

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 5

Jesus Christ: His Advent, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension

This lesson assumes that the student is familiar with Gospel accounts of the person, purpose, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The focus in this study is on those aspects that are particular to Orthodox teaching.

The Coming of Jesus Christ Our Savior

As stated in Part 4, man's disobedience and fall were foreseen by God before He created man. It was recognized from the beginning that the Logos of God, the only-begotten Son of the Father, would become man in order to save man.

The coming of a promised savior, a redeemer, is the most important theme of the Old Testament. From Jacob and David through nearly all of the Old Testament prophets, the promise of a savior is foretold and described. Of course, He is anticipated by Israel as their savior, their Messiah, and not all of mankind. The scope of His mission was not understood until after His resurrection and ascension when Peter was called to the house of Cornelius, a devout Roman centurion, a gentile.

The Preparation for the Savior's coming

A holy vessel had to be prepared for the coming of the Savior. Mary was, and is, this holy vessel. Orthodox tradition teaches that Mary was born of humble, faithful and righteous parents, Joachim and Anna, late in their lives in a manner similar to their kinsmen, Zacharias and Elizabeth. In obedience and gratitude, Joachim and Anna dedicated Mary to the purposes of God.

Orthodox tradition teaches that Mary was brought to the Temple at the age of three, and was taken by Zacharias into the Holy of Holies where only the high priest was permitted to enter once a year. There, in the presence of God, Mary spent the next nine years of her life in prayer and contemplation. The entry of Mary into the Temple is celebrated November 21st as one of the twelve great feasts of the Lord.

Mary wished to remain in the Temple and not marry. However, to satisfy Hebrew law, Mary was betrothed at the age of 12 to Joseph, a righteous widower who already had a mature family. The Church teaches that Joseph was betrothed to Mary as her guardian, not as a husband.

While living in Joseph's house, Mary received a visit by the Archangel Gabriel who announced to her that she was to conceive and bring forth a child by the power of the Holy Spirit and the good will of the Father and that she was to call his name Jesus. Gabriel further announced that He would be great and would be called the Son of the Highest and be given the throne of David. The Church teaches that Mary conceived upon responding to Gabriel, "Let it be unto me according to your word." This event, the Annunciation, is celebrated on March 25 as one of the twelve great feasts of the Lord.

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 5

Jesus Christ: His Advent, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension

Further preparation for Our Savior came through John the Baptist, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make straight the paths of the Lord...” as had been prophesied by Isaiah.

John was the son of Zachariah and Elizabeth, a quiet, holy, but childless couple. The account of John’s conception and birth, and the account of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth during their pregnancies are provided in the Gospels.

John lived an ascetic life, a life that was later emulated by Christian monastics. John preached repentance because the Kingdom of God was at hand. Interrogated by scribes, Pharisees and Jewish officials, John made it clear that he was not the Christ but had been sent before Him. He pointed clearly to the coming One, stating the he was not worthy of loosing the strap of His sandal and that, while he baptized in water, the coming Savior would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John was also called upon to baptize Jesus and, in so doing, recognizes Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The Baptism of Jesus is further discussed below.

The Birth of Jesus

The Gospel accounts tell us that, near the time of Jesus birth, Caesar Augustus decreed that everyone return to their city to be registered. This meant that Joseph and Mary returned to Bethlehem because Joseph was of the house and lineage of David. While they were there, Mary gave birth to Jesus in a cave because there was no room at the inn.

The Church teaches that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a miraculous manner that left her a virgin still and undefiled. (This manner of birth is likened to His rising from the tomb without removing the stone.) Furthermore, the Church teaches that Mary remained a virgin through her whole life and that marriage to Joseph was never consummated.

Contemporary protestant denominations typically teach that Mary and Joseph had more children after the birth of Jesus, failing to understand that the brothers of Jesus spoken of in the Gospels were the sons of Joseph born prior to his betrothal to Mary. These sons included James and Jude.

All early icons of Mary that also include Joseph show him as an old man and, in the icon of the flight into Egypt, James is also shown as an adolescent while Jesus is shown as an infant. It wasn’t until the renaissance that icons and pictures of Joseph and Mary began to show Joseph as a younger man.

The Church also points to the prophecy of Ezekiel as indicating that the gate (Mary) through which Prince (Jesus) entered was used by none other after him.

Further evidence that Jesus brothers were not biological brothers is the fact that, on the cross, Jesus gives His mother Mary into care of the Apostle John. If Mary had other sons, her care would have been left to them under Jewish law and tradition.

