



Sunday School of the American Dioceses
of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

10th Grade

We are the Body of Christ



10th Grade

We are the Body of Christ

Table of Contents

	LESSON	PAGE
1	ONE CHRIST, ONE CHURCH	2
2	A GENUINE AND UNCORRUPTED FAITH	7
3	OUR CHURCH HISTORY	13
4	THE CHURCH AND YOU	23
5	HIGHLY FAVORED ONE	30
6	THE MOTHER OF GOD	39
7	UNDOUBTEDLY THE GOD BEARER	47
8	BORN TO SAVE	52
9	LIGHT DAWNS IN THE RIVER JORDAN	58
10	TRIUMPHANT ENTRY OF JESUS	64
11	THE LAMB OF GOD	70
12	THE LIFE GIVING CRUCIFIXION	77
13	THE FAITH OF THE COUNCILS	81
14	THE NARROW GATE	88
15	THE ORTHODOX WAY	94
16	THE GIFT OF GOD’S FORGIVENESS	100

Supporting materials can be found at <https://talmido.org>

Lesson 1: One Christ, One Church

Lesson Goals

- *I can understand how the Orthodox Church has the “fullness of the Faith”*
- *I can perceive how “seeds of truth” may be found outside the Orthodox Church.*
- *I can defend our Faith by speaking the truth in love.*

Christianity can be broadly categorized into three main groups: Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. The Orthodox group is further divided into Oriental Orthodox and Eastern (Byzantine) Orthodox. While each denomination identifies as Christian, they possess differing beliefs that distinguish them from one another and today there are over 45,000 Christian denominations worldwide. However, the Orthodox Church boldly profess that we have the “one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith” and that we are the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. How do we reconcile the reality of a world where many claim to authentically follow Jesus Christ yet we say the Orthodox Church is the Truth? And how should we engage with friends and family members who are not Orthodox?



The Parable of the Prodigal Son (**St. Luke 15:11-32**) teaches us important concepts such as repentance and humility. But this simple parable also provides valuable insights not only into the nature of God and our salvation, but also a framework to help us understand different Christian denominations so that we can appreciate the uniqueness of Orthodoxy.

The father in the parable symbolizes God, while the brothers (both the prodigal as well as the elder) represents humanity. A central theme in this story is the unconditional love of God. The action of the father allowing the prodigal son to take his inheritance and leave (**St. Luke 15:12-13**) illustrates God's gift of free will given to humanity, recognizing that we are capable of making choices that may not always be good.

The turning point of the story occurs when the prodigal son "came to himself" (**v. 15:17**), demonstrating the process of repentance. This moment reflects the truth that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. The father's act of running to embrace his son, even when the son was "a great way off" (**v. 15:20**), highlights the incredible depth of God's love for us. The father, filled with hope and belief, welcomed his returning son with open arms before the son had a chance to express any words of repentance (**v. 15:21**). This illustrates that God is always eager to embrace those who repent, emphasizing His love for all creation and His desire for us to return to Him using our free will.

Reflect

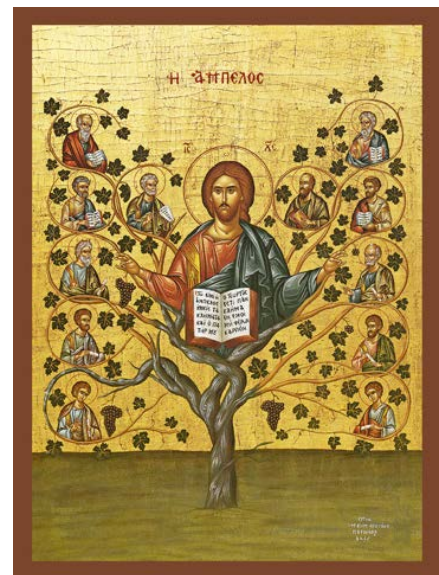
Are some of us created for heaven and some for hell?
Discuss the teaching of predestination which is rejected by the Church.

In the Orthodox Church, our salvation is returning to God and becoming one with Him, just as we are part of His family as sons and daughters. In God's eyes, all people are equal and given the opportunity to experience salvation. All can be saved. Other Christian denominations teach differing views on who can be

saved and how this occurs. But for Orthodox Christians, God is Love and all can be saved. This understanding is more reason why we do not engage in discussions with other denominations with pride as humility is essential to our salvation. The more we study the teachings of our Church, we not only recognize both commonalities and differences between the Orthodox Faith and other Christian denominations but also helps us appreciate the uniqueness and beauty of our Faith.

The One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church

The Orthodox Church holds a profound and unchanged faith that traces back to the Apostles, who learned directly from Christ and in turn turn handed it down to our ancestors. We remember this during Holy Qurbana, i.e., "Let us remember all those who before them, and with them, and after them, have kept, entrusted, and delivered to us the one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith." The Holy Spirit has preserved this faith intact, allowing us



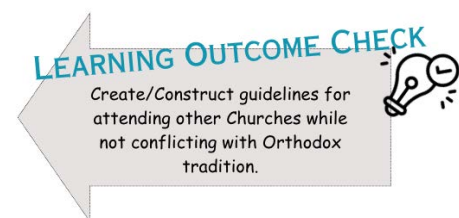
to share in the same beliefs as the first-century Christians. As we engage in worship and daily life within the Orthodox community, we center our practices around the Holy Qurbana - the source of our spiritual life - making our faith not just a personal journey but a collective experience rooted in Scripture. Our commitment to this faith involves embracing a way of life characterized by prayer, acts of charity, confession, fasting, and participation in the liturgy as essential elements of our path toward holiness.

St. Paul emphasizes the sacredness of receiving Holy Qurbana (**1 Corinthians 11:27-29**), teaching that participating in the Eucharist is not merely an individual act but a communal sacrament that reflects our unity as one body in Christ. This is why the Orthodox Church practices closed communion, meaning that only those who share the same faith and teachings are welcomed to partake in this sacrament. This loving approach aims to ensure that every participant has prepared themselves spiritually and is in harmony with the teachings of the Church. It is crucial to understand that even those within the Church must prepare themselves through confession and repentance to avoid approaching the Holy Communion unworthily, as warned in Scripture. Therefore, closed communion serves not only as a way to maintain the integrity of our faith but also as a compassionate act of love that respects the sanctity of the sacrament and the spiritual well-being of all believers.



Love God and Love Others

As Orthodox Christians, we are called to love all people. That includes those who have a different understanding of the faith. We are called to not be judgemental or critical, but rather "speak the truth in love" (**Ephesians 4:15**) and engage in dialogue even when we need to share our beliefs that may contradict their teaching.



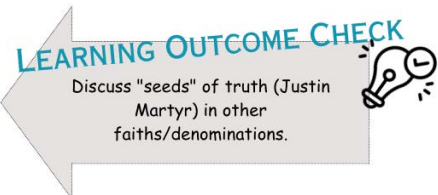
One great example we have from the early church is of St. Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century. Christianity was beginning to make its mark on the world, figuring out how to express the Truth of Jesus Christ in the Roman Empire that was unfamiliar with the salvation history of the Jews and the new revelation brought through the Messiah. Justin opened a school of Christian philosophy. St. Justin subsequently defended the truth of Christian teaching, persuasively confuting pagan sophistry and heretical distortions of Christianity. He also spoke out against the teachings of the Gnostic Marcian. The world of St.



Justin Martyr was also hostile towards anyone who did not accept the established beliefs of the majority. Christians were misunderstood and St. Justin was imprisoned, subjected to torture and suffered martyrdom in 165 by the Roman authorities who saw the new religion as a threat to society and interpreted certain aspects of the Christian faith as backward.

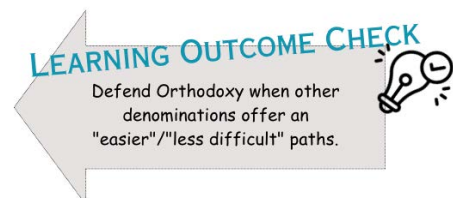
St. Justin shared an idea about his faith in relation to the other religions of that time. He took what he knew about the Roman religion –pagan cult worship, philosophy, and mythology– and demonstrated how these sources revealed Seeds of the Truth that had now been fully revealed to Christians and to the world through Christ.

While he certainly rejected many of the pagan ideas and practices, Justin believed that all of God’s creation was imbued with His reason, His patterns, and His Logos. Therefore, he viewed non-Christians (including those who persecuted Christians) as bearers of the “seeds of the word (*logos spermatikos*),” as humans in which God had implanted his Truth who simply needed the right kind of cultivation to help those seeds grow. Although there are many different denominations (and religions), there are seeds of truth in everyone. It is our calling to help cultivate the Faith, to show them the truth of the Gospel, and ultimately “come and see” our faith in action.



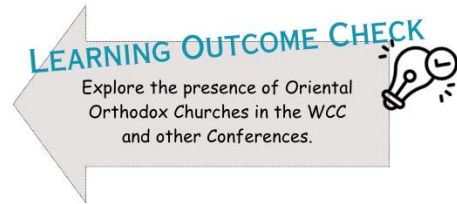
Fullness of the Faith

When interacting with other Christian denominations, it is useful to consider that the Orthodox Church is indeed the religion of the Apostles. The following is a common but very useful summary of how one should consider Orthodoxy: “The Orthodox Christian Church is the original church established by Jesus Christ. It is evangelical, but not Protestant. It is orthodox, but not Jewish. It is catholic, but not Roman. It isn’t non-denominational, it’s pre-denominational. It has believed, taught, preserved, defended and died for the Faith of the Apostles since the Day of Pentecost nearly 2,000 years ago.”



Another lens to consider when talking about the Orthodox Church is that we have the “fullness of the Faith”. The theology of the Church remains unchanged from when the Holy Spirit “spoke through the prophets and apostles” and revealed the Truth. With this blessing comes a great responsibility. Nothing has been added to the Faith, and nothing has been taken away.

It is with this understanding of “fullness” that we engage with other Christian denominations with love and humility but also without compromise. Our church reaches out to the world in different ways. One of those ways is via ecumenical movements such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the National Council of Churches (NCC). These are just a few avenues that our Church is involved in to communicate and share the rich traditions and faith of our Malankara Church. Of course, they also carry the “*logos spermatikos*” in them. Co-existing with respect for them, we learn to live with a better understanding and appreciation of our Faith as well as perceive commonalities and differences of other Christian denominations.



Reflection Questions

1. How can you articulate the theological and spiritual significance of closed communion in the Orthodox Church, particularly in light of the teachings of St. Justin Martyr regarding the “seeds of the word” found in other denominations?
2. In what ways does the Orthodox Church’s understanding of faith challenge the notion of an “easier” path to salvation offered by other denominations, and how can you defend this perspective using examples from the Parable of the Prodigal Son?
3. What guidelines can be established for attending services in other Christian denominations without compromising our Orthodox Faith? How can we defend this position using the concept of the “fullness of the Faith”?

Lesson 2: A Genuine and Uncorrupted Faith

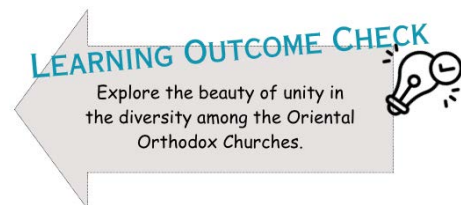
Lesson Goals

- *I can defend the decision our Church made at the Council of Chalcedon.*
- *I can justify “unity in diversity” using the example of the Oriental Orthodox Church.*
- *I can understand the importance of upholding the Orthodox Faith.*

What makes us Orthodox?

At the end of the Fifth Thubden during Holy Qurbana, we proclaim that our Faith was “*kept, entrusted, and delivered to us*” as the “*one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith*”.

On the surface, this is a very bold statement! However, this understanding of a Faith given to us and our responsibility to uphold and maintain what was given to us is the bedrock of the Orthodox Faith and that unites the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. The Holy Spirit, who speaks “*through the prophets and the apostles*” (as proclaimed in the Nicene Creed) makes this possible and not a collection of men working as part of a centralized organization. We see that diversity in the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Divine guidance united the churches in far away places such as Kerala, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Syria, and Armenia in preserving the teachings and theology in respective Liturgical practices, prayers, hymns, and traditions despite centuries of physical and political separation and no central earthly authority. Our unity comes in and through Christ, and this unity transcends language, culture, and political differences.



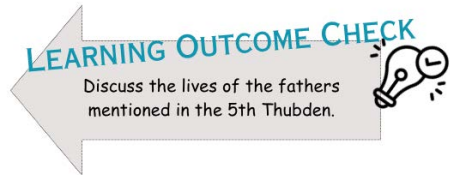
The Faith was given to our forefathers and the preservation and “*handing down*” of this Faith could only be possible through Apostolic succession. Apostolic succession means uninterrupted continuity of today’s faith with the faith and practices of the Apostles which they have inherited from Jesus Christ. Apostolic succession is therefore the hallmark of our accountability and it is indispensable, crucial, and essential for a living Church. If personal convictions, beliefs, or opinions do not fully align with Apostolic succession, one’s faith becomes simply inadequate.

Shared apostolic succession makes the Oriental Orthodox family to remain united to this very day in proclaiming the decisions of the three sacred, holy, and ecumenical councils of Nicea (325 A.D.), Constantinople (381 A.D.), and Ephesus (431 A.D.) as absolute. From these councils came the affirmation of the Person of Christ and why teachings such that St. Mary was “undoubtedly the God-bearer” and correctly holding the title of “Theotokos” was

essential as anything different would change Christ from being fully man and fully God.

This is one of many reasons why we are called to remember *“all those who before and with, and after”* those participants of those three Ecumenical Councils in the fifth Thubden during Holy Qurbana.

We not only remember specific Saints by name but also remember all those who preserved, defended, and upheld the Faith not through any individual merit but their cooperation with the Holy Spirit. They were persecuted, challenged, and often martyred for their actions but remembered today in our prayers as *“those who have kept the one, Apostolic, and uncorrupted Faith and entrusted and delivered it to us”*. Many saints who were also “fathers, bishops, and teachers” are not named as the Thubden would be endless!



The ones who are named begin with the Apostle St. James who was the first bishop of Jerusalem and runs through history to our Saints of India, St. Gregorios of Parumala and St. Divanasios of Vattasseril. This is an important reminder to us that so many men and women willingly sacrificed so much for the love of Christ and His Church to bring us this special gift we have today, and it is indeed a calling to help defend and teach the faith for our generation and for those to come.

The importance of this Apostolic teaching was paramount for our Church fathers, bishops, and teachers of the Faith in 451A.D. at the Council of Chalcedon. Although there were additional political influences that exacerbated the situation, Oriental Orthodox

Churches agreed to reject this council because its implied theological nuances indicated a change of Faith that had been passed down.

We maintain to this day that the defense of the true Faith by St. Dioscorus of Alexandria and other leaders at the Council of Chalcedon was indeed faithful to all the teachings of his predecessors St. Athanasius and St. Cyril of Alexandria.

Oriental Rejection of Chalcedon

The first centuries of Christendom was not without controversy, heresies, and divisions. However, there existed a unity between what is today the denominations that make up the Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Churches. The thousands of Protestant denominations came to being after the Reformation in 1517 A.D. and subsequent separation from the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore it is difficult to identify which holds a shadow of Apostolic succession still today and acknowledge the first Ecumenical Councils. As discussed earlier, through Apostolic succession the ancient Church was initially a unified body that spanned across several countries.

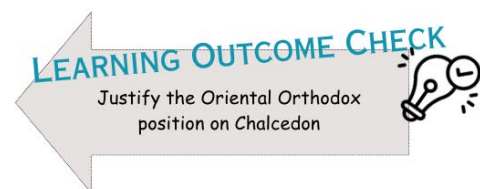


Things changed in the 5th century creating one of the major schisms in Christendom. The divide was regarding the human and divine nature of Christ discussed in the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. The Chalcedon council added that Christ is “one person in two natures” - one divine and one human thereby diverging from the teaching of our early church fathers. St. Dioscorus of Alexandria maintained that one Christ came to being *from two natures, divine and human*. He explicitly rejected the Chalcedonian formula of ‘in two natures’ as it contradicted the faith of Nicaea and indicated that the two natures of Christ continued to exist separately after the incarnation. If the divine nature is not fully united with the human nature through an inward and real union, salvation of humans could not be guaranteed.

The Church Fathers would not stand for such changes to our ancient faith and doctrine protected by the umbrella of the ancient church’s Apostolic succession. In the face of exile, St. Dioscorus stood

his ground by not attending the remaining meetings at Chalcedon. He affirmed his unity with the one catholic and apostolic faith, and protested the Council of Chalcedon citing the holy fathers Athanasius, Gregory, and Cyril, who all strongly discouraged the heresy of 'in two natures' of Chalcedon. Many Church Fathers from Alexandria and Antioch as well as Jerusalem also objected to the position taken by those in authority at this Council, and it was worsened by further ambiguities in the definition of the faith and the Tome of Leo. This led to the disapproval and rejection of the decisions and definitions of Chalcedon by the Coptics, Syrians, Armenians, and Ethiopians and the subsequent exile of the Orientals by the others that broadly made up of what is today the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and older Protestant Churches.

Decades later, St. Severus of Antioch upheld that the decision made to reject Chalcedon was correct. Today, there is academic consensus that the disagreement was not theological, as evidenced in statements published by the Orthodox Joint Commission of the late 20th century. Councils held between what is now the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches eventually agreed to the position taken by St. Dioscorus and our Oriental Church Fathers that Christ was fully man and fully God. But the damage had been done and even today the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches are not in full communion with each other.



St. Severus of Antioch defended the decision by our Church Fathers to reject Chalcedon by eloquently using the teachings of the preceding Fathers, St. Cyril in particular. This is why he is remembered in the Fifth Thubden as the "pillar and teacher of the Universal Holy Church of God" and one who *"preached all the time that St. Mary was undoubtedly the God-bearer."* St. Severus' objection to Chalcedon was that the Council did not affirm the unity of Christ adequately, and that it therefore violated the faith of the Church. St. Severus of Antioch stood in disagreement with Chalcedon's rulings, he confessed that Christ's divinity and humanity are united *"in one incarnate nature"* - the two being united without change, confusion, division or mixture. The Ma'nitho of St Severus,,



emphasizes the importance of doctrinal uniformity, because it protects the Church from distortions of the Truth i.e. a defective vision of God which prevents us from properly worshipping and experiencing God as intended by Christ through Apostolic succession.

Fr. V.C. Samuel observes¹, *“The ‘two natures after the union’ implies, argues Severus again and again, that the human child was formed in the womb by himself first, and that God the Word assumed him later. According to this view, the man remained man and God remained God the Son in a state of conjoint existence, without being united in any real sense, in Jesus Christ. Severus and other non-Chalcedonian leaders maintain that this was the position affirmed by the men of the Antiochene school and declared heretical by the council of Ephesus in 431.”*

Note how our Church Fathers always defended against heresy by clarifying what was given to them. There was never an individual elaboration or new teaching that was claimed to be inspired by the Divine, but rather teaching in more depth the true meaning of what was taught by Christ to the Apostles. There was without doubt political influences as well that led to the schism (notably from the Church of Rome and the Tome of Leo), but theologically the summary of our rejection of the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon was this argument that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was nothing but “fully man and fully God”.

As a result of Chalcedon, there is schism between the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches even today. Both groups of churches are receptive to discussion, and we can pray that through the power of the Holy Spirit we may be united again.

Unity in Diversity

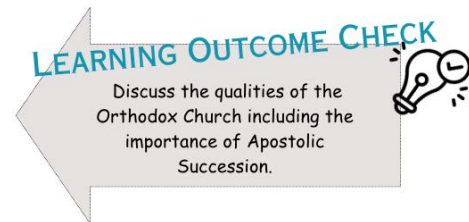
Both the Eastern (Chalcedonian) and Oriental (Non-Chalcedonian) churches consider themselves orthodox, meaning “right-believing” or more specifically “right-worshipping.” However, they have long differed in their views regarding the Council of Chalcedon, which took place in 451 A.D., and its definitions about who Christ is, leading to a painful division that has lasted over 1500 years. In recent decades, efforts to improve relations between these churches have shown both promise and challenges. Theological discussions among their leaders and scholars began informally in the 1960s and became formal in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in a shared conclusion that the initial Christological disagreements no longer justify their separation. Positive outcomes have emerged from these dialogues, including a joint meeting in Damascus in February 1998,

¹ Samuel, Fr. V. C. (2001). The Council of Chalcedon Re-Examined.

where subcommittees agreed that both Orthodox churches mostly retain their original liturgical traditions, which existed in the undivided Church, and that liturgical issues should be clarified to demonstrate their agreement on Christological matters. However, progress toward unity has been hindered by opposition rooted not in theological differences about the nature of Christ, but rather in historical and political issues.

Summary

The Orthodox Church, which has its roots in the early Christian communities established by apostles like St. James in Jerusalem, St. Mark in Egypt, and St. Thomas in India, showcases a remarkable diversity in its practice and cultural expressions. Despite differences in language and traditions, all members of this body of believers are united by a common faith grounded in Apostolic Succession, a crucial aspect that ensures the continuity of beliefs and teachings from the time of Christ to present day. This lineage allows us to worship together and uphold the teachings of Jesus, which were directly passed down through the apostles. The importance of Apostolic Succession lies in its preservation of the original faith, maintaining the unity and sanctity of our beliefs over generations. As guardians of this sacred inheritance, it is our privilege to share and defend this unchanging faith, ensuring that it remains vibrant and true for future generations.



Reflection Questions

1. In what ways did the contributions of the Saints mentioned in the fifth Thubden shape the foundation of the Oriental Orthodox Church, and how do their legacies continue to influence our faith today?
2. Can you explain the significance of the Council of Chalcedon in the context of Oriental Orthodox theology, and how would you articulate our Church's perspective on the decisions made during this council to a friend from the Eastern Orthodox tradition?
3. How does the concept of "unity in diversity" enhance our understanding of the Orthodox Church's mission and identity, and why is it essential for maintaining a harmonious relationship among the various Oriental Orthodox Churches?

Lesson 3: Our Church History

Lesson Goals

- *I can understand why there are so many Christian denominations in India.*
- *I can defend how the Orthodox Church through the centuries in India upheld the genuine Faith without corruption or change.*
- *I can assess how we keep the Faith entrusted to us and pass it on to future generations.*

We are members of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, also commonly known as the Indian Orthodox Church. We are an autocephalous Oriental Orthodox church headquartered in Devalokam near Kottayam in Kerala, India.

Christianity in India has a long history that dates back to the arrival of the Apostle Thomas in the 1st century AD. According to tradition, the Apostle Thomas arrived in the southern state of Kerala and established Christian communities there. The region is known as the "Cradle of Christianity in India." Over the centuries, Christianity spread to different parts of India through various means, including missionary activities, trade routes, and colonization. European powers, such as the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British, played a significant role in introducing and promoting Christianity in different parts of the country. Today, Christianity is the third-largest religion in India, after Hinduism and Islam, with a population of approximately 28 million Christians.

Our Church is known as the "Malankara" Church after an old name for the region that today is roughly equivalent to the state of Kerala. In the ancient world, this area was a major port of trade for spices, well known in Europe and in the Middle East. The presence of Jewish settlements in South India even before the Christian era is a testimony to the presence of an active trade relation. Jewish settlements would be an obvious choice for any Christian to begin ministry in a strange and foreign land.

Although it is less than 3% of India's total geographical size as well as population, Kerala today has dozens of Christian denominations. As a growing Church outside of India, what lessons can we learn from our ancient history to keep the faith that was "entrusted" to us by Jesus Christ and through the Apostle St. Thomas?

The Apostle to India

St. Thomas arrived in India in 52 A.D. in response to the Great Commission (**St. Matthew 28:16-20**) from our Lord Jesus Christ to "**make disciples of all the nations,**

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”.

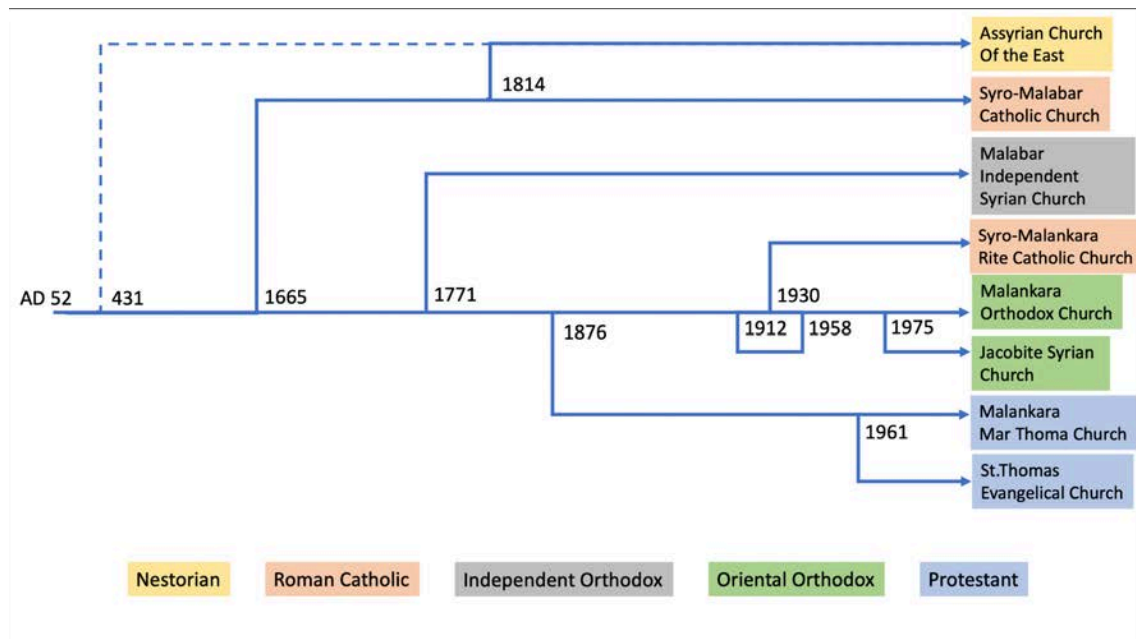
After reaching India and preaching the Gospel, he continued to travel to China and returned to Tamil Nadu where he was martyred in 72 A.D. in Mylapore near Chennai (the capital of Tamil Nadu). The illustration below shows the world as commonly understood by those living in Jerusalem during the days of the New Testament, and helps visualize how St. Thomas literally traveled to the ends of the world to preach the Word of God!



