

# Fundamental Teachings of the Orthodox Church

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## Church - the Depository of Revealed Truths

The Church of Jesus Christ is a unique entity of the Revealed Truths of the Christian religion. The Church or rather the Church of the faithful, embodies the Christian faith, projects Christian hope and gives life to Christian love. The Church was founded by the Lord Jesus Christ, Who remains in it forever as its Head. Christ entrusts His own Being to the Church, handing down divine Revelation, in oral form, and later recorded in written form to constitute Tradition at large. The faithful, saints and sinners, assemble together under the Church's shelter to achieve repentance and forgiveness and to fortify the steadfastness of their will for the accomplishment of the Will of God. In this Church the truth is preserved, proclaimed and shared sacredly among its faithful. This Church is the divine Workshop for the teaching and sanctification of the faithful. It is the depository of truths for their redemption. There is nothing that contributes to the salvation of the faithful which is not contained in the Church's ministry, it's diakonia. The Church is the whole strength of faithful and pious Christians. These people constitute the "royal priesthood" by their sanctification and dedication.

The Church of the faithful embodies the "Conscience of the Church" in its pronouncements and missions. Jesus Christ, the cornerstone of the Church, is "the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev. 1:8), Who has erected, established and bequeathed to the Church the divine Grace which is the almighty power. Therefore, the Militant Church on earth is a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, for the King is ever present to lead and sanctify the members of His own Mystical Body. He is "Jesus Christ, Who is the faithful witness, and the first-begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Rev. 1:5).

This Church of Christ has in its nature, the tendency to become and to grow; it has the nature to engulf and develop the truths of Revelation; it is to be delved into from time to time in finding and pronouncing the truths of which the Church is the Pillar. The Church, as a whole, is infallible, but not God-inspired to the extent that it has understood the entire depth of the truths and formulated and proclaimed them to the world. The Church by nature and duty from time to time - to settle controversies - formulates, defines and pronounces some of these Revealed truths. In such instances, the Fathers of the Church assembled in synods to discuss the disputed points and to decree and interpret the correct meaning of those truths. In doing so, the synods of the Fathers, as a whole and as individuals, believe that their decisions are infallible. Their decisions, however, remain pending for acceptance by the "Conscience of the Church", which is the consent of all the faithful, clergy and laity.

The infallibility of the Church does not mean that the Church, in the assembly of the Fathers or in the expression of the Conscience of the Church, has already formally expressed all the truths of faith and norms. The infallibility of the Church is confined to the formulation of truths in question. This infallibility is not wholly a God-inspired energy which would affect the participants of the synod to such an extent that they would be inspired to pronounce all the truths at one time as a whole system of a Christian catechism. The Synod does not formulate a system of beliefs encompassing all Christian teachings and truths, but only endeavors to define the particular disputed truth which was misunderstood and misinterpreted.

The Church of Christ and its divine nature, as set forth above, is the foundation upon which the Eastern Orthodox Church continues to administer and nourish its faithful, thereby protecting its fundamental essentials.

The essentials of the Orthodox Church and its members can be divided into four main correlated parts:

1. Principles of belief and faith;
2. the worship of God, in Whom lies belief and hope, for salvation;
3. the living of life so as to serve one's neighbor and especially the "least of them" as well as oneself, and
4. the enforcing of a system of order of discipline and administration for the members of this Church.

## THE REVEALED WORD

The teachings and the practices of the Orthodox Church are to be found in the Scriptures and Sacred Apostolic Tradition which have been handed down to the Church of Christ in the Revelation of God. These sacred Sources are essentials not only for correct teaching and worship, but especially as Sources of the promises and covenants of God fulfilled in the Person of Christ. The Father, out of love and compassion, sent Christ to save mankind to remain forever in the Ecclesia which He founded. It is imperative for all Christians to understand the content of these sacred Sources in order to strengthen their faith in God and to accept Jesus Christ as the only Redeemer by Whom and in Whom man's personal

salvation is wrought.

