

The icon of Christ's resurrection conquering death gives hope to believing Christians.



Image courtesy of Fr. Luke Dingman

In today's pluralistic world and, especially, given the religious diversity present within the United States, there is an acute need for clarity about what makes one Orthodox.

Distinctly Orthodox

Five dimensions that distinguish us from other faiths

By Perry T. Hamalis

How are Greek Orthodox Christians distinct from other Christians? What are some of the Orthodox faith's defining characteristics? While there is much that Orthodox Christians share with Roman Catholics and Protestants of various denominations, there are also several aspects of the faith that define and distinguish its members within the Christian world. Described below are five such aspects:

1

"CHRIST IS RISEN – CHRISTOS ANESTI"

Every religion of the world provides an account, or diagnosis, of humanity's predicament as well

as how this predicament can or will be cured. Indeed, examining a religion's teachings on the "predicament" and "cure" is an effective way of determining what it's really all about and what makes it different from other religions. For Orthodox Christians, the refrain of Easter is telling in this respect. "Christ is risen from the dead, and by His death, he has trampled upon death; and to those in the tombs, He bestows life." The core concern of Orthodox Christianity is the problem of death. Death, both as a physical and as a spiritual condition, constitutes humanity's predicament. It is the problem, the enemy (1 Cor. 15:26), the disease from which we need healing.

Anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one should understand this claim in a very personal way. Furthermore, Orthodoxy teaches that God has acted decisively through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to conquer death. God provides the cure to humanity's predicament of both physical death and spiritual death (or sin), and He does so mainly through Christ and the Holy Spirit. When Orthodox Christians repeatedly proclaim the greeting of Pascha—"Christ is Risen, Truly He is Risen"—and sing the joyous Paschal hymns, we are expressing what we believe Christianity is most fundamentally about: victory over physical death and sin—the restoration of life-giving communion with God and creation.

2

THE ANCIENT CHURCH

The Orthodox faith is a profoundly historical faith, an ancient faith, dating back to the feast of Pentecost (Acts 2). Especially during the last century, many converts to Orthodoxy have come to

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the faith through their study of Church history. Converts from Protestant denominations, in particular, have frequently become Orthodox Christians because they have been convinced of Orthodoxy's historical continuity with the original Church, established by Christ through the Apostles. Today, all Orthodox Christians self-identify as members of the "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church," founded in the first century and maintaining an unbroken link to the Apostles themselves through the ordination of our clergy.

It was not until the 11th century that a schism occurred within the Christian Church between the East and the West. Four of the five ancient geographical centers, or sees, of the Church (Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople) remained in communion with each other as the Eastern Orthodox Church, while the fifth see, Rome, separated from the other four and became the Roman Catholic Church. In the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation led to additional division within Western Christianity as Protestant reformers and Roman Catholics broke communion with each other and began a proliferation of new Christian denominations (Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, etc.). The Orthodox Church laments this division within Christianity even as it maintains the bold claim that it has preserved the original faith of the Apostles.

LITURGY AND BEAUTY

3

The 10th century Prince Vladimir of Kiev, while still a pagan, desired to know which was the true religion. According to a traditional account, he thus sent his followers to visit various countries and report back to him. His emissaries went first to the Muslim Bulgars of the Volga, but were dissatisfied—"There is no joy among them." Traveling next to Germany and Rome, they found the Latin worship more satisfying, but complained that it lacked something in beauty. Finally they journeyed to Constantinople and attended the Divine Liturgy at the great Church of Hagia Sophia. And here, they told the Prince, 'We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places; for we cannot forget that beauty.' One of the most immediate, striking and distinctive characteristics of Orthodox Christianity is its liturgy—the manner and space within which members of the Orthodox Church worship God as a community. Orthodox worship is truly beautiful. It engages the faithful through sight, sound, smell, touch and taste; it appeals to reason as well as emotion; it is mystical and concrete. In short, both the sacred space—with its icons and architecture—and the sacred time of Orthodox liturgy—fasts and feasts—have one purpose alone: to bring the faithful into deeper communion with God through beauty and prayer.

