



Door to Paradise

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Jesus Christ and the Early Church

I AM THE DOOR," said Christ. "By me if any man enter in, he shall be saved." Christ is the Door to the Kingdom of Heaven, which we can find within us even during this life and which continues for eternity. But how do we find that Door amidst thousands of different sects and philosophies, all of which present a different image of Christ? If we look into the history of the Church He founded, we find one unbroken line in which His image has been kept pure and undistorted. That line is ancient Orthodoxy, the measuring-stick of true Christianity.

Come to the Door! Find it through the ancient, historic path....

AT A TIME IN HISTORY when mankind had fallen far away from Paradise and was in desperate need of God, the very God Who created man took flesh and became man. This was Jesus Christ, the One Whom the prophets had foretold and the One Whom the whole world was anticipating. Until then all religions were only man's fragmented attempts to understand God. In Christ, for the first time in history, God Himself became man. To those who believed in Him, took up their crosses and followed Him, He opened the possibility of a personal relationship with God, spiritual transformation through the power of His grace, salvation from the consequences of sin, and eternal life in His Heavenly Kingdom. He brought those believers together in love for God and neighbor, against His Church (Matthew 16:18). This Church was founded first upon the sufferings of Christ, then upon the sufferings of His Apostles, and finally upon the sufferings of the martyrs throughout the ages. Thus began Christianity.

After Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven, His disciples were gathered together with thousands of people from all over the known world for the feast of Pentecost. Then, just as the Holy Scriptures had prophesied and just as Christ had promised, *suddenly there came a sound from Heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2-4)*. They began to preach the Way, the Truth and the Life to all those present at the feast in their native languages. Those who received this revelation and followed Jesus Christ began to be known as Christians.

From that day forward the Apostles were endowed with power and the Christian Faith began to spread to the ends of the earth. From Jerusalem the disciples of Christ traveled all over the known world: the Apostles Peter and Paul went to Greece and Rome, Andrew went to Russia, Mark went to Egypt, Simon went to England and Africa, Thomas went as far as India, and Matthew went to Ethiopia. Although they were in different parts of the world they were of *one heart and one soul (Acts 4:32)* and *taught one Lord, one Faith, and one baptism (Ephesians 4:5)*. Everywhere they went they appointed bishops, priests and deacons and ordained them, by the laying on of hands, to be shepherds of Christ's flock. In a short time the Apostles brought multitudes of pagans to Christ—simple people as well as philosophers, beggars as well as kings. Although the Apostles experienced persecution, torture and even death for their beliefs, nothing could stop the Faith from spreading like fire to the ends of the earth. Nearly every Apostle died a martyr's death, and many of their remains are preserved in Orthodox Churches to this day.

It was during these difficult martyric times that the early Church was formed and established, and where the worship, the arts, and the music of the Church found their beginning. These naturally sprang out of the Old Testament and flowed into the New. The form of worship began in the time of Moses, as it was revealed to him by God. The arts originated in the depictions of the cherubim which God appointed Moses to make for the Hebrew sanctuary (Exodus 25:18). This tradition of sacred art was continued by the Apostle Luke, who painted the first iconographic depictions of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child. The music (chant) had its beginning in the Psalms of David. Even the Liturgy (communion service) finds its beginning in the Old Testament, Christ's Body and Blood being the New Testament sacrifice (John 6:48-58). The first communion service composed by the Apostle James, the brother of the Lord, was based on the Apostles' experience at the Last Supper, and is still used in the Orthodox Church today.

The Apostolic Saints

AFTER ALL THE APOSTLES had died, the believers looked to their successors to continue their work. These successors were those disciples who had actually traveled and preached with the Apostles and *held fast to the Traditions that had been given to them by word or epistle* (II Thess. 2:15). One of these successors was a disciple of the Apostle John named Ignatius (106). He was a little boy at the time of Christ. It is recorded that he was the little child that Christ set in the midst of the disciples when He said: *Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Whosoever shall humble hi myself as this little child, the same is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven* (Matthew 18:2). When Ignarius grew up he became the Bishop of Antioch, the city where the disciples of Christ were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Eventually he was imprisoned for refusing to worship the pagan gods. Although he was a prisoner facing death, he wrote several epistles to the churches to which Paul had written earlier, such as the Ephesians and the Romans.

