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[The Law of God: Foundations of the Orthodox Faith.](#) [Lesson 1.](#)

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Supplemental reading for the Law of God classes for adults at the Holy New Martyrs of Russia Church in Mulino, OR

Lesson 1

Introduction

When we visit different places, if we pay attention, we can usually tell to what purpose a certain place is dedicated, and what different people find most important or interesting. At a library, we see shelves with books and comfortable chairs with lamps—this place is designed for storing books and allowing people to enjoy reading them. At a university, we see large rooms with many seats and a lectern in front of them—this place is designed for allowing professors to lecture students. At a concert hall, we also see many seats and a stage in front of them—this place is designed for allowing musicians to perform for spectators. And at a friend's house, we may see posters of a famous actor on every wall—this tells us that our friend likes this actor, finds him interesting, and spends time reading about him and watching his films. It is much the same with Orthodox Christians: by observing how we build our churches, how we decorate them, and what we do, we can learn a lot about what we see as most important to us, what we are most interested in. It does not at all mean that we are not interested in anything else—quite the opposite: we enjoy good books, good music, and good films. But our relationship with our God is more important than all other things put together, and we express our understanding of this relationship in church.

For many of us, going to church on Sunday is the focal point of our encounter with the Orthodox faith; it is the experience that often best expresses our understanding of Orthodoxy. And when we enter an Orthodox church, if we pay attention, we notice that everything in it is specifically designed for one particular purpose—the service of the Holy Eucharist. We see a large room called the *sanctuary* where people gather for the Eucharist, we see the Altar and the Holy Table inside it where the Holy Gifts of the Eucharist are consecrated, we also see people who serve at the Holy Table. The Eucharist, which is at the heart of the service that we call “the Divine Liturgy,” is the highest expression of the Orthodox faith—it shows what we believe about God's relationship to us and our relationship to Him. And because the Eucharist is so important to us, and because it is often the primary way in which we interact with the Orthodox Church, its life, and its teachings, in this course, we shall study the service of the Eucharist—its history, meaning, language, and how it

expresses the very foundations of our Orthodox faith.

Questions for discussion:

1. If someone looked at your room or your house, what could they guess about your interests or about what is important to you?
2. Can anyone guess anything about you by the way you are dressed or by the way you act?

Why do we go to church on Sunday?

The question of why we go to church on Sunday consists of two questions: 1) Why do we go to church, and 2) Why on Sunday? We will try to find the answer to the first question at a later time, but let us now examine the second question: why do we go to church on Sunday and not some other day?

As we read in the Scripture, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the “first day of the week.”^[1] And those who are in the Body of Christ which is the Church^[2] also rise together with Him from the death of sin to eternal life with God.^[3] In celebration of this new life, Christians have been gathering together on the first day of the week in order to give thanks to their Savior. The word *Eucharist* comes from the Greek word which means *thanksgiving*. In the Jewish calendar—our Lord and His Apostles were Jews—the week begins on the day which we now call *Sunday*. Thus, from the very beginning of the Church, Christians gathered together on Sunday in order to take part in the Eucharist.^[4]

The day on which Christ rose from the dead—the first day of the week—also signifies the first day of the New Covenant established between God and us. It is the first day of the new world, in which sin and death no longer have power over people, because Christ conquered both; and in His Body, the Church, we also can be free from the bondage of sin and death. This is why Sunday is so important to us, and this is why we devote this day to God and give thanks to Him—take part in the Eucharist.

Early Christians even chose to call this day *the Lord's Day* instead of *Sun Day*. In Russian, we call this day *the Resurrection Day*, and in Slavonic we say *the No-Work Day* in order to remind us that on this day, our earthly cares must be laid aside because our Lord is calling us to come to His house.

Of course, we can thank God on any other day of the week as well. In fact, very soon after the Church was established, Christians began to celebrate the Eucharist every time they came together to commemorate the life of a saint or an event from the life of Christ. Those were the origins of the Church holidays which we celebrate. Nowadays, in most parishes, we celebrate the Eucharist on Sundays and on major Church holidays, and in monasteries, divine services may be celebrated almost every day. In later lessons, we will learn about various other services of the Orthodox Church and how they relate to the most important one—the Eucharist.

Questions for discussion:

1. How do Christians honor the day of Christ's resurrection?
2. If for some reason you cannot come to church, what do you usually do on Sunday morning?

