

SESSION 3 HOLY TRADITION AND (CULTURAL) TRADITION IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

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Part 1. The Definition and Sources of Holy Traditions

What is Holy Tradition?

Holy Tradition (capital T) is not like cultural tradition, (which we will refer to as small t).

While cultural tradition grows and changes over time expressing the individuality and personality of the ethnic cultures of the country and the people, Holy Tradition is that same and unchanging faith which:

- Christ taught to the Apostles
- the Apostles taught to their disciples
- is preserved in the Church through Apostolic Succession
- grows in understanding through the Holy Spirit

According to Orthodox theology, holy or sacred tradition is the inspired revelation of God. In the Nicene Creed that is read at every Orthodox Divine Liturgy the Church proclaims, "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church." Here the word "catholic" must be interpreted in the sense of the Greek which is καθολικήν. This is a compound word, κατά-ολου meaning "according to all", or "universal."

The term "catholic" has its roots in the Early Church and is found in the Letter to the Smyrnaeans written by St. Ignatius of Antioch in the early 2nd century to Christians in Smyrna when he was speaking of the role of the bishop, saying:

"Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the *catholic (universal) Church*."

Different than the Protestant Church which proclaims Sola Scriptura (only Scripture), the Orthodox Church sees Scripture as part of Holy Tradition not independent from it. This responsibility to honor holy traditions was given to us by St. Paul who said to the Thessalonians,

"So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the παραδοσεις (traditions) we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter." (2 Thes 2:15)

Tradition is understood as the fullness of God's Truth which is proclaimed in the scriptures, preserved through apostolic succession, and expressed in the life of the Church through her sacraments, icons, Ecumenical Councils, canons, and the saints. However capital T, Tradition cannot be confused with small t, cultural traditions. As was said in session 1, the Orthodox Church is *diversity in unity and unity in diversity*. It is in the comparison of capital and small t traditions that the meaning of this statement becomes clear. Holy Tradition binds every Orthodox church in universal *unity* as every church proclaims the same dogmatic truths, celebrates the same sacraments, and recites the same Symbol of Faith or Creed. But each church operates also in *diversity* through the expression of their particular cultural traditions. The Orthodox Church has never been a church of assimilation but one of inclusion. Orthodox evangelism looks at how cultural traditions can be incorporated into the life of the church and how certain traditions can be seen through the lens of Christ's revelation. Historical examples of this include:

Replacing the Pagan Yule Feast with the Lord's birth on December 25th even though historical evidence points to a spring or summer birth being more probable.

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Replacing All Hallows eve with All Saints day.

Replacing the Pagan Spring Renewal Feast with Easter. Interestingly the Greek word used to celebrate the Lord's resurrection is Pascha, while the word Easter is of Saxon origin. It is a form of Eastr, the goddess of spring, in whose honor sacrifices were offered around the time of Passover.

Below are some examples of modern expressions of cultural traditions within Holy Tradition.

| Holy Tradition | Cultural tradition |
|---------------------|--|
| The Divine Liturgy | The way in which Divine Liturgy is celebrated |
| | Palm branches vs. pussy willows |
| | Use of the catechumen litanies by some |
| Holy Communion | Use of the communion spoon vs. wafers |
| The Cross | Different types of cross styles, Russian, Byzantine, Roman, etc. |
| The Wedding Service | Different types of Crowns |

Apostolic Succession

Apostolic succession is fundamental to Holy Tradition since it is linked to ensuring adherence to the command of Jesus to His disciples to *"teach all nations... everything I [Christ] have commanded you."*

To ensure that the traditions that St. Paul mentioned are carried out faithfully and truthfully a link through ordination by a canonically recognized bishop who has personally laid his hands on a successive bishop helps ensure a *passing on* of true and correct Orthodox teachings. True and proper Apostolic Succession has three requirements,

1. a verifiable tracing of a historical direct line of Apostolic ordination by the ordaining bishops.
2. a public and vocal agreement to adhere to and be in agreement with Orthodox doctrine and the Ecumenical Councils.
3. That the ordaining bishops and the candidate bishop are in a state of full communion the other Orthodox bishops from the Apostles to the current episcopacy of the Orthodox Church.

