

Understanding Orthodox Christianity

by Jim Forest, written for Sojourners magazine (c)

For many Christians from other traditions, the Orthodox Church looks like Christianity's answer to Ringling Brothers's Barnum & Bailey Circus — no tigers leaping through circles of flame or clowns being fired from cannons, but vestments which make peacocks look understated and more ritual than in a trapeze act. The casual visitor to an Orthodox service is likely to come away impressed with "the theatrical side of it" and perhaps even a deep sense of God's presence.

One visitor to our parish — St. Nicholas of Myra Russian Orthodox Church in Amsterdam — asked me during the coffee gathering after the Liturgy "if two hours wasn't just a little on the long side for prayer" and "was it really necessary to say 'Lord have mercy' so many times." On the other hand, he was glad he came because "it was like a living museum, like Williamsburg, only here you get to see what the church was like back in the time of Constantine." The surprising thing was that he returned the following Sunday and, back home in Chicago, eventually became a member of an Orthodox parish.

A Protestant visitor to the parish told me she felt like she was "meeting cousins I didn't know I had." She had read about Orthodox Christianity and knew about the Great Schism of 1054 when the bishops of Rome and Constantinople excommunicated each other, "but it just seemed like some detail of history." She was amazed by the intense atmosphere of worship during the service. "I learned today that Christian worship doesn't have to be a classroom with hymn breaks." In her own parish, she said she had once suggested to her pastor he put up a blackboard behind the pulpit "because I always imagine it there anyway."

Not everyone comes away from a first visit to an Orthodox church with positive things to say about it. It's easy to find parishes where it's a major asset to speak a language which was never spoken by anyone you ever met before: Greek, Russian, Romanian, Serbian or Arabic. Many parishes are not only places of worship but ethnic enclaves where national traditions are maintained and in which a great effort is made to keep the mother tongue alive. Yet look around and you will find in many "ethnic" parishes people whose hair or complexion or last name suggests this isn't just a national club (our Russian parish has about ten nationalities worshiping together), while in a growing number of parishes, those born in Orthodox Christian families or cultures are a minority. There are more and more Orthodox parishes in America where the main or only language of worship is English.

Because in many countries the Orthodox Church was the only social structure to survive oppressive rule, Orthodoxy is still haunted by the problem of nationalism. A priest in Moscow told me, "It's easy to find Russian Orthodox Christians who are Russian first, Orthodox second, and Christian last." It isn't just a problem in Russia. In every country there are rivers of people for whom religion is the wallpaper, national identity the wall.

But searching for a parish "as American as apple pie" might mean missing the place God wants you to be. A member of the Greek Orthodox church in the Pacific Northwest wrote me recently about how annoyed she was at first with the Greekness of the nearest parish. She wasn't Orthodox herself or a member of any church, but occasional contacts with Orthodox Christians had moved her from curiosity to fascination to a kind of longing for the quality of the spiritual life she encountered in Orthodoxy no matter what its ethnic shade. For her, the best thing that day was the warm welcome she received from an elderly Greek woman.

Even so, months passed between her first visit and the second. "Finally I decided that I would go back and go back and go back and go back until it no longer felt foreign to me, and then I would decide if I wanted to join. So I went back. The old woman remembered me — she later became my godmother. At the coffee hour, I sat down with a woman with a baby, babies always being good conversation. She turned out to be the priest's wife and directed the choir. Of course, she needed an alto desperately, drafted me into the choir, and invited me to their house for dinner that day. The rest is history."

What drew her to Orthodox Christianity, she explained, was the Divine Liturgy — its "beauty, reverence, peacefulness, the eternal feel, and the sense of community."

Through its liturgical practice, the Orthodox Church ignores no human capacity in trying to open our hearts to God's presence.