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[1] See Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; and John 20:1

[2] See Eph. 5:23 and Col. 1:24

[3] Rom. 6:4

[4] See, for example, Acts 20:7, also Didache 14

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Lesson 2.

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Supplemental reading for the Law of God classes for adults at the Holy New Martyrs of Russia Church in Mulino, OR

Lesson 2

Introduction

Before we begin our study of the Liturgy and the foundations of our faith expressed through this service, we must define a few key terms that will help us in our discussion: *sin*, *Eucharist*, *sacrament*, *baptism*, and *repentance*. Because this course is designed for people who are not theologians by training and is not intended to produce professionally trained theologians, our definitions and discussions will necessarily be incomplete. We will try to examine only a few of the key ideas in ways that are easy to understand, but I urge all students to note things that seem interesting, ask questions, refer to the works of the authors whose names are mentioned in the lessons, and study the source texts directly.

Sin

We shall not retell here the story of the first humans—Adam and Eve—both because it is well-known and because it can be easily found in the first few chapters of Genesis. What is important for us to remember is that the Scriptures speak to us about the other-worldly things by using the words and concepts from this world which we can understand and to which we can relate. Consider, for example, the parables of Christ: “...the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves,”^[1] and others, in which He likens the kingdom to farming, baking, or fishing.^[2] Likewise, when we talk about sin, we often have to use images that are familiar to us, even though they do not fully describe the spiritual reality.

Various Christian authors have talked about sin using various analogies: some have likened it to an act of disobedience, others—to a personal offence to God, yet others—to a crime or a trespass against divine law. Undoubtedly, certain elements of each description can be useful. But in our discussion of sin, it seems helpful to liken sin to a disease, a contagious illness. Having allowed this disease to enter their nature and to afflict it, Adam and Eve passed this corrupted nature to every one of their descendants, that is to say, to the whole human race. Everyone born of Adam carries in his nature the terminal illness of the *original sin*. This illness also corrupts and brings into disarray the divine order of our being, in which our spirit was created to direct us toward God, our soul must follow the direction of the spirit, and our body should serve God in the physical realm. Instead, many humans are led by the desires of their bodies and the passions of their souls, which leads to *personal sin*.

Personal sin is a willful or ignorant violation of the divine law, the divine order, and it leads to spiritual wounds and to spiritual death.^[3] Just as violating the physical laws of gravity or electromagnetism will result in broken bones and electrical burns, in the same way, violating spiritual laws will result in very real wounds, which, however, do not show up on X-ray images. Often, people know that what they are about to do is wrong, but led by their desires and passions they go against their conscience and do it anyway. We can liken this to a drug addict, who knows very well that his addiction is killing him, but goes and gets the next fix anyway. Sometimes, our confused and corrupted nature does not allow us to make the correct choice, and we sin in

ignorance. Unfortunately, just as drinking battery acid without any knowledge of what it is still causes chemical burns, sins committed in ignorance still carry their destructive toll on our spiritual nature.

But what if someone does not see any sins and is convinced that he is not afflicted by this deadly illness? Indeed, there are some people who are dying of cancer, but refuse to believe that they have it and do not run to the physician. In the same way, there are those who do not see their spiritual illness and refuse to run to the Divine Physician. According to Saint Macarius of Egypt, “Those who insist that there is no sin in man are like people who are drowning in a flood but refuse to acknowledge it... In the same way, these people are drowning in the depths of the waves of corruption, but insist that they are free from sin in their minds and thoughts.”^[4] And this brings us to another very important point: only those who see that they are drowning, know that they are dying, realize that they are afflicted—can accept Christ as their Savior Who redeems them from death and heals their illnesses. Saint Ignatii (Brianchaninov) wrote that, “He who does not realize his own sinfulness, his fall, his own demise—cannot accept Christ, cannot believe in Christ, cannot be a Christian. He who [sees himself as] smart and virtuous, he who is satisfied with himself, who considers himself worthy of all rewards earthly and heavenly—does not need Christ.”^[5] But the hearts of those who understand what Christ does for us are filled with thanksgiving toward our Savior.

