

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 6

Salvation in the Orthodox Church

What does it mean to be saved in the Orthodox Church?

It means that, in faith and through baptism, we have died with Christ to the world and sin and have risen with Christ in His resurrection unto His glorious Life. It means that we are a new creation in Him, freed from the tyranny of self-centeredness and from the bondage of fear and death.

It means being restored to communion with God—to know God and to live in the union that He created for us to have with Him. It means that we are restored to the joy and unspeakable richness of knowing Him, which is eternal life. This restoration to union with God continues throughout the life of one who is being saved.

It means that we are living life in God, and that we are becoming gods by His grace according to His will and intention. It means being restored to God's purposes for us. This is the goal and content of Orthodox Christian Life in the Holy Orthodox Church.

Being saved is both a state and a process. The state is living in the restoration of communion with God through faith and grace; the process is life-long growth in faith and grace. Unlike most protestant teaching, the Orthodox Church teaches that, if we fall away from the process of being saved, we jeopardize the state of being saved.

How are we saved?

The Orthodox Church teaches that both faith and action are required to be saved:

We believe in God as taught in the Orthodox faith and in Jesus Christ as God and Savior—and we continue believing in Him day by day throughout our lives.

We recognize that our being is fallen, that our lives have been lived outside of obedience to His commandments, outside His grace, outside the purposes for which He created us. We realize that we are living in spiritual poverty and death not knowing the life he created us for.

We believe that He is God who created us, loves us, joined Himself to us, was crucified for us and rose again for our salvation. We believe that this salvation that He has made available to us is effectual and can restore us to union with Him.

We recognize that we are unable to change ourselves to bring ourselves into union with God, but that participation in His grace through faith and obedience is required. We consciously and continually turn away from sin in thought, word and deed, and turn to Christ as our Savior and refuge.

We believe that we will be transformed to His likeness by Him, but understand that this transformation is gradual, not instantaneous, and continues as we live in obedience and trust in Him.

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 6

Salvation in the Orthodox Church

We continue believing in Him as Savior day by day, moment by moment, for the rest of our lives. “Once saved always saved” is not an Orthodox teaching or practice.

We confess our faith in Him as God and Savior and humble ourselves in obedience and thanksgiving to Him.

We recognize and accept that believing in Him as Savior cannot be separated from obedience to Him and His commandments

We obey His command that we be baptized into Him, into His death and His resurrection, and chrismated into the Life of the Holy Spirit.

We accept and embrace His commandments, seeking to live in faithfulness, humility, purity, piety and love. These include the commandments given to Moses, the teaching of Jesus in the scriptures and the apostolic doctrine and tradition of the Orthodox Church. Thus we spend ourselves—our time, our strength and our substance—in love to one another and to those who need what we have come to possess.

We recognize that we cannot live this kind of life without regular prayer, worship, confession of our sins and partaking of His Body and Blood. We also accept that fasting, as defined by the Church, is an effectual means of humbling ourselves, finding quietness for our souls and attracting the grace of God.

Setting aside time for prayer, meditation and quiet are extremely important, even required, in the on-going process of salvation. Fasting, prayer and contemplation “recall” the powers of the soul from being scattered and bring them back into the depths of the heart—which is necessary for healing and growth in the knowledge of God.

We recognize that we will fail often in living a life of faith, obedience, love, purity, humility and piety—and that when we fail, we must confess our sin and renew our repentance in faith and hope, not succumbing to despair, knowing that He will accept our sincere repentance and that His love and power to save is far greater than our sin and failure.

We recognize and accept the Orthodox Church as the place where we worship, confess our sins and receive the Eucharist.

We accept the doctrine of the Orthodox Church and recognize the Church as the interpreter of the scriptures.

We recognize that salvation is a life-long process and cannot be fully realized except by faith and obedience over a long period of time. However, this not a static dynamic like earning interest on a savings account. God sees and generously rewards our intention in repentance even though we have not

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 6

Salvation in the Orthodox Church

labored a long time. This dynamic also applies each time we return to Him anew in repentance and humility.

