

WHAT IS ORTHODOXY?

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Abstract

Many times in life we become so familiar with certain things that we lose our perspective as to their importance to us. They become like words we use correctly at times but we do not really know their exact meaning without a dictionary. One of these things that we come to take for granted should never be our Holy Orthodox Faith and practice. In many places I have visited in Romania I find that Protestantism and, even worse, pseudo-Christian cults (such as Jehovah's Witnesses) have come to woo Orthodox people away from the Holy Faith and into their sincere but misguided understanding of Christianity.

Orthodox Christians need to know what they believe and practice, and why they do so, in order that they can not only withstand those who would proselytize them, but to also be able to witness to the truth of the Faith into which they were baptized. This understanding must be on both historical and practical level so as to fully encompass the truth of the Faith once delivered (Jude 1:3).

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As I lay in bed sleeping the other day, I had a dream that I was standing before a large group of people from former churches to which we have belonged and I was asked to say a few words on the subject "What is Orthodoxy?" I remember starting to speak but then I awoke in the morning. The idea of the situation and the topic remained with me the rest of the day and in days following and I thought it a good idea to write a piece for the Archangel on what I might have said had I finished my dream. At sometime any or all of us may get asked this question on the spur of the moment and it would be a good idea to have a ready response for just such an occasion (I Pet. 3:15). The following is what I might say in just such a situation.

Explaining Orthodoxy to another who has little or no familiarity with the Faith can be difficult because different people have

varying perceptions of the term Orthodoxy. I remember an incident when posting an open invitation at work for my co-workers to come to see the reaffirmation of Mary Patty's and my wedding vows during Liturgy several years ago. Upon reading the announcement, two young ladies with whom I work asked me "What is Orthodox?" I gave a very brief answer, highlighting the fact that it is thoroughly Christian. Their response was "Oh, we didn't think you looked Jewish!"

Bearing this incident in mind, it is best to remember that we need to be very specific but not overly theological in our reply. Many folks will not really understand the theological differences between Orthodoxy and where they are but they will understand some basic facts that can give them a good understanding of who and what we are in the Orthodox Church.

I like to begin with the historical approach to the Church. The *Timeline of Church History* available in our narthex (published by Conciliar Press) is a very handy and useful tool in this regard. Basically, I say that the Church was one Church for the first thousand years of Church History. I mention the five great Sees or Patriarchates that existed then and continue to exist to the present. This shows the unbroken continuance of the Faith as once delivered to the Apostles by the Lord Jesus, Himself.

Some folks are not impressed or become easily bored with the whole idea of history. Thus, I try to ascertain the receptivity of my audience in this area: if they appear interested and concerned with an historical approach, I may go into a bit more depth; if not, I quickly move forward. The historical aspect can never, in my opinion, be ignored; it is of utmost importance to establish Orthodoxy as the Church of Christ and the Apostles and its unchanged continuity right up to the present moment. The first thing that appears in the New Testament is the Gospel of St. Matthew which is the Gospel to the Jews presenting Christ as their King. The first thing we read in St. Matthew's Gospel is the genealogy, or "pedigree", of Christ, *i.e.*, His historical right to the Throne of David!

From here, I like to use the "Smells and Bells" approach to Orthodoxy. This does two things for me. First, it presents the Faith in easy to understand terms and keeps the discussion away from theological issues. Secondly, it allows me to relate to the audience on

a personal level, especially after approaching it historically which can be somewhat impersonal. To history one can say, "So what?" but when it is put more personally, one must then deal with it on a personal level.

"Smells and Bells", of course, refers to the appealing of the Faith to the five senses: the five "gates" by which anything we experience is allowed to penetrate within a person. We are sensual beings as God created us and our worship should appeal to all of the five senses so as to reach the whole of every person present. In worship settings that are other than High Church, *i.e.*, Liturgical, the usual mode of reaching a person is through the ear gate: the music, prayer, the sermon. The rest of the senses are left untouched. In today's more "modern" churches, the eye gate is especially deprived of any worship experience, gymnasia that double as "churches!"

Some church experiences are like dining experiences wherein one is given plain oatmeal three times a day, seven days a week. Oatmeal is certainly good for one, very nourishing and healthful. If one knows nothing else: the smell of a fresh-baked apple pie, the "feel" of fresh-cooked corn-on-the-cob with some butter and salt, seeing a plump, fully-roasted turkey, oozing stuffing from all of its cavities, or hearing the popping of popcorn on the stove, one may be full and somewhat nourished, but one will probably have an inward, unexplainable yearning for more than oatmeal twenty-one times a week!

