

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 3

The Triune God

What/Who is God?

He is the "I Am:" The Existing One

He defines existence

Nothing exists except by Him

He is existence

He is the reality in which all things exist; nothing exists outside of or independently of Him

He is eternal, ever-existing

He is beyond existence

He is not subject to the concepts, categories and limitations of existence

He is Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit

One God in three persons: eternal community in absolute unity

The Trinity is a mystery: it is not a theological invention, but a divinely revealed truth.

At Jesus' baptism, the Trinity is revealed and participates; the Father speaks audibly, "This is My Son, in whom I am well pleased," and the Holy Spirit descends visibly in the form of a dove.

At His Ascension, Jesus sends His disciples out saying "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"

What is particular or unique about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

There is much that is shared among them, and all participate in most major acts. However, each also has a unique place, or role, in the Holy Trinity:

The Father: the source of all—even of the Son and Holy Spirit

The Son is begotten of the Father in eternity, outside of time and the creation

The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father

The Son is the Word and Wisdom of God

From the Son come intention, expression, creation and initiation in obedience to the Father and the Holy Spirit

The Son is consubstantial and coeternal with the Father

The Son is savior, counselor and sustainer

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The Holy Spirit is the Giver of Life, the perfecter and finisher

The works of God are completed by the Spirit according to the Word of the Son

The Holy Spirit is consubstantial and coeternal with the Father and the Son

The Holy Spirit is the perfecter, finisher, sustainer, sanctifier and protector

We must remind ourselves often that we don't "know" the acts, powers and roles within the Trinity in a precise, clear-cut and exhaustive way. What is stated above about the Trinity must be understood as simplifications and approximations in a form that humankind can comprehend.

God and Time

God created time and exists both within and outside of time

In the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, community pre-exists and permeates creation

God and Creation

God created everything that exists by the Word of His Mouth from nothing ("ex nihilo"): "He spoke and it came to be."

God sustains everything that exists by His Word and Spirit.

God is fully present and active in His Creation but is not contained by it.

The Nature, Attributes, Virtues and Works of God

God has revealed a great deal about His nature, attributes, virtues, powers and works both in revelation directly to holy men and women and through His creation.

God is described with the positive attributes. This called Cataphatic Theology. God is love, light, good, wisdom, authority, judge, creator, life-giver, sustainer, almighty, just, holy, pure, true, forgiving, sanctifying, and many other positive characteristics revealed by God to man and/or through His creation.

Cataphatic Theology has the disadvantage of seeming to limit and restrict God to the characteristics we say that God is—where, in fact, God is actually above and beyond every characteristic or power that we attribute to Him.

With regard to human understanding, it is more accurate for us to speak in terms of what God is not rather than what He is. This is called Apophatic Theology. Here is a sample of apophatic attributes of God:

Immortal, uncircumscribed, uncontained, unlimited, beginningless, immaterial, invisible, unchanging, boundless, passionless, sinless, indefinable, inconceivable, unknowable, unsurpassed, peerless, wanting nothing, in whom is no darkness...

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In the Old Testament, there are many attributes and acts of God that are described in terms that are human in perspective. He “sleeps,” “awakes,” “walks,” “rides,” “sits,” is “angry,” etc. He is given human body parts and human activities. These are poetic attributes that derive from our experience of God, and don’t actually represent God in Truth.

How do we know about God?

What we know about God was revealed by God through His holy servants and affirmed by the Church.

We don’t really know how these things are true or how they work; we accept that they are true with a humble heart and mind knowing that He exceeds all knowledge and discourse and cannot be truly, exhaustively understood by mankind.

Holy men and women, in their encounters with God, are granted understanding in a manner that goes beyond normal human intelligence and understanding. They can only bring back approximations in words that human intelligence can grasp. Thus we must be humble and circumspect about what we think we know of God. He is not contained or fully represented by our understanding of Him.

Through diligence, purity and obedience in faith, we too may be granted understanding within our own being that confirms and deepens the understanding of the teaching of the church.

The Divine Names

How can we speak of Divine Names when God transcends all discourse and knowledge and categories? We can do this only because God is also present in the created world. It is on the basis of man’s experience of God in creation, and His revelation of Himself to man, that we can speak of Divine Names. Here are some of the names applied to God:

Yahweh: The existing one, or the one who is (Hebrew)

Kyrios: Lord; supreme dominion over the whole world (Greek)

Pantocrator: Almighty; holds all things in His hand; upholds the world and its order (Greek)

The attributes listed above are also frequently used as divine names in worship and teaching

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Essence and Energies of God

From the list of apophatic attributes above, we say that God is unknowable, uncircumscribed, surpassing every name or characteristic we apply to Him. Yet these very characteristics and powers were established by revelation by God making Himself known to man through rich communion with Him. Is this a contradiction?

No, it is not a contradiction. God cannot be known in His Essence (“No man can see God and live.) He is the Holy Other. However, we can know Him in His Energies, His Grace, generously bestowed on us. Make no mistake, when we talk about His Energies, we are talking about something that is God, not something created. We use the terms Uncreated Energies and Uncreated Light to make this explicitly clear. This is how we have access to, participate in, and have communion with, God.

Variances in Western Christian Doctrine

The Western church teaches that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son—not the Father alone. This would not seem to be a great problem. However, it tends to diminish the Holy Spirit in importance—indeed, the teaching of the Western church on the Holy Spirit has evolved over time to the place where He is said to be the love relationship between the Father and the Son. Some contemporary Orthodox theologians argue that this lower, diminished view of the Holy Spirit has had a major effect on the relationship between the clergy and laity within the Western church, virtually eliminating the role of the laity in important actions in the church such as elevating clergy to the bishopric.

The Western Church also teaches that man cannot know or experience God in this life except intellectually, but that in the life to come, those who are saved will know God in His Essence. The Orthodox Church does not share this view.