Any bishop who does not meet all three criteria, even with historical claims, is considered outside of Apostolic Succession. An example of this for the Orthodox Church is the Pope of Rome. The Orthodox Church would readily admit that the Pope has a legitimate historical claim as the successor of St. Peter. However, when the Roman Patriarch broke in doctrine from the other Orthodox bishops, according to Orthodox doctrine he removed himself from that Apostolic Succession, deviating from the Faith and therefore breaking the spiritual succession of the Orthodox Faith that was originally transmitted by St. Peter.

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The importance of maintaining apostolic succession was evident even in the early church. One example is when the apostles sent a letter to the Christian communities of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia warning them that those ordained as teachers were acting without authorization (Acts 15:24). In another example St. Paul cautioned Timothy to *“fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands...Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you.”*

Holy Scripture

Purpose of Holy Scripture

Holy Scripture exists for the reason that the Apostle John gives in his gospel. (John 20:30-31)

“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through his name.”

That is, the Bible is written so that we might believe and be saved, but it is also for our JOY as it makes God available to us.

Orthodox Approach to Scripture

The Orthodox would agree with the Protestant mindset that *“The Scriptures constitute a coherent whole. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. That they bear authoritative witness to God’s revelation of Himself in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word, and in the whole history of salvation, and as such express the word of God in human language¹.”*

This includes all Scripture, both Old and New Testaments and that the Bible, in its entirety, reveals the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ.

However, where the Orthodox would differ from the Protestant mindset is that for Orthodox, *“We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church. Our approach to the Bible is one of obedience².”*

Scripture must be read within *“the living Tradition of the whole Church.”* According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture³.

Two other differences are also important to note. One is that we must be especially attentive to the content and unity of the whole Scripture. This means that we cannot read portions of scripture that fit our lifestyle and ignore other parts. Nor can we use isolated segments of Scripture to bend them into supporting certain political or moral ideas. One of my seminary professor’s favorite saying was “Don’t use Scripture like bullets to hurt others.” Examples of these “bullets” have included slavery, Manifest Destiny, Just War, prosperity theology, and the theology of Millenarianism.

¹ Taken as an excerpt from the Moscow Conference held in 1976 between the Orthodox and the Anglicans.

² Ibid

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Article 3, para 113

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Lastly, for the Orthodox Scripture is Christological, not Christocentric. Oftentimes in non-denominational churches there is the tendency to overemphasize Christ at the expense of the other Persons of the Holy Trinity. While the Orthodox believe that Scripture reveals the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ, the God-Man, it also recognizes Christ as one Personhood of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, Scripture must be read as a balance of the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as one in essence and always in Communion and operation with one another.

The Scriptural Mind – How Should Scripture Be Read?

There are three key characteristics of the Orthodox approach to Scripture.

1. Recognize that Scripture is not Christ-centered but the revelation of Christ.
2. That it is both personal but at the same time is addressed to us as members of a community of faith.
3. Reading of Scripture must be done in obedience to the Church. This means that it is read and understood in union with the Church, thus Scripture and Church cannot be separated.

Books of the Bible

The Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Churches all recognize the 27 books of the New Testament, however we are not all in agreement with the canonical books of Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament). A comparison of the books each church accepts is at Table 2. It can be seen that there are books which are included in the canon of the Greek Orthodox Church that are considered apocryphal according to the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

Can there be additions to the current Bible?

The *closing of the canons of Scripture* is the expression which means that no more additions would be authorized for the Bible unless determined by an Ecumenical Council. The current 66 books of the Old and New Testament were “closed” by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent of 1546 and for the Protestant Church by the Church of England through the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563.