Note: Apostle John was the son of Zebedee and Salome. Salome was one of the myrrh-bearing women and the daughter of Joseph, Mary’s betrothed. So, there was familial relationship between Mary and John.

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 5

Jesus Christ: His Advent, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension

Jesus Christ, the God-Man

As stated earlier in Part 3, Jesus is fully human and fully God. He shares with us all aspects of being human except for sin. He is the sinless one. This means that he grew up in a normal fashion being subject to Mary and Joseph.

The Church teaches further that the Logos of God united Himself to Man without change to His divine nature and being—His human nature was not mixed with His divine nature but each remained separate “without mixture or confusion.”

What His coming means:

The primary impact was that the One who was able to save had at last come for the purpose of saving man. The Church further teaches that, by His becoming man and joining Himself to His creation, Jesus lifted the nature of man as well as the whole of creation. In doing this, however, He did not violate the free will He had given to man. In understanding the impact of Jesus incarnation on humanity and the creation, it is essential to understand that this impact was effectual before His coming as well as after.

His acts and ministry during His life:

Circumcision on the eighth day: Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day in obedience to the Law which Jesus came to fulfill. This is celebrated on January 1.

Presentation in the Temple on the 40th day: Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Temple to consecrate Him to the Lord and for Mary to purify herself. Neither of these was necessary, but was done in obedience to the Law. Zachariah was serving his turn as high priest in the Temple at this time, and he stood Mary in the place for unmarried maidens rather than married women.

This meeting in the Temple was also the occasion for the prophecies of Simeon and Anna over the Christ child. The tradition of the Church is that Simeon was one of the Jewish scholars who participated in the translation of the Septuagint from Hebrew into Greek. He came across Isaiah’s prophecy of a virgin who would give birth. Simeon started to change “virgin” to “young woman,” but was stopped by an angel. The angel told Simeon that he would not die until he saw this come to pass. Thus, upon seeing the infant Jesus, Simeon spoke these words, “Now, Lord, let Thy servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen Thy salvation.” He further prophesied that “this child is set for fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that will be spoken against” and to Mary that “a sword will pierce through your own soul also.”

Several Pharisees were also present and were vexed that Zachariah had stood Mary in the place for virgins. They reported all this to Herod who took instant action to kill the Infant. However, having been directed by an angel, Joseph and Mary had already escaped with Jesus to Egypt.

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 5

Jesus Christ: His Advent, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension

This presentation of the Lord in the temple is celebrated on February 2nd as one of the twelve great feasts of the Lord.

The baptism of Jesus and the temptation by the Devil: Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River where the Trinity was manifest in the voice of the Father declaring His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased and the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus in the form of a dove. Jesus was soon after led into the wilderness for forty days of temptation by Satan—withstanding all of them in humility and obedience.

The Church celebrates the baptism of Christ on January 6. It is called either the Epiphany or Theophany. Both names indicate that the fullness of the Trinity was revealed. Traditionally, this celebration was second in importance only to Pascha (some also place Pentecost ahead of Theophany in importance).

The Church also teaches that Jesus' submission to baptism had a reverse effect: rather than the subject of baptism being sanctified and transformed, which is the normal effect of baptism, the subject (Jesus) sanctified and transformed the waters of the Jordan and subsequently the whole of creation.

Orthodox fathers also teach that Jesus' baptism also revealed His purpose in coming. The immersion demonstrated the death of the old, sinful man and His rising from the waters represented the resurrection to the new life and the new man made pure and holy.

Jesus selected the twelve disciples and began of His ministry at Cana of Galilee at the wedding feast. Tradition holds that the groom was Simon the Zealot.

A summary of His public ministry: The focus of Jesus ministry was the preaching of the Kingdom of God and teaching faith, repentance and true righteousness before God that leads to eternal life. He called men back to their created nature and to recognize that which is of eternal value. He healed diseases; cast out unclean spirits; raised the dead; called all who would to come unto Him to rest, peace and the ever-flowing Life of the Holy Spirit. He also upbraided Jewish leadership for their vanity, injustice and "replacing God's commandments with the traditions of man."

The transfiguration of Christ: Before His passion, Jesus led Peter, James and John up a high mountain, Mount Tabor, and "was transfigured before them." His face shone like the sun and His clothes became white as light. Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. A bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice came out of the cloud saying, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased. Hear Him!" The Transfiguration proclaims Christ's divine Sonship and His future glory when He, as Messiah, will usher in the long-awaited Kingdom. The Transfiguration is celebrated on August 6 as one of the great feasts of the Lord.

