

Our Christian Heritage
Orthodoxy and Catholicism
January 10, 2010
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(Matthew 16:13–20 NRSV) Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" {14} And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." {15} He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" {16} Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." {17} And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. {18} And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. {19} I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." {20} Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

I grew up in the north suburbs of Chicago. In my hometown it seemed like there were four groups of people: Catholics, Jews, Orthodox Christians (Greek Orthodox) and then the rest of us.

It was a great place to grow up in, especially if you lived in a household that promoted coexistence and tolerance of other religious groups.

Every weekend, through Jr High, I spent it at OLPH (Our Lady of Perpetual Help) although we all called it (affectionately of course → Old Lady's Pickle House).

Now, let me be honest → occasionally I went to Mass with some friends, but generally, my time at OLPH was at their Roller Skating Rink, yep, the local Catholic Church had a roller skating rink.

But not only did I occasionally attend Mass, I also attended Greek Orthodox services a few times.

Both experiences were totally foreign to the United Methodist services that I was used to. And to be honest, I never really understood much of what was going on.

But as we continue our examination of our Christian family tree we need to take some time to look at the contributions that both Orthodoxy and Catholicism have

given to us.

We will begin by looking at Orthodoxy since it claims to be the oldest of all Christian denominations.

At first, of course, the early followers of Jesus were neither Catholic or Orthodox → they were known of as “followers of the Way.”

But as time went on, the early followers began to argue over issues of theology and practice. These conflicts were significant and threatened to destroy this fledgling sect of Judaism.

In 325, in the city of Nicaea, the leaders → bishops of all the great cities, came together and created what we know of today as the Nicene Creed.

As time went on, great differences developed between eastern Christians centered in Constantinople and those that were centered in Rome.

The differences were more cultural or political → you might even say philosophical. But soon, the empire was being torn apart.

As time went on, the gulf widened.

Questions about the relationship between the four major leaders of the East (known as patriarchs) with the prince among leaders in the West (the pope) became particularly thorny.

The patriarchs recognized the pope as first among equals → they did not believe that he had authority over their churches.

It was in the seventh century when the two sides really began to separate.

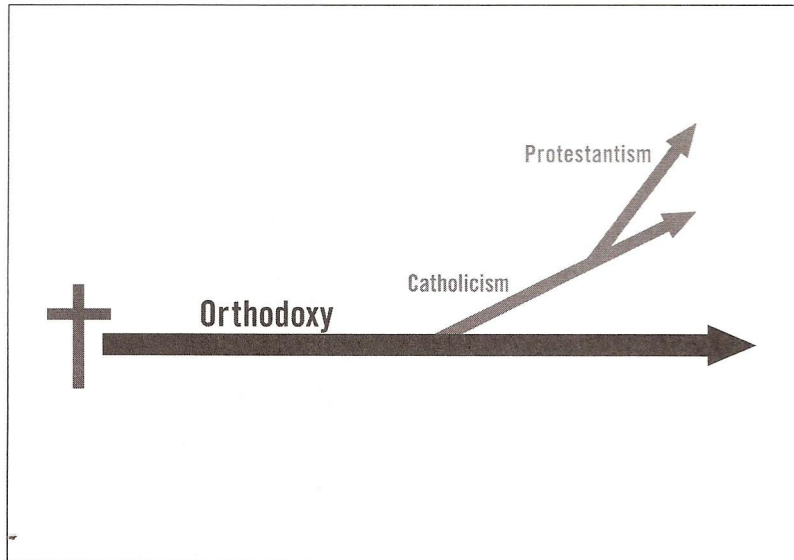
At a regional council meeting being held in Toledo, Spain the Western Christians added three words to the Nicene Creed without consulting the East. These three little words stated that the Holy Spirit proceeded not only from the Father, but also from the Son.

That was the beginning of the end.

Then in 1054, Pope Leo X and Patriarch Michael I -- --excommunicated each other as well as each other’s followers from the church. This is known in Church history as the Great Schism.

The Eastern Church and the Western Church both look at the history slightly differently.

From the Orthodox perspective → they believe that they are the direct and continuous successors of the apostles, and that the Roman Catholic Church, by adding to the Nicene Creed, giving too much authority to the Pope, and changing liturgy had wandered from the correct path.



Thus the Eastern Christians became known as Orthodox, which means “right worship” or “right doctrine”.

In other words, the Orthodox traditions, claim to have the right forms of worship and doctrine, which means that the rest of us --- well --- we don't.

They unapologetically believe themselves to be the true church.

The various branches of Eastern Orthodoxy (Greek, Russian, Syrian, etc) are the second largest body in Christendom with somewhere between 95 to 300 million followers).

Central to Orthodox beliefs is the Nicene Creed. This is also central to Roman Catholics as well as Protestants (with those additional three words).

Another major difference between the East and the West has to do with the concept of Original Sin. Original Sin – the notion that the sin of Adam and Eve is passed on to all humanity is central to the West. The East believe that what is passed on is death and all that death brings.

We are slaves to death

Only through Jesus can we be redeemed from death and the devil
Once we accept this gift, we begin a lifelong journey toward becoming like God.

The aim of the Christian life is to become like God → to be transformed and made Holy → or in the words of Paul, to become a new creation.

The purpose of Worship in the Orthodoxy church is to help the worshiper experience what the Orthodox would call the real world. While we see our daily lives as the real world, the Orthodox don't. For them, the real world is heaven → God's eternal kingdom.

Everything in worship is to help the worshiper focus on God's real world.

This is done in a number of ways.

Through Architecture

The dome at the top of an Orthodox church is to help the worshiper sense being embraced by God's heavenly realm.

