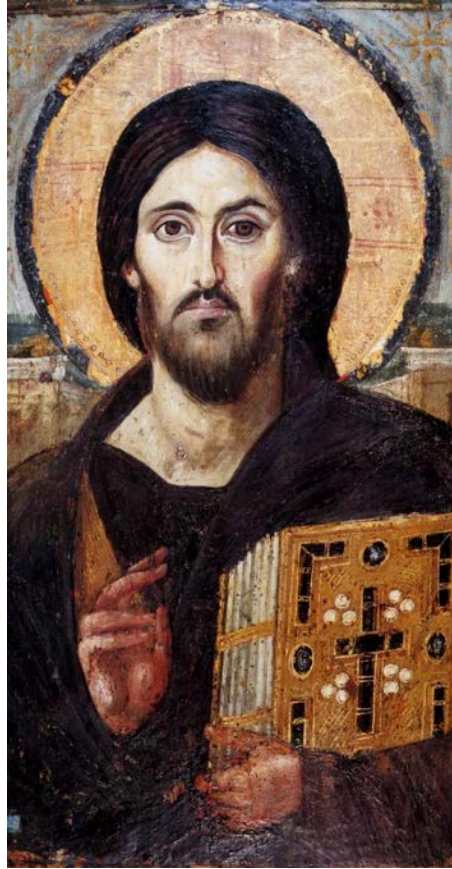




Sunday School of the American Dioceses
of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

8th Grade

The Symbol of Faith



8th Grade

The Symbol of Faith

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

Lesson 1: Who Do You Say That I Am?

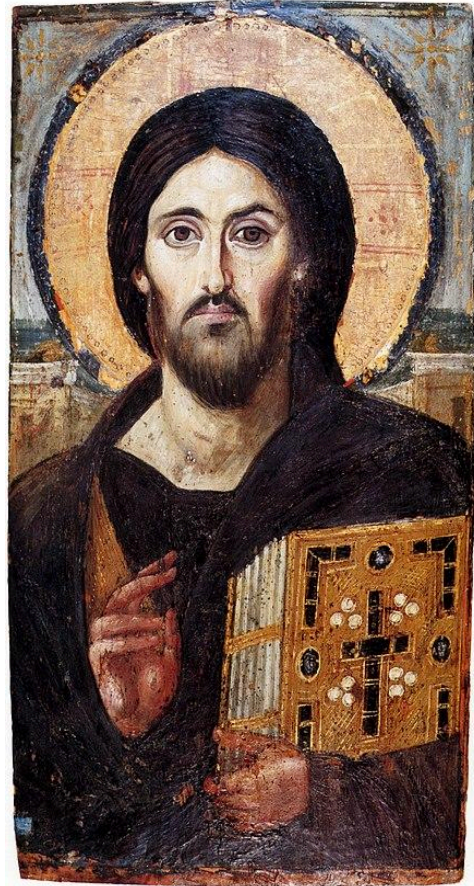
Lesson Goals

- *I can examine how the Councils focused on preserving the true understanding of Christ.*
- *I can understand why our Church does not recognize the Council of Chalcedon.*
- *I can explain how St. Dioscorus defended the true Faith*

The early Church flourished as the disciples of Christ spread the good news of the Gospel, baptizing many and journeying across the world.

We see this beginning in **Acts 2**, and how the prayers of the Apostles and Saints as well as the blood of the martyrs brought many to the faith. People were amazed at the fervor of the believers. The Gospel message, as witnessed and preached by the Apostles, resonated with them. The Church began to grow not only in Jewish communities but also with the Gentiles (i.e., those who were not Jewish), and Christianity spread outside of Israel throughout the Roman Empire. Early Christian communities were set up in Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, Carthage and Alexandria and by the end of the 2nd century spread through Europe, Africa, and Asia (including India!).

The Book of Acts is a testimony to how the Church was led by the Holy Spirit and the importance given to correct doctrine. We see what distinguished the Christian Church clearly articulated in **Acts 2:42**, i.e., *“And they continued steadfastly in the **Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship**, in the **breaking of bread**, and in **prayers**.”* These four elements are present even to this day in the Orthodox Church!



The Four Characteristics of the Early Church (Acts 2:42)

- **Apostles’ doctrine:** This is the teaching given to us from the Apostles. The Apostles (including St. Paul) were individually chosen by Christ, as was recorded in Holy Scripture. Our Lord directly spoke to, taught, and even chastised them. St. Mary (the

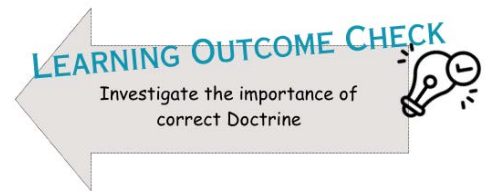
Mother of God) knew Him better than this group of special disciples. This is one of many reasons why the teachings given to the Apostles, especially about the Person of Christ (**St. Matthew 16:15**), is held sacred and considered as “doctrine.”

- **Fellowship:** Fellowship is the gathering together of the faithful who believe in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Fellowship is an important part of the Church that takes its highest form during Liturgy but is very important before and afterwards. Fellowship in Christianity is always united in Christ as we literally become the Body of Christ which is understood as the Church (**1 Corinthians 12:12; Colossians 1:24; Ephesians 1:22; Galatians 3:27**). Christ also teaches that He is present when two or more gather in His name (**St. Matthew 18:20**).
- **Breaking of bread:** Throughout Scripture and the early writings of the first few centuries, the “breaking of bread” is understood to be Holy Qurbana where the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. In the “Road to Emmaus” passage in **St. Luke 24:13–32**, the two disciples did not recognize Christ until He *“took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.”* This intentionally brings us back to the Last Supper (**Matthew 26:26-30**). When we partake of the Body and the Blood, our eyes are opened and we know Him.
- **Prayers:** Actually, the Bible verse, correctly translated from the Greek, refers to “*the prayers*.” The first Christians always had liturgical worship and used hymns and prayers similar to what we use today in the Orthodox Church based on the Bible (notably Psalms) and the common teaching. Again, there were not individual interpretations but expressions of the common Faith.

The Church was united in a common Faith, and that Faith was the one taught by the Apostles. The Church prayed for guidance from the Holy Spirit who preserved their unity. The early Christian Church never depended on individual understanding and interpretation of the Faith. Historically there were many influential individuals such as Appolinaris, Arius, Nestorius, and Marcion who were in positions of power, influential in other ways; some were even appointed Bishops and priests who began to teach their own understanding of Christ. But in each and every instance, the Church united in the “Apostles’ doctrine”, dismissed the incorrect teaching, and worked to undo the damage of the individual.

Whenever any teaching arose that created controversy in the Church, the leaders of the Church assembled together and examined the different views and declared the true faith based on their discussions. It was important to discuss these new views so that no one

was led astray by the new teachings. More importantly, it was necessary to protect and safeguard the Apostolic teaching. Any deviation from the Apostolic teaching would completely change the “one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith” that was indeed delivered by Saints and all the faithful to the current ones. We remember some of them in the fifth Thubden of the Holy Qurbana. Changing the teaching of these Church Fathers would make us no longer an Orthodox Church.



When the wrong teaching or heresy grew to an extent that it threatened to change what we know about the Person of Christ (i.e., who Christ actually is), then it was necessary to gather a “great” Council. These were not pre-determined or scheduled meetings of Church leaders, but rather a response to a growing threat within the Church that would change the teachings as were given to the faithful.

The following describes the Council of Jerusalem as found in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 15) and the Great and Holy Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (325 A.D.), Constantinople (381 A.D.), and Ephesus (431 A.D.).

The Council of Jerusalem

As St. Paul and St. Barnabas preached to the Gentiles in Antioch, a problem arose regarding their conversion. Some Jewish Christians from Judea insisted that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow Jewish customs to be saved. St. Paul and St. Barnabas disagreed and traveled to Jerusalem to discuss this issue with the apostles and elders. The main topic was how the Old Testament Law applied to Christianity. Some supported the idea of requiring circumcision.

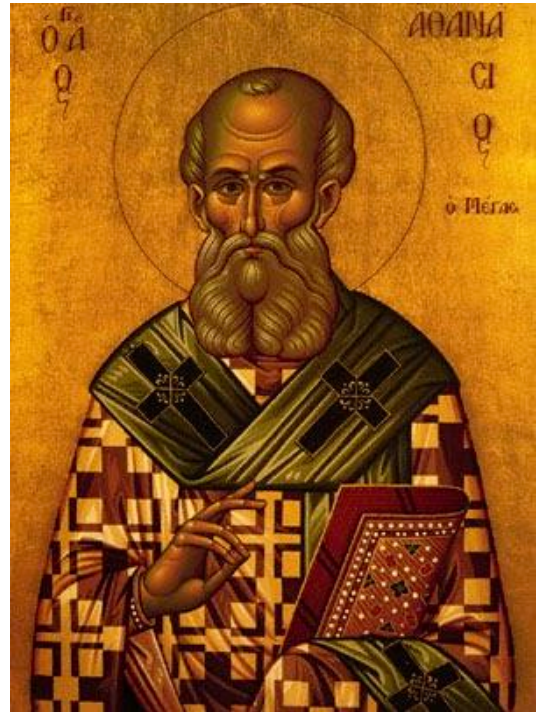
The council, led by St. James, the brother of Jesus decided that Gentile Christians would only need to follow specific rules for Gentiles found in the Torah, allowing the Church to welcome people from all backgrounds—Jewish and Gentile alike. This council set a precedent for how the Church would resolve significant disputes concerning the faith, demonstrating the importance of coming together to seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance



in teaching the true faith. These gatherings are known as “the councils.”

The Council of Nicaea (325 AD)

In the fourth century, a priest named Arius from Alexandria, Egypt, taught that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was a created being and not God from the beginning. This belief posed a significant challenge to the Christian faith, which teaches that Jesus is fully God and fully human. To address this issue, Emperor Constantine called for a council in 325 A.D., where 318 bishops and priests gathered in Nicaea. During the council, there were extensive discussions about Arius’s teachings, with St. Athanasius playing a key role in opposing them.

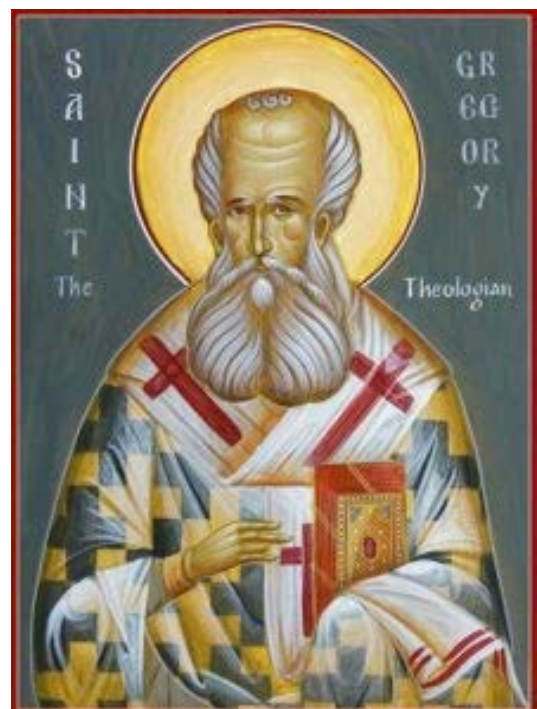


The fathers of the Council ultimately affirmed the true Christian faith by formulating the first version of the Nicene Creed, declaring that they believed in one God, the Father Almighty, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, who is of one essence with the Father and through whom all things were made. This declaration helped clarify the Church’s position and reinforced the belief in the divine nature of Jesus Christ.

The Council of Constantinople (381 AD)

The Council of Constantinople, held in 381 AD, was convened in response to a new teaching introduced by Macedonius, a bishop, and his followers, who claimed that the Holy Spirit was a created being and therefore lesser than God the Father and God the Son. To address this false teaching, one hundred and fifty bishops gathered to defend the Orthodox Faith.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus the Theologian and St. Gregory of Nyssa played key roles in affirming the equal status of the Holy Spirit within the Holy Trinity, which is understood as one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, all

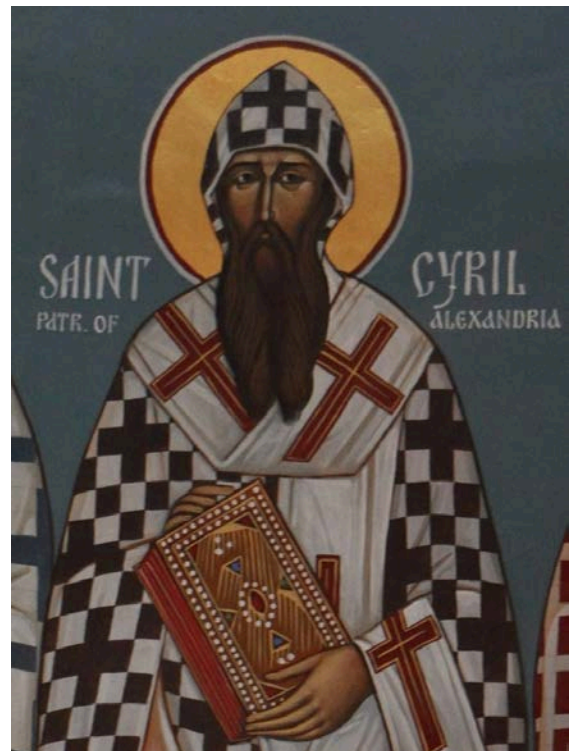


sharing the same essence. As a result of their discussions, the Council expanded the Nicene Creed to include a clear statement about the Holy Spirit: “And in the One Living Holy Spirit, the life-giving Lord of all, who proceeds from the Father, and who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets and the apostles. In the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, we confess one baptism for the remission of sins and we look for the resurrection of the dead and the new life in the world to come. Amen.”

The Council of Ephesus (431 AD)

In 431 AD, the third ecumenical Council took place in Ephesus, where two hundred bishops gathered to address the teachings of Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople. Nestorius believed that while St. Mary gave birth to Jesus, He was merely a human being, and that God came to dwell in Him later.

St. Cyril of Alexandria, a prominent theologian of that time, played a key role in the Council and is remembered for his teachings about St. Mary. He emphasized that Jesus Christ is one Person who is fully God and fully man, declaring that because St. Mary gave birth to God Himself, she is honored as the Theotokos, or Mother of God. Additionally, the Council established that there should be no further changes to the Niceo-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is a statement of Christian faith.



The Rejection of the Council of Chalcedon

We remember in the fifth Thubden of Holy Qurbana that we “proclaim those three sacred, holy, and ecumenical councils of Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus,” and remember the teachings and all the “glorious and God-fearing fathers, bishops, and teachers who participated in them”. With the affirmations from the three Councils we received the Nicene-Constantinople Creed which is referred to as the “**Symbol of Faith**”.

Very important beliefs about the Nature and Person of Christ were also affirmed. **Christology** is a term used to refer to the study of the nature and person of Jesus Christ,

including who He is and His Life, notably the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection. Christology and the Person of Christ were also at the center of these Councils and as mentioned before, all who participated in these important Councils defended and clarified the teaching given to us. In the fifth Thubden, this is meant when we say that they *"have kept, entrusted, and delivered to us the one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith"*.

The first Council of Nicaea affirmed that Jesus Christ was God and fully Divine, "consubstantial" with the Father, and rejected the Arian contention that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Son, was a created being. This doctrine was reaffirmed at the Councils of Constantinople and Ephesus, and those Councils also affirmed the Trinitarian doctrine of the equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son and that St. Mary was the "God bearer" or Theotokos.

All of these affirmations not only resolved controversies and defeated heresies, but also upheld the Christology that was given to us by the Apostles who learned directly from Christ. We believe Christ is fully man and fully God, and St. Mary is the Theotokos (Mother of God, or the God-bearer). This is what we regularly sing in the opening hymn of Holy Qurbana (Maneesa of Mar Severus), i.e., *"He became man without change"*.

It is important to keep this in mind to truly appreciate the courage and wisdom of our Church father St. Dioscoros of Alexandria at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D..

Leading up to the Council, St. Dioscorus was outspoken in his defense that Christ's humanity and divinity must be regarded as united in "one incarnate nature," using the words of St. Cyril who he served as secretary for years and succeeded as Patriarch in 444 A.D.. One incarnate nature means that after becoming a human being, Christ was seen and perceived as one being, not separated as God and human. It was one Christ, who was doing everything. To put simply, Christ was fully man and fully God with no division.

As a disciple of St. Cyril, it is not at all surprising that he was looked to in the ancient Church as a genuine leader and defender of Truth. He also had many political



LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Analyze the basic issues of the Council of Ephesus and how they connect to the issues of the Council of Chalcedon.



adversaries who opposed the support he provided to a monk named Eutyches. They were bitter also because he refused a letter of Pope Leo I of Rome (known as the Tome of Leo) to be read to the bishops at a minor council in Ephesus (449 A.D.), which he presided over.

The Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) formulated that Jesus Christ was ‘one Person’ made known ‘in two natures,’ and St. Dioscoros found this unacceptable because it was not in conformity to the faith of the Church and it contradicted the Council of Ephesus (431). This split or “schism” in the early Church led to what are now Orthodox Churches in **Egypt, Syria, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Armenia and India** which are commonly referred to as the **Oriental Orthodox Churches**. This group of Churches maintains that the ‘in two natures’ of Chalcedon was not the tradition of the pre-Chalcedonian Church, which proclaimed the One Christ as ‘from two natures’ (humanity and divinity) and ‘one incarnate nature’ of Christ.

Summary

A Great Ecumenical Council is not just a meeting of the leaders of the different Churches, but rather an extraordinary *meeting* of all the Bishops of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. It is to discuss a fundamental teaching that may be heresy, changing the Apostolic teaching of who Jesus is. This teaching of the person of Christ is what we have been handed down and kept unchanged through generations, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the prayers of all our faithful departed ancestors. As Orthodox Christians, we have never changed the teaching of who Jesus is so that we can work towards perfecting ourselves to be like Him.

Reflection Questions

1. What were the main reasons our Church objected to the decisions made at the Council of Chalcedon, and why do you think these objections are significant for us today?
2. Why do you think St. Dioscoros is honored in the 5th Thubden during the Holy Qurbana? Additionally, why does St. Cyril receive special emphasis during this time?
3. What could happen to our Church if we decided to ignore or change the teachings that were handed down to us by the Apostles? Why is it important for us to stick to correct doctrine?

Lesson 2: One True God

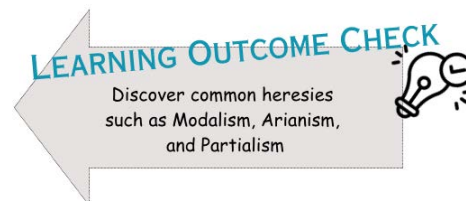
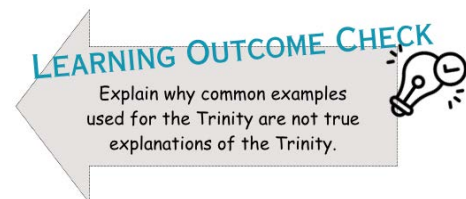
Lesson Goals

- *I can analyze that One God is Three Persons*
- *I can examine various heresies that concern the Holy Trinity.*
- *I can explore the reference to the Holy Trinity in the Divine Liturgy.*

The Nicene Creed begins with “We believe in One True God”. Our One True God is also the Holy Trinity - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This mystery can never be fully understood as it is a paradox.

Using examples are good to start understanding the concept of the Trinity, but all fall short. It is important to understand the limitations as they can lead to misunderstandings that are false teachings called heresies. No analogy can ever fully explain this mystery.

Throughout history, many ideas about the Trinity have emerged that conflict with Orthodox Christian teaching. Here are three significant heresies that have been addressed by the Church:

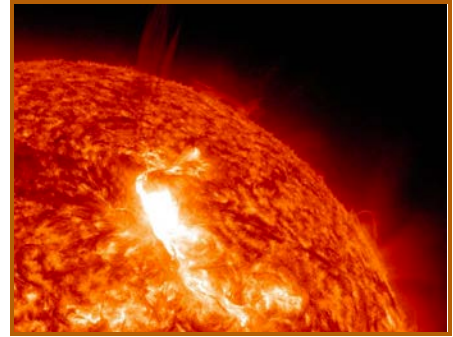


- **Modalism:** This belief suggests that God operates in different “modes” at different times, almost like wearing masks. For example, proponents of Modalism might say that when God created the world, He was acting as the Father; when Jesus was on Earth, He was acting as the Son; and when the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost, He was acting as the Spirit. This view confuses the unique roles of each Person in the Trinity and blurs their distinctions. In reality, all three Persons of the Trinity exist simultaneously and work together in full harmony. A common analogy that falls into this heresy is using water which exists in three forms: solid (ice), liquid (water), and gas (steam). While these forms share the essence of being water it does not explain the one True God as liquid

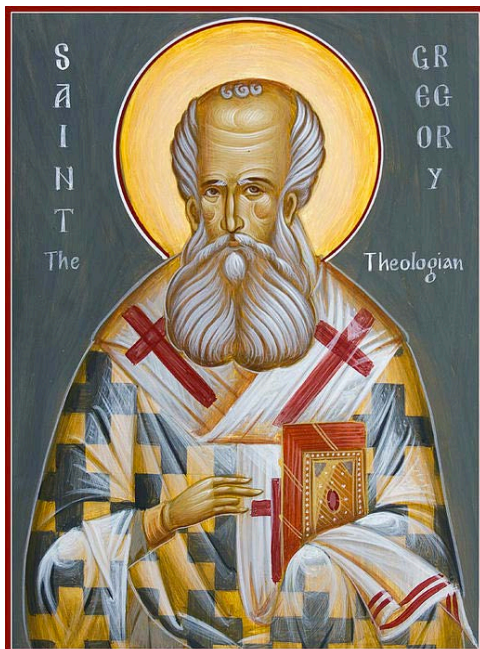


water, steam, and ice does not exist at the same temperature.

- **Arianism:** Arianism teaches that Christ, the Son of God, is not divine and was created by the Father. This idea suggests that because God is unbegotten, He must be uncreated. Since Christ is described as being “begotten” of the Father, Arianism claims that He must therefore be a created being and not truly God. This misunderstanding undermines the equality and divinity of the Son and puts our salvation at risk, as it questions the divine nature of Christ. A common analogy that is Arianism is comparing the Trinity to the Sun, teaching the physical sun represents the Father, the light that comes from the sun symbolizes the Son, and the warmth represents the Holy Spirit.
- **Partialism:** This heresy proposes that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are merely parts of God. For example, it might use the analogy of a three-leaf clover, where each leaf represents one Person of the Trinity, and the clover as a whole represents God. This view is incorrect because it implies that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are only “part” of God, rather than each being fully and equally God.



A True Understanding



St. Gregory of Nazianzus was an important Church father who is known for his reflections on the Holy Trinity. He emphatically taught how the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are distinct and equal in divinity, but are at the same time One God with one will and one energy. For St. Gregory Nazianzen, the Trinity is not just an abstract or complicated idea about God, but rather really important as it shows us the starting point and purpose of being a Christian. The Holy Trinity connects to many important topics, like how we read the Bible, how we know things about God, and how we practice our faith in worship, self-discipline, and helping others in our community.

St. Gregory writes, *“To us there is One God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceedeth from Him is referred to One, though we believe in Three Persons. For one is not more and another less God; nor is One before and another after; nor are They divided in will or parted in power; nor can you find here any of the qualities of divisible things; but the Godhead is, to speak concisely, undivided in separate Persons; and there is one mingling of Light, as it were of three suns joined to each other. When then we look at the Godhead, or the First Cause, or the Monarchia, that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in Whom the Godhead dwells, and at Those Who timelessly and with equal glory have their Being [in] the First Cause--there are Three Whom we worship (Theological Orations V.14).”*

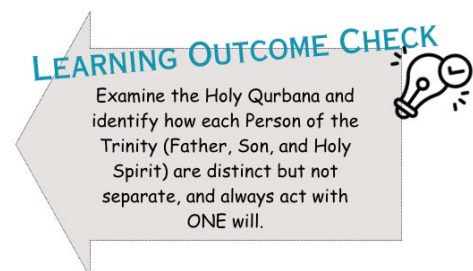
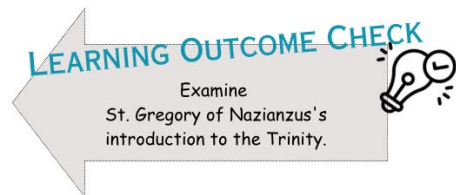
St. Gregory of Nazianzus provides a clear explanation of the Trinity, emphasizing that while we recognize three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—there is only one God. Each Person in the Trinity has unique attributes: the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten by the Father (**St.**

John 3:16, 18; St. John 1:14, 18; I John 4:9), and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (**St. John 15:26**). Importantly, the Holy Spirit also takes His essence from the Son. Despite these distinctions, all three Persons share essential qualities; they are eternal, self-existent, uncreated, divine, undivided, and of one essence and nature. There is a single Divine Will and Energy that unite them, meaning they act together in harmony. St. Gregory reminds us that our understanding of time must be set aside because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist outside of time and do not possess a beginning or an end. Thus, God transcends temporal constraints, highlighting the profound nature of the Trinity.

