

The Mysteries Of The Church



One of the best-known prayers of the Orthodox Church speaks of the spirit of God being "present in all places and filling all things." This profound affirmation is basic to Orthodoxy's understanding of God and His relationship to the world. We believe that God is truly near to us. Although He cannot be seen, God is not detached from His creation. Through the persons of The Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, God is present and active

in our lives and in the creation about us. All our life and the creation of which we are an important part, points to and reveals God.

There are special experiences in our corporate life as Orthodox Christians when the perception of God's presence and actions is heightened and celebrated. We call these events of the Church Mysteries. This description emphasizes that in these special events of the Church, God discloses Himself through the prayers and actions of His people.

Not only do the Mysteries disclose and reveal God to us, but also they serve to make us receptive to God. All the Mysteries affect our personal relationship to God and to one another. The Holy Spirit works through the Mysteries. He leads us to Christ who unites us with the Father. By participating in the Mysteries, we grow closer to God and to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This process of deification, or theosis, as it is known by Orthodoxy, takes place not in isolation from others, but within the context of a believing community. Although the Mysteries are addressed to each of us by name, they are experiences which involve the entire Church.

The Mysteries of the Orthodox Church are composed of prayers, hymns, scripture lessons, gestures and processions. Many parts of the services date back to the time of the Apostles. The Orthodox Church has avoided reducing the Mysteries to a particular formula or action. Often, a whole series of sacred acts make up a Mystery. Most of the Mysteries use a portion of the material of creation as an outward and visible sign of God's revelation. Water, oil, bread and wine are but a few of the many elements which the Orthodox Church employs in her Worship. The frequent use of the material of creation reminds us that matter is good and can become a medium of

the Spirit. Most importantly, it affirms the central truth of the Orthodox Christian faith: that God became flesh in Jesus Christ and entered into the midst of creation thereby redirecting the cosmos toward its vocation to glorify its Creator.

THE EUCHARIST

The Holy Eucharist, which is known as the Divine Liturgy, is the central and most important worship experience of the Orthodox Church. Often referred to as the "Mystery of Mysteries", it is the Church's celebration of the Death and Resurrection of Christ offered every Sunday and Holy day. All the other Mysteries of the Church lead toward and flow from the Eucharist, which is at the centre of the life of the Church. The previous pamphlet in this series was devoted to the meaning and celebration of the Eucharist in the Orthodox Church.

BAPTISM

The Mystery of Baptism incorporates us into the Church, the Body of Christ, and is our introduction to the life of the Holy Trinity. Water is a natural symbol of cleansing and newness of life. Through the three-fold immersion in the waters of Baptism in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one dies to the old ways of sin and is born to a new life in Christ. Baptism is one's public identification with Christ's Death and victorious Resurrection. Following the custom of the early Church, Orthodoxy encourages the baptism of infants. The Church believes that the Mystery is bearing witness to the action of God who chooses a child to be an important member of His people. From the day of their baptism, children are expected to mature in the life of the Spirit, through their family and the Church. The Baptism of adults is practiced when there was no previous baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity.

CHRISMATION

The Mystery of Chrismation immediately follows baptism and is never delayed until a later age. As the ministry of Christ was enlivened by the Spirit, and the preaching of the Apostles strengthened by the Spirit, so is the life of each Orthodox Christian sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Chrismation, which is often referred to as one's personal Pentecost, is the Mystery which imparts the Spirit in a special way.

In the Mystery of Chrismation, the priest anoints the various parts of the body of the newly-baptized with Holy Oil saying: "The seal of the gifts of the Holy Spirit." The Holy Oil, which is blessed by the bishop, is a sign of consecration and strength. The Mystery emphasizes the truth that not only is each person a valuable member of the Church, but also each one is blessed by the Spirit with certain gifts and talents. The anointing also reminds us that our bodies are valuable and are involved in the process of salvation.

The Mysteries of initiation always are concluded with the distribution of Holy Communion to the newly-baptized. Ideally, this takes place within the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. This practice reveals that Orthodoxy views children from their infancy as important members of the Church. There is never a time when the young are not part of God's people.

