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Introduction to Orthodox Christianity



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Current Overview

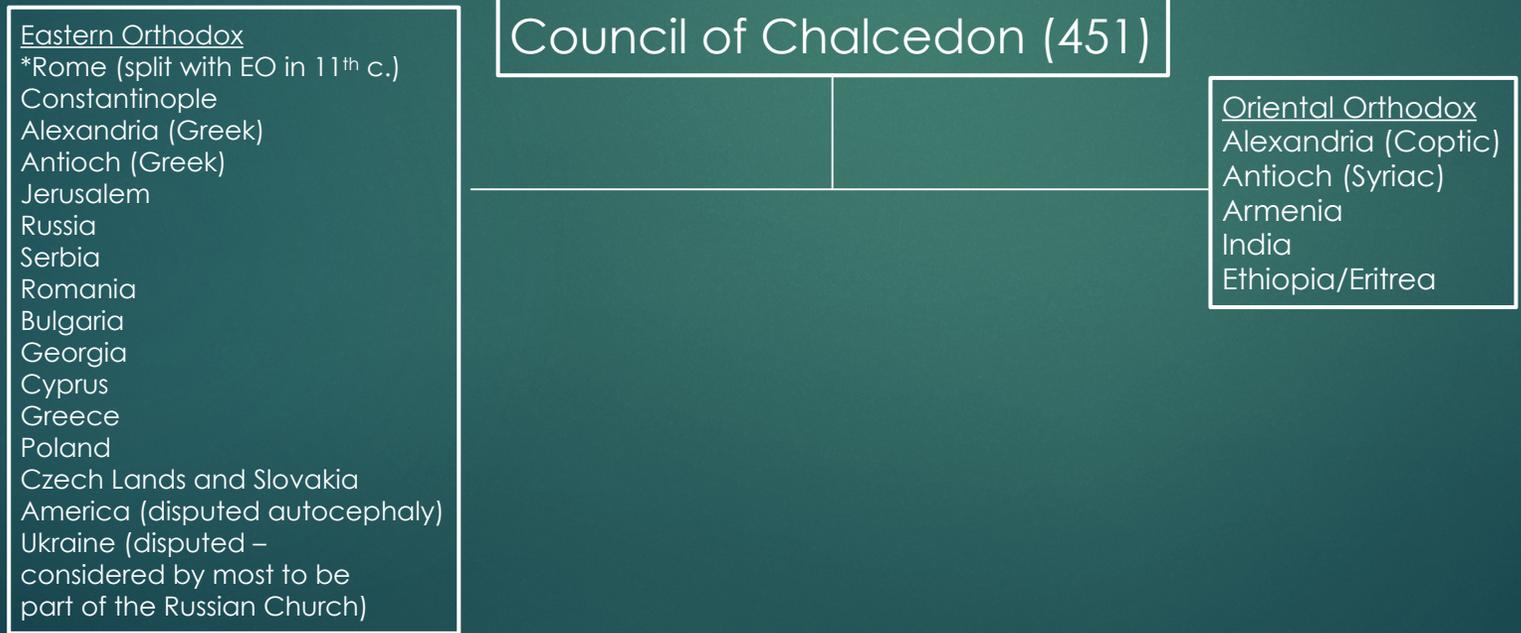
- ▶ There are over 200 million Orthodox Christians worldwide, making it the second largest Christian group in the world (after the Roman Catholics).
- ▶ There are two main groups that use the title “Orthodox”: the Eastern Orthodox (larger group) and the Oriental Orthodox (smaller group).
- ▶ Around half of the Eastern Orthodox Christians in the world are part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The remainder are part of the Churches of Constantinople (parts of Greece and areas abroad), Alexandria (Africa), Antioch (Middle East), Jerusalem (Israel/Palestine and Jordan), Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Albania, the Czech Lands and Slovakia, America (disputed autocephaly), and Ukraine (disputed ecclesiastical jurisdiction – considered by most to be part of the Russian Church). Most of these have parishes in the U.S.
- ▶ The Oriental Orthodox are concentrated in Egypt (Coptic Church), Middle East (Syriac Orthodox Church), Armenia (Armenian Apostolic Church), India (Malankara/Syriac Orthodox), and Ethiopia (Ethiopian Orthodox Church).
- ▶ Each group (Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox) forms a worldwide communion. Relations are generally positive between the two groups, although they are not formally in union since the fifth century.
- ▶ This briefing will focus on the larger group of Eastern Orthodox.

