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**HEALING RELATIONSHIPS AND SPIRITUAL TREASURES:
THE GIFTS OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY**

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Introduction: The Icon of the Resurrection

Christ is in our midst!

One of the most distinctive and prominent icons of the Orthodox Church is the icon of the Resurrection of Christ, which is sometimes called “The Descent into Hades.” It is an icon which seeks to give us a deeper insight into the historical event of the Resurrection, the event which is so central to the Christian faith and to our identity as believers.

The icon shows the Risen Christ dressed in bright white robes. He appears to be standing above the tomb. While we can barely see the imprints of the wounds in his hands and his side, the scene has little to remind us of the tragedy of the crucifixion.

Now, he is truly the Victorious Christ. Standing above the rock of the tomb which looks like a cross, he is truly the Resurrection and the life (Jn. 11:25)

When we look carefully at the icon, we see that the Risen Christ is reaching out. Indeed, he is not alone. His hands are grasping two others. And, in this depiction of the profound inner meaning of the Resurrection, the Risen Christ is grasping the wrists of a man and a woman. With Christ as their Leader and Guide, Adam and Eve appear to be lifted up out of the tomb as well. Their faces are turned to the Risen Christ with expressions of faith and trust. While the Lord firmly grasps their wrists in his hands, they are not being dragged against their will. On the contrary, Adam and Eve, as representatives of all humanity, are freely yielding to the love of God in Christ. The Resurrection of Christ is the ultimate victory over the power of alienation, sin, Satan and death. The love of God in Christ has overcome once and for all the evil powers which seek to separate humanity

from God. The Resurrection of Christ is also the resurrection of Adam and Eve as well.

The icon helps us to perceive the deeper meaning of the event of the resurrection. The bold image expresses in color and line the declaration of St. Paul who says: "If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vein, and your faith is in vein...But the fact is Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the Resurrection from the dead. For as in Adam all die, in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Cor. 15:14, 21)

The bold and vivid icon of the Resurrection of Christ also expresses visually the theme of the Resurrection Hymn of the Orthodox Church: "Christ is Risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and bestowing life upon those in the tombs."

This will be the hymn chanted time and again on Easter night by the Orthodox Christians here in Lehigh County and through out this country when we celebrate Easter this year on May 5 (2002). The five million Orthodox in this country will join their voices with the 300 million Orthodox believers throughout the world in celebrating the resurrection of Christ, the most important event in the Gospel, the most important liturgical event of the Church, and the most important affirmation of every Orthodox believer. The Orthodox in America will join their voices with those through the ages who trace their faith back to the land of Palestine where Our Lord was born, where he taught, and where he rose in glory.

Already, some may sense that Orthodox Christianity is somewhat different from what you are accustomed to see and to hear. By looking at the icon, we are engaging not only a particular artistic expression. But, we are also entering into a particular way of interpreting the Gospel, a particular way of looking at reality through the perspective of God's revelation in Christ. Thus, Fr. Dumitru Staniloae says:

The deepest foundation of the hope and joy which characterize Orthodoxy and which penetrates all its worship is the resurrection. Easter, the center of Orthodox worship, is an expression of joy, the same joy which the disciples felt when they saw the risen Saviour. It is the explosion of cosmic joy at the triumph of life, after the overwhelming sorrow of death---death which even the Lord had to suffer when he became man. ...Orthodoxy emphasizes with special insistence the faith of Christianity in the triumph of life.¹

The Continuity of the Faith Community

The Orthodox in America have a strong sense of unity with Orthodox throughout the world, and with the Orthodox throughout the ages. Since Orthodox missionaries first worked among the natives of Alaska in the 18th century, Orthodox Christians have been present here in North America. While the presence of Orthodox in North America reaches back over two hundred years, we believe that we live in continuity with those who have professed the same faith since the time of the Apostles. The faith of the Orthodox may be expressed in a wide variety of languages and through a variety of

liturgical forms as well as within a variety of cultures. Yet, its fundamental affirmations of Orthodox Christianity remained unchanged whether we are gathered in Church of St. Nicholas in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania or the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Palestine.²

The term Orthodox has been used by the Church to describe itself at least from the fourth century. In order to distinguish the Church from heresies and sectarian movements, the early teachers, the Fathers and Mothers in the faith, frequently spoke of the Church as catholic and orthodox. Since the time of the Middle Ages especially, the Orthodox Church has used the term “orthodox” to distinguish it from expressions of Western Christianity. While this distinction has value, it is important to remember that Orthodox Christians see themselves as members of the Church established by Christ and nurtured by the Holy Spirit since the first Pentecost. It is the Church which has a continuous history.

By using the term Orthodox, we are reminded of two important and interrelated affirmations. First, Orthodox means “true glory.” The emphasis here is on the importance of offering our praise and thanksgiving to God. The Orthodox believe that the glorification of God is the most fundamental response of the believer and of the entire Church to the saving acts of the Triune God. In the most profound sense, giving glory to God is the most fundamental purpose of our life. In praising God, we express our love for God with our whole heart, soul and mind. Worship is central to the identity of the Orthodox Church and to its members. Our worship epitomizes our entire life which is meant to give glory to God.

