

Catechism Class -- The Basics of Orthodoxy Course 101

St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Topic 1: Introduction—What is the Orthodox Church?

(Source: Carlton, Clark. *The Faith: Understanding Orthodox Christianity, An Orthodox Catechism*. Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 1997, the Introduction, pp.19-38.)

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

(The Faith, p. 19)

Our Lord Jesus Christ came to earth to establish His **Church**:
 (“Church” comes from “*ecclesia*” = “assembly”)

The Church is the **Body of Christ**:

“...the **Church**, which is **His Body**, the **fullness** of Him that fills all in all.”
(Ephesians 1:22-23)

The **Church** holds the Truth, as it is “the **pillar** and ground of the **truth**.”

“the house of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”
(1 Timothy 3:15)

The Church holds “the **faith** which **was once for all delivered to the saints**.” (Jude 1:3)

The Lord promised that evil and hell will not destroy His Church.

Jesus said: “I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades **shall not prevail against it**.”
(Matthew 16:18)

The Church keeps precious truths—**holy “traditions”** of the Apostles that were “**received from us** [the Apostles]”. (2 Thessalonians. 3:6)

The Church was commanded by the Apostles to “**hold the traditions** which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

These “holy traditions” were to be held, and NOT changed, NOR were they to be privately interpreted, for the Apostles taught that Scripture is **not** “of any **private interpretation**.”
(2 Peter 1:20)

Summary so far: The Church, being the body of assembled believers in Christ, is the Pillar of the Truth. Christ God is the Ultimate Truth. Like a pillar which holds an icon, so the Church holds up Christ the Truth for all the world to see. The Church received from Christ the whole Faith, at the

beginning. Christ gathered His followers, taught and trained them to be His disciples, and then sent them out into all the world as His Apostles.

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹**Go** therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations, **baptizing** them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰**teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

“Apostles” means “the sent ones”. But before being sent into all the world, they were personally taught by the LORD God Jesus Christ for three long years. They received Christ’s Teaching, His Doctrine (“doctrine” = “teaching”).

Christ’s Doctrine = the Apostolic Doctrine.

Christ sent the Apostles to proclaim the Truth to all nations, and to unite the world to that Truth, to Jesus Himself by Holy Baptism. The Apostles traveled out into all the world **to teach that same Doctrine** to all the nations, instructing them to observe, to do, and to obey everything that the Lord Jesus had taught them.

Since it was the Apostles who formed the first Church (the first “assembly” of the followers of Christ), and since they had heard Jesus’ teachings directly from His mouth into their ears, the Apostles **did not** like it when outsiders invented new twisted theological ideas and polluted the pure Doctrine of Christ. The Apostles insisted that only the Church only can interpret the Scripture. They also insisted that all believers who became members of the Body of Christ must NOT change the Doctrine of Christ. They must guard the Apostolic teachings and defend them, not add to them nor subtract from them.

However, today, after 2,000 years there of 1,000s of organizations which call themselves the “church” of Jesus Christ. Yet their interpretations of Holy Scripture and their **doctrines vary widely**.

Only One Church today—**the Eastern Orthodox Church**--can claim to be the **original, complete, full, historical, continuation of the apostolic community of the “Early Church.”**

Examine the history. Examine the doctrines. Which church today still holds and teaches the **same complete 1st Century Faith** that was “once for all delivered to the saints”? **Answer: only the Orthodox Church does** (also known as the Eastern Orthodox Church; the Orthodox Catholic Church; the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church). For this true Apostolic Faith, millions of Orthodox Christians throughout the centuries have shed their blood and died to defend and hold it **unchanged**...as the Apostles said: **“hold the traditions** which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” (2 Thess. 2:15)

The Apostle Jude wrote: “I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you **to contend earnestly for the faith** which was **once for all** delivered to the saints.” (Jude 1:3)

2 John 9-11: ⁹Whoever transgresses and does not abide in **the doctrine of Christ** does not have God. He who abides in **the doctrine of Christ** has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; ¹¹for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

[show timeline of various modern churches vs. the Orthodox Church of the 1st Century (and of today)]

To get out of this problem of multiple competing “versions” of Christianity, each claiming to be correct, 1,000s of people nowadays are abandoning the 11th Century (*Medieval Roman Catholic*) and 16th Century (*Protestant*) variants of Christianity, and JOINING the continuation of the very Church of the holy Apostles—the Holy Orthodox Church.

People are tired of temporary religious fads. They are looking for **doctrines** that will not be changed, but are rooted in **history**. They hunger for genuine **worship**, which will transform their lives with real change, with real **holiness**.

The Faith, pp. 21-22: “The claim of the Orthodox Church to be the one and only *true* Church is based upon **four factors**:

The **HISTORICAL APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY**, which has:

The **APOSTOLIC TRUE FAITH**
TRUE WORSHIP
TRUE HOLINESS

1) The **HISTORICAL APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY** is the Church of the Apostles. It still exists. The Orthodox Church has maintained an unbroken **historical continuity** with the original Church founded by Jesus in Jerusalem.

[**Apostolic communities**, with **Apostolic succession** of bishops...bishops who ordained bishops who ordained bishops, down through the centuries, all the way back to the Apostles themselves, who selected and ordained the first bishops to be their successors.]

2) The **APOSTOLIC TRUE FAITH** is maintained within the Apostolic Church. The Orthodox Church has faithfully **maintained** the **Apostolic faith** that was “once for all delivered to the Saints” (Jude 1:3), **neither adding to nor subtracting** from it.

