

Orthodox Christianity: On Being Truly Catholic

Nearly two thousand years ago, Our Lord Jesus Christ was born on the earth and began to teach a small group of followers about the God that had created the universe and had specifically guided the Israelite people for the nearly two thousand years previous thereto. While Jesus was preaching to the leaders among the Jewish religion, they came to understand that He was claiming to be the Divine Voice that spoke to the Prophet Moses from the burning bush on Mount Sinai. Alarmed by this thought, they first sought to stone Jesus and later they succeeded in gaining the consent of the Roman governor to have Roman soldiers crucify Jesus for the perceived offense of blasphemy. Despite the initial success of the Jewish leaders, Jesus' resurrection three days later caused many Jews and Greeks at that time to become followers of the small group of apostles that Jesus had taught both before and after His Resurrection. This enlarged following of Jesus was called the Church, and within three years was referred to as the Christian Church.

For the nearly 300 years that followed, the members of this Church remained together under the guidance of bishops that had been appointed by the first apostles and their immediate successors, but they had to keep their worship of God hidden from the Roman authorities, praying in secret in the catacomb tombs of major cities, and, when they were occasionally discovered by the state authorities, the public acknowledgment of their faith in Jesus invariably resulted in their death as martyrs for Christianity. When finally the Roman Emperor Constantine decided to abandon the official Roman pagan religion and become a Christian, he ordered an end to the persecution of the members of the Christian Church. This new era of peace allowed Christians to worship openly without fear of persecution, and also enabled Christians throughout the world to exchange their ideas and understandings concerning the teachings that Jesus had given to His apostles.

Within just a few years it became apparent that Christians were divided into two separate groups, one believing that Jesus was indeed the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that spoke to Moses, and the other group believing that Jesus was not God, but rather, was created by God as the leading angel or spirit in God's creation. The former group, wishing to emphasize that they accepted the full Christian Faith and tradition, began to refer to themselves by the Greek word Catholic (*katholikos*), that means "according to the wholeness." The other group called themselves Arians, after their leading teacher, the priest Arius, who taught that Jesus was not God. For the next two hundred years that followed, the Catholic Church and the Arian Church vigorously opposed each other's teaching, until finally nearly all Arian Christians came to accept that Jesus was God, and then became members of the Catholic Church. For many years, the Church was at peace, and the full Catholic teaching continued to be acknowledged in the way that Christians prayed around the world.

Around the year 1000, however, Christians suddenly became divided by an extraordinary assertion by one of the bishops, the Pope of Rome, that he was entrusted by God with all power on earth, both concerning matters of religion as well as all matters of the state government. This rather strange mixture of religion and politics was seen to be quite foreign to the original teachings of Jesus by most of the bishops of the Catholic Church at that time, and, therefore, many prominent bishops, such as the Patriarchs of

Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople, together with the Pope of Alexandria, charged the Pope of Rome with abandoning the "wholeness" of the Catholic Faith, and began to refer to their Churches as the Orthodox Catholic Church, while the Roman Pope referred to his some-what changed "Catholic" Churches as the "Roman" Catholic Church. For nearly a thousand years now, the Orthodox Catholic Church, often referred to merely as the Orthodox Church, has continued to teach the original unchanged Catholic teachings taught by Jesus to His apostles. In many lands this teaching was persecuted, but it remained the prevailing Christian teaching in the Holy Land, in Syria, and in Greece where the first Christians had taught the Faith that Jesus gave them. Many Christians of Slavic descent, such as those from Ukraine, Russia, Serbia, and Bulgaria likewise remained faithful to the original Catholic teachings of the Orthodox Church, which is still today the oldest and second largest single grouping of Christians in the world..

About one hundred years ago, when the Roman Pope demanded of those that followed him the further embellished teaching that he was infallible, some of his followers realized the extent of his deviation from original Catholic Christianity, and petitioned the Patriarchs of the Orthodox Church to allow their churches to return to true Catholicism (i.e., Christian wholeness). They also requested that they be allowed to keep the customs and rituals that had been practiced by their Catholic forefathers in times before the Roman Pope separated himself from the Orthodox Church. Permission for this was first granted in 1911, and since that time churches in America, Italy, France, Great Britain, and Yugoslavia have returned to the fullness of the practice of the ancient Catholic Church. Another event has happened somewhat more recently within the Roman Catholic Church to cause some of its followers to question whether or not their Church had remained truly Catholic. This event was called the Second Vatican Council. While not fully understood at first, the type of changes mandated by this council in 1965 left many Roman Catholics wondering what had happened to their "Catholic" Faith. The ancient Mass, with its sense of seeking the Holiness of God with its congregation present, had been almost completely lost, and the deep reverence that everyone was inclined to display before the Holy Altar had been replaced with a town-meeting atmosphere.

The Bishops of the Orthodox Church have long hoped that a time would come when Roman Catholics might realize the extent of the departure that their Church has taken from the Catholic Faith, and that it was important not merely to call one's Church "Catholic," but also to practice the Catholic Faith in a manner that remains truly Orthodox in belief and practice. To assist in the return of those who wish to practice this Ancient Catholic Faith, they proceeded to set up a special group of Bishops in 1984 called the Autonomous Metropolitan Orthodox Church of Milan and Aquileia, Western Europe and the Americas. In 1994, this Autonomous Metropolitan Orthodox Church of Western Europe and the Americas had its autonomy further recognized by the Ukrainian Orthodox Patriarchate of Kiev. This grouping of Bishops is especially intended to provide for the return to the fullness of the Catholic Faith for those who wish to keep the ancient Western tradition and practices of their Catholic fore-fathers, together with the Eastern tradition that is practiced throughout the rest of the Church.

Today, in Western Europe, Canada, the Caribbean, and the United States there are available for those who wish to worship according to the fullness of the ancient Catholic belief and tradition, parishes of the Orthodox Church for Christian of the Western tradition. Here the ancient Mass is celebrated just as it had been before the departure of the Roman Pope from the Church's ancient teachings. Here the All-Holy Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Saints are beseeched during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass to intercede for both the living and the dead. Here the ancient belief that Jesus is God and one of the three Divine Persons of the Holy Trinity is cherished and preached. If you or anyone you know is interested in regaining this access to the ancient Faith as held through many centuries by those from whom they are descended, please contact the local parish or the chancery office whose address and phone number are given below. A Priest will be only too happy to explain these matters of Faith in more detail for you if you wish, and to answer any questions you may have, and to tell you the local Church where you would be welcome to regain the Faith that was once long ago given by Our Lord Jesus Christ to His Apostles. Even if you are merely curious, he will be happy to explain these matters of Faith or to relate them to your own particular religious upbringing and experience. It is important in these times that we seek after the truth that Jesus presented to us, and to keep His Teachings just as Saints throughout the centuries sought to pass on to us, a Faith that is cherished as truly Catholic and necessarily Orthodox, yet lived in the midst of the constantly changing world around us.+

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