The second meaning of Orthodox is “true doctrine.” The Orthodox believe that the Orthodox Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has proclaimed, preserved and taught the authentic Christian faith free from addition, diminution and distortion from the time of the Apostles. The Orthodox Church believes that there is nothing in its body of beliefs that is contrary to truth or that inhibits genuine union with God and with others in the midst of creation. The Orthodox Church believes that our faith affirmations are meant to guide the believer in living an authentic human life in communion with the Triune God and in service to others in God’s name. Authentic belief is not an impediment to our relationship with the triune God. True doctrine is not to be disregarded. On the contrary, the faith of the Church is meant to guide the believers in their growth in holiness and discipleship.

There is an intimate relationship between the worship of the Church and the faith of the Church. The Orthodox affirm the ancient Christian dictum: the rule of prayer is the rule of faith: *lex orandi est lex credendi*. This means that the faith of the Church is expressed through her worship which is centered upon the Holy Eucharist. It is expressed in her scriptures as read and proclaimed in worship. It is also expressed in the prayers, creed, hymns, icons and rituals of worship. The Eucharist and all other acts of worship express our faith. It is through acts of worship the Triune God is honored, and it is through worship that our personal faith in the Living God is nurtured and strengthened.³

The Eucharist is the most important act of communal prayer for Orthodox Christians. It is the center of the Church's liturgical life. In obedience to the command of the Lord given at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19), the community of believers gathers at the Eucharist. We hear the Word of God, we offer prayers, we present the gifts of bread and wine, we recall the mighty acts of God, we seek the blessing of the Spirit, and we receive Holy Communion as an expression of union with Christ and with one another. And, we leave the Eucharist to live as Christ's disciples in the world. The Eucharist is an action, the Orthodox believe, that manifests the reign of God in their midst and is an expression of the Kingdom to come.

The Distinctive Spirit of Orthodox Christianity

Christianity in America is frequently identified solely with either its Protestant or Roman Catholic expressions. While Orthodoxy has had a presence in North America reaching back to 1794, insufficient attention has been given to the life and teachings of the Orthodox Church in this land.⁴

The first thing we need to remember is that Orthodox Christianity can not be included under the various groups of Christians whose history and theological perceptions are rooted primarily in Western Europe and were greatly influenced by the ecclesiastical trends of the Middle Ages, the Reformation Period and the Enlightenment. The historical development of the Orthodox Church is distinctive and quite different from that of both Roman Catholicism, especially after the Middle Ages, and the various expressions of Protestantism.

Indeed, since the time of St. Augustine in the North Africa in the fifth century and the Cappadocian Fathers and St. Macrina in the Cappadocia in the fourth century, Eastern Christianity has understood and celebrated the Christian faith in a manner which is distinctive. Sometimes this has been complementary to the theological perspectives of the Christian West. Sometimes this has been dramatically different to the perspectives of the Christian West, especially many of those resulting from the 16th century.

In addition to this, it is important to remember that Orthodox Christianity did not experience the Scholasticism of the Western Middle Ages. It did not directly participate in the debates of the faith and works or Scripture and tradition of the Protestant Reformation and Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. It did not experience debate over religion and reason, or religion and science in the Western Enlightenment. Orthodox has not shared in the Western debate over biblical literalism of nineteenth century.

Clearly, the historical development of Orthodox Christianity has been different from that of Western Christianity. Moreover, when we look at Eastern Christian theology generally we frequently find a different spirit. It approaches the reality of God and the human person with an emphasis upon mystery, wonder and joy. We do not find in Orthodox theology the dichotomies which have been part of the Western Christian traditions. One does not find a harsh distinction between the City of God and the City of Man, between nature and the supernatural, between the body and the spirit, between Scripture and

Tradition, between the Law and the Gospel, or between the sacred and the secular. One does not find an absolute barrier between this life and the life to come.

Within its own context, the Orthodox have had their own difficult challenges especially since the Great Schism with the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. Among the greatest challenges has been the fact that many parts of Orthodox Christianity have been under Islamic political domination, some since the seventh century. Likewise, the Orthodox Church in Russia and in parts of the Balkan peninsula were under atheistic Communist governments for much of the 20th century. Even to this day, many of the historic centers of Orthodox Christianity are under restrictive political regimes.

Orthodox Christianity in some places is only beginning to recover from the domination of repressive political and religious regimes. Under these regimes, Orthodox witness was often seriously limited. The Orthodox Church was frequently prohibited from undertaking educational, missionary, and charitable ministries. In some places such restrictions still apply. The many Orthodox immigrants who came to this country since the mid 19th century carried with them their Orthodox faith. But, they often also carried with them the wounds of oppression, and a newly enlivened sense of cultural identity which they could freely express in this country.

In spite of these historical and political limitations, however, Orthodox Christianity both in North America and in other parts of the world continues to express, especially through its worship, a holistic vision which affirms the love of the Triune God, the dignity of the human person, and the value of the material creation. The icons which grace the churches and the homes and the workplaces of Orthodox Christians bear witness to this vision of faith. The icons visually bear witness to the same vision of reality which is rooted in the Gospel of Christ.

