

Concepts Pertaining to Orthodox Worship (1)

Faith is the foundation for worship, or said another way, worship is the fruit of one's faith. Just as every tree can be recognized by its fruit, Orthodox dogma can be recognized and understood through orthodox worship.

The purpose of the rituals is to keep the believer engaged in the worship. I hope in these series of articles to explain some of these rituals so that you will be able to benefit from true Orthodox worship, experience greater depth of prayer, and will be able to worship in spirit and truth.

1- Why do Orthodox Christians Pray facing the east?

Although God is omnipresent and accepts prayer from any location, the Orthodox Church teaches Christians to pray facing east. This tradition is supported by that fact that many, if not all, ancient churches were built with a sanctuary facing the east. There are many thoughtful reasons why the Orthodox Church continues to practice this rite.

1- The east is the direction from which light proceeds from the sun because the sun, a clear symbol of our Lord Jesus Christ, rises in the east. Just as the sun provides light to the world, Christ is the *"true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world"* (John 1:9). Furthermore, in Mal. 4:2, the prophet prophesies about our Lord Jesus Christ calling him the *"Sun of Righteousness."* Orthodox Christians pray facing east in anticipation and desire to observe the true glory and light of the Lord Jesus Christ.

2- The Bible says that God placed the Garden of Eden in the east (Gen. 2:8). Orthodox Christians pray facing east longing to return to Paradise.

3- The wise men attempting to see the newborn king, observed a star in the east (Matt. 2:2). After following the star in east, they were ultimately able to find Christ. Learning from the example of the magi, Orthodox Christians pray facing east in hopes to be led to Christ.



4- In Ezekiel 44, God reveals to the Prophet Ezekiel a vision of a sanctuary facing toward the east.

5- According to records of the crucifixion written by St. Athanasius, Jesus Christ was crucified facing the west. Therefore, Orthodox Christians pray facing east envisioning that the worshipper is at the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ.

6- The Lord Jesus ascended upon the mount of olives east of Jerusalem. The angels said to the apostles: *"This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven."* (Acts 1:11). So we pray towards east waiting for His second coming saying *"Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"* (Rev. 22)

7- For being in order. Which is better: to pray facing unified direction, or for each one to pray facing a different direction?

2- Why are churches named after saints?

Naming a church in honor of a saint does not imply that the saint is worshipped in that church. Orthodox faith has always taught that worship is reserved for the only one triune God – not saints. However, churches have been named after saints from the earliest centuries of Christianity for the following reasons:

1- In the early church, believers would build altars over the burial site of a martyr in accordance with what is written in Rev. 6:9, *"I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held."* The church would subsequently be named in honor of the martyr whose relics buried under her altar.

2- By naming a church after a saint, honor, glory, and praise are given to God. God speaking through a prophet said to Eli the priest, *"For those who honor Me I will honor"* (1 Sam. 2:30). Since God has honored the saints, why shouldn't believers honor these exemplary individuals by naming churches after them? Even Christ told the woman who anointed Him with fragrant oil that *"wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial for her"* (Matt. 26:13). Similarly, the lives of the saints serve as a memorial for the believers. More specifically, Orthodox Christians honor the work of the Holy Spirit present in saint's lives and aspire to follow in their footsteps. St. Paul commanded the Corinthians to *"Imitate [him], just as [he] also imitate[s] Christ"* (1 Cor. 11:1). In like manner, the entire congregation is called to imitate the virtuous life of the saint of whom the church was named after.

3- In the Old Testament, God frequently declares, *"I am the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"* (Ex. 3:6). If God accepted to be referred to as the God of Abraham, then God is also the God of St. Mary, St. Mark, and all the saints.

4- In modern times, churches are named after many things varying from elements of nature to street address, yet none of the congregants of those churches would testify that their worship is directed to their street address. Therefore, **there is no logical basis to be against naming the church after a saint if a church can be named after a location.**

(To be continued)

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