

ARCHANGEL GABRIEL ORTHODOX CHURCH



CATECHISM - BECOMING A CATECHUMEN

THE CONVERSION OF THE NATIONS IS THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

After our Savior's brilliant Resurrection and just prior to His glorious Ascension He commissioned His followers with these words, "Go forth into all the world and make disciples of all the nations; baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, And, lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (St. Matt. 28:18-20, St. Mk. 16:8)

It is the will of God that every human being be saved, that each and every human person become a child of God in Holy Baptism, that every human being be washed of his sin and partake of everlasting life. It is the desire of the Holy Trinity that all men, women and children of every race and region learn to live in the ways of love, holiness and dignity, in the ways that Jesus Himself lived – by learning His commandments from His Church and by keeping them as an expression of love for God and men.

For the last two thousand years the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church has been busy about this sacred commission. Bearing witness to the saving acts of God, exalting the Cross of Christ and proclaiming His victory over death, sin and the devil, and inviting all men to partake of the salvation of the Lord by faith and baptism – this has been the work of the Church. Starting where she was at the heart of the Roman Empire the Church converted the Empire itself. She extended her Gospel witness to the east in Persia, India and Western China. She extended her witness to the south in North Africa. She extended her witness to the north into Slavic lands, and to the north and west into what is now Europe and America, and she continues and will continue to make disciples of all nations until the entire earth is covered with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea, or human history comes to an end in the providence of God.

It is the very essence of the Church to be apostolic, that is, to not only be built upon the unchanging apostolic teaching, but to be messengers of the good news sent to all corners of the world to announce salvation and to bring the sweet and saving aroma of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, to all. Each local parish manifests the fullness of Christ, and serves as a beachhead for this universal missionary endeavor concretely in the city or village in which it is. There is no parish that is not to be a missionary center.

DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST ARE FORMED BY CATECHISM

The practical means by which the Church accomplishes her task of preaching and evangelization is the catechumenate (which will be discussed at greater length below). Preaching and catechism is how the Great Commission is accomplished. The centrality of the Church's work with catechumens is manifested by the fact that in every liturgy in every Orthodox Church there is appointed to be prayed the *Litany for the Catechumens*.

THE LITANY FOR THE CATECHUMENS

Deacon: Pray to the Lord, ye catechumens.

(The choir responds – Lord have mercy – to each petition.)

Let us, the faithful, pray for the catechumens, that the Lord will have mercy on them.

That he will teach them the word of truth.

That he will reveal to them the gospel of righteousness.

That he will unite them to his holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Save them; have mercy on them; help them; and keep them, O God, by thy grace.

Bow your heads unto the Lord, ye catechumens.

Choir: To thee, O Lord.

Priest: *(silently)* O Lord our God, who dwellest on high and regardest the humble, who has sent forth as the salvation of the race of men thine only-begotten Son and God, our Lord Jesus Christ: Look down upon thy servants the Catechumens, who have bowed their necks before thee; make them worthy in due season of the laver of regeneration, the forgiveness of sins and the robe of incorruption. Unite them to thy holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and number them with thine elect flock:

That with us they may glorify thine all-honorable and majestic name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages.

Choir: Amen.

This litany for the catechumens is placed just after the reading of the Holy Gospel and the sermon. This placement highlights the fact that the Holy Gospel is read and the homily is given for the evangelization and instruction of the catechumens as well as for the edification of the faithful. Even in parishes in established Orthodox countries where the great majority of the population is Orthodox, the litany can still be authentically prayed for it is a prayer for the catechumens of the entire Church. We Orthodox Christians who live in the distant west, and those of us who are in Africa and Asia where Holy Orthodoxy is making its way to the masses depend on the prayers of our brothers and sisters in traditionally Orthodox lands for our work of evangelization. The litany for the catechumens concludes with the dismissal of the catechumens as the deacon instructs “depart catechumens.”

