

Differences between Orthodox Christianity and other Christian beliefs.

It is a privilege to worship the all holy Trinity, and we ask to be granted it.

Nov 13/26, 2018, St John Chrysostom

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And grant us with one mouth, and one heart, to glorify and hymn Thy most honorable and majestic name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages.

Exclamation of the priest (or bishop), after the epiclesis (when the priest prays for the Holy Spirit to come down upon the gifts to make them into the body and blood of Christ).

Fr Nicholas served his last individual liturgy for a while this morning starting at 6 AM. I was standing out in the nave during the liturgy. This is a rare opportunity for me, since I am normally serving during the liturgy. I like it because it gives me an opportunity to pray in a different way. I hear things differently. The only other time since my ordination when I have stood in the nave during the Divine liturgy is when I've worshipped in some of the liturgies in my favorite place in the world, that is the Hermitage of the Holy Cross in Wayne, West Virginia.

We human beings are creatures of habit. We have good habits and a lot of bad ones. We have a tendency to feel things less profoundly when they become routine to us. Nothing in the Divine liturgy is routine. Unfortunately, because human beings tend to habituate to things, sometimes the majestic words we say don't resonate within the heart as they should.

This morning, I heard this exclamation, and it resonated within me. I made a mental note to try to talk about it some other time, because I think it illustrates the significant difference between the Christianity that is in the Church, and the beliefs that are called Christian that are outside of the church.

I'm not trying to be snotty here. There is no Christianity outside of the church. There are certainly Christian beliefs and Christian practices and beautiful Christian morality outside of the Church among those who profess Christ. May God save them. Only in our age, our relatively modern age, about 500 years and counting, do we have so many that believe in a Christianity but not in the Church.

I've experienced "Christianity" outside of the church. It is a Christianity of believing things and justifying all the things we believe by a particular, private interpretation of the Scriptures. It is a Christianity that has borrowed doctrine and dogma from the church, but does not seem to understand where these doctrines and dogmas come from. Some of these doctrines and dogmas are such things as belief in the Holy Trinity, the person of Jesus Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, and to a lesser extent among believers outside the church, baptism. All of these dogmas are defined in short form in the "Symbol of Faith", and in, shall we say "longer form" they are defined by the experience of the Church and our united witness regarding these dogmas throughout the centuries.

We have many catechumens right now. God has blessed us in a way that we have never been blessed before. May it be that we are worthy of the trust that they have put in us. These catechumens, and just about any Orthodox

Christian, will often encounter questions such as, **“How is Orthodoxy different than my faith?”** Most of the time an answer that focuses on externals would be correct (and expected), but not complete.

We could say that we are guided by the Seven Ecumenical Councils, something of which your average evangelical Protestant knows nothing.

We could say that we have the episcopacy, priesthood and diaconate.

We could say that we baptize only by triune full immersion in water (that is, we baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and upon mentioning each of the persons in the Trinity immerse the catechumen fully in water).

We could say that the central part of our worship is the Eucharist, that is when bread and wine are blessed and the Holy Spirit is beseeched, and these elements turn into the body and blood of Christ for the sustenance of the faithful.

We could say that we believe in fasting for everyone and have fasting rules that the church assumes everyone would want to follow.

We could say that we call our priests “Father”, and not “Brother” or “Pastor”.

We could say that we have a sacrament of confession, which is almost unknown among “Bible-believing” Christians.

We could say that we believe the church is visible and invisible, and that there are clearly delineated requirements for membership. The average evangelical Protestant only believes in the invisible church.

We could say that we baptize infants, and never repeat an (Orthodox) baptism.

We could say that we believe the gift of the Holy Spirit is something imparted by the anointment with chrism after baptism, and is not a gift that manifests later in a believer, when he speaks in tongues or manifests other charismatic gifts.

We could say that we don’t speak in tongues during our worship services and consider the gift of tongues (glossolia) to be a gift solely for the edification of those who need to be evangelized, and that this gift is not completely missing from church life, but it is rare and is only among those who are sanctified and holy.

We could say that we have many more services than just the prayer service or a Sunday gathering.

We could say that we have a well-defined calendar of yearly events in which there is something that we commemorate on every day of the year.

We could say that our faith is creedal, that is, it is obligatory that an Orthodox Christian believes every single word in the creed, also known as the “Symbol of Faith”.

We could say that we have defined fasting periods during the year, and long preparation for both the Nativity of Christ and the Resurrection of Christ, which Westerners call “Easter” and Orthodox Christians call “Pascha”.

No doubt we could come up with 100 other external differences between Orthodox Christianity and the typical “Christianity” that is found in America.

Almost all of these things are differences between your average Evangelical Protestant or Baptist or Presbyterian or whatever, and an Orthodox Christian. They are all things that are only on the surface.

Today, when I heard the exclamation about the All Holy Trinity, I realized another difference, and not a shallow one. Most Bible believing Christians believe in the Trinity, but they leave it basically at that. We are assiduous in mentioning the Trinity in every service no matter how big or small, and meditating upon the Trinity and saying profound theological things about the Trinity. Every service has expressions of praise for the Trinity which are simple declarative statements, such as the most common one: “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, both now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.”

