

It is through prayer and worship that God is not merely known about, but known and experienced. And through Jesus Christ, the Church—Christ’s Body—has become this place of encounter with God, heaven on earth (Eph. 1:10). We invite you to “come and see,” as Philip said to Nathaniel (John 1:46), to experience the beauty, glory, and holy splendor of this same Orthodox Church in the twenty-first century.

## WHAT IS THE ORTHODOX CHURCH?

The Orthodox Christian Church is a worldwide body of believers who confess and worship Jesus Christ as the Son of God, as Lord and Messiah. This body has a tangible and continuous history of Christian faith and practice from the time of Christ’s Apostles. The use of the adjective “orthodox” to describe the Church dates back to the earliest centuries and was applied to those Christians who maintained the tradition transmitted by Christ’s Apostles (1 Thess. 2:15).

The Orthodox Church is therefore not a “denomination” and predates both denominationalism and non-denominationalism. She has been labeled as “Eastern” by historians to acknowledge that Christ’s Church began and flourished initially in the Eastern portion of the Roman Empire, and to distinguish her from what eventually became separate church bodies in the Western Hemisphere. However, the Orthodox Church is not reserved for certain ethnicities (e.g. Greek, Russian) but is for all people.

The Orthodox Church is currently the second largest body of Christians in the world, with 225 million adherents across the globe. The 1995 Encyclopedia Britannica noted the Orthodox Church as the fastest-growing Christian church in America, as many are rediscovering the depth and riches of the ancient Christian tradition that remains steadfast and unchanging in regard to the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

Whatever their national or regional origins, all Orthodox churches share the same faith and are united to one another in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). The Head of the Orthodox Church is Jesus Christ. There is no earthly head of the Orthodox Church. All bishops are equal, sharing the same ministerial grace and forming a brotherhood to which each is accountable. It is not an earthly leader that holds the Church together but adherence to the Orthodox Faith—in the words of St. Vincent of Lérins, that which “has been believed everywhere, at all times, and by all.”

Since “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8), the Church has no need to conform to the newest fads or philosophies. She does, however, adapt to new circumstances, adopt the language of the indigenous people, and embrace everything godly and good in any culture in which she finds herself.

## JESUS CHRIST

The first and central doctrine of faith for Orthodox Christians, upon which all else hinges, is that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word and Son of God, one of the Holy Trinity, who was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. He is therefore both fully God and fully Man, making possible the union of human beings with God.



Because Jesus Christ took upon Himself our humanity, all that He does also happens to us:

- ✠ *By His Incarnation*, He joined our fallen human nature with the divine nature, opening the way to real participation in the life of God.
- ✠ *By His suffering and death on the cross*, He destroyed the power of death and released mankind from bondage to an endless cycle of corruption, sin, and death.
- ✠ *By His Resurrection and Ascension* to the right hand of the Father, He exalts our nature, making us partakers in divine glory.

## THE HOLY TRINITY

Through Jesus Christ, God reveals Himself to be Trinity, a communion of three divine Persons existing in perfect unity and love. While God the Father is the unique source of the Trinity, the Son and Spirit come forth from Him from all eternity and share perfectly and fully in His divine nature. God the Father is indeed love. He is not a lone ranger in the sky, but by His very nature lives continuously in loving relationship with His Son and Spirit. The unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the source and model for the unity that is to be shared among persons in the Church: “That they may be one, even as We are one” (John 17:22).

## SIN

The Orthodox Church teaches that Adam’s sin broke man’s natural communion with God and tragically brought death into this world. Those who came after Adam, however, are not guilty of his sin, but are rather affected and infected by all the consequences of the fallen condition. In Greek, “sin” means to “miss the target.” Sin is not the breaking of a moral code but the breaking of relationship, missing the target of love, of likeness to God. Sin is a misdirection of man’s will and energies away from their true target and yearning: life



with God. In God's Church it is possible to overcome sin (although often through great struggle), to be purified and freed to be holy and to grow eternally in union with the grace of God.



Photo by John Skinas, from his book, Pictures of God published by Ancient Faith.

## SALVATION

It is helpful to make a distinction between redemption and salvation. The Orthodox Church teaches that God alone has redeemed mankind through the cross. Salvation is the process of accepting and incorporating that act of redemption personally. Salvation is therefore a process of transformation (Rom. 5:12). It is not merely a matter of being declared "not guilty" by legal decree; it is an organic restoration to union with God, a process of "being saved" (1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15) by God's grace.

The Greek word for salvation designates "healing." The Orthodox understanding of life in Christ views sin and salvation in terms of illness and healing of the soul. The whole life of the Orthodox Church is given as a means for people to be restored to spiritual health—to

come into an authentic union with God, to become Christ-like, and to be more and more open to the Spirit of God. The life of the Church is nothing other than this life of salvation and grace made accessible to all who would avail themselves of it.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ORTHODOX FAITH

If you would like to learn more, contact the priest of your local Orthodox parish, or explore the following websites:

- ✿ [store.ancientfaith.com](http://store.ancientfaith.com) (source of quality Orthodox literature, icons, music, and gifts)
- ✿ [www.ancientfaithradio.com](http://www.ancientfaithradio.com) (Orthodox internet radio, streaming music and talk 24 hours a day, plus downloadable podcasts)
- ✿ <http://journeytoorthodoxy.com>

For further information, please contact:



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# ENCOUNTERING CHRIST IN HIS CHURCH

*"We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among men."*



The quote above was written in the tenth century after a first experience with the majestic worship of God in the Orthodox Church in Constantinople. They express a great truth which has always been at the heart of the Orthodox understanding—that Christianity is first and foremost an encounter with the living and personal God.

BY FR. MICHAEL SHANBOUR