St. Thomas' arrival in India is documented in both Church records as well as other historical evidence. At the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea, records show that a Bishop named John attended representing Persia and India. St. Ephrem attests to the missionary work of St. Thomas in India, and has composed hymns on St. Thomas and his mission in India, martyrdom and the removal of bones to Edessa etc, in the 4th century. Origen of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea both mention St. Thomas' ministry in India.

Ultimately, the most conclusive evidence to prove St. Thomas' presence in India is our Church. We believe our Church has a direct ancient connection to St. Thomas, and despite many untold trials and tribulations over the following centuries, we believe the

Faith we follow today is the same as that of the early church. When we identify as “St. Thomas Christians” we are acknowledging and honoring the Truth brought to our land from one of the chosen twelve Apostles of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.



Our history can be best understood as five phases after the arrival of St. Thomas:

1. East Syrian Years
2. Roman Catholic Influence
3. West Syrian Connection
4. British Era
5. Factionalism

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Summarize the different denominations in India and their origin.



1. East Syrian Years

Sea trade routes existed between the Near East and the Malankara coast. Syrian and Persian merchants had contact with South India in the early centuries of the Christian era. South India had trade connections with the Mediterranean and West Asian world since ancient times. This enabled the Church in those areas, particularly Persia, to have knowledge of the existence of a Christian community in India. Many Christians, when they were persecuted in the Persian Empire, fled to the Southwestern coast of India and found a ready and warm welcome there.

A group of around 400 Syrians from Edessa is said to have arrived in 345, led by a merchant known as Thomas of Cana and accompanied by Mar Joseph, a Syrian bishop (Kottapparambil). Another wave of Syrian immigrants arrived in Malankara in the ninth century.

The community of Christians during this phase in India was small and struggled to maintain the Church hierarchy. However, it is starting from this period that our Church established a long relationship with the Syriac Churches of the East. Our identity with the Syriac Churches was so strong that we would identify as “Suryani Christyanis” (Syrian Christians).

Beginning in the fifth century, the Syriac community in the Near East came to be divided between the Assyrian Church of the East, which accepted the doctrines of the theologian Nestorius, and the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, which regarded Nestorianism as a heresy. Although the influence of Syriac Christianity in India is uncontested, it is difficult to know which tradition was more influential and during which periods. Many scholars have asserted the jurisdiction of the Assyrian Church of the East in Malankara from an early period; others have argued for a continuous Orthodox tradition until 1490, when it is well documented that the church began receiving Nestorian bishops from Persia.

The Persian connection of the Indian churches has to be seen in the context of the internal dissensions and state persecution of Christians in Persia from the 5th century. A Synod of the Persian Church (410 AD) affirmed the faith of Nicea and acknowledged the Metropolitan of Selucia-Ctesiphon as the Catholicos of the East. Not long after, the



christological controversies of Chalcedon, fuelled by the strains between the Persian and Byzantine empires, swayed the Persian church to declare itself Nestorian and its head to assume the title of Patriarch of the East (Babylon). From their base in the then flourishing theological school of Nisibis, Nestorian missionaries began moving to India, Central Asia, China and Ethiopia to teach their doctrines-probably associating the churches in these countries with the work of St. Thomas the Apostle, whom the Persians must have venerated as the founder of their own church.

By the 7th Century, specific references of the Indian church began to appear in Persian records. The Metropolitan of India and the Metropolitan of China are mentioned in the consecration records of Patriarchs of the East. At one stage, however, the Indian church was claimed to be under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan of Fars, but this issue was settled by Patriarch Sliba Zoha (714- 728 AD) who recognized the traditional dignity of the autonomous Metropolitan of India.

There were other developments in the Persian Church of potential import to the Indian Church. A renaissance of the pre-Chalcedon faith began led by St. Jacob Baradaeus, emphasizing the West Syrian Christological tradition of the one united nature, influencing the church in Persia as well. Taking advantage of the relatively favorable political climate following the Arab conquest of Syria and other parts of West Asia, a **maphrianate** (the Maphrian is a position in the Syriac Orthodox Church's ecclesiastical hierarchy, once known as the Grand Metropolitan of the East and also known as the Catholicos - and his office is called the Maphriante) of the anti-Chalcedonians was established and Mar Marutha, a native Persian, became the first Jacobite Maphriana (Catholicos) of the East. The jurisdiction of this Catholicos at Tigris extended to 18 episcopal dioceses in lower Mesopotamia and further east, but significantly, not to India.

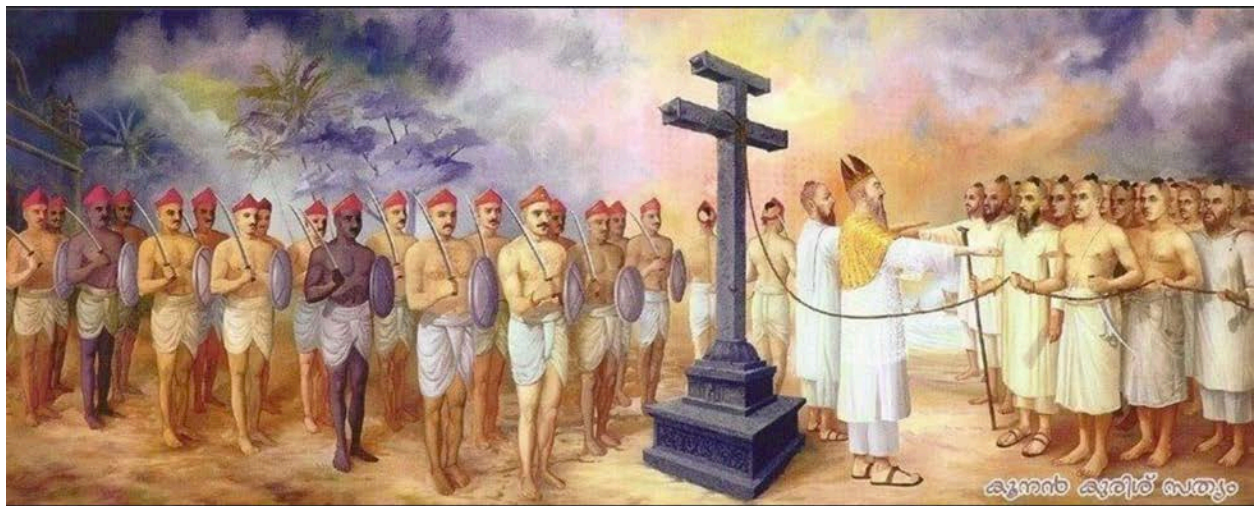
On the growth of the church in India during the first 15 centuries, the balance of historical evidence and the thrust of local tradition point to its basic autonomy sustained by the core of its own faith and culture. It received the trust and courtesy of missionaries, bishops, and migrants as they came from whichever eastern Church - Tigris or Babylon, Antioch or Alexandria, but not from the more distant Constantinople or Rome. There were times in this long period when the Christians in India had been without a bishop and were led by an Archdeacon. On such occasions requests were sent, sometimes with success, to one another of the Eastern prelates to help restore the episcopate in India. Meanwhile the church in Persia and much of the West declined, by internal causes and the impact of Islam, affecting both the "Nestorian" Patriarchate of the East (Babylon) and the Jacobite Catholicate of the East (Tigris).

2. Roman Catholic Influence

The Church in India maintained its local autonomous character. Following the arrival of Vasco de Gama, the Portuguese General, in Calicut, Kerala, India, in 1498, the Europeans came to South India more frequently and by the 16th Century the Portuguese established themselves marking the beginning of European colonization. Although there were established Christian communities in India, the Portuguese brought with them missionaries to carry on evangelistic work in order to establish churches in communion with Rome under the Portuguese patronage. Indian and European Christians seem to have enjoyed cordial relations at first, but by the end of the sixteenth century the situation had completely deteriorated: while the Malankara Christians were content to acknowledge separate apostolic traditions, respectively from St. Thomas and St. Peter, the Catholic missionaries sought to bring the Indian Church under the administration of Rome.

The post-Portuguese story of the church in India from the 16th century is relatively well documented. In their combined zeal to colonize and proselytize, the Portuguese ignored the way of life of the St. Thomas Christians. Many converts joined the Catholic Church especially from coastal areas under Latin **prelates** (an archbishop or bishop) that were ignored by the Orthodox Church, but the colonizers and missionaries also took extra efforts to bring the existing communities under the influence of the Bishop of Rome.

The culmination of their efforts was the Synod of Diamper (1599), which proclaimed the Malankara Church a part of the Roman Catholic Church. Although canonical irregularities meant that Rome never accepted the synod, its conveners nonetheless enrolled the support of the local government and began enforcing use of a Latinized Liturgy.



Resentment continued to grow about this attack on our Faith and on January 3rd, 1653 several thousand Malankara Christians finally rebelled and gathered before the Cross in Mattancherry and took an oath to no longer submit to the Roman Church. So many gathered to take this oath that they could not touch the Holy Cross, so they tied ropes to the Cross and passed amongst themselves so they could all be in unity and touch the Cross together. The story is that the cross bent under pressure and hence the name '*Coonan Kurishu Sathyam*' or the 'Bent Cross Oath' came about.

The oath resulted in the excommunication of those who participated. With no Orthodox bishop to guide them, the faithful had to face serious difficulties. Yet, our ancestors were determined to keep the true Faith entrusted to us and accordingly, Archdeacon Thomas was raised to the title of Mar Thoma, the first in the long line up to Mar Thoma IX.

However, Rome sent groups of Carmelites attempting to reclaim the lost churches. The Carmelites reclaimed eighty-four churches around 1665 A.D. leaving Archdeacon Mar Thomas I (who led the Coonan Cross Oath) with 32 churches. The 84 churches and their congregations were the body from which the **Syro Malabar Church** descended.

3. West Syrian Connection

The remaining 32 communities eventually entered into communion with the West Syriac Orthodox Church at the request of the Church in India. His Grace Mar Gregorios Abdul Jaleel of Jerusalem came to India and in 1665 confirmed the episcopal consecration of Mar Thoma I as the head of the Orthodox Church in India. The Syriac Patriarch of Antioch helped restore the Church in India and allowed the faithful to adhere to Orthodox faith and practice. Many of the rites and practices of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church today tie to this restoration with the West Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch.

4. British Era

The tensions and strains of the relationship between the Syriac Orthodox hierarchy and the clergy in India were sometimes strained. In 1771 Bishop Mar Gregorios, a representative of the Syriac Orthodox hierarchy from the Middle East, had grown dissatisfied with how Metropolitan Mar Dionysius I (the 6th Metropolitan of the Malankara Syrian Church) had treated him. Against Mar Dionysius' wishes, Mar Gregorios consecrated as bishop a leading dissenter, the monk Kattumangatt Kurien, in a secret but canonically legitimate ceremony. The new bishop took the name Mar Cyril (Koorilos), and eventually this schism became the **Malabar Independent Syrian Church**. This was the first of several

schisms from the Orthodox Church and the following centuries unfortunately gave rise to many more schisms and divisions.

In 1876, another split took place, when Anglican-inspired reformers within the Malankara Church broke away to form the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar. History repeated itself in another form when the British in India encouraged reformation within the Orthodox Church partly through Anglican domination of the theological seminary in Kottayam and working to attract membership into Anglican congregations from 1836. Finally, the reformist group broke away to form what is known today as the Mar Thoma Church. The Mar Thoma Church today has more than 400,000 members and is in communion with the Church of England.

This crisis within the Church in India was contained with the help of Patriarch Peter III of Antioch who visited India in 1875-1877. The outcome was twofold - a reaffirmation of the distinctive identity of the Orthodox Church under its own Metropolitan and, at some dissonance with this renewal, an enlarged influence of the Patriarch of Antioch in the affairs of the Indian Church.

The Patriarch of Antioch had attempted to use this opportunity to exert his authority in the Church and suppress the authority of the Malankara Metropolitan. The interference of the Antiochian Patriarch resulted in legal fights and the final judgment of the Travancore Royal court in 1889 which declared that the Patriarch had spiritual supervisory powers over the Malankara Church. But, it also declared that the Patriarch does not have any temporal authority in the Church. The Patriarch was not satisfied with this decision, one of many factors that led to our current phase of factionalism in India.

5. Factionalism

Although the Malankara Church was already autonomous, or a self-governed part of the Syriac Orthodox Church, our Church desired autocephaly, or its own head rather than reliance on the patriarch of Antioch. The Church declared its autocephaly in 1912, and became known as the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. This was also upon the foundation that the relocation of the Catholicate of the East took place in 1912 in India which was originally in Seleucia and later in Tigris.

In 1912, His Holiness Moran Mar Baselios Paulose I was elevated as "Catholicos of the East" and **primate** (ecclesiastical usage, the prelate is usually the head of the Church) of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. This was with the personal participation of Patriarch Abdul Messiah of Antioch and in 1934 the Constitution of the Orthodox Church in

India formally documented our Church as an autocephalous Church with a West Syriac Theological flair proclaiming the faith of the three Holy, Catholic, and Ecumenical Councils, namely that in Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus. This made us members of the Oriental Orthodox Family.



However, a faction of the Orthodox Church in India felt this elevation in 1912 was invalid and pledged their allegiances solely to the head of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius Yakub III. Thus, a schism pitting Orthodox Christians against the other Orthodox Christians came to be.

Our Church confesses and proclaims the supremacy of the Catholicos. Formally we were the **Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church** (sometimes falsely and derogatorily referred to as Metran Kakshi, or Metropolitan's group), while those who claimed the spiritual and temporal primacy of the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch continued as the **Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church** or **Jacobite Syrian Christian Church** (Bhava Kakshi, or the Patriarchal group). A peace accord in 1958 mutually signed between the Catholicos and Malankara Metropolitan HH Baselios Geevarghese II and HH Patriarch Ignatius Yakoub III occurred. There HH the Patriarch Ignatius Yakoub III affirmed the Catholicos as the official Primate of the Orthodox Christians in India as well as the validity of the 1934 Constitution. This truce brought a brief period of peace and reunion between the two factions between 1958 and 1975. However, this peace sadly did not last and the divisions persist even to this day.

Our church is fully self-governed by its local leadership and is indigenous. We do remember and pray for the Syrian Patriarch of Antioch who bears the name of "Mar Ignatius". But we are truly an autocephalous Church and our Bishops are honored and recognized by all other Orthodox Churches.

Sadly, yet another schism occurred in 1930 when two Metropolitans of our Orthodox Syrian Church, Geevarghese Mar Ivanios and Jacob Mar Theophilos, entered into communion with Rome bringing with them the Bethany Ashram monastery and a number of faithful. Their followers subsequently became the **Syro-Malankara Catholic Church**, remaining as an Eastern Rite Catholic Church using essentially the same Liturgy as their former Orthodox brethren. Thus, even amongst the St. Thomas Christians sharing an identical Liturgy, there are at least three jurisdictions celebrating separately in Kerala on any given Sunday.

We must all continue to pray for peace, forgiveness, and unity between the Malankara and Syriac Orthodox Churches. We are of one faith and true brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Summary

St. Thomas Christians in India were united in India until 1657. Our Church has roots tracing back to the apostolic work of St. Thomas, and is one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. With the arrival of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians missionaries, the Church faced extreme challenges resulting in the various denominations today. Yet, through the unwavering faith, prayers, and sacrifices of our ancestors, the Orthodox Church has endured. As we sing during Holy Qurbana, remembering our ancestors in prayer and learning from struggles is the greatest way to pass on the Faith given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that was illumined by Christ to His Apostles, and which St. Thomas carried to India.

Reflection Questions

1. Reframe the story of “doubting Thomas”, remembering that St. Thomas is the Apostle who traveled to India and was martyred as he shared the Gospel with zeal and love for Christ. The “doubt of St. Thomas” has helped many to affirm their true faith.
2. Examine the history of any non-Orthodox denomination from Kerala (India) and explain in love why we are not in communion with them.
3. How can remembering the struggles and adversities of the Church in India through the centuries help us grow our Church today outside of India?

Lesson 4: The Church and You

Lesson Goals

- *I can explain the apostolic tradition of our Church.*
- *I can recognize the different means to grow in faith in our church life.*
- *I can identify the responsibilities of an Orthodox Christian in society.*

Ecclesiology

“No one can have God as their Father who does not have the Church as their mother”. In saying this, St. Cyprian of Carthage demonstrates that the Church is integral to the life of a Christian.

Ecclesiology is the study of the Church. It comes from the Greek word for Church - “ekklesia”. Ecclesiology describes how the Church operates, how She is organized, how She addresses problems that arise, and how She interacts with other spiritual communities.



The Church is often seen as a ship in Orthodox **hymns** and teachings, one which carries and protects her passengers as they travel towards God. Since St. Mary is also often compared to the Church, we sing in the Ququlion for the Mother of God:

“Like a ship, Mary carried,
Adored, and honored
The Captain - Who is the Lord
Of all creation

Using this imagery, ecclesiology describes how to enter the ship, how the passengers are cared for, who the captain is, etc.

The Orthodox Church, as an Apostolic community, has to carry the mission, namely, spreading and cementing the Gospel into the hearts of her children. Leaders and faithful of the Orthodox Church have the specific calling of being sent by Christ. The Holy Spirit helps everyone to understand, assimilate, and live out the characteristics of the Holy Church: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. One shall remember that we recite this at the end of the third paragraph of the Nicene Creed. Therefore, one can say with assurance that any Church, which lives out these four characteristics of the Church does have the fullness of Christ in it in today's fragmented world. We can understand the statement of Jesus Christ in **St. Matthew 16:18** only in this context: **“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church”**. The faith that St. Peter confesses, Jesus is the Christ, is this One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church and it is upon this faith that Christ builds His Church. Even the gates of Hades won't be prevailing against it.

Images of Church from St. Paul's understandings:

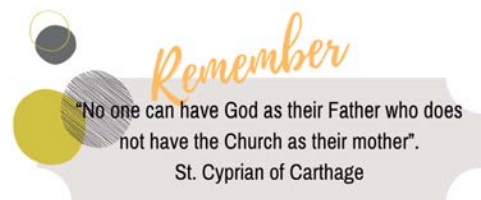
- The Holy Church is the Body of Christ (**1 Corinthians 12:27**) and every Christian is a member of this cosmic Body. Christ is the head of this body so that the Church can become the body, which is integrally together with Christ. There is no living body without a head, and there is no living head without the body. Thus, the Church is One with Christ.
- The Church is the temple of God (**1 Corinthians 3:9-11; 16**) because the Spirit of God is living in each member of the Church. **Ephesians 2:9-22** reads that Christ is the cornerstone of this temple called the Church and every member of the Church is a brick in it (**1 St. Peter 2:5**). This makes the concept of Holiness the Church has and the Church's apostolicity which stems from Christ all meaningful. St. Peter therefore, can say without doubt that the Holy Church consists of chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and is God's special possession (**1 St. Peter 2:9**).

- The Church is the bride of Christ (**Ephesians 5:25-27; 2 Corinthians 11:2; and Ephesians 5:24**). The church will be fully united with Christ, the Bridegroom, at His second coming. The Church is therefore eagerly awaiting the second arrival of Christ. The eternal union of Christ and His bride will take place then as **St. John in the Revelation 19:7-9; 21:1-2** narrates. One can also follow the parable of Ten Virgins (**St. Matthew 25:1-13**) here to understand why the Church is so Holy, devoted, committed, with no wrinkles, without blemish, or anything similar.
- The Church is the flock and Christ is the chief shepherd. In **St. John's Gospel 10:11-18** one can read the importance of the Good shepherd and how He is protecting the Church. Every member of the Church is a sheep and it listens to the voice of the Shepherd.

Therefore, one can say without doubt that everything extends from the Church and does so with a mission and a purpose. After our Baptism, we all become full members of the Church. As St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy, **"Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity"** (**1 Timothy 4:12**). We are all members of the Church! And as such, no matter at what level we work or in what capacity, the way we operate and make decisions day to day, how we perform our duties and work with each other, how the Church operates, and how we solve problems both inside the Church and outside is always focused on Christ. We are to be His Hands and Feet in this fallen world. This is the importance of understanding ecclesiology and its impact on our life and salvation.

The Early Church

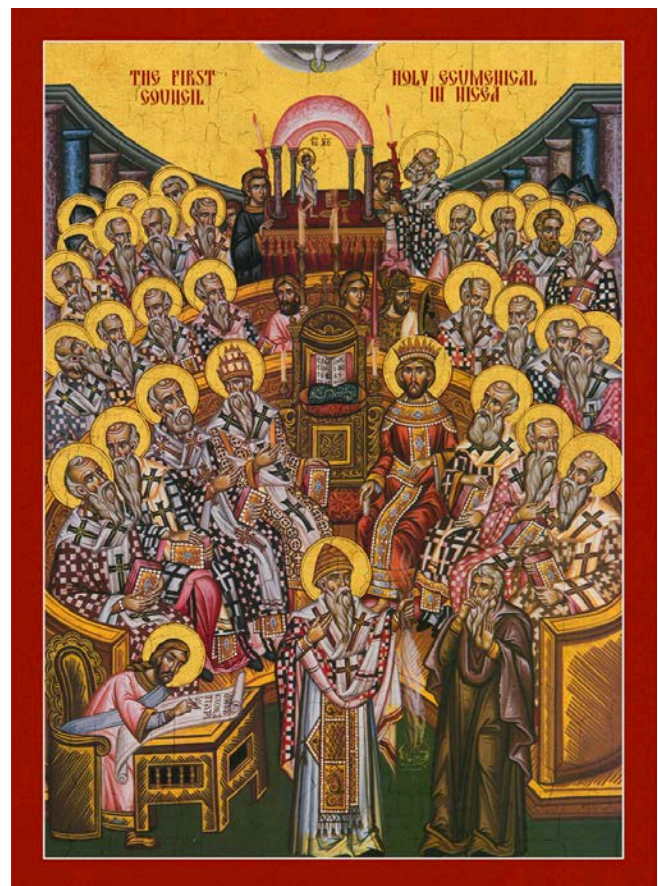
This was seen even in the early life of the Church as documented in Acts of the Holy Apostles. One of the first major conflicts in the early Church was the issue on how to receive Gentile converts. As the Church grew and more Gentiles became followers of **the Way**, the Church had to specify what was required of the new converts. The Judaizers were of the opinion that the converts to Christianity should be circumcised and so become Jews first. They thought that the Law of Moses still applied to the Christians. They were unsure if non-Jews could become full members of the New Covenant without fulfilling the requirements of the Old. In addressing this issue, the early Church set the precedent for how future theological controversies and false teachings would be addressed.



When Paul and Barnabas disagreed (**Acts 15:1-2**) with the Judaizers over the issue of circumcision, the Church decided to send Paul, Barnabas, and others to Jerusalem to discuss this issue with the apostles and elders. Here, we see the precedent for addressing doctrinal issues. The entire Church came together in the form of a council to discuss the issue at one location. In Acts, we see the apostles, the elders and the laity all gather in Jerusalem for the Council. One party shares their opinion. **“But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses’”** (**Acts 15:5**). The leaders of the Church address this view. **“And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them...”** (**Acts 15:7**). Peter proclaims that he was chosen by God to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles and that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. He proclaimed that the Gentiles are saved in the same manner as the Jews. Even though Peter made this proclamation, it is important to note that the Church does not immediately accept his view as the final word on the issue.

Next, the other bishops share their views. **“Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles”** (**Acts 15:12**). Here Paul and Barnabas argue against circumcision using their own missionary experience as evidence. Once again, this is not accepted as the final decree of the Council.

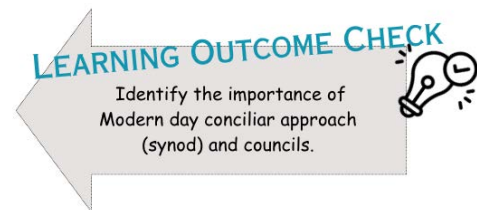
Next, the bishop of the local Church expresses his view. At the Council in Jerusalem, James, the bishop of Jerusalem, reviewed the Scriptures and quoted the Prophets, and suggested four different abstinences for the new Gentile converts. **“Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood”** (**Acts 15:19-20**). At this point, the entire Church led by the apostles and elders wrote a letter specifying the result of the Council. **“For it**



seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things...” (Acts 15:28). Here we see the synergy between the Church and the Holy Spirit.