It is of the utmost importance for the Orthodox Christian, who dedicates his life to Almighty God, to be able to know God's truths. The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, along with Sacred Apostolic Tradition are the divine Sources in which Almighty God revealed His Will and which the Church accepted as being the only depository for these truths. The content of the Scriptures was written by chosen and inspired persons, prophets and disciples, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the Supreme Author and Guardian under Whose direction and protection the Scriptures become the inspired and infallible Source of faith and salvation. The Fathers of the Church expounded the content of the Scriptures in sermons and homilies in order to spread their meaning and blessings so that the members of the Mystical Body of Christ would not be uninformed of the Good News for their spiritual welfare.

In the Orthodox Church the harmonious interpretation of the Revealed Word is necessary to present this faith with a united, sound conviction. This does not mean that individuals, both clergy and laity, lack freedom of expression of their own spiritual insights; but their validity depends upon acceptance by other Fathers of the Church, or even by keeping silent and not being in opposition. Thus the theologian of the Orthodox Church has the freedom to present the same truths of the Scriptures in a new expression in order to contend with contemporary ideals and challenges of society. It is very important for the Church to provide sound interpretation of Christian Sources, so that the tendency of human imagination for superstitious concepts would be curbed.

The following are some fundamental teachings which are essential to the Orthodox Christian.

### BELIEF IN THE TRUE GOD

The Scriptures refer often to the nature and substance of God for the Church to believe in. It is characteristic that St. John recorded: "this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God" (17:3). It is important that the Christian be led not merely in a God, but specifically to believe in the "True God" as revealed in the Scriptures and in the Person and teachings of Jesus Christ. The Christian ascribes to the nature of the True God all attributes of the finest experiences he has known, from the enlightenment of the Gospel, as being almighty' all-loving and all-holy; as a loving Father and Creator; as a Spirit beyond place, time and variation. Almighty God also is defined by the Fathers of the Church in terms that clarify what God is not.

God as Creator created the heavens and the earth, the whole universe. He created angels as "ministering spirits sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation" (Hebrews 1:7,14). Almighty God created man and provides him all the needs of life, sanctification as well as "newness of life" out of love. God's love is the only reason for sending forth His beloved Son to become Incarnate and bear the sins of the world, uplifting the human race for salvation.

### BELIEF IN THE HOLY TRINITY

The fundamental truth of the Orthodox Church is the faith revealed in the True God: the Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is in reality the declaration of the Christian faith, formulated and pronounced by the Ecumenical Synods of the One Undivided Church. It is impossible for the finite human mind to comprehend objectively the substance of the True God, true worship and true norms of life. Human reasoning in regard to faith in the Holy Trinity is confined to formulating the truths which already have been revealed in the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition. These truths of the Holy Trinity were formulated by the First and Second Ecumenical Synods in the Nicene Creed, and were based on Divine Sources.

The Orthodox Church believes that God is one in substance and Triune in three Persons or Hypostases. The Church pronounces in its lucid liturgical confession: "I confess the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, Trinity consubstantial and undivided". In the Holy Scriptures there are passages recorded to strengthen this belief in the Holy Trinity on which the faith in God is revealed. The Scriptures proclaims "to us there is but one God, the Father" (1 Cor. 8:6); "in him (the Son) dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9; cf. Matt. 26:63); and, relating to the Holy Spirit, "thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God" (Acts 5:4). This fundamental belief in the Holy Trinity was the subject of all the Ecumenical Synods in which the unchangeable pronouncement on the Holy Trinity was affirmed. They proclaimed primarily that the second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Logos, and the Third Person, the Holy Spirit, are of the same essence, Homousios, of the Father. In the personal attributions of the Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity the Father begot the Son and the Father proceeds the Holy Spirit. The Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, sends the Holy Spirit to guide His Church (cf. John 15:26). The nature and attributes of the Persons of the Holy Trinity are revealed through Jesus Christ. The truth can be reached only by faith, being above and beyond human comprehension.