Interestingly the Orthodox Church has never officially closed the Biblical Canon. Around 350 AD, St. Cyril of Jerusalem produced a list which seemed to be sourced from the Council of Laodicea and which the Orthodox use today. St. Athanasius of Alexandria as bishop of Alexandria, offered his list of canonical books published as part of his [*Thirty-Ninth Festal Epistle*](#) of A.D. 367 which he referred to as the “wells of salvation⁴.” There was an attempt to codify Scripture by the Orthodox Church at the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672, however this was based on the canons of the earlier Regional Synod of Laodicea (340-381 AD). While this Synod apparently listed the books of the Old and New Testament there was no record of a synodal concurrence, and thus no closing of the canon was adopted.

⁴ Interestingly St Athanasios did include the Book of revelation in his list of acceptable books.

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| TABLE 2 | Protestant | Roman Catholic | Greek Orthodox |
|----------------------------|------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 Esdras | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |
| Tobit | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Judith | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Additions to Esther | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Wisdom of Solomon | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Ecclesiasticus | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Baruch | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Epistle of Jeremiah | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Song of the Three Children | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Story of Susanna | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Prayer of Manasseh | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 1 Maccabees | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 2 Maccabees | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ |
| 3 Maccabees | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |
| 4 Maccabees | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |
| Psalm 151 | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |

✗ = the book is not included in that Bible

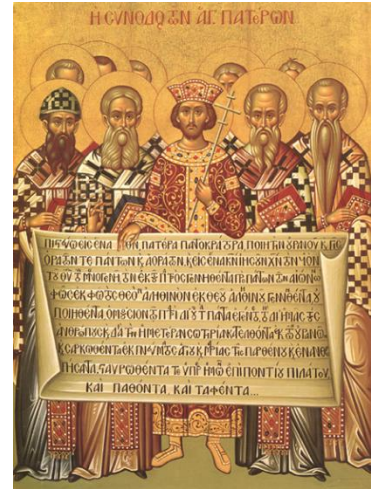
✓ = the book is included in that Bible

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Ecumenical Councils

An Ecumenical Council is a synod of the bishops of the Entire Church, represented by the Pentarchy, who convened to discuss and settle matters of Church dogma, doctrine and practice. The term ecumenical derives from the Greek "Οικουμένη", which means "the inhabited world", and originally referred to the Roman Empire but later was extended to apply to the world in general. The icon shown in figure 1 commemorates the Synod of the Holy Fathers of the Church and is celebrated in the Orthodox Church on the seventh Sunday after the Feast of Holy Pascha.



There are seven councils which are recognized by all three Christian Churches beginning with the 1st Council of Nicaea in 325 AD and ending with the 2nd Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 AD. While the details of each of these councils is beyond the scope of this Catechism the highlights of each are provided.

- 1. Council of Nicaea (325)** - against Arianism and declared that Christ is "of the same essence as the Father", adopted the original Nicene Creed, fixed the calculation of the date for Pascha, and recognized primacy of Rome.
- 2. Council of Constantinople (381)** - against Arianism and Macedonianism, declared that Christ is "born of the Father before all time", revised the Nicene Creed with regards to the Holy Spirit.
- 3. First and Second Councils of Ephesus (431, 449)** – against Nestorianism, proclaimed the Virgin Mary as the Theotokos (Birth-giver to God). Declared Pelagianism a heresy and denounced claims that Christ is a fusion of human and divine natures.
- 4. Council of Chalcedon (451)** - against Eutyches doctrine of monophysitism, adopted the Chalcedonian Creed, which described the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ, human and divine. Elevation of the bishoprics of Constantinople and Jerusalem to the status of patriarchates.
- 5. Second Council of Constantinople (553)** – condemned Origen of Alexandria. Declared that Christ, as God, truly suffered on the cross. (referred to as the Theopaschite formula)
- 6. Third Council of Constantinople (680-681)** – against Monothelitism which claimed that Christ has two natures but one will.
- 7. Second Council of Nicea (787)** – against Iconoclasm - restored the veneration of icons and clarified proper use of icons in worship. This council is rejected by some Protestant denominations, which condemn the veneration of icons.

