

Our Neighbor's Faith – Eastern Orthodox Church

History and Description¹

Most of the denominations we've talked about made their way to America with believers who immigrated here. This is true for the Orthodox Church, too, but instead of moving east to west across the country, the Orthodox faith was carried with Russian immigrants in Alaska and on the west coast, and then spread eastward.

The Orthodox Church dates back to the earliest apostles, like Paul and Peter, who started churches all across the Mediterranean world. In the first few centuries of the Christian church's life, there were many debates over false teachings, and councils where church leaders gathered together to define and explain beliefs and stand against false teachings. "Orthodox" means "true belief," or "right teaching." Major decrees from the first seven of these councils included the divinity of Christ, the two natures of Christ, and the Nicene Creed.

In 1054 the Great Schism (divide) between the western part of the church (based in Rome, which grew into the Roman Catholic Church) and the eastern part of the church (based in what is now Istanbul, Turkey, which grew into the Eastern Orthodox Church), occurred, over a variety of theological and political issues, including Communion practices, the wording of the Nicene Creed, and whether clergy could be married.

Worldwide, the Orthodox denomination is the third largest Christian group; there are three main branches, but the most well known, and the one we'll talk about, is the Eastern Orthodox Church. There are Syrian, Greek, Ukrainian, Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Romanian, and Albanian Orthodox Churches, and more. Even though the languages differ, they all share exactly the same liturgy, worship, sacraments, and beliefs. The patriarch of Constantinople is recognized by all Eastern Orthodox churches as the spiritual head of the church in *honor* only. He has no authority comparable to that of the Roman Catholic Pope. The highest source of authority of the Eastern church is the ecumenical council, a meeting involving the whole church. The bishops of all the Orthodox churches in the world meet together when necessary to discuss common problems, and when the bishops define a matter of faith in an ecumenical council, the church as a whole must accept their decision. At the same time, every person within the church is responsible for Christian truth.

There is a great emphasis on worship in the Orthodox Church, and services are considerably longer than what we might be used to. They feature the Liturgy of the Word and of the Bread of Life. The liturgy is all about the sheer joy found in the resurrected Christ, and the liturgy of worship is the means by which a person communes with the Lord Jesus and has a personal encounter with Jesus.

Worship in the Eastern Orthodox Church engages all five senses: sight, through the visual beauty of the icons and the priests' robes; smell, through the burning of incense; taste, through the sacrament of Holy Communion and the drinking of holy water; sound, through the music of the liturgy; and touch, through practices like crossing oneself, kissing the icon, and lighting candles when you enter the church.

¹ Honoring Our Neighbor's Faith, Augsburg Fortress, 2016, pp. 42-46.

The Orthodox Church celebrates seven sacraments, called *mysterion* (= mysteries). The Orthodox Church is very comfortable with mystery, and celebrates it, and no attempt is made to define what is indefinable in God. The seven mysteries are ways through which God brings grace and love to us. The seven mysteries are: Communion (the true presence of Christ administered by the priest by a spoon from a cup with bread and wine mixed together); Baptism (infants, full immersion); Confirmation (immediately after baptism, able to receive Communion); Confession (priest and penitent both facing forward as God is judge); Holy Unction (for anyone who is sick); Holy Orders (becoming a priest or other type of formal leader in the church); and Matrimony.

Icons are very prominent in Orthodox churches. An icon is a religious painting of Jesus or a saint. They are like “prayers, hymns, and sermons in form and color, a visual gospel.”

The Communion of Saints is also important: the saints on earth communing with the saints in heaven. During worship folks are constantly reminded that they are members of a great body: living saints who never have to feel alone when they pray. These saints express their salvation in responding to social concerns, Christians acting as servants to all people for Christ’s sake.

Tradition is very important, but not in the sense of being stuck in the past; tradition is all that the Holy Spirit has taught and continues to teach. One important piece of tradition is the Nicene Creed. The Bible is the supreme expression of God’s revelation to humans. The Bible and tradition are the two main sources of faith.

Other characteristics of Orthodox churches include the *Antidoron*, a piece of bread given out at the end of the liturgy to worshipers to take with them as an expression of fellowship and love; the fact that some Orthodox churches celebrate Christmas on January 7th (still on the Julian calendar); and the fact that some Orthodox churches celebrate Easter a week or two later.

Statistics: As of 2010, the Eastern Orthodox Churches in America had approximately 779,704 members and 1,882 congregations. (For comparison, the ELCA was at 4,181,219 and 9,846.)

Experience

To see a good example of an “iconostasis,” or wall of icons, check out this website: www.christthesaviourhbg.org/icons.

You can also check out our old friends from St. Andrews Orthodox Church in Ashland (Three Priests in a bar) - <https://www.firstcalled.org/> – or St. Seraphim of Sarov Orthodox Church in Glen Allen - <https://stseraphimofsarov.org/index.php>. For fun, you can also check out this fun Epiphany tradition of the Greek Orthodox community in Tarpon Springs, FL: <https://www.tampabay.com/life-culture/entertainment/things-to-do/2021/12/30/tarpon-springs-epiphany-in-2022-to-open-again-to-public/>.

You can also check out <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Bilateral> and scroll down for information on the dialogue between the ELCA and the Orthodox Church.

Comparison with the ELCA²:

<u>Eastern Orthodox Church</u>	<u>ELCA</u>
1. Accept the original Nicene Creed, which did not include the “filioque” phrase (proceeds from the Father <i>and the Son</i>). Orthodox Christians believe that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father and is sent through the Son.	1. Same, with the addition of the Western filioque phrase. The Western church believes that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.
2. Accept the Bible and seven general councils as authority.	2. Accept the Bible as authority, expressed in creeds and confessions.
3. Celebrate seven sacraments.	3. Celebrate two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion.
4. Believe in “transubstantiation,” that the bread and wine in Communion are changed into the body and blood of Christ.	4. Believe in “consubstantiation,” that the communicant receives the body and blood of Christ with the bread and wine.
5. Highly liturgical with Eastern Rite. Usually in the language of the people but not always so.	5. Liturgical, following the tradition of the Western Church. Language of the people is used.
6. Maintain apostolic succession in that priests must be ordained in an unbroken line back to the apostles.	6. Understand apostolic succession as continuity with the apostles’ teaching.
7. Priesthood is restricted to males. They can be married, but only if they already are before they are ordained.	7. Men and women may become pastors, and are allowed to marry.
8. An episcopal form of government with bishops, priests, and deacons. Patriarchs and archbishops occupy the more important bishoprics but are not more important in theory.	8. Interdependent congregational, regional, national, and global expressions of the church are characterized by democratic decision making, strong ecumenical relationships, elected leadership, and an ordained ministry.

What we Lutherans can learn...

Among other things:

1. Lutherans are fairly comfortable with mystery - we don’t try to explain things of God that are simply beyond us. But I’m not sure we celebrate it. In a world that is sometimes uncertain, celebrating mystery can give us some breathing room.
2. The Orthodox emphasis on the Communion of Saints - those living and those in heaven - is something we could learn to feature more. We talk about this too, but how often do we feel connected to the great communion of saints through time and space?
3. How could we engage all of our sense in worship?

² Ibid.

Let's pray:

Most high and holy God, pour out upon us your one and unifying Spirit, and awaken in every confession of the whole church a holy hunger and thirst for unity in you; we especially pray today for our sisters and brothers in the Eastern Orthodox Church. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.