

Worshipping the Undivided Trinity: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

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Week 6: *The Orthodox Church today: proclaiming the ancient, present, and future
Faith: Living the ascetical life through prayer, fasting and Scripture reading.*

Worship: Praying as You Believe...

I started this course five classes ago relating the story of a couple who wanted to investigate the Orthodox Church. They came to Divine Liturgy, stayed for *ten minutes*, and told the Orthodox friend who had invited them, “*We’ll be going now. I think we’ve got the gist of it.*”

The point is, of course, that no one can “get the gist” of Orthodoxy in such a manner. There is no ‘fast food’ version of the Faith. The Orthodox Faith refuses to be reduced to a sound bite. If you really want to know what Orthodox Christians believe, one of the best ways to learn the Orthodox Faith is through the prayers and worship of the Church. In fact, when it comes down to it, this is the only way. Books can only get you so far.

For Orthodox Christians there is nothing accidental about the worship of Christ’s Church. There is symbolic and real meaning to be found in all the actions of the Divine Liturgy, Vespers, Matins, and the other services of the Church. And throughout the services, the same truths are always affirmed again and again that we may worship God “in spirit and in truth.” Thus, all the litanies of prayer end by glorifying God, the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the refrain that is referred to in the West as the “Gloria Patri.”

The liturgical prayers are so important in Orthodox worship because it is the timelessness of the liturgical worship of the Church, which has kept the Faith through the centuries. The Orthodox Church has maintained since the first century that we “pray as we believe.” If you change the prayers and worship of the Church, your actions effect what will be prayed—and *believed*. The Orthodox ask: What right do we have to change the worship of the Church? It is God who decides how we are to worship Him. The worship of the Church begins in heaven. As we discussed in the first week of the course, Orthodox worship is based on revelation, and is in continuity both with the worship of the people of God in the Old Testament as well as the heavenly worship of the eschaton, which we see depicted in the Book of Revelation. Thus, liturgical worship for the Orthodox is not optional, but rather normative.

Of course, the liturgy of the Orthodox Church has changed and developed through the centuries to a certain extent, but always uniformly and in continuity with Holy Tradition. And while there are cultural distinctions in the various sister churches of the Orthodox Church, nevertheless, the same fullness of the Apostolic Faith is present in all the churches. An Orthodox believer would be familiar and at home with the Divine Liturgy celebrated in Bucharest, Romania or Damascus, Syria, or in Linthicum, MD or Tokyo, Japan, as he would anywhere. In all the churches the 4th century liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is used as the main Eucharistic liturgy.

And this liturgy is based on still older liturgies of the first centuries of the Church. The only places where this is not the case is in places where a pastoral provision is in effect. Such is the case wherever “Western Rite” Orthodox churches are present. In most cases, these churches are Anglican/Episcopalian congregations that have converted *en masse* to the Orthodox Church and have opted to retain continuity with an earlier Western Catholic liturgical rite. But again, this is a pastoral provision and not typical. The point is that wherever the Orthodox Church is present, there is liturgical and theological continuity with Holy Tradition. In other words, as Orthodox theologian, Nicholas Lossky writes, “there is not the least contradiction between the purity of the Faith of Orthodoxy and the content of the liturgy... and the manner of its celebration.”¹ The content and context of the worship of the Church is theology. If the Church ever diverges from the Holy Tradition it must be corrected.

If you go on to study the Orthodox Faith further, you will find that there is a reason for everything that is done in worship, everything giving glory to the Undivided Trinity. There is nothing haphazard or experimental about the worship of the Church.

At the same time, this shared understanding of worship as theology may lead one to assume that Orthodox worship is ‘staid.’ Nothing could be further from the truth. In most parishes the worshippers have a very active part to play in the worship because, in keeping with the original meaning of the word, “liturgy,” “*the work of the people*,” the congregation sings, prays, venerates, joining their voices “with angels and archangels.” The congregation becomes a part of the mystical heavenly choir. Unlike in the Roman Catholic Church, an Orthodox priest cannot celebrate the Eucharist without another person present. The Eucharist is intended to nourish the Body of Christ, the people to whom he ministers on behalf of Christ.

