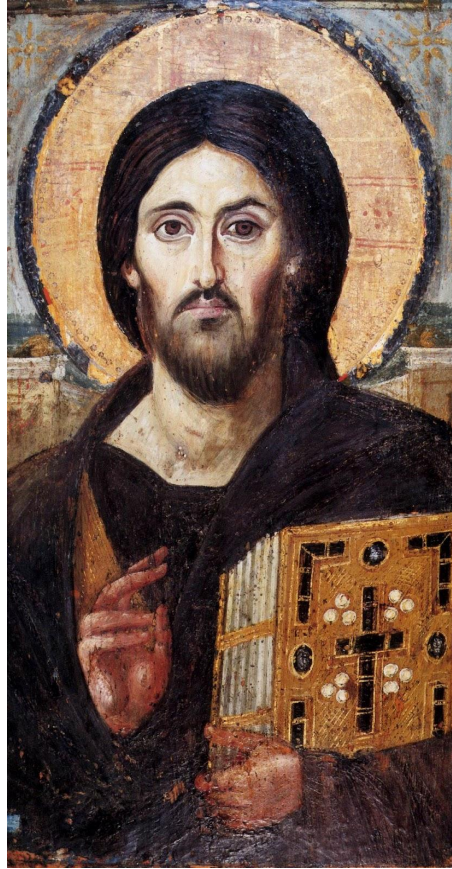




Sunday School of the American Dioceses
of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

8th Grade

The Symbol of Faith



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Lesson 1: Who Do You Say That I Am?

Lesson Goals

- *I can examine how the Councils of Jerusalem, Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus focused on preserving the Apostles' teaching on the Person of Christ.*
 - *I can understand why our Church does not recognize the Council of Chalcedon and subsequent Councils as faithful to the Apostolic Faith.*
 - *I can explain how St. Dioscorus faithfully defended the Faith as taught by St. Cyril and all the preceding Church Fathers.*
-

The early Church flourished as the disciples of Christ spread the good news of the Gospel, baptizing many and journeying across the world.

We see this beginning in Acts 2, and how the prayers of the Apostles and Saints as well as the blood of the martyrs brought many to the faith. People were amazed at the fervor of the believers. The Gospel message, as witnessed and preached by the Apostles, resonated with them. The Church began to grow not only in Jewish communities but also with the Gentiles (i.e., those who were not Jewish), and Christianity spread outside of Israel throughout the Roman Empire. Early Christian communities were set up in Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, Carthage and Alexandria and by the end of the 2nd century spread through Europe, Africa, and Asia (including India!).

The Book of Acts is a testimony to how the Church was led by the Holy Spirit and the importance given to correct doctrine. We see what distinguished the Christian Church clearly articulated in Acts 2:42, i.e., *"And they continued steadfastly in the **Apostles' doctrine** and **fellowship**, in the **breaking of bread**, and in **prayers**."* These four elements are present even to this day in the Orthodox Church!

The Four Characteristics of the Early Church (Acts 2:42)

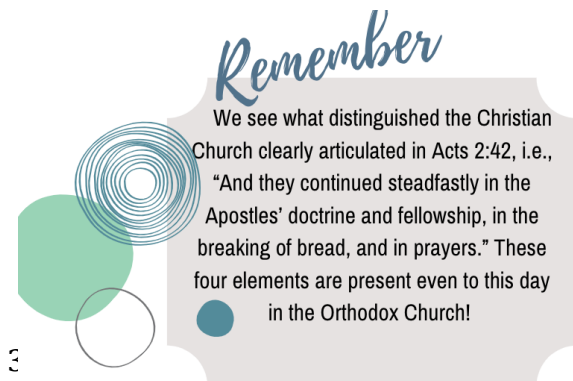
- **Apostles' doctrine:** This is the teaching given to us from the Apostles. The Apostles (including St. Paul) were individually chosen by Christ, as was recorded in Holy Scripture. Our Lord directly spoke to, taught, and even chastised them. St. Mary (the Mother of God) knew Him better than this group of special disciples. This is one of

many reasons why the teaching given to the Apostles, especially about the Person of Christ (St. Matthew 16:15), is held sacred and considered as “doctrine.”

- **Fellowship:** Fellowship is the gathering together of the faithful who believe in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Fellowship is an important part of the Church that takes its highest form during Liturgy but is very important before and afterwards. Fellowship in Christianity is always united in Christ as we literally become the Body of Christ which is understood as the Church (1 Corinthians 12:12; Colossians 1:24; Ephesians 1:22; Galatians 3:27). Christ also teaches that He is present when two or more gather in His name (St. Matthew 18:20).
- **Breaking of bread:** Throughout Scripture and the early writings of the first few centuries, the “breaking of bread” is understood to be Holy Qurbana where the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. In the “Road to Emmaus” passage in St. Luke 24:13–32, the two disciples did not recognize Christ until He *“took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.”* This intentionally brings us back to the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-30). When we partake of the Body and the Blood, our eyes are opened and we know Him.
- **Prayers:** Actually, the Bible verse, correctly translated from the Greek, refers to “*the prayers.*” The first Christians always had liturgical worship and used hymns and prayers similar to what we use today in the Orthodox Church based on the Bible (notably Psalms) and the common teaching. Again, there were not individual interpretations but expressions of the common Faith.

The Church was united in a common Faith, and that Faith was the one taught by the Apostles. The Church prayed for guidance from the Holy Spirit who preserved their unity.

The early Christian Church never depended on individual understanding and interpretation of the Faith. Historically there were many influential individuals such as Appolinaris, Arius, Nestorius, and Marcion who were in positions of power, influential in other ways, and some were even appointed Bishops and priests who did begin to teach their own understanding of Christ. But in each and every instance, the Church united in the “Apostles’ doctrine, dismissed the incorrect teaching, and worked to undo the damage of the individual.



