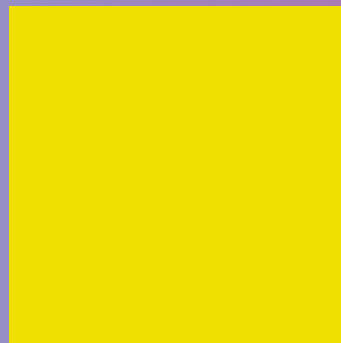


4

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ORTHODOXY

# ORTHODOXY

## BEFORE WE START

1. Please write down five things that come to your mind when you think of Orthodox Christians.
2. Please write down three questions you would like to ask about the Orthodox Church.



Figure 4.1  
Cathedral of the Nativity  
of Christ in Riga, Latvia  
Source: © ingusk /  
Adobe Stock

## 4.1 A LETTER FROM ELENI: WITNESS MY FEELINGS ON BEING AN ORTHODOX

Hello, my name is Eleni and I would like to talk to you about my religious tradition, the Orthodox Church. The name “Orthodox” comes from two Greek words, namely “orthos” (proper, right) and “doxa” (belief or thinking) and it means the right belief or thinking. There are around 260 million Orthodox Christians all over the world. Most of them live in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, as well in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa.

All Orthodox Christians share the same belief but have different traditions when it comes to rituals, history, and feasts. I am, for example, Greek Orthodox, since I come from Greece but there are also Russian, Romanian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Polish, or Albanian Orthodox to name some of them. The head of each Orthodox Church can be a Patriarch or a bishop but we have also priests in our parishes for our regular rituals and celebrations.

Like other Christians, we believe that God is a Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This Trinity of three distinct persons is at the same time only One God. The true mystery of our God was revealed by Jesus Christ who is the Son that became human. He lived in Palestine in the 1st century of the Christian era, he taught and performed miracles but then he was persecuted and died on the cross for our sins. However, being God he rose from death. His death and resurrection revealed God's love for his world and was the beginning of the Christian Church.

Almost all our rituals take place in our worship houses that are called churches. They have some distinct features with deeper symbolic meanings. The sanctuary is always in the eastern part of the church. Only the priest and those who help him can enter it.

Icons, namely paintings of holy women and men, stories from their lives and our holy book, the Bible, are respected by Orthodox and play an important role in our tradition. They cover the walls of our churches or are painted on pieces of wood. My family has two such icons at home that belong to the family for many generations. They are placed in the small icon corner that is used for prayer in my family house. My mother usually takes care that the oil lamp that hangs in front of them is always burning. Icons are usually called the books of all believers, especially of those who cannot read. They remind us in a simple way of the sacred stories and persons of our faith. Our holy book, though, is the Bible or the Holy Scripture. It consists of two parts, the Old and the New Testament. The Old Testament contains 49 books and the New Testament 27. Passages from them and especially the New Testament are read in our worship. In the Greek Orthodox Church, they are usually read in ancient Greek, which makes it sometimes quite difficult to understand. My aunt, however, gave me a nice translation of the New Testament last year and I have spent some time reading it. It is certainly a fascinating book!



Figure 4.2  
Decorated Easter eggs,  
traditional for Eastern  
Europe culture  
Source: © tynza /  
Adobe Stock



Figure 4.3  
Orthodox ceremony of  
the Eucharist  
Source: © Kadmy /  
Adobe Stock

Figure 4.4  
Little boy in the church  
on Easter  
Source: © Anna Om /  
Adobe Stock

One of the most important symbols in our faith is the cross that reminds us of Jesus Christ's sacrifice and God's love. We usually wear it around our neck. We also often cross ourselves, especially during worship or when praying. With our joined three right-hand fingers that symbolize the Holy Trinity, we touch our forehead, below the chest, the right side of the chest and then the left. This is at the same time a gesture of prayer and blessing.

Orthodox Christians usually pray at the beginning and the end of the day. One of our favourite prayers is the Prayer of the Lord, a short prayer that Jesus Christ taught to his disciples and is recited ever since in our worship gatherings but also during prayer at home.

The Orthodox Church has many feasts that are celebrated throughout the year. Some feasts have fixed days in the year and some others that change the date of celebration every year and are called movable. In the period before great feasts, we usually fast, which means that we do not eat certain kinds of food. There are also two regular fasting days in the week, Wednesday and Friday, when we commemorate Jesus' death on the cross. One of the most important fixed feasts in winter is Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. However, the greatest feast is Easter (or Pascha), a movable feast in spring, celebrating the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is one of the most joyous feasts in our tradition. Due to a different calculation system, we celebrate Easter on a different day than other Christian traditions. There is a preparatory Holy Week and at midnight after Saturday, we celebrate Jesus' rising from the dead. Easter Sunday is a day of great joy and family time. We eat together, crack dyed red eggs and greet each other with the phrase "Christ has risen".