The many distinctive characteristics of Orthodox belief and worship cannot be fully discussed in this brief presentation. Yet, it may be helpful to identify three important faith affirmations which are rooted in the Gospel of Christ and which find rich expression in the teachings and worship of the Orthodox Church, and in the lives of her members. In speaking about these affirmations, I shall make some reference to both early Fathers and contemporary Orthodox theologians as well as to the Church's prayers.

The Philanthropic God

The Orthodox profess faith in the Triune God who not only has revealed himself but also has manifested himself as a loving God who is Philanthropos, the one who loves humankind.

"The Lord is God and has revealed himself to us" (Ps.118:26). This joyous proclamation is sung as part of the Morning Prayers in the Orthodox Church. For the Orthodox, these words of the psalms declare that their faith, prayers, and perspectives on life are founded upon the reality of the divine self-disclosure. While not diminishing the value of human reason and reflection, the Orthodox affirm that God is a mystery who is ultimately

beyond human definition. “God can not be grasped by the mind,” says Evgarios of Pontos. “If he could be grasped, he would not be God.”⁵

The limited knowledge that we have of God results chiefly from the divine disclosure and not from human speculation, important though it may be. The One who is beyond all has chosen to be revealed because of his love for his creation. Through this divine self-disclosure, which is centered upon Christ, we have come to experience and to know the one God as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit. As the Church faithfully declares: “three divine Persons, one God.”

Moreover, we have come to know this Triune God as the philanthropic God, the one who in love has created the human person to share in his love. God is the one who refused to abandon his precious daughters and sons to the power of sin and death. As St. John says: “God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son that all who believe in him will not be lost but will have eternal life” (John 3:16). This is the divine victory of love which characterizes the faith of Orthodox Christianity. Over and over in the prayers of the Orthodox Church, we hear the bold affirmation: “You are a good God who loves humankind and to you we offer glory, Father, Son and Holy Spirit...”

The event of Christ's coming is the core of this divine revelation according to Orthodox teaching. The revelation of God to the ancient Israelites is fulfilled in the coming of Christ, who is the promised Messiah. In the person of Jesus Christ, divinity is united with humanity in such a way that the distinctive character of each is maintained. This means that the event of the Incarnation reveals in a profound way an intimate bond between living God and the humanity, together with the entire cosmos. The God who has created us and the world in love and for love is not a distant and remote being. In order to express his love for us, even in a personal and physical manner, God has united himself to us in the person of Christ.

St. Nicholas Cabasilas, the 14th century Orthodox theologian, bears witness to God's love expressed especially in the coming of Christ, when he says:

God pours himself out in an ecstasy of love. He does not remain in the heavens and call to himself the servant he loves. No, he himself descends and searches out for such a servant and comes near and lets his love be seen, as he seeks what is like himself. From those who despise him, he does not depart. He shows no anger towards those who defy him. But, God follows them to their very doors, and endures all things, and even dies, in order to demonstrate his love.⁶

The event of the incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, establishes a new relationship between God and humanity. This relationship is vividly expressed in the earthly ministry of Christ. In his preaching and teachings, Christ reveals to us both the Triune God and the theocentric nature of the human person. Christ has told us of the loving Father who cares for each of us. Christ has promised that the Spirit will be our guide and comforter. In his acts of forgiveness, he declares God's love for each of his sons and daughters. In his healings and exorcisms, and especially in his own death and

resurrection, Christ proclaims the ultimate victory of God over every force of evil power which seeks to separate human persons from God. In all he says and does, the Lord witnesses to the philanthropic character of God and the profound value and dignity of the human person. He declares that we belong to God the Father and we are meant to live in fellowship with him through the Spirit. The Resurrection of the Lord is a bold proclamation that not even death can keep human persons from the Father, who loves us. In all that he has done, Jesus offers human persons life in abundance (John 5:40). As St. Methodios of Olympos says: "What greater thing exists than having a God who is a friend of humanity with a philanthropic incarnation."⁷

The principal task of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the presence of the Risen Christ to persons of every age and every place and to enable human persons to share in his saving work. Christ is not a distant person of history. The Holy Spirit leads persons from a life of self-centeredness to a life centered upon Christ and his gospel. The person of the Spirit is not subordinate to Christ, nor is the ministry of the Spirit inferior to that of Christ. Within the life of the Church, the Spirit unites human persons to Christ, who leads them to the Father. Both Son and Spirit work in harmony to accomplish the will of the Father, who desires that "everyone be saved and come to the knowledge of truth" (I Tim. 2:4).

