historically*, but not *prescriptively*. It accurately tells us what the Church *did*, but not necessarily what we should do *now* that we have more available resources.

The Scriptures in the Liturgy of the Church

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of the Scriptures in the liturgical life of the Church. Since the Church inherited much of its liturgical praxis from Judaism, the reading of the scriptures has been central to its worship from the earliest period, just as it was central to the worship of the synagogue.

This is clear from the description of Christian worship which St. Justin Martyr offers the Roman public in his second-century *Apology*. In that work, Justin is concerned to clear the Christians of the often-levelled charges of gross indecency (fueled by rumors of Christians exchanging “the kiss” between “the brothers and the sisters”), and of cannibalism (fueled by rumors of Christians “eating the Body and the Blood” of Christ). He therefore took pains to explain what Christians actually did (and did not do) at their services.

He begins his description of the Sunday service by saying, “On the day called ‘Sunday’ all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts us to imitate these good things.”²¹ From this, we see that a fixed lectionary had not yet been produced in the mid-second century, and also that the readings from the New Testament (the “memoirs

²¹ St. Justin Martyr, *Apology*, chapter 67.

of the apostles”) and the Old Testament (“the writings of the prophets”) took some time. This was followed by the sermon of the bishop (“the president”).

This emphasis on reading scripture as an invariable feature of Christian worship continues in the Orthodox Church to this day. Much of the Divine Liturgy consists entirely of scripture, including the three antiphons (from the Psalms and the Beatitudes in the Slavic tradition), the prokeimenon (which introduces the theme of the feast day or the reading), the Epistle, the Gospel, and the communion hymn. Even its prayers are suffused with scriptural references and contain many allusions and quotes from scripture. The Psalter in particular finds pride of place in all the Church’s services. Psalms are chanted in profusion at Vespers and Matins, and Old Testament lessons are read during Vespers at Great Feasts, such as Palm Sunday or the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. Many of the Church’s festal hymns are simply elaborations of the scriptural stories themselves, so that the scriptural narrative is constantly placed before the worshipping faithful.

The reading of the Scripture at each celebration of the Eucharist is an essential element. Without the combination of both Word and Sacrament, of the Scripture and the Eucharistic Chalice, the manifested fullness of the Liturgy would be impaired. Separating the Word from the Sacrament so that each becomes a separate “subject” and object of study, is harmful to the life of the Church. As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann says, “The Church’s essence as the incarnation of the Word is realized precisely in the unbreakable link between the word and the sacrament. ...The word presupposes the sacrament as its fulfillment, for in the sacrament, Christ the Word becomes our life.”²²



Thus, the reading of the Scriptures at the liturgical gathering prepares us for and leads us to the Chalice. In both Word and Sacrament, we meet Christ, who works in our hearts to transform us. That is why we speak to him just before we partake of the word of the Gospel and of the Chalice: before the Gospel is chanted by the deacon at the Divine Liturgy, we speak to Christ, crying out, “Glory to You, O Lord, glory to You!” And just before we approach His Chalice, we also speak to him, saying, “I believe, O Lord, I confess, that You are truly the Christ, the Son of the living God. I believe that this is truly Your own most pure Body, and this is truly Your own precious Blood.” In both Word and Sacrament, we encounter Christ Himself who speaks to us and gives Himself as food to the faithful. The scriptural word forms an essential part of this total eucharistic gift.

²² Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1987), 68.

The Old Testament as a Revelation of Christ

It is a mistake to read the Old Testament as the story of Israel and the New Testament as the story of the Church, considering the first primarily as a Jewish book and the latter as a Christian book. In reality, both the Old and New Testaments reveal Jesus Christ, but with this difference: the Old Testament looks *forward* to Christ, whereas the New Testament looks *back* to him. In the former, Christ is foreshadowed; in the latter, He is remembered. In both, He is the main subject and the key to understanding the entirety of the Scriptures. The Old Testament, viewed apart from the life of Jesus of Nazareth, simply ends, cut off on a note of fervent expectation and hopeful waiting with the promised hope unfulfilled.

The Old Testament story narrates the history of Abraham and his descendants from their sojourn in Egypt, their time in the Promised Land, and their apostasy and subsequent exile. It then describes their return to the Promised Land, where they waited for the glory and restoration they were promised by the prophets. That glory never came. God promised through the prophets that they would not only return to Palestine, but that He would return to his Temple and exalt them to glory in the world so that the entire world would come to worship the God of Israel. He promised that the latter splendor of the Temple would be greater than the former splendor (Hag 2:9), for He promised that He would return to the Temple and would let his glory be seen by all the world. But the promised glorious restoration never came.

The first Christians shared this perplexity, and this fevered waiting. But when God raised Jesus from the dead and glorified him, this put the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures in a new light. The promises for glory were to be fulfilled not in an exalted *nation*, but in an exalted *Messiah*. Jesus explained that the prophetic promises for restoration, glory, divine return to the Temple, and the worldwide turning of the nations to Israel's God were to be fulfilled *in him* (Luke 24:44-47). He was the key that unlocked and solved all the puzzles in the Hebrew Scriptures and brought them all together in a single coherent narrative. Christian exegesis was therefore not a matter of taking a verse or two from the Old Testament out of context and applying it to Jesus. It involved seeing how his life, when laid over the Hebrew Scriptures like a grid, made it all finally make sense.

The Fathers were emphatic and unanimous about this. Thus St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote early in the second century, "The beloved prophets had a message pointing to him, but the Gospel is the imperishable fulfillment."²³ St. Epiphanius wrote in the fourth century, "All that God had anywhere ordained by the Law, whether in times, in figures, in revelations of future good things, was clarified when our Lord Jesus Christ came and showed its fulfillment in the Gospel."²⁴ And thus St. Leo wrote in the fifth century, "Christ is the end of the Law, not by annulling, but by fulfilling what is signified."²⁵

²³ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, 9.1.

²⁴ St. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 33.9.

²⁵ St. Leo, *Sermon* 63.5.

The Church values the Old Testament Scriptures because in them it finds Christ revealed. It reads the Old Testament using the prophetic tools of allegory and typology; it reads the New Testament as history.²⁶ In both cases, the Church's aim is to recognize the Lord Jesus in the pages of the sacred texts.

Interpreting the Scriptures

The question arises as to how one interprets the Scriptures. The Scriptures are not a single volume (like the book *War and Peace*), but a library. Determining the meaning and message of a single volume is a straightforward task, but determining the overarching message of many various books such as one finds in a library is not. For this task, one needs an interpretive lens to discern its central message.

It is just here that problems arise with the modern use of the Reformation slogan *sola Scriptura*, or “the scriptures alone.” Many modern Evangelical Protestants use this slogan to mean not only that the Scriptures are the sole authority for Christian doctrine and life, but also (which is somewhat necessary) that the overarching message of the Bible is perfectly clear to any honest Christian reader, both in its general message and its finer doctrinal details. The colorful experience of Church history since the time of the Reformation with its increasing multiplication of denominations shows that this is not so. It is sadly true that intelligent and pious men can and have disagreed about the meaning of the sacred text, not just in questions of minute detail, but in basic questions as well. This includes very important questions such as, “What must we do to be saved? What does the Eucharist mean? How often should it be celebrated? What does baptism mean? How should it be administered? May infants be baptized? May we pray for the dead? Should we pray to the saints? What is the place of Mary in the life of a Christian? How should the church be governed?” All find diverse and contradictory answers. Obviously, the Scriptures are not perfectly clear when read divorced from church history.

That is why the Orthodox Church refuses to divorce scripture from its own history—or, in other words, to rip scripture away from its overarching Tradition. Tradition, for the Orthodox, is not another source of truth along with Scripture, much less a rival source. Tradition is the entire inheritance given by Christ and his apostles. It is Tradition that allows us to come to the true meaning of the Scriptures.

The word “tradition” in Greek is *paradosis*. It is the noun form of the verb *paradidomi*, meaning “to hand over.” Tradition is therefore a teaching handed over from someone else, like a baton handed over in a relay race. Whether or not tradition is a good thing depends entirely upon what is handed over—the Jewish tradition of the elders and the human teaching received by Gnostic groups were not good things, and so were censured by Christ and St. Paul (Mark 7:8-9, Col 2:8). The teaching of the apostles was a good thing, and so St. Paul praises his converts for keeping it (1 Cor 11:2, 2 Thess 2:15). We

²⁶ The Gnostics used allegory in reading the New Testament texts also, since they had little or no interest in the historical Jesus. The Church (with very few exceptions) resisted the temptation to read the New Testament with the same tools of allegory with which it read the Old Testament.

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note in this last text that St. Paul includes his writing under the heading of “the traditions which you were taught” (1 Thess). For the apostles, Tradition includes everything they handed on to the church, including their letters. The New Testament, therefore, is part of this total Tradition.

This means that Scripture cannot be read apart from the Tradition. What the apostles preached “by word,” i.e., verbally (2 Thess 2:15), they also wrote about, so that oral tradition and written tradition must be consistent with each other. Thus, any interpretation of Scripture which contradicts the received oral tradition of the Church cannot be true. Oral and written tradition will be the same since both came from the same apostolic source.

The Place of the Fathers

The question arises, however, “Where can one find this apostolic Tradition in the history of the Church?” The answer: in the consensus of the Church Fathers.²⁷ The Fathers were a varied lot, disagreeing with each other over certain points. They did not all march in lockstep but expressed the sort of variety one might expect to find in men separated from one another by language, time, and geography. For this reason alone, we are not bound by the details of their exegesis of a text, for they differed among themselves in matters of minute exegesis.



But this diversity among them makes their underlying unity shine even more brilliantly, in the same way as the tremendous liturgical diversity of the church at that time made their underlying unity of faith even more impressive. The Fathers are not guaranteed to be authoritative guides, each having some type of hotline to God, verifying the truth of their writings—for how then could we explain their (at times) spirited disagreements? They are authoritative because their underlying core unity witnesses to the apostolic faith diffused throughout the world.

The Fathers share this core unity, sometimes called “the rule of faith,” because they received it from the apostles. In the Creed we confess belief not in “one, holy, catholic, and *patristic* church,” but in “one, holy, catholic, and *apostolic* church.” The Fathers are authoritative because their consensus witnesses to the faith they received from the apostles. The Fathers are the conduit for the apostles’ authority, not the source of that authority itself. In their core consensus, we have access to the apostolic Tradition that they received and preserved.

We thus read scripture as part of a worldwide and inter-generational Church community. The individual Christian will therefore read the Scriptures with humility, preferring the

²⁷ The Church Fathers are the primary spiritual writers, thinkers, and theologians from the post-Apostolic era—classically until the end of the 7th century, but a few extend that range such as St. Gregory Palamas of the 14th c. They wrote about, clarified, and helped to define Orthodox doctrine and the spiritual life.

time-tested Tradition of the Church to his or her own opinions or supposed discoveries. A modern Christian reader should not approach scripture as an isolated individual, however holy and enlightened they may be. Rather, he or she approaches the Scriptures as one treading a large and well-trodden path, following the exegetical signposts and learning from the insights of all who have gone before. In other words, Christians are called to read the Scriptures on their (metaphorical) knees, and over the (historical) shoulders of the Fathers. As Fr Schmemmann wrote, “Any ‘private’ reading of scripture must be rooted in the Church: outside of the mind of the Church it can neither be heard nor truly interpreted.”²⁸

This patristic material is not only available in collections of the Fathers’ writings but is also suffused throughout the liturgical traditions of the Church. The liturgical use that the Church makes of the Scriptures also reflects the mind and conclusions of the Fathers.

That does not mean, however, that new historical tools may not lead to deeper and richer discoveries in the Scriptures. But it does mean that one’s ideas and insights are ultimately offered to the Church to be tested against its collected store of wisdom and the verdicts of others in the community in the time to come. Whether one’s new insights are valuable or not will be proven soon enough. Meanwhile, the modern exegete and theologian will combine both courage and humility in his exegesis, offering insights and submitting to the final ecclesiastical judgment of history.

Reading the Scriptures

In conclusion, one may ask, “How does one read the Scriptures today as a disciple of Jesus?” We offer a few practical suggestions. First, one must read the Scriptures faithfully every day, offering prayer before reading, and taking the time to let the words seep into the heart. The goal of scripture reading is not the only accumulation of knowledge for the head, but also for the healing of the heart and the transformation of one’s life. That is what St. Paul meant when he wrote that scripture was “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). Bible-reading should result in a more peaceful and holy life.

Second, one should read the entirety of the Scriptures, not simply the epistle and gospel for the day. Whether this is done sequentially (by reading the Bible through from Genesis to Revelation) or in some other way (such as reading a chapter of the Old Testament and the New Testament every day) is not important. What matters is opening oneself up to the whole counsel of God.

Third, one may use scholarly aids to enrich one’s devotional reading, such as Bible commentaries, maps, or other scholarly tools. The aim of such tools is to inform oneself

²⁸ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 79.

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of what the Bible meant in its original context. But it should not be allowed to replace a personal application of the sacred text to one's personal life situation.

A final and special word must be said about the Psalter. If the Gospels form the crown of the Scriptures, the Psalter forms its beating heart. Much of the services of the Church consist of the recitation of the Psalter—in the Orthodox Church it is recited in its entirety every week throughout the daily services of Vespers and Matins, having been divided into twenty sections (or “*kathismata*”) for the purpose. In the Psalter we hear the voice of the godly man—praising, pleading, lamenting, raging, ask for pardon. More than that, we hear the voice of Christ, the supremely godly man. As Fr Schmemmann commented, “If all scripture prophesies about Christ, the exceptional significance of the psalms lies in the fact that in them Christ is revealed as though from ‘within’. These are *his* words, *his* prayer.”²⁹ The disciple of Christ will therefore take the Master's words in the psalms and make them his own, praying the psalms and reciting them each day. He will live in the world of the Scriptures, letting them fill his heart and rule his life, to the greater glory of God.

²⁹ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 72.

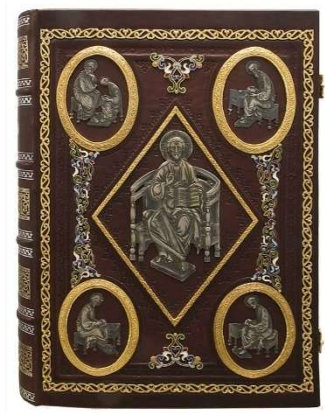
Chapter 8 Meeting Christ, Understanding, and Being Transformed

What is a Gospel?

When we think about “the Gospel” in the Divine Liturgy, we picture it as an event when God’s word is proclaimed from one of the four evangelists so that we meet Christ. Just before we are to hear the Gospel, the priest echoes the words the risen Christ in the midst of his disciples: “Peace be with you” (John 20:26). Thus assured that the LORD is present, we respond, with joy, “and with your spirit!” Our perspective differs from some Protestants, who frequently think of the gospel reading as instruction, and as raw material for the brain and for the preacher’s exposition. And from other Protestants, whose gospel readers instruct the congregation to “listen *for* the word of the LORD,” as though the position of the listener were to discern and judge, searching for something meaningful in a conglomerate of human words. Instead, we Orthodox anticipate the Word heard as something to be joyfully and obediently received, and as accompanied by the living presence of the incarnate Word, God the Son.

Worship, then, draws us into God’s presence, and the Gospel-book is celebrated as the central focus of the “Little Entrance”—a dramatic encounter with the living God in the Liturgy. (Some have wrongly thought that the two “entrances” refer to the emergence of the priest and others from the altar, into the congregation; instead, they are called “entrances” because *we enter* into God’s presence.) Thus, the priest prays on our behalf: “O Master, Lord our God, Who hast appointed in heaven ranks and hosts of Angels and Archangels for the ministry of Thy glory: Cause that with our *entrance* may enter also the holy Angels with us serving Thee, and with us glorifying Thy goodness.” God takes the initiative, speaking to us, and inviting us to approach him more deeply, by means of the Gospel. Even the fact that the Gospel is chanted reminds us of this solemn meeting: this is God’s own “everlasting” or “eternal gospel” (Rev 14:6) and does not require a dramatic performance by an emotive reader, or the critical discernment of the listener, to make its mark.

Because of all this, the reading of the Gospel is an audience with God, for which we stand, as we honor the presence of Christ in our midst. He is with us, speaking divine words. But the Gospel is also written in human words for human ears. Thus, when we hear “the gospel,” or “good news” (Greek, *evangelion*) proclaimed, it is helpful to contemplate the Gospels themselves. What is a gospel, what is its genre, and how does it do its work on the faithful? Which first-century conventions of writing did the four



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evangelists follow, and which did they modify? What expectations should we have of it, as we begin to read and to listen?

Already we are the recipients of significant steps of interpretation that have taken place in the Church long before we hear the words proclaimed. After all, passages have been selected (both as part of the canon of the Bible, and as an item in our lectionaries), and they have been translated from Greek (with the occasional word of Aramaic) into English. But selection and translation only go part-way in making the words plain to us. The homily will also help us to understand, and to respond to the words, as in the days of Nehemiah and Ezra, when the Jewish people returned from their exile and heard God's Word afresh: "So [Ezra and his helpers] read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense and helped [the people] to understand the reading" (Neh 8:8).

The Unique Character of the Gospels

Questions concerning the shape, scope, and purpose of the gospel are actually quite complex, because when we try to compare the four gospels with other kinds of literature, we find a kind of literature that is one of a distinct kind. Whenever we try to understand *any* kind of literature, we compare it with something that we know: if I pull an envelope with a transparent address window out of my mailbox, I anticipate a bill or a check, because I have seen these kinds of things before. The problem is, we can't find pieces exactly like the gospels anywhere else in the ancient or the contemporary world. In fact, some scholars have pointed out that the gospels (like our faith in general) are counter-cultural: while they are *like* some ancient genres, their authors have deliberately rejected the idea that the Roman emperor and his empire were a "gospel," literally, "good news" for the world. The Greek word *evangelion*, "good news," was typically used to promote the coming of the Emperor, as he assumed control of conquered nations. Heralds ran ahead, proclaiming the "gospel" of his arrival! Alexander the Great, for example, considered himself an ambassador for peace and civilization —as good news for the "barbarian" Jewish people – and did not understand why they would not readily adopt the habits of the gymnasium, the theater, and pagan sacrifice!

Many ancient pagan readers, when first encountering a Christian written gospel, or hearing the word during a Christian liturgy, then, would have had certain expectations of the kind of thing he or she was hearing. And they would have had those expectations both fulfilled and shattered. Jesus, in the Gospels, is proclaimed as King, but *not* a king like Caesar. Some might have thought that they were reading a "history" when they saw, as a first item, Matthew's genealogy (Matt 1:1–17), or Luke's own reference to how he did research:

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account,

most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. (Luke 1:1–4)

Still others might have assumed they were reading a *bios* or biography of a hero, especially when noticing Mark’s focus on Jesus and his virtuous death. And a few might have thought in terms of classical poetic drama, as they heard the striking introduction to John’s Gospel. Certainly, there are elements of all these ancient genres (history, ancient biography, drama), especially biography, in our gospels.

The Gospels as Doxology

However, the Gospels do not simply present biographies of Jesus to entertain and edify us, as was the function of ancient *bioi* (“lives” or “biographies”).¹ Rather, we hear from Justin Martyr (see below) that from the very beginning of the Church, the apostles’ memoirs of their Master formed a key part of the worship service. The Gospels, then, were *doxological*, in that they “gave glory” to God, and had their natural home in the liturgy, rather than around the family hearth as a performance, or in the classroom as a lesson. The Gospels go far beyond entertainment, information, or education. They are written, as John explicitly tells us, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:30). They are written, as Matthew implies by his allusions and quotations of the Old Testament, to disclose God’s final act in the long history of Israel (and of the world, as a whole). They are written, as Luke shows at the end of his Gospel, that we might fall down with the early disciples and worship the righteous, crucified, risen, and ascended One (Luke 25:42). They are written, suggests Mark, that we might understand that the true Messiah was one who suffered and died, and showed the whole world, not just the Jewish people, what it really is to be “the Son of God.” (Mark 15:39)

The Unique Message of the Gospels

Mark begins his Gospel in 1:1 by speaking about “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” This seems to be his *title* for his book, and it is clear he expected his reader to understand what he meant. After all, until the Gospels were written, the apostles had verbally proclaimed the “gospel” of Jesus in Christian assemblies, and when they couldn’t be personally present, their “memoirs” about Jesus were read in the worship gatherings. Those who listened expected to hear about what Jesus had done but knew that the response they had should go beyond simply reflecting upon his life, emulating it, and honoring him, as one would after hearing a biography read. To those who were critical of Christianity in the mid-second century, Justin Martyr explains the *liturgical* place of the apostolic witness:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as

¹ Those who are interested in a detailed connection of the gospels to the ancient genre of biography may consider reading the book called *Christobiography Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels*, by Craig S. Keener (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). Though not Orthodox, he has many wise and informative things to say.

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long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.²

Memoires for Our Understanding

The memoirs, then, which came before our gospels, were based on the verbal tradition of the apostles, and were read alongside the Old Testament passages that were used to proclaim Christ at that time, just as Jesus used the witness of the Old Testament to open the minds of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27). Certainly, the early memoirs, and then the four written Gospels *were* interested in history, as were the Law and the Prophets, for God has acted in time and space. However, they are not “histories” in the contemporary sense, for they do not strive for disinterested “reportage.” Instead, they present Jesus as unique— as the culmination of what God had done in Israel and the world and as the beginning of God’s new creation. Even more significantly, they do not simply list Jesus’ activities, but deliberately move to a climax, which is his passion, resurrection, and ascension. Consider how Jesus explained to the two on the road to Emmaus, and then to the apostles as a whole, that the Law, Prophets, and Writings proclaimed his climactic sacrifice:

These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me. And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then he said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:45–47)

Like Jesus’ self-proclamation here, and the subsequent oral apostolic witness (collected in the early memoirs), the gospel accounts have a particular shape and purpose. In Mark, more than 50% of the material is the passion narrative! When St. Paul sums up the “gospel” for the Christians in Rome, he does not emphasize the life and teachings of Jesus (which no doubt the Romans knew) but the Gospel concerning God’s Son, the Messiah, crucified and risen, who is Lord! (Rom 1:3–4). For the earliest Christians, then, the good news was a proclamation of the Messiah who died and who rose again, and who is the divine Lord. They were the first to rejoice, as we do, that “God is the Lord (indeed, the Lord Jesus is God) and has revealed himself to us!” The gospel writers, each in their own way, show how Jesus fulfils God’s purposes for Israel, and the whole world, and how he begins a new chapter in God’s ongoing drama with his people. History and

² Justin, *First Apology*, chapter 67 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff, (T&T Clark: Edinburgh), available at <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01/anf01.viii.ii.lxxvii.html>

theology are brought together, tracing the grand story of his incarnate life among us, with the aim of transforming those of us who hear all these stories. As Fr. Ted Stylianopoulos puts it, “At the transformative level, one has the possibility of being grasped and changed by the power of Christ’s love itself as one fervently embraces the Lord and his words of love in faithful obedience and practice.”³

The Particularity of Each of the Gospels

God’s written Word, the Word that transforms us, is rich and variegated. Many of the larger biblical books contain within them smaller forms—hymns, parables, visions, and so on. This is true of the Gospels as well. As we listen to them, we come to see that each gospel is a kind of *macro-genre*: it includes genealogies, teaching passages, passion narratives, healing and miracle stories about Jesus, apocalyptic discourses, parables that Jesus told, infancy narratives in the case of Matthew and Luke, resurrection appearances, and so on. Papias, who wrote about 125 A.D., is recorded by the later historian Eusebius as quoting a certain elder (presbyter), who passed down a tradition about the purposes of the writer Mark:

*Mark, who was the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not in order, what he heard from Peter that the Lord said and did. For he had not heard the LORD or followed him, but later had followed Peter, who formulated Jesus’ teachings in the form of anecdotes, but not as a finished composition. So, then, Mark did not fail by writing this way certain things as he recalled them, for he had one purpose, not to omit what he heard or falsify anything among these things. These things are reported about Mark.... but about Matthew it has been said that he used testimonies from the first epistle of John and also from that of Peter.*⁴

Mark’s Gospel, the shortest, jumps right to Jesus’ mission, bypassing the nativity stories, and is composed in two great overlapping movements: the first part, from chapters 1 through 8, answers the question “Who is this?” (answer: the Messiah); the second part, from chapters 8 through 16, answers “What kind of Messiah is this?” by insisting that Jesus, the true Messiah, had to suffer and die.

The Evangelist Luke, it seems, was aware that not all the gospels, perhaps including Mark, aspired to present things in strict chronological order, and says that one of his purposes was to research everything thoroughly, and to compose a detailed and “orderly” composition. (Indeed, his is a two-volume work, with the life of Jesus being extended in the Acts of the Apostles, where we see the apostles preaching the Gospel and healing, and the Holy Spirit falling on all believers.) In



³ Fr. Theodore. G. Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross, 1999), 214.

⁴ Eusebius, *Church History*. 3.39.14–15

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contrast to Luke's concentration on ordering all the material he can find, the Evangelist John appears to lift the veil for us so that we can see the spiritual meaning of a *select* number of stories and sayings. So that we would not forget the entire history of God's people, or the blessedness of the fathers and mothers of Israel, the Evangelist Matthew concentrates on the continuity between the stories of the patriarchs, the kings, the exile, and the coming of the Lord. To accept Matthew is to reject the campaign of that ancient heretic Marcion, who said that nothing from the Old Testament had any validity for God's people! It is to remember that God's storehouse has things in it "both old and new" (Matt 13:52), and that a wise householder knows when to pull out and delight in each treasure.

We have a fourfold and complementary witness to the mighty acts of God and should be grateful for the fathers' wisdom in recognizing that we need all four gospels. In the ancient days of the Church, a man called Tatian composed a gospel harmony, called the *Diatessaron* (literally, "through the four"), which attempted to combine the four gospels into a single running narrative. This format may have been more logical but obscured the richness and variety of the four evangelists. It was not this rationalized harmony, but the four gospels, with all their differences and complementarities, that were bequeathed to the Church as the fathers recognized which writings were "canonical"—that is, which truly communicated the canon of truth and faith.

What is the Good News?

So, then, the "gospel" is a proclamation concerning Jesus, Son of God, Lord, who lived and taught, was crucified, arose, and ascended for us. Towards the end of Romans (16:26), the Apostle Paul uses parallelism to speak about "the gospel and the preaching about Jesus Christ;" this could as easily be translated "the gospel, that is, the preaching about Jesus Christ." The "gospel" and the "proclamation," then, are the same thing. Moreover, St. Paul, when his ministry is coming to an end, speaks about his honor in proclaiming "the gospel of the *grace* of God" (Acts 20:24). God's *grace*, or clemency towards us, is seen in the deep visitation of our world by the Son: it is that mighty act which is proclaimed in the good news.

Our Predicament

The proclamation of God's grace, however, assumes that there is something broken in us and in our world that God is being gracious about. The first two chapters of Romans outline our weak and sinful human condition and refer to the general judgment to which we will all be subject (see especially Romans 2:16). Accordingly, John's Gospel speaks of the light shining "in the darkness" (John 1:4), Matthew's Gospel about the need for Messiah to "save his people from their sin" (Matt 2:21), Luke about the pious who were "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38), and Mark leads with John the Baptist proclaiming repentance. Further, Jesus, when he announces the coming of the rule of God (in Himself), issues as his first command: "*Repent* and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). All this assumes that there is a serious problem for the Gospel to speak into. This can be problematic in our own relativistic day: in order to perceive the Gospel as good

news, we cannot be blind to our predicament. Indeed, in the 21st century, it may be necessary to open our own eyes (as well as those of our friends) to “bad news” that we and they have been avoiding, before the good news can be seen in its glory. Our need for salvation is presupposed by the humble plunging of God incarnate into our *fallen* world. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann puts it this way,

[I]t is the Christian gospel that God did not leave man in his exile, in the predicament of confused longing. In this sense of radical unfulfillment, God acted decisively: into the darkness where man was groping towards paradise, he sent light. He did so not as a rescue operation to recover lost man: it was rather for the completing of what he had undertaken from the beginning. God acted so that man might understand who he really was and where his hunger had been driving him... The light God sent was his Son: the same light that had been shining unextinguished in the world's darkness all along, seen now in full brightness.⁵

The Witness of the Gospels

This story, from incarnation through to ascension (with its promise of a second coming), is especially encoded in the four gospels of our New Testament. Other “gospels” vied for attention in the early centuries but were rejected because they did not conform to “the rule of faith” passed down by the apostles and mentioned explicitly by St. Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1:9:4). For example, the so-called *Gospel of Thomas* contained strange ideas about the body, and about our sexuality, exalted esoteric knowledge over faith, and said little or nothing about Jesus’ death and resurrection. The *Protevangelion of James* does not concentrate upon Jesus, but what might have happened prior to his birth, and also was not recognized as canonical.⁶ The fathers recognized our four gospels as canonical because they conformed completely to holy Tradition passed down about Jesus, because they had a close connection to eye-witnesses (though were not all *written* by eye-witnesses), because they focused upon the passion and resurrection of Jesus, and because they were widely read by Christian communities everywhere.

When we study them carefully, we may be amazed both by how and where they overlap, and by how each of them is distinct in its witness. This is true when we look at the actual wording of each account, and also when we look at the selection of events, and how they are ordered. Roughly, we may say that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are most alike (and so they have been called “synoptic,” meaning that we can easily see their connections together “with the eye,” or at a glance), while John is more concentrated, less expansive in what it records, and more explicitly theological than the others. What the synoptics imply about Jesus’ deity, John explores in great depth. In academic circles, much ink has been spilled concerning the differences between John and the synoptics, and the

⁵ Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2018), 26.

⁶ Though recognized as uncanonical the *Protoevangelion of James* includes details concerning the Holy Theotokos that form part of holy Tradition.

differences between the synoptics themselves, resulting in various suggestions as to how they might be related, in terms of *literary* dependency.⁷

Good News for the Churches

On top of this mysterious relationship with each other, it is clear that the gospels were written not simply to *report*, but also to *show how* Jesus' teaching and ministry address *the problems* that the Church (in its various communities) faced and still faces. So then, the evangelists can be seen to select and to shape their stories so that they answer particular questions that their reading community encountered, and which we may also be bothered about in our own day. One clear example is seen in Mark 7, where Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees about his disciples not washing their hands ceremoniously; the gospel (in many versions of Mark 7:19) explicitly applies this to the later controversy in the Church regarding whether one could eat food that was not kosher. Another can be seen in the way that Luke applies Jesus' parable of the two sons (Luke 15:11–31): Jesus no doubt was referring, as he originally told the story in Israel, to the ultra-religious Pharisees over against the more lax Jewish "people of the land;" Luke uses it to suggest that the "younger brother" is the Gentiles, who have not paid attention to the God of Israel.

As a result of this complexity and development, questions have been asked through the ages, and especially in our day: did one or more of the evangelists use other gospels, as well as oral report, lost (to us) writings, as well as eye-witness knowledge, in composing his gospel? How much latitude in writing was expected in a work that at least resembles the ancient biography? What do we do about the fact that John's Gospel seems to present a three-year ministry for Jesus, while the synoptics, which give us many more episodes, seem to imply a one-year ministry? Did Jesus cleanse the Temple at the beginning or end of his ministry, or twice?

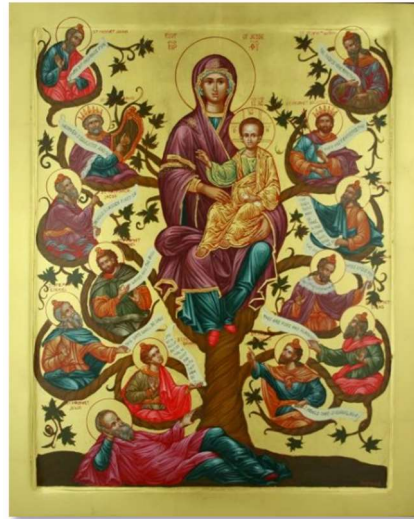
No solution that has been suggested to explain this complex relationship between the gospels answers all the questions that we might have about chronology, or detail: this is because the purpose of the gospels is to show Christ in his glory, and draw us to him, not primarily to give us history lessons. History, nevertheless, remains important to us, because God the Son entered human time and space, and redeemed it. He cares about the body, and not just our souls or spirits. Moreover, the continued use of four various gospels in the Church invites us to ask questions like these. Yet, these concerns should not distract us from the main one, which is the identity of Jesus, and God's claim upon our lives.

⁷ Various theories of literary connection have been suggested through the ages, including the disappearance of certain sources (e.g., "Q," a purported sayings-source, supposed by scholars to have been like the "Gospel" of Thomas). None of these theories is completely satisfactory, and some who write about them seem to imply that the evangelists had the ability to cut-and-paste, as we can with computers.

Components of the Written Gospels Genealogies and Beyond

If the Gospels were merely biographies, all four of them would have to include genealogies, because this is an essential component of the ancient genre. Matthew and Luke do include them, but in such a way as to surprise the reader, and also to intimate the Gospel itself. Non-Orthodox who visit an Orthodox church on the Sunday before Christmas are frequently astonished to see us standing for the long reading of Matthew's genealogy. Many consider the "begats" of both the Old and New Testaments to be mere padding, a context for the real story. But for us, the concrete nature of Jesus' humanity is central—He truly was born of Mary and had a human history!

But there is more to it than that. The genealogy of Matthew contains four little surprises that prefigure the surprise of the Incarnation itself. Amidst the ancient fathers listed, as in a normal genealogy, there are four women: Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba. And what women they are! All four of them were questionable, by standards of Jewish piety—three of them were not even Jews by birth, one of them was a harlot, and two of them were involved (though against their will) in illicit sexual conduct. Yet there they are, in the middle of Jesus' pedigree. Rahab the harlot becomes so important in early Christian preaching that she is mentioned not only here, but also in the epistle to the Hebrews and in the letter of James, as an example of Gentile faith. The implicit lesson signaled by the presence of these four is that Jesus came to fulfill the needs of the wretched and not only the pious, of the Gentiles and not only the Jews, of women as well as men.



A similar theological take-away comes out of Luke's genealogy, which traces backwards from Joseph and Mary—the son of this one, the son of that one—to Adam, "the Son of God" (Luke 3:23–38). Luke's point is that Jesus, though nurtured in Joseph's family, though born of Mary, and though the beneficiary of all the DNA passed on by his ancestors through her, is also "the Son of God"—and in a more direct, personal, and profound way than Adam, the first-created. For He is the Only-begotten Son, and not merely a creature, though He is also fully human.

The fourth Gospel, in recognition of this, goes beyond human genealogy to a time before the beginning, where the evangelist pictures the Word in communion literally "towards the Father," (*pros ton theon*, John 1:1), and with the Spirit.⁸ He is the Son that

⁸ The image is that of the Son with the Holy Spirit leaning in toward the Father to catch his every word and know His every desire. This "leaning in" is most beautifully illustrated in Rublev's famous icon of the Holy Trinity, in which angels, who represent the figures of the Son and Holy Spirit, in full communion with the Father, incline their heads toward him.

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enlightens every human being who comes into the world (John 1:9). And yet, says John, He became man, and dwelt among us, coming to his own “who did not receive Him” (John 1:11). The Son is “in the bosom” of the Father, and “exegetes”⁹ Who the Father is to us (John 1:18).

Birth narratives

John’s Gospel begins pre-creation, and Mark’s Gospel begins as Jesus comes onto the public scene (or just before, with his cousin John), but Matthew and Luke each record something about Jesus’ early years. This was an expected component of the ancient biography, but the Evangelists turn this convention to their own purposes. With Matthew, we sense the continuation of the Old Testament Scriptures, as we hear about dreams in which God’s angel speaks: the Gospel is not something alien to the story of Israel, but its fulfillment.¹⁰ With Luke, Jesus’ early story is told in parallel with that of John, but in such a way as to show his *essential* superiority to his cousin. John may be the greatest prophet born of women (Luke 7:28), but Jesus is the only true Human, the desire of the ages, the fulfillment of hope for Jew and Gentile.

And so, in Matthew’s account, we hear of Joseph’s dilemma, of his dreams, of the star and the magi, of Herod’s machinations, of the slaughter of the innocents, of the flight into Egypt, and of the holy family’s return to Nazareth. The narrative is full of intrigue, suspense, foreshadowing, and human touches. Its ins and outs are punctuated with verses from the Old Testament, as the Evangelist frequently tells us “this was to fulfill what was written....” As hearers, we are well prepared for what will come as we move beyond Jesus’ infancy and childhood—the astonishing teaching and actions of this One who has come as a fulfillment.

Luke’s account is wonderfully artistic, weaving together the infancy stories of Jesus and John as they meet, even in the wombs of their mothers. Instead of actual quotations from the Old Testament, the stories are told so that they recall older stories of Eli, of Hannah, of the prophets and kings. We hear luminous words from the angel Gabriel, from John’s father, from Simeon, from Elizabeth, and from the Theotokos, as Luke pairs male and female witnesses to this One who has come to change the history of humankind. We follow this child through to his twelfth year, where we, with his parents, find him aptly “in the house of [his] Father,” teaching the teachers. John may be great, but early in this gospel, even in the womb, the prophet John acknowledges the presence of One who will increase in all things: like Mary, we treasure these things in our hearts, and prepare to learn more!

Miracles, Healings and Exorcisms

The miracles of Jesus have been, of course, a source of contention since the time of the Enlightenment. The newfound loyalty to the scientific method more and more entailed a

⁹ In this case, the Son *reveals* who the Father is.

¹⁰ Edith M. Humphrey, “God and Angels” in *Jesus among Friends and Enemies*, ed. Chris Keith and Larry W. Hurtado (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 46–49.

skepticism regarding God circumventing the normal sequence of events or chain of causation, leading more and more people from that age on to belittle ancient naïveté. Some who remained attached (at least emotionally) to Christianity discovered inventive ways to retain what they considered a deeper significance to the miracles than their ability to evoke awe and wonder. For example, the miracle of the feeding of the thousands was understood more as a parable of sharing (based on the example of the young boy with his loaves and fishes). In extreme cases (e.g., 19th century philosopher David Strauss), even Jesus' resurrection was transformed into a parable, or "myth" concerning the renewal of humankind in general. More pragmatic minds concentrated mostly on the teaching of Jesus, and its affirmation of the "brotherhood" of all human beings but left the miracles aside as an expression of the first century mindset that more advanced cultures cannot share. (Recently, in a turn away from modernism, there are those who are more open to unusual events than their Enlightenment-formed forbears. However, the "post-modern" imagination would eschew any Christian claim that these signs point specifically to the Triune God, rather than demonstrating the potential of human beings). For those who recite the creeds, however, it is apparent that God-enacted miracles are part and parcel of the gospel, for we celebrate the creation out of nothing, God becoming human, the resurrection of Jesus, and the working of the Holy Spirit, who gives spiritual gifts to the Church. We confess that this same Spirit is "everywhere present and fills all things"—sometimes acting through the chain of ordinary events, but sometimes in astonishing ways.

Miracles

It is helpful for us to consider the different terms used in the Gospels for miracles—mighty acts (Greek, *dynamis*), signs (*semeia*), wonders (*terata*), and "works" (*erga*). Of these, the word "wonder" most easily captures the sense of our word "miracle," which comes from the Latin, and means literally, "something to be wondered, or marveled, about." The paired term "signs and wonders" is found throughout the Old Testament concerning the actions of Almighty God, especially during the time of Pharaoh, and sometimes by the hands of Moses and Aaron. When applied to Jesus' deeds, the implication is clear that this Man is acting as God in the midst of Israel. John uses both the term "sign" for the miracles that he numbers and also the word "work," just as he speaks of the Father and Son working in concert (John 5:17): what Jesus performs is an active sign of his identity and harmony with the Father. But the miracles are not only theological signposts. They act mightily among God's people, as his compassion works for their good. Some of these mighty acts have to do with healing, some with feeding, some with rescuing from the turbulent waves. As we read through the Gospels, we are reminded of the God of Israel and his compassion towards the people, as seen in Psalm 106 (MT 107)—redeeming from trouble, gathering together, feeding them when hungry, bringing the rebellious out of darkness, rescuing from



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prison, nearing the gates of death in illness, saving them from the tempestuous waves, bringing them to a haven, raising up the needy. All these “works and wonders” of God are replicated in the God-Man, by whom, as with the Psalm, we may “consider the steadfast love of the Lord” (106:43). They show *who* He is, but also work for our good.

Exorcisms

In hearing of Jesus’ healings, his exorcisms of the oppressed and possessed, his compassionate feeding of the crowds, his walking on the water, we may *wonder at who He is*: miracles lead us to do theology. But they also lead us to *gratitude* as we consider his great love for us. The way that the Evangelists give shape to these wondrous stories leads us in both directions—to adore God, *and* to give thanks. The stories witness to his identity, and they also are for our benefit, for as Fr. Alexander Schmemmann insists, we are primarily *homo adorans* (Mankind made to worship).¹¹ God’s identity and his generosity are one, and so each miracle narrative indicates the Gospel in a nutshell, nudging us closer to him, when we respond appropriately.

Parables

Miracles do not compel belief, but they beckon and intrigue those who are seeking, and strengthen those of us who already have a small measure of faith. Surprisingly, the power of parables is even more mysterious, something we would not expect from a form of teaching. Why is this so? Jesus, with a few exceptions, performed his miracles before the crowds, but He explained the full meaning of his parables only to the disciples. Indeed, the Gospel of Mark records that Jesus understood his mysterious delivery of the parables as a fulfillment of the uncomfortable words of Isaiah:

But when He was alone, those around Him with the twelve asked Him about the parable. And He said to them, “To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God but to those who are outside, all things come in parables,

*so that Seeing they may see and not perceive,
And hearing they may hear and not understand;
Lest they should turn,
And their sins be forgiven them. (Mark 4:10–12).*

These prophetic words, confirmed by Jesus himself, are difficult both to hear and to comprehend. What we can say is that Jesus indicates it is necessary to be *inside* to really perceive the truth: we must allow God to change our perspective in order for the parables to truly make their mark. For the one who is intent upon keeping Jesus at arm’s length, no true perception can take place. But when we allow the Holy Spirit to draw us *inside*, then understanding, repentance (turning again) and forgiveness follow.