The council of Jerusalem set the precedent for how the Church dealt with future issues such as Arianism, Macedonianism, and Nestorianism. The pattern outlined above is what is followed in the Ecumenical Councils.

The Orthodox Church follows the model from the Council of Jerusalem for faith matters for it is not a democracy nor is it a dictatorship. Every decision is made in the context of the Church. No individual decides dogma for themselves. No bishop is above the Church. The ecclesiology of the Orthodox Church is synodal - a synod (or council) governs the faith of the Church. The Catholicos is seen as the first of the Holy Episcopal Synod. In return the members of the Holy Synod acknowledge the Catholicos as first out of respect and honor for God. The Catholicos respects all other bishops as brothers in love for Christ, while the other bishops reciprocate the same. This is also Trinitarian as all three persons in the Holy Trinity have the same will and same energy.



And above all, each and every Bishop acts to adore, praise, and glorify God. Have you ever wondered why the Catholicos are addressed as “His Holiness” and the Bishops of our Church as “His Grace”? The head of our Church today is His Holiness Moran Mar Baselios Marthoma Mathews III. The “His” in the titles of our bishops are not to direct the respect and honor towards the individual, but rather to remember, honor, and glorify God. As we proclaim during Holy Qurbana, “the One Holy Father, the One Holy Son, and the One Holy Spirit, alone is holy”. This has been the model for the Christian Church for all ages and the importance of understanding ecclesiology.

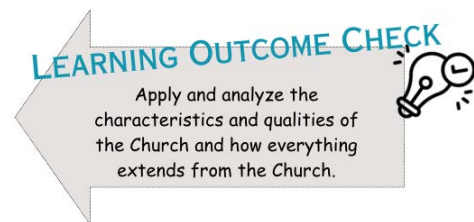
The Holy Episcopal Synod presided over by the Catholicos, is the highest body of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, and is composed of all

bishops. The Holy Synod's authority is definitive and binding in the church's theology and faith practices, as well as in the sequence of Apostolic Succession to the Throne of St. Thomas. The Malankara Syrian Christian Association's decisions and the Church Constitution of 1934 serve as the primary sources of authority for the Church in all things about worldly affairs. The metropolitans are responsible for administering the dioceses given to them by the Malankara Managing Committee as approved by the Holy Episcopal Synod. The respective Diocesan Councils and the Diocesan Assemblies assist the Metropolitan in this process.

Ecclesiology safeguards the faith of the Church. Apostolic Succession is very important in the Orthodox tradition. In the priest's prayer of absolution for the faithful, apostolic succession is very much seen. "May God have mercy upon you, and may He guide you to everlasting life through the authority of priesthood which was entrusted by our Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples who, in turn, entrusted it to their successors until it was given me". This spiritual succession of authority comes from Christ Himself. However, there are times where those with Apostolic Succession from Christ lead the Church astray. Nestorius was Archbishop of Constantinople - he had received Apostolic Succession. Despite that, he started promoting heresy. Ecclesiology ensures that Apostolic tradition is maintained while also emphasizing the importance of apostolic succession.

Summary

For Orthodox Christians, everything begins with the Church. It is in the Church that we are received into the True Faith. It is through the Church that we receive adoption as sons and daughters of God and receive the Holy Spirit. Despite having received grace, we fall away from God due to the illness of sin. The Church provides the medicine of Confession to wipe away all that separates us from God. When we are physically or mentally sick, the Church provides anointing. It is in the Church that man and woman are joined to become one through the mystery of Holy Matrimony. This mystery is a symbol of the mystical union between Christ, the Bridegroom and the Church, His Bride.



As Fr. Bijesh Philip notes, "*The Church is the continuation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In union with Christ, the Church makes God visible to the world. As a mother, [She] brings up [Her] children in the image and likeness of God.*"²

² https://mosc.in/the_church/theology/ecclesiology

It is important for us to remember that we are the Church, and we must participate as members of the Body of Christ to be the Church and be a witness both inside the parish and to our friends and community. Without understanding ecclesiology and how the Church has and always lives as witness to God, we are in danger of failing to live to our calling as baptized Orthodox Christians.

Reflection Questions

1. How could you exemplify Christ in your everyday activities as an Orthodox Christian?
2. In the concluding hymn during the Sunday of the Renewal of the Church we sing this verse:

*Bless'd are You, O Holy Church
For You guard the One True Faith
The Lord who died for Your sake
Takes pride in Your faithfulness*

What are some ways we can show our faithfulness to the Church in school and at home?

3. Reflect on and analyze the following quote from Fr. Thomas Hopko: *"If a parish has no awareness and consciousness of being "sent" by God to speak His words, to do His work, and to accomplish His will in this world, then it is not an Orthodox Christian parish."*

Lesson 5: Highly Favored One

Lesson Goals

- *I can use typology and defend how the Theotokos fulfills Old Testament prophecy*
- *I can explain why we hold the All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary in such high honor.*
- *I can learn about our path to holiness from the life of the Theotokos.*

In the Orthodox Church, a special place of honor is given to Ever-Virgin St Mary the Mother of God (Theotokos) . She is the supreme example of the cooperation between God and Man; for God, Who always respects human freedom, did not become incarnate without her free consent which, as Holy Scripture tells us, was freely given: Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word (Luke 1:38).

The Ever-Virgin Mary in Scripture

To the Orthodox, there is continuity in Scripture between the promises of the Old Testament(OT) and fulfillment in the New(NT). The Virgin Mary can only be understood from Scripture in the form of “types” and prophecies from in Old Testament Scripture extending through the NT through her own witness at the events of Christ’s Nativity, through the Christ’s disciples’ observations of her.

Through her self-sacrificing cooperation with the Divine plan, the Virgin Mary ibridges the Old and the New Covenants by becoming the living embodiment of fundamental Scriptural themes.

The Virgin Mary is the type referenced as Jacob’s ladder by which Heaven (as Christ) can descend to Earth(Genesis 28:10-12); the burning bush (of everlasting Virginitiy)(Exodus 3:1-11); the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:10-22), the golden candlestick (Exodus 25:31-40), the golden censer and holy of holies (Leviticus 16) all of which carry the Heavenly (like Christ) Aaron’s Rod (Numbers 17:1-11), the living fleece (Judges 6:36-40), the stem of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1), and the East Gate of the Temple (Ezekiel 42:1-2). Mary is the “mother” though remaining a virgin, according to the prophecies of Genesis 3:15, Isaiah 7:14, Micah 5:1-2; and the woman “Mother of the Lord” or “Mother of Jesus”, as she is called eleven times in the New Testament; she is the “mother” of humankind, represented by the Apostle John on Golgotha (John 19:25-27).

The Ever-Virgin Mary in Iconography

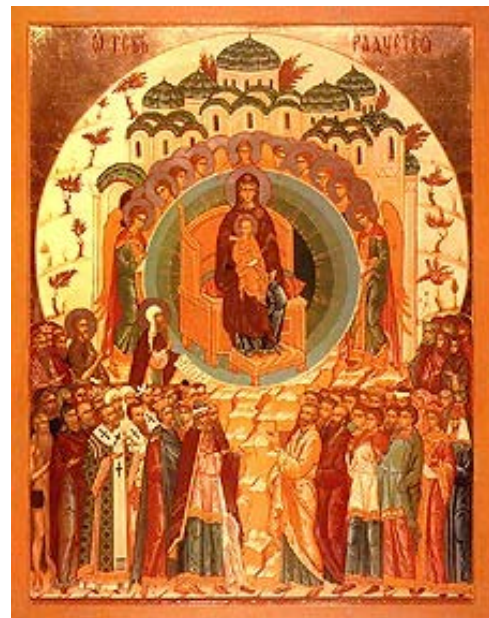
Above the head of St. Mary are the letters “MP OY” which is the transliterated abbreviation of the Greek: “Meter Theou”, or the Mother of God who has the unique privilege in Orthodox iconography of holding the infant with the overhead letters “IC XC” identifying Jesus Christ. The first icon of Theotokos, with Christ child, is reputed to have been written by the hand of St. Luke the evangelist.

The red traditional veil covering Mary is a sign of humility, and this tradition continues in our Church today. The outside clothing color of red symbolizes divinity while the inside color of her clothes is green and blue to symbolize humanity. The three stars indicate her virginity before, during, and eternally after the birth of Jesus Christ.



The Ever Virgin Mary in our Hymns

The hymns and prayers we use in our liturgical services are filled with references to St. Mary, the Ever-Virgin. A prime example is the Sneebea liturgical season, which extends from the Holy Cross festival to Palm Sunday. This season is inspired by the theme of the Theotokos celebrated on Sheema Wednesday, highlighting the essential role of the Theotokos within the Malankara Orthodox Church. Through the beauty of our icons, the teachings of Scripture, and the heartfelt expressions in our hymns, we see how deeply St. Mary's everlasting virginity is honored and how she remains central to our faith and worship.



A few examples:

Post-Gospel Hymn (Quqoyo – Tone 1)

I know not how to call you,
daughter of David,
Nor do I know what name to give you,
O Mary
You are 'virgin' yet you nurse the Son
You are 'mother' yet remain virgin
Therefore, I will call you
the mother of our God
That the learned and the doubters
be put to shame
Halleluyah - Woe to the doubters

Concluding Hymn (Qum Paulos)

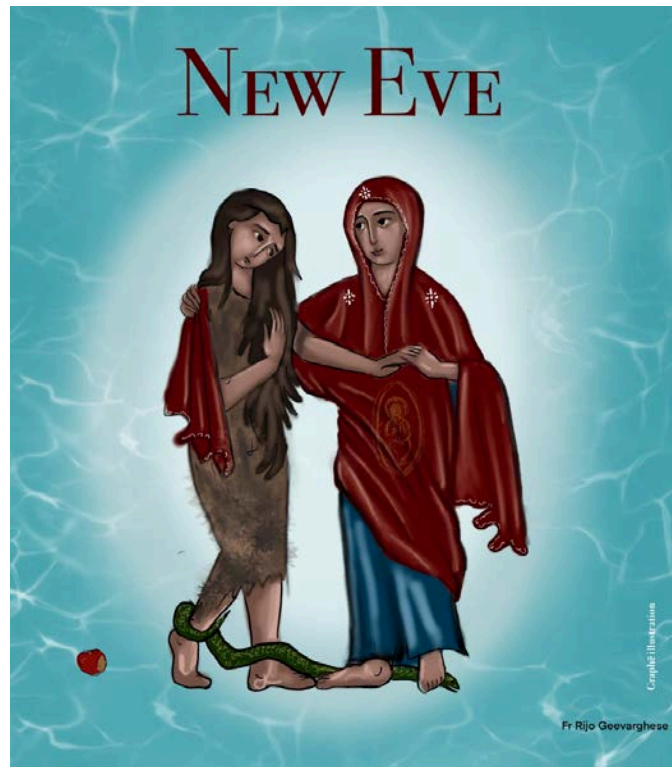
Blessed be Mary the one who was poor
And who was made rich
by her son the Christ
It is worthy to praise your remembrance
All generations and races praise you
As the virgin said – “All generations
Will call me blessed -
for He looked on His servant”
The Lord blessed Mary -
for she had proclaimed
That the One within -
her womb was - the Lord

The New Eve

Genesis describes how mankind introduced Creation to suffering and death through the disobedience of eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16,27).

Significantly, Genesis 3:15 is called the Protoevangelium (First Gospel). This verse prefigures the reality of the Virgin Mary's mission: in opposition to the serpent (the “enmity”); in union with the Messiah-Redeemer (her “seed”) fighting and crushing the head of the serpent; in contrast with Eve, seduced and conquered by the serpent (Genesis 3:13; 2 Corinthians 11:13).

Saint Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon (A.D.120-202) summarizes the theme in his great work *Against Heresies*: “Mary the virgin is found obedient, saying “behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to



your word.” In contrast, Eve was disobedient. For she did not obey when she was still a virgin...Having become disobedient, she was made the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire human race. Correspondingly, Mary, who was also a virgin (although betrothed to a man), by yielding obedience, became the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race...”

The Mother of God

The New Testament reveals the profound fulfillment of the “woman” prophesied in the Protevangelium. St Mary was a descendent of King David, the daughter of Joachim and Anna, who through persistent supplication overcame a lifetime of barrenness with a child in their old age. They raised her in prayer, and dedicated her to the Temple of Jerusalem. While she was espoused to Joseph, Angel Gabriel appeared to her and delivered the divine annunciation to bear God as Immanuel (God with us). The Church celebrates the Annunciation (Suboro, Vachinappu) to the Theotokos annually on the 25th of March as well as the fourth Sunday in the season of Annunciation. Despite knowing the shame and pain that would come next, the All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary’s obedient response to the Annunciation reversed the Man’s disobedience in Eden, thus becoming the “second Eve” or “new Eve,” the supreme example of cooperation between God (incarnation of the Word) and the free will of man. Her life is a rule for us all: Our goal is to have Jesus within us just as Mary chose to have Christ within her. Indeed because Theotokos sacrificially chose to give Christ flesh, we have the opportunity to consume His flesh such that He lives within us and we live in Him (John 6:54; 1 John 4:13).

1. The Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

Angel Gabriel greeted the Virgin Mary – “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women.” When Virgin Mary gives her response “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” is the moment when the Logos took flesh and the Virgin of Nazareth becomes the Theotokos, fulfilling Old Testament Messianic prophecies. But that “high favor” undoubtedly brought her shame, distress, and pain. Despite this personal suffering, the Virgin Mary freely, actively continues cooperating with the Redeemer unto the foot of the Cross on Golgotha and for the rest of her earthly life.

2. The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56)

The pregnant Ever-Virgin Mary departs for the hill country to serve her cousin, St. Elizabeth. In bringing the unborn Jesus into the presence of Elizabeth, two events of grace take place: Elizabeth prophecies by the Holy Spirit and the unborn

John is sanctified in Elizabeth's womb: "when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41). The Virgin Mary then, inspired by the same Holy Spirit, proclaims her "Magnificat" or song of praise glorifying the Lord, in which she rightly prophesies that all generations will call her blessed (Luke. 1:46-55).

3. The Nativity of Jesus (Luke 2:4-20)

The Virgin Mary "... brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). The Nativity Hymns proclaims, "a wonderment of nature takes place, for creation gives birth to her Creator."

4. The Presentation of the Infant Jesus to the Temple (Luke 2:22-39)

The child Jesus is presented to the Temple in fulfillment of Jewish law, and in a prophetic offering that finds its fulfillment with the hanging of Jesus on Golgotha. Simeon foretells the suffering of Mary's heart that will ultimately take place at the Cross: "...yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Luke 2:35).

5. The Finding of the Child Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52)

When the child Jesus is found after three days (foreshadowing His three days in the tomb), the Virgin Mary is informed by Jesus: "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49), and the Gospel tells us that the Virgin Mary "kept all these things, in her heart" (Luke 2:51).

6. The Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-10)

"Whatever He says to you, do it" (John 2:5). The Virgin Mother intercedes "before His time has come" at Cana.. When Jesus Christ calls His mother, "Woman," He is connecting her to Genesis 3:15 and prophesying the "Woman" who will be with Him at Golgotha (cf. John 19:25).

7. The Mother of God during Crucifixion and the Foot of the Cross (John 19: 25-27)

Every year, in the Great Friday service procession hymn we are reminded of the heart-breaking scene when St. Mary cries like a dove asking Jesus why He has allowed these bad people to do this to Him? Then at the foot of the Cross He says "Woman, behold, your Son... behold, your Mother" (John 19:26-27). Jesus gives to

the Apostle John, and symbolically in John to all who seek to be “beloved disciples,” and even to all humanity, the gift of His own Mother to be our own Spiritual Mother. Another implication is that she had no other children to care for her, underscoring her Ever-Virgin status. The NT refers to the brothers and sisters of Jesus. It is believed that Joseph was a widower with children, but not of St Mary. In the Manitho of Mar Severios, we re-affirm the Holy Virgin Mary as glorious, chaste and pure, Mother of our God.

8. The Presence of the Theotokos in the Upper Room (Acts 1:13-2:4)

After the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus Christ, “Mary, the Mother of Jesus” (Acts 1:14) is central amidst the Apostles and disciples in the Upper Room who await the descent of the Holy Spirit offering her guidance, support, and nurturing.

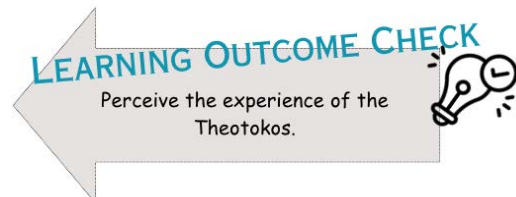
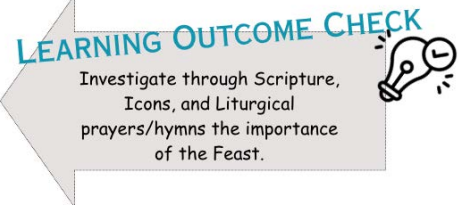
9. Pauline Reference to the Mother of God

In Galatians 4:4 St. Paul testifies here to the Divine Motherhood,. “...When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4).

The Dormition (Shoonoyo) of the Theotokos

The “falling-asleep” (*dormition, shoonoyo*) of the Theotokos is celebrated on August 15. The Feast also commemorates the tradition of translation of her body into heaven (*vangippu, assumption*). Since the early church, the feast is preceded by the fast from August 1 to 15 including a note from Leo the Great around AD 450: “*The Church fasts are situated in the year in such a way that a special abstinence is prescribed for each time. Thus, for autumn there is the autumn fast, in the seventh month [Dormition fast]...*”³

According to Sacred Tradition of the Orthodox Church, at the time of her death the disciples including the St. Paul returned to Jerusalem to see the Theotokos, except for the St. Thomas who was too far away in India. Following her repose, the body of the Theotokos was taken



³ Brian E. Daley translated, *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, (SVS Press, 1998).

in procession and laid in a tomb near the Garden of Gethsemane.

When St. Thomas was arriving three days after her repose and desired to see her body, the body of the Theotokos was in process of being assumed in Heaven and so she dropped her Zoonoro (“belt”/“girdle”) to the Apostle Thomas. St. Thomas, along with the rest of the Holy Apostles, opened up her grave and did not find the body of the Theotokos. In this way the Holy Belt is proof for the Church of her resurrection and bodily ascension to the heavens, and, in a word, of her *metastasis* (transposition)

Post-Gospel Hymn⁴ – (*Enono Nuhro* – Tone Seven)

1. Blessed Mary, by your death
The sky was filled with blessings
And the earth was made holy
At your death, Holy Virgin
The angels rejoiced and sang
As your body was carried
Into the heights of heaven
Heaven received your body
Which had carried Christ our God

2. Mary, who has reached heaven,
The dwelling of Christ, your Son,
Pray to - Him on our behalf
That He may show us mercy;
That He may protect His Church
And grant glory to His priests
And wisdom to His deacons
May all - those who honor you
Be saved by your Holy Son



Addressing Heresies

There were some controversies within the Church on her importance. In 431 AD addressed one such heresy dispelled at the third Ecumenical Council when St. Cyril of Alexandria correctly argued that Ever-Virgin Mary bore Jesus Christ who was

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Discuss origins of St. Mary's designation as Theotokos from the Council of Ephesus in 431.

⁴ *Service Book of the Holy Qurbano* (MOSC, 2017), 273-274.

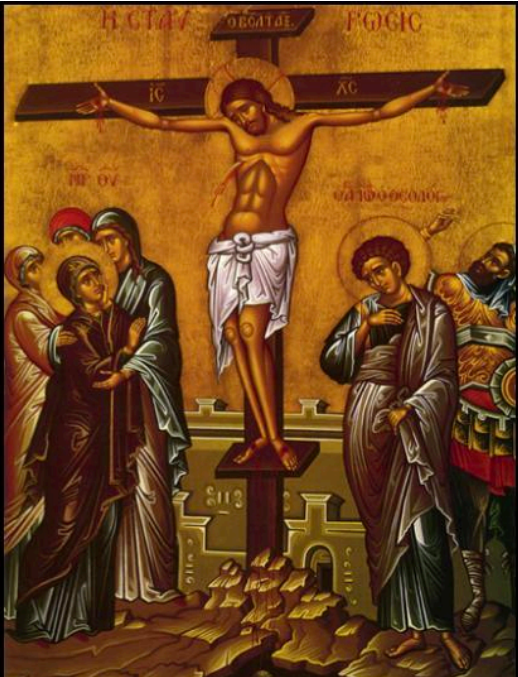
fully God and fully man from the very first moment of His incarnation. She is the Theotokos (Syriac “Yoldath Aloho”; Malayalam “Daiva Prasavithri”), meaning God-bearer (Theos' -God and 'Tokos' from the verb 'tiktein' - to bear). The Council added “the virgin Mary, mother of God” to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. The title Theotokos is more a glorification of Christ rather than St. Mary. For the one born of Mary is, as the Orthodox Church sings at Christmas: “. . . He who from all eternity is God.” This teaching corrected the heresy was taught by Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, that St. Mary gave birth to a human Messiah the Christ upon whom God later inhabited, making St Mary Christokos(Christ-bearer).

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK
Contrast Theotokos vs Christotokos.

a

Also false is the notion that God the Word started His existence in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God existed forever before time existed. At a particular moment in history, the Logos gained flesh from the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (Mt 1; Lk 1). It is the formal teaching of the Orthodox Church that Jesus is indeed a real man, a whole and perfectly complete man with a human mind, soul and body, but also God from before time.

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK
Examine the significance of St. Mary because of what we believe about Christ.

 <i>"Mother of God" written by the hand of Jan Isham</i> "But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2:19)	<u>The Procession to Golgotha</u> Matthew 27:31-33 Mark 15:20-22 Luke 23: 26-30 John 19:17 <u>Great Friday 1st Procession Hymn</u> As He came from the city, With the cross on His shoulders, The Hebrew women gathered. They wept bitterly for Him. His mother stood from afar With her friends surrounding her Like a dove, she moaned with grief, "Where my Son are You going? My Belov'd only Son, Where are they taking You to? Why did You give Yourself up To the ungrateful people? O my Son, woe be to me Woe is me, my belov'd." Bless'd is Your Passion for us, And Your great humility!	
---	---	--

Highly Favored

Orthodox Christians revere the Theotokos more than all the saints and angels because she was found worthy to give birth to God the Savior. Due to her role in the Incarnation and God's plan of salvation, we honor Theotokos as the pre-eminent and the most exalted among all the Saints. We venerate but do not worship her, for worship belongs to God alone.

The All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary was a human being. She was chosen as one that God highly favored, blessed among women to be the fountainhead of our salvation, "a dwelling place of holiness for the One who is above the Cherubim." She lived a pious and humble life, serving, praying, obeying and praising God. This prepared her to be a willing handmaid who agreed to her special calling as the Mother of God. The All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary exemplifies humility, unconditional obedience and wholehearted devotion to God. As the Ever-Virgin Mary bore Jesus physically, we as Christians now have the privilege to bear God within us through His Body which He received from the Theotokos. She is the personification of the Church. Just as the Theotokos carried Christ as a ship carries the captain who steers it (Quqiliyon 1), the Church carries Christ, the Head of the Church. We imitate her practical spiritual life, including the purity and humility by which she guided her free will into perfect obedience to do the Will of God. She is the archetype for our life and a great inspiration and example in our journey of Theosis.

Reflection Questions

1. Defend the teaching of the All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary using one of the typologies listed in this lesson.
2. Looking at Genesis Chapter Three – would we be able to address the Virgin Mary as Second Eve? If so, why?
3. Analyze how St. Mary is undoubtedly the Theotokos but also a human being just like us. With this teaching of our Church, defend that St. Mary will also experience the final judgment as she too will "look for the new life in the world to come".

Lesson 6: The Mother of God

Lesson Goals

- *I can explain the significance of the Feasts of the Mother of God.*
- *I can reflect on how I can emulate the humility and obedience of St. Mary.*
- *I can defend how St. Mary represents the Church to bear Christ to the world.*

The Virgin Mary has an exalted and special place in the Church due to her humility and obedience to God and thus takes a prominent place in the life and consciousness of the Orthodox Church. The Feasts of the Mother of God are actually a theological biography of the Most Holy Mother of God. The Feasts of the Mother of God are also dedicated to celebrating the life, virtues, and role of the Virgin Mary in the incarnation and salvation ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Annunciation to the Theotokos

Our Lord Jesus Christ was “begotten of the Father before all worlds”. Christ is eternal and always existed before time and creation.

During the Concluding Hymn of the Feast of Annunciation:

*The archangel
A-n-nounced to Mary,
“Peace be with You,
The Lord is with You”
O Mary, you
Ca-rry in your womb
Him Who carries
The whole creation*

Gabriel portrays an incarnate God living in her womb that is the same as the Creator of all.

