

The Orthodox Church

Who are we?



Uusi Valamo, Finland, 5 June 1977, Archbishop Paul leads the Prayer at the Consecration of a Church.

There at the Beginning. The Church of the Biblical World.

IN HER PART OF THE WORLD the Orthodox Catholic Church of the East is simply “the Church.” There we are “the Christians.” We carry on an uninterrupted, continuous tradition going back to the origins of the apostolic Christian faith. Because of our low profile here, one of our bishops says Orthodox Christianity is “America’s best kept secret.”

The Orthodox Church is organically the same congregation born at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem on Pentecost. In so many places mentioned in the New Testament we have remained the same through the centuries, a direct continuation of the Church of the Apostolic Age.

Does the Orthodox Church of today in fact correspond to the picture we get of the Church when we read the New Testament and the writings of the Apostolic Fathers? She does—as much as a grown-up corresponds to a picture taken of her as a child. Although the Church has developed, she is the same in essence and spirit in the twenty-first century as she was in the beginning. While we have come to an ever deepening understanding of the “faith once delivered to the saints,” we have added nothing, subtracted nothing, distorted nothing (which is the Christian sense of the Greek words *orthodox* and *catholic*).



Communion time
in the Liturgy at
Holy Resurrection
Church in Nyeri,
Kenya.

AFTER THE DEATH OF MOHAMMED in 632 A.D., militant Islam’s assault on the Orthodox Catholic faith—on the Incarnation and salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, on the Holy Trinity, on the sacramental mysteries and the sanctification of life, as well as on a Christian art bearing witness to the Incarnation—took its toll, reducing the size of our flocks and isolating us. Driven from Arabia and Persia, cut back in Egypt and Ethiopia, in Syria and Mesopotamia and Palestine, we have vanished from Antioch and Ephesus and Colossae, from Galatia and Philippi. Two eastern schisms took their toll. Reduced to minority status we persevere in places where Christianity first appeared; in places like Damascus, in Bethlehem and Nazareth, and in Jerusalem where the Church of Sion, under the leadership of Patriarch Theophilos, 141st Bishop of Jerusalem, is guardian of the Holy Places. Towns and countries where St. Paul preached, such as Corinth, Thessalonika and Athens, Cyprus, Crete and Greece, are full of our churches.

From East to West.

BEGINNING IN THE NINTH CENTURY Greek and Slavic evangelists and teachers—Sts. Cyril and Methodius, brothers from Thessalonika, are the best known—brought Christ to the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Russian missionaries in turn brought Christ to Siberia and the Far East, to Northern China, Japan and Korea, and in 1794 to Russian America or Alaska as we know it today. (After President Johnson purchased Alaska in 1867 for 2 cents an acre—Seward’s Folly they called it—we were probably the only religious group marked for “reassignment” by the United States Government.) On the eve of the 20th century the Church of Russia could respond to an inquiry of the German Bible Society in Leipzig with translations of Holy Scripture into 98 languages.

The 20th century visited great suffering upon tens of millions of Orthodox Christians—in Turkey, Palestine, Eastern Europe in particular. By World War II, the communists had the Church of Russia in a death-grip. But today things are changing; less so in the Middle East, but certainly in Eastern Europe and across Asia. Even the Church in China is enjoying a breath of fresh air.



The light of Christ returns to a place where it was snuffed out. Over 50 years communists destroyed the Orthodox Church of Albania. Today she is being brought back to life.

IN THIS COUNTRY we owe our presence to waves of immigration from the ancient Patriarchates and Local Churches that began at the end of the 19th century. Our organization here reflects the fact that the Eastern Church is administratively decentralized, governed from centers old and new by ancient canons adapted *ad hoc* to modern conditions. This has advantages and disadvantages. So in service to the Gospel Message we must be self-critical and cultivate the Truth, while discerning mere human traditions and surmounting ethnic differences. We must all of us face the challenge of the modern world.

