

Orthodoxy - The True Church?

(my simplified and humble thoughts)

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Sometimes doubts come into my mind of whether the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church is "The True Church" or is this just a bunch of legalism and authoritarian domination, or a cult, or am I being led astray. How do I know this is the right path? How do I know they are right and not someone like Billy Graham, Max Lucado, John MacArthur, or James Dobson? Especially when Orthodoxy stresses not to try and rationalize or think things through but to trust and have faith in the Traditions of the Church, in the Holy Elders, and in God. Orthodoxy is an "eastern way of thinking" and I've been raised my whole life in a "western culture" with a "western way of thinking". Orthodoxy does not discourage this just not over-emphasizing this in all things.

It helps me to look back at the history of the Church and the beginnings of Christianity. I know this is rationalizing and thinking things through. For now, I will work on reassuring my faith in the Church with my "western way of thinking" and hopefully, someday, move on to an "Orthodox way of living".

Before there was the Holy Canon of Scriptures (the Bible), there was Christianity, Christians, and the Church for at least 200-300 hundred years. Christianity came because of Christ. I know that sounds simplistic, but it was because of Jesus the Christ, the God-man that Christianity came into existence. Followers of Christ were first called Christians in Antioch, one of the main centers of the beginnings of Christianity. They were called Christians, because they were known as followers of Christ or imitators of Christ, ones who followed the teachings and living as Christ lived. The Holy Apostles, along with the 70 Apostles that were sent out (mentioned in the Gospels), and the growing new believers established "places of worship". Because Christ was Jewish, and the Disciples were Jewish and because Christ did not come to abolish the "law" or the Old Testament, but to fulfill it in all ways, Jesus and the early believers practiced the style of worship as laid out by God. Jesus taught His Holy Apostles many things that were not written in the Gospels, but what was written in the Gospels were written so that we who followed in later generations might believe that Jesus is the Christ.

The Apostles were taught by God – Jesus Christ, and then later by the Holy Spirit. These same Apostles taught others and had disciples. These are the Traditions that Peter, John & Paul talk about following in the Epistles of the New Testament... exhorting us to follow the Traditions and teachings of the Apostles and not to follow "strange doctrine". This was before the New Testament or the Bible was "canonized" and made into one book.

When I think about the Priests and the Bishops and the formalization, structure and organization of the Church, I need to remember that this was established first by the

Holy Apostles, the direct disciples of Christ. These Apostles appointed Bishops, Priests, Deacons and organized the Church so that it could not be some organization, but for the Holy Sacraments to be performed with holiness, humility and sanctity.

It was the apostles who appointed the leadership of the Church and the requirements and ways for Christians to receive Holy Communion, Holy Baptism, Marriage, and Burial. It was the Apostles who taught us how to do the "laying on of hands" for the anointing of those who were called into the ministry. We see some of this in the Bible in the Acts of the Apostles, when they appointed Deacons and how they would lay hands on others to go into other parts of the world to establish "churches" or communities of believers and places of worship. It was the Apostles who laid the foundation of what is today our Liturgy. The original Liturgical service was written by James the brother of the Lord, who wrote the epistle of James. The Liturgical services we have today are shortened versions by St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil and St. Gregory. In the Orthodox Church, we can trace our Priests and our Bishops all the way back to the Apostles, so there is a direct chain of a "laying on of hands" passed down from generation to generation... keeping the same Traditions as set forth by the Apostles.

The Church went on for 300 years without the Holy Bible as we know it today. During these first few hundred years the Church endured great persecution but continued to grow. It wasn't until the time of St. Constantine the Great, when Christianity ceased for a time to be persecuted. Then there began to appear the many letters (epistles) and gospels circulating around and some of which were heresies began to spring up. It was at the first of the seven Ecumenical Councils that the Holy Canons were decided upon, including the Holy Canon of Scriptures based on the septuagint and included the apocrypha.

The Church throughout the years that followed, had a total of seven of these Councils. The entire Christian world was represented and discussed, often in disputes and disagreements, what was Truth and what was heresy, by God's grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Traditions of the Church, the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Canons were established and were verified by God through various signs and wonders.

The basic doctrines of the Church were established and the Church was one Holy Catholic (meaning Universal) Apostolic (meaning handed down from the Apostles) Church (meaning all were of one body, the body of Christ). The doctrine of Mary, the mother of Jesus, was established as the Most Holy Theotokos, the Mother of God, her sinless life, her virginity that continued even after the birth of Christ, her death and miraculous disappearance of her body as a sign of the resurrection of us all. The doctrine of the Theotokos was more about establishing the two-fold nature of Christ than it was about disputing her. The Church had no questions about her life and all that I've mentioned already. The Church was debating the question of the nature of Christ

and was it right to call Mary the Mother of God, not just the Mother of Jesus. The debate was on Jesus being fully God and fully man, undivided.

