

June 18, 2017 - Different, yet Related: The Orthodox Church ©

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Scripture: Psalm 82, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, 16-17, Rev 21

In John 10, Jesus says to the Jewish authorities,
“I and the Father are one.”

Then the story continues:

*The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. **32**Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?” **33**The Jews answered him, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.” **34**Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? **35**If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken— **36**do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’? **37**If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; **38**but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” (Jn 10:30-38).*

Jesus quotes Psalm 82 here, where it says,
“I say to you, You are gods”.

It is quite a statement, a daunting, exalting statement which elevates human beings far beyond our consideration of ourselves. But the statement by Jesus and the Psalms is the core theological idea behind the Orthodox church, which is called *theosis*, which is also called *illumination*, or *divinization*. *Theosis* is the idea that, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of Jesus Christ, we become like God. We begin to exhibit all the characteristics of God in the world. And the one true example of God in the world is Jesus Christ.

This is the purpose of the Orthodox way, to provide the avenues and guideposts and teachers in order to become that which God desires us to be. As with last week, I will do my best to emphasize the ideals of the tradition.

The Orthodox church represents about 12 % of all worshipping Christians in the world, which makes it the second largest group of Christians after Catholicism. The Orthodox also call themselves the “*One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church*”, just as the Catholic Church calls themselves. This is because up until around 1054AD, the entire Christian church was represented by 5 seats of leadership - Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Constantinople, and Jerusalem. These seats of leadership were held by bishops, and

went by different titles. The important point for today, though, is that each of these seats were primarily representative, with each bishop considered to be, according to ancient teaching, *firsts among equals*.

Remember last week I said all of our church movements in the Christian tradition are really questions of authority? This is one of them. Through a series of power plays and theological issues, the “Western” church which was overseen by Rome claimed authority over all the rest of the seats.

The churches of Antioch, Alexandria, and most importantly Constantinople, all rejected this and maintained their allegiance to one another. This is traditionally called “**The Great Schism**” in church history. Depending on which side you are on, the Orthodox church broke away from Rome, and Rome upheld the primary and traditional teachings from the very early church.

I, however, was directly corrected on this understanding by our Greek Orthodox friends, Dina and Dean. Dean and I were talking about the unity of the church, and I mentioned I longed for the day when we could all come together with the Catholic Church. He stopped and looked me in the eye and said, “*Oh, no. Rome left the Orthodox way. THEY will come back to us, not the other way around.*”

All this is to say that the Orthodox church makes a direct and, I would say, legitimate claim to the very early church.

Unlike our conversation about the Catholic Church last week, where things are pretty well laid out and the history is organized through one central channel, the Orthodox tradition is much, much murkier.

The best way, I think, to talk about Orthodoxy is to begin with worship. Everything flows out of worship in order to understand the tradition - the theology, spiritual disciplines, governing structure, missions - all of it flows from worship.

The Orthodox churches are structured to reflect Revelation 21. When you walk into an Orthodox church, the intent is to reflect Heaven on earth. Each church has two poles around which all worship takes place. We can speak of those poles as Heaven and Earth, the spiritual and the physical, Jerusalem and Constantinople. Between these two poles, the graces of God are given and received, in the Word, in prayer, in song, and in the Eucharist.

Whereas the Eucharist is the center of all worship in the Catholic tradition, the entire act of worship is central to the Orthodox. And this is what actually defines an Orthodox

church - worshipping in the Orthodox way. When a new church is looking to associate with one of the Orthodox church organizations, this is what primarily determines acceptance. Are you worshipping using the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox? The liturgy, the worship, defines the church and everything it does.

To be clear, the great celebration in the Orthodox way is also the Eucharist, and virtually all the Orthodox bodies teach that the bread and the wine is the body and blood of Christ, just as the Catholic Church teaches. But each element of worship is sanctified by its presence in God's temple.

So here is what this means when we think about the Orthodox way: Remember Jesus saying "*The Kingdom of God has drawn near*"? The Orthodox say we find out what that means in the church.

Because the local church is a reflection of Heaven on Earth - each local church is an image of the greater church. The Divine Liturgy is ancient, and the variations are fairly limited to St. John Chrysostom and St. James of Jerusalem. But like the rites of the Catholic Church, you can go to any Orthodox church in the world and know what is going on based on the Divine Liturgy.

The Divine Liturgy is ornate, complex, and *long*. Many churches chant the entire service, and most of the hour or so is spent standing. Orthodox churches have a lot of incense and candles. There is a good reason for this. If the Holy Spirit is present in the church, then every church is a temple of the Lord. If every church is a temple of the Lord, then how do we know God is present? The same way the Jewish people knew God was present with them. Remember at Pentecost how the people knew God was present with them in the desert?

Exodus 13, 40

The theology of the Orthodox church is as vast as the Catholic tradition, but I will highlight two differences. The first is what we have already talked about - *theosis*. We are becoming like God, according to the promises of Christ and the prophetic word before Him. This reflects who we are in relationship to the Trinitarian God, according to what we heard in Psalm 82, and where we learn about that relationship - in our daily lives as "God's Temple", according to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and what it is all leading toward - the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21.

