

PRAISE FOR  
*Welcome to the Orthodox Church*

Frederica Mathewes-Green, through her writing, has become the “Greeter” for every person who begins to seek out and explore the “other Christianity” which is the Eastern Orthodox Church. Few authors can take the mystery, beauty and often-daunting complexities of Orthodoxy and transform them in such an inviting path of spiritual journey as this author has done with this book.

—THE VERY REV. DR. CHAD HATFIELD,  
Chancellor, St. Vladimir’s Orthodoxy Seminary, New York

How do you introduce (Eastern) Orthodoxy? Frederica Mathewes-Green suggests we treat it as a large, and much-loved, family house. She takes us round it, showing us all the rooms and what goes on in them. Her conversational style is completely accessible, but utterly honest; there is lots of information, and she deals directly with problems to be encountered. It feels a bit like Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. This is a wonderful book.

—FR. ANDREW LOUTH,  
Professor of Patristic and Byzantine Studies at Durham University

In her own warm and engaging way, Frederica takes you on a journey into a strange and exotic world for those unfamiliar with it but a spiritual refuge and oasis for those who have embraced it. This just may be the Church you have been looking for and didn’t even know it existed.

—JOHN MADDEX,  
CEO, Ancient Faith Ministries

This beginner’s guide to Orthodoxy can be described as a work of superb hospitality. While guiding her guests through a fictitious but true-to-life Orthodox house of worship and introducing them to its parish family, Frederica Mathewes-Green serves up a lavish feast of Orthodox architecture, art, theology, history, and devotional practices, all seasoned with tangy anecdotes and nuggets of wisdom. Even longstanding Orthodox believers will find nourishment here.

—CAROLE MONICA BURNETT,  
Editor, Fathers of the Church Series, Catholic University of  
America Press, Washington, DC

No one alive today has done more to introduce ordinary Americans to the wonders of the ancient faith than Frederica Mathewes-Green. If not for her, I doubt I would be Orthodox. Hers was one of the greatest and most surprising gifts anyone has ever given me, and it's thrilling to think of how many others will receive it through this book.

—ROD DREHER,  
author of *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*

Beautifully written and carefully explained with a heart for the non-Orthodox. As an evangelical who grew up in the Greek Orthodox Church, until being shipped off to boarding school in England, I found myself longing to revisit the liturgy and traditions of my youth.

—EMMANUEL KAMPOURIS,  
Former Chairman & CEO of American Standard Companies,  
Founder of [www.biblemesh.com](http://www.biblemesh.com)

Frederica Mathewes-Green is one of the most engaging interpreters of the Eastern Christian way in our time. In this book she takes us by the hand as it were and introduces us to something of the mystery, wisdom, worship, and beauty—in short, the life—of Eastern Christianity. A rich, illuminating introduction.

—TIMOTHY GEORGE,  
Founding Dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University  
and Chair of the Doctrine and Christian Unity Commission  
of the Baptist World Alliance.

Frederica Mathewes-Green has given us a warm and inviting defense of Orthodox Christianity without being defensive. This wonderful book explains the roots of the ancient truths and traditions of the Church in a conversational style to a broad audience of both believers and those still searching, while avoiding pedantic language which can be off-putting: a great book about the great Church.

—ANDREW NATSIOS,  
Professor, George H.W. Bush School of Government and  
Public Service, Texas A&M University

*Welcome*

TO THE

ORTHODOX  
CHURCH

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
Eastern Christianity

Frederica  
Mathewes-Green



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*To my husband, Father Gregory Mathewes-Green,  
on our fortieth anniversary.  
You are my one true love, both now and ever and unto ages of ages.*



# Contents

Introduction: How to Learn About Orthodoxy	xi
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## *Part One: Inside the Temple*

1 "Enter His Gates"	3
<i>The Narthex, Praying with Icons, Venerating Them, Making the Sign of the Cross</i>	
2 "The House of God"	11
<i>Church Architectural Styles, Wraparound Iconography, Why No Pews?, The Saint of the Day</i>	
3 "So Great a Cloud"	21
<i>Loving the Theotokos, The Prayers of the Saints</i>	
4 "Upon This Rock"	38
<i>Quick History Lesson, East and West Divide, Filioque, Conciliarity</i>	
5 "A Sacrifice of Praise"	47
<i>Baptism, Holy Water, The Perils of Service Books, Beauty in Worship, Music, Tradition</i>	
6 "Partakers of the Divine Nature"	68
<i>Theosis, Saints, Skepticism, Miracles</i>	
7 "Christ and Him Crucified"	85
<i>Icon of the Crucifixion, Models of Atonement, The Light of God, Lamentations for the Crucified Christ</i>	
8 "Image of the Invisible God"	98
<i>Iconoclasm, The Iconostasis, Images of Christ, Images of the Theotokos, The Image Behind the Image</i>	

- 9 "Your Body Is a Temple" 112  
*Icons in the Apse, The Altar, Divine Energies, Relics*
- 10 "Into the Sanctuary" 125  
*The Antimens, A Valid Eucharist, Liturgical Implements,  
 Various Crosses*

### *Part Two: Inside the Liturgy*


- 11 "Reconciling the World" 137  
*Immaculate Conception, Original Sin, Sin as Sickness,  
 Salvation as Healing, Christ the Champion*
- 12 "Not Counting Their Trespasses" 147  
*Love's Offering, The Meaning of Ransom, Pressing  
 the Metaphor, Take the Earliest View*
- 13 "The Lord Is King" 157  
*Tardy Worshipers, Confession, New Calendar,  
 God's Love, Repentance, Hymns for the Theotokos*
- 14 "Lord, Have Mercy" 174  
*Mercy, Forgiveness, The Love and Compassion of God,  
 The Nature of Sin*
- 15 "Awake, Sleeper" 191  
*Satan, The Nous, Watchful Prayer, God's Presence in the Heart*
- 16 "Time for the Lord to Act" 216  
*Kairos Time, Doctrinal Development, Chanting the  
 Scriptures, Mercy*
- 17 "Choose This Day" 229  
*Love and Forgiveness, Processing with the Gifts,  
 Free Will, Synergy, The Power of Choice*
- 18 "Where Two or Three Are Gathered" 250  
*The Kiss of Peace, Love and Communion, The Holy  
 Gifts, Mysteries, Closing Prayers*

## *Part Three: Inside the Community*

19	<p><b>"When You Fast"</b>  <i>Keeping the Fast, Expecting to Agree, Typical Moments from Coffee Hour</i></p>	271
20	<p><b>"Each Person Is Tempted"</b>  <i>Late-Night Phone Call, Battling Temptation, Desiring Holiness, Praying for Each Other</i></p>	283
21	<p><b>"Make Disciples . . . Baptizing Them"</b>  <i>Baptism and Chrismation, Exorcism, Saints' Names, Anointing Oil, Harrowing Hell</i></p>	288
22	<p><b>"A Great Mystery"</b>  <i>Marriage and Remarriage, Betrothal, Crowning, Marriage in Heaven?, The Best Wine</i></p>	307
23	<p><b>"Built His House upon a Rock"</b>  <i>House Blessing, Icon Corner, Spontaneous vs. Written Prayers, Meal Blessing</i></p>	319
24	<p><b>"Those Who Have Fallen Asleep"</b>  <i>Preparing the Body, Feast of the Dormition, Feast of the Transfiguration, Mercy Meal, The Funeral</i></p>	330
	<p>Conclusion: "Go and Do Likewise"</p>	343
	<p>Significant Feast Days</p>	346
	<p>Notes</p>	347
	<p>Recommended Reading</p>	355
	<p>Index</p>	358

# Introduction

## *How to Learn About Orthodoxy*

y husband is an Orthodox priest, so he regularly teaches a class to introduce newcomers to the faith. It's trickier than you'd think. At the first class he writes on the board:

What you will not learn in this class: Orthodoxy.