Jesus is often pictured on the dome – looking down on the congregation → surrounding the worshipers

Through Liturgy

The whole point of the liturgy is to help people understand that they are striving for God's eternal realm

Through Icon's

Orthodox churches are filled with pictures of Jesus, the Disciples as well as the saints. These images are used as teaching tools (especially at the time when people were illiterate) But they also are a symbolic reminder to the people that they are surrounded by those who have gone before and that the saints, as well as Jesus, will guide and lead them in this life.

I personally find great comfort in many of the Icons that I have been able to collect over the years, and the symbolic reminder they are, of those who have gone before us.

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination with over 1 billion followers. That is more than all the Protestants and Orthodox combined.

In the US, Protestants outnumber Roman Catholics about two to one, but living where we do, we would never know that to be the case.

As I shared earlier, the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity view history a bit differently.

Rome quickly became the center of Christianity.

By the end of the first century – Rome was the center of the church. Peter and Paul had both been put to death there.

Rome was the power center of the world

So it is not surprising that the Church became more and more aligned with Rome.

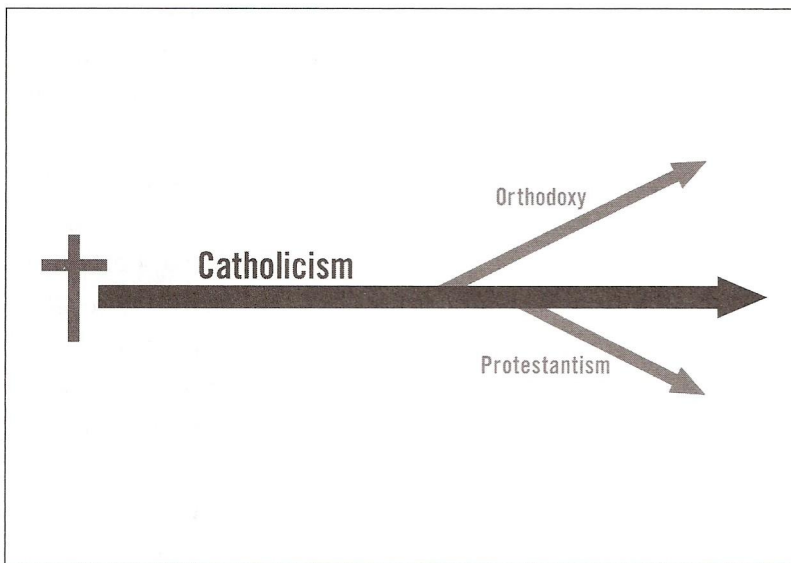
The bishop of Rome came to be regarded as the most influential bishop, and by the end of the fourth century he started to be called pope.

The word pope simply means father.

Soon, however, the “pope” was calling the other bishops “sons” and by the fifth century – the authority of the pope was accepted by the Western churches. The East continued to struggle with the “pope’s” new found authority.

As I mentioned early, the East and West split in 1054, but the West saw the split very differently than the East did.

The Orthodox believe that they are the true church of the apostles and that the Catholics broke away from the faith. The Catholics, however, believe that the Roman Catholic Church is the true church of the apostles and that the Orthodox were the ones who had fallen away.



I want to lift up just a few things about that I think we can all gain from the Roman Catholic Church.

One of the strong emphasis in the Roman Catholic Church is the Church Year. We just finished Advent, and Christmastide and now are in the season of Epiphany. In a few weeks we will begin the season of Lent.

Within many Protestant Churches there is no emphasis on the Christian Year – No recognition of Advent or Lent → and I think that is a real loss.

I remember when I first came here and wanted to have an Ash Wednesday service – there were some who did not think we should do that because it was “too

Catholic". I think the season of Lent is one of the most meaningful in the life of Ridge Church. And a recognition of the church year, helps keep us grounded in the Jesus life story.

Other practices, that I have never been able to really grasp, but is an interesting discipline is the practice of the Rosary or the Stations of the Cross.

The Rosary consists of repeated sequences of the Lord's Prayer followed by ten prayings of the Hail Mary and a single praying of "Glory Be to the Father"; each of these sequences is known as a *decade*. The praying of each decade is accompanied by meditation on one of the Mysteries of the Rosary, which are events in the lives of Jesus Christ and his mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The Stations of the Cross is a symbolic re-enactment of the path of Jesus to the Cross.

If they will help bring you closer to God in your walk, then use them, by all means!

Within both Orthodoxy and Catholicism, there are seven sacraments (while in the protestant traditions there are only two). Without a doubt, the sacrament of the Eucharist is of central importance to the Roman Catholic Church.

It is the center of their worship service.

While in the Protestant tradition, it is the sermon that is at the core of worship – for Catholics and Orthodox it is the Eucharist.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, they believe that during the prayer of institution by the priest, that the bread and the wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus. This doctrine is known as transubstantiation.

We, in the Protestant tradition, do not believe that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus, but that the bread and the wine symbolically represent Jesus. We believe that Jesus is present in the bread and wine and that we are --- spiritually --- receiving Christ.

If you have been at a Catholic Mass, you know that after the elements are served, the Priest drinks the rest of the wine and places the unused wafers into a special tabernacle (by the way, that is what people are bowing to, when they enter the sanctuary). The reason why they do this, is out of respect and reverence.

In the protestant church we are always left with the question → what to do with the communion elements after the service? For the Catholics the answer is easy. But it isn't so easy for us.

When I clean up following communion, I always take the wine and pour it outside into the ground to symbolize God's love for all of creation, and I take the bread

and tear it up and give it to the birds → I can't just pour it down an sink or throw the bread in the trash.

Both the Roman Catholic tradition and the Orthodox tradition claim that they are the one true faith. I don't think that they are right, but I do believe that there are things that we can learn from them → if we are willing to listen!