



What is Orthodoxy?

by Fr. Sergei Sveshnikov

On the first Sunday of Great Lent we celebrate the Triumph of Orthodoxy, a feast that was established in the year 842 to mark the final defeat of the Iconoclast heresy. In issuing a decree to celebrate the Sunday of Orthodoxy, the Synod of Constantinople wished to specifically commit the restoration of holy icons and the triumph of Orthodox Christology to the memory of the Church. During the eleven centuries that have followed since that day, the feast has come to be celebrated as the triumph of Orthodoxy over all heresies that have troubled the Church. Within the solemn proclamation of the Anathema which is heard on this day in every Orthodox cathedral, the Church in its fullness confirms the faith of the Fathers and rejects all heresies of the past and present. But the meaning of this feast is not in the rejection of false teaching from our midst, but in the true triumph of Orthodoxy in our hearts.

What is Orthodoxy? All too often we are more familiar with the heresies of old—Iconoclasm, Arianism, Monophysitism—or of the modern day—Ecumenism, Modernism, Sergianism—than we are with our own faith. We can eloquently argue the fallacies of Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, but can we tell what makes us Orthodox? What is Orthodoxy, and how can we strive for its triumph in our lives?

As we begin our search for the meaning of Orthodoxy, we must first look at the definitions given by the Fathers in the profession of faith or the Creed. From its very beginning, the Christian faith had to be defined, set apart, called out, and elected. Several redactions of the Creed—from that of the Apostles to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed—stand witness to this laborious task of

defining Orthodoxy. The word “Orthodox” is not in the Creed; the Fathers of the Nicene Council (A.D. 325) called it simply “the Symbol of Faith” (Σύμβολον τῆς Πίστεως). But it is this profession of faith that continues to serve as the foundation of our belief today, and that is why we rightfully call it “the Symbol of the Orthodox Faith.”

The Holy Church uses the Creed to instruct us in our faith throughout our entire earthly life. We recite the Creed before we are baptized into the Church, we hear it during services, we solemnly proclaim it together during every Divine Liturgy, we recite it every day as part of our daily prayer rule, and when partaking of our last Communion on the bed of illness and infirmity, we once again proclaim the Symbol of Orthodox Faith. This profession of faith which we make ours is an unbroken link that ties us to the faith of the Apostles and the martyrs, the Fathers and the holy hierarchs—it is the profession of every Orthodox saint for over two millennia. Those who so often “speed-chant” right over the Creed, and especially those who do not know the Creed, should remember that this profession of faith is made by the whole choir of the saints of the Church, and we should try to join in this choir—“with one mouth and one heart.”

Is knowing the basic truths contained in the profession of our faith enough to be Orthodox? The holy apostle James says:

“You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (James 2:19) Knowing the truth is not the same as making it your own. Each one of the ancient and modern heretics knew the Creed very well, and most of them did not even try to change it, take anything away or add anything to it. Instead, they corrupted the understanding of the faith, and spread their corrupt teachings among people. This is why it is so important to be familiar with the works of the Fathers of the Church.

Through a life of prayer, fasting and study of the Scripture, the Fathers acquired the mind of Christ, and the Holy Spirit guided their understanding of divine truths. To them, the words of the Symbol of Faith were not abstract concepts, but the very foundations of their lives.

We no longer read the works of Saint John Chrysostom or other Fathers in most parish churches. Even our divine services, full of the wisdom and the spirit of patristic theology, have become abbreviated and less attended. As piety among us declines, we are not willing to sacrifice much time from our busy lives to be in church and to hear the beautiful and profoundly meaningful words of the services. Yet, in spite of this, the services do not become less beautiful and meaningful, nor do they become less important for us. Even though our piety is declining, our literacy is not. Most of us can read, and the texts which were once hand-copied and kept in monastery libraries are now widely available both in print and in electronic format. In order to acquire the Orthodox mindset and the worldview of the Fathers, we must become familiar with their thought and with their heritage. Both the theological and the liturgical heritage of the Fathers are indispensable to our formation as Orthodox Christians.