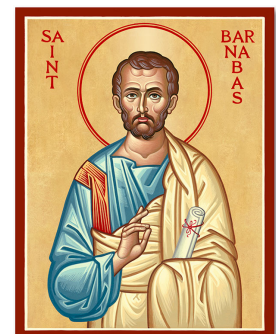
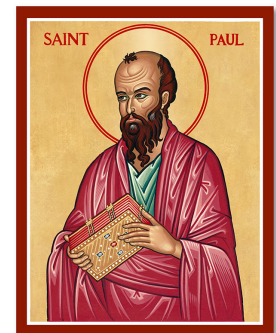
Whenever any teaching arose that created controversy in the Church, the leaders of the Church assembled together and examined the different views and declared the true faith based on their discussions. It was important to discuss these new views so that no one was led astray by the new teachings. More importantly, it was necessary to protect and safeguard the Apostolic teaching. Any deviation from the Apostolic teaching would completely change the “one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith” that was indeed delivered by Saints and all the faithful to the current ones. We remember some of them in the 5th Thubden of the Holy Qurbana. Changing the teaching of these Church Fathers would make us no longer an Orthodox Church.

When the wrong teaching or heresy grew to an extent that it threatened to change what we know about the Person of Christ (i.e., who Christ actually is), then it was necessary to gather a “great” Council. These were not pre-determined or scheduled meetings of Church leaders, but rather a response to a growing threat within the Church that would change the teachings as were given to the faithful.

The following describes the Council of Jerusalem as found in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 15) and the Great and Holy Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (325 A.D.), Constantinople (381 A.D.), and Ephesus (431 A.D.).

The Council of Jerusalem

As St. Paul and St. Barnabas were preaching to the Gentiles in Antioch, there arose a problem as to the conversion of the believing Gentiles. Jews from Judea who had converted to Christianity came to Antioch and started teaching the Gentiles that they must be circumcised, as Jewish custom dictates, in order to be saved. St. Paul and St. Barnabas disagreed with them and went back to Jerusalem to address the issue with the apostles and elders. The core issue was to address the relationship between the Old Testament Law and Christianity. Some of the believing Pharisees in Jerusalem agreed with the men saying that circumcision was necessary. After much discussion, the Council, which was composed of the Apostles and elders, and was presided by St. James, the brother of Jesus, utilized the Tradition and Teachings in order to decide that Gentile Christians would adhere to the rules prescribed for Gentiles within the Torah. This, in essence, opened up the Church to all peoples, Jewish and Gentile. This council set the precedence for how the Church would solve major disputes concerning the faith. The leaders of



the Church came together to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and with a desire to teach the true faith and such meetings were called “**the councils**”.

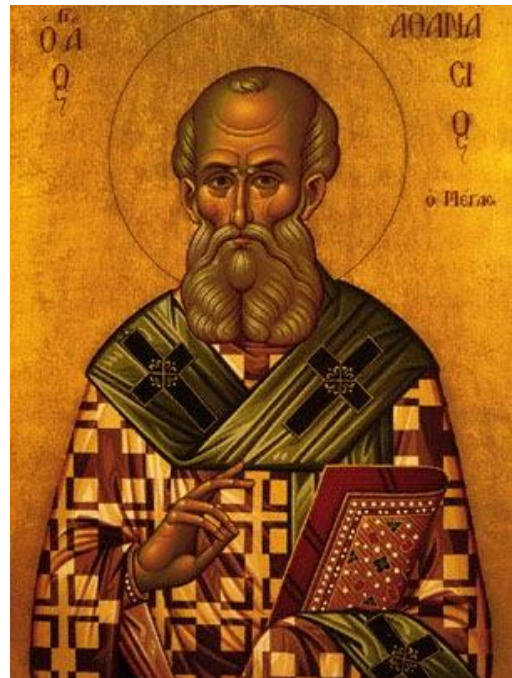
The Council of Nicaea (325 AD)

In the fourth century, a priest named Arius from Alexandria, Egypt, started teaching that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was a created being and was not God from the beginning. Therefore, after Christ was born into this world, Arius taught that he was not of the same essence as God the Father. This idea was a big problem for the Christian faith because it challenged the foundation of the faith which was that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human. We believe that God who loved mankind so much that He Himself became man and suffered and died for the sins of man so that we may be reconciled with God.

The Church in Alexandria tried to guide Arius back to the true Christian faith but Arius held on to his teachings. Emperor Constantine called for a council in order to settle the dispute. In 325 A.D. three hundred and eighteen bishops and priests assembled from Churches all over the world in Nicea.

At the council, there were lengthy discussions regarding the Arian teaching. St Athanasius, a deacon and secretary to Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria at the time, played a major role in fighting against the Arian teaching. The fathers of the Council proclaimed the faith of the Church in clear terms in what would be the first version of the Nicene Creed.

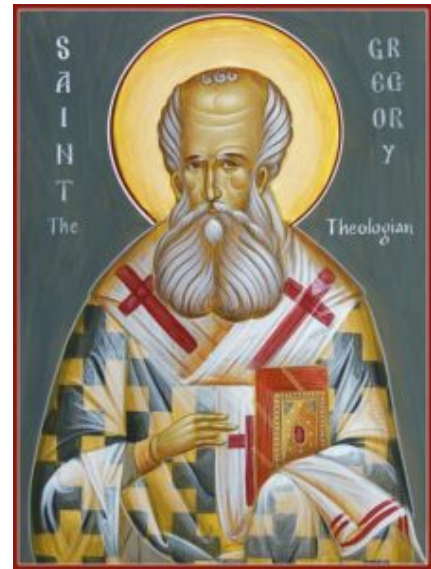
They taught: *“We believe in one God. The Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light; true God of true God; begotten not made; of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made.”*



The Council of Constantinople (381 AD)

A new teaching arose concerning the Holy Spirit. Macedonius, a bishop, and his followers taught that the Holy Spirit was a created being and therefore, He was lesser than God the Father and God the Son. The second ecumenical council was called to address this issue. One hundred and fifty bishops attended the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

St Gregory of Naziansus the Theologian and St. Gregory of Nyssa defended the Orthodox Faith by proclaiming the equal status of the Holy Spirit and thereby the Holy Trinity. There is one God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, having the same essence



The Council added to the Creed: *“And in the One Living Holy Spirit, the life giving Lord of all, who proceeds from the Father: and who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets and the apostles. In the One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, we confess one baptism for the remission of sins and we look for the resurrection of the dead and the new life in the world to come. Amen.”*

The Council of Ephesus (431 AD)

The third ecumenical Council was held in Ephesus in 431 AD. Two hundred bishops gathered to discuss the teachings of Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople. His teaching was that St. Mary gave birth to Jesus Christ but He was only a human being and God came and dwelt in Him later on.

