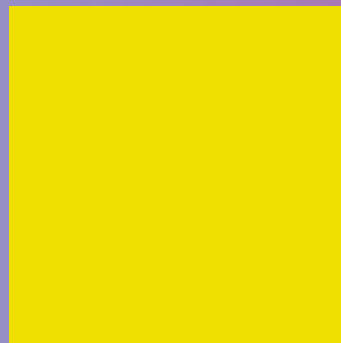


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ORTHODOXY

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# ORTHODOXY

## 4.1 GENERAL

With 260 millions of members, Orthodox Christianity represents about 12% of all Christian population around the world. For historical reasons, the main part of Orthodox Christians, namely 77%, is located in Europe. There are also some big Orthodox Christian Diaspora communities in America and Western Europe (e.g. Germany). Orthodox Christians are usually defined according to their ethnic origins (e.g. Greek, Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian, etc). They should also be distinguished from Oriental Christians. The former live mainly in Central and Eastern Europe and the latter in Africa. However, apart from geographical location, there are also some significant theological differences between these two groups, especially in matters regarding Christology (the person of Jesus and his divine and human natures).

Useful numbers and facts regarding Orthodox Christianity are provided by Pew Research Center on their webpage.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See:

a) "Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, November 8, 2017,

<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/>,

b) "Orthodox Christianity's Geographic Center Remains in Central and Eastern Europe," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, November 8, 2017,

<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianitys-geographic-center-remains-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

## 4.2 STRUCTURE OF TEACHING

### 4.2.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC (5-6 MIN.)

- As a point of departure, the teacher could ask to look at figure 6.1 in students' book and ask them if this kind of building is familiar to them.
- The teacher then asks students to write down five things that come to their mind about Orthodox Christianity. He then creates a mind map on board and writes down their ideas.
- Or he asks them to note three questions that would like to ask regarding Christianity

### 4.2.2 WATCHING VIDEO (CA. 10 MIN.)

- The class watches the brief video of Eleni's description of Orthodox Christianity and are asked to answer the multiple-choice questions of exercise

### 4.2.3 EXERCISE 1 (5 MIN.)

#### **What do we remember from Eleni's experience**

(After watching the film, Multiple choice – Comprehension of the video)

1. The word "Orthodox" means

- (a) the right belief
- (b) the conservative
- (c) the old-fashioned

2. Why are icons so important for Orthodox Christians?

- (a) they tell stories of faith in a simple way
- (b) they are the holy book of the Orthodox Church
- (c) they are made by holy men of the Bible

3. The holy day of Orthodox Christians is

- (a) Saturday
- (b) Sunday
- (c) Friday

4. The most important feast for the Orthodox Church is
- (a) Christmas
  - (b) a fixed feast in spring
  - (c) Easter
5. In the Orthodox Divine Liturgy the participants
- (a) receive both the consecrated bread and wine
  - (b) receive only the consecrated bread
  - (c) drink wine from a cup
6. During the Baptism in the Orthodox Church
- (a) water is sprinkled on the head of the child
  - (b) a crown is placed on the head of the child
  - (c) the child is immersed three times in a font full of water
7. Which number is important in the Orthodox Church?
- (a) two
  - (b) three
  - (c) forty
8. In the Orthodox Church, women
- (a) do not participate in common worship
  - (b) help in the church but cannot be religious leaders
  - (c) they can be priests like men
9. Eleni says that living according to the Orthodox faith means
- (a) caring only for other Orthodox Christians
  - (b) leading a secluded life in the family
  - (c) showing solidarity to other humans and all creatures

**Solutions:** 1a. 2a. 3b. 4c. 5a. 6c. 7b. 8b. 9c.

## 4.2.4 DISCUSSING TYPICAL FEATURES OF ORTHODOX WORSHIP (15-20 MIN)

### Most Orthodox Christians keep icons at home

% of Orthodox Christians who ...