The great drama of God's saving activity is recounted for Orthodox Christians especially at every celebration of the Eucharist, which is popularly known as the Divine Liturgy. Within the context of the Liturgy, the Great Eucharistic prayer, the Anaphora, calls to mind the mighty acts of God with its moving words:

It is fitting and right to sing to you, to bless you, to praise you, to give thanks to you, and to adore you throughout your dominion! For you are God: ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, existing forever, yet ever the same, you and your only Son and your Holy Spirit! From nonexistence, you brought us into being, and when we had fallen away, you raised us up again. You have never ceased doing everything to lead us to heaven, to bestow on us your kingdom which is to come. For all of this do we thank you and your only Son and your Holy Spirit, for everything you have done for us, whether we are aware of it or not, whether it is manifest or hidden from us. We also give you thanks for this liturgy which you are pleased to accept from our hands, though there stand before you thousands of archangels, tens of thousands of angels, cherubim and seraphim with their six wings and many eyes, borne aloft on their wings as they sing the victory chant, crying loud, proclaiming and saying: Holy, holy, holy Lord of power and might! Heaven and earth are filled with your glory: Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest.⁸

Based upon the Gospel of Christ, Orthodoxy Christianity proclaims the truth of the Triune God who is the philanthropos. Ever present with us, this Loving God has created the human person and all creation in love and in order to share this love, and draw us into

communion with each Person of the Trinity.

The Theocentric Person

From the very moment of our creation by God, the human person is fashioned with an orientation to God who is the source of life. There is a natural and enduring relationship between each person and the Triune God which is rooted in the very act of divine creation and which is deepened through the Incarnation and the coming of the Spirit. This means that it is natural and healthy for the human person to live life in communion with God. It is unnatural for the human person not to be in a loving relationship with God. Orthodox thought holds that the biblical description of the human person as being created in the “image and likeness” of God (Gen. 1:26) is a profound affirmation which speaks both about the deep bond of love between God and each human person and the dignity of each person.

St. Basil the Great speaks about our love for God as an expression of the natural bond when he says:

The love of God is not something we learn from another. Neither did we learn from another how to love the sunshine or how to defend our life. Nor has anyone taught us how to love our parents, or those who have reared us. And so, indeed much more, learning to love God does not come from outside. But in the very commencement of the life of the person there is placed within us a certain seminal conception which has from itself the beginnings of all a natural propensity towards this love.⁹

Each human person is of profound value and dignity because of this fundamental relationship with the Triune God revealed in Christ. Regardless of position in life, each human person is always a daughter or son of the loving Father. Like the prodigal son, the human person never loses this fundamental dignity even in the midst of sin which distorts true human identity and weakens the bond of unity.

St. Gregory of Nyssa emphasizes the profound dignity of the human person when he says:

For this is the safest way to protect the good things you enjoy: Realize how much your Creator has honored you above all other creatures. He did not make the heavens in his image, nor the moon, the sun, the beauty of the stars or anything else which surpasses understanding. You alone are a reflection of eternal beauty, a receptacle of happiness, an image of the true light. And, if you look at him, you will become what he is, imitating him who shines within you, whose glory is reflected in your purity. Nothing in the entire creation can equal your grandeur. All the heavens can fit into the palm of the hand of God...Although he is so great that he can hold all creation in his palm, you can wholly embrace him. He dwells within you.¹⁰

The entire purpose of God's self-disclosure, which is centered upon Christ, is to restore the humanity and the entire cosmos to communion with himself. The human person has profound value and dignity precisely because of his or her relationship with God. Created in the "image and likeness" of God, each person is called to live in communion with God (Gen. 1:26).¹¹

The story of the "Fall", which is found in the first chapter of Genesis, describes the loss of the intimate communion between God and humanity as well as the entire creation. "Created for fellowship with the Holy Trinity, called to advance in love from the divine image to the divine likeness, man chose instead a path that led not up but down," writes Bishop Kallistos Ware. "He repudiated the Godward relationship that is his true essence."¹²

In reflecting upon this situation, Orthodoxy has neither diminished the tragedy of human sin and its consequences, nor the greatness of God's love. In spite of the alienation caused by human sin, God never abandons his sons and daughters. Although sin distorts the relationship between God and his creation, it never destroys the fundamental bond between the Father and his sons and daughters. Orthodox thought tends to speak of the image of God as being distorted or diminished but never destroyed by human sin. The Orthodox believe that in the coming of Christ, God the Father demonstrates his love for the alienated, and calls humanity back to his friendship. The human person is never meant to be separated from God, the source of life and holiness.¹³

While the Orthodox recognize the tragic character of humanity's alienation from God, what is often called the "ancestral sin", the emphasis is always upon the love and mercy of God, who could not abandon those whom he had created in love. Through many means, God sought to call his sons and daughters back to authentic human life lived in communion with him. As the ancient liturgy of St. James says: "You brought man into being by forming him from the dust of the earth, fashioning him in your image and likeness, and placing him in a paradise of delights. When he fell away from you by disobeying your commandments, you did not abandon him. Rather, in your loving kindness, you sent him first the law and the prophets and then your only son to renew and restore your image in him."¹⁴

With the coming of Christ, the will of the Father to restore his precious sons and daughters to communion with himself is profoundly expressed. Orthodox frequently affirm the old adage: "God became human so that we may become divine." This bold affirmation points to the fact that we are called in Christ to share in a genuine communion with God which fulfills but does not abolish our human nature. The coming of Christ marks a profound union between the divine and the human in the Person of the incarnate Lord. At the same time, the coming of Christ demonstrates the divine victory over the forces of sin, Satan and death.