St. Cyril of Alexandria is one of the greatest theologians and had great respect and influence on the Church of the late 4th and 5th centuries. This “exalted and true tower” is remembered to this day for his teachings on St. Mary. As remembered in the fifth Thubden, he “clearly expounded and declared the Incarnation of God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who took flesh.” The Council led by St. Cyril declared Nestorius’ teaching as false and that Jesus Christ is one Person - fully God and fully man. As St. Mary gave birth to God Himself, she is the Theotokos, Mother of God. This Council also decreed



that there should be no more additions and deletions to the Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed.

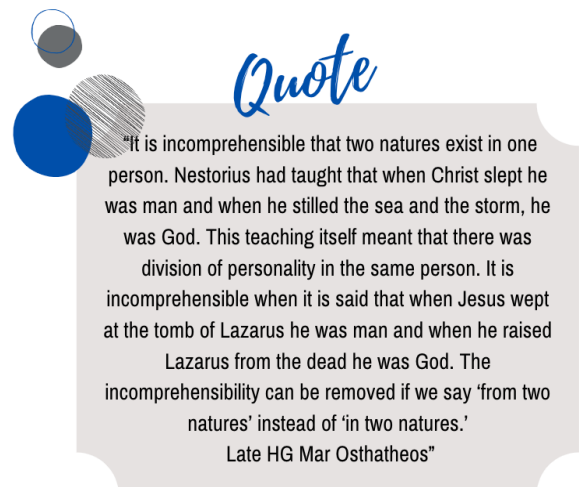
The Rejection of the Council of Chalcedon

We remember in the fifth Thubden of Holy Qurbana that we “proclaim those three sacred, holy, and ecumenical councils of Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus,” and remember the teachings and all the “glorious and God-fearing fathers, bishops, and teachers who participated in them”. With the affirmations from the three Councils we received the Nicene-Constantinople Creed which is referred to as the “**Symbol of Faith**”.

Very important beliefs about the Nature and Person of Christ were also affirmed. **Christology** is a term used to refer to the study of the nature and person of Jesus Christ, including who He is and His Life, notably the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection. Christology and the Person of Christ were also at the center of these Councils and as mentioned before all who participated in these important Councils defended and clarified the teaching given to us. In the fifth Thubden, this is meant when we say that they “*have kept, entrusted, and delivered to us the one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith*”.

The first Council of Nicaea affirmed that Jesus Christ was God and fully Divine, "consubstantial" with the Father, and rejected the Arian contention that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Son, was a created being. This doctrine was reaffirmed at the Councils of Constantinople and Ephesus, and those Councils also affirmed the Trinitarian doctrine of the equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son and that St. Mary was the “God bearer” or Theotokos. All of these affirmations not only resolved controversies and defeated heresies but also upheld the Christology that was given to us.

Our Church believes and proclaims that Christ is fully man and fully God. It is because of our strong belief in this Truth that we also affirm that St. Mary is the Mother of God, the God-bearer (Theotokos).



As we sing in the Maneesa of Mar Severus,

*The Only Begotten Son,
Word of the Father,
Immortal in His nature
And who by His grace
Descended for all mankind
To bring life and salvation
For our fallen human race;
Who did become incarnate
Of the pure Virgin,
The holy and glorious Theotokos;
He became man without change
And was crucified for us,
Christ, who is our Lord and God;*

This opening hymn of the Holy Qurbana clearly proclaims our Christology that Christ is fully man and fully God without division (i.e., “He became man without change”) and that St. Mary is the God-bearer (i.e., “The holy and glorious Theotokos”).

Many factors led to the Council of Chalcedon and the decisions that were made, and we must always remember the courage and wisdom of St. Dioscoros of Alexandria.

Leading up to the Council, St. Dioscorus was outspoken in his defense that Christ's humanity and divinity must be regarded as united in "one incarnate nature," using the words of St. Cyril. One incarnate nature means that after becoming a human being the second person of the Holy Trinity was seen and perceived as one being, not separated as God and human. It was one Christ, who was doing everything. As a disciple of St. Cyril, it is not at all surprising that he was looked to in the ancient Church as a genuine leader and defender of Truth. He also had many political adversaries who opposed the support he provided to a monk named Eutyches. They were bitter also because he refused a letter of Pope Leo I of Rome (known as



the Tome of Leo) to be read to the bishops at an earlier council he presided over.

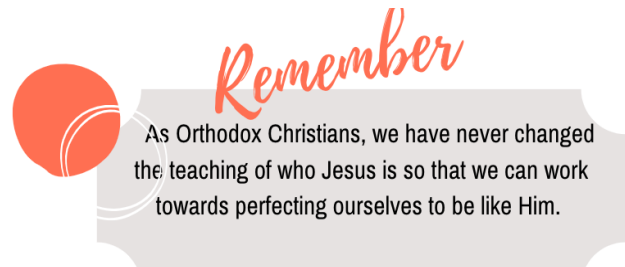
The Council of Chalcedon formulated that Jesus Christ was 'one Person' made known 'in two natures,' and St. Dioscoros found this unacceptable. This statement and the Tome of Leo reintroduced at Chalcedon were rejected by a group of bishops, teachers, and leaders loyal to the affirmations of the first three Councils, and in turn they were excluded from the proceedings.

This split or "schism" in the early Church led to what are now Orthodox Churches in **Egypt, Syria, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Armenia and India** who are commonly referred to as the **Oriental Orthodox Churches**. This group of Churches maintains that the 'in two natures' of Chalcedon was not the tradition of the pre-Chalcedonian Church, which proclaimed 'from two natures' and 'one incarnate nature'.

Summary

A Great Ecumenical Council is not just a meeting of the leaders of the different Churches, but rather an extraordinary *synaxis* (or meeting) of all the Bishops of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church to discuss a fundamental teaching that may be heresy, changing the Apostolic teaching of who Jesus is.

