

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 102

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

Topic 1: The Birth and Mission of the Church

(The Faith, Chp.10)

“The Church is the historical Body of Christ, Whose mission is to manifest Christ’s loving presence to the whole world.” *(The Faith, p.153,)*

Intro: quote by **St. Clement**, friend and fellow-worker with St. Paul and the 3rd Bishop of Rome, writing in about **AD 96**: “The First Epistle of Clement” (see pp.159-160, *The Faith*)

The **Apostles received the Gospel for us** from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent from God. Thus Christ is **from God**, the Apostles **from the Christ**: in both cases the process was orderly, and derived from the will of God. The Apostles received their instructions; they were filled with conviction through the **Resurrection** of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with faith by the Word of God; and they went out full of confidence in the Holy Spirit, **preaching the Gospel** that the kingdom of God was about to come. They preached in country and town, and **appointed** [*ordained*] their first-fruits, after testing them by the Spirit, to be **bishops and deacons** of those who were going to believe. And this was no novelty, for indeed a long time ago the Scripture had mentioned bishops and deacons; for there is somewhere this passage: “I will set up their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith.”

The Apostles learned from Jesus Christ the true “**good news**”—the “**evangelion**”. But **before** they went out into all the world to publish that news, they needed “**power from on high**”. This power came from the Holy Spirit, which Jesus said that His Father had **promised** to give them.

Jesus said to His Apostles: “Behold, I send **the Promise of My Father** upon you; but tarry [*wait*] in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with **power from on high**.” (Luke 24:49)

Christ promised to not leave us “comfortless” (orphans). (John 14:18)

The Holy Spirit would be sent: He is the Comforter Whom Jesus promised to send upon the Apostles (John 14:16-17)

Therefore, the **Descent of the Holy Spirit** as tongues of fire upon the heads of the Apostles—Holy Pentecost—is the **Birthday of the Church**.

Christianity is not a philosophy—it is not a set of rules—it is not simply a “religious organization”. It is a REALITY.

It is “a living relationship with Christ Himself in the Holy Spirit. This relationship is the life of the Church”—which is the Body of Christ. (p.153)

The Holy Spirit helps make this union with Christ happen.

The Three Persons of the Holy Trinity always work together.

The **Son** and the **Spirit** are “the two hands of God”, as St. Irenaios said. (p.153.)

See Genesis 1 & 2—the Creation. The Father used both His Son (Word/Logos) and His Spirit to create man and the world.

Also, in the effort of God to save humanity – in His economy of salvation – both the Son and the Spirit cooperated with the will of the Father.

Examples:

At the **Annunciation**, the Holy Spirit **descended** upon the Virgin and effected the Incarnation of the Word, the Son of God.

At Christ’s **Baptism**, the Holy Spirit **descended** upon the Son, anointing Him as Messiah (the “Anointed” One).

At **Pentecost**, the Holy Spirit **descended** upon the Apostles, uniting them with the risen and ascended Christ, anointing them, and transforming them into the Body of Christ.

Since the Son and the Holy Spirit always work together, **Both Divine Persons cooperated in the establishment of the Church** of Christ on Holy Pentecost.

When “the Holy Spirit descended upon the Disciples, they ceased to be mere followers of Christ and **became the Church** [the *ecclesia*, the “assembly”], the very Body of Christ.” (p.154) Filled with the Holy Spirit, they became living stones in the living Temple of God. **Therefore, Pentecost is the birthday of the Church.**

We believe *in* the Church—not simply that one exists.

In our Nicene Creed we confess that the Church is “One, Holy, Catholic, & Apostolic.”

The Church is “the **fullness** of Him that filleth all in all.” (Eph. 1:23)

She is “the **pillar** and ground of the truth.” (1Tim.3:15)

Jesus promised that the gates of hell would **not** be able to destroy this Church
(Matthew 16:18)

The Church is **real, concrete, historical** and **visible** (not invisible, not super spiritualized).

She is **apostolic**.