What you will learn: About Orthodoxy.

What's the difference? Like so many important things in life, Orthodox Christianity is not something you can grasp from the outside. From the outside, it looks simply like a grand, historic institution—the ancient Christian church of the East, outside the bounds of Western Europe. (We could just as well call it “Eastern Christianity,” though it is, of course, a worldwide faith, like every form of Christianity.)

Orthodoxy is a rich faith, abounding in treasures of arts and architecture, liturgical poetry and music, and profound works of theology and spirituality. Even after joining the church, a person can go on making new discoveries, year after year. There is plenty to learn *about* Orthodoxy.

But to learn Orthodoxy itself is a different matter. Because once you're on the inside, you find that Orthodoxy is not primarily a religious institution, but a spiritual path. The institution exists for the sake of the path. Every element you meet has the same purpose: to help you be filled more completely with the life and presence of Christ. There is an undercurrent of dynamism, liveliness, and a frank expectation of action and growth. When asked, “What's different

about Orthodoxy?" people who have converted to Orthodoxy keep returning to the word *challenging*.

So those who join the Church find that each beautiful new thing they encounter contains a note of exhortation. Each bears persistent questions: How are you applying this in your life? Have you forgiven everyone you should? How is your humility today? How is your self-control? There's a great deal of talk about sin and repentance, even though that's currently unfashionable; yet self-reflection and change are indispensable if there's going to be any growth. There are frequent reminders to be vigilant against temptation—as if that was something that really *mattered*, as if it had some effect on our ability to practice God's presence.

The icons that fill a church may initially look like nice religious paintings, but they have an unsettling way of coming to life. You begin to feel like the people depicted are looking back at you, looking *through* you. "Here we are," they seem to say. "We lived for Christ. How about you?"

So Orthodoxy is a path of continual transformation, and people who join the church are always discovering more of what it "is," and not just what it "is about."

But if it's so hard to grasp Orthodoxy without actually living it, how are you supposed to get to know it in the first place? The curious can hardly be told to come back when they're ready to sign up. In today's theological free market, those who are considering a change want to know a great deal about a faith before making a decision. Others don't expect ever to join the church, but would still like to know more about it. Perhaps they have a relative or friend who has become Orthodox, and they wonder what all the fuss is about. Perhaps they've been invited to a wedding or liturgy and wonder what they're in for. A book that sorts it all out would help.

And that's exactly where I ran into a problem.



When I started trying to organize this work, I found the material isn't very amenable to sorting. All the dynamic elements slide into one another, so you can't (at least I can't) separate a chapter on sacraments from a chapter on theology from a chapter on history. Some living quality gets lost in the process. It's resistant to categorization, and many of the familiar categories don't quite work anyway.

In part this is because there's a lot about Orthodoxy that just never got put into words. Historically, the Orthodox haven't spent much time explaining their faith to other Christians. Descendants of Christian Europe inherit many centuries of interdenominational debate and verbal sparring, but those living in traditionally Orthodox lands (Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, mostly) had less experience of that. They had lots of unsettling experiences with *non*-Christians—Persians, Mongols, Muslims, Communists—and knew well how life in Christ differs from life without him. But the long-running arguments among Western Christians, the countless terms with precise and prickly meanings (e.g., works, merits, atonement), just didn't play a part in the Eastern Christian story.

I can tell you how we went about it, when my family joined the Orthodox Church some twenty years ago. We mostly got to know Orthodoxy by *experience*. Our journey preceded development of the Internet, and we went quickly through the few books then available on the subject. So if we wanted to understand what the church teaches on a particular topic, we made sure to look at how it was handled in worship.

Say we wondered how Orthodox understand Christ's Ascension. We would look up the prayers and hymns that are used that day; we'd study the icon of the Ascension (which, no matter where or when it's painted, shows the same characters arranged in similar ways). As the years passed and the liturgical cycle kept turning, our comprehension kept expanding. We learned how the meaning of the Ascension connects to the meaning of the Incarnation, and the Transfiguration, and even to the creation of the human race in Genesis. We kept building and correcting our understanding.

At first, a lot of things were startling. I kept hearing theological ideas, or combinations of ideas, or ways of expressing them, that I'd never heard before. After some years those surprises were less frequent, and then came a period of noticing that there were things I *didn't* hear about anymore. It wouldn't have surprised me if the concept of God's wrath had cropped up in Orthodox spirituality, since I knew it was a thoroughly premodern church. But I found that, on the rare occasions it was mentioned, it was always when stressing that God is *not* wrathful. Prayers would say, in so many words, "Though we deserve your wrath, you instead always give us compassion."

Another example was the "problem of evil," the question of why there is suffering in the world, and in particular why the innocent suffer. This is a tormenting puzzle in the West, for Christians and non-Christians alike. However (and it took me several years to notice this), in Orthodoxy it just doesn't come up. Orthodox Christians suffer as much as people do anywhere, and grieve as deeply. But there isn't the confusion and bitterness about it that infects the discussion in the West. It took me quite a while to fully grasp the reason why.

This time of learning and discovering was exciting, to tell the truth. My husband and I had completed our seminary degrees some years before, and exploring Orthodoxy sent us back to revisit and rethink a multitude of topics. Many a settled concept had to be revised. Many a Scripture we'd thought obvious had to be seen in a different light.

Often, that was a light that better reflected the original Greek text. European theology was built upon a foundation of reading the Bible in Latin translation, and as we went along we learned that there are gaps in what Latin can convey. For example, there was no equivalent for the New Testament term "energy" (*energeia*), used some thirty times by St. Paul. That's another intriguing, perspective-changing element we'll get to later.

From the beginning, there was something about Orthodoxy that struck me as really *different*. It was hard to put into words. It wasn't only the explicit theological differences, but also some basic

assumptions about who we are, and how God is known, and what Christianity is supposed to do. There was an unnamable underlying *something* that was different from any form of Christianity I'd ever known, and grasping it was a multiyear project.



Since I learned Orthodoxy in this unpredictable way, it was not obvious how I should pass it on to others. Compare and contrast might seem the most obvious course; start with what people already know about Christian faith and make adjustments. If you'd never heard of baseball, you'd ask, "Is it like bowling this way? Is it like soccer that way?" After I give a talk about Orthodoxy, the audience's questions often follow that line, comparing what I've said with the denominations they already know.