This teaching of the person of Christ is what we have been handed down and kept unchanged through generations, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the prayers of all our faithful departed ancestors. As Orthodox Christians, we have never changed the teaching of who Jesus is so that we can work towards perfecting ourselves to be like Him.



Reflection Questions

1. What was our objection to the Council of Chalcedon? Why was this important?
2. Why is St. Dioscoros remembered in the 5th Thubden during the Holy Qurbana? Why is St. Cyril remembered with added emphasis in the 5th Thubden?
3. What would happen to our Church if we chose to ignore or change the teaching given to us by the Apostles?

Lesson 2: The Holy and Glorious Trinity

Lesson Goals

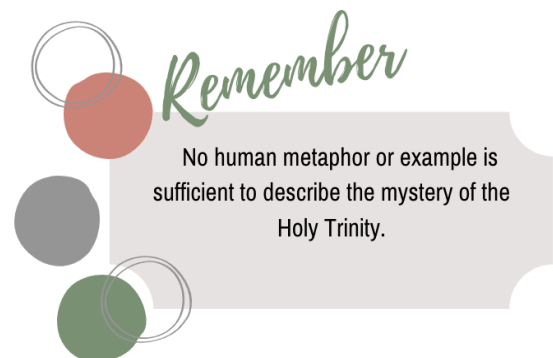
- *I can discuss the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity and the attributes being shared within.*
 - *I can examine various heresies that concern the Holy Trinity.*
 - *I can explore the reference to the Holy Trinity in the Divine Liturgy.*
-

Orthodox Christians worship the One True God who is the Holy Trinity - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Holy Trinity is a mystery, and the human mind cannot comprehend the unity of the Trinity. The Trinity is expressed as three Divine Persons; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Three Persons of the Trinity are equally God, are distinct from each other, and remain eternally united as One God. Therefore, the Holy Trinity is at the same time both 3 and 1. How can we understand this paradox?

There are many examples in modern thought to describe this paradox, such as water. Water can take three different states of matter; solid, liquid, and gas. However, each state of water is still in its essence the same as each other. Another popular metaphor for the Trinity is in looking at the sun. The physical sun is compared to the Father, while the light from the sun is the Son, and the heat from the sun is the Holy Spirit, but they are all connected to each other. None of these metaphors are accurate, however. They lend us to the risk of falling into heresy or false teaching about the Holy Trinity. No human metaphor or example is sufficient to describe the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The human mind is unable to fully contemplate the Holy Trinity; God Who is both Three and One.

As a result, there were many false teachings and beliefs about the Holy Trinity that emerged in the early centuries of the Church. The Orthodox belief in a Trinitarian God was seen by many as polytheism. The adverse reaction to Trinitarian belief has been intended to highlight an extreme position for monotheistic beliefs. One such belief was called Modalism. Modalism stated that God took



on different modes, depending on the activity. In this sense, each mode was similar to God wearing a different mask. So when God created the world, He wore the mask of God the Father. When Christ was born and lived on this earth, God wore the mask of God the Son. When the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost, God wore the mask of God the Spirit. This is a **false** teaching of the Holy Trinity. God did not take on different modes throughout the course of human history. Each Person of the Trinity acted in concordance with the other two Persons. Modalism ended up blurring the lines of distinction between the Persons of the Holy Trinity.

Another major **heresy** of the Church was Arianism. Arianism taught that Christ, Son of God and second person of the Holy Trinity, was a created being, and not divine. Arianism believed that for God to be unbegotten, He had to be uncreated, but if Christ was begotten of the Father, that meant the Son of God was then created. This was a great heresy the Church struggled against for centuries. Arianism subordinated the Second Person of the Trinity under God the Father. All Three Persons of the Trinity are equal in divinity. If Christ was not truly God (as Arianism proclaimed), then our own salvation was put into question.

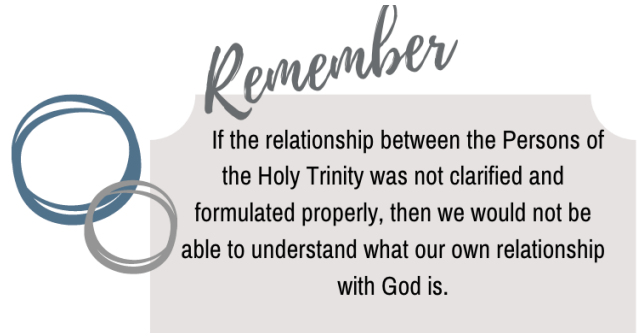
Partialism was another Trinitarian **heresy**. This heresy taught that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit together are components of the one God. This led them to believe that each of the persons of the Trinity is only part God, only becoming fully God when they come together. Oftentimes we hear the analogy of a three leaf clover when referring to the Trinity. This analogy states that each of the leaves represent the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while the whole clover itself represents God. This view is a heresy because it views the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as components or parts of God.

These heresies the Church faced had to be addressed for the sake of our own understanding of God's redeeming salvation for His Creation, which is reflected in the relationship between the Three Persons in the Holy Trinity. If the relationship between the Persons of the Holy Trinity was not clarified and formulated properly, we would not be able to understand what our own relationship with God is.

A True Understanding

St. Gregory of Nazianzus explains how the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are distinct and equal in divinity, but are at the same time One God with one will and one energy. He writes:

"To us there is One God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceedeth from Him is referred to One, though we believe in Three Persons. For one is not more and another less God; nor is One before and another after; nor are They divided in will or parted in power; nor can you find here any of the qualities of divisible things; but the Godhead is, to speak concisely, undivided in separate Persons; and there is one mingling of Light, as it were of three suns joined to each other. When then we look at the Godhead, or the First Cause, or the Monarchia, that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in Whom the Godhead dwells, and at Those Who timelessly and with equal glory have their Being [in] the First Cause--there are Three Whom we worship (Theological Orations V.14)."



