

# Welcome to the Orthodox Church:

## An Introduction to Eastern Christianity

by Frederica Mathewes-Green, Paraclete Press, 2015

### Discussion Questions

(Note to the group leader: As I wrote these questions I was picturing a reader who is just beginning to learn about Orthodoxy. But readers can come from many different backgrounds, so feel free to adjust the questions to suit your group. If you can suggest improvements or better questions, send them to [fmg@frederica.com](mailto:fmg@frederica.com))

#### Introduction: How to Learn About Orthodoxy xi

1. What other sorts of things might a person be able to “learn about,” but not “learn,” except by experience? Is there something that you have learned-by-doing, that you think others cannot grasp just by reading about it?
2. If a church is described as “challenging,” does that make it more attractive to you, or less?
3. “They...knew well how life in Christ differs from life without him.” How would you describe that difference to a non-Christian?

#### Part One: Inside the Temple *Exploring the empty church*

##### 1 “Enter His Gates”      3 *In the narthex, the church’s lobby or foyer*

1. Icons are images of our Lord, and of our fellow-believers who are now with him. We keep these images near us wherever we pray, because they help us feel a connection to the people they depict. Do you have a photo of a loved one that affects you that way?
2. Iconography requires each artist’s unique skill and talents, yet the artist does not seek self-expression, and sticks to the traditional ways icons show people and events. How does this differ from our expectation of what “art” is like? Might such restrictions make icons more useful to the community?

3. St. Athanasius, like early Christians generally, expected that making the sign of the Cross would have immediate, sometimes visible, practical effects. Are those effects still possible today?

4. C.S. Lewis noted that, in Orthodox worship, “no one takes the slightest notice of what anyone else is doing.” But is there a good side to monitoring and evaluating how others are behaving? Does it help us be more aware that we are worshipping as a community?

## 2 “The House of God” 11 *In the nave, the congregation’s worship space*

1. Have you visited a church, in the US or abroad, that was built in the cross-in-square design? Does that form of a worship space have any particular effect on a visitor? On the “feel” of worship?

2. If you were to go for the first time to a church that has no pews, where would you prefer to stand?

3. Would you be able to die for your faith, if suddenly arrested and condemned like St. Felicity? A character in a story by Flannery O’Connor “could never be a saint, but she thought she could be a martyr if they killed her quick.” Is it harder to die for Christ swiftly, or to live in times when your faith is increasingly mocked and rejected?

## 3 “So Great a Cloud” 21 *Still in the nave*

1. The Virgin Mary has been a controversial figure in Western Christianity. If you grew up in a Christian family, how were you taught to think of her? How do you think of her now?

2. If a Christian in a liturgical church mentions Mary, some Protestants’ faces immediately darken. They dislike giving her too much honor—but it looks like they actually dislike *her*. How do you think the Lord thinks of his mother?

3. There are many different schools of thought when it comes to interpreting the Bible. Which (or whose) do you prefer? Why do you believe it to be the most accurate?

4. Is there someone in the bible or church history whom you feel particularly close to? If that person died in Christian faith, we can picture him or her in Paradise, in the presence of God, praying constantly. Would you be comfortable asking him or her to pray for you?

## 4 “Upon This Rock” 38 *A quick history lesson*

1. Since Rome was the center of the early church in West, we usually think of it as the center of the church everywhere. Is it a surprise to learn that four other cities considered themselves Rome’s equal, and took charge of their own affairs? Or that so much of church history took place outside of Europe? Or that, as Rome was falling, Christianity continued thriving further east?

2. Was it right for the Eastern and Western Churches to separate because of a single word, “filioque”? Or was that word only the tip of a much broader disagreement?
3. Which preserves a faith better, a strong, authoritative outer shell around the faithful, or a strong, shared inner connection among them?

### 5 “A Sacrifice of Praise” 47 *Still in the nave*

1. Why are people today fascinated by ancient documents and the early years of Christian faith, when a generation ago it was a “hippie” Jesus that they wanted?
2. In the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese, 70% of the clergy are converts. Why would clergy, in particular, be drawn to Orthodoxy?
3. A wedding reception is one time we want things to be very beautiful, yet that beauty does not make us feel stuffy and formal. Are there other occasions when beauty enhances the event without making it feel rigid or fussy?
4. What are some family Christmas traditions that you particularly enjoy? Are there some Christmas traditions you wish would be forgotten?