But that can result in more confusion. Some points that initially look similar can turn out not to be so, on closer inspection. Sometimes the same biblical term is understood in a different way. Some Eastern Christian concepts lie outside Western categories entirely. It's not just that the answers are different; even the *questions* are different.

Strange as it sounds, Catholic and Protestant look a lot alike from an Eastern perspective. Those two cousins grew up in the same family; they share a common geography, a common history, and have argued over common questions.

But the Orthodox weren't part of that Western story. They had little role in the Crusades (besides defending themselves from invading crusaders); they had no Avignon popes, no sale of indulgences, no scholastic movement, no Reformation, no substitutionary atonement theory, no Enlightenment, no modernism. It's a whole different story.

On the other hand, describing and exploring differences between East and West in a forthright way might just seem like making trouble (and, as you'd guess, I'm partial to Orthodoxy). Why focus on differences, some might ask, when Christians need to stick together?

But if you're reading this book, you must be at least a *little* curious about the differences. With almost anything it's the differences that are most interesting. Men and women are mostly alike—both have sinuses, elbows, and spleens—but it's the differences that have traditionally been most intriguing.

Unfortunately, I couldn't treat each topic with the thoroughness it deserves. There just wasn't room. In the bibliography you'll find many recommendations for further reading that will increase your understanding. There are now many more books about Orthodoxy available than there were when my family joined the church.

Yet the best way to understand anything is not to read about it, but to experience it firsthand. Some people seem to do nothing *but* read books, gathering ever-more-detailed opinions. Don't do that. Nobody can understand how the Orthodox spiritual path works without digging in and practicing it seriously and with self-discipline. The ancient Orthodox prayers, the hymns and visual arts, are designed to communicate directly to the worshiper. They've spoken to Christians of all lands and cultures and somehow transcended their borders. They have the power of art and beauty; they go directly to the heart.

If you think about it, reading is an impoverished way to learn anything. We can learn to read the squiggles on a page, but we are made to read people. We watch how people move, listen to how they use their voices, watch what they say and do. From that we learn about the thing they are doing, and what it means to them.

That's how most people got to know the Christian faith in ages past: not by reading books, but by joining a community. They learned by keeping their eyes and ears open during worship, listening to the Scriptures and sermons, and thinking about the words of hymns. They participated in the fasting seasons, benefiting from the advice and support of the "old hands" who knew it well. They watched the people around them, seeing what they did and listening to how they spoke about the faith—not just the words, but also the quality of reverence in their voices. Over time, they soaked things up.

In the midst of a community like that, “thrown in the deep end” so to speak, you wouldn’t learn things in any particular order. You’d learn important things alongside less-important things (though you wouldn’t know the difference at the time). You’d keep running into the same thing over and over from different angles, and have to keep correcting first impressions. Gradually, you’d see how all the elements fit together, and how they work in practice.



Having pled for the superiority of direct experience over reading a book, here we are—at the beginning of a book. I’ve attempted to overcome some of the medium’s limitations, and simulate that “deep end” experience, by constructing an imaginary parish, St. Felicity Orthodox Church. (You’ll find out more about the name in chapter 2.) We’ll get acquainted with Orthodoxy by making a series of visits there, dealing with a full range of topics as they might arise naturally, in a context of places and relationships.

In part 1, we begin on a weekday when the church is empty. There are a lot of things to look at in an Orthodox church, and a preliminary visit when it’s quiet can help you get your bearings. We’ll learn about architecture, icons, prayer, saints, and more. Not every church is arranged exactly like St. Felicity, but what we see here is typical and will orient us for things to come.

In parts 2 and 3 we’ll come back to the church for some of the events you might experience in real life: a Vespers service, a typical Sunday-morning liturgy, a wedding, a funeral, and so on. We’ll also go to a parishioner’s home for a house blessing, and sit in on coffee hour. These parts doesn’t aim to tell a story; they just present a series of snapshots, to show how things might look in practice. While the characters I introduce are fictitious, they’re intended to be realistic and typical, and to resemble people you might meet in any Orthodox church—or anywhere else, for that matter.



Orthodox Christianity is a spiritual path. It is that rather than an organization, or even a set of theological propositions. Eastern Orthodoxy is a comprehensive program of inner transformation; it is a journey, a way, even "the Way" (see, e.g., Acts 9:2; 19:9; 22:4).

This path *has* an institution, like a hospital has an administrative board. Still, the life of a hospital will always be its healing mission. You hope that those board members were carefully selected, but even glaring failures would not be able to damage medical science itself.

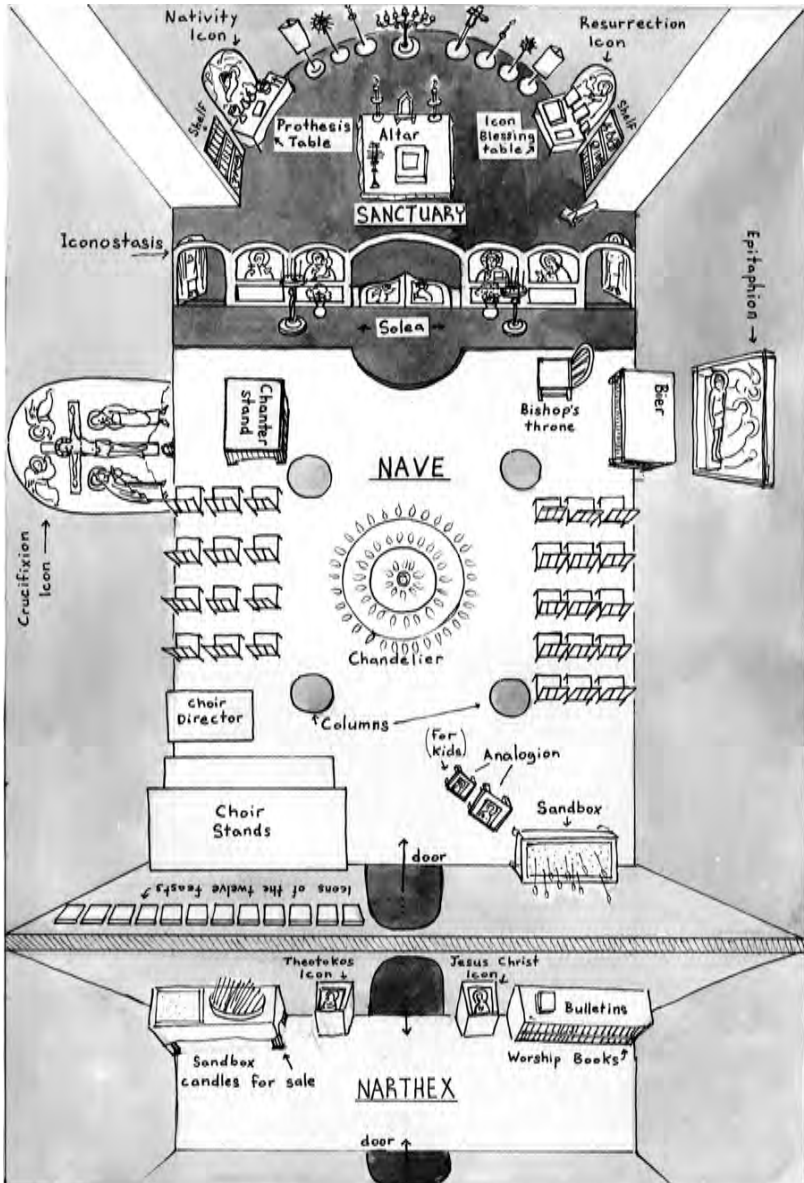
Orthodox Christians are grateful for the church, which has preserved and offered this spiritual path century after century, but can't be too surprised if flaws appear in the earthly institution. There will always be weeds among the wheat; as Jesus said, "an enemy has done this" (Matt. 14:24–30). Yet the time-tested process of spiritual healing continues to be effective, no matter how humans mess things up.