	Have icons at home
<b>Former USSR</b>	
Moldova	97%
Georgia	96
Ukraine	91
Armenia	89
Belarus	88
Russia	87
Kazakhstan	85
Latvia	84
Estonia	74
<b>MEDIAN</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Other European countries</b>	
Greece	95%
Romania	95
Bosnia	93
Serbia	92
Bulgaria	83
<b>MEDIAN</b>	<b>93</b>
Ethiopia	73%

Source: Data for former USSR and other European countries from survey conducted June 2015-July 2016 in 19 countries. Data for Ethiopia from Spring 2015 Global Attitudes Survey. Data for U.S. not available.

"Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4.1

Icons at Orthodox  
Homes, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/>

It is difficult to tell Orthodox Christians from their appearance or dressing. They do not usually pray in public although in mainly Orthodox countries they sometimes cross themselves when they pass by a Church building. Their worship buildings are, however, easy to identify (if there is some time left in the class, exercise 1 of extra exercises could be a useful introduction to an Orthodox Church). If there is time available, the teacher could also briefly discuss figures 6.3 and 6.4 (6.3: All baptized Orthodox Christians receive both the consecrated bread and wine. Orthodox Christians believe that they are spiritually changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. The consecrated bread is cut in very small portions and put in the chalice together with the consecrated wine. It is then distributed to the members of the congregation. 6.4: Candles play an important role in Orthodox spirituality and worship. Orthodox Christians usually light candles, usually made by bee wax, when they enter a church. Candles stand in other places in the church. They remind the faithful that Jesus Christ is the light of the world and that his death and resurrection brought the light of hope in the world).

### Icons (10-15 min.)

Icons are also a very important part of Orthodox Churches but also of everyday religious practice and worship. Most Orthodox Christian homes have one or more icons or a special praying corner full of them. The Pew Research Center provides some useful facts regarding icons in Orthodox practice (see fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

The teacher could use some facts from this figure and then ask the class to read the text of Exercise 2. (The teacher could project the icon of Theotokos Glykofilousa, see under resources below, on the wall while students could spend 5 min. reading the text. Alternatively, students could look at the picture in their book). Then they could discuss it for about 6-10 min.

### Exercise 2: Let's talk about icons

Icons occupy a central place in Orthodox life and spirituality. Orthodox icons have a deep symbolic meaning. Even the colours used stand for certain ideas. Read the following explanation and choose the colour you feel suits you better. Explain why:

**Gold:** it is the colour that symbolizes the divine world. It is usually found as a background in various icons, in halos and on the clothes of Jesus Christ.

**Blue:** it stands for the Kingdom of God, heavens, infinity or eternity. It is usually found as a background in various icons and as the colour of garments of the Mother of Jesus.

**Red:** it is the colour of life, love, passion, of Jesus' sacrifice but also his resurrection. It is sometimes found as background as well.

<sup>1</sup> A "Most Orthodox Christians Keep Icons at Home," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project (blog), accessed June 22, 2020, [https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/pf\\_11-08-17\\_orthodoxy-00-03/](https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/pf_11-08-17_orthodoxy-00-03/).

**Green:** it is the colour of renovation, hope, youth and nature. It is usually found in icons that depict Jesus' birth or the annunciation of his birth to his mother by the angel.

**White:** it stands for purity and divinity. This is the colour of garments of the angels and Jesus when the aim is to stress his divine nature as the Son of God.

**Black:** it can either be the colour of death or evil but it also used for the garments of the ascetes and monks to denote that they abstained from all worldly pleasures.

**Brown:** the colour of the earth, a symbol of mortality and ascetic life

**Purple red:** the colour of royalty and glory. It is used for the garments of Jesus Christ and his Mother.

Now look at the following icon of Jesus' Mother\*\* and Jesus as a young child and try to explain the message of the colours used on it.



Figure 4.2. The Theotokos in the type of Glykofilousa (kissing her child, Jesus), 15th c. Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève: "Creta o venezia, madona glykophilousa, 1457.JPG", [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Creta\\_o\\_venezia\\_madonna\\_glykophilousa\\_1457.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Creta_o_venezia_madonna_glykophilousa_1457.JPG)

The colours that students could identify are: gold as a sign of divinity in the icon background and the clothes of Jesus and Mary; Mary's garments in purple-red, a sign of her royalty being the Mother of God; the blue inner garment of Mary as a sign of eternity, since again she is the Mother of eternal God.