Trinitarian Liturgy

The life of the Trinity is the life of the Church, which is our life in Christ. The liturgical life of the Church is centered around the activity and operation of the Holy Trinity. Our life in the Church begins with baptism, which is done in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (**St. Matthew 28:19**). Furthermore, we are anointed and consecrated with Holy Chrism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we participate in the liturgical life of the Church, we are joined into the life of the Holy Trinity.

The presence of the Holy Trinity is also seen throughout Holy Qurbana. One example where we witness the presence of the Holy Trinity is the **Blessing of the Censor**. The Blessing of the Censor, which is done before the recitation of the Nicene



Creed, **confesses the divinity and holiness of each Person in the Trinity.** The priest takes one chain representing the Father, two chains representing the Son (for He is both human and divine), and the last chain represents the Holy Spirit. The priest holds these chains and proclaims the holiness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Blessing of the Censor is an acknowledgment of faith in the Trinity. The priest is also invoking the blessing of the Trinity for the Anaphora which is to follow.



The Holy Qurbana cannot take place without the presence and blessing of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Another example of the Holy Trinity in Holy Qurbana is the **first benediction of the Anaphora.** This benediction, which is done soon after the Kiss of Peace, says the following: “May the love of God the Father, the grace of the Only-begotten Son, and the fellowship and indwelling of the Holy Spirit be with you all my brethren, forever.” This benediction (taken from **2 Corinthians 13:14**) is Trinitarian and we see different attributes for each Person of the Trinity. This does not mean that each attribute only applies to that specific Person, but rather that all these attributes are qualities of God. The eternal love, grace, and fellowship of God is promised in this benediction.

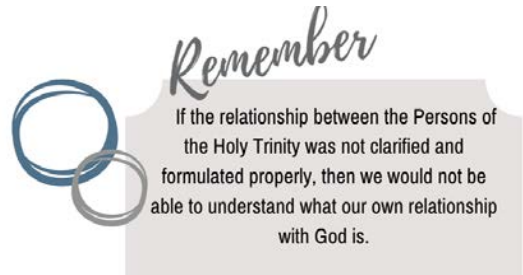
One last example that shows the presence of the Trinity in the Holy Qurbana is the **Elevation of the Mysteries.** This occurs right before the Quqlions are sung. During this time, the holiness of the Father, Son, and Spirit are again affirmed.

The creation of the world out of love is attributed to the Father. The salvation of the world through the redemptive suffering of Christ is attributed to the Son. The perfection and fulfillment of all that has been promised and given to us in this world, and the world to come, is attributed to the Spirit. We affirm that we are not holy to commune the Body and Blood of Christ, but through the holiness of the Trinity, we are made worthy.

So, it is very important that we say Amin (so be it) after the priest says : with us is the One Holy Father...with us is the One Holy Son...with us is the One Living Holy Spirit...The Holy Trinity is glorified as the Body and Blood are elevated to the heavens, and as we prepare to approach the altar in repentance and humility.

The Holy Trinity: A Mystery of Love

A true understanding of the Trinity is crucial for us as Orthodox Christians. Our understanding of the Trinitarian God is the basis for our understanding of what our purpose is as human beings on this earth. The mystery of the Trinity is a mystery of Love: an eternal, self-less love between the Three Persons of the Trinity, and a love that we are called to have in our own lives.



In the beginning, there was only Love, a love that was shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is in that love that the rest of creation was formed, culminating in the most perfect manifestation of that love, *“Let **Us** make Man in **Our** image, according to **Our** likeness.” (Genesis 1:26)*. The plural-possessive adjectives show that the Trinity was involved in the Creation of Man, not just God the Father or God the Son.

We were created out of the love of the Trinity, so that we could love God and be loved by Him. The Holy Trinity is the model for our lives. All human beings were created to be the perfect image and likeness of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways do the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share the same divine essence while also being distinct persons? Connect your answer to what you learned about their relationship in the Holy Qurbana.
2. Reflect on the heresies of Modalism, Arianism, and Partialism. Can you think of a situation or explanation that might misrepresent the Holy Trinity? How do these examples differ from the true understanding of the Trinity? Consider how St. Gregory of Nazianzus’s insights might help clarify these misconceptions.
3. How does the Holy Qurbana help illustrate the concept of the Holy Trinity acting with one will? Share a specific part of the Liturgy that highlights this unity among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Lesson 3: The Father Almighty

Lesson Goals

- *I can examine the first paragraph of the Nicene Creed and relate to God the Father.*
- *I can understand that God the Father is not an authoritative figure but a loving father.*
- *I can explore the Old Testament understanding of God the Father.*

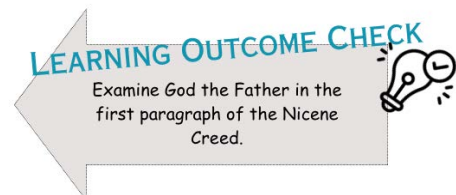
“And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.”

- St. Matthew 23:9

The words of Jesus can be challenging for believers to understand. Some people mistakenly think that when Jesus said not to call anyone “father,” He was telling us to avoid using this term for religious leaders or our own parents, as if it would offend God the Father. This interpretation is incorrect and highlights the risks of relying only on personal readings of the Bible without deeper understanding. If this view were true, then people wouldn’t use the term “father” for their parents either, which is not the case. Therefore, it seems unfair to single out certain communities, like the Orthodox Church, for using the term “Father” for clergy. The Orthodox Church teaches that while all honor and glory are rightfully due to God the Father, the title “father” for human beings reflects a small part of that divine dignity, and they still deserve respect. Ultimately, the honor, glory, power, and dignity of God the Father are unparalleled and should be recognized as such.

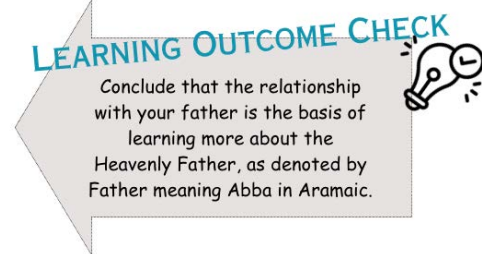
Who is God the Father?

In Orthodoxy, we believe that God is our loving Father and the source of everything in the universe. Some people argue that humans have created the idea of God to make sense of the randomness of life and to find meaning in the world. However, Orthodox Christianity teaches that our understanding of God is grounded in revelation—God has shown us who He is through His actions and interactions with us. While our experiences in life, such as the love we receive from our own fathers, can give us insights into God’s character, the heart of our faith lies in what God has revealed to us directly. This belief is beautifully captured in the first part of the Nicene Creed, which states, “We believe in One True God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible,” highlighting God as our Creator and sustainer of all that exists.



Abba

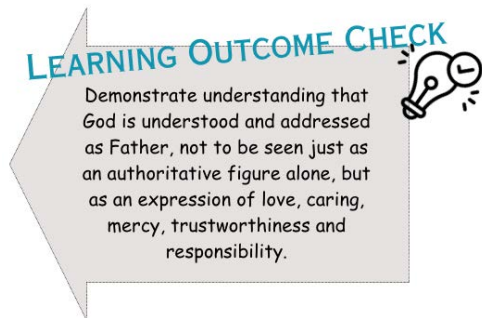
This short but meaningful word defines God as our Father and points us in the direction of the prayer taught to us by His Son. Jesus teaches us to call the Father “Abba,” which in Aramaic (old Syriac) indicates a very familiar form of father. This term indicates we should have an intimate relationship with God the Father.



In the Lord’s Prayer we learn that:

- Our will should be to do God’s will
- To ask Him for our basic needs (not our wants or desires)
- To focus on our key need to have our sins forgiven
- To demonstrate our identification with our Father by forgiving others
- To ask for protection against evil and evil-doers as we may be unable to avoid evil ourselves.

By these words from His Son we understand that although the Father is “above” or apart from our universe, the proper relation between ourselves and God is of Father to children. He is not a distant king giving random orders, nor a disinterested spirit who sets the universe in motion and then leaves it, nor a mischievous superpowered entity competing with humans for affection, resources, or even romance as seen in other faith traditions.

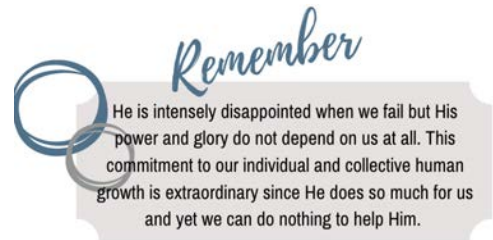


Rather He is our Father, devoted to our development and growth towards the goal of holiness. He is not interested in pleasing our subjective, childish desires like some superhero. The Father wants us to imitate His goodness in small ways. He is intensely disappointed when we fail but His power and glory do not depend on us at all. This commitment to our individual and collective human growth is extraordinary since He does so much for us and yet we can do nothing to help Him. We can only honor Him by trying our best and worshipping Him.

The Triune God

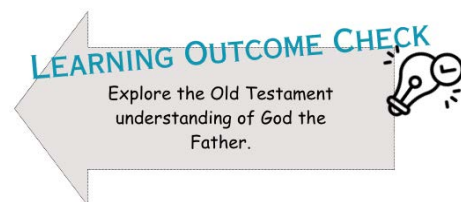
The short but powerful Creed definition of the Father points us to God's revelation from prehistoric times as Moses recounted in Genesis. Before time and space, God existed eternally. God referred to Himself grammatically in plural: "*And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness*" (**Genesis 1:26**)

This plurality is also seen in other passages, like the Tower of Babel (**Genesis 11:7**). Such accounts tell us the Father is God with the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Triune God, the Trinity. How three can be one and one be three is a deep mystery that some persons and faith traditions are unable, or unwilling, to accept. We understand that whatever substance the Father is, so is the Son and the Holy Spirit (in Greek, *homoousia*). Jesus tells us that to see Him is to see the Father (**St. John 14:9**). Yet each is a separate, real entity (hypostasis) who appears as a person (prosopon). So they are three and they are one in a way that we cannot fully understand. Indeed it is right that in a world where so many mysteries exist we should not be worried about not being able to understand the fullness of our God empirically. He is beyond our ability, as the eternal is beyond the finite. Worship of God contains the whole Trinity at all times. So, while in our human limitations we may focus on worship of one person in the Trinity at a time, we are always worshiping the Trinity implicitly.



A Merciful Father

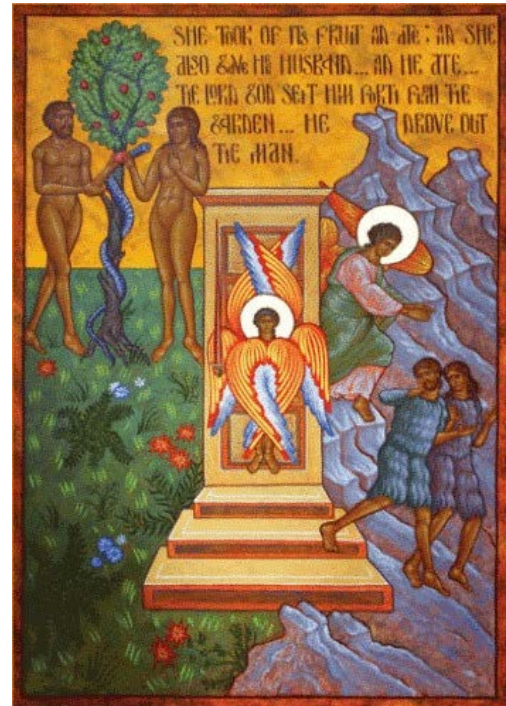
We know more about our Father from Genesis. For example, God creates the Garden of Eden for His children, Adam and Eve. Within the Garden is everything that they will need to thrive and multiply. For His own reasons in the Garden, God places two trees, one of eternity (everlasting life) and one of brevity (instant knowledge of good and evil and everything in-between) (**Genesis 2:9**). Many may interpret this as a warning of death from a vengeful God who is always looking for an opportunity to destroy His creation, but this is completely false. Instead, God is warning us to not chase after instant knowledge because it immediately makes us more impatient, and thereby welcomes the end (**Genesis 2:17**). By chasing after an impatient goal, we are acknowledging that we are in a hurry, which means that we are under a time limit. In response, we hurry, which means we choose a temporary existence with an end: death.



Despite God's warnings, we still chase our own death, being fueled by our own vanity to be as wise as God (**Genesis 3:5**). Following our own human ambitions and selfishness only leads to our end, just like Adam and Eve, who tried to hide their new found shame with leaves. Many interpreters suggest that the Fall of Man was because of the vengeance of a vicious divine power bent on shaming and punishing broken humans.

The Orthodox Church corrects these false interpretations. Though our God is omniscient (all knowing), He still questioned Adam and Eve about how they came to recognize their shame. When a human father clearly sees cookie crumbs in his child's mouth and all around, he may also ask the child, "what have you done?" or "what happened to the cookies?"

St. Ephrem teaches that God gave Adam and Eve a chance to repent and be forgiven. Instead they pointed fingers at everyone but themselves. When God speaks of the curse of Adam on the earth, He is not stating a punishment but rather explaining to Adam and Eve the consequence of introducing disobedience in the world. If humans had been patient and obedient, knowledge of good, evil and all other needs would have been automatically provided.



Sadly, Adam and Eve's impatient, selfish decisions alienated all of Creation for generations to come. Now all people will have to work hard for their daily needs and then in the end, will still meet their death. As they left the Garden of Eden, God made them garments of skin. This showed His continued mercy as they headed out into a cruel world of their own creation, a broken version of the world God had created for them.



They were sent from the Garden of Eden to keep humans away from the Tree of Life, a temporary delay. In His endless mercy, God eventually gives humans the food of eternal life, namely the Body and the Blood of His Son. Great is God the Father, the source of mercy!

Old Testament Vengeance vs New Testament Mercy

Some people interpret God's behavior in the Scripture to be severely punishing, almost bloodthirsty. Meanwhile God in the Gospel is distinctly merciful, loving, and forgiving. The Orthodox Church has always corrected this misunderstanding. The nature of God the Father is merciful, loving, tender, and compassionate from the Creation until now.



Some examples of His mercy in the Old Testament include:

- Creation
- His reaction to the Fall of Man
- Cain's life was spared after he mercilessly killed his brother
- Lot's family escaped from Sodom-Gomorra
- Salvation of God's people from Egypt
- His forgiveness of Nineveh in the time of Jonah

His mercy continued all the way until the crucifixion of His Son on the Cross and the presence of the Holy Spirit to comfort and perfect the world. Humans have always been inconsistent in their commitment to God, but God has always been consistent in His faithfulness and trustworthiness to humans. God has always been merciful and full of love. Our human understanding of God may change and require correction at times. One example is when Jesus answered a doubt on the Mosaic law allowing divorce:

"He said to them, 'Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.'" - St. Matthew 19:8

This verse shows that human understanding of God's intentions may be clouded by human weakness. The advent of Christ into the world ended all confusions and made clear that God the Father is the source of mercy and love from the beginning, to now, and forevermore. That is all due to the unchanging and loving nature of God.

Heretical Teachings of God

Modalism

Some people have misunderstood God's nature in how He portrays Himself before humans. They believe that God reveals a different "mode," ("face" or "appearance"), at different times. Sabellius taught this in his ancient heresy, and modern-day preachers knowingly or unintentionally take up this issue too. To be more precise, they claim that in the past, God revealed Himself as the Father, then later revealed Himself as the Son, and then after the Ascension as the Holy Spirit. However, there has always been only one single entity/person with different sides.



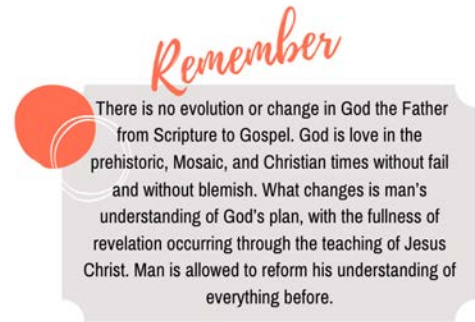
Although this heresy would neatly solve the problem of three in one being just one seen from different "angles", it also happens to be wrong and disproven. The best proof against the error is the Epiphany (Theophany/Denaha) when simultaneously present in time and space are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Three separate persons as the Triune, three-in-one God were present.

Gnosticism/Marcionism

Some heresies also argued that there was a difference between Old Testament and New Testament deities. For example, throughout time, many wicked people have attempted to control others by controlling religious information. Specifically, the "truth" of the religion/god is revealed only to certain people and those people share that special knowledge only with some other specific people. Further evidence of the "specialness" of that group was bizarre behavior and practices formed by their peculiar knowledge. Unsurprisingly, these "special" groups' practices often involved asking for large amounts of money or other resources. Early Christianity was plagued by such heresies, collectively termed *gnosticism*, which means that they claimed they are the recipients of a special, secret knowledge (in Greek, *gnosis*) that was revealed to highly regarded people, such as Apostles or other saints, who then taught these particular people.

While many strains of gnosticism infested the Church, one particularly popular form stated that there was a true god, the father named by Jesus Christ, and in opposition to this true god was a notorious being of lesser stature, generally termed "the demiurge," who created this world to fulfill his wicked personal desires. Therefore he is actually an agent of evil and deception. A particular variant of this heresy called Marcionism argued for a clear difference between Old and New Testament deities.

However, unlike other forms of gnosticism, Marcionism did not claim special knowledge. The heretic, Marcion, claimed that Apostle St. Paul had stated all this in his epistles but they had to be read “properly.” He also rejected the key Old Testament books because they were in the service of the evil “demiurge.” This is how Marcionism argued for a major distinction between the “good” New Testament god and the “evil” Old Testament god.



The Orthodox response is to reject this nonsense as misinformed and heretical because there is no evolution or change in God the Father from Scripture to Gospel. God is love in the prehistoric, Mosaic, and Christian times without fail and without blemish. What changes is man's understanding of God's plan, with the fullness of revelation occurring through the teaching of Jesus Christ. Man is allowed to reform his understanding of everything before. What emerges as truth is the tender mercy of God the Father toward us, His children rooted in His nature as love. Glory be to the Triune God.

In summary, God the Father is the Creator of all. He is one person of the Trinity, the Triune God. His mercy causes Him to care for us throughout all of human history and into eternity. While persons who read the Bible in their own way may try to see a difference in God's nature and behavior over time, we know that His nature has not changed then, and now, and nor will it change in the future. His nature is based on love and exhibits faithfulness, trustworthiness, and mercy.

Reflection Questions

1. How does understanding the concept of God the Father in the Nicene Creed shape our perception of divine authority and love?
2. In what ways does your own relationship with your earthly father influence your understanding of God the Father as portrayed in Scripture?
3. What are some characteristics attributed to God the Father in both the Old Testament and the Gospel, and how do these support the notion of God as loving and merciful?

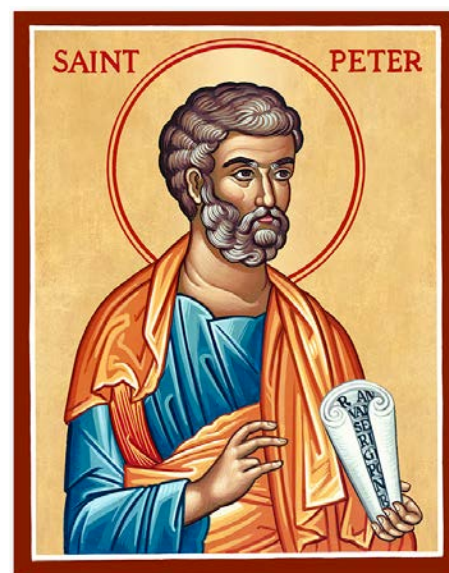
Lesson 4: One Lord Jesus Christ

Lesson Goals

- *I can study how the Nicene Creed describes the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, Jesus Christ.*
- *I can examine the salvific role of Christ in our lives.*

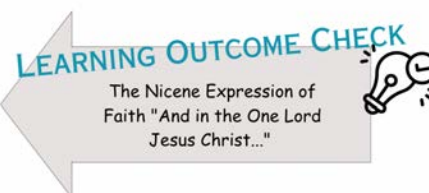
“Who do you say that I am?”

This is the question that Jesus poses to His disciples in the Gospels (**St. Matthew 16:15**, **St. Mark 8:27**, **St. Luke 9:18**), and one that is still important for us today. If we look at the Gospel of Matthew, the Apostle Peter responds to Jesus saying, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,*” (**St. Matthew 16:16**). This was a profound confession of faith that came from St. Peter. No one else had ever openly stated until this time that Jesus was the **Messiah**, the Christ, the One prophesied about in the Old Testament, and the One who was meant to save the Israelites. Christ recognizes the faith of Peter and proclaims that, “*on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it,*” (**St. Matthew 16:18**). The Rock of Faith that Peter confessed is Christ Himself. He is the True Rock, which cannot be overcome by sin, death, or corruption. He is the Rock of the Church and the foundation of our lives. Christ is the Word of God who fills all things and is in all things. The first step to understanding who we are as human beings is understanding who Christ is in our lives. Like the disciples, we have to ask ourselves, “who do we say that Christ is?”



“The One Lord Jesus Christ”

We confess in the Nicene Creed that we believe in “the One Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God.” Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, “begotten of the Father, before all worlds.” Christ is the pre-existent and eternal Son of God. He is fully God, being “one in essence with the Father.” Christ has the same Divine Nature as the Father and Holy Spirit. Christ is uncreated, existing without beginning or end.

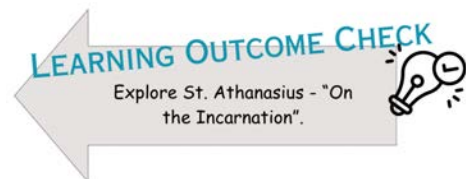
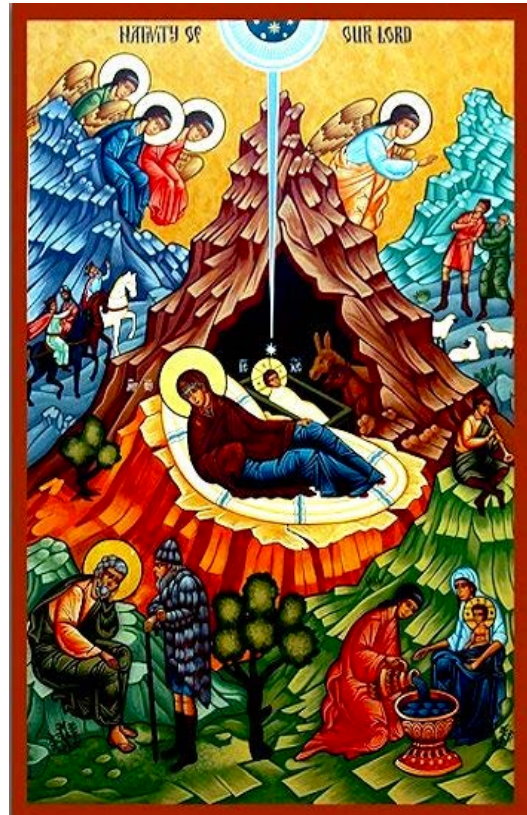


We later say in the Creed that Christ came down from heaven for our salvation. The Feast of the Nativity marks this event, the **Incarnation** of Christ. It is the Incarnation of Christ that unites mankind with Him. Christ dwells in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, through the Holy Spirit, and becomes Man.

Through the Incarnation, Christ is fully God and fully Man. He does not lose His Divine Nature and there is no change in Himself, but rather He joins all of humanity to Himself. The Incarnation of Christ is the true mystery of Jesus.

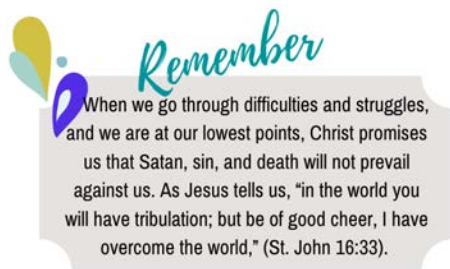
How could God become Man in the womb of a virgin? This is an indescribable mystery, but one that is necessary for our salvation. Without the Incarnation, communion with God is impossible.