Not every Orthodox leader is a saint. Not every church member is devout. People go to church for all different reasons. Not every congregation is full of people urgently seeking transformation in Christ (though it can be hard to tell, because the most diligent are often the most quiet). In some Orthodox congregations this way of transformation has been forgotten, and is neither taught nor sought.

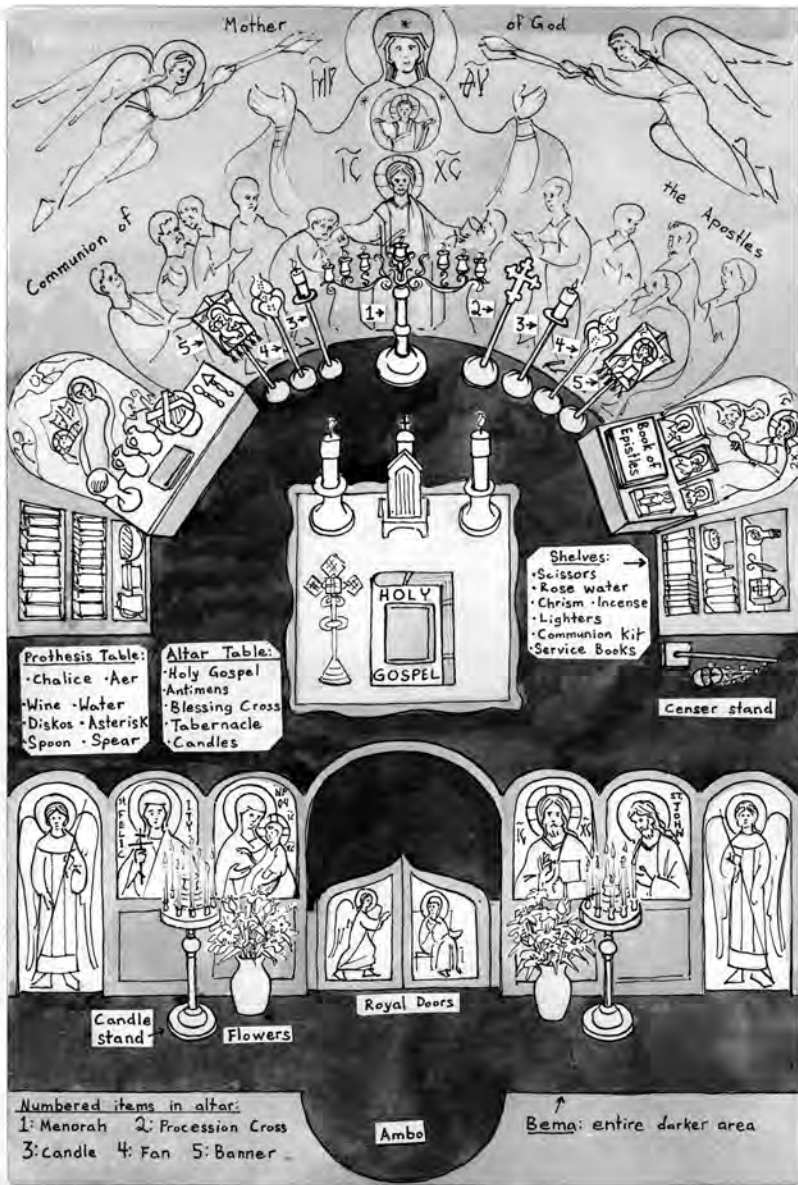
But even in a congregation that appears dull and distracted, the Way itself is still effective, waiting to be tried, like an unopened Bible. All the Orthodox "tribes and tongues" hold this treasure in common—even when they follow it badly, even when they fail in visible ways, even when they practice it in parallel observance, grumbling at the guys in the church across the street.

If Orthodoxy were a worldly organization, it wouldn't be an efficient one. If it claimed infallible leadership, it would be greeted with laughter. But Orthodoxy is not a set of propositions, not a mere organization. It is a Way—a way to be immersed in the presence of God, through our Creator and Savior, the only Lord, Jesus Christ.

# Interior of a Typical Orthodox Church



# Sanctuary of a Typical Orthodox Church





PART

# One

## INSIDE THE TEMPLE

*Though Orthodox Christians refer to the building as “the church” like everyone else, they also call it “the temple.” Our trip to St. Felicity will familiarize you with the different areas in the temple, what happens there and why.*

*We’ll look at the narthex (the front lobby), the nave (the congregation’s worship space), the iconostasis (a screen that holds icons, at the front end of the nave), and the altar (the whole area behind the iconostasis). As we do, we’ll spend some time looking at practices such as praying with icons and making the sign of the cross. We’ll also talk about concepts such as the prayers of the saints, the atonement, theosis, and the place of the Virgin Mary. The conversation around these ideas and practices will lay a foundation as we move deeper into the life of the Orthodox Church.*


# 1

## *“Enter His Gates”*

(Ps. 99/100:4)



### *The Narthex, Praying with Icons, Venerating Them, Making the Sign of the Cross*

et's drop in on St. Felicity Orthodox Church on a weekday morning, when things are quiet and no worship is going on. As we come through the front doors, we find ourselves in a little foyer called a *narthex*. Here we see the same things you'd find in the lobby of any church: service bulletins, newsletters, forgotten umbrellas, a basket of canned goods for a local soup kitchen, pinned-up notices for retreats and events, and, on a Sunday morning, greeters. But in the narthex of an Orthodox church you find a few more things as well.

There's also a basket of candles, mostly taper-style candles made of beeswax, and depending on the parish, votive candles in small or large glass containers. There may be a donation basket—you'd be surprised how much those candles cost the church—or, during services, someone on hand to receive donations and make change. In some churches there are also slips of paper on which you can write the names of those you'd like prayed for during the service (in two columns, for the living and the dead).

The narthex is more than just a lobby, though. It's actually part of the liturgical space, and some services, or preliminary parts of

services, were traditionally held here. For example, before a wedding the priest would meet the bride and groom here and ask formally if they had come of their own free will, and whether they had promised themselves to anyone else. He'd ask a series of questions here before a baptism, too. These days those preliminaries are more likely to be held inside the nave, the main worship space, but you'll sometimes see the narthex used in its traditional way.



