

Catechism Class -- The Basics of Orthodoxy Course 101

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

Topic 2: The Foundations of the Orthodox Faith:

*The Holy Trinity, the Incarnation of the Son of God,
& Theosis (Union with God)*

The Church is the Body of Christ—where mankind **participates** by Grace in the eternal life of the Most Holy Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—Three Divine Persons (the Three-in-One God).

We begin with the *ultimate* question: **What is the PURPOSE OF LIFE?**

Answer: Man was created by God to share freely in God’s glorious, loving, fantastic, wonderful Divine Life. He created us in His Own Image so that we might bear His Likeness: **be like Him**.

We were created to become Temples of the Living God.

“Do you not know that you are **the temple of God** and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” I Corinthians 3:16

St. Athanasius (defender of the teaching of the Trinity and the Incarnation, in the 4th century) taught: **“God became man so that man might become God.”**

[Note: we do **not** become God by Nature/Essence, but we become “Godly”, by becoming “like” God by being filled with His Power, Presence, Grace and Energy]

St. Paul said it this way, in II Corinthians 8:9 --

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was **rich**, yet for your sakes **He became poor**, that you through **His poverty might become rich.**”

[In other words, the Son of God Who is **RICH** in His Divinity, joined us in our **poor** humanity, in order to lift up humanity to the heavens, giving us by Grace a chance to share in His **RICH** Divinity via the Holy Mysteries, such as His Body and Blood—the Holy Eucharist.]

St. Basil the Great (4th Century bishop, defender of Orthodoxy) wrote:
“**Man is a creature with orders to become God,**”
(*meaning*, “to become like God”).

St. Peter reminded us of God’s very own command to the human race:

“It is written, ‘**Be ye holy; for I am holy.**’” (I Peter 1:16)

God long ago had commanded Moses to tell the people to “be holy”:

“For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore,
and **be holy, for I am holy.**” (Leviticus 11:44)

We Orthodox teach: to be “like” God is to be holy, free, powerful, loving, humble, personal, etc., by being united with the only true Almighty God (Who is holy, free, powerful, loving, humble, personal, etc.), in the way that that a stained-glass window participates in the illuminating energy of the sun, without becoming literally a sun.

(Our favorite term for **salvation** is “**theosis**” = “union with God”; “theos” means “God”; “theosis” is a union of energy, not a union of essence).

Genesis 1:26 & 27: God said: “Let us make man in Our **image**, according to Our **likeness**...So God created man in His own **image**; in the **image** of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

Man was made in the **image** of God, with the **potential** of **growing** to be **more and more like** God.

(illustration: Image = doing a line-drawing; Likeness = filling in the colors)

By using freewill, and growing in love for God, ever closer to God, Adam and Eve had the possibility of sharing more and more of God’s Grace, Energy, Glory, Power, etc., which in turn would make them more and more like God. That was the design. That was the plan.

By His own design, all of humanity is called by God to be “**partakers of the divine nature.**” (2 Peter 1:4) This IS the ultimate MEANING of Life: for us humans (who have a **created** life) to be given the opportunity to share in the **uncreated** eternal everlasting life of the Creator, the Most Holy Trinity.

[Note: for clarity and emphasis, I repeat: the Church Fathers always have understood this “partaking of the Divine Nature” to be a gift of infilling, an interpenetration of humanity with God’s Divine Energy, not an essential union. Hinduism and Greek Platonic ideologies of pantheism are avoided as heresies—lies invented by the Devil, the father of lies.]

God is love. He loves us. **All** that God is by Nature, He wants to **share with us by Grace**, by freely **giving** it to us in gifts of love.

We do **not** become “God” by nature/essence, (i.e. we do not turn into the 4th and 5th Persons of the Holy Trinity). We remain human, but we get filled with God—more precisely, we become more and more filled with His Presence, His Glory, His Energy, His Working, His Manifestation, like the way in which the branches of a tree are filled with the wind when the storm rages through the forest. Or, better, like the manner in which a metal sword, when plunged into a fire, takes on the heat, warmth, and glow of the fire, without turning into fire. Metal remains metal, but takes on the energy of the fire. So too, humans remain human, but take on the Divine Energy of God.