For the eyes there are the many candles, all the ritual gestures linked with particular moments in the Liturgy, the symbolism of the vestments worn by the clergy, the activities of other worshipers which, far from being distractions, are often inspiring. There is all the icons (from the Greek word for image), not only painted on wood and placed in various places in the church but the building itself, which often will have imagery on walls, ceilings and within the dome. Sacred

imagery in places of worship has been part of Christian life since it found refuge in the Catacombs. Icons are objects of reverence, not worship. They help to lift the veil between our day-to-day world and eternity, reminding us that all who have died in Christ are alive in Christ. They provide a means of helping renew our bond with Christ, with his mother — her usual title in the Orthodox Church is "Theotokos," meaning "God bearer" — and with all the saints who have given witness to transfigured life. They are not only looked at but are often "greeted" with a kiss.

For the ears there is the continuous chant and singing — apart from the sermon, very little is spoken. As St. Ambrose declared, "To sing is to pray twice."

For the nose, there is incense, an invisible reminder of Paradise and of the Kingdom of God; it symbolizes our prayers rising to heaven.

Touch is also involved. Christianity is an incarnational religion centered on Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, who has become one with us in the flesh. The early Church linked physical and spiritual actions in every possible way, a tradition which has been eroded little by little in many churches but has never been lost in Orthodox Christianity. It's the body language of prayer. We don't just say or think something, we do it. The words "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" are expressed with the physical action of crossing ourselves. There are moments when it is usual to lie face down on the floor. On Pentecost, we have "kneeling prayers." Both fasting and feasting are physical expressions of the spiritual life — putting on your plate that part of the Gospel the Church is concentrating on today.

The pulpit is an architectural feature rarely found in Orthodox churches. Sermons are usually delivered from near the altar and tend to be brief and to the point — it's unlikely there will be a reference made to a recent "Star Trek" episode and there are rarely any attention-catching jokes to warm the congregation. In many churches, the priest will hold a cross in his hands while commenting on the day's readings.

There are two processions in the Liturgy. In the first, a book containing only the four Gospels is solemnly carried through the church, then placed on the altar — the "holy table." Biblical readings are at the heart of the first half of the Liturgy, yet in Orthodox worship the goal is not to talk about God or become better informed about the Bible, but primarily to stand before God in worship. Entering the church building, we place ourselves in a situation where awareness of God is everything, and in which all that happens, all that surrounds us, is meant to help us be aware of God's presence.

Despite obvious contrasts, Orthodox Christianity is not altogether different from what most Christians take for granted. We all have the Bible and most of us have some form of sacramental life, even if among Christians there is a tremendous range of opinions about what a sacrament is and what happens in baptism or to the bread and wine on the altar — the "holy mysteries." Most of us live within an "iconographic calendar" — a procession of seasons of attention to events recorded in the Bible. We all belong to communities that revere the memory of certain people who gave witness to Christ and challenge us to be less fearful. But there are many aspects of Orthodoxy that, if nothing more, can serve to remind us of what was once normal for all Christians but has been lost by many along the way.

Take Pascha, as Orthodox Christians call the feast of Christ's resurrection. This is the high point of the year in every Orthodox parish and home, truly the feast of feasts. Attending the Orthodox midnight service for Pascha is as close as most of us will get to heaven in this earthly life. For the main part of Christian history, Pascha was far and away the most important festival for all Christians, whether belonging to churches of Greek or Latin descent, but in non-Orthodox countries it has been increasingly overshadowed by Christmas.

Perhaps the reason so many of us have a Christmas-centered religious calendar is the impact of the "Age of Reason." The birth of Jesus is something the most reasonable person can accept — if Jesus lived, surely he was born. Whether we think he was God Incarnate or simply a remarkable rabbi whose short life gave birth to a movement we call Christianity, still we can celebrate his birth. But nothing is more at odds with reason than believing a murdered man rose from the dead. For many people, the resurrection is an intellectual embarrassment, something best explained as a metaphor: "The disciples had an inner experience of Christ after he was dead and buried…"

Why hasn't Orthodoxy experienced a Resurrection-to-Nativity shift? It may be pure Orthodox bullheadedness — Orthodox Christianity does not bow to the latest idea, the current fashion, the slogan of the moment, knowing that by the time any adjustment is made, we will still find ourselves behind the times.

It may have something to do with the millions of martyrs who have arisen in the Orthodox Church in the last few hundred years but especially in this century — the Orthodox Church has been kept close to basics by suffering, much as happened throughout the Roman Empire before Constantine.