When people arrive for worship, most will take a candle and go to an icon here in the narthex to pray, mentally offering some words of greeting and recalling their prayer needs. (They'll greet icons this way inside the nave, too.) The custom when entering an Orthodox church is to pause in front of an icon and pray; if there is a nearby candle stand, you might light your candle and leave it here.

Depending on your background, you might think that sounds like idolatry. You're not the first person to have such thoughts, and sorting out the meaning of icons took over a hundred years, and cost the lives of hundreds of icon-defenders. We'll talk in more detail about that in chapter 8; in fact, we'll keep learning more about icons as we go along, answering questions and learning what icons have to teach.

But, here at the start, it helps to keep in mind that what Orthodox Christians chiefly feel when they look at icons is *love*. Maybe you have a photo of someone you love who has departed this life. You might keep it framed in your home, someplace where you'll see it frequently. When you see it, your thoughts fly to this person; you might give thanks that he or she is alive in Christ now, and no doubt praying for you.

If you can picture feeling that way toward the photo of a loved one, then you're very close to understanding how Orthodox Christians feel toward the saints, and the icons that bear their images.

Icons are never the object of worship; we don't pray to them. We don't even pray in a different *way* in the presence of icons; there is

no distinct form of "spirituality" for icons. To us, icons are more like companions—more like that photo of a loved one. They remind us that the unseen "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1) is surrounding us whenever we pray, and when we don't, as well.

Icons are treated with respect, the kind of respect you would give to your favorite Bible. A leather-bound, gilt-edged, red-letter bible is not *the* Bible; if it were lost in a fire, the Bible would still exist. And yet, because it is a copy of the Holy Bible, it deserves respect. Your familiar, favorite Bible probably wins your reverence and affection as well. You wouldn't worship it, but you would always handle it with respect. That's because you think of it as a place of encounter with God. Icons are a similar place of encounter, and have often been called "windows into heaven."

Christians made use of the visual arts from the faith's earliest years. Images depicting people and events from the Bible and Christian history were invaluable during the long centuries when most Christians were illiterate. They served a purpose much like the pictures in a children's Bible, filling a church's walls with images depicting the people and events of salvation history. In those days all Bibles were copied by hand, and were astronomically expensive; think of how much it would cost today to have a calligrapher make you a copy of the Bible. So a parish was likely to have only one copy, and people would encounter the Scriptures most often by hearing them read aloud. If someone wanted to refresh his memory of a story that might not come around for another six months, he could seek out its picture on the wall. (Missionaries also found portable icons useful when conveying the gospel story across a language barrier.)

Icons depict the characters and events of Scripture in wood and paint, rather than paper and ink; for this reason they are often said to be "written" rather than "painted" (though the distinction in English doesn't occur in Greek). Most icons are unsigned, in humility, but if the painter's name appears, it's phrased as "by the hand of" the painter. This means that the true source of the image is the united prayers of the community, and it was delivered through the iconographer's hand.

Why light a candle? Because it reminds us of the light of Christ (“I am the light of the world,” John 8:12). When we go to the evening prayer service, *Vespers*, in part 2, we’ll encounter an ancient hymn that was sung when the evening lamps were lit, one that praises Christ as the “joyous light of the holy glory of the immortal Father.”

But we light candles for a practical reason as well. For the many centuries before electric wiring was invented, churches were pretty dark. Lighting a candle in front of an icon would make that beloved face bloom out of the darkness. Throughout the service it would remain visible, a reminder of invisible reality: all the saints who have ever lived are here, praying with us. Although candles don’t much serve that practical function anymore, it is still our custom—our “family tradition,” you might say—to place them there, as we’d light candles on a dinner table. It is a gesture of respect and affection.

Either here in the narthex, or just inside the nave, there will be an icon that represents the name of the church. If the church is called “Holy Ascension,” the icon will depict Christ’s Ascension. If the church is called “St. Paul,” the icon will be of their patron saint, St. Paul. (And by the way, an Orthodox church is called “St. Paul” rather than “St. Paul’s,” the form more common with Western churches.)

Some of these patronal images may surprise you: in a church named “Holy Trinity” you are likely to see an icon of the three angels who visited Abraham and Sarah and told them that they would have a son.\* A church named “Holy Resurrection” will have an icon showing Christ, not at the garden tomb, but in the cavernous realm of death, setting the captives free. The icon of a church named “Holy Cross” would not show the Crucifixion, but a man in clerical robes holding the cross high in the midst of a gathering of worshipers, a snapshot from church history. In the foreground stands St. Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine, who recovered the cross of Christ from beneath the foundations of a Jerusalem temple to Venus, where it had lain buried for three centuries.

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\* This image is called “The Old Testament Trinity.” The version by St. Andrei Rublev, AD 1360–1427, is one of the best-loved icons in the world.

Icons tell stories and teach theology; they summarize and convey things that can't be readily expressed in words. It is a great responsibility to teach theology, so the form and content of icons follow standardized patterns. An icon of Christ's Transfiguration, for example, will always depict the same characters, arranged in the same ways. We don't want the artist's personal opinions popping up in icon-painting any more than we'd want them in Bible-translating.

So, unlike contemporary artists, an iconographer doesn't seek self-expression in her work. Her job is to accurately pass on the faith she has received, following in the footsteps of icon-painters throughout the ages. But her icon will vary just enough from anyone else's to reveal the uniqueness of God's work in her soul. The depth of her prayer life, and her wrestling with fasting and prayer while painting it, will shine from the completed icon.

It is the custom to venerate a church's patronal icon before going into the nave, and if you watched people doing this, you'd soon conclude that "venerate" means "kiss." It's a gesture of reverence, honor, and even affection. They are greeting the person depicted in the icon, and in many Orthodox cultures friends exchange a kiss when they meet. So as members of the church come through on Sunday morning, they will pick up a candle and then pause before the patronal icon. They will make the sign of the cross (usually with a bow), pray silently, and kiss the icon—on the hands or feet of the person depicted, preferably. If there are also icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary in the narthex, they will venerate them, too. (A liturgical kiss, by the way, is silent; a gentle pressure of the lips, but no "smack." Children's kisses excepted, of course.)

There may also be an icon on a low stand for children to venerate. Everyone enjoys watching little ones as they learn how to make the sign of the cross. That right hand goes flying all over the place. It looks like a random one-handed version of "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes."



To make the sign of the cross, Eastern Christians lift the right hand and touch the forehead, the lower chest or abdomen, the right shoulder, and the left shoulder. That movement from shoulder to shoulder is the opposite of the custom in the West, where the hand goes from left to right. I had to relearn this when I became Orthodox, and it helped me to think, "Push, don't pull."

Some Christians mistrust the sign of the cross, thinking of it as a relic of medieval superstition. It's a gesture that goes back much earlier, though, even to the years of Roman persecution. Tertullian (AD 160–225) cautions Christian women not to marry unbelievers: "Will you escape notice when you sign your bed, your 'dear little body'?"<sup>1</sup> He warns that the husband who sees this and realizes his wife is a Christian might use it against her, threatening her with arrest and execution. This was still the age of martyrs.