### 6 “Partakers of the Divine Nature” 68 *Theosis*

1. When Christ was transfigured, not only his face shone, but also his clothing. What does this tell us about God’s use of matter?
2. “He was made man so that we might be made god” (St. Athanasius). What does that mean? What are the risks of misunderstanding it?
3. Was there a time when you felt particularly blessed by God, or felt his presence with you?
4. Do you believe miracles can happen today? Why or why not?

### 7 “Christ and Him Crucified” 85 *Still in the nave*

1. Do you think it is better to depict Christ’s crucifixion “realistically” in terms of blood and gore, or “realistically” in terms of his victory over death and the evil one?
2. Do you think that the Father had to receive payment for our sins in order to forgive us?
3. Is the analogy of the police officer helpful? Is it incomplete, or flawed in some way?
4. How can God be the same, unchanging, and yet some experience his presence as light while others experience it as fire?

## 8 “Image of the Invisible God” 98 *Still in the nave*

1. Is there a dividing line between treating an image with honor or affection, and idolatry?
2. Why do Orthodox iconographers not paint imaginary scenes, like Jesus welcoming a new arrival in heaven? Why are the subjects of icons restricted only to historic people and events?
3. There are images of Christ, like the beloved “Head of Christ” by Warner Sallman, that fill a role for Protestants much like that of icons in the Orthodox Church. The “Sacred Heart” image of Jesus holds similar meaning for Catholics. Is there an icon or image of Christ, or a saint, that is especially meaningful to you? What faith-related images do you keep in your home?
4. Is the veneration of icons different in some way from the love people feel toward Western Christian devotional images? Is the love of icons and devotional images different from the way people feel toward beautiful religious paintings in a museum?

## 9 “Your Body Is a Temple” 112 *Looking into the altar*

1. It would be very easy to fake a relic, of course; on the other hand, a true relic would be carefully preserved and passed down, from one generation to the next. What do you risk, if you venerate a fake relic? What do you risk, if you reject a true one?
2. If we read the Greek word *energeia* as “energy” instead of “works” or “operations,” does it change our sense of God’s presence in the world?
3. Why should we fight against our passions and follow an ascetic path, if God has already forgiven all our sins?

## 10 “Into the Sanctuary” 125 *Still in the altar*

1. Before the printing press was invented, books had to be hand-copied, and were extremely expensive. So the faithful most often encountered scripture in a context of worship, where it was surrounded by a supporting framework of hymns, icons, preaching, and teaching. What are the advantages to encountering the Scriptures this way? What are the advantages to studying the bible for yourself?
2. Is it better for a pastor to be married, or to be a celibate who can spend more time on scripture and prayer?
3. A Holy Week prayer reminds Judas of the many good things he received from the Lord, but has forgotten. Are there some things you should call to mind more often, and thank God for?

## Part Two: Inside the Liturgy *Participating in worship*

### 11 “Reconciling the World” 137 *Vespers*

*(Saturday, December 8)*

1. It has been said that Original Sin (or the Ancestral Sin) is the one Christian doctrine that can be proved true every day by the news headlines. Have there been recent news stories that reminded you of humanity's fallen state?
2. The 17<sup>th</sup> century poet John Donne wrote that "No man is an island," for all humanity is united as one. Today, though, we put great emphasis on individual freedom. People don't feel this bond as readily; in fact, they are more likely to feel lonely. What might be the benefits of recovering a stronger sense of that unity? What might be the drawbacks?
3. "Salvation is so much more than the moment of the Cross. It's the *whole story*." How is the Virgin Mary's conception of Christ an aspect of salvation? How is Christ's healing ministry an aspect of salvation? What about his Ascension? How is "the whole story" about our salvation?

### 12 "Not Counting Their Trespasses" 147 *Still exploring salvation*

1. Hebrews 10:4 says "It is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." Then why, do you think, did God command the Hebrews to offer it?
2. What is the difference between an offering and a payment?
3. Christ said that he came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). What did he mean by "ransom"?