Eucharist

The second term we should discuss is *Eucharist*. As we mentioned in Lesson 1, the word *Eucharist* means *thanksgiving*, but thanks to God can be given in various forms. We could, for example, just say “thank you”; we could also write a speech or even an ode; or we could erect a monument as a way to show our gratitude. And we see all of these forms of thanksgiving in church. Christians build magnificent monuments to honor Christ, our services are filled with beautiful hymns and odes, and our prayers—with words of thanksgiving. Consider, for example, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow commissioned in 1812 by Emperor Alexander I “to signify Our gratitude to Divine Providence for saving Russia from the doom that overshadowed Her [the Napoleonic invasion—S.S.]”^[6] or the following hymn from the Divine Liturgy: “We praise You, we bless You, we give thanks to You, and we pray to You, Lord our God.” The Orthodox understanding of the Eucharist, however, while including all of the aforementioned elements, is more specific.

We believe that the Son of God became man, accepted the death of the Cross, and rose on the third day in order to save us, humans. He gave us a way to put aside our old corrupt nature, which inherited death, and to unite with Him in His resurrected Body, which gives life. Each one of these concepts will be discussed in more detail in further lessons, but it suffices to say here that the Eucharist is the sacrament of the Body of Christ. The focal point of the Eucharist is the act of communion—the union with Christ through the consumption of His Body and Blood by the faithful.

If we ask ourselves what the one unique thing that Jesus left to us is, we will quickly realize that He did not leave us a holy book—as far as we know, He did not write anything at all to be passed down to His disciples and to us,^[7] He did not leave us some novel teaching—His moral commandments can all be found in the Old Testament which He Himself gave to His people. But He gave Himself to us—His Body and His Blood: “... Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it He broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My Body.’ Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks, He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is My Blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”^[8] Now imagine that someone that someone who loves you gives you a gift. It is not enough to say “thank you, I accept your gift”—you must actually take it. If you say that you accept the gift, but never actually stretch your arm out, never actually take it—have you really accepted anything? This is why when Christ offers us His precious Gift, we give thanks—thus, *Eucharist*—and partake of this Gift by doing exactly as Christ commanded—we take, eat, and drink.

Sacraments

The Eucharist is one of the sacraments of the Church. In fact, some have referred to it as “the sacrament of sacraments”—the highest sacrament. But what is a *sacrament*? In short, a sacrament is a synergetic act of God and man that has one goal—our salvation. Some count two sacraments, others—eight, a more common number in the West is seven: baptism, chrismation, communion, repentance, matrimony, unction, and priesthood. But in essence, there is only one sacrament—the sacrament of our salvation, and any synergetic act of God and man in the context of salvation is sacramental. Another helpful picture to keep in mind when we discuss sacraments is an image of medicine, which God, the Divine Physician, gives us in order to restore us to health and life. This image will be very important to us when we discuss the sacrament of the Eucharist in the next lesson, but for now we will limit the scope of our discussion to just two sacramental acts: baptism and repentance.

Baptism

Everyone born of the old Adam inherits corruption and death from him. Christ became the new Adam for us and allowed us to be born again, not as children of the old Adam, but as children of God. He took upon Himself our human nature inherited from the old Adam and restored it, sanctified it, and resurrected it to eternal life with God. And by being in Christ’s Body, we also can have this life. This is why it is so important to be in Christ’s Body—because there is no life in any other body—not in Paul’s, not in Peter’s, not in mine, and not in yours—only in Christ’s.

Apostle Paul wrote that the Body of Christ is the Church.[\[9\]](#) Baptism is the sacrament by which we enter into the Church, the Body of Christ. Through the visible sign of immersion into water, we become partakers of the invisible reality[\[10\]](#)—our old corrupted nature is buried and a seed of the new life is planted in us by God. Here is what the Apostle Paul wrote about the sacrament of baptism:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. We know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him. The death He died, He died to sin, once for all; but the life He lives, He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.[\[11\]](#)

Thus, in baptism, we are freed from the bonds of original sin and enter into the Body of Christ in which is our salvation. Therefore, a person who is not baptized remains outside the Body of Christ and does not partake of the life of the Body.[\[12\]](#) This is why an unbaptized person cannot participate in the Eucharist—the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. We will discuss this in more detail later.