[Apostolic faith, Apostolic traditions, & Apostolic teachings and doctrines]

Orthodox = *Ortho+doxa* = straight/right/correct/true + opinion/belief = “**true belief**” (“true faith”)

“doxa” in Greek means **both** “opinion” and “glory”

- 3) **TRUE WORSHIP**—this is offered to God by the Apostolic Church, in the Apostolic manner. The Orthodox Church faithfully **worships** God in Spirit and in Truth, providing mankind with personal access to the life and grace of the All-holy Trinity.

[Orthodox = *Ortho*+*doxa* = straight/right/correct/true + worship/glorifying = “**true worship**”]

- 4) **TRUE HOLINESS**—is the fruit of Holy Spirit working within His Apostolic Church. The Orthodox Church has produced untold numbers of Saints throughout the centuries—persons who carry within themselves the uncreated Grace of God.” [We can study many examples of *theosis*, **of true holiness**, of a *true union* with God through Grace in the hearts and lives of holy men and women throughout the centuries.]

Let’s dive a little deeper now into these **four** areas:

A. Apostolic History

The Church that Jesus founded is a historical community--a **family** of Faith. It is not philosophy. When we study the historical Orthodox Church and we are convinced of it, we must not merely imitate it, but join it. There is a living Apostolic succession in the Church, especially in its leadership, the bishops. The gates of hell never shut down nor swallowed up this community.

B. Apostolic Doctrine

History is good, but not good enough by itself. A community of faith needs to have **both** an Apostolic succession (i.e. of bishops) who, together with the faithful believers, have preserved the Apostolic teachings and the Apostolic “traditions” unchanged. The Roman Catholics do have a claim to history. They remind us often of their apostolic succession. But on many doctrinal points over the centuries they have deviated from the Apostolic teachings, especially during Medieval Europe in the 11th – 13th Centuries. For example, the Papal claim to universal sovereignty over the entire Church did not exist in the early Centuries, but was invented later. The 19th Century Papal claim to infallibility goes against the Early Church’s historical practice of holding Church Councils.

Beginning in the 16th Century, the Protestants began to “protest” Roman Catholic Medieval inventions, and began to try to purge them out. But, without any guide, having rejected the consensus teachings of the Early Fathers of the Church, and trusting only their “sound reasoning” to interpret the Holy Scriptures, the Protestants have failed for last 500 years to find any agreement amongst themselves. They keep throwing out ideas and arguing with each other, breaking apart and forming new “churches”, with each one claiming to be the “true Church”. But these religious groups are only 500 years old, or less. (The Orthodox Church has church buildings and icons that are 1,500 years old, or more!)

The simplistic general rule of thumb is: the Roman Catholics added in new ideas, while the Protestants subtracted ideas.

C. Right Worship

The first Century Church worship was very “Jewish”, very “liturgical”, and very structured. There were bishops, presbyters (priests), and deacons in the 1st century. Worship was centered on the Holy Eucharist, which was received every Sunday. We will now read St. Justin’s 2nd Century quote, found on pp. 29-30 of *The Faith*:

The Divine Liturgy celebrated in an Orthodox Church today is structurally the same service as that described by St. Justin the Philosopher in the year 150:

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

D. True Holiness (Sanctity)

The “proof is in the pudding”. Does this historical Orthodox Church worshipping community, which so closely guards its dogmas--does it work? Are lives changed by the power of the Holy Spirit? Are the Gifts of the Spirit as well as the Fruit of the Spirit evidenced in the lives of Orthodox Christians down through the centuries? **The answer is: YES!** Orthodox Church history has preserved the stories of 1,000s of her Faithful who became living Temples of the Holy Spirit, and operated in all the Gifts, and were full of His Fruit. Modern examples of healers and wonder-workers exist down to the present:

St. Seraphim of Sarov (+1833), St. Herman of Alaska (+1836), St. John of Kronstadt (+1909), St. Nectarios of Aegina (+1920), St. Arsenios of Cappadocian (+1924), St. Papa Nicholas Planas (+1932), St. Silouan the Athonite (+1938), St. Matrona of Moscow (+1952), St. John Maximovitch of San Francisco (+1966), St. Porphyrios (+1991), St. Sophrony (+1993), St. Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994), and many others.

In summary, the true **historical Church community** which the LORD Jesus started, the Body of Christ Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, safely protects the **true teachings** given by Christ originally to His Apostles. That true Apostolic doctrine safeguards the **true worship**, in which we approach God in Spirit and in Truth, and thus have access to the Throne of God (“*altar table*” in Greek is called “*thronos*”) where we find Grace to help in time of need. Through the Holy

Mysteries, such as Holy Communion, we access the Grace of the enabling Divine Presence of God which is able to forgive, to heal, to transform and to transfigure us into **holy people** (*the “holy” people in Greek are the “saints”*), the true adopted sons and daughters of God, who show forth His likeness in themselves and radiate that Divine Grace to everyone around them.

“In the final analysis, a Saint is the living embodiment of the **history, doctrine, worship, and ethical life** [*spirituality*] of the Church” (*The Faith*, p. 33).

The Church is ***life in Christ***. Through Him we get to participate and share in the eternal unending Life of the All-Holy Trinity. By receiving Christ through the Holy Mysteries, by following His teachings and commandments, and by experiencing the Divine Grace that He offers us in His Church, we are prepared for eternal life.