### 13 "The Lord Is King" 157 *Vespers begins*

1. The Epistle of James instructs, "confess your sins to one another" (James 5:16). Why should someone confess his sins to another person, and not just to God? Should the members of a church confess their sins to other church members, or to their best friend, or to the pastor, or anyone in particular?
2. "Repentance is rethinking." It means coming to a newer, truer understanding of yourself, recognizing your sins and gaining more insight into your motivations. What role does emotion play in that process, do you think? Is it important to also "feel sorry"?
3. The custom of Orthodox missionaries is to translate the faith into the language of each new land, but sometimes there is no good equivalent. Two such terms in English would be "Theotokos" and "presbytera" (or another of the many terms for a priest's wife). In the latter case, we don't have a word for it because we don't have the role; Catholic priests don't have wives, and Protestant pastors' wives don't hold the honored spiritual-pastoral position an Orthodox priest's wife does. What English term would you suggest Orthodox adopt?

### 14 "Lord, Have Mercy" 174 *Still in Vespers*

1. The hymn “Joyous Light” recognizes in the evening lamp-lighting the presence of Christ who is our Light. Jesus said both “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12) and “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). What does it mean to be “light”?
2. How can reflection on our sins cause simultaneous sorrow and joy (*charmolypi*)?
3. The concept of “honor” is not as prevalent today as it was a thousand years ago. What are some contexts in which we still see people become concerned for the preservation of honor? (For example, respect for a nation’s flag?)
4. How can one man’s adultery damage the community around him? (Did you see that little girl spill the gravy?)
5. Have you ever found out that you had hurt someone, without meaning to? Or been the recipient of that kind of hurt, when someone said something that unintentionally caused you pain? Is it accurate to call that sin, even if it wasn’t intentional?

15 “Awake, Sleeper”    191    *Still in Vespers*

1. How does recognizing the existence of the devil help solve “the problem of evil”?
2. The widespread idea that reason (“head”) and emotion (“heart”) are opposites makes it hard for Christians to speak of God in the public realm; it implies that, since God is not perceptible to reason, he must be an emotional projection. Might recovering the Scriptural view—that we experience God like we experience everything else, through our receptive mind (*nous*)—affect our ability to share our faith?
3. What would be a situation in which you would use your active, reasoning mind (*dianoia*)? When would you use your receptive, comprehending mind (*nous*)?
4. To say that the *nous* is broken is to say that we misunderstand much of what we take in—conversations, events, other people. How would the healing of the *nous* change our relationship with the Lord, and with other people?
5. How do you think the Prodigal’s life unfolded, after he came home?

16 “Time for the Lord to Act” 216    *The Divine Liturgy*  
(*Sunday, February 17*)

1. Is it appropriate today to use language of fighting and battle when we talk about our faith?
2. How do you think it affects a church community if there is only one Sunday worship service?
3. Three ways of handling theology are described: simple accumulation (concerned with worship), increasing precision and breadth (concerned with accuracy), and updating to speak to the times (concerned with evangelism). Which do you think is most appropriate?

4. Is it a good idea in worship to read or chant the Scriptures without expression, so that hearers can encounter it without the reader's interpretation? Or is it better to read expressively, to bring the Scriptures to life?

17 "Choose This Day" 229

*Still in the Liturgy*

1. Why would the early Christians keep returning to the tomb of a loved one, to offer prayers at set intervals?
2. Is it easier to forgive someone, or to ask for their forgiveness?
3. If you have not experienced Forgiveness Vespers, picture what it would be like to do this at your church. What would be the hardest part? (If you have experienced it, what did you find to be the hardest part?)
4. Are you aware of God sometimes giving you "opportunities for salvation," in which you can choose to accept or reject his will?
5. Why might someone not want to be rescued?

18 "Where Two or Three Are Gathered" 250

*Still in the Liturgy*

1. Is the Kiss of Peace practiced at your church? Do you like or dislike this ancient practice? Do some of the variations appeal more to you than others?
2. "Let us love one another that we may confess the Trinity." Does love of fellow worshippers help keep our faith strong? Does strong shared faith help us love fellow worshippers?
3. Do you have a patron saint? If not, is there a saint whom you would like to fill that role?
4. If you had been one of Jesus' followers the day he said "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53), would you have been one of the "many" disciples who "no longer walked with him"?
5. Why do Orthodox priests not give communion to non-Orthodox worshippers?