### THE SECOND PERSON OF THE HOLY TRINITY

Another fundamental belief of the Orthodox Church is the faith in the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, Who became "incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary and became man" (Nicene Creed) for our salvation. The Virgin Mary Theotokos gave birth to Jesus, Who is the only begotten Son of God. In the Orthodox Church the Theotokos is highly honored as expressed in praises recorded in the Scriptures with qualities mirrored in the Magnificat

(cf. Lk. 1:46 ff.). Despite the high honor and the highest admiration which the Orthodox Church bestows upon the Virgin Mary Theotokos, it does not teach either her immaculate conception, nor her bodily assumption into the heavens. The Church venerates the Theotokos as "holder of Him Who is illimitable ... and infinite Creator".

God's love caused Him to send His Son Jesus Christ to save man. For the Christian the Incarnation of Christ is a mystery. Apostle Paul, the most keen interpreter of the life of Christ, in his epistle to Colossians writes that it was "the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now made manifest to his saints" (Col. 1:26; cf. Rom. 16:25-26). Jesus Christ was sent for this divine mission "when the fullness of time was come" (Gal. 4:4), when man was prepared to accept Him as his Savior. Christ was born with two perfect natures, the divine and human, as God-man. When a Christian refers to Christ in the Old and New Testaments, he should presuppose the fact of the two natures of Jesus Christ which are made manifest in His Gospel and deeds.

Another essential in the life of Christ, which is indispensable for the Church faith, is the Crucifixion of Christ which is considered the end of His humiliation and emptiness on earth. The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ nails to the Cross the sins of mankind. The Church considers this divine event the "sorrowful Easter", for it is linked with His Resurrection.

The Orthodox Church considers the highest event in the life of Christ to be His Resurrection. It is pronounced as the glorification of Christ, touching upon the scope and the nature of Christ's Mission, which has been a part of the everlasting Christ. Christ presented Himself, as "the resurrection, and the life" (John 11:25). Without this belief in the Resurrection the preaching and the faith of the Church is in vain as Apostle Paul proclaims (cf. 1 Cor. 15:14). The belief of the Church is that on the third day Jesus Christ rose again. The Resurrection of Christ is considered by the Church to be the supreme declaration of faith. The Lord's Day, Sunday, is dedicated to His Resurrection. For this reason, the celebration of Easter in the Orthodox Church is called the "Feast of Feasts".

The Church believes that "He shall come again with glory to judge"; to judge the world and everyone on earth; to "render to every man according to his works" (Romans 2:6) of faith in Christ and His Gospel, his love expressed in good works, and in helping, others described as the "least", as explicit witnesses to the steadfastness of his faith in Him. In the Orthodox Church the justification and salvation of man depends on the standard of "faith which worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6).

### THE THIRD PERSON OF THE HOLY TRINITY

The Orthodox Church believes "in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, the Giver of life" (Nicene Creed). The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, Who proceeds from the Father only (cf. John 15:26). The Church firmly opposed the opinion that the Holy Spirit was created by the Son, and pronounced the correct belief in the Nicene Creed at the Second Ecumenical Synod. The Orthodox Church does not phrase filioque, "and of the Son". According to the Scriptures, the Son Jesus Christ only sends the Holy Spirit in time, saying: "I will send unto you from the Father even the Spirit of truth which proceedeth from the Father" (John 15:26).

It is evident from the Scripture that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father only; this was the belief from the very beginning of the One Undivided Church. When the church in the West inserted the "filioque" phrase into the Creed, this innovation precipitated the Great Schism of the Undivided Church. The "filioque" phrase is an error. It is not found in the Scripture. It was not believed by the Undivided Church for eight centuries, including the church in the West. It introduces a strange teaching of a double procession of the Holy Spirit and refers to two origins of the Spirit's existence, thus denying the unity of the Godhead.

### THE FALL AND REGENERATION OF MAN

Almighty God created man after His own image and likeness (cf. Genesis 1:26), and bestowed upon him endowments to fulfill his destiny. God instructed the first created human beings, Adam and Eve, in what they ought not do. They failed to obey God's commandment and fell into sin, through arrogance and disobedience which deprived them of God's Grace. With them "the whole creation groaneth and travelleth in pain together until now" (Romans 8:22). The Orthodox Church believes that the corruption of the God-like image of man was not complete, that man's will became blurred, but did not disappear. Man's desire for salvation implies that man feels his inner emptiness and turns to God for forgiveness and redemption. Almighty God in His compassion and love prepared for this regeneration of man by sending His Son, Jesus Christ the Savior.