St. Gregory is able to concisely explain the paradox of the Trinity and the attributes given to each Person in the Trinity. We cannot distinguish between the Persons of the Trinity other than that the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten by the Father (St. John 3:16, 18; St. John 1:14, 18; I John 4:9), and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (St. John 15:26). The Holy Spirit takes His essence from the Son (Silent prayer at invocation of Holy Spirit during Holy Qurbana, text of St. Mathai Royo). There are not three Gods, but only One. However, there are several attributes that apply equally to all Persons in the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all eternal, self-existent, uncreated, undivided, glorious, holy, of one essence and nature with each other, and divine. There is One Divine Will and Energy between the Three Persons. All Three Persons act with the same Divine Will. St. Gregory also notes that we have to suspend our concept of time because the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost preceded and transcended time. No Person in the Trinity has a beginning or end; God is outside of time.

Trinitarian Liturgy

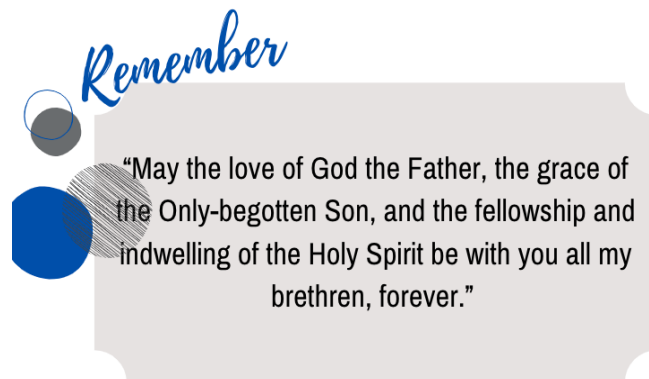
The life of the Trinity is the life of the Church, which is our life in Christ. The liturgical life of the Church is centered around the activity and operation of the Holy Trinity. Our life in the Church begins with baptism, which is done in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (St. Matthew 28:19). Furthermore, we are anointed and consecrated with Holy Chrism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we participate in the liturgical life of the Church, we are joined into the life of the Holy Trinity.

The presence of the Holy Trinity is also seen throughout Holy Qurbana. One example where we witness the presence of the Holy Trinity is the **Blessing of the Censor**. The Blessing of the Censor, which is done before the recitation of the Nicene Creed, **confesses the divinity and holiness of each Person in the Trinity**. The priest takes one chain representing the Father, two chains representing the Son (for He is both human and divine), and the last chain represents the Holy Spirit. The priest holds these chains and proclaims the holiness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Blessing of the Censor is an acknowledgment of faith in the Trinity. The priest is also invoking the blessing of the Trinity for the Anaphora which is to follow. This means that the rest of Holy Qurbana cannot take place without the presence and blessing of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



Another example of the Holy Trinity in Holy Qurbana is the **first benediction of the Anaphora**. This benediction, which is done soon after the Kiss of Peace, says the following:

“May the love of God the Father, the grace of the Only-begotten Son, and the fellowship and indwelling of the Holy Spirit be with you all my brethren, forever.” This benediction is taken from 2 Corinthians 13:14. In this benediction, (Trinitarian blessing), we see different attributes for each Person of the Trinity. This does not mean that each attribute only applies to that specific Person, but rather that all these attributes are qualities of God. The eternal love, grace, and fellowship of God is promised in this benediction.



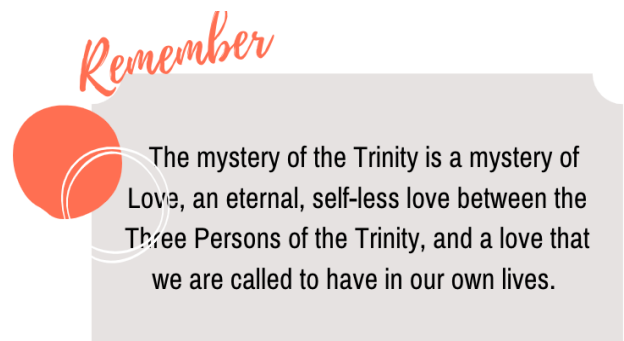
One last example that shows the presence of the Trinity in the Holy Qurbana is the **Elevation of the Mysteries**. This occurs right before the Quqliyons are sung. During this time, the holiness of the Father, Son, and Spirit are again affirmed.

The creation of the world out of love is attributed to the Father. The salvation of the world through the redemptive suffering of Christ is attributed to the Son. The perfection and fulfillment of all that has been promised and given to us in this world and the world to come is attributed to the Spirit. We affirm that we are not holy to commune the Body and Blood of Christ, but through the holiness of the Trinity, we are made worthy.

So, it is very important that we say Amin (so be it) after the priest says : with us is the One Holy Father....with us is the One Holy Son.....with us is the One Living Holy Spirit..... The Holy Trinity is glorified as the Body and Blood are elevated to the heavens, and as we prepare to approach the altar in repentance and humility.

The Holy Trinity: A Mystery of Love

A true understanding of the Trinity is crucial for us as Orthodox Christians. Our understanding of the Trinitarian God is the basis for our understanding of what our purpose is as human beings on this earth. The mystery of the Trinity is a mystery of Love, an eternal, self-less love between the Three Persons of the Trinity, and a love that we are called to have in our own lives.



In the beginning, there was only Love, a love that was shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is in that love that the rest of creation was formed, culminating in the most perfect manifestation of that love, *“Let **Us** make Man in **Our** image, according to **Our** likeness.”* (Genesis 1:26). The plural-possessive adjectives show that the Trinity was involved in the Creation of Man, not just God the Father or God the Son.

We were created out of the love of the Trinity, so that we could love God and be loved by Him. The Holy Trinity is the model for our lives. All human beings were created to be the perfect image and likeness of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Reflection Questions

1. Does the Orthodox Church believe in One God or Three Gods? Explain the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. What is the difference between Modalism, Arianism and Partialism?
3. Find examples of references to the Holy Trinity in the Liturgy.