It's interesting that Tertullian doesn't then say, "So stop making the sign of the cross." To refuse to bear the cross of Christ, to conceal it even for personal safety, was simply not possible. "Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

To the early Christians the sign of the cross was not a merely symbolic gesture, but a way to invoke the immediate presence and power of Jesus Christ. St. Athanasius (about AD 320) invited skeptics to test this for themselves: "Let him who would test this by experience, in the presence of lying demons and fraudulent oracles and magic, let him use this sign of the cross which they laugh at. He will see how it makes demons take flight, oracles cease, and all magic and witchcraft is ended."<sup>2</sup>

Trusting in such power, the early Christians made the sign of the cross frequently. "Let the Cross, as our seal, be boldly made with our fingers upon our brow and on all occasions," says St. Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 313–386), "over the bread we eat, over the cups we drink, in our comings and in our goings, before sleep, on lying down and rising up, when we are on the way and when we are still."<sup>3</sup>

When Westerners see Eastern Christians make the sign of the cross, they are often impressed with the accompanying seriousness of intent. Even as settled a nonliturgical evangelical as Charles Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, could say:

After praying with an Orthodox sister, Irina Ratushinskaya [who survived Communist prison], . . . I said my "Amen" and then watched her make the sign of the Cross with such depth of feeling that I had a powerful urge to make the sign myself. I resisted—for fear it might be a betrayal of my Baptist tradition. How foolish I felt when I later discovered that believers since the very beginning and through the centuries have made the sign of the Cross, signifying that they have been crucified with Christ.<sup>4</sup>

In the West, all five fingers are loosely held together; some say this represents the five wounds of Christ. In the East, it's more complicated. I almost hate to tell you. This is the sort of thing that I resented when I was initially (and somewhat uncertainly) following my husband into Orthodoxy. Some of the Orthodox customs I was learning seemed overly detailed, and struck me as fussy and complicated.

One thing that helped me through was the gradual realization that Orthodox worship is rarely self-conscious. The beloved Anglican author C. S. Lewis noticed this when visiting Orthodox churches, and liked it very much. "Some sit, some lie on their faces, some stand, some kneel, some walk about, . . . and *no one takes the slightest notice of what anyone else is doing*," he said in one letter.<sup>5</sup>

People behave in a way that is devout and respectful, of course—we all face the altar and pray—but if you feel like you can't lift your arm for one more sign of the cross, no one will gasp. In Orthodox worship, your personal expressions of devotion are your own business, and not a matter for others' scrutiny.

When Orthodox Christians make the sign of the cross, they position the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand together at the tip, to represent the Trinity. This is what you use to touch forehead, abdomen, shoulder, and shoulder. The ring and little finger are held together, to represent the two natures of Christ; they are bent down to touch the palm, to represent his descent to earth.

When I first began attending Orthodox worship, I found it very hard to scramble my fingers into this position on short notice. So I

would form them correctly at the beginning of the service and just try to keep them that way till the end. I never knew when it was going to be time to make the sign of the cross again; it seemed like we were doing it every few minutes.

I grew up thinking of the sign of the cross as something you do at the beginning and end of a prayer, like bookends. But Orthodox Christians cross themselves with great frequency during worship: when entering or leaving a church, when kissing a cross, an icon, or the Gospel book, at each mention of the Trinity or of the cross, before and after a reading from Scripture, during the Nicene Creed, during the Communion prayers, at the end of the Lord's Prayer, before and after receiving Communion—really, just about any time. Even outside of church I cross myself when I hear an ambulance siren, and when I hear something I should pray about. In such cases it is the gesture that seals a flying prayer: "Lord, help."

When we cross the nave of the church from one side to the other, we show respect to the altar by stopping in the middle to bow toward it and cross ourselves. I absorbed this habit so completely that I automatically start to do it whenever I cross a large room. If I'm walking across a movie theater, I have to remember not to stop in the middle, cross myself, and bow to the screen.



Those who come from a Western liturgical background have been looking around the narthex for a holy water font, so they can dip their fingers and make the sign of the cross. We don't have these in the Eastern Orthodox Church; we do have holy water, but it is used for sprinkling and (this was a surprise to me) drinking. We'll encounter the holy water font inside the nave.

And the sharp-eyed have noticed there is something here they don't usually see in a narthex: worship books. Why are they out here, and not on the little shelves on the backs of the pews? Wait and see. Next we enter the nave.

# "The House of God"

(GEN. 28:17)



*Church Architectural Styles, Wraparound Iconography,  
Why No Pews?, The Saint of the Day*



We'll spend the next few chapters in the nave, the worship space proper. But before we enter, let's stand here in the narthex a minute more, in front of the doors to the nave.

What will we see when we open them?

My mind flies over the hundreds of Orthodox churches I have seen. I have been to Hagia Sophia, the magnificent temple built in Istanbul (then Constantinople) in AD 537. It is one of the largest churches in the world—eighty thousand square feet—and its "floating" dome is still an architectural wonder. I've been to many, many American churches built in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the hard work and devotion of immigrants from Russia, Syria, Greece, or other nations. I've been to churches that were entirely covered, walls and ceiling, with magnificent icons, a veritable jewel box. I have been to the ruins of many ancient Orthodox churches in Turkey. Our brothers and sisters in Christ may have run there, and died there, when the invaders came sweeping in; now the stones, some of which still bear crosses, are tumbled about, worn by wind and rain.

I've been to many American Orthodox churches that occupy buildings originally built by Protestant or Catholic congregations.

Since Orthodox prefer to worship facing east (I'll explain why below), the worship space has sometimes been turned sideways, or even completely around, such that today's worshipers face the side where the original congregation came in the door.

I've been to Annunciation Orthodox Cathedral in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and variously described as "the flying saucer" or "the floating hamburger." I have been to a church in an industrial park, where a flat plywood disk bearing an icon of Christ was attached to the metal ceiling twenty-two feet overhead. I've worshiped in a church in a strip mall, between a Chinese buffet and a nail salon. I have been to a start-up church that was meeting in the priest's home, where the worship space took a sharp right on its way from the front door to the end of the living room. (My friend commented, "It's the first time I've ever seen an L-shaped nave.") I've been to churches where a borrowed room, available only on Sunday, was converted into a holy place, the throne of God and an outpost of heaven, by setting out a couple of icons on folding easels and a homemade wooden altar.

Is there any particular way that an Orthodox church should look? The earliest congregations gathered in people's homes (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:9), and sometimes houses would be set apart more permanently as churches. Once Christianity became legal, in AD 313, believers could start building structures specifically designed for worship. The earliest were based on the Greek and Roman architectural design known as a *basilica*; *basil* means "king" in Greek, and the *basilica* was the king's law court.\* (If you're thinking, "I thought *basil* was an herb," you're right. Remember that St. Helena found the cross of Christ's crucifixion in Jerusalem? It's said that she found a delicious herb growing over the site, and named it "basil." Basil plants decorate the nave on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, September 14.)