Soon afterwards he was taken to the arena where he was eaten alive by wild beasts, and gave his soul into the hands of God.

Another of the Apostles' successors was Lazarus, whom Christ raised from the dead (John 11:1). After the day of Pentecost, Lazarus traveled with his two sisters, Mary and Martha, throughout the Mediterranean and settled on the island of Crete. Here he spread the Christian faith as one of the first bishops of the Church. Later he and his sisters went to preach the Gospel in France. Lazarus was known to have said that ever since he was raised from the dead he had a bitter taste in his mouth that reminded him of death and the final judgment, which every soul will face. He died peacefully as a saint, no longer tasting any bitterness, for there is no bitterness in Heaven.

Mary Magdalene was another disciple of Christ who became an equal to the Apostles. After the day of Pentecost she traveled to Rome and appeared before the Emperor Tiberias Caesar, greeting him with the words: "Christ is Risen!" referring to the resurrection of Christ from the dead. She then presented him with a red egg as a symbol of the new life that was given to the human race through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. From that day on eggs were always used in the celebration of the great feast of Pascha (commonly known as Easter). Before the Emperor she also denounced Pontius Pilate for his unjust condemnation of Jesus Christ. Caesar heeded her and transferred Pilate from Jerusalem to Gaul, where he died from a terrible illness. Leaving Rome, she traveled to Ephesus and helped the Apostle John. Here, she peacefully went to the Lord Whom she had served so faithfully.

Other disciples who continued the work of the Apostles were St. Clement of Rome and St. Polycarp. St. Clement was brought to the Faith by the Apostles Barnabas and Peter, who appointed him bishop of Rome; and he later suffered a martyr's death in the Crimea near Cherson. St. Polycarp was a pagan who had been brought to the Faith and baptized by the Apostle John. Both Clement and Polycarp wrote epistles that still exist today.

Also at that time there was a man named Dionysius in Athens, Greece (Acts 17:34). When Christ breathed His last on the Cross, St. Dionysius beheld the sun darkened although he was miles away, and said: "Either God the Creator of the world is suffering or the world is end and saw that the people there had an altar to "the unknown God." Paul then openly said to those gathered: *The One Whom you ignorantly worship, Him I proclaim unto you* (Acts 17:22), and began to tell them about the One True God Who gave His life for the world. Dionysius happened to be present and was moved in his soul to embrace the Christian Faith. He was then baptized by Paul and became a bishop of Gaul (France), residing in Paris.

Through these holy men and women the continuity of the Orthodox Church was preserved, even during those times of great persecution.

The Catacombs

THE FIRST CHRISTIANS were rejected by the world and were persecuted unto torture and death, fulfilling Christ's prophecy: *If the world hate you, know that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love his own, but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you* (John 15:18). To escape persecution Christians fled to the catacombs—underground caves where they buried their dead—and conducted their secret prayer services there in hiding, totally cut off from the world. They lived in constant expectation of martyrdom and so were always vigilant, preparing

themselves for the other world. Earthly wealth, comfort, and honor had no meaning for them since suffering stripped them bare of such things.

The spread of the Christian Faith among the pagans provoked persecution against the early Christians because they refused to worship any God other than the One living God. Thousands of men and women died by courageously undergoing the cruelest forms of torture imaginable. They were beheaded, burned, drowned, lacerated and crucified for their Faith; the countless records and histories of the martyrs attest to their undying love for God. The early 4th century historian Eusebius wrote: "I myself was an eyewitness of it. The iron implements would become blunt and broken, and the executioners themselves would become wearied and have to take turns to relieve each other."

The call to a violent death was a great reality for those who believed in God and His Christ. Martyrdom was considered the ultimate act of renunciation of the world and the highest form of confession of one's Faith. While in the world's eyes it was total dishonor, in the eyes of the believers it was the greatest glory. For the early Christians, the body, which is a temple of God, could also become a sacrifice for God in enduring unto death for the Truth. Only God and His Spirit dwelling deep within the martyrs enabled them to overcome a death that was for them True Life.