The fourth century saint and prominent Church father, St. Athanasius of Alexandria (mentioned in the fifth thubden of the Holy Qurbana), wrote extensively, in his work *On the Incarnation*, about the birth of our Lord and its significance in our salvation. He writes “God became man so that man might become god.” This statement is foundational in the Orthodox doctrine known as *theosis*. To “become god” most certainly does not mean we become God in essence (note the lowercase “g”, see also Psalm 82:1). Rather St. Athanasius says this to emphasize that Christ descends to the level of humanity so that we can ascend to His divinity. We are becoming god through His grace and He is God by His nature. It is union with God, by which our whole being becomes enveloped in the divinity of God.



In the Creed, the account of the Incarnation is immediately followed by the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ. Along with the Incarnation, these events in the life of Christ make up the **economy of Christ**, or the working of our salvation. Everything that Christ did and continues to do is always for our salvation. Nothing

Christ does is for His own benefit and everything He does is always for us. Christ became Incarnate so that He might die for our salvation. Christ takes death upon Himself for the sake of all mankind so that we might have eternal life in Him. He endures pain and suffering on the Cross, identifying Himself with us at our lowest points in life and meeting us where we are so that He might lift us up. The Resurrection of Christ marks the victory of life over death, of Christ over Hades. Death and corruption have no more power over us because Christ, being the essence of life itself, tramples Death by His own death. Through the

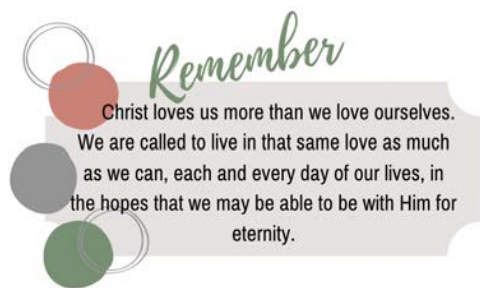


Resurrection of Christ, all of humanity is able to experience the same resurrection. The joy of this great victory over death is ultimately a joy in Christ Himself. After the Resurrection, Christ remained with His Disciples for 40 days. After these 40 days had passed, Christ ascended unto heaven, and now eternally "sits at the right hand of His Father." Even in the Ascension of Christ, we see the great love that He has for us. Since Christ is perfect God and perfect Man, when He

ascended unto heaven, He brought human nature itself to the right hand of God the Father. This is how much He loves us, that He has brought us to the throne of God to be with Him for all eternity. How great does God value us! Not only did Christ, God Himself, become Man and die for us, He also defeated death and elevated us to the heights of the heavens. Our true worth as human beings is seen in the Person of Christ. How much is our life worth? It is the life of Christ itself.

Christ in our Life

Our understanding of Christ is crucial if we wish to understand our true purpose in life. We are called to participate in the life of Christ so that we can be in eternal communion with Him in the Kingdom of Heaven. Every aspect of our life should be centered around Christ. And why should we love Him? As St. John the Apostle writes, "*we love Him because He first loved us,*" (1 John 4:19). In the life of Christ, we have seen how much Christ loves us through His salvific economy (plan of salvation). In a world full of struggles and difficulties, it is Christ who gives us strength and hope. Christ has given us eternal joy through His Resurrection. As Jesus told Peter, the gates of Hades shall not prevail against the Church. However, Jesus' response does not refer just to the Church. Christ is the foundation of not only the Church, but of our very lives. When we go through difficulties and struggles, and we are at our lowest points, Christ promises us that Satan, sin, and death will not prevail



against us. As Jesus tells us, *“in the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world,”* (**St. John 16:33**). Christ was born into a dark world, illuminating all of creation with His eternal Light. Likewise, it is in our darkest and most difficult moments of life that Christ illuminates our hearts. It is impossible to fully explain how much Christ has blessed us in our lives and how much more we should desire to love and be with the One who has given us everything. Christ loves us more than we love ourselves. We are called to live in that same love as much as we can, each and every day of our lives, in the hopes that we may be able to be with Him for eternity.

Reflection Questions

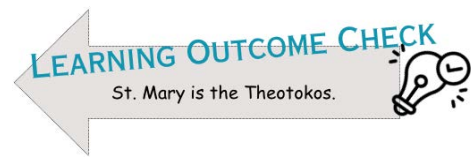
1. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus tells Peter, “You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church.” What do you think this “rock” symbolizes in terms of your personal faith and community belief? How can you strengthen your own foundation of faith like Peter?
2. Based on the Nicene Creed, how do you think the major events in the life of Jesus Christ (like his birth, death, resurrection, and ascension) shape our understanding of his role in salvation? Can you identify ways these events relate to your own life experiences?
3. In what specific ways can you incorporate the teachings and examples of Jesus into your daily routine? Think about your actions, words, and attitudes in school and at home. How can you strive to reflect Christ’s love and compassion in your interactions?

Lesson 5: Yoldath Aloho, the God Bearer

Lesson Goals

- I can defend why Orthodox Christians venerate St. Mary as the Theotokos
- I can relate how St. Mary's upbringing and choices in her life serve as a role model for us all
- I can understand that God's plan for our salvation needed cooperation from someone as special as St. Mary, and that she was prophesied in the Old Testament

The term "Yoldath aloho" is Syriac for "the one who delivered God" or "God-bearer", or the human 'Birth-giver to God.' In Malayalam, she is called "Daiva Mathavu" or "Daivaprasavithri" and is equivalent to the Greek word "Theotokos" or, as we recite in the Nicene Creed, the "Mother of God."



The Greek word "Theotokos" also means the 'God-Bearer', the one who bore God in her womb,' ('Theos' -God and 'Tokos' from the verb 'tiktein' - to bear). This most common title of Mary, Theotokos (the God-bearer), has been in use since the 3rd century. This title was re-iterated by the third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus.

The *Magnificat* is found in **St. Luke 1:46-55** and is Latin for "[My soul] magnifies [the Lord]". This special hymn of praise by St. Mary reflects how this young virgin chosen by God in all humility appreciates and accepts her role in human salvation. The truth of her words, "For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (**v.48**), needs to be understood and appreciated by all Christians to truly grow in the fullness of the Faith.

St. Mary was chosen for God's highest plan, and through her came the salvation of mankind. She was the first person to receive Jesus Christ within her. This was not by accident. The Virgin Mary was part of God's plan, foreshadowed to the prophets and devout people from the Old Testament days. Her spiritual way of life, obedience, humility, and continuous pursuit of God's will in her life brought this mission to her. A correct understanding of the Theotokos is essential to learn how we are being saved.

Life of St. Mary



St. Mary was born to St. Joachim and St. Anna. We know

of these saints through a few sources, including the Proto-evangelion of St. James, and all our Church traditions confirm they were faithful people and longed for a child throughout their lives. They had to endure scorn since, at that time, childlessness was considered a stigma, a curse, and a disgrace. But they never grumbled, rather they fervently prayed to God, humbly trusting in Him. They are remembered as Saints due to their life of devotion.

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Discuss the early life of St. Mary, including her parents.



They had a strong faith in God despite their life's circumstances or what people may have thought about them. They had a lifetime of bareness, but through their persistent supplication, they were blessed with a daughter, Mary, in their old age. We commemorate her birth as the Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos every year on the 8th of September.

They were so thrilled to have a child that they promised to dedicate her to the Temple when she was born. They raised her in prayer and supplication to God and, at a very young age, dedicated her to the Temple of Jerusalem. The Feast of the Dedication of the Theotokos to the Temple is the celebration of her entrance as a child into the Jerusalem Temple and is commemorated on the 21st of November every year.

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Examine the Feast of the Theotokos in the Temple.



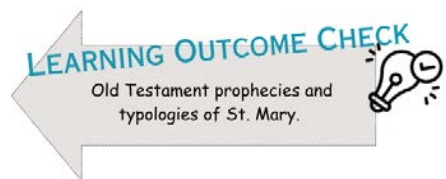
While she came of age, she was espoused to Joseph. Angel Gabriel appeared to her and delivered the divine annunciation about her bearing Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity. The Church celebrates the Feast of Annunciation (Suboro) to St. Mary annually on the 25th of March as well as the fourth Sunday in the season of Annunciation.

Typology of St. Mary



The classic definition of typology in Christian theology and biblical exegesis (interpretation of a text, usually in reference to Holy Scripture) is a doctrine or theory concerning the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament. There are important typologies related to St. Mary that we often reference in our Liturgical hymns and prayers as well. With the illumination from Christ, we understand clearly how these events, persons, or statements in the Old Testament are seen as types of prefiguring or shadowing real events or aspects of Christ or His revelation described in the New Testament.

Some important typologies¹ of St. Mary:



- **The Burning Bush (Exodus 3:1-21):** On Mt. Sinai, Moses saw the Bush that was burning but was not consumed. So too, the Theotokos bore the fire of Divinity, but was not consumed.
- **Jacob's Ladder (Genesis 28:10-17):** In his dream, Jacob saw a ladder ascending to Heaven, with Angels ascending and descending on it. The Theotokos is a Ladder, stretching from the Earth to Heaven, for on It God descended to man, having become incarnate.
- **East Gate of the Temple (Ezekiel 44:1-3):** We read how the gate that is facing East in the sanctuary of the Temple is shut, and God says, "It shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it, because it was through that gate that the glory of the Lord entered into the temple of the Lord." (Ezekiel 44:1-2). Only through St. Mary did God enter the world as a full man.
- **The Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:10-22, 3 Kingdoms 8:1-11, Hebrews 9:4, Revelation 11:19):** The Theotokos is often called an Ark, for the Glory of God settled on her, just as the Glory of God descended on the Mercy Seat of the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant (**Exodus 25:10-22**).
- **Aaron's Rod (Num. 17:1-11):** Just as Aaron's Rod sprouted miraculously in the Old Testament, so too, the Theotokos has budded forth the Flower of Immortality, Christ our God. Humanity after the sin of Adam is considered as decaying and dying. St. Mary is the dried-up rod from which shoots new sprouts.
- **The tent of the meeting (Exodus 40:1-5, 9, 16, 34-35):** The Tabernacle was the place where the Glory of God dwelt. So too, the Glory of God dwelt in the Theotokos, the Living Tabernacle (**Ex. 40:34**).
- **The tree and the lamb (Genesis 22):** After God stops Abraham from sacrificing his only son Isaac, He makes a lamb (ram) caught in a tree manifest for the sacrifice. This was a foreshadowing of the virgin St. Mary giving birth to Christ as in nature there, it is not possible for this to happen as it did.
- **The rock and water (Exodus 17:6, John 4:13):** When Moses led the people through the desert to the Promised Land, he was commanded by God to strike a rock (**Exodus 17:6**). God made water to flow from it for the sustenance of the people of Israel. Like the virgin birth, water came forth from that which it naturally could not have come.

¹St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, South Canaan, Pennsylvania (2010). "These Truths We hold: The Holy Orthodox Church, Her Life and Teachings", Compiled and Edited by A Monk of St. Tikhon's Monastery.

- **The fish and coin (Matthew 17:27):** Christ tells St. Peter that a coin will be in the mouth of the first fish he catches (**Matthew 17:27**). This miracle shows the power of God over nature and is yet another foreshadowing of the virgin birth.

She first appears in the New Testament when Angel Gabriel announces Jesus' birth (**St. Luke 1: 30-31**). We see her again when Jesus was dedicated in the Jerusalem temple for naming (**St. Luke 2:21-22**), when they went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover (**St. Luke 2:41**), at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (**St. John 2:1**), at the foot of the cross of Jesus (**St. John 19:25**) and at the end when Mary together with the disciples (**Acts 1:14**) was praying in the upper room. Thus, we are exposed to the important role that St. Mary played in Jesus's life and His ministry and in the growth of the Church. St. Mary continued to be a virgin all her life, and she is addressed as the Virgin Mary or the Virgin Mother.

As St. Mary grew older, tradition has it that she was praying on the Mount of Olives, and the Angel Gabriel once more appeared to her and disclosed: "Thus says your Son, The days are approaching when I will take My Mother unto Me."

St. Mary heard those much longed-for words which she received with gladness. Upon her wish, all the Apostles were summoned to St. Mary's bedside in anticipation of her death. On that Sunday, surrounded by a large crowd of believers and Apostles, she was taken up to heaven.

However, St. Thomas as we know was in India and arrived late. Miraculously, he managed to catch a glimpse of her as she was taken up and as proof of this encounter, was given the girdle and kerchief that St. Mary was using. We observe this as the Feast of Shoonoyo (dormition) of the Theotokos, on the 15th of August every year.

When we commemorate St. Mary's life and celebrate the dormition, assumption, and glorification of our Lady, we are celebrating our own death, resurrection, and glorification with Christ. Everything that we say happened to the Theotokos will one day happen to those who follow Christ and love His appearance.



St. Mary: Our Role Model

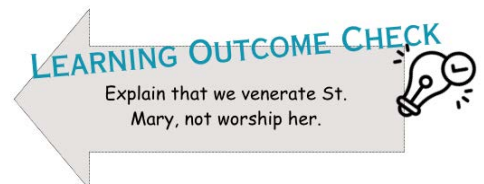
Among all the saints of the Church, St. Mary occupies a preeminent position. St. Mary's glory lies precisely in her being human, just like us!

She was born and died a natural, human death. However, by calling her a Saint, the Church confirms that she led a life pleasing to God and that her life was a model for us on how to live a Christ-like life.

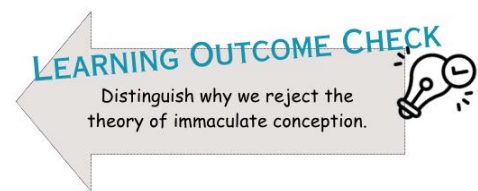
Our goal as Christians is to have Jesus within us just as St. Mary had. Although St. Mary literally had Christ within her womb, we too might strive for that same holiness that she possessed which brought favor to God so much so that He asked her to be the Theotokos. St. Mary was chosen by the Father to bear His only begotten Son – a fact that we remember when we sing the Quqliyon of St. Mary (“See the Royal Daughter stand ..” from **Psalms 43** OSB).



These are a few of the many reasons we venerate St. Mary, but it's important to understand the difference between veneration and worship. 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. Equivalent words in Malayalam are **vandanavu** and **aaradhana** respectively. We don't offer aaradhana to the saints or St. Mary, but we offer vandanavu to them.



The Orthodox Church strongly believes that everything that is taught about the Virgin Mary not only shows how special her Son's birth is but also reflects what we, as followers of Christ, hope for as part of His family. In other words, what happened to St. Mary will happen to us when we accept Christ to live inside us! This is another reason why we reject the Roman Catholic teaching of the “Immaculate Conception” which asserts that St. Mary was preserved by God by being conceived and born without Original Sin. Not only does our Church not believe sin is inherited, but moreover, the purity and holiness of St. Mary is more special as she was born just like us! The Immaculate Conception ironically diminishes the uniqueness of the Holy Mother.



St. Mary is Theotokos

At the start of the Holy Qurbana, the priest who is celebrating says a very special prayer: “May Mary who bore You and John who baptized You, intercede for us, O Lord! Have mercy on us all”

This prayer affirms Mary as 'Mother of God'. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit (**St. Luke 1: 41**), pronounced Mary as 'Mother of my Lord' (**St. Luke 1: 43**). St. Gregory of Nazianzus teaches us that St. Mary connects us with divinity. It is a mistake also to say that the Son of God passed through St. Mary as if she was a conduit. Christ took His birth as fully human and fully God. There was no participation of a male in His birth, and therefore, He is divine. There is full participation of a female and therefore, He is fully human.

We hold St. Mary with the highest veneration as she is our ultimate role model. Her choices from her free-will made her the most perfect and holy dwelling place for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to enter this world as man. Unlike other denominations, we do not view that St. Mary was “supernatural” or simply a vessel, but rather we acknowledge and hold dear to us the truth that because of her, we are all saved through Christ. Our worship is to God alone but our generation, and all generations before and after us indeed, will venerate her and will call her blessed. Our devotion to the ever virgin and blissful St. Mary, the Mother of God, must remain strong. As St. Ignatius of Antioch further emphasizes, “He who is devout to the Mother of God will certainly never be lost”.



Mary said, “You strengthened me to carry You.

When I bore You in the cave, I saw – Your glory

The Seraphim fly above Your little crib

Command them to raise their wings that I, - may enter

To kneel down – and worship You, Lord

At Your crib – surrounded by flames I will give to You pure milk, which shall please Your will”

- Qolo from Sh'hima
Wednesday Evening
prayer

Reflection Questions

1. How does recognizing St. Mary as Theotokos (Mother of God) shape our understanding of her role in Jesus' life? In what ways do we show veneration to St. Mary, and how is this different from worship?
2. Can you identify some Old Testament prophecies or stories that relate to St. Mary? How do these typologies help us understand her significance in the biblical narrative?
3. Who were the parents of St. Mary, and what qualities or events make them recognized as saints? How does knowing about her early life contribute to our appreciation of her role in Christianity?
4. How would you use the three examples ("a tree, a rock, and a fish") in the Slessby Third Hour Prayers to explain why people who say St. Mary couldn't have been a virgin when she became the Mother of God are wrong?

*The Church - proclaims three myst-ries
To teach those who doubt the Truth:
A tree, a rock, and a fish
Which brought forth wond'e'rous fruit
The tree did bring forth a lamb
The rock did flow with water
The fish did bring forth a coin
These three - reprove him who doubts
The myst'ry of Virgin birth
Lord, have mercy upon us and help us!*

Lesson 6: Habitation of Rest

Lesson Goals

- I can explain what it means for the departed to pass from this world
- I can describe how the departed await their resurrection and their Final Judgment
- I can explain the Biblical Foundation to the Prayers for the Departed

When someone dies, we often use the phrase “may he/she/they rest in peace,” which comes from the Latin term “dormit in pace” found in the catacombs of early Christians, signifying that the person died in the peace of the Church and is united with Christ. While many believe that death is the end of life, Orthodox Christians view it as the beginning of a new life. “Habitations of Rest” is taken from the Sedro of the First Service of the Funeral Service for Men.

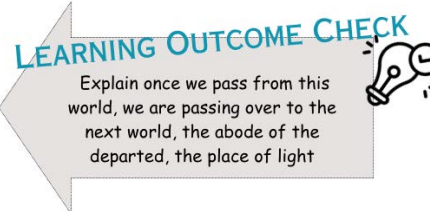
Death represents the separation of the soul from the body. Saint Paul describes death as a “departure” (**2 Timothy 4:6**) and a “deliverance of the soul from prison” (**2 Corinthians 5:1-4**), while the Acts of the Apostles refer to it as “sleep” (**Acts 13:36**). Saint Peter highlights it as “putting off the body” (**2 Peter 1:14**). According to Saint Paul, death is seen as the “last enemy” and a significant challenge to God’s creation, as humanity was meant for life. Death entered the world through the sin of Adam and Eve, affecting us all. However, Jesus Christ’s Resurrection overcame death and sin, allowing us to attain eternal life through Him (**St. John 11:25; 3:14-16; 4:14; 6:40, 47-58; 14:1-6**), so that we can be reunited with Him in Paradise (**St. Luke 23:42-43; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:21-23**).

Life After Death

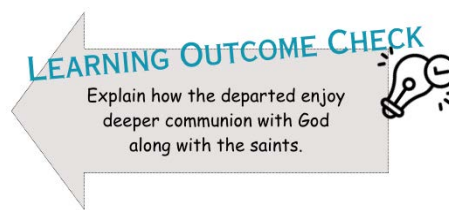
Life after death is seen as a key tenet of the Orthodox Christian faith. Our souls split from our bodies as we leave this life. The body returns to the ground after this separation and eventually decomposes. “For dust you are, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19; Job 7:21) signified that after death, one will return to the same earth from which they were all taken. We look forward to the day when our bodies, which are changed into a glorified state (**1 Corinthians 15:50-54**) like Christ’s own body (**Philippians 3:20-21; 1 John 3:2**), will be reunited with our souls between the time of our death and the Final Judgment.

Orthodox Christians believe that the soul is immortal and continues to exist after the physical death. Death is seen as a separation of the soul from the body, but the soul remains conscious and enters into the afterlife. This is because the real death is not the separation between body and soul, but the separation between God and the soul. Our belief is that the souls of the dead, who died before Christ continued to exist in a place called Sheol or Hades (**Psalm 139:8; Isaiah 14:9-11**).

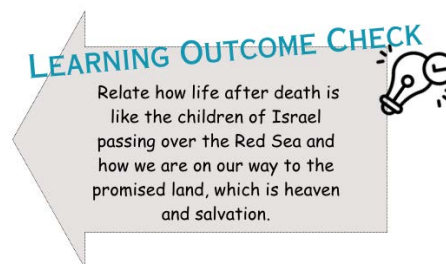
Those who received the baptism and die are taken to the chamber of light and the souls are guided by the Holy Angels there. We learn these things from the introductory prayer of the first service (men and women) for the departed. That is the reason for us to prefer calling them the departed because they are alive, are in communion with God and the fellow faithful departed.



They wait for the Final Judgment there and are in communion with the saints. During this waiting time, the soul lives in a “middle state” and undergoes what we call the particular judgment (**Hebrews 9:27**). In other words, immediately after death, we experience a foretaste of paradise or hell, depending on the kind of life we lived here on earth. And our souls remain in this state until the Final Judgment, when all will “come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (**St. John 5:28-29**). This judgment is based on God’s mercy, love, and justice.



In the teachings of our fathers, death is comparable to the children of Israel passing over the red sea to the promised land, which is heaven and salvation (**Exodus 14: 19-31**). The children of Israel passed over the red sea, and continued to live in communion with God under the leadership of Moses, and they never went back. Similarly, the faithful departed have passed over to the chamber of light from this world, which is similar to the life in Egypt under Pharaoh. Pharaoh under whom the Israelites suffered is compared to the Satan under whom all humans suffer. They continue to live in communion with Christ, angels, saints of both Old and New Testament times, and fellow departed.

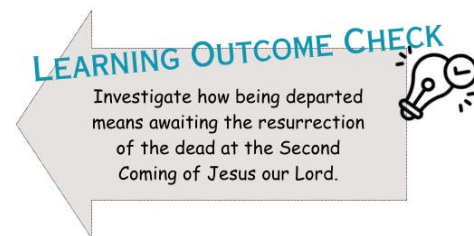


Final Judgment

There will be a second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ we are told in Scripture. The Second Coming of our Lord is the Last Judgment. We find the parable of the Last Judgment in **St. Matthew 25:31-46**. In this parable, the Lord speaks about what will happen at His Second Coming, when He will “sit on the throne of His glory” and separate all the nations “as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats” (**vv. 31-32**). The sheep will be on His right hand, and the goats on the left.

The sheep receive the Kingdom prepared for them, because of their compassion, love, and almsgiving to those in need. The goats, on the other hand, receive condemnation because they did not care for their fellow man or show compassion upon him. For “inasmuch as [they] did not do it to one of the least of these, [they] did not do it to [Him]” (**v. 45**). Jesus concludes His parable by stating that those on the left “will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (**v. 46**).

At the Second Coming, there will be resurrection of the dead in a transfigured appearance. The departed are awaiting the resurrection of the dead at the Second Coming of Jesus our Lord. The Transfiguration experience where Moses and Elijah appeared to Christ (**St. Mark 9:2-13; St. Matthew 17:1-13; St. Luke 9:28-36; II Peter 1:16-18**) is the validation for this claim. Saint Paul reasons that the resurrection of the dead is what makes us Christian. Christ showed us the way through death to a new transfigured life. If we do not believe in this we cannot believe in the Resurrection of Christ.



“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise... But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep... For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:13-15, 20, 22).

“...all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (St. John 5:28-29).

Our souls will be reunited with our bodies in the Final Judgment, and both will be judged by God (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Prayer for the Departed

Prayer is basically a dedication and communion with God. We pray in the fellowship of love. Prayer is also the expression of our faith and belief. It is an occasion to remember with thanks those who are indebted to us in spirit and body. We continue our prayers till the bond of love to them is strong within us. We are praying for the departed loved ones with the full hope that they are in Paradise and that they are in fellowship with our Lord. Prayer is also the communion of saints: the living and those in Paradise. Holy Eucharist is the ultimate expression of our faith, belief, fellowship, communion and the real enactment of the incarnation and redemptive work of our Lord. Remembering our departed in the Holy Eucharist makes us and them part of this supreme sacrament.

As Orthodox Christians we have a very serious relationship with our departed. We pray for them and we continuously offer them up to God. Those who have left their body are not dead, but alive. We describe them as “sleeping” and this is the way we regard them, as living ones who have simply left and live in another place. The place where we bury their bodies is called a “cemetery”, from the Greek word *koimeterion* which literally translates to sleeping place.