### BAPTISM - THE SANCTIFICATION OF MAN

The Orthodox Church invokes God's Grace for the sanctification of its members. For this reason, the Church uses sacred ceremonies instituted by Christ or His Apostles. The sacred ceremony of Baptism with that of Chrismation and the ceremony of the Holy Eucharist with that of Confession are the sacred Mystera (sacraments) which every Christian should receive as an active communicant of divine Grace. There are three other sacraments: ordination, marriage and unction. They are granted to man, but are not obligatory, if not so desired.

Jesus Christ commissioned His Apostles to "go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The Church of Christ from the beginning baptized its members by immersing them thrice by a priest in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Immersion baptism was the practice of the early Church. Only one baptism is allowed. Therefore, by dispensation, the Orthodox Church accepts as valid those baptisms performed in other Christian churches which baptize their members in the name of the Holy Trinity. By Baptism the Church holds that all optional and original sins are cleansed by the Grace of God. The Chrismation of a newly baptized person is the confirmation of his faith which is "the seal of the gift of the Holy Ghost".

#### THE MYSTERION OF REPENTANCE

The sacred ceremony of repentance and confession has been practiced from the very beginning by the Church. The Christian confesses his faith and sin, especially before partaking Holy Communion, as a spiritual preparation for communion with God. The very first word of Christ recorded in the Scriptures was "Repent". This is the only voluntary decision required of the Christian, asking a "change of mind" from evil and negligence to the active faith in God through communion with Him. Absolution of sins is a divine act, for only God can forgive sins. In the Orthodox Church the priest merely reads prayers, using verbs in the passive voice, invoking the remission of sins by God. The Church states that after "one baptism for the remission of sins", the confession of sins through the Sacrament of Repentance is considered God's highest gift to man (cf. Matthew 18:18; John 20:22-23).

#### THE MYSTERION OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST

The most awesome ceremony in the Orthodox Church is the Mysterion (sacrament) of the Holy Eucharist. This ceremony was instituted by Jesus Christ the day before His Crucifixion, as He enriched His Church forever with the Divine Gifts, His own Body and Blood. This ceremony of the Holy Eucharist is both His sacrifice for the salvation of man and a sacred mysterion. The Holy Eucharist is the seal of the proclamation of the communion with God. It is the only Sacrament offered by the Church in which the elements of bread and wine not only carry the Grace of God, as a mysterion, but are "changed" into and "is" the very Body and the very Blood of Christ, being a propitiatory sacrifice.

The institution of the Holy Eucharist is recorded in Matthew (26:26-28), Mark (14:22-24), Luke (22:19-20) and in First Corinthians (11:23-35). Jesus during that night of the Mystic Supper, took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said:

"Take, and eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying. Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." (Matt. 26:26-28).

This awesome sacrifice has been entrusted to the Church to be re-enacted and given to the faithful for the nourishment of their faith and the forgiveness of their sins in remembrance of the Lord. The Orthodox Church maintains the practice of the early Church of giving both the Body and the Blood of Christ to all communicants, both clergymen and laymen. Spiritual preparation is necessary for the recipient "to prove himself", otherwise he "eateth ... damnation to himself" (1 Cor. 11:29; cf. 1 Cor. 11:23-33). For the officiation of the Holy Eucharist the Orthodox Church has four liturgies. That of St. Chrysostom is the most used.