From the world's point of view it seemed that the Christian Faith was dying along with its martyrs, but this was not so. Many pagans, seeing the faith and confession of the martyrs and the miracles that they performed, were themselves convinced of the Truth of the Christian Faith and became Christians. The more the Christians were persecuted, the more the Christian Faith grew.

The earliest account of martyrdom is that of St. Stephen who was a deacon of the Church (Acts 6:5). He was stoned to death for preaching in the Jewish temple that Jesus Christ was the Messiah. As he was about to die he looked up towards Heaven and saw *the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God* (Acts 7:55).

Another account of a martyr of the catacomb period of Christianity is the life of St. Catherine (305). She was the daughter of a ruler in Alexandria, Egypt. From childhood she was well educated. She loved the wisdom of this world until she encountered Christ, Who is True Wisdom. She then became a Christian and fearlessly taught others of the one true God Who became incarnate to save the world.

For this she was placed under heavy guard to be tortured. When the arena was filled with spectators, she was brought out before the wisest men of the empire in order for them to challenge her in her Christian Faith. Her answers left everyone speechless, and many believed her words, becoming Christians themselves. This enraged the emperor to such an extent that he had everyone burned alive who was found to be a Christian. After imprisonment St. Catherine was taken to the place where she would be executed. She then prayed: "Stretch out Thy hand, which was nailed to the Cross for my sake, and receive my soul." After enduring much torture she was finally beheaded.

The number of martyrs who died in these first centuries of the Church is endless, attesting to the vitality and convictions of the first Christians. Many of the actual accounts of the lives and deaths of these martyrs still exist thanks to the believers who courageously preserved their memory in the catacombs.

The Byzantine Empire

THEN SUDDENLY, in the midst of all the sufferings of the Christians, the persecution ceased. In the year 312, Constantine the Great, the emperor of the Roman empire, which comprised the greater part of the civilized world at that time, was conquered by the sign of the Christian Faith. Just before a decisive battle, he and all of his soldiers saw a Cross of light in the sky with the inscription, "By this sign you will conquer. The following night Christ appeared to him with the Cross in His hand and told him that by this sign he would defeat his enemy, directing that each soldier's shield bear the sign of the Cross. The emperor fulfilled the command of God and conquered. Seeing the power of the Cross he abandoned paganism and embraced the Christian Faith, placing his entire empire under the protection of Christ and His Cross. Constantine legalized Christianity and then moved the seat of the empire from Rome to Constantinople to make a new beginning, calling this city the second Rome. Thus arose Byzantium—the first Christian empire, governed by Christian principles.

Now that the Church was free to come out of the catacombs, churches began to be built above ground. Some of the first churches constructed were over the holy sites in Israel where Christ had lived. Also, later on in the sixth century a monastery was built on Mount Sinai over the site of the burning bush (Exodus 3:2), near the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. Most of these churches still remain to this day as Orthodox churches and monasteries.

With the Church above ground, Christianity began to flourish. The Christian religious art of iconography began to be refined, church music (chant) began to thrive and the amount of Christian literature began to grow. In short, the Church became the center of every aspect of life. This period of freedom and rest for the Church became the time to articulate the beliefs of the Christian Faith and to choose the books that would comprise the standard of Scripture.

Emperor Constantine called a council of bishops to gather from the four corners of the world. This council was the first of seven Ecumenical Councils in the history of the Church and was modeled after the council in the time of the Apostles (Acts 15). This council, held in Nicaea, articulated the Creed of the Christian Faith so that there would be one confession of the Faith and not different interpretations. Before this council there was no universally accepted New Testament canon of Scripture and, thus, no Bible. There were simply the accounts of Christ's life by the Apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and many epistles (letters) from several of the Apostles such as Paul and Peter. There were also the letters and writings of the disciples of the Apostles such as Sts. Ignatius, Clement, Dionysius and others. One of the persons who was instrumental in this council was St. Athanasius of Alexandria. He was the one responsible for the canon of Scriptures that comprise the New Testament that we have today.