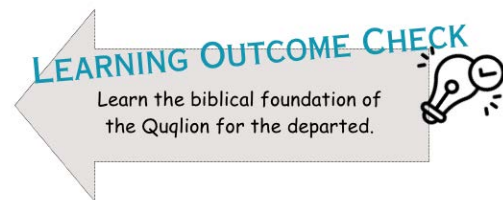
First and foremost, the Orthodox pray for the departed because the Bible tells us to. As members of the Church, the Body of Christ, we are exhorted to pray for one another (**James 5:16**). Whether we live or die, “we belong to the Lord” (**Romans 14:8**). For we are “members of His Body, of His flesh and of His bones” (**Ephesians 5:30**). The Church is “the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God”. As such, she includes “tens of thousands of angels” and “the spirits of righteous people made perfect” as well as those of us alive on earth (**Hebrews 12:22-24**). Because of Christ’s resurrection and victory over death, death does not end our membership in the Body of Christ. For neither “death nor life [...] will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (**Romans 8:38-39**). The Orthodox remember that God “is not the God of the dead, but of the living – for all are alive to Him (**St. Luke 20:38**). Therefore, we pray for both the living and regard our departed as the “dead in Christ” (**1 Thessalonians 4:16**).

The most notable examples of prayer for the dead in Scripture are perhaps Judas Maccabaeus and Saint Paul the Apostle. Judas Maccabaeus offered sacrifices and prayers for his fallen soldiers with the future resurrection of the dead in mind. As he said: “It is therefore a good and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, so they may be set loose from their sins” (**2 Maccabees 12:39-46**).

Secondly, we have the Apostle Paul, who prays for his departed friend Onesiphorus. As he writes: “May the Lord grant that he find mercy from the Lord” on Judgment Day (**2 Timothy 1:16-18**). And so we the Orthodox do likewise!

The Malankara Orthodox Church has designated the first Sunday preceding the start of the great Lent (Wedding of Cana Sunday) to commemorate all the faithful departed. The churches hold special prayers for them, and offer the Holy Divine Liturgy on their behalf asking God to forgive their shortcomings. Since the Lord is of living people “And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (**St. Mark 12:26,27**). We also remember our beloved departed on the Holy Saturday, the day in which Christ preached the Gospel to the dead before Him.

The Quqilion for the Faithful Departed in our tradition is taken from **Psalms 102(103):13-16**.



*As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.
The life of mortals is like grass,
they flourish like a flower of the field;
the wind blows over it and it is gone,
and its place remembers it no more.*

When an Orthodox believer passes away, we participate in several prayers to honor their memory. We gather for a church ceremony called the “care” of the body, where we bid farewell to our loved ones together as a community. During this ceremony, we ask God for the first time to grant rest to the soul of the deceased “in the Light of His presence.” After this, we bury the body in the ground and place a cross at the burial site, symbolizing Christ’s victory over death. In our tradition, we do not burn the body because, while it is not considered holy in the way we worship, it deserves our respect. This respect comes from

the belief that each Christian has received God's grace through their body, as shown through Baptism, Chrismation (anointing with holy oil), and receiving Holy Communion.

Following the burial, a series of ceremonies known as "commemorations" take place, where we ask God for the repose (rest) of our loved ones' souls. These commemorations occur on the third day, ninth day, and thirtieth day after death, then on the fortieth day, the first anniversary of their passing, and every year on the anniversary thereafter.

In addition to these commemorations, Orthodox Christians often provide the names of departed family members and friends to the priest, who commemorates them during the Holy Qurbana (the Divine Liturgy).

We believe that time and space do not limit our prayers. The Church prays for the departed out of mercy, showing love toward them and leaving the rest to God. We ask God, who gives life to all, to keep our departed loved ones in His eternal memory, granting them mercy, peace, forgiveness for their sins, and a favorable standing before Christ's judgment seat. As Orthodox Christians, we have hope in Christ both in this life and in the afterlife. He reassures us by saying: "I am the One who lives, and became dead, and behold I am alive for ages and ages [...] And I hold the keys of death and death's underworld" (**Revelation 1:18-19**). Therefore, we turn to Him in prayer for both the living and the departed, as has been the custom of the Church throughout the ages.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do we often use the term "departed" instead of "dead" when referring to those who have passed away, particularly in the context of memorial services?
2. What important lessons about life after death can we learn from the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46, especially concerning how this relates to the journey of the Israelites passing over the Red Sea to the promised land?
3. In what ways can we take care of our souls today, and what practices or hymns associated with memorial services for the departed can help us reflect on the deeper communion with God that they enjoy?

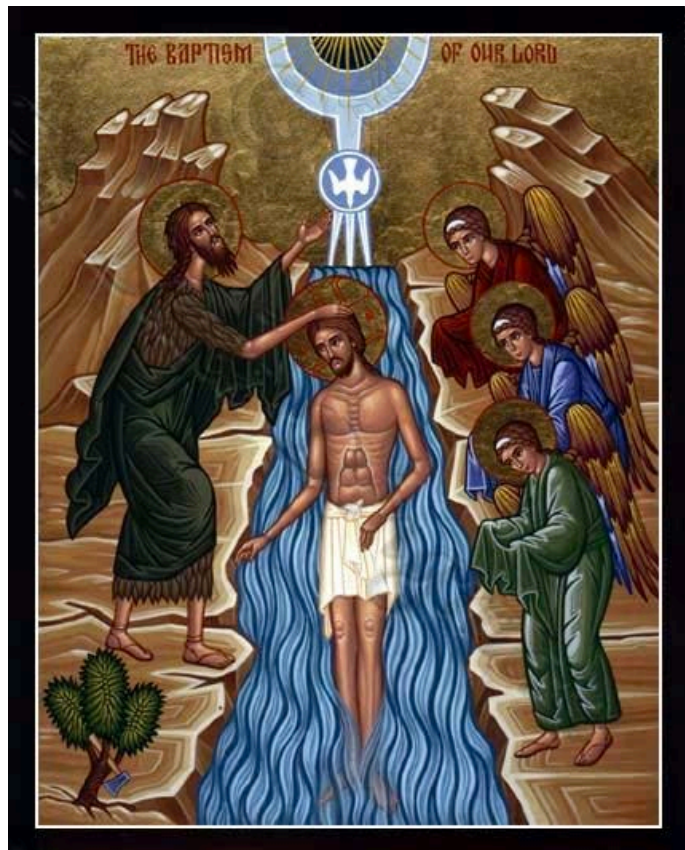
Lesson 7: The One Living Holy Spirit

Lesson Goals

- *I can explain how the Holy Spirit is the Perfecter of Sacraments*
- *I can explain how the Holy Spirit has worked in my life*
- *I can state various attributes of the Holy Spirit*

When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, we see the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon Him like a dove from heaven (**St. John 1:32**). When Jesus began His public ministry, He said “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . .” (**St. Luke 4:18**). Jesus is always in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, because there is never a moment when the Son is without the Holy Spirit.

Christ was preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons, and accomplishing every sign to show He was the Messiah. God the Father revealed Himself to us through Jesus Christ. It is the Holy Spirit that reveals to us the purpose of Christ even today.



The One Living Holy Spirit

The Nicene Creed highlights our core belief that the Holy Spirit is both divine and vital to us even today as Christians as He helps and works to perfect us. The Holy Spirit is eternal, uncreated, and consubstantial with the Father and the Son. This means He shares the same divine nature as the other persons of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit is always present and actively working. On Pentecost, it was the Holy Spirit that

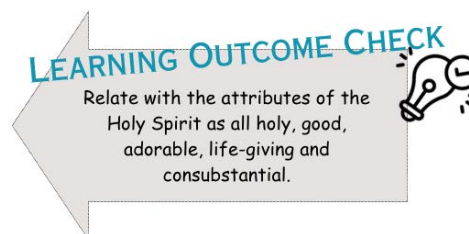
LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Investigate the Nicene expression, "And in the One Living Holy Spirit..."



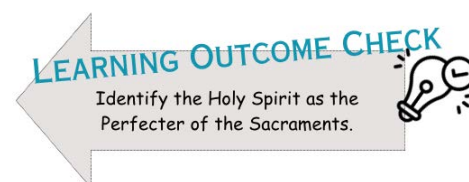
descended in the form of “tongues of fire” (**Acts 2:1–4**), He is the life-giving force that empowers Christians to live out their faith and fulfill their purpose in the world.

The attributes of the Holy Spirit further affirm His role as a source of goodness and holiness in the Church. The Holy Spirit is described as good, embodying every holy characteristic found in God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. In St. Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, he outlines the fruit of the Spirit, including love, joy, and kindness (**Galatians 5:22–23**), which reflects the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. By participating in the sacraments, such as Baptism and Holy Communion, Christians receive the grace of the Holy Spirit, which works within them to renew and transform them into the likeness of God. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is not only the giver of life but also the one who inspires believers to exhibit these holy and good attributes in their daily lives.



Holy Spirit is the Perfecter of Sacraments

The Holy Spirit is present and active in each of the sacraments, serving as the one who perfects these sacred rites. Through His divine action, ordinary materials are transformed to become instruments of the Spirit, drawing us closer to the Divine. For instance, during the Holy Qurbana, ordinary bread and wine undergo a profound transformation to become the true Body and Blood of Christ. St. John of Damascus articulates this mystery - *"But if you inquire as to how this takes place, it is enough for you to know that it is effected by the Holy Spirit. The manner of the change can in no way be understood. But one can put it well thus, that just as in nature, bread, by eating, and wine and water, by drinking, are changed into the body and blood of the eater and drinker, yet not becoming a different body from the former one; so the bread of the Table, as also the wine and water, are supernaturally changed by the invocation and presence of the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of Christ, and are not two, but one and the same."*



1. **Holy Baptism:** From the day of their baptism, children are expected to mature in the life of the Spirit, through their family and the Church. All the newly baptized receive the Holy Spirit during their baptism. The priest or bishop conducting the baptism prays to the Holy Spirit while breathing over the face of the baptismal candidate, all

while mixing the warm and cold water, which symbolizes the water's consecration. We are born again to become children of God.

2. **Holy Chrismation:** Holy Chrismation is the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the newly baptized infant, just as the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples in Pentecost. The child's entire body is anointed with the Holy Chrism, "the seal and the gift of the Holy Spirit." We are established in Christ through baptism and are anointed and sealed in the Spirit through Chrismation. As **2 Corinthians 1:21-22** states, "Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee."
3. **Holy Matrimony:** Human love in God is confirmed in marriage. Man and woman become one flesh as husband and wife in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is given to the couple, that they can grow together in Christian life and become closer to God. The Holy Spirit lives within both the husband and wife. So, what is begun on earth does not *part in death*, but is fulfilled and will continue most perfectly in the Kingdom of God.
4. **Holy Eucharist:** The Holy Spirit consecrates the bread into the lifegiving, redeeming, and heavenly Body of our Lord, which is for the liberation of our souls and bodies. The Holy Spirit, also, consecrates the mixture of wine and water in the cup into the redeeming and life-giving Blood of the New Covenant. The Body and Blood of Christ are given, for the forgiveness and remission of our sins, for a blessed and eternal life, for resurrection from the dead, and for a new life in the Kingdom of Heaven.
5. **Holy Unction:** It is stated in **James 5: 14-15**, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." The Orthodox Church has a special service of healing, which may be performed at any time and as many times as needed. The prayer is done with the use of oil which is the symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Church. It is used as a sign of forgiveness, strength and God's holy presence.
6. **Holy Confession:** In **St. John 20:22-23**, Jesus gives the Apostles the authority to forgive sins. "He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven to them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" In **Acts 2:38**, Peter says, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized

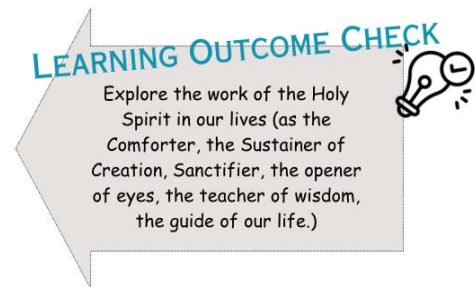
in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Repentance needs to be an inward change. This inner change gives rise to new ways of living, exalts Christ and gives evidence of the truth of the Gospel.

7. **Holy Orders/Ordination:** The Church’s continuity is maintained through the Holy Orders. The Bishop, by placing his hands, invokes the Holy Spirit onto the ordination candidate, who has been chosen by God and set apart to do special services for the Church.

The Holy Spirit is in action, when a Church gets consecrated. It is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies our houses. When a faithful is being buried, the Holy Spirit empowers them to join the abode of light, the place the faithful departed live. In short, Christian life has a guarantee for fulfillment because the Holy Spirit is always ready to help us lead a holy life, a journey towards theosis.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit plays a vital role in our lives, helping us grow closer to God by guiding us to be like Christ. Let’s explore the different ways the Holy Spirit works in our lives.



1. **The Holy Spirit Dwells in Us:** The Holy Spirit is God’s presence within us. The Bible tells us in **1 Corinthians 3:16**, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” This means that the Holy Spirit lives inside us, making our hearts and lives His home.
2. **The Holy Spirit is Our Comforter:** Jesus promised us a Comforter, the Holy Spirit, in **John 16:7**. He said, “For if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” This promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit brings us peace during tough times, helping us navigate the challenges we face in life.
3. **The Holy Spirit is Our Helper:** The Holy Spirit provides us with wise counsel. In **John 14:26**, Jesus assured His disciples, “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” The Greek word for Helper, “Parakletos,” shows that the Holy Spirit is there to support and remind us of Jesus’ teachings.

4. **The Holy Spirit is the Source and Teacher of Wisdom:** The Holy Spirit helps us understand God's thoughts and His will. In **1 Corinthians 2:11**, it says, "No one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God." The Holy Spirit opens our minds and hearts to the hope of salvation and the incredible inheritance awaiting us in God's eternal kingdom.
5. **The Holy Spirit is Our Guide and Source of Truth:** In **John 16:13**, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the "Spirit of Truth." He guides us into all truth, helping us understand God's Word and leading us in our daily lives. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would share what He hears from the Father and lead us in the right direction.
6. **The Holy Spirit Opens Our Inner Eyes:** The Holy Spirit helps us see and understand the presence of God in our lives. In **4 Kingdoms (2 Kings) 6**, the prophet Elisha prayed for God to open the eyes of his servant, who was scared when enemy troops surrounded them. After God answered the prayer, the servant saw the mighty army of God protecting them. Similarly, in **Luke 24:31**, when Jesus broke bread with His disciples after His resurrection, their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him. The Holy Spirit helps us recognize the truth and presence of God that is often hidden from our sight.

As we grow in our faith, let us pray for the Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

Reflection Questions

1. How does understanding the Nicene expression "And in the One Living Holy Spirit" help us see the importance of the Holy Spirit in our faith and its role in our lives?
2. In what ways do the attributes of the Holy Spirit—such as being all holy, good, and life-giving—impact how we relate to God and understand our own spiritual journeys?
3. Why is the Holy Spirit referred to as the Perfecter of the Sacraments, and how can we recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as our Comforter, Sustainer, and Guide?

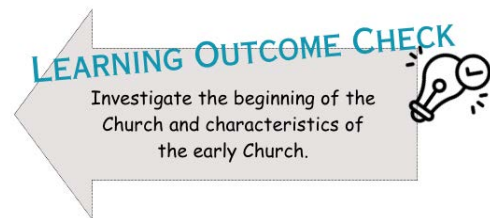
Lesson 8: One Church

Lesson Goals

- *I can understand that the Church is the continuation of the Incarnation and how it is preserved in its faith, dogmas and doctrine, from its origin to today.*
- *I can elaborate on the imagery of the Church in being the Body, Living Temple, and Bride of Jesus Christ.*
- *I can understand that the purpose of the Church is to be the Kingdom of God on earth*

Before His Ascension to Heaven, Jesus Christ had given the promise of the Holy Spirit to “guide you into all truth” (**St. John 16:13**). With the fulfillment of that promise, beginning at Pentecost, the Church was founded with a status far above that of a mere institution. From the first assembly of St. James, St. Peter, St. Paul and the other Apostles, despite persecution, political oppression, and desertion, the Church miraculously carries on, even today, the same faith. Life and faith of the Church today remains the same as that of the New Testament times.

The Church is the continuation of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. In union with Christ and through the Holy Spirit, the Church makes God visible to the world. Jesus is the rock and foundation of our Church. The Holy Spirit who perfects everything and leads the church to its perfection in its essential characteristics, namely; the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. The Holy Spirit accomplishes the mission of the Church through us, all of her members. For us, as children of God and Christians, everything centers on the Incarnation and as the Church we continue our life in union with Christ.



The New Israel

With many of the early Christians being Jewish, they saw themselves called to continue and pick up the task from where Adam and Israel had failed to fulfill God's purpose. They believed themselves to be the children of God, the specially chosen Holy people of God -The New Israel.

Linguistically, the origin of the word 'Church' is from the Greek word 'Ekklesia', meaning an assembly of people who are “called out” from the world for a purpose. This term appears only twice in the synoptic gospel of **St. Matthew** in **16:18** and **18:17**, but used more commonly in the book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles. The Hebrew equivalent

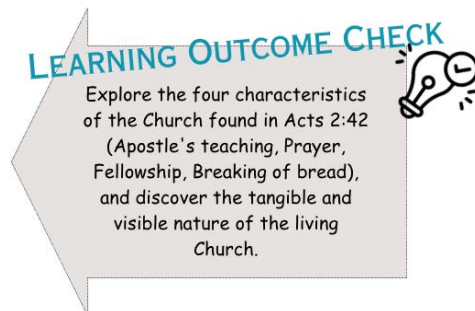
of 'Ekklesia' is 'Qahal' which is used in the Old Testament to describe the Jewish assembly gathered mainly for worshipping God. By using the Greek equivalent of the Jewish assembly, the early Christian community was disclosing its identity as the chosen people/generation, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, or **the New Israel (I Peter 2: 9-10; Titus 2:14)**. This is exactly what we understand with the Malayalam word, Sabha.

The Christian Church is the assembly of God. The Church is the coming together of chosen people committed to keep His Word. The Church seeks to do His will, His work in the world, and realize the heavenly kingdom on earth.

Four Elements of the Church

The origins of the Church were visible from the day of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit descended upon the Twelve Apostles in the Upper Room. That day some 3,000 souls believed in Christ and were baptized.

When the first Christian community began, “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (**Acts 2:42**). Thus, we see that the central elements or characteristics of the worship that were present from the very beginning continue in our Orthodox Church, to this very day. The **apostolic doctrine** is being taught in the **fellowship** of a common assembly; the breaking of the **Eucharist Bread**; and the offering of the special liturgical **prayers** and hymns.



The Book of Acts continues to relate the growth of the early Church from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, to Samaria (**Acts 8**), and to Antioch and then to the Gentiles (**Acts 13**), where we find new converts and new churches throughout Asia Minor and the Roman Empire. The apostles and missionaries traveled throughout the known world spreading the Gospel.

The spread and growth of the Church was not easy. Many enemies tried to hinder its progress and growth. Although they fought against the Church, they could not defeat her. In spite of persecutions, the Christians were an example of loyalty and sincerity to Christ, to their faith, to each other and



even to their persecutors. Thus, their lives were a good model for all people to follow.

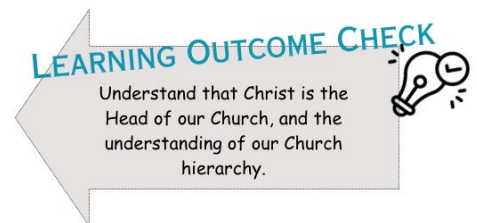
One of the tasks of the early Church was defining and defending Orthodox theology against the battering waves of heresies especially in the ecumenical councils. The Church still uses forms of worship that were practiced in the first centuries. Built on the foundation of Christ and His Apostles, nothing has been added to our faith, because nothing can be added. Nothing has been deleted nor reduced from it, because nothing is there to be deleted. The faith of the Holy Church is complete because she is built upon the foundation, the faith the Apostles have received from Christ.

Church and her Images

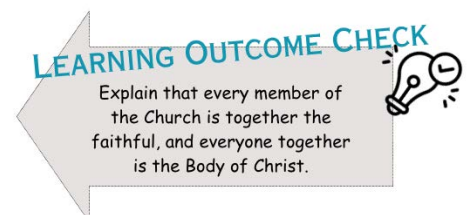
There are a lot of poetic images and figures of speech for the Church within the Bible and the Orthodox liturgical texts. An example of this would be Noah's ark in the Book of Genesis being compared to the bridal image of the Church as the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation.

Three frequently used images of the Church in liturgical texts and hymnology are the Body of Christ, Living Temple, and Bride of Christ.

1. The **Church as the Body of Christ** is a regular metaphor within the books and letters of the New Testament (**Romans 12: 4-5, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 1:23, 4:12, Colossians 1: 18,24**). **Romans 12: 4-5** points out clearly how Jesus Christ is the head of the Church and we, the faithful are various members (limbs of the same body) with distinct functions and calling. It shows how close and intimate the relationship and fellowship within the Church is from its head, Jesus Christ, to all its members, the faithful of the Church.

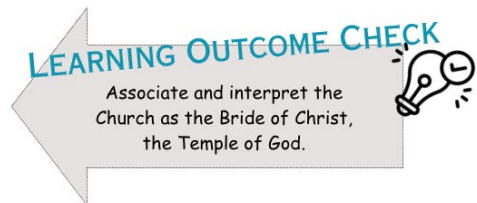


The members of the body are the faithful living and departed. Because we are connected to Jesus Christ, we can relate to one another and enjoy harmony as parts of the same body. We are not all given the same gifts, but together we are equipped to do God's will. We live out our faithful relationship to God through the Church and we are called to do it with harmony, humility, selflessness, forgiveness, sober thoughts, and proper use of our spiritual gifts. Through



baptism, all the members of the Church are initiated into and anointed for the ministry of the kingdom of God. Christ continues to be present and visible in history through His body, the Church. The life of Christ fills the whole body through the Holy Spirit. The Church is a living, dynamic organism, the living Body of Jesus Christ.

2. We see the **Church as the Living Temple**, not just a building with ornate expensive interiors. The image of the Church identifies itself as a living organism with Christ Himself as the cornerstone; the Apostles and prophets as the foundation; Believers as the living stones that add to the growth of the building. This image also highlights the fellowship of the members in the church and the union of the church with Christ, the cornerstone. On behalf of the whole creation worship is offered to the Triune God in this living temple. In other words, this living and ever-growing temple indwelt by the Holy Spirit stands for the whole created universe. When we come together to worship, the whole community of believers including the physically visible and the invisible heavenly orders take part in worship and continue to pray for one another (**Ephesians 2:19-21, 1 Peter 2:4-6**).
3. The **Church as the Bride of Christ** is a powerful image in the Pauline letters. St. Paul uses the image between husband and wife to show the mystery of deep communion between Christ and His Bride, the Church. This image gives us a vision of the ultimate oneness between Christ and His Church. Christ is preparing the bride for the final presentation at the wedding. Church being an integral part of Christ evokes veneration and respect rather than blaming and criticizing. The Church also needs to grow in its loving union with Christ and obedient submission to the will of God as revealed in Christ. These images also indicate the beauty of the fellowship and communal life in the Church. They point to the mystery of the Church by depicting the combination of the historical and final dimensions; the past, the present and the future. In other words, the Church is for the faithful living and at the same time also for the faithful departed..



The Spirit of God

The book of Revelation provides an image of the Church as the people of God with God in their midst (**Revelation 21:1-3**). This is the perfected Church, the bride ready for her husband, Christ, and she is the abode of the righteous. In the letter to Ephesians, St. Paul emphasizes Church as a community that is being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (**Ephesians:2:19-22**). In the Acts of Apostles, we see the early Christians assembling with one accord, in prayer and supplication. They were awaiting the arrival of the Holy Spirit in obedience to the command of our Lord. They knew that the Holy Spirit will guide the Church into all truths (**Acts 1:14, 2:1, 17:7-15**).

One of the earliest Church Fathers, St. Irenaeus in the second century teaches: “For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth. Those, therefore, who do not partake of Him, are neither nourished into life from the mother's breasts, nor do they enjoy that most transparent fountain which issues from the body of Christ.”

We believe that in the Church, the Holy Spirit in its fullness abides and the Church has been entrusted with a special role to discern the right and wrong. The Holy Spirit pours out the gifts, and reveals the acts of God to humanity and to all creation for His purpose and glory. The great responsibility to realize this is laid upon each of us who are members of the Church.