Whatever the historical reasons, Orthodox Christianity is remarkable for its refusal to see Christ simply as one more of the "great figures of history" who needs to be freed from the rubble of miracle stories which obscure the "historical Jesus." Orthodoxy remains passionately centered on the Christ of the Gospels: God Incarnate, born of a virgin, who died

on the cross and rose from the dead, smashing the gates of death's kingdom, becoming the rescuer of those who seek God's mercy and love.

It's no exaggeration to say these altitudes are normal among Orthodox Christians, not simply something we are supposed to aspire to. Given the pressures and sales-pitches of the modern world, this is a stunning achievement. What we often fail at is looking for the Christ of the Gospels outside the church building.

This isn't a new problem, as we see from a sermon on St. Matthew's Gospel delivered by St. John Chrysostom in the fourth century: "Do you wish to honor the Body of the Savior? Do not despise it when it is naked. Do not honor it in church with silk vestments while outside it is naked and numb with cold. He who said, 'This is my body,' and made it so by his word, is the same that said, 'You saw me hungry and you gave me no food. As you did it not to the least of these, you did it not to me.' Honor him then by sharing your property with the poor. For what God needs is not golden chalices but golden souls."

Because Orthodoxy wasn't significantly influenced by St. Augustine, the Church in the Greek-speaking world never came to regard anyone as predestined for hell but saw everyone as being created for communion. The stress is on the primary fact of each person being made in the image of God and therefore worthy of love, even though we are all sinners. (Note the stress in the Jesus Prayer, so widely used by Orthodox Christians: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." A similar note is struck in the prayer used daily during Lent, "Oh Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of vanity, faint-heartedness, lust for power and idle talk, but give to me, your servant, the spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love. O Lord and King, grant to me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother.")

In some ways, the form of "western" Christianity that comes closest to Orthodoxy is the Protestant tradition, with its intense devotion to the Bible, with parishes having a high degree of autonomy and lay people bearing a major role in the decision-making process. I am especially reminded of Black churches, where services can easily run overtime, in which singing is the main form of worship, and where you sense that prayer isn't just a formality but is deeply felt by one and all.

In other ways, the form of Christianity that comes closest to Orthodoxy is the Roman Catholic Church: it is sacrament-centered, stresses the pastoral role of the bishop, has a similar understanding of integrating the physical and the spiritual, counts many mystics among its saints, links each day with the calendar of saints, makes a similar use of symbols, and realizes we don't travel toward heaven alone but as part of the community of believers.

The list of parallels with both Protestants and Catholics is long, but there are also differences. From an Orthodox perspective, the center of the Church is not Rome or any distant city, no matter how important the role of the bishop residing there, for no one can be head of the Church but Christ. The center is the altar of one's parish church. This is the nearest throne of Christ. From the holy table, which supports both the Gospel book and the chalice, Christ both speaks to us and gives us eternal life.

As in the Catholic Church, the monastic vocation is of tremendous importance in Orthodoxy, yet celibacy is not nor has it ever been a precondition to being a priest. The vast majority of Orthodox priests are married. This makes for a very different climate in the parish, something closer to the Protestant tradition. The priest's wife — called "Matushka" in Russian parishes, "Presbytera" in Greek, "Khouria" in Arabic — is usually one of the principal figures in the parish. A friend says that when her father, an Orthodox priest, is away, no one seems to notice, "but when my mother is absent, it's a crisis." Another tells me, "If the priest orders you to go right and Matushka says left, go left."

But isn't the Orthodox Church — or any church that only ordains men — sexist? Frederica Mathewes-Green, co-founder with her priest husband Fr. Gregory of an Orthodox mission parish in Baltimore, says one of the big surprises for her has been how seriously she has been taken in her adopted church: "I have been given many more opportunities, been invited more often to speak and write, since becoming Orthodox than I ever did as an Episcopalian. I have found the Orthodox Church to be more welcoming and ready to listen to my voice than the so-called 'liberal' mainline Protestant ones, which are only open to establishment voices and marginalize women who don't say what is expected."