With the founding of the first Christian empire—the Byzantine empire—came the Bible, the Creed, and a whole Christian experience that would change the face of the world forever.

The Monastic Ideal

THIS TIME OF FREEDOM in the Church gave rise to one vital problem. Without the suffering of persecution and martyrdom as a means to Christian perfection, many of the Christians began to conform to this world. In their freedom and wealth they began to forget that the Christian life is about leading the soul from this world to the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a path of suffering in this life in order to obtain peace in the next. Consequently, men and women seeking spiritual perfection instead of the pleasures of this world, fled into the deserts and wildernesses of Palestine and Egypt. Like the walls of the catacombs, the wide expanses of the desert isolated them from the influence of the world and provided the opportunity for a more God-centered life. Through a life of prayer, fasting, self-denial, chastity and vigilance these ascetics became voluntary lifelong martyrs and were known as monks and nuns.

Although it was in the fourth century that monasticism developed, its origin is in the Old Testament times when God revealed to Moses the vow of the Nazarite—a vow of consecrating one's life to God (Numbers 6:2). Then from Elijah to John the Baptist, the prophets set examples of this vow. Later this was perfected in the life of Christ. After having witnessed Christ's example, the Apostle Mark, who established the Church in Egypt, started the first ascetic communities which continued this way of life. These communities had as their models the prophets of the Old Testament, and operated on the principles set forth in Acts 4:32. They came to be known as monasteries, and their inhabitants began to be called monks. The term "monk" was derived from the Greek word *monos*, which means single or alone—one who chooses to be alone with God. From these communities arose the great monastic saints of fourth century Egypt.

One of the earliest records of a monk is the life of St. Anthony the Great (†356). When he was young his rich parents suddenly died and left all their wealth to him. Saddened by their death, he went one day into the church and heard the priest read from the Scriptures these words: *If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give it to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in Heaven: and come and follow Me* (Matthew 19:21).

Hearing this his heart began to burn for Christ. He then went home, gave away all his inheritance to the poor and went off into the Egyptian desert to be alone with God. He then went home, gave away all his inheritance to the poor and went off into the Egyptian desert to be alone with God. He lived there until he was over a hundred years old—praying, fasting and reading the Holy Scriptures. Hearing of his way of life, thousands of others followed his

example, and monasticism began to spread far and wide. After Sr. Anthony died, the bishop of Alexandria, Sr. Athanasius the Great, who was close to him, recorded his life for the inspiration of others. This was the same Athanasius who was responsible for choosing the books of the New Testament that we use today. Athanasius brought this life of a saint throughout the world and changed the face of history with the story of St. Anthony, the uneducated monk who lived in a cave.

This way of life called monasticism quickly spread throughout the world, preserving the same genuine spirit of the early Church. Entire cities and societies found their beginnings in the simple poverty of these monks. First a monk would settle in some uninhabited place, then people would settle nearby, and in time villages would grow. In this way, monasticism spread throughout Egypt, Israel, Ethiopia, Greece, Italy, Ireland, France, Romania, Serbia, Russia and to the ends of the world.

The Great Separation

IN THE VERY BEGINNING of the Christian Church the Apostles appointed successors to guide and guard the Church. These leaders were called deacons, priests and bishops. Priests were appointed as pastors of single churches, bishops were appointed as pastors over geographical areas that encompassed many churches, and patriarchal bishops were spiritual advisors over the bishops and priests and all the churches. This form of hierarchy was carried over from the Old Testament times of Moses (Exodus 18:13-21).

Although there were hundreds of bishops throughout Christendom, there were only five patriarchs—one for each of the five important cities in the empire: Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Rome. All took counsel with one another, having Christ as the head, and there was no one person who ruled the Church. All significant decisions were made only in council, no one patriarch or bishop having absolute superiority over another, but all working together in equality. Through this hierarchy the Church had succeeded for centuries in maintaining unity.

In the ninth century, however, the East and the West began to drift apart. The Patriarch (Pope) of Rome began to introduce new and foreign ideas into the Faith. One of these ideas was the supremacy of the Roman Pope over the rest of the Christian Church. The other four patriarchs of the Church in the East, knowing that having one supreme ruler over the entire Church would divide and corrupt the Church, unsuccessfully pleaded with the Pope of Rome not to introduce this new idea.