The Kingdom of God

Some attribute the Church to be the flock of God (**Acts 20:28**), while others refer to it as a group of believers on Earth, who are joined by the Saints who have departed to heaven (**St. Matthew 18:18, Revelation 7:9**). The collective definition of the term church is the group of believers who have the one Apostolic faith and are gathered together in the house of God around the sacraments of the Church, headed by the Bishop, conscious of their fellowship with the heavenly hosts and with the departed saints.

We can summarize the Church as the **Kingdom of God** on earth. It is the mystical Body of Christ, whose head is the Lord Jesus Himself, who through His Holy Spirit, continues to carry out His power, authority, and work within the realms of His body.

The Church holds an essential role in the Christian doctrine and life. Without the Church as a divine, mystical, sacramental, and spiritual reality in the midst of the fallen and

sinful world, there can be no full and perfect communion with God. The Church is God's gift to the world. It is the gift of salvation, knowledge and enlightenment, the forgiveness of sins, and the victory over darkness and death. It is the gift of communion with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit. This gift is given totally, once and for all, with no reservations on God's part. It remains forever, until the ages of ages: invincible and indestructible. Men may sin and fight against the Church, believers may fall away and be separated from the Church, but the Church itself, the "pillar and bulwark of the truth" (**1 Timothy 3:15**) remains forever.

The Church is the place established by Christ, where we become what we are created to be, growing, maturing and being perfected, while the Church receives what it needs from each of us for its perfection. It stretches our vision from beyond our worldly lives to the eternal and heavenly as we ascend together as one to worship the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

Reflection Questions

1. How do the early characteristics of the Church, as described in Acts 2:42, shape our understanding of what it means to be part of a faith community today?
2. In what ways can we demonstrate that we are living members of the Body of Christ in our daily lives, and how does our connection to one another reflect the unity and diversity of the Church?
3. How does recognizing Christ as the Head of the Church influence our understanding of Church hierarchy, and what role do all members play in building up the Church as the Bride of Christ and the Temple of God?

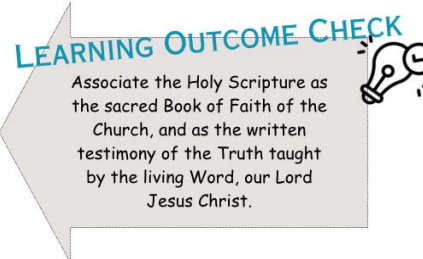
Lesson 9: The Word of God

Lesson Goals

- *I can understand the Holy Scripture as the sacred Book of Faith of the Church and as the written testimony of the Truth taught by the living Word, our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- *I can explain the process through which the Old and New Testaments were canonized.*
- *I can identify when the Scripture is used during the Holy Qurbana.*

Our Book of Faith

The Bible (or Holy Scripture) is the sacred Book of Faith for the Orthodox Church. It holds the highest importance and authority because it helps us grow deeper in our belief that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of God” (**St. John 20:30-31**). The Gospel of John also teaches us that the Word refers to Jesus Christ Himself - “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (**St. John 1:1**). While the Bible is essential it is not a substitute for Christ or the Body of Christ (i.e., the Church); rather, the written Word points us to Jesus, the Living Word of God.



Before the Bible was formally organized into the Old and New Testaments, it consisted of various letters and writings that the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church recognized as holy truths about God. When Jesus walked the Earth, the New Testament did not exist. For Orthodox Christians, it is crucial to understand that the scriptures, both Old and New Testament, always direct us to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As Fr. Thomas Hopko said, “the words of the Bible are human words...[but] are truly the very Word of God,” meaning that they are inspired by God but still reflect the lives and cultures of their human authors.

The Bible reveals the story of God and His relationship with His people, and through it, we come to know God Himself. Reading the Bible is more than just reading words; it is a journey of faith. By approaching the scriptures with an open and humble heart, we allow God to fill us with His Word. As we engage with the Bible prayerfully, we learn about the Faith of our Church and grow in that faith. Thus, the Holy Scripture stands as the written testimony of the Truth taught by the Living Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, guiding us toward a deeper understanding of God’s love and purpose for us.

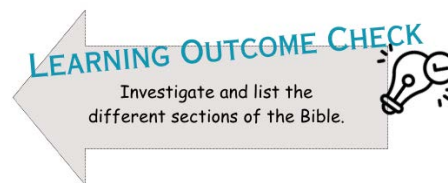
Books of the Holy Bible

Throughout history, there has been much discussion about “lost books” of Christianity, especially with recent discoveries like the Dead Sea Scrolls and popular media such as “The Da Vinci Code.” However, for the Orthodox Christian Church, these writings were never truly lost; rather, they were known but intentionally excluded from the Bible because they did not fully support the teachings of Christ. The Holy Bible has been compiled over centuries, and while its many books were carefully copied by hand, the sacred content was always respected. The process of gathering these texts into the Old and New Testaments was significant, leading to the creation of what we now consider canonical books.

The Bible serves as an ecclesiastical text that connects directly to the Church, which provides interpretations of Scripture through the guidance of the Saints—those who have achieved theosis, or union with God. It is important to recognize that the cultural and historical context in which these scriptures were written is vastly different from our present time, making contemporary interpretations challenging. Despite this, the Church maintains that all Scripture is inspired by God and serves to teach, correct, and guide believers, ensuring that they are thoroughly equipped for good works as expressed in 2 **Timothy 3:16-17**.

The Bible is the sacred Book of Faith within the Church, and has a specific structure. The Old Testament is traditionally divided into four sections: the Books of the Law (Torah), consisting of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; the Books of History, which include Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and numerous others; the Books of Wisdom, featuring Psalms, Job, and Proverbs; and the Books of Prophecy, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi.

The New Testament is categorized into five sections: the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline Epistles, the Catholic (General) Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. It is important to know the origins and canonization of these texts so that we can understand the Bible’s role as both a written testimony of faith and a medium through which believers encounter the living Word, Jesus Christ.



Old Testament

The term “Old Testament” is primarily used by Christians, but it refers to the same sacred scriptures shared between both Jewish and Christian traditions. All the writings referenced in the Bible come from what we now call the Old Testament, which underscores its holiness and truth. The significant distinction between the Old and New Testaments is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the messianic prophecies found within the Old Testament. The number of books considered part of the Old Testament can differ; this is due to various historical and linguistic factors, particularly the early Church’s reliance on the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Septuagint, translated around the 3rd century BCE in Alexandria, Egypt, contains 49 books and was the version of the Old Testament used during the time of Christ. In contrast, the Hebrew canon was finalized around the last two centuries BCE and the first two centuries CE, resulting in 39 books. Some texts present in the Septuagint, such as the Wisdom of Solomon and 2 Maccabees, were omitted from the Hebrew canon due to concerns about Greek influences perceived as “perversion” by certain Jewish authorities, particularly during the Reformation. As a result, most Western Christian Bibles commonly include only the 39 books from the Hebrew canon, while Orthodox Christians regard this version as incomplete.

In addition to the Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible, other translations and versions of the Old Testament have emerged throughout history. The Peshitta, a Syriac translation, is notable for its early origins, dating back to the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. It contains 46 books and is considered a significant text within the Syriac-speaking Christian community. Additionally, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has revealed that many biblical manuscripts closely align with the Septuagint, raising further questions regarding the completeness of the Hebrew canon. As a result, the Orthodox Church’s liturgical practices include readings from texts not found in most Bibles, affirming the view that the Old Testament tradition carries a wider scope of books than is commonly recognized in the Western canon.

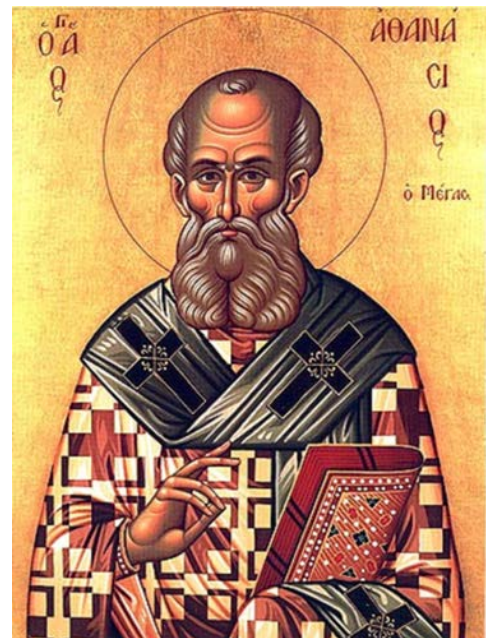
The Old Testament is traditionally subdivided into four sections:

Old Testament Sections	Books
Books of the Law	Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Books of History	Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Kingdoms (1 Samuel), 2 Kingdoms (2 Samuel), 3 Kingdoms (1 Kings), 4 Kingdoms (2 Kings), 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, 1 Ezra, 2 Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, 3 Maccabees
Books of Wisdom	Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Sirach
Books of Prophecy	Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Lamentations of Jeremiah, Epistle of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel

New Testament

The New Testament, unlike the Old Testament, contains 27 books that are recognized by all Christian denominations, including Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant faiths. These books begin with the Gospel of St. Matthew and conclude with the Book of Revelation. The process of selecting these books was not a simple decision but rather a collective affirmation by the Church. In 367 A.D., St. Athanasius wrote a Paschal letter that listed the New Testament books in the same order we find them today. It's essential to note that St. Athanasius did not personally choose these books; he confirmed that they were already in use by the Church at that time and aligned with the teachings of Christ.



Earlier, in 318 A.D., a local council in Carthage also acknowledged these books, highlighting the significance of oral teachings and the Church's commitment to preserving the teachings passed down from Christ and His Apostles.

The New Testament is organized into five sections: (1) Gospels, (2) Acts of the Apostles, (3) Pauline Epistles, (4) Catholic (General) Epistles, and (5) Revelation. The Gospels are further categorized into the Synoptic Gospels, which include St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke, alongside the unique Gospel of St. John. The Acts of the Apostles was authored by St. Luke the Evangelist, while St. Paul wrote 14 of the New Testament Epistles. The Catholic Epistles were composed by Saints James, Peter, Jude, and John. Finally, St. John wrote the Book of Revelation, which is the last book included in the New Testament canon.

To study the Bible as the sacred Book of Faith, it is essential to understand how the Old and New Testaments were canonized. The Old Testament canon that consists of 39 books in most Western traditions is incomplete. The more ancient translations in Greek (Septuagint) and Syriac (Peshitta) contain the full Old Testament canon as it reflects the Truth revealed to the Prophets and the book numbers varied slightly based on linguistic tradition. In contrast, the New Testament canon was formed through the discernment and decisions of the early Church, which recognized and affirmed the writings that conveyed the Truth revealed to the Apostles. This formal process of canonization highlights the Bible's sacred authority and its role as a testimony to the divine teachings of Jesus Christ.

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Examine the process through which the Old and New Testaments were canonized.



Authorship of Scripture

Regarding authorship of the various texts of the Bible, there is no doubt that the Holy Spirit inspired the holy people to write the Books. However, this does not necessarily mean that those persons wrote it by themselves. E.g. If Moses wrote the first 5 Books of the Old Testament (Pentateuch), who then wrote about Moses's death in the book of Deuteronomy? St. Paul's authorship of Hebrews is questioned, but we are comforted by the wisdom of the early Church that even if St Paul himself did not write it, it was his own teachings (i.e., different understanding of authorship in ancient days).

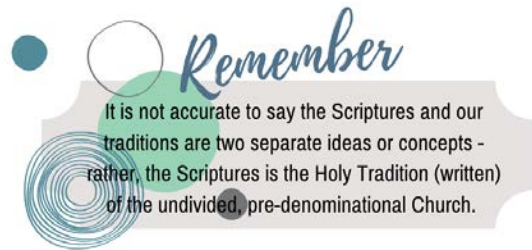


This is how the ancient world understood authorship, and applies to both the Old and New Testament. We see this in some icons of St. John that show a young disciple scribing to the Apostle's right. This disciple is traditionally identified as St. Prokhor, one of the seven Deacons chosen later to care for the Christian community in Jerusalem (**Acts 6:5**). In the icon, St. Prokhor is shown writing the words of St. John whose ear is inclined towards the heavens as if listening directly to God.

Scripture and Tradition

The word “tradition” often carries a negative meaning, especially due to events during the Protestant Reformation, when people sought to challenge the wrongdoings of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. The idea of “sola Scriptura,” or “Scripture alone,” emerged during this time as a way to reject teachings that were seen as made by man. However, this concept is quite different from the beliefs of the early Church, which thrived for centuries without a formal New Testament canon. For early Christians, “tradition” and “teaching” were essentially the same. The Greek term “paradosis” means to hand down or transmit knowledge, reflecting the true meaning of tradition. Jesus taught His Apostles, who then passed down His teachings to the disciples and Bishops, continuing the cycle through generations down to us.

It is important to understand that Scriptures and traditions are not two separate ideas; rather, Scripture is a part of Holy Tradition, which was established in the early, unified Church. One cannot separate the Holy Scriptures from the sacred traditions that nourished the faith. Both the written and unwritten traditions derive their significance from the teachings of Christ, which were preserved and shared within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. These traditions help maintain the integrity of the faith and guide the believers in their spiritual journey.



St. John Chrysostom highlighted an important difference between written and unwritten traditions - “We really shouldn’t need the help of the written texts; we should be able to display such a clean lifestyle, that the grace of the Holy Spirit would act directly onto our hearts. Just as books are inscribed by ink, that is how our hearts should be inscribed by the Spirit. But, since we have distanced ourselves from this grace, let us accept this second alternative with appreciation.”

Importance of the Holy Bible in our Life

The Holy Bible holds a special place in the life of believers, serving as a vital document of faith rather than just a historical text. It was written to guide us to believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, granting us life in His name, as stated in **St. John 20:30-31**. The early Church never relied solely on Scripture alone, which is a concept called “Sola Scriptura,” as it is not found in the Bible itself. Instead, the Church teaches that Scripture must be understood within the context of its tradition and beliefs, emphasizing the

importance of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church in interpreting its teachings. For many years, even before the Bible was written down, the Christian faith thrived through the prayers of the faithful and the sacrifices of martyrs.

In the Orthodox faith, the Scriptures are seen as part of the Church's living tradition. It was the Church that wrote down the words of Scripture (from Moses, to the Apostles and St. Paul). It was the Church that preserved the words of Scripture (**1 Corinthians 15:1-8**). It was the Church that told us what Scripture is – she chose from among several texts (**St. Luke 1:1-4**) and selected those that upheld the Canon of Truth. It was the Church that maintained the fullness of Christ's revelation (**Acts 20:35**).

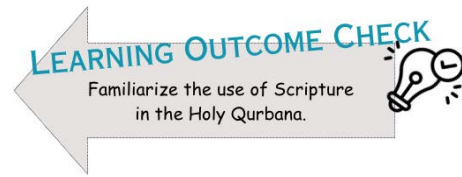
Understanding the Bible requires looking at Scripture as a whole, not interpreting individual verses in isolation. This approach, known as typological interpretation, helps us to grasp the deeper meaning of God's Word. The Bible is indeed divinely inspired, but it is the Church that teaches us how to understand and apply its lessons in our lives, guided by the wisdom of the Church Fathers and the shared beliefs of our community. Thus, the Holy Bible, in essence, is a sacred document meant to be explored within the life of the Church.

Remember **St. John 20:30-31** - The Holy Bible is a Faith document, and every word in Scripture is put in context and understanding of one who believes in Christ. The Holy Bible is not self-interpreting (**2 Peter 1:20-21; Acts 8:30-31**), and there is no verse in the Bible that says Scripture alone is to be used to understand God. There is no doubt that Holy Scripture is the Divine inspiration and Word of God (**2 Timothy 3:16**), and we look to the guidance of our ancestors (i.e., patristic teaching or writings of the Church Fathers) to better understand and apply the lessons of the Holy Bible. The Bible is interpreted and understood through the Church and within the Church!

Importance of the Holy Bible in our Liturgy

Holy Scriptures make up an invaluable part of our liturgical tradition. The majority of our liturgical prayers were written through the inspiration of Holy Scriptures. Throughout the daily prayers of the Church, the Sacraments, and the Festal Services, the role of Scripture is constant. In the daily Sh'himo prayers, various Psalms are chanted throughout the day. The hymns in our Sacraments and Festal Services are rooted in Holy Scripture. The Faith of the Church is reflected in our liturgical prayers, and our prayers are built upon the foundation of the Word of God. As we have seen, the Word of God is Christ Himself.

Most notably, there are countless instances within the Holy Qurbana where the Bible is referenced. If we look at the very beginning of Holy Qurbana, we see two Epistle readings as well as a Gospel reading. It is necessary that the Bible is read at the beginning of Holy Qurbana. We first experience the Word of God through the reading of Holy Scripture, and then we enter into the Anaphora, where the Word of God is seen in the Eucharist (the Body and Blood of Christ). In the Anaphora, elements such as the Kiss of Peace, the Veil (Shushafo), and the Trinitarian blessings all have Scriptural foundations.



We can look at two specific instances within Holy Qurbana that are integral to our worship and tie us to the Holy Scriptures. In the Anaphora, there is a moment where the congregation proclaims the following prayer:

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, by whose glory the Heaven and earth are filled, Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who has come and is to come in the name of the Lord God; glory be to Him in the highest."

This specific prayer is taken from the vision of the Prophet Isaiah. When Isaiah is granted a vision of the Kingdom of Heaven, he sees the Seraphim flying and crying out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory." (**Isaiah 6:3**)

At this moment in the Holy Qurbana, we, as a congregation, like Isaiah, are joining with the worship of the angels, praising the Creator of all for His eternal glory and love for Creation.

Immediately following this prayer, we begin the Institution Narrative, where the priest narrates the Mystical Supper offered by Christ. The priest says the following words of institution:

*"Take, eat of it. This is My Body, which for you and for many is broken and given for the remission of sins and for the life which is eternal...
Take, drink of it all of you. This is my Blood which for you and for many is shed and given for the remission of sins and for the life which is eternal."*

These words of Christ Himself are taken from all three Synoptic Gospels (**St. Mt. 26:26-28, St. Mk. 14:22-24, St. Lk. 22:17-20**). The Eucharist that we partake in every Holy Qurbana is a remembrance and participation in the first Eucharist instituted at the Last Supper of Christ.

Summary

The Word of God is a vital and dynamic part of our lives as Orthodox Christians, allowing us to connect with the experiences of faith shared by Biblical figures. For instance, through baptism, we celebrate a moment akin to the Feast of Pentecost, and in repentance, we can relate to St. Peter's restoration or the story of the prodigal son. Our faith is rooted in experience, and by living in Christ within the Church, we join the faith journey of the saints before us. Orthodoxy teaches that the Holy Bible is the record of God's revelation to humanity, presenting a cohesive message about God's truth and inspired by the Holy Spirit. While we honor the written Word, we recognize it cannot be separated from Jesus Christ, the Living Word. The Scriptures are ultimately understood through the lens of Christ, with the fullness of His message preserved within the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, where we learn and grow in our faith.

Saint Isaac the Syrian emphasizes that the Scriptures are vital for deepening our relationship with God - "For [Scripture] serves as the gate by which the intellect enters into the divine mysteries and takes strength for attaining luminosity in prayer. Scripture draws the mind up and sets it at every moment in the direction of God; it baptizes it from this corporeal world with its insights and causes it to be above the body continually."

Reflection Questions

1. What are the different sections of the Bible, and why is the Holy Scripture considered the sacred Book of Faith by the Church?
2. Can you explain the process of how the books of the Old and New Testaments were canonized? Why is this process important for understanding Scripture?
3. In what parts of the Holy Qurbana do we use Scripture, and why is it significant in our worship?

Lesson 10: Healing of Body, Mind, and Soul

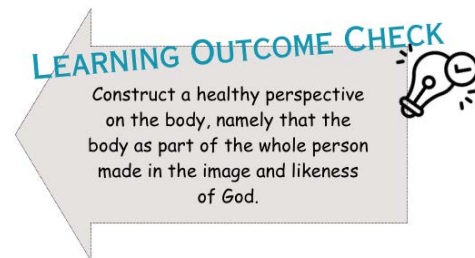
Lesson Goals

- *I can understand how the Church helps us deal with the pressures of the outside world.*
- *I can visualize how we can make our bodies a temple of the Holy Spirit.*
- *I can understand that God cares about the well-being of our whole self.*

Sickness and Suffering Enters our Paradise

When God created man and woman, He made them unique from His other creations. We are made in the image and likeness of God (**Genesis 1:26**) and the breath of life is breathed into us to give us a living soul (**Genesis 2:7**). We are created with a body, soul and spirit. Since we are made according to His image and likeness, we have the privilege, beyond the rest of creation, to be like God and participate in His life.

We have the ability to reflect the divine nature and be inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. We were created for union with our Creator.



An inherent part of being made in God's image is the gift of free will - the freedom to make our own choices. With the God-given ability to choose, Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation of the devil and ate from the forbidden tree. The union that man had with God was thus weakened; the bond became not as strong. Through their choice, sin entered the world. Sickness and suffering became its consequences. Death became inevitable (**Romans 6:23**). Due to their choice, the rest of mankind was born with a fallen nature - with an inclination to sin.

Our Well-Being

In spite of the fall of man, God never abandoned us; His love for us did not change. Divine intention was not the suffering of mankind but rather it was for man to be in communion with God. The Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals this intention to us! God wishes for a complete and holistic healing for us which includes our physical, spiritual, emotional and mental well-being. This is evident as an important part of Christ's ministry was healing! This healing ministry continued from the Apostles to the churches which they established around the world. Healing was an essential part of the early Church and continues to be so even now. The Church is concerned about our overall well-being: spiritual, physical and mental.

Physical illnesses like heart disease, cancer, diabetes etc, with its concerns, impact on family and life, and research for its cures are being actively pursued, openly discussed and commonly treated in the world today. There seems to be ample awareness in the world of these conditions. We have advanced much further in this respect and more and more deadly diseases are on their path to treatment and cure.

But through this lesson we would like to address another equally important aspect of one's well-being - mental health.

Stress, anxiety, depression, addictive behaviors, sleeping and eating disorders are all words common to a person living in the present world. Yes, these existed in its various forms from the beginning of time, but it seems to be at its ever-rising peak. Every day we are bombarded with graphic details of gruesome crimes and atrocities committed around the world. The world is filled with uncertainties and unprecedented events - a constant state of turmoil and unrest. Coping with all of these affects our mental health!

What is Mental Health and its Illnesses?

Mental health means the health of our mind. This includes our emotional, psychological, and social being. It is the foundation for our actions, emotions, thinking, learning, resilience, and self-esteem. It is key to our relationships, our spiritual growth, our personal and emotional well-being. It helps determine how we handle issues, relate to those around us, and make choices in our lives. Mental health is important at every stage of our life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood and old age. Not taking care of our mental health can lead to issues with our physical and spiritual health, and the same is true in reverse as not caring for physical and spiritual health can affect our mental health.

Many factors can cause mental illnesses such as biological factors, chemical imbalances in our brain, life experiences, social circumstances and environmental aspects. Many of us have mental health concerns from time to time, but it becomes a mental illness when ongoing signs and symptoms cause frequent stress and affect your ability to function. But, this is nothing to be ashamed of! It is a medical condition, just like heart disease or diabetes and

Remember

Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation of the devil and ate from the forbidden tree. The union that man had with God was weakened; the bond was not as strong. Through their choice, sin entered the world. Sickness and suffering became its consequences. Death became inevitable (Romans 6:23). Due to their choice, the rest of mankind was born with a fallen nature - with an inclination to sin.

Remember

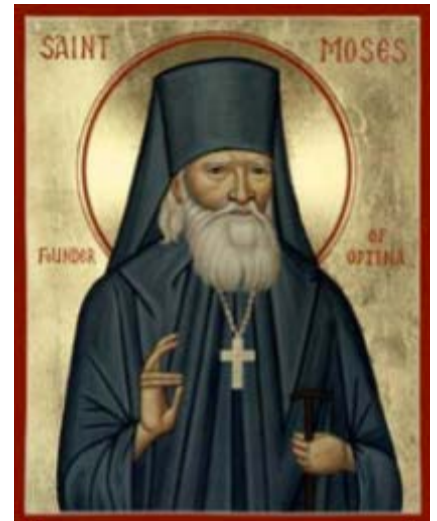
In spite of the fall of man, God never abandoned us; His love for us did not change.

they are treatable. Even though mental illness is common and can affect anyone, there is still a great stigma attached to it. This stigma creates reluctance and shame in seeking help. The acceptance and understanding of mental illnesses have come a long way from where they used to be, but there is still work to be done.