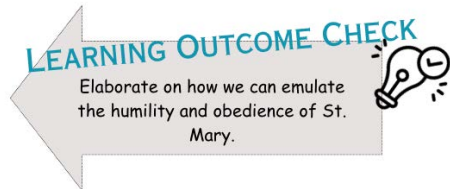
The Annunciation is also celebrated during the Orthodox season of Nativity when the Promion



reading includes: *Praise... to the Eternal Word and Only Son of the Father who at the announcement of Gabriel the archangel came to dwell in the Virgin. Blessed is the womb that bore you. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and do it.*

We always read the gospel from **St. Luke 1:26-38** during the days when Annunciation is remembered. St. Mary chose to accept the Divine plan that Angel Gabriel related to her. She made a considered decision, after having her doubts allayed by Gabriel before finally answering, **“Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.” (St. Luke 1:38)**

She accepted the Logos notwithstanding her recent betrothal to Joseph and the sure reputation she would receive from society as a mother before marriage. She humbly embodied Jesus’ words, “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.” (**St. Luke 9:24**).

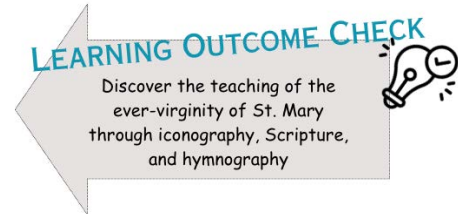


As a lesson for us, we may have trouble getting out of our comfort zones as well when we are directed to do the work of God. We may be busy with other aspects of our life and may even say we do not have time, but St. Mary ensured that God’s word was fulfilled. She was willing to risk her life, her freedom and her reputation to fulfill God’s promise. It is definitely not easy, but St. Mary shows a true example of how to be a true follower of Christ.

Theotokos and the Church

Church dedicates several feasts to Ever-Virgin Mary as she exemplified how to bear Christ and be a light to the world.

St. Cyril of Alexandria identifies St. Mary with the Holy Church at the Council of Ephesus thus: “Let us praise with songs of joy Mary the ever-virgin, who herself is clearly the holy Church, together with the Son and most chaste Spouse! To God be praise forever!” St. Jacob of Sarug extolls St. Mary in the following lines: “The wise Virgin was the mouth of the Church, and she heard the explanation for the creation of the whole world”. St. Ephrem the Syrian references the virgin in **Isaiah 7:14** as St. Mary and as the Holy Church. Just like the Holy Church, the Theotokos is chaste, pure, glorious, and splendid (**Ephesians 5:21**). St. Mary delivered her Son without a physical father as the Holy Church delivers her children through baptism without a physical father.



At the same time, we are not elevating her to the ranks of God. The Church considers the Ever-Virgin Mary as a human being needing prayers for salvation. Therefore, during the Pre-Holy Qurbana Thuyobo service the celebrant always prays for St. Mary to Jesus Christ.

Agricultural Feasts of the Virgin of the Sowing – January 15; of the Crops May 15; of the Vineyard August 15;

In the Malankara and Syriac Orthodox Churches, the Intercession of Mary and her sustenance of the infant God are linked to feasts of the sustenance of nature, especially the agricultural rhythms of the farmers. These three Feasts are on the fifteenth day of the months of January (*Ido d'yoldath Aloho hal zar'he*), May (*i'do d-yoldath Aloho d Al Shable*), and August. The Dormition of the Virgin Mary replaced the Feast of the Virgin Mary for blessing the Vineyards (*Sate*), which falls on August 15th.

Poet Simon Kookoyo(Potter) and students attribute to St. John, the Evangelist the initiation of these feasts. They say: “*With dew and drizzle the land of Ephesus was sprinkled when St. John brought to it the messages of the Virgin Mary commanding that the blessed Feasts of the Virgin be celebrated three times a year. The Feast of the Virgin Mary of the sowing is in January. In May is the Feast of the Virgin Mary for blessing the crops and in August is her Feast of the blessing of the vineyards, which are the symbol of the mystery of life.*” St. Ephrem, speaks of the Virgin saying that, “*Mary became of the field who received the grain of wheat in her womb and this grain of wheat, Jesus Christ our Lord, gives life to the world.*”

In origin, this is an agricultural feast which arose from the needs of the farmers to seek God's help for a fruitful harvest. Just as the infant Jesus depended on His mother, the farmers were at the God's mercy of sufficient rain and good weather. As a result, they sought God's assistance and appealed to the intercession of the Theotokos for their crops. For blessing of the seeds, it was common for farmers to take out the seeds from the store houses only after intercessory prayers to the Theotokos. The Virgin Mary was considered as a special fort around their efforts during the entire season and especially when the crops were almost ripe from natural calamities, particularly floods. During the harvest season, the first and best bundle of crop was kept apart for the Church.



Feast of the Annunciation to the Theotokos⁵ (Suboro) – March 25

The Feast of the Annunciation is so important it is celebrated twice. Celebrating the Incarnation of the Word (in Malayalam the “Wording” or Vachanippu) -- the Logos made flesh in the Virgin Mary. The Feast of the Annunciation of the Virgin Mary comes nine months before Christmas on the twenty-fifth of March. As the action initiating the Incarnation of Christ, the Annunciation has such an important place in Orthodox Christian theology that the Festal Vespers and Holy Qurbana with the Anaphora of St. James is always celebrated on the Feast, even if it falls on Great Friday. This Feast usually falls during the

⁵ <https://syriacorthodoxresources.org/Feast/Annunciation.html>

Great Lent most years, and reminds us of Christ's humility and the Theotokos' obedience. The Annunciation reminds us of what God can do when both are exercised perfectly.

At the beginning of the Liturgical year, the Malankara Orthodox Church observes the Sundays, usually known as the Sundays before the Nativity of Christ, which include Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, the Sunday of the Virgin Mary's visitation to Elizabeth, etc.

The biblical account of the Annunciation in the first chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke (1:26-39) is the origin of the repeated "Hail Mary." The Virgin Mary's exultant hymn, the Magnificat, found in Luke 1:46-55, has been part of the Church's liturgy of the hours for many centuries.



Post Gospel Hymn⁶ (Quqoyo – Tone Four)

*Let all with mouth, tongue, and word call Mary blessed
Blessed is Mary, for she is that blessed field
From which sprouted - the source of all joy;
She is worthy - to be called blessed
Blessed is she, that chariot, whose knees were the wheels
And in her womb she bore the Savior of the world
Hal...May her prayer help us*

In reference to Annunciation, Tuesday prayer reads: "Gabriel flew with spiritual wings. He hailed Mary and conveyed the salutation forwarded to her saying, hail be to you, the Lord is with you, The savior of the universe shall shine forth from you...your virginity astounded Gabriel, oh Mother of God. He folded his hands and prostrated in adoration before

⁶ Service Book of the Holy Qurbano (MOSC, 2017), 249.

you and hailed you because he beheld His Lord dwelling in your womb. You were equal to the chariot carrying the bearer of mankind.”⁷

Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God⁸ – September 8

The Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos is celebrated on September 8. Within the Malankara Church the feast and eight day fast prior are unofficial opportunities for meditation on the suffering of God, His mother, and grandparents.



The *Protevangelion of St James* was a popular but not apostolic book detailing traditions around the birth and early years of the Virgin Mary. These details are not contained in the Gospels or other books of the New Testament. The narrative in this book claims that Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, remained childless into older age but continued to be faithful to God.

The pious Saints Joachim and Anna were subjected to societal derision since childlessness was viewed as a Divine punishment for sin. On feast days, the High Priest refused to accept the sacrifice of childless sinner Joachim. Joachim fled to the hill country

⁷ HH Ignatius Zaka Iwas - *The Holy Virgin Mary in the Syrian Orthodox Church* (2010)
www.syrianorthodox.org

⁸ Catherine Aslanoff, editor and Paul Meyendorff, translator, *The Incarnate God: The Feasts of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary*, (SVS Press, 1995).

in shame and guilt. When Joachim in the hill country and his wife Anna at home in Jerusalem were both praying at the same moment, both of them saw an angel who revealed that Anna would give birth to a child whose name would be known throughout the world. Anna vowed to present her child to the Lord as a gift. Joachim went back home, and Anna eventually gave birth to Ever-Virgin Mary.⁹

The Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos, therefore, is a memorial of St. Mary's birth and of her righteous parents. For the "Vessel of Light," the "Door to the Orient," the "Throne of Wisdom" is being prepared on earth by God Himself in the birth of the holy girl-child Mary. These titles for Ever-Virgin Mary are inspired by the OT and NT.

Feast of the Glorification of the Mother of God – December 26

On the first day of the Nativity of the Lord, the Church glorifies the Redeemer of the human race. On the second day of the Nativity (December 26), the Church honors the Theotokos. In some Orthodox churches, this day is also called the 'Synaxis' (meaning coming together to glorify) of the Holy Theotokos. This Feast was also called "the Nativity Gifts" referring to the gifts which the Magi from the East brought to the Divine Child Jesus. The Feast is also referred to as "the Flight into Egypt," recalling the prophecy that God will call the Messiah out from Egypt (Mathew 23:15). In the fourth century, Saint Epiphanius of Cyprus, witnesses this feast among other Fathers..

The Third Hour prayer on Wednesday from Saint Jacob of Serugh summarizes the veneration of the Theotokos in the Orthodox Church,

*"With amazement and wonder I speak of the great status the daughter of mankind has attained. Was it the grace that made the son of the highest descend onto her, or was it she who desired to be the mother of her only son? It is clear that God descended to earth by Grace. Mary, who was so godly, yielded and he beheld her humbleness and innocence and dwelled in her, for it pleases the Holy to dwell in those who are humble... "Only in the humble and innocent I dwell". He saw that she was the humblest of mankind, those who are born to women. None has ever been more humble than Mary. Neither has anyone ever been more exalted than her. Glory be to the Father, who chose her for her humility and adoration be to the son who descended in humility (from high) and dwelled in her. Thanks be to the (Holy) Spirit who is pleased to dwell in humble ones. Glory be to the one nature of the Trinity... May you, O, Son of God, through the prayer of Mary, who bore you nine months, keep wrath away from us."*¹⁰

⁹ Orthodox Church of America – Nativity of the Mother of God (2014), oca.org/saints/lives

¹⁰ Awsar Slawoto: *The Book of Common Prayer*, (SEERI, 2006), 573-575.

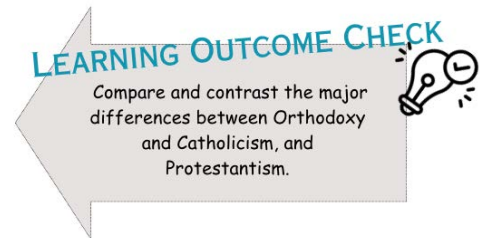
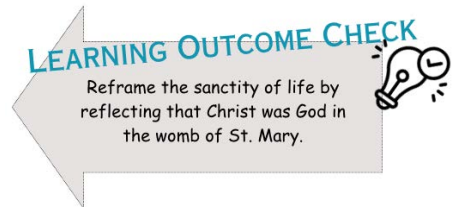
The Importance of the Theotokos

St. Gregory of Nazianzus taught, "Anyone who does not admit that holy Mary is the Mother of God is out of touch with the Godhead. Equally remote from God is anyone who says that Christ passed through the Virgin as through a channel, without being formed in her in a manner at once divine and human - divine because without the agency of a man; human because following the normal process of gestation." There was never a moment in time that Christ was not God.

The Church defines the perpetual sanctity of life beginning in the womb, beyond the last breath of our lives, to the second coming of Christ and the eternal Kingdom of God because Christ has charted these experiences. Sanctification of human life started in the womb of St. Mary, because Christ lived in her womb.

The Roman Catholic Church agrees that St. Mary was indeed the Virgin Theotokos. However, new concepts developed such as the Immaculate Conception of St. Mary that were not present in the ancient Church. At the other extreme, some Protestants deny the holiness of St. Mary and represent her role as simply a vessel.

The teaching of the Orthodox Church is simply that St. Mary is the Mother of God because of Christ. St. Jacob of Serugh teaches of the Theotokos, "*Your prayer accompanies us, O blessed One. Your prayer accompanies us.*" We proclaim and celebrate that through God's graciousness to humankind every Christian receives what the Theotokos receives, the "great mercy and grace of God."



Reflection Questions

1. What are some of the common themes in the Feasts of the Mother of God?
2. As Orthodox Christians, how do we address the question from those outside our own tradition about biblical evidence for the Feasts of the Mother of God?
3. How does the life of the Mother of God become a model for all humankind?

Lesson 7: Undoubtedly the God Bearer

Lesson Goals

- *I can explain the Church's teaching on why the Virgin Mary is the Mother of God.*
- *I can interpret the theology of the Church through the hymns on the Theotokos.*
- *I can illustrate that the Holy Church's adoration of the Theotokos is veneration and not worship, which is offered to God alone.*

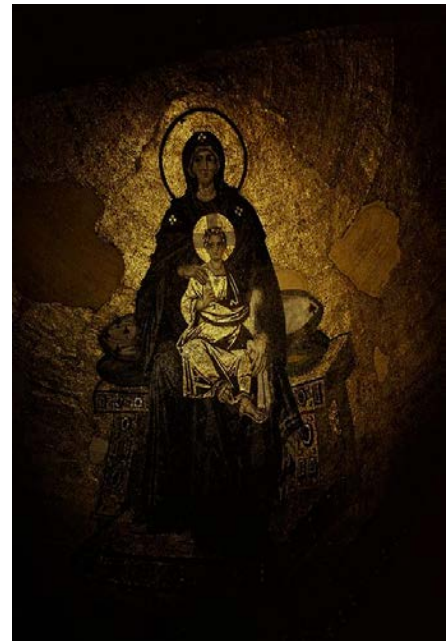
In the Orthodox Church, the Virgin Mary is referred to as "Theotokos" or "Yoldath Aloho" – a title given to Virgin because the only-begotten Son of God, equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit, entered the world through her womb. The Greek term *Theotokos* and Syriac term Yoldath Aloho means God bearer. The Virgin Mary is undoubtedly the Mother of God because the one who is born of her is God through Whom the whole universe was created. That's why we honor the Virgin with such radiant and impressive titles in the Church.

Theotokos

The Orthodox Church reverence for the Virgin Mary is centered on Christ. It's important to frame our entire understanding of the teachings of the Church about the Virgin by beginning with Christ. The title, Mother of God, seems to have first been used in liturgical and devotional practice by Christians in Egypt. It appears in an ancient prayer, *Sub Tuum Praesidium* which dates back to the third century.

Nevertheless, the title, Mother of God, was used in an Alexandrian creedal formula. When challenged in 322, Patriarch Peter of Alexandria defended its legitimacy. Use of the title, Theotokos was formally sanctioned by the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431.

The Church declared that both Divine and human natures were united in the person of Jesus, the son of Mary. Hence, the Virgin Mary may be called Theotokos, since the son she bore according to the flesh, Jesus, is truly one of the Divine persons of the Trinity. This title is really a Christological statement, which affirms that the second person of the Trinity, who was born into history as fully human, is really 'God with us'.



St. Cyril defended this ancient Church understanding in his *anathema* against Bishop Nestorius. Anathema is a Greek word, and it literally means anything devoted to evil or an accursed thing. It is used by the Church not as a permanent and final judgment as our strong belief is God is our judge. However, it is a formal statement by the Church usually against a teaching that clearly contradicts the teachings given to us from God. St. Severus of Antioch in his 29th Cathedral Homily says citing the story of Achan in (Joshua 7) that the gold, silver, and expensive robe that Achan stole were not supposed to be kept by an Israelite. They were anathema. In other words, anything that shall not be among the children of Israel, within their tents, and in possession with them is anathema. It is something forbidden, something that does not belong to them, and anyone who holds on to them is also forbidden. Anathema is thus a curse pronounced upon a rebel or an adversary, as well.

In the words of St. Cyril, “If anyone will not confess that the Emmanuel is very God, and that therefore the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (Θεοτόκος), inasmuch as in the flesh she bore the Word of God made flesh [as it is written, The Word was made flesh] let him be anathema.”

St. Cyril’s defense that the Virgin Mary was the Theotokos (God bearer or birth-giver of God) focused on the truth that Jesus is God. The Syriac term, “yoldath aloho” literally means “the one who begets” or “gives birth to God”, and we remember St. Cyril in the 5th Thubden of Holy Qurbana as the one who “clearly expounded and declared the Incarnation of God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who took flesh.” Severus the Great of Antioch defended Orthodoxy building on the strong foundation from St. Cyril and we remember him in the same Thubden as one “who preached all the time that Mary was undoubtedly the God-bearer”.

The All Holy and Virgin Mary was chosen by the Father to bear His only begotten Son – a fact that we remember when we sing the Quqliyon (or cycle of prayers) to the Virgin Mary:

The King’s daughter stands in glory,
Halleluyah w Halleluyah
And the Queen at Your right hand

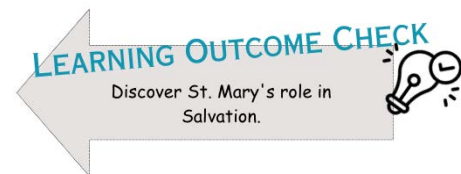
Leave your people and your father’s house
Halleluyah w Halleluyah
For the King will desire your beauty
Barekmor

Jesus received His humanity from the Virgin Mary, but never at any moment was devoid of His divinity. Jesus was and is always God, and this means even in the womb of the Virgin Mary, He was divine. This great mystery is worthy of our wonder, and often included in our prayers and hymns. For example, from the Wednesday night vigil prayers:

The Virgin bore a wonder - let us go and contemplate
The Ancient of Days - wrapped in swaddling clothes
The Virgin bore an elder, the Ancient of Days
He who holds mountains is carried by a maiden
He gives bread to the hungry
But is nursed like an infant
The Son with no beginning - willed to have a beginning
He came to birth and - He is without end. *Barekmor*

Contemplating the Virgin Birth

One of the central claims of the Christian faith is the Virgin Birth of Christ. The Virgin Mary became the vessel for the Lord of Glory Himself, and bore in the flesh Him whom heaven and earth cannot contain. Would this not have been grounds to consider her life, including her body, as consecrated to God and God alone? The Virgin Mary teaches us about the Incarnation of the Word of God requires that we first accept the Incarnation. Once we do, then her virginity not only after birth, but also before and indeed the character of her entire life become in themselves a wellspring of teaching about life in Christ and the glory of God. The role of the Theotokos in our salvation was prepared from the beginning of the ages. The significance of the Virgin Mary in the Salvation can never be fully understood but it is worthy of our awe and reflection. Scripture, hymns, and prayers make references to the Virgin Mary's role and often illustrative words that are intended to spark our interest and curiosity. The proper veneration of the Theotokos which the Orthodox Church has always held, not because the Virgin Mary is the great exception but because she is the great example.



The Virgin Mary's royalty is declared when we consider that God is Pantocrator - the Almighty and Creator of Heaven and Earth. All things come from God, and that one of His creations was so pure and holy to be worthy of bearing God in the womb can never be fully explained. The images and words used are given by the Holy Church to encourage us to

understand this amazing woman, one who proclaimed that “generations will call me blessed” (**St. Luke 1:48**). The glory and honor given to the Virgin Mary because of her role as mother is because of the one she bore in her womb - from the Qolo of the Quqlion to the Theotokos,

*Glory to the Pow'r
Who left the Cherubim
And the Seraphim,
Descending to dwell
In the Virgin's womb;
And He took flesh from her
To save Adam's sons
From Death and Satan.*

Veneration of the Theotokos

These are a few of the many reasons why we venerate the Virgin Mary, but it's important to understand the difference between veneration and worship. Worship belongs to God, while veneration can be ascribed to human beings, who were completely attune with God. In Greek these are different words - lateria is the veneration reserved only for God, and proskynesis is the veneration used for saints and most of all, Mother Mary. In Malayalam veneration is *vanakkam* and worship is *aaradhana*.

An Orthodox writer and teacher Dr. Clark Carlton explains, *“There is nothing - absolutely nothing! - that we affirm dogmatically about the Virgin Mary that is not at once a witness to the incarnation of her son and also a confession of what we ourselves expect as members of His Body. When we celebrate the Dormition, Resurrection and Glorification of our Lady, we are celebrating our own death, resurrection and glorification with Christ. For everything that we say happens to the Theotokos will one day happen to those who follow Christ and love his appearing”.*

It's important for us to know that everything we believe about the Virgin Mary is also in Scripture, and we should be able to answer any questions with humility and love about our Faith and most of all our own Mother, who is the Theotokos and the one whom God favored because of who she chose to be!

Our Salvation

In **Romans 12:2**, we are reminded that we must transform ourselves to be like Jesus, the 2nd person of the One Triune God who became man. The “perfect will” of God is to be One with Him, and St. Paul uses the word “mind” to mean not just our intellect but

our thoughts and our heart. Transformation is more than being happy after hearing a good sermon but rather the choice of transforming how we live and how we think, changing so we are thankful for the fast before major events/feasts, and being happy to pray and be with God.

The Virgin Mary, like all the saints, was human. She was born like any other human and died a natural, human death. However, by calling her a Saint, the Church confirms that she led a life pleasing to God, that her life was a model for us on how to live a Christ-like life. And for Mother Mary, the Theotokos, in particular we hold an even higher level of respect, veneration and honor...and that is even written in the Bible as being proclaimed by an angel! (**St. Luke 1:28**)

For Orthodox Christians the Theotokos is the first to walk in the path of salvation. Her obedience is a symbol and example of the obedience required by us also as we set Christ in our hearts. She is a symbol of the Church itself, whose members are called to consider the body the “temple of the Holy Spirit,” (I Corinthians 6:19) just as she became the Temple of the Holy Spirit and Throne of Christ the King at the incarnation of the God.

Reflection Questions

1. Why were the Church Fathers particular about defending the title Theotokos against those who tried to teach that “God cannot have a mother”?
2. We sing during the Shimo prayers, *“By three mysteries the Church does teach a lesson to doubters: A tree (Genesis 22), a rock (Exodus 17:6, St. John 4:13), and a fish (St. Matthew 17:27) The tree and the lamb (Genesis 22) which brought forth wondrous fruit”*. How would you defend the mystery of Virgin birth to those who doubt this teaching?
3. What was the role of the Theotokos in God's plan for our salvation?

Lesson 8: Born to Save

Lesson Goals:

- *I can explain how the Nativity of our Lord is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.*
 - *I understand how Incarnation becomes the means to salvation.*
 - *I acknowledge the Divine mystery that Jesus is fully God and fully man.*
-

*“O God the Father, Who by Your great love toward mankind, did send Your Son into the world to bring back the sheep that had gone astray.”
(Prayer of the Priest in the Anaphora of St. James)*

Union Broken

God created humankind in His own image and likeness, and granted humankind free will. St. Ephrem the Syrian says, “For when God created Adam, He did not make him mortal, nor did He fashion him as immortal; this was so that Adam himself, either through keeping the commandment, or by transgressing it, might acquire from this one of the trees which outcome he wanted.”¹¹

St. Irenaeus of Lyons speaks of Adam and Eve as spiritual children who needed to grow into spiritual adulthood (and achieve spiritual perfection). The human being had not yet reached his proper end of being deified. Man was created in a state of spiritual immaturity with the capacity for growth into spiritual perfection and also with the capacity of decay into spiritual corruption or non-being.

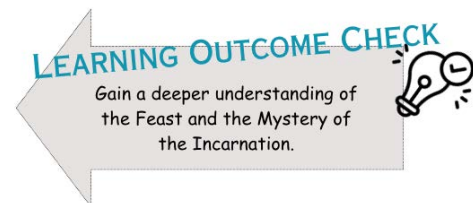
Man used his given free will to choose to sin. By disobeying God, mankind’s union with God was weakened. By sinning, man walked away from God, the source of Life, towards death. The result of the Fall is restricting the spiritual growth of humanity. The potential for further union with God was limited. Due to the Fall, the likeness of God in man became tainted. Human nature was still inherently good but now there was an inclination to sin which did not exist before the Fall. The consequences of the Fall were that all humanity now is born with a *fallen* human nature. All of humanity became susceptible to death. Though humanity is not guilty of the sin committed by Adam and Eve, it inherited all of the effects of that first sin. Despite man choosing to walk away from God, God’s love for man and His desire for union with man did not change. From the beginning and even after the Fall, God wanted humankind to be in union with Him. For this union to take place, the

¹¹ St. Ephrem, Hymns on Paradise, p. 208-209.

Incarnation was always inevitable. Scripture testifies of this in the first epistle of St. Peter when it says, “He [Christ] was foreordained before the foundation of the world” (**1 Peter 1:19**). St. Isaac the Syrian describes the purpose of Incarnation as *only* to express divine love. “God did all this for no other reason, except to make known to the world the love that He has.” He became man “not to redeem us from sins, or for any other reasons, but *solely* in order that the world might become aware of the love which God has for the whole of His creation.”¹²

Yeldo : Incarnation as Salvation

The Incarnation is the expression and fulfillment of God’s love for man. It is the means by which God redeems and by which He saves - enabling mankind to once again grow in union with Him. The purpose of the Incarnation is for man to become like God as God had always intended. St. Athanasius aptly summarizes the Incarnation when he says “For He was incarnate that we might be made god.” In other words, the Son of God became the Son of Man so that sons of men might become sons of God. The Word of God, in the Second Person of the Trinity, became man to restore man to his intended state of being which was corrupted by the Fall and to lead Him to His proper intended end of being deified.



