

CHANGELESSNESS

One of the distinguishing features of the Orthodox Church is her changelessness. The Orthodox Church baptizes by a three-fold immersion as was done in the early Church. It still confirms infants at baptism bestowing upon them the "seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit." It still brings babies and small children to receive Holy Communion. In the liturgy the deacon still cries out, "The doors, the doors," recalling early days when none but baptized members of the Christian family could participate in the liturgy. The Nicene Creed is still recited without the later additions. The Orthodox Church has two distinctive features: (1) her changelessness; (2) her sense of living continuity with the church of the early apostles.

THE NICENE CREED

In the Nicene Creed we confess: "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." What do these words mean?

ONE means that the Church is one because God is one. "There is one body, and one Spirit... one hope... One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all" (Eph. 4:4-6). In His great Priestly Prayer, Jesus prayed that the Church may be "one" even as He and the Father are one (John 17:22).

HOLY. The Church is holy because our Lord made her so. "Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27). Not only is the Church holy but it is also her purpose to make us holy, i.e., different from the world, conformed to God's will.

CATHOLIC. The Orthodox Church is Catholic, meaning whole, because she has preserved the wholeness of the faith of Christ through the centuries without adding or subtracting to that divinely revealed faith. For this reason she has come to be known as the "Orthodox" Church, i.e., the Church that has preserved the full and true faith of Christ. Orthodox Christians believe that the Church, which has Christ Himself as Head and which is the temple of the Holy Spirit, cannot err. Her voice is the voice of Christ in the world today. The word "Orthodox" is applied to the Orthodox Church to designate that it has kept the true "Faith which was once delivered to the Saints" (Jude 1:3).

Catholic means also that the Church is universal. It embraces all peoples, the entire earth. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son . . ." Just as there are no distinctions within the love of God, so the Church stretches out her arms to the world. "Here there cannot be Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man . . ." (Col. 3:11). God's love is all-inclusive; so the Church is Catholic.

APOSTOLIC. The Church is apostolic because she teaches what the apostles taught and can trace her existence historically directly back to the apostles.

It was the Apostle Paul, for example, who established the Christian Church in Greece through his early missionary journeys. His letters to the Corinthians, the Thessalonians, the Philippians were written to the churches he had established in those Greek cities. The Church he founded there has never ceased to exist. The Apostles Peter & Paul founded the church in Antioch which exists to this day as the Antiochian Orthodox Church. Other apostles established the church in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Greece and Cyprus. The Eastern Orthodox Church has existed in these places since the days of the apostles. From these cities and countries, missionaries brought the Gospel (Good News) of Jesus to other countries: Russia, the Ukraine, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, etc. This self-governing family of churches is known today as the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Thus, the Orthodox Church is the legitimate and historical continuation of the early Church. She has the same faith, the same spirit, the same ethos. "This is the Apostolic faith, this is the faith of the Fathers, this is the Orthodox faith, this faith has established the universe" (From the Sunday of Orthodoxy vespers).

The Church is both visible and invisible. The visible Church is the Church Militant on earth. The invisible Church is the Church Triumphant in heaven, "the heavenly Jerusalem . . . innumerable angels in festal gathering . . . the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven" (Hebrews 12:22-23).

Christ has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church (Matthew 16:18) and that He would be with it until the end of the world (Matthew 28:20). St. Paul calls the Church "the pillar and ground of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).

SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

The highest authority of the Eastern Church is the Ecumenical Council, involving the whole church. When the bishops of the church define a matter of faith in an Ecumenical Council, a requisite for its recognition is the acceptance and consent of the whole Church. Only then can it be considered infallible, or inspired of the Holy Spirit, who resides in the whole church, consisting of clergy and laity, to guide it to all truth. This makes every person within the church responsible for Christian truth. There have been instances where decisions of the bishops in an Ecumenical Council have not been accepted because they were rejected by the church as a whole.