

Worship Worship in the Orthodox Church is understood to be the highest calling of mankind, to fall down at the feet of the Almighty God, the Holy Trinity, and to be given over entirely to him, becoming united mystically with him in the holy mysteries (“sacraments”). To worship God is to fulfill the purpose for which we were created.

Orthodox worship is liturgical, that is, following specific ritual patterns and cycles in reverent dignity and embracing the whole of the human person. Its reverence and awe are due to its being understood as entering into the very throne room of the Creator. Orthodox worship is transformative, bringing the Christian more deeply into communion with God and with his cooperation changing him into a holy person, a saint. Its pattern is after the worship in Heaven, which includes an altar, incense, chanting, and so forth (Is. 6 & 7; Heb. 8:1-6; Rev. 4, 5).

Worship is distinct from veneration in that the latter is simply the genuine respect that Orthodox Christians show for holy people and things, while worship itself is a total giving over of the self to be united with God.

A secondary but essential component of worship in Orthodoxy is to teach the dogmas of the faith, forming the Christian in the doctrines of the Church, which are not merely rational propositions to be agreed with but rather the guide to a salvific way of life.

The center of Orthodox Christian liturgical life is the Divine Liturgy, at which believers who are prepared by prayer, fasting and confession, receive the Holy Eucharist, bread and wine which have been mystically changed by God into the Body and Blood of Christ (John 6:47-58). Other major services include Vespers (evening prayer) and Matins (morning prayer), following in the footsteps of the Apostles, who worshiped according to the traditional hours of prayer (Acts 3:1, 10:9, 10:30).

Sacraments More properly termed holy mysteries, the Church’s entire life is one of sacrament. In the mysteries, the Christian is united with God, becoming a partaker of the divine nature (II Peter 1:4). With all the sacraments, God makes his presence known in his divine energies, using physical means to convey himself to his people. The word mystery in this sense carries both the meaning of something beyond our understanding but also the mystical, that which unites the divine with the human. Historically, the term mystery refers not so much to a “thing” as to an “action,” God acting upon man.

There are seven generally recognized sacraments, though the number has never been fixed dogmatically by the Church. Two are sacraments of initiation into the Church, baptism (Rom. 6:4; Eph. 4:5; Col. 2:12; I Peter 3:21) and chrismation (also called confirmation; Acts 8:14-17, 19:6). Another completes the initiation and nourishes the life of the Christian, the Eucharist, which is regarded as the highest of the sacraments (John 6:47-58; Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42, 46). The remainder of the sacraments are occasional: holy unction for the sick (James 5:14), confession for repentance and reconciliation with the Church (I John 1:9; James 5:16), marriage for those joined in the marital community (John 2, etc.), and ordination for those called to serve the Church in holy orders (Acts 6:1-6, 13:3; Titus 1:5; I Tim. 4:14; II Tim. 1:6).

All of the mysteries require preparation in the Church’s life, and so may not be administered to the non-Orthodox (Matt. 7:6). The one exception is baptism, which is the mystery that unites the Christian with Christ in the Church, bringing him from being a believer in Christ as a catechumen (one who is preparing for baptism) to a full member of the Body of Christ.

Clergy Clergy are those in the Orthodox Church who have been called by God to fulfill specific functions of service and leadership in the Church (Acts 6:1-6, 13:3; Titus 1:5; I Tim. 4:14; II Tim. 1:6). They are

not worthy in themselves to fulfill these functions, but by the grace of ordination, God enables them to carry out his will. This is why after an ordination is complete, the word *Axios!* (“Worthy!”) is shouted, not because the Church is affirming the worthiness of this individual to be ordained (since he has already been ordained at that point), but rather because the Holy Spirit has descended upon him and done the work of granting the man the clerical ministry.

Clergy are not inherently higher or better than the laity in the Church, who are also ordained to a specific ministry as the royal priesthood of Christ. The ministry of the clergy is, however, a more intense and potentially spiritually dangerous role, since its business is the ministry of the holy mysteries and the responsibility of the teaching of the people of God. God will hold clergy accountable for the responsibility he gave them.

There are two basic categories of clergy in the Church, those in minor orders and those in major orders. The minor orders which are currently in use in the Church are reader, cantor (chanter) and subdeacon (in some traditions, cantors are not used because choral music is the norm). The major orders which have survived from apostolic times and remain permanent within the Church are deacon, presbyter (priest/elder) and bishop. The bishops are all theologically equal, working together in council to work through tough questions for the Church. Though certain bishops have more seniority than others, there is no equivalent to the Roman Catholic pope, either administratively or dogmatically.