This vision of God as philanthropos and of the human person as theocentric is also reflected in the manner in which Orthodox understand salvation. The Orthodox place a special emphasis upon an understanding of salvation, which is viewed primarily as

sharing. Through the coming of Christ, the Orthodox believe that God has shared fully in human life, thereby enabling human persons to share in his life of unselfish love. Salvation is, therefore, both a loving and free gift of communion with the Father and the process by which human persons respond lovingly and freely to that gift given in Christ through the Spirit. Salvation certainly involves the forgiveness of sin but is not limited to this alone. It is essentially a new relationship freely offered by the Father through Christ and in the Spirit. Salvation is truly a gift of the loving God. But, it also a gift which must be consciously received and treasured in a personal way.¹⁵

The term "deification" (*theosis*) is frequently used by the Orthodox to describe the process and the goal of sanctification whereby the human person responds to the divine initiative and moves ever closer to the living God through a life that reflects and imitates the divine love. God never forces himself on us. Each person must freely respond to the divine initiative. This sense of divine-human cooperation is frequently referred to as synergy. The human person experiences the presence of the divine in a specific and deeply personal way. Yet, the Orthodox believe that persons are most fully human when they freely choose to live their lives in communion with God, the Source of life and holiness. Those who live in Christ know that the process of deification begins at the very moment of personal creation and continues to the life which is to come. Love knows no limit and no boundary. The Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, and the other Saints, who have passed beyond this life, bear witness to this reality.

There is an important point to be made about human response and human choice. God does not compel anyone to follow him. The human person must freely decide day in and day out. Indeed, the human person always has the free will either to live in communion with God or to turn away from this relationship. Despite Orthodoxy's very positive understanding of the person's dignity and worth, the tragedy of human sin and its consequences are never ignored or minimized. The human person, whether non-believer or believer, always has the freedom either to fulfill the true vocation of living in communion with God or to become alienated through a selfishness desire to live apart from God. Freedom is a divine gift and an essential dimension of the human person.

When speaking about human response to the divine initiative, the Orthodox frequently refer to the example of Mary, the Mother of God. Mary certainly had a very important role to play in the coming of Christ. Yet, she was called freely to accept this vocation. She was invited freely to cooperate with God in bringing about the Incarnation. As such, Mary stands the preeminent example of a person of faith who freely responds to the divine initiative. Speaking of the role of Mary in the Incarnation, St. Nicholas Cabasilas says:

The Incarnation of the Word was not only the activity of the Father, of his Son and of his Holy Spirit...but was also the work of the will and faith of the Virgin. Without the three divine persons, the plan could not have been set in motion. Likewise, the plan could not have been carried into effect without the consent and faith of the most pure Virgin. Only after teaching and persuading her does God make her his mother and receive from her the flesh which she consciously wills to

offer him. Just as the Word was conceived by his own free choice, so in the same way Mary became his mother voluntarily and with her free consent. ¹⁶

While our circumstances differ, the activity of God in the life of the Virgin Mary is not unlike his activity in the life of each of us. God calls us to be his living icons in the world, revealing his love through our own daily obligations and responsibilities. We are not meant to be passive vehicles of God. As St. Paul says: “We are God’s fellow workers...” (1 Cor. 3:9) We are called to cooperate with the Triune God in the process of our growth in holiness and of the salvation of the world. God takes the initiative, but there is need for our human response. It is in this sense that we can understand St. Paul who directs the believers to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13) God invites all, yet compels none.

We do not grow and mature in relationship with God on our own or in isolation from others. Salvation is not simply personal but also communal. In the first place, the Orthodox teach that believers grow in their relationship with God in the company of others, through the life of the Church. The Church, as a community of believers, is not an accident. It is, in fact, part of the divine plan of salvation established by Christ and enlivened by the Spirit. Persons become publicly united with Christ and with His Church through the rite of Baptism. Their communion with each other and with the Triune God is celebrated in the Holy Eucharist where all share in the one bread and one cup (1 Cor. 10-17). Within this community of faith, believers have the opportunity to cultivate the bond of love not only with each other but also with the persons of the Holy Trinity. The Orthodox take very seriously the old Christian adage: “A Solitary Christian is no Christian.”

The Orthodox place special importance on the custom of having a Godmother or Godfather at baptism as well as the custom of having a sponsor for a wedding. These liturgical practices are not simply formalistic. Rather, they are expressions of the fact that the sacraments of the Church establish new relationships that take us beyond our immediate families. These are true sacramental bonds which are meant to assist us in our mutual growth. These new relationships serve to remind us that we do not grow in our faith by ourselves. As St. Paul reminds us, we are “knit together in love” (Col.2: 2) through the coming of Christ.

Likewise, the practice of honoring the saints is central to Orthodox spirituality. By honoring the saints, we are reminded that we are part of a community of believers which transcends time and space. Through our faith in the Triune God, we are united with the countless holy women and holy men of all generations and walks of life who have been God’s ambassadors and co-workers in the world. The icon of a saints reminds us that each were unique persons living at a particular time and in a particular place. Yet, each responded to the call to be signs of God’s presence. In seeking their prayers, we ask the saints to remember us in the presence of God as we learn from their example. In recalling the saints and venerating their icon, we are in fact affirming the important truth that God calls women and men to work with him for the sake of the healing and salvation

of all.

