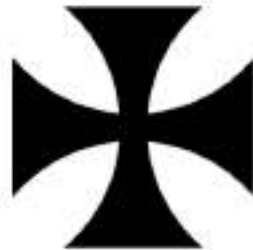


PONTIFEX



Orthodox Prayer upon entering a church

I will come into your house in the greatness of YOUR mercy: and in fear I will worship YOU in YOUR holy temple.

Lead me, O LORD, in YOUR righteousness because of my enemies;
make YOUR way straight before me, that with a clear mind I may glorify YOU forever, one divine power worshipped in three Persons: FATHER, SON and HOLY SPIRIT.

Amen.

Introduction

What is a Church? What is the Church, with capital C? So, what is the Universal Church? But a particular Church? The Orthodox Church? In very short words the Orthodox Church: The *Eastern Church*, and the Orthodox Ethos would be the *Eastern way of understanding theology and worshipping*.

I do hope you understand that speaking about a Church, the Orthodox Church, The Church of the East which pretends to be the Church © (An Exclusive Ecclesiology *Unam Sanctam* versus An Inclusive **Ecclesiology of Branches**), is not easy at all, especially when having only less than an hour at our disposal. I would rather try to explore and to discuss with you some aspects meant to help both of us, me and you, to enrich our general understanding of the spiritual life. My main goal is to discuss some relevant spiritual aspects able to help us to draw inspiration from one another for our spiritual struggle and by the end of this presentation to be able to say: “You know, by the end of the day, we are not as incompatible and different as one might say at a first sight, and we could actually draw inspiration from one another”. So, *Ponti – facere => Pontifex*. Allow me to start suddenly,

1. The sacredness of the liturgical space

Since I deliver this Introduction in a chapel, I'd like to emphasize concrete elements instead of theoretical theology. So, as we entered into this liturgical space belonging to the Sibiu Faculty of Theology we prayed, and maybe you saw us, Father Radu and myself, making liturgical gestures of worship or bowing in front of the icons or the Cross, or the *Iconostasis* etc. This is because in the Orthodox Church we have a very clear idea of the Sacredness, especially of the Sacred space. This opens for our believers a very concrete spiritual horizon, the one of **the presence of the divine** in a certain space. This very clear idea – the divine is present in a certain space – is useful, especially when it comes to the church-going. There is nothing one could do at home in exchange, by their own, that resembles to what this presence in this specific space could offer. It has also some limits as we shall see shortly.

How does the Orthodox Spirituality inspire this sense of presence?

I'll depart from the church itself. Most of our churches, of course with tiny exceptions, are small, domed, circular, meant not so much to make the attender feel small in front of the All-Might Divinity, un-important, but rather to inspire the sense of humbleness offered by the feeling of being participant in whatever happens here. So, as soon as you step inside, you feel you don't need to make an exceptional effort to be part of the "Sunday Church celebration" or each kind of on-going celebration.

The space itself bears great importance. If, for example following, a more western minded theological attitude, we were to ask most of our Sunday Church attenders: "Did you go to Church today", they would reply with no reserves "Yes, of course!". "What were the Bible readings or the sermon about?" Many, if we were to be honest, would reply, "I don't know, but it was beautiful". This sense of the presence that can't be replaced by a meditation or a prayer at home is very positive when it comes to church-presence but, it can also be limitative: you don't need to involve too much, not even intellectually. The simple presence offers something.

Dialog: How do you try to enforce this sense of presence in your Churches?

2. A very concrete and bodily spirituality and experience

The Orthodox Liturgical celebrations would not be able to offer this sense of concrete and sacred presence if it wasn't for its very bodily (corporal) spirituality. Physical elements of our spirituality are present in the room.

Allow me tell you a funny story from the time I was an Orthodox envoy-student in Rome in a Catholic university thanks to an ecumenical cooperation. I was attending with another Orthodox Georgian colleague for the first time a Catholic celebration in Rome... we entered and we were a bit in confusion, after some seconds my colleague whispers to me: "Are you also in confusion, because there's nothing to kiss?" We manage to solve our inner spiritual crisis when we found on a wall a cross put on the right high and we were able to bow in front of it in a gesture of worship and kiss it. This, I suppose says a lot of how the *Eastern Mind* or the *Orthodox Ethos* really functions. As soon as you step in an Orthodox liturgical space you are involved in a very bodily experience where all your senses are activated, you continuously bow, make the sign of the cross, kiss icons, touch relics, feel the smell of incense (approx. each 15-20-30 minutes takes place a new Incencesation), see the light coming from outside in the in the incense smoke, you taste the Eucharist (or the *Anti-Doron*), see the colour of the icons, hear the music or hear the sound of small bells attached to the priest vestments or turibulum and so on...