The Ascetical Life

You’ve probably heard the adage, “Sunday only Christian.” To be truly Orthodox, one cannot be a “Sunday only Christian.” The Orthodox Faith is to be *lived* day in and day out. To be an Orthodox Christian means to grow in deification, in that unity and intimate fellowship/communion with the Holy Trinity. And this life is called “ascetical” because at the heart of the Gospel is the upward call of our Savior Jesus Christ, who said, “**If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it**” (Matt. 16:24-25).

Jesus Christ Himself sets the pattern for the Orthodox life of Faith by His life and death on the cross. God is love and Christ demonstrates this love of God through His humility, first through the Incarnation and then through His submission to the sufferings and death of the cross. Characteristic of this love is God’s great humility as seen in Christ. St. Paul sums up this loving humility as follows: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in

¹ Nicholas Lossky in John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and Its Role in the World Today*, 4th ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 230.

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).

“*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...*” As we are deified, we acquire more and more the mind of Christ and His Church. We live for Him. We are transformed more and more into His likeness. The central paradox of the Orthodox Faith is that in grasping after the temporal, we sacrifice the eternal; in sacrificing everything we can attain in this world, we gain eternity. In dying to self, we live.²

The early Fathers of the Church, in keeping with the Pauline Epistles, often describe the necessity but also the difficulties of fighting “the flesh.” “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom. 8:5-6).

God takes pleasure in making Saints. And it is the Saints who come to bear the most striking resemblance possible to Christ Himself, who live according to the Spirit. The Saint is the one who is no longer a slave to sin, the one who knows and has experienced the forgiveness of God. The Saint exhibits a profound trust in the power of the living God because he or she has personally experienced Christ’s redemption. As a result of Christ’s redemption of the race of Adam, each one of us has the *potential* to be deified, to be made holy so that we may be united to God who is holy. It is deification, in turn, which restores us to the likeness of God which is characterized by this holiness.

As we have discussed, God accomplishes this great work in us through the Sacraments which He has given to His Church as well as through other means by which He imparts His grace, such as prayer and through the Holy Scriptures and the words of the Fathers, who lived the Faith. It bears repeating that the Orthodox Faith is meant to be lived *moment by moment*. It is a state of being and not merely some outward identity. Being an Orthodox Christian means living this life for God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Living the Orthodox Faith, the Faith God imparted to His Body, the Church, is our vocation as Christians. And God gives us the means to live the Orthodox Faith day by day.

This is where the ascetical life comes in. Prayer, fasting, and study of the Holy Scriptures are all part of this daily life for the Orthodox Christian. We’ll begin with fasting.

Fasting

Some may think that Orthodox Christians are always fasting. Truth be told, we do fast a lot compared to other Christians as we strive to live the life of the Church each day. First, a word about what Orthodox fasting *is* and *what it is not*.

² *The Orthodox Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 47.

In the Holy Scriptures and in the writings of the Church Fathers, we see that fasting is associated with humbling oneself, with seeking God's will for our lives, and with recommitting ourselves to God (e.g., Psalm 69:10, Judith 4:9, Acts 13:2-3, Acts 14:23). Prayer and fasting go hand in hand and have always been part of the Church and the Christian's effort to be deified. As Orthodox theologian Fr. Alexander Schmemmann has written: "It is highly significant that it was while fasting that Christ met Satan and that He said later that Satan cannot be overcome 'but by fasting and prayer.'"³

If we take the words of our Savior to heart, then we too should follow His lead and the practice of the Church through the ages. There are three types of Orthodox fasts: the weekly Wednesday and Friday fasts, the fasts before great feasts, such as Great Lent and the Nativity Fast, and the complete fast which occurs before partaking of the Eucharist. Let's discuss each in turn.

When non-Orthodox hear the word 'fast' they may assume that the Orthodox simply don't eat during a fast, completely abstaining from *all* food. In most cases though, Orthodox fasting means rather abstaining from *certain* foods for specified times while generally eating smaller portions and abstaining from eating between meals. Fasting is a discipline of the Church and as such, is taken very seriously by the great majority of Orthodox Christians. We are part of a large family of Faith and we like to fast together, that is, *as a family*. Why do we fast?