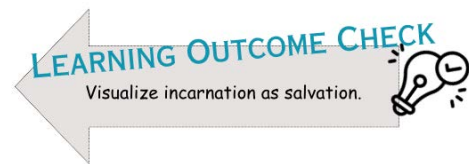
There is significance in the manner in which God became man. All of humanity was born with a fallen human nature due to the Fall. Man has no choice in the matter. He receives fallen nature as an involuntary inheritance. This includes St. Mary, the Mother of God. Contrary to the doctrine of Immaculate Conception of the Catholic Church, she is born with the same fallen humanity as the rest of humankind. In the Catholic theological understanding, the transmission of corrupted nature (and death) took place through procreation and in order to save St. Mary from having a corrupt human nature, they had to innovate the theory of Immaculate Conception of St. Mary.

In this context, the significance of the Virgin Birth of Christ is seen. On the one hand, the Virgin birth allows for the Incarnate Word of God to be both divine and human. On the other hand, Jesus Christ was born of a virgin womb, and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity took flesh and became human.. Christ was born with the humanity of Adam *after* the Fall. As God, He was not susceptible to the corruption of death, and as God became human He was able to reverse the corruption. Here lies the great mystery. The Lord chooses,

¹² *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian* by Met. Hilarion Alfeyev (Cistercian Publications, 2000). p. 10

voluntarily, to take on corruption. He did not have to die. Yet, He freely chooses to die to free the rest of humankind from humanity's slavery to death. Again, He is born with the fallen humanity of Adam in order to heal, redeem, save, and ultimately deify it. As St. Ephrem says, "He clothed Himself in the likeness of humanity in order to bring humanity to a likeness of Himself."¹³ Christ suffered the effects of fallen human nature (such as hunger, fatigue, etc.), but did not commit any personal sins. He did all of this of His own free will, however, and not from necessity. The goal of Incarnation is the gift of salvation to mankind, which shows the ultimate love of God.

The purpose of Incarnation as salvation (through becoming children of God and becoming like God) is seen throughout the Liturgical tradition. At every Holy Qurbana and in the Sixth Hour Prayer of each day, the Ma'nitho of Mor Severus is sung. In it, we sing,



"Who by His grace, descended for all mankind to bring life and salvation for our fallen human race. He trampled death by His death and destroyed our death."

Christ descended to bring salvation to the human race. In the second Qolo of Matins of Wednesday, we sing

"Glory to the Holy Father who sent forth His Holy Son. And He dwelt in the Holy womb. He became a son of man in our image and likeness that we may become like Him. And might be made children of His Father and partakers of His One Holy Spirit."

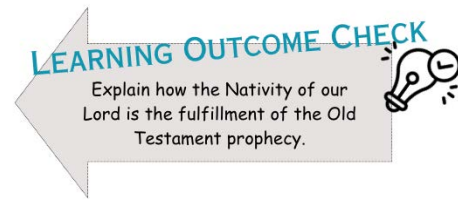
He became a son of man so that we may become like Him and be adopted as children of the Father. In the Sedro of Vespers of the Second Friday of the Great Fast, we pray,

"By Your mercy, You descended and became man in order to restore us as children of God. O Lord, You set out to find the lost ones. You found our race, rose us on Your holy shoulders, and brought us to the house of Your Father."

¹³ St. Ephrem, Hymns on Paradise, 11.6

Yeldo: Fulfillment of Prophecy

The Messiah was revealed through prophets. In the Nativity Sedro, we hear, “all the prophets spoke of Your invisible nature and with their voices, all the preachers revealed Your existence and with the eyes of the Spirit saw Your human birth from the holy virgin”.



- “Abraham, the father of innumerable generations prefigured You by the tree that bore the ram.” Instead of sacrificing Isaac, Abraham sacrificed the ram.. This ram represents Jesus Christ.
- Moses on Mount Horeb, saw the glorious fire that dwelt in the bush without burning or consuming the bush, which is the fire of divinity that dwelt in the womb of the holy virgin while preserving her.
- Isaiah, the son of Amos, foretold of this Child Who manifested from the holy virgin and Whose authority does not pass away, and Whose Kingdom is everlasting (**Isaiah 7:14**).
- The prophet Isaiah saw this holy Child and cried out: ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and He will be called the Wonderful,” for He is God and man. (**Isaiah 9:6**).
- The prophet Ezekiel saw this hidden Child on the chariot with four faces (4 gospels) and preached that He would appear to the world in the flesh (**Ezekiel 1:6**).
- Today was born the One Whom David called the Son that sits at the right hand (**St. Matthew 22:44; St. Luke 20:41-44; Psalm 110:1 KJV - 109:1 OSB**). David sang of this Child of wonder, saying that He shall descend like rain upon the fleece (**Psalm 71:6 OSB - 72:6 KJV**) which is the holy virgin, and again when he sang, “You are My Son, today I have begotten You”, (**Psalm 2:7**)
- Jeremiah represented this beloved Child, saying, “The Lord shall raise a ray from David” (**Jeremiah 37:9 OSB - 30:9 KJV**). Daniel saw this compassionate Child and called Him the stone hewn without hands (**Daniel 2:34**).
- Job - "I know that my Savior is living and He will be seen on earth at the end" (**Job 19:25**).¹⁴

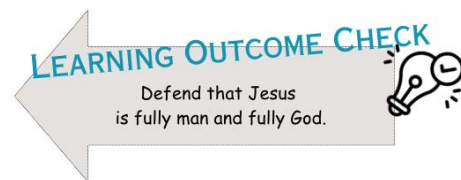
¹⁴ The Septuagint translation (Orthodox Study Bible) does not use the term "Redeemer/Savior" but the Peshitta translation does. See *Holy Bible from the ancient Eastern text : George M. Lamsa's translations from the Aramaic of the Peshitta*. (Harper Collins, 1968).

Jesus: Fully God and Fully Man

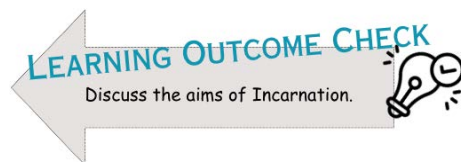
Although Christ became fully human, at no point did He stop being fully divine. When He was born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ was both man and God as one person. We sing this in the Qolo of Matins about St. Mary on Friday:

“Praise to the Strong One who left the ranks of the angels and descended and dwelt in the virgin’s womb. He entered her as God and came from her as God-man. Halleluia! Come, you peoples, and praise God who became man to save us!”

St. Cyril of Alexandria taught a unity of the human and divine natures in Christ. The emphasis on the unity of natures is seen in his famous formula of “one incarnate nature of God the Word.” This unity does not mean that one of the natures overtakes the other in any way. Christ is “perfect in Godhead—and also perfect in manhood at the same time; truly God and truly man.” Jesus shares the same substance, essence, or nature with the Father according to the Godhead, and yet He also shares the same substance, essence, or nature as humanity in order to save us. The existence of human nature in Christ is what allows for His suffering and His death. By definition, God, Himself, cannot suffer. However, since God fully takes on humanity, He suffers, because humanity is His own. He has a human body and thus He sanctified the human body. He has a human mind and thus sanctified the human mind. He has a human will and thus sanctified the human will.



Christ saves man through His Incarnation, through the communication of properties of His divine and human natures. For there to be a full communication or exchange of properties, Christ is fully human (and fully divine). “The great Image of glory was seen in mankind’s likeness/ To make man partake in His great glory; He is the image of God and yet, the image of man!” (Madrosho, Lilio of Nativity). To the extent that God took flesh and became human, he redeemed and saved it. The Word becomes flesh to restore communion between creation and God. God has united Himself to us that we might be united with Him. This is the purpose of the Incarnation.



For the Word, realizing that in no other way would the corruption of human beings be undone except, simply, by dying, yet being immortal and the Son of the Father the Word was not able to die, for this reason He takes to Himself a body capable of death, in order that it, participating in the Word who is above all, might be sufficient for death on behalf of all, and through the indwelling Word would remain incorruptible, and so corruption might henceforth cease from all by the grace of the resurrection.

- St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation, Section 9

Reflection Questions

Reflect on the following stanza from the Communion hymn from the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord:

*The Creator has been revealed
Today, He put idols to shame
Today, has come the Physician
To grant healing to all the sick
Today, the fortress of Satan
Has been destroyed and abandoned
Today, the Son of the Virgin
Became the Savior of the world
We cry aloud, Lord, and sing praise
"O Blessed Child, Glory to You!"*

*We, His servants, cry out and sing:
"Glory to the Incarnate Son"*

1. Analyze the connection between the Incarnation and our salvation. How is the Son of God fully and perfectly God and fully and perfectly man? Why is this so important?
2. How is death referred to in this hymn? What connection is there with the "Physician" and healing?
3. Evaluate how we understand the statement - Christ is the "Savior". What is he saving us from?

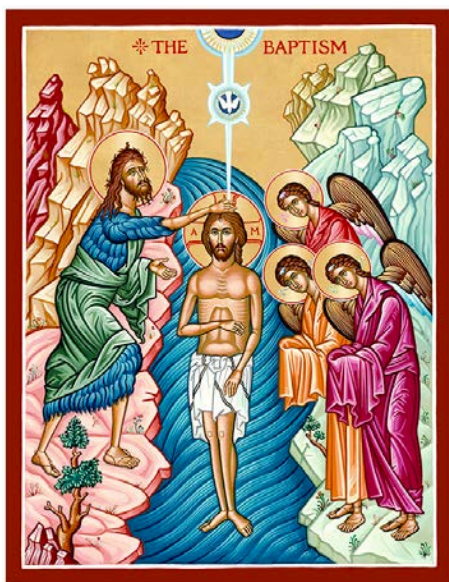
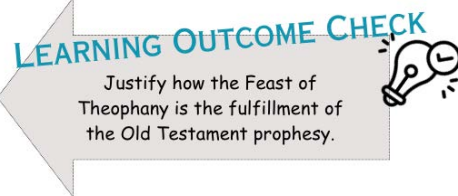
Lesson 9: Light Dawns in the River Jordan

Lesson Goals

- *I can demonstrate knowledge of the Feast of Theophany as observed in the Malankara Orthodox Church. .*
- *I can reflect why the blessing of the water symbolizes the purification and redemption of the entire fallen world.*
- *I can articulate ways in which the Feasts of Nativity, Theophany, and Presentation in the Temple are related.*

The Festival of Lights

Every festival celebrated during the liturgical year commemorates, enacts, and relives the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. As a result, every Feast represents a "refraction" through time of the special mystery of redemption. The Feast of Denho is celebrated each year on January 6 and for the Holy Church this is the commemoration of the **Baptism of Christ**. The Syriac word **Denho** means 'shining forth' (**dawn or daybreak**) (St. Luke 1:78). Daybreak in this context means the rising of the **Sun of Righteousness** (Malachi 4:2, Isaiah 60:1, 2 Samuel 23:4; Habakkuk 3:4) that was manifested at this festival. Denho is one of the oldest feasts in the life of the Church, older than the Feast of Yeldo or Nativity.



The divine revelation of the Holy Trinity happened at this Feast, and therefore, this is also called the Holy Theophany or Epiphany. At the **Baptism of Christ**, all three Persons of the Holy Trinity— the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — are made manifest.

Thus, the name of the Feast is **Epiphany**, meaning **manifestation**, or **Theophany**, meaning **manifestation of God**. All three words—Denho, Epiphany and Theophany—are proper terms. However, as Eastern Christians we should prefer Theophany, and as Syriac Christians we should know and use Denho.

From the first century of the Christian Church, there has always been “The Festival of Lights”. When the Sun of Righteousness dawns, the whole creation sees the light (**Psalm 35:10 OSB and 36:9 KJV**). We sing this also in the song “By your light we see the light Jesus, full of light.” It became a tradition later that in the depth of midwinter, the Festival of Lights was celebrated from Nativity (Christmas) till Theophany.

Over the centuries, the various aspects of this festival were separated into individual Feasts on different days: His Nativity, the Visitation of the Magi, His circumcision, and His presentation in the Temple. But the principal event of the Feast of Lights – Christ’s Baptism – continued to be commemorated on January 6.

Why is the Baptism of Christ so Important?

At the feast of Nativity (Christmas), we celebrate the incarnation of the Son of God, but the sonship was revealed at His Baptism. It is recorded in all four gospels (**St. Matthew 3:13-17, St. Mark 1:9-11, St. Luke 3:21-22, St. John 1:29-34**). When Jesus came up from the water, the heavens opened suddenly, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him. The Bible records that the Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus. The Father’s voice from heaven bears witness to the Son, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased”; and at the same moment the Holy Spirit, Who proceeds from the Father, descends in the form of a dove and rests upon the Son” (**St. Matthew 3:16-17**).

In the Orthodox tradition, this is seen as a revelation of the Holy Trinity. The Father and the Holy Spirit give testimony to the appearance of the Son of God in the flesh among mankind. The celebration of baptism, the divine manifestation, universal salvation, and the restoration of cosmic order helps those participating in the Feast remember their responsibility to live as God’s children on earth and motivates them to protect creation as the place of the manifestation of divine love.

Saint Ephrem in his hymns on the Nativity and Theophany mentions the importance of Denho - “All of the feast days derive their beauty and are adorned from the treasures of this Feast Day. Greater is this day than every day for on it the Compassionate One came out to sinners. The first-born Feast Day is this Day that is the first to conquer all the Feast Days Our Lord, increasing peace for us that we may celebrate The three Feasts of the Deity.”

His Baptism is a prefigurement of His death. The waters of the Jordan become symbolic of Hades. Christ’s descent into the waters becomes his descent into Hades where he “leads captivity captive” (**Ephesians 4:8**) and sets free those who have been held in bondage to death. So there are not one but two theophanies, one that occurred in the past when Christ was baptized and the second in the future which will happen with glory at the

end of the world. Paul says to be “looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (**Titus 2:13**)

Why did Jesus get baptized?

Jesus came to the river Jordan not to receive the forgiveness of sins or for receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit. People were baptized by John, confessing their sins, as a sign of repentance. When Jesus came to Jordan, John the Baptist tried to prevent him, saying “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?” (**St. Matthew 3:14**). These words demonstrate that Christ did not come like others for repentance because He Himself is perfect.

Why Did Jesus Get baptized?

- Christ’s baptism in Jordan was “theophany,” a manifestation of God to the world, because it was the beginning of our Lord’s public ministry. It was also a “theophany” in that the world was granted a revelation of the Holy Trinity. All three Persons were made manifest together: the Father testified from on high to the divine Sonship of Jesus; the Son received His Father’s testimony; and the Spirit was seen in the form of a dove, descending from the Father and resting upon the Son.
- Christ was baptized in order to reveal the truth to John the Baptist; to show the way that human beings have to follow in their life; and to sanctify the waters; “not to begin with receiving sanctification, but granting participation in sanctification.”
- Christ submitted to Baptism in order to teach us how we should behave in order to attract the grace of the Holy Spirit. This is why he became an example, in all things, that he might reveal the Holy Trinity; the Father witnessing from above, the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove and Christ himself bearing witness that he is the Son of God.

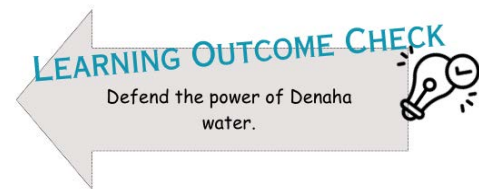
Why Did Jesus Get Baptized by John?

- Christ himself was baptized by John not because he was sinful and needed to repent, but because in allowing himself to be baptized he showed that indeed he was God’s “Beloved Son,” the Saviour and Messiah, the “Lamb of God who takes upon himself the sins of the world” (Matthew 3, Mark 1, Luke 3, John 1-3).

- Christ who was not known to the majority of people by his divine birth from the Virgin. This is why John the Evangelist says: “he stood up in the midst of the people” (John 1:26). Saint Paul says that, “John baptized the people with a Baptism of repentance asking the people to believe in him who was to come after him, namely Jesus” (Acts 19:4).
- So we see that Christ was baptized in order that the multitude of people who were there might know him and believe in him; and also in order that “all righteousness might be fulfilled” (Matthew 3:15)

Blessing of the Waters

When the church celebrates the feast of Theophany, water becomes the means of healing and grace. The celebrant prays to bless the water “for the healing of sickness; for support of the weak... for the purification of passions; for the sanctification of the homes; for the preservation from all injuries”. The holy water from the church is given to the faithful to consume so that we may receive the gift of the divine healing of our soul, body, and spirit.



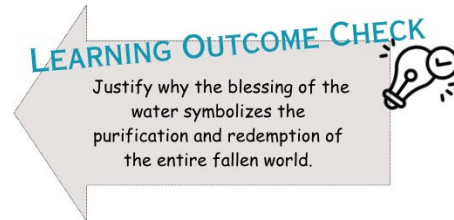
The following excerpt from the blessing of the water of the Denho service shows how waters continue to be a source of blessing and grace for His chosen people:

“By the water and the Spirit, You have renewed our nature which was corrupted by sin; by the waters You overwhelmed sin in the days of Noah; by the waters of the sea You delivered the Hebrews from the bondage of Pharaoh; by the fire and water of the Prophet Elijah’s sacrifice You absolved Israel from the worship of Ba’al. Even now, Oh Lord, as You bless these waters by Your grace, bestow upon all those who touch them or participate in them or use them, in true faith, for any purpose whatsoever; blessings, holiness and purification; health, healing and rest to the afflicted; encouragement, aid and freedom from all mental and carnal passions.”

The Restoration of Creation

Christ in His baptism purified the waters. As He entered into river Jordan, all waters on earth became purified. He came to redeem not only human beings but, through them,

the entire creation. The waters become the means of healing and grace. But not only waters, any other material thing may be a bearer of the Spirit.



The Feast of Epiphany speaks of the restoration of the pure human image, as well as of all material nature. Creation “will be set free from its bondage” and will obtain “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (**Romans 8:20**). All things are to be set right. They are to be permeated by the light, love, grace, and glory of God. In the Feast, the Church reminds us of the historicity of the Incarnation and the goal of Christian existence: to “become partakers of the divine nature” (**2 Peter 1:4**). The verb baptize means sink, dip, and wash. This symbolizes the burial of the dead in the tombs as the baptized are buried with Christ to rise up with Him in the new life.

Season of Epiphany

Epiphany is not only a feast of the Church, but it is also a full season within the liturgical calendar of our Church. The calendar is divided into seven seasons, one of which is the season of Epiphany, which lasts from the day of Nativity until right before the beginning of the Great Lent.

During this season, Ma’altho, or Presentation of the Lord, is also celebrated.

The feast of the Presentation is linked to the Jewish rite of purification of the mother which was performed according to Mosaic law 40 days after the birth of a male child (Leviticus 12:2-6). According to the law, only the mother needed to be purified, but, as a firstborn son, Jesus needed to be redeemed (Exodus 13:11ff). Thus the Feast of the Presentation is logically celebrated 40 days after Christmas. “Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.” (**St. Luke 2:22, OSB**) Hence, this feast is celebrated on February 2. The earliest information regarding the celebration of this feast comes from Egeria, a woman who described her pilgrimage to the Holy Land around the year 390.



Why, then, do we celebrate this feast after the Feast of the Theophany on January 6th? The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ is considered the completion of the Nativity, where the light from heaven shines down on Him to reveal the incarnation of God to the

world. It is the conclusion of the Twelve Days of Christmas, as Theophany is celebrated 12 days after Nativity.

During the first four centuries of the church, the Feasts of Nativity and Theophany were celebrated as one feast on January 6 and it was referred to as the Feast of Epiphany “revelation from above”. Later in the fourth century, the two feasts were separated, and the practice of celebrating Nativity on December 25 was introduced by the Church of Antioch. In the fifth century, this practice was adopted by the Church of Alexandria, and later was also adopted by Jerusalem. The Malankara Orthodox Church continues to celebrate Theophany on January 6.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do we find the water that is used for Denho service so powerful?
2. Why did Jesus need to be baptized if He is already God? Why did he pick John the Baptist to baptize him?
3. Why do we celebrate the Feast of Theophany 12 days after Nativity?
4. Explain how Epiphany, Theophany, Denho and Baptism of the Lord can be used interchangeably.

Lesson 10: Triumphant Entry of Jesus

Learning Goals

- *I can interpret Hosanna as the blessing of all creation.*
- *I can analyze Christ's Entry into Jerusalem from the perspectives of the Jews.*
- *I can connect Christ's entry into Jerusalem with His entry into our hearts.*

The Feast of Hosanna commemorates the event when Christ entered Jerusalem on a colt. The people who heard Christ was approaching cut branches from the palm trees and gathered to meet Him (**St. John 12:13**).

This event was spoken about by the prophets. As stated by the Prophet Zechariah, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Proclaim it aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King comes to you; He is righteous and saving; He is gentle and mounted upon a donkey, even a young foal” (**Zechariah 9:9**).



The palm leaves that are blessed and distributed during the Feast of Hosanna are first described in the Book of Leviticus. During the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, God instructed the people of Israel to “...take for yourselves on the first day the ripe fruit of a

tree, leaves of palm trees, the branches of leafy trees, and the pure willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days" (**Leviticus 23:40**).

The Prophet Ezekiel had a vision where the image of palm trees was used to decorate the heavenly temple. As stated, "...on each entrance chamber were ornamental palm trees, equally displayed on one side and the other" (**Ezekiel 40:16**). Again, "...from the space above the door, even to the inner room, as well as outside, and on every wall all around, inside and outside, by measure within and without were depicted cherubim and palm trees, between cherub and cherub. Each cherub had two faces, the face of a man toward a palm tree on one side and the face of a lion toward a palm tree on the other side. Thus, it was depicted throughout the house all around. From the floor to the threshold, the cherubim and the palm tree were interspersed upon the walls" (**Ezekiel 41:17-20**).

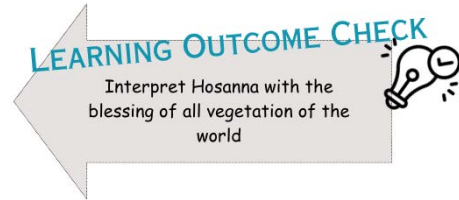


Also, the design of palm trees was placed on the doors of the temple as well. As stated, "Depictions were upon them, cherubim and palm trees upon the doorways of the temple, like the depiction of the sanctuary..." (**Ezekiel 41:25**). Furthermore, when King Solomon was constructing the Temple in Jerusalem, "...he carved all the walls of the temple all around, both the inner and outer sanctuaries, with carved figures of cherubim and palm trees." (**1 Kingdom 6:28**). The temple constructed by Solomon and the one seen in Ezekiel's vision were the same in their design. Finally, in the Book of Revelation, St. John the Apostle sees a vision of the believers standing before the throne of God. As described, "...behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands..." (**Revelation 7:9**).

The imagery of palm trees is not solely found in the Gospels but has been carried through since the time God gave the law to His people. The significance of the palm branches is elaborated by St. Severus of Antioch, who states, "Indeed, on the one hand, the fact that the donkey walks on the branches and leaves of palm trees would make it clearly known that not only He who was mounted upon it but also those who would believe in Him were going to subdue all their enemies, trample them under their feet and win a glorious victory. For the branches and leaves of palm trees are the emblems of victory."

The palm branches are a sign of the victory that is given to us through Jesus Christ. The victory that is achieved is the victory over death through Christ's death on the cross. Through His death and resurrection, Christ has granted us the gift of eternal life.

During the Feast of Hosanna, the priest blesses the palm leaves during the special service that commemorates the Feast. While the chief celebrant blesses the leaves, he blesses branches and trees from which they were cut off and blesses all the lands and plants. Those blessed leaves make the palms of blessings, guardians of homes, conquerors over Satan and for the deliverance from all temptations.



Those blessed leaves are cared for with reverence. In one of the prayers for the blessing of the palm leaves, the following is stated by the priest, "You, O Lord, God, who, by all providence, have performed all these wonders on our account, even now, by Your plentiful mercies, bless these branches and the trees from which they were cut off and also all the plants which Your Lordship created. Let them be a blessing to their recipients, a deliverance for those who hold them, make them branches of glory, leaves of holiness and hosanna of purity." In another prayer said by the priest, "Yea, O Lord, by the abiding of Your grace, bless all of us and all the lands and the plants, together with these branches, and make them palms of blessings, guardians of homes, conquerors over Satan and for the deliverance from all temptations."

As evident through Scripture and our liturgical prayers, the usage of palm leaves is a sign given to us by God as a symbol of victory and a reminder of our connection to creation itself. In addition, the palm leaves serve to indicate that the physical space it is in is considered to be holy and sanctified. Therefore, palm leaves show that the whole world has been sanctified by Christ and are a reminder of the victory we have through Him.

The worship reminds us to confirm Jesus as the King of all nations and invite Him into our hearts. The elegance of our worship is not simply saying some petitions. Rather, we stand before God as angels do and remember things that God did for the world and its inhabitants. In fact, the Palm Sunday worship depicts heavenly worship, "*After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, people, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*" (**Revelation 7:9**)

Palm Sunday is our chance to prepare our hearts for the King who came down from heaven to save us from our sins. He reigns peace and love if we open our hearts for His triumphal entry. Through our majestic worship, we join the heavenly worship for the Heavenly Kingdom.