Lesson 3: Father Almighty

Lesson Goals

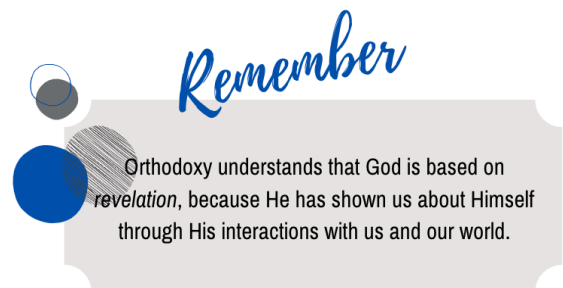
- *I can examine the first paragraph of the Nicene Creed and relate to God the Father.*
- *I can understand and address God as Father, not to be seen just as an authoritative figure alone, but as an expression of love, caring, mercy, trustworthiness and responsibility.*
- *I can explore the Old Testament understanding of God the Father.*

*"And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven."
- St. Matthew 23:9*

These words of the Savior are a test for believers. Some people wrongly believe that Christ was saying that we are not to address any religious intermediary as "father" because it would be an insult to God the Father. This misinterpretation is a clear example of the dangers of relying solely on one's own reading of Scripture to understand faith matters. This interpretation would mean we should not call reverend clergy "Father," as we do in the Orthodox Church, or even call our parents "father." However, no one uses this interpretation as an excuse to call their parents by their first name. So, this is just a hypocritical attack on the ancient churches, including the Orthodox. On the other hand, the Orthodox Church correctly understands Jesus' statement to mean the fullness of glory and honor is indeed due to God the Father. Any humans we call "father" are a small reflection of that glory, but they still deserve that dignity. What can we say then about the honor, glory, power and dignity of God the Father?

Who is God the Father?

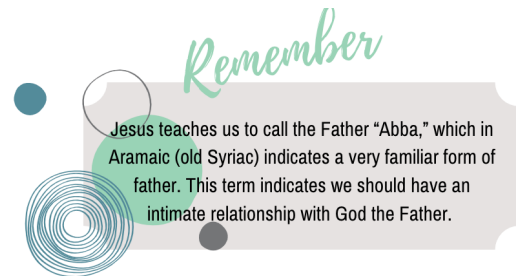
In Orthodoxy, God is our Father and the source of all. Critics argue that people all over the world and throughout the ages understand God as a way to explain what happens in the world. They think God is just our way to find connections and meaning in the world's unrelated, random events. In contrast, Orthodoxy understands that God is based on *revelation*, because He has shown us about Himself through His interactions with us and our world. We may have insight into God's character or intentions based on our life observations and experiences, including our relation to our own father's love for us. But the



fundamental foundation of our faith and understanding comes directly from God. The Church summarizes this understanding of true faith in the 1st clause of the Nicene Creed , “We believe in One True God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.”

“Abba”

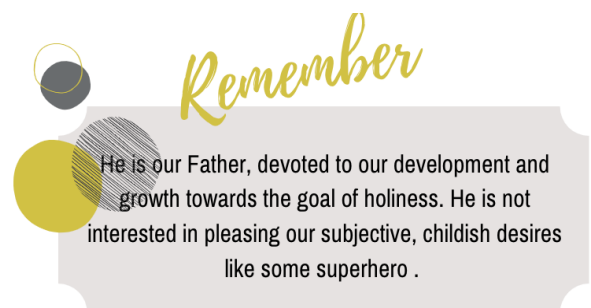
This short but meaningful statement defines God as our Father and points us in the direction of the prayer taught to us by His Son. Jesus teaches us to call the Father “Abba,” which in Aramaic (old Syriac) indicates a very familiar form of father. This term indicates we should have an intimate relationship with God the Father.



In the Lord's Prayer we learn that:

- our will should be to do God's will
- to ask Him for our basic needs (not our wants or desires)
- to focus on our key need to have our sins forgiven
- to demonstrate our identification with our Father by forgiving others
- to ask for protection against evil and evil-doers as we may be unable to avoid evil ourselves.

By these words from His Son we understand that although the Father is “above” or apart from our universe, the proper relation between ourselves and God is of Father to children. He is not a distant king giving random orders, nor a disinterested spirit who sets the universe in motion and then leaves it, nor a mischievous superpowered entity competing with humans for affection, resources, or even romance as seen in other faith traditions. Rather He is our Father, devoted to our development and growth towards the goal of holiness. He is not interested in pleasing our subjective, childish desires like some superhero . The Father wants us to imitate His goodness in our small ways. He is intensely disappointed when we fail but His power and glory do not depend on us at all. This commitment to our individual and



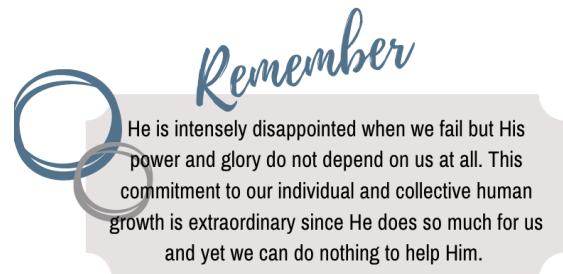
collective human growth is extraordinary since He does so much for us and yet we can do nothing to help Him. We can only honor Him by trying our best and worshiping Him.

The Triune God

The short but powerful Creed definition of the Father points us to God's revelation from prehistoric times as Moses recounted in Genesis. Before time and space, God existed eternally. God referred to Himself grammatically in plural:

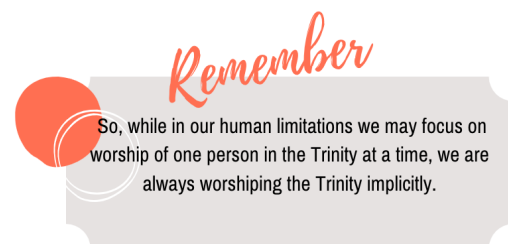
"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." Genesis 1:26

This plurality is also seen in other episodes, like the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:7). Such accounts tell us the Father is God with the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Triune God, the Trinity. How three can be one and one be three is a deep mystery that some persons and faith traditions are unable or unwilling to accept. We understand that whatever substance the Father is, so is the Son and the Holy Spirit (in Greek, *homoousia*). Jesus tells us that to see Him is to see the Father (St. John 14:9). Yet each is a separate, real entity (*hypostasis*) who appears as a person (*prosopon*). So they are three and they are one in a way that we cannot fully understand. Indeed it is right that in a world where so many mysteries exist, for instance in physics, mathematics, psychology and medicine, we should not be worried about not being able to understand the fullness of our God empirically. He is beyond our ability, as the eternal is beyond the finite. Worship of God contains the whole Trinity at all times. So, while in our human limitations we may focus on worship of one person in the Trinity at a time, we are always worshiping the Trinity implicitly.