### **Rituals: Baptism (6 min.)**

Orthodox rituals are also quite different from those of the other Christian denominations and religions. The class is invited to read a passage written by Eleni describing the baptism of her young sister and fill the gaps with words provided. The class could also consult the glossary for possible unknown words.

### **Exercise 3: Baptismal Ritual**

You have read/watched Eleni's full description of the ritual of baptism. Please try to fill in the gaps with one of the words given below. Each word can be used only once.

#### **Faith, anointment, candle, cross, cut, oil, crossing, life, reborn**

Today is a happy day in my family. My young sister is going to get baptized. She will become a full member of the Orthodox Church. During the ceremony, she will get her Christian name, she will be dressed in white new clothes and wear a **cross**, all symbols of her new **life** as a Christian. Although in ancient times people were baptized as adults, today in the Orthodox Church children are usually baptized in the early months of their lives. Baptism will be performed in our parish by the priest and the godparents of my soon-to-be-baptized sister will be there to help during baptism. Godparents are usually friends of the family or relatives. They will be her spiritual parents and responsible for her growing up following the teachings of the Orthodox Church.

In the first part of the ceremony, the priest will announce the name of my sister and everyone will look happy. He will, then, ask her godmother to recite the Symbol of **Faith** on behalf of my sister who is of course still too young to read it on her own.

Then the priest will lead both my sister and her godmother in front of the baptismal font and with the help of the godmother, he will anoint my sister with blessed **oil**, a symbol of blessing and new creation. He will immerse her three times into the water of the font in the name of the Father, the Son, and

the Holy Spirit. Well, not all babies find it very amusing and many of them cry when immersed in water. It is, however, a moment of joy. My teacher explained to us that this is a symbol of dying and being **reborn** into a new life following the example of Jesus Christ who died and was risen from the dead. Immediately after getting out of the font, the chrismation takes place. It is the **anointment** of the child's body blessed oil. Through this, my sister will become a child of God who received the Holy Spirit of God. The priest will **cut** a few hairs from her head that symbolizes a small gift that my sister offers in the ceremony. She will be dressed in new clothes and she will wear a cross, an important symbol of faith for all Christians. It shows that from now on my sister will have to follow the example of Jesus Christ in her own life. The godmother will carry my sister and hold a lighted **candle** symbolizing my sister's first steps in her new life as a Christian. Finally, the priest will read a short passage from the holy book of the Gospel and bless my sister again touching her head with it. People show their great respect towards this book by kissing it and **crossing** themselves, a typical gesture of the Orthodox people. As a member of the Church my sister will participate in the sacraments of the Church. No surprise that this is an important day in our family. After the ceremony we will celebrate it together with friends with food, sweets and music and my lucky sister will get a lot of presents!

Tradition plays an important role in Orthodox theology, spirituality, and everyday life. Among Orthodox, there is currently an ongoing discussion about the nature of this tradition and whether it is a temporary or everlasting authority. In other words, the main question is whether the tradition is a kind of anchor that ties Orthodox Church to her past and history but somehow does not leave much space for innovation or whether it could be used as a springboard for a brave leap into the future. The class is invited to think about the advantages and disadvantages of tradition as a religious authority that dictates certain attitudes and behaviours. The class could devote the last part of the lesson in discussing tradition.

#### **Exercise 4: That's tradition**

Tradition as the accumulated experience and knowledge of the Orthodox Christian Church plays an important role in the lives of Orthodox Christian even today. However, the question is often raised whether or in what extent can or should tradition shape the life of contemporary Orthodox Christians. Having watched Eleni's presentation please make the following exercise in groups of two:

a) Think of practices and customs that are regarded as traditional in your families or society and discuss them among each other,



#### 4.2.5 DISCUSSING TYPICAL ASPECTS OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN LIFE

- b) What role do you think tradition plays in the lives of Orthodox Christians, and
- c) Discuss the pros and cons of tradition as an authority regulating the religious lives of the members of a religious group (the one member of the group could present the positive aspects and the other negative ones).
- Alternatively, the class could reflect on the two verses from the Good Friday hymn (exercise 5) and relate them to contemporary issues like alienation, refugees, marginalized people. The main question to reflect upon is how worship can influence the worldview of Orthodox Christians and provide ethical standards. The reference to Jesus Christ is here of significance.