Another new idea that the Pope of Rome began to introduce was the changing of the age-old Christian Creed that had been established by the early Church. The Creed is a summary of the beliefs of the Christian Faith, established since the times of the Apostles and based on the Scriptures. The Church in the East warned the Western Church of the dangers of changing any part of the Faith and especially the very Creed itself. But the changes were already in full swing, and the bishops in the West had already begun to adopt these new ideas, even though the believers resisted.

In these difficult times of division much dialogue took place between the Eastern Church and the Western Church in an attempt to work out their differences. Since the Orthodox Church would not compromise and allow any changes to be made in the Faith, in 1054 the Roman Church officially severed itself from the rest of the Church.

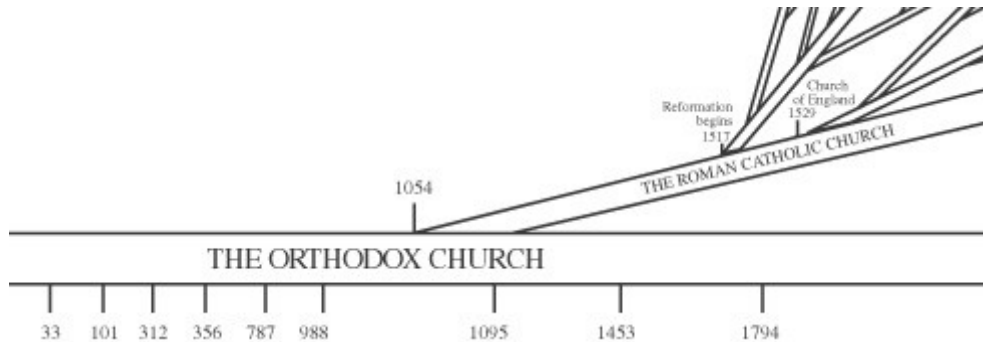
The division was based on issues of authority and theology, and underlying both these issues was the following dividing factor: In the East the Church was always looked at as something otherworldly which joins Heaven and earth, while in the West the Church began to become this-worldly, pointing believers towards the earthly organization rather than the one spiritual organism of the Body of Christ. Thus began "Organized Religion".

Although the rest of Christendom tried to call Rome back to the Orthodox understanding of Christianity, Rome had already made its decision to part ways and would not turn back. This was the first denomination (division) in Western Christendom, which later proved to be the first of thousands.

Throughout the years after this devastating schism, the West experienced tremendous turmoil and corruption. The Crusades began, which evolved into an attack on the Church in the East. Then came the Renaissance, which brought back pagan ideals and mixed them with Christianity, then the Inquisition, and finally the Protestant Reformation. The West experienced

the "Middle Ages," which marked the gradual transition between the ancient Christian world-view and the modern godless one. The East experienced no such Middle Ages, since there the Orthodox Church preserved the Christianity of the Apostles and the early Church.

Orthodoxy continued to endure martyrdom and persecution from the world—this time from the yoke of the Muslims. As with the persecution under the pagan Romans, suffering at the hands of the Muslims kept the Church pure by not allowing for lukewarmness of faith.



The Church in History

33

After the death and resurrection of Christ, the Church is established through the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

101

The death of the last of the Apostles, St. John the Evangelist, occurs after his having written the book of Revelation.

312

The establishment of the first Christian society, the Byzantine Empire, under the direction of St. Constantine the Great.

356

With the death of St. Anthony the Great, monasticism begins to be spread throughout the world.

787

The last of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, which identified all heresies and articulated the beliefs of the Christian Faith.

988

The conversion of Russia begins with the missionary labor of Saints Cyril and Methodius.

1054

The Great Schism occurs with the breaking off of the Western Roman Church from the Eastern Orthodox Church.

1095

The first of the Crusades begins, which weakens the Byzantine Empire and contributes to its eventual fall.

1453

The Turks overrun Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire ends.