Due to the schism of the Early Church, the acceptance of these councils varies widely between different branches of Christianity throughout history. Prior to the East-West schism the Universal Church accepted the first eight (8) councils (from the 4th to the 9th century) as Ecumenical.

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8. **Fourth Council of Constantinople (879-880)** - also known as the 8th Ecumenical Council was a reunion council held at Constantinople This council affirmed the restoration of St. Photius the Great to his See and condemned the addition of the Filioque to the Nicene Creed.

While the Eastern Orthodox Church has not generally accepted any later synods as Ecumenical, the Roman Catholic Church continues to hold councils in Rome under the Pope and has counted twenty-one to date. While the Orthodox Church has convened synods or councils after the great Schism they are referred to as an Ενδημουσα Σύνοδος ([Endemousa Synod](#)) and not Ecumenical and are therefore not binding on the One Church.

Canons of the Church

Canon law is the tradition of the Church which governs Orthodox Church life. Scripture can often be difficult to interpret and apply in day-to-day life especially those dealing with moral or ethical concerns. For example, in 1 Timothy, chapter 3 St Paul talks about the qualifications for bishop and deacon in general terms. It talks about the requirement to have a “good reputation” and “be of good conduct”. The canons of the Church provide the details of what these terms mean by indicating the minimum age, what establishments they can frequent, and even who can live with him. Like the Jewish Mishnah, the Canons of the Church preserve the Oral Traditions that are not necessarily written in the Bible, but we are commanded to honor - 2 Thessalonians 2:15.



These laws, or canonical traditions, as we have seen previously, can only be amended, or revoked through a synodal council.

The Apostolic Canons and decisions of the Ecumenical Councils are collected in a book called The Πηδαλιον ([Pedalion](#)) which in Greek means rudder⁵. (see figure 2)

The Pedalion was compiled on Mount Athos and was first published in A.D.1800 and include the canons of:

- The Holy Apostles
- Decisions of the Councils, ecumenical as well as regional
- Writing of the Holy Fathers of the Church

These writings are preserved in the original Greek text, for the sake of authenticity, and explanations are offered in a modern language to make it easier to understand the meaning, as well as the intent.

Holy Fathers of the Church

The Church Fathers are influential theologians and writers in the Church, particularly those of the first five centuries of Christian history. The term specifically refers to writers and teachers of the Church, not necessarily saints and do not include the New Testament authors. There are several categories of Holy Fathers recognized by the Orthodox and Catholic Church.

⁵ The term rudder is used as a symbol of the rudder of the ship of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of the Orthodox Christians

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Apostolic Fathers – The very earliest Church Fathers and represent the generation that had personal contact with the Twelve Apostles. They include Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome, and Polycarp of Smyrna.

Latin Fathers – those who wrote in Latin and include Tertullian, St. Augustine of Hippo, St. Ambrose of Milan, and St. Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate.

Greek Fathers - those who wrote in Greek and include St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, St. Symeon

Cappadocian Fathers – mid 4th century writers from the area of Cappadocia located in the middle of modern-day Turkey. Known collectively as “The Cappadocian Fathers, they include Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. (see figure 3) They are considered, along with Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, to be the great defenders of Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy in the patristic period.



The Desert Fathers – Early Christian hermits, ascetics, and monks (both men and women) who lived mainly in the Scetes desert of Egypt beginning around the 3rd century AD. These fathers include Anthony the Great, Pachomius, Arsenius the Great, and the Elder Paisios. The monastic traditions and rules they established strongly influenced the traditions of Mount Athos in the East and the Rule of Saint Benedict in the West. The Desert Fathers emphasized living and practicing the teachings of Christ, much more than composing theoretical and doctrinal treatises.

Are the Holy Fathers the Theologians of the Church?

With regards to the term “*theologian*” the Orthodox Church sees this as a very restrictive term with a clear definition best expressed by the meaning of the term given by the 4th century monastic [Evagrius Ponticus](#) who said “If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian⁶.” Although the term theologian is used prolifically today, the Orthodox Church has given the appellation *Theologian* to only three persons, John the Theologian, Gregory the Theologian, and Symeon the New Theologian.