Our salvation takes place within the broader context of relationships with other persons who may not be related to us through the life of the Church. Indeed, the ecclesial relationships are meant to be a constant reminder of the profound relationship which each of us has with every member of the human family. This sense of solidarity with fellow believers is also an important pointer to the true significance and importance of all human relationships. Regardless of circumstances or belief, each of us is created by the same God. Each of us is part of the same human family. Indeed, each of us have been united in with God in a very intimate way through the humanity which Christ has shared with us. Truly, whenever we show express our love for another person, even the “least of my brethren” (Matt. 25:40), we are in fact expressing our love for Christ who is united to one and all.

There is a relationship between the love which we have for God and the love which we have for others. As we draw closer to God in love, the more closely we are drawn in love to others. The intimate relationship between our love for neighbor and our love for God is emphasized by Saint Dorotheus of Gaza when he says:

Imagine a circle marked on the ground. Suppose that this circle is the world, and that the center of the circle is God. Leading from the edge of the circle to the center are a number of lines, and these represent the paths or ways of life that people can follow. In their desire to come closer to God, the saints move along these lines towards the middle of the circle, so that the further they advance, the nearer they approach both God and to one another. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another, and the closer they come to each other, the closer they come to God.¹⁷

Such is the nature of love. The nearer we draw to God in our love for him, the more we are united together by love for our neighbor. The greater our union with our neighbor, the greater is our union with God.

One cannot profess faith in the Triune God who is philanthropos without at the same time affirming that the human person by nature is also philanthropos. If we are created in the image and likeness of God, expressed perfectly in Jesus Christ, then this means that we too are meant to live a life which expresses love for the other. This has been the perspective which guided the charitable activity of such important holy women and men such as St. Macrina, St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, St. John the Faster, and St. Herman of Alaska to name but a few.

Known for his staunch defense of the needy and their care, St. John Chrysostom says:

So give God the honor which he seeks, that is give generously your money for the poor. God has no need of golden vessels but of golden hearts. I am not saying that you should not give golden altar vessels and so on, but I am insisting that nothing can take the place of charity for the poor. The Lord will not reject the first kind of

gift, but He prefers the second... Nothing is colder than a Christian who does not work for the salvation of others. You cannot plead poverty here, for the widow throwing two small coins will embarrass you. Paul was so poor that he was often hungry and lacking the necessary nourishment. You cannot plead humble birth for the Apostles were obscure and from obscure families. You cannot put forward your lack of education, for they were illiterate. You cannot plead weakness for Timothy was one who suffered frequent illnesses. Everyone is able to be of service to his neighbor if only he is willing to do his part.¹⁸

All of this reminds us that the development of the person not only takes place through relationship with the Triune God but also through relationship with others in the midst of creation. According to Orthodox thought, the human person is not meant to be an autonomous or individualized self. Rather, the human person is part of a network of relationships which is meant to contribute to wellbeing and wholeness. To be a person is to be in relationship with others. Being in communion both with God and with others, both those living and those dead, is central to the person's identity. Authentic relationships are essential for the formation of the human person. It is, in fact, the growth in the "likeness of God" which is the fulfillment of the "image." Orthodox theologians speak of the person as being radically interpersonal, a being in communion. In this way the person reflects the interpersonal nature of the Holy Trinity.¹⁹

Based upon the Gospel of Christ, Orthodox Christianity affirms the value and dignity of the human person created by the Triune God and called to live in communion with him, and with others in the midst of creation. The human person has a natural orientation toward God which needs to be fulfilled within the responsibilities and obligations of life in this world. In the face of forces today which depersonalize and diminish the dignity of the human person, Orthodoxy proclaims the dignity and value of the person. Within the context of ecumenical discussions, this vision can contribute much to Christian witness today.

The Gift of the Good Creation

One cannot enter an Orthodox church building and attend a service of worship without sensing the profound respect which is given to the aspects of the created world. The building is not stark. It is filled with color. Icons grace the walls. Candles flicker. Bells ring. The smoke of incense rises. Water, wine, bread, and oil are offered and received in thanksgiving. Human hands are lifted in expression of prayer. Creation is not abandoned in this place of worship. The physical is a vehicle for the spiritual.

Believing that the creation is truly "very good" (Gen. 1:31) and "that the heavens declare the glory of God and the work of his hands the firmament proclaims" (Ps. 19(18): 1), the Orthodox profess a very high regard for the material world both in its faith affirmations and in its worship. "The creation," says Bishop Timothy Ware, "in its entirety is God's handiwork; in their inner essence all created things are "exceedingly good."²⁰ Although the creation is prone to distortion both because of its createdness and human sin, it remains fundamentally valuable and "very good" because it has its origin in God. It

too is called to bear witness to his providence and love. Indeed, in uniting himself with our humanity, the Son of God established a profound relationship not only with our human nature but also with the entire created order. Jesus frequently referred to aspects of creation in his teachings and frequently used elements of creation to reveal his divine power. The one who created and fashioned the world entered into it for our salvation and for the salvation of the entire creation.

With this in mind, four points are especially important. First of all, the creation is viewed as a gift of God to be honored and treasured. Every aspect of creation is a blessing meant to inspire our love for the Creator and to draw us more closely to him, and to one another. If the human person is truly the “crown” of creation, then all the physical world is provided by God for our goodness and to assist us in our salvation.