Orthodox Spirituality

Over the first few centuries of the Christian faith, a pattern of living the spiritual life developed that has been sustained and taught by the Orthodox Church to the present day. This life was developed primarily, but not exclusively, by monastics. It is required of monastics according to their rule of life. However, it can also be embraced at least in part by those of us living in the world with great profit to our souls.

This spiritual life is a life of prayer and fasting. It is a life of continual self examination and pursuit of humility and love.

It is a life that requires setting aside meaningful blocks of time dedicated to prayer and quiet contemplation or meditation. Reading of the scriptures and other holy books written by Christian fathers is generally practiced.

The regular use of the Jesus Prayer is almost always a key element of this spiritual life: "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." There are shorter variations that can also be used, such as, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."

A true Orthodox life of prayer includes prayers to Mary, the mother of God, and to the saints. Such prayers are requests for their intercession with God, knowing that their prayers will be heard. The Church also teaches that Mary is herself a conduit of God's grace.

It is a life of cultivating humility and godly sorrow for sin and for the lost estate of man as he was created. It is a life of tears from the heart which cleanse the soul.

It is a life of conscious and continual avoidance of personal recognition, flattery, unnecessary possessions, dependence on material possessions, self satisfaction, comparison to and judgment of others, and all such forms of psychological compensation and pleasure, and in place of all these is a focus on union with God in love and humility, and on love for our neighbor, as the only sources of true joy and pleasure.

Modern secular teaching of "self esteem" and "believing in yourself" are not compatible with true Orthodox faith except in the sense of recognizing and respecting the wondrously glorious creation that each one of us is.

It is a life of continual vigilance of our actions, thoughts and motives, ferreting out and turning away from those which are not in obedience to Christ.

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 6

Salvation in the Orthodox Church

This life is normally lived under the direction of a spiritual father. It must be understood that this kind of life has its dangers, particularly those of self-deception and of flattery and deception from demonic sources.

The Church speaks of salvation as the “acquisition of the Holy Spirit” through the behavior and practices listed above. The Church teaches that we are sealed with the Holy Spirit in Chrismation, but the degree to which we actually live in the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit is determined by the degree with which we have given ourselves to unmitigated love of God.

In order to sustain our lives in God, and to grow in salvation, under the conditions of the present world, applying the practices of the spiritual life is of critical importance.

Faith versus Works; Contemplation versus Action

The Church holds that dividing faith and works is a false dichotomy—and that both are valid and necessary. The Church also holds that a life given to contemplation is just as valid as a life given to love in action—and that neither is superior to the other.

Purification, Illumination and Deification

The great spiritual fathers of the Church taught that there are three general stages of salvation: purification, illumination and deification (or theosis).

We embrace purification by a life of continuing repentance, subduing the pressures of the flesh, passions and selfishness.

As purification in repentance is achieved in us by grace, we encounter illumination: the first stages of dispassion characterized by insight, contemplation, purification of the intellect, “opening the eyes of the heart,” and fuller communion of the Holy Spirit.

Illumination gives place to the mystical and perfecting stage that enables one to “search the hidden mysteries of God” and fills him with “the fellowship of the Spirit.”

Further exploration of these stages of spiritual healing and growth is far beyond the scope of this study. This very brief discussion has been included just to acquaint the student with the terminology.

Spiritual Gifts

Spiritual gifts of foreknowledge, healing, prophecy, etc. may be granted to those who have become pure in heart and strong in love of God. Apparent operation of such gifts in someone who is not thoroughly established in the spiritual life as outlined above must be treated with great caution and should be referred to the priesthood for consideration and action.

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 6

Salvation in the Orthodox Church

How do we know God and commune with Him?