Mind-Set of the Eastern Church in a Nutshell.

It is a historical fact which no one can deny that the Christian East has remained aloof from the great controversies and changes which have occurred in the West as a result of papal centralization, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation. The Orthodox Catholic East went on developing and living according to the great patristic tradition: the theology, sacramental doctrine, biblical-world piety and spirituality of the Fathers, and above all their sacramental conception of the Church. She deliberately refused to identify herself with any particular systematization of philosophical thought and divine Revelation such as (Aristotelian) Scholasticism. And the constitution of the Church in the East was never thought of solely in terms of laws by which a law-dominated institution was governed.

As a matter of fact, the Orthodox Church never provided herself with a codification of canon law. The canons issued by the early Church councils were regarded merely as expressions of the Church's nature under certain concrete circumstances, a sort of "jurisprudence of the Holy Spirit," as it were. They were never transformed into a kind of juridical supergovernment, never looked upon as a means by which to exercise an effective control over all members of the Church, centrally or from above. (We merely wish to point out that the West has gone much further in these two directions than the East.)

Similarly the Gospel Message itself: the Orthodox Catholic East never considered the Gospel as a system of legal prescriptions which men could adopt overnight. We must accept life according to the Gospel as a commitment and common ground. It means ongoing struggle against sin and evil. Love of God and neighbor resists reduction to a system of legal "obligations."



During a four-week tour of duty in Kampala, Uganda, this Orthodox Christian Mission Center medical team cared for over 1,600 patients.

THE ORTHODOX CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE EAST summons all Christians to return to the faith of the Apostles and Fathers which she is conscious of having preserved in its fullness. Her claims are as exclusive and categorical as those of Rome. Our ecumenical task, if we can speak this way, is to urge the Western Church on the one hand fraternally to return to our common sources, and Protestants on the other to be more receptive to the idea of Holy Tradition as a source of Revelation.

An Invitation.

THE ORTHODOX CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE EAST—the Church of the Biblical World—is engaging America. And she welcomes seekers.

NOTE: The foregoing presents thoughts of Archbishop Paul of Finland (*The Faith We Hold*), Fr. John Meyendorff (*The Orthodox Church*), and the Editor.

Scripture and Tradition

The sources of doctrine as defined in the Orthodox Catechism are the Holy Bible [or *Books of Holy Scripture—Ed.*] and the Holy Tradition transmitted by the Church.

Why is the Church given priority...? Because the Church came into being first, and only afterwards, little by little, did the books of the New Testament, the gospels and epistles appear. Moreover, when we take into account how few “books,” or manuscripts, there were in those days, and the fact that besides the genuine writings there were other gospels and texts written under the names of the apostles, it is easy to understand how important the living Tradition of the Church was in safeguarding the true Christian faith. The prime importance of Tradition is plainly shown by the fact that it was not until the fifth century that the Church established conclusively which books in circulation should be regarded as genuinely inspired by God’s revelation. Thus the Church herself determined the composition of the Bible.

It is to the Church, which defined what the contents of the Bible would be, that the Orthodox Christian turns for his interpretation of the Bible.... Without such a criterion the authority of the Bible would rest upon the subjective opinion of each individual trying to interpret it. It is our belief that the Bible by itself, without the Tradition as its living interpreter, is insufficient as a source of truth.

The fifteenth chapter of Acts tells of a meeting held by the Apostles, who announced their decision by saying: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” Similar gatherings of the Apostles’ successors, all the bishops of the Church, were held from time to time during the first millennium. At these meetings articles of faith were formulated and decisions made on contemporary problems arising in the life of the Church. Seven such ecclesiastical councils have been recognized by the Church as general or ecumenical and their decisions thus recognized as binding upon the whole Church. The first of these synods or councils was held at Nicaea in the year 325 and the seventh in Constantinople in 787.

— Archbishop Paul of Finland,
The Faith We Hold, pgs. 18, 19