History and Practices

- ▶ The Orthodox Church traces its lineage directly to Christ and the Apostles, and claims to be the Church established by Christ on Earth.
- ▶ In the early centuries after the earthly ministry of Christ, each local church was headed by a bishop (“overseer”) who was assisted by presbyters (literally “elders” or “priests”) and deacons (“servants”). Orthodox hold that the unbroken link of “Apostolic Succession” ties the current clergy of the Orthodox Church with the Apostles (i.e. each bishop was ordained by others going back in a line to the time of Christ).
- ▶ The bishops of larger cities and those cities in which the Apostles had preached were accorded primary over the surrounding areas.
- ▶ Most of the main cities (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and later Jerusalem) were often called “Patriarchates” and their bishops called “Patriarchs” or “Popes” (Rome and Alexandria). They exercised oversight over the churches in their regions.

History and Practices, con't

- ▶ Major issues of theological importance were solved by a general or “ecumenical” council in which all of the bishops in the world were represented. The Creed of the Church (“I believe in one God . . .”) was formulated at the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in the fourth century.
- ▶ In the fifth century, the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox split at the Council of Chalcedon regarding the appropriate terminology for describing the humanity and divinity of Christ (Christology). Both groups have continued in parallel until the present day, and share almost all aspects in common.



History and Practices, con't

- ▶ From the fourth century until the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Christianity was the official religion of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire. This empire at various times included the whole of the eastern Mediterranean region.
- ▶ When the Emperor Constantine established the city of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in the fourth century, it was styled as the 'New Rome' and the bishop of Constantinople claimed seniority equal to Rome.
- ▶ During the tenth century, following the pioneering work of Saints Cyril and Methodius, Eastern Christianity spread to the Slavic people of eastern Europe.
- ▶ The famous story is told of Prince Vladimir of Kiev who sent his emissaries to inquire about various religions so that he might choose one for his kingdom. When his emissaries came to Constantinople (modern Istanbul), they saw the ornate Orthodox services, and "knew not whether they were in heaven or on earth". Prince Vladimir accepted their recommendation, and the people of Rus (modern Russia/Ukraine) accepted Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

Historical Overview, con't

- ▶ In the eleventh century, the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholics divided over several differences. Most of the main differences between the two are:
 - ▶ (1) The *filioque*. The Orthodox use the original Creed, which states that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. The Roman Catholic Creed states that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father “and the Son” (in Latin *filioque*), which was rejected by the Orthodox Church, which retained the original Creed from the fourth century.
 - ▶ (2) Purgatory. The Orthodox do not accept the idea of purgatory in the same way as the Roman Catholics, although Orthodox do pray for the souls of the departed.
 - ▶ (3) The Authority of the Roman Pope. The Orthodox believe that issues of major importance should be settled by a worldwide council of bishops, and that the Roman Pope can have only a ‘primacy of honor’, but does not have authority over the entire worldwide Church.
 - ▶ (4) The Immaculate Conception. The Orthodox believe that the Virgin Mary lived a life without committing sin, but reject the idea that she was conceived sinlessly.
 - ▶ (5) God's Essence/Energies. This is an intricate question regarding the nature of God's existence and His operation in the world. It is beyond the scope of this briefing.

History and Practices, con't

- ▶ Some other differences between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics are as follows:
 - ▶ (1) Clerical Celibacy. While most Roman Catholic priests are required to be unmarried, Orthodox deacons and priests may be married, as long as they get married before being ordained (they may not marry after being ordained). However, only unmarried candidates may be chosen to become bishops.
 - ▶ (2) The use of leavened bread. While Roman Catholics usually use unleavened wafers for communion, Orthodox use leavened bread.
 - ▶ (3) Appearance. While most Roman Catholic priests are typically clean shaven, most Orthodox priests grow their beards. Orthodox priests are usually distinguishable by beards, long black robes (though other colors of robes are sometimes worn), and often wear large crosses (the wearing of a cross / the style of the cross may indicate the rank of the priest).
 - ▶ (4) Church Architecture. Most Orthodox Churches divide the altar from the general sanctuary with a wall called an "iconostasis". This wall is decorated with images of Christ, angels, saints.