1517

The Protestant Reformation begins, which is a reaction against all of the changes that took place in the Western Church after its breaking away from the Eastern Church.

1794

The Russian mission establishes the Orthodox Christian Faith on American soil.

The Third Rome

AT ABOUT THE TIME of the falling away of the Roman Church, the Orthodox Church was enlarged by the conversion of an entire nation. This was the Slavic nation of Russia. The steps towards this conversion first began in the year 863 when two missionary monks from the Byzantine Empire, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, set foot in Bulgaria and other Slavic lands. Through their labors, Christianity eventually reached Russia. Though they were from distant Constantinople, they were familiar with the Slavic people and language from their childhood. Since the Slavic people had no written language, St. Cyril devised the Slavonic alphabet from Greek in order to translate the Holy Scriptures. Hence the alphabet used in Slavic countries today is called the "Cyrillic" alphabet.

Although Sts. Cyril and Methodius brought the Gospel to the Slavic nations, the full conversion of the Russian people took place one hundred years later. Russia was almost totally pagan at that time, although there were small pockets of Christianity thanks to the labors of the Apostle Andrew. Apostle Andrew had preached throughout the land of Russia and placed crosses both in Kiev and on the Lake Ladoga island of Valaam in the north.

Almost a thousand years after Sr. Andrew, in 988, the Russian Prince Vladimir decided that an official religion was necessary for his country. In search of the true faith he then investigated all the major religions of the world, sending an envoy to visit their churches and temples. After having observed different religions, the envoy returned to the Prince and said, *When we went to Greece and the Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, we knew not whether we were in Heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men and their service surpasses those of all other nations.*" The Prince accepted the Orthodox Christian Faith, was baptized, and ordered that all the idols of the nation he destroyed.

It was not long before the entire Russian land became a bastion of Christian spiritual life filled with many saints. Soon churches covered the land, monasteries filled the vast wilderness, and golden domes were seen towering over every city and village.

Then in 1453 a great tragedy occurred. The seat of the Byzantine Empire of Constantinople was overtaken by the Muslim Turks who had been warring against Christian nations for hundreds of years. The fall of Byzantium led to the rise of the New Byzantium—Holy Russia. It seemed as if Russia was called upon to preserve the Orthodox Faith. The first Rome had departed from Orthodoxy and the second had fallen. Thus, Moscow became the third Rome.

Just as in Byzantium, every aspect of life in Russia was centered around the Church and Christian spiritual life, yet there still arose the need for a much deeper, God-centered life that only the desert can offer. In Russia the harsh wilderness became the desert that offered solitude and austerity for the God-centered life called monasticism. The founding father of Russian monasticism was St. Anthony of Kiev (1073). After having been formed as a monk on Mount Athos, Greece, he returned to his homeland and settled in a cave in Kiev. In a short time a whole monastery arose around that cave. Soon the monastic ideal spread throughout all of Russia, even to its deepest wilderness.

During the thousand years of Russian Christianity there were always saints who continued the spirit of the early Christian Church. For example there was St. Seraphim of Sarov (t1833), a monk who from childhood lived a very pure life. He had the gifts of healing and unceasing prayer, and was seen surrounded by a magnificent, unearthly light. This was the same Divine

light that Christ shown upon His Apostles so long ago and that His Apostles brought to the ends of the world.

The Ends of the World

WHILE RUSSIA was at its spiritual height, a group of Orthodox missionaries was sent eastward across Siberia to the New World in order to spread the treasure of the Byzantine Christian Faith. In 1794, a mission team of ten monks was gathered from the Monastery of Valaam, the island where Apostle Andrew had preached the Christian Faith centuries before. In the spirit of the Apostles these Russian monks sailed to Alaska, and through love and self-sacrifice brought thousands of the native peoples to the Christian Faith. One of these missionary monks met a martyr's end while another began monastic life in the New World, in the spirit of Sr. Anthony the Great and St. Anthony of Kiev. This was St. Herman (†1836), who became the **first saint of the land of America**. Thus, through Russia, the Christianity of the Apostles, of the catacombs, and of Byzantium was planted in American soil.