The resurrection of Lazarus: Just days before His passion, Jesus returns to Bethany already aware that Lazarus, His friend, died four days before. After greeting the grieving Martha and Mary, Lazarus sisters, He asks Martha where they have laid Lazarus. Jesus wept and asks Martha to have the stone rolled away. After

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 5

Jesus Christ: His Advent, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension

remonstrating Martha to “believe and see the glory of God,” the stone was removed, Jesus gave thanks to the Father for hearing Him and then cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” Lazarus came forth still bound in grave clothes. All were deeply astonished—some believed but some ran to the Pharisees to tell them the things Jesus had done. The Jews, now thoroughly shaken, doubled their efforts to destroy Jesus.

The resurrection of Lazarus is regarded by the Orthodox Church as a foreshadowing and an assurance of the general resurrection of the dead. The resurrection of Lazarus is celebrated on the Saturday before Palm Sunday and Holy Week.

Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection and ascension

Except for a few minor points, Orthodox teaching of the death, burial and resurrection is the same as Western Christianity teaching. The difference is how fully the Orthodox Church relives and celebrates His Passion and Resurrection.

After Palm Sunday, the Church dedicates the following week, Holy Week, to His Passion and Resurrection. Orthodox Christians completely immerse themselves in Jesus’ rejection, suffering, humiliation, death, burial and resurrection. They liken themselves to those who rejected and killed Jesus but also call themselves to the repentance that is available in Christ Jesus and join full-heartedly in the joyous celebration of His resurrection and triumph over death and the grave.

Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday provide an interlude of joy and triumph between Lent and Holy Week. The glorious resurrection of Lazarus four days after his death and Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem is joyfully celebrated with recognition that His passion follows closely.

Monday through Wednesday of Holy Week: the Bridegroom Matins and other services recount the teaching of Jesus to His disciples that followed His triumphant entry into Jerusalem while looking ahead to the suffering and humiliation of Jesus that is to come. Believers are called to watchfulness and preparation through themes drawn from the parables of the Ten Virgins and Wedding Supper Guest with No Wedding Garment. We are called to preparation for and identification with the Savior’s suffering and humiliation that is to come.

Monday services also commemorate the sufferings of the Patriarch Joseph that prefigure the Passion of Christ and also the barren fig tree cursed by the Lord.

Tuesday services recount the parables of the Ten Virgins and Talents as parables of judgment.

Wednesday commemorates the woman who was a sinner and anointed Jesus’ feet in contrast to Judas’ death which resulted not from his betrayal of Christ but from his refusal to believe in the possibility of forgiveness. The

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 5

Jesus Christ: His Advent, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension

Triodion denounces those who rejected Christ and delivered Him to death while identifying ourselves as being in their number for have we not also betrayed and rejected Him many times in our hearts.

Holy Thursday: Four events are celebrated on Holy Thursday, the washing of the disciples' feet, the institution of the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist, the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, and the betrayal of Christ by Judas.

Holy Thursday night, which liturgically is Friday morning, the sufferings of Christ are commemorated: the mockery, the crown of thorns, the scourging, the nails, the thirst, the vinegar and gall, the cry of desolation and all that the Savior endured on the Cross, along with the confession of the Good Thief. At the same time, the Passion is not separated from the Resurrection. Even on this day of our Lord's deepest self-abasement, we look forward also to the revelation of His eternal glory.

The matins service on Thursday night includes all of the gospel accounts of His Passion, starting with the Last Supper and ending with His burial. At the midpoint of these readings, the priest comes out carrying the Cross, nails a full-body icon of Jesus to it and leaves it standing in the nave for veneration.

Holy Friday: The Deposition and Lamentation services are held Friday afternoon (which is liturgically Saturday). The Deposition Vespers service celebrates Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus taking Christ down from the Cross, preparing Him for burial and placing Him in a new tomb. The Lamentations Matins service commemorates Christ in the tomb with lamentations, but also celebrates His descent into Hades where He freed those held there and destroyed the power of darkness.

Holy Saturday: The Vespers Liturgy of Saint Basil is celebrated and includes fifteen Old Testament readings, the last stage of preparation for those being baptized. These readings carry the themes of Passover, Resurrection and baptismal initiation.

Holy Sunday or Pascha: The Celebration of Holy Pascha joyously commemorates the Christ's resurrection from the dead and the trampling down of death through death. Each person receives the Light of Christ from the darkness of the tomb. Adam and Eve are set free and we are endowed with Life.

Each and every year, at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the presiding celebrant goes into Christ's Tomb during the Paschal celebration and emerges with his torch miraculously lit from which everyone receives the light. This miracle takes place every year in spite of close scrutiny by doubters and the many efforts made to subvert it.