Jewish Perspective on Christ's Entry into Jerusalem

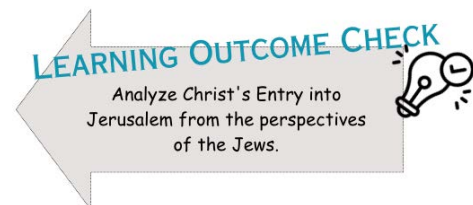
The Jewish people had mixed perspectives during Christ's entry into Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders, such as the priests and scribes, were frustrated and furious with Jesus Christ. His popularity increased, especially after He raised Lazarus from death (**St. John 11:38-44**). The Jewish leaders saw Him as a threat. As stated, "And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, 'Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.' But He answered and said to them, 'I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out'" (**St. Luke 19:39-40**).

However, not all Jewish leaders were against Christ. The key word in this passage is 'some'. Even among the Pharisees, some supported Christ, but only in secret.

An example is Nicodemus, who visited Christ at night to speak to Him. As stated, "There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus at night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him'" (**St. John 3:1-2**).

At the moment of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the people were joyous at receiving Jesus into Jerusalem. St. Luke's gospel states, "...as He went, many spread their clothes on the road. Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen..." (**St. Luke 19:36-37**). Yet, all this changed by the time of the crucifixion when the Jewish people wanted to crucify Him.

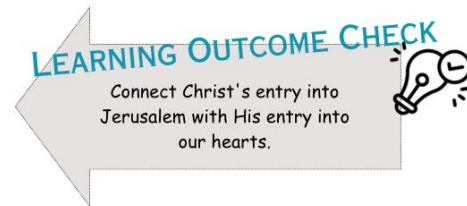
The reaction of the Jewish people is a reflection of how our relationship with God can sometimes be. There are moments when we honor God through our lives and are joyous for His blessings. However, there are other moments where we find ourselves in opposition to God. When life doesn't go as planned, and we experience frustration, we should learn to rely on God more and more and thus experience the grace of God more lovingly.



Jerusalem and Our Hearts

When Christ entered Jerusalem, it was a time of peace, celebration, and joy. St. Severus of Antioch connects the arrival of Samuel the Prophet to Bethlehem with the triumphant entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. In **1 Samuel 16:4**, the people of Israel ask Prophet Samuel whether he came peaceably. Why so?

The answer was that peace between God and humans was already lost. When Christ entered triumphantly into Jerusalem, the people received Him with olive tree branches and palm leaves, indicating peace between God and humans getting established. Olive branches meant peace. When the dove brought an Olive branch, it told peace to Noah (**Genesis 8:11**), the end of the sin of Adam. Palm Sunday was the answer to the question of the people of Israel to Prophet Samuel, says St. Severus of Antioch, and thus it was the new beginning. There was the feeling of hope that God had come to help and save His people. Jerusalem holds a special place in the hearts of the Jewish people.



King David established Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. His son, King Solomon, built the original temple. The temple was the place where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. Inside the ark were the tablets of the law, Aaron's budded rod, and the jar of manna. Jerusalem held a special place in the hearts of the Jewish people because of the blessings God had bestowed on the inhabitants of the city and on all of Israel. Jerusalem stood as a sign of God's favor and protection for His people. As expressed in the Book of Psalms, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand be forgotten; may my tongue be glued to my throat if I do not remember you, if I do not prefer Jerusalem in the beginning of my merriment" (**Psalms 136:5-6**).

However, there is something more significant to God than the city of Jerusalem. In his Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul says, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (**1 Corinthians 3:16-17**). When we celebrate the moment of Christ entering Jerusalem, we are to reflect on whether we can joyously celebrate Christ entering into our hearts once again.

God considers us to be more valuable than any temple built by human hands. We are made in the image of God and are more valuable than any building. By becoming one of us, God's incarnation established the immeasurable value we possess as human beings. When Christ entered Jerusalem, the gates of the city were opened for Him. Whether we open the gates to our hearts for Christ is a choice we must make.

As Christ says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (**Revelation 3:20-21**). The Feast of Hosanna is more than a commemoration but a contemplation of whether Christ will triumphantly enter into our hearts.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the significance of the Palm leaves used in the Feast of Hosanna?
2. How do we reconcile with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as King, and then the King who enters into His Passion and Crucifixion?
3. What steps can a believer take to have Christ be and remain the center of their life?

Lesson 11: The Lamb of God

Lesson Goals

- I can establish connections between the Passover of the Old Testament and Christ as the fulfillment of that Passover.
- I can understand the differences between the Passover accounts in the Synoptic Gospels and St. John's Gospel.
- I can examine Christ's words of the Institution of the Holy Qurbana and understand their implications for our salvation.

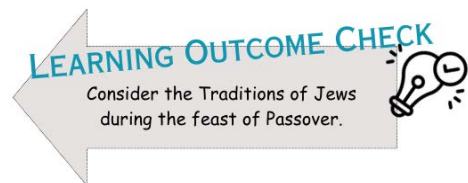
Christ the Passover Lamb

When St. John the Baptist saw Christ coming towards him to be baptized, he testified an important revelation to all - "Behold, the Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sin of the World!" (St. John 1:29).

Passover is one of the most important festivals in Judaism. It is a celebration of the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and it is also an opportunity to reflect on the theme of deliverance from death. In this chapter, we will explore the significance of Passover as the deliverance from death and the role of the lamb in this celebration. In addition, we will examine what days led to Christ's betrayal and crucifixion.

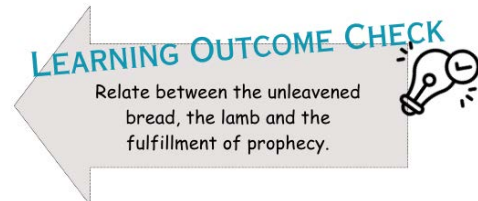
The story of Passover begins with the Israelites in Egypt, who were enslaved by Pharaoh. Moses, chosen by God to be their leader, was tasked with convincing Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. When Pharaoh refused, God sent ten plagues upon Egypt, the final one being the death of every firstborn in the land. However, the Israelites were instructed to mark their doorposts with the blood of a lamb, so that the angel of death would pass over their homes and spare their firstborn sons (Exodus 12).

The Passover celebration includes several traditions that are observed by Jews to this day. One of the most significant is the Seder meal, which is a family meal that takes place on the first two nights of Passover. During this meal, the Haggadah (a book that tells the story of the Exodus) is read, and several symbolic foods are eaten, including unleavened bread (matzah) and a roasted lamb bone.

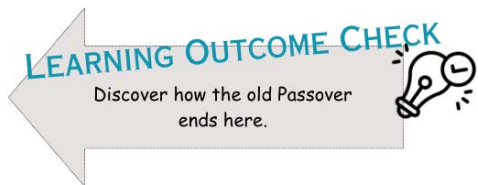


The lamb bone on the Seder plate represents the Paschal lamb that was sacrificed in the Temple during the time of the Exodus. This lamb was required to be male, one year old, and without blemish, and it was roasted whole and eaten by the Israelites on the night of the Exodus. The symbolism of Jesus Christ as “the Lamb” alludes to Christ’s death on the Cross “to take away the sins of the world”.

The unleavened bread (matzah) is another important symbol of Passover. According to tradition, when the Israelites were fleeing Egypt, they did not have time to let their bread rise, so they baked unleavened bread instead. This bread represents the haste with which the Israelites left Egypt, and it also symbolizes the purity and simplicity that is required for a life of faith. The unleavened bread is often referred to as the bread of affliction, and it is eaten with bitter herbs to remind the Jews of the bitterness of slavery in Egypt.

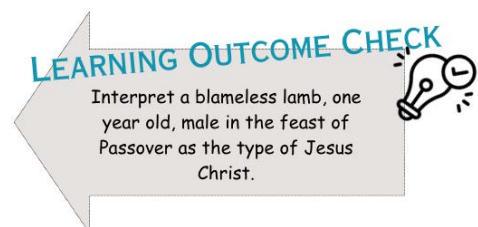


The Passover celebration is deeply rooted in Jewish history and tradition, and it also points to the fulfillment of prophecy in Christ. In the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus is referred to as the "Lamb of God" (St. John 1:29), and in the book of Revelation, He is described as a lamb that was slain (Revelation 5:6). Just as the Passover lamb was a symbol of deliverance from death, so too is Christ's sacrifice on the cross a means of deliverance from sin and death.



The connection between Christ and the Passover lamb is a topic that has been explored extensively by the Church Fathers. One of the most notable references to this connection is found in the writings of Saint John Chrysostom, who wrote: “As the Jews were celebrating the Passover with the slaying of the lamb, so we celebrate the Passover with the offering of the Lamb, Christ. They celebrated the shadow, we, the truth. The shadow passed away, the truth has come” (*Homilies on the Gospel of John*).

Saint Cyril of Alexandria also wrote extensively on this connection, noting that the Passover lamb was a type or prefiguration of Christ, who was the true and perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He wrote: “The lamb which was slain as a type of Christ was a male of a year old, and without blemish, and had no broken bone, and was slain by the whole

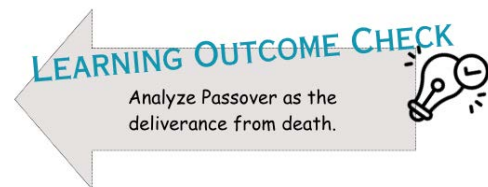


multitude, as it were, of the people of the Hebrews. And Christ, the true Passover Lamb, is of one year, that is, of one dispensation, and without blemish, that is, without sin; and He suffered willingly, and was slain by the whole people, that is, by the Jews and Gentiles alike” (*Commentary on the Gospel of John*).

Saint Gregory of Nyssa also saw the connection between the Passover lamb and Christ, writing: “The Passover of the Jews was a type of Christ, Who is the true Passover, because the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world was sacrificed for us. The blood of the Passover lamb saved the Israelites from death, and the Blood of Christ saves us from eternal death” (*The Great Catechism*).

Overall, the Church Fathers saw the connection between Christ and the Passover lamb as a crucial element in understanding the salvific work of Christ. The Passover lamb was a type or prefiguration of Christ, who was the true and perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. By understanding this connection, Christians can better appreciate the depth of God's love for humanity and the extent to which He was willing to go to save us from sin and death.

Passover is a celebration of deliverance from death that is deeply meaningful for Jews and Christians alike. The traditions of the Seder meal, the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb, and the eating of unleavened bread all point to the theme of deliverance, both in the context of the Exodus and in the ultimate deliverance that is found in Christ. As we reflect on the significance of Passover, we are reminded of the power of God's saving grace and the hope that is available to all who put their trust in His salvific sacrifice.



Passover in the Synoptic and Johannine Gospels

When we read all the Gospels, we understand that Saint John's timeline of the Passover seems to differ from the Synoptic Gospels (Saints Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The Synoptic Gospels indicate that the disciples prepared the Passover meal “on the first day of Unleavened Bread,” or Thursday night (Saint Mark 14:12; see also Saint Matthew 26:17; Saint Luke 22:7). Judas went out to betray our Lord Jesus Christ that evening, and Jesus was arrested in the night. He was then crucified on Friday. He was in the grave until Sunday morning, on which day He was raised from the dead.

In the Johannine Gospel, Saint John records three Passovers. These three Passovers occur in the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry. Saint John alone recorded the three separate Passover celebrations. Saint John mentions the first in John 2, the second Passover in 6:4 and the third one in 11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; and 19:14. This third Passover was the one that occurred on the night before Jesus died, and it is the one recorded by all four Gospel writers in conjunction with the Last Supper and the death of Jesus.

Synoptic Gospels

In the Synoptic Gospels our Lord Jesus Christ sends some disciples (only Saint Luke says it was Peter and John) into Jerusalem to prepare for His last meal; in all three Synoptics, it is clearly a Passover Meal, which commemorates the Exodus of the Jews (Saints Mark 14:12; Matthew 26:17; Luke 22:7-8, 15). All three Synoptics show Jesus speaking the blessing prayers, and saying the bread and wine is His own body and blood (Saints Mark 14:22-25; Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:15-20). Only Saint Luke has Jesus Christ explicitly say, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Saint Luke 22:19). Only Saint Luke gives evidence of the Passover tradition of blessing multiple cups of wine (Saint Luke 22:17, 20). Saint Luke also has much more incidents during the Last Supper, including Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial (Saint Luke 22:31-34; cf. John 13:36-38). In Saint Mark and Saint Matthew, our Lord Jesus Christ's prediction of Peter's denial takes place just after the supper, as they are on their way to Gethsemane (Saint Mark 14:26-31; Saint Matthew 26:30-35).

Saint John's Gospel

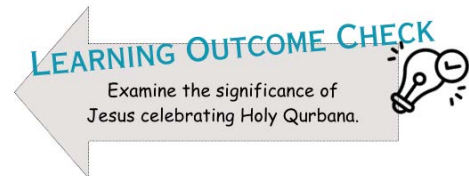
In Saint John's Gospel, our Lord Jesus Christ's Last Supper is not a Passover Meal, but takes place just before the Feast of Passover (Saint John 13:1) and in Saint John, Jesus is crucified on the same afternoon that the Passover Lambs are slaughtered (cf. 19:31-37). The "Eucharistic" words of Jesus are not recorded in Saint John 13, but were already spoken earlier (Saint John 6:22-59). During this final meal in Saint John's Gospel, Jesus washes all of His disciples' feet (John 13:2-16). Then He tells them, "For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (13:15). During the meal, Jesus foretells Judas' betrayal (Saint John 13:21-30) and Peter's denial (13:36-38). During the meal, Jesus also gives a "Farewell Discourse" (13:31—16:33) and addresses a long prayer to God the Father (17:1-26).

Christ at Passover

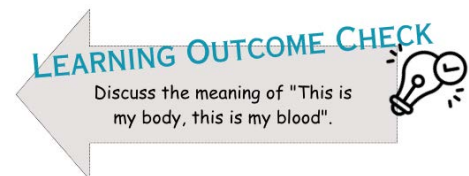
As Christians, we confess that the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist or "Holy Qurbana" was instituted by our Lord at His final meal with His disciples before entering into His Passion. This institution by Christ is important because Christ foreshadows His death and

resurrection through the Eucharist. We, as Christians, are able to understand that the Passover meal and the bread and wine that Christ offers as His Body and Blood truly point to His death and resurrection. That is why it is imperative to follow the Lord's command and to partake in the Eucharist in remembrance of Him (St. Luke 22:18-20; I Corinthians 11:23-25).

Christ is the author and the One who acts in all the Sacraments of the Holy Church, of which the Eucharist is at the center. This sacrament is one that Christ Himself establishes, directly commands us to partake of, and to do so in remembrance and participation of His Death and Resurrection.



It is important to note here that Christ does NOT say that the bread and wine are symbols of His Body and Blood. He says that it is His Body and Blood, and thus we confess that through apostolic succession, we continue to receive that Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Holy Qurbana. This may be difficult for us to understand, and even some in the Scriptures struggled with these words that Christ taught about being the Bread of Life and walked away (St. John 6:60-61). The Church does not try to explain how the bread and wine we offer becomes the Body and Blood. It is a mystery! So, even though we don't know how the bread and wine we offer become the Body and the Blood, we believe that it does and we confess it to be so. Not only that it is true, but that through His Body and Blood, we gain eternal life and He abides in us always (St. John 6:56).



When was Jesus crucified?

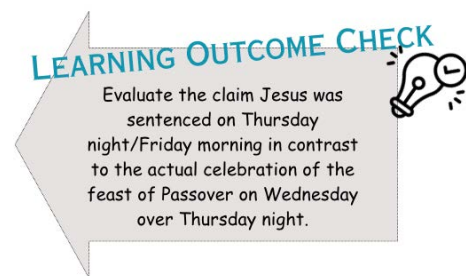
The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ is one of the most significant events in Christian history. It is during this time that we see the ultimate sacrifice made for humanity. The events leading up to this moment are important to understand, as they give context to the ultimate sacrifice that was made.

The timing of Jesus' sentencing and crucifixion has been a topic of debate among scholars and theologians for centuries. While some argue that Jesus was sentenced on Thursday night/Friday morning and crucified on Friday, others contend that he was sentenced and crucified on Wednesday/Thursday, in accordance with the timing of the Passover feast.

Patristic sources do not provide a clear consensus on this issue, but some offer insights that may shed light on the matter. For example, St. John Chrysostom argues that Jesus was indeed crucified on Friday, citing the fact that the Sabbath began on Friday at sunset (Homily 85 on the Gospel of Matthew). Augustine also supports this view, stating that Jesus was crucified on the sixth day of the week, which was the day of preparation for the Sabbath (Tractate 120 on the Gospel of John). We also attest to this in our worship, especially on Great and Holy Friday, where there are many references to Adam being created on the sixth day and Christ being crucified on the sixth day.

However, other patristic sources suggest that Jesus was crucified on Wednesday/Thursday. For example, St. Gregory of Nyssa writes that Jesus was crucified on the day of the Passover, which was Wednesday (The Great Catechism, Book IV). St. Epiphanius of Salamis also supports this view, stating that Jesus was crucified on the day of the Passover, which was the fourth day of the week (Panarion, 51).

In terms of scholarly sources, the debate over the timing of Jesus' crucifixion continues to this day. Some scholars argue that Jesus was indeed crucified on Friday, while others maintain that he was crucified on Wednesday/Thursday. One argument in favor of the latter view is that the Gospel of John places the Last Supper on the day before the Passover (John 13:1), which would have been Wednesday evening according to the Jewish calendar. Additionally, the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) suggest that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, which would also place the crucifixion on Wednesday/Thursday.



We may never know what exact day that Christ was crucified, but this does not change the fundamental truth that Christ died for us, took on the sin of the world as the Eternal Passover Lamb, and defeated death through His Resurrection. What is clear is that the events of His crucifixion and resurrection represent the ultimate sacrifice and victory over sin and death, fulfilling the Passover theme of deliverance from death and redemption.

In conclusion, understanding the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is essential in understanding the sacrifice that was made for humanity. The Passover Feast and its traditions, including the sacrifice of the blameless lamb and the unleavened bread, provide important context for the ultimate sacrifice made by Jesus Christ, a sacrifice that is eternal and never has to be done again. The Old Passover is no more, and the new Passover

with Christ as the Lamb is an eternal one that we all partake in at every Divine Liturgy and eternally.

Reflection Questions

1. How is Christ the fulfillment of the Passover?
2. What do the different timelines in the Synoptics and St. John's Gospel tell us about Christ?
3. How is the Holy Qurbana relevant for our salvation?
4. Analyze St. Simeon's words, "Now let your servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen Your Salvation" (St. Luke 2:29). How can we also relate to this prayer and apply in our life as we receive the Holy Qurbana?

Lesson 12: The Life Giving Crucifixion

Lesson Goals

- *I can construct the journey of the faithful thief, through the Song of the Two Thieves.*
 - *I can explain the concept of time in liturgy.*
 - *I can defend how Christ died on the Cross but never lost His Divinity.*
-

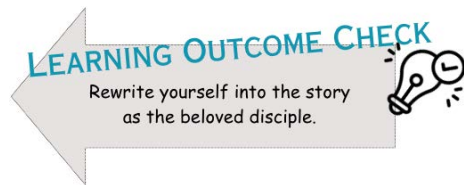
As early as the 2nd grade, you may have learned that the Gospel of John is written differently than the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). It is called the Theological Gospel because of its depth in reflection on what God has done for our salvation. The Synoptic Gospels had already been written and circulated by the time the Gospel of John was written. Therefore, John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, was able to use his limited amount of papyrus to communicate the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ in a more reflective manner, knowing the previous three gospels had already given “an orderly account” (**St. Luke 1:3**). For example, the Gospel of John begins with the same words as the book of Genesis, “In the beginning” knowing that an account of the Nativity has already been written in two other gospels. Therefore, he has the liberty to go back to the very beginning and speak of the Incarnation of the Son of God and what that means for us in the prologue to this Gospel. Towards the end in chapter 20, John gives us the key to the purpose of this Gospel when he writes, “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (**St. John 20:30-31**).

One particular instance of this is in John 19: 25-27:

25 Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother, and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" 27 Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.

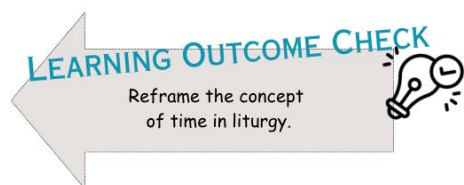
These verses take us to the scene of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross. It is an emotional scene. It speaks of the reality of the situation that the Virgin Mary would need someone to take care of her after the death of her only son.¹⁵ Also, John himself is the youngest of the disciples, a mere teenager at the time.

He would need someone to take care of him as well. And yet, these details, though very heartbreaking, would not necessarily be worthy of the Gospel written “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” That is until you look again at the passage. Why were the names of Mary the Theotokos and John omitted? Verse 26 says: “When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by.” It’s an odd use of words. The sentence could have been: When Jesus saw Mary, his mother and me, John standing by. It would have taken less words, even in Greek. Yes, the beloved disciple is John. But, John wrote this so that it wasn’t just him. He wrote you into the story as well. You are the beloved disciple. When almost everyone has abandoned our Lord Jesus Christ in His suffering at the cross, You are found there at the foot of the Cross as the beloved disciple, remaining faithful to the Lord. Our Lord Jesus Christ has a concern for you. He does not wish to leave you alone.



26 When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, “Woman, behold your son!” 27 Then He said to the disciple, “Behold your mother!” And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.

Therefore He entrusts you to your mother, The Church. And He also entrusts The Church to you the beloved disciple as well. It is a profound reality. You do not read a story of something that merely happened a long time ago, but these verses take you beyond time and space and place you at the foot of the Cross.

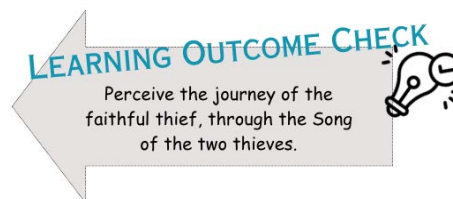


The Holy Liturgy does the same thing. On Great Friday, at the Service of the Veneration of the Cross, you are given the opportunity to worship and kneel before the Cross. You, along with the Church, are singing and chanting at the time: “We bow before the Cross, by which we receive salvation for our souls, and together with the thief we cry out, Remember us O Christ when You come!”

¹⁵ The need for someone to take care of the Theotokos also tells us two things, that Joseph has already passed away and that Jesus was St. Mary’s only child. The brothers referred to in John 7:2-4 must either be children of Joseph from his previous wife who had passed away leaving him a widower or they must be his cousin-brothers which is a common word usage in both Semitic families as well as families of eastern cultures.

In The Song of the Two Thieves during the 9th Hour of Great Friday, the first deacon sings:

Come, all peoples, and listen
To the voice of the two thieves;
Discern the words, which they
speak
To each other on the Cross!

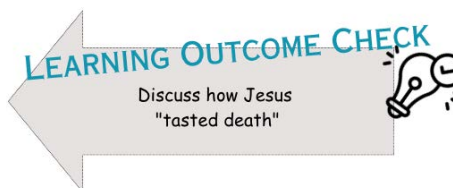


Note that the invitation is to all peoples in the present tense to listen to the conversation between the two thieves being crucified on either side of Jesus. The rest of the song calls your attention to everything that is happening during the Lord's crucifixion, from the rocks bursting because of the earthquake and the sun darkening, to the destruction of Sheol's gates and the trembling of Creation at the suffering of the Lord. Listening to this confession of faith of the thief on the right hand side is a moving experience that culminates in the whole congregation singing the final stanza:

O Lord, who has promised life
To those who believe in You,
Remember us when You come,
For we, O Lord, confess You!

The Liturgy is not looking backwards and re-enacting something that has happened in the past. Instead, when you come to worship in the Orthodox Church, you are stepping beyond time and space and worshipping at the event itself. You are both participating in the event itself and also the event is coming forward into the present now. The prayers and hymns of the Church reflect this. Note the use of the word "Today" throughout the liturgy.

When you stand in Church on Great Friday, you worship the Lord who has tasted death for Your sake today.¹⁶ To taste death means to experience it. But, also, the last thing He did before giving up His Spirit was to receive the sour wine.



After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, "I thirst!" Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop, and put it to His mouth. 30 So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit. (St. John 19:28-29)

¹⁶ Hebrews 2:9

This is the reversal of the sin of Adam and Eve who had tasted the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil because it looked good to them. By their tasting of that fruit, death had entered into the world. And now, by our Lord tasting the sour wine, and entering into Sheol, death is destroyed. It is by His death that He then tramples upon death itself and destroys it, once and for all. Death has lost its sting (**1 Corinthians 15:55**) because it cannot hold the sinless One. If it cannot hold our Lord Jesus Christ, then it cannot hold you either, because you have received Christ and He dwells within you because of the Holy Qurbana, the fruit from the Tree of Life that you have tasted.