Dealing with Mental Wellness

Just like any other illness there is help and treatment for mental illness. Recognizing and seeking help at the right time is always important. Let's explore how some of our spiritual disciplines can help us cope with burdens of the fallen world.

St. Gregorios of Parumala writes in his Kalpana No 513 of 1892 to the Kattoor Church: "Blessed faithful of God! God has redeemed you from the world through His blood and made you of His folk. Therefore, do not turn back to the world. You shall endeavor to praise God in your being awake and being asleep, in your farming and your trade." Such a devoted lifestyle heals its observers from all possible snares of evil that can lead to mental distress.

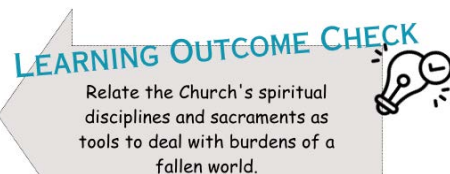


Saint Moses of Optina

St. Moses of Optina once said "Nourish your soul daily with the words of life and with prayer and with every good work." Just as we nourish our body with various kinds of food and drinks, we need to nourish our soul with Scripture, prayer and good work. Loving one another, doing charity work, and attending worship services are some of the ways we can try to nourish our souls.

Role of the Church

We have learned and read the words of St. John Chrysostom, who said "The Church is a hospital, and not a courtroom, for souls. She does not condemn on behalf of sins, but grants remission of sins." In the Church, the joyful sustain their joy, the worried acquire merriment, the saddened receive joy, the troubled find relief, and the heavy-laden find rest. Many of the prayers, sacraments and other practices in the Church are not only for our spiritual growth and sustenance but also for our healing and restoration.



- **Participation in the Church**

Regular participation in the Church and its activities are very important for a Christian. This can cultivate a sense of belonging and foster healthy relationships and companionship. We should not be resistant, lazy or afraid to come to Church. We should not stray away from coming to Church because we are concerned about what others think of us or how God thinks of us. We should not be discouraged because of the length or process of the prayers and worship. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and He wants us to freely come to His temple and worship Him. Deeply concentrating and focusing on the prayers by limiting distractions is a practical and useful method to free ourselves from the burdens of this world. The Church is a safe place to renew ourselves and face the pressures of the world. The worship of the Church is formed and patterned after worship instructed in Scripture and fully understood in Christ. The goal of worship is to come to know God more through our life in the Church and grow in union and likeness with Him.

- **The Holy Qurbana**

Participating in the Holy Qurbana diligently and regularly will nourish us to a fuller relationship with God. We shall partake in the service of the Holy Qurbana regularly, timely and above all with complete preparation. We should recite the evening prayers, read Scriptures, be well-rested, wake up early, and fast before coming to Church in time for morning prayers and Holy Qurbana. We must meditate on these



prayers to let go of our distractions and pressures of the world. We prepare our minds and bodies to receive Christ. Today's culture sees the weekend as the time to relax and have fun – a break from work or school. However, we do not live according to the world's standards but rather by God's standards. "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God (**Romans 12:2**).” This is not to say we cannot enjoy what the world has to offer, but rather we should prioritize our time and energy to grow in our relationship with God.

- **The Sacraments**

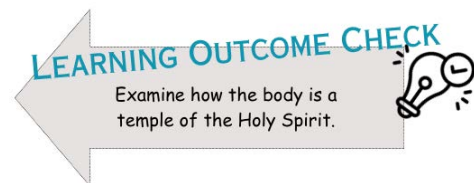
The Sacraments are the actions of God within the Church in which we receive God's grace by means of this material world. From Holy Baptism in which we are reborn and washed clean of the sinfulness of the fallen world to Chrismation in which we receive the anointing with the Holy Chrism (or Holy Mooron). Both of these are our entrance into the church. Then there is also Holy Unction, which is a sacrament of healing. In the sacrament of Holy Confession, we free ourselves from the stain of sin and the feelings of guilt and shame caused by sinfulness. Then Holy Qurbana which is the Mystery of all Mysteries that completes all Sacraments and joins us to the Body of Christ.

Role of the Church Family

As members of the Church community, we are called to love, pray, care for, and show compassion to our fellow Christians, which is both a duty and a responsibility. By creating an environment of love and acceptance and refraining from judgment, we contribute to the well-being of our Church family. We can ask our spiritual leaders and fellow parishioners for prayers and support during times of physical and mental challenges, as our journey of salvation can be difficult and filled with unseen trials. Many believers have experienced this and can offer guidance and encouragement to help us overcome obstacles. The prayers and assistance of our Church leaders, who are trained in spiritual and counseling practices, can guide us according to the Word of God and help us focus on eternal life. Moreover, it is our duty to pray for others facing mental health struggles, reach out with kindness, and offer empathy and friendship in their times of need, while avoiding judgment and gossip, which are not pleasing to God.

Role of Ourselves

“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?” (**1 Corinthians 6:19**). Our body the temple of the Holy Spirit of God, not just the physical body, but the entire self. We have been bought with a price, which is the unblemished, precious blood of Jesus Christ (**1 Peter 1:18-19**) and so we are to honor and glorify God with our bodies. We are to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the price and the union that God intended for us. Spiritual discipline helps us to accomplish this.



- **Life of regular prayer**

We have many prayers, hymns and mantras that help us through times of difficulty. Personal, family and communal prayers are very important. The Church prescribes praying seven times a day. These **canonical hours** of prayer, the frequent days of fasting, and preparation for the Holy Qurbana are not only reserved for priests or for monks living in monasteries but also the faithful like us. The Sh'heema (pronounced sheh-hee-ma) is the set of the daily cycle of prayers in the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. It provides sets of prayers for each of the seven canonical hours, with unique themes for each day of the week. The whole purpose of the Sh'heema is to allow us to base our lives in constant prayer throughout the day – to provide a structure of prayer for our daily life.

- **Life of fasting**

It is widely known that the Orthodox Church gives much importance to fasting, following the examples of Jesus Christ and of the Apostolic community. In our materialistic society, we learn to identify ourselves through self-indulgence and we tend to see fasting only as a time of deprivation and penance. But this is incorrect. Fasting is the feast of the soul and good fasts are like medicine which cures our soul and mind, and along with other virtuous works, it leads us to eternal life. In our spiritual battle, fasting gives us strength to fight the evil one.

- **Tradition, Scripture and Liturgy**

Having a discipline of daily and continuous learning of the Word of God is also important as daily prayers and worship. Understanding the traditions, reading the Scriptures and participating in the liturgical life of the Church can help us build a strong spiritual and personal discipline. This is how we grow further in our relationship with God, and with others in our journey of salvation. Many times, the Word gives us encouragement and strength during our times of stress, worry and anxiety. Meditating on the Word can improve our state of mind and outlook on life.



- **Our Relationships**

Our family and friends love us and care about us. Sometimes, we might have strained relations with some of them but a family rooted in the love and trust of God can go a long way in helping and supporting each other. Good mental health and family support can go hand in hand and our family and friends can be a primary source of strength and mental support for us. Reaching out to your friends or families, maintaining a healthy relationships and having open conversations can only help us cope effectively with stress and mental illness

- **Personal Disciplines**

When we understand that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, we also understand the need of looking after ourselves and taking care of our body.

Eating a balanced and nutritious diet, staying active, doing regular exercises, sleeping well, keeping away from alcohol, drugs and other harmful substances are very important.

Engaging in volunteering, church activities and community support, help not only others in need but can give you a sense of belonging, gratitude, and fulfillment. We learn to love others and ourselves through this. There is a clarity to our purpose and our calling. This helps us grow in our union with God.

Adopting good life skills and practices help you relax and reduce stress. Research shows that simple things like a smile or laughter can boost your immune system, ease pain, relax your body and reduce stress.

Focusing on your own strengths and abilities, improving and overcoming your weaknesses, and even learning new skills, can encourage your confidence and give your mental health a boost.

Role of External Help

Just like for our physical illnesses, there are ways to cure and treat mental illnesses. You can always approach your Achen to seek guidance and prayers. Seeking the right help at the right time, talking to your doctor or physician, following their medical instructions, and adopting coping mechanisms are definitely available avenues to deal with this. **Seeking help is a sign of strength — not of weakness.** And it is important to remember that treatment is effective.

The **Diocese of South-West America Department of Counseling**² is dedicated to bringing about awareness in mental health and wellness. Please take some time to explore these sites and educate ourselves of the challenges you or your friends, family, or acquaintances may be dealing with.

Managing our overall health and well-being (including our mental health) is an act of stewardship for the life God has given us. Every good gift comes from above and this includes the healing we get through doctors, therapists, and counselors!

Reflection Questions

1. How does Psalm 118 (119):164, which expresses praise for God's righteous laws, reflect the importance of spiritual disciplines in our lives, particularly in helping us manage the challenges we face in a fallen world?
2. In what ways does the concept of the Church as a hospital illustrate the idea that individuals can find healing and support as they navigate the struggles of life, particularly in relation to the burdens they carry?
3. Why is it important to view our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, and how does this perspective contribute to our understanding of overall health and well-being as individuals created in God's image?

² Website: <https://www.ds-wa.org/counseling.html>; Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/DSWACounseling/>

Lesson 11: Our Guides to Holiness

Lesson Goals

- *I can understand the characteristics of a Church Father.*
- *I can explain that Church Fathers are venerated as they had Christ within them.*
- *I can be inspired to live and grow in faith through the examples of Church Fathers.*

Church of the Fathers

The Church rests upon the promise of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who said that the Holy Spirit “will guide You into all truth” (**St. John 16:3**) and “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (**St. Matthew 16:18**). To continue this witness as the Body of Christ until the coming of our Lord Jesus, amidst different circumstances, cultural setting and time in faith, is the great mission of the Church.

The Church holds its faith that God has not and will not ever abandon the Church, nor let her fall into error. The Holy Spirit is always meant to be guiding the church. St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians elaborates how Jesus Himself will equip and empower her appropriately with right leaders and teachers (**Eph 4:11-16**).

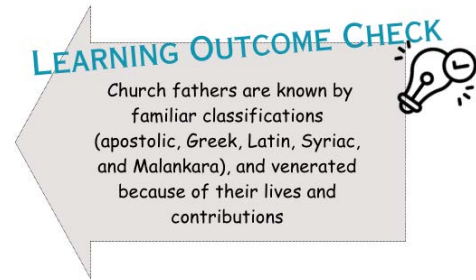
The early Church in the Roman empire, as an extension of the Apostolic age, practiced and lived out daily the living Bible. In this way revealing in all things as the Bride of Christ and His ambassador in the world. The Church gladly and joyfully faced persecution until the 4th Century when Emperor Constantine made the decision to cease persecution and allow public Christian worship. With the arrival of freedom from persecution, the Church found genuine desire to understand further the true Christian faith and explore how to live it in new circumstances. Along with it came the hard reality of councils, controversies and heresies that resulted in the development of much of the theological terminology and Christian doctrine as we know it.

To better understand and face the challenges and struggles of the Church in our own times, we look to the past to discover the faith and beliefs of the early catholic (universal) Orthodox Church and acknowledge her spirit and try to apply it. In this, we come across an array of men and women from the past, the experienced faithful within the Church who taught and lived out their faith and we collectively call them ‘Church Fathers’.

Who is a Church Father?

In the Old Testament, we see the title 'Patriarchs' or 'Fathers of Israel' given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (**Exodus:3:13,15, Deuteronomy 1:8**). Towards later times we see in the Jewish tradition and at the time of Christ, 'Father' as the title for 'Rabbi', the designated teacher who initiates a disciple.

Within the Orthodox Christian Church universally, we do not attribute special or specific era of the Church Fathers, nor do we commonly have special criteria of canonization of Saints or Fathers as set by the Roman Catholics. We follow the tradition of the early Church as shown through the writings of St. Athanasius when he refers to St. Dionysius of Alexandria, St Dionysius of Rome and others using the term "Fathers." St Clement of Alexandria said, "Words are the progeny (offsprings) of the soul; hence we call those that instructed us our fathers." There are three main essential characters that are usually attributed in the qualification of a 'Church Father'.



- The "Father" should consider the teachings handed over from the earliest fathers and examine them within Church's life without deviation from Orthodox Christian doctrines (Orthodoxy of Doctrine).
- As a source of teaching, the "Father" must attain the spirit of the early Apostolic Church so that through him, who offered his life side by side with his sayings, believers can follow his example and trust his teachings. (Holiness of Life).
- The "Father" should participate in Christian literature, such as discourses, dialogues, letters, sermons, apologies (specific writings defending the Christian faith) and/or commentaries on Scripture.

This study of the lives of the Church Fathers, their acts, thoughts, sayings, writing and events in their times is commonly referred to as 'Patrology'. The works of the fathers are authenticated for use in the Church through:

- Studying the meanings of the terms which a Father had used
- Comparing the terms which a Father had used with the same terms used by his contemporary Fathers

- Not relying alone on the writings of a single Father
- Not relying alone on the separate quotation from the acts of a single Father

Classification of Works

The writings and works of Church Fathers are primarily classified based on:

- Time
 - Ante-Nicene (before the Council of Nicea - 325 AD)
 - Nicene (during the Nicene times)
 - Post- Nicene Fathers
- Languages
 - The Greek (Eastern) and national languages such as the Coptic, Syrian, Armenian and the Latin (Western) Fathers.
- Place
 - Alexandria
 - Antioch
 - Syria
 - Cappadocia
 - Latin speaking areas (Western)
 - Local Fathers
- Material Content
 - Apologetic writings
 - Biblico-exegetical writings
 - Homilies
 - Letters
 - Liturgical works
 - Dialogues
 - Christian poetry and songs
 - Ascetic writings
 - Church canons
 - Church history
 - Theological (Dogmatic)

In addition, Church Fathers are also grouped under certain broad periods:

- Beginning of Christian Patristic Literature
- Ante- Nicene Literature after St. Irenaeus
- The Golden Age and Eastern Fathers
- Western Fathers in Fourth and Fifth Centuries
- After the Council of Chalcedon
- Local Fathers

It is fitting to realize that the Church considers the study of Church Fathers as never ending in light of these two most important points:

- The Church is full of anonymous 'Church Fathers', men and women who through their love of Christ have lived out their faith and contributed works to building up the Church.
- The work of the living Holy Spirit in the Church is not static but will be continuing to eternity through the contribution of Church fathers, men and women, from within the Church committed to live in obedience to Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

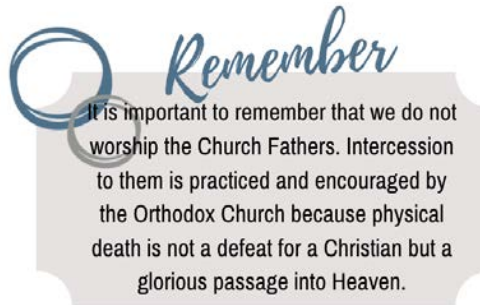
We are to be inspired by the godly examples the Church Fathers set during their lives. They sacrificed a lot in the defense of our faith. During the 4th and 5th centuries, many heresies attacked the Church, but the Church, through the faithful leaders, their teachings and literary works, strongly defended its true faith. We can say, without any doubt, that these significant personalities are really heroes, and the champions of Orthodoxy.

It is important to remember that we do not worship the Church Fathers. Intercession to them is practiced and encouraged by the Orthodox Church because physical death is not a defeat for a Christian but a glorious passage into Heaven. We believe they



are in the presence of God and they are able to intercede for us better as they led model lives when they were on Earth.

We remember and honor them to express our love and gratitude to God, who has perfected the Saints and Church Fathers. The Church cherishes them in her heart as sources and models for a spirit inspired life.



Reflection Questions

1. Identify and discuss the primary reasons Church Fathers are venerated within the Orthodox Church. What characteristics have led to their recognition as significant figures in the Church?
2. Choose one of the three Holy Hierarchs—St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, or St. John Chrysostom—and explain how their life and teachings have shaped your understanding of Orthodoxy. What specific aspects of their contributions resonate with you?
3. Reflect on the various classifications of Church Fathers (such as apostolic, Greek, Latin, Syriac, and Malankara). How does understanding these classifications enhance our appreciation of their diverse contributions to the Church's faith and teachings?

Lesson 12: Our Liturgical Tradition

Lesson Goals

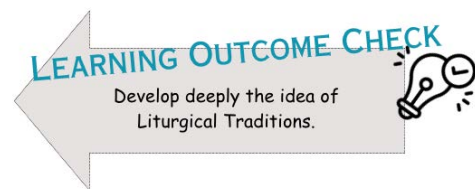
- I can relate to the importance of Syriac in our Church traditions and Liturgy.
- I can identify the Syriac influence in our prayers and in the Holy Qurbana.
- I can explain how the liturgical order of prayers was created.

The Syriac Foundation of our Liturgy

Syriac is a form of Aramaic, a language that most scholars agree was the language of Jesus and His disciples as it was the common language of Judea in the first century AD. This ancient connection is not just interesting trivia but has blessed our Church with a uniquely beautiful and deep connection with the One Living God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Dr. Sebastian Brock is a renowned scholar of Syriac studies and spent considerable time in Kerala for his research. He has remarked, “because of its long isolation from the other Churches, the liturgical tradition of the Church of the East incorporates a number of striking images and features which have disappeared from other liturgical traditions.” Yes, our Church practices and maintains the ancient liturgical tradition of the original Christians.

Fr. Dr. Baby Varghese is the renowned liturgical scholar of our Church. In his book “West Syrian Liturgical Theology,” Achen introduces the theological foundation of our Syriac tradition by commenting that the West Syrian fathers did not have a formal definition of liturgy as “perhaps it is felt unnecessary to define something self-evident, and so intimate to one’s experience.” Through prayers and liturgy we experience the presence of Jesus Christ and the members of the Holy Church from the beginning until our times.

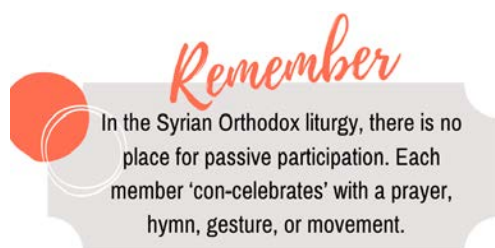
Fr. Baby Varghese continues, “for the West Syrians, worship is the vocation of man, the very purpose for which he was created. He was created to live in communion with God, as a liturgical being. This idea is fundamental to understanding the meaning of *leitourgia*, as lived and expressed by the West Syrian tradition. Liturgy is not something external to Christian witness. It is not an ‘accessory’, but an essential element of the Christian tradition. It is the very expression of the Christian identity. According to the West



Syrians, to be a Christian means to be a liturgical being. Worship is not a supplementary or practical discipline in the life of a Christian. It is the realization of his vocation.”

This insight is very important to remember as we develop a deeper understanding of our Liturgy. What most people often see when visiting an Orthodox Church is rules and repetition, but what needs to be understood is the Holy Qurbana, and all our prayers are celebrated according to an order that is based on Divine Revelation and patterns. This ‘ordo’ (taksa in Syriac), or order, based on rites is shared with us in our tradition, which consists of Liturgical texts, prayers, hymns, the lectionary, gestures, architecture, and symbolism. Fr. Baby Varghese expands more on the meaning of liturgical order by reflecting, “ordo is an ordering of a vision; it expresses the mind of the community. It orders and orients the community, by assigning each member his/her role and function in the celebration. In the Orthodox Syrian liturgy, there is no place for passive participation.” Every member participates in celebration of the Holy Liturgy with a prayer, hymn, gesture, or movement. Therefore, the order of liturgy includes our active presence and participation. Through Holy Liturgy, members of the Church live out the calling as the ‘royal priesthood’, which offers “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (**1 Peter 2:5-9**).

In our Divine Liturgy, words like “Barekmor” and “Kurielaison” are often chanted and incorporated into our prayers. These are neither Malayalam words, nor English. They actually derive from ancient languages such as Syriac and Greek. These are not just words that we should memorize, but rather we must understand the meaning of these words while we worship. Qurbana is derived from the Syriac word for offering.



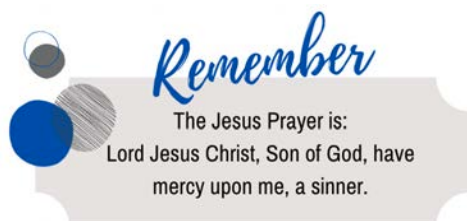
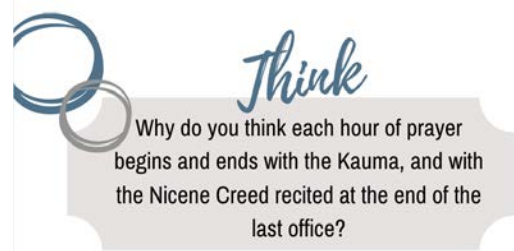
Our Church identifies itself as the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church due to our deep roots in Syriac tradition. Syriac became the official liturgical language of the St. Thomas Christians because of the collaboration between Persia (who used East Syriac Liturgy) and India in the first few Centuries. Bishops, who used to come to India, were from Syriac-speaking areas. The Syriac liturgical tradition

of our Church can be represented in the daily prayers found in the Sh’heema, or the book of common prayer of the Orthodox Syrian Church. According to Scripture, the liturgical day starts in the evening, as seen in **Genesis 1:5**, “And there was evening and there was morning, one day.”

The Sh'heema portrays the seven canonical offices or hours of prayer for each of the seven days of the week. The canonical hours of prayer are in this order:

- **Ramsho** (Evening Prayer or Vespers) at 6:00 PM
- **Soutoro** (Night Protection prayer or Compline) at 9:00 PM or before bedtime
- **Lilio** (Night Vigil) in the middle of the night or early in the morning before dawn
- **Sapro** (Morning Prayer or Matins) at 6:00 AM
- **3rd Hour** at 9:00 AM
- **6th Hour** at 12:00 PM
- **9th Hour** at 3:00 PM

There is also a particular order of service for each hour of prayer as well as for the Holy Qurbana. Each hour of prayer begins and ends with the Kauma, and with the Nicene Creed recited at the end of the last office. The times for each hour of prayer to be conducted do not need to be exact, as they are just guidelines, and they can also be combined to be done consecutively. For example, it is common practice to conduct Ramsho and Soutoro offices of prayer back to back and to recite the Nicene Creed and sing the intercessory hymns after the Soutoro portion. It is still important to pray as many times in the day as possible. Reciting the Jesus prayer whenever we can, enables us to continuously experience the mercy and presence of God.



The days are also classified as first day, second day and so on to represent a different set of daily prayers for each day. Each day also has an associated theme. Monday and Tuesday represent days of repentance. Wednesday is devoted to St. Mary, the Mother of God who is also known as the Theotokos. On Thursday, we commemorate all of the Saints. Friday is the day we remember the Holy Cross. Saturday is considered the day of the departed. Finally, Sunday is the day where the Resurrection is celebrated. The seven hours of prayer are also

represented in Scripture (**Psalm 118:164** OSB or **Psalm 119:164**), "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws."

Each of the hours of prayer also include an introductory prayer followed by hymns and a concluding prayer. The Nicene Creed is also recited at the final office of prayer that is conducted, followed by the Quqlion (prayers of intercession).

Kauma

Kauma prayer is unique to Syriac tradition and is completely biblical. The word Kauma means "standing" in Syriac. It calls worshippers to attention for prayer. It starts with a **doxology**, or hymn of praise, which glorifies the Holy Trinity.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one true God; Glory be to Him and may His grace and mercy be upon us forever. Amin."

It continues with praising God using the hymn of angels like it is found in **Isaiah 6:3**. This is a direct citation from **Revelation 4:8**.

"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, by whose glory, the heaven and earth are filled. Hosanna in the Highest!"

It is followed by the **Trisagion** which is addressed to the Son of God where we chant

*"Holy Art Thou, O God!
Holy Art Thou, Almighty!
Holy Art Thou, Immortal!
Crucified for us, have mercy on us."*

Then, we say a penitential prayer, which is a prayer for forgiveness,

*"Lord, Have mercy upon us.
Lord, be kind and have mercy.
Lord, accept our services and prayers.
Have mercy upon us."*

Finally, we say another prayer to glorify God,

*"Glory be to You, O God!
Glory be to you, Creator!"*

The Syriac tradition also addresses the Son directly, affirming that Christ is God who is One with the Father and the Holy Spirit,

Glory be to You, O Christ the King, who has compassion on His sinful servants. Barekmor."

Finally, it ends with the Lord's Prayer and optionally, the intercessory prayer "Peace to Thee, Mary, full of Grace".