Other questions were on the nature of the Trinity and the Holy Spirit. The Church for a thousand years declared that the Son was begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeded from the Father and that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit yet were still One God. The Early Church believed that God was Mystery and that although we may know God in His attributes, He is unknowable in His essence. We cannot fully understand God, the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of the God-man Jesus Christ, how the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, yet is sent by the Son. The eastern way of thinking does not try to figure things out or rationalize these things. They leave it alone, and in humility recognize that His ways are higher than our ways, and are past finding out. But God in His great mercy allows us to see through Jesus and through the acts of the Holy Spirit His attributes. We know that He is all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful. We know many things about God, but to understand His being, His essence is a mystery.

In the Old Testament, it was often mentioned that no one could look upon God nor see His face. Even Moses, the friend of God, could only see the backside of God and the Holy Angels around the throne covered their faces. God also declared that Israel was to have "no graven images" of God. However, in the New Testament, we read that Christ has shown us the Father, God has become man. This is the incarnation of Christ and the revelation of God where we can behold Him face-to-face and see His glory. Even the Apostles Peter, James & John saw Christ transfigured right before their eyes, the veil was lifted and they could see the glory of God in Christ the man. Christ not only blessed mankind by becoming a man, but He blessed all of creation by becoming the created. Fulfilling the Old Testament, and allowing us to "see" God and all of creation then can become sanctified. This is the reasoning behind the Holy Icons.

The first icon was from Christ himself. There are two very similar stories of the very first icon. The first is from the Eastern traditions and the "image made without hands" and we have replicas of that today, the other one is the story from the western traditions of St. Veronica while Christ was on the road to Golgotha. The second icon was written by Luke, the Physician and writer of the Gospel of Luke and the book of the Acts of the Apostles who wrote the first Icon of Mary the Mother of God, which we also still have replicas of today. There is a Russian Icon which celebrates that first icon and shows St. Luke painting that first icon. The Church Councils settled this debate and much blood was shed in defense of those very icons.

Icons we must remember were around before the scriptures were circulating. Even after the Canon of the Holy Scriptures was established, the printing press still had not been invented, and very few people knew how to read or write or were literate. Pictures were painted – rather Icons were written... this was the term the Holy Fathers used

because they were written to declare the message of Christ. Christ in creation, Christ in His saints, Christ in all things, so that all might see and worship Christ. The Holy Fathers explicitly reprimanded and condemned the worship of Icons. They declared that they were “windows to heaven”, to transcend this earth and allow us to look into heavenly things. All Icons have a story that has been written to lead us to Heaven, to lead us to Christ. When I look upon an Icon, I must not see it as an expression of art, I must look into it as if I am looking into heaven itself and I need to examine myself and see if I am measuring up to the message contained in the written testimony. I need to see if I can grasp the spiritual meaning contained in the image. The Icons of the Saints are to show not an exact picture of that person, but of Christ in that person revealed. So that when we see that Saint, we are seeing an attribute of Christ revealed and it leads us to Christ. The Icons of the Theotokos, point us to Christ. The Icons of Christ through its many interpretations, reveal various attributes of Christ. All of these Icons, should lead us to see heaven before us and how to live a heavenly life.

This was the Church for over one thousand years until the time of the great schism, the split between east and west, the split between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. The Church was one and believed all of these things and more than I've written here.

The One True Church established ways of worship, ways of prayer, ways of fasting, the way we make the sign of the cross, the calendar, the feasts and festivals, the sacraments and the services. There were allowances made for the weak and the old, allowances and some diversity for cultural reasons. So the liturgy was translated and the scriptures were translated into other languages and the style of music reflected the culture, but the doctrines, the canons, the liturgy, the scriptures, have remained the same. The Church determines what is Holy Tradition and has also determined what are cultural traditions in some places called rubrics.

The Church makes it clear that this is NOT to be a legalistic way of obtaining or earning our salvation. The Church gives us these Canons so that we can achieve salvation not only in heaven but have heaven here on earth in our present lives, so like one of the holy fathers has said, that they could be in the midst of hell and as long as the presence of God was with them, they would be in heaven. The Church wants us to work out our salvation so that we can go through the process of deification – becoming like Christ, more God-like in all aspects and areas of our mind, body and soul. That we might be one with God even as the Holy Trinity is one.

I need to constantly remind myself of these things... that this Holy Catholic Apostolic Church is the Church that Jesus Himself and the Holy Apostles established and their disciples, the Holy Fathers, have given us these things that we may know God, have strength through our sufferings and obtain the resurrection and life eternal. This is the One True Church, and although at times doubts creep in, I can stand on the Church that the Gates of Hell cannot prevail against it, because it is the Church Triumphant, the

Church Militant, the body of Christ. May I have the grace and mercy of God to stay faithful through the prayers of the most Holy Theotokos and all the Saints. Amen.