Saints The term saints may be understood in two senses. First, the saints are all those who are in the Body of Christ, the Church (Acts 9, etc.). Saint literally refers to one who has been set apart for God’s purposes, which is the essential meaning of holiness. To be holy is to be set apart and thus has nothing particularly to do with one’s personal worthiness or sinlessness.

In the second, more common, sense, the saints are those whose lives have most clearly shown that they are set apart for the service of God. Their holiness, which is not their own but is Christ’s (Gal. 2:20), has shone forth so obviously that Orthodox Christians pay them great respect, which is termed veneration. This veneration is due to Christ’s work and is a recognition of Christ in the saints.

Because the Church recognizes the work of Christ in the saints, it undertakes the formal work of glorification (or canonization), by which the saints are affirmed by God’s people as being among the saved, that their lives may be imitated, just as the Apostle Paul urged us to imitate him as he imitated Christ (I Cor. 11:1). Liturgical services are therefore composed for the celebration of the feast days of the saints, and their place as participants in the common worship of the whole Church is confirmed with iconography, visual images which connect us with a spiritual reality. The saints always surround us as a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1).

Orthodox Church of the Mother of God

Mays Landing, NJ
Hudson St & Ivan's Lane,
Mays Landing NJ 08330

For more on Orthodox Christianity see:
<http://ChurchMotherOfGod.org>
<http://www.oca.org> and
http://nynjoca.org/about_orthodoxy.html

An Introduction to Orthodox Christianity

Introduction Orthodox Christianity is not familiar to most Americans, despite the community of the Orthodox having existed for some 2,000 years and despite the presence of Orthodox Christians in America for more than 200 years.

So, what is Orthodox Christianity? It is the life in faith of the Orthodox Church, inseparable from that concrete, historic community and constituting its entire way of life. The Orthodox Christian faith is that faith “handed once to the saints” (Jude 3), passed on in Holy Tradition to the apostles by Jesus Christ, and then handed down from one generation to the next within the Church, without addition or subtraction.

The sole purpose of Orthodox Christianity is the salvation of every human person, uniting him to Christ in the Church, transforming him in holiness, and imparting eternal life. This is the Gospel, the good news, that Jesus is the Messiah, that he rose from the dead, and that we may be saved as a result.

Historically, the Orthodox Church is the oldest of all Christian churches. Ultimately, all Christians can trace their own history back to the Orthodox Church. In the pages of the New Testament is the account of the beginning of the Orthodox Church, and Orthodoxy continues to live on in the vast majority of the places mentioned in the New Testament where the Apostles first preached the Gospel. This is the Church which wrote, compiled and canonized the Holy Scriptures, which formulated the traditional doctrines of Christianity, and which has believed and lived the same faith for 2,000 years.

Today, Orthodox Christianity’s largest communities exist primarily in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, though there are also sizable communities in North America, Western Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia, primarily through immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries, but also through a growing number of converts to the faith. It is the second largest Christian communion in the world, smaller only than the Roman Catholic Church. The Orthodox Church is sometimes referred to as “Greek Orthodox” or “Eastern Orthodox,” but the best term is simply Orthodox Christian. So what do Orthodox Christians believe? And how do they live?

God Orthodox Christians worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Holy Trinity, the one God (Matt. 28:19; II Cor. 13:14; I Peter 1:1-2; Rom. 14:17-18, 15:16, etc.). Following the Holy Scriptures and the Church Fathers, the Church believes that the Trinity is three divine persons who share one essence. There never was a time when any of the persons of the Trinity did not exist. God is beyond and before time and yet acts within time, moving and speaking within history.

God is not an impersonal essence or mere “higher power,” but rather each of the divine Persons relates to mankind personally. Neither is the word God merely a name for three gods (i.e., polytheism), but rather the Orthodox faith is monotheist and yet Trinitarian. The God of the Orthodox Christian Church is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the I AM who revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2-14).

The Church primarily draws near to God and communes with Him in divine mystery, approaching God apophatically, that is, not laying down precise, exhaustive definitions of Who God is, being content to encounter God personally and yet realize the inadequacy of the human mind to comprehend him (John 1:18; I John 4:12; Is. 55:9).

The primary statement of what the Church believes about God is to be found in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, formulated in 325 and 381 AD at the First and Second Ecumenical Councils.