2.1. Icons

Now we should deepen a bit the most popular and visible symbol of the Orthodox Church: the icons.

We see here so many icons that are watching us. Icons watching us??? Bear with me. It is often said that icons are "windows towards Heaven", well, I wouldn't necessarily want to go against this understanding, but it's actually a weak understanding. Icons do actually play a higher part in emphasising the presence of the All-mighty. If painted according to the Canon-Law of the Orthodox Church, icons

should play a very practical spiritual part: an anti-escapist role. Escapism makes reference to moments when our mind escapes, so to say, when our attention is drawn elsewhere. A normal painting usually helps in an escapist direction, when sitting for some time in front of a painting our mind starts to reflect, especially if we speak of 3d landscape.

However, icons are not landscape or a simple decorative art. This is not the case at all. The icons which are a kind of anti-art, because the iconography does not respect the art standards. One of these standards is the normal perspective of every 3-dimensional painting, according to which objects in the front would always be bigger than objects found in the backwards or there is a perspective-line going deeper in the painting towards a central horizon point. In a Byzantine/Orthodox icon all these facts are reversed.

Normal 3D images, having a central horizon point and objects found in backwards are smaller than objects in front:



Byzantine icons with a reversed perspective¹, no central horizon point or line, nor objects in backwards being smaller than those in front, the lines of convergence are reversed.

¹ There is a significant debate among the specialists on the “inverted” or “reversed” perspective of icons. From those sustaining it and presenting it as necessary feature of a Byzantine true icon (among these the most notable would be the renown theologian Fr. Pavel Florensky, see: <https://catalog.obitel-minsk.com/blog/2020/03/the->



Inversed lines of convergence



Buildings in backwards are not smaller
 We should not be able to see the out sides
 of the buildings in right and left parts of
 the icon. If you trace the point of
 convergence, you will observe they are
 heading to you actually.

The horizon point in a Byzantine icon is actually the observer the icon, “this world”. So, icons are not something to help our mind escape from an earthly here and take us in a heavenly there, there is no central horizon point. They do not have the function to make us meditate, in the sense of a passive reflection, as when we see a picture representing a beautiful landscape, but to give us the sense of a presence that opens towards us. There is nothing escapist when speaking about icons. Using the reversed perspective, the icons inspire the idea we are watched by the reality represented in painting not the

[reverse-perspective-in-iconography;](https://sncbulletins.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/07-outline-intro-orthodoxy-07-of-08.pdf) Fr. Theophan Whitfield, see: <https://sncbulletins.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/07-outline-intro-orthodoxy-07-of-08.pdf>) to those sustaining that the “inverted/reversed perspective” would be only a myth (see: <https://mmekourdukova.livejournal.com/468333.html> or <https://russianicons.wordpress.com/2011/09/01/reverse-perspective-another-icon-myth/>).

other way. The “heavenly reality” is opening and it is here. This is the main function of icons: to inspire the sense of real presence. No outside perspective, no mind-escape, passive meditation or reflection, on the contrary, we can say, in a very non-politically correct way, icons invade our space.

Because of the real presence -> a liturgical, worship function

What to observe in an icon?

Icons are not pictures, nor photographs, do not contain realist emotions, rather stylist, simplistic or even cartoonish. The face of a Jesus or a Saint represented in an icon is not meant to show us HOW He/She was but rather WHO He/She was. Having always the eyes wide-open, the face showing no emotions is meant to look at you. One must feel puzzled by the gaze of Jesus or the saint represented in the icon. The details of each person represented in an icon are symbolic, doctrinal and theological.



Some dogmatic and theological symbols one can find in the icons: the Greek letters “O Ω N” (actually “ó òv” meaning “He

Who Is”, Exodus 3,14), or the eyes having different shapes and measure representing that Christ was true God and true Human, or the three stars in the vestments of Saint Mary (representing the absolute pureness/virginity of Mary: before, during and after giving birth to Jesus) and so on.

Another disregard of the reality is the golden horizon, characteristic to almost every-icon. Even in icons representing events where also some buildings appear, the background or the horizon is always golden, not blue (the sky is missing). This golden yellow background represents that Something that cannot be actually represented, the absolute pure, unchanged, immanent nature of God, which is eternal, never changes, but which sustains everything, being the very background of everything. The golden background for an icon is what the resonant *ison* (a constant background sound that doesn't change, having the role to create a simple harmony) is for the Byzantine Church music.

