

On Becoming an Orthodox Christian

Inquirer

Oftentimes once a person attends Orthodox worship and prayer they will want to know more about the Orthodox Church. They will seek out books and pamphlets to read, listen to podcasts, ask questions of the Priest and other Orthodox Christians, continue to attend worship and prayer. This process of inquiry makes one an Inquirer. If from what the Inquirer learns they desire to become an Orthodox Christian, then should discuss reception into the catechumenate with the Priest.

Catechumen

Historical background – God created humans with the capacity, and desire to learn. He did this so that He could reveal Himself to the people with which He made covenant to be their God and they, His people, i.e., to make possible the Creator and the created could have relationship. The revelation of God, particularly the ways in which He interceded, protected, delivered, chastened His people existed for many years as oral tradition. Transmission of the revelation took form as music and or poetry, committed to memory and recited individually and corporately during festal and ritual occasions. In short, this is how the covenant people in successive generations, learned who God is. In time, elements of the oral tradition were committed to writing, collected, and treated with great care and reverence. The oral tradition never ceased but continued alongside the written tradition and provided the context in which the written text could be properly understood. From the beginning the Holy Spirit superintended this process ensuring the revelation of God remained untarnished and undiminished.

God directed His Old Covenant people to teach their children the things and ways of God

“Now, Israel, listen to the statutes and ordinances I am teaching you to follow, so that you may live, enter, and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, so that you may keep the commands of the Lord your God I am giving you... Look, I have taught you statutes and ordinances as the Lord my God has commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to possess. Carefully follow them, for this will show your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the peoples. When they hear about all these statutes, they will say, ‘This great nation is indeed a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him? And what great nation has righteous statutes and ordinances like this entire law I set before you today?”
(Deuteronomy 4:1-8)

In the New Covenant Jesus commanded His Apostles to teach

“The eleven disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted. Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:16-20)

From the time of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit into Orthodox Christians on the Day of Pentecost, the Church has instructed Her people. The teaching of Christ to the Apostles and from them to the first Christians began in earnest from the resurrection of Christ to the Day of

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Pentecost with particular energy from the Ascension of Christ to Pentecost, a ten-day period during which the disciples of Christ received direction to wait... until the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. What did the disciples do during this time if not share with each other all that Jesus had taught them? Recall the episode recorded by St. Luke regarding Christ's encounter with some of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He showed them from the Scriptures – Moses, the Writings, the Prophets, that all that happened concerning the Christ was anticipated for quite some time and recorded in the Scriptures. The disciples needed Christ to illumine them in order to understand. With Pentecost the disciples preached the Gospel and instructed the people in Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. Paul and Barnabas spent months with the fledgling Christian communities they planted, teaching them. And so, it went and goes. Evangelizing in the days following the descent of the Holy Spirit went easily compared to later centuries primarily because those to whom the Apostles preached and taught possessed Scriptural knowledge, received at home, school and synagogue. As Christianity spread to non-Jewish, non-Scripturally literate people, New Testament era teachers, pastors, and prophets needed more time, effort, and energy to explain and teach the things of God. In the wake of this circumstance the Church established a structured and intensive curriculum by which those who desired to become Orthodox Christians could learn not only the content of the Orthodox faith, but how to live the Orthodox faith. By the fourth century, those enrolled as catechumens could look forward to a catechetical period to last three years culminating in Baptism (*As Priest I require at a minimum one year for the catechuminate*).

Purpose

In addition to learning the content of the faith, the catechuminate is a time for spiritual reflection leading to repentance, the forsaking of sin, embracing the struggle to live a holy life. As such there are foundational moral requirements for Orthodox Christians to meet from the catechuminate going forward. Cohabitation between a man and woman without the benefit of marriage is unacceptable. If a person interested in becoming a catechumen cohabits, they must end the cohabitation in order to enter the catechuminate.

The Orthodox Church has always considered homosexuality a sin. Though same sex attraction may be deeply seated in the soul, someone seeking entry to the catechuminate and subsequent reception into the Church must repent of this sin and covenant with God to live life singly, pursuing by the grace of God, along with all Orthodox Christians a life holy and pleasing to God.

Many converts to the Orthodox Church come from some other religious tradition. However, a growing number of people with no religious experience are seeking the Orthodox Church. It is typical for someone learning about Orthodox Christianity to understand it through the filter of their previous religious experience both in terms of teaching and practice. Keep in mind, however, Orthodox Christianity will not “fit” into the paradigm that is Roman Catholicism or Protestantism. Both the foundation and structure of Orthodox Christianity is unique. To grasp Orthodox Christianity or to let Orthodox Christianity grab hold of a person, they need to leave their previously acquired religious knowledge and practice at the door of the Church. The particulars will be broached during catechism.

In preparation for reception to the catechuminate, an inquirer will with the Priest prayerfully consider the selection of a Sponsor (i.e., Godfather, Godmother). The Sponsor must be a serious Orthodox Christian, and the same sex as the inquirer. The Sponsor will assist the catechumen to navigate through this process. Before settling upon a Sponsor, the inquirer will ask the blessing of the Priest for their selection for a sponsor.

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Central to worship in the Orthodox Church is offering. We are frequently admonished in the prayer of the Church to “commit ourselves, each other and all our life unto Christ our God.” We make thanks-offering to God the gifts of bread and wine which become for us truly the Body and truly the Blood of Christ received “for the remission of sins and unto life everlasting.” From time immemorial Orthodox Christians have brought the first fruits of their harvest to God as offering. We still do this in the Orthodox Church. On the Feast of Transfiguration for example, we bring grapes into the temple to receive a blessing. Though in present practice the blessed grapes are shared and eaten by the faithful following Divine Liturgy for the Feast, some churches, monasteries still make wine from these grapes offered which is then used in the Divine Liturgy. Most of us living in the United States do not work the farm. We do not have fruits and produce from our fields to offer in worship to God. So, we offer a portion of our earnings received as compensation from our employment. The catechumenate is the prime time and opportunity to determine how much to give and begin the practice of giving.

