

# Orthodox (Eastern) Christianity

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## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

**Required Daily Observances.** Orthodox Christians are expected to pray daily following one of the patterns established by the Church, which are found in recognized prayer books.

**Required Weekly Observances.** Orthodox Christians must attend weekly celebrations of the Divine Liturgy, if available. They are encouraged to attend other weekly services such as Vespers and Matins, as well as special Feast Day services, if possible.

**Required Occasional Observances.** Orthodox Christians must occasionally make sacramental confession to an Orthodox priest. During Lent, Orthodox should attend special seasonal services, if available. If seriously ill, they should be anointed by an Orthodox priest.

**Required Holy Days.** There are 12 major feast days in the Orthodox calendar:

- Pascha (Easter).
- Nativity of the Mother of God.
- Presentation of the Mother of God.
- Annunciation, Nativity of Christ (Christmas).
- Presentation of Christ.
- Theophany (Epiphany).
- Transfiguration.

- Palm Sunday.
- Ascension.
- Pentecost.
- Dormition (Assumption).

During the week before Pascha, there are special observances each day. Some dates of these Holy Days are fixed; others are variable. Dates are determined in either the Old or New calendar, depending on the Orthodox jurisdiction involved. It is important to note that Orthodox holy days – especially Pascha (Easter) – often occur on different days than their Western counterparts.

## **RELIGIOUS ITEMS**

### **Personal Religious Items**

- Religious medallion and chain.
- Small icon cards.
- Prayer rope (small knotted rope similar to a Catholic rosary, used in connection with the Jesus prayer).
- Prayer book.
- Church calendar.
- Bible.
- Blessed palms.
- Small container of holy water.

### **Congregate Religious Items (necessary only when clergy-led services are to be celebrated)**

- Larger icons of Jesus Christ and Mary with stands.
- Censer.
- Incense.
- Charcoal.
- Votive candles.
- Altar and cloth.
- Small side table and cloth.
- Gospel Book.
- Spoon and knife (plastic).
- Chalice, diskos (paten).
- Red cloth napkins.

- Wine.
- Leavened bread (must be specially prepared for each communion service. Consult with the celebrating priest for details).
- Star (small metal cover over bread).
- Service books and booklets.
- Liturgical vestments (stole, phelonion, belt, cuffs).
- Olive oil.

## SEARCHES

While Orthodox Christian inmates place great value in the Bible and other religious items (even articles that have been formally blessed), these can be handled by other people. Staff are expected to show the same respect for such items as for religious articles of all traditions. Religious articles are not to be mishandled, thrown, placed on the floor, brought into the bathroom, or placed on the toilet or washbasin.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR MEMBERSHIP

**Requirements.** There are two requirements for membership in the Orthodox Church:

- **Baptism.** Normally administered by an Orthodox priest. Non-Orthodox baptisms may be accepted at the discretion of the local priest. However, such baptisms must have been performed with water and in “the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Baptisms by non-Orthodox must be documented.

- **Chrismation.** This must be performed by an Orthodox priest. In this sacrament, holy oil (chrism, blessed by a bishop) is applied to various parts of the initiate’s body. Chrismation always immediately follows Orthodox baptisms. It is performed apart from baptism when non-Orthodox baptisms are accepted.

**Total Membership.** In the U.S., there are about 2.5 million Orthodox Christians. In the rest of the world, there are about 250 million Orthodox Christians, largely concentrated in the former Soviet Union, Eastern and Southern Europe, and the Middle East.

## MEDICAL PROHIBITIONS

Orthodox Christians may not mutilate their body, including receiving tattoos.

## DIETARY STANDARDS

Orthodox are required to fast regularly. Fasting periods include most Wednesdays and Fridays, Lent, Advent/Nativity (five weeks before Christmas), Dormition/Assumption (August 1-15), and a variable period before the Feast of the Holy Apostles. There are other fast days as well. The dates can be determined by consulting an Orthodox liturgical calendar. During fasting periods, Orthodox abstain from animal products, including fish, chicken, and dairy products. In rare instances, fish is allowed during a fast period.

Orthodox fasting rules can be accommodated by self-selecting the meatless entree in mainline.

## **BURIAL RITUALS**

The bodies of deceased Orthodox Christians must never be cremated. They should be buried according to the rite of the Orthodox Church.

## **SACRED WRITINGS**

The Bible is the sacred book of the Orthodox Church. The Church recognizes the larger canon of the Old Testament, as included in the Septuagint.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

Orthodoxy in the U.S. is currently structured into different jurisdictions, each historically based upon distinct ethnic backgrounds. These share the same faith and practice, and nearly all are in full communion. They are governed by councils of bishops. Moreover, bishops oversee Orthodox ministries within an assigned geographic area, usually called a diocese. All Orthodox clergy are subject to a bishop.