It is important to remember that baptism is the entrance, but not the final destination; it is the seed, but not the fruit. Without life according to the commandments of Christ, the seed dies as the one that fell on rocky soil.[\[13\]](#) If the newly-baptized person continues to live according to his old sins and passions, then the divine seed is choked out as the one that fell among thorns.[\[14\]](#) If we sin, we cannot remain in the Body of Christ, which is without sin. But let us not get despondent—we all fall short, but the all-merciful God gives us ointment to heal our spiritual wounds and to make our baptismal gowns once again white as snow.

Repentance

Repentance is one of the sacraments which God gave us for our salvation. Repentance is an act of

co-laboring with the Creator; the miracle of transforming the old self into new, dirty into clean, ill into whole. The foundation of the sacrament of repentance is the realization of one's deadly sinful illness, a clear vision of one's demise. Only he who understands that he is ill will run to the Physician; only he who sees that he is perishing will call out to the Savior; and only he who wants to be well will follow the rubrics prescribed by the Physician and take the necessary Medicine.

In repentance, a man separates himself from sin, learns not to be one with it, and begins to understand that he is created in the image of God, but sin is a horrible caricature, corruption, and illness. Having seen the ugliness of sin, a man turns away from it, opens his wound to the Physician, and begs for healing. It is in this movement of man toward God—one who is ill to the Source of health—and God toward man—the Physician to one who needs His help—it is in this union of two mutually-directed acts that the sacrament of repentance takes place.

Repentance necessarily includes a sincere desire to turn one's life away from sin and toward God. Merely listing one's sins without any desire to stop committing them and without any steps in that direction can be likened to the bragging of a thief who cheerfully recounts his past crimes while preparing for the next one.

We must daily repent of our sins and ask God for healing. The evening prayer rule which can be found in any prayer book contains the Daily Confession of Sins—an example of a daily confession before God. We must make this general confession our own. We must unite with the words of this prayer in such a way that they come not only from our mouth but also from our heart. We can and must change the words of the Confession to reflect our own spiritual state and add to it our own "illnesses." And it is not necessary to wait until evening to turn to our Heavenly Father with repentance and a plea for help: when you notice a sin, immediately turn your heart to God, repent, and pray for help and healing!

Confession, on the other hand, is an ecclesiastical testimony of personal repentance, a freeing from the burden of sin in accordance with Christ's commandment,^[15] and an opportunity to receive help and support from the Church in our struggle against sin. One should go to confession not only when preparing for Communion, but also at any other time when it is needed. Of course, it is impossible to list all of our sins in all their details during a confession. But this is not necessary. It is important to understand the essence of the illness and how to treat it, rather than indulge in all the possible manifestations of its symptoms.

Questions for discussion:

1. Can you name any involuntary sins or those committed in ignorance?
2. What is a *synergetic act*? Give an example of one.

Further reading

The best works on the effects of sin and *repentance* are written by the holy ascetics: Abba Dorotheus, John of the Ladder, Macarius of Egypt and others, and also the diaries of John of Kronstadt.

On *baptism*, it is best to refer to the catechetical writings of the holy hierarchs: John Chrysostom, Gregory the Theologian, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, and others.

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[1] Matt. 18:23; NRSV here *et passim* unless otherwise noted

[2] Matt. 13:24, 31, 33, 47

[3] We will not discuss in this lesson the effect that sin has in the physical world, including our physical bodies.

[4] Макарий Египетский, преп. *Духовные беседы*. Христианская жизнь, 2005. С. 155.
Translation from Russian here and elsewhere is mine—S.S.

[5] Игнатий (Брянчанинов), свят. *Творения*. Т. I-V. СПб., 1905. Т. IV, с. 378.

[6] From the Imperial manifest, 25 December 1812

[7] The Church tradition states that Jesus wrote a letter to king Abgar V of Ephesus. The texts to which we now have access are widely considered to be a third-century fabrication. In John 8:7 we also read that Jesus wrote on the ground with His finger. Neither instance, however, can in any way be considered an attempt by Christ to provide us with a sacred text.

[8] Matt. 26:26-8

[9] Colossians 1:18, 24

[10] Saint Augustine of Hippo defined a sacrament as a visible sign of an invisible reality.

[11] Rom. 6:3-11

[12] One notable exception is the holy martyrs who did not always have an opportunity to be baptized before they suffered martyrdom for Christ. Their own blood shed for Christ becomes for them as if the waters of their baptism.

[13] Matt. 13:6

[14] Matt. 13:7

[15] Matt. 18:18; John 20:22-3