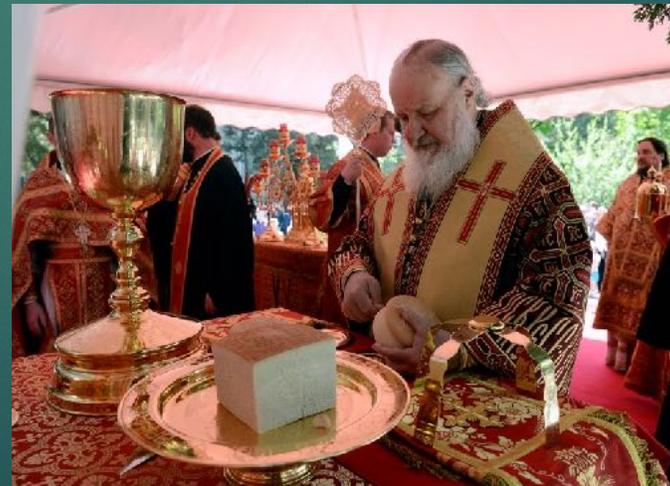
History and Practices, con't



Orthodox priest and family.



Iconostasis separates Altar from the sanctuary.



Leavened bread for Holy Communion.



Church interior.

History and Practices, con't

- ▶ The goal of Orthodox life is “union with God” (in Greek *theosis*). Orthodox believe that the coming of Christ opened the door for humans to be united with God and thereby achieve peace, joy, and eternal life.
- ▶ Orthodox seek to achieve this eternal happiness by being united with Christ in the Church. This is achieved through (1) prayer, (2) fasting, and (3) almsgiving, as well as repenting and partaking of the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments):
 - ▶ Holy Baptism. All of one's sins and former life are washed away forever.
 - ▶ Holy Chrismation. One is anointed with oil blessed by the bishops for receiving the Holy Spirit.
 - ▶ Holy Communion. Orthodox believe they partake of the Body and Blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine, thereby receiving eternal life. Communion is usually distributed with a spoon.
 - ▶ Holy Confession. Believers confess their sins with a priest present as witness, and the priest pronounces the absolution and forgiveness of God.
 - ▶ Holy Matrimony. A man and a woman are joined together in marriage with the blessing of a priest. Orthodox families are encouraged to have children, divorce is considered a sad result of human frailty and sin, and second and third re-marriages may be granted in some cases (such as the death of a spouse or other circumstances).
 - ▶ Holy Orders. A bishop lays hands on a candidate for ordination, and prays for God to enable him to carry out the ministry of a priest (or deacon). Bishops are ordained by two or three bishops together.
 - ▶ Holy Unction. A believer is anointed with oil for spiritual and physical healing.

History and Practices, con't



Orthodox marriage service.



Priest distributes Holy Communion.



Priests listen to confessions.



Priest baptizes a child.



Ordination.



Priest hears a confession in the midst of a protest in Ukraine.

History and Practices, con't

- ▶ Orthodox services seek to convey a sense of mystery and holiness. Clergy wear ornate robes, incense is used, and the priests, deacons, and choir sing the prayers throughout the services. Icons depicting Christ, saints, and angels cover Orthodox churches.
- ▶ Orthodox fast on Wednesdays (for the betrayal of Christ by Judas), Fridays (for the crucifixion) and during certain seasons of the year by abstaining from meat and dairy, and often from fish, wine, and oil.
- ▶ A strong emphasis is placed on repentance. Orthodox believe every living person has the chance to change and turn to God through repentance.
- ▶ Worshippers make the sign of the cross and bow repeatedly during services, kiss icons, and often light candles. Women wear scarves on their heads in most churches throughout the world.
- ▶ Believers greet priests (or bishops) by asking a blessing. The priest makes the sign of the cross over the person, who then usually kisses the hand of the priest. Priests greet bishops in the same manner, and priests greet each other by kissing each other's hands simultaneously (this is considered an important point of etiquette among believers, but is not expected from non-Orthodox).

QUESTIONS?