

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 101

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

Topic 14 Part Two: Our Union with Christ in His Church (His “Body”)

(The Life, Chp. 6)

In Part One of this topic, we learned that to be saved, **we need FAITH, TRUTH, and REPENTANCE**. Through a repentant life of true faith, we unite with Christ in His Holy Church, and through this holy union our *salvation*—in the fullest understanding of the term—is **made possible**.

Now, in this **Second Part** of this topic, we will focus on **WHERE we are saved** – WHERE is this salvation made possible? The answer is: **in the Holy Church**.

We understand this Holy Church to be the **One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church** (which we also call the “Orthodox Catholic Church,” and, the “Eastern Orthodox Church”) which was founded on the Day of Pentecost when the Father, at the request of His Son, sent down the Holy Spirit upon His Holy Disciples and Apostles, making them the foundation of the New Testament era Church.

[This entire body of information about the holy historic ancient apostolic Church will be enlarged upon chapter by chapter in the second semester catechism class—*The Basics of Orthodoxy 102*—but it is now placed here by way of introduction ... and because it fits into the flow of the topics.]

The Lord Jesus promised: “I will not leave you **comfortless**.” (John 14:18) Furthermore, He promised to send them the Holy Spirit Who is known as “the **Comforter**”, “the Helper”, “the Advocate”. (John 14:26). This He did on the Day of Pentecost, after His Ascension into Heaven. The Holy Spirit descended and *filled* the Apostles. They were united with God, through the Presence of the Holy Spirit. This was **the birth of Christ’s Church**—known as His **Body**. St. Paul often referred to the Church as Christ’s “Body”. “He is the Head of the **Church, which is His Body**.” (Colossians 1:18; see also 1 Corinthians, the entire chapter 12)

If the historic ancient apostolic Church is the place where we are to be saved, what exactly is it?

1) “**The Church is not a social organization** or a group of people with similar social or political beliefs. Rather, **She is the presence and life of Christ on earth**...The life of the Church is **life in Christ**. Her life is His life. Her ministry is His ministry.” (*The Life*, p.79)

2) “**The Church is not merely a place** where Christians learn about God. When Jesus took upon Himself our human nature, He made it possible for us to **share** in His divine life. **In the Church we experience and participate in the life of Christ**.” (*The Life*, p. 79)

We sing when we partake of Holy Communion in Great Lent: “O taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Ps. 34:8) This is experiential. We **connect with** God; He enters us; we taste of His goodness, mercy, and life.

3) “**The Church is not a building; She is a People filled with the Holy Spirit** who share in His [Christ’s] life and bring His life to the world.” (*The Life*, p. 79)

Just as the **Son of God became the Son of Man** (son of Mary) when the Holy Spirit came upon the Virgin Mary, so now, **sons of men can become “sons of God”** (by Grace and adoption) and can share in the Divine Life of Christ when the Holy Spirit descends upon them and fills them.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body...now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.”

4) “**Anyone who desires to follow Jesus Christ and to share in His life must be united to His Body, the Church**,” for *in His Church (His Body) we have access to His life.* (*The Life*, p. 79)

Mystical Union with Christ is possible in His Church (His Body), through His Holy Mysteries of **Baptism, Chrismation and Communion**.

Through these unexplainable and Holy Mysteries (the Sacraments), **we can be in Christ and Christ can be in us.**

This actual union with Christ **enables** us to share the life of Christ.

“By being united to Christ’s Holy Orthodox Church through the mysteries (Sacraments) of Baptism, Chrismation, and the Holy Eucharist **we share in the life of Christ.**” (*The Life*, p. 79)

For example: “**For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.**” Galatians 3:27

St. Paul taught: “**In Christ** we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28)

St. Nicholas Cabasilas explained concerning the Union brought about by the Holy Mysteries of Holy Communion, Holy Chrismation, and Holy Baptism:

“It is therefore by this Bread that we live,
and by the Chrism that we are moved,
once we have received being from the Baptismal washing.
In this way we live in God.” (*The Life*, p. 80)

Thus, “**In Christ** we live [by Eucharist] and move [by Chrismation]
and have our being [by Baptism].” (Acts 17:28)

“**Baptism** confers being and in short, existence according to Christ. It receives us when we are dead and corrupted and first leads us to life. The **anointing with chrism** perfects him who has received [new] birth by infusing into him the energy that befits such a life. The **Holy Eucharist** preserves and continues this life and health, since the Bread of life enables us to preserve that which has been acquired and to continue in life. *It is therefore by this Bread that we live and by the Chrism that we are moved, once we have received being from the Baptismal washing. In this way we live in God.* We remove our life from this visible world to that world which is not seen by exchanging, not the place, but the very life itself and its mode.” St. Nicholas Cabasilas, (*The Life*, p. 80)

In brief:

Holy **Baptism** gives us a regenerated new life, a new birth. We are born again.
Holy **Chrismation** imparts the Divine Energy necessary for such a new divine life.
Holy **Communion** preserves, sustains, nourishes and continues this new life.

A) The Holy Baptism:

This is our **new birth**, our very **recreation** by God

Jesus taught: “Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.” (John 3:5)

The Fathers of the Church have classically interpreted “of water and the Spirit” to refer to Holy Baptism, where water and the Holy Spirit (the created water and the Uncreated Spirit) meet, where the Holy Spirit fills the water in the baptismal font with God’s Presence and Grace. By dipping into this blessed holy water, the person to be baptized is immersed into God, quite literally and mystically. The person meets the Holy Trinity in this mystical water.

From the baptismal font we are “brought forth” to a new and eternal life in Christ as from a **spiritual womb**. Hence, we are “**born again**.”