I'd like to give an example of how a Protestant feminist theologian, Janet Cawley, was inspired by the Orthodox icon of the Holy Trinity she saw in a small Orthodox Church in the US. Depicting the Holy Trinity not as an Old Man on a cloud, but rather as Three Angels, almost un-gendered at a table in small church, this image inspired Janet to feel the presence of God very close to her and inspired her that God calls us to be in communion of action, almost at the same level, in climate theology sense: God creates the world and we are called to pursue the most natural activity after creating something: to preserve. *Inter-actional God (A New Climate for Christology. Kenosis, Climate Change, and Befriending Nature, 2019)*



2.2. Singing and dancing

Normally Orthodox worship implies only *acapella singing*, no instruments and all believers are encouraged to sing. This does not always happen, people do not always know the hymns but we repeat dozens of times: *Κύριε, ἐλέησον* (*Lord, have mercy*), *Σοί, Κύριε* (*To You, oh Lord*) or *Παράσχου, Κύριε* (*Grant us, oh, Lord*) so these short expressions are sung not only by the choir but also by the entire congregation. If we sing, we must also dance. We do not have a proper dance but we have a physical movement that we perform quite often during the liturgical services: **the sign of cross**.



The sign of the Cross is performed each time the name of the Trinity or of Jesus is mentioned but also in each moment the believer feels that during worship or sermons something touches her or his heart. An Orthodox former Baptist theologian said that the sign of the cross in the Byzantine rite is like the modern *Amen* of

Baptist and Pentecostal sermons; the congregation feels instantly when there is an intense spiritual *momentus* and makes the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross'-instant movement is the ancient *Amen* of the Church.² There is a beautiful choreography when doing so: three and two fingers representing the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, moving the hand up, down, right and left (not left-right as in the Catholic or traditional Protestant Churches). Somebody wrote that Orthodox hold their theology literary "in their hands".

2.3. Fasting

Another clear example of how bodily the spirituality gets to be in the Orthodox Church is fasting. Since not very long time ago, most of the families were following the Orthodox fasting programme, which still has very much a social aspect because during fasting periods one can find in



Romania, for example, in shops special shelves with fasting food³. This has also led to the fact that *vegan* or *vegetarians* programmes or gurus did not have lot of success in Orthodox societies. Orthodox fast-rule, if completely followed, implies a number of days equal to almost half of the year: 40 days before Christmas, 47 days before Easter, 2 weeks before 15th of August (St. Mary's feast), approx. 1 week in June before the feast of St. Apostles Peter and Paul and all the Wednesdays and Fridays during the year. Observing Orthodox fast means abstaining from meat, fish, milk- and egg-products. (Considering the remarkable number of the fasting days, see

² Idea taken from the already quoted Father Theophan Whitfield, himself an Orthodox convert and former Baptist.

³ The inscription on the shelves is not *Vegetarian Food* but *Fasting Food*.

the internet meme “I was vegan before it was cool. The Eastern Church is not impressed”)

3. The presence of the Church Authority

There is another discrete presence in all Orthodox Churches – the empty throne. The symbol of the empty throne taken from the Roman Empire. The bishop sits when visiting a church. The presence of the throne for us is a not simple authority sign, is how we do understand the universality of the Church. All the local communities, so the parishes from one determined territory are to be subject of the same bishop, and bishops are part of Synods – regional, national or pan-orthodox collegial bodies. And it is not the local community who chooses a bishop, but the national Synod, so the representants of another local Churches – Dioceses. This is an ancient practice meant to inspire that Church around the world are responsible one for another and profoundly linked.

4. The Order of Prayer in the Orthodox Church

Personal prayer – there is no universal-decided rule regarding the simple believers such as the reading of the Breviary in the Catholic Church. Usually, morning and evening prayers for laymen (laity) are made out of psalms, patristic texts, Bible fragments etc.⁴ Usually personal prayer at home is made in front of *corner-of-prayer*, some corner of the room with icons and candles. Laymen’s personal prayer still needs something else: to have the blessing of a spiritual father because prayer must also to be keepable (*Pray as you can, not as you cannot*,⁵

⁴ An example of an Orthodox Book of Prayers for believers can be found here: <https://www.transchurch.org/ourfaith/prayers>.

⁵ The expression is actually taken from the book of the Anglican Archbishop of York: STEPHEN COTTRELL, *How to Pray* (Church House Publishing, 2010).

so choosing a program that one can observe for a long period), and in order to find the right routine for everyone, a professional advice is needed, and this is the figure of the spiritual father. We shall see suddenly why a prayer-routine is so emphasized in the Orthodox spirituality.

