



# **A Visitor's Welcome to the Greek Orthodox Christian Church**

By Dr. David Carlson

### **What is the Orthodox Christianity?**

The term, “Orthodox” means “correct praise” or “right teaching”. The Orthodox Christian Church is both orthodox and catholic (universal), thereby offering a “correct praise” for all (universal).

### **When did Orthodox Christianity begin?**

Our Church was brought into existence by Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, one Person of the Holy Trinity. After Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles, empowering them to go forth to all nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28: 19 NKJV). The Apostles ordained others to serve the Church, as she grew, passing this authority to following generations (Apostolic Succession) and enabling us to serve this living body of Christ.

### **When did Orthodox Christianity become a separate entity within Christianity?**

Christianity grew throughout the known world, which corresponded to the former Roman Empire. Differences developed between the two halves of the Church, the Western and Eastern, and continued without resolution. This resulted in a split between the eastern Christian Church and the western Christian Church in 1054 A.D.

While there were a variety of issues, the two main disagreements caused the Christian Church to divide into two parts, Eastern and Western.

One disagreement involved the understanding of the Holy Trinity and the procession of the Holy Spirit. The Eastern Church taught that the Holy Spirit proceeded from God the Father, as formulated by the First and Second Ecumenical Councils, 325 A.D. and 381 A.D. respectively. The Western Church formally added the phrase “and from the Son”(Filioque) at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 A.D., teaching that the Holy Spirit proceeded from God the Father and the Son.

A second disagreement between the Eastern and Western Christian Churches involved the authority of the Pope, the Bishop of Rome. The Orthodox

Church views the Bishop of Rome as the “first among equals”, meaning that the Bishop of Rome is the senior and most highly respected of all Christians bishops of the undivided Church, maintaining the “primacy” of the Bishop of Rome. The Roman Catholic Church understands that the Pope is the sole head over the entire Christian Church, maintaining the “supremacy” of the Pope. Since the Christian Church divided into the Eastern Christian Church and Western Christian Church, the Patriarch of Constantinople (present day Istanbul) is now considered the “first among equals”. The See of Constantinople was founded by Saint Andrew the Apostle.

### **Did the Protestant Reformation affect Orthodox Christianity?**

The Eastern Church, the present-day Eastern Orthodox Church, did not experience the Protestant Reformation of the 15th and 16th centuries. During those centuries, the Eastern Orthodox Church was struggling to survive under the Islamic domination. The Protestants were “protesting” some of the practices of the Western Church, the present-day Roman Catholic Church.



**Who are the Orthodox Christians more like:  
Catholics or Protestants?**

Orthodox Christianity is probably better seen as a third understanding of Christianity, rather than more like one or the other two. Protestant visitors to Orthodoxy will find certain similarities. The Orthodox Divine Services are especially beautiful, as the Services are based upon scores of Biblical passages, something like a spoken and sung “stream of Scripture”.

Catholic visitors to Orthodox Church will find many similarities in Orthodox worship and belief to their own. Both communities accept the same seven Sacraments, as the means by which Christ is present in His Church (Baptism, Confirmation, Confession, Eucharist, Ordination, Marriage, and Unction), and both believe that Christ’s Presence in the Eucharist (Holy Communion) is real, not a symbolic presence. Both Orthodox and Catholic Churches also hold to the traditional meaning of Apostolic Succession, which is the understanding that the current Bishops and Priests were ordained by a line of previous Bishops that goes back to the original Apostles and thus to Christ Himself.



**When people come into an Orthodox Church,  
they light a candle. Why is this?**

Coming into our Church from outside, everyone first enters the Narthex, which is a kind of “halfway” space between the outside world and the Church. Lighting a candle in the Narthex can mean several things. One purpose is to signify, while lighting the candle, we wish to leave our worldly cares in this room before entering the Church with the eternal Light.

Also, a prayer is offered simultaneously as the candle is lit. The Church teaches that the prayer continues to be offered while the candle burns. The faithful then venerate an icon, by kissing it. In a way, our worship begins out in the Narthex, even before coming into the Divine Service itself.

**Why do worshippers kiss the icons?**

Icons, the painted pictures of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Saints, or sacred events, are very important in Orthodox worship and have a deeper purpose than ordinary paintings. Icons are windows into the sacred realm, into the Kingdom of God. These depicted persons, in a spiritual way, are present with us. We kiss the icon to show love and respect, even as we might kiss the picture of a family member. This expression of reverence is another form of prayer in action.

**Does kissing icons mean that Orthodox  
Christians worship the icon or the  
person portrayed?**

No. Only God (the Holy Trinity --- the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) is worthy of worship. The Virgin Mary and the Saints are worthy of our deep respect and love or what is called “veneration”. As has been stated, kissing the icons is a form of prayer in action, showing our love and respect for the spiritual beings who are alive with Christ and, therefore, with us in worship.