#### Exercise 5: Living according to faith

Eleni finished her letter by saying that “being Orthodox does not only mean keeping the proper faith but also living according to this faith”. This is often repeated in many ways in texts of Orthodox worship. Moreover, it is often stressed in them that a true expression of love towards God is love towards people in need. Jesus Christ many times is used as the prototype of all people that are unjustly persecuted and suffer.

Read the following verses of a hymn sung on Good Friday (the Friday before Easter Sunday). Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus’ followers laments his death and asks the Romans for his body to bury.

“Give me this stranger, who from infancy has been as a stranger, a sojourner in the world.

.....

Give me this stranger, that I may hide him in a tomb, for as a stranger He has no place to lay His head.”

What possible associations could someone hearing the hymn make to current situations and challenges?

Preparing this exercise, the teacher could read the excerpt from a homily by Epiphanius of Salamis (4th century) that follows, which seems to have been the inspiration of the hymn. It is a fictive reconstruction of the speech of Joseph of Arimathea, a follower of Jesus Christ, who came to the Roman governor, Pilate, to ask for the body of Jesus to bury it properly:

“O judge, I have come to make of thee a trifling of Him that was by thee condemned, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the poor, Jesus the homeless, Jesus the crucified, the bound, the shelterless, the Stranger, who in a strange land is unknown, Jesus the contemptible, who for all was suspended [on the Cross].”

“Give me this Stranger, for what profit to thee is the body of this Stranger? Give me this Stranger, for from afar He came to this place to save a stranger, to a dark region He descended to draw up a stranger. Give me this Stranger, for He alone is a stranger. Give me this Stranger, whose country we know not, the strangers. Give me this Stranger, whose place and birth and ways we know not, the strangers. Give me this Stranger, who lived in a strange land a strange life and existence. Give me this Stranger, whose generation and disposition we know not, the strangers. Give me this Stranger, who had not where to lay His head. Give me this Stranger, who as a homeless stranger in a strange land was born in a manger. Give me this Stranger, who from the very manger fled Herod as a stranger. Give me this Stranger, who from His very swaddling bands was a stranger in Egypt, who has no city, no village, no home, no abode, no kindred, for this Stranger is found in foreign lands with His Mother.

Give me, O prince, this naked man on the Cross that I may cover Him that covered my nature’s nakedness. Give me Him that is both a dead man and God, that I may shroud Him that has hidden mine iniquities. Give me, O prince, this dead man who buried my sin in Jordan. I entreat thee for a dead man Who suffered injustice from all, who by a friend was sold, who by a disciple was betrayed, who by brethren was persecuted, who by a slave was smitten.

For a dead man I interceded, who was condemned by them that He freed from slavery, who by them was given vinegar to drink. who by them that He healed was wounded, who by His own disciples was forsaken, who of His own Mother was bereaved. For a dead man, O prince, I beseech that homeless One Who was suspended on the Cross, for He has no father near Him upon the earth, no friend, no disciple, no kindred, no burier. Nay, He is alone, the Only-begotten of the Unique, God in the world, and none else save He.”

(Epiphanius of Salamis, Homily on the Burial of the Lord Jesus Christ, 11-14: Patrologia Graeca 43:444C-448B)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> English Translation: “Homily of Saint Epiphanius,” Dormition of the Theotokos Orthodox Church (blog), April 18, 2014, <https://dormitioninconcord.wordpress.com/2014/04/18/homily-of-saint-epiphanius/>.

## 4.3 EXTRA EXERCISES

### 4.3.1 EXERCISE: THE PARTS OF AN ORTHODOX CHURCH

Read the following description of a typical Orthodox church and compare it with the image of its interior. Fill in the brackets in the text those numbers of the parts noted in the image that correspond to the description given. Not all numbers will be used.