After the death of Sr. Herman the legacy of Orthodox Christianity in the New World was continued by Sr. Innocent (†1879). He was a simple priest from Siberia who had an unquenchable longing to give his whole life to the

service of God. This longing was fulfilled when he sailed to the wilds of Alaska. There he traveled throughout this frontier just as the Apostles did in other lands so long ago, living in hardships and difficulty, suffering extreme poverty and battling the harsh elements of nature with the sole purpose of making Heaven accessible to as many souls as possible. St. Innocent had to create a written language for the natives of Alaska just as Srs. Cyril and Methodius had done for their native people so long ago, so that these new Christians could have the word of God in their own language.

St. Innocent was later chosen to be the Bishop of Alaska and continued to sacrifice himself for his flock. Then in old age he returned to his homeland where he was chosen to be the head of the Church of Russia (a position similar to that of a patriarch). While head of the whole Russian Church he started missionary societies with the aim of spreading the Gospel to the ends of the world. After having lived a full life in the service of God, St. Innocent died in his homeland and found his rest with the saints in Heaven.

Less than twenty years later, a great luminary of the twentieth century was born in St. Innocent's homeland, who would one day continue the apostolic work in America. This was Sr. John Maximovitch. From childhood he loved Christ and His Church more than anything else in this world. This love was tested when his homeland of Russia became communist/atheist and underwent one of the bloodiest persecutions in the history of Christianity. The Church once again had to go into the catacombs in order to survive. In these difficult times God preserved St. John's life and he escaped to the Orthodox country of Serbia, where he later became a monk; and soon thereafter he was made a bishop.

As a bishop and successor of the Apostles he went to China, where he founded Orthodox churches. Here he started an orphanage and took care of unwanted children. He would even go to the slums and find babies in garbage cans and take them home. Later he was asked to be the bishop of San Francisco in the United States where he continued his work of living and spreading the Gospel.

Although he lived in the city, his way of life was like that of the desert monks of old. He prayed without ceasing, ate very little only once a day, slept only three hours a night, and wholly sacrificed himself for God and for his fellow man. He voluntarily chose this difficult way of life for the simple reason that Heaven was more important to him than the comforts of the earth. Through this he attained such heights of Christian perfection that he was seen several times surrounded in an unearthly light that emanated from him, and he was given the gift of working miracles. In 1966 St. John died and was laid to rest in San Francisco. To this day, along with St. Herman, St. Innocent, and all the saints of the Orthodox Church, he is revered for bringing the light of Christ to the ends of the world.

Conclusion

FROM THE TIME of the saints of the early Church to the saints of our own day and age, the original Church of Christ has been preserved as a treasure given to mankind by God Himself.

Throughout the centuries this universal Orthodox Church has maintained the fullness of the Christian experience in continuity, theology, spirituality, and sacramental life. It has given us the Liturgy, the Creed, the Bible, monasticism, and the whole of the Christian world-view.

This may come as a surprise to those who thought that the divided and fragmented Christian experience of the West was the only expression of the Church. Others, however, who have discovered the Eastern Church find relief for their souls, which are hungering for the ancient, historical Christian Church that the Apostles began, and which still exists in our own times.

This Church extends from the saints in Heaven down to the believers here on earth in order to raise us from earth to the heights of Heaven. Thus, the true essence of the Church cannot be found in its earthly institution but must be sought in the spiritual life of the Church which takes place in the heart; for it is within the heart that Christ reveals Himself.

Once Christ reveals Himself to a soul, the heart becomes a battleground where the Christian fights his way towards Heaven. This battle, which is the lifelong struggle of good over evil and virtue over vice, is called Unseen Warfare, and is the essence of the spiritual life of a Christian. In conducting this struggle the soul becomes purified in order to make a place for the living God to come and dwell in it. This is the true and ultimate purpose of the Church. Everything else in life is only secondary.

It was in order to establish this Church that God came down to earth, became a man, suffered, died, resurrected from the dead, and ascended into Heaven. Through this God showed mankind the way from earth to Heaven, and gave us His Holy Church to be the place where Heaven and earth meet, and where communion with God begins.

Source: <http://www.stjohnmemphis.org/orthodoxy.htm>