We speak of knowing God, and that it is God's own intention that we know Him. The question might remain even after the explanations above, "How is that we know God?" We know that we know Him as more than an intellectual concept: we become aware of and abide in His presence without being able to describe it; we encounter Him in sudden and joyous illuminations that fill our minds and hearts that we know are beyond our own ideas and thinking; we are lifted up during the Divine Liturgy into what we can only describe as a foretaste of heaven (actually it is heaven); we become aware in the middle of a challenging endeavor that our words and actions are coming through His grace. Some have heard Him audibly; some have had visions of light and glory. A few have been visited by saints and even the Lord Himself.

God has made us to know Him and experience Him. As we grow in Him, we may have greater, more frequent encounters with Him, or perhaps not. We do not measure ourselves or our state by such experiences. All of these experiences must be treated with humility and sobriety, and we must be ever alert to deception. When the Church encounters an extraordinary occurrence, such as a weeping icon, it starts with the assumption that it is a deception and performs a rite of exorcism. We too must also be sober, careful and humble regarding any experience we may have.

Life after death and the end of the Age

What happens when we die?

The Orthodox Church does not hold a clear teaching on what happens after death, except that Jesus Christ will return to judge the living and the dead, and at that time, the dead will arise either to eternal joy or to eternal condemnation, just as the gospels teach.

There are ancient traditions, however, regarding what our state will be after death. Jesus, in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, gives credence to this tradition. The faithful and just will rest in the bosom of Abraham; the unjust and ungodly will go into the pit.

There is another Orthodox tradition regarding what we will experience after death usually referred to as the "Tollhouses."

This tradition holds that each person after the body dies will have to pass through a sequence of "tollhouses" (usually 20 to 30). In each of these tollhouses, the person will undergo temptations and accusations of a particular kind, and by these temptations and accusations, may be taken from the protection of angels, diverted from the way to the place reserved for the faithful and just, and be yielded up to the will of demons.

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 6

Salvation in the Orthodox Church

The Church does not take a position on this tradition, but many respected Orthodox writers do ascribe to it as means of portraying the pathway of the soul after death to the place where it awaits the final judgment.

Jesus' return and the final judgment

The Orthodox Church teaches the scriptural account of Jesus second coming and the final judgment. This final judgment is observed on the Sunday before the beginning of the Great Lent (and is mercifully followed on Sunday evening by Forgiveness Vespers).

The Church also holds a tradition strongly adhered to by most of holy fathers of the Church that the final judgment is primarily the response of each person to the unmitigated love of God that will be showered on all humanity and the entire creation. The faithful and obedient will experience this Love as glorious joy, light and warmth; the unbelieving and disobedient will experience this same Love as unbearable fire and self-condemnation.

Who will be saved?

A great deal has been written by Orthodox hierarchs and theologians about "who will be saved." The Church, herself, teaches that she is the path to salvation but does not say that no one will be saved outside the church. The spectrum of positions on this question is very wide. There are respected Orthodox writers who hold that salvation is reserved only for those who find and walk the narrow way. There are others, just as respected, who believe that virtually everyone will eventually be saved. The Church avoids both of these extremes doctrinally.

Oddly, it is among those who most strictly live the monastic life in obedience and self-denial who also have the most inclusive view of who will be saved. Knowing the love of God most fully and most intimately, they are unable to reconcile God's love with eternal damnation, even though this damnation is chosen by the damned. Room is given in the Church for expressing this view, but the Church at the same time points to the seminal importance that must be given to man's freedom that God continues to respect and uphold.

We must regard our own salvation soberly and humbly, with godly fear. We do not claim as certain our personal salvation (as many of us were taught to do as protestants); neither do we fall into despair or defeat in our failures nor exult too highly in the victories that we perceive taking place within us or in situations where we have failed in the past. We do not give up because we know that His love, mercy and grace are greater than our sins and failures, and that He regards our intention and effort even when we fail. A broken and humble heart He will not despise.