

WHAT IS THE ORTHODOX CHURCH?

The Orthodox Church is the original Church that was founded by the Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles, and it preserves both apostolic tradition and apostolic succession. It has had a physical, historical presence from the day of Pentecost to the present time. The Church began as one united body in Jerusalem, spread throughout the world, and has continued with its teachings unchanged up to today. This unity and continuity, since it is from God and was promised by Him, cannot be broken. Christ only founded one Church with one set of beliefs. He did not start tens of thousands of different groups with different beliefs, and it is not His will that they exist. The bishops of the Orthodox Church, on the other hand, who are shepherds of the flock under the great Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, are the bearers and protectors of the apostolic Faith “which was once for all delivered to the saints” [Jude 3].

HOW IS THE ORTHODOX CHURCH ORGANIZED AND ADMINISTERED?

The apostles, during their ministry throughout the world, chose faithful, godly men, instructed them in the whole Faith, and through a unique gift of divine grace by the laying on of hands, established these chosen men as bishops in the local parts of the Church to succeed them in their apostolic office and ministry. In this way, the episcopacy perpetuates the mission of the apostles, safeguarding the teachings of Christ and transmitting them to the faithful without any deviations or innovations, from generation to generation. Thus is preserved the God-established hierarchal order. The clergy of the Orthodox Church comprise bishops, priests (presbyters), deacons, and lower clergy such as subdeacons and readers. The word bishop means “overseer,” and his role is to guide the flock entrusted to him through teaching the Orthodox Faith in its purity and ordaining both married and unmarried clergy to minister to the laity and lead them on the path of salvation. To

be a shepherd of souls is a tremendous and grave responsibility that requires self-sacrificing love and fidelity to the doctrines of the apostles. Only the Orthodox Church has maintained unchanged the whole teaching (the apostolic tradition) and God-pleasing way of life and worship which the apostles all received from the Lord and all taught, and provides its members with the holy mysteries (sacraments) instituted by the Lord for our salvation.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “APOSTOLIC TRADITION”?

This is the teaching and the way of life and worship that the apostles instituted, having received it from the Lord. The term denotes not only those things that the apostles taught through writing but also that which they preached and taught orally by their God-inspired words and also the rules of Church life decreed by them. Through preserving the entire teaching and regulated order of the apostles, the Church safeguards herself from disobedience to God through innovation in regard to Faith, worship, or way of life. You may also hear the expression “holy or sacred tradition,” which usually denotes customs or pious practices that have been used since ancient times, such as making the sign of the Cross over oneself.

The twelve apostles of the Lord preached and established Christian communities throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe, and the most important of these churches became patriarchates, apostolic sees that had special influence. In ancient times there were five patriarchates: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. These became special guardians of the Orthodox Faith, and their bishops (patriarchs) were leaders in preserving the tradition of the Church. One important aspect of this tradition are the holy canons, rules that have been composed by the divinely-inspired ecumenical councils and which all Christians are obliged to follow.

WHAT WERE THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS?

In the first centuries after the Resurrection of Christ, Christianity was often persecuted in the Roman Empire under its pagan rulers. This finally ended when Saint Constantine the Great became the sole Roman emperor in 324 and both legalized and promoted the Christian Faith. Nevertheless, the devil, who never ceases to plot against the Church, was now devising new ways to separate believers from the Church. He did this by creating heresies, which are false beliefs about Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Church, or any aspect of the Orthodox Faith. When someone knowingly accepts any such blasphemous teachings, the Holy Spirit, Who is “the Spirit of the truth” [Jn. 15:26], can no longer dwell in that person, for he has cut himself off from the Church. For this reason, the holy fathers, men who were renowned both for their wisdom and for their holiness—some of whom were even workers of miracles—gathered together at councils in order to refute all pernicious heresies and declare what are the proper dogmas which are necessary to believe in order to attain salvation. These sacred gatherings were inspired by the Holy Spirit to make the most authoritative proclamations that the Church possesses. The First Ecumenical Council took place in 325 in Nicea (in modern Turkey) and condemned the heresy of Arius, who taught that the Lord Jesus Christ is not fully God. This council also produced the Nicene Creed, a brief summary of the Faith, which is read at every Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church to this day.