At this point the catechumens are asked to leave the Divine Liturgy in order not to be in the gathering around the Eucharist since they are not yet members of the Body of Christ. It is

appropriate at this for the catechumens to retire to the Narthex (or to attend catechetical lessons, if such are offered).

THE PLACE OF THE CATECHUMENS IN THE NARTHEX

The sacred art of ecclesiastical architecture also bears witness to the important ministry of catechesis and the role of catechumens. All Orthodox churches are traditionally divided into three portions: the narthex, the nave, and the sanctuary or holy altar. The narthex is the furthest western portion of the church, and serves many purposes. It is a place of transition between the world (outside) and the kingdom of God (the nave), and is a place where Orthodox Christians make special prayers and intentions and venerate icons. The narthex is also the place of penitents, or those Orthodox Christians who are under penance for some particular sin. The narthex is also properly the place of the catechumens. The catechumens, by virtue of being enrolled as catechumens, have been initially separated from the world and brought near to the Church, but have not yet been organically joined to her by baptism into the body of Christ. This spiritual reality is manifested in our parish by the fact that the catechumens are dismissed from the Liturgy shortly after the Gospel reading, but may stay in the narthex.

THE PROCESS OF CATECHISM: COURTSHIP-ENGAGEMENT-MARRIAGE

The process of becoming an Orthodox Christian can be compared very closely to the process of becoming a married person for it involves the same basic movements of courtship, engagement and marriage. When a person first becomes interested in the Orthodox Church a series of initial interactions take place. Perhaps one visits for a liturgy, researches Orthodoxy on-line, or engages in a conversation with a friend who is Orthodox. If these initial interactions are blessed, a more studied process of inquiry follows which can be compared to the process of courtship. One who launches into this dance with the Church is called by the Church an *inquirer* or a *seeker*. These early days of exploration can be overwhelming and eye-popping for an inquirer, who perhaps has never seen anything like the Divine Liturgy, a church temple full of sacred icons staring at the inquirer, and persons crossing themselves, bowing, and prostrating. It may be the inquirer's first exposure to sacred chant, incense, and sacred space. As such it takes a while to become familiar and comfortable with these new liturgical surroundings, and the inquirer is encouraged to be patient and to expect to slowly and progressively come to a greater understanding and appreciation of the deep meaning of each liturgical action.

During this courtship with the church the inquirer is encouraged to be focused, and to attend as many divine services as possible. *The best catechism is in frequent and watchful attendance at the divine services.* This is true because the Church prays what she believes, and believes what she prays. Every service of prayer is deep theology, and all true theology is prayer. During the period of inquiry/courtship the seeker is also encouraged to read at least one basic text that introduces the Orthodox Church. If all proceeds well, the seeker will begin to ask himself if he could, in fact, become an Orthodox Christian; if he could envision himself living the

Orthodox life. This is a natural development, much like a couple in courtship beginning to envision the possibility of wedlock.

After this initial period of serious inquiry (it is suggested that this be no less than two months) the inquirer may come to a place in which he wishes to be enrolled amongst the catechumens of a particular parish in order to be prepared for reception into the Church. This is a very serious decision akin to becoming engaged, and Orthodoxy takes engagement very seriously. When one moves from courtship to engagement, no longer is the question asked "Will we get married?" That question was asked and answered in the act of engagement, and the engagement itself is a matter of preparation for the wedding. So it is with the inquirer becoming a catechumen. Once that move has been made, it is no longer a question of whether the person intends to be baptized into the Orthodox Church but rather it is a matter of preparing for such. It is not a question of if, but when.

At this time the inquirer should seek the blessing of the pastor of the parish he is attending, and request to be made a catechumen. Should the pastor judge that the inquirer is well-prepared to do so he will read the Prayer for Enrolling a Catechumen, making the inquirer a catechumen.

PRAYER FOR ENROLLING A CATECHUMEN

The short service of the reception of catechumens may take place at the beginning or conclusion of Vespers or before the Divine Liturgy. The candidate(s) is (are) met by the celebrant in the Narthex.