Just before our Lord gives up His Spirit, He says, “It is finished.” It hearkens back to the “In the beginning” found at the opening words of John’s Gospel, which had connected to the beginning of Genesis itself. According to Fr. John Behr, this “It is finished” refers to the making of man in **Genesis 1:26**.¹⁷ And now, having accomplished all these things, the Lord was going to rest in the tomb on the Sabbath. Now, the eighth day, the New Day of the Resurrection can begin. This is what you experience every Sunday in the Holy Qurbana. It is a foretaste of the Kingdom. It is both an end and a beginning at the same time. Through death you receive life. And now, today your participation in the death of Christ gives you life.

Reflection Questions

1. When we celebrate a feast of our Lord in Church, are we looking backwards and re-enacting that feast?
2. Why do you think Jesus said “I thirst” while he was on the cross?
3. Read Hebrews 2:9, how does Christ “taste death” on Great Friday? What does this mean?

¹⁷ <https://youtu.be/xhQ5d2wNvMk?t=240>

Lesson 13: The Faith of the Councils

Lesson Goals

- *I can Describe the Faith of the Three Ecumenical Councils*
 - *I can Elaborate on the Church being One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*
 - *I can Explain the Veneration of the Holy and Ever Virgin Mary as the Mother of God*
-

The Church faced numerous challenging decisions as it advanced through history. The apostles and later the bishops served as the Church's appointed leaders. The Church always resolved disagreements and made decisions by coming to a consensus among all the inspired believers. In its first few centuries of existence Christianity witnessed the persecution of many of its members by officials of the Roman Empire. After persecution ended, the Church grew. In early days, Jerusalem was the center of Christianity, later it became Rome, and now Constantinople. The apostles ordained men to succeed them. Today, these are known as bishops. Bishops were the shepherds of their flocks – rural bishops of small towns and villages, metropolitan and archbishops of larger cities and states, and the Patriarchs were by now five: Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch. The Patriarchates were a position of honor and prestige but not a ruling oligarchy. When a council is called, just as at Jerusalem in the first century, all bishops converge, each with an equal vote.

At the beginning of the 4th century, two disagreements troubled the Church:

1. When should Christians celebrate Pascha (Easter)? Some Christians were celebrating, with the Jewish Passover, others on a particular Sunday, and others in a certain week, not on a Sunday.
2. What was the nature of Jesus – God or man? No one had yet put into words exactly what the Church believed about Jesus. Now that peace reigned for the Church, theology blossomed. What is theology? The study of God and formulation of Christian belief. Soon, a serious disagreement developed between Patriarch Alexander of Alexandria and one of his priests, named Arius. Arius thought things through and decided that, if Jesus was born, there must have been a time when He was not, and therefore He could not be equal to God the Father. He was not truly God. Many Christians began to be swayed by his reasoning, splitting the Church.

First Ecumenical Council

The First Ecumenical Council, also known as the First Council of Nicaea, took place in 325 A.D. in Nicaea (modern day Turkey). Emperor Constantine called the Council to address a dispute that had started between Bishop Alexander and Arius, an Alexandrian presbyter. By 325 A.D., the conflict had become so extensive that it appeared to be a threat to the stability of the Church in the eastern Roman Empire. The debate centered on whether or not belief in Jesus Christ's full deity and belief in the unity and transcendence of God were compatible. Arius claimed that the Son of God, manifested in Jesus Christ, could not possibly be "God" in the full and true meaning but was instead, the most elevated of all God's creatures, influenced by some Neo-Platonic intellectual schools.

Arius started spreading the new concept that the Son was not there at all at one point in time. Arius acknowledged that Christ was the son of God the Father, who had been made just a little bit earlier than the angels but who was nonetheless created and was not identical to the Father in essence. According to this heretical doctrine, Christ was not God. How can He save man if He is not God? This is the main argument that Arianism generated.

At the Council, presided over by Bishop Hosius of Cordoba, Emperor Constantine and 318 A.D. Fathers denounced the teachings of Arius as heresy. They formulated the Nicene Creed, which affirmed the full divinity of Jesus Christ and His consubstantiality with God the Father. The *Nicean Creed*, otherwise known as *The Symbol of Faith*, was composed there, at what came to be known as the First Ecumenical Council. While other Creeds did exist before Nicaea, this new Symbol was meant to be the Church's official statement of belief. While rites differed from country to country and even province to province throughout the Empire, worship contained some constants—and one of these was the Creed. The Fathers at Nicaea recognized the need of having an easily memorized text which could be recognized from Great Britain to Constantinople and over to Syria and down into Egypt and Ethiopia and beyond as the standard of the Christian Faith. The Creed clearly combats Arianism; the Son is confessed to be: *One Lord Jesus Christ, THE Son of the Father, begotten of the Father BEFORE All Ages*. Furthermore, He is *Light of Light, True God of True God, Begotten NOT made, of ONE Essence with the Father, by WHOM all things were made*.

At this Council, it was resolved to celebrate the Feast of Resurrection (*Kyomto*) on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox, after the Jewish Passover. It also determined the various rules for bishops, priests, and deacons, their jurisdiction, and their elections/ordinations respectively. Canons that priests should be married, and many other canons regarding excommunication, and penance were established at the First Ecumenical Council.

Second Ecumenical Council

Under the reign of Emperor Theodosius I, the Second Ecumenical Council met at Constantinople in the year 381 A.D. This Council was called in response to Macedonius, a bishop of Constantinople who taught falsehoods and denied the Godhead of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Holy Trinity. He said that the Holy Spirit is not God and that He is a created power, making Him like an angel subservient to God the Father and God the Son.

St. Gregory the Theologian, who presided over the Council, Gregory of Nyssa, Meletius of Antioch, Amphilochius of Iconium, and Cyril of Jerusalem were among the 150 bishops in attendance. The Macedonian heresy was denounced and rejected during the Council. The Council established the equality and unity of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son as dogma.

The Nicene Creed, or “Symbol of Faith,” was further strengthened by the Council with five Articles that set forth its teaching on the Holy Spirit, the Church, the Mysteries, the resurrection of the dead, and life in the world to come. As a result, they created the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which serves as the true profession of the Church's faith.

The Council passed seven Decrees, which the Emperor further approved. The Canon reaffirmed the Nicene faith and anathematized doctrines that disagreed with it, which were essentially varieties of Arianism. Other canons forbids bishops to interfere in the affairs of other Local Churches, and defines how to receive into the Church people coming from various heretical communities.

Third Ecumenical Council

Under Emperor Theodosius II, the Third Ecumenical Council met in Ephesus in the year 431 A.D. The false teaching of Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, who taught that the Most Holy Virgin Mary merely gave birth to the man Christ, with whom God then united and dwelt in Him, as in a temple, as previously He had done with Moses and other prophets, prompted the call for the Council. As a result, Nestorius referred to the Holy Virgin as the Christotokos rather than the Theotokos and the Lord Jesus Christ as God-bearing rather than God incarnate.

Nestorius felt that Theotokos implied a blending of Jesus’ divine and human natures, which he believed were joined only by the will. Nestorius’ preferred term, Christokos, suggested a more complete separation of Jesus’ two natures. The conflict on this point of doctrine was especially hostile between Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandria, and Cyril

successfully petitioned to declare Nestorius' views heretical. The 200 bishops in attendance at the Council condemned and repudiated Nestorius' heresy and ruled that one should acknowledge that Jesus Christ's divine and human natures were united at the time of his incarnation. They also ruled that one should confess Jesus as the true God and the true Man, as well as the Holy Virgin Mary as the God-bearer (Theotokos).

In rejecting Nestorianism, the Council of Ephesus officially recognized Mary as the "Mother of God." The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was likewise affirmed by the Council, and any alterations or additions to it were categorically forbidden. The Council of Ephesus also rejected the concept of Pelagianism. This view held that it was possible, at least in theory, to live a morally perfect life without special aid from God. A belief in Pelagianism amounts to a rejection of the doctrine of original sin (Romans 5:19).

Another unfortunate incident that happened in the aftermath of the Council of Ephesus and the condemnation of Nestorius was an immediate split in the Eastern Church, creating the Assyrian Church of the East.

Veneration of the Mother of God

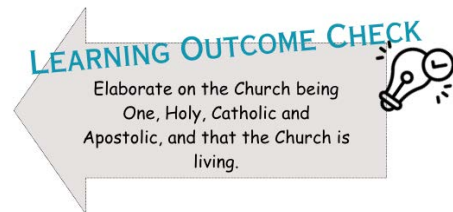
Orthodox Christians revere the All Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary more than all the saints. The Church calls the Virgin Mary Theotokos, translated from Greek, this word means "God-bearer," or "Mother of God". The Church ascribes this title to her because she did not simply bear the man Jesus Christ; she bore the incarnate God. Jesus Christ was not only fully man, but also fully God. By bearing Jesus Christ, the Son and Word of God [and thus also God Himself (John 1:1)], we give her the fitting title, Theotokos. She is the Most Holy (Panagia) beyond all saints and the Church gives the Mother of the Lord an extraordinary, most honorable, and most revered position.

The Archangel Gabriel greeted her at the Annunciation (Luke 1:28-29) as well as Saint Elizabeth, the mother of Saint John the Baptist (Luke 1:40-43). The Most Holy Virgin herself prophesied through the Holy Spirit: 'For behold, from henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for He who is mighty has done great things for me' (Luke 1:48-49). From these words we understand that the exceptional honor accorded to the Mother of the Lord is intentional and appointed by God Himself. This exceptional honor that is accorded by the Orthodox Church to the Ever-Virgin Mary forms the veneration of the Mother of the Lord. The Church honors the Mother of God because she is the mother who gave birth to the Son of God and the first one who intercedes for the world in the presence of the Most Holy Trinity.

It is important to note that ascribing particular titles (the Ladder which raised all from earth to grace; the Living Ark; the Burning Bush; etc.) to Mary does not equate to worshipping her as one might worship God. The titles given to her merely explain the true nature of Christ and protect His identity as fully and perfectly God and fully and perfectly man. Any title she receives can only be understood in light of her Son and His saving activity. The Church offers the Ever-Virgin Mary honor and reverence (proskynesis) as the Theotokos, in worship. The Church recognizes that the Ever-Virgin Mary is the one who brought forth Christ, the pre-eternal, uncreated, Incarnate Son of God, through the good will of the Father in heaven, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is this God, the Trinity, one in Essence, whom the Orthodox Church worships and offers inward form of adoration (*latreia*).

The Church

The Nicene Creed proclaims that the Church is One (John 10:16), Holy (Ephesians 5:26-27, 2 Peter 2:5&9), Catholic (Romans 10:18) and Apostolic (Ephesians 2:20). These are considered the four Marks of the Church.



The Church is One – Irrespective of the background of how a church came into being, the services provided, activities performed and the needs they fulfill, a parish has to be Christ's One Holy Church. One, here refers to unity among the believers which is essential for the growth and vitality of the Church. Irrespective of the physical attributes, ethnicity, language, sex, political affiliation, denomination or any other classification that could possibly divide us, we are all united and One in Christ. St Paul compares the members of the Church to the human body (Romans 12:4-5) each of which have a different purpose and function but work together to enable good health and life.

The Church is Holy – St Paul says that the Church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23), the Son of God who is Holy. So every part of the parish is holy – being sanctified by the holiness of God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit. And God commands us when we become part of the Church to be Holy as declared in Leviticus 20:26 – “You shall be holy to Me, for I, the Lord your God, who separated you from all peoples for Myself, am holy.”

The Church is Catholic – The word catholic is used to mean complete and whole – it lacks nothing in its mystical and sacramental being. The presence of the Holy Spirit enables this fullness of life, grace and truth. Though the members of the Church are imperfect, sinful and

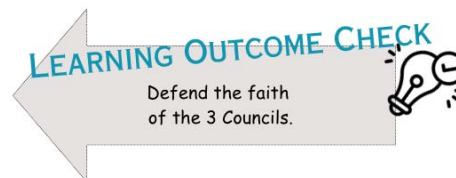
small-minded, they become complete through their willingness to become one with the fullness of God. This is enabled through their works and efforts to reflect Christ.

The Church is Apostolic – The Church is built on the foundation of the sacrifices of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20) and is therefore rooted in apostolic doctrine and tradition. The members of the Church are entrusted to keep and live the faith (*paratheke*) delivered to the apostles and saints (Jude 3), passed on through the bishops and priests through the ages and then to each of us. St Paul calls Jesus *the Apostle and High Priest* (Hebrews 3:1) – He is God’s representative to man (Apostle) and man’s representative to God (High Priest). Jesus affirms the mission of the Church when He tells His disciples that His food (nourishment) is “doing the will of His Father who sent Him” (St. John 4:33-34). This is the same mission he entrusts the disciples as He sends them out saying, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you (St John 20:21) ... Receive the Holy Spirit (22)”. St Paul says that the Church is encouraged by the Holy Spirit.

(Acts 9:31). Each of us as part of the Church have the same mission as the disciples – bring God’s unity (One), holiness (Holy) and completeness (Catholic) to the people around us. If the Church does not have the awareness of being “sent” (Apostle) by God to “speak and do Christ” it is not being the “right” (Orthodox) Church; it is just a “club” or a synagogue of Satan (Revelation 2:9) who will be made to bow down in front of believers (Revelation 3:9).

Conclusion

The ecumenical councils were an extraordinary synaxis or meeting of all Bishops of the Church to discuss fundamental teachings. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed was adopted to counter false teachings and summarize the faith foundation of the Church. St Mary and the saints show us that regular human beings like us can accomplish spiritual synergy with the Divine – when our will is the same as God’s will. Though the Christian journey is not easy, we should get strength from Jesus’ assurance, “.. you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (St. John 16:33). For what is impossible with men is possible with God (St. Luke 18:27).



Reflection Questions

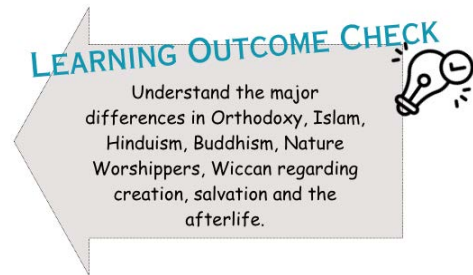
1. Someone asks - 'What is the Church?' How would you respond to this question?
2. Your friend notices that you go to Church every Sunday. One day your friend asks you, "What exactly do you believe?" Respond to your friend's questions using the Three Ecumenical Councils as a basis.
3. Reflect on the 4 marks of the Church.

Lesson 14: The Narrow Gate

Lesson Goals

- *I can identify and describe the major differences between Orthodox Christianity and other world religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam.*
- *I can explain the Orthodox Church's perspective on the relationship between Christians and non-Christians, including the significance of faith membership.*
- *I can reflect on the elements of truth found within different religions while recognizing the unique fullness of God's revelation in Orthodox Christianity.*

Religions are not all the same. They do not all worship the same "God". This observation ought to be obvious to anyone who takes religious believers at their word when they describe their beliefs. Yet at the same time, we can recognize that there is truth in all religions and philosophies. When discussing the differences between Orthodox Christianity and other religions, we reference those other faiths as "incomplete" rather than "false". Yes, they usually have false elements, but it is better to focus primarily on what is true and show how that leads to Orthodox Christianity, the fullness of God's revelation to humankind.



From the Orthodox point of view, all Christians and non-Christian that are not Orthodox are not the Church. The Church is a concrete, historical community founded by Jesus Christ through His apostles, which has existed in a real community for roughly two millennia. For any person, whether formally a member of the Orthodox Church in this life or not, the critical question is whether that person will be a member in the next life after the resurrection.

So, while we say heterodoxy is dangerous to the spiritual life, it is not up to us to judge any particular person in terms of how that danger affects them in particular. We do not know, because none of us can look into another's heart. Nevertheless, because an Orthodox Christian believes that the Orthodox Church represents the fullness of the Christian faith, they are called by God to share their faith with others, to invite them to experience that same fullness and be transformed by it.

It is essential that all these discussions, while standing firm on what is true and right, be conducted with humility. The Orthodox must not say, "I am right, and you are

wrong,” because, after all, we refer to ourselves as the “chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15) every time we receive communion. The Orthodox Christian faith is uniquely true and this is not to the credit of any Orthodox person. The Orthodox person did not invent it, and we all fall short of living it as we should, because we are sinners. Thus, the Orthodox Church proclaims her heritage as the one, original Christian Church founded by Christ not in pride, but in humility as a historical experience.

Judaism

Of all non-Christian religions, the one with which Orthodox Christians have the most common is Judaism. We share a common inheritance from the covenant made with Abraham, though we interpret and apply it differently, and of course Christians also believe that there is a New Covenant.

Judaism emphasizes a way of life, following particular rituals and, perhaps more famously, dietary requirements (kosher). Ritual washings are a significant element. Orthodox Christianity shares this emphasis with Judaism on adopting a whole way of life designed to bring the remembrance of God into every moment, and some of our practices are even based on our common heritage.

Jews reject major Christian doctrines, such as the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and His identification as the Messiah. Jews are still awaiting the coming of the Messiah. Especially in this last sense, Christianity may be seen as simply the fulfillment of Judaism, which hoped for both the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead. Seen in this way, the primary difference between Christianity and modern Judaism is that Christians see things as being at a different place on the timeline – the Messiah has come, and the resurrection has begun with Christ as the first-fruit.

We do share with Jews a belief of monotheism, that there is only one God. We also share a common belief in divine revelation from God through the prophets, though we believe that the prophets ultimately were predicting the coming of Jesus Christ and that God made His final revelation to the apostles at Pentecost.

Like Christians, some Jews believe in an afterlife and believe in the final resurrection of the dead. Jews believe they are God’s chosen people. While Judaism receives its membership by birth, especially maternal ancestry, Orthodox Christianity demands the conversion of the soul to faith in Christ and entry into the covenant via baptism. Christianity, therefore considers itself the “True Israel,” which receives the covenant promised to Abraham by faith and not by the flesh.

The status of Jews belonging to the Old Israel who have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah is complicated in the New Testament. Paul seems to suggest in Roman 9-11 that

unbelieving Jews may yet be grafted into the tree of Christ before the end, that they may have something that is “irrevocable” (Romans 11:29). That said, Orthodox Christians do not teach dispensationalist doctrine that essentially set up Judaism as a parallel path to God.

Islam

Islam originated when Muhammad, the last of the prophets, received a word-for-word dictation from the Archangel Gabriel, which is now known as the Qur’an. The Arabic word Islam literally means “submission,” and it describes how the Muslim (“one who submits”) is to live toward God in Arabic, Allah).

Islam regards its relationship to Christianity similarly to the Christians regard their relationship to ancient Judaism - that it is the final fulfillment of previous Abrahamic religions. Islam sees Jesus as a true prophet and believes in His virgin conception and birth, as well as His second coming. Islam is radically monotheistic; however, rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and even the idea that God could have a son. Trinitarianism is looked upon by Muslims as disguised polytheism.

Muslims regard the Christian Bible as having been corrupted over time, believing that the original teachings of Jesus were essentially Muslim. The Qur’an, by contrast, is supposedly a direct dictation from God Himself in Arabic. It is an absolutely authoritative text from which most doctrines and practice are derived.

Muslims believe that proper life consists in adhering to the five pillars of Islam:

- *Shahadah* - The confession, “I testify that there is no god but God, and I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” Making this confession with sincerity is how one converts to Islam.
- *Salah* - Ritual prayer performed five times a day, facing toward Mecca.
- *Zakat* - Almsgiving, both to help the poor and for the spread of Islam.
- *Sawm* - Fasting during the month of Ramadan, which consists of not eating or drinking anything at all, as well as sexual abstinence, before sunset or after sunrise. In practice, however, some wealthy Muslims will simply sleep through the day and then feast at night. The fast is much more difficult for poor and working Muslims.
- *Hajj* - A one-time pilgrimage to Mecca for all who can afford it.

Orthodox Christians share all of these elements of proper life in various ways, although they are not regarded as absolute obligation as they are for Muslims. Submission

to God is what defines Muslim life. For Orthodoxy, the obedience we offer to God is given freely out of love for him, and because doing so transforms us inwardly to become more like Christ. In Islam, God is merciful and perfect, but He is not truly loving. God is absolutely transcendent, and so there is no true communion with Him. All that said, most Muslims would probably say that they feel they have a connection with God.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a group label for a collection of religions and associated traditions from India that range from classically pagan - a single tribe worshiping its individual god or gods - to a kind of attenuated monotheism. Some Hindus believe in multiple gods. Others believe there is only one God, and everything is part of Him. Still others believe there is only one God who may occasionally manifest Himself in various forms, avatars which have been mistaken by certain tribes as separate gods. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to define Hinduism.

Despite the great variation in Hindu beliefs and practices, there are certain common sets of belief which most Hindus share. For most Hindus, the human soul (the *atman*) is eternal. For some the soul is part of *Brahman* ("God," the universe), and so salvation consists in realizing this fact and being absorbed back into the oblivion of non-personality.

Most Hindus believe in karma, a sort of universal justice in which those who do good (*dharma*, roughly "order") are rewarded, while those who do evil are punished. This justice is not necessarily the act of a god but is rather in some sense the law of nature. Most Hindus seek to gain good karma, perhaps through good deeds or devotion to a god, so that they may experience a better life here on earth or in their next incarnation.

Because the soul is immortal, it may be incarnated into a new life whether as a human being or as an animal. The body is therefore ultimately meaningless, and cremation is the norm for the dead, with the ashes being cast into the Ganges River to symbolize merging with the universe.

Many Hindus will gladly accept Christ as yet another god or as an avatar of Brahman, because that is consistent with their religious system. The greatest difference between Hinduism and Orthodox Christianity is Orthodox particularism - the teaching that there is one God, who revealed himself perfect God and perfect man - Jesus Christ, who founded the one Church, who confesses one Lord, and upholds one faith and one baptism.

In terms of similarity, however, Hinduism is highly iconic (images are used to connect with the divine) and, in a sense, sacramental, with most of its religious imagery and

rituals seen as participating in realities larger than the purely local. Like Orthodoxy, it is mystical in this sense.

Buddhism

Buddhism originated at least four hundred years before the birth of Christ with the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, most commonly known as the Buddha (the “Awakened One”). The Buddha himself left behind no writing, so his teachings are a collection of traditions that are believed to have originated with him. In its essence, Buddhism is non-theist, believing in no god at all. It is therefore sometimes said to be a philosophy rather than a religion.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism also believes in karma, as well as the cycle of reincarnation. This cycle is called *samsara*, the endless experience of suffering. Life itself is seen as suffering and so escape from life and the cycle of rebirth is the highest goal. This escape is called nirvana which could be achieved in this life and after death. One who has achieved it is not bound by time or *samsara* any longer and has been absorbed into non-distinction.

The Buddha was the first bodhisattva, an enlightened person who has attained nirvana but stays behind in order to bring salvation from *samsara* to those who are less advanced. There are other *bodhisattvas*, and among Tibetan Buddhists, the Dalai Lama is regarded as one. In a sense, these figures also function similarly to Christian saints, though of course with many exceptions.

Buddhist philosophy is summarized in what are called the Four Noble Truths:

1. The truth of *Dukkha* (suffering, anxiety, stress) is that all conditional or transient phenomena and experiences are ultimately unsatisfying.
2. The truth of the origin of *Dukkha* is that desire for pleasure or the rejection of pleasure result in dissatisfaction and the cycle of reincarnation (*samsara*).
3. The truth of the cessation of *Dukkha* means that the cycle of dissatisfaction and reincarnation will also cease.
4. The truth of the path of Liberation from *Dukkha* is that by following the Noble Eightfold Path - behaving decently, cultivating discipline, and practicing mindfulness and meditation - one can be liberated from *samsara*.

Orthodox Christians can agree with these Four Noble Truths to some extent. Certainly, our passionate desires do indeed lead to suffering, though they are not necessarily direct causes. We also don’t believe in *samsara* and its cycle of reincarnation, so

our goal is not to be liberated from that. The practice of virtue and asceticism for us is to achieve union with God. We are not seeking to lose ourselves but be illumined and deified by communion with God.

Final Thoughts

While we believe that Orthodox Christianity is the fullness of God's revelation to humankind, we also believe that God is working in all people throughout all of history. That work will manifest itself in a number of ways, including within other religions. All people are created in the image of God and meant for communion with Him and all are deserving of our love, honor, and respect.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways do the beliefs surrounding creation differ among Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism? Provide specific examples to illustrate these differences.
2. Discuss the concepts of salvation in Orthodox Christianity and Buddhism. How do these views shape the adherent's understanding of moral conduct and spiritual development?
3. Analyze the views on the afterlife held by Orthodox Christianity and Nature Worshippers. What implications do these beliefs have on the practices and rituals observed within each faith tradition?

Lesson 15: The Orthodox Way

Lesson Goals

- *I can appreciate the growth of the Church in India and across the world.*
- *I can understand and evaluate how the Orthodox Church in Kerala resiliently resisted political and social pressures exerted by the Roman Catholic Church.*
- *I can connect the ways our Church survived despite all the struggles and conflicts over the centuries to my life and struggles.*

Once a man was wearing all black with a Cross around his neck and a special headcover. His beard is untrimmed and the back of his hands were calloused. Despite his somewhat intimidating appearance, when a child smiled and began to strike a conversation with him, he responded with a smile and spoke with kindness and gentleness. This is a form of Orthodox evangelism! Orthodox Christian monks commit their life to Christ, and live in monasteries but at times need to mingle with the outside world. Even on flights, the monk never stops his devotion to Christ and his dress and actions reflect his commitment to the call he received.