There are two dimensions to this apostolic nature of the church:

- 1) the “**horizontal dimension**”
 “Horizontal” = She is a historical entity which stretches across the centuries.
 She is “a **visible human community** which **dates** from the **time** of the Apostles.” (p.155)
- 2) the “**vertical dimension**”—the Church as the image of the Kingdom of Heaven in which we participate in the heavenly realities. In the Divine Services, especially the Divine Liturgy, we are surrounded by **angels** and the spirits of the **saints**—the martyrs—as we approach the very **throne** of God and the **Blood** of Christ. (*The Faith*, Chp.11)

Hebrews 12:1 “since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses (martyrs)”

Hebrews 12:22-24

²² But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, **the heavenly Jerusalem**, and to an innumerable company of **angels**,

²³ To the general **assembly and church of the firstborn**, which are written in heaven, and to **God** the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,

²⁴ And to **Jesus** the mediator of the New Covenant, and to the **Blood** of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

Both dimensions are needed for a group of Christians to be called “**the Church**”.

The **HORIZONTAL DIMENSION**:

(four aspects: historical, apostolic succession, apostolic doctrine/tradition, missionary)

- A) **HISTORICAL**: The Church “is an entity which exists in history.” (p.155)
 She has a concrete, visible nature.
 She is “the historical apostolic community, made up of **real** people, and not merely someone’s idea of a ‘perfect’ society.” (p.155)

There are lists of **bishops, saints, and heretics**.

There are **buildings and cemeteries** as proof of this community’s on-going existence on earth.

B) **APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION:** The Church “is founded precisely upon the historical Apostles of Christ.” (p.156) The Apostles ordained bishops as their successors.

Ephesians 2:19-22 the **Apostles** (plural) are the “**foundation**”—not just one Apostle.

Rev. 21:14, 19-20 The Heavenly New Jerusalem (“the Church”, the “Bride of Christ”) has “**twelve foundations**, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

Matthew 16:18-19 “On this rock I will build My Church,” said Christ.

“On this rock” is interpreted by the Orthodox Christians to be Peter’s holy confession of faith in the Divinity of Jesus as the Son of the living God.

The Apostolic confession of Faith that Peter expressed **is the same confession of Faith** that **we all are called to confess**—the confession of Faith in the **Divinity of Christ: He is 100% God and 100% man.**

Peter (as “rock”) simply earned the name by being so quick and bold to solidly confess the truth about Christ as “the Son of the living God.”

But it is upon “the rock” of **this Apostolic confession of Faith** in Christ’s Divinity that the Church is built.

Side Note: some non-Orthodox read Matthew 16 as Christ’s selection of Peter to be His “Vicar”, the chief leader, a “Pope” over all other Apostles, bishops and Christians. This is **not** the original historical Orthodox interpretation, but is a **much later** Roman/Latin innovation.

The “keys of the Kingdom”—the power to bind and loose sins: to remit sins—were given **both to Peter and to all the Apostles** (not to Peter exclusively)

Matthew 16:19 Power of binding and loosing is **given to Peter**

Matthew 18:18 Power to “bind and loose” **given to all the Apostles**

John 20:22-23 Power to forgive is given **to all the Apostles** by Christ.

The Apostles, as Foundation, are **equal in authority:** Christ gave them **all the same power to bind and loose.** They are **12 equal foundation stones**, as Rev.21:20 states.

However, Christ alone remains the “**Head**” and the “**chief cornerstone**” of the Church. Christ alone is the “**Head**” of the Church. (Eph.1:22)

Christ alone is the “**chief cornerstone**”. (Eph. 2:20) Jesus is “the Shepherd and **Bishop** [*overseer*] of your souls.” (1 Peter. 2:25)

The Apostles were established by Christ as the leaders (the “foundation”) of the Church. They confessed their Confession of the Faith and passed it on. We have already witnessed this in St. Clement’s quote (on p.159-160).

“**The visible unity** of the Church throughout history is expressed in terms of **continuity with the Apostles**” and **their apostolic community**. (p.156)

St. Clement further explains how the Apostles set up bishops as their legitimate successors:

“Our Apostles also knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the **title of bishop**. For this cause, therefore, since they had received perfect foreknowledge, they **appointed** those who have been already mentioned and afterwards added the codicil that if they should **fall asleep**, other **approved men should succeed to their ministry**.” (*First Epistle of Clement*, found on p.156-157 of *The Faith*)

St. Clement is describing the Apostolic succession of bishops. “**Apostolic succession**” means the “legitimate authority within the Church is always derived from **direct historical succession** from the **original** Apostles.” (p.157)

The *very community* that the Apostles established still exists on the face of the planet today. **Apostolic succession** is traced through lines of bishops, descending from the Apostles, who taught—and still teach—the Apostolic holy traditions.