Some may complain that the language of the services is archaic and that the writings of the Fathers are too complicated and difficult to understand. This is true. Those who do not put forth effort to become familiar with the spiritual

texts will indeed find them difficult. This is true, however, of any area of knowledge. People who do not practice reading have difficulty getting through a page, those who do not cook cannot easily follow a recipe, one who is not familiar with economics does not know the difference between the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Dow Jones Composite Average or what their significance is, and if you do not watch many films you can hardly understand the talk about movie stars. Similarly, if we do not spend time and effort becoming familiar with the heritage of the Church, we will continue to feel like strangers who do not understand Orthodoxy, cannot relate to it, and can barely comprehend the language of divine services. Everything worth pursuing takes time and effort. We have the time. It is our choice what we do with it and toward which things we apply our efforts.

Finally, even this is not enough. If Christ willed for us to be saved through knowledge and understanding, He would have published a book and opened a school. Instead, He founded the Church. Knowing the texts and languages makes a good academician, but it does not protect a man from the river of fire, unless he is inside the Arc of Salvation—the Church. And to be in the Church, we must live the life of the Church—with its fasts and feasts, its services and sacraments—all has been established for our benefit. Every time we disobey the Church, every time we choose not to attend a service, every time we give up the fast to please the demands of our bellies—we continue to cut the very fabric that connects us to the Church. To be God’s children, we must become part of God’s family.

Our salvation is in the Body of Christ, and being in this Body and in communion with this Body is what truly makes us Orthodox. Orthodoxy is not merely a teaching, a philosophy, or even a worldview; it is the sacrament of salvation. Therefore, it is not enough to know or to have; it is necessary to *be*. Orthodoxy is not primarily a body of knowledge, but first and foremost it is life—life in the Church and the life of the Church. And just as human life consists of very small and seemingly insignificant steps that together make up our journey from the cradle to the grave, life in the Church also consists of small steps that lead from death to resurrection. Each one of these steps, no matter how small, is very important, and we must strive on our spiritual path as the merchant, who having found a pearl of great price, gave up everything else to own it (Matt. 13:45-46)..

You cannot find ten minutes in a day to pray to God?—Seek diligently and find five! You cannot find time to read the works of the Fathers?—Start by reading the Gospel and do not forsake it! You cannot be in church for every service?—Begin by making a real effort to come at least for every festal service! You cannot give a lot of money to those in need?—Give what you can, even if it is only two mites (Mk. 12:42), or call your elderly neighbor and ask if you could be of any help. Do something about your spiritual life! The kingdom of heaven is not reached by “couch potatoes,” but by those who force themselves out of their comfort (*cf.* Matt. 11:12); Christ is not calling to Himself the lazy who refuse to walk, but those who labor (Matt. 11:28) and who “strive to enter through the narrow gate” (Lk. 13:24). Not every one of us will walk in the footsteps of Saint Seraphim of Sarov and fast as he did, but every one of us knows when it is a Wednesday or a Friday. Not everyone will pray for two hours as did Saint Martyr Polycarp, but everyone knows the simple words

that have been repeated by multitudes of saints: “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!”

And so it is in the life of the Church, in the life exemplified by our saints, that we find the true meaning of what it is to be Orthodox. And this life is not a biography or a memoir. It is not found in ancient scrolls or on the pages of history books. It must be found in the mirror. You, who were so wondrously fashioned in the divine image of the Creator (Gen. 1:27), take courage to become His likeness, and your faith will make you well (*cf.* Matt. 9:22)!

As we celebrate this Sunday of Orthodoxy, let us remember that the triumph of Orthodoxy cannot be marked on the calendar—it is marked in our lives and in our hearts. Let us rejoice today with the whole Church, and let us sing the restoration of holy icons in the temples of God. But this restoration did not end in the ninth century; it is to be completed by us, as we co-labor with God to restore His holy images in the temples of our own souls.

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