In **monasteries**, the communities follow an official liturgical routine called the *Liturgy of the hours*. Each important moment of the day is consecrated through prayer: the liturgical day begins actually in the evening with the *Vespers*, there is a *Midnight Office* whose psalm⁶ and hymnological content is very close to the Service of the Funeral being dominated by a nuance of an imminent eschatology, inspired by the *parable of the ten virgins* (Matthew 25).⁷ *Christ is coming back in the middle of the night of your life, be prepared!* There is no better moment to contemplate and pre-taste the death as the darkness of the night during a prayer held at the light of the candles. Look at it from another side: each funeral is a personal *eschata* and each night you pray prepares you for that moment, or, the monks are pre-celebrating their funerals each night. In the morning there is the celebration of the *Lauds*, a service dedicated to the Christ as *Light from above. Glory to you who have sent us the Light!* In most of the monastery there is also a daily eucharistic celebration. Important to mention is that, normally you won't find in the Orthodox world so-called active

⁶ I refer particularly to the Psalm 118 (according to Byzantine psalm-counting-system)/119 (according to the Western psalms-counting-system), the longest psalm. This psalm, which contains many contemplative verses, is found both in the *Midnight Office* as in the *Orthodox Funeral Office*.

⁷ The main hymns, found in the center of the *Office* refer to parable the ten virgins, using the narrative of an imminent eschatology: "Behold, the Bridegroom cometh at midnight, and blessed is that servant whom He shall find watching; but unworthy is he whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, lest thou be weighed down with sleep; lest thou be given up to death, and be shut out from the kingdom. But rouse thyself and cry: Holy, Holy, Holy art Thou, O God, through the Theotokos have mercy on us! Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit! Meditating on that terrible day, O my soul, watch, keeping thy lamp alight and filled with oil; for thou know not when unto thee shall come the voice saying: Behold the Bridegroom! Beware, therefore, my soul, lest thou fall into slumber and be left outside, knocking, as were the five virgins; but wakefully watch, that thou mayest come to meet Christ with good oil, and He shall bestow upon thee the divine chamber of His glory." (See the entire liturgical service of the *Midnight Office* here: <http://www.saintjonah.org/services/midnight.htm>).

monastic orders (so orders specialised in philanthropic or pedagogical work) but only/mostly contemplative monasteries whose only duty is to preserve and observe the day-light – darkness-night and Sunday-to-Sunday rhythms of prayer. So, there is a certain separation between the *world* and the monastic life.

Now let us go back to the absolute need of a *praying-routine* in the Orthodox spirituality. Praying by meditating significant spiritual concepts and observing a certain rhythm of the day gives you the impression that the prayer is truly universal and cosmic – *Cosmos* means *world* in Greek, and a *praying-routine* truly makes you feel as being part of the *Cosmos*. So, in the Orthodox Church, for those seeking a more elevated spiritual life, it does not matter only how, but also and mostly when you pray for sanctifying certain moments of the day. It is not so important how much you pray during a day, but mostly how long one is able to observe a certain routine of prayer; only a long-repeated routine of prayer will offer the taste of a cosmic spiritual experience, and with this, a taste of what does it mean to be fully human because we are connected to the *Cosmos* around us.



5. The understanding of the Tradition

Is *Sola Scriptura* as incompatible with the Orthodox view on Tradition at it seems?

Let us depart from the renown formula *Lex orandi – Lex credendi* (- *lex vivendi*) (traditionally belonging to Saint Vincent of Lerins)⁸

The rule of prayer (*lex orandi*) is the rule of believe (*lex credendi*), the rule of worship gives the rule of faith or even the rule of life. (*lex vivendi*) What does this mean? Normally, in a Western theological setting departing from the creed, hymns and texts for worship would be created. In the Eastern thought this setting is reversed. Liturgy precedes and guides theology. We could take into consideration two general questions that would apply for every faith:

What do we believe? (**Question of Theology**)

How do we worship? (**Question of the Liturgy**)

A Western tendence following a logical-rational regard in the matter, would give priority to theology (what do we believe). It is the theology that would necessarily condition the content of the liturgy (the liturgical texts written in accordance to the faith).