**Are there any features of the Orthodox  
Church that might help me understand  
Orthodox Christianity?**

Yes. The structure of Orthodox Churches offers visual lessons of our beliefs. Orthodoxy highlights that we, as a body of believers, are more than a gathering of people who come together for praise, prayer, and learning.

We are, in this place, in the very presence of God, even as the Jerusalem Temple provided access to God (the Holy of Holies) in the Old Testament and early New Testament periods. Various elements of Orthodox architecture, as well as elements of our worship (some will be discussed below), relate to the worshipful nature of our Church.

Secondly, Orthodox Churches throughout the world tend to conform to certain repeating architectural patterns, many of which retain ancient elements from the very early centuries of Christianity. Traditionally, Orthodox Churches have a large dome covering the congregation. It is not coincidental that the dome is globe-shaped. In worship, the dome symbolizes that we are in a new world, the kingdom of God. There is typically a large icon of Christ, the “All-Governing”, in this large dome.

Our present, beautiful Byzantine Church in Carmel was built in 2008 and its design is patterned after the magnificent Byzantine Church of Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul). It therefore recalls our Church’s glorious past and, at the same time, is very modern.

### **Why is there a screen at the front of the Church and why does it have those particular icons on it?**

This wall is called the “iconostasis” or “icon screen”, and specific icons are included to face the congregation. The “Royal Doors” or “Beautiful Gates” (again using the imagery from the Jerusalem Temple) are in the middle of the icon screen and, through them, we can see into the Altar.



### **Are the icons on the icon screen always the same?**

Most of them are, yes. The three icons to the right and left of the Royal Doors are usually the same.

To the right of the Royal Doors is an icon of Jesus Christ, the Merciful; to the right of Christ is the icon of Saint John the Baptist, the Forerunner who announced the coming of the Messiah; and next on the right is the icon of Archangel Michael. The next two icons to the right are unique to our Parish and are the icons of Saint Spyridon and Saint Panteleimon.

To the left of the Royal Doors is always the Theotokos (Mary, the “mother of God”) with the Christ child; then to her left is an icon representing the name of the local Church, which for our Parish is Holy Trinity. Here, the three angelic visitors to Abraham and Sarah at Mamre (Genesis 18) represent the three persons of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and then the next icon to the left is the Archangel Gabriel. Again, the next two icons to the left are unique to our Parish and are the icons of Saint Katherine and Saint Theodora.

### **How do these larger icons contribute to Orthodox worship?**

When our worship service, which is called the Divine Liturgy, begins, the Priest first proclaims “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”. With these words, the Priest invites all present to enter into the Kingdom of God, which was begun in Jesus’ ministry and is now present in the Church. We draw near to Christ in worship, even as Christ comes to us (especially through the Gospel reading and in the Holy Eucharist).

Since the saints are alive with Christ in His Kingdom (Revelations 6:9), we believe that the saints are invisibly present with us and join with us in worship. The icons remind us of the presence of the Holy Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), the Virgin Mary, and all the saints who join with us each time we gather to worship.

**What is in the area behind the icon screen,  
between the Royal Doors?**

This is the Altar, from where the Bishop or the Priest preside over the Divine Services and are assisted by the Deacons and the Altar Boys. On the Altar Table in the Altar, the Holy Eucharist, or Holy Communion, is celebrated.

The Eucharist “makes alive” or “makes real” again the sacrifice of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins and for our spiritual healing.

Every worshipper is invited to see the story of Jesus whenever the worshipper looks toward the Altar. The first icon on the left side of the icon screen, we see the icon of the Theotokos with the Christ child, reminding us of the Incarnation (Birth of Christ), when God took human form. At precisely the center point of the apse, directly behind the Altar Table, the icon of Christ resting in a Chalice that is supported by a cherubic angel reminds us of Jesus’ real presence in the Eucharist. To the right of the Royal Doors, we see the icon of Jesus Christ, which reminds us that our Resurrected Lord will come again at the end of human history to judge humanity.

**Why does the Priest face away from the  
congregation? Isn’t this rude?**

The Priest is actually facing toward the Altar. He is facing the same direction as the congregation, as we look to Jesus throughout our worship.

The area where the congregation gathers is called the “Nave”. That word is related to the word “naval” which reminds us of a ship. The Priest, then, might be compared to the captain of a ship. From the Altar, the Priest leads us in prayer and directs the worship service.

At various times of the Divine Services, the Priest turns toward the congregation to bless them, to preach, to cense, and distribute the Holy Eucharist.

