

Church Mysteries

The Sacraments of the Orthodox Church, like the Church Herself, can be said to possess a double character, for they are at the same time inward and outward, visible and invisible. **They combine in themselves both an outward visible sign with an inward spiritual grace.** For example, in the Holy Eucharist, we eat the Body and Blood of Christ, although visibly they appear to be bread and wine. Likewise, in Holy Baptism there is an outward washing with water, but simultaneously an inward cleansing of sins. Thus, we often speak of the Sacraments as being mysteries, for, in the sense outlined above, what we see is not what we believe.

In most of the Sacraments, the Holy Church takes things that are material, e.g., bread, wine, water, and oil, and make them vehicles of the Holy Spirit, in imitation of our Lord's Incarnation, when, as the Second Person of the Trinity, He took material flesh and made it a vehicle of the Holy Spirit. We also note here another characteristic of the Sacraments, in that they are personal. That is, the grace of God is given to every Christian individually. Therefore, in most of the Sacraments, the Priest pronounces the Christian name of each person as the Sacrament is administered. Thus, for example, at the Holy Eucharist, when giving Holy Communion, the Priest says, the Servant (or Handmaid) of God [Name] partakes....

Customarily, in the Orthodox Church we speak of Seven Sacraments, although we must note that this was not fixed until about the 17th Century. The Fathers themselves disagreed as to the actual number some said two, some six, some

ten, and there were even those who said seven, but differed among themselves as to what constituted that seven. Many other sacramental acts, such as the Blessing of Waters at Theophany, the Monastic Tonsure, the Burial Service, and the Blessing of Any Object, for example, possess the same criteria as the earlier definition of sacrament. In any case, the number seven has no absolute dogmatic significance in our Orthodox theology, but is used only for teaching convenience.

The Sacraments, as they are traditionally numbered, are:

1. Holy Baptism'
2. Holy Chrismation
3. The Holy Eucharist
4. Repentance (Penance, Confession)
5. Holy Orders
6. Holy Matrimony
7. The Anointing of the Sick

by Bishop Kallistos (Ware).

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

The Sacraments

The sacraments in the Orthodox Church are officially called the "**holy mysteries.**" Usually seven sacraments are counted: baptism, chrismation (or confirmation), holy eucharist, penance, matrimony, holy orders and the unction of the sick.

The practice of counting the sacraments was adopted in the Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholics. It is not an ancient practice of the Church and, in many ways, it tends to be misleading since it appears that there are just seven specific rites which are "sacraments" and that all other aspects of the life of the Church are essentially different from these particular actions. The more ancient and traditional practice of the Orthodox Church is to consider everything which is in and of the Church as **sacramental** or **mystical**.

The Church may be defined as the new life in Christ. It is man's life lived by the Holy Spirit in union with God. All aspects of the new life of the Church participate in the mystery of salvation. In Christ and the Holy Spirit everything which is sinful and dead becomes holy and alive by the power of God the Father. And so in Christ

and the Holy Spirit everything in the Church becomes a sacrament, an element of the mystery of the Kingdom of God as it is already being experienced in the life of this world.

Viewing the Church as the new and eternal life of the Kingdom of God given to man by God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, we understand first of all that for life to exist there must be birth. The birth into the eternal life of God is the mystery of **baptism**. But birth is not enough for living; there must be the ongoing possibility of life: its power, energy and force. Thus, the mystery of **chrismation** is the gift of the power to live the life of Christ which is born in man by baptism. It is the gift of the "all-holy and good and life-creating Spirit" to man.

Life also must be sustained. This is normally done by eating and drinking. Food is the nourishment which keeps us alive. It is man's communion with creation which keeps him existing. But, naturally speaking, our normal eating and drinking does not keep us alive forever. Our natural communion with the world is a communion to death. We need eating and drinking of a special food which nourishes us for eternal life. This food is the "mystical supper of the Son of God," the body and blood of Christ, the mystery

of the **holy eucharist** -- the communion to Life Itself.

For life to be truly perfect, holy and good, there must also be a particular mystery about **marriage** and the bearing of children. In this world all who are born are born to die, and even the most perfect of human love stands under the condemnation: "... until death do you part." The mystery of Christian marriage transforms human love, childbearing, and family communities into realities of eternal proportion and significance. In marriage we are blessed by God for unending friendship and love. We are blessed so that the fruit of our love, the begetting of our children and the life of our families will be not "unto death" but unto life everlasting.

Until the final establishment of the Kingdom of God, our life remains under the attack of its demonic enemies: sin, sickness, suffering, sorrow and death. The mystery of **penance** is the remedy for spiritual sickness. It allows us to turn again to God, to be taken back, to be forgiven and to be received once more into the life of God from which our sins have separated us. And the mystery of **holy unction** is the remedy for our physical sickness which is the power of sin over our bodies, our inevitable union with suffering and death. Holy unction

allows us to be healed; to suffer, not "unto death" but, once more, unto life everlasting. It is the incorporation of our wounds into the life-creating cross of Christ

The mystery, finally, which allows the perfection of divine life to be ours in all of its fullness and power in this world is the mystery of the Church itself. And most specifically within the Church, we have the mystery of **holy orders**: the sacrament of priesthood, ministry, teaching and pastoral care. The clergy of the church -- bishops, priests, and deacons -- exist for no other purpose than to make manifest, present and powerful in the Church the divine life of the Kingdom of God to all men while still living in this world. Thus, from birth to death, in good times and bad, in every aspect of worldly existence, real life -- life as God has created and saved and sanctified it to be -- is given to us in the Church. This is Christ's express purpose and wish, the very object of his coming to the world: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

The Church as the gift of life eternal is by its very nature, in its fullness and entirety, a mystical and sacramental reality. It is the life of the Kingdom of God given already to those who believe. And thus, within the Church, everything we do -- our prayers, blessings, good works, thoughts, actions -- everything participates in the life which has no end. In this sense everything which is in the Church and of the Church is a sacrament of the Kingdom of God.

by V. Rev. Thomas Hopko