Sunday is the holiest day of the week. It is the day when we go to the church to participate in the Divine Liturgy, a special worship gathering. In the Liturgy we celebrate Eucharist, that reminds us of Jesus Christ's last supper with his friends and disciples, his death and resurrection. The gifts of bread and wine are offered and are consecrated. We believe that they are changed into

the Body and Blood of Christ spiritually. At the end of the Liturgy, the priest invites the members of the congregation to receive them. Through their consumption we believe that we remain in communion with Jesus Christ but also with the rest of the community. At the end of the Liturgy small pieces of bread are also offered to all participants, a reminiscence of the common meals that ancient Christians held when they met.

Our parish church is very important for our family life not only because of the celebration of great feast and the Divine Liturgy but because some of the most important events of our family life take place there.



Figure 4.5  
Newborn baby baptism  
in Holy water  
Source: © Denis /  
Adobe Stock

Today, for example, my young sister is going to get baptized and become a full member of the Orthodox Church. During the ceremony, she will get her Christian name, she will be dressed in white new clothes and wear a cross. Although in ancient times people were baptized as adults, today in the Orthodox Church children are usually baptized in the early months of their lives. Baptism will be performed by the priest and the godparents of my soon-to-be-baptized sister will be there to help. They will be her spiritual parents and responsible for her growing up following the teachings of the Orthodox Church. My sister will be called Sophia, after one of my grandmothers. During the ceremony, the priest will immerse my sister three times into the water of the font in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a symbol of dying and being reborn into a new life following the example of Jesus Christ who died and was risen from the dead. No surprise that this is an important day in our family. After the ceremony, we will celebrate with a large dinner and music and my lucky sister will get a lot of presents!

There are so many things to celebrate as a family, like baptisms, name days but also marriages. My aunt Maria married two months ago and it was really a big event with relatives coming from all over the world to be present

in the ceremony that took place in the church. The priest exchanged the wedding rings three times in the fingers of the young couple. Number three is important in the Orthodox Church because it refers to the Holy Trinity. He also placed the wedding crowns on their heads and led them around the table, in a dance that symbolizes their joyful beginning in their common life. The priest also held the cross in his hand that stands for the difficulties that they have to face together.

Well, life and death are a cycle as my grandmother Eleni says. As a family, we celebrated happy events but also the death of some dear friends and relatives. We had to say our goodbyes to my grand-grandfather Nikos some years ago. It was a difficult time for us all. When the casket was placed in the earth the priest poured olive oil and wine in the shape of a cross three times and threw some wheat seeds on it. The priest explained that like the seeds that are buried in the earth to grow and come into light in spring so the dead will rise at the end of the days. Orthodox people believe that death resembles a kind of a long sleep from which all dead will wake in the Second Coming of Jesus. Till then we have to remember them with love. Memorial services are very important, then, and are held on certain days of the year. Women bring sweets and boiled wheat to the church on these days and the family offers almsgiving in the memory of the dead. We are sad but at the same time we hope to meet them again and we never stop to love them.

Women participate in all worshipping events in our church, clean it or volunteer in the social work of our parish by preparing meals for the poor or visiting families in need. Although we are regarded equal members of the community we are not allowed to become priests or have some other public role in the life of the community. It is a pity but as it is often said this is a matter of tradition and history. Well, tradition is a very important aspect of our lives and it can encompass many aspects of our religious life; teachings but also common practices and customs. Since the Orthodox Church believes that it is the continuation of the early Church, tradition is of great importance. However, especially young people think that some things that older people call "tradition" could certainly change according to contemporary needs.

As members of a religious community but also of society we are expected to live according to our faith and also act in ways that reflect this faith. Loving God and our neighbour (either Christian or non-Christian) is the highest command and besides our regular worship and participation in Eucharist, we have to show our love and solidarity to other human beings but also our respect to the rest of God's creation. Almsgiving then but also a life of humility and careful and respectful use of goods are some of the most important practical aspects of Orthodox life. As the priest in our church usually says in his preaching being Orthodox does not only mean keeping the proper faith but also living according to this faith.