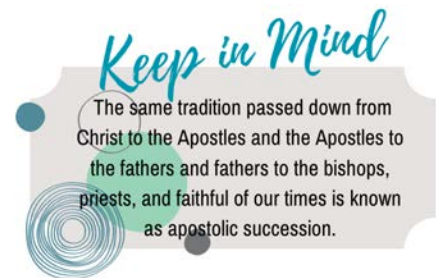
Psalms, Prayers and Hymns

Once the Kauma is concluded, the celebrant will recite an introductory prayer related to the current hour of prayer. Psalm 51 is recited everyday during the morning prayer following the introductory prayer. If it is a feast or Sunday an **Enyono** or a supplication is sung right after Psalm 51. If it is not a feast day or Sunday, the prayer moves further without the **Enyono**. Different Psalms are recited appropriate to the time of the day. Psalm 63 is recited in the morning and Psalms 140, 141, 118, and 116 recited in the evening. Next will be an **Eqbo**, followed by a loud announcement from the Altar Servant "Stoumen Kalos". This Greek expression means one has to stand well and attentively. During feast days and Sundays a **Promion**, **Husoyo**, and **Sedro** are read following Stoumen Kalos. Husoyo prayers are invariable and Promion and Sedros are variable. **Qolos** follow the Sedro, which will be followed by an **Ethro**. Kolos follow the Ethro, which will lead to the reading of Holy Evangelion. A Qukilion cycle with verses from Psalms, Ekbo, Kolos, and Huthomo will be the next ones to follow. The service ends with concluding prayers.

Pethgomo is the hymn sung before reading the Gospel. The Eqbo is a short hymn, while the Qolo is in multiple stanzas. Huthomo is also the hymn or prayer recited by the celebrant at the conclusion of the Holy Qurbana.

Keeping the Holy Tradition

St. Paul mentions in **2 Thessalonians 2:15**, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or epistle." This is why we, as Malankara Orthodox Syrian Christians, carry the same tradition passed down from Christ to the Apostles and the Apostles to the fathers and fathers to the bishops, priests, and faithful of our times. The order of all of our prayers and the Holy Qurbana is



very significant in this aspect. The tradition of our Church is reflected in the hymn sung before the reading of the Epistle of St. Paul during the Holy Qurbana. This is why, to this day, we keep the ancient Syriac traditions rooted as part of our Church.

*I have heard Paul
The Blessed Apostle Say
"If any man or angel
Teaches a gospel to you
Other than what we had preached,
Let him be cut off-from the Church"
Behold how perverse doctrines
Are springing forth from all sides
Blessed is he who begins
And ends in the Lord's teachings*



This hymn is derived from **Galatians 1:7-9**. The hymn tells us that there is a single Gospel message presented by the Holy Scriptures. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church has not and will not deviate from this great commission from the Apostle, St. Paul. This message is expressed in many ways in our liturgical tradition including the order, the tones, and the practices. We shall learn these liturgical words and their meanings to make the Holy Liturgy meaningful to

us.

Summary

The core of our Syriac tradition of worship is around 2,000 years old! Although the tradition is ancient, it does not make the worship stale or meaningless. The challenge is to understand this tradition as our church fathers intended and also to allow this tradition to take root within ourselves. This is when the worship truly becomes meaningful and impacts our relationship with God and with each other. Through worship, we ascend to heaven and together with the departed, we glorify God.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you explain the order of prayers of our Church? Use the Sleeba evening prayers from the Qurbana Kramam to observe the structure and order of prayers.
2. In the context of our Church, when does the liturgical day officially begin, and what scriptural or traditional evidence supports this understanding?
3. What is the significance of the Kauma in our liturgical practice??
4. In this lesson, are we discussing language or tradition? Why is it important to celebrate the liturgy in the Syrian tradition in different languages?

Lesson 13: Angels and Demons

Lesson Goals

- I can connect how angels interact with us to God's will for all His creation.
 - I can conclude how Satan and the demons had fallen away from God by their choices.
 - I can relate how God has a special purpose for us and how angels help.
-

In the Beginning

The Book of Genesis begins, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This actually carries profound theological teachings and St. Ephrem reflects on the profound wisdom that is imparted by this simple sentence:

"At this point these comprised the only things that had been made, for there was nothing else created along with heaven and earth. Even the elements that were created on that day had not yet been created. If the elements had been created along with heaven and earth, Moses would have said so. But he did not, lest he give the names of the elements precedence over their substances. Therefore it is evident that heaven and earth came to be from nothing because neither water nor wind had yet been created, nor had fire, light or darkness been given their natures, for they were posterior to heaven and earth. These things were created things that came after heaven and earth and they were not self-subsistent beings for they did not exist before [heaven and earth]."



"After this Moses spoke not of the firmament and things that were above [it], but rather of those things that were between the firmament and the earth which is within [the firmament]. Moses wrote about [the things within the firmament] for us, although he did not write about everything for us, for he did not record for us the day on which the spiritual things were created" (Commentary on Genesis).

The Spiritual Battle

St. Ephrem's commentary brings two points that are foundational to our understanding of God's Creation:

The first is that God is the creator of all things (visible and invisible). As stated in the Nicene Creed, God is the only creator and through His Love, He created all that is seen and unseen. If we truly reflect on this teaching, it means that God even created the angels that would eventually turn against their Creator (the leader of which is Satan)!

The second is that although the Holy Bible does not give us all full details about the spiritual world, there are important teachings of the unseen. The Holy Bible is a book of Faith with the primary purpose to help us with our salvation in Christ. Although Moses did not explicitly mention when angels were created in respect to that of man, nevertheless we are very aware there are important dynamics between God, the unseen world, and man.

In **Genesis 3:1**, we are first introduced to "the serpent" - "Now the serpent was more cunning than all the wild animals the Lord God made on the earth." We are taught this is Satan or the Devil, and he is also referenced throughout Scripture e.g., **Isaiah 14:12**, **Ezekiel 28:12-15**, **St. Matthew 4:1-11**, **St. Mark 1:12-13**, **St. Luke 4:1-13**, **2 Corinthians 4:4**, **1 John 5:18**, etc. And at the end of Chapter 3, we read about another spiritual being - the cherub. From **Genesis 3:24**, "He then stationed the cherubim and the fiery sword which turns every way to guard the way to the tree of life."

In the very same chapter, we see spiritual beings loyal to God and those who are not. Further, the being who was not loyal to God attacked what God loved most. By tempting Adam and Eve and deceiving them, what Satan accomplished was to hurt God by turning that which was created in His Image and Likeness away from Him. This gives us the first glimpse of the spiritual battle between the demons and God. It is a fruitless endeavor that will, without any doubt, end in the destruction of the demons.

What the Church teaches us is that angels are both created by God, and as described in our liturgical hymns made of "fire and spirit". They are not human created in God's image and likeness (**Genesis 1:27-28**). But they were entrusted with special honor and roles in God's Divine Council. But as they were also created with free-will (i.e., the ability to choose to obey or disobey), we find that a group of these spiritual beings turned away from God. Those who remained loyal and served God out of love are those we call angels. And those who turned away from God are called demons (which includes Satan).

What is the cause of this rebellion by the angels? **Isaiah 14:12-14** gives us an understanding that the demons were driven by jealousy. Satan in particular wanted to be above all creation and be like the Almighty. But not having been created in God's Image and Likeness (**Genesis 1:27**) and for that purpose (**Genesis 1:28**), Satan was denied and then cast down. The spiritual beings who were loyal to Satan also fell from grace and are known as demons.



Although the details of this are not contained in much detail in Scripture, what is important and evident as early as Genesis 3 is that Satan and the fallen angels were not content and began their attack on God by focusing on what God loves most - men and women!

Similar to humanity, the light of God and His grace are freely available and it is in exercising free will that determines who receives and benefits from it. Therefore similar to men, choice identifies angels into two groups:

- **Angels:** Similar to men, they are the righteous or elect (**1 Timothy 5:21**) or holy (**St. Matthew 25:31**) ones because they preserved their love to God and remain in a state of grace. (e.g. Gabriel or Michael)
- **Demons:** The evil ones, or the devils, who did not keep their righteousness and fell, were expelled from heaven, and condemned to damnation for judgment (**Jude 1:6; Ps 78:49**). (e.g. Satan or demons)

Who are Angels?

The word “angel” comes from the Hebrew (*mal'akh*) and Greek (*angelos*) language, meaning “a messenger sent to convey a message.” In the Syriac tradition, the word “Watcher” is often used for the angelic powers as well. The Watchers are those who are always vigilant and holy before the presence of God (**Daniel 4:13**). Furthermore, in the apocryphal text of The Book of Enoch, the “Watchers and Holy Ones” (*irin w-qadishin*) are heavily discussed, specifically the fall from heaven and into evil by many Watchers.



Both the Old and New Testament Scripture testify to the existence of angels - from the cherubim that guard the road to the Tree of Life in the book of Genesis, to our Lord Jesus Christ Himself speaking many times about angels, to the confession of St. John the Apostle about the multitude of Angels in the book of Revelation. The presence of Angels amongst us and the part they play in our salvation is found in our Liturgical Tradition, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the Holy Scripture.

The role of the angels in human history and salvation cannot be understated. We already pointed out how the temptation of the serpent led to the fall of mankind and the break in communion between man

and God. Furthermore,



we see the angels interact with men and women of the Hebrew Scriptures, such as Elijah (**I Kings 19**), Isaiah (**Isaiah 6**), and Nebuchadnezzar (**Daniel 4**). Even more significantly, we see the Archangel Gabriel bring the news of the salvation of the world to Mary the Theotokos and Joseph and also brings the news of Christ's forerunner to Zechariah and Elizabeth (**St. Luke 1**). The angels are present at Christ's temptation (**St. Matthew 4:11**), at the Resurrection of Christ (**St. Matthew 28:5**), and at Jesus' Ascension into Heaven (**Acts 1:11**). Angels, though unseen and not of this world, have played an integral role in the story of humanity (both good and bad).

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Explain the role of angels in our lives.



The Angel of the Lord

Angels are primarily heavenly spirits whom the Lord sends to fulfill His good will. They are referenced at times in Scripture as "*angels of God*" (**Genesis 28:12**; **St. Matthew 22:30**; **St. Luke 12:8-9**; **St. John 1:51**).

A careful reading of Scripture is needed as there are times when an "angel" is actually God Himself! For example in **Exodus 3:2** we read, "Then the Angel of the Lord appeared to him (Moses) in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he saw the bush burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed."

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Interpret how certain instances of the word "angel" in the Old Testament refer to God.



But then we read in verse 4 onwards that it was God who he saw coming and spoke to him! When Moses recognized this was Yahweh, the God of Israel, he turned away to hide his face (**Exodus 3:6**).

The identification of God as “the Angel of the Lord ” is one of numerous proofs that Israel understood that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob existed as One God and as many Persons. What was revealed through Christ was the Truth that God is Three Persons - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But even in the most ancient texts of the Torah, we see that this understanding that the One True God was also multiple Persons was understood and believed.

As explained in the Orthodox Study Bible, God is called the Angel of the Lord because here God is the Messenger (the meaning of the word “angel”) of the Father. It is God the Word who reveals Himself to Moses! Jesus who is the Word and the Second Person of the Trinity is bringing God the Father’s Will to Moses. To quote the Orthodox Study Bible notes on **Exodus 3:2**, “He is called the Angel of the Lord because He is the Angel or Messenger of the Father who reveals the Father’s will. For He is the Will of the Father. He is the Only-begotten God because He is begotten from the Unbegotten Father before all time and ages.”

The Role of Angels

From liturgical traditions of the Orthodox Communion and from Scripture, we see the primary function of all angelic hosts is praising and serving towards the eternal glorification of God. The following are some of the roles that angels may play:

- **To worship God** (Heb 1:6, Rev 5:11,12)
- **To minister to God**, to make known His will, being His ministers or messengers to His people
- **To praise God** (Is 6:3, Ps 148:1-3)
- **To serve the saints** (Heb 1:14, Gen 24:7, Gen 19:16)
- **To protect us**, When attacked God sends them to protect us (4 King 6:14-17)
- **To deliver us**, When in danger God sends them to deliver us (Acts 12:5-11, 27:23-25, Dan 6:22, Ps 33:8)

- **To take care of us** , God appoints a Guardian Angel to accompany and take care of each of us (St. Matt 18:6, Acts 12:15)
- **To carry the souls of saints to heaven** (St. Lk 16:22 & Funeral Service)
- **To pray for people**, the Angel of God praying for His people and God answers the prayers (Zech 1:16, Tobit 12:15)

The Qauma of the West Syriac Orthodox tradition begins with the “Holy, Holy, Holy” which is the hymn of the angels (**Isaiah 6:3, Revelation 4:8**). The prayer is then addressed to the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, as we along with the angelic hosts praise and glorify Christ as God.



This is a special prayer as it combines the praise and glorification that is directed to, and reserved only for, our Lord with the reminder that God loved us so much that He gave Himself to redeem us. And from the start of creation we see the angels not only in the same praise and glorification, but also serving God in a multitude of ways. Furthermore, one of the final prayers of the Lilyo (Midnight) prayers is the Hymns of the Angels that begins, “As the angels and archangels on high in heaven sing praise, so we poor children of earth sing praise and say...”

Through the Scriptures, Fathers, and the worship of the Holy Church, we see that our lives are linked with the angels as their colleagues in eternity. While angels have the power and ability to transcend time and space, it is so humbling to realize that these angels whose primary office is to praise and glorify God are also appointed to serve and help us. In the world, being in the flesh, we are in a constant spiritual war having to face the evil one. God,

in His providence and inexhaustible love for us, sends forth His angels to minister to us who inherit salvation and give charge over us to keep us in our ways. Thus, we hope and try to ascend our lives to be 'angelic,' always in constant praise and service to God, as the Hymns of the Angels calls us to be.

Reflection Questions

1. If God is Love and all powerful, how are Satan and the fallen angels able to continue their actions against us?
2. How do angels help us in our journey towards perfection in Christ? How do demons take us away?
3. Activity: Identify different instances where angels minister or interact with people of the Bible.
4. Read and reflect on the Hymn of the Angels from Liliyo prayers.

Lesson 14: Wellness through Faith

Lesson Goals

- I can identify healthy and unhealthy relationships.
- I can manage unhealthy interpersonal contexts.
- I can assess what social media can do to me.
- I can understand emotions of self and others
- I can appreciate the importance of being part of the Church and the unique and healthy contexts present there.
- I can gain a realistic, positive and accepting attitude towards counseling.

In this lesson on the reciprocity of Christian life and our mental health, we discuss how our Church plays a crucial and critical role as a spiritual organization that provides not only the context but also functions as a catalyst in the development and maintenance of optimum mental health to each one of its members, particularly children.

Let us start with a brief discussion to add on to what you have learned about mental health in lesson 8.

Scientists historically were so preoccupied with **mental illness** that study of **mental health** was largely ignored until the last century. In the last 60 years, significant measurable bases of mental health have emerged.

We may consider ourselves mentally healthy if we are:

1. Committed to our academic and co-curricular activities;
2. Able to appropriately balance our time and energy for study and for play;
3. Able to maintain a respectful, obedient and loving relationship with our parents, teachers and elders;
4. Able to maintain a loving and caring relationship with our siblings, relatives and friends;
5. Committed to involvement in a social group and function effectively, both as a member and as a leader;
6. Able to help the needy and the poor;
7. Aware and in good control over our emotions and express our emotions appropriately to the context without hurting others.
8. Sensitive to the emotions of others, understand and respect the perspectives and feelings of others.

9. Able to evaluate the social contexts we come in contact with and select those consistent with our value system.
10. Accepting of ourselves and other with all limitations and maintain healthy levels of respect for others and ourselves;
11. Clear about our sense of identity – as: who am I? What is the purpose of my life? What are my value systems?
12. Resilient - we tolerate frustrations and failures without being emotionally overwhelmed. This is analogous to having a competent immune system that protects the body from infections.

Now that we have a fair idea of sound mental health, let us discuss the factors that influence mental health, particularly that of an adolescent person. Our development, whether physical or mental, is the product of the interaction between heredity, environment and the stage of development. As heredity is already given, our concern is with the developmental and environmental factors, which are to a significant extent under our control and hence modifiable.

Developmental Factors: Adolescence

Now that we are growing up as adolescents and have attained puberty, our minds will be filled with multiple emotions. In addition to the stress of academics and the adjustment issues at home and with our friends, adolescence brings forth a turbulence of emotions and thoughts. We may become easily irritable and angry; sometimes easily upset and tearful; we begin to critically evaluate and question the do's and don'ts of parents and elders; we also feel intensely attracted to the opposite gender, have strong sexual feelings, get into relationships; sometimes feel guilt and remorse; we may also experience a sense of identity crisis (thoughts such as who am I?, what is the meaning of life?, what is the purpose of life? etc.). To understand the adolescent experiences better, it is important to know more about our emotions.

Environmental Factors

The important environmental factors that have a significant say on mental health are the interpersonal context we interact with and the larger socio-political, cultural, and social environment we live in. As the latter is virtually beyond our control, let us discuss the interpersonal context. As we move towards adolescence, there is a significant shift from parents and the home to the peer group and friends at our school, neighborhood, at church and virtually, in social media. This shift, termed "the second individuation," is a natural and normal process and is an important step towards moving into adulthood. Consequent to

this shift, the time and energy we invest at home decreases and increases with our friends. Sometimes our friends and their values become more important in our life. The effect this can have in our life is very significant. Depending on the quality of the interpersonal context, the influence it has can be either positive and beneficial or negative and detrimental to our mental health.

Before we examine the interpersonal context in detail, let us examine the developmental stage that we are currently going through: adolescence.

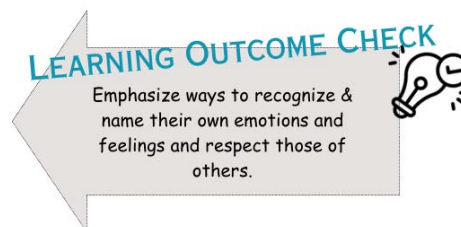
What are emotions?

Emotions are what we feel and experience; are integrated with our thoughts and activities; and are an essential component of life. Emotions may seem as positive and negative. Love, hope, joy, forgiveness, compassion, faith, awe, and gratitude may sound like the important positive emotions. Mental and spiritual health is the blend of the positive emotions that bind us to other human beings. Negative emotions, as the society teaches to us, are anger, fear, anxiety, worry, sadness, and dejection. When we have issues with our parents, teachers or friends we experience these negative emotions. They are also experienced when we are frustrated or have failure experiences or when we don't rise up to our own expectations. We shall understand that there are no negative or positive emotions. We feel them as negative or positive and they are there to help us realize how we feel at that moment. When we feel an emotion as negative, it is an alarm to us and a check point for ourselves. We can ask ourselves whether a saint would do what I feel like doing with these negative feelings? We must also know that others also experience those same negative emotions when they encounter similar situations. If we react to the negative emotions over extended periods, they can erode our mental health, jeopardize our interpersonal relationships and render us vulnerable to mental problems. We shall respond to those emotions through asking questions to ourselves like "how shall make my life holy now." In short, it is important to know ways to handle the negative emotions and to enhance our experiences of positive emotions to maintain good mental health. St. Paul says to the **Ephesians 4:27-29**: "...nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." It is equally important to know that other people also have their emotions and have a right to feel the way they want.

Healthy Interpersonal Relationships

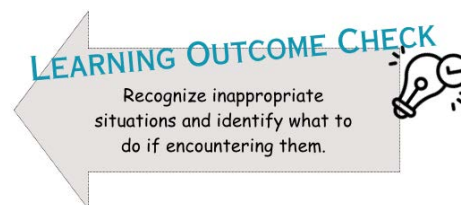
In the background of the above-mentioned adolescent mental state, let us examine the positive and healthy interactions patterns that should be present in an interpersonal context so that we develop sound mental health and grow up as healthy and confident adults.

A healthy interpersonal context should be intellectually, emotionally and spiritually stimulating; should facilitate personality development; helps create a clear sense of identity; helps to mold healthy moral value system; should make an influence on the important life goals; and should function as a shock absorber to help overcome the emotional trauma of failure experiences. The relationships should be mutually respecting, encouraging, caring, accepting, affectionate, transparent, open and willing to listen to our difficulties without gossiping about it later. The interaction patterns should help to develop social skills, public speaking skills, and leadership skills. The interpersonal context should have a definite purpose, should have a goal – oriented altruistic activities, has clear rules and discipline.



Unhealthy Interpersonal Contexts

Your friends at school or in your neighborhood may have some of the positive qualities mentioned above, but might also have some of the negative or unhealthy components. It is quite possible that at times you were bullied, encouraged to use alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or led into unwanted and unhealthy relationships that have sexual involvement. You may develop an infatuation with someone who has values and belief systems not consistent with our Christian values. It is important to note that a love relationship with somebody who does not share your values will eventually lead to problems and breakups. If these are not happening now, it is possible that such inappropriate and unhealthy influences may occur in the future. It is important to keep in mind that the casual and occasional use of addictive substances such as tobacco, alcohol and drugs eventually lead to addiction. Also, please be reminded that unwanted and inappropriate relationships erode your moral values and lead to degradation of your personality and mental health. The interpersonal context and interactional patterns should be devoid of ridicule, hurtful teasing, bullying, gossiping, and victimizing. The context should not use or encourage the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. The context also



should neither promote sexually oriented conversations nor physical intimacy. In short, unhealthy friendships can and will take you far away from God.

Healthy Interpersonal Relationships

We have seen that our mental health is significantly influenced by our friends and peers. So in order to maintain and optimize our mental health it is essential that we seek the company of peers and friends who influence us positively and avoid the company of those who do not. To be able to do this, we need to develop three mental skills:

1. Have a clear understanding of our own values and beliefs.
2. To evaluate the peer group and friends and see whether they follow our values and beliefs and also to see whether they encourage any of the unhealthy habits. If so, develop the social skills to detach from such peers and seek out the company of peers who have healthy characteristics.
3. The ability to say “no” when we find their preferences not consistent with our faith, beliefs and moral values is an effective social skill.

Bullying is a troublesome issue at school and in social media. Bullying is repeated oppression, psychological or physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful one. Generally, bullies are aggressive, tough, strong, confident, and impulsive. Victims are usually unpopular, lonely, rejected, anxious, depressed, unwilling to retaliate, and lacking in self-esteem. This shows that the victims have poor mental health and are not part of a healthy and positive friends’ group. So the easiest thing to avoid being bullied is to have good mental health i.e. if you appear confident, happy, relaxed and have good self-esteem and if you have friends who are caring and supportive, the chance of getting bullied is minimal. But if you are being bullied, it is important to get help from an adult or talk to your priest.

Social media is a unique interpersonal context of the 21st century, where the barriers of age, gender, time, space, geography, ethnicity and culture vanishes; traditional values of truthfulness, sincerity, honesty, discipline, decency, decorum and morality are relegated to the back bench; where people can have fake and multiple identities. Social media has numerous advantages

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Identify positive and negative influences of friends and peers and focus on finding positive friendships.



LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Recognize signs of bullying and elaborate what to do in those situations.



LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Analyze the impact of social media on mental health.



but they are far outweighed by the potholes, pitfalls and booby traps that await to ensnare the unsuspecting adolescent. We need to know to judiciously use it with the wisdom we gain from our Church.

The Unique Role of our Church

Some of the unique and healthy contextual and catalytic functions of our Church in the development and maintenance of optimum mental health are that it:

- provides a metaphysical and spiritual realm
- provides the benchmarks for appropriate social behavior
- provides a clear sense of identity

Let us discuss each one of these in some detail.

Provides a Metaphysical and Spiritual Realm

Our church with a tradition of nearly 2000 years has theology, liturgy and practices that are systematic and structured and function in a well-disciplined pattern. The **Holy Qurbana**, packed with positive energy takes you into the spiritual realm. If you participate in the Holy Qurbana with faith, preparation and commitment you will experience an intense cleansing, feel deeply comforted, relaxed, heard, understood completely, energized and confident to face the world. You can pour out all your problems, sufferings and failures to the Holy Spirit, the ultimate counselor. There is no better therapeutic experience than an active and involved participation in the Holy Qurbana after a Holy Confession. Holy Qurbana functions as a catalyst that enhances your mental health and optimizes your performance.

Sunday School, MGOCSM and family prayer fellowships and other prayer meetings help to build your faith and interpersonal relationships.

The regular prayers in your family with all the members together is a great strength and a great bonding force among the family members. Family ties, mutual support and the quality time spent with the family are great determinants of mental health.

The spiritual practices of our church during fasts help to develop the skills of meditation, introspection and frustration tolerance. This will help in understanding yourself better and facilitates control of emotions.