We fast in order to discipline ourselves, to say no to the 'flesh', to learn that we truly don't live by 'bread' alone, and to identify with our Savior. The fact is that food can become a means by which we not only nourish our bodies, which is a necessary and good thing, but also "gratify the flesh", that is, misuse God's good gift of food not to satisfy legitimate hunger but to actually do harm to our bodies and souls through over-indulgence. In an obese nation such as the United States, for many gluttony is a significant problem. When we gratify the flesh in one area it is difficult not to gratify it in another. By denying the flesh some of what it craves for a time, we learn *discipline*, to say "No!" to the flesh and "Yes!" to the spirit and to God. St. John Chrysostom writes, "The value of fasting consists not in abstinence only from food, but in a relinquishment of sinful practices..."⁴

Fasting can be difficult. On Wednesdays Orthodox fast in remembrance of Christ's betrayal at the hands of Judas. In the Orthodox Divine Liturgy before we receive Holy Communion we say a prayer of St. John Chrysostom from the 4th century, saying, "Neither will I give thee a kiss as did Judas, but like the thief will I confess thee..." It is this sentiment which becomes our prayer on Wednesdays. Likewise, on Fridays, we fast to remember Christ's crucifixion and once again we remember that Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Strictly speaking, this fast is chiefly from all meat and dairy products, though in practice, many Orthodox fast only from meat products on these days. As on all the fast days, shellfish is permitted. The practice of fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays is one of the earliest practices of the Church, and is attested to by the first-century writing called the Didache (8:1).

³ Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 96.

⁴ *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox*, ed. Johanna Manley (Crestwood, NY: Monastery Books, 1999), 724.

In preparation for some great feasts of the Church there is a more extended fasting period. The greatest of these fasts are the Nativity Fast, which begins mid-November and ends with the feast of the Nativity (Christmas) and the fast of Great Lent, which lasts for 40 days, ending at Holy Week, which has its own fast, and culminates in Pascha (Easter), the celebration of the glorious resurrection of our Lord. The most important of the fasts, which begins gradually, is the Lenten Fast, also called the Great Fast. In the first week of this fast the Orthodox give up all meat. In the second week, we give up all dairy for the remainder of the Fast. One learns to live without, to realize that our food, as with all our other needs, comes from God. We learn to appreciate anew things we take for granted.

During Great Lent, fasting is accompanied by increased services at church, which help the faithful to enter into the spirit of self-examination and repentance and also to identify with and walk the way with Christ to Golgatha. It is a difficult but thrilling journey that can be a means for further deification and spiritual strengthening. In the wee hours of the morning while partaking of Holy Communion at Pascha, we rejoice and celebrate Christ's victory over death and His glorious resurrection. At our post-Liturgy feast we then celebrate and enjoy the blessings of some of the foods we have gone without during the Great Fast.

The third type of fast is that done before receiving Holy Communion. This is a complete fast from all food and beverage for five or more hours before receiving Christ's Body and Blood, which is meant to be the first spiritual and physical nourishment we receive into our bodies. This fasting renews our understanding of our prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread" as we pray daily in the Lord's Prayer. In fact, the early Fathers of the Church interpreted this part of the Lord's Prayer to refer not only to our daily physical needs, but also to the spiritual sustenance of the Eucharist.

As with all things in the Orthodox Faith, fasting is meant for man and not man for fasting. That is to say, that the application of disciplines varies as do circumstances. Some people, for medical reasons, cannot fast completely for long periods of time. Important is that one's fasting discipline be worked out with one's spiritual father, often the local parish priest. Generally, for instance, the very young do not fast before Eucharist and some elderly may need to take medicine with some food before Eucharist.