The parables, then, *conceal while they also reveal*. Each of them has the power to send the “hook” of the Holy Spirit into us, allowing God to turn our world inside out, so that we see things as they really are. In this way, each parable acts as a microcosm of the Gospel,

¹¹ Schmemmann, *For the Life*, 22.

reminding us of our state, and why God's visitation is indeed "good news." An excellent example is Jesus' famous story of the "Good Samaritan": Jesus told this parable to one who seemed to be insincere when he asked, "who is my neighbor?" After telling the story, with all its challenges, Jesus turned the tables on the questioner, asking, "Who *proved* to be a neighbor to the man in need?" The answer was shocking: the *Samaritan*, the one considered to be a heretic and ethnic half-breed, played the role of the neighbor, and showed the model for pleasing God. And so it is that Jesus himself, considered impure and religiously questionable among the leaders, displayed in his own life what it is like to be "neighbor" to us, to those who are in spiritual and physical need. It is He who, at personal cost, never passes by on the other side; it is He who pours on medicine so that our wounds are treated; it is He who puts us in the environment where we can be brought to full healing. The parable issues both its personal challenge for us to "be neighbors" to those with whom we are uncomfortable, and its teaching regarding the costly grace of our compassionate God, who has entered so deeply into our fallen world, and trampled down death by death. The wisdom of the fathers reminds us how these stories operate in our hearts and minds on various levels, both theological and moral.

As we hear these stories from Jesus' very own lips, we pray that the Holy Spirit will find a welcome place in each of our hearts, and in our community. Cued by the traditional interpretations of the Church, let us be alert to the various messages that these living words continue to speak, in continuity with how they were heard by the apostles, to whom Jesus originally explained them. This will include being prepared for the "cutting" operation of the word of God, as it pierces our hearts and lays bare our disease so that we can be healed.

Controversies

Some of the parables that Jesus told were highly controversial in their original context: the most obvious example is the parable of the vineyard (Mark 12:1–12; Luke 20:9–19), which Jesus aimed at the Jewish leaders, who perceived that he had "spoken the parable against them" (Mark 12:12; Luke 20:19). But there are also stories *about* Jesus that move towards controversy; in terms of the gospels as a whole, they provide the suspense that direct us towards Jesus' crucifixion. One trap inherent in hearing such stories is that we might see these merely as historical explanations of why Jesus suffered as He did; an even more dangerous trap would be for us to exploit these as a means of distancing ourselves from the human response of some who encounter Jesus and reject God the Son ("This is what *they* did! Isn't that *just terrible!*"). The preface to John's Gospel stands as a constant reminder that the controversy stories speak to the human condition: in that cosmic context, the phrase "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him," can never be restricted to refer to the Jewish or first-century people. Israel's role, instead, is to show up close what we are all like, as though there were a magnifying glass over humanity. And, of course, rejection is not the whole story. After all, the apostles, as Jews, were his own, and "to as many as received him, He gave the power to become the children of God." The controversies, then, show God's *modus operandi* in dealing with us, the intransigent and hostile, and serve to highlight his truth and his mercy.

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The Shape of Controversy

A significant controversy story about Jesus, that reflects the first major controversy faced by the Church after Pentecost, is recorded in Matthew 15:1–11, and more extensively in Mark 7:1–23. We have noted this passage already in terms of its application to later problems, but let's consider here how it unfolds as an argumentative passage. Jesus' debate is held specifically with the Pharisees and is so important that some of the players are scribes (scholars) of Torah who have come down from Jerusalem to check the teaching and practice of this new "rabbi" and his followers. The shape of the controversy is most easily seen in Matthew's briefer narrative: Jesus is challenged by Pharisees and scribes disturbed by religious practice (or lack of it); Jesus answers their question with a question, in typical rabbinic style; He then explores the issue; finally, He caps his critique of the scribes with a prophetic quotation, which serves as a "zinger." This basic shape—challenge, counter-challenge, discussion, and proclamation—is filled out in Mark's version, which also explains, for the purpose of his Gentile readers (including us), some of the particulars of Torah and how it was understood in Jesus' day. Many manuscripts of Mark, as we have seen, also explicitly link this controversy with the problem encountered *later* by the early Church regarding the eating of kosher food (Acts 15): "So He declared all food clean" (7:19).

From Matthew, we derive the drama, and see the Gospel at logger-heads with what had morphed into a cancerous Pharisaic tradition; from Mark, we understand through Jesus' willingness to challenge his contemporaries, both the historical detail and the theological application. In all of this, we see the grace of our LORD matched by his passion for truth. Jesus' harsh words are, paradoxically, born of "love," for he does not want to see those of fragile faith led astray by "blind guides" (Matt 19:14). Controversy here casts light on the truth, and also on the character of the One who is Truth.

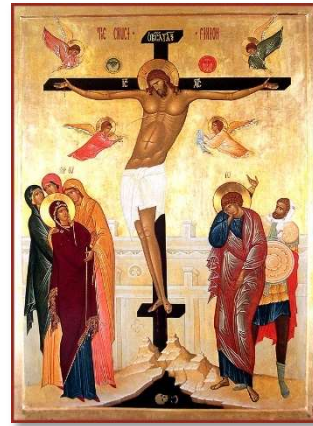
Theological Discourses

There are several passages in the synoptics, and many more in John's Gospel, where we are led to follow Jesus in sustained thinking about deep matters. We may think of his instruction of the apostles in Matt 11:25–30/Luke 10:17–24, in which his intimate relation with the Father, and our privilege in seeing God's climactic visitation of humanity, are explored. Or we may consider the discourses surrounding "light" and "water" in John's Gospel (chapters 4 and 9). These passages direct us to worship the God-Man, and to ponder the wonder of the Trinity, whose Persons are both ordered, and in complete mutuality. In such extended passages, we come to see what Jesus means (at least in part) when He said we are no longer mere servants, but friends of God, knowing what He is doing! The Gospel emerges not simply as a means of escape from sin and death, but a way to true transformation and communion with our Creator.

Narrative of Jesus' Death and Resurrection

For many Christians, this is the very center of the Gospel: they cling to gospel songs like "The Old Rugged Cross," and quote St. Paul's words about our faith being in vain if

Christ is not risen (1 Cor 15:17). For Orthodox, the utter significance of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is seen in our weekly Liturgies, in the ubiquitous cross, in our Holy Week services. But these mighty acts of God find their dramatic and effective place within the larger narrative of salvation history from Adam and Eve through the call of Israel and the Gentiles, within the specific narrative about Jesus from His Incarnation to Ascension (and promised return), and within the cosmic mystery of the Triune God. The way in which each evangelist underscores these larger contexts is something that can be seen in the narratives of Gethsemane, Calvary, and the empty tomb. As we might expect, John's Gospel intimates the larger human context with deft strokes: "Behold the Man!" (John 19:5) takes us back to Adam, as does Jesus' breathing of the Spirit upon the apostles (John 20:22). In the crucifixion of Jesus, we see the true Human Being, dying the only good death, obedient to the Father, humbly giving all for his human brothers and sisters. In His Resurrection comes the power of new life, the first sign of a new creation. All the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion are connected with the history of Israel, for they tell their narratives with an eye to Psalm 21 (22): "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me;" "they wag their heads;" "Let God deliver him;" "for my clothing they cast lots;" "He has done it [i.e., "It is finished"]!" As Fr. Patrick Reardon explains, "Of all the psalms, Psalm 21... is *par excellence* the canticle of the Lord's sufferings and death."¹²



Oddly enough, it is Mark's Gospel, which is usually more reserved about Jesus' divinity than the others, that subtly (and ironically) hints at the universal implications of the crucifixion, when an outsider (a centurion) exclaims, "Surely this was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). Matthew's Gospel, in its peculiar telling of the crucifixion and resurrection also connects us with the unseen actions of Jesus, and the harrowing of hell:

And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe, and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matt 27:51–54)

In this astonishing narrative, the Evangelist knits together the crucifixion and resurrection, showing how these together form *one* mighty act of God, and how death is swallowed up in life. His approach prefigures our own Divine Liturgy, which does not isolate a particular point in salvation history but relates the entire arc of the incarnate God's action on our behalf. Matthew intimates by how he tells the story that the prophet Daniel's promise of resurrection (Dan 12:1–3) is fulfilled in what Jesus has done. This is named purposefully in Luke's resurrection narratives, when Jesus twice says that the

¹² Fr. Patrick Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith, 2011), 41

Law, Prophets, and Writings looked forward to what would happen for our good (Luke 24:26, 24:46–7).

Ascension and Promised Return

What God has done is not complete without the Ascension, and the promised return which is implicit in Jesus' exaltation: "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, *will come in the same way* as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11b). At the climax of the Divine Liturgy, just after we hear Jesus' words regarding the bread and cup, the priest, celebrating on our behalf, prefaces the offering with these words: "Remembering, therefore, this saving commandment and all that has been done for our sake: the Cross, the tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the enthronement at the right hand, and the second and glorious coming again..." It is with *all* these mighty divine acts in mind, that we say "thine own of thine own we offer thee..." We *remember* in our offering and thanksgiving (Eucharist) *all* that *has been done for us*—including the Ascension and "the second and glorious coming again." This raises two immediate questions: How is it that the Ascension has been done *for us*? And how can we speak about the future coming as *done*?

Liturgical Reality

The second question is the hardest, in terms of logic. We might say that "remember" here simply means "to keep in mind that it has been promised" —remembering the assurance that Jesus will return. But, in the context of the Divine Liturgy, this is not enough. For in worship, we are actually connected with heavenly things and with the new creation. Having entered into worship with the angels, the Theotokos, and the saints, we find ourselves in a place where Jesus is *present*, in which his *Coming* is not simply a promise, but a reality. From God's perspective, this has been accomplished, though we await it in this mixed place, where Christ's reign has been inaugurated, while other things must still happen in time and in space. The Liturgy puts us in an utterly mysterious position: we are not simply *practicing* to be in the direct presence of God but are there. The good news includes an assurance that God is not confined by time and space but redeems that which we experience as limitations.



For Our Sake

As for the Ascension being done *for our sake*, this may seem strange to some. There are some for whom the Ascension is simply a necessary event to return Jesus to his true home—the heavens, from which He *came* for our sake. From this perspective, the Incarnation, teaching, Crucifixion, and Resurrection were done for us; and then He returns, his work well done. But such a view ignores Jesus' own words regarding the efficacy of the Ascension: "it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away,

the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you” (John 16:7). So, the “going away” is for our benefit, to help us, part of the good news. After all, it is connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit: Jesus’ glorification is the flip-side of our being endowed with gifts (Eph 4:8).

Why? We need to banish from our minds the idea that the Ascension is the *undoing* of the Incarnation. Jesus retains his human nature eternally and takes it with him as He is exalted on high. Just as the High Priest in the Old Testament wore upon his breast the names of the tribes of Israel, so Jesus takes us with him as a gift to the Father. The Ascension is not simply the enthronement of God the Son—it is the means of our glorification as his Body! St. John Chrysostom, in his inimitable way, shows us how the Ascension is the seal of the Gospel, the picture of our being reconciled to God, the “gospel” proclaimed in the very highest key. Note how the Golden-Mouthed preacher ties together the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus with the glorification (theosis) of the faithful, the glory of the Gospel. This he does while echoing much of Hebrews, and also dipping into Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, Luke, and Romans:

So that you may learn that He did not hate our nature, but that He was turning away evil.... [Remember that] we who appeared to be unworthy of the earth, were this day [through his Ascension] brought up to the heavens. For we, who from the beginning were not even worthy of what was below, have come up to the kingdom on high; we have gone beyond the heavens; we have grasped hold of the royal throne.

Even that very [human] nature, on account of which the Cherubim had to guard Paradise, this day is seated above the Cherubim! But how has this great wonder happened? ...how did we come up to such a height?...

For this is the wonderful thing: that it wasn't we who had grown unjustly angry with God who made the appeal, but that One who was justly vexed, who called us to His side, who entreated us, so that there was peace... And this is also what Christ did. God was angry with us, for we were turning away from God, our human-loving Master. Christ, by putting Himself in the middle, exchanged and reconciled each nature to the other. And how did He put himself in the middle? He Himself took on the punishment that was due to us from the Father and endured both the punishment from there and the reproaches from here...

You have seen how He received from on high the punishment that had to be borne! Look how also from below He received the insults that had to be borne: “The reproaches of those who reproached you,” Scripture says, “have fallen upon me.” Haven't you seen how He dissolved the enmity, how He did not depart before doing all, both suffering and completing the whole business, until He brought up the one who was both hostile and at war—brought that one up to God Himself, and he made him a friend?

And of these good things, this very day [the Feast of the Ascension] is the foundation. Receiving, as it were, the first fruits of our nature, He bore it up in this way to the Master. And indeed, just as it happens in the case of plains that bear ears of corn, it happens here. Somebody takes a few ears, and making a little handful, offers it to God, so that because of the little amount, He blesses the whole land. Christ also did this: through that one flesh and “first-

fruits,” He made to be blessed our [whole] race.... Therefore, He offered up the first-fruits of our nature to the Father, and the Father was so amazed with the offering, both because of the worthiness of the One who offered and because of the blamelessness of the offering, that He received the gift with His hands that belonged, as it were, to the same household as the Son. And He placed the Offering close to Himself, saying, “Sit at my right hand!”¹³

In this splendid passage, the Golden-Mouthed preacher is expounding the Ascension for the feast day. However, in explaining its power, he also describes Christ’s sacrifice in terms of representative atonement, as an effective means of reconciliation, and as a triumphant offering of thanks and obedience, when he presents the first-fruits of our risen human nature to the Father. All this is done for our sake, with the promise that when He comes again, we will be in harmony with him, for our estrangement has been removed, and reconciliation has been accomplished. The “good news” therefore entails our complete transformation.

What Does Hearing the Gospel Entail?

The earliest Christians, in the Acts of the Apostles, referred to their mode of living, demanded by the Gospel, as “The Way.” Soon, however, the name “Christian” was adopted, rather than merely “follower of “the Way” (Acts 11:26). *Christians* in Antioch described themselves in such a manner that attention was focused on Jesus *Christ*, not on a philosophy or even on a method of living, and this description stuck. However, when we put “first things” first—knowing Jesus is primary—then the other things entailed by the Gospel naturally follow, including worldview and manner of living.

Living as a Follower of Christ

We see this principle playing out when we notice a little phrase that runs through the letters that we call “the pastorals”—1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. “The saying is sure, and worthy of full acceptance” is a motto that is attached not only to the Gospel in those letters, but to teaching about the life of the church, and the nitty-gritty of Christian living. This formal assurance is found attached not only to central Christian doctrine such as the atonement (1 Tim 1:15), the utter faithfulness of God (2 Tim 2:11–13) and justification (Titus 3:8), but also to the office of bishop (1 Tim 3:1), and the value of godliness over bodily training (1 Tim 4:8). Practical and ethical matters, then, are interconnected with the Gospel, and are solemnly passed on and carefully received in the living Tradition of the Church. Perhaps the one clear indication of the presence of the living Tradition is its integral *connection* with the Christian story, or with revelation about the Triune God, as passed down to us by the apostles: would a change to this custom do damage to the Gospel, or to our understanding of God? The discernment of whether a particular practice has this integral link to the deposit of faith is sometimes immediately apparent. More often, however, this is a discernment not to be made quickly or solo by theologian, scholar, liturgist, or even a single community: patience and attention to the

¹³St. John Chrysostom, *S. in Ascensionem D.N.J.C.*, (“Sermon on the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ”). The Greek is in *Patrologia Graeca*, Migne 50.444–446; Author’s translation.

entire witness of the Church are indicated. Such characteristics do not come easily to the Church in our restless and quickly-paced age. The gradual coming-to-age of the doctrine of the Trinity and overt worship given to the Holy Spirit should be a sign to us against arrogance or impatience when we think about everything that the Gospel entails.

So, then, though the Gospel is focused on Jesus—who He is, what He has done, is doing, and will do—it also embraces *us*, and our personal and corporate lives and thinking. Indeed, the written gospels speak about “the gospel of *the kingdom*”—and this kingdom, or rule of Christ, is something in which we are involved, both as “subjects” of the King, and as ambassadors for him. This may sound grand, but our participation in the kingdom or rule of Christ can also be seen in humble acts. Consider the unnamed woman who washed Jesus’ feet prior to his death, of whom it was said that she would be remembered for this, “wherever the gospel is proclaimed”! (Matt 26:13)

Our Transformation

The Gospel, then, leads organically to our transformation. The priest, just before the Gospel is read, prays this on our behalf:

Shine in our hearts, O Master Who loves mankind, the pure light of Your divine knowledge, and open the eyes of our mind that we may comprehend the proclamations of Your Gospels. Instill in us also reverence for Your blessed commandments so that, having trampled down all carnal desires, we may lead a spiritual life, both thinking and doing all those things that are pleasing to You. For You, Christ our God, are the illumination of our souls and bodies, and to You we offer up glory, together with Your Father, Who is without beginning, and Your all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

Our repentance is demanded by the good news about Jesus, and our transformation is the consequence of God’s historical work. St. Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 4:3 about the “gospel of the glory of Christ” and Ephesians says that we are to be “partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6). So, then, if the Gospel is good news because it allows for repentance, it is even *better* news because we may share in God’s glory. St. John Chrysostom speaks of this “greater” news when he refers to 2 Corinthians 5:21, a verse that sums up the Gospel of Jesus “becoming sin” for our sake. He marvels,

Had He achieved nothing else but only done this, think what great a thing it would have been to give His Son . . . But [the apostle] mentioned that which is far greater than this . . . Reflect therefore how great the things are that He bestowed on you . . . ‘For the righteous,’ he says, ‘He made a sinner; that He might make the sinners righteous.’ But he doesn’t say it that way. Indeed he says something far greater . . . He does not say ‘made [Him] a sinner,’ but ‘sin;’ and not only ‘He who had not sinned,’ but ‘He who had not even known sin,’ that we also ‘might become’ (he does not say ‘righteous,’ but) ‘righteousness,’ and ‘the righteousness of God.’¹⁴

¹⁴ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on 2 Corinthians* 11.5. Author’s translation.

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We see a similar rhythm, in which God first repairs and then promises to glorify, in John's Gospel. Jesus, on the night He was to be betrayed, seeks to wash his disciples' feet, leading them beyond acceptance of him, to teach them to embrace his way of living. When He comes to Peter, we remember how Peter seeks to dissuade him, and then says, "wash all of me!" Jesus responds to Peter that the disciples have already been made clean by the *word* that Jesus has spoken. The starting point of the Gospel is to make us *clean*. But that is not all. For we know that the Gospel, once received, lodges in the heart, and prepares us for true communion with the living God.

The Epistle

If the Gospel, an announcement of who Jesus is and what He did for Israel and the whole world, is for our cleansing and transformation then the appointed epistle reading deepens our understanding with more in-depth Christian teaching. One cannot say that "Jesus is Lord" in a sensible manner without knowing something of the Holy Trinity, for example. Nor can we call him "Lord" and not live our lives accordingly. This reading unpacks some of the latent truths of the Gospel reading, whether that reading concerns the beginning of Jesus' earthly sojourn with us, his teachings, his mighty deeds, his controversies with those who did not and do not accept him, or the sequence of his death, resurrection, and ascension. Those who paired the epistle reading with the Gospel reading for each Liturgy did not do so in a haphazard way. (This pairing of holy readings is actually a continuation of the ancient Jewish tradition of pairing the Torah with a reading from the Prophets— what was called the Haftorah. Like the ancient people of God, we know that scripture helps to interpret scripture). We should listen, then, for how the epistle interprets, explains, or applies the Gospel. Thus, the homily will explore the implications of the Gospel, mingling it with the nitty-gritty of the epistle's instruction, our concerns about the world and our lives, and our hope for God's transformation of the cosmos in order to draw us into closer communion with our Lord and Savior.



Conclusion

The time will soon come in the Liturgy for us to lay aside all earthly care and sing with the angels, but here we bring everything under God's scrutiny, putting our concerns and those of the world at the feet of the Lord. As we hear the Gospel read and expounded, there is both realism *and* hope. The Gospel, from the earliest history of the Church, has been heard both by believers and seekers, and calls us all in an ongoing sequence of hearing, believing, repenting, being comforted, committing, and being transformed. Lessons we thought were only for beginners open up vistas for even the most mature: for the Good News involves welcoming Christ, ongoing repentance, deepening faith, and learning continually how to live more and more like Christ. It is the "eternal" or

“everlasting” good news, with power to lay our whole lives bare before the great Physician and Healer of our souls and bodies, so that He may make us anew: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12). In wonder at the spiritual surgery that He performs in us, we cry out: “Glory to Thee, O Lord, glory to Thee!” When the Word makes his mark on us, we are prepared to enter into the fullness of his presence, in the celebration of the Holy Mysteries.

Chapter 9

The Church

Litanies

As members of the Body of Christ, Christians are called to pray for one another. Our needs are many and varied and include: our own personal struggles, the needs of our family and our church family, those in our social sphere (neighbors, school, work), our government, and those in the world who are outside the faith. The Church uses Litanies as a way to petition God and to pray for ourselves and each other. Each petition in a litany is sung and then is followed by either “Lord have mercy” or “Grant this, O Lord.”

In the Divine Liturgy, several litanies are recited at different places in the service and for different reasons. Previously, we discussed both the Great Litany at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy and the litanies between the antiphons. Now we have the litanies that follow the Gospel and the sermon. There is a litany specifically for supplication called the “Augmented”¹ Litany, which includes prayers for the Orthodox faithful. There are also litanies for specific groups of people, such as the faithful, the departed, and the catechumens.

In the Augmented liturgy, we specifically petition God for our local community and its needs: our clergy (metropolitan, bishop, priests, deacons, and all other clergy) and our brethren (brothers and sisters in Christ); it is possible to add the names of people, living and departed, as needed on a particular day. We also pray for our country and its president, our civil authorities, our armed forces, the founders of our local parish, and the patriarchs of the Orthodox world who are departed.



The petitions in the Augmented Litany can seem general in nature because they only name the people for whom we pray and then ask for the Lord’s mercy. For example, “We pray for our metropolitan, for our bishop, for priests, deacons, and all other clergy... Lord, have mercy!” There is a sense, when singing these petitions, in which we emphasize that our Lord knows the needs of the clergy (or of the armed forces, etc.), and that we are relying on the wisdom of God to supply their needs.

However, especially in the litanies for the faithful, the departed, and the catechumens, the requests are very specific. This is not to say that we must inform the Lord of their needs, but rather that *we* would know and understand what their (and our) needs are,

¹ The Augmented Litany is the Litany of Fervent Supplication with two petitions added to the beginning.

what we hope for, and what God provides for us. For example, we pray for the pardon and remission of the sins of the departed, “both voluntary and involuntary,” and that the Lord would establish their souls “where the just repose.” These prayers are illuminating, as they teach us what both we and they hope to receive in the world to come.

These litanies are essential to our personal prayer life as well, as we keep our own lists of the living and the departed and ask God to forgive and redeem them. When we pray for each other, when we learn to pray for those we have never met (such as those who have gone before us), and for those who serve us (the clergy), we are learning to live within the Body of Christ.

The Church as the Body of Christ

The word translated “church” in English is the Greek word *ekklesia*. It means “gathering” or “assembly,” regardless of the purpose of the gathering. In Acts 19:41, it is used to describe an *ad hoc* gathering of angry Gentiles, assembling to protest the work of St. Paul, whose labors were cutting into their profits as makers of idols. It is the translation of the Hebrew *qahal*. The word *qahal* is used in Judges 20:1 to denote Israel assembled for military battle, and in Deuteronomy 9:10, where it describes Israel gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai to meet God. In the New Testament the word most often refers to the gathering or assembling together of Christian believers into a group for the purpose of Eucharistic worship on Sunday.

Christ had promised that He would manifest Himself and be spiritually present in their midst whenever they assembled, even if the eucharistic gathering of all the Christians in a town was small, consisting of only two or three (Matt 18:20). In their gatherings, the Christians were therefore not merely reflecting upon an historical Christ who was now absent but were invoking a living Christ who had promised that He would be with them until the end of the age (Matt 28:20). When the Christians assembled as an *ekklesia*, Jesus Christ was in their midst. It is this weekly miracle that is celebrated in the standard Orthodox liturgical greeting, “Christ is in our midst!” (The reply is significant: “He is and will be!”—i.e., He is present now and will be even more so after the Second Coming.)

It is because of this reality of Christ’s promised presence among his people that the *ekklesia* is called “the Body of Christ.” Just as a person lives, works, speaks, and manifests himself through his body, so Christ lives, works, speaks, and manifests Himself in and through the assembly, the Church. Although there are many images of the Church in the New Testament (the Church as branches of a vine, the Church as God’s household, the Church as bride, the Church as God’s city²), the image of the Church as the Body of Christ is the most significant one. From this reality, three things follow.

First, when the Church gathers and finds Christ in their midst, He is present to transform and to heal. That is, Christ works today through his sacramental mysteries. In

² John 15:5; 1 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 5:23f, and Revelation 21:10f.

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baptism, He grants the penitent forgiveness of sins, new birth, and sonship. In the Eucharist, He feeds his people with his Body and Blood and bestows upon them “purification of soul, the communion of the Holy Spirit, and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven.”³ In ordination, He fills the elected candidate with his Holy Spirit to enable him to fulfill his tasks. In unction, He grants healing and forgiveness. The visible celebrant is the one performing the sacraments of baptism, eucharist, ordination, or unction, but the real celebrant is Christ, who works invisibly through His Church. As St. Leo the Great once wrote, “Our Redeemer’s visible presence has passed into the sacraments.”⁴ That is why in the early Church all these other sacramental rites were usually performed within the context of the Eucharist, when the people gathered to find Christ among them.

Second, when the Church proclaims its message, it speaks with the authority of Christ Himself, since it is his Body. That is why St. Paul described the Church as “pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15) and wrote that it was through the Church that Christ’s manifold wisdom was revealed (Eph 3:10).

The Church’s message is the message of the living Christ Himself. This is what theologians mean when they declare that the Church is infallible. It does not mean that everything that every bishop or priest says is true. But it means that when the Church speaks as the Church, expressing its mind and its settled teaching, the message may be received as entirely trustworthy, reliable, and true.

That is because, thirdly, the Church will never be forsaken or abandoned by Christ, but He will always be present to guide them. We see this in his promise that his Spirit would lead them into all truth and that the gates of Hades would never prevail against them (John 16:13; Matt 16:18). The question may be asked: how can the authentic voice of the Church be discerned? The answer: through the ecumenically received work of the councils, the writings of the Fathers, the liturgy, and the spiritual practices.

An even cursory examination of Church history reveals that this guidance takes time and involves his people debating, arguing, and struggling to reach a final consensus. The results of this consensus can be found in the works of the councils that were finally accepted by the Church throughout the *ecumene*, the “inhabited world”, as containing the truth (the so-called “ecumenical councils”). Sometimes, this process of receiving the findings of a council took decades (for example, in the case of the Council of Nicaea in 325). But eventually, when the Church did reach a settled consensus of the majority, this was accepted as the result of the Spirit’s guidance.



³ From the anaphora of St. John Chrysostom.

⁴ St. Leo the Great, Sermon 74, *On the Lord’s Ascension II*, Section II.

The bishops throughout the history of the Church have held many councils and produced many definitions. Some were true (e.g., Nicaea in 325, which declared that Christ was of the same divine essence as the Father), and some were not (e.g., Hieria in 754 which condemned icons as idolatrous). After councils were held and did their work, it took time for the faithful throughout the world to decide whether to accept the work of the council as true or not.

It was this final acceptance and reception of a council which gave it status as an “ecumenical council”—a council accepted as true by the Church at large throughout the world. The work of these councils, being finally accepted by the faithful worldwide, held the true teaching and authentic voice of the Church.

A large part of this historical witness was the contribution of the Fathers. The Fathers were an immensely varied lot, spanning great distances and many centuries, and writing in different languages. They differed from each other and did not always agree with each other (some of them had famously and scandalously public conflicts, such as Jerome and Augustine). But they agreed upon many things, and it was this underlying agreement upon the core teachings of the Faith (the so-called “*consensus patrum*”) that constitutes the patristic message.

Their message was further confirmed by the eventual universal acceptance of some men as reliable expressers of the apostolic message. To be a true Father, one needed to be accepted universally in the same way as the true church councils were universally accepted. That is why, for example, Cyril of Alexandria was accepted as a true Church Father, while Nestorius of Constantinople was not. Both proclaimed their messages, but the Church at large eventually came to see that Cyril’s message was consistent with the truth, while that of Nestorius was not.

We also hear the Church’s true voice in its liturgical worship, (compare the formula *lex orandi, lex credendi*, “the law of prayer is the law of belief”). That is, we can tell what the Church believes by how it worships. For example, the Church’s belief in the importance of Mary as the Mother of God may be gauged by the many prayers offered to honour her and ask for her intercession; the Church’s belief in the Real Presence of Christ and the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist may be seen in the words of the anaphora and other prayers of the Divine Liturgy.

The authentic voice of the Church may also be discerned from its spiritual practices such as the content of its icons and its hymns. The Church’s belief in the reality and eternity of damnation, for example, may be learned from its icons of the Last Judgment, and from the many hymns and prayers describing the punishment of the lost as eternal.

Thus, the work of the ecumenical councils and of the Fathers, the words used in the Church’s liturgical worship, and the entirety of its spiritual culture together form a single whole proclaiming the teaching of the Church in a pluriform and variegated way. Ultimately the work of hearing the true voice of the Church and of authenticating its message falls to the faithful, the true guardians of the Faith. The bishops might proclaim a message, but it is up to the ordinary members to either accept their work or refuse it.

Christ guides His Church through the entirety of its members, not through select chosen individuals, such as bishops of given cities, by they from Rome or Constantinople.

Spiritual Gifts are Given to All

Like a body that has many members, organs, and limbs, each with a different function, so the local church has many members, each with a different function. St. Paul reminded the Corinthian church of this truth in his first letter to them, to draw them away from their notion that speaking in tongues was the only gift worth having, by saying that speaking in tongues was only one gift among many. There were other gifts too, and he ranks them in order of importance—their relative importance being based on how much they served the common good of the church.



Thus, Paul mentions the apostles as first in importance, followed by prophets⁵ as second in importance, followed thirdly by teachers (1 Cor 12:27–28). Then after these come healers, helpers (Greek *antilempseis*), administrators (Greek *kuberneseis*), and speakers in tongues (Note that the gift of glossolalia does not come last but shares the last place with healers, helpers, and administrators). By this listing, Paul tells his Corinthian converts that other gifts are far more important than that of speaking in tongues, with which they seemed to have been obsessed.

Paul mentions other gifts as well, such as words or messages of wisdom, words or messages of knowledge, miracle-working faith, the ability to discern spirits, and the interpretation of what is said in tongues (1 Cor 12:8–11). Each gift (Greek *charisma*) is necessary to the healthy functioning of gathered assembly just as all the contributions of the human body are necessary for its healthy functioning.

Elsewhere, Paul describes such functions in the Church as Christ's gifts to His Church. In Ephesians 4:11, he mentions apostles, prophets, evangelists,⁶ shepherds and teachers. In Romans 12:4–8, he lists gifts of prophecy, service⁷, teaching, exhortation/counselling, giving money, governing/presiding⁸, and performing acts of mercy.

None of these lists were intended to be comprehensive. Paul's point throughout is that Christ has poured out the gifts of the Spirit generously upon His Church, and each Christian has a gift from the Spirit and a function to fulfill. St. Peter makes the same point in 1 Peter 4:10 where he writes, "As each has received a *charisma*, employ it for one another as good stewards of God's varied grace [*charis*]." Each Christian has his or her own gift to use for the common good of the assembly.

⁵ That is, New Testament prophets such as Agabus (see Acts 13:1, 21:10–11), not the prophets of the Old Testament.

⁶ Evangelist means a preacher of the *evangelion*, the Good News (compare Acts 21:8 to 2 Timothy 4:5).

⁷ In Greek, *διακονία/diakonia*, which is the work of deacons.

⁸ In Greek, *προϊστάμενος/proistamenos*, which is the work of bishops/presbyters.

The binary distinction between the clergy and the laity, the so-called *ecclesia docens* and the *ecclesia discens* (the “teaching church” and the “learning church”) must here give place to a richer and more complex model. There is indeed a distinction between clergy and laity (see below), but this distinction was not the governing model in the apostolic church. *All* members of the church, the holy people of God, had a gift to share for the common good—for laity as well as clergy.

Ordained Clergy: Bishops, Presbyters, and Deacons

That said, there is a distinction between clergy and laity, in that some gifts are given by the Spirit through the laying on of hands with prayer in the sacrament of ordination. That is because the exercise of some gifts involves authority over the community, and this authority needs to be publicly and widely recognized, acknowledged, and blessed. We glimpse this distinction in Hebrews 13:17, which exhorts the faithful to “obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as men who will have to give account.”

We also catch other glimpses of this in the New Testament. For example, in Acts 14:23 Luke relates that Paul and Barnabas ordained presbyters for them in every church. The word rendered here “ordained” is the Greek *cheirotoneo*, which means, “to appoint, choose, install.” The means of appointing presbyters through the prayerful laying on of hands is seen in 1 Timothy 4:14, where Paul reminds Timothy of his own appointment. We see this reflected also in Acts 6:6, with the appointment of men to deal with the church’s financial distribution to the widows (ever afterward identified as the first men to be ordained as deacons): “These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them.” A presbyter was one of those who ruled the local congregation with real authority and jurisdiction.

At first, the words presbyter/elder (*presbyteros*) and bishop (*episcopos*) were used interchangeably. In Acts 20, St. Paul summons the presbyters of Ephesus (vs. 17) and reminds them that God made them bishops (vs. 28). In his first instructions to Timothy (1 Tim 3), Paul speaks only of bishops and deacons, though he later speaks also of presbyters (for example, in 1 Tim 5:17). In his instructions to Titus, Paul tells him to appoint presbyters (vs. 5) and goes on immediately to describe the worthy candidate as a bishop (vs. 7). These verses indicate that the words *presbyteros* and *episcopos* described the same office.

We see this identity of terminology also in such early works as the *Didache* (c. 100) chapter 15, which encourages the reader to “appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord,” with no mention of presbyters, since these were then identical with the bishops.

The same terminology can be found in I Clement (late 1st century). In chapter 42, we likewise read of “bishops and deacons” only. In chapter 44, Clement says that the apostles “knew that there would be strife over the bishop’s office” (literally, “over the name of the bishop”). In the same chapter, he says, “Blessed are those presbyters who had gone on ahead, for they need no longer fear that someone may remove them from

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their established place.” Thus, we see the terms “bishop” and “presbyter” used interchangeably.

However, just a few years later, in the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, we read of the three separate offices of bishop, presbyter, and deacon. Thus, for example, Ignatius writes to the Ephesians, “your council of presbyters is tuned to the bishop as strings to a lyre.”⁹ Here the offices of bishop and presbyter are clearly distinct. What happened?

I suggest that the development was merely terminological. If the end of the first century saw so profound a change as the creation of a new office, gathering to itself new authority (the so-called “creation of the monepiscopacy”), it is inconceivable that this innovation from the apostolic model would have emerged with no protest or left no record of the ensuing conflict. Yet no record of any such conflict survives. Indeed, Ignatius wrote to the churches of the area, including the Roman church, confident that the same model of governance was in use there, and spoke of “bishops appointed throughout the world.”¹⁰ This would be very strange if the three-fold system of bishop-presbyters-deacons was a recent innovation that had not yet spread to other churches such as Rome.



Even during the early days of the first century, one of the bishops/presbyters must have presided at the altar, saying the anaphoral eucharistic prayer. During the first century, this person had (and needed) no specific or unique title. In most communities, he was probably known by his name.¹¹ Soon, when persecution from without and the threat of schism from within made internal unity more important, the role of the presider became necessary, because the people rallied around their leader. The title *episcopos* was then reserved for him.

But the change of terminology involved no change of structure—the other presbyters continued to rule the church along with their bishop. Thus, Ignatius exhorts the faithful in Magnesia not to do anything “without the bishop and the presbyters;”¹² the Trallians were told to “do nothing without the bishop but be subject also to the council of presbyters.”¹³ There was no change of structure or of power, which is why history records no church protest, for there was nothing to protest about. Presbyters continued to rule under the headship of their bishop, as they had always done.

⁹ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 4:1.

¹⁰ St. Ignatius, *Ephesians*, 3:2

¹¹ For example, in Jerusalem the presider was known simply as “James”. See Acts 12:17 and Gal 2:12.

¹² St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians*, 7:1.

¹³ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Trallians*, 2:2.

Specific Functions of Ordained Clergy

The main task of the bishop was to preside at the altar—giving voice to the people and to the royal priesthood by offering the prayers of the Church. He was surrounded by his fellow-presbyters¹⁴ as they all prayed the anaphoral eucharistic prayer together, but it was his voice that was heard by the faithful and his voice to which the people responded with the liturgical “Amen,” sealing his prayer, and making it the prayer of the Church. The prayers of the other presbyters were offered silently; it was the bishop who presided.

As the local leader and main shepherd for the community, he was also the one who baptized, who excommunicated from the assembly those whose sins merited such expulsion and received them back into the Eucharistic fellowship once they repented. That is, he was their local pastor.

We see these functions delineated in the document known as the *Apostolic Tradition*,¹⁵ which represented the liturgical praxis of Rome in the early third century. The ordination prayer for the bishop mentions his function of “propitiating (God’s) countenance and to offer the gifts of (His) holy church”— to preside at the Eucharist; his function of “having the power to forgive sins”— to receive the penitent back to communion, through what would later be called the sacrament of confession; his function of conferring orders”— to ordain presbyters and deacons and other ranks and orders; and his function of “loosening every bond”— to exorcise in baptism and to heal.¹⁶ Though assisted by others, such as presbyters and deacons, as the president at the Eucharist, he was the main liturgist and celebrant for the community.

As the local leader, he was also the main teacher, since it was his teaching that was reflected in the anaphoral prayer. His teaching was therefore the teaching and doctrine of the local church; its orthodoxy of doctrine depended entirely upon his own. That is the reason that a bishop and his community would break communion with another bishop and community if their doctrine diverged significantly. The unity of the Church depended upon the unity of the bishops with one another, and their mutual recognition of each as holding the same faith. The bishops defined the faith of their community, and they were therefore the glue which held the universal Church together.

This centrality of the bishop, to provide the doctrinal norm for the community, is expressed during the consecration of bishops in the Orthodox Church. That is, they are ordained during the Divine Liturgy in time for them to give the homily—to exercise their office as teacher.

¹⁴ See 1 Peter 5:1, where Peter refers to himself as a “fellow-presbyter” (Greek *sumpresbyteros*).

¹⁵ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, chapter 3.

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The main task of the presbyter¹⁷ was to exercise authority as one of the rulers of the local church. The presbyters as a group, along with their leader, the bishop, made decisions regarding the governance of the local church—for example, who to appoint as reader. Thus, when Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, appointed a subdeacon and a reader in the absence of his presbyters, he felt he had to justify his actions to them, explaining that it was necessary at the time and assuring them that the men were worthy.¹⁸ Similarly, when Bishop Alexander of Alexandria wanted to depose his presbyter Arius, he had to call his other presbyters to do this.¹⁹ The presbyteral council had local power, exercised in conjunction with the bishop.

It was natural, therefore, that when all the faithful could not gather in the same place for the Eucharist under the presidency of the bishop, that he would appoint one of his presbyters to serve the “overflow” congregation elsewhere. This arrangement was at least as old of St. Ignatius in the early second century, who wrote that a Eucharist was valid if it was presided over by a bishop “or one to whom he shall have committed it.”²⁰

Very soon, in fact, the Church grew to such proportions that many Eucharists were presided over by presbyters, and not by the bishop, though the bishop remained the local leader throughout the city, village, or hamlet over which he presided, and arranged for all the baptisms there. In the present day, with our large dioceses where the bishops must provide administrative leadership over many cities, villages, and hamlets, the normal president at the Eucharist is always a presbyter, the bishop being rarely seen. Almost all the episcopal, pastoral, and liturgical functions have devolved upon the presbyters, ordination being the sole exception.

The main task of the deacon was one of financial service and pastoral aid. Deacons were the institutional servants of the Church, responsible for the exercise of the congregation’s *diakonia*. Indeed, the word “deacon” means “servant”, and *diakonia* means “service”. But not just any service—service to the poor.

Thus, in Acts 6:1 Luke states that the Hellenistic widows of Jerusalem were overlooked in the “daily serving of food”—in Greek, the daily *diakonia*. In Acts 11:29, when the faithful in Antioch collected money to send to the Christian poor in Judea, this relief money is described again by Luke as *diakonia*. In Romans 15:31, Paul also describes the money he had collected for the poor in the mother church as “my *diakonia* for Jerusalem.” Thus, the word *diakonia* often meant “money”; the *diakonos* or “deacon” was the one locally responsible for it.

¹⁷ Today usually called “priest”. The two terms are different: a *presbyteros* was an elder, originally an old man. A priest (*iereus*) was someone who offered sacrifices. Only gradually did the term come to be applied to the presbyters after they came to preside more often at the Eucharist.

¹⁸ Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistle 23*, “To the Clergy, on the Letters Sent to Rome, and About the Appointment of Saturus as Reader, and Optatus as Sub-Deacon.” A.D. 250.