A Merciful Father

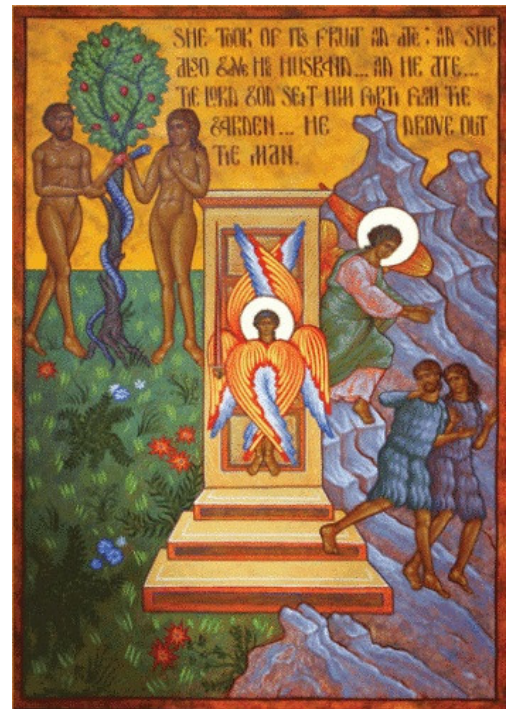
We know more about our Father from the Genesis account. For example, God creates the Garden of Eden for His children, Adam and Eve. Within the Garden is everything that they will need to thrive and multiply. For His own reasons in the Garden, God places 2 trees, one of eternity (everlasting life) and one of brevity (instant knowledge of good and evil and everything in-between) (Genesis 2:9). Many may interpret this as a warning of death from a



vengeful God who is always looking for an opportunity to destroy His creation, but this is completely false. Instead, God is warning us to not chase after instant knowledge because it immediately makes us more impatient, and thereby welcomes the end (Genesis 2:17). By chasing after an impatient goal, we are acknowledging that we are in a hurry, which means that we are under a time limit. In response, we hurry, which means we choose a temporary existence with an end: death.

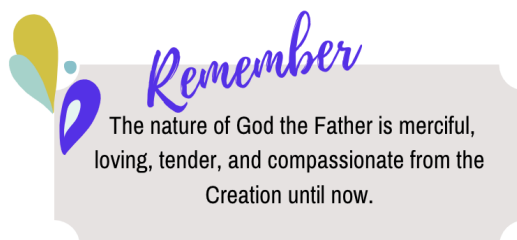
Despite God's warnings, we still chase our own death, being fueled by our own vanity to be as wise as God (Genesis 3:5). Following our own human ambitions and selfishness only leads to our end, just like Adam and Eve, who tried to hide their new found shame with leaves. Many interpreters suggest that the Fall of Man was because of the vengeance of a vicious divine power bent on shaming and punishing broken humans.

The Orthodox Church for whom this Scripture was written corrects these false interpretations. Though our God is omniscient (all knowing), He still questioned Adam and Eve about how they came to recognize their shame. When a human father clearly sees cookie crumbs in his child's mouth and all around, he may also ask the child, "what have you done?" or "what happened to the cookies?"



St. Ephrem teaches that God gave Adam and Eve a chance to repent and be forgiven. Instead they pointed fingers at everyone but themselves. When God speaks of the curse of

Adam on the earth, He is not stating a punishment but rather explaining to Adam and Eve the consequence of introducing disobedience in the world. If humans had been patient and obedient, knowledge of good, evil and all other needs would have been automatically provided.



Sadly, Adam and Eve's impatient, selfish decisions alienated all of Creation for generations to come. Now all people will have to work hard for their daily needs and then in the end, will still meet their death. As they left the Garden of Eden, God made them garments of skin. This showed His continued mercy as they headed

out into a cruel world of their own creation, a broken version of the world God had created for them. They were sent from the Garden of Eden to keep humans away from the tree of Life, a temporary delay. In His endless mercy, God eventually gives humans the food of eternal life, namely the Body and the Blood of His Son. Great is God the Father, the source of mercy!

Old Testament Vengeance vs New Testament Mercy

Some people interpret God's behavior in the Scripture to be severely punishing, almost bloodthirsty. Meanwhile God in the Gospel is distinctly merciful, loving, and forgiving. The Orthodox Church has always corrected this misunderstanding. The nature of God the Father is merciful, loving, tender, and compassionate from the Creation until now.



Some examples of His mercy in the Old Testament include:

- Creation
- His reaction to the Fall of Man
- Cain's life was spared after he mercilessly killing his brother
- Lot's family escaped to Sodom-Gomorra
- Salvation of God's people from Egypt
- His forgiveness of Nineveh in the time of Jonah

His mercy continued all the way until the crucifixion of His Son on the Cross and the presence of the Holy Spirit to comfort and perfect the world. Humans have always been inconsistent in their commitment to God, but God has always been consistent in His faithfulness and trustworthiness to humans. God has always been merciful and full of love. Our human understanding of God may change and require correction at times. One example is when Jesus answered a doubt on the Mosaic law allowing divorce:

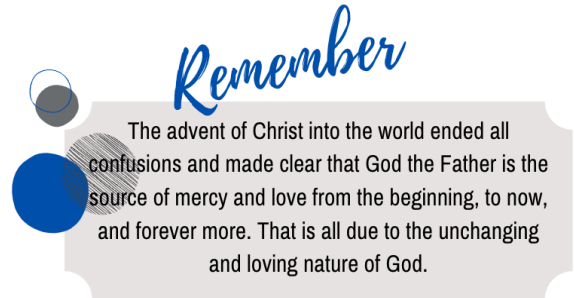
"He said to them, 'Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.'" - St. Matthew 19:8

This verse shows that human understanding of God's intentions may be clouded by human weakness. The advent of Christ into the world ended all confusions and made clear that God the Father is the source of mercy and love from the beginning, to now, and forever more. That is all due to the unchanging and loving nature of God.