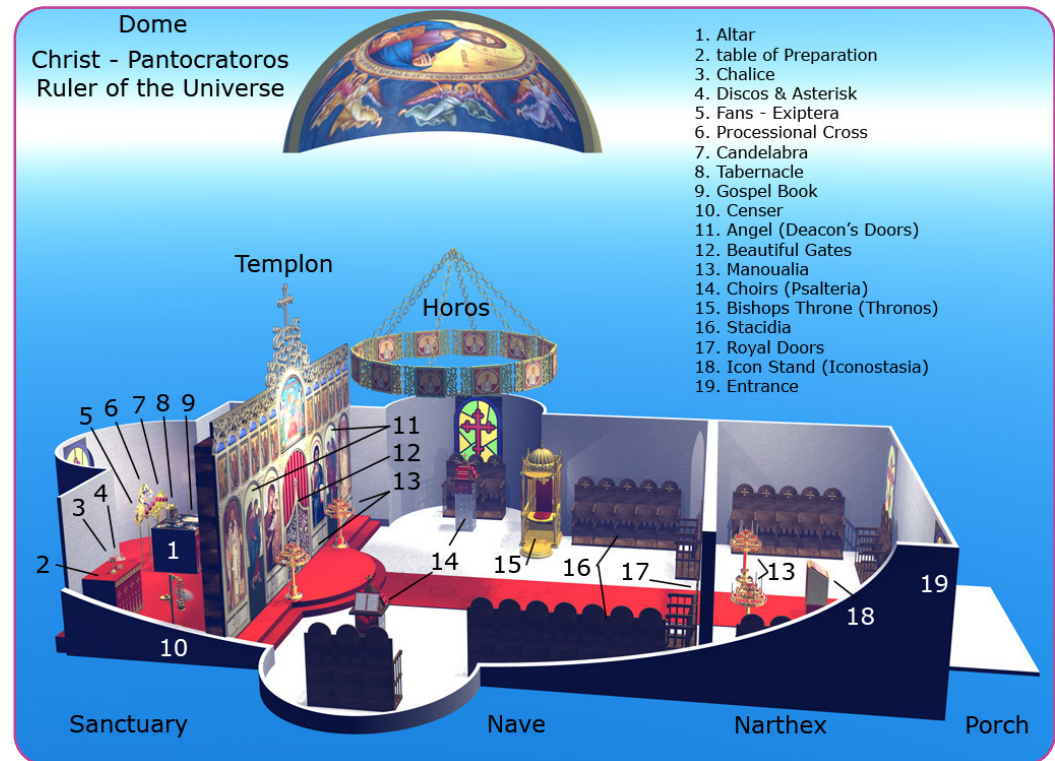


Figure 4.2. The interior of a typical Orthodox Church ("Eastern Orthodox Church Architecture", Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern\\_Orthodox\\_church\\_architecture#/media/File:Orthodox-Church-interior.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Orthodox_church_architecture#/media/File:Orthodox-Church-interior.jpg))

A typical Orthodox Church is divided into three distinct parts: the entrance (narthex), the church proper (nave), and the sanctuary (altar) and is usually built with its sanctuary facing east.

The **narthex** connects the church to the outside world. People entering the church usually light candles in candle holders, the *manualia* (.....) and show respect to the icon that stands on the *iconstand* (.....). Orthodox Christians light candles as an act of prayer and remembering the words of Jesus Christ who said: "I am the light of this world". In ancient times the narthex was the place for the catechumens, of those people, namely, who wanted to become Christians and received instruction of the Christian faith before getting baptized. In traditional Orthodox churches, people can enter the church proper through the *Royal Doors* (.....).

The **nave** is the main and, therefore, the biggest part of the Orthodox church. The word probably comes from the Latin word 'navis' that means the ship. The Church is a ship that sails with the members of the congregation in the stormy sea of this world. The captain of this ship is Jesus Christ who in the Orthodox Church is represented by the local bishop. Therefore, his *throne*

(.....) stands on one side of the wall. Even when the bishop is absent from the congregation his throne reminds the members of the church of his spiritual leading role. Along the walls and in the centre of the nave there are pews where people can sit during the worship. In some Orthodox traditions, though, there are only *stacidia* (.....), high-armed chairs along the walls of the nave. The walls and the ceiling are covered with icons depicting holy women and men (saints) as well as stories from their lives or the Holy Scriptures. Orthodox Christians do not worship icons. They kiss them and cross them when they approach them to show their affection and respect to the persons depicted. Saints, and most prominent among them the Mother of Jesus Christ, the *Theotokos*, are regarded as examples for the Orthodox Christians to follow. Close to the sanctuary, there are two stands for the choir (.....). The hymns of the Orthodox worship are sung alternately, reminding the fact that worship is a dialogue and not passive participation.