¹⁹ Gregory Dix, *Jurisdiction in the Early Church: Episcopal and Papal* (London: Faith House, 1975), 40–42.

²⁰ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *The Letter to the Smyrneans*, chapter 8, v.1.

In the early church, he was charged with oversight for the church's charitable work, and for such pastoral tasks as taking Holy Communion to those who were absent from the Liturgy.²¹ The deacon functioned as a liturgical assistant to the presiding clergy in the Liturgy, offering the laity's prayers in the litanies because of his pastoral ministry to the laity throughout the week. Nowadays it is customary to regard the deacon merely as a liturgical ornament to the bishop—nice to have, but distinctly superfluous. Indeed, many Orthodox congregations do not have deacons. This would have been unthinkable in the early church. Deacons were essential to each congregation because deacons were the embodiment and institutionalization of their local ministry to the poor. How, they would have asked, could the local church fulfill its *diakonia* to the poor without its *diakonos*?



Because of their liturgical role as assistant in the Liturgy, deacons are ordained at the place in the service which best reveals their role as assistant—that is, they are ordained after consecration of the Eucharistic gifts, but before their distribution, so that they can help to distribute Holy Communion. Even now, at every Liturgy, the deacon is the one bringing out the Chalice and inviting the faithful to come forward.

All these offices are required for the healthy functioning of the Church, for the life in the local church includes the proclamation of the Gospel, the teaching of the Scriptures, the ordering of a governed and disciplined life, and the works of mercy to the poor and needy.

The bishops, presbyters, and deacons, though ordained with public prayer by the laying on of hands, were not the only ordained offices in the Church. Other offices, involving public authority over others, also required public ordination and recognition. These included those doing several necessary tasks, sometimes called “the minor orders” to distinguish them from the “major orders” of bishop, presbyter, and deacon.

One minor order was the subdeacon, whose task it was to aid the deacon in the service of the altar, ensuring that all functioned smoothly. The present Orthodox prayer ordaining a subdeacon prays that he may “stand before the doors of Your holy temple and kindle the lamps in the tabernacle of Your glory”—do all the hidden labour necessary at the Liturgy.

Another office was that of the reader, whose task it was to read the lessons at the liturgical assembly. This was a key role, since not everyone could read well in those early days. Moreover, it was the responsibility of the readers to keep custody of the books,²² which were very expensive.

²¹ Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, chapter 65.

²² Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), 25.

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Other ancient clerical orders have fallen in abeyance, since the need for them no longer exists. In ancient days, there was the office of the doorkeeper, who functioned as a kind of security in the days when Christian assembly was illegal.

There was the office of exorcist, responsible for saying the regular prayers of exorcism in the days when there were many adult converts requiring days of exorcism leading up to their baptism.

There was formerly the office of deaconess. A deaconess was required in the days when candidates for baptism were baptized naked, and a woman was required to descend into the water with the naked female candidate to anoint her. Obviously (some felt) this task could only be performed by a woman, and so deaconesses were ordained to fulfill this work. Deaconesses were required to be single and at least 40 years of age.²³ With the eventual lapse of an effective catechumenate and the predominance of infant baptism, her work was no longer required, and the title became merely honorary as the office died out.

The Church and Eschatology

The Church belongs ultimately to the age to come; here in this age, it is only sojourning on its way to the Kingdom. That means that although there are earthly and institutional elements to the Church (e.g., the existence of officers and leaders, of rules and boundaries), it can never be fully defined in institutional terms. The Church is, in fact, the Kingdom of God on earth in sacramental form, as seed.²⁴

The entire world has been redeemed by Christ and is therefore on the way to becoming the Kingdom of God. The Church is that part of creation which has submitted to Christ and begun to experience that final transformation now, in this age. The Church is therefore a microcosm, an image of what all will become in the age to come. It is set in this age as a promise and prophecy of the future triumph of Christ over all. The Church is the presence of the future, the presence now of the Kingdom of God is which “already and not yet.”²⁵

In its historical sojourn, the Church has had a long journey, from the catacombs to Byzantium, from being a hunted sect to being ruler of the Roman world. In its current state, the Orthodox Church consists of 15 individual bodies called “autocephalous churches”—churches spread throughout certain geographical areas in which the bishops within that area all look to one bishop as their leader and coordinator. Sometimes this leader is called a “patriarch”, but the title varies, as does the size and spread of the autocephalous churches.

The term autocephalous is comparatively modern; it now refers to the fact that each individual church has its own head (Greek *kephale*) and so functions independently of the

²³ See Canon 15 of the Council of Chalcedon.

²⁴ See Christ’s parable of the Kingdom as seed, Mark 4:30–32.

²⁵ Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (Dallas: Fontes Press, 2017).

other autocephalous churches. Thus, there is no single leader with power or jurisdiction or leadership responsibility for all the Orthodox churches, functioning in the same way as the Pope functions in the Roman Catholic Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople occupies a place of honour as the first among equals, the place once filled by the Bishop of Rome before the west split from the east. But he has no canonical authority whatsoever outside his own jurisdiction.

It is the same within an autocephalous church: the head of an autocephalous church, the *primus inter pares* and leader of the synod or gathering of bishops, has no jurisdiction outside his own diocese. The diocesan bishop, though answerable to the synod as a whole, is sovereign within his own diocese. Despite the multiplicity of episcopal titles (such as Patriarch, Metropolitan, Archbishop) the hierarchy is relatively simple, consisting of the diocesan bishop and the clergy under him.

Since many autocephalous churches identify with the national goals and aspirations of the nations which often constitute their boundaries, the temptation exists for those churches to function as the spiritual handmaiden to the nation, submerging their eschatological identity and the priority of the Gospel to national identity and goals. But however much the temptation exists for churches to serve political agendas (especially in time of war), this temptation should be strongly resisted.

Monasticism

Monasticism forms a counterweight to this perennial worldly temptation, for monasticism represents the “angelic life,” a world that though rooted in this age, sets its focus upon the age to come. The seed that would eventually flower into monasticism is found within the New Testament. St. Paul pointed out that the single person had more leisure to pray and seek God than did the married person, since the latter was encumbered by a multitude of earthly cares relating to marriage and child-rearing (see 1 Cor 7:32–36). Not everyone had the *charisma* of abstinence or the domestic freedom to embrace such a life of singleness (1 Cor 7:7), but Paul recommends such a life for those for whom it was possible.

It is not surprising then that some people with the economic freedom to do so embraced a life of solitary retreat on their properties. This was the path of St. Anthony early in his monastic career. When he decided to pursue solitude, he “placed his sister in the charge of respected and trusted virgins, giving her over to the convent for rearing.” At this time “no monk knew at all the great desert, but each of those wishing to give attention to his life disciplined himself in isolation, not far from his own village.”²⁶ Even in the time before St. Anthony, there were virgins living together in community, and men living in isolation on their estates, not far from the villages. It was only after this time men like Anthony left their properties and ventured into the desert to live in greater solitude and greater isolation.

²⁶ St. Athanasius, *The Life of St. Anthony*, chapter 3.

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There were other models of monastic discipline as well. In the fourth century, wealthy landowners, such as St. Gregory of Nazianzus, would retreat to their family properties, maintain their connections with their families and kin, and use their money to sustain them in their life of contemplation and prayer. In the capital at Constantinople, a number of urban monasteries sprang up, in which the monastics were very much involved in the life of the city and empire generally. In Egypt, a more eremitic desert monasticism was more popular, along with large cenobitic communities, containing many monks. In many Orthodox monasteries today, someone wanting to be a monk or nun first joins a cenobitic monastery, and only leaves for a more solitary life as a hermit with the blessing of the abbot or abbess.

Monasticism therefore has experienced a long and varied life and plays a very important role in the life of the Orthodox Church. Missionaries have often been monks, coming to a new land to preach the Gospel relatively unencumbered with family responsibilities. Indeed, the first Orthodox churches in North America began with such a missionary band of monks in the 18th century, including St. Herman of Alaska, canonized in 1970. Especially worthy of note is the large confederation of monasteries on Mount Athos, the monastic republic in Greece, which has functioned as a spiritual center for monks from many lands for a thousand years.



The monastics have always functioned as witnesses to the eschatological nature of the Church. Especially in Byzantium and in places where the Church and its bishops were much tempted by the power and wealth to become worldly, monastics always pointed to and embodied the truth that the Kingdom of God is not of this world, even if the reigning emperor confessed himself a Christian and the empire over which he ruled favoured the Church and professed to be Christian. The identity of the Kingdom of God with any kingdom in this age can never be complete. Monasticism constitutes a standing witness to this truth. It is, in fact, the institutionalization of the eschatological nature of the Church.

In the Byzantine days, when monks abounded in the Church, the decision was made to select the bishops from the ranks of those who had embraced celibacy—the monks. The monks were regarded as the cream of the clerical crop, men of proven spirituality. Further, it was thought prudent to entrust ecclesiastical power only to those who had first learned humility and the art of powerlessness. This system, of course, works best in a Byzantine situation like the one in which it arose, when there was an abundance of monks from which to choose the bishops. In situations where there is not such an abundance of monks, things can be more challenging.

The Ascetical Life

The life of *askesis*, or engaging in discipline, is of course not confined to monks. *Askesis* does not necessarily involve extreme practices, such as wearing chains or sitting upon a pillar, although some monastic athletes have pushed the boundaries of their discipline by such things to see how far they could go and where their limits lay. All Christians are encouraged and expected to fast. This involves abstinence from certain foods (such as meat, fish, and dairy) at certain times (such as on all Wednesdays and Fridays and during the four fasting seasons of the church year).

This program of asceticism, which is tailored to one's circumstances under the direction of a spiritual director such as one's parish priest, has as its aim the rooting out of one's vices and the replacement of them with virtues. Everyone is subject to passions and weaknesses. Ascetical practices such as fasting, vigil (staying awake at night to pray), chanting psalms, and prayer can help in the war against the flesh and against our own deficiencies.

Such practices, however, must be performed with humility and a determination not to judge others, otherwise one will gain no benefit from such practices, but on the contrary will suffer spiritual harm. The church in its hymns repeatedly holds up the cautionary example of the Pharisee, warning the would-be ascetic not to judge or consider himself better than others, lest he fall under the condemnation received by the Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14). Spiritual pride in one's accomplishments is the worst of all faults, and the Church constantly warns its children against it.

The Remembrance of Death

One aid in the practice of asceticism is the remembrance of death. Indeed, many prayer books contain a prayer in which the person faces his or her bed before retiring and says, "O Lord Jesus Christ, lover of mankind, is this bed to be my grave, or will You shine upon my wretched soul with the light of another day?" In the life of a spiritually healthy person, remembrance of death is not morbid, but simply a mark of sanity: death is inevitable and eventually will come to us all, possibly suddenly and without warning. It is only sensible to be aware of this possibility. Far from casting a shadow over life's joys and pleasures, it encourages us to enjoy them to the full. It puts everyday annoyances and irritations in perspective; if you knew for certain you were going to die tomorrow, how annoyed would you really be over the price of gasoline today?

In our Western secular culture, characterized as it is by (comparative) affluence, we tend to forget about death and consider sickness a temporary roadblock on our untroubled journey through life. Our secular culture has pushed death to the margins where it can be mostly ignored. Few people die at home anymore, but in hospitals, where they are quickly whisked from the hospital room to the morgue and from there (often) to the crematorium. Sometimes the body is not present for the funeral, which has been re-titled "a celebration of life," because calling it "a funeral" sounds too funereal and depressing. Having effectively banished the robust Christian faith from our culture, we have nothing

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to console us in the face of our inevitable mortality, since our happy guesses and hopeful wishes can only take us so far.

In older days, sickness was considered inevitable and often led to death. It was not unusual for children to die in infancy or for mothers to die in childbirth. Adult men too were often swept away when disease passed through a town or village, and death was a part of life—something which could not be denied or marginalized. Nowadays, with better health care, we can sustain a bit more effectively the fantasy that we are immortal. But eventually a death in the family, whether sudden or expected, serves to bring us back to earth and reality.

The Christian faces sickness and death knowing that Christ has trampled down death, and that neither sickness nor death is to be feared as the greatest calamity. When Christians fall sick, they call upon the presbyters to anoint them and pray (James 5:14–16). The sacrament of anointing is the instrument whereby the Lord brings joy and life, either through healing of one's illness or bestowing of peace in the midst of the illness. Since one's whole aim in life is to glorify God, one can glorify him either by giving thanks for physical healing, or by one's patient endurance in sickness.

It is as St. Paul said, our desire is to honor Christ in our body and our affliction, whether by healing and life, or by continued sickness and death. If we are healed, that will mean thanksgiving for our recovery and a more fruitful life lived for Christ. If we do not recover but die, that is our gain, for we then enter more fully into life and joy. Sickness, though serious for the Christian as for everyone else, has been transfigured by Christ. If to live is Christ, then sickness cannot ultimately rob us of our joy.



When a Christian therefore falls sick, he or she should offer the sickness to Christ along with the rest of their life, asking that they might learn from it how to grow closer to Christ, and asking for such healing as the Lord wills to provide. Our secular society considers sickness as abnormal and therefore as intolerable. The Christian knows that it is part of life in this age, and one more stage in our journey to the Kingdom of God.

The reason that Christians do not fear sickness and death as others do is because they believe in Christ's Resurrection, whereby He trampled down death by his own death and brought life and immortality to light. For us, all does not end in death, dust, and dissolution, but in triumph, life, and joy. Death is for us a passage to the Kingdom of God and a stage on our way to the final resurrection of our bodies on the Last Day, after the Second Coming.

On that day, Christ will raise our decomposed bodies from the ground and restore them, making them immortal and spiritual like his own risen flesh (1 Cor 15:42–49). We will

then live in our resurrected bodies in a new heaven and a new earth, in which righteousness finally dwells (2 Pet 3:13), bearing an immortal and invincible weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Cor 4:18).

This is the reason that, even now, Christian funerals are celebrations of the Lord's victory, and why we can even make a funeral dirge into the song "Alleluia."²⁷ We are sad because of the temporary loss of our loved ones, but we rejoice knowing that death cannot separate us from Christ, and therefore cannot finally separate us from one another. We bury our dead, commending them to the victorious love of God, seeing their faces and giving the last kiss one final time, confident in our final joyful reunion on the Last Day.

Being a part of the Church, the Body of Christ, means that the union we experience with him cannot be severed by death. In life and in death, we remain a part of his Body, and remain one with each other. As members of his Body, we continue to pray for one another. Here on earth, we regularly commend our departed loved ones to God, confident that they in turn are praying for us as well.²⁸

Conclusion

The Church, the Body of Christ, is characterized by a great variety of devoted Christian believers, shepherded by our overseers, together reflecting the presence of Christ in the world. Each member has his or her own role within the Body, having been given gifts bestowed on him or her by the Holy Spirit, which we use to build up the Church and to further the Kingdom of God on earth. As we wait for the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the souls and bodies of the departed, we experience God now through the sacraments which sustain us. We strive daily on the path to God, which is the ascetical life. Through our efforts and by the grace of God, we work towards the elimination of vice and culturing of virtue, whether we are living in the world or have chosen the monastic way of life. God, who has given us everything we need for a life of love, devotion, and redemption, is bringing us to Himself, our eschatological hope.

²⁷ "Making our funeral dirge the song.... Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia" (Oikos of the Orthodox funeral service)

²⁸ The usual days for such liturgical commemorations are on the first day after death, the third, ninth, and fortieth days, and on the annual anniversary of the repose.

Chapter 10

The Cherubic Hymn

One of the most beautiful moments in the Divine Liturgy is the singing of the Cherubic Hymn. Here we are exhorted to cast aside all earthly cares, and to unite ourselves to the heavenly choir that mystically escorts our Lord into the Holy of Holies, the “noetic altar above the heavens,”¹ where we experience the “reasonable worship”² of all the heavenly hosts. While the people of God sing, the presiding priest or hierarch begins to pray silently to Christ— “the King of Glory,” “our High Priest,” the prophetic Word of the Father who “rests upon the saints”— asking that his own unworthiness not stand in the way of his vocation to represent the people in their offering. The priest then humbly asks that he be enabled to stand before the Holy Table, the earthly counterpart of the heavenly altar. All the while, he acknowledges that his own priesthood is nothing less than a participation in the never-ending priesthood of Christ.

In the oldest portion of this prayer (first expressed by St. Theophilus of Alexandria)³ we hear, “For You, O Christ our God, are both the offeror and the offering, the receiver and the one distributed.”⁴ Our Lord is simultaneously the priest, the sacrifice, the one to whom the offering is made, and the one received by the people in the Eucharist. The entire mystery of our salvation is perfectly summarized in this brief statement. As we explore the meaning of these words, we will uncover the truth of our salvation as accomplished by our Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal King, Priest, and Prophet; and how his self-offering is our initiation into a Christian life of intercession and self-sacrifice.

Man’s Original Vocation

As we carefully read the first chapters of Genesis, we discover that man was entrusted by God with certain duties. As the one called and designated to be God’s image, Adam was to act on God’s behalf as king, priest, and prophet. Each of these roles related to humanity’s position as ambassadors to the created realm and intermediaries between God and the cosmos. As king, man was meant to rule benevolently, a vassal lord serving at the pleasure of the eternal King.⁵ St. John Chrysostom writes that God “first erected the whole of this scenery, and then brought forth the one destined to preside over it.”⁶ So long as man ruled well, he would be entrusted “with complete control over creation.”⁷ To further reinforce man’s dominion over creation, God brings all the

¹ Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Litany before the Lord’s Prayer.

² Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Anaphora (Prayers of Consecration).

³ Norman Russell, “Homily on the Mystical Supper,” in *Theophilus of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2007), 60.

⁴ Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Prayer before the Great Entrance.

⁵ “Vassal lord” refers to a political leader who has agreed to a suzerainty arrangement with a more powerful lord and kingdom. The vassal receives protection in exchange for fidelity to the more powerful lord.

⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 1–17*. trans. Robert Charles Hill (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), Homily 8.5.

⁷ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 10.11

animals to Adam to be named; and they minister to him like servants in a king's court.⁸ Yet he was not to become oppressive due to his elevated role; Adam was told to “guard the garden” (Gen 1:15), acting as a wise steward of the world entrusted to his care and avoiding idleness.⁹

In commanding Adam to “serve and guard the garden” (Gen 1:15), God assigned him a priestly function. These same tasks of serving and guarding were entrusted to the priests assigned to the ministry of the tabernacle and Temple.¹⁰ Their daily function was to unite heaven and earth through various sacrifices. But rather than slaying goats and sheep, the first man was called upon to offer up the whole of God's good creation in thanksgiving. Father Alexander Schmemmann writes that, through this priestly vocation, man was called to recognize “that everything in the world and the world itself is a gift of God's love, a revelation by God of his very self, summoning us in everything to know God, through everything to be in communion with Him, to possess everything as life in Him.”¹¹ St. John Chrysostom writes that if Adam would remain faithful to God, he would gradually, as he was meant to “awaken...to an expression of thanksgiving in consideration of all the kindness he had received [from God].”¹² It was not that God needed the praise and offerings of Adam—the Lord Almighty is self-sufficient by nature, and does not *need* anything man has to offer him.¹³ Rather, sacrifice is for the sake of man, not for God, so that humans may “learn to win over the supplier of good things, and not to be ungrateful.”¹⁴ Offering “thanksgiving to him for [his kindnesses is] . . . the highest form of sacrifice.”¹⁵



In addition to man's royal and priestly duties, he was also called to act as a prophet of God. We often mistake the role of prophecy with that of foretelling the future; but in fact, the Greek term *prophētēs* (*navi* in Hebrew) refers to a messenger who receives and announces important news. Only sometimes does the news point to future events that may come to pass. Thus, man was to receive the word of God—the message of his truth, love, mercy, and justice—and to proclaim it to the world. According to Chrysostom, one of Adam's earliest prophetic acts was to declare “bone of my bone and

⁸ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 14.12-19

⁹ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 14.8

¹⁰ We see examples of the priests of the tabernacle/Temple being instructed to “serve and guard” in numerous places, including Numbers 3:7–8, 8:25–26, 18:5–6; 1 Chronicles 23:32; Ezekiel 44:14.

¹¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 177.

¹² Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 13.14.

¹³ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 9.12.

¹⁴ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 9.12.

¹⁵ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 9.12.

flesh of my flesh” at the creation of Eve (signifying that Eve is his equal and mate).¹⁶ As king, priest and prophet of the universe, Adam is now joined by his queen.

The Fall

Adam and Eve did not remain in paradise beyond those first idyllic moments. God had placed two trees in the middle of the garden: the “Tree of Life,” and the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.” The first of these was intended to sustain the life of man, and to enable communion with the Living God. But taking and eating from the second tree was forbidden, as God warned it would result in death.¹⁷ St. Theophilus of Antioch writes,

*God transferred him from the earth, out of which he had been produced, into Paradise, giving him means of advancement, in order that, maturing and becoming perfect, and being even declared a god, he might thus ascend into heaven in possession of immortality. For man had been made a middle nature, neither wholly mortal, nor altogether immortal, but capable of either.*¹⁸

Yet they grew impatient for God’s gift and prompted by Satan (in the guise of a serpent), they took and ate the fruit of their own accord. By this act of rebellion, they placed themselves in opposition to the merciful God who desired what was best for them. Even so, God imposes death, not as punishment, but as an opportunity: “He set a bound to his [man’s] sin by interposing death and thus causing sin to cease putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.”¹⁹ This event is often referred to as the first or ancestral sin, and sets the stage for humanity’s relationship with God for the rest of history.

The process of man’s temptation described in Genesis 3 is instructive. The serpent initially appeals to Eve’s pride, saying “You will not surely die; for God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (vs. 4–5). However, the narrator tells us that “the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise” (vs. 6), indicating that the initial appeal was to her physical senses and appetite—her eyes and stomach—and only last to her ego. For many of the Church Fathers, the account of the fall teaches us that temptation primarily comes from the world around us (taken in through our senses) and from our bodily desires (welling up from within our flesh). Although we must also confront demonic appeals to our pride, we remain our own worst enemies. And even if we do not sin exactly “according to the likeness of the

¹⁶ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, 15.12-14.

¹⁷ It is important to note that in Genesis 3:6, Eve does not receive the fruit from God, but rather is said to “take” and “eat” it on her own. In the Divine Liturgy at the Anaphora, we quote the words of Jesus Christ, which command us to “take and eat” of his holy Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Whereas Eve stole from God, turning his blessings into a curse, in the Eucharist, God gifts us with his own life in a blessing we freely receive.

¹⁸ Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus*, 2.24 in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Vol. 2, Repr., (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 104.

¹⁹ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, 3.23.6 in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 457.

transgression of Adam” (Rom 5:14), we re-enact the fall in our thoughts, words, and deeds each day.

The primary motivation for Adam’s sin was self-love (*philautia*), which is a rejection of the selfless love (*agapè*) that defines the action of God (1 John 4:16). Self-love is called by St. Maximus the Confessor “the mother of all sins”: it begins when we exalt ourselves, and then begins to fester, eventually leading to every other sort of transgression.²⁰ “For since the deceitful devil at the beginning contrived by guile to attack humankind through his self-love, deceiving him through pleasure, he has separated us in our inclinations from God and from one another, and turned us away from rectitude.”²¹ Selfishness makes it impossible to fulfill the two great commandments:

Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 22:37–40).

Acting upon self-love was not only a rejection of God’s command, it also bound Adam and Eve to the physical (sensory) world, plunging them into a matrix of suffering (*pathos*) where they would continually waver between pain and pleasure.²² Now corrupted, human nature would from then on be plagued by sinful temptations and their own impassioned desires.

The Aftermath

Beginning with man’s expulsion from paradise, we trace a pattern of continual disobedience that marks the remaining narrative of the Scriptures. Time and again, man rejects his calling to be a king, priest, and prophet on behalf of God, and instead brings corruption and death into the world. With this progression into disorder, we find that the three original vocations begin to splinter. Ideally, every family would be wisely guided by the “royal” presence of the father and mother. Likewise, the father would act as the priest for his family (as we see in the case of Job 1:5, where he makes daily offerings for his wife and children), and his wife would assist through her vocation of prayerful intercession. And both were called to proclaim God’s truth, love, mercy, and justice as prophets.

But corruption dissolved this unity of action. Eventually, individuals with specialized roles were chosen by God for certain purposes. Instead of every man acting as a wise king, God would call forth men like David and Solomon to lead the people. Instead of each man making offerings on behalf of his family, God would establish a specific tribe of priests to make sacrifices in a specific location (the tabernacle or Temple). And

²⁰ Maximus the Confessor, *Four Centuries on Love*. 2.8 in *The Philokalia: The Complete Text, Vol. 2*, compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth. trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 66.8.

²¹ *Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Andrew Louth (London: Routledge, 1996), 87.

²² *Ad Thalassium 61* in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, trans. Paul Blowers (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 131–2.

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instead of every person acting as a prophet, God would send designated messengers to Israel to declare his word, men like Elijah and Isaiah. What was common to all three vocations was that each was appointed by God himself, and the sign of this appointment was an anointing with sacred oil (*chrise* in Greek – literally “to be christened”).²³ By raising up kings, priests, and prophets from among the people and for the people, God slowly prepared the world for the coming of something greater—one who would unite the threefold ministry within himself and truly be the Messiah or Christ (“the anointed one”).

The Advent of Christ

Although the Lord continued to look after and guide his people, much of the Old Testament remains a testimony to their constant rebellion against him. Rather than being a light to the rest of the world, reflecting the holiness of Yahweh²⁴, they split into two feuding kingdoms (Judah and Israel), both gradually becoming infested with idolatry and immorality. After repeatedly warning his people to repent—to no avail—God finally allowed them to be conquered and exiled by the Assyrians and Babylonians. A generation later, a remnant would return to rebuild Judea, creating a semi-autonomous state that would be successively passed from empire to empire (Persian, Greek, and then Roman).

During this time period, the people of God longed for deliverance from these pagan rulers, a hope that evolved into a desire for a great leader. Looking to their Scriptures, the Jews discovered prophecies about a chosen one, someone who would break the control of foreign powers, and who would restore the whole of Israel to its rightful place and thereby usher in an age of peace and righteousness. This man would be a great king from the line of David: “There shall come forth a rod from the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isa 1:1–2). He would also be “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4), modeled after the righteous “priest of God Most High” who offered up bread and wine on behalf of Abraham (Gen 14:18). And finally, he would be the true prophet, as God tells Moses: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (Deut 18:18).

During the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, many Jews began to proclaim that the Messiah had come. They were amazed by the way he taught with authority, by his power to cast out demons, and by the many miracles he performed. They began to proclaim

²³ Some prophets were physically anointed, such as is described in 1 Kings 19:16: “And Jehu the son of Nimshi shall you anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shall you anoint to be prophet in your place.”

²⁴ The name “Yahweh” is used by some to represent the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (meaning four letters) יהוה (Yod Heh Vav Heh). It was considered blasphemous to utter the name of God; therefore, it was only written and never spoken, resulting in the loss of the original pronunciation. It is more common in English-language bibles to represent the Tetragrammaton with the term “LORD” (capitalized).

that the time of deliverance was at hand; and yet they were unprepared for the sort of kingdom he was establishing. Rather than abolishing the Romans, Jesus came to cast out the true enemy of mankind—that ancient serpent, the devil. And rather than restoring Jewish rule in the Middle East, he came to inaugurate a spiritual realm: the Kingdom of Heaven. The expectation of a worldly conqueror was disappointed, and many Jews rejected Jesus at his crucifixion.

But in the experience of his resurrection from the dead on the third day, Jesus revealed to his apostles that he is truly the one spoken of in the “Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). As the fulfillment of the Scriptures, Jesus represents the antithesis of that first man who sinned; he is “the last Adam” (1 Cor 15:45) who perfectly unifies, embodies, and actualizes the original three vocations forsaken by our ancestors. As the fourth century Christian historian Eusebius writes, “[A]ll these [anointed ones of the Old Testament] have reference to the true Christ, the divinely inspired and heavenly Word, who is the only high priest of all, and the only king of every creature, and the Father’s only supreme prophet of prophets.”²⁵

Christ the King

Unlike a typical king, Jesus Christ did not come to assert his will over others, but to reveal the mercy of his Father. This is evidenced by the fact that, although he is equal with the Father, he “emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and...being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:5–8). While he is by nature eternal and unable to suffer, he came to suffer and die at the hands of his own creatures in order to redeem them. As he tells his apostles, “[T]he Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28). Thus, his kingship is rooted in selfless love, not the selfish will to power that so often defines human relations. Throughout his ministry, Jesus demonstrated his extreme humility through teaching and healing, and by not responding in kind to the deception and violence arrayed against him. Even during his arrest, he tells St. Peter not to defend him with force, reminding him that the Father would grant him “more than twelve legions of angels” (Matt 26:53) to defend him if he were to ask. And later, when Pontius Pilate asks if he is a king, Jesus responds, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). His realm is not like any earthly kingdom, and his rule is not like that of any earthly king.

After his resurrection on the third day, Jesus Christ remained with his disciples, preparing them for their coming mission. He tells them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18), and he instructs them to go into the world teaching and baptizing all who would trust and believe in him. Then on the fortieth day, he ascended into the heavens where he “sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2), enacting his eternal reign as the risen and glorified Lord. And finally, on the fiftieth day, the Day of Pentecost, he enabled his disciples to spread his Kingdom to the four corners of creation by granting them the gift of the Holy Spirit—the living

²⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.3.8 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1:86.

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presence of God within each baptized believer. By cooperating with God's will, the Spirit would empower them to embody and enact Christ's selfless love. The visible community of these men, women, and children would be called the Church.

The reality of Christ's eternal reign is not something apparent to all. The Scriptures assert that the Father has already "put all in subjection under him," and yet "now we do not yet see all things put under him" (Heb 2:8). In our present age, we stand between the first and second coming. Creation is always on the brink of the great judgment, and yet time ticks on. The heavenly Kingdom has already been ushered in by our Lord, and yet the world does not recognize it. It remains a matter of faith: Christ must reign through the heart of each believer and in the community of his saints. To those who submit themselves now to his rule, they are already "seated...with him in the heavenly places" (see Eph 2:5–7). And yet, the apostle warns we must "endure" if we also want to "reign with him" in the age to come (2 Tim 2:12).

Christ the High Priest

The role of every priest is to bind heaven and earth through his intercession and offerings. In this sense, a priest is a mediator between two parties: representing the people as they reach upward towards God, and then representing God as he responds to his people. But the priesthood of Jesus Christ is entirely unique, being his very identity: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5). Through the incarnation, the divine and created realities are brought together in a union "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."²⁶ And thus, mankind is reconciled to the Father in the very person of the eternal Son who "became flesh and tabernacled among us" (John 1:14).



Because he is fully man, Christ is able to intercede for humankind as our high priest and "make expiation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17). His priesthood is not an earthly time-bound one like that of Aaron, as the apostle tells us in Hebrews, but rather an eternal priesthood foreshadowed by the mysterious Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20; Psalm 2:7). Whereas the Aaronic sacrifices could never truly remove the sins of the people (hence the necessity of repeating it annually on Yom Kippur), the atonement of Jesus was made "once for all when he offered himself up" (Heb 7:27). And with his ascension into the heavens and seating at the right hand of the Father, he enters into the heavenly Holy of Holies to realize an "eternal redemption" (Heb 9:12), thereby opening the door to paradise to those who are "sprinkled by his blood" through the sacraments of baptism and reception of the Eucharist. St. Cyril of Alexandria writes, "For finding us as discarded and living outside of the holy and blessed city, meaning the Church of God,

²⁶ *Tome of Chalcedon in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14:264–5.

Christ came to us bearing our image. And examining us, he cleansed us through holy baptism and by his Body.”²⁷ For those who enter into this new covenant in his blood, and thereby become members of his body, the Church, Christ is able to release them from the power of sin, death, and corruption by uniting them to himself, because “both he who sanctifies and those being sanctified are all one” (Heb 2:11).

In this context, we are reminded again of the prayer said prior to the Great Entrance by the bishop or priest serving the Divine Liturgy: Jesus Christ is referred to as both “the offerer” and the one being sacrificed, “the offering”.²⁸ But this prayer also affirms that Jesus is also “the receiver,” the one to whom the offering is made. This is because the Son of God exists eternally as one essence with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Although it is only the Son who has assumed flesh, and who has become our high priest and the “one mediator between God [the Father] and men” (1 Tim 2:5), he is never separated from the other two Persons. Throughout the Scriptures and within the life of the Church, we witness all three persons of the Trinity acting in perfect unity to accomplish our salvation.

Sanctification

As we have seen, the priesthood of Christ is the bridge between the eternal, infinite life of God, and the limited, physical life of human beings. In becoming one of us, and therefore sanctifying his human nature, Christ made it possible for us to experience his divine life by grace (a freely-offered gift from God that transforms the recipient). From the moment of his conception in the womb of the Holy Virgin and Theotokos Mary, Jesus divinized the human nature he made his own, and by extension he began to sanctify the whole of creation. We see this demonstrated in his earthly life by signs and wonders, and by the fact that “power went out from him” (Luke 6:19) when others touched his garments. Entering into our reality, God again proclaims the world to be good, and begins to cleanse it of the spiritual pollution that has held it in bondage for so long (Rom 8:21). In Christ, every stage of human life is sanctified—from conception, to infancy, to youth, to adulthood. And likewise, the world he encounters is sanctified by his presence. We see this most clearly in the early Christian interpretation of Theophany, commemorating Christ’s baptism in the Jordan. For ancient peoples, water could symbolize either life or death: we need water to live, but often it becomes a destructive force in the form of storms, floods, and turbulent seas. It was also thought to be the abode of monsters and foul spirits who ruled over it. By entering into the waters of the Jordan, Jesus does not need to be cleansed, as he himself is the source of life and regeneration. Rather than being cleansed, he cleanses the waters, causing the pagan gods of the river and sea to turn back (see Psalm 113[114]:3). As St. Gregory of Nyssa preached, “For Jordan alone of rivers, receiving in itself the first-fruits of sanctification and benediction, conveyed in its channel to the whole world, as it were from some fount in the type afforded by itself, the grace of Baptism.”²⁹ Theophany shows us the Trinity

²⁷ *Glaphyra in Patrologia Graeca*. Ed. J. P. Migne. (Paris: 1857–1866), 69.560.

²⁸ Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Prayer during the Cherubic Hymn.

²⁹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on the Baptism of Christ in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 5:522.

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beginning to wash the world of corruption, an act made personally manifest in our own baptism, and also expressed through the blessing of Holy Water in the Church on January 6. This ongoing act of renewal will only come to fruition in the age to come, when a “new heaven and new earth” (Rev 21:1) will finally be revealed.

We witness this sanctification of the universe in a more personal way in the Divine Liturgy. At the consecration of the Eucharist, the presiding clergyman stands in the place of Christ the high priest, offering gifts on behalf of the people; and the Trinity receives this offering as a representation of our entire lives. Yet God does not need our gifts (he is free of all necessity). Rather, he blesses and sanctifies the bread and wine, changing them into his presence—the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. In this way, the Son of God is also “the one distributed” in the Eucharist.³⁰

In receiving these gifts, the faithful are united to God and each other in the most intimate manner: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the Blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the Body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread” (1 Cor 10:16–17). Thus, the Eucharist becomes the “medicine of immortality,” the means by which God’s eternal life is made real in the body and soul of a Christian.³¹ St. Irenaeus explains,



For we offer him of his own, announcing consistently the communion and union of the flesh and Spirit. Far as bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God is no longer common bread but the eucharist—consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly—so also our bodies, when they receive the eucharist, are no longer corruptible, but have the hope of the resurrection unto eternity.³²

It is in the midst of the Liturgy, reaching its climax with the reception of the sacrament, that the people of God participate in the priestly action of Jesus Christ.

Christ the Prophet

We read in Hebrews the following: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (1:1-2). Whereas in the Old Testament, the Word of God came to certain designated messengers who were charged with preaching to the people of God, now the Word

³⁰ Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Prayer during the Cherubic Hymn.

³¹ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians* in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Michael Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 151.

³² *Against Heresies* 4.18.5 in *Anti-Nicene Fathers: Fathers of the Third Century*, Vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff, (Edinburgh, 1890), 1:486.

himself, by whom the Father “spoke” the universe into being, has become flesh and spoken to us face to face. Jesus Christ is not just a prophet bearing the message of another, as God he is also the originator of that message. Through him we encounter the perfect disclosure of the Father. As St. John writes, “No one has seen God at any time [but] the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him” (John 1:18).³³

During his earthly life, Jesus preached to the people by his own authority. His message of selfless love and mercy went beyond the requirements of the Torah. Rather than abolishing the Law of Moses, he filled it to overflowing, pointing us beyond the letter and to its spirit. As a teacher, Jesus often came down to the level of his audience, telling parables using familiar agricultural imagery. Yet when dealing with hypocritical religious authorities, his words were sharp, reminiscent of the Old Testament prophets. These hard sayings of Jesus continue to challenge the hearer and are meant to push us out of our comfort zone. Whether gentle or firm, the words of the Savior are a necessary balm intended to impel us towards salvation.

With the advent of the Messiah, we enter into the fullness of God’s plan for man. He raised up Adam and Eve so that in, in them, we may be restored to our true purpose. And by sending the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, he enabled them to understand and live by the “law of the Spirit” (Rom 8:2) which is now written upon the heart of each one of the faithful (see Jer 31:33). This signifies a radical change in life as he or she passes-over from slavery to freedom, from death to life, from darkness to light. The proclamation of our redemption therefore is “good news” (gospel), the only message worthy of spreading to the four ends of the earth. Our encounter with the incarnate “Word of life” (1 John 1:1) through our experience in his body—the Church—is a continuation of the words and works of our Lord, which are carried forth by the lips of his people.

The Restoration of Our Calling

Now that the Messiah has re-established in himself the threefold calling of king, priest, and prophet, he enables his disciples to fulfill these roles by extension. St. Paul writes, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . .for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27–28). Through faith and baptism, we are united to him; and by his grace we make real the original vocation for which we were created. Just as he is called *Christos*—the Anointed One—so we became “little christs,” anointed and sealed by the gift of the Holy Spirit in the mystery of chrismation.³⁴ It is by the presence of the indwelling Spirit that God is able to empower his servants to act: “[F]or it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). In the theology

³³ The word translated “declared” in John 1:18 is *exēgēsato*, from which the English word “exegesis” (meaning “to interpret”) derives. So, the Son of God has literally “exegeted” the Father. In other words, we only know the Father as revealed through his Son.

³⁴ This is a popular phrase of unknown origin, but in modern times has been used by writers such as C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* and Fr Alexander Schmemmann in *Of Water and the Spirit*. The latter connects it directly with the Sacrament of Chrismation.

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of the Orthodox Church, this is referred to as *synergeia* (or “co-working” in 1 Cor 3:9), denoting the fact that God works in and through us only when we cooperate with him. To say that “God is selfless love” (1 John 4:8) is to say that he will never coerce or compel us to act. Indeed, he only invites and impels us towards what is good, true, and beautiful. It remains to us to respond to his call, and to invite his grace by aligning ourselves with his holy will.

The Old Man

In order to fulfill our vocation in Christ, we must first confront the unruly nature of Adam that wars against us. His disobedience, and the continual rebellion of his descendants, lives on in each of us. The root-cause of our sins continues to be self-love. On the most basic level, we seek our own survival. But even when these needs are met, we continue to pursue endless comforts and pleasures, placing ourselves above all others. Like Eve as she gazed at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, we desire that which is not ours, and so we snatch it for ourselves. Even after we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, we continue to struggle with “the old man” (Eph 4:22). St. Paul laments, “I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom 7:22–23).

In becoming a man, Jesus Christ “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:16). He encountered and defeated temptation, never giving into it or wavering in his response. When tempted three times by Satan after his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus reversed the threefold disobedience of Eve. Whereas she desired the fruit with her stomach, Christ responds, “Man shall not live by bread alone” (Luke 4:3–4); whereas she misused her senses by longing for the world (represented by the fruit), Christ rejects the world and all its fallen power (4:5–8); and whereas she listened to the serpent and desired the fruit to make her wise like God (thus exalting herself like Satan), Christ tells the devil, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God” (4:9–12). Having defeated the power of sin, Jesus then defeats death itself by his resurrection, destroying the unjust dominion of the evil one over God’s creatures. In Christ, we participate in this victory as he empowers us to overcome sin, corruption, and the devil. Yet, to invite his grace into our daily struggle with sin, we must strike a blow against “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16) through the practice of asceticism.

Asceticism

The term “asceticism” is derived from the Greek verb meaning “to train,” and referred to the rigorous exercises employed by athletes in preparation for competition. St. Paul says in Acts, “I myself always train [*askō*] to have a conscience without offense toward God and men” (24:16). Elsewhere, he describes the benefit of asceticism more clearly: “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1 Cor 9:27). The goal of such discipline is to curb our disorderly desires and redirect our spirit towards God. The three pillars of asceticism are fasting, prayer, and acts of mercy. Fasting strikes a blow at our most fundamental

bodily appetites by controlling when, what, and how much we eat. According to the *Teaching of the Twelve (Didache)*, Christians should fast at least twice weekly, on Wednesdays (the day of our Lord was betrayed) and Fridays (the day of the crucifixion). In addition, the Church practices longer periods of fasting throughout the year, including the Great Fast (Lent) in the spring. Fasting should always be united with prayer (*cf.* Mark 9:29). While fasting disciplines the body, prayer disciplines the mind and directs it away from the senses (the external world) and back towards God (who meets us in the interior “closet” of our hearts). The third component of asceticism is acts of mercy (*eleēmosynē*). Although this sometimes refers to almsgiving (monetary charity), more generally it signifies any selfless act performed for another. Such acts of mercy serve to turn our hearts away from self-love and pride, and toward love for our fellow human beings made in God’s image. St. John writes, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (1 John 4:20). Through acts of mercy, we learn the meaning of *agapē*, which is an action, not a sentiment.