Part Three: Inside the Community *Gatherings and prayers*

19 "When You Fast" 271  
(Sunday, March 30)

*Coffee hour during Lent*

1. When you picture yourself keeping the seven-week fast before Pascha, what foods would you find hardest to give up? How would you feel on Pascha, if you had succeeded in your goal?

2. Given that fasting customs vary from one community to the next, why wouldn't a person just shop around for the easiest one? And, since under the principle of economy (*oikonomia*) the fast can be adjusted for health or other reasons, why haven't people over the years gradually done away with fasting altogether?
3. Why would people expect to agree—especially, theologically? How has this agreement been able to continue so long without a visible earthly authority to define and enforce it?
4. Would it be difficult to speak with your pastor about your habitual temptations? What might be the benefits of having such a conversation?

20 “Each Person Is Tempted” 283 *Guidance for habitual temptation*  
(Sunday, April 12)

1. Is there a long-term passion (temptation) that you struggle with? Are you tempted, like Jimmy, to say “It started happening again”?
2. Can being part of a church community strengthen you to resist temptation, even if no one but the pastor knows what your temptation is? Does it make a difference if resisting temptation is talked about and encouraged at that church?
3. Is it better to be delivered from temptation, and no longer be troubled by such thoughts? Or better to have the thoughts, and struggle against them?

21 “Make Disciples . . . Baptizing Them” 288 *Baptism & Chrismation*  
(Saturday, April 26)

1. “Chrysostom” means “Golden-mouth.” When you read St. John Chrysostom’s Pascha sermon, do you think he deserves this praise? What makes this an effective sermon? Like the Gettysburg Address, it is short and simple. What gives it its punch?
2. Why, do you think, are men attracted to Orthodoxy more readily than women are?
3. Why is physical touch important in baptism, chrismation, and ordination? Is it important that a pastor today stands in a long line, going back to the apostles, of clergy who were ordained by the literal laying-on-of-hands?

22 “A Great Mystery” 307 *Wedding / Crowning*  
(Sunday, June 1)

1. What would you say to someone who objected to reading the passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (page 315-316), because it refers to wives being subject to their husbands?
2. In the early church virginity and monasticism were highly valued, and some people were tempted to go further and proclaim that it was more exalted than married life. The story we hear

in today's Gospel counters that, however, because Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding. It's not a healing miracle, but simply provides wine for the party—over a hundred gallons of excellent wine, much more than the guests could drink. What does this tell us about Christ's view of marriage?

3. At an Orthodox wedding the bride and groom receive rings, receive crowns, process around a table holding hands, and drink from a common cup—but they do not speak any vows to each other. Would the service be improved by adding lines for them to speak? Or do these silent actions achieve the same result?

### 23 “Built His House upon a Rock” 319 *Houseblessing* (Sunday, July 6)

1. Is there a place in your home where you go to pray? Is there anything you keep or use there—candles, prayerbooks, holy images?

2. Have you ever seen a miraculous icon? If so, how did it affect you? If not, what do you think of such claims?

3. When a priest blesses a home for the first time, he sprinkles holy water on every wall (and on computer and TV screens), commanding that “every evil and demonic action” will be put to flight. Why is this an important part of the service?

### 24 “Those Who Have Fallen Asleep” 330 *Funeral* (Monday, August 4)

1. Why might someone want a saint like Tasia to be her patron?

2. “Restore me to your likeness and reshape me in pristine beauty,” says the Evlogeteria for a funeral service, though later hymns will speak of our beauty “lying in the tomb deformed, disfigured, and dishonored.” What beauty do we lose in death, and what is the beauty that Christ will restore to us?

3. When the time came for Abba Sisoës to leave this life, he saw the Lord saying, “Bring me the vessel from the desert.” What do you hope the Lord will say when he calls you home?

### Conclusion: “Go and Do Likewise” 343 *Next*

1. “These resources aren't the private property of the Orthodox, because all Christians go back to the early church.” Have you discovered elements of the Orthodox faith that you want to begin using in your own life?

2. When all the parts of the Orthodox way are working together, there is spiritual growth and transformation—there is change. But not everyone is looking for change. What results are you looking for from your life of prayer and spiritual practice?