

The Orthodox Church: For Your Information
Upbeat
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Centers of the Eastern Church

The centers of Patriarchates of the Eastern Orthodox Church are Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. Each Patriarchate is administratively independent, but all spiritually acknowledge the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople as “first among equals.”

In addition to the four Patriarchates with their many geographic and ecclesiastical subdivisions, there are also many independent or autocephalous Orthodox Churches. These include the Churches of Greece, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and others. In each of these nations Orthodoxy has become the people’s religion with each Church having its own Synod and Hierarchy who, is either a Patriarch, Metropolitan or Archbishop. For instance, the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Church in Russia is a Patriarch, while in Greece the head of the Church of Greece is an Archbishop.

For a thousand years after the birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost, Christianity remained essentially undivided. Its five centers were located in Rome, Constantinople (now Istanbul), Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch. The interpretation and definition of early Christian dogma was resolved by Seven Ecumenical Councils, the first of which convened in the year 325 and the last in the year 787. At these Councils, all leaders and centers of Christianity were represented and shared in the shaping of Christian doctrine. After the last Council in 787, this unity of faith between east and west began to disintegrate due to theological and jurisdictional differences which eventually led to the Great Schism of 1054. This unfortunate division of Christianity was further complicated five centuries later when the Great Reformation of 1517 took place through which the third great branch of the Church, Protestantism, was born.

Orthodox Hold Common Doctrines

Orthodoxy has absorbed the cultural traditions of many nations. Nevertheless, all Orthodox Churches are identical in doctrine and all share full communion with one another. Whether an Orthodox Christian be from Russia, Africa, America, Japan, Greece, Lebanon or Finland he may go to any Orthodox Church and participate in or receive any of the Sacraments, these being Baptism, Chrismation, Communion, Confession, Unction, Matrimony and Ordination. Orthodoxy believes that the eternal truths of Christianity reside in both Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition. Holy Scripture is the Word of God. Holy Tradition is the all encompassing experience of the Church since its inception from Apostolic times.

Orthodoxy in America

When George Washington was just beginning his second term as president of the United States, the first Orthodox Church was being established in North America. A group of Russian monks founded a Russian Orthodox mission on Kodiak Island in the Aleutians in

1794, and by 1825 nearly all Aleutians were Orthodox. Fifteen years later, in 1840, the Russian Orthodox Church consecrated the first Bishop of Alaska, and his Cathedral was built in Sitka in 1848. While the Russians were the first to establish churches and a hierarchy in North America there had also been an early scattering of other Orthodox nationality groups in the New World. As early as 1767, Greek laborers from Asia Minor had settled in Florida and named their community New Smyrna. The establishment of the first Greek Orthodox Church, however, did not occur until nearly 100 years later in New Orleans.

The great bulk of Orthodox peoples in America...Serbians, Romanians, Russians, Syrians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Carpatho-Russians, Albanians, etc., arrived in the waves of immigration that flooded the New World at the turn of the century.

Churches Established

It was during the first decades of the twentieth century that well over half of the Orthodox Churches in America were founded. Most of these parishes depended upon their Mother Country and Church hierarchs for direction and leadership. Parochial schools and foreign language newspapers were established that helped maintain these strong national and cultural traditions. Thus, Orthodoxy in America developed along national lines that acted as a unifying element within each jurisdiction, but also as a barrier to inter-Orthodox cooperation and progress. Since World War II, and particularly within the 1960's, these barriers have begun to crumble. Numerous factors have contributed to this, some of which are: (1) recognition of Orthodoxy as the fourth major Faith through legislative action in nearly thirty State Legislatures, (2) assignment of Orthodox chaplains to the Armed Forces, (3) formation of local Orthodox Clergy Associations and Fellowships, (4) establishment of the Council of Eastern Orthodox Youth Leaders of the Americas in 1954, (5) creation of the Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America in 1960, and many other similar activities and actions.

The establishment of several Orthodox seminaries has fulfilled a vital need for American born and English speaking priests, and converts to Orthodoxy which two or three decades ago were unheard of are now not uncommon. Statistically speaking Orthodoxy is a fast expanding Church in America, and has an estimated six million communicants in its various jurisdictions.