⁶ *Treatise On Prayer*

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Part 2. Symbols and Sacraments

What is a Symbol?

Symbols are widely used in Orthodox theology and practice. To understand how symbols are used first we should discuss what the characteristics of a symbol are.

- Symbols point beyond themselves to something else and are integral to that which they point and invite us to participate. The example here is a flag. ➡ **Flag**
- Symbols open up levels of reality which otherwise we could not imagine or anticipate. The example here is art. ➡ **Art**
- Symbols unlock dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to a reality or realities of which we are unaware. The example here is a play.

Symbols, however, are different from signs. A sign is like the red sign at the street corner which points to the command to stop the movements of cars at certain intervals. However, the red light and the stopping of cars have no relation to one another. They are united only as long as the convention of RED lasts. If blue becomes the new color that means STOP, then this becomes the new convention. ➡ **A play**

The same is true of words as they point beyond themselves with a meaning and not just sounds. But language changes over time and words can take on a new meaning or convention or lose their original meaning altogether.

From a theological standpoint a Symbol points to that which concerns us all, as the ultimate concern....God. Applying this idea of symbols we just saw, we can now apply this idea to symbols we use in the church.

- Icons point to the saint or event they depict. The icon, as a Symbol, invites us to participate in the life of the saint by modeling their life. ➡ **Icon**
- Holy Communion, as a Symbol, opens up a level of reality normally not available to us which is the real presence of the True Body and Blood of Christ. ➡ **Communion**
- The Divine Liturgy, as Symbol, unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to a reality or realities of which we are unaware, participation in the Kingdom of Heaven. ➡ **Liturgy**

The Orthodox Church maintains these as true Symbols since their convention or nature has remained unchanged throughout the history of the Church. The Orthodox Church has resisted changing the words of the Divine Liturgy to adjust to evolving societal conventions. While there have been some changes to the Liturgy over the centuries, these changes, such as language, do not impact the Liturgy as a Symbol. This is because there is no change to the meaning or convention, but the change only serves to open up a level of reality to those who speak other languages.

This is in opposition to some other churches which have transformed particular Christian Symbols into signs by altering their convention to suit evolving societal norms thus severing the original convention. Examples of this include the Protestant rejection of icons, church services which focus on sermons at the

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expense of the liturgical (worship) essence, and the elimination of certain sacraments as unnecessary. The ultimate rejection of the theological meaning of Symbols is Atheism which is the attempt to reject or be unconcerned with what these Symbols points to; that which concerns us all and is the ultimate concern....God⁷.

Symbols of the Orthodox Faith

Other Symbols of the Orthodox faith include the bishop, the cross, holy relics, and the elements used for the celebration of holy sacraments.

Cross

The Cross is the Symbol of Christ's victory over sin and death. As St Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:24

For in the Cross of Christ Crucified lies both the power of God and the wisdom of God for those being saved.

The Cross is venerated as that reality through which Man will suffer as did Christ, but also a symbol of the promise of the empty cross which is His resurrection and ours. The Cross stands in the church (typically behind the altar) year-round to remind us of Christ's redemptive act and to keep before us the goal of our efforts. During Holy Week, the Church puts the cross directly in front of us to emphasize the importance of the Cross as a Christian symbol of hope and to remind us all of Christ's own words, (Matt 16:24)

"If anyone wishes to follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.."