St John Chrysostom speaks about the gift of creation when he says:

The creation is beautiful and harmonious, and God has made it all just for your sake. He has made it beautiful, grand and rich, He has made it capable of satisfying all your needs, to nourish your body and also to develop the life of your soul by leading it towards the knowledge of himself, all this for your sake. . For your sake, he has made the sky beautiful with stars. He has embellished it with sun and moon for your sake, so that you can take pleasure in it and be enriched by it.²¹

The Orthodox Church makes constant use of the elements of the physical world in its worship. Bread and wine, water and oil, fruits and flowers, are but a few of the many elements which are taken up by the Church in its worship. In blessing these things of the earth, the Church affirms that the physical world has its origins with God, that it possesses intrinsic value, and that it can be a vehicle of his presence. This is the same principle which applies to the icon. It is composed of the “stuff of creation,” wood and paint, or stone and glass. The icon is means of relating with God and with one another.

Secondly, the physical creation establishes a special bond between human persons. We all share in this common inheritance. We all have inherited a common blessing from the ultimate source of all things. When viewed as a precious gift, the creation is not something which we can truly “possess” in a selfish and self-centered manner. In receiving the creation as a gift, each of us has the obligation to be true stewards of God’s creation and to share this creation with others. For those with eyes to see, the physical world provides us with a profound means of communion with the Creator and with one another.

Thirdly, our growth in holiness takes place within the context of the created world. Salvation also has its cosmic dimension. The Orthodox teach that human persons are not saved from the world but in and through the created world. The soul is not saved separately from the body, but rather together with the body. The whole person, body and soul, is meant to share in the process of deification, beginning with the relationships and responsibilities of this life. In the 14th century, St. Gregory Palmas said: “We are not able

to designate as human only the soul or just the body. But rather, both together, of which it was said that it was created by God in His own image."²² Growth in holiness does not draw us away from the creation. The physical world is not by nature an obstacle to our growth in holiness. Far from rejecting the body and the rest of the material creation, the Orthodox look upon the physical as the work of God and the medium through which the divine is manifest.

Most of the icons of the saints depict them in an historical setting. This is an important observation. Yes, it is true that the saint is pictured in a manner which appears to express his or her transfiguration. Likewise, there is sometimes a symbolic expression of the saint's particular ministry or task in life. Yet, at the same time, the saint is pictured in his or her historical clothing. The broader context of the saint usually depicts him or her within a specific historical setting. Sometimes the saint is depicted in the company of other. In fact, some saints are depicted with their pets or other animals. Quite clearly, the saints who dwell with the Lord in glory are related in a positive way to their historical context through the icon. The icon is a clear reminder that the saint grew in holiness within the context of the responsibilities and obligations of daily life. The icon is also a reminder that life is meant to be lived in harmony with God's creation.

Finally, many Orthodox writers have come to emphasize the fact that the believer is truly meant to be a priest of creation. In every aspect of our life, we have the opportunity to remember the acts of God and to offer back to the Father the creation as an act of praise and thanksgiving. We receive graciously what has been freely given to us. And, we offer back in thanksgiving the fruit of our human labor. The entire creation, good from the beginning, is related to the reality of the incarnation. The ultimate transfiguration of the entire cosmos is already prefigured in the lives of the faithful, in the Eucharist, in the icons, and in the relics of the saints.

Based upon the Gospel of Christ, Orthodox Christianity affirms the goodness and value of the material creation. At a time when the value of the human body is diminished and the natural environment is abused, Orthodoxy affirms that God creates the human body and the entire physical world in love. As believers, we are called to be faithful stewards of the physical as well as the spiritual blessings of God.

The Orthodox believe that the Eucharist typifies human life as it is lived in fellowship with God. The bread and the wine are the fruit of creation given by God and fashioned by human hands. The offering placed on the altar signifies not only what has been received but also who the believers are. This reminds us that ultimately our life is a Eucharist, an offering of thanksgiving. Through this offering, the Orthodox seek not simply their own salvation but the salvation of the entire world in Christ Jesus. At the Eucharist, the believers stand together before God with uplifted hands of gratitude, praying the words of the Liturgy: "Offering to you your own, from what is your own, for all things and in all things... We praise you, we bless you, we give thanks to you, and we pray to you, Lord our God."²³

Conclusions

In this presentation, I have identified a number of the distinctive affirmations of Orthodox Christianity. Many would say that the Orthodox Church shares with the Roman Catholic Church and with many Protestant Churches the essential affirmations of the Christian faith as received from the Apostles. In the past hundred years especially, the Ecumenical Movement has encouraged the divided Christian churches to come out of their isolation and to seek reconciliation in one faith. This involves a renewed examination of the issues of division and a commitment to overcome these. It also involves a recognition of those affirmations which divided churches continue to share. All of this takes place with the goal of healing the wounds of division and restoring full communion.

