

# **Catechetical Letter 1**

## ***First things: God***

### ***He Who is; The Trinity***

It is appropriate to start at the beginning when explaining something. We are attempting to write concise catechetical letters about the Orthodox Christian faith, and we will start at the beginning. In the effort to be concise, and get something written quickly, we will not be comprehensive. If there is anything that confuses you or alarms you, God knows all things. You may ask us anything, or challenge us, but only God can reveal truth to any man.

Actually, we will start before the beginning. Before all things, there was God. This is a fundamental dogma of Christianity.

When asked for His name by Moses, God answered famously: "I AM".

"And Moses said to God, Behold, I shall go forth to the children of Israel, and shall say to them, The God of our fathers has sent me to you; and they will ask me, **What is his name?** What shall I say to them? (14) And God spoke to Moses, saying, **I am THE BEING;** and he said, Thus shall ye say to the children of Israel, THE BEING has sent me to you." (Exodus 3:13-14)

He called himself "the being", or the "existing one". Other translations say "I am whom am". This means that only God exists in and of himself, with no source or creator. He is, and because He is, all other things - stars, planets, angels, animals and men - have their existence because of Him.

God is the fundamental "fact" of the universe. All things were created by Him out of nothing.

This is a well known belief, but few understand its implications. If all things were created by God, according to His sovereign and unassailable will, there is no reason for pride, or covetousness or pursuance of possessions, fame or any earthly thing and all things find their life, and purpose and rest in God and in God only. Orthodox Christianity is the constant living in accordance with this conviction. In a true Christian, this conviction affects EVERY aspect of their life. All intelligent things (men and angels) are naturally inclined to seek God, to know Him and be united with Him. This is the fundamental fact of human nature. Blaise Pascal put it well: "There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus."

There is no knowledge outside of God. There is no beauty outside of God. There is no perfection outside of God. There is no life outside of God.

We are making stupendous statements, that the world does not believe. We live in an age where men and women derive meaning for their life from things other than God. They define themselves by their talents, or desires, or possessions. There is no meaning in life apart from God, because apart from God, there is no life. All that we do that is not like God leads to death.

Orthodox Christianity may be described as an attempt to know the truth about God, which is revealed only by Him to man, and understood only by man when his soul is in a state that can understand. Of

course, all this is accomplished by grace (a word which we will define in time - the standard definition "unwarranted favor" is a shallow representation of this truth), and also by our desire and effort.

Lets us start then, in trying to understand God.

The first dogma we must understand about knowing God is that He is transcendentally above and invisible to all His creation, except when He wills to make Himself known. Christianity is completely a revealed religion. It is the process of God revealing Himself to the human heart. Only God can give us knowledge about himself.

Everything we can say about Him is because of His revelation of Himself to us, and whatever we say about Him cannot describe Him, because he is unknowable. He can only be known by experience, which He initiates. Orthodox Christianity is the practice of continually, and increasingly experiencing God.

Let us say in a simple way who God is, as He has revealed Himself to us.

Before we do this, we must emphasize that anything we know about God is known because of His will and our struggle. Knowledge of God is the only important knowledge in the universe. Life lived without the goal of knowing God fully is life wasted. This may seem harsh to many who do not believe in God, or have a smaller understanding of God, but this statement is true. If God created all things, than not knowing God is the greatest tragedy for man because we were created to know God. Every action, thought, disposition and attitude in our life must be evaluated in this context. Anyone who reads these letters carefully will come to this conclusion.

God has told us very little about Himself, because we are capable of understanding very little.

He has revealed to us that He is one God, and a Trinity of persons (or hypostases). We have little time to explain the complexity of the word "hypostases". Ultimately, the only way to understand it is for God to reveal Himself to us, and for us to know Him by experience. The whole purpose of these letters is to equip those who read them to desire to attain to the knowledge of God, and order their lives exclusively towards this end. If anyone does this, they will attain to the knowledge of God and union with Him.

The Father is the sole source of The Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son and Holy Spirit are equally eternal, and equally God as much as the Father is God. We dogmatize that Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is eternally begotten of the Father, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father. We cannot fully understand these statements, because God cannot be understood. He can be experienced, and our experience of Him brings us knowledge of Him, as He reveals Himself.

Our fundamental statement of faith states these truths about God. This statement is called the "Nicene creed", or the "Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed", or in church writings, often by its first two words: "I believe". Another letter will explain this creed and do a line by line exegesis, but we will say a few things here. It was written by the entire Church, as represented by her bishops, at the first two (of 7 total) Ecumenical Councils, in the fourth century. We use this creed as a prayer in many services, such as during Morning Prayers, the Divine Liturgy, Compline, and the baptism service. We hold all words in it to be absolutely true, and absolutely necessary to believe and live by.

Here is the beginning of the Creed:

"I believe in **one God, the Father Almighty**, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in **one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages. Light of Light; true God of true God, begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father by Whom all things were made;**"

Later in the Creed, the Holy Spirit is mentioned: "**And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life; Who proceedeth from the Father; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; Who spake by the prophets.**"

These words summarize all we know in words about the Holy Trinity. The true meaning of these words is actualized in a person only by experience.

The fact of the Holy Trinity raises an important set of questions. One can say without exaggeration that the Church's sole purpose is to answer these questions and direct its children to live according to the "One Who Is".

1. Why is believing in the Holy Trinity important? In other words, it is obligatory to believe that God is "Father, Son and Holy Spirit", or can one just as well believe in God as one person (as the Muslims do), or believe in many gods, or forms of God in nature, etc?
2. How does the nature of the Holy Trinity affect how we should live, and determine what is "good" and "bad"?
3. How do we learn of the Holy Trinity?
4. Can we be united to the Holy Trinity, even though God is impassible, and totally transcendent and unknowable?

We will examine these questions in forthcoming letters. All further letters will have the sole intent of making us know the Holy Trinity and be united with Him.

We conclude our letter with an inspired prayer of St Silouan of Mount Athos, which is good to use any time when praying for others and represents the most important things we can desire for anyone and the *highest achievement man can attain*:

**I pray Thee, O merciful Lord, for all the peoples of the world,  
that they may come to know Thee by the Holy Spirit.**

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Bibliography of Scripture and Church hymns which illuminate the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which can only be understood fully by experience. This list is not remotely comprehensive.

"And Moses said to God, Behold, I shall go forth to the children of Israel, and shall say to them, The God of our fathers has sent me to you; and they will ask me, **What is his name?** What shall I say to them? (14) And God spoke to Moses, saying, **I am THE BEING**; and he said, Thus shall ye say to the children of Israel, THE BEING has sent me to you." (Exodus 3:13-14)

In the beginning **God** created the heaven and the earth. (2) And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the **Spirit** of God moved upon the face of the waters.

(3) And **God said**, Let there be light: and there was light. Genesis 1:1-3

Here the Trinity is referred to with "God" being the Father, Spirit being mentioned, and the Word (another name for Jesus, the Son of God) being mentioned by "God said".

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: (20) Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, *even* unto the end of the world. Amen." Matthew 28:19-20

"And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: (17) And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Matthew 3:16-17

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, *be* with you all. Amen." 2 Corinthians 13:14

This is a model for many of our prayers in church. Almost all "exclamations" (the ending of prayers) by the priest are a doxology (hymn of praise) to the Holy Trinity, which is explicitly mentioned.

"*There is* one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; (5) One Lord, one faith, one baptism, (6) One God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all." Ephesians 4:4-6

"Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, (2) Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied." 1Peter 1:1-2

"But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, (5) Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; (6) Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; (7) That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life." Titus 3:4-7

Priest Seraphim Holland 2015

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