In the centuries that followed, more heresies (which are always the result of man’s pride) attempted to attack the Church, and the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) emperors, who had the God-given task of defending the Faith and legislating moral laws in conformity with Christianity, summoned additional ecumenical councils: the 2nd (Constantinople, 381), which condemned Macedonius, who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit; the 3rd (Ephesus, 431), which condemned

Nestorius, who denied that the Virgin Mary is the Mother of God incarnate; the 4th (Chalcedon, 451), which condemned the Monophysites (Copts) for teaching that the Lord Jesus Christ did not have two natures, divine and human; the 5th (Constantinople, 553), which condemned Origen, who taught the preexistence of souls; the 6th (Constantinople, 681), which condemned those who teach that Christ had only one will and energy instead of two, divine and human; and the 7th (Nicaea, 787), which condemned the Iconoclasts for rejecting the sacred tradition of venerating holy icons.

WHAT WAS THE SUBSEQUENT HISTORY OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH?

In time, the Orthodox Faith spread throughout the Balkans and Western Europe, and by 988, it became the state religion of Russia. All Christians at this time, East and West, shared one Faith and one set of beliefs. In 1054, however, a catastrophe occurred when the Pope of Rome, who had influence over all of western Christendom, split away from the Orthodox Church of the East. The Latins had changed the Nicene Creed by adding the phrase *filioque* ("and from the Son"), saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son also, although the Scriptures say that He proceeds from the Father alone [Jn. 15:26]. The Greek Orthodox Church of the East refused to accept this blasphemous innovation to the Creed, preferring to keep the original Nicene Creed without any addition, and this was the reason for the split. From that time, the Roman Catholic Church lost the grace of the Holy Spirit. They were afterwards torn apart by internal divisions such as the Protestant Reformation (16th C.), which departed even further from the true teachings of Christianity.

In the East, the Church had suffered greatly following the rise and conquests of Islam, which swallowed up the churches in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey. In 1453, the Ottoman Empire finally conquered Constantinople, which spelled the end of the Byzantine Empire. From that time, the

spiritual center of the Orthodox world moved to Moscow and the Russian Empire, since the Christians of the Balkans were now vassals of the Muslims and their Faith was persecuted.

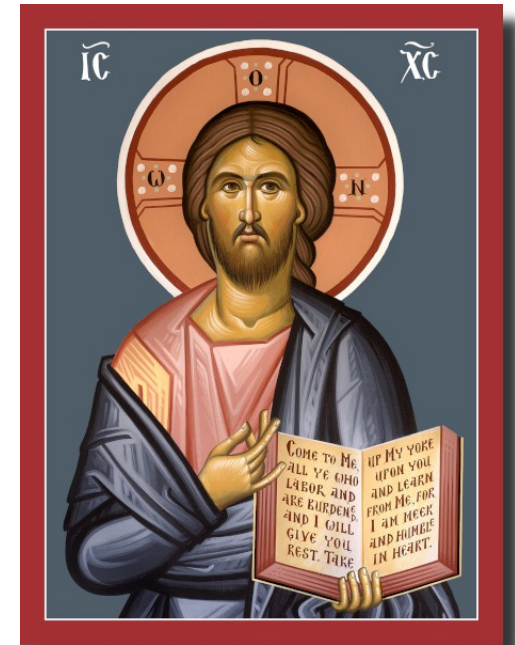
WHERE DOES THE ORTHODOX CHURCH EXIST IN THE WORLD TODAY?

Due to an unprecedented proliferation of heresies, the number of true believers has greatly diminished in our time. In 1917, the great Orthodox civilization of Russia was destroyed in a communist revolution by the Jewish Bolsheviks, who murdered the pious Tsar Nicholas II, the last Orthodox monarch and "the one who restraineth" [2 Thess. 2:7] the forces of lawless evil. Thereafter, in 1965, the new heresy of Ecumenism was introduced into the Orthodox Church, a diabolical teaching which says that all Christian "denominations" are valid and lead to salvation. Unfortunately, all the major Orthodox churches, in keeping with the modern spirit of "tolerance," have succumbed to this heresy and fallen away from Christ in this Great Apostasy. Today there are few Orthodox who have not been polluted with the heresy of Ecumenism. Nevertheless, the true Church, according to the promise of Christ [Mt. 16:18], shall remain pure and unblemished until the end of time, no matter how small it becomes or how few members continue to profess the right Faith.

To learn more about the Orthodox Church, its situation today, and how true bishops can be identified please contact Archbishop Gregory, head of the Genuine Orthodox Church of America, at:

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The Orthodox Church