Above the nave in the dome, there is the icon of Jesus Christ as the Ruler of the Universe (*the Pantokrator*). The dome symbolizes the divine world whereas the rest of the church the created world and the earth. The construction of the church, therefore, aims at showing that both the spiritual and the material world meet in the church and that those who enter it to worship experience this encounter. A huge chandelier called *Horos* or *Polyeleos* usually hangs from the dome.

A tall screen separates the proper church from the sanctuary. It is called *iconostasis* or *templon* (.....). Ancient churches did not have this wall. It was introduced around the 14th c. On this screen, large icons of Jesus Christ, Theotokos or various saints are placed. It does not only separate the holiest part of the church from the rest of the building but at the same time, it connects them through the icons that use material elements (wood, colours) to depict the spiritual and holy. Three doors allow entrance to the sanctuary: the central one is called *Beautiful Gates* (.....) used only by the priest and the one on the left the *Deacons' Gates* (.....) used only by deacons and auxiliary staff.

The **altar** (.....) stands in the middle of the **sanctuary**. It is the holiest place in the church. On it, a copy of the Gospel book (.....) and some liturgical vessels are placed. On the left (north) side of the sanctuary, there is the *Table of Preparation* (.....) where the gifts brought in Eucharist are prepared.

Not only the texts of worship and the Church Fathers but also those of the Scriptures provide certain ethical guidelines for the conduct of Christians. The following text from the letter to the Christians of Rome by Saint Paul is a good example of this.

Romans 12:9-10.13-21

**4.3.2 EXERCISE:**  
**SAINT PAUL AND THE**  
**ETHICS OF LOVE**

Fill the gaps of the text with the missing words provided.

**peace, right, proud, bless, friend, evil, need,**

Love must be sincere. Hate what is (1) .....; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Share with the Lord's people who are in (2) ..... Welcome others into your homes.

(3) ..... those who hurt you. Bless them, and do not curse them. 15 Be joyful with those who are joyful. Be sad with those who are sad. Agree with one another. Don't be (4) ..... Be willing to be a (5) ..... of people who aren't considered important. Don't think that you are better than others. Don't pay back evil with evil. Be careful to do what everyone thinks is (6) ..... If possible, live in (7) ..... with everyone. Do that as much as you can. My dear friends, don't try to get even. Leave room for God to show his anger. It is written, "I am the God who judges people. I will pay them back," says the Lord. Do just the opposite. Don't let evil overcome you. (8) ..... evil by doing good.

## 4.4 GLOSSARY

### **Almsgiving**

Offer to those in need material help as a gift.

### **Anointment**

The application of holy oil in a religious ceremony.

### **Ascete**

A person who leads a life of self-denial and austerity for religious reasons.

### **Bishop**

The highest spiritual leader for the Orthodox Christian communities in a certain geographical territory that is usually called 'diocese'.

### **Congregation**

A group of people gathered for religious worship.

### **Consecrate**

Make or declare something sacred (holy).

### **Deacon**

From the Greek word "diakonos" (helper). A member of the lower rank of Christian ministers (the other two being priest and bishop).

### **Divine Liturgy**

The most important worship event in the Orthodox Church during which Eucharist is celebrated.

### **Eucharist**

A ceremony during which the bread and wine are consecrated and are consumed by those participating in the event who are baptised. Eucharist comes from the Greek word "eucharistia", which means "thanksgiving". Orthodox Christians believe that the wine and the bread are mystically the Blood and Body of Jesus Christ.

### **Godparents**

Those persons that present a child to be baptized and take responsibility to act as their spiritual parents and care for their religious education. They are usually either relatives or friends of the family.

### **Halo**

A golden crown around the face of a saint or Jesus Christ. It indicates holiness and divine glory.

### **Iconostasis**

A high screen covered by icons separating the sanctuary from the rest of the church.

## **Monk**

A member of a religious community of men living a secluded life of poverty, chastity and obedience. The female equivalent is a nun.