In the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4–15), Christ tells us that it is only the good soil that is capable of receiving the word of God and bearing fruit. This is not an innate condition, or we would not be held accountable for the outcome. Rather, the Church Fathers understand the work of asceticism as the necessary preparation to respond to God. When we combine the power of fasting, prayer, and acts of mercy in our regular spiritual endeavors, we till the soil of the heart. This is the way to reject the ploy of the serpent that deceived our first parents, and to enable us then to grow into the image of Jesus Christ, our perfect King, Priest, and Prophet.

Becoming a King

Disciples of Christ are summoned to a lofty position: to rule as kings and queens by his side. “If we endure, we shall also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12). But if this speaks to the glory of the age to come, the apostle also presents a present paradox: the Father has already “raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6). The key to this mystery is our participation in the ongoing reign of the Messiah. By allowing him to reign in our hearts, we in turn share in his eternal reign. When we humble ourselves and submit to his will, he exalts us and appoints us heirs to his Kingdom. This is demonstrated clearly through the “Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee” (Luke 18:9–14). The self-righteous Pharisee, in praising himself and insulting the publican, is condemned by God; while the publican is vindicated by God in response

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to his sincere repentance. The proud man is brought low, while the humble man is exalted.

Therefore, the Kingdom our Lord has established is not of this world, and so is not shaped by fallen human reasoning and the will to power. Human society fabricates a false hierarchy structured according to prowess and power. And most often, those who rise to the top act not out of charity, but out of selfish ambition. However, Christ inverts this pyramid when he reveals that the first shall be last and the last first. Rather than endorsing the human saga of conflict and competition, the Lord teaches us to lead through service to others. In responding to the ambitions of his disciples, he asserts,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:25–28).

The ultimate expression of this service to all is Christ's self-offering on the cross, which St. Paul also points to as the evidence of God's love for humanity (*cf.* Rom 5:8).

In order to fulfill our personal royal vocation, we must understand not only how to restore right relationships with other persons, but also how to interact with the entire cosmos that God has entrusted to our care. When Adam and Eve were tasked with cultivating and protecting the garden, God made clear that it did not belong to them. They were to be stewards, acting in his stead; but as they labored, he would also provide for them from the fruits of the garden. If we desire to restore such a relationship with creation we must once more perceive that everything belongs to God. "What do you have that you did not receive?" St. Paul asks (1 Cor 4:7). Everything we have (our life and our health) and everything we receive (either as the rewards of our just labors, or as a gift from others) is indeed a gift from the Lord. And since we do not possess it, we will be called to account for how we took care of each of these gifts entrusted to us. This includes our relationship with the natural world. Christians are commanded to respect and care for the environment and animal kingdom, always bearing in mind that we do this on behalf of God who created all.

A common motif in the New Testament is that of wealth and poverty. There is a tension between the sin of greed and materialism (*mammon*), and its opposite virtue, non-acquisitiveness.³⁵ From a Christian perspective, scarcity is not really a problem related to economics, it is the outcome of a spiritual affliction. Fear constricts the heart and leads to greed. Selfishness poisons the soul and produces misers. But with Christ we are promised "life most abundant" (John 10:10). The breath of the Spirit looses the heart and awakens it to God's bounty. The only appropriate response to so great a gift is

³⁵ Non-acquisitiveness is the idea that Christians should not be enslaved to the material world. In other words, there is a danger in being addicted to the material world and all of its comforts and pleasures. As it is sometimes said, we are to hold the world in an open hand, not clenching it, but rather allowing it to be a blessing for whoever is in need.

absolute generosity. Because everything belongs to the Lord, we must learn to stop grasping for it and instead to give freely. “So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). While the Law of Moses established duties of tithing (giving a tenth of one’s livelihood), the Gospel teaches us to give our entire life to God. This should be reflected by our magnanimity and hospitality. As Christ makes clear, we shall be judged by how we share our treasures, time, and talents with others, whether it be our brethren in the Church, our neighbors, or strangers in need (Matt 25:31–46).

Becoming a Priest

Intercession and Worship

As every priest is called to restore and preserve the bond between the Creator and creation, so every Christian assumes this vocation by participating in the priestly intercession of Jesus Christ, our true high priest. This is the second aspect of the “royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9) that the faithful enter into by means of their baptism and anointing with holy chrism. The first way we accomplish this is by continual praise and worship of God. It is not as though God needs our worship, as he is beyond all necessity. For one who loves God, it should be a natural outpouring of gratitude for his gifts of life and love. Even the universe hymns the glory of God: the psalmist writes, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1); and in the prayers for blessing holy water we proclaim, “The sun sings to you, the moon glorifies you.” Likewise, the Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy reminds us that all the angelic hosts forever surround the throne of God chanting of his glory.³⁶ These angelic choirs were of old joined by the human voices of the Levites, who assisted the priests in the liturgy of the tabernacle and Temple. And now, in the age of the new covenant, Christians mystically unite their song of praise to that of all creation, both visible and invisible.

Thanksgiving

Not only does a priest bless the Name of God by sending up glory, he also calls down God’s blessing upon creation. This is truly possible now that Christ has poured out sanctification upon the entire cosmos, hence restoring the goodness previously corrupted by sin and demonic powers. “For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim 4:4–5). In a general sense, every member of the Church can and should “in everything give thanks” (1 Thess 5:18); but more specifically, we are called to receive the world gifted to us and offer it up to God in thanksgiving so that he may bless and sanctify it, and so that we may in turn employ it for its right purpose—the food we eat, the tools we use, even the currency we spend. Through the union of all the faithful

³⁶ The “Anaphora” (meaning, “to offer up”) is the central part of the Divine Liturgy, in which the celebrant offers up the gifts of bread and wine to God, asking him to sanctify them and return them to us as his true presence (the Body and Blood of Christ, the Eucharist).

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as Church, the Body of Christ, all of creation is restored and brought back into the dominion of God.

Laying on of Hands

The most specific way that we see the priesthood enacted in the Church is through the sacrament of “laying on of hands” (*cheirotomia*) or ordination. As in the days of the Aaronic priesthood, only a small number of qualified men are called to serve in the Temple and offer the bloodless sacrifice “on behalf of all and for all.”³⁷ The biblical symbolism of male and female complementarity finds its fulfillment here, as the priest represents Adam who was appointed to serve sacrificially in God’s paradisiacal temple; and Eve (*Zōē* in Greek, the one who brings “life”) assists through constant prayerful intercession. Although male and female, in this context, fulfill different tasks, their spiritual labor comes together in their service to God. As Jesus Christ is our high priest (who, though a representative of all human beings, also assumed the physical, biological reality of a male), so his Mother the Theotokos is our prayerful intercessor (representing the complimentary female role of supporting the priestly vocation by prayer). These roles, illustrating a spiritual hierarchy of masculine and feminine are likewise imaged in marriage (see Eph 5:22–33, which is read at all Orthodox weddings). This spiritual hierarchy is also reflected in the local parish presided over by the presbyter when he is assisted by his wife, the presbytera.³⁸ Such complementarity is not a denigration of one sex or the other, but both man and woman are equally beloved by God and redeemed in his Son.



Living Sacrifices

Although only some are called to be priests, all are called to offer their own lives to God. “I beseech you therefore, brethren,” St. Paul writes, “by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom 12:1). To live according to *agape* is to live self-sacrificially, always obeying those twin commandments of love for God and love for our fellowman. “Love is a holy state of the soul,” St. Maximus writes, “disposing it to value the knowledge of God above all created things.”³⁹ And he adds, “He who loves God will certainly love his

³⁷ Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.

³⁸ The term “presbyter,” meaning “elder,” is the official title of a priest. In the Byzantine tradition, the wife of a priest is called “presbytera,” pointing to her role in assisting him in his ministry. In Romanian, the priest’s wife is called “preoteasa,” and in Arabic “khouria,” meaning the same as “presbytera.” In the Russian tradition, the priest’s wife is called “matushka,” meaning “little mother,” showing again her complementarity with the “batushka” (father).

³⁹ Maximus the Confessor, *Four Centuries on Love* 1.1, 164.

neighbor as well.”⁴⁰ St. Dorotheus of Gaza illustrates this dynamic using a geometrical image:

Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. . . Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center; the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of men. To the degree that the saints enter into the things of the Spirit, they desire to come near to God; and in proportion to their progress in the things of the Spirit, they do in fact come close to God and to their neighbor. The closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another.⁴¹

Like traveling down the spokes of a wagon wheel towards the hub, we simultaneously learn to love our fellowman as our love for God grows.

Becoming a Prophet

The responsibility to proclaim God’s message—to be a prophet—is obligatory upon all. Every member of the Church is exhorted to embody the word, and to “speak...the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). We accomplish this in many ways: when we share the Gospel with those who have not heard; when we declare God’s justice by standing up for the weak; or when we speak of God’s mercy and forgiveness to those in pain. In every instance, our words must be carefully conceived and delivered, since our Lord warns us that we will be judged for every idle syllable (Matt 12:36). The saints recommend that, when in doubt, silence is preferred. And when it is necessary to speak, our thoughts should first be sifted through prayer, and tempered by the Holy Spirit: “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one” (Col 4:6). This stands in stark contrast to the rampant vulgarity so common today.

The parish priest is entrusted with leading his parishioners to the Kingdom of God; and so he is called to fulfill a prophetic task in his preaching and spiritual guidance. In particular, the sacrament of confession is an opportunity for God to speak through the priest for the sake of the penitent. For this reason, the priest is called a spiritual father. He is a shepherd and therefore accountable for their salvation, which is a reflection of his love and care for his flock.

Monks and nuns are also called to fulfill a prophetic calling within the Church. Following the model of St. John the Baptist, they spend their days in asceticism and contemplation. And gradually, in time, God may reveal himself to them and initiate them into the deep mysteries of faith. Yet this is not for their own benefit, but so that they can arise and go—to preach the word, find the lost, and bind the broken. St. Seraphim of Sarov was one such monk. After years of prayer, fasting, and solitude, God instructed him to return to the world and minister to his people through spiritual guidance (and occasionally through miracles). Although such prophets are difficult to find in our time, Orthodox

⁴⁰ Maximus the Confessor, *Four Centuries on Love*, 1.23.

⁴¹ Dorotheus of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric Wheeler (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 2008), 138–9.

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monasteries around the world continue to provide a path to holiness that produces luminaries for all our benefit.

Conclusion

The history of our salvation is a tale of redemption from bondage. Man was enslaved to death, sin, and the devil. He disdained and lost his threefold vocation as king, priest, and prophet, and was thereby cast out into the world. But in Christ, we are set free and restored to paradise. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to fulfill our calling. In this way, we become sons of the Father, and inheritors of the Kingdom.

Chapter 11 The History of the Church

The Church as Israel

In one sense, the Church of Christ did not come into being on the day of Pentecost. That is because the Church of Christ is the Israel of God that accepted its destiny in Christ and embraced the promises which God made to his people and fulfilled through Jesus—and Israel began long before the day of Pentecost circa 33 A.D. God had promised to bless Israel, and after their return from exile, to bring the Messiah and to establish His Kingdom on earth. The Church of the first century was that portion of Israel which believed in Jesus and through which God fulfilled his promise to bless and glorify his people. It constituted the faithful remnant, the true Israel.

The history of the Church, therefore, properly begins with the call of Abraham and God's promise to him that through his family, all the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen 12:1–3; Gal 3:14). It was on the day of Pentecost that Israel began to be glorified by him and began its work of blessing all the world's nations.

The identity of the Church with true Israel is sometimes obscured by the overwhelming predominance of Gentiles within the Church. One therefore hears of the so-called supersessionist theology which teaches that the Gentiles in the Church have replaced (Jewish) Israel as the people of God. It is true that because of the hard hearts of many in the synagogue, Paul said that he was turning to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46). And it is true that the Law fulfilled its divinely appointed role as a pedagogue to lead Israel to Christ, and that Judaism as a religion was therefore now obsolete (Gal 3:24; Heb 8:13). Yet even after Paul turned away from the hard-hearted Jews of Pisidian Antioch, he continued to preach the Gospel to other Jews in their synagogues, offering the Gospel to the Jew first, and also to the Greek (Rom 1:16). And Israel as a people still have a fundamental role to play in God's true vine, for Jewish people who come to faith in Christ will be grafted back into that Vine, signaling the end of the age and bringing blessing to the whole world.

Paul's teaching is clear. The Church has not replaced Israel. The Church *is* Israel, the faithful remnant in whom the Messianic promises for blessing Israel would be fulfilled. The cross and resurrection of Christ have radically re-configured and re-defined membership in God's people. Formerly, membership in Israel was expressed through circumcision and keeping the Mosaic laws. Now it is expressed through baptism and discipleship to Jesus. That is why Paul called the Church "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16 and "the commonwealth of Israel" in Ephesians 2:12. This is the reason that St. John (or rather the Lord, speaking through John as prophet) declared that those in the synagogue of Smyrna, who were persecuting the church there, were lying when they said that they were Jews (Rev 2:9). The true Jews and members of Israel were the Christians, whether they came from Jewish or Gentile parents.

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The quarrel of the Church with the synagogue was therefore an in-house Jewish quarrel, a disagreement over what now constituted membership in Israel after the death and glorification of Jesus the Messiah. The apostles' contention was that the Jews which rejected Christ thereby forfeited their right to be called true Jews or to be considered a part of his people. The death of Jesus as Messiah radically changed everything, relativizing the Law and reconfiguring Israel's destiny. The glory that was promised by the prophets had indeed come with Jesus, but that glory was not to be realized nationally. Israel was not to be glorified as a nation, but rather as a transnational people in the glorified Messiah.

The Martyric Church

If the first Christians imagined that the fulfillment of God's promises to bless his people and glorify them in the world meant that they would experience no opposition, they were soon taught otherwise. The Lord Himself warned them of this, saying, "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20), and the persecution which engulfed the infant Church after the day of Pentecost abundantly fulfilled his words (Acts 4:5–31, 5:17–39, 8:3). As first the persecution came from the Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Romans functioned as rescuers of the Christians. But soon enough, the Romans themselves also turned against the Christians, and the Church found itself under threat from all sides.

The first fierce persecution from the Romans came at the hands of the emperor Nero, after the great fire in Rome in the sixth decade of the first century. The Christians were commonly thought by Roman society at large to be polluted wretches, and thus were an obvious target, as Nero arrested and killed Christians in the area around Rome—a persecution which claimed the lives of Peter and Paul.

Soon enough, however, the scope of the persecution widened, and Christians throughout the entire empire were in danger. They were universally hated, and subject to legislation outlawing their assemblies and threatening their very existence. The persecution heated up so that by the time of the emperor Diocletian at the end of the first century, Christians began to live under threat of arrest, exile, or worse.



The reasons for the "halo of hatred around the Church of God"¹ were many and varied. The whole of society, education, and culture in the Roman world were built upon the foundation of the worship of the pagan gods—a worship which affected everything, including such everyday things such as the meat sold in the market (see 1 Cor 8-10). Christians would have nothing to do with such idolatry and refused to eat the food set before them, if they knew it had been offered to

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1926), 189.

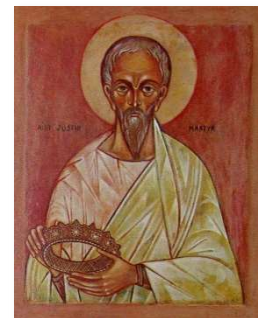
idols (1 Cor 10:28–29). This meant that their daily existence was dramatically impacted by their faith, and they soon had a reputation as a group that hated their neighbours and the society around them.

Furthermore, the comparative secrecy of their assemblies helped perpetuate misunderstandings and further contribute to their bad reputation. Talk about “eating the Body and drinking the Blood” (i.e., receiving the Eucharist) and about Jesus being the *pais theou* (the child/servant of God²) led to the misunderstanding that the Church was engaging in cannibalizing infants. Talk about the “brothers and sisters” exchanging “the kiss” (the Kiss of Peace) led to accusations that the Church engaged in incest. No wonder the Christians in those days were hated.

The persecution of the Church was sporadic but sustained. The laws decreed that Christians were not allowed to exist, but the enforcement of the laws depended upon circumstances, the mood of the mob, and the clemency of the local rulers. But whether Christians were arrested, tortured, and killed or not, the threat of such things always hung over their heads. The Church of the first three hundred years was a martyric Church, a Church in which baptism and attendance at the Eucharist could lead to exile, torture, or death.

Many in fact did suffer the ultimate penalty for their faith, and the Church from the start honored them as the truest of disciples, the athletes, and heroes of Christ. The confessors (who continued to confess their faith even under torture) and the martyrs (who died for Christ) were held in the highest honor. The stories of the martyrs were recited and shared, and the anniversaries of their martyrdoms (called their “birthdays”, since they were born above in heaven on that day) were commemorated every year, if possible, by serving the Eucharist above their tombs. After Pascha, the feasts of the martyrs were the earliest commemorations on the Church’s developing calendar.

As a response to such persecutions, a number of Christians undertook the task of writing to defend the Church, denying the charges that Christians were doing anything wrong or criminal, and explaining how the worship of the Christian God was reasonable and good, and further explaining why the Christians refused to worship the traditional gods of the pagans. These men were known as “the Apologists,” since they offered an *apologia* or defense of the faith. Justin, writing and teaching in Rome, offered two written defenses of Christianity, as well as an explanation (in his *Dialogue with Trypho*) of why Christianity was preferable to Judaism, the other major non-pagan form of monotheism in the Roman Empire that was seeking converts. Justin was martyred for his faith in 165 A.D. Another Christian who aggressively defended the faith was Tertullian, writing from North Africa somewhat later.



² Compare the use of the phrase in Acts 4:27; the King James Version renders it God’s “holy Child Jesus.”

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As well as threats from outside the Church, the faith was threatened by error from within. This included threats from some Christians whose explanation of Christianity distorted the Scriptures and incorporated the Church's proclamation of Jesus into alien systems of thought. Those teaching these distortions were many and varied, and usually are known under the general term "Gnostics", those with special and secret *gnosis*, or knowledge. What almost all the Gnostic systems had in common was a rejection of the goodness of the created world and a rejection of the creator God of the Old Testament as the one true God.

Christians like Irenaeus, teaching in Lyons, outlined the various competing Gnostic systems and argued against them in his massive work *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus focused upon the apostolic tradition of teaching that could be found in all the major episcopal centers (such as Rome) as the standard, condensing that teaching into a canon or rule of faith. He died in the year 202.

The first three centuries were times of immense conflict, as the Church battled enemies without and within. There were also times of growth, as the number of Christians increased dramatically despite the persecutions, so that Tertullian observed that the blood of the martyred Christians functioned like seed for growth.³ The growth was most dramatic in the cities. The Christians were everywhere and were impossible to ignore. At the beginning of the fourth century, a determined attempt was made by the emperor to eliminate them from the life of the empire in a long persecution stretching over a decade. It was the climax and culmination of a long struggle.

The Peace of Constantine

Since it was the emperor's task as *Pontifex Maximus*⁴ to preside over the State's devoted worship of the gods, it was thought by all the Christians, even apart from the imperially-sponsored persecutions, that the office of emperor was incompatible with the practice of the Christian faith, and that a Christian emperor was an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. That is why Constantine appeared to the Christians like a thunderclap coming from a clear and cloudless sky.

Whether converted to Christ earlier in life or shortly before entering Rome in triumph in 312, it soon became clear that Emperor Constantine believed in the Christian God and intended to favour the Church. He confirmed the cessation of persecution and allowed the properties of the Church to be returned. He and his immediate dynasty championed the Christian cause, even calling the bishops to Nicaea to sort out the confusion caused by the teaching of Arius and promising to back the official teaching of the Church with governmental support. With Constantine as emperor, a new day dawned for the Church.

Christians at the time wondered whether their new good fortune wasn't perhaps too good to last, and with the accession of Julian as emperor, it seemed as if their prosperity

³ Tertullian, *Apology*, chapter 50.

⁴ The Latin term for "supreme pontiff", the chief high priest and most important position in the ancient Roman religion.

under Constantine and his sons was indeed just a passing phase. Emperor Julian detested the Christians and was determined to turn back the cultural clock and restore the unquestioned ascendancy of the old pagan religion. His sudden death on the field of battle in 363 after a reign of only twenty months brought his pagan agenda to a decisive end. All subsequent emperors would be Christian.

The Roman empire was now officially under the heavenly protection of Christ, who ruled through the might of his chosen servant, the emperor. As the Church rapidly grew in importance, government involvement in Church affairs also grew apace. The government's determination to use force to root out heresy and enforce an imperially-backed Orthodoxy was to have both positive and negative effects—especially when the bishops did not actually profess the Orthodox⁵ faith.

For good or for ill (or both) the Church would experience government involvement in almost every aspect of its life. The emperor was heavily involved in the selection of bishops. And as government-facilitated wealth poured into the church, bishops became very competitive, with rich and important men jockeying for important episcopal positions and those important bishops striving to gain ever more power and influence. From being the targeted leaders of a hunted and persecuted sect, bishops came to be the controllers of wealth and power. The situation was not conducive to finding the best men as leaders, as the good leaders among the bishops recognized and often lamented.

But for all the drawbacks of official government support, the Church under a co-operative Roman State was able to do much good. In particular, such support helped to facilitate the Church's aggressive evangelism, and in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Isa 60:1–3), many people came to faith in Christ, abandoning their idols and worshipping the one true God. That included a mission to the northern peoples of the Rus at the end of the tenth century, through the missionary labours of such men as Cyril and Methodius.

The Church during these centuries flourished. Great and beautiful cathedrals were built and adorned with icons and mosaics, and there was an explosion of hymnography. The Christians abundantly proved themselves capable of producing a culture and an aesthetic as fine and even finer than pagan Roman aristocrats produced before. Hellenism became Christianized.

It was during this time that the Church held long and fruitful (and often heated) debates about the exact nature of Christ. Was He truly God in the same sense that the Father was God? Or was He only “like” God? And was He truly as human as we are? And how should one understand the union in him of the divine and the human? These questions were examined and argued over in a series of councils from the fourth to



⁵ For example, when Arianism and Iconoclasm were politically ascendant.

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eighth centuries. The councils, whose results were finally accepted by the majority of the Church throughout the world, were called “ecumenical councils”, and these set the standard for doctrinal orthodoxy ever after. The most significant product of the first ecumenical council was the Nicene Creed, which contained the essentials of the Orthodox faith, including the beliefs about God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and the Church. All of the ecumenical councils were held in the east. The results of the councils’ findings had the force of law through imperial support. Dissent from these findings was heresy and was disallowed in a Christian state, wherein the Church and secular worlds had become fused.

These centuries also saw the rise, flourishing, and eventual triumph of monasticism. Thoughtful men and women with money and leisure often went on prayerful retreat in solitude on their properties, removed from the bustle of the town. In the fourth century, beginning most prominently with St. Anthony, Christians in Egypt went further out into the desert, so that the desert became a veritable city, populated by those who sought God in solitude and who pushed the boundaries of their earthly limitations. In places such as Constantinople, urban monasteries arose, where the monastics were very much involved in the society around them, and their contribution to Church life was invaluable. The eastern part of the Roman empire flourished under the cross of Christ.

Schism with the West

In 330 A.D., the Emperor Constantine moved the capital of the empire to the newly created city of Constantinople (on the site of the older city of Byzantium), which was called the “New Rome.” This decision was to have far-reaching consequences. As the new seat of government, the city grew to have increased importance in the Church as well, changing the status quo. The bishop of Alexandria formerly had the second place among the bishops, after the bishop of Rome. Now the second place belonged to Constantinople.

The Roman empire came to have two loci of power, one in the west (centered in Rome), and one in the east (centered in Constantinople). Eventually, given the vast distances separating west from east, the western churches and eastern churches came to live their lives in comparative isolation from each other—distance being accentuated by difference of language. St. Augustine, for example, a giant among the bishops of the west, could speak no Greek. That meant that efforts among bishops as they strove to reach theological consensus over matters of Christology were greatly hampered.

Eventually the east and west grew even further apart, and with the effective collapse of Roman political power and stability in the west, the western churches were obliged to find such stability as they could among the new non-Roman rulers. The Roman emperor in Constantinople was too far away to provide the needed stability and security; other arrangements would have to be made. It was because of this new situation that the bishop of Rome threw in his political lot with the so-called “Holy Roman Empire” of Charlemagne and his successors.

Within this new situation, the city of Rome and its bishop had a unique role. In the eastern region, Rome, though having the primacy, was but one apostolic church among others, and the bishops of Alexandria, Constantinople, Antioch, and Jerusalem all had their roles to play in reaching a universal consensus. In the west, Rome stood alone, towering over the other episcopal sees. At length, the prestige and authority of the see of Rome came to count for more than consensus. Bluntly put, the bishop of Rome became accustomed to being obeyed. It worked well enough (more or less) in the west, where Rome provided a much-needed haven of stability. In the east, the results of Rome's self-promotion were more mixed.

The churches of the east and west disagreed and quarrelled over many things, some more significant than others. They came to differ over the content of the Creed, with Rome (after resisting the innovation for some time) eventually reciting the Creed with the additional word "*filioque*" inserted, thereby declaring that the Spirit proceeded from the Father *and the Son*. East and west also differed and fought over liturgical usages, such as the possibility of a married clergy, and the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist.

Underlying all these quarrels and impeding their speedy resolution, were differing models of how such decisions were to be reached, though this insight about the underlying problem was not fully recognized at the time. In the west the authority of the bishop of Rome was seen as key to unity, whereas in the east the churches continued to use the older model of unity through consensus. This underlying and unacknowledged difference expressed itself in a quarrel between the bishops of Rome and Constantinople in 1054 so that those bishops broke communion with each other. Though not constituting a schism between the entire west and the entire east, the date 1054 came to have symbolic value, expressing the definitive break.

From the beginning of the second millennium onwards, the churches of east and west ceased to regard themselves as belonging to the same family. East and west lived their lives in virtual isolation from each other, scarcely speaking to one another as they did formerly, and understanding each other even less.



The Rise of Islam and the Fall of the East

In the early sixth century, a warlord, claiming prophetic authority, by the name of Mohammed arose in Arabia. Drawing upon the venerable Arabic tradition of inter-tribal raiding (later termed *jihad*) his military forces were soon masters of Arabia, and they began to push for military victory and plunder further afield. In a political landscape where the Romans were weakened by decades of war, Mohammed and his forces were spectacularly successful, and within a hundred years the armies of Islam (as the new movement was soon called) had conquered vast sections of the Roman world. Westward expansion was halted by Charles Martel in 732 at the Battle of Tours (in modern France). Much of the Christian east was swept away, submerged under the tidal wave of Islamic advance. In some places (such as Egypt) the rule of the Byzantine emperor was so

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resented that the Islamic forces were welcomed as liberators. The Islamic power tightened its grip, and many Christians converted to Islam to take advantage of the benefits that came with being a Muslim.

As a world power, the Islamic state reached political stability and coexisted with the other world powers, though never renouncing the ultimate goal of world domination. Atrocities in the Holy Land against the Church of the Resurrection (also known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre) provoked a series of military attempts by western kings to overthrow Islamic forces in the Middle East and retake the Christian sites. A number of these so-called Crusades were held, and for a while the Holy City of Jerusalem was indeed retaken by western Christians. But the project was too expensive to maintain long term, and eventually Islamic dominance reasserted itself.

In the mid-fifteenth century, the head of the Islamic state began yet another attempt to conquer the Christian capital of Constantinople—by then the city was much reduced and standing almost alone in the east, like an island in the sea of Islam. After a long siege, the city fell to the Muslim armies in 1453, bringing to an end the long rule of a Christian Roman Empire. Christians throughout the east now had to learn how to live with a reduced and subservient status as *dhimmis*, “protected peoples”, under their Islamic overlords. The Christian west remained free, as did the Christian north, in the land of the Rus. But the Christian east had fallen, and along with the ancient category and rank of martyr, a new category was emerging—that of “new martyr”, those who had perished for their Christian confession of Christ under Islam.

Byzantium after Byzantium: The Modern Age

The long and final fall of the Christian Roman empire that came with the overthrow of Constantinople did not, of course, spell the end of the Christian Church in the east. As peoples grew out of the remnants of Byzantium and began to form new nations, the Church in the east grew along with them as part of their national DNA. These new nations modeled themselves on the former Roman empire, so that the churches within these new nations became state churches, effectively bearing and expressing national identity.

The legitimacy of the new states came to be symbolically expressed by the independence of the churches within them, as those churches sought for (or sometimes unilaterally declared) independence from Constantinople or autocephaly. What were once distinct groupings of bishops now became political powers, as the eastern churches plodded along into the modern age.

The modern age suffered a tremendous explosion of violence and bloodshed when the Communist Revolution erupted in Russia, convulsing the country, persecuting the churches there, and threatening to become dominant throughout the world. Bishops, priests, monastics, and laity in Russia and the lands around it suffered exile, torture, and death in numbers



St Tikhon of Moscow

surpassing even those in the pre-Constantinian days of the pagan Roman empire. The Communist boot settled upon the land of the Rus and all eastern Europe, drawing an iron curtain across its borders, and cutting them off from the west. The oppression would last a lifetime, until Communism collapsed under its own weight, and the nations suffering oppression were, one by one, able to shake themselves free.

It was after this that the churches which had suffered oppression under the Communist regimes began to regain their strength. Russia, especially, rebounded with vitality and renewed vigour, building churches and monasteries, and beginning the massive task of educating and catechizing an entire population left in theological ignorance after decades of repression and a church in chains. In this situation of new-found freedom, the various Orthodox churches began to again find their voice and interact with the other Christians churches.

Ecumenism

The so-called “Ecumenical Movement” began with the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, at which various Protestant churches discussed the difficulties on the mission field which were caused by the divisions among the Protestant churches. A desire for unity was in the air, and in 1920, Ecumenical Patriarch Germanus V wrote an encyclical “to the Churches of Christ Everywhere,” proposing a forum and fellowship for the churches similar to the League of Nations. The divisions characterizing the Christian world were felt to be a scandal, and an impediment to the Christian effort to convert the world.

Eventually, the World Council of Churches (or the WCC) would be formed in 1948 with a view to finding unity among the churches confessing a belief in the Trinity. Its stated aim was to be “a community of churches on the way to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ. It seeks to advance towards this unity, as Jesus prayed for his followers, “so that the world may believe” (John 17:21).⁶

Orthodox involvement in the ecumenical movement has proven to be very controversial among some. Nonetheless, dialogues and conversations continue to be held at an official level, though these arguably have little effect on the day-to-day life of anyone involved in the dialogues. The Orthodox Church continues to maintain, even through its involvement in such dialogues, that it is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and all other non-Orthodox bodies are separated from it.

⁶ The World Council of Churches, “What is the World Council of Churches?” Accessed 10/10 2022.
<https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc>.

How Orthodoxy Understands Other Christian Communities⁷

The history of Christianity in the east and west is a narrative of growth and schism. From its beginnings in Jerusalem and Palestine, the Church spread into the Gentile world. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and the final destruction of the Jewish state after the Bar-Kokhba revolt in 132 A.D., the Church began to consist more and more of Gentiles. It spread throughout the Gentile world, establishing major centers in the east and the west, and even beyond the Roman empire in the cities of the Persians.

The Church quickly differentiated itself from those who obviously co-opted and distorted their message (such as the Gnostic groups) and eventually expelled those within the Church whose understanding of Christ was seriously and dangerously in error (such as the Arians). Though the churches of the east and west maintained cultural and linguistic differences, all Christians considered themselves as belonging to one and the same Church. The center of gravity of theological creativity, and of heretical activity, remained largely in the east, and so, it was in the east that all the ecumenical councils were held, under the watchful eye of the emperor, who resided in Constantinople.

As the centuries progressed, the civil division of the empire into western and eastern parts, along with the political instability in the west, furthered an unintended estrangement between the eastern and the western churches. Eventually the churches of the west came to accept certain developments, such as the exaggerated role of the papacy and the Filioque, which led to a mutual alienation from the churches of the east that did not share these innovative developments. The alienation was exacerbated, first by the notorious “Bull of Excommunication” laid on the altar of Hagia Sophia in 1054 by Cardinal Humbert of the Roman church, and then sealed by the western Crusader’s sack of Constantinople in 1204. By the thirteenth century, the Orthodox east and the Catholic west were no longer in communion.

The developments in the Catholic west which the east found problematic were considered problematic by some in the west also, and in the sixteenth century these problems reached the boiling point, resulting in the Protestant Reformation. There was a large-scale rebellion against the Pope and in Roman Catholicism. Some groups rebelled more radically than others, but all the dissenting groups were united in their emphatic rejection of the papacy and key aspects of Roman Catholic teaching.

If the Roman Catholics were separated from the Orthodox Church, the Protestants were doubly so, though the bewildering varieties of Protestantism meant that some Protestants were more inimical to Orthodoxy than others. Some members of the Church of England, for example, appreciated aspects of Orthodoxy, while members of the Anabaptist groups repudiated almost everything that the Orthodox held dear. For the Orthodox themselves, all these western events from the Great Schism onward, occurred

⁷ The use of the term “churches” here does not speak to the issue of ecclesial status of groups outside of Orthodoxy. The term is used here in the same sense that it had in the encyclical of Patriarch Germanus V (see above).

outside its canonical boundaries, and were happening to those already in a state of separation.

The Orthodox Church knows itself to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church confessed in the Nicene Creed, and regards other Christian communities as separated from it. The Church cannot cease to be one any more than it can cease to be holy, catholic, or apostolic, for if it does, it ceases to be the Church. Those Christian bodies which have drifted apart from or deliberately left the Orthodox Church have departed from the Church's sacramental unity and should return.

Some communities are closer to Orthodoxy than others, especially the non-Chalcedonian churches⁸, such as the Coptic, Ethiopian, and Armenian, etc. Some Orthodox theologians believe that the difference between our Christologies is merely verbal, and not substantive, and that both the Chalcedonian Orthodox and the non-Chalcedonians are saying the same thing in different words; on the other hand, we still must acknowledge their rejection of the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's two natures. These matters require attention to discern the compatibility of our respective Christologies and to deal with the matter of saints from one group which have been excommunicated by the other.

The Roman Catholic Church represents more of a theological challenge. Even though Rome no longer requires some of its churches to recite the Creed with the addition of the *filioque*, this does not solve the theological differences posed by the *filioque*. Additionally, Roman Catholic insistence on a papacy with universal, ordinary jurisdiction (as defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870) remains a significant impediment to unity. The Orthodox have long agreed that in a united Church, the bishop of Rome would have the kind of primacy that was exercised by him in the early centuries of the Church. But a bishop of Rome with authority to unilaterally define faith and morals when speaking *ex cathedra* is unacceptable to the Orthodox. Thus, the Orthodox confirm Rome's potential primacy but not supremacy. For progress to be made in re-establishing sacramental communion, the Roman Catholic Church would have to renounce the dogma of papal authority as promulgated at Vatican I. However, as recently as 1995 in the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, such central papal authority was explicitly reaffirmed. Doctrinal papal proclamations such as the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary and her Assumption as defined by the Roman Catholic Church remain problematic for Orthodox Christians. And among other issues, the problem of the Eastern Churches in communion with Rome is particularly troublesome. Other practical issues, such as the Roman Catholic approach to annulment and remarriage, and the wide-spread imposition of the *Novus Ordo* Mass, with its jettisoning of the much older worship forms and fasting disciplines, make any discussion of unity problematic.

The extreme varieties of Protestantism make generalization all but impossible. Very conservative Protestant churches may hold some traditional doctrines and ethics but

⁸ The churches which do not accept the findings of the Council of Chalcedon which met in 451 and affirmed that Christ had two natures united in one person.

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without any understanding of the mystery of the Church. On the other hand, the doctrinally revisionist and socially “progressive” Protestant churches have jettisoned not only most Orthodox dogmas, but also have enthusiastically embraced the ordination of women, the marriage of homosexuals, and the promotion of abortion. Additionally, the rise of so-called non-denominational Evangelicals, who are very difficult to definitively describe, requires nuanced responses from Orthodox Christians who seek to make the apostolic Faith known to them. In the last 50 years, some Evangelicals have been more open to the discovery of apostolic and Orthodox Christianity and discussions with these have often proven fruitful.

How Orthodoxy Understands Non-Christian Religions

Non-Christian religions are quite varied, so one must have varied approaches to them. Here we discuss Judaism, the various polytheistic faiths (such as Hinduism), and Islam. What all these faiths share in common is that the Church calls them all to join in the saving worship of the Trinity, to accept Christian baptism, and to live as part of the Church.

Regarding Judaism, Israel was called by God to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and to welcome the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that “all nations” would be blessed through that Messiah. Without such acceptance of Jesus as the Christ, as St Paul says, the natural Jewish branches of the tree of Israel “will be cut off,” even while Gentile “wild branches” are “grafted in” (Romans 11:16-24). Instead, most Jews in the first and second centuries rejected Jesus as a deceiver, and opposed the movement that He began, regarding it as heretical, dangerous, and blasphemous. The Jewish people continued in this unfortunate trajectory for centuries afterward.

Today, some Jews regard Jesus as a good Jew whom his followers misunderstood and deified in a way that He never intended. However, the classic and more negative assessment of Jesus may be found in the Talmud and in the polemical recounting of his life, the *Toledoth Yeshu* (The “Stories of Jesus”). It was this older, anti-Christian Judaism that the Church Fathers knew, including Judaizing and proselytization of Christians, and against which they reacted.

Here we must admit that, in the past, those who named themselves Christian committed terrible atrocities against Jewish people, most recently in the Holocaust during the Second World War. The Church teaches that such actions against Jewish people, or any non-Christians, is immoral, sinful, and wrong, and has no place among those who claim to follow Christ.

Instead, Christians believe that God called Israel to accept Jesus as the Messiah, and the Church continues to urge the Jewish people to convert to Christ, thereby fulfilling their ancient ancestral destiny. Some Jewish people who have converted to Christ refer to themselves not as “converted Jews”, but as “completed Jews”, since they believe that Judaism is completed and fulfilled in Christianity. The Church continues to invite their Jewish neighbours to accept Jesus as their Messiah and come to faith in him,

remembering St Paul's assurance that "the natural branches... if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again" (Romans 11:23).

In the first century (and from time immemorial), all men outside of Israel worshipped a multiplicity of gods, usually using images of them in their cult. This situation continues to the present day in places that were not integrated into the emerging Christendom of the Roman empire, places such as India and the far east. These religions are often grouped together under the name of "paganism", though the term is too generalized to be helpful. The polytheistic religions have their own histories, developments, permutations, and complexities.

What they have in common is a belief that many gods and powers exist and that these powers are to be offered worship and sacrifice. The biblical name for this is "idolatry", which is the substitution of the one, living, and true God with other lesser beings who do not share the divine nature. St. Paul was clear that the power animating these spurious forces falsely claiming divinity was demonic, "What the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God" (1 Cor 10:20).

St. Paul intimated that eternal life may be given to those who had never heard of God's revelation and Law, but who still, by perseverance in doing good, seek for glory, honor, and immortality (Rom 2:7). Our merciful God will rightly judge those in this circumstance. However, it remains true that forgiveness of sins, adoption to sonship, the assurance of salvation, the gift of joy, and transformation only come through faith in Jesus Christ. That is why the Church preaches the Gospel to everyone, calling them to repent and be baptized.

This was the approach of St. Paul when he preached to the pagans of his day. He acknowledged that the pagans of Athens had certain elements of truth, found in their poetry (Acts 17:28). Yet, he still called them to find the true God in Jesus.

In the same way today, in the Church's approach to those of "pagan" religions, Christians should take care to treat those with whom they are speaking with respect, to affirm what commonalities can be found, and to present the Christian faith as the correction and the fulfillment of the truth that God has already revealed to them through their religion. This was the approach of the missionaries preaching to the Native American (First Nations) peoples of Alaska, men such as Sts. Herman and Innocent of Alaska. Effective mission work thus involves respectful listening before it involves persuasive speaking.



Islam, like the Gnostic systems of the early Christian centuries, is a religion that seeks to incorporate Jesus and biblical stories within its system of thought and worship in a way that is alien and inimical to the original truths of the Christian Faith. Islam regards the seventh-century warlord Muhammad as a prophet who cleansed and corrected the religions of Judaism and Christianity that came before him, since the thought that those

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religions had badly distorted God's original message to them. Islam presents itself as the true and corrected version of Judaism and Christianity, and as the sole true monotheistic faith on earth, and as such it aggressively seeks to convert all the earth to Islam. Though hostile to polytheistic pagan religions, it respects Judaism and Christianity as "peoples of the Book." They are allowed to coexist with Islam, provided they accept a socially diminished and subservient role. This role is part of a comprehensive social structure known as *sharia*.

Christians reject Islam's claim that Muhammad was a true prophet and that he had been sent by God. The Church rejects the Qur'an⁹ and does not accept it as the Word of God. It is apparent from the contents of the Qur'an that its author had heard many stories from heretical Christians. It is also just as clear that the author rewrote much of what he heard: Miriam the sister of Moses is conflated with Miriam the Mother of Jesus, and Ishmael is substituted for Isaac as the son whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice.

Islam's emphatic and decisive rejection of Jesus as divine and its rejection of a belief that he died on the cross mark it as a heresy, as recognized by early Christian writers, such as St. John of Damascus. Like those in other non-Christian religions, Christians therefore invite Muslims to renounce Islam and find their true submission to the one true God in the Christian faith.