## 4.2 EXERCISES

### Exercise 1: What do we remember from Eleni's experience

1. The word "Orthodox" means
  - (a) the right belief
  - (b) the conservative
  - (c) the old-fashioned
2. Why are icons so important for Orthodox Christians?
  - (a) they tell stories of faith in a simple way
  - (b) they are the holy book of the Orthodox Church
  - (c) they are made by holy men of the Bible
3. The holy day of Orthodox Christians is
  - (a) Saturday
  - (b) Sunday
  - (c) Friday
4. The most important feast for the Orthodox Church is
  - (a) Christmas
  - (b) a fixed feast in spring
  - (c) Easter
5. In the Orthodox Divine Liturgy the participants
  - (a) receive both the consecrated bread and wine
  - (b) receive only the consecrated bread
  - (c) drink wine from a cup

6. During the Baptism in the Orthodox Church

- (a) water is sprinkled on the head of the child
- (b) a crown is placed on the head of the child
- (c) the child is immersed three times in a font full of water

7. Which number is important in the Orthodox Church?

- (a) two
- (b) three
- (c) forty

8. In the Orthodox Church, women

- (a) do not participate in common worship
- (b) help in the church but cannot be religious leaders
- (c) they can be priests like men

9. Eleni says that living according to the Orthodox faith means

- (a) caring only for other Orthodox Christians
- (b) leading a secluded life in the family
- (c) showing solidarity to other humans and all creatures



## Exercise 2: Let's talk about icons

*Icons occupy a central place in Orthodox life and spirituality. Orthodox icons have a deep symbolic meaning. Even the colours used stand for certain ideas.*

*Read the following explanation and choose the colour you feel suits you better. Explain why:*

**Gold:** It is the colour that symbolizes the divine world. It is usually found as a background in various icons, in halos and on the clothes of Jesus Christ.

**Blue:** It stands for the Kingdom of God, heavens, infinity or eternity. It is usually found as a background in various icons and as the colour of garments of the Mother of Jesus.

**Green:** It is the colour of renovation, hope, youth and nature. It is usually found in icons that depict Jesus' birth of the annunciation of his birth to his mother by the angel.

**White:** It stands for purity and divinity. This is the colour of garments of the angels and Jesus when the aim is to stress his divine nature as the Son of God



Figure 4.6. The Theotokos in the type of Glykophilousa (kissing the infant Jesus). Genève: "Creta o venezia, madona glykophilousa, 1457.JPG", [madonna\\_glykophilousa\\_1457.JPG](#)



**Black:** It can either be the colour of death or evil but it also used for the garments of the ascetes and monks to denote that they abstained from all worldly pleasures.

**Brown:** The colour of the earth, a symbol of mortality and ascetic life.

**Purple red:** The colour of royalty and glory. It is used for the garments of Jesus Christ and his Mother.

Now look at the following icon of Jesus' Mother and Jesus as a young child and try to explain the message of the colours used on it.

g her child, Jesus), 15th c. Musée d'art et d'histoire de  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Creta\\_o\\_venezia\\_](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Creta_o_venezia_)

### **Exercise 3: Baptismal Ritual**

*You have read/watched Eleni's full description of the ritual of baptism. Please try to fill in the gaps with one of the words given below. Each word can be used only once.*

**Faith, anointment, candle, cross, cut, oil, crossing, life, reborn**

Today is a happy day in my family. My young sister is going to get baptized. She will become a full member of the Orthodox Church. During the ceremony, she will get her Christian name, she will be dressed in white new clothes and wear a ....., all symbols of her new ..... as a Christian. Although in ancient times people were baptized as adults, today in the Orthodox Church children are usually baptized in the early months of their lives. Baptism will be performed in our parish by the priest and the godparents of my soon-to-be-baptized sister will be there to help during baptism. Godparents are usually friends of the family or relatives. They will be her spiritual parents and responsible for her growing up following the teachings of the Orthodox Church.

In the first part of the ceremony, the priest will announce the name of my sister and everyone will look happy. He will, then, ask her godmother to recite the Symbol of ..... on behalf of my sister who is of course still too young to read it on her own.

Then the priest will lead both my sister and her godmother in front of the baptismal font and with the help of the godmother, he will anoint my sister with blessed ....., a symbol of blessing and new creation. He will immerse her three times into the water of the font in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Well, not all babies find it very amusing and many of them cry when immersed in water. It is, however, a moment of joy. My teacher explained to us that this is a symbol of dying and being ..... into a new life following the example of Jesus Christ who died and was risen from the dead. Immediately after getting out of the font, the chrismation takes place. It is the ..... of the child's body blessed oil. Through this, my sister will become a child of God who received the Holy Spirit of God. The priest will ..... a few hairs from her head that symbolizes a small gift that my sister offers in the ceremony. She will be dressed in new clothes and she will wear a cross, an important symbol of

faith for all Christians. It shows that from now on my sister will have to follow the example of Jesus Christ in her own life. The godmother will carry my sister and hold a lighted ..... symbolizing my sister's first steps in her new life as a Christian. Finally, the priest will read a short passage from the holy book of the Gospel and bless my sister again touching her head with it. People show their great respect towards this book by kissing it and ..... themselves, a typical gesture of the Orthodox people. As a member of the Church my sister will participate in the sacraments of the Church. No surprise that this is an important day in our family. After the ceremony we will celebrate it together with friends with food, sweets and music and my lucky sister will get a lot of presents!