Our priests, sisters, monks, bishops, and saints of the Orthodox Church choose to live a life that may be extreme by today's social standards, but in their life they teach us ways that will help us navigate the complex and difficult world. Christians have been called by Christ Himself to live in the world without being of the world (**St. John 17:13-16**), and everyone baptized into the Church become chosen and holy just like priests (**1 Peter 2:9**).

The Church in Kerala

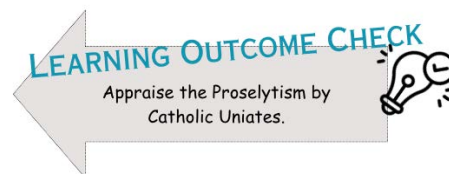
The survival of the Orthodox Church in Kerala is truly a powerful lesson of how God protects His Church. As Kerala was an important port of trade in the ancient world, Europeans would visit frequently and eventually Catholic and Protestant missionaries would accompany and begin to preach and convert many from the Orthodox Church. However, our ancestors held fast to the Faith given to them, and by their life and sacrifice entrusted to us the same Faith. All give us examples on how to be children of God and stay loyal to the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

Influence of the Roman Catholic Church

The term "Uniat" or "Uniate" refers to what are known as Eastern Catholic churches. Their members were formerly part of Orthodox churches but now are under the Roman Catholic Church and uphold the Pope as their head. These churches have a unique

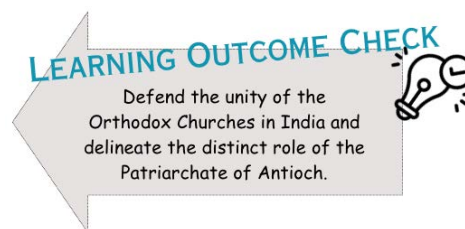
relationship with both the Catholic Church and their original Orthodox traditions and many even recite the Nicene Creed without the Filioque.

In Kerala, one of our former bishops Geevarghese Mar Ivanios of Bethany Monastery, Perinaad, Ranni, near Pathanamthitta was influenced and decided to leave our Church in 1930 with another two more bishops and a number of faithfuls. Thus, the Malankara Catholic Rite evolved. This was the direct attempt by the Catholic Church to proselyte our faithful. The word proselyte means sheep stealing. The Catholic Church accepted these faithful as their members, gave them a special status. They remain today as part of the Roman Catholic Church and it was an unfortunate episode in the history of our Church. Our ancestors though resisted the arguments and coercion and remained faithful to the Orthodox Church.



Influence of the Syriac Patriarchate of Antioch

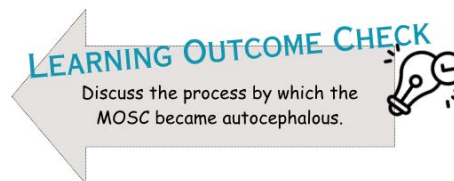
Leadership of our Church invited the Patriarch of the Antiochene Orthodox Church to India to seal the final deal of the end of relationships and court cases with the Marthoma Church, who were separated from our Church in later part of the 1800s. In 1876 the Patriarch HH Peter III arrived to Kerala. Our fathers looked at him as the spiritual father, who could stabilize the boat, the Orthodox Church in India. However, the Patriarch of Antioch had other ideas. He wanted our Church to be under him spiritually and temporally. He consecrated seven new bishops. In order to cement his goals to bring the Malankara Church under his authority the Patriarch of Antioch convened a Synod in 1876 at Mulanthuruthy. He cleverly divided the Malankara Church into seven dioceses, assigned one of the newly consecrated seven bishops to each diocese and asked them to write their consents to shepherd the dioceses as per the orders from the Patriarch. He also ordered these new bishops to collect the reseesa or individual tax from each faithful and send it to the Patriarch of Antioch. Reseesa can be translated to head tax, which all males above the age of 21 give to the head of the Church. Malankara Church was thus forcefully brought under the authority of the Patriarch of Antioch. Until then the bishops used to come from Antioch and they did not explicitly gain any temporal powers, although they tried to grab the power many times. Thus, the Church in Malankara was brought under the temporal and spiritual authority of the Patriarch of Antioch. A spiritual father, whom the Malankara Church had invited to establish peace and stability, rocked the boat and stole the authority from the



hands of our forefathers. Successor of Patriarch HH Mar Ignatius Peter III, HH Mar Ignatius Abdulla continued the efforts to subdue the Malankara Church under his authority. These efforts were successfully refuted in 1912, after so many attempts to establish peace failed miserably.

The Path to Autocephaly

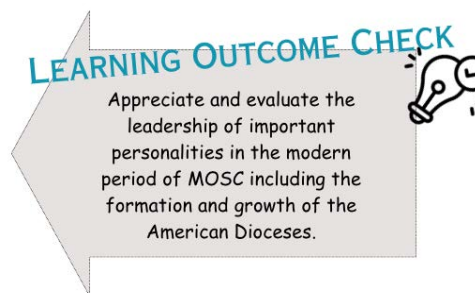
"Autocephaly" means having one's own supreme head. Autonomy means self-governance with one's own code of law. The Malankara Church's next struggle was to regain autocephaly spiritually and temporally. Our fathers under the leadership of St. Geevarghese Mar Dionysius of Vattasseril strived to achieve autocephaly and autonomy from 1908, after his consecration as Metropolitan. In 1912 the dream came true as the former Patriarch of Antioch HH Mar Ignatius Abded M'shiha arrived in Kerala and declared the Church in India autocephalous, and autonomous. The freedom of the Church in India, which was stolen by one Patriarch has been reinstated by another Patriarch of the same Church and that was a great moment of victory in the history of our Church. HH Mar Ignatius Abded M'shiha himself consecrated the first Catholicos, the spiritual Supreme Head of the Indian Church under the name HH Baselios Paulose I. Thus, the Malankara Orthodox Church became autocephalous. St. Mar Dionysius continued to strive to create a constitution for our Church. Although the saint couldn't see the promulgation of the constitution, he did all the groundwork before he passed in February 1934. In December 1934, the Constitution of our Church was promulgated and we became autonomous.



Leadership of the American Dioceses

A number of faithful and priests of the Malankara Orthodox Church were migrating to the United States and Canada during the 1960s and 1970s. Many of them came as healthcare professionals or for higher education. It was the commitment and devotion to the faith and tradition of their Church, which made them congregate and worship at smaller pockets in the 1960s and 1970s.

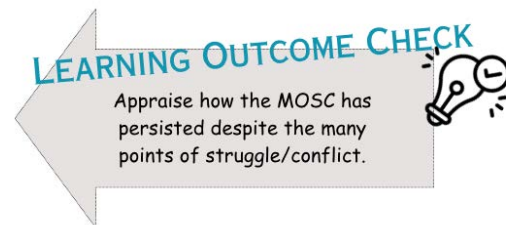
In 1976 parishes of America and Canada were organized and brought under the Bombay Diocese. The next step was the creation of a new diocese under the leadership of Metropolitan HG Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios in 1979. Number of parish churches were established and grew in many more cities of the United States and Canada under the leadership of Mar Makarios Thirumeni.



In 1991 the Malankara Metropolitan assumed the leadership back from Mar Makarios Thirumeni and appointed Metropolitan HG Mathews Mar Barnabas as the Auxiliary Bishop. In 1993 Mar Barnabas Thirumeni was confirmed as the Metropolitan of the American Diocese. At the same time a new Diocese was formed by the name Diocese of UK, Europe, and Canada under the leadership of HG Metropolitan Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios. From 2002 onwards, HG Metropolitan Zachariah Mar Nicolavos was appointed as Assistant Metropolitan of the American Diocese, who assisted Mar Barnabas Thirumeni in the administration of the Diocese. In 2009 the geographical boundaries were again revisited and Canada was brought back to the American jurisdiction. Along with this move the American Diocese was divided into two, as Northeast American Diocese and Diocese of South-West America. HG Mar Barnabas Thirumeni and HG Mar Nicholavos Thirumeni continued at the helm of the Northeast American Diocese and HG Metropolitan Alexios Mar Eusebius was appointed as bishop of the Diocese of South-West America. In 2011 Metropolitan Mar Barnabas Thirumeni retired and Metropolitan Mar Nicholavos was enthroned as the bishop for the Northeast American Diocese. Nicholavos Thirumeni is continuing his ministry there meritoriously. In 2017 HG Metropolitan Dr. Zacharias Mar Aprem assumed the leadership of the Diocese of South-West America as Assistant to the Malankara Metropolitan and Mar Aprem Thirumeni continued until November 2022. HG Metropolitan Dr. Thomas Mar Ivanios was appointed as bishop of the Diocese of South-West America in November 2022.

Resilience Amid Struggles

Life was not easy for the early immigrants in the American Continents. They had to fight against the various opposing circumstances like language barrier, unfamiliar climatic conditions, cultural differences etc. Cultural differences do not merely mean the cultural differences between India and the Americas. It meant the different areas that they migrated from Kerala as well. In spite of all these odds, our forefathers had one common goal, a place to congregate and worship the true God following the true Orthodox faith, and the Malankara Tradition. Under their vision a number of congregations started buying church buildings and many have renovated their already existing facilities. This was a great achievement for the children of Malankara. Many young men, who were born and brought up in the Americas joined the ministry and became Achens. Many more Achens migrated to the United States and Canada. The Church and the Diocese became more organized and structured. Administration of the Dioceses became future and growth oriented. Spiritual Organizations started flourishing. Sunday School and

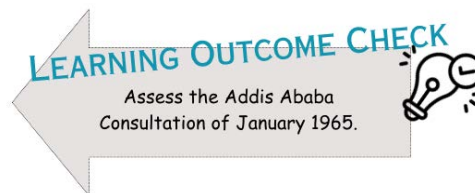


OVBS, Marth Mariam Vanitha Samajam, MGOCSM, Family Conferences, FOCUS, Youth League etc. started gaining more speed and progress. A new spiritual awakening happened in the Americas for the faithful of Malankara Orthodox Church.

At the same time other developments also happened. Everyone wanted the best for the Church and the Diocese and deciding for the best was not easy. This has caused differences of opinions among members of our Church. The forming period of the Diocese of the Malankara Orthodox Church also witnessed unhappy divisions of parishes and people. Thank God, such hurtful events have ended and the churches in the Americas have started to flourish tremendously. At present there are over 120 parishes in the Americas, thriving and growing. Except for a very few, parishes in Americas own their facilities and more families are joining the churches. Second generation and third generation are growing in the faith. New English translation of the liturgical texts and Sunday School texts and curriculum have been published in Americas for the predominantly English speaking generation. The American Diocese are now embarked to a great journey, doubtlessly.

Addis Ababa Consultation of 1965

The Emperor of Ethiopia His Eminence Heile Sallassie conceived the idea in 1964 to organize the Orthodox Churches, which declined to accept the Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD. A meeting of all the heads of such five Churches was convened in 1965 in Addis Ababa, Capital of Ethiopia. Heads of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Armenian Orthodox Church, Malankara Orthodox Church, Antiochene Orthodox Church, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church came together and established communion, which was readily available due to unity in faith. This family of five Churches are there named as Oriental Orthodox Churches in contrast to Eastern Orthodox Churches, which confess the Chalcedonian Council 451.



The Addis Ababa consultation of 1965 has a huge significance in the growth of Malankara Orthodox Church. The Malankara Church received a wider respect and honor among the world churches and ecclesiastical leaders as members of the Oriental Orthodox Church family and this has contributed to the growth and reputation of Malankara Orthodox Church outside of India and in the Americas also. The popularity of the Emperor of Ethiopia being the patron of such an ecclesiastical movement contributed tremendously in establishing our Church's footprint in the faraway lands from India.

Reflection Questions

1. Focusing on one event of our history, what lessons can be applied to our Church life and spiritual growth?
2. How meaningful is autocephaly and autonomy for our Church?
3. Appreciate the leadership of Emperor Heile Sallassie in organizing the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

Lesson 16: The Gift of God's Forgiveness

Lesson Goals

- *I can define the concept of sin and articulate its implications within the framework of Orthodox Christian teachings.*
- *I can explain the significance of Holy Confession and describe the steps necessary for preparing a meaningful confession in accordance with church practices.*
- *I can identify the sources and symptoms of peer pressure and stress, as well as the effective strategies for overcoming these challenges while adhering to my faith.*

Alexander is a sophomore in a local high school. He belongs to the Indian Orthodox church and regularly goes to church and participates in all activities of church with the whole family. He is the only church going student among his immediate friend group in school. His friends usually talk about late night parties or television shows on Saturdays and Sundays when they come back to school on Mondays. Alexander has nothing similar to share during those discussions and he feels isolated.

Most of our Sunday School students in high school can relate to Alexander mentioned in the above situation. We are living in a multicultural society with conflicting moral values. Some of them do not believe in God and some others come from broken families. Some students may have single parent or same sex parents. Many of them may not have any religious affiliation or experience of going to church. Some of them may be addicted to drugs, alcohol, movies, videogames etc. Terms like Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and anxiety disorders are common problems among children now. According to the recent findings by the National Institute of Mental Health and the US Center for Disease Control, approximately 4.5 million children between the ages of 8 and 15 have a mental health disorder at any given time. In 2015, The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) estimated that 43.4 million American adults experienced at least one episode of mental illness (Grcevich,S; 2018). That means approximately 50 million Americans suffer from mental illness on any given day.

Although we attend church every Sunday, we are interacting with the above-mentioned population during the remaining six days of the week. This can create tension and identity crisis in all of us. Sometimes we question our own faith and try to find simpler ways to worship God and justify ourselves. During the course of time, we may move away from our faith and engage in sinful activities. Therefore, we need to understand our faith to defend against sinful outside influences.

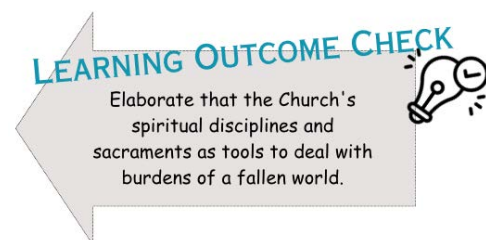
What is faith? Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). Christians believe in everlasting life with our savior Jesus Christ. We love God and give priority to God compared to anything in this world. Even if our relatives and own parents desert us, God is there to protect us (Psalms 27:10). Our trust in God keeps us moving with confidence in our everyday life. When others around us are anxious about the future, we Christians surrender all our problems before God and pray for mercy. In fact, “fear not” appears 365 times in the Holy Bible, one for each day of the year.

Prayer is a communication between man and God. It is the process of allowing the Lord Jesus to enter into our hearts. The Lord says in Revelations 3:20, “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me.” This clarifies the strong fellowship between man and God. The Lord Jesus has taught us that we should pray persistently in the example of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). We should avoid temptations and selfish desires during our prayer. Sometimes it is a struggle to focus on our prayer. Even our Lord Jesus was struggling in prayer even unto His death in the garden of Gethsemane. He said to Peter, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mathew 26:41). We should meditate on God’s love during prayer and trust that God knows our limitations and will provide for our needs at the right time.

What is Sin?

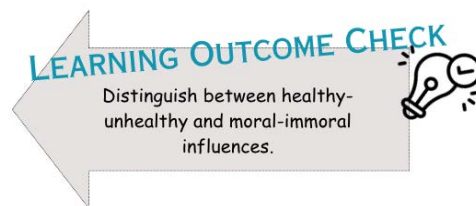
Sin is referred to as *hamartia* in Greek, which means “to miss the mark.” The “mark” or “target” that Christians “aim” towards is a life lived to the best of our ability in accordance with God’s teachings, precepts, and commands. We sin when we fall short of this standard, when we miss the mark. Murdering is wrong. Envy and arrogance are sins. It is wrong to steal a car. A candy bar theft is wrong. Attending the Liturgy while harboring animosity against others is just as sinful as refusing to attend.

God gave us Ten Commandments to lead a lawful life in this world. People and nations around the world universally accept these tenets. Sin is the transgression of the law (1 John 3:4). Wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). We all commit sins knowingly or unknowingly every day in our life. How can we get rid of sins? God will forgive our sins if we genuinely confess (1 John 1: 9). Here we can find the significance of Holy confession in our church. The story of Prodigal son is a best example to illustrate the importance of confession. The



parable of the prodigal son teaches us that our heavenly father is always ready to receive us whenever we, sinners, approach Him with due repentance.

Due to our selfishness, we are unable to keep good relationships with others. This is caused by our sinful nature. We have to take necessary steps to guard against such sins. The greatest commandment God gave us is to love one another. Unless and until we are at peace with our brethren, we are not worthy to worship Him. Therefore, it is necessary to review and renew our life through the sacrament of Confession. Holy Confession is a renewal of Holy Baptism. A spiritual elder says, “The tears of repentance are an extension of baptism.” We need to achieve *metanoia*, a state of spiritual conversion, through true confession.



Why Should We Confess Before a Priest?

Our sin is primarily against God, “against You, You only, have I sinned.” (Psalms 51:4). However, our sin is also against the community, the church, the body of which we are members. In addition, sin is something that we commit against ourselves, because it causes inward tensions, struggles and unrest. Confession before a priest helps us in three levels:

1. As a representative of God, the priest has the authority to forgive our sins as mentioned in the Bible, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:23).
2. As a representative of the church and the community, the priest hears our confession and absolves our sins.
3. Confessing and sharing our mistakes with a respected person like the priest provides psychological relief. Oracular confession provides personal counseling and guidance needed for a new start. The “seal of confession” makes it obligatory on the part of the priest to keep strict confidence of whatever is said in confession. This will help us to communicate frankly with the priest during confession.

How Can We Prepare for Confession?

1. Self-Examination: Spend time in prayer and try to recollect your past and write down the mistakes made on a paper.
2. A Contrite Heart: We should have a genuine repentance before God when we realize our failings and shortcomings. Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death (2 Cor. 7:10).

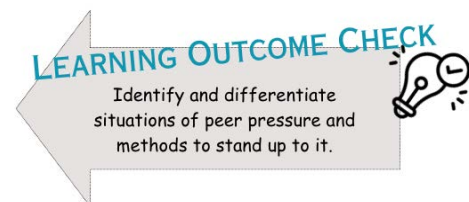
3. Make a decision to improve one's conduct and change one's life. *Metanoia*, a Greek word, means turning of the mind, thought or of life. Thus through metanoia, we offer ourselves to God in contrition and humility.
4. Read the penitential psalms. There are seven penitential psalms. They are Psalm 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 129 and 142. Among them, psalm 51 is very important that depicts the story of King David's sinful behaviors and his repentance. Almost all services in our church begin with the reading of psalm 51. This is also one of the prayers in our everyday morning prayer.
5. During confession before a priest, kneel down before him and say, "I have sinned my father, pray for me." Then mention your sins without unnecessary details or misleading words. Be truthful to yourself and genuinely judge yourself so that God lifts up His judgment from you. Listen to the instructions of the priest and follow them accordingly. After the confession, spend some quiet time in the church and ask God to guide you to lead a holy life. Also, pray for the father confessor to strengthen his ministry.
6. Refer to the service book of the Holy *Qurbano* pages 380-386 for a list of possible sins and prayers we recite during Holy confession.

Peer Pressure and Ways to Overcome Such Pressures

When people come together, they can be very powerful. This can be a good and helpful thing. Unfortunately, people do not always make the best choices, and sometimes this can cause other people to follow along or stumble. People's expectations or desires for us can cause us to conform to the behavior that we think will help us look better in the eyes of others. This phenomenon is known as peer pressure. The most common perception of peer pressure may be with children or teens or in a classroom setting. Peer pressure can sometimes lead us to ungodly actions or sinning. For example, we may be tempted to partake in activities that go against our morals or treat others unkindly because other expect or want us to. This could mean the need to dress or act a certain way, cheating or copying someone else's work or letting others copy your work, being dangerous and reckless when driving, using drugs or alcohol, shoplifting or stealing, engaging in sexual activity, etc.

How to Overcome Peer Pressure:

Peer pressure can be challenging, but approaching it from a Christian perspective can provide helpful guidance. In the face of peer pressure,



it's important to remember that our ultimate goal as Christians is to honor God and live according to His teachings. Here are a few ways to navigate peer pressure from a Christian standpoint:

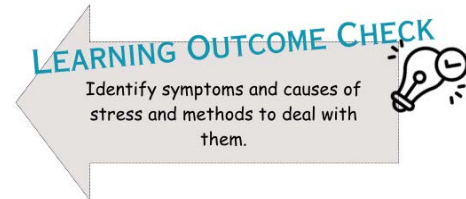
1. **Know Your Values:** Take time to understand your own beliefs and values based on your faith. This will help you establish a strong foundation and make it easier to resist pressures that conflict with your convictions.
2. **Seek Guidance From Scripture:** The Bible offers wisdom and guidance on various topics, including peer pressure. Reading and meditating on relevant passages can help you gain insight and make informed decisions. Praying for guidance is also essential.
3. **Find a Spiritual Father and a Father Confessor:** A relationship with a spiritual father is one of the most important relationships in an Orthodox Christian's life. Right from the time one is twelve years of age, take the opportunity to truly learn what it meant to confess and to delve into a deeper relationship with your parish priest as a true mentor and spiritual father.
4. **Surround Oneself with Like-Minded Individuals:** Build a support system of friends who share similar values and beliefs. Having a strong community can provide encouragement and accountability when faced with peer pressure. The most common reason why young people fall astray is that they get mixed up with bad company. We all need friends, so the secret is to find friends who love God.
5. **Be Confident in One's Faith:** Develop a deep understanding of your faith and be confident in it. This confidence will make it easier to politely decline any activities or behaviors that go against your beliefs. As part of daily routine, have a fervent prayer rule and read the Holy Scriptures and other spiritual books. Make it a point to attend Holy Liturgy and other services in Church regularly.
6. **Practice Assertiveness:** Learn to respectfully voice your convictions and stand firm in your decisions. Remember that it's okay to say "no" if something goes against your values, even if it means going against the crowd.
7. **Be a Positive Influence:** Instead of succumbing to peer pressure, strive to be a positive influence on others. Lead by example and demonstrate the joy and fulfillment that comes from living a life aligned with Christian principles.

Remember, everyone faces peer pressure at some point, and it's how we respond that matters. Trust in your faith, seek wisdom from God, talk to your spiritual father, and

surround yourself with supportive people who will help you stay true to your Christian values.

What Causes Stress and How to Overcome Such Issues:

One can experience stress due to various factors, such as academic pressure, social expectations, family dynamics, and personal challenges. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, the Church offers us some ways to help overcome stress:

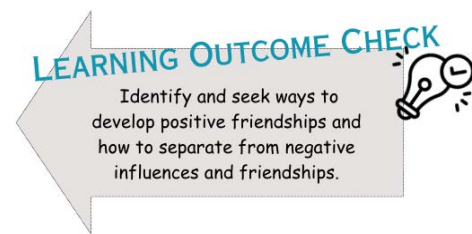


1. **Prayer and Faith:** Turn to prayer as a source of comfort and strength. We as Orthodox Christians believe in the power of prayer, and seeking a deeper connection with God can provide solace during stressful times. Trust in God's plan and find peace in your faith.
2. **Embrace the Sacraments:** Participate actively in the sacramental life of the Church. Frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Confession can bring spiritual healing and renewal, helping you find inner peace and guidance.
3. **Practice Mindfulness:** Incorporate mindfulness techniques into your daily routine. Take moments to reflect, journal, do things that one enjoys like sports, quality time with godly friends, engage in enriching hobbies, and be present in the current moment. These practice can help reduce anxiety and bring a sense of calm amidst stress.
4. **Seek Support from Spiritual Elders:** Turn to spiritual elders or experienced clergy for guidance. These wise individuals can provide spiritual counsel, helping you gain perspective and navigate challenging situations.
5. **Find Balance:** Recognize the importance of balance in your life. Prioritize your spiritual well-being, but also take care of your physical, emotional, and mental health. Make time for activities that bring you joy, such as hobbies, spending time in nature, or engaging in creative pursuits.
6. **Connect with the Church Community:** Engage with fellow Orthodox Christians and participate in church activities. Surrounding yourself with a supportive community can provide a sense of belonging, encouragement, and

understanding, helping to alleviate stress.

7. **Prioritize Self-Care:** Take care of yourself by maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Get enough sleep, eat nutritious food, exercise regularly, and take breaks when needed. Nurturing your physical and emotional well-being allows you to better cope with stress.
8. **Practice Forgiveness:** Orthodox Christianity emphasizes forgiveness as a means of healing and letting go of burdens. Learn to forgive yourself and others, as holding onto grudges or guilt can contribute to stress and anxiety.

Remember that stress is a normal part of life, but it's how we respond to it that matters. By incorporating these principles into your life, you can find strength, peace, and resilience to overcome stress and navigate the challenges of school and university life.



Reflection Questions

1. How can the Church's spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and confession, serve as effective tools for coping with feelings of sadness, loneliness, or depression, and how do they differ from seeking help in a professional counseling setting?
2. In what ways can engaging in hobbies or community service help reinforce positive friendships and provide a sense of joy that counteracts the pressures and stresses faced in a fallen world?
3. How can understanding the symptoms and causes of stress help students identify situations of peer pressure, and what strategies can they employ to stand firm in their values amidst societal pressures regarding body image?