Conclusion

The history of the Orthodox Church is bound up with the nation of Israel from which it stems. The Church, beginning with the people of Israel and including those who believed in Christ, had its beginning at Pentecost, and has been guided and guarded by the Holy Spirit for two millennia. The seeds of the Church are the martyrs, not only those in the first few centuries A.D., but throughout the 2,000-year history of the Church. Even in the last century, thousands of Christians in the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, and in other places were imprisoned, tortured, and died for their faith in Jesus Christ. Despite the tribulations in every age, we in the Orthodox Church continue to worship the Holy Trinity according to received Tradition and will remain witnesses to the true faith until Christ our Savior comes again.

⁹ Arabic for "recitation." It consists of 114 thematically disjointed *surahs*, or chapters, each purporting to be the actual words of God to Muhammad, collected after his brief career.

Chapter 12 The Anaphora

“And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all to me...” (John 12:32)

“Let us lift up our hearts...We lift them up to the Lord.”

“We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty.”¹

Immediately after the people of God recite their faith in the Creed, we are directed by our deacon to “stand aright!”, in preparation for our offering to God, and *his* offering to us. We agree with the deacon, calling this action in which we will participate “a mercy of peace, a sacrifice of praise,” and then the priest blesses us, saying, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you.” When we respond, “And with your spirit,” we are told, “Let us lift up our hearts!” and we agree, saying, “We lift them up unto the Lord.” We have begun the “Anaphora,” that solemn and mysterious climax of our Divine Liturgy which means, literally, “The Lifting Up!”

But what is “lifted up”? Surely, our focus is trained upon Jesus Christ, lifted up for all, so that by his death He put an end to death, and conquered over the evil one. As St. Athanasius rejoiced,

...It was quite fitting that the Lord suffered this death. For thus being lifted up He cleared the air of the malignity both of the devil and of demons of all kinds, as He says: I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven; and made a new opening of the way up into heaven as He says once more: Lift up your gates, O you princes, and be lifted up, you everlasting doors.²

During the prayers of consecration which follow, we find ourselves back in the Upper Room (when Jesus spoke of his body and blood given for the life of the world), back in Gethsemane, and back at the cross. We also find ourselves caught up into the heavenly Temple, where the Lamb is surrounded by the whole of a thankful creation:

Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, *for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men* for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth... *Worthy is the Lamb who was slain*, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing! (Rev 5:9–10, 12, author’s italics)

¹ These are the famous words of Russian envoys to Constantinople, reporting what they saw in the Eucharist there. From *Povest’ vremennykh let* (*The Russian Primary Chronicle*).

² *The Incarnation of the Word of God*, 25.5-6, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm>

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As the Hebrew version of one Psalm puts it, He is “enthroned on the praises” of his people (Psalm 22:3, Hebrew MT).³ The Holy Mysteries are lifted up in praise, so Christ is lifted up before our eyes. Together, we are drawn and enraptured by the sight of the Lord, high and lifted up, who also is among us; as we adore him, our attention, our heart, the center of our being, is also lifted up. His luminous presence brings us to give thanks, to make *Eucharist* (literally, “Thanksgiving”) for all that He has done, is doing, and will do for us. We are even assured that this lifting up goes beyond the heightening of our attention. Father Alexander Schmemmann sums up all that is happening in this way: “The Eucharist is the *anaphora*, the “lifting up” of our offering, and of ourselves. It is the ascension of the Church to heaven.”⁴

Our practice and prayers during the Anaphora show the faith of the Orthodox in a vivid manner. Here, at the most solemn point of our gathering, the contours of what we have received from God’s hand, going back to the very beginning of creation, come into focus. We thank our Lord for the marvelous things that He has made, though we are aware of our fallen condition; we remember his work across time and space, in Israel and in the Church, and especially in the Incarnation; we thank him for his sacrifice, knowing that He has lifted Himself to the Father as an offering on our behalf; we wonder with rejoicing at the coming of the Holy Spirit, whose presence lifts up and transforms what we think of as “the ordinary”, the bread and the wine, into gifts of God, for the people of God; and we remember all those saints who show forth the glory of God.

Thanksgiving, Creation, and the Fall

The Anaphora, then, causes us to lift up our hearts in thanksgiving. This is not simply something that the priest does while we look on, but includes our memorial prayers and our thanks, in harmony with the obedience of the Son to the Father: “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name” (Heb 13:15). In distinction from the Roman (Catholic) practice, our priests cannot celebrate the Liturgy solo, but serve as representatives of the people of God, who say “Amen!” and also enter into the offering of thanksgiving. This should be clear from the term that we give to our action, the “Eucharist” (literally, the “giving thanks”).

Thanksgiving

Unfortunately, when we use the term, “Eucharist,” some may be simply puzzled by a perplexing liturgical word borrowed from the Greek. When we translate it into the English, “Thanksgiving,” others may be put off by the sentimentality that surrounds this holiday in America, or be reminded of the saccharine sweetness of Pollyanna, who

³ The parallel verses of the Septuagint (LXX) (Psalm 21:4) do not contain this metaphor of the Lord enthroned on our praises, but simply speak of God dwelling among the holy ones. The Hebrew version is here more concrete, reminding us of the role of the Theotokos, who in her person shows forth the nature of the Church, as she presents Christ on her lap, as if on a throne.

⁴ Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2018), 47.

learned to play the “glad game” in order to displace a bad mood.⁵ Children of our pragmatic age, we are not likely to think of giving thanks as foundational to who we are as human beings. We are more likely to judge thanksgiving to be a matter of disposition, more natural to optimists than to pessimists or realists. Essential to human beings, we would assume, is thinking, caring for others, creativity, and the like. The giving of thanks, we might assume, cannot define who we are, or who we are meant to be, since it is related to situations and moods, and therefore variable. However, this approach forgets the deepest foundational truth about us: we are creatures made in the image of God, to whom we owe everything, and first of all, a debt of gratitude.

The inability to give thanks continually is thus not simply a dispositional quirk, or a wound on the jaundiced souls of some who have seen more sorrow than others. Rather, it is a human malady found everywhere, and fostered by a distorted view of where we are (in a good creation, Gen 1:4 ff.), who we are (made after God’s image, Gen 1:27), and whose we are (God’s own handiwork, Eph 2:10). Many have thought that the primal sin of Adam and Eve was *pride*, and there are good reasons for seeing radical self-centeredness as close to the root of our problem. However, St. Paul tells the story of creation and the fall in such a way as to highlight our human refusal to worship and give thanks, and how *that* rebellion has infected every one of us:

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds, and four-footed animals, and creeping things.... [They] exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Rom 1:20–25)



In this sequence, then, we see that God made the world so that it gives intimations of who He is— “His invisible attributes are...understood by the things that are made.” One of the innate *characteristics* of the creation is that it shows who God is. If we go back to the primal story of Genesis, we hear from God’s own lips what this “showing forth” entails. Of the creation, He said, “it is *good*” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25); concerning the day on which he created humankind, He said, “It is *very good*!” (1:31). So, then, in looking at the creation itself, we see evidence of the *goodness of God*; in looking at humanity, we see evidence of the *excellence of God*. The created order, and especially human beings, are signposts, traces of God’s very nature.

⁵ Eleanor H. Porter, *Pollyanna* (Boston: L.C. Page, 1913). Pollyanna became a byword for someone who is always optimistic and cheerful.

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But, of course, the purpose of a signpost is to point to something other than itself. Human goodness consists in being an icon of God, in mirroring the image and likeness of the Creator. Our sacred story of origins differs from both the early Mesopotamian myths, like the *Enuma Elish* (where humankind was made out of dragon's blood to serve in slavery to the gods), and the contorted stories of the later Gnostics (where a rebellious demigod made humans, resulting in a decline from what was perfect and spiritual, into the imperfect material world). Clearly, those who composed such stories did not correctly read the signs imprinted in creation concerning a Creator who was both good, and who declared the material creation, in all its teeming variety, to be good as well. Nor did they understand that God's intention for humankind is not to enslave, but to have intimate communion with us, and through us to cultivate and perfect the world that He has made: we are to be partners with him, what some have called *sub-creators*. This astonishing compliment paid to human beings is surely worthy of thanksgiving!

Creation

This perspective should, in part, be apparent to human observers from the character of the world itself, which, though damaged by the fall, still retains the ability to “declare the glory of God” (Psalm 18(19)). But the whole story can only be known to those who have actually heard God speak, through vision and divine word, or through his prophets or apostles. We are privileged to have been admitted into the very counsel of God, knowing, as Jesus says, that He “no longer calls us servants but friends” (John 15:15). Very few philosophers imagined, by simply looking at the results of God's creative act, that its Maker worked the deed with the bare majesty of His Word, not straining or fighting any battle with other cosmic beings. Even fewer realized that what is created was made from nothing (*ex nihilo*). This is only hinted at in the Hebrew account of Genesis, and in other places in the Old Testament which speak of God's sovereign control over creation; some Hebrew scholars have even argued that “creation from nothing” is not required by the wording of the biblical text. The Greek version of Genesis, however, baldly states that “God made the heavens and the earth,” and the teaching that God created without raw material or help is also clarified by the inspired and “admirable” Solomonia,⁶ the mother of the seven Maccabean martyrs. Reminding them of the sheer creative power of God, she encourages all her sons, and then her youngest, to look forward to the resurrecting power of that same Creator:

I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you breath and life, nor I who arranged in order the elements within each of you. Therefore, the Creator of the world, who formed man in the beginning and devised the origin of all things, will give both breath and life back to you again in His mercy, since you now disregard yourselves for the sake of His laws.... My son, have mercy on me. I carried you for nine months in my womb and nursed you for three years. I reared you and brought you up to this point in your life and have



⁶ The name is given by Holy Tradition, not in the Scriptures.

taken care of you. I beseech you, my child, to look at heaven and earth and see everything in them and know that God made them out of nothing; so also He made the race of man in this way. (2 Macc 7:22–24, 26–28)

Perceiving the same truth, many ancient (and contemporary) Jewish scholars have held to this doctrine, as we see in Philo's work concerning the Old Testament commandments,⁷ and in the book known as 2 Baruch (21:4, 48:8). But the wonder of the creating God is finally and unequivocally taught in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul (Rom 4:17), whose teaching is surely in harmony with the Apostles' and Jesus' own understanding of Genesis, of what God did "in the beginning" (Matt 19:8).

When Jesus shows us with clarity what the Father is like (John 1:18, 14:8), it becomes impossible to think God needed either material or support in his creating activity; nor could we ever think that this God made the creation, including human beings, because He lacked anything, or required to be served. As our Creed reminds us, the Triune God is Himself the Creator: we praise the "Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible," the "Son... through whom all things were made," and the "Spirit, the Lord and giver of Life." Everything in creation comes from the bounty and goodness of our Maker, and is his special gift to us, the crown of his work. And so, while we are singing and praying, the priest prays this on our behalf:

Holy God, You dwell among Your saints. You are praised by the Seraphim with the thrice holy hymn and glorified by the Cherubim and worshiped by all the Heavenly powers. You have brought all things out of nothing into being. You have created man and woman in Your image and likeness and adorned them with all the gifts of Your grace.

Human beings may be said to be "creative," but in comparison to the utter power of God, our "making" of things, which requires the raw material and wisdom supplied by God, is mere child's play.

At the Anaphora, then, we enter into the role for which we were always intended—we stand in amazed thanksgiving at the goodness of God, and "lift Him up with our praises," as did the Theotokos when she took over the role of the cherubim who stand around his throne. Throughout the Old Testament, we hear of the two golden cherubim who were placed on either side of the ark of the covenant, conceived of as a throne where God condescends to "sit" and visit with his people. In prayer (the Psalms) and in vision (Isaiah, Ezekiel, the Apocalypse), we are also given a glimpse of the heavenly court, gathered around "the Lord of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim" (e.g., 2 Sam 6:2)—actual cherubim, not simply representations of such beings. Besides the furniture of the tabernacle/Temple, and the revelations of the heavenly throne-room, Christians also keep, from the Nativity canon, another wondrous scene in mind: "I behold a strange but very glorious mystery: heaven—the cave; the throne of the Cherubim—the Virgin." Human-fashioned cherubim may have adorned the physical ark, and strange celestial creatures may stand around the heavenly throne, exalting the Lord;

⁷ *De Specialibus Legibus (On the Special Laws)* 4.187.

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it is the Virgin-Mother, however, who is the true carrier of the Lamb who sits “in the midst of the throne” (Rev 7:17). Along with her, in the Divine Liturgy, we “mystically represent the cherubim,” surrounding the Lord with our praises, and giving him glory.

This sober joy into which we enter is a foretaste of what we shall experience at the resurrection, when our worship, along with the angels, is uninterrupted. Moreover, our present worship in the Liturgy is not meant to be an isolated moment, but an enhancement that overflows into our whole lives, which are meant to be conducted in praise and thanksgiving. Yet in the Anaphora, as we stand together to offer holy things, we are given a time to put away other concerns, so that our thanks can come to the fore. At this point in the Liturgy, we have already brought to him our gifts of bread and wine, and now the priest will ask him to show their inner nature, their ability to become the Body and Blood of Christ, and so to feed us in both body and in spirit.⁸ As Alexander Schmemmann reminds us, we have a higher calling than *homo sapiens* (“thinking Humanity”) or *homo faber* (“making Humanity”). Above all, God has made us to be *homo adorans*, “worshipping Humanity;” thanksgiving is our first and primal response to the generosity of God.⁹

The Fall

There remains a complication, however. The good (and very good) creation was marred (though not obliterated) by the fall, the curse on humankind and the world, and the expulsion from Eden. Rather than naturally joining the cherubim, fallen humankind finds them barring the way to paradise (Gen 3:24). How can we make sense of these tragic losses, in the light of our call to thanksgiving? First, it helps to imagine what the world, and what our personal lives would be like if we lived eternally in this fallen condition, and if we had been left in Eden to wreak havoc! C. S. Lewis has famously called death, which began with God’s judgment on Adam and Eve “a severe mercy.”¹⁰ Father Thomas Hopko (of blessed memory) agrees with him, saying,

There is a certain mercy in that, because if we could just sin and sin and sin and do evil and wickedness and grow forever without end, it would be just an endless hell, which some people still, God forbid, may choose, but the fact that we die gives us a chance, gives us a chance to be reborn, gives us a chance to start all over.¹¹

The sentence of death, the curse of the land, the hardship in childbirth, and the expulsion from Eden are all severe, to be sure. They come, however, not as sheer

⁸ Especially in the Liturgy of St. Basil, we hear the words, “show these things to be....,” rather than “change these things.”

⁹ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 22.

¹⁰ Sheldon Venauken’s, *A Severe Mercy* describes Lewis’ letter in which he speaks about the death of one of a loving couple as “a severe mercy.” Some have commented that Lewis here was applying the words of the blessed Augustine in *Confessions* 8:11, who spoke of God’s inner scourging, and stripping him of all support, in a similar way.

¹¹ “Forgiveness Sunday— The Expulsion of Adam from Paradise,” <http://www.pravmir.com/forgiveness-sunday-expulsion-adam-paradise/>

punishments, but as mercies from God, driving us to him in our neediness, and reminding us that we have ceased to be what He intends for us to be. Without death, we might be tempted to continue worshipping ourselves, mere creatures, and never receive what God has in mind for those who love him.

Death and suffering, then, need not lead us away from a stance of thanksgiving, for they have a purpose, difficult though this is to remember when we are in the midst of them. The great act of humility, seen in God the Son, is the means by which we come to see how God has used all things, including tragedy, for our good. Our deepest thanks is directed towards Jesus' passion and death on the cross, seen as a seamless part of his offering to the Father for our sake.

The Son's Offering to the Father and Sacrifice

During Lent, we are delighted to join in the ancient liturgy of St. Basil of Caesarea. At the Anaphora, we lift up our hearts as our priest (or bishop) prays,

For, since through man sin came into the world and through sin death, it pleased Your only begotten Son, who is in Your bosom, God and Father, born of a woman, the holy Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, born under the law, to condemn sin in His flesh, so that those who died in Adam may be brought to life in Him, Your Christ.

This prayer bears a family likeness to passages in St. Paul's letters, and in the Church Fathers—the knitting together of themes and of soteriological¹² moments. In one sentence are integrated echoes of the Gospel and at least five passages from the epistles (Rom 5:12; John 1:18; Gal 4:4; Rom 8:3; 1 Cor 15:22). We glimpse the glory of creation, God's call of Israel, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection—all of these connected with the atonement made for our sake. We can use the word atonement here in its most basic sense—that which Christ has done to make as “at one” with God and with the rest of creation, restoring the primal unified goodness of Creation.

Atonement

The atonement is such a great mystery that the Bible and the Church Fathers have used many metaphors to help us to grasp it. We may find it helpful to speak about the eight “Rs” of our atonement—Redemption, Reparation, Representation, Righteousness, Rescue, Recapitulation, Reconciliation, and Re-creation. Typically, our Eastern theologians and our hymnody stress the rescue and reconciliation accomplished by God the Son, who won as Victor over the enemy of death for our sake and reunited us with his Father. Even Western theologians have begun to celebrate our Orthodox emphasis upon *Christ the Victor*, and some have declared that, over against Western “justification” and the sacrificial death of Jesus, the East shows a more helpful model to understand the work of Christ.

¹² Soteriology is the study of the doctrine of salvation, therefore a soteriological moment is an instance in which the means of our salvation is clearly spoken of, e.g., in the priest's prayer, “... born under the law, to condemn sin in His flesh, so that those who died in Adam may be brought to life in Him, Your Christ.”

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We should be happy that our Western friends are rediscovering the fullness of the mystery of Jesus' death. On the other hand, it seems that they have not grasped the many-faceted ways in which Eastern Christians have understood this mystery. Certainly, Western theology has, from our perspective, overemphasized the judicial metaphor of "justification," sometimes making it appear that Christ entered into a kind of contractual relation with his Father so that we would be acquitted. At times the relationship between Father and Son has even been pictured in the West as adversarial, with the Father wreaking vengeance upon the Son, who stands in for fallen humanity as a kind of "whipping boy." Pagan ideas concerning the need to propitiate an unwilling god are not helpful when we remember the Father "who did not withhold his only-beloved Son" (Rom 8:32), and the Son who always acts in concert with the Father. Still less helpful in our day is the medieval idea, made popular by Anselm, of a heavenly King whose honor requires "satisfaction" by Jesus, who dies for this purpose: our God is holy, and can never be "shamed" in such a fashion as to need his honor recovered. However, it is helpful for us to remember that God's justice (or righteousness) is indeed a biblical and patristic theme, and that the metaphor of justification (that is, our acquittal) stands alongside others for atonement, both in the Bible and in many ancient fathers. For example, we hear from the mouth of St. John Chrysostom,

The sentence of the judge was going to be passed A letter from the King came down from heaven. Rather, the King himself came. Without examination, without exacting an account, he set all free from the chains of their sins. All, then, who run to Christ are saved by His grace and profit from His gift. But those who wish to be justified by the Law will also fall from grace.... And if any were to cast in prison a person who owed... and another were to come and... to pay down the [debt], and to lead the prisoner into the king's courts, and to the throne of the highest power, and make him partaker of the highest honor..., the creditor would not be able to remember the [debt]; this is our situation. For Christ has paid down far more than we owe, indeed, like a drop compared with the limitless ocean.¹³

Christ's Sacrifice

Besides understanding Jesus' death in terms of justification and repayment of debt, the theme of sacrifice (represented in the "Rs" as "reparation"), is a major part of our heritage, and comes especially to the fore in the priestly prayers of the Anaphora. As St. Gregory Nazianzus reminds us, "We needed a God made flesh and made dead, that we might live."¹⁴

We can see this element of sacrifice in many places of our Liturgy. First, the priest, in preparing and sanctifying the mysteries, re-enacts for us what happened to Jesus on the cross, even to the point of piercing "the lamb." Secondly, just after the prayers for the catechumens, as he prays, the priest calls what is about to happen a "bloodless sacrifice."

¹³ St. John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians: Discourse 1:9; Epistle to the Romans, Homily X*, Rom 5:17, author's translation.

¹⁴ St. Gregory Nazianzus, "Second Sermon on Pascha," *Oration 45.28*, author's translation. Available also at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310245.htm>

And finally, in the Anaphora, we hear about Christ's body *broken* for us and the blood of the New Covenant *shed* for us and for many. Indeed, the Deacon prays that the gifts offered will be received by "our Loving God at his holy, heavenly, and spiritual altar as an offering of spiritual fragrance." This language of altar, reception, and fragrance is reminiscent of Old Testament sacrifice, such as when Noah offered a sacrifice to God in thanksgiving after the flood, and God is said to have "smelled" the odor of the sacrifice and responded in favor (Gen 8:21). We know, having seen the Father in the character of his Son, that He does not *need* anything, or require to be cajoled to receive the offering that Jesus made, and that we present to him in the mysteries. But the language of sacrifice is aptly used and helps us to grasp the wonder of what He has done for us. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The Father does not require this of an unwilling victim; rather, Son and Father, joined by the sanctifying Spirit, act together in this sacrifice of all sacrifices, for the life of the world.



So, then, there are different biblical and patristic ways of speaking about the atonement, and sacrifice figures strongly among them, as reflected in our prayers in the Anaphora. In his death for us, Jesus makes reparation for the sins committed since Adam, redeeming, or buying us back, representing us truly before the Father, enacting his righteous judgement of acquittal for our sake, recapitulating everything that it is to be human (including our death), rescuing us from

Satan, sin, and death, reconciling us to God, and beginning the process of re-creation. We will receive "holy things for the holy," knowing that the mysteries are for our re-making, the healing of soul and body. Though what happened on the cross, represented in our celebration of the Mysteries, is the high moment of God's demonstrated love, it is also part and parcel of everything that Jesus is and has done for us. Indeed, we could consider the Son's sacrifice on the cross as the ultimate expression of his *eternal* loving obedience to the Father. Always, the Son defers to the Father, though they share mutuality in divinity and honor (John 5:19; 1 Cor 15:27–28). The cross is what this willing submission looks like in our world of sin and death that God aims to renew. What God has done for us in the atonement is so mysterious that we need a multitude of ways to look at it—the Son is our Victor, our Sacrifice, our Reconciler, our Redeemer, and so much more.

If he is our true representative, then we should not be surprised to hear ourselves named towards the end of the Anaphora. We are, of course, right to think of Jesus as our perfect *substitute*, for only He was good and strong enough to rescue us. Not one of us will ever be asked to grasp the nettle of death in the way that He did, as poetically described in Psalm 21/22:

*O God, my God, hear me: why have you forsaken me?
The words of my transgressions are far from my salvation.*

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*O my God, I will cry out by day, but You will not hear me.
And by night, but not for a lack of understanding in me.
But you dwell among the saints, O praise of Israel.
Our fathers hoped in You:
They hoped in You, and You delivered them...
But I am a worm, and not a man;
A reproach of man and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me...
Do not stand off from me, for affliction is near;
There is no one to help....
I am poured out like water,
And all my bones are shattered...
Save me from the lion's mouth,
My humiliation from the horns of the unicorns.
I will declare Your name to my brethren,
In the midst of the church I will sing to You...*

Only He fought the fight with death, darkness, sin, and the enemy to its fullest extent.

The Offering of Ourselves

But from another perspective, Jesus is our *representative* “Die-er,” showing us what it looks like to be perfectly offered to the Father. And so, the gift of the cross *for our sake* becomes, by the dignity offered to us by God, the responsibility of the cross *for us to carry*. In speaking with Peter, just before the Transfiguration, Jesus insisted upon the necessity of his own death (Mark 8:31); immediately after this He spoke about the necessity that his disciples also should be cross-bearers—“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

Our sacrifices, then, are rightly bound up with his, both in our lives, and in the Anaphora, when the priest remembers us before God along with the Theotokos and the blessed saints. To speak of our joining in the sacrifice is not to diminish the uniqueness of Jesus’ action on our behalf. Rather, it gives glory to it, for we learn to echo in our own lives what He has done and offer all that we have to God. The letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus offering Himself “and the children God has given” him (Heb 2:13). Even more shockingly, St. Paul speaks of his own suffering and toil among the Gentiles as “making up what is *lacking* in the afflictions of Christ” (Col 1:24). Certainly, the apostle knew very well that Jesus’ sacrifice is unique. Certainly, he had no illusions regarding his own human weakness and our universal need for a Savior. What he was getting at was that Jesus has called us friends, sent the Spirit in order to make our human sufferings productive, and during his own earthly life promised that we would do greater things—presumably in the area of reaching beyond Israel—than He did in the flesh. Our faithful and joyful witness for the truth, in our lives and in our afflictions, gives glory to the One who has called us, and in whose steps we follow.

We must be careful at this point. Some Protestant expressions of communion are so geared to human effort and sacrifice that one would think that the entire service is all about that. There is even a service contrived by the World Council of Churches that uses various loaves, all representative of different races — “Wonder Bread” for the black community, baguettes for the French, and so on. Those attending this contrived service are given the impression that it is all about *us*, and that the entire purpose of the Eucharist is to show “unity in diversity.” The unutterable wonder of the cross is nearly forgotten, except as a kind of emblem for human actions of generous acceptance. Jesus is rendered a mere mascot. But this is a tragic abuse of the most solemn moment of our meeting with the Triune God. Instead of politicizing or socializing this Mystery, we are to remain astonished at the utter uniqueness of Jesus’ act.

At the same time, we are taught about his divine power to draw us into his life, so that we, too, become participants in the great recalling of the world to Himself. Not because we underestimate God’s power, but because the Incarnation has drawn all of us to the transforming Lord, do we dare to think that our little voices may sing with his, our little lives be ennobled by his, and little sacrifices be joined to his. And so, the blessed Augustine of Hippo reminds us, as he reminded the Easter baptismal candidates before him, “there you are, on the table; there you are, in the chalice!”¹⁵ In our self-offering, we are joined with the sacrifice for all time, that of the God-Man, Jesus. The priest enacts this by placing pieces of bread representing the people of God on the paten, and in the cup. We enact it by formally offering our whole lives to Christ our God. We engage, then, in a purposeful entrance into Jesus’ action—both in word and deed—and follow in the pattern of our great high priest, Christ. Christ feeds us with Himself, and we offer ourselves as a bloodless sacrifice, bound up with the one and only Lamb of God.



The Work of the Holy Spirit

But what actually is happening in this bloodless sacrifice? The Protestant community, by and large, has rejected the idea of an altar and a sacrifice, and sees their “Lord’s Supper” as a memorial of what Christ has done, a time of meditation in which God and God’s people join together in a family meal. We must recognize that there are, however, some Protestants who continue to speak of the “real presence” of Jesus in the Eucharist, declaring that there is a particular grace in obeying this “ordinance” of the Lord. Even when the Lord’s intimacy is recognized in their rites, however, there is a spiritualization of what is going on. Those outside of Orthodoxy do not perceive the cup and the bread as the “medicine of immortality,” nor do they consider that the congregation is doing anything other than “practicing” for the time when we will finally be with the Lord in

¹⁵ *Sermon 229, “On the Sacraments of the Faithful,” The Fathers of the Church 38*, tr. Muldowney (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1959), 201-202.

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heaven. That is, talk of a “change” in either the gifts or the congregation is not natural in the Protestant scene. As a result, no special care is given to the bread and wine, which, when remaining, is disposed of after the service in ways that seem shocking to us.

In the Roman Catholic context, there is utter respect for the “elements” in a way that is more congenial to us. However, frequently the prayers and the stance during the Mass give the impression that Christ is being repeatedly sacrificed at each service. There is greater attention given to the actual moment of transformation, over against our Orthodox understanding of being drawn further and further into God’s presence. We, for example, show great reverence for the Chalice even during the Great Entrance, where it is sometimes placed on the forehead for healing: and all this before the actual consecration and call for the Spirit’s descent. Christ is among us all through the Liturgy, gathering us up with the angels and blessed faithful: the reception of the holy Mysteries is the pinnacle of our journey. What we experience here is neither a mere remembrance, nor is it a repeated offering, nor is it a new sacrifice: it is the self-same offering of Jesus on the cross, made present for our sake by the Holy Spirit.

We might also feel that too much intricate philosophizing goes on in the Roman context, where theologians tend to follow the explanation of Thomas Aquinas, who himself relied on Aristotelian categories. The bread and wine, Catholics tell us, are transformed in their “substance” but not in their “accidents”—there is an inside part of them that becomes the body and blood of Christ, but they continue in their appearance as they always were. This kind of “parsing” or distinction is foreign to us. We simply ask the Holy Spirit to “make the change” (St. John Chrysostom’s liturgy) or to “show” the elements to be “the body and blood” of our Lord (St. Basil’s liturgy) and do not try to explain the mode in which this happens. Christ is among us. He feeds us with Himself, and gathers us, together, into the divine life. Certainly, the epiclesis (when the Holy Spirit is called upon by us to act) is important: we offer the fruit of creation, and ourselves, to God, and ask the Holy Spirit to sanctify and transform. And we bow in adoration, as He is present. But God has been with us throughout the entire service: this is the highest moment of that special tryst with him. We know that the Holy Spirit is everywhere present, has been with us before the Anaphora, and will be with us as we prepare to leave, for “we have seen the true light.” As Fr. Alexander Schmemmann reminds us, those who are in Christ and who have received from him are not to divide their lives into secular and sacred compartments, because to do so is a “negation” of worship and a “heresy” concerning the nature of humanity: we are to worship at all times, recognizing God’s presence everywhere.¹⁶ The Communion is a heightened moment, bringing us into the heavenly courts; but it transforms the whole of our lives, which are continually graced and glorified by God. It is natural, then, for us to remember all the saints during this time of joy.

¹⁶ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, “Worship in a Secular Age,” Appendix 1, 140.

Remembering the Saints with Thanksgiving

It is interesting that the power of the Eucharist is so acknowledged, even among those who have forgotten its complete meaning, that vestiges of this confidence remain. Even in non-liturgical Pentecostal meetings, for example, the ill are remembered and anointed during their Lord's Supper, even though the act is not understood in its fullness. But we Orthodox are blessed to hold to the Apostolic traditions, and to take Jesus at his word: "For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. (John 6:55–56). As a result, nothing could be more natural at this time, when we encounter the Lord of life, than to name the saints who now see him better than we do, and to remember also those among us who especially require prayer.

Naming

To "name" something or someone has a long tradition in the Scriptures and in Holy Tradition. It is a solemn act of recognition that has several aspects. First, there is the idea of "naming" in order to show mastery, though of an intimate and benign kind: we see this in Adam's naming of the animals who are brought to him by God (Gen 2). Conversely, the "Man" who wrestles with Jacob in Genesis 32:22–32 will not tell Jacob his divine name but gives Jacob a new name. As Fr. Schmemmann reminds us, naming "reveals the very essence of a thing...its essence as God's gift,"¹⁷ Of course, it is the greater one, the one with a fuller perspective, who can see this essence in the lesser one, and so properly bless him or her. We should then be astonished that Christians, unlike the Jewish people before them, are invited to "name" God as Father, and we are "bold" to do that because we are in Christ, adopted sons and daughters. In this case, the naming is a privilege, an indication of our intimacy with God, and *not* of our power over him, or ability to see all that He is! Amazingly, God has called us to "bless" him as the Lord, and as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, though usually it is the role of the one who is greater to bless those under him (Heb 7:7). Such is the humility of God: but we remember all this when we bless and name him, knowing that He has made us worthy to do so.



Naming the Saints

When we name other people, it seems that this is a naming that is different both from the custodial naming of animals, and the extraordinary naming of God: it is a kind of "lateral" blessing that we extend to brothers and sisters in Christ, some of them far more gifted than we. And the blessing is interconnected both with our trust in God's great generosity, and our thanksgiving for all that He has given, is giving, and will give. When

¹⁷ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 21.

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at the Anaphora we name the Theotokos and the other blessed who have come before us, we express our solidarity with them, and the rich corporate nature of our whole life in Christ. We cannot control those blessed whom we name, nor their circumstances, and so when we name them, we do so with awe, in a kind of utterance that is closer to our audacious blessing of God than to Adam's naming of the animals. We know them, and presume, indeed, that they know us better than we know them. In our personal prayers, we are coming to know these blessed ones better and better, and so we celebrate the wonder that they are with us around the table of the Lamb. They are with us, and we remember that.

Our prayers for our living bishops, priests, and friends are attended by the same awe, as we remember all that God is doing in our midst. We acknowledge those who are not with us physically, but to whom we are joined in this act of Thanksgiving. Naming is a natural thing for the Church of God. Consider that we name babies and new converts in their baptisms, showing the same wonder and intimacy. It is not as though God needs to be introduced to these dear ones, or reminded of them: after all, He knew them before, knows them after, knows them in a far deeper way than we do. But such is the nature of the Christian family that we are instructed to pray for them, and even for those who have not yet joined us:

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority... for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:1–34).

Our prayers for each other, then, are a natural part of our life together. The Eucharist, while a deeply personal time between each of us and the Lord, is also a means of drawing us closer together, reflecting the deep, organic connection that we have with one another as the Body of Christ.

Remembrance of others, and intercessory prayer for them, proceeds on the foundation of an absolutely unique God, who is generous to all, and who invites us to participate in this generosity when we pray for each other, and even for those outside the household of faith. The letter to the Galatians speaks of prayer for other Christians as a supremely important act, while also giving us a salutary reminder of our temporality. Even our participation in timely action is important to God: "Since, then, as we have this present moment, let us do good things for all, and especially for those who are in the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). The word used to refer to the "present moment," *kairos*, is the same Greek word that is used when the deacon reminds the priest, "It is *time* for the Lord to act," at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy. God, of course, superintends all of time, but frequently in the gospels and the epistles emphasis is put upon the time in which we now stand, the present moment—for that is, as humans, what we possess. The past flees away and the future we cannot know: but God has given to us this moment, and has entered into it in His Son, who accepted our human limitations, for our sake. It may even be that during the Divine Liturgy we are given even more than an ordinary present moment, for in Christ we have been transported into the heavenly Kingdom.

God knows and fills the whole sweep of time, and Himself is the supreme judge regarding how best to act in the moment. Standing beside his throne, we have a more certain knowledge of the large picture (shown to us in Holy Scriptures, the Tradition of the Church, and the prayers of the ages), and are prompted to act at the right time—to *pray*, through the dwelling of the Holy Spirit among us. This present moment (*kairos*) is ours in which to act, and so we are instructed to “redeem the time (*kairos*), because the days are evil” (Eph 5:16) and reminded that “now is the acceptable time (*kairos*)” to act in harmony with the Lord (2 Cor 6:2; cf. Isa 49:8). As Jesus told his disciples before his death, we are no longer servants, but friends, because we know what the Father is doing (John 15:15). This insight concerning our position and our role is not intended to make us arrogant or presumptuous, but to move us to wonder. The Creator of all is including *us* in his loving action for the world.

Inclusion in this divine energy is expressed in a particularly beautiful way when we pray for each other, further strengthening the links that join together his household of faith. Consider what happens when one of us prays for another: that believer, praying in Christ, and through the Holy Spirit, brings his or her brother or sister, with that person’s own concerns, before the Father. Here we see true communion: the Holy Trinity, the prayer, the one being prayed for, and his or her own concerns (frequently other people), are all linked within the give-and-take of prayer. This is amplified when we pray in concert, together in the assembly of God’s people. In such prayer, we acknowledge Christ as the head of the Body, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the beneficence of the Father, whose will is that we should be one, as the Trinity is One. Our intercessions and remembrance at this time picture the very nature of the Church.



Indeed, our prayer is an *effective* icon that does not simply represent, but also expresses and creates this unity to which we are called. The Church at prayer, then, is an icon of God that is a good in itself, just as marriage is a good in itself but shows forth the unity of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:31–32). As such prayers are offered, those who come into our midst will say, “See how they love one another!”

The Riches of the Anaphora

We have seen, then, how this highest moment of the Liturgy, the Anaphora, opens up to us staggering truths about what and who is lifted up, and why we do this. We are taken back to creation and remember all that God has done in our human history, while also thinking soberly concerning the complications of the fall for us and for the whole of creation. We focus upon the sacrificial gift of God the Son—his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return in glory, wondering at a miracle of atonement (at-one-ment) so great that we need many different ways of looking at it. In awe, we add our own thanksgiving to his sacrifice, knowing that God asks us, too, to give ourselves to him for the sake of others. We contemplate and see how the Holy Spirit works at this great moment, sanctifying the Holy Mysteries for our healing, and also transforming the

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whole of our lives, as a foretaste of the blessedness we shall experience eternally. Finally, we remember the Theotokos, the blessed saints, and those in our midst who are in special need, showing in these intercessions our nature as the Church, in which each member of the body is connected to the others.

As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (of blessed memory) sums all this up, he reminds us that in the Anaphora we offer bread and wine, the whole creation, ourselves, and Christ. But of course, he reminds us, it is only the hands of the priest and the voices of the worshippers whom Christ Himself, the true celebrant, uses, as He lifts everything up to the Father.¹⁸ This time of “lifting up” takes us to a new vantage point in which we can see the whole drama of God, from the dawn of creation to the new creation, and are assured of our place together in it. But it is not simply a matter of understanding or seeing: we *are lifted* into his mysterious presence, and are quickened in mind, in soul, in spirit, in heart. We share together in God’s gift, One given to all and for all.

¹⁸ Kallistos Ware, “The Eucharistic Sacrifice—Who Offers What to Whom?” https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2014/01/the-eucharistic-sacrifice-who-offers-what-to-whom-met-kallistos-ware.html

Chapter 13 The Mother of God

Hymn to the Theotokos

During the Anaphora, the most solemn part of the Divine Liturgy, the eucharistic gifts are changed into the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. At the conclusion of the Anaphora, the priest prays that this act of worship be offered for all of the faithful departed¹ *but especially* for “... our most holy, most pure, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary.” Thus, the prayer following the Anaphora prays for those who have fallen asleep, including the Theotokos.

Thus, the Theotokos is again acknowledged as the preeminent saint of the Church. In fact, the prayer that follows, called the Hymn to the Theotokos, extols her virtues:

*It is truly meet to bless thee, O Theotokos, ever-blessed and most pure and the mother of our God. More honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim, without corruption thou gavest birth to God the Word: true Theotokos we magnify thee.*²

And although she is highly venerated, she is still a human being in need of salvation. Fr Thomas Hopko describes this part of the Divine Liturgy in the following way: “...the Divine Liturgy is the real presence and power of the unique saving event of Christ for His people... it is always offered for all who need to be saved. Thus the liturgical sacrifice is offered for Mary and all of the saints, as well as for the whole Church and the entire universe of God’s creation.”³

Thus Mary, the Mother of God, is honored above the cherubim and the seraphim who stand in the presence of God. Theologically speaking, she was Christ’s earthly throne and now stands at the head of the saints before the throne of God in His Kingdom and intercedes for us.

The Mother of God and Our Salvation

The modern world is very accustomed to thinking about famous people. We have a virtual cult of personality surrounding sports stars, actors, and politicians. We focus on their character, history, worldview, and achievements. This same mindset often occupies those who come to the Orthodox faith and see its treatment of the Virgin Mary, and in fact all the saints. In truth, we know very little about the Virgin Mary’s background. The Church’s liturgical cycle has incorporated traditional material from outside the gospels that gives an indication of her childhood. However, the focus of these stories is not on

¹ “...ancestors, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, ascetics, and every righteous spirit made perfect in faith.”

² *Vespers and Divine Liturgy: Service Book for the Faithful*, eds. Jonathan Lincoln and Heiromonk Heran (South Canaan: St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2021), 68.

³ Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith, Vol. II: Worship* (Syosset: Orthodox Church in America 1972), 188.

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her personality so much as on her role within Christ's work of salvation. That she is considered essential in that work requires that we broaden our understanding of the full nature of salvation itself.

One of the earliest confessions of Christian faith is found in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He describes the confession as "tradition" that has been handed down to him, "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures..." (1 Cor 15:3). It is a phrase so familiar that it is easily overlooked. That Christ "died for our sins" immediately asks, "How?" It is the core question of our salvation and the overriding concern of all of the Church's teaching. The narrative of how our salvation was accomplished in Christ applies to all of the Church's doctrines concerning the Virgin Mary. These teachings are not about Mary so much as they are about salvation itself.

If we look at the great ecumenical councils of the Church, their concerns center on salvation itself. The language regarding the Trinity, or the two natures of Christ and such, are not matters of abstraction. They were not trying to create a special vocabulary for doing theology. Instead, they sought language that would give expression to the character and nature of salvation itself. What they gave us was the language of *communion*.



St. Irenaeus, writing in the 2nd century, used a phrase that would be repeated many times in the writings of the early Church. He wrote, "God became man so that man could become god."⁴ This is a description of that reality of communion by which we are saved. God made us in His image and then became one of us without giving up His divinity. Thus, He joined us to Himself so that we would have the life of God in us. To be "saved" then is to live the life of God—to live in accordance with the image in which we were created.

The first aspect of this saving communion is accomplished in the event known as the Annunciation, the announcement by the Archangel Gabriel to Mary that she was to become the mother of the Messiah, God's Son (Luke 1:26–38). St. Luke records that Gabriel was sent to Mary and informed her that she had found favor with God. He announced that she would conceive and bring forth a son named Jesus, who would be "Son of the Highest", who would reign over the house of Jacob forever, and whose kingdom would never end. Most incredibly, she was told that He who was to be born would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and not a man and called "the Son of God." We honor Mary because of her great virtue but also because she said "yes" to God.

The Nicene Creed summarizes this event with the simple words: "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man."⁵ In saying that He was "incarnate", we are told that God

⁴ St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III, chapter 19.1

⁵ Lincoln, *Vespers and Divine Liturgy*, 61.

did not merely appear in Mary's womb, or "borrow" her womb for His use. Rather, He "took flesh" of the Virgin Mary. In other words, He was (and is) "bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh" (Gen 2:23). It was *our* humanity, in the womb of the Virgin, that was united to God. "God became what we are."⁶

Thus, first and foremost, the Church's honoring of Mary celebrates and remembers that what took place *in* her was the beginning of our salvation. In the event of the Annunciation, we see that she is a full participant in that work. God's intention is made known to her, with an explanation and answer given to her question. Her response, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word. (Luke 1:38)" is an act of profound self-emptying and humility before God. It is an action that is often, in the writings of the Church, contrasted with the disobedience of Eve (Gen 3:6).