The Church Fathers explained what happens to us in Holy Baptism by speaking about the image of a scarred coin. The ugly old coin is thrown back into the mint’s furnace to have the king’s impression renewed and re-stamped upon the coin. Similarly, humans, scarred by sin, can be renewed and recreated by the Divine Fire in the Baptismal Font, where the distortion of sin is burned away, and where the **Image of God** is re-stamped, and renewed, upon you.

Baptism is also our **union** with **the Death and Resurrection of Christ**: (Romans 6:5-11)

Our inner “old man” of sin is **drowned**, and we **rise** to a **new life** as we rise from the font, as from a **spiritual tomb**. Our old life-style of living in darkness, in separation from God, is **ended** as we dive into the brightness of **living a new way**, rising in and with Christ.

St. Nicholas Cabasilas comments:

“He who seeks to be united with Him [i.e. Christ] must therefore share with Him in His flesh, partake of deification, and share in His death and resurrection. So we are baptized in order that we may die that death and rise again in that resurrection.” (*The Life*, p. 81-82)

B) Holy Chrismation:

This is “the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit” (see Ephesians 1:13). It is one’s personal experience of the Grace of Pentecost. It is your personal Pentecost. Through Divine Anointing with Holy Chrism we are given the Grace and Power of the Holy Spirit to live our new life **in the likeness of God**.

In Genesis 2:7, God formed man out of the dust of the earth, and then immediately breathed into him “the breath of life”.

So too, the one who has been **recreated** by God in Holy Baptism, is immediately **imparted** the Holy Spirit to **animate** that **new creation**.

The Holy Spirit descended upon the Lord Jesus after His Baptism, setting for us, His followers, the divine **model**. After our Baptism, the Holy Spirit also descends upon us, through the anointing with the Holy Chrism, anointing us and in effect making us “little christ”.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (4th Century) writes of Chrismation:

“Having been baptized into Christ, and put on Christ, ye have been made conformable to the Son of God...Being therefore made partakers of Christ, ye are properly called ‘**christs**’, and of you God said, ‘Touch not my christs’ (cf. Ps. 105:15), or ‘**anointed**’. Now ye were made ‘christs’, by receiving the emblem of the Holy Spirit; and all things were in a figure wrought in you, because ye are figures of Christ. He also bathed Himself in the river Jordan, and having imparted the fragrance of His Godhead to the waters, He came up from them; and the Holy Spirit in substance lightened on Him, like resting upon like. In the same manner **to you also**, after you had come up from the pool of the sacred streams, was given the Unction, the emblem of that wherewith Christ was anointed; **and this is the Holy Spirit.**” (*The Life*, p. 82-83)

“Thus, **in baptism we are united with Christ** and through **the Holy Chrism we are anointed with the same Spirit** that we might live after the likeness of Christ.” (*The Life*, p. 83)

C) Holy Communion:

We “feed” on Christ—we eat His Flesh and drink His Blood—so that we might live by Him. Jesus taught: “He that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me.” (John 6:57)

Jesus gave His Body and Blood for the life of the world:

Jesus taught: “I am the **living bread** which came down from heaven; if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever; and the bread that I will give is My **flesh**, which I will give for **the life of the world**...Verily, verily, I say unto you, **Except ye eat the flesh** of the Son of Man, and drink His blood, ye have **no life in you**. Whoso **eateth My flesh**, and **drinketh My blood, hath eternal life**; and I will **raise** him up at the last day. For My flesh is **meat indeed**, and My blood is **drink indeed**.” (John 6:51, 53-55) Real food, real drink.

The Fathers of the Church have classically and consistently interpreted Christ’s words to be **actual**, not symbolic nor metaphorical. In a manner beyond words, in a Holy Mystery, we partake of the very Body and Blood of Christ, His glorified humanity. Holy Communion (the Holy Eucharist) is the most concrete and most personal Union with Christ to be offered to Christians this side of Heaven.

“This **union** is neither symbolic (in the modern sense of the term) nor metaphorical, but **actual**. St. Paul writes, ‘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**?’ (1 Cor. 10:16)”
(*The Life*, p. 84)

St. Paul even scolded believers in the 1st Century who partook of Holy Communion casually, without self-examination, without repentance, and without discernment (without seeing by **faith** that the Bread and Wine are now the Body and Blood of Christ). He said that for their mistake and carelessness and unbelief, some believers got sick and even died under God’s judgment after partaking of the Holy Communion—the Holy Eucharist—**unworthily** and without due preparation. (See 1 Corinthians 11:24-32)

Holy **Baptism** and Holy **Chrismation** are perfected in the Holy Mystery of Holy **Communion**.

St. Nicholas Cabasilas:

“After the **chrismation** we go to the **table**. This is the perfection of the life in Christ; for those who attain it there is nothing lacking for the blessedness which they seek. It is no longer death and the tomb and a participation in the better life we receive, but the risen One Himself. Nor do we receive such gifts of the Spirit as we may, but the very Benefactor Himself, the very Temple whereon is founded the whole compass of graces...It is therefore the final Mystery as well, since it is not possible to go beyond it or to add anything to it.”
(*The Life*, p. 83-84)

In conclusion: WHERE we are saved? WHERE is this salvation made possible?

The answer is: **in the Holy Church.**

The Church—the Body of Christ—becomes “**our mother**” because it is in Her “**womb**” of the Baptismal Font that we are “**born again**”. In the Church we receive the Holy Spirit. Like a mother, the Church **feeds** and nourishes us with the “**food of eternal life**”, the Holy Eucharist, as we grow in Christ.

In the Church we are **united with Christ**. In the Church we are **saved**. It is His **Body**. This union both **prepares us for Heaven to come**, and also at the same time is an **actual foretaste and experience** of the heavenly life in Christ **here and now**.