St. Irenaios (AD 130-202) wrote in about AD 180, in which he **appeals** to both **apostolic succession and apostolic doctrine** when he is writing against heresies and false teachings. (St. Irenaios was the disciple of St. Polycarp, the disciple of St. John the Apostle.)

“Those who wish to see the **truth** can observe in every Church **the tradition of the Apostles** made manifest in the whole world. We can enumerate those who were **appointed bishops in the Churches by the Apostles**, and their **successors down to our own day**. They never taught and never knew of such absurdities as those heretics produce.”

(*Against Heresies*, quoted in *The Faith*, p. 157.)

Thus, already in the Second Century we can see the principle of **Apostolic tradition** being safeguarded by the **Apostolic succession** of bishops. Therefore, through “the succession of bishops we see the continuity of the Church’s faith and life.” (p.157)

C) **APOSTOLIC TRADITION**: As the inheritor of apostolic authority (*through the bishops*),

the Church **must be faithful to apostolic doctrine**.

No bishop is free to invent NEW teachings.

Rather, the bishops are to **maintain, hold**, and even “**contend earnestly** for the Faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 1:3)

This is the “holy tradition” of the Apostles, given to them by Christ—it is not man-made earthly traditions.

See 2 Thessalonians 2:15, where St. Paul the Apostle wrote: “Brethren, stand fast and **hold the traditions** which you were taught, whether by *word* or our *epistle*.”

The Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs wrote their answer to the English Protestants in 1718:

“We **preserve the Doctrine of the Lord uncorrupted**, and firmly adhere to the Faith He delivered to us, and keep it free from blemish and diminution, as a royal treasure, and a monument of great price, **neither adding anything nor taking anything from it.**” (Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 204).

Apostolic succession (of bishops) **and faithfulness** to *apostolic teachings/doctrines/traditions* **are required** for a local church to be considered still part of the original Church.

In addition, being **visibly united** with *the historical Church* is needed.

The See of Rome (Roman Catholics) has apostolic succession of bishops, linked back to the Apostles.

HOWEVER, the See of Rome (meaning: the Bishop/Pope of Rome) has **innovated** a number of **non-Apostolic teachings**. Thus, it is no longer maintaining faithfully the Apostolic Faith given to the first Romans by the Apostles themselves. (See Jude 1:3) While having Apostolic succession, the Roman Catholics over the centuries have polluted the Apostolic tradition/teachings.

This **unfaithfulness** to the **pure** teachings of the Apostles has put Rome **out of communion** with the other historical Orthodox Patriarchates, who are

simply waiting for their former sister diocese of Rome to repent of her innovations and return to the unity of the original Apostolic faith.

- D) **MISSION TO THE WORLD:** As “apostolic”—“sent forth with a message”—the Church by nature is missionary and continues to carry its pure message of salvation in Christ to all the world.

Matthew 28:19-20 **The Great Commission**

¹⁹ Therefore go and **make disciples of all nations, baptizing** them in the Name of the **Father** and of the **Son** and of the **Holy Spirit**, ²⁰ and **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

We are all called to fulfill this evangelical nature of the Church.

Conclusion: The Church is the historical Body of Christ, the community and assembly of believers **founded by the Apostles (who themselves were selected by Christ personally)**. This same historical Church is continued by **the Apostles’ legitimate successors** (the Orthodox bishops), who hold faithfully to the teachings (**holy traditions**) of the Apostles (without innovation, without adding or subtracting). Both Apostolic Succession and Apostolic Tradition (doctrine) continue today in the visible, historical community that Christ and His Apostles founded—the Holy Orthodox Church. The Church continues to offer the Good News of this Life in Christ to the world around us today.

St. Irenaios (AD 130-202) gives us a great summary quote from his famous book *Against Heresies*, found on page 160 of *The Faith* catechism book:

By “knowledge of the truth” we mean: the **teaching of the Apostles**; the **order of the Church** as established from the **earliest times** throughout the world, the distinctive stamp of the **Body of Christ**, preserved through the **episcopal succession**. For to the **bishops** the **Apostles committed the care of the Church** which is in each place, which **has come down to our own time, safeguarded without any written documents**; by the most complete exposition which admits **neither increase or diminution**; the reading of the **Scriptures** without falsification, and consistent and careful exposition of them, avoiding temerity and blasphemy; and the special gift of love, which is more precious than knowledge, more glorious than prophecy, surpassing all other spiritual gifts.