## **New Testament**

The second part of the Christian Bible that contains the stories of Jesus Christ, his disciples and teachings deriving from Jesus' life and preaching.

## **Old Testament**

The first part of the Christian Bible that contains the history, teachings, prophecies, and rituals of ancient Israel.

## **Parish**

A small community of Christians that has its own worshipping house (church) and a priest as its head .

## **Patriarch**

A leading bishop among all the other bishops who is also the spiritual father of an Orthodox Church.

## **sacrament**

A religious ceremony that imparts divine grace.

## **Sanctuary**

The most sacred part of the church.

## **Theotokos**

A name of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. It comes from the Greek words "Theos" (God) and "tikto" (give birth) and it refers to the Christian faith that Jesus was not just a man but also the Son of God.



Photo: Annie Spratt | Unsplash

## 4.5 TRANSCRIPT OF THE VIDEO

Hello, my name is Eleni and I would like to talk to you about my religious tradition, the Orthodox Church. The name "Orthodox" comes from two Greek words, namely "orthos" (proper, right) and "doxa" (belief or thinking) and it means the right belief or thinking. There are around 260 million Orthodox Christians all over the world. Most of them live in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, as well in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. All Orthodox Christians share the same belief but have different traditions when it comes to rituals, history, and feasts. I am, for example, Greek Orthodox, since I come from Greece but there are also Russian, Romanian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Polish, or Albanian Orthodox to name some of them. The head of each Orthodox Church can be a Patriarch or a bishop but we have also priests in our parishes for our regular rituals and celebrations.

Like other Christians, we believe that God is a Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This Trinity of three distinct persons is at the same time only One God. The true mystery of our God was revealed by Jesus Christ who is the Son that became human. He lived in Palestine in the 1st century of the Christian era, he taught and performed miracles but then he was persecuted and died on the cross for our sins. However, being God he rose from death. His death and resurrection revealed God's love for his world and was the beginning of the Christian Church.

Almost all our rituals take place in our worship houses that are called churches. They have some distinct features with deeper symbolic meanings. The sanctuary is always in the eastern part of the church. Only the priest and those who help him can enter it.

Icons, namely paintings of holy women and men, stories from their lives and our holy book, the Bible, are respected by Orthodox and play an important role in our tradition. They cover the walls of our churches or are painted on pieces of wood. My family has two such icons at home that belong to the family for many generations. They are placed in the small icon corner that is used for prayer in my family house. My mother usually takes care that the oil lamp that hangs in front of them is always burning. Icons are usually called the books of all believers, especially of those who cannot read. They remind us in a simple way of the sacred stories and persons of our faith. Our holy book, though, is the Bible or the Holy Scripture. It consists of two parts, the Old and the New Testament. The Old Testament contains 49 books and the New Testament 27. Passages from them and especially the New Testament are read in our worship. In the Greek Orthodox Church, they are usually read in ancient Greek, which makes it sometimes quite difficult to understand. My aunt, however, gave me a nice translation of the New Testament last year and I have spent some time reading it. It is certainly a fascinating book!

One of the most important symbols in our faith is the cross that reminds us of Jesus Christ's sacrifice and God's love. We usually wear it around our neck. We also often cross ourselves, especially during worship or when praying. With our joined three right-hand fingers that symbolize the Holy Trinity, we touch our forehead, below the chest, the right side of the chest and then the left. This is at the same time a gesture of prayer and blessing.

Orthodox Christians usually pray at the beginning and the end of the day. One of our favourite prayers is the Prayer of the Lord, a short prayer that Jesus Christ taught to his disciples and is recited ever since in our worship gatherings but also during prayer at home.

The Orthodox Church has many feasts that are celebrated throughout the year. Some feasts have fixed days in the year and some others that change the date of celebration every year and are called movable. In the period before great feasts, we usually fast, which means that we do not eat certain kinds of food. There are also two regular fasting days in the week, Wednesday and Friday, when we commemorate Jesus' death on the cross. One of the most important fixed feasts in winter is Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. However, the greatest feast is Easter (or Pascha), a movable feast in spring, celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is one of the most joyous feasts in our tradition. Due to a different calculation system, we celebrate Easter on a different day than other Christian traditions. There is a preparatory Holy Week and at midnight after Saturday, we celebrate Jesus' rising from the dead. Easter Sunday is a day of great joy and family time. We eat together, crack dyed red eggs and greet each other with the phrase "Christ has risen".