At the same time, it is clear that the Orthodox Church has maintained some very distinctive perspectives on the Triune God who is philanthropos, the human person who is theocentric, and the goodness of the creation. While these affirmations are rooted in the Gospel of Christ, they are not the same as those found among most expressions of Western Christianity today. In identifying these distinctive perspectives, the Orthodox present them to Western Christianity as an offering. It is an offering presented with the belief that the spirit of Orthodox Christianity can truly enrich many aspects of Western Christianity, and contributes to a renewed appreciation of the depth and breath of the Christian faith as well as its worship and witness today.

There could be no better way of closing this presentation than by citing the famous *Paschal Homily* of St. John Chrysostom (354-407). This Homily is read in Orthodox Churches throughout the world on the night of the Resurrection. The words of St. John, written centuries ago, express well the joy and hope of people who believe in the Philanthropic God, the theocentric human person and the goodness of creation.

Are there any who are devout lovers of God?
 Let them enjoy this beautiful bright festival!
 Are there any who are grateful servants?
 Let them rejoice and enter into the joy of their Lord!

Are there any weary from fasting?
 Let them now receive their due!
 If any have toiled from the first hour,
 let them receive their reward.
 If any have come after the third hour,
 let them with gratitude join in the feast!
 Those who arrived after the sixth hour,
 let them not doubt; for they shall not be short-changed.
 Those who have tarried until the ninth hour,
 let them not hesitate; but let them come too.
 And those who arrived only at the eleventh hour,
 let them not be afraid by reason of their delay.

For the Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first.
 The Lord gives rest to those who come at the eleventh hour,
 even as to those who toiled from the beginning.
 To one and all the Lord gives generously.
 The Lord accepts the offering of every work.
 The Lord honors the deed and praises the intention.

Let us all enter into the joy of the Lord!
 First and last alike, receive your reward.
 Rich and poor, rejoice together!
 Conscientious and lazy, celebrate the day!
 You who have kept the fast, and you who have not,
 rejoice, this day, for the table is bountifully spread!

Feast royally, for the meal is ready.
 Let no one go away hungry.
 Partake, all, of the banquet of faith.
 Enjoy the bounty of the Lord's goodness!

Let no one grieve being poor,
 for the universal reign has been revealed.
 Let no one lament persistent failings,
 for forgiveness has risen from the grave.

Let no one fear death,
 for the death of our Savior has set us free.
 The Lord has destroyed death by enduring it.
 The Lord vanquished hell when he descended into it.
 The Lord put hell in turmoil even as it tasted of his flesh.

Isaiah foretold this when he said,
 "You, O Hell, were placed in turmoil when he encountered you below."
 Hell was in turmoil having been eclipsed.
 Hell was in turmoil having been mocked.
 Hell was in turmoil having been destroyed.
 Hell was in turmoil having been abolished.
 Hell was in turmoil having been made captive.
 Hell grasped a corpse, and met God.
 Hell seized earth, and encountered heaven.
 Hell took what it saw, and was overcome by what it could not see.

O death, where is your sting?
 O hell, where is your victory?

Christ is risen, and you are cast down!
 Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!
 Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!
 Christ is risen, and life is set free!
 Christ is risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead.

For Christ, having risen from the dead,
 has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

To him be glory and power
 Now and forever and unto ages of ages. Amen! ²⁴

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¹ Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, "Orthodoxy, Life in the Resurrection," *Eastern Churches Review* 2:4 (1969), p. 371.

² For an introduction to Orthodox Christianity in North America, see Thomas FitzGerald, *The Orthodox Church* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1995).

³ See, Kyriaki FitzGerald, *Religious Formation and Liturgical Life*, (Ann Arbor, I, 1985).

⁴ For a very valuable introduction to the history and teachings of Orthodox Christianity, see Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

⁵ Evgarios of Pontos, *PG* 40:1275c

⁶ St. Nicholas Cabasilas, *On the Divine Liturgy*, 2:132

⁷ St. Methodios of Olympos, *Homily on Symeon and Anna*, *PG* 18:361

⁸ *The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*.

⁹ St. Basil the Great, *Homily on the Love of God and Neighbor*.

¹⁰ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Song of Songs*, Homily 2.

¹¹ For a very valuable perspective on these concerns, see (Archbishop) Demetrios Trakatellis, "Man Fallen and Restored in the Teachings of S. John Chrysostom," *Sobornost*, 4:10 (1964), pp. 569-584.

¹² Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), p. 59.

¹³ Metropolitan Maximos Aghiorgoussis, *In the Image of God* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001) p. 117f.

¹⁴ *The Liturgy of St. James*

¹⁵ Here I follow many of the important observations offered by Metropolitan Maximos in his book *In the Image of God* and Bishop Kallistos Ware in his book *The Orthodox Way*.

¹⁶ St. John of Damascus, *Homily on the Incarnation*, 4-5.

¹⁷ St. Dorotheus of Gaza, *Instructions*, 6.

¹⁸ St. John Chrysostom, Homily 20 on Acts.

¹⁹ An extensive discussion of these themes can be found in John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985). I also appreciate the

comments by Professor Albert Panteleimon Raboteau who has related Orthodox perspectives to those of the traditional African worldview.

²⁰ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 46.

²¹ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Providence*, 7:2.

²² St. Gregory Palamas, *Prosopopoiea*, PG 150: 1361c

²³ The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.

²⁴ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Pascha*.