

The Communion of Saints: The Orthodox Church

It was the fall of 2005, and I was a first year seminary student at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. Newly married and ready to dive into my studies, I took the Course Intro to Corporate Worship with Dr. Larry Stookey who was a retired United Methodist pastor, serving a church ¼ time, had written hymns and many of the prayers in the United Methodist hymnal, and had written several books on worship. He was an EXCELLENT teacher, inviting the students to reconsider every element of worship and how it invited the participant to encounter the Divine. One assignment was to visit a local Orthodox worship service and take notes. Seems easy enough, and many of us attended the same cathedral.

Upon entering, the senses were immediately heightened. We had silenced our cell phones out of respect, and I was certainly glad I had for I thoroughly distracted. The smells of the incense wafting through the air and (I sensed) the feeling of bodies inching closer to make room. The women were on one side and the men on the other, all standing unless unable due to age or illness. The iconography covered the ceiling of the domed roof, the walls, and the pillars. Gone were the familiar white walls, replaced by the Biblical stories. The expressions were absent, inviting the onlooker to project and consider what the characters were feeling, saying, and thinking. It was quite a spiritual test to see which stories I could remember, who was being portrayed? What story was that, and like a flood, the stories, the images, the scenes washed over me.

The service itself was mostly sung, much of it in languages I did not understand, and even in those moments, I found myself listening to the stories of the saints. I guess up until that point I had always considered the “cloud of witnesses” described in Hebrews to reference the saints I had known – my great-grandparents, women and men from church...you know people who I knew and had known me. Suddenly, my heart was bombarded with the reality of the vastness of the cloud of witnesses, including John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, Peter, James, and John, Noah, Esther, Ruth, Adam, Eve, oh my, how the list goes on and on. The cantor sang, the priest and the congregation responded. Familiar patterns in worship, prayers, peace, gospel lesson, offering, and benediction, but the familiar became somewhat more consuming in that space, as I was reminded of the scope of the family of God. The altar and holy of holies, where only the priests could enter were reminders of the power of the Most High God, the mysteries of things we don’t yet understand, and the reverence we should assume when we encounter the God of the universe. It was a powerful experience.

This is our second to last stop on our travels through the diversity of faith traditions. We have missed many, so I suppose we aren’t done learning yet. Today, we consider the Christian Orthodox Church, and next week we learn about the Baha’i faith. The Eastern Orthodox Church is the second largest Christian Church with approximately 260 million baptized members, half of which are in Russia. There are local synods governed by the Bishops, but there’s no central authority ruling the Bishops – no Pope.

The Orthodox tradition teaches that it is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church established by Jesus and the bishops are successors of Christ's apostles. They trace their roots to Peter, who was commanded by Jesus to feed his sheep, named the Rock on which the church would be built, and given the keys to heaven. The Orthodox Church WAS the Christian church until the schism in 1054 when the Roman Catholic Church split over the authority of the Pope.

The purpose of the Christian life in the Orthodox tradition is to attain *theosis*, the mystical union of humanity with God. The Orthodox Church recognizes 7 sacred mysteries, which we think of as sacraments, including Eucharist, Baptism, Chrismation (confirmation), confession, unction (anointing the sick), matrimony, and ordination.

The Orthodox Worship Experience is multi-sensory, hoping to orient the worshippers in alignment with one another and with God. The sensory experience is by design. The icons become windows to heaven. The space invites participants to consider the promise of resurrection, offering a foretaste of what is to come.

In general, men and women dress respectfully, typically wearing their "Sunday best" to enter the church. Often, women cover their heads as prescribed by Paul (1 Cor. 11:13). Children are considered full members of the church and stand attentively and quietly during services. There is often a choir area at the side or in a loft in back. In addition to the choir, a chanter is always present at the front of the church to chant responses and hymns that are part of the Divine Liturgy offered by the priest. There is usually a dome in the ceiling with an icon of Christ depicted as [Ruler of the Universe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantocrator) (Pantocrator).

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eastern_Orthodox_Church)

We differ in our understanding of scripture, but the basic creeds of faith are shared. Our practices differ, but our reverence for the mysteries of God are similar. I don't believe that the Orthodox Church is the only one and true expression of the Christian faith, but I give thanks for the ways the Orthodox tradition invites us to remember the traditions of our faith, the strength of our history, the power of telling the stories and seeing them as our own, and the breadth of the communion of saints.

Today, especially, I celebrate our Saints. This past week I had the privilege to preach at my Oma's memorial service, celebrating her life and honoring that in our tradition, death is NOT the end. The Orthodox tradition invites us to consider the eternal, Jesus' resurrection is an anticipatory event, anticipating the resurrection that we all will realize. I celebrate the Saints who helped ensure that we can have a roof on our church, for us and generations to come. Some of you remember the faithfulness of the saints, and some of us will only hear stories.

The testimony of scripture reminds us that Saints are known and unknown. I celebrate the Saints who have been honored in our Choir, whose voices have filled this sanctuary for decades, and whose names are placed in their honor where they sang. I celebrate the Saints who we will honor in a few weeks at our Service of Remembrance. I celebrate the ways their lives are continuing to shine through each of us. And I celebrate that our family of faith doesn't end with

those we can remember. Our family history goes back to Abraham and Isaac, Ruth, and Esther, and all those people whose stories have become our own through the testimony of scripture. The legacy of faith, the connection of God's people – the communion of Saints – is not bound by time or memory, but instead is everlasting through the power and grace of God.

This is a powerful reminder of who we are as a community of faith, who we are as people of God – now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.