The Holy Bible is yet another important contribution of the church. Regular reading of the Holy Scriptures will give you solace, hope and energy and enlighten you regarding

minor and major decisions you need to take in life, for example Psalm 90 and 120, which we sing during evening prayers..

Provides the Benchmarks for Appropriate Social Behavior

The Interpersonal relationships with the clergy, peers, elders and juniors have almost all the qualities of a healthy interpersonal context discussed earlier. It is essential that you stay back at the church after the Holy Qurbana and participate in church activities so that you get the opportunity to build close relationships. We may consider our Church as a home away from home. The nature and qualities of the interpersonal relationships with members of your parish may be taken as the benchmarks of healthy social behavior and may be used to assess the quality of your relationships with your peers and friends outside. This helps you identify inappropriate and manipulative approaches from people outside the Church. If you get into relationship difficulties and/or emotional problems due to some failure experiences at school or with your friends, you may seek the counsel of the clergy or a respected elder of your church whom you respect and trust.

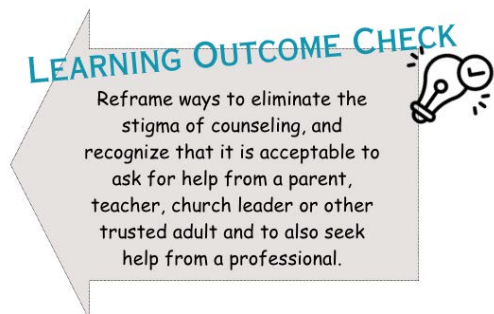
Provides a Clear Sense of Identity

One of the important mental developments that should take place during adolescence is to have a clear sense of identity. That means the adolescent should find answers to the fundamental questions such as who am I? where am I going? what is the purpose of my life? God and our church give clear answers to these and other basic questions of life through the prayers, readings from the Holy Bible and spiritual discourses. If you strengthen your faith and commitment to the teachings of our church, you will develop a clear sense of identity, which in turn fills you with confidence and enables you to reflect true Christian love in your relationships.

In short, being part of the church positively influences virtually all the facets of your personality and function as an excellent catalyst for your overall development, which in turn enhances and maintains sound mental health.

Importance of Counseling

It is quite possible that all of us encounter life situations and experiences which are beyond our coping repertoire. When the situation becomes overwhelming and we are not able to cope we become preoccupied, have difficulty in controlling



our thoughts, feel sad, angry, anxious, worrying and hopeless.... If this pattern of emotional disturbance continues for a few days, then is the right time to seek external help in the form of counseling. The clergy and other respected senior members of our Church are representatives of the Holy Spirit, the ultimate counselor. We may approach the clergy or a respected and trusted senior member of our parish, tell him/her that you need some time to talk. After an open talk with that person, usually we will feel better. We may have to talk to that person a few more times to discuss our issues in more detail and to work out a plan of action to sort out the problems. If that person suggests that we require help from a professional counselor, we may allow him to talk to our parents who will make arrangements for professional help. It is important to keep in mind that consultation with a professional psychologist is as important as consulting a dentist for toothache. If we do not timely address the problem with our tooth, we may end up losing that tooth. Similarly, timely addressing an emotional problem will prevent failures in studies and relationships and will help prevent the emotional issue from developing into a mental problem.

In this lesson we discussed the modulatory role of interpersonal relationships on the quality of our mental health, the need to be judicious in the selection of our friends and the unique and healthy interpersonal context of our church. Also, the importance of seeking support in the form of counseling whenever we find that the adjustment issues get beyond our coping repertoire.

Reflection Questions

1. Think about your friends and peers. Can you list three positive influences they have on your mental health? Additionally, can you identify two negative influences and discuss how you might address them in a Christ-like manner?
2. How can you recognize and name your emotions during a frustrating or happy moment? Share a situation where you expressed your feelings appropriately and how that helped you or someone else.
3. Why do you think there's a stigma attached to counseling, and why is it important to ask for help from trusted adults like parents or church leaders? What are some ways we can encourage our friends to seek help when they need it?

Lesson 15: Am I Saved?

Lesson Objectives

- *I, as an Orthodox Christian, can understand salvation*
 - *I can recognize how salvation is from Jesus Christ*
 - *I can discover what to do after I am saved?*
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Being Saved

We often hear from other Christian denominations that “being saved” means we are going to heaven, while those who are not saved are going to hell. The popular idea is that St. Peter makes a judgment at “the pearly gates” of heaven or an angel or demon awaits the departed soul to take them “up” or “down”.

This was not the teaching of the ancient Church, and the entire concept of “salvation” is better understood in terms of **healing**. For the Orthodox Church, “being saved” is a continuous process that spans our lifetime and into eternity. During this process, we aim to become more like God (**theosis**); and we are transformed by following the teachings of the Church to become more like Christ (**Matthew 5:48**). For Protestants, salvation may be considered an event that occurs when an individual becomes baptized. For Orthodox Christians, the process only begins with the Holy Baptism but there is more to come after.



Salvation through Jesus Christ

It is important to remember that God created us out of His Divine Love. He loved us so much that He created us in His image and likeness (**Genesis 1:27**). To fully understand the Orthodox teaching of salvation, we need to begin with this important concept - one that is so important that it is literally the first chapter of the Bible! We were created with the potential to be like the One who created all that is seen and unseen, and we were given everything we needed to grow and fulfill this potential.

In the Nicene Creed, we confirm that God is the “maker of Heaven and Earth” .. with no mention of a place called Hell. Although Hell is a very real consequence of the decisions we make in this world, the Creed affirms that there is no place called Hell.

Hell (and in turn salvation) is commonly taught to be a place created by God for the express purpose of banishing the wicked for everlasting punishment. Somehow in this place the damned are not with God .. but, for Orthodoxy, we know such a place does not exist. God is present everywhere, and there is nowhere in the seen and unseen world where His Glory does not shine.



The goal of the Christian therefore is not to a place called “Heaven” but rather to grow into deepening communion with God by acquiring the Holy Spirit, beginning in this life and continuing forever. This is crucial as all who die go to only one place and that is with God. All who love God and follow His teaching will experience Paradise, while all those who reject God and in vain try to turn from God will feel miserable.

In this respect, we are all sinners and the Church is our hospital, preparing people for the experience that all will have being in the presence of God. The only real question is what effect seeing God will have on us.

This is the context to understand the words of C.S. Lewis - “Ultimately, there are only two kinds of people ... those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done’. All that are to fail in the final judgment are to choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. The doors of Hell are locked on the inside”.

It is through Jesus that all this has been reconciled and renewed after the Fall of Man (**Genesis Chapter 3**). God’s gift of ultimate Love was His Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection and now the choice is for us to decide whether we want to accept this gift or not. Like how we may receive gifts from our parents or other loved ones, the gift is not realized until we start doing something with it. When we start the Holy Qurbano, we recite the Ma’nitho of Mor Severus, the hymn which details the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Demonstrate how God saves and loves mankind through the events of the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

of Jesus Christ. The line “To bring life and salvation for our fallen human race” summarizes why Jesus entered into this world.

This is why our response to the question “Are you saved?”, that some outside our Church may ask, is in 3 parts. We are saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved.

We Are Saved

Salvation is not something that we can earn, but rather, it is a gift from God. In the words of Molly Sabourin, “I was originally saved over 2000 years ago when God the Son took on human flesh and offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice for all of mankind, defeating the power of sin by suffering on the Cross and destroying death through His miraculous Resurrection.”

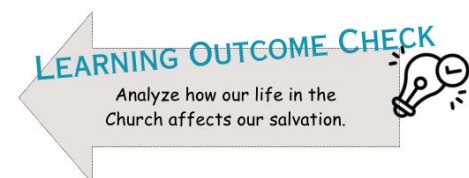
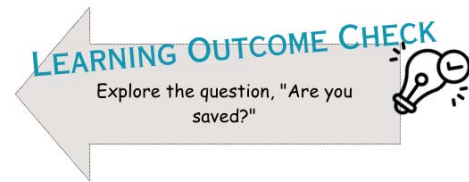
God loved the entire world, and in this respect the entire world is saved. As St. Paul says in **Ephesians 2:8**, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.” Salvation in this respect is not earned. It became reality once God was Incarnate as Jesus Christ and sent into this world to die for our sins. It is only through the grace of God that we can receive salvation.

We Are Being Saved

We still need this gift of salvation daily, which is why we are considered being saved. We are constantly being tempted by the devil. For this purpose, the process of salvation continues throughout the journey of the Sacramental life in the Church.

We also have the free will to become members of the Orthodox Church, which is the Body of Christ (**1 Corinthians 12:27**). By entering into the family of the Orthodox Church through Holy Baptism and Chrismation, we are saved from evil by the Holy Spirit.

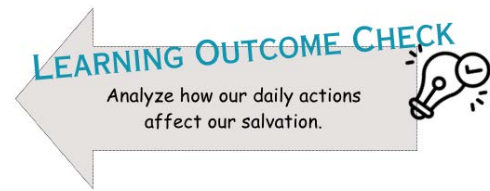
Again, the purpose of salvation for us is not to get into Heaven or escape Hell but rather to continue to become like God (theosis) through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Qurbana, we become even closer in Communion with God and through the teachings of the Church become more Christ-like.



St. Paul mentions in **1 Corinthians 1:18**, “For the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Jesus Christ also preached in the gospel according to **St. Matthew 16:25**, “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” This indicates the process of trying to save yourself through your own power versus letting God perform the saving. If we let God lead our lives and we are willing to risk our lives for Him, we are in the process of being saved.

On this point, Molly Sabourin shared her reflection - “I am being saved daily through my intentional decisions to follow Jesus’ example within each situation that I find myself, viewing paradise not as just a someday destination but as the everyday experience of self-denial, of being filled, through the Eucharist, obedience, and love for others, with Christ.”



We Will Be Saved

Our life on earth is short, and God has a plan for us in eternity. Through our faith, we will be in communion and walk with the Lord.

St. Mark 13:13 says, “But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” This shows that salvation is not simply an event that occurs at a specific time and place but something that lasts a lifetime.



Salvation is a gift to us from God, but what we do with it will determine how much of it we receive. The result is **theosis**, which is transformation into becoming like God. While we can and should never become God, God formed us in His image and He also intended for us to be created in His likeness, like He did with Adam and Eve. While they did not succeed, He sent Jesus Christ for us to be not only the sacrifice but the guide towards how we should live our lives.

To summarize using the words of Molly Sabourin, “I will, Lord have mercy, be saved at the Great and Final Judgment when I give an account for a lifetime of actions, when it

becomes clear whether or not I cooperated with the grace so generously bestowed upon me.”

Who of us, having been blessed beyond all comprehension, should feel the need to insure that regardless of our choices a reward will be ours free and clear? Who of us dare to sit idle with our assurances, interpreting the conditions of the Bridegroom’s invitation while our lamps for illuminating the darkness run out of oil?

My individual salvation is being worked out with fear and trembling through the unique responsibilities God deemed best to set before me. Based upon the model of the tax-collector who beat his breast and begged for leniency (**St. Luke 18:9-14**), I am careful to not assume I have a handle on the spiritual state of others. I would do best, rather, to stay focused on my own flagrant shortcomings, reverencing both friends and enemies, all of whom were created in God’s image, as living icons of Christ Jesus.

“I share my faith, yes, but not out of obligation; a soul that has found its meaning cannot help but be a witness to such joy. My ongoing testimony is presented through acts of service, in accordance with Christ’s commandment to love God by loving your neighbor. I pray ceaselessly for the courage to fight the good fight, staying faithful until my very last breath upon this earth.”

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways do the events of the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ illustrate God’s love and salvation for mankind, and how can these events be personally understood and embraced in our spiritual lives?
2. Reflecting on our faith journey, how can we engage with the question “Are you saved?” in a manner that deepens our understanding of salvation within the context of Orthodox Christianity?
3. How do our daily actions and choices, along with active participation in the life of the Church, influence our relationship with God and our experience of salvation?

Lesson 16: Standing Before the Throne

Lesson Goals:

- I can conclude how Satan and other demons had fallen away from God due to their choices
- I can relate how God has a special purpose for us and how angels help us towards that goal

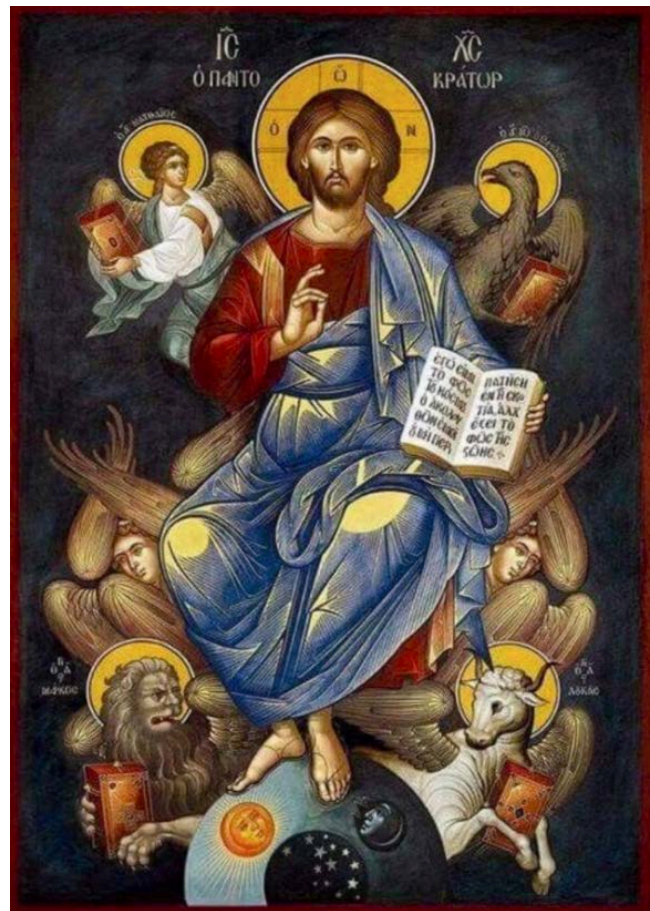
The Thronos

In the Orthodox Church, the altar table upon which the Holy Qurbana is celebrated is known as the “thronos” which is Greek for “throne”.

In earthly kingdoms, a throne is the center of a royal court and upon which the ruler sits and presides over the kingdom. By calling the altar the throne, we should begin to connect and see the same imagery but with a divine and heavenly understanding.

Upon the Heavenly Throne sits the Almighty, who is the maker of all that is seen and unseen. The throne of the Lord is the same as the one seen by the Prophet Isaiah (**Isaiah 6:1**) and St. John (**Revelation 4:2 -11**).

Fr. Baby Varghese in his book “West Syrian Liturgical Theology” teaches that the function and position of the entire Church architecture has a clear intention which is “precisely to place us before the Holy Trinity and the throne of Christ”³.



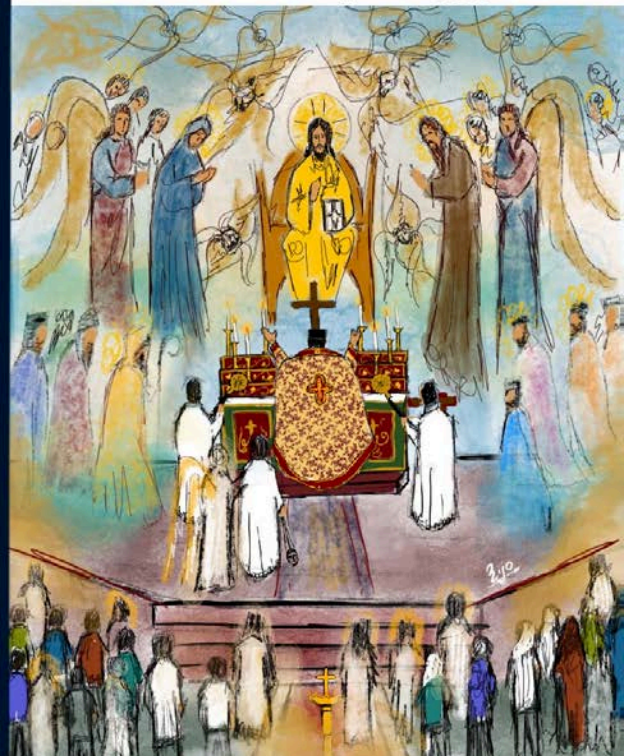
³ Varghese, Baby. West Syrian Liturgical Theology. Enskede: SRF, 2012.

Fr. Baby Varghese further explains, “Everything stands in a harmony, for which the church has been called out. The church bears the whole cosmos and presents it to God and it becomes a ‘type’ of God’s glorious presence. The great ‘cloud of witnesses’ participates in the cosmic liturgy. The church portrays the whole earthly life of Christ and proclaims its cosmic significance. The Incarnation was not merely for the salvation of man, but on the contrary for the restoration of the whole cosmos as a ‘liturgical symbol’, capable of sharing in the glory of God, for which everything has been created.”

How it looks



How it really happens



As we say in the prayer for the departed, “*may the living and departed together cry out, ‘Blessed is He who has come and is to come and will raise the dead. Amin!’*”. The Holy Qurbana is the closest experience we have to be in communion with God, along with all of creation that loves Him. Together we stand in front of the Throne, and worship and praise the One that gives us true life.

As God has blessed us with free will, it is our choice to participate and grow towards a closer life with Him. The Church has given us many sacraments to help us in this change to be like Christ. Holy Baptism, Holy Confession, and Holy Communion are three important gifts. It is through Holy Baptism that we enter the Church, and through Holy Communion

that we are physically and spiritually joined with Christ. Holy Confession is an important Sacrament as we are not perfect and even after Baptism we commit sins (“willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly”). The Church provides all these gifts for us to partake so that we can be restored and renewed to life with Christ. This is why we proclaim in the Creed, that “we look for the resurrection of the dead and the new life in the world to come”.

Eschatology is the term in theology for teaching concerning death, judgment, and our final destiny as humans. The word comes from two Greek roots meaning "last" and "study". Especially in today's world where there are innumerable theories of “end times” and multiple theories about our souls and bodies, it is important to understand the Orthodox Church has a very clear eschatology or "the doctrine of the last things" that is strongly rooted in the understanding that God is Love.

God created us out of Love, and He created us in His Image and Likeness because He loved us! Because of what happened in the Garden of Eden, we were separated from God's plan which was to be in eternal communion with Him! A careful reading of Genesis reflects that His Plan and Will for us was to carry out His Love to all creation that was in chaos and subdue (**Genesis 1:27-28**). It is very difficult to avoid the multiple popular opinions and rhetoric on who is “going to hell” and who God loves. Such questions are of no importance to us. Our focus should be on Christ at all times and His Love for all mankind.

Our Baptism does not “guarantee” our place in heaven. This is a teaching often found in Western churches, but ignores the importance of our actions and choices. There is no doubt that God could have programmed each one of us to do His Will. Can this truly be the action of a loving God? True love requires freedom, and it is our free-will that ultimately leads to our final judgment before God. We can choose to humble ourselves and be like God, or we can choose to focus on ourselves or other objects and turn ourselves away from the One who truly loves us. These temptations and passions that turn us away from Christ are always real even after we are baptized, and God in His infinite mercy and love always welcomes us back. The importance of repentance and confession in our spiritual journey cannot be emphasized enough.

In the words of LL His Grace Paulos Mar Gregorios, “True holiness is achieved by the combination of hope, faith, and love expressed in worship and daily life. Give your strength and time to prayer and worship and the loving service of your fellow men, and the passions will gradually be conquered.”

Our judgement ultimately is how Christ-like we have chosen to become (theosis), and the sacramental life of the Church plays a vital role in helping us be like Him (**St. Matthew 5:48**). We know perfection is an impossible task, and why the Church cries 'Kurielaison' (Lord have mercy) so often in our prayers, petitions, and songs. But we know our God is a loving Father who as the parable teaches us is waiting for us to return to Him.

Lazarus and the Rich Man



Jesus taught important lessons through parables, and although these stories may seem simple on the surface they should be constantly meditated and studied as literally these teachings are from the Word of God. The Parable of Rich Man and Lazarus (**St. Luke 16:19–31**) is important to understand our eschatology.

The story is about two men - one rich who is not named and the other poor who is Lazarus whose name in Hebrew means "God is my help". As the left half of the icon shows, indeed there was nobody to help Lazarus but God! The rich man had everything he ever

needed - wealth, popularity, food, power, and all that the secular world gives great value. This brings to mind another rich man who had approached Christ asking what he should do to inherit eternal life, to which Christ replied to sell his possessions and give to the poor (**St. Matthew 19:16-29**). It is important to understand that neither of these rich men were “bad” but rather they valued their wealth more than anything else!

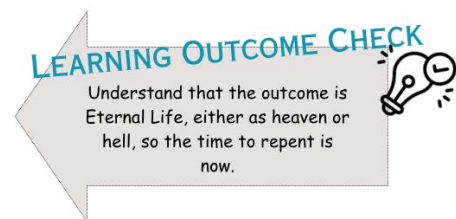
Lazarus on the other hand had nothing. As described in Scripture, he lived by the rich man’s gate and was “covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.” (**St. Luke 16:20-21**). To the world, this man was a failure .. and yet, in the eyes of God he was truly special.

St. Ephrem comments on this - “See then! The more the rich man lived sumptuously, the more [Lazarus] was humbled. The more Lazarus was made low, the greater was his crown.”

As we read in the parable, both men died .. but it was Lazarus whom the angels carried to Abraham’s side whereas the rich man was buried and ultimately found himself in Hades. This is reflected in the right side of the icon, where we see Lazarus comforted by Abraham while the rich man is crying from the fire and depths below. This illustrates what we read in **St. Luke 16:26** which reads “And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” The plea of the rich man can no longer be heard as the warnings and opportunities for him to be like God were ignored in pursuit of worldly pleasures that took him away from Christ (**St. John 14:6**). Remember that the rich man’s failing was not because he was rich, but rather what he chose to do with his wealth. In the parable, his choices contributed to the prolonged suffering of Lazarus.

Eternal Life

God is Love, and in the Second Coming the judgment to come will be based on His Love. There are some who will choose to enjoy this eternal life, and for them this state is truly paradise. But for others, this eternal life will be unlike everything they had wished and hoped for in this world. For them, eternal life will be hell and feel like all the painful adjectives used in Scripture and in our hymns.



God does not love one person differently than the other, and His Love for us does not change. It is for us to decide now whether we humble ourselves and repent like Lazarus, or be like the rich man who thought his life on earth would never end.



The icon of the Final Judgment is one that is intended to bring us fear and trembling, but not because we believe God is unloving or has not given us the rules of His judgment. Because of the gift of free will, the judgment ultimately becomes our transformation to be like Christ. The Church is the greatest gift given to us, and through the power of the Holy Trinity we transform when we cooperate with God.

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Discuss the consequences of our actions, and how our free-will ultimately leads to our final judgement before God.

When we repent and live the Sacramental life of the Church, we become “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (**St. Matthew 5.48**). This is *theosis* which is the transformation in us to be like God.

When we repent and live the Sacramental life of the Church, we become more Christ-like which is demonstrated by loving God and others as Christ Himself loved (**St. John 15.12**) and denying our passions and taking the Cross upon us each day (**St. Matthew 16:24**). When we repent and live the Sacramental life of the Church, the Holy Spirit that is within us at our Holy Baptism

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Explain the connection between repentance and confession and forgiveness of sin.

transforms us and we exhibit all the characteristics described as the fruits of the Holy Spirit, i.e., “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (**Galatians 5:22-23**)

Although we do approach the Second Coming with fear and trembling, we also have the comfort and reassurance of our loving Father that the new life in the world to come will be the one that fulfills a far greater destiny than anything the material world can offer. St. Ephrem reflects on this using the same parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, giving hope to those who choose to be like Christ in this present life, and a comfort as we pray for our departed ones who had “died with hope” in God.

*And may I learn how much I will then have received
From that parable of the Rich Man
Who did not even give to the poor man
The leftovers from his banquet;
And may I see Lazarus,
Grazing in Paradise,
And look upon the Rich Man,
In anguish,
So that the might of justice outside
May cause me fear,
But the breath of grace within
May bring me comfort (7.27; Ephrem 1990: 129).*

Reflection Questions

1. Explain the relationship between repentance and confession in the Orthodox tradition. How does this relationship facilitate the forgiveness of sins, and what role does it play in a believer’s journey towards reconciliation with God?
2. Discuss the significance of understanding the consequences of one’s actions determines their eternal destiny. How should the urgency of repentance influence daily life and spiritual practices in preparation for final judgment?
3. Elaborate on how free-will affects our moral choices and ultimately our final judgment before God. What scriptural examples or teachings from the Orthodox faith illustrate the importance of exercising our free-will in light of eternal consequences?