We read in the Holy Scriptures that prayer is meant to accompany fasting as a primary spiritual discipline of the Church. Prayer, as has been said, is communication with and worship of God. Working with one's spiritual father, Orthodox Christians develop their prayer lives, learning to commune with God more and more as they grow in their knowledge and love of God. There are prayers prescribed by the Church, which can be very helpful. They are prayers which have been prayed in the Church for centuries and are, therefore, hallowed by the voices of our ancestors in the Faith who have gone before us to be with God. To these prayers we add our own, according to inspiration and need. The prayers of the Church are really intended to prompt us to pray from the heart, to grow in intimacy with God. The Jesus Prayer is certainly one such aid and the Church has provided us with many others for our edification as well. Many Orthodox Christians pray in the morning and evening from the prayers in the Pocket Prayer Book or from some other resource of the Church.

The home is seen in Orthodoxy as a ‘little church.’ Families will stand or kneel together before their icons and candles in their ‘prayer corner,’ a special place in the home set aside for prayer. Again, the Orthodox Faith is meant to be lived at all times and to be modeled in the home by nurturing parents.

Another discipline of living the Orthodox Faith is reading from the Holy Scriptures. The Bible is God’s ‘living Word’ and contains His divine revelation. Orthodox Christians read the Holy Scriptures in order to acquire the mind of the Church, that is, to be conformed increasingly into the image of Christ. The fact that the Scriptures are God’s ‘living Word’ also means that God can speak to us through the sacred writings and that we are meant to apply the writings of the Holy Scriptures to our lives.

At the same time, Orthodox Christians do not believe that it is profitable to interpret the Holy Scriptures in any way that conflicts with the collective voice of the Church through the ages, particularly if that interpretation conflicts with the Orthodox Faith in any way. For this reason, we place special emphasis on the interpretations of the Fathers of the Church and those in authority, who are responsible before God to proclaim the Truth of the Word in keeping with Holy Tradition. The Orthodox Study Bible is a popular resource because it provides commentary from an Orthodox perspective in keeping with the Church’s teaching. There are also Bibles with the daily lectionary readings for the day, which also contain commentary from the Fathers of the Church.

Conclusion: The Orthodox Church in the World Today

Orthodox Christians have always referred to themselves as “the martyrs’ Church.” Throughout the history of the Orthodox Church beginning in 33 A.D., Orthodox Christians have faced the threat of persecution and martyrdom at the hands not just of pagans and atheists but also at the hands of other religious groups outside the Church, particularly the Muslims. This persecution continues today. In fact, in our own day, many of the holy sites of the Church are being desecrated and bulldozed and the remaining Orthodox Christian communities are being persecuted, driven out, or killed. This is particularly true in Turkey, which professes to be the only ‘secular’ Muslim state in the world. In our lifetime, it is possible that there will be no more Orthodox Christians in the biblical Antioch, where the followers of Christ were first called Christians and where the Orthodox have remained up until our own day. Now, very few are left.

Conversely, for the time being, Orthodox Christians are fairing well in Syria, home of the Antiochian Orthodox Patriarchate, which has some 350,000 members in the Middle East. On the other hand, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem is shrinking due to massive immigration due, in large part, to the violence and instability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Due to new missionary endeavors in sub-Saharan Africa, e.g. Uganda, Kenya, the Patriarchate of Alexandria is now growing. At the same time, it must be said that the Orthodox often face much persecution in areas that are predominant Moslem both in Africa and elsewhere.

Worldwide, the Orthodox Church can claim 140 million⁵ (though other sources estimate as many as 250 million) members in Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, the Middle East, Australia, and North America. There are also significant missionary churches established in the Far East and in Africa, which fall under the Patriarchate of Alexandria.

Americans aren't used to thinking of 'recent' history as the past two hundred years, but for the Orthodox Church the past two hundred years *is* recent history. The first Orthodox missionaries came from the famous Valaam Monastery in Western-most Russia and reached Alaska in 1794. They quickly established themselves in what was then a Russian imperial territory, founding numerous churches among the native peoples of Alaska, who eagerly embraced the Orthodox Christian Faith. Significantly, as is the case wherever Orthodox Christianity founds a Church, the services were conducted in the native tongue—in this case, that of the Aleuts. In fact, by the time Alaska was sold to the United States, the Russian Orthodox missionaries had translated the Bible and liturgical services of the Church into *several* native languages of the Eskimos. Thus, in effect, the first indigenous Orthodox Christians in the new world were the native peoples of Alaska, "the last frontier"—and they have been Orthodox Christians now for over 200 years!