**Why does the Priest use incense around the  
Altar, the icons, and toward the congregation?**

**What is the purpose of the incense?**

In the Old Testament (Exodus 30), God directs that incense be used in worship. The pleasant smell was believed to drift up to the heavenly realm and please God. In the Psalms of the Old Testament, there is also the request that the Psalmist’s prayers would rise like incense and please God.

Incense in Orthodox worship carries these same meanings and more. The Priest censes the Altar, the icons, and the congregation, as a way of extending Christ’s blessings on all that are present and acknowledging the image of God in each person.

**Why and when do Orthodox Christians  
cross themselves?**

Orthodox Christians make the ancient sign of the Cross frequently during worship by joining together the thumb, index finger, and middle finger of their right hand and then touching the forehead, then heart area, then the right shoulder, and then the left shoulder. This ancient gesture is usually done when there is a mention of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) during the Divine Services. This simple gesture, of making the sign of the Cross on our bodies, can be considered a way of keeping our minds and hearts on Christ. It is another type of bodily prayer or prayer in action.



### **Are Orthodox worship services long?**

Worship services in the early Church could last many hours. In the United States today, our Divine Services usually last about one hour and a quarter, including the sermon.

### **How many types of Divine Services are in the Orthodox Church?**

During the liturgical year, various Divine Services are offered in the Orthodox Church, praising God and seeking His mercy. The primary Service that is celebrated on Sundays is the Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom. Every time the Divine Liturgy is celebrated Holy Eucharist is offered to the faithful.

### **Why do the Priest and Altar Boys walk around the Church at various times of the Service?**

There are two processions in the Divine Liturgy, reminding us of the two parts of early Christian worship. The first procession includes the presentation of the Gospel to the congregation with a hymn that calls the faithful to worship. The Gospel is placed on the Altar Table and then later opened to hear the words of Jesus.

The second procession brings the ordinary elements of bread and wine around and through the congregation, where they are then placed on the Altar Table. During the Consecration of these offerings, the Holy Spirit descends and transforms them into the real presence of Christ.



### **Who is allowed to receive Holy Communion?**

Baptized Christians who are confirmed in the Orthodox Church and who have prepared themselves may approach the Chalice to receive Holy Communion. Since the Orthodox Church does not extend Holy Communion to persons from other Christian faith groups who are present during the Divine Liturgy, this practice is not intended to be an insult. It may be an unfortunate acknowledgement that the Christian Church is divided. Orthodox Christians pray that Christ's Church may again be one, as Christ Himself prayed. The Orthodox Church sees that an open Chalice is a result of unity, not a means to it. All visitors are invited, at the end of the Divine Liturgy, to join with the congregants in approaching the Priest to receive a piece of antidoron or "blessed bread".

Orthodox Christians do not themselves take the Eucharist as some "right". Each Orthodox Christian is encouraged to prepare prior to receiving the Holy Eucharist by fasting, praying, confessing sins, and having a repentant heart. This might mean that, on any given Sunday, not every Orthodox Christian who is present will approach the Priest to receive Holy Communion. The Orthodox Church encourages the faithful to receive the Eucharist frequently.

### **Why is Greek used in the Divine Services and does everyone present understand Greek?**

Greek was the language of the early Church. Evangelists, such as Saint Paul, evangelized the Roman world in Greek. The entire New Testament was originally written in Greek. The Councils of the early Church were also conducted in Greek. And locally, the immigrants who founded the Church in Indianapolis were Greek. To retain the Greek language is, in part, to connect ourselves with our Christian roots.

In accordance with the Orthodox approach, the majority of the Divine Services are presently offered in the language of the people, which in the Indianapolis area is English. There are Divine Liturgy books available to facilitate both languages.

**Does a person have to be Greek, or Russian, or from some other Eastern European heritage to be an Orthodox Christian?**

NO! The Orthodox Church in the United States welcomes anyone who seeks to worship God and to grow in Christ. Our Parish continually receives people into the Orthodox Church either through Baptism or Confirmation. The Orthodox Church is Christ's Church and, therefore, everyone is welcomed!

**What books would help me learn more about Orthodox Christianity?**

Bishop Kallistos Ware: The Orthodox Church and The Orthodox Way

Rev. Alexander Schmemmann: For the Life of the World

Rev. Stanley Harakas: Living the Liturgy

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom: Living Prayer

There are also many websites where more books, icons, incense, and other religious items can be found. Some include:

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese: [goarch.org](http://goarch.org)

Orthodox Marketplace: [orthodoxmarketplace.com](http://orthodoxmarketplace.com)

**What if I would like to speak with someone or get more information?**

Our Parish website is a valuable source of information about our Parish and Faith.

You may also call our Parish Office at (317) 733-3033 Mondays through Fridays from 9 am to 5 pm for more information or to speak with the Parish Priest.





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