In fact, the more filled we are with God [filled with His Divine Energies], the more truly human we become. This is our **ultimate calling and destiny**. It is what God **designed** us to be.

(illustration: candle and flame: candle = man; flame = God

What is the purpose of a candle? To be ignited by a flame and to carry that flame. A candle without a flame is a candle not fulfilling its purpose.)

God is Divine Light. Jesus said: **“I AM the Light of the world.”**

(John 8:12)

Man is created to be like God; thus, man is supposed to be a light also.

That is why Jesus said to His Disciples: **“You are the light of the world.”**

(Matthew 5:14)

But man only can really be a light like God, when he/she has God’s Light.

(Think of the Holy Spirit coming down upon the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost and filling them with Himself as He manifested His Presence as **tongues of fire** sitting on their heads.)

Back in the very beginning, mankind—Adam and Eve—failed miserably in their job of becoming like God, in being filled with more of God. They tried to do it by themselves & failed. They tried to deify themselves by eating the forbidden godless fruit. But you cannot become more like God without God, by pushing Him away, by excluding Him, by trying to do it by yourself, by disobedience and rebellion.

[Think of a **toaster** trying to toast bread all by itself, after it has **unplugged** itself from the source of energy—the electrical outlet. It cannot do it. It is delusional if it thinks it can. Reality is simple. **The toaster, to fulfill its purpose and design, needs to be plugged into the energy source.** In the same way, humanity, to fulfill its design, needs to be **plugged/connected** with the source of Life and Divine Energy—the Most Holy Trinity.]

Thus, when Adam and Eve **unplugged** from God, by disobedience and rebellion, they were spiritually deadened, as their hearts grew dark, lacking the light and color and energy of the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

Instead of growing more and more like God, more and more illumined, we humans each day take on more and more the image of the Devil: de-humanized, demonized, dark, selfish and proud.

In the Beginning, man used his freedom (free-will) to walk away from God. Now man is so weak, he cannot get back to God by himself. He needs help.

The human race was broken and weakened by pulling away from God. (illustration: heroin addict gives birth to a child with birth defects)

The human race became “damaged goods” as a result of its “Fall” away from God and into the Devil’s dark kingdom of evil.

Man became so weak that he could not on his own efforts ascend to heaven and unite with God (the Divine “Flame”). Therefore, God decided to come down to find us and unite with us (the Flame came down to us, to light the candle, to fill us with the Holy Spirit’s Presence/Grace/Glory). God still wants the human race to reach its potential and purpose for which He made it: to share in His Divine Life and Love and Light by uniting with us. He does **not** give up on His original plan for mankind.

To reunite fallen humanity with Himself, God SENT His eternal Only-Begotten Son to take on human flesh and blood, body and soul. We call this action the “**Incarnation**”. “Carne” means “flesh”. God got into flesh.

The Son of God, Jesus Christ, came & revealed to us:

- the teaching of the **Trinity** (“Tri-unity”),
- the *Incarnation* (“in-flesh-ment) of the Son of God, and,
- Theosis (“union with God”):

The Church’s **theology**—what She says and believes about God—is based upon what God has revealed about Himself—not on some theories or speculative philosophies. Jesus Christ and His teachings—as preserved in His Church by the Apostles and their writings—are the clearest revelation of God that we have.

The words of Christ: John 3:16: “**God** so loved the world that *He sent His only begotten Son*, that whoever believes in **Him** should not perish but have everlasting life.” (This verse speaks of **Persons of the Trinity**, the *Incarnation*, and theosis.)