This event teaches us that our salvation, utterly impossible apart from God, is also not possible apart from human cooperation. Our salvation is wrought in the incarnation of Christ, in which God united Himself with our human nature. Jesus is fully God and fully man and acts as both in the world. Mary's participation in that unique and essential event is utterly integral to its fulfillment. She cooperates in her will and in her very flesh. As such, she cannot be set aside as somehow inconsequential. In the mind of the Church, to set Mary aside would be to set the humanity of Christ aside.

Veneration of Mary as the Mother of God

The life of the Church serves to nurture us in the faith. The Church's traditions, such as prayers, services, feasts, and fasts are a means of allowing us to not just *think* about the faith, but to *live* it, and to allow it to have full expression in our lives. On a very deep level, this is the primary purpose in our veneration or devotional love of the Virgin Mary. As such, we do not merely believe in the event of the Annunciation as an isolated fact in the story of our salvation. We enter into the event itself through our participation in the traditions of the Church. Christianity is not the story of "things" that happened; it is the story of God acting in and through human beings to bring them into union with Him. Our acts of veneration, such as honoring icons, singing hymns, celebrating feasts, and offering prayers all serve this deeper purpose. The Annunciation, for example, is an event that takes place in the life of Mary. In our veneration of her and in our commemoration of that event, the Annunciation becomes present in us as well, just as she is present in our devotions.

It is useful to think for a minute about the meaning of veneration and devotion. Neither term is meant to have the meaning of "worship." We offer worship (the honor and love due to our Creator) to God alone. However, He has given us people, events, and even objects that are worthy of honor and remembrance, as well as a measure of devotion. For example, in the Ten Commandments, we are told to worship God alone. We are also told to honor our father and our mother. This distinction applies to our veneration and devotion toward the saints, icons, crosses, and others in the life of the Church.

⁶ St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V, chapter XVI.2

The Theotokos

There is one unique word that describes our level of devotion to and honor of the Virgin Mary, which has become essential in the Church's life of prayer and praise: that word is *Theotokos*. This Greek term means "the one who gave birth to God." There is evidence of its use in the Church as early as the third century. It passed from the language of devotion into the language of dogmatic theology in the year 431 A.D. at the Council of Ephesus (the Third Ecumenical Council). The Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, had sought to forbid the use of the term, saying that we should instead call Mary, "Christotokos," ("the one who gave birth to Christ"). For the Church, this was a denial of the unity of Christ's person, as though He could somehow be separated into two. Though the title is a paradox ("how can a mere human being be the mother of God?") it is the paradox of Christ as God-become-man. The argument over the word, "Theotokos," was not about who Mary was, but about who Christ is. The term "Theotokos" was formally recognized and declared to be the proper title for her and continues to be used to this day. In the Orthodox Church in America, the title is usually left in its Greek form, Theotokos, rather than being translated. It is a name that those who are new to the Church learn with time.

Most Holy Theotokos Save Us

It is in this intimate context of our salvation that a common phrase in the liturgy of the Church must be understood. We sing, "Most Holy Theotokos, save us!" In modern, Protestant theology, the word "save" has come to have a very restricted meaning to refer only to the narrow event of becoming a Christian ("have you been saved?"). This is an unfortunate bit of shorthand that distorts the larger meaning of an English word that has long been used in a different manner. "God save the King," is the national anthem of Great Britain. And though there is no argument that God can "save" the King, the British are not offering a prayer for him to accept Christ as his Lord and Savior. Rather, "save" has the wider meaning of "protect," "preserve," or "help." It has precisely that meaning in the Church's prayer, "Most Holy Theotokos, save us!" ("help us, protect us, preserve us," etc.)

The Gospel of John has two stories that are deeply significant in understanding the place of the Theotokos in Christ's work. The first of these is the story of the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11). Mary and Jesus were among the guests. At the wedding feast, the wine ran out. We are told that Mary saw this and spoke to Christ about it. He says to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." She then said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it." The critical point turns on the fact that Christ's ministry has yet to begin. If He acts, that ministry will not be stoppable. All that it entails of His suffering (and hers) will follow. Her direction to the servants does two things: it puts the final decision in Christ's hands while making it clear that she herself is ready. It is a conversation of an intimate collaboration.

The second story is that of Mary at the foot of the Cross (John 19:25–27). Mary is standing with the disciple, John. Christ says to her, "Behold your son," and to John, "Behold your mother." We are told that John then took her to live with him. The

Church has always seen in these words a reflection of Mary as the mother of the whole Church, represented in the disciple John. This moment at the Cross is also prophesied in the Gospel of Luke, where the Elder Simeon, when Christ was presented in the Temple as a baby, spoke to Mary regarding her child, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34–35). Mary is more than a witness at the Cross: her own soul is pierced as well. What we see is that the communion with Christ that begins with the Annunciation is affirmed at the Wedding of Cana and continues throughout Christ’s ministry on earth.

The Scriptures contain other details concerning the Theotokos. We learn in both St. Matthew’s Gospel and St. Luke’s that she was a virgin, and that Christ’s conception was without a human father. Because Christ was “incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,” He was of the flesh of Mary just as He is of one essence with God the Father. Again, Mary is a participant in the incarnation, not just a vessel.

The Life of the Theotokos

There is a 2nd century non-canonical writing called the *Protoevangelion of James*, that contains several stories on the background of the Virgin Mary as well as on the infancy of Jesus. Though this writing was never accepted as authoritative in the Church, many of the stories within it have been accepted as traditional and incorporated into the feasts of the Church year. These traditions concerning the Theotokos, although not matters of doctrine, are honored as matters of piety. Therefore, they are worth noting in some detail.

The Conception of the Theotokos (December 9). Tradition, as recorded in the *Protoevangelion*, tells us that the parents of Mary, Sts. Joachim and Anna, were childless and in their older years. For this, they were reproached by others. St. Joachim served as a priest in the Temple. One day, the angel Gabriel spoke to each of them separately and told them that they would have a daughter who would bring blessings to the whole human race.

The Nativity of the Theotokos (September 8). The same source tells of Mary’s birth. While there are no particular doctrines concerning her conception or her birth, in these feasts the Church affirms that she is a fulfillment of God’s plan in bringing salvation to the world.

The Presentation of the Theotokos in the Temple (November 21). The tradition relates that Mary was brought as a small child to the Temple by her parents in order to be raised there among the virgins consecrated to the service of the Lord until the time of their betrothal in marriage. According to Church tradition, Mary was solemnly received by the Temple community, which was headed by the priest Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist. The feast meditates on Mary as the new “Ark of the Covenant,” inasmuch as she will contain God in her womb. It is a feast that marks the transition from the physical Temple in Jerusalem to the new Temple, the people of God, prefigured in the child, Mary.

The Annunciation to the Theotokos This feast (March 25), celebrates the appearance of the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary and her conception, by the Holy Spirit, of the child, Jesus. Together with the Dormition (August 15), it is the most important of the feast days associated with Mary.

The Dormition (“Falling-asleep”) of the Theotokos (August 15). The Church in no way denies the full humanity of the Virgin Mary. What takes place in her life is a work of God’s grace. A singular mark of that humanity is that she dies, as do we all. Her death (“falling asleep”) has a rich tradition surrounding it. All of the Apostles were present, with the exception of Thomas. Additionally, we believe the traditional teaching that her tomb was found to be empty several days after her death; that is, God had given her a resurrected body, a promise of our own resurrection on the last day. This is not celebrated as a separate feast (as in the Roman Catholic feast of the Assumption). Rather, it is referenced in the texts associated with the feast of her Dormition.

Mary’s Virginity

Following the Scriptures, the Church over the centuries has pondered the meaning of Mary’s virginity. The “how” of a virgin conceiving and giving birth are beyond our understanding or explanation. That it is *true* is clearly taught in the gospels and is the universal teaching of the Church. Further, the Church teaches that Mary remained a virgin in giving birth and throughout her life (the doctrine of “perpetual virginity”). This was a common part of the universal teaching of the ancient Church and is witnessed in the Fathers, both East and West.⁷ This is in no way rooted in some ancient aversion to sexual relations. Rather, it is a doctrine revealed to us in Scripture. “Then said the LORD unto me; This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it; because the LORD, the God of Israel, hath entered in by it, therefore it shall be shut” (Ezek 44:2). This verse concerning the sanctuary gate has always been interpreted by the Fathers of the Church to be a typological reference to the Virgin Mary.

God’s dealings with Mary reveal His utter concern for the integrity of the human soul in its freedom. Mary’s virginal conception occurs *with her permission*. Her response at the announcement of the Archangel Gabriel is, “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to your word” (Luke 2:38).

Had Christ been conceived by human means (with a human father), He would not have been the Son of God. There was an early heresy called Adoptionism that put forward such an idea. It suggested that Jesus the human being was somehow “adopted” into His sonship with God. But the integrity of the “mere man” Jesus, would have been violated in such an arrangement. The Church does not say that He “became” God, but that He is “begotten of the Father before all ages.” Or, in another translation, He is “eternally begotten of the Father.”

⁷ In fact, the “brothers” and “sisters” of the Lord are believed to be relatives; they were most likely Joseph’s children from his first marriage, he being an elderly widower when he took Mary into his care.

Communion Between the Living and the Departed

In our services, we remember the needs of those who are living, and we remember the needs of those who have departed. Many of the litanies conclude with the prayer, “Commemorating our Most Holy, Most Pure, Most Blessed Lady, Theotokos, and ever-virgin Mary, and all the saints, let us commend ourselves and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.” We do with our words what is done with the bread on the altar. We gather everything and everyone together and present them to God.

“No one is saved alone.” This is a common saying in Orthodoxy. It recognizes the fact that the truth of our existence cannot be reduced to our individuality. On the biological and cultural level, the commonality or “communion” of our life is obvious. We come into existence through the *union* of a man and a woman. We share their DNA. What we inherit from them is a staggering amount of our reality, including major portions of our personality. We are birthed into a culture, permeated by its history. We learn a language that itself contains untold centuries of grammar and words that are themselves the product of a larger humanity. Although each of us must live an individual existence, we are still only giving an individual expression to a life which has its foundation in a common, shared reality.

In the life and teaching of the Church, this understanding extends to almost every aspect of the faith. Our commonality is the language in which salvation itself is described. We are “baptized into Christ.” When we partake of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, we understand that Christ “abides in us” and we “abide in Him.” When we speak of Christ’s death on the Cross, we are not describing something He did so that we do not have to do it. We speak, instead, of being “crucified with Him.” In the words of the early Fathers, “Christ becomes what we are that we might become what He is.”

This way of being carries over into the nature and character of our relationships with others. St. Silouan of Mt. Athos famously said, “My brother is my life.”⁸ It is a profound understanding of what it means to love. One expression of this love is found in the doctrine of the “Communion of Saints.” The Church is one. It does not consist of two parts—the living and the departed—or in that common phrase the “Church Militant and the Church Triumphant.” The life of the Church is a single, common life that encompasses the whole of its members throughout time, both the living and the departed, those of the present, those of the past, and those who are yet to come.

In the preparation of the bread and wine for the Divine Liturgy, the priest makes special cuts of the bread and arranges it in a symbolic manner on the Discos (plate). At the center is the “Lamb,” the cube of bread that will be consecrated as the Body of Christ. Surrounding the lamb are particles taken from the bread and placed in a manner



St Silouan of Mt Athos

⁸ St. Sophrony, *St. Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edwards (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2021).

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representing the Theotokos, the Choirs of angels and saints, and all believers, both the departed and the living. This “icon” of the Church is then carried in procession and placed on the altar during the time of the Great Entrance as we sing, “Let us now lay aside all earthly cares...” It is an expression in the actions of the Liturgy of the true commonality and unity of the Church.

Contemporary culture tends to overemphasize the individuality of persons. This comes from a concern to protect the needs and dignity of each person but has often come at the expense of remembering the *common* life shared by all humanity. Even in science fiction (such as Star Trek), there is a recognition of the tension between the needs of the many and the needs of the few. In the Church, this tension is resolved. It is resolved by understanding that we do not exist as utterly detached, separated entities. Rather, each life co-inheres in all lives, and all lives co-inhere in each life. It is not either-or.

This understanding of our common life is not relegated to the realm of ideas, a theoretical notion to be locked away in a book. In general, the teachings of the Church are brought into our daily practice of the faith that they might truly form and shape our lives. The common life of the Church finds its expression particularly in our prayers.

Prayers for the Departed

Because the Church is one Body, encompassing both the living and the departed, it is important to consider exactly how we pray for the departed. What is it that they need? For what do we ask? A very clear example is offered by the priest in our services for the departed:

O God of spirits and of all flesh, Who has trampled down death by death, and overthrown the devil, and given life to Your world: O Lord, give rest to the souls of Your departed servants N. (N.), in a place of light, a place of refreshment, a place of repose, where all sickness, sorrow and sighing have fled away. Pardon every sin committed by them in word, deed, or thought, in that You are a good God, and the Lover of mankind; for there is no man that lives and does not sin, for You alone are without sin, Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and Your word is truth.⁹

This prayer states that God gives to the departed what he has promised in Scripture: to “wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4).

Additionally, it is a prayer for their sins to be forgiven, with the reminder that there is no one who lives without sin, and that all of us stand in need of God’s forgiveness.

No doubt, such prayers raise questions in the minds of many. Some might hear these prayers as though we were asking God to forgive someone who has not themselves repented. The Orthodox faith has never spoken definitively in such matters, preferring

⁹ Isabel Florence Hapgood, tr., *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church, revised edition* (NY: Association Press, 1922), 369.

to let the words speak for themselves. There is not a doctrine of purgatory in the Orthodox faith, nor an explanation of the “mechanics” of life after death. There are, indeed, stories and private revelations about these matters shared by various saints, none of which rise to the level of Church dogma. Instead, there is an abiding confidence in the goodness of God towards every creature, and the cry of our hearts on behalf of those we love.

A holy monk once suggested that the life of any individual here on earth affects the lives of those around them. The prayers for such an individual after his death, by those who knew him or were touched by him, are in effect, an echo of his own life, its sound continuing to reverberate in the hearts of others. Our prayers are therefore his prayers as well.

On a psychological level, prayers for the departed offer a very profound means of therapy and healing in the grief of those who have been left behind. They serve as an ongoing communion, reminding us that death does not destroy our relationships. This reality is reflected in the Orthodox custom of offering prayers for the departed on the anniversary of their death. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), told by Christ, offers interesting details in this regard:

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, the dogs came and licked his sores.

So it was that the beggar died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'

But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime, you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.' Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'

Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, Father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' (Luke 16:19–31)

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First, salvation is described as “Abraham’s Bosom,” an image that suggests the uninterrupted communion with the community of faith as a key element of paradise. The Rich Man, however, finds himself cut off and in the torments of Hades. From there, he calls out to “Father Abraham,” as a prayer to a departed saint. Of course, his prayer is rebuffed, and it is explained that help cannot be sent to him. The parable itself is not a story intended to relay details about life after death. It is, however, a story that points towards the importance of care for the poor. But the details of Jesus’ story, paradise being Abraham’s Bosom and the prayer to a saint, draw no notice and receive no rebuke in the gospel. They seem to be details that would have been a normal part of Jewish understanding at the time. Subsequent study has indeed confirmed that the Bosom of Abraham was already a part of Jewish understanding, and that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, interceded for those who were tormented in the fires of Hades.¹⁰



The debates beginning in the 16th century between early Protestants and Roman Catholics resulted in both a refinement and hardening of doctrinal positions regarding life after death¹¹ and the nature of salvation.¹² Orthodox Christianity predates these debates and was never part of them. As such, the Orthodox teaching reflects a much earlier understanding of these matters and may, to some, seem to be less developed. There is, in Orthodox thought, a reluctance to speak with authority about things that have not been given definitive treatment in the Scriptures. What we know and understand in the matter of the departed is an abiding assurance in the goodness of God and His willingness for all to repent and be saved (2 Pet 3:9). The Church’s prayers for the departed holds to this hope and gives voice to it in its remembrance before God.

The Last Judgment

Learning that we are part of a common life, shared with the people of God throughout the ages, is an important part of understanding what it means to say, “God is love” (1 John 4:16). The prayers of the Church direct our hearts towards a great chorus of prayers shared by the faithful through the ages. The voices of the Most Holy Theotokos with all the saints, joined together with ours, remind us of St. Paul’s words:

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:38–39).

Those who have gone before us, “those who have fallen asleep in the faith: ancestors, fathers, patriarchs, prophets, apostles, preachers, evangelists, martyrs, confessors,

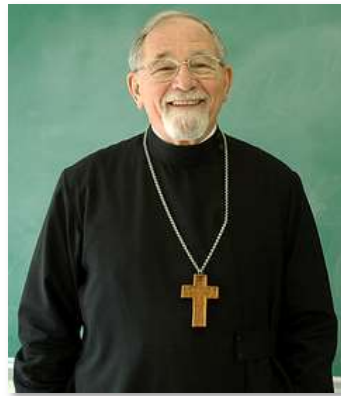
¹⁰ *Apocalypse of Zephaniah 11:2–4.*

¹¹ For example, whether or not one can pray for the departed and whether purgatory exists.

¹² For example, whether one is saved by faith alone and what role, if any, good works play.

ascetics, and every righteous spirit...and especially our most holy, most pure, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and Ever-virgin Mary,”¹³ have chosen, in their living and dying, Christ, the Light of the world. They are guides and intercessors, as we struggle toward Christ. But, ultimately, we each make choices of the degree to which we will live into our baptism. An essential part of the Gospel message is that human beings are free. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Cor 3:17). The ultimate expression of this freedom is found in our ability to love. That same freedom, however, can also entail the refusal of love. As such, we can refuse the offer of God’s love and choose, instead, to live in rebellion. This choice is reflected in the doctrine of the Last Judgment. Fr. Thomas Hopko, of blessed memory, offered this summary:

God takes no “pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezek 18.22). He “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the Truth” (1 Tim 2.4). He does everything in His power so that salvation and eternal life would be available and possible for all... If some men refuse the gift of life in communion with God, the Lord can only honor this refusal and respect the freedom of His creatures which He Himself has given and will not take back... Even in this, He is loving and just...



The doctrine of eternal hell, therefore, does not mean that God actively tortures people by some unloving and perverse means... Neither does it mean that God “separates Himself” from His people, thus causing them anguish in this separation (for indeed if people hate God, separation would be welcome, and not abhorred!)... All are raised from the dead into everlasting life: “those who have done good, to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5.29). In the end, God will be “all and in all” (1 Cor 15.28). For those who love God, resurrection from the dead and the presence of God will be paradise. For those who hate God, resurrection from the dead and the presence of God will be hell. This is the teaching of the fathers of the Church.¹⁴

There are mysteries here that are beyond our knowledge and the doctrine of the Church. St. Paul spoke of mysteries “that cannot be uttered” (2 Cor 12:4) that were revealed to him at a certain point. He also once said that “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the mind of man the good things God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor 2:9). Various Fathers of the Church have offered thoughts and speculations about the last things, but, in general, the Church has resisted saying more than it knows in the matter.

The most fundamental aspect of the judgment was noted in the quote by Fr. Hopko. God is love, and what we expect of His judgment is the reign of His love. That love can be rejected is an inherent aspect of the freedom required for love to be returned. What

¹³ Lincoln, *Vespers and Divine Liturgy*, 67–8.

¹⁴ Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith: Doctrine, Volume 1* (Syosset, NY: Department of Religious Education, Orthodox Church in America, 1998), 112.

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we see is that the will of God is abundantly revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are told that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God gives totally of Himself (His only begotten Son), even to the point of enduring a shameful and painful death and entering into the darkness of Hades itself, that He might deliver us. This is His eternal will.

This eternal question should also be seen as a daily question. The great parable of the Judgment can be found in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus said,

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.

And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry, and you gave Me food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you took Me in; I was naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry, and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty, and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger, and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’

Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’ Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matt 25:31–46).

One contemporary Orthodox theologian¹⁵ has suggested an interesting reading for this passage. Rather than seeing each person as “all goat” or “all sheep,” he suggests that each of us harbors both within our hearts. Every moment of the day is an opportunity in which we are able to feed Christ, to give Him drink, to take Him in as a stranger, to clothe Him, or to visit Him. We face the judgment at every moment. Our Christian life consists in struggling to be more sheep than goat. This is echoed in a famous saying of the Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn:

¹⁵ Steven Freeman, “Glory to God For All Things,” Blog posted August 23, 2017. <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/2017/08/23/judgment-seat-christ/>

The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained.¹⁶

We see that “small bridgehead” manifested in the “good thief” depicted in St. Luke’s Gospel. Clearly guilty of terrible crimes and being “justly punished” (his own words), he, nevertheless, says to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when you come into Your kingdom.” To him, Jesus says, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” It is essential that we acknowledge that this judgment begins within our hearts. But this judge is like no other. For the feast of the Elevation of the Life-giving Cross we hear,

*Today the Cross is lifted up,
and all the world is sanctified.
For You, while enthroned with the Father
and with the All-holy Spirit,
by stretching out Your hands thereon,
have drawn the whole world to Yourself,
that it might know You, O my Christ.
Therefore, grant divine glory
to those who trust in Your goodness.¹⁷*

The irony of this identification (Cross and Throne) is revealed on the very day of the crucifixion. Kings are normally crowned while sitting on a throne. This King is crowned as He “sits” upon the Cross. It is proclaimed for all to see: “King of the Jews.” Orthodox iconography makes the irony yet more clear, by changing the description hanging above the crucified Christ into the “King of Glory.” The Cross is His throne, and the Cross reveals His glory.

This is the champion and judge of the book of Revelation: the “Lamb who was slain,” and it is this Lamb who is most closely associated with “Him who sits upon the throne” (Rev 5:12-13). The Great Irony of the Christian Gospel is that all of these images of power are most clearly manifest in the Crucified Christ. Thus St. Paul says that he is determined to know only “Christ Crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). St. Paul does not treat this as a temporary, passing image, but the very image of God: “Christ crucified...the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 2:2-3). This is not a momentary diversion. The Lamb is *slain* from the foundation of the world. It is an eternal image and revelation. And it is Christ Crucified that all things are revealed to be what they truly are. It welcomes the thief while the hypocrisy of others drives them away.

The second coming of Christ (the last judgment) remains a mystery until that Day, but we must hear and heed the words of Christ. Like a drumbeat in Matthew 24 and 25, our Savior exhorts His disciples to watch. “Therefore, you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matt 24:44). When Christ will return, we

¹⁶ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (NY: Harper and Row, 1976), 178.

¹⁷ Exapostilarion at Matins for the Feast of the Elevation of the Life-giving Cross, September 14.

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do not know. Our task in the meantime is to be prepared: to “be more sheep, than goat,” to emulate the Wise Virgins (Matt 25:1–13) whose lamps were full and whose wicks were trimmed, to live our lives in humble attentiveness as we wait for that eternal day.

Conclusion

We honor the Theotokos as the mother of the Church because she is the mother of Jesus, and we are His Body. The Archangel Gabriel came to her with an unheard-of announcement: that she would become the mother of the “Son of the Highest” (Luke 1:32), although she had not known a man. Despite her inability to understand God’s plan, and yet because of her love for God and her belief that she was the handmaiden of the Lord, she immediately said “yes.” She is, therefore, the example for all Christians as we respond to God’s call and claim on our lives.

Every day we must say “yes” to God and “no” to anything that pulls us away from Christ and His Church. We strive to be more “sheep” than “goat,” and to honor God in our obedience. We look to the Mother of God and all of the Saints, that “great cloud of witnesses”¹⁸ that have gone before us to show us the way. Remembering that they are not in some far-off realm of the departed, but that we participate with them in the one Church, we entrust ourselves and our departed loved ones to their care.

All of our lives, ours and those who have gone before, are in Christ’s hands. He loves us so relentlessly that he took up his throne on the Cross, so that we, like the thief, we might be with him in paradise. Therefore, St. Paul says to the Romans, “Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the Law. And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation *is* nearer than when we first believed” (Rom 13:10-11).

¹⁸ Hebrews 12:1

Chapter 14 The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer "is the pre-eminent prayer of the Church. In the daily Church services, it is recited sixteen times, during Great Lent twenty-two times" (in monastic practice).¹ In the Divine Liturgy, we find the Lord's Prayer in the portion of the service called, "the Liturgy of the Faithful": that portion of the Liturgy that comes after the catechumens have been dismissed. In contemporary practice, catechumens are allowed to remain in church for the remainder of the Liturgy. But in the ancient church, the catechumens actually left the service, so they did not hear the Lord's Prayer. It was a prayer reserved for the faithful (this was also the case with the Creed). Jesus gave the prayer to those closest to him, his disciples. In a like manner, it was a given to catechumens at their baptism when they, too, drew near to Christ.

In the Liturgy, the Lord's Prayer is the last prayer that we say before the Eucharist. The priest asks, on behalf of all, that God would make us worthy! to come before him with boldness and without condemnation as we call on him in this intimate prayer. We address God Himself as a familiar friend and ask for "our daily bread:" in this instance, specifically, the Body and Blood of Christ. And that through our union with Christ in the Eucharist He will endow us with divine grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit: that we will be delivered from all that is dangerous to us, that our sins would be forgiven, and that we would receive the strength of soul and body that we need to live lives that glorify God.

Some of us learned the Lord's Prayer as little children, others later, and some may be encountering this prayer for the first time. Regardless of which category we belong to, it is necessary for any Orthodox Christian to understand the theological and doctrinal importance of this foundational prayer, for Jesus commanded his disciples, saying, "Pray then like this" (Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2).

The Lord's Prayer

Like most of his teaching, Jesus gave this teaching on prayer in response to need and request. He was praying in a certain place, and his disciples overheard him. This was scarcely difficult, since in that day (unlike our own) prayer was offered aloud, even when one was in a public place. One *could* pray quietly enough not to be heard, as Hannah once did (see 1 Sam 1: 10–13), but this was unusual. Praying, like reading, was then an audible activity. His disciples were impressed with the quality of his prayer and wanted to

¹ From a sermon on the Lord's Prayer, by Archimandrite George, Abbot of the Monastery of St. Gregorios of Mt. Athos, delivered on the Second Sunday of Great Lent in 1990 at Saint Dimitrios Church in Thessaloniki. Accessed 9/7/2022. https://www.orthodoxprayer.org/Articles_files/Lord's%20Prayer/Lords_Prayer-George-Monastery%20of%20St.%20Gregorios.pdf

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pray like him. They therefore asked him to teach them to pray, even as John the Baptizer taught his disciples (Luke 11:1).

In response the Master gave them not a lecture or a collection of spiritual principles to put into effect, but a model prayer. By praying this prayer, they could at length learn what all prayer should be. It was concise enough to be immediately committed to memory and stored in their heart for meditation. It was not just a model, however. It was an actual prayer, meant to be prayed, for Jesus did not just say, “Pray *like this*” (Greek *outos*) in Matthew 6:9, but in Luke 9:2 He also said, “When you pray, *say*” (*legeite*). And the Church has ever after obeyed him, using this prayer along with all her other prayers.

The Lord’s Prayer is present in the New Testament in two different forms: a longer one in Matthew 6:9–13 and a shorter one in Luke 11:2–4. Some manuscripts, however, have a longer Lukan version which corresponds more completely to Matthew’s version. Given the liturgical habits of the time in which Matthew’s longer version was always used liturgically, later scribes copying Luke’s text were tempted to regard the shorter Lukan version as incomplete and to correct it by inserting the omitted phrases. Thus, though manuscripts of the Bible² like Sinaiticus and Vaticanus have the shorter version, other manuscripts like Alexandrinus and Ephraimi have the longer one. There can be little doubt, however, that the shorter version is the original one that Luke wrote, for if Luke’s original version conformed to Matthew’s version, it is difficult to imagine why a scribe would edit it so severely.

Probably because Matthew’s version is fuller and longer, it soon became the one preferred by the Church at large, so that when the author of the *Didache* (written probably around 100 A.D.) bids his readers to say the Lord’s Prayer three times a day, it is Matthew’s version he offers (chapter 8).

“Our Father who art in heaven”

We note at the outset the corporate nature of the prayer: the Lord taught us to say “*our* Father”, not “*my* Father” so that even when we say this prayer on our own with no one else around, we still pray as part of a family. The Lord did not act as a one-on-one mentor to individuals, but as a Master to a group of disciples, and his commands to us presuppose that each person is part of a larger group. He was not offering a course in spirituality to individuals who might be interested, but forming a *qahal*, a gathering, an *ekklesia*, a church. As such, when He was asked by this group for instruction on prayer (Luke 11:1), he offered a model prayer which presupposed prayer in a group.

We note that Christ taught us to address the deity not as God, Lord, or King (all perfect, good, and Biblical titles), but as “Father”—almost certainly *abba* in the original Aramaic. *Abba* means not just “father”, but more specifically “papa”. Along with *imma* (mother) it was one of the first words a Jewish child learned (compare Isa 8:4). It is a word of sweet intimacy and loving familiarity. The title “father” denotes respect and can be uttered

² For example see <https://www.codexsinaiticus.org/en/>

while kneeling or standing at attention; *abba* presupposes a loving embrace. Yet despite the immense transcendence of God whose glory fills heaven and earth, and before whose face the exalted cherubim and seraphim veil themselves in awe, we are still taught to invoke this transcendent God as our “papa”.

This is because Christ shares with us his intimate relationship with the Father. He is the Son of God by nature, and so of course calls God “*abba*” (compare Mark 14:36). He shares this sonship with us, so that all that He is by nature, we can become by grace. Thus, after his resurrection He commands Mary Magdalene to tell his disciples that He is ascending “to My Father and your Father; to My God and your God” (John 20:17).

Also, we note that God is described as being “in heaven”—or, literally, “in the heavens” (plural). We tend to think of heaven in the singular, with earth down here and heaven up there. The ancients thought of heaven in the plural. St. Paul referred to the paradisaal dwelling of Christ as “the third heaven” (2 Cor 12:2f). Others spoke of seven heavens. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews spoke of Christ having “passed through the heavens” (Heb 4:14). One should not ask, “So, are there three heavens or seven?” for we are not speaking the language of arithmetic, but of metaphor. This is theology, not astronomy. The point of the theological metaphor is the transcendence of God. God is not just “up there.” He is greater than that. And He is not just “up above up there.” He is higher still. There are many heavens, and God is above them all. In fact, He is so exalted that He has to humble Himself to see what goes on in heaven as well as on earth (Psalm 113:6). He surpasses and defies all description. He is not just “our Father”, but “our Father in the heavens”.



This means that the God who loves us is a God of power and might. He is the Lord *Sabaoth*, the Lord of the heavenly armies, and that power and might are there to help and save us. There are many that oppose us, many enemies that seek to do us harm and drag us down to death, dust, and despair. We need fear none of them, for the God who is our *abba* is in the heavens. The Psalmist told us of this long ago: our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases (Psalm 115:3). And what He pleases is to embrace us as his children, since we have taken refuge in his Christ.

“Hallowed be Thy Name”

To understand this petition, we must first understand the Hebrew significance of a name. In our culture, a name is simply a verbal tag, a number of syllables by which someone is specifically identified and differentiated from others. For us, a name hardly differs from a number: “You are Thomas” or “You are Barsanuphius.” It hardly matters; the name is simply a label worn so that one can be picked out in a group. It was

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otherwise in the Old Testament, where a name embodied a person's essential nature. Thus, one might be given a different name if one embraced a different destiny: Abram became Abraham when God called him to be the father of a multitude, and Simon bar-Jonah became Kephass (or Peter) when the Lord called him to be his apostle.

God's Name also embodies his essential nature. When He revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush and told him that He was calling him to bring to Israel the message of impending liberation from Egypt, Moses foresaw that Israel would be sceptical and would ask, "What is His name?" (Exodus 3:13). This was not a request for a verbal identifier; they knew that He was the God of Abraham, whom they had been worshipping. They were not asking for his verbal tag, but inquiring after his credentials and whether or not He had what it took to overcome the gods of Egypt and defeat the world's greatest superpower. In response God replied, "I am who I am"—i.e., his power was untrammelled, and his acts were not conditioned by anyone. He could do whatever He pleased—including liberate Israel from Egypt. He was the great I Am. He had not manifested Himself with such power before (Exodus 6:3), but now He would.

God's Name, therefore, is identical with his power. We see this, for example, in the prokeimenon for Wednesday Vespers, Psalm 54:1. One feature of Hebrew poetry is its parallelism, wherein the poet says something one way and then repeats it another way. Thus, "Save me, O God, by Your name, and vindicate me by Your might." Here it is clear that God's "name" is synonymous with his "might." Thus, the Name we are to hallow is God's manifested reputation for power in the world, his ability to save his people.

The word "hallow" is quite archaic and is scarcely used outside religious circles. The word "hallow" is the Greek *agiazō*, meaning "to make *agios*, or holy, to sanctify." And what does it mean to "hallow" something? One path to understanding it might be to turn it on its head and to ask first what it might mean to *profane* God's Name.

In Isaiah 52:5, the prophet accuses Israel of profaning God's Name by their sins. Israel had defected from their God and worshipped the idols and had ground the face of the poor, in every possible way flouting God's Law. For this God had abandoned them to their sins and allowed foreign oppressors to prevail over them, sending them into captivity. The nations had concluded from this that Israel's God was too weak to defend his people from the nations who were supported and strengthened by their gods. Yahweh's³ power was despised by them, so that His Name was blasphemed among the nations. St. Paul later took up this accusation and leveled it at the Jews of his own day in Romans 2:24, saying that Jewish transgression of the Law resulted in Judaism and the Jewish God being despised among the nations of his time. Thus, one profanes the Name

³ The name "Yahweh" is used by some to represent the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (meaning four letters) יהוה (Yod Heh Vav Heh). It was considered blasphemous to utter the name of God; therefore, it was only written and never spoken, resulting in the loss of the original pronunciation. It is more common in English-language bibles to represent the Tetragrammaton with the term "LORD" (capitalized).

of God through one's sins, for the sins of religious people inevitably reflect upon the God whom they profess to serve.

In the same way, our transformed life also reflects upon the God who we profess to serve. St. Justin Martyr happily pointed to the transformed life of murderous and aggressive people whose natures had been tamed by Christ: "We who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also willingly die confessing Christ."⁴ In like manner St. Paul encouraged the thief to steal no longer, but to work so as to have something to give to those in need (Eph 4:28). In this way the world would see that God had so transformed the thief's heart that instead of taking other people's things, he was now giving away his own.

The Lord Himself said the same thing about the power of a transformed life: "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Our changed lives inevitably reflect upon our God. And of course, the greatest way to sanctify God's Name is to die for him—when the world sees how the Christians are even prepared to lay down their lives for God, they will ask, "What kind of a God is this that his people will even die for him?"

This is how we sanctify the Name of God: by letting our light" so shine before men that they will glorify our Father in heaven" (Matt 5:16). We may speak and preach all we like, but all will be in vain if by our lives we do not sanctify God's Name. If the Gospel cannot transform and heal the human heart, it will have no credibility in the world—and nor should it. We are called to be transformed, not just our own sake, but for the sake of the world.

We note finally that this first petition in the Lord's Prayer has to do with God's honour and glory, and not our own happiness and fulfillment. It is right that we pray for ourselves, and ask God for our daily bread, our daily forgiveness, and daily deliverance from the time of trial. But more important than our own welfare is God's glory, and thus we pray first for His Name to be sanctified, not for ourselves. Our name, reputation, and passing pleasure are as nothing compared to him. It is His Name that we should strive to sanctify.

"Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will be Done"

It seems clear that these words constitute a single petition expressed with Hebrew poetic parallelism, and not two separate petitions, since the Lukan version of the Lord's Prayer in Luke 11:2 simply reads, "Thy Kingdom come," omitting the further elaboration contained in Matthew's more Jewish version.

The concept of the Kingdom of God was part of the Jewish apocalyptic inheritance. Suffering under the iron boot of Rome, Israel in the first century looked forward to a time when the Gentile kingdom would be no more and would give way to the Kingdom of God. In this kingdom, it was popularly thought, the hated *Pax Romana* would be

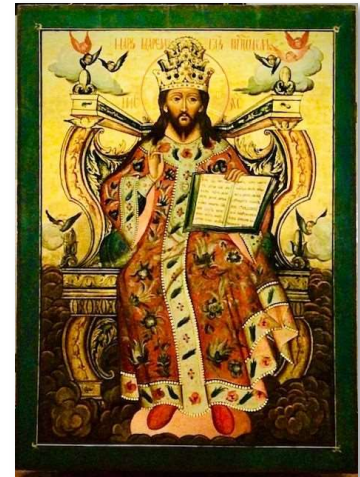
⁴ Justin Martyr, *Apology*, chapter 39.

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replaced by a glorious *Pax Hebraica*, and the nation of Israel would be exalted to a place of supremacy in the world. Rome would no longer rule the nations. Instead, decrees of power and justice would proceed from Jerusalem, where the Messiah would rule the nations in God's Name. Such a kingdom would come about by the power of God and His Messiah. It would be a political and military kingdom, swept to power by God's miraculous wrath on the nations, though of course the people of Israel would have a hand in such a revolution. The Essenes⁵, for example, called this the war of the sons of light against the sons of darkness.

This was the kingdom that most of Christ's hearers were expecting that God would bring when Christ announced that the Kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:15), and so Christ took pains to correct their erroneous notions of the coming Kingdom of God. That was the point of all his parables about the Kingdom: it was not to be a political kingdom, nor one that would sweep evil from the earth. Instead, evil tares and good wheat would grow side by side until the end of the age. His Kingdom was not of this world. In fact, it was already present among them: whenever Christ healed and liberated the oppressed, there was the Kingdom of God (Matt 13:24f; Luke 17:20–21). In this age, the Kingdom was present as a sacramental reality, one which brought healing, forgiveness, and transformation to the human heart and bestowed eternal life.

But a more powerful manifestation of the Kingdom would come at length, as the kingdoms of this world became the Kingdom of the Lord God and of His Christ (Rev 11:15), and it was this Kingdom for which the Lord taught his disciples to pray. Currently, in this age, God's will is not done. Rather it is the will of the rich and powerful that is carried out, the will of tyrants, liars, the elite, the 1%. One may imagine that where democracy is the prevailing form of government, the will of the people carries the day. This is not entirely true, since behind every democracy of any size stands a hidden plutocracy. In this age, people starve, and children cry and the rich grind the faces of the poor and go to their soft beds and sleep well afterward. Wars ravage the countryside and unjust death goes unavenged. When the violence takes place between nations, we call it war; when it takes place within a nation, we call it crime, but the reality is the same. God does not will such violence and injustice. In this age, God's will is not done.



But a day will come when his will shall finally be done on earth as it is done in heaven, and the Kingdom of God shall replace the kingdoms of men. Then “the wolf will lie down with the lamb and the weaned child shall play over the adder's den and they will not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain, for the earth shall be filled with the

⁵ The Essenes were an apocalyptic community of the 1st century living throughout the Roman Empire. They are particularly known for the deposit of scriptures and religious writings, the Dead Sea Scrolls, found at Qumran, in the Judean desert.

knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa 11:6,8,9). It is this Kingdom for which we pray every day.

Thus, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are praying for the overthrow of the present order. One begins to see why it was that the Romans found the Christian faith somewhat threatening. The little Aramaic word *maranatha*—"Our Lord, come!" contained the whole of the Christian hope. Christians do not hate the world—how could we, since God made it? But we are strangers and sojourners in this age, which the Enemy rules as its effective god (2 Cor 4:4). And we long for liberation, and the day when children will cry no more. Thus, one of the earliest recorded Christian prayers, found in the *Didache*, dating from about 100 A.D.: "May grace come, and may this world pass away!" All true Christians have this prayer in their hearts as we look past this world's horizons to the glory waiting just beyond it. Closely allied to our concern that God's Name be sanctified in this age is our desire that His Kingdom come, and his will be done. Let the world pass away, O Lord! May Thy Kingdom!

"Give Us This Day our Daily Bread"

The Greek for the word rendered "daily" is *epiousios*. It is a rare enough word that Origen thought that perhaps the Evangelists had invented the word themselves (in *On Prayer*, 27.7). Origen could not have known of the fact that it turned up in a record of a housekeeping account in Fayum, Egypt, where it referred to a food allowance. But what precisely does it mean? In Acts 16:11, we find in Luke's note on the apostolic itinerary the following: "We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the next day, to Neapolis." The Greek rendered here "the next day" is *epiousse*. It is reasonable therefore to translate the "*epiousion* bread" as "bread for the next day", or "tomorrow's bread." This was also the interpretation of St. Jerome.

This means that Christ bids us pray for what we need to live another day. We are not bidden to pray for enough bread to last the coming year, or the coming month, or even the coming week. Rather, though we may *plan* for years to come, we must *live* one day at a time. It is of a piece with the rest of the Lord's teaching: "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day" (Matt 6:34). We might miss the wry Jewish humour hidden in this counsel, for it envisions a person wringing his hands every night when the sun goes down, angsty over whether or not the sun will rise again and tomorrow will occur. Tomorrow cannot benefit from our angst and worry. It will come right on time, the Lord says, without any help from us. Relax!