Priest: Blessed is our God always, now and ever and unto ages of ages.

Choir: Amen.

The priest asks the candidate(s): Do you desire to enter into and abide in the unity of the Holy Orthodox Faith?

The candidate(s) respond(s): I do so desire.

The priest then signs him(her) with his right hand saying: In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Priest / Deacon: Let us pray to the Lord.

Choir: Lord, have mercy.

Priest: In Thy Name, O Lord of Truth, and in the Name of Thine Only-begotten Son, and of Thy Holy Spirit, I lay my hand upon Thy servant(s), _____, who has (have) been found worthy to flee unto Thee, and to take refuge under the shelter of Thy wings. Remove far from him (*her, them*) his (*her, their*) former delusion, and fill him (*her, them*) with the faith, hope and love which are in Thee; that he (*she, they*) may know that Thou art the only true God with Thine Only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,

and Thy Holy Spirit. Enable him (*her, them*) to walk in all Thy commandments, and to fulfill those things which are well-pleasing to Thee; for by doing these things, he (*she, they*) shall find life in them. Inscribe him (*her, them*) in Thy Book of Life, and unite him (*her, them*) to the flock of Thine inheritance. And may Thy holy Name be glorified in him (*her, them*), together with that of Thy beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and of Thy life-creating Spirit. Let Thine eyes ever regard him (*her, them*) with mercy and let Thine ears attend to the voice of his (*her, their*) supplication. Make him (*her, them*) to rejoice in the works of his (*her, their*) hands, and in all his (*her, their*) generation; that he (*she, they*) may render praises unto Thee, and may sing, worship and glorify Thy great and exalted Name always, all the days of his (*her, their*) life. For all the Powers of Heaven sing praises to Thee, and Thine is the glory, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.

Choir: Amen.

Priest / Deacon: Let us pray to the Lord.

Choir: Lord, have mercy.

Priest: O Lord our God we pray to Thee and beseech Thee, that the light of Thy countenance may shine upon Thy servant(s), _____, and that the Cross of Thine Only-Begotten Son may be graven in his (*her, their*) heart and in his (*her, their*) thoughts; that he (*she, they*) may flee from the vanity of the world and from the evil snare of the enemy and may follow after Thy commandments. And grant, O Lord, that Thy Holy Name may never be rejected by him (*her, them*) and that he (*she, they*) may be united, in due time, to Thy holy Church, and that the awesome mysteries of Thy Christ may be administered to him (*her, them*); that having lived according to Thy commandments and having preserved without flaw the seal of Thy Holy Spirit, he (*she, they*) may receive the joy of the elect in Thy kingdom. Through the grace and love towards mankind of Thine Only-begotten Son, with whom Thou are blessed, together with Thine All-holy, Good, and Life-giving Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.

Choir: Amen.

Whereupon the priest leads the catechumens into the center of the nave, holding his epitachelion.

At this point the inquirer has made a definitive decision to become an Orthodox Christian forever. He knows that this commitment is not a denominational switch, but an approach to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. It is a commitment to faithfully serve God as a member of the Orthodox Church no matter where one lives on this earth. The catechumen is engaged to the Church, and will complete this engagement with the spiritual marriage which is holy baptism. It is expected at this juncture that the new catechumen inform in writing any religious body in which he was previously a member his desire to be removed from the membership of said body. The catechumen is numbered amongst the rank of catechumens that belongs to the particular parish, and will begin the formal and informal process of

catechesis. From this point the catechumen self-identifies to the outside world as an Orthodox Christian. Should the catechumen die before reception into the church, he will be buried as an Orthodox Christian.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE

Each catechumen is reminded that the process of catechism is a road of repentance and faith which leads to union with the Holy Trinity and membership in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Such a road is a road toward Christ and away from the evil one. Demonic opposition is to be expected during the course of catechism. These obstacles can be overcome by the help and mercy of God and a strong resolve on the part of the catechumen.