Of the 12 great Feasts of the Orthodox Church, two of them are devoted to the Cross,


- Exaltation (or Raising Up) of the Honorable and Life-giving Cross on September 14.
- Veneration of the Cross on the 3rd Sunday of Lent

Holy Relics

Throughout Church history Christians have demonstrated a pious veneration for the clothing, articles, and bodies of the Saints. A relic typically consists of the physical remains of a saint or the personal effects of the saint that has miraculously been preserved for purposes of manifesting God's Grace and is not unique to Christianity. Even scripturally we see evidence of this, specifically by the witness of the Acts of the Apostles,

"...so that even handkerchiefs (σουδαρια) and aprons (σικκίνθιον) that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them." (Acts 19:12)

Although the Jewish faith does not venerate any holy relics or man-made symbols, even here there is an exception - the Ark of the Covenant. As the most important symbol of the Jewish faith, like the Christian idea of a Symbol as it points to someone outside of itself - God.

⁷ It is interesting to note that the Veterans Administration has acknowledged  as the symbol of Atheism.

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The 4th century Orthodox theologian St. Ephraim the Syrian of Edessa relates the following concerning the holy Martyrs:

"Even after death they act as if alive, healing the sick, expelling demons, and by the power of the Lord rejecting every evil influence of the demons. This is because the miraculous grace of the Holy Spirit is always present in the holy relics."

And speaking of Edessa, there is also the Orthodox tradition of King Abgar ruler of Edessa being healed by the Holy μανδύλιον (towel or napkin) of Christ as recorded by Eusebius, in his history of the Church.



Reliquary of St Dionysius of
Zakynthos

This importance of the veneration of holy relics was confirmed by the Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Synod:

"Our Lord Jesus Christ granted to us the relics of Saints as a salvation-bearing source which pours forth varied benefits on the infirm. Consequently, those who presume to abandon the relics of the Martyrs: if they be hierarchs, let them be deposed."

God performs miracles through the holy relics of saints and in this way reveals His glory and glorifies His saints in whom He is pleased. This fragrance of myrrh has been given to the holy relics to remind us of this and that we are "...the pleasing aroma (ευωδία) of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing." (II Corinthians 2:15)

Every Orthodox Church, when it is consecrated, will have a holy relic



(λείψανο αγίου) placed permanently in the Altar Table (figure 3). Many other Orthodox churches will also have a reliquary located somewhere in the sanctuary (figures 4 and 5). Both the altar relic and the reliquary will contain a small fragment of bone from the saint (figure 6).



Icons

Icons also serve as an important Symbol and Tradition in the Orthodox Church. However, icons, were and continue to be one of the more controversial aspects of the Church. This is mainly due to a misunderstanding of how they are used in the Orthodox Church. This misunderstanding of the place of icons in the Church became the spark that launched one of the darker periods in church history and was called the Iconoclastic Controversy.

History of the Use of Icons in the Church

Even though the use of icons was popular among the faithful especially in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, there was those who opposed the making and veneration of painting or icons of Christ

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and the saints. Toward the end of the 6th century and in the 7th, people began to attach superstitious beliefs to the icons believing that they possessed a supernatural ability and thus they began to worship the icons. As this practice achieved cult status in the 8th century the Byzantine emperor Leo III took a public stand against the perceived worship of icons, and officially prohibited the use of icons in the church. This prohibition unfortunately encouraged open persecution of icon venerators that continued through into the reign of Leo's successor, Constantine V.

In 787 AD the empress Irene convened the 2nd Council of Nicaea (also known as the 7th ecumenical council at Nicaea) at which Iconoclasm was condemned and the use of icons was restored. The Iconoclasts regained power in 814 AD after Leo V's accession, and the use of icons was again forbidden at a council in 815 AD.

The second Iconoclast period ended with the death of the emperor Theophilus in 842. The next year his widow, Empress Theodora prompted Patriarch Methodius to summon the Synod of Constantinople which finally restored icon veneration and established specific rules governing the use of icons. This event is celebrated in the Orthodox Church on the first Sunday of Great Lent as the *Feast of Orthodoxy or Triumph of Orthodoxy*.

The following passage from the 7th Seventh Ecumenical Council clarifies the place of icons in the Orthodox Church.

"We define that the holy icons, whether in color, mosaic, or some other material, should be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on the sacred vessels and liturgical vestments, on the walls, furnishings, and in houses and along the roads, namely the icons of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, that of our Lady the Theotokos, those of the venerable angels and those of all saintly people.