The idea of smell as primary may not seem proper at first, but the sense of smell is the first sense that should be awakened when one walks in the door of an Orthodox Church for the first time. We are hit by the smell of the incense that lingers throughout the building and permeates everything. When we had the organ first examined a few years ago, I came to the Parish on a Friday morning to open the door for the organ man. He had with him a man from the factory in the Midwest who wanted to see our instrument for himself. As I opened the door to the narthex and they walked in, the man from the factory stopped suddenly and took a deep breath. He then exclaimed, "Ah, a Church that really smells like a CHURCH!" The incense impacted him immediately.

What is the significance of the incense in our worship? It represents the prayers of the Saints who have gone before us into Heaven

and are praying for us and for all humankind. It represents the fact that our worship is a sweet savor in the nostrils of God and our worship is an integral part of the prayers of ALL the Saints, past and present.

As an aside, if one looks at Rev. 8:3f, one could get the impression that the incense is actually something other than the prayers of the Saints since it reads, *And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand.* The incense is definitely said to be “with” the prayers of the Saints thus indicating that they are two distinct entities. The original Greek, however, reads as follows: *And another angel came and stood upon the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him many incenses, that he should offer the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incenses, the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand.* When one compares this mistranslation with Rev. 5:8 which reads, *And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints,* one gets the idea of the prejudice that pervades many “translations” of the Bible. This verse actually reads, *And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of incenses, which are the prayers of saints.* The word for “incense(s)” in both passages is the same word in Greek!

The “Bells” part refers, of course, to the auditory sense, the ear gate. This is the most obvious since the ear takes in the music, the prayers and the homily. It is what we have most in common with other forms of worship.

Beyond the aromatic and auditory senses, however, the Orthodox Faith continues to shine. The olfactory sense, the eye gate, is deluged with elaborate Iconography and the Vestments of the Sanctuary Party and so many other things that comprise Liturgical Worship for the Orthodox. The Icons are primarily of the Lord Jesus

Christ, Whom we worship supremely. God, the Father, and God, Holy Spirit, are NEVER depicted in Orthodox Iconography.

Next in order is the Iconography of the Holy, Ever-Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. She is rarely, if ever, seen depicted apart from Her Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Whenever one sees the *Theotokos*, one always sees her directing attention to her Son, the Lord Jesus as the One to worship and adore. The Lord Jesus is often seen directing attention to His Holy Mother as one whom we should venerate regularly, NOT WORSHIP. Veneration is the paying of respect to one to whom respect, admiration and emulation is due because of their position, achievements, etc. We venerate the Mother of God because she is the first Christian (the first to have Christ formed in her) and the vanguard of the Christian Faith, the Sacred Ark of the Covenant which led Israel in its journeys and into battle.

Next in order are the Holy Saints of God who have preceded us into the presence of God. This includes in order: the Holy Archangels, principally St. Michael, St. John the Holy Forerunner, St. Stephen, the first Deacon and Martyr for the Faith, the Patron Saint of the particular Parish, and then any the church has canonized in its history.

The Icons are called “windows to Heaven” by the Orthodox faithful because they are there to assist us in our worship of Christ and the entire Holy Trinity. We always venerate Icons and never worship or pray TO the Saints. We ask them to intercede for us to Christ our God as we would ask any other Christian to pray for us in any situation. The Holy Saints of God are still part of the Church; they do not exit the Church when they exit this life. This is what is commonly known as “the Communion of the Saints”. The departed Saints are much closer to God and the Lord Jesus than we are; they see them and interact with them continually!

The veneration of Icons is the same as when a family man happens to be traveling away from home for an extended period of time. He may very well take along a picture of his family and place it prominently in his hotel room. He may even talk to the picture at night before retiring and kiss the image of each of his family members at the same time. One would not think it strange to do such a thing because it demonstrates the love he has for his dear

family from whom he is temporarily separated. One would never accuse such a man of idol-worship!

One may even have a departed loved one who was, in this life, a mentor and advice-giver in difficult circumstances. It may be someone like a Father or Grandmother or uncle. It may be that, after that person has departed this life, a difficult situation presents itself and a person may go and talk to that person while standing before his or her portrait or snapshot in order to get one's mind to try to imagine what advice and counsel that mentor may have given if he or she were still here on earth.