Sunday is the holiest day of the week. It is the day when we go to the church to participate in the Divine Liturgy, a special worship gathering. In the Liturgy we celebrate Eucharist, that reminds us of Jesus Christ's last supper with his friends and disciples, his death and resurrection. The gifts of bread and wine are offered and are consecrated. We believe that they are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ spiritually. At the end of the Liturgy, the priest invites the members of the congregation to receive them. Through their consumption we believe that we remain in communion with Jesus Christ but also with the rest of the community. At the end of the Liturgy small pieces of bread are also offered to all participants, a reminiscence of the common meals that ancient Christians held when they met.

Our parish church is very important for our family life not only because of the celebration of great feast and the Divine Liturgy but because some of the most important events of our family life take place there.



Today, for example, my young sister is going to get baptized and become a full member of the Orthodox Church. During the ceremony, she will get her Christian name, she will be dressed in white new clothes and wear a cross. Although in ancient times people were baptized as adults, today in the Orthodox Church children are usually baptized in the early months of their lives. Baptism will be performed by the priest and the godparents of my soon-to-be-baptized sister will be there to help. They will be her spiritual parents and responsible for her growing up following the teachings of the Orthodox Church. My sister will be called Sophia, after one of my grandmothers. During the ceremony, the priest will immerse my sister three times into the water of the font in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a symbol of dying and being reborn into a new life following the example of Jesus Christ who died and was risen from the dead. No surprise that this is an important day in our family. After the ceremony, we will celebrate with a large dinner and music and my lucky sister will get a lot of presents!

There are so many things to celebrate as a family, like baptisms, name days but also marriages. My aunt Maria married two months ago and it was really a big event with relatives coming from all over the world to be present in the ceremony that took place in the church. The priest exchanged the wedding rings three times in the fingers of the young couple. Number three is important in the Orthodox Church because it refers to the Holy Trinity. He also placed the wedding crowns on their heads and led them around the table, in a dance that symbolizes their joyful beginning in their common life. The priest also held the cross in his hand that stands for the difficulties that they have to face together.

Well, life and death are a cycle as my grandmother Eleni says. As a family, we celebrated happy events but also the death of some dear friends and relatives. We had to say our goodbyes to my grand-grandfather Nikos some years ago. It was a difficult time for us all. When the casket was placed in the earth the priest poured olive oil and wine in the shape of a cross three times and threw some wheat seeds on it. The priest explained that like the seeds that are buried in the earth to grow and come into light in spring so the dead will rise at the end of the days. Orthodox people believe that death resembles a kind of a long sleep from which all dead will wake in the Second Coming of Jesus. Till then we have to remember them with love. Memorial services are very important, then, and are held on certain days of the year. Women bring sweets and boiled wheat to the church on these days and the family offers almsgiving in the memory of the dead. We are sad but at the same time we hope to meet them again and we never stop to love them.

Women participate in all worshipping events in our church, clean it or volunteer in the social work of our parish by preparing meals for the poor or visiting families in need. Although we are regarded equal members of the community we are not allowed to become priests or have some other public role in the life of the community. It is a pity but as it is often said this is a matter of tradition and history. Well, tradition is a very important aspect of our lives and it can encompass many aspects of our religious life; teachings but also common practices and customs. Since the Orthodox Church believes that it is the continuation of the early Church, tradition is of great importance. However, especially young people think that some things that older people call "tradition" could certainly change according to contemporary needs.

As members of a religious community but also of society we are expected to live according to our faith and also act in ways that reflect this faith. Loving God and our neighbour (either Christian or non-Christian) is the highest command and besides our regular worship and participation in Eucharist, we have to show our love and solidarity to other human beings but also our respect to the rest of God's creation. Almsgiving then but also a life of humility and careful and respectful use of goods are some of the most important practical aspects of Orthodox life. As the priest in our church usually says in his preaching being Orthodox does not only mean keeping the proper faith but also living according to this faith.

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