St. James says the same thing about living in the present and trusting in God. We tend not only to worry, but to presume. We are masters of our fate! We will decide what we will do in the future. Indeed, "today and tomorrow we will go into such and such a town, and spend a year there, and trade, and get gain!" (James 4:13). Or maybe not. Maybe we will die tonight and no such plans for trade and gain will ever materialize. A good way of living would acknowledge the uncertainty of all our plans, and write them, if not on water, then at least with a tentativeness born from humility. We should say, "*If the Lord*

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wills, we shall live and shall do this or that” (James 4:15). We may plan for the future but must live one day at a time.

This was the lesson that God wanted to teach Israel even before they entered the Promised Land. When He cared for them in the howling wilderness, He fed them with manna. The provision was given every single day, with enough manna only for that day. The next day’s manna would be gathered the next day, and if one attempted to gather two day’s worth of manna, the manna left over for the next day would spoil. The exception proved the rule: on the day before the Sabbath, twice as much manna could be gathered, teaching Israel to rest on the Sabbath, and on that day only, the leftover manna did *not* spoil (Ex 16). We are to trust God every day, not presuming on the future or worrying about it. We pray for our *epiousion* bread, enough to get us through another day.

Also, we note that the term “bread” here refers not just to the material with which we make sandwiches, but all our food, all that we need to live. In the ancient world, to “eat bread” meant “to eat a meal”, which of course usually included more than just bread. This petition therefore also includes the health that we need to live. More importantly, as the Fathers of the Church were keen to point out, it includes what we need for our spiritual health. In other words, it also includes the Eucharist. Thus St. Cyprian of Carthage: “‘Daily bread’ may be understood both spiritually and simply...For Christ is the bread of life...Now we ask that this bread be given to us ‘today’ lest we who are in Christ and receive His Eucharist daily as the food of salvation should be separated from Christ’s body.”⁶

We also note in this petition that the emphasis is on our needs, not our desires. There is much that we desire that we do not actually need. Our needs are actually very simple. St. Paul has advice for us all, especially those of us in affluent nations: “If we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content” (1 Tim 6:8). We pray for our daily bread, not our daily Black Forest cake. This petition rebukes our greed, and bids us to live simply.

Finally, we note that our bread comes from God. We might be tempted to think that it comes from Safeway—i.e., that it comes from farmers, and then from truckers who brought it from the farm to the store, and then from the retailers, who stocked the shelves and sold it to us. But in fact, our bread ultimately comes from God, as does everything else we receive in this life, including our very next breath. That is why we give thanks to him whenever we eat. We are all beggars at his table and depend upon him for absolutely everything. The petition asking him for our *epiousion* bread reminds us of this blessed dependence.

⁶ St. Cyprian of Carthage, *Treatise IV: On the Lord’s Prayer*, 18. Accessed 10/14/2022.
<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iv.v.iv.html>

“Forgive Us our Trespasses”

The rendering of this phrase could be more accurately and literally rendered, “Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors.” It is a brief enough petition, but within it hide two bits of counsel for us as we strive to live the Orthodox life.

Firstly, this petition presupposes that we need forgiveness every day. If the Lord teaches us in this prayer to pray for our daily bread, then arguably we also need to ask for daily forgiveness. And as any Christian knows, forgiveness is only offered to us on the basis of our repentance of the sin for which we ask forgiveness. It is nonsense to say to God, “I refuse to repent of this sin, but please forgive it anyway.” That is not asking for forgiveness of sin (which is always forthcoming from the Lover of Mankind), but for *indulgence* of sin (which, mercifully, is never forthcoming). If we ask for forgiveness, we must first repent. This is assumed.

That means that repentance is not something we do just once (for example when we become a Christian if converting as an adult), but every single day. It is not an historical event to which we can look back, like our first day of school, but a life-style. And this life-style sets us radically apart from the surrounding world, for in the secular world, constant repentance is excluded.

As disciples of Jesus, we are committed to a living in a different way. We look into our hearts and, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, begin to see ourselves as we really are, and to see in our hearts the mess that is really there. This insight might lead us to despair if it were not the work of the Holy Spirit. The Enemy tells us of our sins to condemn us; the Spirit shows us our sins to heal us. When the Spirit shows us our sins, we may be sad, but it is “a bright sadness” (in Schmemmann’s memorable phrase⁷) because it leads us to forgiveness and healing. In the words of St. Paul, it produces a sorrow leading to repentance, a sorrow without regret, unlike the sorrow of the world, which produces death (2 Cor 7:8f). This sorrow produces hope and joy.

Each day, therefore, we look into our own hearts and make an examination of conscience. When our conscience, enlightened by the Spirit, shows us our sins, we repent and offer our repentance to God, and He responds by forgiving and justifying us (see Luke 18:14). Justification therefore is not a single, once-for-all event. Through God’s grace, we live under a continual outpouring of his justification and forgiveness, because we live in a constant state of repentance.



Secondly, we note that this justification and forgiveness is offered to us only on the basis that we forgive others. I suspect this is why the Lord referred to our misdeed as “debts”, and not as (for example) transgressions or stains. For what is a transgression? It is going too far, going where you should not. If I put a sign on my lawn saying, “NO

⁷ Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 33.

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TRESPASSING,” and you walk on the lawn and through my front door, you are transgressing, going where you should not. The proper response to a transgression or a trespass is to back up and get out. You should not have gone where you went—so go away. And what is a stain? A stain is a blemish, a blot. One removes a stain on a piece of clothing by bleaching it out, by intense washing. But a debt is more simply dealt with. If I have a debt of \$100—if I borrow \$100 from you and cannot repay you—the debt may be dealt with by a simple act of forgiveness. You may, if you wish, cancel the debt with a mere word, saying, “I forgive you the debt,” so that I no longer owe you anything.

This is why the Lord referred to our sins as debts—because He wanted us to forgive the debts that others have incurred with us. If a person sins against us and hurts us, he or she owes us spiritually. We can, if we wish, cancel the debt with a mere word, saying to them from the heart, “I forgive you.” And this, the Lord says, is what we must do if we would be forgiven ourselves. There is no way around this; the requirement is absolute.

This is not because God is arbitrary or is playing games with us. It *would* be arbitrary if God made as a requirement for forgiveness that we stand on our heads, for there is nothing about standing on our heads that has anything to do with us being forgiven. It would be arbitrary if God made as a requirement for forgiveness that we paint our faces blue with woad, for the colour of our faces has nothing to do with our being forgiven. But there is everything having to do with our being forgiven in our forgiving others. For if we refuse to forgive others and clench up our hearts against them, our hearts cannot receive God’s forgiveness. A hard and clenched heart is closed, and our hearts must be open in order to receive God’s forgiveness. To forgive and to be forgiven involve adopting the same inner posture of the heart.

This petition for forgiveness reminds us of the constant need to both repent and forgive. God loves us, but He offers salvation and joy on no other basis.

“Lead Us Not into Temptation, but Deliver Us from Evil”

The next petition in the Lord’s Prayer is, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” These two conjoined sentences should be considered as a single petition in Hebrew poetic parallelism, like the earlier petition, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” because in the Lukan version we read only “lead us not into temptation.” It is unlikely that Luke’s version would omit one of the petitions of the prayer. It is more likely that he considered the bidding “deliver us from evil” simply as an expansion of the petition asking safety from temptation.

There are some issues of translation. The King James Version and the Anglican Book of Common Prayer both render the final clause as “deliver us from evil”—i.e., deliver from the reality of evil, either from evil overwhelming us, or us succumbing to evil actions, or both. It is from these Anglican sources that this particular wording found its way into English culture so that it is the most familiar version of the Lord’s Prayer for many English speakers today. A more accurate rendering from the Greek would be “deliver us from *the Evil One*” (*tou ponerou*), since the presence of the definite article indicates a

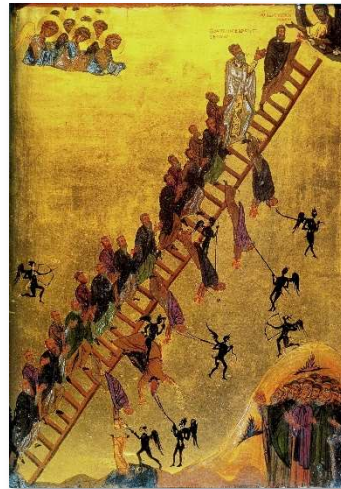
personal reality, not an impersonal one. That is, we do not ask to be delivered from evil in the abstract, but from the machinations of Satan.

The word “Satan”, though it meant merely “adversary” in its original Hebrew (thus its use in Psalm 109:6), came to function as a personal name for the devil (thus its use in Matthew 4:10, 2 Corinthians 2:11, and Revelation 12:9). It would seem that the Lord did not want the personal name of the Enemy to feature in the model prayer He gave his disciples, and so He used the circumlocution “the Evil One” here. It is also possible that Luke omitted this part of the two-fold petition from his version, since his pagan audience would be less familiar with the verbal usages and world-view of Judaism. Not having the figure of Satan in their mythologies, they might have simply found the reference incomprehensible, and asked, “*which* evil one?” Perhaps that is why Luke subsumed this last clause into the first one, summarizing it all in the words, “lead us not into temptation.”

It is crucial for us to recognize the importance of spiritual combat. As Christians we do not simply face temptations that come from our fleshly appetites and the seducing applause of the worldlings around us. The challenges facing us come from the Devil, as well as from the World and the Flesh. The evil we face is thus more potent and deadly than if it came merely from men. For the evil that lurks in the hearts of men is mixed with at least some goodness in those hearts, since all men are made in the image of God. But there is no goodness left in the heart of Satan. In him we face pure malevolence—malevolence made all the more deadly since it is combined with cunning schemes. As St. Paul said, “We are not ignorant of his schemes” (2 Cor 2:11).

This belief in a personal devil sets us apart from many in modern culture, for whom belief in a personal devil is a barbarous vestige of medieval superstition. I remember even one Orthodox writer opining that Orthodox Christians need not believe in a personal devil. “The Devil,” he wrote, “is just ‘evil’ with a ‘d’ in front of it!” Such a writer can scarcely have read the New Testament or the Fathers or an Orthodox Prayerbook, all of which take for granted a belief that Satan is real. Satan is, according to our perspectives, a fallen angel, one who led a pre-temporal rebellion against God so that he and fellow-angels were expelled from heaven’s courts and became demons. For him this combat is personal: he hates God but cannot destroy him, so he vents his wrath upon us, intent on marring, corrupting, and destroying God’s image (i.e., us).

How does the Evil One do this? By inundating us with *peirasmos*. The word usually rendered “temptation” in the Lord’s Prayer is *peirasmos*, also rendered as “trial”. It refers to a crisis which tests us, pushes us to the limit, a crisis in which we may fail the test and fall away from God.



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That was how the word is used in Luke 22:31, to describe Satan sifting Peter as thoroughly as wheat is sifted, by overwhelming him by a temptation to despair after his denial of Christ. That is how the word is used in Revelation 3:10, to describe an hour of persecution and seduction that was coming upon the whole world. St. Paul often spoke of how Satan would send persecution in an attempt to overwhelm Christians in hope they would apostatize.⁸ He spoke of Satan hindering him from coming to Thessalonica by persecuting him (1 Thess 1:18), and of suffering a multitude of insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties as messengers of Satan (2 Cor 12:7, 10). St. Peter referred to Satan prowling about like a hungry lion, seeking someone to devour—i.e., through persecution inducing apostasy (1 Peter 5:8). St. John spoke of Satan cast out of heaven at the Ascension of Christ and coming down to earth in wrath, making war against the saints through persecution (Rev 12:9f).

In the Lord's Prayer, therefore, it seems that *peirasmos* refers to an hour of trial that comes upon us in the form of persecution. In this petition, we pray that we may withstand the assault. The Lord issues the same call to faithfulness in the fire when He refers to the persecution and difficulties coming upon the Church just before the final end of the age: "That day will come upon you suddenly like a trap...Keep on the alert, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34–36). *Peirasmos* will come to all who serve Christ in this wicked and perverse generation, for the Evil One wars mightily against us.

"For Thine is the Kingdom"

For most English-speaking people in our culture, the Lord's Prayer ends with the words, "For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen." This is, however, an ecclesiastical and liturgical conclusion, not a part of the original Lord's Prayer. That does not mean, of course, that the *ekklesia* should omit the ecclesiastical conclusion in the interest of exegesis or liturgical archaeology. Arguably the Lord gave his disciples a model prayer ending with the words, "deliver us from the Evil One" knowing that, as good Jews, they would add a doxological conclusion to it.

This is certainly what the Church did with the prayer, and the various manuscripts testify to a number of different endings—which also testifies to the fact that the final doxology is not original to the prayer itself. Thus, the early manuscripts Sinaiticus and Vaticanus lack any doxology, as do citations in Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, and Gregory of Nyssa. Other manuscripts contain as a doxology "For Thine is the power forever and ever," while still others (such as the extant version of the Didache, written ca. 100 A.D.) read, "For Thine is the power and the glory forever," while yet others read, "For Thine is the Kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit forever." Yet another reads the (now traditional) "For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever." The Orthodox Church, perhaps not unexpectedly, uses the fullest version possible: "For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory, of the Father and of

⁸ To renounce Christianity.

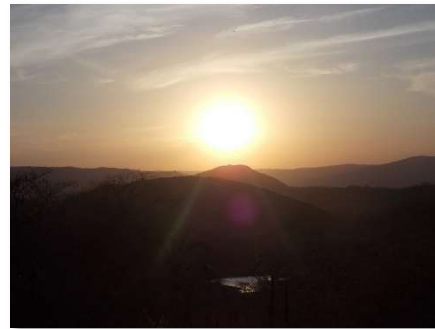
the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and always and forever (or, more literally, “now and ever and unto ages of ages”).

Which doxology the Church uses is less important than the fact that it chooses to end its prayer with a note of praise to God. It is the praise of God which humanizes us and helps us fulfill our role in the world. Man is a microcosm, and the link between the rest of creation and its Creator. In some sense the totality of creation already praises God: through the noise that the leaves of a tree make when blown by the wind, the tree claps its hands and acclaims its God (Isa 55:11; Psalm 96:12); when the hungry lion roars, it is seeking its food from God (Psalm 104:21). But in another sense all creation must praise the Creator through the mouth of man, whom God has set over creation as king. *We* give voice to the voiceless fish; *we* translate the lion's inarticulate roaring into a hymn of praise. This is our role as the priestly link between God and the rest of his creation. As the priest gives voice to the prayers of his congregation at the Divine Liturgy, so mankind gives voice to the varied creatures filling the world.

This offering of praise constitutes our true dignity as human beings. Our glory is not that we are rational and capable of complicated language and speech. It is not that we have opposable thumbs and make tools and technology. It is not that we can produce philosophical systems and are wise. Man is not *homo faber*, a maker of tools, or *homo sapiens*, a creature of wisdom. We are *homo adorans*, creatures capable of self-transcendence through worship. Without this ability and capacity for worship, we are not fully human; even in our pomp we are like the beasts that perish (Psalm 49:20).

That is perhaps why the Orthodox service of Matins, originally a monastic vigil taking one through the wee hours of early morning until the dawn, culminates in the Psalms of Praise, Psalms 148–150. And when the sun finally peeks over the horizon after the long hours of the morning vigil, the celebrant upon seeing it cries out, “Glory to You who have shown us the light!” and the assembled worshippers respond by singing the Great Doxology.⁹ The Church can think of no better way of beginning each day than with the praise of God.

Whether or not one chants the entire service of Matins every day (a bit of a challenge for us non-monastics), it is important nonetheless to begin each sleepy day with the praise of God. We may not all be monks, but we are all human, creatures made and redeemed by Christ, we are *homo adorans*. Now we toil through the long night of this age. But a bright dawn is coming, bringing a day which will know no evening. The Kingdom and the power and the glory belong ultimately not to man in his pomp, but to God, and when



⁹ “Glory to God in the highest and, on earth, peace, good will toward men...”

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the Day of the Lord finally dawns, all will know this. Even now, every time we pray, we end our prayer by ascribing all the glory to him.

Chapter 15 The Sacraments

Rituals and Sacraments

It is difficult not to open a book of systematic theology and find reference to “the seven sacraments”, often capitalized for greater effect: The Seven Sacraments. The Fathers, however, never bothered to define a sacrament, much less to offer a comprehensive list of them. So, the first thing one must say about the sacraments from an Orthodox perspective is that one cannot properly speak about The Seven Sacraments as the West has traditionally spoken about them. We can talk about baptism, the Eucharist, ordination, anointing, marriage, confession, burial, tonsuring, blessing Holy Water, and many, many other things. But we cannot reduce it all to a tidy system, so that what applies to one ritual applies to them all.

Perhaps less misleading than talk about the Seven Sacraments is talk about the Church’s rituals and corporate actions. The Greek term for these is “the mysteries”, from the Greek word *mysterion*. A “mystery” of the Church is not so-called because it is mysterious in the sense of being incomprehensible. A “mystery”, as the Church uses the word, is not something which Christians cannot understand, but something that Christians understand experientially. The element of mystification is for the world, not for the Christians. In that sense, the Gospel itself is a mystery (Rom 16:25–26), for its wisdom is opaque to the unbelieving world but revealed and accepted by the Christians. A mystery is therefore a truth revealed only to the initiated—or, in Christians terms, to the baptized. The outsiders don’t “get it.” We insiders do.

These mysteries are rituals, but they are not just any rituals. One could, I suppose, use the term to describe a private ritual or practice, such as crossing oneself or saying the Lord’s Prayer, and St. Augustine, for example, does use the Latin term *sacramentum* in just this way. But the term “sacrament” refers to rituals of the Church that are done corporately and congregationally. Thus, in this definition, baptism is a *mysterion* and a *sacramentum*; saying the Lord’s Prayer in one’s private devotions is not.

The reason why sacraments/mysteries are essentially congregational in their performance is that they are acts of the risen Christ. He is the one who bestows rebirth in baptism and pours out his Holy Spirit through the blessed oil in chrismation. He is the one who feeds us with his Body and Blood and offers forgiveness in the Eucharist. He is the one who by his Spirit gives men the ability to function as bishops, presbyters, and deacons when prayerful episcopal hands are laid on the candidate. All sacramental life comes solely from him. And He has pledged His Presence to the Church when they gather in His Name, even if the gathering is as small as two or three (Matt 18:20). This is not to deny that He remains with his faithful people even when they are alone, but He promises a special kind of Presence when they gather in obedience to his command. It is when Christ is present in this way that He acts to save and to transform. Thus, all the Church’s

sacraments are corporate in nature. After all, “assembly” is what the word “church” really means (in Greek *ekklesia*).

Baptism and Chrismation

The service of baptism has undergone a long and profound development. In the early days of the Church’s history, those desiring to become Christians were first enrolled as catechumens and continued in that state for some months or even years. Their baptism came as the culmination of a lengthy preparation. In the Christian east, the children of Christians were often enrolled as catechumens in infancy and later baptized as children. Eventually however, the practice of baptizing children of Christians during their infancy came to prevail in the east as it had in the west, and our current baptismal service reflects this practice of infant baptism.

From the days of the apostles, the rite of baptism was liturgically two-fold, consisting of a triple immersion in water, and an anointing with oil, often accompanied by a laying on of hands. In the west, the immersion became separated from anointing, which took on a liturgical life of its own as “the Sacrament of Confirmation”. In the east, the original integrity of the total rite has been preserved, with the immersion and the anointing remaining part of a single service. We can distinguish the baptismal immersion from the anointing (and call the latter “chrismation”), but the baptismal service consists of both elements.

This baptismal service is the way that people have always become Christians, ever since the days of the apostles. In the New Testament, baptism is the way that God bestows new birth and the forgiveness of sins. As we have seen in chapter 6, this new birth, in the few times it is mentioned in the New Testament, is always linked with baptism.¹ Baptism is the only way that we “put off the old man”² and, as St. Paul writes that we “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). It is *the* gateway to the Church. Not surprisingly, therefore, Peter writes that “baptism now saves you” (1 Pet 3:21). The teaching of the Lord and his apostles is clear: through baptism, one is offered forgiveness of sins, rebirth, newness of life, and Christ Himself. Baptism is how one becomes saved. This inseparability of baptism with salvation is presupposed in the phrase found at the end of Mark’s Gospel: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16).

Through triple immersion in water in the name of the Trinity, God gives the candidate a new birth to eternal life and the cleansing forgiveness of sins. Through the anointing with chrism (i.e., with fragrant and perfumed oil), God gives the candidate the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In the early third century, Tertullian witnesses to this understanding of the two parts of the single initiation. In his little book *On Baptism*, he writes about the sequence of immersion and anointing: “Not that in the waters we obtain the Holy Spirit; but in the water... we are cleansed and prepared for the Holy Spirit” (Ch. 6). This distinguishing of function between the immersions and the anointing is why the

¹ John 3:3–5; Acts 2:38, 22:16; Romans 6:4; Ephesians 5:26 and Titus 3:5

² Ephesians 4:22; Galatians 3:9

anointing can be detached from the service, if pastoral necessity demands, and administered by itself as the Sacrament of Chrismation.

The Church may administer the sacrament of chrismation apart from baptism when receiving heterodox Christians into the Church.³ If a person has been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, they are not baptized again, but, having put aside former doctrinal errors, and having renounced the devil and all of his machinations, they receive the anointing with oil, which is “the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.”⁴ If baptism is a personal participation in Pascha, chrismation is a personal participation in Pentecost.⁵ We should be careful to note however, that there is no baptismal ritual without chrismation and there is no chrismation without baptism, even if the two parts of the whole are separated by some time.



We see, therefore, that the sacramental mystery of baptism is *the* instrument Christ uses to bestow new life upon the candidate who comes seeking to become his disciple.

But is Christ willing to bestow this new life and give his Spirit to infants also? We already find a precedent in John the Forerunner’s baptism. And John’s baptism is rooted (many say) in Jewish proselyte baptism. This latter baptism was often given to all the members of a household. When the head of a Gentile household wanted to convert to Judaism, his entire household would usually follow his lead. The males of the household would be circumcised, and then the entire household—men, women, children, and even infants—would be baptized, to wash away the stain of the Gentile world. Then, they were then considered to be Jews. The point is that such baptism was given even to infants, and it is this baptism which John used as his model, and which Christ in turn used as his. Not surprisingly then, the apostles were prepared to practice household baptism,⁶ which would have included infants.

It is not so hard to believe that Christ’s grace extends even to the youngest. He who said that the Kingdom of God belonged to such as children and who blessed even infants (Luke 18:15–16) is willing to pour his grace into the hearts of the youngest who are brought to him. If John the Forerunner could be filled with the Holy Spirit even while yet in his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15), it must surely be possible for newly-born infants

³ Archimandrite Ambrosius (Pogodin) “On the Question of the Order of Reception of Persons into the Orthodox Church, Coming to Her from Other Christian Churches”, Originally published in Russian in *Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniya*, Chapter 1. Accessed 10/10/2022. <https://www.holy-trinity.org/ecclesiology/pogodin-reception/reception-ch1.html>

⁴ See Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 6; 2 Corinthians 1.21–22

⁵ Hopko, Thomas, *The Orthodox Church, Vol. II: Worship*. Accessed 10/10/2022.

<https://www.oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith/worship/the-sacraments/chrismation>

⁶ Acts 11:14, 16:15, 16:33

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to receive the Holy Spirit as well. As they mature, they must treasure the gift given to them and seek to grow in the Holy Spirit to finally be saved, just as adults must seek to grow and cultivate the baptismal gift they were given. But the necessity for growth *after* baptism does not mean that grace was not already freely given *in* baptism. Of course, grace was freely given; that is what “grace” means.

Eucharist

The earliest title of the main Sunday service of the Christian Church is “the Eucharist”, from the Greek word *eucharisteo*, meaning, “to give thanks.” As early as about the middle of the second century, Justin the Philosopher wrote that the bread and wine which the Christians received sacramentally was “called among us ‘the Eucharist’, “of which no one is allowed to partake but the ones who believe that the things which we teach are true.”⁷ The ritual service would also later be called “the Divine Liturgy”, and “the Mass”.

The Lord Jesus commanded his disciples to perform this ritual on the night on which He was betrayed. Before noon the next day, He would be crucified and hanging on a Roman cross, offering Himself as a voluntary sacrifice to take away the sins of the world, and within a few hours, He would be dead. He therefore instituted this ritual as the way of ensuring that his sacrifice would be powerfully present and effective among his disciples. By doing so, He transformed what was a simple judicial execution into an enduring sacrifice. The recurring ritual of the Eucharist was the means whereby his disciples could benefit from that sacrifice.

The Lord instituted the Eucharist during his final meal with them. A large, furnished upper room was prepared for Jesus and his disciples to eat their last meal together. At the beginning of this meal, the Lord took bread and broke it. This was not unusual; every meal began with the breaking of bread. But what happened next *was* unusual—as He gave them the bread, He said, “This is My body which is given for you” (Luke 22:19). The apostles’ reaction is not recorded, but one can imagine their alarm. Then, at the conclusion of the meal, a final cup of wine was blessed and drunk. Again, this was not unusual; every meal would be accompanied by wine, and every Passover meal concluded with this third cup. But as Christ gave them the wine, He said, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you” (Luke 22:20). As St. Paul recounted it to the Corinthians (in a letter which predated the writing of the gospels), Christ added that they should do this “for My memorial” (sometimes translated “in remembrance of Me;” the Greek is *eis tēn emān anamnāsin*). It is doubtful that the apostles understood what our Lord was talking about, for they had refused to believe that He was about to die. But his words sounded ominous enough. It was only later that they would understand.

Christ met with his disciples on Sundays after His Resurrection, and by this, He was telling them that the first day of the week was *the* day when they should come together. Accordingly, though the apostles would continue as good Jews to worship with their fellow Jews in the synagogues on the Sabbath, they would also meet with their fellow

⁷ St. Justin, *Apology*, chapter 66.

Christians on the next day. This day they soon began to call “the Lord’s day”, because it was on this first day of the week that the risen Lord manifested Himself to them when they were together. They would meet every Sunday evening for a meal—a full meal, a supper (Greek *deipnon*), during which there would be prayers, Scripture readings, hymns, and of course stories about Jesus. The culmination of the meal would be the Eucharist, when the one presiding over the meal would take bread and wine, pray over them, break the bread, and all would eat and drink.

By the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, the taking of the sacramental bread and wine had become separated from the meal itself. The Christians would meet before dawn on Sunday morning (which of course before Constantine’s time was just



another workday) and have the Eucharist. They would then gather again later that day for the meal itself, which they called an *agape*, or “love-feast”. We know this from a letter that Pliny wrote to his emperor, Trajan, in about 112 A.D. He reported that the Christians’ “custom had been to gather before dawn on a fixed day and to sing a hymn to Christ as if to a god...With this complete, it had been their custom to separate, and to meet again to take food—but quite ordinary, harmless food.”⁸

What was this bit in Pliny’s letter about “ordinary, harmless food?” Here we arrive at the heart of our faith and the central mystery of the Eucharist. Pagans at that time believed that we Christians met together to practice cannibalism, that we killed and ate a baby at our services. And of course, Christians whispered about “receiving the Body and the Blood.” What else could it mean except ritual child-killing and cannibalism? That was why Pliny made a point of reporting that at our meals the food was “ordinary and harmless”—no cannibalism, so far as he could tell.

But if not cannibalism, what does this talk about eating flesh mean? It is a stunning image, and one that goes back to Christ Himself: “He who eats My Flesh (Greek *sarx*) and drinks My Blood has eternal life...he who eats Me, he also shall live because of Me” (John 6:54, 57). The Lord’s words on the night of his last supper should be understood as a sacramental application of this earlier teaching—when the disciples ate the bread at the Eucharist in the church, they also ate his Body, his Flesh. When they drank the wine, they also drank his Blood. St. Paul taught precisely this: “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing (Greek *koinonia*, participation) in the Blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing (Greek *koinonia*) in the Body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16). In some sense then, the eucharistic bread *was* His body, and the wine in the cup *was* His blood. It was not a simple metaphor (like Christ saying, “I am the vine” in John 15:1). Paul said that what was shared and eaten was His body and His blood. And he said that some of

⁸ Pliny the Younger, *Letter to Trajan*, chapter 6.

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those who ate it improperly had sickened and died as a result (1 Cor 11:30). No one dies from a mere metaphor.

How then could Christ's Body and Blood be present for us? Because in the Eucharist, the Church obeys Christ in making a memorial (Greek *anamnesis*; Hebrew *zikkaron*) of His Passion. Most people today do not understand memory or memorial as the ancient Hebrews did. For us memory is something in our heads, a merely mental activity, like daydreaming. But in the Biblical understanding, a memorial is something done so that God will remember and act. Take, for example, the blowing of the silver trumpets which Moses was commanded to make in Numbers 10:1f. The Hebrews were to blow the trumpets over their sacrifices "that you may be remembered before the Lord your God and be saved" (Num 10:9). The memorial was the act of blowing the trumpets; God remembered and acted. Or take the example of Cornelius the centurion in Acts 10:31. The angel told him that his "alms have been remembered before God." That is, his alms functioned as a memorial, and God remembered and acted—in this case, the action of sending Peter to him with the Gospel.

It is in this biblical sense that Christ made the eating and drinking his memorial. By eating and drinking at the Eucharist, the Church makes his memorial, and by the power of the Holy Spirit God remembers Christ's Passion and saves us. In this way, Christ's Passion is present among us. His death is not merely a past historical event, but a present sacrifice, effective and powerful in our midst. The Sacrifice is present on the Holy Table, and by partaking of the Bread and Cup, we partake of his Body and Blood, his Sacrifice.

The Eucharist is therefore our participation in the saving self-offering of Christ. When we eat his Body and drink his Blood, we receive his divine life and abide in his salvation, receiving forgiveness, healing, transformation, and the power of the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist is thus the fiery center of our Christian life. It is also what binds us together one with another as the Church. Indeed, in the Eucharist, we enter into the fullness of the Church, renewing us and reconstituting us week by week as the Body of Christ. As St. Paul said, "We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). The Eucharist is thus the source of our common unity in Christ; it is the ecclesial sacrament *par excellence*. It is not surprising if the Eucharist was liturgical context for all the other sacraments of the Church. Even now, in Orthodoxy, all ordinations are performed at the Eucharist.



Given the Eucharist's central place in our salvation, we should prepare ourselves carefully to receive it. We do this by fasting from midnight the night before, so that we come to the Chalice with hungry stomachs and hungry hearts. We do this by praying beforehand that we may receive worthily, forgiving all who have sinned against us and hurt us, and repenting of our own sins. We do this by living all our days in fervent faith,

receiving the sacrament of Confession regularly, being faithful in daily prayer and in Scripture-reading, always striving to please the Lord in all things. In other words, we come to the Chalice as Christians, as those who live for the Lord. Thus, every Sunday and every feast-day finds us at the Chalice, partaking of salvation. We come every week because we need to. We come every week because we are unworthy and sick and need to be healed. We come every week because He told us to. We come in the fear of God and with faith and love because without this feast, we have no life.

Holy Matrimony

That our current sacramental rite of matrimony is the product of long development can be seen by reflecting on the simple fact that in the days of the apostles and beyond, there *was* no church rite of matrimony. When two Christians wanted to marry each other in (say) the second century they simply agreed to live together as a married couple, registered their marriage, and then came to church and had Holy Communion together like they did every other Sunday. In the Roman world, marriage consisted of the mutual consent of the partners. No third party, or ceremony, or witnesses were legally required. Christians did not invent a marriage ceremony to fill this vacuum—they simply accepted that this was how people, including themselves, got married. There was no special rite used which made their marriage a Christian marriage—Christian marriage existed because marriage existed in society and some of the married persons were Christians, not because the Christians were married in a special ceremony. Indeed, one anonymous early church writer in his *Epistle to Diognetus* expressly says that Christians marry in the same way as everyone else does.

This does not mean that the Church did not have its own understanding of Christian marriage, or that it did not regard marriage differently than the world did. The Church's understanding of Christian marriage was actually quite different from that of the world and involved a life-long union in Christ with no possibility of divorce. Since all Christians lived to serve Christ, their marriages also were meant to reveal and express the Kingdom of God. But this different understanding did not express itself in a special ceremony in those early days.

Obviously, the assembled church community would want to celebrate the new couple's joy, and so during the Eucharist the celebrant might offer a special prayer or blessing for the new couple. In the fourth century one hears of the Church accepting the use of floral crowns for the new couple, though previously it had frowned upon these things as pagan fripperies. Chrysostom, ever the pastoral preacher, suggests that the floral crowns should be regarded as crowns of victory over the passions, to celebrate the couple's intact chastity. But though these crowns may have been popular with those getting married, they were not required.

In the late ninth century, one could become married either through a blessing or by crowning or by simple mutual agreement. The creation of a marriage ceremony came only *after* the ninth century, when the State gave the Church the difficult responsibility for all marriages in the (by then) Christianized Roman Empire, regardless of whether

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those being married were communicants. But in all cases, Christian marriage was sealed by the Eucharist, because the Eucharist was for Christians the source of all saving grace.

It was only in the beginning of the tenth century that one first hears of a marriage service apart from the Eucharist. Now those ineligible to receive the Eucharist (such as those entering into a mixed marriage) were still to be married by the Church, which then had to devise a new ceremony. It is this ceremony which the Orthodox Church uses today.

The wedding service as presently constituted consists of two parts: the betrothal (when the couple get engaged), and the crowning (when the couple, having concluded the period of betrothal, are married). Given that during the time of betrothal the couple had all the responsibility of mutual fidelity to each other and none of the joys of shared conjugal life, there was all sorts of incentive to make the time between betrothal and crowning as short as possible. Currently it is short enough, since one service follows immediately after the other, so that the liturgical engagement lasts about four minutes, the time needed to walk from the back of the church where they were betrothed to the center of the church where they will be married.

The betrothal consists of the mutual agreement of each party to marry the other (the legal requirement for all marriage), which is expressed in the giving of rings.

The man gives his bride a ring, and the woman gives her groom one too, each one placing it on the fourth finger of the right hand as the hand of honour (note: not the left hand, as in the west). There are no vows needed to express this mutual agreement; the exchange of rings express their wordless and beautiful consent.



After the betrothal comes the crowning. The bridal pair stands together in the center of the nave, since their union expresses the eternal union between Christ and his bride, the Church. The priest places crowns on the heads of both bride and groom and prays that God Himself will crown them—not with flowers, but with glory and honour. After this the couple share a single cup of wine as an image of their shared joy and intimacy, an intimacy (and cup) which they will share with no one else.

Next, they take their first steps together as a married couple, as the priest leads them three times around a table with the Gospel upon it, and the choir sings hymns of praise to God. This circular procession around the Gospel shows how they must keep Christ at the center of their married life. Throughout all the service the priest prays for the couple, asking God's blessing upon them.

Thus, a Christian marriage is quite different from a secular marriage. Couples not married in Church but by a civil functionary such as a justice of the peace are, of course, still married. But these secular marriages will be different than the marriages of devout

Christians. “For me to live is Christ,” said St. Paul (Phil 1:21), and for a Christian life has no other purpose than to glorify the Lord. Because of this, the marriages of Christians have no other purpose than to glorify Christ also. All the joys in marriage—shared sexuality, the blessing of children, long life—are received as gifts from him, and call forth thanksgiving. Husband and wife regard each other as Christ’s gifts. This means that they must treat each other with respect and kindness, serving each other in love, with life-long commitment and fidelity to the other.

Holy Orders

One question that may be asked is, “Why does the Church have clergy at all?” Muslims do not have clergy in the same way that Christians do—and neither, if it comes to that, do Quakers. The answer is that the Church is more than a mere collection of assembled Christians. The Church is a body.

St. Paul describes the Church as a body at great length in chapter 12 of his First Letter to the Corinthians. There he writes that just as the different members of a human body have different functions, so the members of the Church as the Body of Christ also have different functions. In the human body, the ear has the function of hearing, the eye, of seeing, the legs and feet, of walking. All these differing functions are necessary for the body to carry out all the different things that it must do. It is the same with the Church—the Church has many functions and tasks it must fulfill to bring all of its members to spiritual maturity.

Because of this, Christ bestows gifts on His Church to help it do the things it must do, giving to some the gift of apostleship, to others the gift of prophecy, to others the gift of evangelism, and to still others the gift of shepherding and teaching (Eph 4:11). These ministries are not ends in themselves—still less were they instituted for the personal benefit of the ministers. Rather, they all serve the common goal of “equipping the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12–13). That is, all the ministries of the Church, from the highest to the lowest, from that of apostle all the way on down, exist for no other purpose than to help all the laity grow up and mature in Christ. The clergy exist for the laity. That is why clericalism is not only pathological, but also self-contradictory.

Certain of these ministries are obvious in their function—readers are set apart to read liturgically, and subdeacons are set apart to help the deacons in the service at the altar. Their function is more specific and limited than those of deacon, presbyter, and bishop, and is confined to the liturgical services themselves. It is otherwise with deacons, presbyters, and bishops, for they continue to exercise their ministry even after the liturgical services have ended. They have a pastoral responsibility in that they work intimately with the people. For this reason, they have a greater accountability and are set apart with more solemn prayer. That is why the Church exercises more care in choosing deacons than in choosing subdeacons. In the present rites of ordination, deacons,

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presbyters, and bishops are hailed with the cry of *Axios! Worthy!* because their suitability for their ministry is of the utmost importance to the health of the Church.

What are the functions of those ministries ordained by solemn laying on of hands? Let us look at them one by one. Deacons are the institutional servants of the Church, responsible for the exercise of the congregation's *diakonia*. Indeed, the word "deacon" means "servant," and *diakonia* means "service". Presbyters are the Church's rulers and counselors. The term "presbyter" comes from the Greek *presbyteros*, meaning "elder," or "old man", and in Israel it was the elders who ruled the local communities.

In the early church, each congregation had several presbyters who formed a council around the leading presbyter, the bishop. The bishop was the main liturgist who presided at the services, surrounded by his fellow-elders. They were the ones who made the pastoral decisions and ruled the local church under the guidance and vision of the bishop.

Bishops are the Church's main celebrants and teachers. In the early church, a bishop served as main pastor and liturgist of every local congregation. He was the one who offered the prayers at the weekly Eucharist, baptized the new converts, anointed the sick, and restored the excommunicated penitent back to the Church. He was the one who gave the sermon each Sunday, and it was his orthodoxy (or lack of it) which determined whether his congregation was recognized as orthodox by the rest of the church. His most important task, therefore, was to preach the Gospel, to "rightly define the word of truth." This concern for the orthodoxy of each bishop is the reason why he is thoroughly examined prior to his ordination as bishop in our modern rites.



Holy Orders are therefore Christ's gifts to the Church, as each of these functions is a *charisma* or spiritual gift. But as important as they are, they are not the totality of the Church, and they exist only to serve the laity. Indeed, in one sense the clergy are a part of the laity, in that they all form part of the holy *laos*, the people of God. Therefore, we see them standing in the church, the clergy and laity alike, facing the same way when they pray. All face east. All face the same Lord, receive the same salvation, and are called into the same Kingdom.

Holy Unction

The Orthodox sacramental mystery of Holy Unction is intended not simply as a preparation for imminent death, but as an instrument of recovery and life. The relevant New Testament text is as follows,

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call the presbyters of the church and let them pray over him having anointed him with oil in the Name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him. (James 5:14–15)

The context is clearly ecclesiastical, for it assumes that the sick person is a member of the local church, able to call for the presbyters⁹ who rule the local church. These clergy will come to the sick man and anoint him with oil in the Name of Jesus and then lay hands on him, praying for life, recovery, health, and salvation, for all these things are all bound up together. When this prayer is offered in faith, the Lord will respond and save the sick, bestowing healing and (if sins have caused the sickness in some way) forgiveness as well. The measure of healing bestowed of course is left in the hands of God, but life and health will be given—whether it be physical healing, spiritual healing, or both.

The rite of Unction is often used in churches on Holy Wednesday, as a kind of substitute for the sacrament of Confession in preparation for Pascha—and indeed the prayers used in that service speak of forgiveness of sins as well as physical healing. Regardless of whether one’s parish serves Holy Unction on Holy Wednesday or not, this sacrament is of spiritual benefit even to those not physically ailing, for we are all ailing spiritually, and in need of God’s mercy and inner healing. Thus, all who come to be anointed in this sacramental mystery must open themselves up to the Lord, allowing and expecting him to touch not only their physical weaknesses but their souls as well. That is, they must come in faith and repentance, turning away from their own sins, and forgiving the sins of any who have sinned against them. Only by so doing can they hope to find healing from the Lord.

The Sacrament of Confession

A commitment to our own spiritual health means making a regular spiritual house-cleaning. Indeed, going to the sacrament of Confession is a bit like spring cleaning—we clean up after ourselves all the time, but make a special effort a few times per year to deep clean our home, especially those areas that are regularly missed. The sacrament of Confession is very similar. In our daily prayers, we ask God to forgive our sins. However, in the sacrament of confession, we confess our sins to God *in the presence of the priest*, who has been empowered by the Holy Spirit to forgive our sins and who is prepared to help us overcome them.

The sacrament of Confession is about more than simply being forgiven. It is also about being healed. Any 12-step program (such as Alcoholics Anonymous) will tell you that to be truly healed, one needs to “make a fearless moral inventory,” which is an examination of conscience, and then share this with another person. It is a difficult thing to do. By confessing our sins to another person, we destroy our pride and let God in, and this is the only way to truly begin the process of dealing with our sins and overcoming them.

Where, you might ask, did the priest get this power to forgive sins? It is not his personal possession. As he himself says in the very prayer of absolution, “I do not have power on earth to forgive sins, but God alone does.” But the priest does represent God’s Church,

⁹ The service books make provision for seven priests at the church service or around the bed of the afflicted, but obviously in a contemporary parish setting this is rarely possible, especially if the prayer is offered in a hospital setting.