#### Worship - the Hope for Salvation

Prayer is considered the soul of the faith not because faith cannot express itself, but because it depends on prayer in order to express faith with vividness. In this respect, faith and prayer are so correlated that it is difficult to discern between the two. Prayer, for a sincere and devoted member of the Church, has the power to modify him for a sound spiritual life. Prayer is considered in the Orthodox Church the highest privilege a Christian has, that of communicating with God, praising and supplicating Him. Prayer is the center of the religious life of a devoted Christian. The Scriptures should be read prayerfully. Good works should be done with fervent prayers to Almighty God. The Lord of the Church left to us a divine model in the Lord's Prayer. The Orthodox Christian is expected to pray when he feels the need, a spiritual need or emptiness, in which Almighty God is supplicated to grant His Grace to overcome this need.

The Church always prays not only through the special priesthood, but through every communicant, for everyone is a member of this Mystical Body of Christ. The Church does not supplicate Almighty God only to avoid the tribulations and difficulties of life, but beseeches Him to grant His Grace either to overcome them or endure them. For Christ said "in the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 ff), urging continuance in the faith, "that we must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). The Orthodox believer should pray to Almighty God not only to free himself from emptiness, but also that he might do with what he has. He should not ask for wealth, possessions, health, etc., but rather beseech Almighty God to make him as one of His servants, a strong believer, a fervent supplicator, a faithful servant of His Will. He prays to God as his Father after the fashion of the Lord's Prayer. He does not ask for perfect health, but beseeches God to grant Him the enlightenment and courage to accept even death as the threshold of everlasting life.

The Orthodox Church, considered the depository of infallible public worship, has been entrusted with the power of God's

Grace to gather all its members, to pray and be sanctioned together, to communicate with each other as a spiritual Ecclesia and to be in communion with God and one another. The Grace of God is bestowed upon each Christian by the Word of God in the Person of Jesus Christ and His Church as well as through the sacred ceremonies, mysteries, and other divine services where the presence of every member of the church is important.

The highest pattern of worship in the Orthodox Church is the Holy Eucharist, which is officiated as the Divine Liturgy. In the Divine Liturgy the Grace of God is bestowed upon the communicants. The faithful partake of the very Body and Blood of Christ for their sanctification and remission of sins. All communicants participate with devotional life and spirit in the Divine Liturgy. The Holy Eucharist, the very Body and Blood of Christ, is considered by the Church divine nourishment for its members. The Holy Eucharist is the most essential service to the life of the Ecclesia. During the officiation of the Divine Liturgy, added to the Prayers of Sanctification of the Holy Gifts, bread and wine, are other prayers, Scriptural passages and instructions, along with thanksgiving prayers for the uplifting of hearts and minds to Almighty God.

The Church also has many other services for worship in which the Divine Revelations are the monuments of devotional, doctrinal and moral standards in the form of sacred dialogues between the believers and their Lord. The Orthodox Church in its spiritual expression provides many services which are cycles of prayers for the day, the week, and the year commemorating various events in the lives of Jesus Christ and His Saints. The prayers and hymnology of the Orthodox Church are rich in quantity and quality, and the contents of the services are preserved in an unchangeable nature in their ritual for the glorification of Almighty God, the Savior.

"Faith which worketh through love"

In the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition the main purpose of the covenants of God, as stated in the Old and New Testaments and including the humiliation and sacrifice of Christ, was the salvation of man. The Orthodox Church has kept this teaching of salvation, in its highest annals, completely recognizing in it the main mission of the Scriptures. The salvation of sinners is wrought by Christ Himself as God-Man "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven" (Nicene Creed). The Church believes that Christ enlightens the minds of the people, purifies their hearts and frees their wills from the bondage of the devil. Christ became flesh "to make reconciliation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17). In that respect, the Church fought against two extremes:

that in the innate sinfulness of mankind human nature is able to practice virtue by itself, making Christ's sacrifice only a moral example (Pelagianism);

the theory that the human soul is totally corrupted, and man's salvation is God's work alone, predestining man to salvation or to perdition (Augustine).

The Church teaches that Christ the Son of God "was made in the likeness of man ... humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:7-8).