Christ: “The **Father** Himself, **Who sent Me**.” (John 5:37)

Christ: “It is **My Father** Who honors **Me**, of Whom you say that **He is your God**.” (John 8:54)

Christ: “**I and My Father are One**.” (John 10:30)

Christ: “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, **I AM**.” (John 8:58)

Christ: “The Comforter, **the Holy Spirit**, Whom the **Father** will send in **My name**, He will teach you all things.” (John 14:26)

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are revealed at Christ’s Baptism. (Matt. 3:16-17)

Christ commanded that our Baptisms be “**in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit**.” (Matthew 28:19)

Christ taught *Incarnation* and theosis: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the Bread of Life...*I am the living Bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this Bread, he will live forever*; and the Bread that I shall give is *My flesh*, which I shall give for the life of the world...He who eats *My Flesh* and drinks *My Blood* abides in Me, and I in him.” (John 6:47-48,51,56)

The Apostle Paul taught that we unite with God: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (Galatians 3:27)

The whole purpose of the *Incarnation* of the Son of God: Christ came to unite the human race to God so that we can fulfill His plan for us—that we become Temples of the Most-Holy Trinity.

Christ taught **Trinity**, *Incarnation* and theosis in John 17:21-24:

“That they all may be one, as You Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that *You sent Me*. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that *You have sent Me*, and have loved them as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold **My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me** before the foundation of the world.”

Summary: the way we hold our fingers when we cross ourselves is a “**handful of theology**”.

- 1) **The Doctrine of the Trinity:** Three fingers for the (Three Divine Persons) held together to show their Unity (Tri+Unity=Trinity).
- 2) **The Doctrine of the Incarnation:** Two other fingers (ring and pinkie) are held down against the palm, to show that the Son of God (Who has two natures—Divine and human) came down to human flesh to save us.
- 3) **The Doctrine of Theosis:** Then we trace the victorious cross on our bodies, as we dedicate to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—our mind (touch forehead), our heart and soul (trace down past heart to the bosom), and body (touch both shoulders), asking God to come and fill us with His Presence.

*** Tell stories of saints as examples of becoming **Living Temples of God:**

St. Seraphim of Sarov (+1833), a wonder-worker and healer, who was fully transfigured with his disciple Nicholas Motovilov;

St. John of Kronstadt (+1909) who healed thousands, especially the blind with holy water, or the sick by just reading their names at the Divine Liturgy;

St. Nectarios of Aegina (+1920), whose healing ministry has cured more people after his death than prior to it, especially of cancers, and he keeps appearing to people, not only in dreams but even in broad daylight;

St. Arsenios of Cappadocian (+1924), such a great wonder-worker that even the dirt from the doorway of his cell cured people;

St. Papa Nicholas Planas (+1932), whose presence blessed the taxi drivers with incredibly good taxi fares, and who sometimes was translated (spiritually supernaturally moved) from place to place, like the time when he was seen arriving at a church on foot prior to his friends who had come in vehicles, even though they and he had all started out on their journey to the church at the same time, and ... he was seen in dreams kindly correcting the faithful, even during his lifetime;

St. Matrona of Moscow (+1952), whom the KGB was never able to capture...even though she was born blind, she always knew when and where to go to avoid the police; she was prophetic and had the eyes of her soul wide open. 1,000s flock to her tomb to ask and receive miracles.

St. John Maximovitch of San Francisco (+1966), whose relics lie incorrupt in his tomb to this day...and even though the City of San Francisco had placed scientific devices in his tomb to measure decomposition, none was ever measured.

St. Porphyrios (+1991), a healer with such tremendous gifts of spiritual discernment, that nothing was a secret to him. So many people were cured by his prayers that many books and books continue to be published, full of his miracles.

St. Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994), a perfect example of a great ascetic, whose love and clairvoyance and prophecies and healings touched the hearts of the 1,000s who visited him and converted the hardest hearts to become genuine Christians. Seeing St. Paisios was once transfigured with blinding glorious Uncreated Light of God. When he saw this, the Greek who had been formerly deceived by the yellowish glow of a Hindu guru, repented and never again was tempted by the deceptions of demonic Hindu pantheism.