In addition to these, there are also "Festival Icons," which depict major, and even minor, events detailed in Scripture. One such popular Icon would be the Icon of the Last Supper. Any Biblical event may be depicted iconographically. An Icon is normally said to be "hand-written" rather than painted or drawn.

These illustrations demonstrate that of which Iconography really consists at its core. They do not encompass every aspect of it but they reach the heart of the matter.

Orthodoxy appeals to the sense of taste most directly in the receiving of the Holy Eucharist which is offered to everyone who is Orthodox and fully prepared to receive by having searched one's conscience for unconfessed sin and enmity with one's neighbor. This aspect of reaching all five senses, the Holy Eucharist, is possibly the most controversial of the tenets of the Faith. It stirs up arguments concerning the true meaning of the elements of Holy Communion: is it a Sacrament of the Church or is it just a symbol; is it simply physical elements of bread and wine or have those elements been transformed into the True Body and Blood of Christ? I will try to address this issue in another issue at a later date.

The Holy Eucharist is not the only appeal to the sense of taste in the Orthodox Faith, however. There is also the "Blessed Bread" which is offered to the faithful and to Christians of other persuasions following the Holy Eucharist. This is a loaf of specially prepared bread, prepared with special prayers, blessed by the Priest at the altar and distributed by the ushers after Holy Communion.

There is also the fellowship meal which follows the Liturgy. This is a common meal which is shared by all of the faithful and visitors to the Parish where all can eat and talk with one another

to their heart's content. This is the meal to which St. Paul refers in I Cor. 11:20-22 where the Corinthian Church was in abuse and the Holy Apostle to the Gentiles had to issue corrective warning. This is another of the ancient customs of the Church that is preserved in Orthodoxy.

Finally, there is the sense of touch and it too has its place in Orthodoxy. Those who are not spiritually prepared to receive Holy Communion and those outside of Orthodoxy who visit an Orthodox Parish, receive a blessing from the Priest in Lieu of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. To administer this, the Priest touches the head of the person and, making the sign of the Cross with his finger or thumb, he pronounces a blessing upon the person in the Name of the Holy Trinity.

Also, there is the exchange of the Kiss of Peace between the Orthodox Faithful when they meet and/or part. This is an ancient custom of the Church which is commanded by two different New Testament writers in five separate places in the New Testament, all of which are in the imperative (command) mode. There is St. Paul in Rom. 16:16: *Salute one another with an holy kiss* and I Cor. 16:20: *All the brethren greet you. Greet ye one another with an holy kiss* and II Cor. 13:12: *Greet one another with an holy kiss* and I Thes. 5:26: *Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss*. There is St. Peter in I Pt. 5:14: *Greet ye one another with a kiss of charity. Peace be with you all that are in Christ Jesus. Amen*. In Orthodoxy, we take seriously the commandment of Christ in Jn 13:34f: *That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*.

The last point I try to make after I elaborate on the theme of "Smells and Bells" is that of Liturgical Worship versus an unstructured worship style where "the Holy Spirit is free to move as He pleases." There is a natural segue from the previous topic into this next point and this is a common "argument" against Orthodoxy and Liturgical Worship in general, and it needs to be addressed, I believe.

Within this discussion is the sub-topic of Liturgical Prayer versus spontaneous prayer as is commonly employed in non-liturgical, "low church", forms of worship. The best means to answer

this argument against Liturgical Prayer is to take the person to the Scriptures, the place where many find their “final authority for all faith and practice”. In Ac. 2:42 it states, *And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.* This seems “harmless” enough until one sees that the same passage in the original Greek reads at the end, *and in the prayers.* This makes a big difference in the understanding of the passage. The inclusion of the definite article “the”, which is in the text without controversy but ignored by the translators, makes the prayers specific prayers and not simply random, spontaneous, generic “prayer”. A person may say that this is “splitting hairs” but one then must bring the discussion back to the way that much of Christendom defines the Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. The typical definition of “Verbal, Plenary Inspiration” insists that every word of the Holy Scriptures was “hand-picked” by the Holy Spirit and that specific wording is no accident. Insisting upon the formulation of doctrine based upon individual word-choice in Scripture becomes inherent within their own definition!