### **Orthodox Jurisdictional Headquarters**

Standing Committee of Orthodox Bishops in America  
10 East 79<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY, 10021  
(212) 570-3593

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America  
8 East 79<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY, 10021  
(212) 570-3500  
[www.goarch.org](http://www.goarch.org)

Orthodox Church in America

P.O. Box 675, Syosset, NY 11791  
(516) 922-0550  
[www.oca.org](http://www.oca.org)

Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese  
358 Mountain Road, Englewood, NJ 07631  
(201) 871-7954  
[www.antiochian.org](http://www.antiochian.org)

## **HISTORY**

In Europe and the Americas, the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches are well known. It is only recently that Eastern Orthodox Christianity has grown to prominence in the West.

Christianity began in the East. Orthodoxy was born in Jerusalem at the Feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Church and the world. In its first three centuries, the Church endured persecution by the Roman Empire. Despite its persecution, the Church grew rapidly, sustained by its episcopal leadership and sacramental worship.

A turning point occurred in 312 C.E., when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. In 313 C.E., Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which legalized the faith throughout the Empire.

The Church used its new freedom to address several foundational theological issues over the next 400 years. Major disputes and questions were decided in ecumenical councils, in which bishops from all over the Christian world attended. The first two Ecumenical Councils – of Nicea (325 C.E.) and Constantinople I (381 C.E.) – carefully defined the Trinitarian nature of God. The next four Ecumenical Councils defined the divine and human person of Jesus Christ. They also approved the popular title “Theotokos,” or “Mother of God,” for the Virgin Mary. The seventh and final Ecumenical Council (Nicea II, 787 C.E.) affirmed the veneration – but never worship – of religious images. For Orthodoxy, the decisions of these Ecumenical Councils are second only to the Bible in authority.

During his momentous reign, the Christian Emperor Constantine divided his empire. The western half of the empire continued to be governed from Rome. However, the eastern half would be ruled from a new capital, Byzantium, renamed Constantinople. This city and its beautiful Cathedral of Hagia Sophia became the leading center of Eastern Christianity.

After the division of the Empire, the Latin-speaking West and Greek-speaking East began to drift apart. The two halves split in 1054 AD over the issue of papal authority and Rome's alteration of the Nicene Creed. The Latin-speaking West became known as the Roman Catholic Church. The Greek-speaking East became known as the Eastern Orthodox Church.

When the Western half of the Roman Empire fell to German tribes in the 5th century, the Eastern half remained unharmed. It was known as the Byzantine Empire, and lasted for another thousand years. However, in 1453, Constantinople was conquered by the Muslim Ottoman Turks.

Before the fall of Constantinople came another major turning point. In the 10th century, missionaries from Constantinople converted Russia and most of Eastern Europe to Orthodox Christianity. After the subjugation of Greece, Russia became the leading center of Orthodoxy.

Greece and the Greek Orthodox Church won its independence from the Turks in 1827. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 began 70 years of intense persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church, which ended in the 1990's.

Russian monks brought Orthodoxy to Alaska in 1794, and immigrants from several Orthodox countries brought their ethnic churches with them to America, which remains the situation today.

## **THEOLOGY**

Orthodox theology is drawn from "Holy Tradition," which includes (in approximate descending order of importance) Scripture, the Ecumenical Councils, the Nicene Creed, the liturgies, writings of the saints, icons, and canon law.

At the heart of Orthodox theology is faith in the Holy Trinity – that God is one in essence, yet eternally subsists in three eternally divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Equal to faith in the Holy Trinity is belief in Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, who assumed human flesh and human nature, yet remained fully God. By Christ's death upon a Roman cross, and by his resurrection from the dead, he has conquered death and offers eternal resurrection to all mankind. Orthodox equally honor the third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who was poured out upon the earth at Pentecost and perpetually lives and works within the Church.

Orthodoxy believes that God created mankind in His own image, thereby endowing man

with great dignity and value. However, man used free will to disobey God. As a result, man has become subject to corruption and death, on physical and spiritual levels. Mankind's relationship with God was severely damaged. The Orthodox doctrine of salvation is summarized by the term "deification" or "theosis" – the process by which the original image of man is restored, the sicknesses of sin are healed, and the energies of God – His love, faithfulness, forgiveness, humility – are imparted to the faithful individual.

Deification begins at baptism, which unites us to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. Deification continues in the sacrament of chrismation, in which believers receive the gift of the Holy Spirit through the anointing of blessed oil. It is continually nourished by partaking of the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion. It is furthered by confessing sins to a priest, and receiving his announcement of God's forgiveness. Deification continues by a lifestyle of prayer, fasting, giving to the poor, and performing good works. These are vital ways in which faith is put into action. The process continues until the faithful enter the joy of God's presence in heaven.

**RESOURCES.** The Orthodox Christian Prison Ministry, P.O. Box 822169 Vicksburg MS 39182, [ogand@bellsouth.net](mailto:ogand@bellsouth.net)