Writing about women martyrs of the early Church in her book, *Facing East*, Mathewes-Green comments: "Perpetua, and the many women saints like her through the ages, stands as the best refutation of accusations that the Christian faith is oppressive, anti-woman, and inherently sexist. If that were so, women like this would not have been remembered and honored by the Church for century after century." She notes that a number of women saints have been given the title "Equal to the Apostles."

There is a strong movement in contemporary Orthodoxy to restore the ancient office of Deaconess, but the effort inches along at a pace that amazes on-lookers used to leaping time zones.

One of the notable Orthodox qualities — slowness — is downright shocking to most people when first

encountered, but eventually is recognized as a healing experience in a society moving at high speed. Orthodoxy is Christianity traveling at four or five miles an hour. Practically nothing is done in a hurry. The best Liturgies are those in which you simply forget about time. To rush through the Liturgy would be like going to Macdonalds for Thanksgiving dinner.

Our lack of haste is linked to Orthodoxy's care not to accidentally lose anything of value. This gives rise to one of the complaints frequently voiced about Orthodoxy — that "it's stuck in tradition." But is this such a terrible thing? None of us minds traditionalists in the kitchen — every loaf of bread is the work of a thousand generations and an infinity of hands. Are we obliged to be ceaselessly inventive in our religious life? Do the inventors and perfecters of baking have nothing to teach us about how to open the door to heaven? In "Fiddler on the Roof," we hear Tevye singing the praises of tradition, the blessing of following sacred customs even when the reasons behind them are not fully understood. In voicing that conviction, Tevye might as well be an Orthodox Christian as an Orthodox Jew. It's a point of view G.K. Chesterton defended in his book *Orthodoxy*: "Tradition is democracy extended through time …a suffrage so universal that it includes not only the living but the dead . . . Tradition gives the vote not only to ourselves but to our ancestors."

Yet tradition is more than mimicking the steps great-great-grandmother danced. "Holy tradition is something alive," says Bishop Kallistos Ware, a lecturer at Oxford University and author of *The Orthodox Church*. "It is not simply mechanical acceptance of things from the past. It is listening to the Holy Spirit in the present."

The Orthodox sensibility is marked by immense respect for all those saints, known and unknown, who taught us how to perform each gesture as an act of communion with God. We depend very much on the wisdom of those saints we call "the Church Fathers," referring to a community of theologians who were not only brilliant scholars but whose theology gives voice to their direct experience of God. For Orthodoxy, a theologian is not simply an expert on God but a mystic — someone who has been illumined by the Divine life. When you go to confession, the priest is quite likely to offer suggestions and help by quoting from the Fathers of the Church who were tested through spiritual struggle and whose teachings are trustworthy and sound. And confession itself is part of the necessary preparation for Holy Communion, along with prayer and fasting.

Part of preparation for communion is to be sure you have sought reconciliation with the people around you. As one of the prayers warns us, "Before drinking the Divine Blood in Communion, make peace with those who have grieved you. Only then may you dare to eat the Mystical Food." It is a deep sense of being required to forgive and to seek the conversion rather than the destruction of enemies that helps explain why Russian Christians have not launched a punitive vendetta against their former oppressors.

Another blessing of Orthodox practice is the spacious welcome that children are given. The biblical foundation we work from is Christ's instruction, "Let the children come unto me and forbid them not." In the Orthodox Church this means baptism soon after birth and Eucharistic life from infancy onward. We don't believe in waiting till they reach "the age of reason." It's true that as we get older, most of us become more capable of "understanding" and "explaining," but has anyone reached the age when he or she can explain the Divine mystery?

A psychologist friend, Pamela Olsen, notes a contrast between the "western" approach, on the one hand, and the Orthodox, on the other: "The school of psychology that I was trained in was phenomenology — description rather than explanation and causation. Orthodox theology seeks to describe experience, rather than explain or prove, whereas western religion often seeks to prove with great unlikely leaps of logic; that never quite get it. (It's interesting that western converts to Orthodoxy sometimes bring with them the need to prove everything.) I can't remember if our pastor actually said this, or I gleaned it from things he : We will tell you our story. You can take it or leave it. We're not into trying to prove it. It is simply our story. The theological works tend to try and unpack that story and discover/describe its many layers of meanings. So I'm not sure that the intellectual could be separated from the spiritual — words are so confining."