At the center of Orthodoxy's worship is the Divine Liturgy, the celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion. This sacrament, more than any other, expresses and realizes the Orthodox Church's message of salvation. Holy Communion is the "cup of salvation" and the "medicine of immortality" since it is here that Orthodox Christians literally become united with Christ and with each other. As an event of reunion with God and creation, participation in Holy Communion is nothing less than resurrection from the dead. For the Orthodox, however, Holy Communion does not work "magically," nor is it a merely symbolic gesture;

its real and profound effects require human cooperation and spiritual preparation. The faithful *make* the bread, *make* the wine and offer these gifts *and themselves* back to God in thanksgiving and hope.

MISSIONS AND PHILANTHROPIA

4

As mentioned above, the Orthodox Church is, historically, the "Apostolic" Church. However, Orthodoxy is also "apostolic" in the literal sense of the word, "to be sent out." Missionary activity has been a vital aspect of Orthodoxy since the Church's beginning and it continues to be a definitive characteristic of the faith. Whether one talks about the activities of St. Paul among the Gentiles, the development of a new alphabet by Saints Cyril and Methodius to help evangelize the Slavic people, the Russian monks who sailed to Alaska bringing Orthodoxy to native North America, or the efforts of Orthodox missionaries today in places such as Korea, Albania, Hong Kong and Uganda, one sees that the Orthodox Church takes seriously Christ's command to "*go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature*" (Mark 16:15).

For the Orthodox, mission is quite simply an expression of "philanthropia." It is a genuine response to the second great commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39). Yet one should also note that respecting the freedom of human persons and their local cultures is integral to Orthodox missions; all efforts to convert others through force or threats are rejected, for love cannot be forced upon others. In addition to the philanthropy of missions, Orthodox Christianity embodies a long tradition of service to the poor, the sick and the neglected. Here again, the purpose is not merely obeying God's commandments, it is existential—restoring life through communion. As St. Anthony put it, "our life and our death is with our neighbor."

MONASTICISM AND INNER PRAYER

5

The philanthropy of missions, as well as that of outreach to the poor, the sick and the downtrodden, is complemented within

Orthodoxy by the philanthropy of monasticism and inner prayer. While missions and social outreach are outwardly focused and engaged with the cities and institutions of the world, monasticism and “hesychasm” are inwardly focused and engaged with the desert or wilderness. Monasticism began in Egypt, near the end of the third century, with St. Anthony’s decision to head into the desert to pursue Christian perfection and pure love for God. Today some of the most well-known Orthodox monastic centers include the republic of Mount Athos, the cliff-top communities of Meteora, St. Catherine’s monastery on Mount Sinai and St. John the Baptist monastery in Essex, England. One should also note the renaissance of monasticism across Romania and in many formerly Soviet countries, as well as the relatively recent growth of both male and female monastic communities in the U.S.

At the center of Orthodox monasticism is “the heart.” The Orthodox monk aims to cultivate and enlarge his or her heart through inner prayer and stillness (hesychia) and through

warfare against the passions that have corrupted the heart. Reciting the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon us” [or, “upon me, a sinner”], factors fundamentally into the lives of most monks and nuns, and this spiritual practice has often been identified as one of Orthodoxy’s greatest contributions to Christian Spirituality. Finally, while pursuing a monastic life may seem like escapism—if not selfishness—Orthodoxy has defended monasticism as an authentic vocation for some, while being careful not to disparage those called to marriage or to life in the world. The true monk or nun is not, in fact, cut off from the world but rather is deeply connected with the world through his or her intense prayer “that all may be saved.”

WHILE THERE IS MUCH MORE that could be said about Orthodox Christianity’s distinctive characteristics, we can end by calling attention to the saints of the Church. In one sense, the saints’ lives and teachings are the best lens for viewing Orthodoxy and for comparing it to other expressions of

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Christianity. Orthodox saints understood the Easter message in the core of their beings; they are themselves the unbroken chain that connects the faithful to the day of Pentecost; the liturgy permeated and defined their lives; and they expressed both their love for God and their love for neighbors with such sincerity, such profundity, and such intensity that they became imitators of Jesus Christ and authentic bearers of the Holy Spirit. It is, then, the universal call of humanity to sainthood that has defined Orthodoxy and that continues to define Orthodoxy’s contribution to the world today. 