There was originally one multi-ethnic Orthodox Church in the United States, a single jurisdiction under a hierarchy whose mother Church was the Patriarchate of Moscow, since the Russians were the first to establish the Church in the New World. This Orthodox presence was composed of a variety of ethnic parishes and missions, notably Russian, Arab, and Greek, all ministered to by a single administration. However, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution caused the disruption of the lines of authority between bishops in America and hierarchs in Russia, and the unfortunate consequence was the breakup of that formerly united Church into several ethnic jurisdictions. However, there is a major movement underway to form, once again, a single jurisdiction—or even one Patriarchate—for all of North America. The Orthodox Church in America, a jurisdiction commonly called the OCA, which claims one million members, has already gained autocephaly, that is, independence from Russia and now has its own Patriarch though recognition from the other sister Churches of Orthodox Christianity have been slow in coming. The Antiochian Archdiocese has just been granted autonomy by His Eminence, Patriarch Ignatius IV, which may pave the way for a future autocephalous Church composed of the Antiochian Archdiocese and the OCA. The Antiochian Patriarchate now has more members in North America than in the lands where the Patriarchate was first founded, numbering some 450,000 and is steadily growing every year due to large numbers of converts discovering Orthodoxy for the first time.

In total there are now some 3 million or more Orthodox Christians in North America composed of the Greek Orthodox, OCA, and Antiochian Archdiocese. There are other Orthodox Churches in full communion as well, not including the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, OCA, and Antiochian Archdiocese. Together, these churches all compose what is referred to as the SCOBA, the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops in America./change to: The heads, or "ruling hierarchs", of each of these sister churches, together form what is called the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops, or SCOBA.

⁵ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 6f.

As one can judge by these numbers, the Orthodox Church in the United States is still primarily a ‘missionary endeavor.’ That said, in 1992 the pan-Orthodox International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) was founded. Since that time, the IOCC, under SCOBA sponsorship, has distributed over \$140 million of short-term and long-term aid to the poor throughout the world, helping millions of people in twenty countries around the world, including the United States.⁶ And in 1993 another pan-Orthodox missionary agency, also now sponsored by SCOBA, was formed: the OCMC (Orthodox Christian Mission Center), which in less than ten years is now operating in twenty countries and has 21 long-term missionaries. Also in the early 1990’s, over 2,000 evangelical Christians, who had previously been associated with Campus Crusade for Christ, were received into the Antiochian Archdiocese. One of their numbers, Fr. Peter Gillquist, is now head of the Office of Missions and Evangelism for the Archdiocese. It is also worth noting that in some regions of the Antiochian Archdiocese today roughly a third of Antiochian Orthodox priests today are former Episcopalian/Anglican clergy.

Thus, the ethnic face of the Orthodox Church in the U.S. can no longer be referred to as a purely ‘old country’ immigrant community. The Orthodox Church today is firmly committed to bringing Orthodoxy to America and fulfilling the Great Commission of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by whom the Church was founded nearly 2000 years ago. The Archbishop of the Greek Archdiocese in America, His Eminence, Demetrios sums up this missionary endeavor as follows:

The Lord Jesus Christ sends personally every member of our Church to offer the treasure of the Orthodox Faith to the people we meet, to the people who constitute contemporary America. He gives us the privilege to share with others the treasures of the absolute and liberating truth of God and the infinite, life-giving love of Christ.⁷

⁶ Charles R. Ajalat, “A New Era for Orthodoxy in America,” *Again* 24.4 (Oct.-Dec. 2002):5.

⁷ Father Nektarios Morrow, “Change, Renewal, and Offering: Our Orthodox Faith in Contemporary America,” *Again* 24.4 (Oct.-Dec. 2002): 17.