Jesus Christ Jesus is God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. He is the I AM revealed to Moses (Ex. 3:2-14). He is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6). He is the God before the ages who came to Earth as a little child. He and the Father are one (John 10:30), for he is of one essence with the Father. During his passion and death on the cross, one of the Trinity suffered in the flesh.

As described in the Gospels, Jesus Christ was born of a woman, grew into a man, preached, healed, taught his disciples, died in physical reality on the cross, and then rose bodily from the dead on the third day. He then ascended into Heaven (Acts 1:9) and sat down at the right hand of the Father (Mark 16:19). Of all mankind, he alone is without sin.

Jesus is the Theanthropos, the God-man. He is not half God and half man, nor is he a hybrid of the two. Rather, he is fully God and fully man, perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity. He has two natures, joined together in the Incarnation without mixture, division, or confusion. This is the doctrine of the Incarnation, that God became a man. He is the Messiah, the Christ—the Anointed One of God, foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament.

His work on Earth was for the purpose of saving mankind, for the life of the world. Everything he did was for our salvation, whether it was being baptized, relating parables, healing the sick, or his glorious death and resurrection. Because of who he is and of what he did for us, we have the opportunity to become by grace what he is by nature, to the fullness of the stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13). That is, we can put on the divine, becoming partakers of the divine nature (II Pet. 1:4).

The Church The Church is the Body of Christ, a divine-human communion of Jesus Christ with his people. The sole head of the Church is Christ (Eph. 1:22, 5:23; Col. 1:18). The traditional belief in the Church is attested to in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. By this is meant that the Church is undivided and not many (one), sanctified and set apart for the work of God (holy), whole and characterized by fullness and universality (catholic), and goes out into all the world to preach the Gospel and baptize the nations (apostolic), as well as being rooted and founded in the work of the Apostles.

The Church is the Bride of Christ (John 3:29), the eschatological spouse of the Son of God, united to him in faith and love, for which he gave himself up on the cross (Eph. 5:23). The intimacy of a husband and wife is an earthly image of the intimacy that Christ has with his Church, and the union of an earthly marriage is a shadow of the union of that marriage of the Lamb of God with the Church.

The community of the Church is the locus of salvation for mankind; it is truly the Ark in which mankind may be saved from the flood of corruption and sin. In it, Christians sacramentally work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), worshiping the Holy Trinity in spirit and in truth. The Church is the pillar and ground of truth (I Tim. 3:15) and thus may be relied upon in the Christian's struggle to apprehend the one truth for himself. The Church is eternal, and the gates of Hell will never prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).

The Church consists of the prophets and saints of both the Old and New Covenants, the angels and the concrete, historical community of believers in this earthly life. Those who have gone on before us are known as the Church Triumphant, while those in this life are known as the Church Militant (Heb. 12:1).

The final boundaries of the Church are known only to God himself, but outside the historical context of the Church—that is, the Orthodox

Church—the nature of the connection of any human being to the Church (whether a believer in Christ or not) is unknown to us. Throughout Church history, various groups have broken from the Church, a tragic reality which does not divide the Church but rather divides believers from the Church. The final status of Christians in such communities is dependent on God's mercy and grace, which is also true for those with membership in the Church in this life.

In this life, however, to be an Orthodox Christian means belonging to the Orthodox Church. It is not something one can do alone or as part of a separate group. Orthodox Christians believe that other Christian or even non-Christian groups may manifest varying degrees of the truth of the Gospel but that the fullness of the Christian faith is found only in Orthodoxy.

Holy Tradition Holy Tradition is the deposit of faith given by Jesus Christ to the Apostles and passed on in the Church from one generation to the next without addition, alteration or subtraction. Holy Tradition is transmitted to the Christian from Christ's Apostles both by word of mouth and in writing (II Thess. 2:15, 3:6). Vladimir Lossky has famously described the Tradition as "the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church." It is dynamic in application, yet unchanging in its doctrine. It is growing in expression, yet ever the same in essence.

Unlike many conceptions of tradition in popular understanding, the Orthodox Church does not regard Holy Tradition as something which grows and expands over time, forming a collection of practices and doctrines which accrue, gradually becoming something more developed and eventually unrecognizable to the first Christians. Rather, Holy Tradition is that same faith which Christ taught to the Apostles and which they gave to their disciples, preserved in the whole Orthodox Church and especially in its leadership through Apostolic succession (Jude 1:3).

The central position in Holy Tradition is occupied by the Holy Scriptures, the written witness to God's revelation in the Church. As such, the Scriptures are always interpreted from within the Tradition which was the context for their writing and canonization, a process which lasted until the 4th century (367 AD is the year in which we see the first list of the 27 books we now know as the New Testament).