The Orthodox Church holds the truths of morality closely with those of faith. The fact is, this Church maintains and practices the theme of the Scripture, "faith which worketh through love" (Gal. 5:6), and this is evident when applied to the intentions and conduct of its members. The Ten Commandments of the Old Testament (cf. Exodus 20:1-17) are considered the minimum of rules for right living, enabling reason and free will to discern right from wrong. For the Orthodox Christian who desires to devote himself to the principles of right living along with right faith, the instructions of the Lord to His disciples are to be studied and practiced, as is recorded in Matthew (chs. 5, 6 and 7), where is found a higher level of life in the Christian society.

In the Orthodox Church, the truths of faith and morals are correlated to such a degree that one cannot exist without the other. The practice of these truths of conduct and morality cannot be achieved without the help, mercy and Grace of Almighty God. This is the reason that faith in and prayer to God are correlated with morality. The Orthodox Christian is assigned by his own faith to be the steward of God's love for God's people who are in need, "the least" not only materially but also spiritually.

"Authority with Freedom" in Church Administration

The revealed truths of the Church on faith and morals have not been formulated as a whole. The whole body of revealed truths are to be found in the Scriptures and Tradition, which have been interpreted and used as such by teachers and thinkers of the Orthodox Church. Only the truths of the Church which have been disputed by misinterpretations are formulated by an Ecumenical Synod, the authoritative body of the Orthodox Church in such matters. In this Church, there is no authorized listing of all the truths on faith and morals in a formulated system, nor an official catechism which encompasses all the truths. The Church leaves teachers and thinkers of theology free to constantly study and present the existing truths of the revealed word to cope with human needs and circumstances. Orthodox theologians are free to further study various subjects in greater depths, achieving a greater perspective from which to interpret the truths of the Church for the steadfastness of the faithful. These findings of the theologians are not new truths, but the same truths interpreted with greater simplicity and clarity. The gradual unfolding of a revealed truth is the result of devoted research

and profound clarity in faith and practice which should not be isolated from the entire body of revealed truths. This freedom of inquiry in the Orthodox Church characterizes its nature of "authority with freedom". It also provides a sacred opportunity to the Fathers and theologians to further explore these revealed truths.

## THE ECUMENICAL CHARACTER OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

The Orthodox Church maintains undefiled the dogmas of teaching and the rules of administration formulated and taught by the Synods of the One Undivided Ecumenical Church of the first millennium of the Christian era. The Orthodox Church continuously and without interruption is the true keeper of the truths of the Undivided Church, without omissions or additions. This Church has never created or added officially any new teaching after the Great Schism of the One Undivided Church. The teachings of this Church are ecumenical in character and in fact. It has introduced no innovations. It does not believe in the primacy of any one leader of the Church, nor in the infallibility of any Church leader. It does not believe in the filioque ("and of the Son") phrase inserted in the Nicene Creed by the Church in the West, nor in communion by only one element of the Holy Eucharist for the layman. It does not believe in compulsory celibacy of clergymen, purgatory, the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, nor in other innovations proclaimed in the West after the separation of the Church. The Orthodox Church continues on the original road, keeping undefiled both the teaching and the type of administration of the venerable, Undivided and Ecumenical Church.

## THE SEVEN ECUMENICAL SYNODS

The highest authority for the interpretation and protection of the truths of the Revelation of God and for the preserving of those which were disputed is the Ecumenical Synod, the official council of bishops. The synods were modeled after the gathering of the Apostles who came together to discuss the truths which were disputed at that time (cf. Acts 15:22 ff). The bishops of the One Undivided Church were summoned in synods to discuss and decide on matters of faith as well as rules of discipline; the former are called "dogmas" - dogmas, and require unanimous decision, while the latter are called "canons". The Orthodox Church recognizes the Seven Ecumenical Synods (Councils) of the bishops of the One Undivided Ecumenical Church which took place between the 4th and 8th centuries. This includes decisions and canons of provincial synods, canons of the Apostles and of the Fathers which have been adopted by an Ecumenical Synod. The Seven Ecumenical Synods pronounced various statements of Faith (dogmas) stating Christian Truths in answer to heresies and disputes, and also issued many canons for discipline and administration.