### **Exercise 4: That's tradition**

*Tradition as the accumulated experience and knowledge of the Orthodox Christian Church plays an important role in the lives of Orthodox Christians even today. However, the question is often raised whether or in what extent can or should tradition shape the life of contemporary Orthodox Christians. Having watched Eleni's presentation, please, discuss the following questions in groups of two:*

1. Think of practices and customs that are regarded as traditional in your families or society and discuss them among each other,
2. What role do you think tradition plays in the lives of Orthodox Christians, and
3. Discuss the pros and cons of tradition as an authority regulating the religious lives of the members of a religious group (the one member of the group could present the positive aspects and the other negative ones).



Figure 4.7  
Young mother and her little blond Caucasian daughter with candles in Orthodox Russian Church  
Source: © vadiar / Adobe Stock

## Exercise 5: Living according to faith

*Eleni finished her letter by saying that “being Orthodox does not only mean keeping the proper faith but also living according to this faith”. This is often repeated in many ways in texts of Orthodox worship. Moreover, it is often stressed in them that a true expression of love towards God is love towards people in need. Jesus Christ many times is used as the prototype of all people that are unjustly persecuted and suffer.*

Read the following verses of a hymn sung on Good Friday (the Friday before Easter Sunday). Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus’ followers laments his death and asks the Romans for his body to bury.

“Give me this stranger, who from infancy has been as a stranger, a sojourner in the world.

.....

Give me this stranger, that I may hide him in a tomb, for as a stranger He has no place to lay His head.”

When hearing the hymn what are the associations that one could make to current situations and challenges?



Figure 4.8  
Hands of the poor receive food  
Source: © kuarmungadd / Adobe Stock

## 4.7 GLOSSARY

### **Almsgiving**

Offer to those in need material help as a gift.

### **Anointment**

The application of holy oil in a religious ceremony.

### **Ascete**

A person who leads a life of self-denial and austerity for religious reasons.

### **Bishop**

The highest spiritual leader for the Orthodox Christian communities in a certain geographical territory that is usually called 'diocese'.

### **Congregation**

A group of people gathered for religious worship.

### **Consecrate**

Make or declare something sacred (holy).

### **Deacon**

From the Greek word "diakonos" (helper). A member of the lower rank of Christian ministers (the other two being priest and bishop).

### **Divine Liturgy**

The most important worship event in the Orthodox Church during which Eucharist is celebrated.

### **Eucharist**

A ceremony during which the bread and wine are consecrated and are consumed by those participating in the event who are baptised. Eucharist comes from the Greek word "eucharistia", which means "thanksgiving". Orthodox Christians believe that the wine and the bread are mystically the Blood and Body of Jesus Christ.

### **Godparents**

Those persons that present a child to be baptized and take responsibility to act as their spiritual parents and care for their religious education. They are usually either relatives or friends of the family.

### **Halo**

A golden crown around the face of a saint or Jesus Christ. It indicates holiness and divine glory.

### **Iconostasis**

A high screen covered by icons separating the sanctuary from the rest of the church.

**Monk**

A member of a religious community of men living a secluded life of poverty, chastity and obedience. The female equivalent is a nun.

**New Testament**

The second part of the Christian Bible that contains the stories of Jesus Christ, his disciples and teachings deriving from Jesus' life and preaching.

**Old Testament**

The first part of the Christian Bible that contains the history, teachings, prophecies, and rituals of ancient Israel.

**Parish**

A small community of Christians that has its own worshipping house (church) and a priest as its head .

**Patriarch**

A leading bishop among all the other bishops who is also the spiritual father of an Orthodox Church.

**sacrament**

A religious ceremony that imparts divine grace.

**Sanctuary**

The most sacred part of the church.

**Theotokos**

A name of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. It comes from the Greek words "Theos" (God) and "tikto" (give birth) and it refers to the Christian faith that Jesus was not just a man but also the Son of God.



Photo: Annie Spratt | Unsplash



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**EDUC8 Consortium**



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