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and Christ committed the stewardship of divine grace to that Church. That is, He gave His Church the authority to bind and loose, and after His Resurrection He said to his disciples, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whosoever’s sins you forgive, they have been forgiven them; whosoever’s you retain, they have been retained” (John 20:22). In this act, Christ committed the keys of stewardship to His Church, and gave the Church, in the person of the priest, authority to gain forgiveness from God for those who repent.

We Orthodox take for granted the assurance of forgiveness, but this was new in the ancient world. In that world, when one repented one could only hope that God would forgive. There was no assurance or guarantee. But Christ gives to His Church the firm assurance of forgiveness, so that we can really know now for certain that God forgives us. Eternal life thus is not a distant wistful hope, but a joyful present possession. As a part of Christ’s body, we can know that we have been forgiven and now have eternal life.

We see the stewardship of divine grace in action in the ministry of the apostle Paul. One member of the Corinthian community sinned rather badly (he was living as husband and wife with his stepmother), and on Paul’s insistence, the offender was expelled from the eucharistic communion of the church (1 Cor 5:1–5). Later, he was overwhelmed with regret and repented and amended his life. Paul therefore urged the Corinthian community to forgive him, and to welcome him back (2 Cor 2:6–8). Thus, the church’s authority to forgive sins was revealed through the restoration of the penitent after excommunication.

In the early church, this responsibility to restore the penitent devolved on the pastoral leadership, and especially upon the congregation’s main pastor, the bishop. An early ordination prayer for the bishop mentions this responsibility, and asks God to give the new bishop the Holy Spirit for his ministry of “offering the gifts of Your holy Church” (i.e., presiding at the Eucharist), and “in the spirit of high-priesthood having the power to forgive sins according to Your command...to loose every bond according to the authority which You gave to the apostles”¹⁰ (i.e., restore the excommunicated to the fellowship of the church). In this prayer, we see the bishop’s responsibility to decide who is in the church and who is out. If a person had been expelled from the church for grave sin, it was the bishop who allowed him back in upon repentance and prayed for his forgiveness.



Later, however, this rite of forgiveness for the excommunicated became fused with another private spiritual exercise, one which became especially popular among monks. In this practice, the young monk would confess his sins to an older monk who was his spiritual father as the young one struggled to gain the victory over his sins. The penitent had never been excommunicated; he was only confessing his sins and receiving counsel for his spiritual benefit. The older monk would listen and give counsel and pray for the

¹⁰ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, chapter 3.

younger one's forgiveness. It proved to be spiritually valuable, and not just for monks. Nowadays everyone in the church uses the sacrament of Confession like this.

Thus, this Sacrament has developed a great deal over the years and is used in a number of ways. The Church uses it to reconcile excommunicated persons when they repent (its original function), to reconcile Orthodox to the Church after they have lapsed and been away from the Church's communion for a long time, to offer forgiveness to Orthodox communicants after they commit some major sin, and to Orthodox communicants as part of their regular spiritual house-cleaning. How many times throughout the year should we go to confession? Different churches have different guidelines, but ultimately each person should consult with his or her spiritual father for appropriate frequency.

In all its many uses, the Sacrament of Confession brings the penitent back to Christ, and to his boundless mercy. The penitent confesses his sins to God in the presence of the priest as witness. Christ receives the confession and brings forgiveness and healing. Both priest and penitent stand together before the cross, and in that sacramental moment, both are sinners who are debtors to the boundless love of God.

The Burial of the Dead

Our burial office is suffused not just with sorrow but also with joy and confidence in the mercy of God. It also increasingly differs from the rites for the burial of the dead found in secular society. Modern society has returned unwittingly to the understanding of ancient paganism, which posited a sharp dichotomy between the soul (very valuable) and the body (completely disposable). For ancient pagans and for modern secularists, what really mattered was the soul. The body was regarded as the disposable earthly container for the soul, possessing no more lasting value than an envelope containing a letter. One keeps the letter (maybe) but throws away the envelope into the garbage. Similarly at a secular funeral today one says nice things about the soul but burns the body as if it were so much garbage. This burning is called "cremation" and is a thriving industry. The practice of cremation has always been execrated by Christians (and by Jews and Muslims) until fairly recently. Orthodox still object to the practice and insist upon committing the bodies of their deceased to the earth.

In Orthodox theology, it is the entire person, soul and body, which bears the image of God, since the human person is an amalgam of flesh and spirit. In an Orthodox funeral service, the deceased person is present for their funeral in the Church. They are not whisked from their hospital beds to the hospital morgue and thence to the crematorium. The Orthodox also do not hide the fact of death by having a "celebration of life" service, which ignores the very real and shocking fact of death, the unnatural separation of the soul from the body. The bodies of the departed are present at their funerals. The casket remains open so that their loved ones may see their faces as they pray for them. Then they are given the last kiss before the casket is closed, and they are reverently buried in the earth. The cemetery, the earth, forms the bed from which the dead will awake at the final resurrection on the Last Day. Indeed, the word "cemetery" comes from the Greek word *koimeterion*, and literally means "sleeping place", since we confess

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that Christ has transformed death into a mere sleep, so that we will rise from death just as those who sleep awake and rise each new day.

The Orthodox burial office therefore presupposes that the dead person being buried will rise again. Christians share Christ's victory over death. As death no longer has dominion over Christ, so it no longer has dominion over us. That is why the Church patterns its liturgy for Christian burial after the Holy Saturday Matins service, which celebrates Christ's own burial and triumph over death. The usual elements of the Matins morning service (Psalm 119, Psalm 51, and the Canon) are there in the funeral service. As Christ died and was raised, so his disciples also die in sure and certain hope of their own resurrection. That is why the liturgical pattern of his burial forms the pattern for theirs.

Christian burials are therefore markedly different from secular ones. Ours are filled with hope and certainty and joy. As St. Paul wrote, we do not grieve as the hopeless world does (1 Thess 4:13). We give our beloved dead the last kiss, as a pledge that we will greet them again. We pray for their souls, confident of the mercy of Christ. We commit their flesh reverently to the earth, waiting for their final resurrection. And we refuse to let sorrow consume us. For Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

Conclusion

The Orthodox tradition is very physical. We do not practice the faith only in the mind (what we believe) but with the whole body. We bow after the Little Entrance as we sing "Come let us worship *and fall down* before Christ."¹¹ We cross ourselves in a very particular way to indicate deep theological truths by the position of our hand. We use wheat and wine in our Eucharistic celebration. We are anointed with holy oil at our Chrismation, on feast days, and at Ordination and Holy Unction. We use icons during prayer and allow them to communicate spiritual truths. We even honor the bodies of the departed and consider them to be sacred. Thus, we constantly make use of the physical world as an aid to our practice of the faith.

By our participation in the services and by making use of sacramental objects, we experience the reality of the events we are commemorating. All Orthodox Christians die with Christ in baptism, are raised with him out of the waters, receive the power of the Holy Spirit in Chrismation, receive His body in the Eucharist, are healed in unction, receive the cleansing of our souls in confession, and are buried in the ground until the last day. By God's grace, and with our participation, we will be raised to be with Christ eternally!

¹¹ *Vespers and Divine Liturgy: Service Book for the Faithful*, eds. Jonathan Lincoln and Heiromonk Heran (South Canaan: St. Tikhon's Monastery Press 2021), 45.

Chapter 16

The Fellowship of the Faithful and Our Witness to the World

It is not good that man should be alone. (Genesis 2:18)

We've come now to the end of the Divine Liturgy. We have received the bread of Life and the cup of Salvation. In the Litany of Thanksgiving, we thank God for his Gifts "asking that the whole day may be perfect, holy, peaceful, and sinless, let us commend *ourselves and each other* and all our life unto Christ our God.¹ Note that in the prayer we do not ask these blessings only for ourselves, that we might be somehow privately blessed, but we ask them for one another as the fellowship of the Body of Christ. Being an Orthodox Christian is always a "we" proposition. We are never alone, and that is by God's design.

The Fellowship of the Faithful

No one exists alone — not even God (Gen 1:26). Human beings are communal by nature, for we are made in the image of God, the Holy Trinity who is a communion of Persons. We are *designed* for communion with God in union with Christ and with one another in him. To be fully human, and to share in the eternal life of God *is* to be in this communion.

In uniting ourselves to Christ, we are united with God and with the Church, "... which is his Body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:23). Just as it is not possible to be united to God apart from union with Christ, so it is not possible to be united to Christ apart from our union with one another in his Body, the Church (Eph 1:22–23, 5:30–32; 1 John 1:3).

Our union with the Holy Trinity in the Body of Christ is a communion of love with one another through which we partake of, and participate in, the eternal life of God in Christ Jesus. Eternal life is not to be understood as a never-ending existence. Rather, it is primarily a *kind* of life. The biological life of our bodies has a beginning and an end. Eternal life, which only the Divinity has in Himself, (John 5:26) has no beginning and no end (Rev 4:8). Therefore, when Holy Scripture speaks of us having the gift of eternal life, it is speaking of the gift of personal participation in the divine energy of the love of God: in the *kind* of life shared by the persons of the Trinity (1 Pet 1:2–4). This is why when John the Beloved Evangelist and Theologian tells us that "love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7) and that he writes these things "in order that you may know that you have eternal life," (1 John 5:13) he is not primarily telling us that we will live forever and 'go to heaven when we die.' He is speaking rather of our participation in the very life of God in Christ's own Body, the Church. He is assuring us that if we are sharing the love of God with one another in his Body, then we

¹ The 'whole day' here is not simply the day on which the Liturgy is celebrated, but the eternal 8th day of the Kingdom of God.

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are participating in the kind of life that only his divine energies can create; and therefore, the *kind* of life we have is eternal, not primarily in its duration (although this is also true), but in union with the Divine Fountain of Immortality² from whom it flows. We have eternal life because we live in him, sharing in the eternal communion of love with one another that is his life (1 John 5:20).

Koinonia

The unity we have with one another in Christ as members of his Body, the Church transcends any sort of pseudo-unity that can be found in this world. It is not merely a sharing of common opinions or ideals. Instead, we are quite literally members of one another in a single Body, each member sharing fully in every aspect of the whole. An analogy for this unity in Christ is the way in which God designed the genetic constitution of our own physical bodies. Each of the tiny, seemingly insignificant cells of our bodies contains within it the DNA of our whole body. Though each cell of our body has its own proper function and purpose, each one contains the entire body within itself and is thereby unified and identified with the whole. So it is with the Body of Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote, “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ (1 Cor 12:12). Our union with one another in Christ is therefore neither contrived nor artificial. It is an organic unity bestowed on us in our baptism that is both manifested and fulfilled in our eucharistic communion in the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus.

Each of our brothers and sisters in the Lord are thus inseparable members both of Christ and of our own selves (Rom 12:4–5). We can no more ignore, injure, or separate ourselves from any of our brethren in Christ without injury, both to Christ and to ourselves, than we can if we were to do the same to parts of our own bodies. For this reason, we know that our Lord was not merely speaking metaphorically when He said, “Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me” (Matt 25:40). This is why we confess one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. As there is only one Lord Jesus Christ, so He has only one Body. There is, therefore, one Church which is his Body. This is the great mystical ecclesiological³ truth of the Orthodox Faith in which we must take care to abide. Regardless of what our culture insists upon, we are not autonomous individuals who can live or even have a “relationship with God” on our own.

One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church

It is relatively easy for most of us to hold fast to our confession of faith in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life. But maintaining our faith *in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church* can often prove to be among the most challenging aspects of our life in Christ. Our exalted (and entirely true) understanding of what the Church is can easily lead to

² “Receive the Body of Christ, Taste the Fountain of immortality” (Communion Hymn)

³ Ecclesiology is the study of the Church, therefore *ecclesiological* refers to something that is true of the Church.

disillusionment when we also find that the Body of Christ, our participation in the eternal life of the Holy Trinity, is comprised of sinners who, like us, can be selfish, unloving, worldly, ungrateful, neglectful, offensive, faithless, cliquish, unholy...even immoral at times. All the sins to which mankind is prone can be found in the Church of the Living God. This should not come as a surprise if we truly know ourselves as we are known by Christ. Yet, it can present a challenge to our faith. At such times (and they will come sooner or later) we must beware to resist the temptation to look around us at what others are doing and draw the conclusion that faith in Christ and union with him in his Body makes little or no difference.

When these doubts are expressed to others, it is common to hear that “it has always been thus in the Church.” Although this may be true, it will not excuse any one of us if we neglect so great a salvation (Heb 2:2–3). In such times of doubt, we do well to meditate on the Saints whose lives we commemorate throughout the liturgical year and with whom we also share communion in Christ. When faced with the indifference or outright sins of their brethren, they persevered in faith, remained steadfast, and proved to be powerful examples of faith that others sought to emulate. It is fitting for us also to remember that we do not (and cannot) know the end of others’ lives, regardless of what they may appear to be at any given moment. Peter openly denied Christ. Paul was a persecutor of the Church. Saint Mary of Egypt was a seductress and lover of the pleasures of the flesh... There is always hope in Christ for everyone, just as there was hope for us when we were dead in trespasses and sins. Above all, we do not consider the sins of others. We remember, rather, our own sins and the infinite mercy of God toward us.

Bearing One Another’s Burdens

“I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1–3). This apostolic entreaty to the churches makes an assumption that extends well beyond our gathering together for Liturgy and coffee hour. It assumes that we will heed the new commandment of Christ to his disciples: “that you love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:34). And it is not possible to live out his commandment exclusively within the walls of our temples and church halls. Our gathering together as His Church in the Divine Liturgy is the source of our communion with one another in Christ; yet it is beyond the Liturgy itself that the liturgy of Christ’s love for us is fulfilled. When we gather together, we see or hear about the needs of our brethren and find opportunities to love one another indeed. “If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?” (James 2:15–17) Therefore, if we see a need in the Body that our Lord has enabled us to fulfill, let us not hesitate or be neglectful in love, for it is for this that He gave gifts to each of us.

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The apostle's instruction also directly addresses the reality that we are all sinners who will be constantly confronted with the need to love one another as Christ loved us. As Christians, we freely choose to love our brethren *despite* their weaknesses and sins, and *despite* whatever they may do that irritates us. Love is not a feeling, but an action. While we were yet sinners at enmity with God, "Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8), and if we are to be conformed to his Image, we will choose day by day, moment by moment, to love each other as He loved us. As paradoxical as it may seem, this is one of the reasons we must remain in communion with one another in the Church in order to be deified in Christ. God has made the very brothers and sisters with whom we have difficulty the means of our salvation. Without them, we could never share in the fullness of his love and become like him in all things. And lest we be blind to our own faults, each one of us is prone to weakness and sin. Each of us can be irritating, exasperating, or hurtful to others at times. And though our faults may be different than those of our brethren, they are no less a burden for them to bear.

Our unity in the Church is a gift of God and a witness to the exceeding greatness of his love for mankind that our adversary the devil, filled with bitter envy of the dignity that God has bestowed on us, takes pleasure in disrupting. And though he knows that the Church cannot be destroyed, (Matt 16:18) he will nevertheless seize any opportunity to inflame our passions and thereby manipulate us into fostering schism in the Body of Christ.

There are times when we will become angry with one another – sometimes with good reason. Be angry but choose not to sin against the Body of Christ, and do not let anger take root and become bitterness.⁴ Some will offend us at times. Choose to take no offence. Some will exasperate us at times. Choose to be patient. Some will be harsh at times. Choose to be gentle. Some will lack faith at times. Choose to Have faith for their sake. All will have weaknesses. Choose to bear their burdens. Some may sin against us – even seriously so. Forgive them.

Having this attitude of Christ is the foolishness of God that is wiser than men and the weakness of God that is stronger than men.⁵ It is the power of participation in the obedience and love of Christ Himself. These are the weapons of righteousness (2 Cor 6:7) that put our adversary the devil to shame. It is the power of the Cross of Christ that we take up daily — the very Life-bearing Cross that is "...a weapon that cannot be vanquished, the adversary of demons, the glory of the martyrs, the true adornment of saints, and the haven of salvation."⁶

Love

We confess at the outset that love is as "ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-existing and eternally the same"⁷ as God Himself, for God is

⁴ Ephesians 4:26; Hebrews 12:15

⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:25

⁶ Hymn of the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross

⁷ Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

love (1 John 4:16). Thus, it is impossible to define love, for to define something is to comprehend it. We must also confess that all true love is God's love, for love is of God. Thus, true love will always correspond to the way God loves us. He has made the mystery of his love known in Christ.

In reply to the question, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" our Lord answered from the Law, quoting directly. "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 22:37–40). They show us what God's love is, as well as the kind of love that will be reflected in the lives of his people who love as He loves.

We must hold fast to the truth of his love and steadfastly reject the subtleties of deceivers who would have us rejoice in iniquity to our ruin and to the ruin of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ is clear: "If you love Me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). For no one who denies or refuses to live in his love can share in his eternal life.

Sound Judgment

It should be evident that discerning between God's love and the many counterfeits requires us to have sound judgment (Heb 5:14). This brings us to another of perhaps one of the most misunderstood words in our culture. As Orthodox Christians, we must be clear in our understanding of the Scriptures and the Fathers when they speak of what it means to *judge*, lest we be led astray in the confusion of this world.

There is a judgment that condemns others. This kind of judgment is forbidden by our Lord in his love for us, lest we condemn ourselves. For there is no one who does not sin. Not even God Himself condemns sinners; He seeks rather to restore them (John 3:17, 8:3–11). Another sort of judgment doesn't condemn as such, but constantly looks for faults in others and seeks to correct them while being blind to its failure to correct those in itself. These kinds of judgment are not only foolish and arrogant, they are wholly inconsistent with the love that is of God, and thus they alienate us from his life.

There is, however, another kind of judgment that is *required* of Orthodox Christians. When presented with anything that conflicts with what God has revealed to us in Christ, we are to judge it accordingly, regardless of how it may appeal to our reason or emotion, and regardless of the apparent 'authority' of the source (Gal 1:8). This judgment is one of humility, for great humility is required in order to trust the Wisdom of God when it conflicts with our own or that of those whom we love.⁸ Judging in this way does not seek to condemn anyone, nor to correct anyone directly. Rather, we stand humbly yet firmly in the truth that is in Christ, refusing to accept lies lest anyone be deceived into believing that the very things which sever us from communion in God's eternal life are lifegiving. Like the One who is the criterion of this judgment, it loves and accepts those

⁸ Acts 4:19; Philippians 1:9–11

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who are deceived but refuses to accept or participate in deception. It is patient and kind, humble, never rude, never provoking. It shares in the suffering that inevitably comes upon those who persist in sin and patiently bears their slander. It believes no one to be incapable of repentance. It maintains hope for them, intercedes for them, and endures all things for their sake.

This self-emptying love that is the eternal life of the Holy Trinity in which we share as members of Christ's Body, the Church is the Almighty Power that made the heavens and the earth and everything in them. It is the power that made the very wood and nails of the Cross on which He poured out his life for us. Self-emptying, self-sacrificing, love is the omnipotent power of God Himself. Nothing can overcome it. Nothing can destroy it. Death itself is powerless against it. It is the power of the Cross of Christ and the means of victory over our adversaries, sin and death.

Death and the Cross

To *this* world, the Cross of Christ —God's immeasurable, indestructible power of love — is foolish and weak, as are those who choose to take it up by uniting themselves to his Body. This world is severed from the eternal life of the Holy Trinity and is living (or rather dying) in the darkness of unreality. Blinded to the reality that death is overthrown in Christ, (1 Cor 4:3–4) — the world fears death above all things—not only the death of the body, but also the death of pleasure, of the ego, of one's social or economic status. It is this death that even we feel deeply and know experientially at times. It is the death that is at the root of all our fears, anxieties, tensions, our chronic sense of isolation from God, from others, and even from ourselves. We find ourselves ultimately incapable of being who we want to be and of doing all the good we desire.⁹ It makes living at peace with one another seemingly impossible; death is a constant reminder that something is terribly wrong with the world in which we live. Estranged from the eternal life of the Holy Trinity that is in Christ, it is the way of those who are of this world to seek life in self-preservation, pleasure, power, wealth, prestige, etc. And they seek it in the creation rather than the Creator. So it is that sin reigned in death.

“Because of the tender compassion of Thy mercy, O Master, Thou couldst not endure to behold mankind oppressed by the Devil; but Thou didst come, and didst save us.”¹⁰ Death has been overthrown for us by the Cross of Christ who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel. And death is overthrown *in* us when, we take up his Cross and follow him, “trampling down death by death” ourselves by the power of Christ's own life. No longer fearing death of *any* kind, the life of Christ in us enables us to pour out our lives completely, loving one another in the same way — and to the same extent — that God has loved us. Having the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, we can be free of anxiety, love our enemies, do good to

⁹ Romans 7:21–24

¹⁰ Baptismal prayer for the blessing of the water.

those who hate us, and pray for those who persecute us and use us spitefully, refusing to return evil for evil, but rather doing those things that witness to the peace of God in us.¹¹

The Necessity of Fellowship

We have dwelt at length on the love that is of God and the implications of his abolishment of death for our sakes because it draws our attention to the absolute necessity of fellowship (communion) with one another. Only in union with Christ in the Church can the death that would otherwise swallow us in its corruption be overcome. Only in the Church can we share in his eternal life of love by participation.¹² Week after week in Matins, Vespers, the Divine Liturgy, and the Feasts of the Church, year after liturgical year, Christ our true God calls us through one another to the fullness and wholeness of his life in and through his Body. We need one another in order to keep ourselves from being conformed to the way of this world and to have our minds constantly renewed in the truth.¹³ It is truly not good that man should be alone. We were created in Christ to give ourselves to one another in the fellowship of his love, as He gave Himself for us.

Our Witness to Christ in the World

In our final prayer at the end of the Divine Liturgy, we ask for “blessing on those who bless Thee” and, in turn, we bless “the name of the Lord, henceforth, and forever more.” But we’re not finished. In fact, we’ve just begun. Having received the Eucharist, the very life of Christ that binds us together in his Body, the Life that sustains us after we leave church, we are sent out to our homes, to our work, to our friends, family, to anyone that we may encounter, to live in the Life that we have received. Following the Eucharist, we proclaim,

We have seen the true Light, We have received the Heavenly Spirit, We have found the true Faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity who has saved us.

How did we find the true Faith? While it may be true that some of us sought it out, it is also true that none of us would have found the Faith were it not for faithful witnesses whose lives testified to the eternal life of Christ in His Church. Their lives, permeated with the grace, truth, joy, and peace that come through communion in Christ and fidelity to his commandments, shone upon us with the glory and indescribable beauty of the eternal life of the Holy Trinity. This is what empowered the Saints to witness to Christ in this world. It is what our Lord has called each of us to do: to keep his commandments and to be witnesses of him.¹⁴

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann writes,

¹¹ Romans 14:19

¹² 1 John 3:14

¹³ Romans 12:2

¹⁴ John 14:15; Acts 1:8

It is only as we return from the light and the joy of Christ's presence that we recover the world as a meaningful field of our Christian action, that we see the true reality of the world and thus discover what we must do... It is today that I am sent back into the world in joy and peace, having seen the true light, having partaken of the Holy Spirit, having been a witness of divine Love. What am I going to do? ...It all depends primarily on our being real witnesses to the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit, to that new life of which we are made partakers in the Church.¹⁵

The Knowledge of a Witness

We often feel that if only we knew more about the Faith, more of its history, theology, the teachings of our holy Fathers, the lives of the Saints, then we could become better witnesses of Christ and be able to convince others of the truth of our Faith. These are desires that are to be encouraged. Knowledge is good and useful. Ignorance can lead to many errors. Yet there is another, greater kind of knowledge. Our Lord said, "If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority (John 7:17). This is the kind of knowledge that comes from doing his will, from keeping Christ's commandments. This kind of knowledge is known in the very depths of our being — not by way of the mind alone, but by the heart that has come to know by experience that life in Christ is a spring of living water welling up to eternal life (John 4:14)

What is the doctrine of which Christ is speaking when He says that we shall know concerning the doctrine if only we will do his will? He has taught us, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength... And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Mark 12:28–31). John the Beloved Evangelist and Theologian assures us that, "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3b). They do not require years of study or a theological education, helpful though these may be. Christ's doctrine and commandments are simple. The simplest minds—the illiterate, the uneducated, even the mentally handicapped—are capable of understanding them, as He has demonstrated in innumerable lives of his Saints. His closest chosen apostles were unlearned men, yet they were found to be full of power in the knowledge of God.¹⁶ What Christ's teaching requires in order to be *known* is simple obedience in love. St. Silouan the Athonite teaches us that "The commandments of God are not difficult, but easy (1 John 5:3). But they are only easy because of love, while they are all difficult if there is no love."¹⁷

Obedience in Faith

Only by loving obedience to Christ can any of us be empowered to "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."¹⁸ Yet simple though the commandments are, obedience to Christ requires virtue (power) that we clearly do not possess of ourselves. Being perfect, loving our

¹⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 113.

¹⁶ Acts 4:13

¹⁷ St. Sophrony, *St. Silouan the Athonite*, trans. Rosemary Edwards (Crestwood: SVS, 2021), XVI.10.

¹⁸ Matthew 5:16

enemies, praying for, and doing good to those who hate us, persecute us, and use us spitefully are not things toward which we are naturally inclined. We know that such perfection is beyond our own ability—so much so that some mistake Christ’s words for hyperbole. We are all painfully aware that our sinful passions incline us to react, to avenge, to hate in return for hate, to wound in return for being wounded. Yet we also know that this is not the way of Christ.¹⁹ Our obedience to his commandments, therefore, is an obedience of faith. We *believe* He will grant us the power to fulfill his commandments in and through our obedience, trusting in his faithfulness completely. When He united us to Himself, He endowed us with his power. Thus, we have the full assurance of faith that He has both granted and *will* grant us all that is necessary to be conformed to his image when we obey him in everything.²⁰ We need not shrink from obedience for fear of being unable to do the seemingly impossible, “for with men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.”²¹ It is precisely the inability of any person to be like Christ in his own strength that magnifies the power of God in us and reveals us to be his witnesses.²²

Watchfulness

If we desire to be faithful witnesses to Christ in this world, we must be *watchful*. For most of us, our everyday lives are predominately peaceful and largely free of serious conflicts, hatred, or persecution. Most of the time our neighbors are reasonably amiable and seek no harm against us regardless of how they feel about our faith. Most of the time our government is content to allow us to practice our faith in peace. The prevailing conditions in which we are blessed to live seem not to require anything extraordinary in terms of faith or obedience. It is in just such times that it is necessary for us to continue in prayer and watchfulness lest these conditions of our life lull us into a false sense of what is normal or that a life free of troubles is something to which we are entitled. Our Lord assures even as He forewarns us of what we, as his witnesses in the world, will face: “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”²³ Yet when things suddenly turn unpleasant for us, when our faith is reviled or we suffer injustice for our faith in Christ, it can come as a surprise. The strangeness of it can catch us off guard... careless, inattentive, forgetful of who we are and to Whom we belong.

The Apostle Peter writes,

But the end of all things is at hand; therefore, be serious and watchful in your prayers. And above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins.... Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings,

¹⁹ 1 Peter 2:23

²⁰ Romans 8:29

²¹ Mark 10:27

²² 2 Corinthians 4:7

²³ John 16:33

*that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. Therefore, let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.*²⁴

If we heed Christ and his apostles, being vigilant in the knowledge of what is to be expected precisely because we belong to Christ, we will not be caught by surprise; nor will the shock cause us to succumb to the temptation to react in accordance with our sinful passions. If we are watchful, our faith will be strengthened when such things happen to us. We will remember that our Lord told us it would be thus for those who are in him. We will be all the more confident of his promise to empower us to obey because suffering for his Name's sake is itself a sure sign that we belong to him. Our faith will then be perfected in obedience, and our witness in this world will be empowered with divine grace.²⁵

The Role of a Witness

If one considers a witness in a court of law what qualities make for a faithful witness, and what role do witnesses play? A faithful witness is one who testifies to the truth with integrity and without regard for the outcome. While his or her testimony is essential to the process, the outcome of the proceedings is not in the hands of the witnesses. Similarly, our role as witnesses to Christ is to testify to the truth, by our lives and our words. And the outcome of our witness is, similarly, neither within our control nor within the realm of our responsibility.

There is an assumption in modern consciousness that the purpose of our lives and witness to Christ is to “change the world” or to “make the world a better place.” This idea is so pervasive that some consider it almost an article of faith that ‘success’ in the life of a Christian is measured by the observable difference he or she makes in the world. It inclines us to judge ourselves and the Church by the degree to which our witness to Christ makes the society around us more moral, more just, more merciful to the poor, more family-friendly, or other similar (and desirable) improvements to the common life of human beings in this world. And because no one, including Orthodox Christians, denies that this world would indeed be a better place if these things were true of our society, to maintain a perspective to the contrary can at first glance seem to be isolationist, unloving, or even scandalous. After all, who wouldn't want the world to be a better place for everyone? Are we not commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves? Is it not true that the early Christians “turned the world upside down” by their witness to Christ?²⁶

First and most importantly, neither our Lord, his apostles, nor our God-bearing Fathers ever taught, commanded, or even hinted that our primary task as Christ's witnesses is to make this world a better place. Even when we read, for example, St. Basil who says, “If

²⁴ 1 Peter 4:7–8, 12–14a, 19

²⁵ Mark 13:37; Matthew 26:41

²⁶ Acts 17:6

we all took only what was necessary to satisfy our own needs, giving the rest to those who lack, no one would be rich, no one would be poor, and no one would be in need,”²⁷ seeming to refer to what we in our day might call ‘social justice,’ we should understand what he intends. Although there is no denying that if this were to occur, the world would be a better place in which to live, St. Basil is preaching on Matthew 19:16–22, the story of the Rich Young Ruler. He is concerned here with the frivolous use of wealth and material overabundance, and the way in which they blind his hearers and detour them away from the Kingdom of God. We must resist the temptation to conflate such teaching with the idea that our lives in Christ can or should primarily be about changing this world.

Who is our neighbor?

When the Fathers speak of justice, they have our *neighbor* in view. ‘Humanity’ or ‘society’ is not our neighbor, for neither humanity nor society have any existence apart from, concrete, specific human persons with names and faces. Our neighbor is not an abstraction whom we can love with ideas, social policies, better laws, or coercion of any kind. Our neighbor is a person — the person we encounter directly. He or she is our brother or sister in Christ, our relative, our friend, our enemy, our coworker, our next-door neighbor, the clerk at the store. He or she is the Lazarus who sits at our gate²⁸ and the one who lies wounded at the side of the road on which we are traveling.²⁹ Cartoonist Charles Schultz, creator of the Peanuts Gang, once had his character Charlie Brown confess, “I love humanity. It’s people I can’t stand.” The insight expressed is profound. Feeling love toward humanity, desiring to improve society, or feeling compassion for the poor are good; but the opportunity for *real* love and witness to Christ comes when we encounter specific people who, like us, have irritating weaknesses and besetting sins. Real people can prove far more challenging than ‘humanity’ in the abstract when it comes to our being faithful witnesses to the love of Christ.

There is yet another, more poignant understanding of who our neighbor is. We are all familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan—so familiar that we may overlook how it is that Christ answered the expert in the Law of Moses who asked him, “And who is my neighbor?” Our Lord addresses his question in a way that turns the question on its head. He does not ask, “And who is the neighbor in this story?” Instead, He asks, “So which of these three do you think *was neighbor to him* who fell among the thieves?”³⁰ Who, then is our neighbor? The Archimandrite (now Saint) Sophrony writes of the spiritual insight he gained as a personal disciple of the Starets (Holy Elder), Saint Silouan:

‘Our brother is our life,’ the Starets often said. Through Christ’s love all men are made an inseparable part of our individual, eternal existence. The Starets began to understand the commandment, Love thy neighbor as thyself, as something more than an ethical imperative. In

²⁷ St. Basil, “Homily to the Rich” in Roman A. Montero, *All Things in Common: The Economic Practices of the Early Christians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2017), 122

²⁸ Luke 16:19–21

²⁹ Luke 10:25–37

³⁰ Luke 10:36

the word as he saw an indication, not of a required degree of love but of an ontological³¹ community of being.³²

Although it is true that we are to love our neighbor *as much as* we love ourselves and treat him or her accordingly,³³ we enter into the fullness of the witness of Christ's love when we love our neighbor *as our self*, when we recognize ourselves in our neighbor because he or she *is* a part of us, indivisible from who we are. In the parable, Christ says the Samaritan had *compassion* which literally means that he fully identified himself with the man he saw lying wounded and half dead, recognized *himself* in him, and was thereby moved to take his suffering upon himself and to do whatever was necessary to restore him to health—precisely what Christ did for us.

Witness Beyond our Immediate Neighbor

None of this is to suggest that our witness can *never* extend beyond our immediate neighbor or that we should never concern ourselves with those outside our own personal sphere. Missionaries, for example, can reach those whom we cannot, and we do well to support them. Yet even the witness of a missionary is as a neighbor to those to whom he or she is sent.

Our political support for laws that serve to make our society more just can sometimes also make this present life better for many. But while civil law has the capacity both to enforce and to teach that which is acceptable *to society* (whether it be good or evil),³⁴ in terms of *behavior* it cannot witness to the love of Christ. Moreover, unless we are in positions of direct authority ourselves, our actual witness in such things is limited primarily to our prophetic voice and to our vote as citizens. Any more than these is a distraction from our primary calling to witness to our *neighbor* and only serves to submerge us in the evils and conflicts of this world.

Prophetic Voice

Our prophetic voice serves as a call to repentance toward God and neighbor that must never be conflated with advocacy for political or social change.³⁵ The will of God and the breaking in of His Kingdom can never be enacted by law. It is only made manifest within those who *desire* it.³⁶ When the prophetic voice of John the Forerunner was heard in the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, his reply to those who asked, "What shall we do then?" was unconcerned with

³¹ Something that has to do with the very nature of our being and existence.

³² Rosemary Edmonds, *The Monk of Mount Athos* (Crestwood, NJ: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 31.

³³ Matthew 7:12

³⁴ Laws against racial discrimination, for example, not only *compelled* citizens to comply, but also largely succeeded in *teaching* the citizenry that racial discrimination is an evil they *desire* to avoid. Likewise, laws allowing abortion on demand *taught* the citizenry that abortion rights are a good (or at least not an evil), resulting in a dramatic increase in both the acceptance of abortion and the actual number of those who choose it.

³⁵ John 18:36

³⁶ Luke 17:21

social or political revolution in society. Rather, it was personal and focused upon Christ and our neighbor:

He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."³⁷

A prophetic voice is addressed to the heart in the hope that the hearer will *desire* to repent of his or her own volition. Coercion of any sort is alien to the Gospel. If we consent to 'change the world' by any means other than personal repentance, we do violence against the freedom of our neighbor which is both the antithesis of the love of God. As faithful witnesses to Christ in this world, our prophetic voice must reflect God's own love and absolute respect for human freedom. The response or the outcome is nether in our control. Only the Spirit of God in Christ can change human hearts.

Voting

The forms of government under which we live in North America also afford us the opportunity to vote. Human government *is* ordained by God,³⁸ and just laws that protect our neighbor from evil *are* better than unjust laws. In this sense our vote, however insignificant it may seem, matters—both to God and to our neighbor. Yet by failing to keep political considerations in proper perspective, many overemphasize their value in terms of our witness. Human government can help to restrain evil behavior and encourage or enforce the good, but this is its only role.³⁹ Our opportunity to vote for the various levels of elected representatives comes once a year at most. The amount of time and energy we invest in political considerations ought therefore to reflect this reality. If we allow ourselves to be drawn into more than this, we may be unwittingly drawn into the lie that we can somehow 'change the world' for the better by means of political action, something neither we nor any political leader is qualified to do.

On Holy Saturday, we joyfully sing from the Psalm,

*Arise, O God, judge the earth for to Thee belong all the nations!*⁴⁰

Let us therefore be mindful that only Christ our God is *worthy*, not only deserving but *capable*, of judging the earth in righteousness and truth. Only He can set right all that is wrong with the world and its inhabitants. Let us not allow anything in our minds to usurp the competence that belongs to Christ alone. And let whatever votes we cast

³⁷ Luke 3:11–14

³⁸ Romans 13:1–7

³⁹ Romans 13:1–7

⁴⁰ Psalm 82:8

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reflect as godly a witness as possible in this world without putting our *trust in princes or sons of men in whom there is no salvation*.⁴¹

The Hidden Nature of our Witness

Much like the leaven hidden in the measures of meal,⁴² the effect of our witness to Christ is often hidden—even from ourselves. Our results-oriented culture measures everything by visible outcomes, and this can tempt us to judge ourselves (or the Church) only by what our eyes can see. The truth, however, is that we cannot always know what effect our witness to Christ has...or will have.

Let us consider the Saints whom we venerate, and whose lives we seek to emulate. What were Abraham's, Isaac's, or even Jacob's 'accomplishments' in terms of what they could have observed with their own eyes? Jeremiah and all the other prophets who faithfully witnessed to the truth and called the people of Israel to repentance were abject failures if seen only in the light of what they appeared to have 'accomplished' by their witness. Saints John Chrysostom and Maximus were cast out, persecuted severely, and died in exile. For every Saint who saw the fruit of their witness during the course of their earthly life there are just as many, if not more, who did not. Yet their faithful witness has borne an abundance of fruit that remains to this day.

In much the same way, our witness is like seed sown in the hearts of others.⁴³ This is true whether we perceive it or not, whether it takes root or not, or whether we are there in person to observe it if it does. How many of us can recall a seemingly insignificant (at the time) word or act of kindness from a faithful witness with whom we have since lost contact or who is now reposed? The seed they planted in our hearts lay dormant until God sent events or other faithful witnesses into our lives to water it and bring it to fruition.⁴⁴ Like a farmer who sows in faith though he himself is unable to cause the seed to germinate or bear fruit, our God calls us to be faithful in our witness and entrust the outcome to his faithfulness.⁴⁵

The Witness of Christ

*"Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and peace have kissed..."*⁴⁶

This prophecy in the Psalms speaks of Christ who is Himself the faithful and true witness⁴⁷ of God the Holy Trinity. In him there is no opposition between the loving mercy of God and the truth of God or between what is right and what brings peace. He

⁴¹ First Antiphon of the Divine Liturgy (Psalm 145)

⁴² Matthew 13:33

⁴³ Matthew 13:3–9

⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:6

⁴⁵ James 5:7–8

⁴⁶ Psalm 85:10

⁴⁷ Revelation 3:14

is the truth,⁴⁸ and in him there is no truth apart from love.⁴⁹ He is righteous, and in his righteousness, He is the Gospel of peace.⁵⁰ If our testimony to the truth of the Orthodox Faith is to be faithful, it will declare the *fullness* of who He is and reflect the manner in which He Himself witnessed to his Father.

Seeing the true Light, finding the true Faith, and being catechized in a way that enables us to discern truth from error is a wonderful blessing bestowed on us by Christ and His Church. Our Lord's Apostles and our God-bearing Fathers struggled, suffered, and often gave their lives to defend the Faith from error. They were willing to do so not merely because errors are 'wrong', and they wanted to be 'right.' Rather, they did it out of love for God "who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."⁵¹ They understood that the truth of Christ is the Way for all to be saved. Heresies are not merely incorrect 'facts' about God. Heresies have very deadly consequences because they divert people from the only Way they can be delivered from death and share in the eternal life of the Holy Trinity. Our motivation for witnessing to the truth of Christ is likewise love for God and our neighbor. The truth—if indeed it is the *fullness* of the Truth that is the Orthodox Faith—can never be reduced to an argument over who is 'right' or who is 'wrong.' We are called to witness to Christ out of loving compassion for our neighbor. If, however, we go about wielding the truth of the Orthodox Faith as a weapon to prove how 'right' we are or how wrong our neighbor is, it is no longer the truth of our Lord Jesus Christ that we proclaim but ourselves and our own righteousness.⁵²

The good news of the righteousness of Christ to whom we witness is his "peace on earth and goodwill to men."⁵³ Although our Lord said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be those of his own household,"⁵⁴ He is not speaking of our witness to him,⁵⁵ but of the conflict that will arise from those who respond to his love with hatred or to his peace with envy or fear out of the sense of condemnation that comes of exposure to the Light that is Christ.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ John 14:16

⁴⁹ Neither in him is there love apart from truth.

⁵⁰ Ephesians 2:14

⁵¹ 1 Timothy 2:4

⁵² 2 Corinthians 4:5

⁵³ Luke 2:14

⁵⁴ Matthew 10:34–36

⁵⁵ "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and harmless as doves." Matthew 10:16.

⁵⁶ "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." John 3:19–20.

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Every word the True and Faithful Witness spoke in bearing witness to the Truth was that of his Father. And though He was a man in appearance⁵⁷ who spoke with a human voice like that of any other man, his word was (and is) the word of God which “is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, ...a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from his sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”⁵⁸ The words of a faithful witness, then, will always be those of God and not his or her own. Though quoting ‘chapter and verse’ directly carries little weight in a culture that no longer accepts the Scriptures as authoritative, the words of God that faithfully testify to the Word of God have an authority and power that penetrates into the heart.⁵⁹ The truth can be resisted,⁶⁰ but it nevertheless resonates deeply in all who hear it (and not only in those who immediately respond with faith) because Christ is the light of every person who lives.⁶¹

May our witness to Christ always be in the fullness of him who is the Truth, free of hypocrisy, overflowing with his love in meekness, gentleness, and patience. May our words and our deeds be sown in peace for the sake our neighbor’s peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ in accordance with his will and to the praise of the glory of his grace.

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.⁶²

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⁵⁷ Philippians 2:8

⁵⁸ Hebrews 4:12–13

⁵⁹ Matthew 7:28–29

⁶⁰ Romans 1:18; Acts 7:51

⁶¹ John 1:9

⁶² Ephesians 3:20–21