The Ascension of Christ: During the forty days after His Resurrection, Jesus met with His disciples and taught them many things concerning the Kingdom of God. On the fortieth day, He met with His disciple and commanded that they not leave Jerusalem

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 5

Jesus Christ: His Advent, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension

“but to wait for the promise of the Father...” Then, in plain view of all, “He was taken up and a cloud received Him out of their sight.”

Jesus Christ, the God-man, today

The Orthodox Church teaches that Jesus Christ, the God-man, sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven today, still one divine person in two natures (divine and human). Of course, this is the view from within time. However, this union of His two natures is also eternal.

The Church teaches that Jesus, the God-man, will return in glory at the end of the Age to judge the living and dead and to usher in His eternal Kingdom, of which there will be no end.

The Virgin Mary

The Church teaches that Mary is the Mother of God, the Theotokos (God-bearer). She prays ceaselessly for our souls and is a conduit of God’s Grace to humanity.

Church tradition teaches that, at the time of her death, the apostles were brought together for her dormition and burial. However, once again, the Apostle Thomas was a week late. He asked that her body be exhumed that he might make his last veneration of her. This was done, and when the casket was opened, her body was not there. Only her sash remained. The Church holds that her body was taken to heaven and transformed to the same kind of body that Jesus has following his resurrection. The same is also held regarding the Apostle John.

Appendix A: A brief survey of Christological heresies

Heresy Name	Summary of the Heresy	Origination	Church Position
Docetism	Belief that Jesus' physical body was an illusion, as was his crucifixion; that is, Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and to physically die, but in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit, and hence could not physically die	Tendencies existed in the 1st century, but it was most notably embraced by Gnostics in subsequent centuries.	Docetism was rejected by the ecumenical councils and mainstream Christianity, and largely died out during the first millennium AD.
Adoptionism	Belief that Jesus was born a mere (non-divine) man, was supremely virtuous and that he was adopted later as "Son of God" by the descent of the Spirit.	Propounded by Theodotus of Byzantium, a leather merchant, in Rome c.190, later revived by Paul of Samosata.	Theodotus was excommunicated by Pope Victor and Paul was condemned by the Synod of Antioch in 268.

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 5
Jesus Christ: His Advent, Life, Death, Resurrection and Ascension

Heresy Name	Summary of the Heresy	Origination	Church Position
Sabellianism (Modalism)	Belief that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three characterizations of one God, rather than three distinct "persons" in one God.	First stated by Noetus of Smyrna c.190, refined by Sabellius c.210 who applied the names merely to different roles of God in the history and economy of salvation.	Noetus was condemned by the presbyters of Smyrna. Tertullian wrote <i>Adversus Praxeam</i> against this tendency and Sabellius was condemned by Pope Callistus.
Arianism	Denial of the true divinity of Jesus Christ taking various specific forms, but all of these forms agreed that Jesus Christ was created by the Father, that he had a beginning in time, and that the title "Son of God" was honorific.	The doctrine is associated with Arius (ca. AD 250—336) who lived and taught in Alexandria, Egypt.	Arius was pronounced a heretic at the First Council of Nicea (AD 325), then later exonerated by imperial pressure, and finally declared a heretic in 381 by the First Council of Constantinople.
Apollinarism	Belief that Jesus had a human body and lower soul (the seat of emotions) but a divine mind.	Proposed by Apollinaris of Laodicea (died 390)	Declared to be a heresy in 381 by the First Council of Constantinople
Nestorianism	A belief that Jesus Christ had two separate natures, human and divine, in one being but did not include a belief that these two natures were permanently united in one person	The doctrine is identified with Nestorius (c. 386–c. 451), Archbishop of Constantinople and his teacher, Theodore of Mopsuestia.	This view of Christ was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431.
Monophysitism or Eutychianism	Belief that Christ's divinity dominates and overwhelms his humanity, as opposed to the Chalcedonian position which holds that Christ has two natures, one divine and one human,	After Nestorianism was rejected at the First Council of Ephesus, Eutyches emerged with diametrically opposite views.	Eutyches was excommunicated in 448. Monophysitism and Eutyches were rejected at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.
Monothelitism	Belief that Jesus Christ had two natures but only one will. This is contrary to Orthodox Christology, which teaches that Jesus Christ has two wills (human and divine) corresponding to his two natures	Originated in Armenia and Syria in AD 633	Monothelitism was officially condemned at the Third Council of Constantinople (the Sixth Ecumenical Council, 680–681).