For us is the opposite. If how do we worship guides what do we believe, it means that in the development of the Creed, Bible

⁸ For more information on *Lex orandi – Lex credendi* see: MARY-ANNE PLAATJES-VAN-HUFFEL, "Rethinking the Reciprocity between Lex Credendi, Lex Orandi and Lex Vivendi: As We Believe, so We Worship. As We Believe, so We Live", in *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, vol. 76, no. 1 (2020), available online at: <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/hts/v76n1/38.pdf>; for a Protestant regard on the matter, please see: GLEN CLARY, "Lex orandi, Lex Credendi – a Reformed Perspective", available online at: <https://reformedforum.org/lex-orandi-lex-credendi-a-reformed-perspective/>.

Canon or later Canon Law, the liturgical Tradition had the main role. There was a **liturgical Tradition** before a universal Creed or a Bible Canon. We can go even deeper, to mention that some New Testament biblical texts contain **liturgical hymns** already in use at the time of the New Testament drafting. So, the Liturgical Tradition precedes the Bible, at least chronologically, which means: the Bible is just another part of this Tradition. This is how we explain the historical fact that, during the Synodal debates of the first centuries' Ecumenical Councils which actually created the content of the faith, liturgical hymns were quoted and brought into discussions as arguments for how the faith Creed should be drafted.

Let me put it on another way, that, a first glance might sound a bit strange: **we Orthodox, we do not think first and pray second**. It is rather the liturgical worship that most of the believers are profoundly linked to and, not the least, it is the liturgy that managed to convert and to conquer the heart of many non-Orthodox.

But it also has another facet less positive: it explains why the catechism, sermons or everything else linked to the teaching of the faith does not occupy a place of special interest, or didn't use to occupy until the Orthodox identity met the West and got inspired from it in developing activities linked with catechism or religious education. The great importance given to liturgy also explains the limited level of knowing the doctrine of the faith in the Orthodox world or the low interest for reading the Bible. Instead, there is a strong faithfulness towards the Liturgy and the Church. I assume most of the Orthodox believers going each Sunday to Church (at least in the Orthodox-majority countries) would not manage to explain at a minimum-satisfying level the main dogmas of Christianity: the Trinity and the Incarnation, but they would still go, because it is the

experiential sensation offered by the Divine Worship that has precedence to whatever intellectual aspect.

This aspect was very well understood in the XVI and XVII centuries by the Catholic Polish and Austrian Authorities when, after many failed attempts to convert to Roman-Catholicism the Orthodox Ukrainians or Romanians found in some territories that temporary came into their administration. They realised those Byzantine-rite worshipers would never give up their faith, even if back-then, Ukrainians and Romanians had almost no religious education; the general term used back-then by the simple Orthodox believers to refer to what we theologically call today the Byzantine Rite was the *forefathers' ancestral law*. So, the Catholic Authorities realised that keeping the Liturgy in its *interum* but changing some small details in the faith might actually work, and it did, and so were born two of the biggest Greek-Catholic Churches: the Ukrainian one and the Transylvanian (Romanian) one. This is the Greek-Catholic Church: Roman Doctrine and Byzantine Liturgy, and this has to do a lot with the Orthodox Church and its history. But let us go back to the Orthodox Tradition.

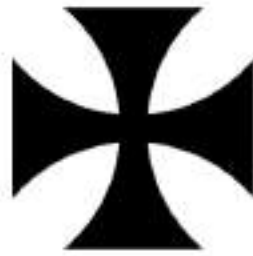
Until now we have seen that there should not be a contradiction between Tradition and Bible, since one is a part of the other, according to the Orthodox understanding. There is more to Tradition when it comes to the Orthodox understanding.

Especially during the III-IV and Vth centuries, the centuries of the monastic development, Tradition began to be understood, despite the totality of liturgical rituals, also as the togetherness of ascetical rules that really functioned. So, Tradition was seen as a liturgical and ascetical recipe for success in the spiritual life.

The Bible seen as a part of the Tradition also means, for the Orthodox, that the reading and understanding of the Sacred Scriptures is made in the communion of the Church. There is a communitarian reading and a guided understanding of the Bible.

Being attached to Tradition (with capital T) means for the Orthodox Church also the perfect communion with the Past: The Church of the first centuries, the Church of the Martyrs, the Church of the Fathers of the Desert, in the end ... the perfect communion with the Apostolic Church.

Now, going back to *Sola Scriptura*, what do you think?



Syriac Orthodox/Maronite Prayer of farewell to the Holy Altar

Remain in peace, O holy altar of GOD.

I hope to return to you in peace.

May the offering I have received from you forgive my sins
and prepare me to stand blameless
before the throne of CHRIST.

I know not whether I shall be able to return to you again to offer
sacrifice.

Guard me, O LORD, and protect your holy Church,
that she may be the way to salvation and the light of the world.

Amen.