Mankind Orthodox Christian doctrine about human nature teaches that man was created by God to worship him in communion with him, made in his image to attain to His likeness (Gen. 1:26). All human beings are thus of infinite value, because they bear the indelible stamp of their Creator. All human beings are composed of both a soul and body, which are permanently part of human nature. Man was created sinless, but not perfected, and so although Adam was pure when he was created, he was created as a being of dynamic progress, capable of growing more and more like God.

At the fall of man, Adam and Eve not only sinned in violation of God's commandments, but their way of being shifted. Their nature was not changed in itself, but the image of God in them became obscured by sin, which is a separation from God in our very being. Fallen man is thus not totally depraved, but rather suffers from the disease of sin which renders holiness much more difficult to attain to.

All of mankind suffers from the effects of sin (death, sickness, and all evils), even if a particular individual may theoretically not have committed any personal sins. Guilt does not enter into Orthodox anthropology, since it is essentially a legal category and not directly relevant to the existential reality of man's sin illness. Thus, even if the term original sin is used in Orthodox theology, it is understood not as a transmitted guilt for Adam's sin, but rather as an inherited disease which may be cured in salvation, the dynamic path of growth into God's likeness.

Salvation In the Orthodox Church, salvation is understood as theosis, the infinite process of becoming more and more like God. It is also termed deification or divinization, and its meaning is that the Christian may become more and more soaked with the divine life, becoming by grace what Christ is by nature. As St. Athanasius the Great (4th century) said, "God became man so that man might become divine." By participation in the Incarnation, man becomes like Christ. This reality goes far beyond the simple question of going to Heaven after death. Salvation is a process which encompasses not only the whole earthly life of the Christian, but also the eternal life of the age to come. It is often described in terms of three stages—purification (katharsis), illumination (theoria) and divinization (theosis). Salvation is thus not only becoming sinless (purification), but it is also a progress in being filled with the divine light (illumination). Additionally, it is becoming so filled with God in union with him that the Christian shines forth with the likeness of God, in some cases even literally becoming a bearer of the Uncreated Light, a physically visible light from God that is his presence, such as at the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-6; Mark 9:1-8; Luke 9:28-36) or when Moses spoke with God on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 34:29-35). Though the terminology of three stages is sometimes used, there is much overlap between them, and the whole process itself is often termed theosis.

It is only in and through Christ that man can be saved (John 14:6). Salvation cannot be earned, being a free gift from God. Its acquisition, however, requires man's cooperation with God, because God will not violate the free will of man. A life of repentance and participation in the sacraments is the means by which man cooperates with God. This cooperation is termed synergeia (synergy), making us co-workers with God (I Cor. 3:9; II Cor. 6:1).

In theosis, man becomes filled with the divine life. He takes on God's attributes, but he does not become merged with the Holy Trinity. There is union without fusion. Man can become a "god" by grace, not in a polytheistic sense (because there is only one God), but rather in terms of becoming a son or daughter of the Most High by means of adoption (Ps. 82:6; John 10:34). Thus, a classic patristic image of theosis is a sword held in a flame—the sword gradually takes on the properties of the flame (light and heat), but remains a sword. All things are to be gathered together in Christ (Eph. 1:10, 2:6).

Spirituality The term spirituality has unfortunately become quite vague in our time, but if for the sake of this presentation we take it to mean "the daily life of the Orthodox Christian," we can say certain pertinent things. Orthodox Christians seek to pray without ceasing (I Thess. 5:17), and so for nearly every moment in life, every task, every occasion, there is a prayer. This does not mean that extemporaneous prayer has no place in the life of the Orthodox Christian, but it does mean that in general, Orthodox draw on the experience of the saints rather than their own private opinions, which are less trustworthy.

Fundamentally, the spiritual life of an Orthodox Christian is liturgical, sacramental, and mystical. This level of spiritual intensity is not something reserved for esotericists or monastics, but is for everyone. This life not only involves prayer and frequent participation in liturgical services, but it also involves a whole ascetical way of life, engagement in fasting and other ascetical disciplines, so that the whole human person, both soul and body, may be brought into communion with Jesus Christ. This means that holiness is much more than moral precepts and involves a whole way of looking at the world and living in it, that there are holy people, holy places and holy objects.

Orthodox spirituality is fundamentally practical and customizable, always geared toward the single goal, the "one thing needful"—life in Christ.