## THE AUTOCEPHALOUS BRANCHES OF ORTHODOX CHURCH

In the Orthodox Church there are many autocephalous (self-governing) branches governed uniformly by the same canons of the Ecumenical Church. These churches are in full communion with each other and hold the same dogmas and truths of faith and morals, and also have unity in worship and in principles of administration. In the Orthodox Church the axiom of "authority with freedom" prevails. The Ecumenical Synod is considered infallible on matters of faith, however, not in matters of administration and discipline. The synod can change, add or omit canons and rules according to situations or circumstances which confront the Church from time to time. The decisions of the Ecumenical Synods are carried out by the bishops who are overseers within their own districts of faith and morals. The bishops of the Church are equal to one another in the office of priesthood. They differ in rank of position which depends upon the distinction of their cities, such as the Patriarchal centers of Alexandria, Constantinople, Antioch, etc.

It is obvious that this type of administration is democratic, governing the affairs of the Church according to the canons, which in reality serve as a constitution for the Church and which apply to all the self-governing branches of the Church. In this respect, the particular churches have the freedom to decide on and to apply canons and pronouncements of synods along with the spiritual principles and truths of Scripture and Tradition. At the same time, churches have the authority to enforce these truths and defend them from profane abuses.

## THE POSITION OF THE LAYMAN IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

The administration of the Church has both a spiritual as well as a civil character. Both clergymen and laymen have the responsibility to abide within the discipline and order, keeping the faith sound and unchangeable. The laymen of the Orthodox Church are especially prominent in the election of candidates to the Priesthood. Their cooperation is also indispensable in matters of the "Conscience of the Church". The faithful, clergy and laity, constitute the "royal priesthood", which means they are called upon by God to serve in Church. Laymen share the spiritual and administrative affairs of the Church with clergymen the responsibility for the steadfastness of the faith and the discipline of the whole membership of the Church. They have the right to participate in the tasks of the Church in teaching, mission and charitable obligations. They have an interest in church affairs from the community level up to the synods.

## THE "CONSCIENCE OF THE CHURCH"

The "Conscience of the Church-Ecclesia" is the highest authority of appeal in the Orthodox Church. It is, in reality, the common consent of opinions of faith, hope and love by all communicants of the Church. This common consent is especially important for faith and morals, which are divine truths. The Conscience of the Church, truths indispensable for

the faithful. The Conscience of the Church, introduces the ever-existing truths of the Revealed Word for formulation in the Ecumenical Synods and accepts those truths of salvation already formulated by the Ecumenical Synods. The common consent of all members of the Church accepting or rejecting a "formulated" truth by a synod, constitutes the Conscience of the Church. The synodic system and the function of the Conscience of the Church are also the fundamental characteristics of the democratic system of administration which prevails in the Orthodox Church.

The sovereignty of God is implanted in the freedom of man's nature and destiny in understanding and obedience within the Church. The Church is guided by the Holy Spirit, Who remains in it until the consummation of the ages. Democratic spirit in the Orthodox Church is kept by the constitution of its faith and the canons governing its affairs. The Church at large grants to its leaders the authority to apply its regulations at the appropriate time. The effectiveness of the constitution of faith and the canons of order of the Church has been proven even among its self-governing, autocephalous branches. As one and the same Ecclesia, they adhere both to its articles of faith and its rules of discipline. They are equally applied to all its members even those in high governing positions - without exception. In the Orthodox Church even the Ecumenical Patriarch is considered "the first among equals" in leading this great Church according to this constitution of faith and the canons of order. Any shortcomings in the administration of the Orthodox Church are due to the fact that this Church had no opportunity to convene an ecumenical synod during a period of outside political upheavals and foreign domination. The synod is the only authoritative body that issues new canons of order and eliminates obsolete ones. However, these shortcomings deal with and affect only the external affairs of the Church.

The Eastern Orthodox Church is aware of democratic principles in government. It has accomplished the venerable task of merging God's authority and man's freedom in the formulation of its confession of faith and rules of order. There is no one person who leads or speaks for the Church nor do all its members act separately. But it is the Church as a whole, the one Mystical Body of Christ, which throughout the centuries has carried on the truth as it was taught and heard "everywhere, at anytime".

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