During the catechumenate, the Priest provides instruction and guidance on setting a rule of prayer and supporting the catechumen in the practice of a prayer rule.

In cooperation with the Priest a catechumen will prayerfully select an Orthodox Saint as their patron signified by the adoption of that Saint’s name. Perhaps the best way to go about this is to consult the daily lives of the saints. I have found that many catechumens while reading the lives of the saints will be positively impressed by a saint and desire to adopt them as their patron or to allow the saint to adopt them. The Priest will make the final decision, i.e., provide the blessing for adoption of the name of the saint as their own.

Prior to their Chrismation or Baptism, an adult convert will make a life confession to God with the Priest present as witness to the confession. A life confession is just as it sounds. The catechumen will prayerfully examine their life, make note of all those sins committed and then confess these in the confessional. For those unaccustomed to confession, which is most everybody, this requirement is intimidating. Yet, those who embrace the grace made available by the Holy Spirit and confess, consider this could be the only right and proper way to make entrance into the Church.

Should a catechumen make the decision to enter the Orthodox Church and they are married (i.e., having been married outside the Church in a religious service in another Christian church) according to the Holy Synod of Bishops, Orthodox Church in America, do not need to be remarried in the Orthodox Church. However, these and or those united in a civil ceremony or religious service other than Christian, will discuss with the Priest the best way to proceed in order to bring their marriage under the blessed protection of Almighty God.

During the catechumenate, the Priest along with the Bishop, when necessary, will determine the means of entry into the Orthodox Church – Baptism, Chrismation & Eucharist; Chrismation & Eucharist; or Confession and Eucharist. The catechumen will discuss with the Priest the frequency with which they will make Confession and receive the Holy Eucharist once they are received into the Church. In the Orthodox Church in America typically a communicant receives the Holy Eucharist at least monthly or more (this is considered frequent communion) and will make Confession no less than one time per month. The Priest will instruct the Communicant on how to make confession.

When making preparation to receive the Holy Eucharist, an Orthodox Christian will to the best of

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their knowledge, be at peace with all. That is to say, if they know they have sinned against someone, they will confess their sin to the person and ask for forgiveness. Naming this sin in the Confessional must also take place. If a woman has her menses, she will abstain from reception of the Holy Eucharist. If a man has a nocturnal emission the night before the Divine Liturgy, they will abstain from receiving the Holy Eucharist. Also, a healthy Orthodox Christian will fast from all fluids and food no less than from midnight the night before Divine Liturgy until after reception of the Holy Eucharist. If someone smokes, they will abstain from smoking for the same duration as from food. If someone is ill, aged, pregnant, or nursing an infant, discuss with the Priest a rule of fasting which considers any unique circumstance. The married will abstain from sexual relations the evening/night prior. Finally, attendance at Great Vespers the evening before the Divine Liturgy and praying the prayers before Holy Communion along with the Canon in Preparation of Holy Communion (found in just about every Orthodox prayer book with which I am familiar) will round out preparation to receive the Eucharist.

Finally, a brief word on head covering for women. Unfortunately, due to cultural rebellion, women are discouraged from wearing a covering on their head as has always been customary for Orthodox Christian women from time immemorial. It is seen as an act of subservience to men in what is considered a male-dominated society. This of course is not the case for the Orthodox Church. Women are encouraged to cover their heads in addition to dressing modestly, "because of the angels." In Genesis we read about the Nephilim, the giants of renown. The Nephilim are the offspring of the unnatural union between those angels created by God to provide protection over the nations and the daughters of men. We are told that these angels looked with longing upon mortal women and as such abandoned their God-ordained and blessed positions of honor and responsibility. In short, the Church asks that women cover their head for modesty. I encourage women to cover their head, but the action must be accepted freely. In short, I do not demand it as requisite to participation in the Holy Sacraments of the Church. This guidance on modesty applies to men just as much as it applies to women. Men must adorn themselves modestly at all times, especially when in the house of God.

As an inquirer grows in their knowledge of the Orthodox Church and the practices established over millennia for spiritual growth, they very naturally desire to undertake these practices. In the Orthodox Church, it is never appropriate for an Orthodox Christian to decide completely on their own of what their spiritual life will consist. This is always a process characterized by discussion with a spiritual father, i.e., parish priest, and the parish priest bestowing his blessing on a way forward. One prayer practice in particular I observed over the years which meets this characterization is the Jesus Prayer and along with it, use of and adornment with a prayer rope. Words of caution – a blessing from your Priest is necessary to begin the discipline, rule of the Jesus Prayer, to include use of a prayer rope. Before beginning practice of the Jesus Prayer rule of prayer, you must be a catechumen. Discrete use of a prayer rope (33 knots or less) may be used in church. Under no circumstances is it proper to wrap a prayer rope (of any size but seen mostly with 100 knot or more) around one's wrist, visible for others to see. Yes, we see monastics so adorned in their monastery, but Protection of the Holy Virgin Mary is not a monastery. We must always be on guard against self-delusion, i.e., prelest.

This summary on the catechumenate may seem a bit daunting, as it addresses serious matters. The one who desires to enter the Orthodox Church will quickly learn the Apostolic maxim, "Let everything be done decently and in order." Putting this content on paper will go a long way to insure all is done decently and in order, that the one preparing to enter the Church will do so knowing what the Orthodox Church believes and how that belief must transform their lives.