On the overall topic of Liturgical versus non-liturgical Worship, there are several strong arguments. These again come directly from the Holy Scriptures and are, therefore, all the more weighty.

The first is found in Ac. 13:1ff where the first four verses read as follows: *Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus.* In this passage the key phrase is *As they ministered to the Lord* in vs. 2. The Greek reads simply *leitourgounton de auton to Kirio* which literally translates, *And while worshipping the Lord.* This appears at first not to be of great significance until one realizes that the main verb, a participle here, is *leitourgeo* from which the English word “Liturgy” comes. Thus, the phrase can be legitimately translated, *And, as they were celebrating the Liturgy before the Lord.* It is significant to

note here that it was during this structured Liturgy that the Holy Spirit spoke to the Church at Antioch (the Church to which we belong!) and caused them to do something out of the ordinary, *Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them*. This is certainly the spontaneous action of the Holy Spirit but it is within a structured approach to worship! A train can only get from one place to another when confined to a set of tracks; it cannot go “spontaneously” wherever it wishes outside of the structure of a set of tracks. A kite can only stay aloft and soar in the heavens as long as it is on a tightly-held string; let go of the string to give it its “freedom” and it crashes helplessly to the ground. So it is the same way in our worship.

The second approach to this takes us back to an historical argument once again. We need to point out that the worship of the Patriarchs of Judaism: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Israel itself beginning with Aaron and Moses all through its history, was Liturgical. Any thinking person will be forced to agree with this assertion. The worship at the time of Christ was certainly Liturgical since Christ conformed in every detail to the Law of Moses and taught in the Temple. The worship of the early Church was certainly Liturgical, especially in light of Ac. 13:1ff and other passages in the New Testament. Worship in the Church continued to be Liturgical up until the time of the Reformation in the late 16th century. Orthodoxy, as well as Roman Catholicism and many branches of Protestantism continued in Liturgical Worship. It was only some forms of Protestantism that eschewed Liturgical Worship and that for only the last four centuries. The Worship in Heaven will be Liturgical as seen in the Book of the Revelation to St. John. In that glimpse into Heaven we see mention of incense, Altars, Liturgical, repeated Prayers (*and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come, 4:8*), Thrones, vestments, elaborately bedecked places of worship, etc. These all point to a thoroughly liturgical approach to worship in Heaven for all eternity.

With all of this seen in an overall view, that a liturgical format was the proper form of worship from the very beginning, continuing up through the 16th century, changed only by a relative few for four hundred plus years, and continuing through all of eternity, why would one choose to think that God had REALLY gone away from what

He has so clearly demonstrated that He wants, Liturgical Worship? Without abandoning logic and reason here, an honest person is forced to admit at this point that non-liturgical worship is one's personal choice over what God desires. In essence the person is saying, "I do not care what God wants, I like it better my way!" This is a dangerous position in which to be!

This takes us back to the story of Cain and Abel. God told each man what kind of sacrifice He wanted and each brought something different. The righteous Abel brought a lamb sacrificed from the flock and Cain brought of the fruit of the ground. God accepted Abel's offering and He rejected Cain's offering. How do we know that God told the two men what to bring? Look at Heb. 11:4 which reads, *By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.* Saint Paul says here under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that it was *by faith* that Abel offered *a more excellent sacrifice than Cain*. Comparing Scripture with Scripture, we read in Rom. 10:17, *So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* God spoke to men in those very early days and He told each man what sacrifice to bring. The one, the righteous Abel, obeyed; the other, the rejected Cain, disobeyed, choosing his own desires over God's, and the results were devastating to the latter!

The choice, then, is simple for us in light of the history of worship as God has commanded it from His people: are we going to choose to be the Righteous Abel or are we going to choose to be the rejected Cain? That is not to say that Liturgical Worship will come easy to many folks and will not be a challenge to which to adapt oneself. When have some choices in life been easy to make and stick with, especially those that involve doing the "right things" as opposed to what we "feel like" doing. When we overcome the flesh, *i.e.*, doing what we "feel like" doing, and do what God says we should do, it is a victory for the believer in obeying the Holy Spirit within us. The form of worship we choose is not something other than this type of choice.

This is not to say also, that Liturgical Worship by itself will save us. Becoming accustomed to it when it is not to one's liking is an opportunity to turn one's human free will around so that it agrees with the Will of God. This is what saves us!