The second difference is what led to the split between the Eastern, Orthodox, Church and the Catholic Church. It is called the '*filioque*' controversy. This is heady stuff, but

these sorts of conversations were of utmost importance at all levels of the church back in the first 1000 years of the church.

Filioque is Church Latin for the phrase “from the Son”. The filioque is a statement about the nature and understanding of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has always been a big deal in the Eastern, now Orthodox, church, and the filioque controversy was a deal-breaker for many of the churches. The filioque clause was added to the creed by the Roman Catholic Church around 1000AD and it said, “*the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son*”. This created an uproar in the Eastern Church, because the phrase implies that the Holy Spirit is of secondary importance to God and Jesus Christ.

For some in the East, the phrase came dangerously close to suggesting the Holy Spirit was a created being that is completely subject to the will of God and Christ in the same way we are. For the Orthodox, the Holy Spirit proceeds from God alone and is the co-equal third person of the Trinity for and from all eternity. It seems like a problem of interpretation and semantics to us, but it was a really big deal way back when, leading to excommunications, arguments, and finally ‘The Great Schism’ of the Eastern and Western churches.

That said, the Orthodox tradition is a rich, luxurious, sensual experience of theological views and ideas. Many of the things you hear from me on a Sunday morning come from the Eastern traditions of the church.

The structure of the Orthodox church is considerably different from the Catholic Church. It is still hierarchical, but the Orthodox church understands their priests, bishops, and patriarchs to be ‘first among equals’. The Orthodox church considers Christ to be the head of the church and the weight of tradition to be the authority on the Holy Scriptures, which defines the boundaries of the faith. Orthodox churches therefore associate with larger organizations of Orthodox churches, usually according to the language and traditions of a particular region.

These organizations are called “autocephalous” church bodies unified by their worship. *Autocephalous* essentially means ‘self-rule’.

There are 15 autocephalous Orthodox church bodies, such as the Russian Orthodox, the Greek Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Antiochian Orthodox, Slovakian, and the Orthodox Church of America. These bodies choose bishops to oversee a region along

with a Holy Synod, made up of local church leaders. The authority of Patriarchs, Bishops, and Synods are primarily non-binding and advisory. Sometimes the autocephalous churches gather for what are called “*Pan-Ecumenical Conferences*”.

The missionary work of the Orthodox church is a little difficult to discern. The missionary work is often defined by the concerns of the region with which the particular Orthodox body is associated. For instance, the Syrian Orthodox church is very involved in mission work with Syrian refugees; the Greek Orthodox church is very involved with poverty issues in Greece and the surrounding area; the Russian Orthodox church is very concerned about renewing faith in Russia post-Communism. Spiritual disciplines are a rich tradition in the Orthodox churches. I have with me an Orthodox prayer rope, which is a tradition that comes from the Greek monasteries, most particularly Mount Athos. The ‘hesychiastic’ tradition is a kind of deep prayer that uses the breath and is also a Christian meditation. On each bead, the person in prayer breathes in and says, “O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God”, and on the exhalation, the pray-er, says, “Have mercy on me, a sinner.” There are devotional books going back hundreds of years to help with daily prayers.

Another spiritual discipline or practice is the adoration of icons. This also has a significant history of controversy between the East and the West. Icons are images of Jesus, the Marys, the Disciples, Bible stories, and Saints. There are deep theologies about the tradition of icons from Orthodox theologians, but I will tell you what Brother Stavros at New Skete Monastery told me about icons. When I attempted to lay some deep, but very limited, theology about icons on him, he said, “*Well, I don’t know about that. The simplest way to describe icons is that they are simply pictorial expressions of Biblical texts. Do you love stories in the Bible?*”

“Yes”, I said.

“*This is what icons are*”, Brother Stavros said, “*the Bible in images. When we kiss the icon (kissing the icon at the entrance of the temple is a thing in the Orthodox tradition) we are simply acknowledging our love and devotion to the Bible.*”

I should also note that Mother Mary is a major figure in Orthodox churches. Often, in the dome over the gathering place of the people in the sanctuary is an icon of Mother Mary holding the baby Jesus. The image is a reminder to all of us that we are like her in a very real way. Remember at the beginning when I talked about *theosis*, the idea that we are becoming like God?

Well, the name for Mother Mary in the Orthodox tradition is *The Theotokos*, which means, “The One who Carries God”. Because of who we are in Christ, we are like Mary - we are carriers of Christ, who is God. We share this with Mary.

Each of the traditions we are looking at have surprises. What is most surprising to me in the Orthodox tradition is its integrity over time. It is messy. Even the worship is kind of messy. An Orthodox service is one of the most beautiful things you will ever see, but it is messy. It doesn't start on time, the preparations for things always looks like the priests and the deacons are doing it for the first time, no one really knows when to stand or sit. The structure is messy, making the various bodies vulnerable to state powers, and there are constant pressures from the outside, because the Orthodox church seems to thrive in troubled areas of the world. And yet, and yet, a tradition almost as old as Christianity itself continues to be present in our world, in a beautiful, thriving, elegant way.

Amen.