CONFESSION

As members of the Church, we have responsibilities to one another and, of course, to God. When we sin, our relationship to God and to others is distorted. Sin is ultimately alienation from God, from our fellow human beings, and from our own true self which is created in God's image and likeness.

Confession is the Mystery through which our sins are forgiven, and our relationship to God and to others is restored and strengthened. Through the Mystery, Christ our Lord continues to heal those broken in spirit and restore the Father's love those who are lost. According to Orthodox teaching, the penitent confesses to God and is forgiven by God. The priest is the "Mysterical witness" who represents both Christ and His people. The priest is viewed not as a judge, but as a physician and guide. It is an ancient Orthodox practice for every Christian to have a spiritual father (or mother) to whom one turns for spiritual advice and counsel. Confession can take place on any number of occasions. The frequency is left to the discretion of the individual. In the event of serious sin, however, confession is a necessary preparation for Holy Communion.

MARRIAGE

God is active in our lives. It is He who joins a man and a woman in a relationship of mutual love. The Mystery of Marriage bears witness to His action. Through this Mystery, a man and a woman are publicly joined as husband and wife. They enter into a new relationship with each other, God, and the Church. Since Marriage is not viewed as a legal contract, there are no vows in the Mystery. According to Orthodox teachings, Marriage is not simply a social institution, it is an eternal vocation of the kingdom. A husband and a wife are called by the Holy Spirit not only to live together but also to share their Christian life together so that each, with the aid of the other, may grow closer to God and become the persons they are meant to be. In the Orthodox Marriage Service, after the couple has been betrothed and exchanged rings, they are crowned with "crowns of glory and honour" signifying the establishment of a new family under God. Near the conclusion of the Service, the husband and wife drink from a common cup which is reminiscent of the wedding of Cana (John 2:1-12) and which symbolized the sharing of the burdens and joys of their new life together.

HOLY ORDERS

The Holy Spirit preserved the continuity of the Church through the Mystery of Holy Orders. Through ordination, men who have been chosen from within the Church are set apart by the Church for special service to the Church. Each is called by God through His people to stand amid the community, as pastor and teacher, and as the representative of the parish before the Altar. Each is also a living icon of Christ among His people. According to Orthodox teaching, the process of ordination begins with the local congregation; but the bishop alone, who acts in the name of the universal Church, can complete the action. He does so with the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the imposition of his hands on the person being ordained.

Following the custom of the Apostolic Church, there are three major orders each of which requires a special ordination. These are Bishop, who is viewed as a successor of the Apostles, Priest, and Deacon, who act in the name of the Bishop. Each order is distinguished by its pastoral responsibilities. Only a Bishop may ordain. Often, other titles and offices are associated with the three orders. The Orthodox Church permits men to marry before they are ordained. Since the sixth century, Bishops have been chosen from the celibate clergy.

HOLY UNCTION

When one is ill and in pain, this can very often be a time of life when one feels alone and isolated. The Mystery of the Anointing of the Sick, or Holy Unction as it is also known, reminds us that when we are in pain, either physical, emotional, or spiritual, Christ is present with us through the ministry of his Church. He is among us to offer strength to meet the challenges of life, and even the approach of death.

As with Chrismation, oil is also used in this Mystery as a sign of God's presence, strength, and forgiveness. After the reading of seven epistle lessons, seven gospel lessons and the offering of seven prayers, which are all devoted to healing, the priest anoints the body with the Holy Oil. Orthodoxy does not view this Mystery as available only to those who are near death. It is offered to all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. The Church celebrates the Mystery for all its members during Holy week on Holy Wednesday.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Orthodox Church has never formally determined a particular number of Mysteries. In addition to the Eucharist she accepts the above six Mysteries as major Mysteries because they involve the entire community and, most important, are closely related to the Eucharist. There are many other Special Services and Blessings which complete the major Mysteries, and which reflect the Church's presence throughout the lives of her people.