Whenever these representations are contemplated, they will cause those who look at them to commemorate and love their prototype. We define also that they should be kissed and that they are an object of veneration and honor, but not of real worship, which is reserved for Him Who is the subject of our faith and is proper for the divine nature, ... which is in effect transmitted to the prototype; he who venerates the icon, venerated in it the reality for which it stands."

Purpose of Icons

Icons serve a number of purposes which includes,

- Enhancing the beauty of a church
- Instructing the laity in matters pertaining to the Christian faith.
- A means of veneration which lifts our minds up to the prototypes which the icons symbolize.
- Arousing us to imitate the virtues of the holy personages depicted on them and in the process transforming and sanctifying us.

The Sacraments

Sacraments, like the other Symbols we have mentioned, disclose and reveal God to us, and thus serve to make us receptive to God. The Holy Spirit works through the Sacraments leading us to Christ who unites us with the Father. In this way all the Sacraments affect our personal relationship to God and to one another. By participating in the Sacraments, we grow closer to God and to receive the gifts of the Holy

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Spirit. The idea of sacraments as part of liturgical worship date back to the time of the Apostles and their use is even mentioned in the [Didache](#).

In the Orthodox Church, sacraments are referred to as Μυστήρια or Mysteries⁸. The origin of the term “mystery” by the Orthodox Church is given in *The 1681 Holy Catechism of Nicolas Bulgaris*⁹;

“...Mysteries are so named from «μύω» which means “I keep the mouth closed.” And that because they contain a certain hidden grace, which may not be manifested to unbelievers, for they not having the light of faith, cannot at all comprehend them as in the example of Nicodemus. The other meaning of «μυώ» is «I teach Divine things.” Whence also Eustathius, fitting together the two meanings, said, “The Mysteries ought to shut the mouth, (the first meaning,) and not to publish what they have been taught (second meaning).”

Bulgaris, in his Catechism, also defines a Mystery as “a sign perceptible to the senses, containing God’s invisible grace, purposely arranged for the salvation of men, significant by divine ordinance.”

This being close to the words of St. Augustine who said, “A Mystery is a visible sign of an invisible grace.”

Sacraments typically involve the use of the matter of Creation such as water, earth, oil, fire, plants, seeds, etc. In addition to matter, the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church include prayers, hymns, scripture lessons, gestures and processions.

It is important to note that the Orthodox Church does NOT reduce the Sacraments to a particular formula or action, that is they are not some type of magic formula. In this way there is no one part of the service that is more important than the rest or that if the order is not performed correctly then, as we say in Greek, “the sacrament won’t take.”

There has never been a universal declaration within the Orthodox Church that there are only seven sacraments and early Orthodox writers varied as to the number of sacraments¹⁰. The best statement is that of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, who, quoting St John Chrysostom, said that everything is sacramental, meaning that everything God creates is designed to manifest his presence in the world and point back to Him. However, the accepted seven (7) sacraments in the Orthodox Church are:

1. Eucharist
2. Baptism¹¹
3. Chrismation
4. Marriage¹²
5. Confession
6. Holy Unction (anointing)
7. Ordination or Holy Orders

⁸ 1. The word sacrament is derived from the Latin sacramentum, meaning “a consecrated thing or act.” This itself was a Latin translation of the Greek μυστήριον (mysterion) which translates to “mystery”.

⁹ Nicolas Bulgaris, born on the Greek island of Corcyra, at the beginning of the 17th century, was a hymnographer of the Orthodox Church and compiled many works of the Holy Church Fathers. His “Catechism” is one of the earliest examples of a complete text on the Orthodox sacraments as well as a guide for the Examination of Candidates for Holy Orders.

¹⁰ John of Damascus lists only 2, Dionysius the Areopagite lists 6, Metropolitan of Ephesus (15th century) lists 10.

¹¹ This will be discussed in greater detail in Session 7.

¹² This will be discussed in greater detail in Session 8.