A *basilica* has a simple design: a rectangle with an entry door at one end, and at the other a semicircle capped by a half-dome called an *apse*. Sometimes the main body of the rectangle was divided

\* I'm using the term *basilica* here in its architectural sense alone; in the Roman Catholic Church, a church is called a *basilica* only when it has received that honorary title from the pope.

into three long aisles, with two rows of columns running down its length. When the center aisle was built higher than the side aisles, the top walls could be pierced with windows, letting in a great deal of light.

In the fourth century, a number of basilica-style churches were built by St. Helena and her son St. Constantine. He was the first Roman emperor to embrace Christianity, and his works included the original St. Peter's in Rome and the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem (in the West it's called the Church of the Holy Sepulchre). Churches in such important cities endured a great deal of renovation over the centuries—hostile, benign, or well-intentioned-but-regrettable. The Church of the Resurrection was completely demolished by Jerusalem's Muslim conquerors in the eleventh century, but in the rebuilt church, patches of St. Helena's original mosaic floor can still be seen.

If you wonder what it would have been like to worship in an ancient, intact basilica, you can't do better than visiting the Church of St. Apollinare Nuovo in the Italian city of Ravenna. It was built about AD 500, and even in photos you can get a feel for the wonderful light brought in through the high windows, which sets the great expanses of golden mosaic shimmering. (Sometimes gold tiles are inlaid at different angles so reflected light will shift and twinkle.) Though we usually think of icons as paintings, some of the best-preserved ancient icons were crafted of mosaic tiles, tiny squares of glass containing a layer of color. Mosaics never fade, and can be cleaned of candle smoke and grime, so they give us the best idea of what ancient Christian art looked like.

In the West, the basilica design was expanded by adding a *transept*, another aisle running horizontally across the nave, just below the apse; this gave the whole building the shape of a cross. As these long, narrow buildings grew taller (the fourteenth-century Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris is a great example), the ceilings would soar to high pointed arches, creating for the worshiper a sense of heaven's endless reach and God's transcendent power. This is a beautiful design, very graceful, which draws the worshiper's eyes to the

delicate play of arches crossing overhead. If there's a drawback, it is that such a long nave puts the worshiper far from the altar, and such a high ceiling can make him feel isolated, alone in a crowd.

Church architecture developed differently in the East. Some early churches were built at the site of a martyr's tomb, as a square structure (representing the earth) with a domed roof (representing heaven). Then the apse was borrowed from the basilica design, which bumped out the eastern wall into a semicircle, providing room for an altar. Worshipers would enter through doors on the west and face east, toward the altar, as they prayed.

Why east? Because Christ told us that's where we will see him when he comes again: "As the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of man" (Matt. 24:27). He is the "bright morning star" (Rev. 22:16). As early as the fourth century, St. Basil the Great could refer to eastward worship as a custom so ancient that no one knew its origin.<sup>6</sup> While the Jewish tradition was to face Jerusalem to pray, and Muslims face Mecca, Christians have always faced east; even in Japan, Orthodox Christians face east.

A central dome was an early characteristic of Eastern Christian churches—but there's a problem. A dome can only be made so wide. What if you need a bigger church? The building could be enlarged by setting the dome upon four pillars, and expanding the square around it on all sides. You could make the square as large as necessary, and the encompassing dome would still unite the space visually. This design is called "cross-in-square." (We'll see why in a minute.) Just as the Gothic church design spread throughout the Christian West, the cross-in-square is found in all Orthodox lands.



By the way, I found it confusing at first that there were so many different Orthodox lands and churches: Russian, Greek, Romanian, Antiochian, and so on. I assumed that they were all different denominations, like the variety of viewpoints among churches that share the name "Baptist." I learned, though, that all are members of the same

worldwide Orthodox Church. Every land should have its own national church, but here in America waves of immigrants set up their own parishes and administrative bodies before that could be organized. The process to create a single American Orthodox Church is under way, though not with brisk American efficiency. There's a saying, "I don't believe in organized religion. I'm Orthodox."

Administrative unity won't make a dramatic difference on the local level, since such churches are already one in the important ways. In a big city a hundred years ago you could have seen an Irish Catholic church, a Polish Catholic church, and an Italian Catholic church, but they knew themselves to be members of a common faith. As those immigrants made America their home, such distinctions melted away, and hopefully the same will happen here. Whether administrative wheels turn quickly or slowly, unity already exists in local parishes, where people from many lands come together and share their traditions.

In the meantime, these different groups (Greek Orthodox, Antiochian Orthodox, and so on) are termed *jurisdictions*, not denominations. They share the same liturgies, faith, and spiritual path, and are in communion with each other. In the United States most worship is in English. (Our fictional St. Felicity Orthodox Church doesn't represent any particular ethnic background; I've intentionally given it elements from many different lands.)



As we step into the nave, we find ourselves in a room that feels much larger than would seem possible, due to the airy height of the ceiling and its dome far overhead. It is hard to get a sense of the shape of this room. Everywhere around us there are curves: round arches, cylindrical pillars, and a generous half-shell ceiling to crown the altar.

As we walk to stand in the center of the church, under that dome, we find ourselves at a crossroads. Extensions (called "bays") reach in all four directions, each framed by two columns. Before us is the bay that extends to the altar, and behind us is the bay that goes back to the church's narthex and front door. If we look left or right, the

pairs of columns now enclose the bays on those sides, extending the nave left and right.

These four bays form a cross with arms of equal length, which is the reason for the name “cross-in-square.” Churches built on this plan look square from the outside (more or less, allowing for additions), but inside, thanks to the four columns marking off the space, it feels like a cross—one that, nevertheless, has a round ceiling. This is an interesting contrast, and creates a feeling of being gathered together “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings” (Matt. 23:37). Instead of soaring to a heavenly point, such a ceiling “mothers” the congregation and unites it.

Orthodox churches can be built in many different styles, but the cross-in-square is most traditional. It can gain extra bays, till it looks octagonal or even round; these bays can be topped with their own, smaller domes. When those domes are of different heights, sometimes even painted with different designs, the exterior view can be baffling. St. Basil Cathedral (built 1555–1561), in Moscow’s Red Square, has a cross-in-square at its center, but with its extra bays and cluster of multihued, snow-shedding “onion domes” it has been described as resembling a bonfire.<sup>7</sup>

It’s expensive to complete the icon program in a church, but since St. Felicity has the advantage of being imaginary, we can cover every inch of walls, ceiling, and columns with scenes and people from the Bible and church history. Now it’s even harder to get a sense of the shape of the interior space. Yet there is an intimate feeling, thanks to the sheltering dome and the room’s gently rounded lines. The full-length saints on the walls and columns are about our size, and might be taken for fellow worshipers—as the saints they represent really are.

The most eye-catching thing in the nave is the wooden screen, like a room divider, that stands between the main worship space and the altar. It is adorned with icons and is called the *iconostasis*, a Greek word meaning “icon stand.” The iconostasis developed from a smaller structure, a low wall called a *templon*, which separated the altar area from the worship space in churches of the early centuries. The templon

was very like the communion rail in a Western church. (There is no communion rail in an Orthodox church, since we stand to receive Communion.) With time, as the interiors of churches were painted with images of saints and Bible stories, icons were attached to the templon as well. With even more time, it grew larger and higher, to hold more icons, and eventually became our modern-day iconostasis. (We'll examine the iconostasis in more detail in chapter 8.)