What drew her from a Presbyterian background to Orthodoxy, she explained, was a "deep-down joy I experience coming into the church, smelling the incense, seeing the beauty, being surrounded by the icons, seeing familiar faces, being greeted with a smile or a hug by people who are also trying to live in the Kingdom of God. I don't know what the true church is, but I know that God dwells here, and not only God, but a whole community of believers and saints, some of whom are there in the icons . . . a community that has endured and will endure."

The Orthodox Church in brief…

The Orthodox Church, with more than 250 million active members throughout the world, is a fellowship of independent (autocephalous) churches each governed by its own senior bishop (called Patriarch or Metropolitan) and linked to each other by a common faith, similar principles, and a common liturgical tradition. Only the languages used in worship and minor aspects of tradition differ from country to country. The Russian Orthodox Church is by far the largest Orthodox church today.

In its doctrinal statements and liturgical texts, the Orthodox Church recognizes the authority of the seven ecumenical councils at which East and West were represented together. These were the Councils of Nicea I (325), Constantinople I (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (680), and Nicea II (787).

The Ecumenical Councils of the first millennium defined the basic Christian doctrines on the Trinity, on the unique Person and the two natures of Christ, expressing fully the authenticity and fullness of his divinity and his humanity. These doctrines are expressed in all Orthodox statements of faith and in liturgical hymns. In light of this traditional doctrine on the Person of Christ, the Virgin Mary is venerated as Mother of God and her intercession invoked because she was closer to the Savior than anyone else and is, therefore, the representative of fallen humanity and the most prominent and holiest member of the church.

There is no Orthodox equivalent to the office of Pope in the Roman Catholic Church. A "primacy of honor" belongs to the Patriarch of Constantinople (modern Istanbul), the city that was the seat of the Byzantine Empire from 320 to 1453 AD. The power exercised by the Ecumenical Patriarch has never been comparable to that exercised in the West by the Bishop of Rome. He does not possess administrative powers beyond his own Patriarchate, nor does he claim infallibility. The other churches recognize his role in convening pan-Orthodox consultations and councils.

All national jurisdictions have made their way to America, a process begun in 1794 by Russian monastic missionaries to Alaska and California. In addition, there is the Orthodox Church of America, which grew out of the Russian Orthodox Church but was granted independence by its mother church. Estimates of the number of Orthodox Christians in the US range from four to five million.

Further reading:

The Orthodox Church, by Timothy Ware (now Bishop Kallistos) — the best overall introduction to Orthodoxy. The author is a lecturer at Oxford and a monk of St. John's Monastery on Patmos. (Penguin, third revised edition) By the same author: The Orthodox Way — theological basics of Orthodoxy, with many quotations from ancient and modern sources. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, second revised edition.)

The Year of Grace of the Lord, by Father Lev Gillett (writing anonymously as "A Monk of the Eastern Church") — meditations on the Gospel arranged to follow the calendar. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.)

The Roots of Christian Mysticism by Olivier Clément — a systematic introduction to the radical writings of the Church Fathers. Clément reminds his readers that Christianity was originally a mystical religion; to the extent that churches have lost their mystical center, they become bone dry and lifeless. (New City Books)

For the Life of the World by Alexander Schmemmann — a presentation of the Orthodox understanding of sacraments and the sacramentality of all creation. (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press)

Praying with Icons by Jim Forest — a well-illustrated introduction to icons with a focus being their integration into prayer life. (Orbis Books)

The Illuminating Icon by Anthony Ugolnik — an introduction to Orthodoxy written mainly for American Protestant readers. (Eerdmans)

Becoming Orthodox by Peter Gillquist — a story of conversion that moves from the Campus Crusade to the Orthodox Church as a community of evangelical Christians try to find out what happened to Christianity between the age of the Apostles and the Reformation. (Conciliar Press.)

Facing East by Frederica Mathewes-Green — a personal, vivid, often funny introduction to Orthodoxy in the form of a journal by a convert whose priest-husband serves a mission parish in Baltimore. (Harper San Francisco)