

Chapter I

Basic Tenets of the Orthodox Church

As we have seen in the introduction the Orthodox Church is the one which inherits the characteristic features of the Early Church, which was undivided till the Council of Chalcedon. That is why they call themselves the *orthodox*, that means the people who have the right kind of faith (the Greek word *ortho* means *undefiled* and *doxa* means *worship*).

What do the Orthodox Christians believe?

The basic tenets of the Orthodox Church could be summarized as the following:

1. There is one **God** who has manifested Himself in three persons: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. God is everywhere (*omnipresent*), God knows everything (*omniscient*) and God is capable of doing everything (*omnipotent*). The universe is created by the triune God and it has its existence in the Holy Trinity and the trinitarian God leads the world into its fullness. That means, God has a purpose about the universe, which he created, and this purpose will be served only if the universe remains in contact with its creator.
2. The created universe includes things of nature (stars, planets, ocean, mountains etc.), living beings (plants, animals, birds, fishes etc.) and supernatural beings (angels). However, **human beings** have a special status among the things God created. They are the crown of creation and God created them in His own *Image*. However, as a result of the sin committed by Adam they had a *fallen nature*. God sent His *only son* to this world to save man from this condition.
3. **Jesus Christ** is the Son of God. The Councils (Holy Synods) of the Ancient Church proclaimed clearly that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully Man. Being the Son of God He had an equal status with God the Father. But He emptied himself and took the shape of a human being so that the sinful human nature becomes sanctified and the distance between God and Man is nullified. He was born in Bethlehem out of a virgin called Mary in the days of King Herod, brought up in Nazareth, Crucified by the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate and resurrected on the third day. The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ was an act of *Salvation* for mankind; He died not because of his sins, but because of our sins. Through the Crucifixion and Resurrection Jesus conquered sin and death. Therefore anybody who believes in Jesus Christ will be saved out of the *fallen nature* and he becomes a *new creation*.
4. **The Church** is the assembly of the believers in Christ. It is the temple of God where the apostles are the foundation stones and the believers form the stones

by which the Temple is built. The believers have to lead a holy life so that the holiness of the temple is not mutilated. As St. Paul calls it, the Church is also the Body of Christ. Those who share the Eucharistic communion become the organs of the Body of Christ. The organs of this Body should always be pure and unblemished.

5. **The Sacraments** are liturgical acts through which the members of the Church get active participation in the life and works of Jesus. The Orthodox Church prefers the word *Mysteries* to *Sacraments* and the Church does not specify the number of the *Mysteries*. Through some liturgical acts the believer enters into a mystical union with Christ and he realizes the meaning of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ in his personal life.
6. **Holy Baptism** is a *mystery* by which a believer comes into contact with Jesus Christ and he becomes a member of the Church, i.e. an organ of the Body of Christ. Since the Orthodox Church believes that salvation of human being is possible only through the faith in Jesus Christ, *Baptism* is a must to participate in the other *Mysteries* of the Church.
7. **Holy Qurbana** is the enactment of the life and works of Jesus Christ. It is not simply a *remembrance* of what Jesus did on earth. Rather it gives the believer an opportunity to have an active participation in the act of Salvation done by Jesus Christ. The Holy Qurbana is not an occasion when people show their hospitality towards people of other faiths. On the contrary those who share the Table of God should have the same faith about Jesus Christ and the salvific act happened through him. That means, those who partake in the Eucharist become the members of the Church and after the communion they can not say that they belong to another faith.
8. As Jesus Christ promised, the **Holy Spirit** came to the Church on the 50th day after Easter (Pentecost). Those who are baptized get the indwelling of the Holy Spirit through the anointment of *Holy Muron*. They have their life in the Holy Spirit and they get the gifts (*Charisma*) of the Spirit. Love is the greatest gift of the Spirit. There are other gifts like joy, patience, kindness, generosity, self-control and the abilities to heal, to understand different languages, to speak in tongues, to teach and to prophesy. However, one gift is not above the other and each believer should use the gift that he possesses for the edification of the Church.
9. The leaders of the Church are called *Ministers*. The Orthodox Church believes in a three-fold ministry; viz. *bishop, priest and deacon*. The leaders of the Church receive their authority through the **Holy Ordination**. Only the *bishop* can ordain somebody and through *ordination* the believer receives a special grace (*charisma*) of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual authority transferred to the ordained is a continuation of the authority of the bishop, who ordains. The bishop got it from his predecessors, who trace their history back to the

apostles. Thus the spiritual authority of a newly ordained bishop will be the same as that of the apostles, who received the authority from Christ. We call this process the uninterrupted *apostolic succession*.

10. The **Bishop** possesses the role of Christ in the Church. The bishop will ultimately take decisions concerning a church. The Orthodox Church does not

believe in the supremacy of a universal bishop. Each community which has a Eucharistic communion under the leadership of a bishop is universal (*catholic*) in itself. There can be a council of bishops (*Synod*) in a nation. Its leader may be called *Pope* (as in Rome or Egypt), *Patriarch* (as in Syria or Russia) or *Catholicose* (as in Armenia or India). However, the leader of the Synod is only *the first among the equals*.

11. For the orthodox believer not only the *undefiled faith* but also the **spiritual life** is important. Some people choose a *monastic discipline*, so that they get more time for the church, whereas some others lead a *family life*. The spiritual life of the Orthodox Christian is a mixture of *fasting and feasting*. They observe fasting or disciplines of a *Lent* not only on two days of a week (on Wednesdays and Fridays) but also on five important seasons of an year; 50 days before Easter, 25 days before Christmas, 15 days in August, 13 days in June and three days in Jan./Feb. (Nineveh Lent). Some people fast on certain other periods of a year like the first eight days of September (Feast of the *Nativity of Mary*).

12. **Life after Death** is an important component of Orthodox Faith. Biological death is not the point of the termination of one's life. He has another phase in his life and that is after the death. This life has a lively existence and the believers observe *communion with the deceased* through their prayers and Holy Qurbanas. That means, the living ones can pray for the dead and the dead ones can pray for the living. This is the reason for the orthodox prayers for the *intercession of saints*. Through such prayers the believers enjoy a *Communion of the Saints*.

What is the source of the Orthodox Faith?

Even though I can substantiate each and every point mentioned above with the help of a Bible, I don't make an attempt for it. There are two reasons for that: firstly, this should be a short essay. Here I have listed all the important points of Orthodox Dogma and if I begin to explain them this article will be four times longer. More important is the second reason; the basis for Orthodox Faith is not only the Bible but also other forms of *Divine Revelation*. In the Bible we have the reports of the Revelation of God received by His people. But God did not remain inactive after the formation of Bible. He manifested Himself and revealed His will and purpose through the Church. All the points mentioned above have its origin in the Bible. But some of them were developed in their present form through a series of discussions happened within the Church. Regarding those points we turn into

the writings of the Fathers of the Church and we respect the decisions of the Holy Synods. The Orthodox Church believes in the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church. Therefore the Church is able to receive *divine revelation* even today. In this way the Bible will not be a book of archaic narrations. On the contrary, the Church can translate the biblical truths into its contemporary context.