The next thing we're likely to notice, as we look around, is that there are no pews. There are short rows of chairs along each side wall, but the main body of the church is open, with oriental rugs spanning the floor. That's why the service books are kept in the narthex. No shelves on pew backs. No pew backs. No pews.

If you've been to the great cathedrals of Europe, you probably noticed that they don't have pews either. Sitting down in church is a fairly recent idea. Recall that, for the first fifteen hundred years, the universal expectation on Sunday morning was that God was going to appear in a tangible way, an *edible* way, of all things, turning ordinary bread and wine into his body and blood. You can understand why people would be standing at attention for that. That God is offering his body as food—offering it even to the lowliest sinner—is astounding, when you think about it. It's a good idea to think about it, because it goes a long way toward explaining the tone of Orthodox worship.

If the focus of worship was instead on the sermon, and helping the people to understand the Scriptures and how to live a Christian life, it would make sense to give them a place to sit down. Pews began to appear after the Protestant Reformation, in the sixteenth century, and their obvious usefulness made them ubiquitous in time.

Now we expect people to sit down while the pastor stands to preach, but the ancient way was the reverse: the teacher alone would sit (we still speak of a "chair" at a university), while students stood respectfully around him, or perhaps "sat at his feet" (Lk. 10:39; Acts 22:3). Chairs, in fact, came into common household use only about five hundred years ago. Not that people didn't sit down, but they sat on stools and benches; a chair with a back was a fancy

thing, an emblem of authority. (Those early chairs and thrones were uncomfortable, too; it took some time for people to figure out that the back did not have to be at exactly a ninety-degree angle.) The Greek word for “chair” is *kathedra*, and a cathedral is the building where the bishop keeps his chair.

One functional result of a church not having pews is that it doesn’t have kneelers either. Surprisingly, Orthodox worship doesn’t involve much kneeling. It’s standing up, almost all the time. Most people sit for the sermon—finding one of the chairs or just sitting on the floor, if that’s most convenient.

Newcomers shouldn’t feel anxious about all this standing. It is always all right to sit down if you need to. The “don’t watch your neighbor” guideline applies here, too. The most important times to stand, if you’re able, are during the reading of the Gospel and the Eucharistic prayers. Other than that, if everybody else stands up, go ahead and do the same.

Though St. Felicity follows the Old World style, you’ll see pews in many (perhaps most) Orthodox churches. A building purchased from another denomination may have come with pews, and some new Orthodox churches are even built with them. That’s an instance of cultural sensitivity: when Orthodox immigrants observed that it was the American custom to have pews, they adapted to it. For the same reason the church may have an organ, though Orthodox worship is nearly always sung a cappella, without accompaniment. Even when an organ is used, it only undergirds the melody in a simple way. Every parish needs a choir director, but it may not need an organist.



Near the narthex door, where we just came in, we see a stand with a slanting top, like a lectern, made to hold a single icon. The role of this stand—it’s called an *analogion*—is like that of the blackboard at a restaurant, the one that lists “Today’s Specials.” The icon placed here will show who or what is special today. If

it is the feast of St. George, we'll see an icon of that young man, on horseback in his military array. If it is January 6, the Feast of the Theophany—Epiphany in the West—we'll see Christ standing in the River Jordan, as St. John baptizes him. Sometimes the icon changes daily, but when there's a major feast the corresponding icon might hold this place for a week or more. (In some churches you'll find this icon-stand in the middle of the nave, rather than just inside the door as here.)

It's not likely that a church would own an icon for every day of the year and every saint on the calendar—there could be dozens of saints each day. When the specific icon isn't available, an icon of the parish's patron, St. Felicity in this case, will be the default placeholder, and we see her here today.

I chose St. Felicity for this imaginary church because she is my patron saint. She was a North African slave, killed in the Carthage arena in AD 203 as part of the birthday celebration for the emperor's son. She appears in the icon as a slender young woman holding a cross (the emblem of a martyr) and a scroll. Felicity was arrested along with several other members of her church. She was pregnant at the time, and feared that, because the Romans did not execute pregnant women, she would be separated from her companions, held back to die later in the company of criminals. Everyone prayed for her labor to begin, and she gave birth in her prison cell to a little girl, who was adopted by a family in her congregation.

In labor, Felicity cried out in pain. A prison guard mocked her, saying in so many words, "You're screaming now? Just wait." In her icon, St. Felicity holds an open scroll that gives her reply: "Now I suffer; but in the arena another will suffer for me, because I will be suffering for him."

Felicity was only a slave, but the leader of these Christian prisoners, St. Perpetua, was a brilliant and educated young woman, herself mother of an infant son. Perpetua kept a prison diary during the days leading up to their martyrdom, and it is one of the treasures of early Christian writing. You can find it, and most of the other ancient documents I'll mention, online.

Orthodox don't think of St. Felicity as merely a historical figure. We expect that she is alive in heaven now, and continually worshipping before God's throne. We ask her to pray for us, just as we would ask any friend.

Beside St. Felicity's icon stands a rectangular box, table-height, of sand. This is for candles; many people, after venerating the icon on the stand, will light their candle and place it here. There are several other places in the church where candles could be placed—brass stands in front of Christ and the Virgin Mary on the iconostasis, and near other icons elsewhere in the church.

I find that the topic of prayer and the saints is one of the things that makes nonliturgical Christians nervous. Their objections have a realistic basis, because prayer to the saints has at times gotten completely out of hand. We'll cover that topic in the next chapter.


### 3

## “So Great a Cloud”

(HEB. 12:1)



### *Loving the Theotokos, The Prayers of the Saints*

 In the Middle Ages, in Europe, an idea arose that one should go through appropriate channels with a prayer need: bring it to your patron saint, who would then carry it to Mary, who would then submit it to Christ, who would then present it to the Father. A chain of command, so to speak—a pattern familiar from feudal society.

Of course, that was the only society medieval people knew. A peasant could never hope to tell a king his troubles. Christianity was a thrilling liberation from such bonds, because that peasant could go right over the king's head. But our peasant would not expect to go straight to the top. He would think himself blessed that he could catch the ear of a heavenly underling, and put the petition in motion. Unfortunately, this led to some very bad ideas about the allocation of power in heaven, most notably in the case of the Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos*.\*

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\* The title *Theotokos*, which Orthodox Christians commonly and constantly use, means “Birthgiver of God.” It was in use by AD 250, and probably arose in reaction against an idea that Jesus had not always been God. To say that Mary is the *Theotokos* is to say that Christ was God even in his mother's womb; the theological point is about him rather than her.

Because “Birthgiver of God” is unwieldy, *Theotokos* is often translated “Mother of God,” which is all right as long as you understand it doesn't mean she gave birth to God the Father or the Trinity. Mary does not precede the eternal God, of course. But from the moment she responded to the angel, God was fully present in her womb.