The church has always defended the dignity of the Holy Trinity aggressively. This is a real big deal to us. We talk about it all the time, we invoke the Holy Trinity in our prayers all the time, and we pretty much define the minimum requirements of being an Orthodox Christian as believing in the Holy Trinity correctly and without reservation. We have called councils to defend the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the dogmas regarding the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Everything about the Holy Trinity is the most important thing to us. Since we are made in God’s image and our destiny is to attain to His likeness, this makes it obvious that we should consider knowing everything we can about the Holy Trinity to be the most important knowledge that we can obtain, and even the most important thing we can do.

When I was a Protestant for about a minute, I saw that we rarely spoke dogmatically about the Holy Trinity, and rarely in our prayers did we invoke the holy Trinity. We would say prayers that began with things like: “Father God”, or simply “Lord”, and at the end of the prayer most people would say “in Jesus name”.

A great strength of our church is that we speak incessantly about the Holy Trinity and we glorify the Holy Trinity in every prayer service great or small. When I was a younger Orthodox Christian, I found all of these exclamations to be somewhat repetitive. After all, to say something like “Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit” is a very simple phrase. And if one hears it a dozen times or more in a service it may seem to be repetitive, but a better understanding of these exclamations is that understanding them is the *whole purpose of our life*.

It is a privilege to learn about the holy Trinity. After all, we were created to know God, and how can we know Him unless we understand the Holy Trinity? Of course, this task is impossible with men, but as the Scriptures tell us even the impossible with men is possible to God. So, we soldier on, and worship the Holy Trinity, and make mention of the Holy Trinity constantly.

We consider that the ability to worship the Holy Trinity is a gift of God Himself. It is not a given that we can glorify the Holy Trinity. To the “pure all things are pure”, and only the “pure in heart shall see God”, and of course if

we see God, we would know Him. Therefore, we *beg* the Lord to grant us the ability to glorify Him. We ask for this privilege, something we do not deserve. I remember reading years ago the so-called Westminster catechism, which has as its first article that the purpose of our life is to glorify God. An Orthodox Christian does not think this way. We think that the purpose of our life is to attain to the likeness of God, something we cannot do without God Himself helping us in everything. We consider it a privilege to be able to worship God and we beg Him for this privilege.

That's what this exclamation does. It begins with the phrase: "***Grant us...***"

The exclamation goes on by begging that we would with "***one heart and with one mouth glorify and hymn***" the most holy Trinity.

This simple exclamation, and hundreds just like it, reveals our attitude in prayer and our primary objective in prayer. It is to know God. We cannot know God unless we glorify Him with "one mouth and one heart". God is single, and simple. There is nothing in the Holy Trinity that is not in union and agreement. Our prayer here is asking that we be completely in union with God in our heart and our mouth. It is impossible for this to take place unless we are one heart and one mouth in dogma and in practice. Only those in the church can be of "one mouth and one heart", proclaiming the same dogmas with the same zeal and ecstatic fervor. Only those who are pure and struggling to follow the commandments, and obeying the dogmas and the practices of the church can be of "one mouth and one heart" with God and with the body of Jesus Christ, which is the church.

It is truly a great *privilege* to worship God. It is not a responsibility nor requirement of us; it is an inner compulsion that should be present in the heart because God lives within us and our gratitude forces us to ecstatically pray and glorify the holy Trinity. We need help in doing this, so we ask for this help.

If someone is willing to stand still for you to explain it, this indeed is one of the great differences between Orthodox Christianity and the typical Christianity without the church that we see so present in our society today. Of course, usually people want simple and short answers, and when we answer a true answer with theological depth their eyes kind of glaze over, because we are in an age where theology is not considered to be very important or even very interesting.

Let us who are Orthodox banish from us any sense of superiority over those who believe in Christ without the Church. We have been given a great gift, and we are unworthy of it. We must strive to be worthy of it. We must strive in spirit and in truth. In spirit, we must struggle to follow the commandments to obey the church, and do not judge those outside the church except in one thing – there are those that believe with sincerity Christian doctrines who are outside the Church because they don't believe in the Church in an apostolic way, and they are not joined to the Church by baptism from the Church. We do not judge their souls, but if we also worship in truth, we do not ignore that there is an apparent Christianity outside of the Church and there is true Christianity in the Church. May

God save us who are true Orthodox Christians and forgive us, because we don't always live as true Orthodox Christians. May God help us and everyone to know the Holy Trinity.

I will end with one of my favorite prayers that I say often when I am commemorating people in my parish and in prison and those I know and even categories of people, including those I don't know. I would say a prayer for them in some way saying: "Lord have mercy upon such and such a person", and then and the prayer with the following phrase: "and grant that they may know Thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent". This is an adaptation of John 17:3, where the Lord Jesus Christ defines salvation as follows: "And this is eternal life, that they may know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent".

We certainly cannot know God without knowing the Holy Trinity, and without living, as best we can, as the Holy Trinity lives, with love, and agreement with all things that are godly with one mouth and one heart.