Heretical Teachings of God

Modalism

Some people have misunderstood God's nature in how He portrays Himself before humans. They believe that God reveals a different "mode," ("face" or "appearance"), at different times. Sabellius taught this in his ancient heresy, and modern-day preachers knowingly or unintentionally take up this issue too. To be more precise, they claim that in the past, God revealed Himself as the Father, then later revealed Himself as the Son, and then after the Ascension as the Holy Spirit. However, there has always been only one single entity/person with different sides.



Although this heresy would neatly solve the problem of three in one being just one seen from different "angles", it also happens to be wrong and disproven. The best proof against the error is the Epiphany (Theophany/Denaha) when simultaneously present in time and space are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Three separate persons as the Triune, three-in-one God were present.

Gnosticism/Marcionism

Some heresies also argued that there was a difference between Old Testament and New Testament deities. For example, throughout time, many wicked people have attempted to control others by controlling religious information. Specifically, the "truth" of the religion/god is revealed only to certain people and those people share that special knowledge only with some specially-selected people. Further evidence of the "specialness" of that group was bizarre behavior and practices formed by their special knowledge. Unsurprisingly, these "special" groups' practices often involved asking for large amounts of money or other resources. Early Christianity was plagued by such heresies, collectively termed *gnosticism*, which means that they claimed they are the recipients of a special, secret knowledge (in Greek, *gnosis*) that was revealed to highly regarded people, such as Apostles or other saints, who then taught these special people.

While many strains of gnosticism infested the Church, one particularly popular form stated that there was a true god, the father named by Jesus Christ, and in opposition to this true god was a notorious being of lesser stature, generally termed "the demiurge," who

created this world to fulfill his wicked personal desires. Therefore he is actually an agent of evil and deception. A particular variant of this heresy called Marcionism argued for a clear difference between Old and New Testament deities.

However, unlike other forms of gnosticism, Marcionism did not claim special knowledge. The heretic, Marcon, claimed that Apostle St. Paul had stated all this in his epistles but they had to be read “properly.” He also rejected the key Old Testament books because they were in the service of the evil “demiurge.” This is how Marcionism argued for a major distinction between the “good” New Testament god and the “evil” old Testament god.

Remember



There is no evolution or change in God the Father from Scripture to Gospel. God is love in the prehistoric, Mosaic, and Christian times without fail and without blemish. What changes is man's understanding of God's plan, with the fullness of revelation occurring through the teaching of Jesus Christ. Man is allowed to reform his understanding of everything before.

The Orthodox response is to reject this nonsense as misinformed and heretical because there is no evolution or change in God the Father from Scripture to Gospel. God is love in the prehistoric, Mosaic, and Christian times without fail and without blemish. What changes is man's understanding of God's plan, with the fullness of revelation occurring through the teaching of Jesus Christ. Man is allowed to reform his understanding of everything before. What emerges as truth is the tender mercy of God the Father toward us, His children rooted in His nature as love. Glory be to the Triune God.

In summary, God the Father is the Creator of all. He is one person of the Trinity, the Triune God. His mercy causes Him to care for us throughout all of human history and into eternity. While persons who read the Bible in their own way may try to see a difference in God's nature and behavior over time, we know that His nature has not changed then, and now, and nor will change in the future. His nature is based on love and exhibits faithfulness, trustworthiness, and mercy.

Reflection Questions

1. How does the Nicene Creed define our faith regarding God the Father?
2. Does God the Father differ between the Books of Moses and the Gospel? Why or why not?
3. What event in the Bible disproved the Sabellian heresy?
4. List examples of God's mercy in the Bible.
5. How does Marcion's heresy differ from Gnosticism with respect to the source of their knowledge?

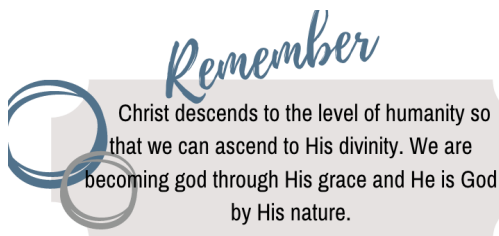
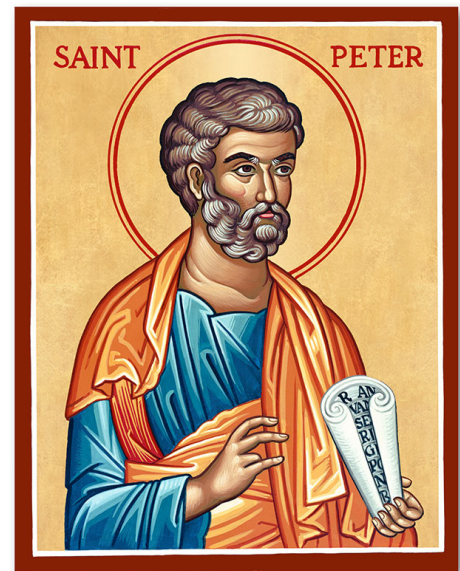
Lesson 4: One Lord Jesus Christ

Lesson Goals

- *I can study how the Nicene Creed describes the Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, Jesus Christ.*
- *I can examine the salvific role of Christ in our lives.*

“Who do you say that I am?”

This is the question that Jesus poses to His disciples in the Gospels (St. Matthew 16:15, St. Mark 8:27, St. Luke 9:18), and one that is still important for us today. If we look at the Gospel of Matthew, the Apostle Peter responds to Jesus saying, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,*” (St. Matthew 16:16). This was a profound confession of faith that came from St. Peter. No one else had ever openly stated until this time that Jesus was the **Messiah**, the Christ, the One prophesied about in the Old Testament, and the One who was meant to save the Israelites. Christ recognizes the faith of Peter and proclaims that, “*on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it,*” (St. Matthew 16:18). The Rock of Faith that Peter confessed is Christ Himself. He is the True Rock, which cannot be overcome by sin, death, or corruption. He is the Rock of the Church and the foundation of our lives. Christ is the Word of God who fills all things and is in all things. The first step to understanding who we are as human beings is understanding who Christ is in our lives. Like the disciples, we have to ask ourselves, “who do we say that Christ is?”

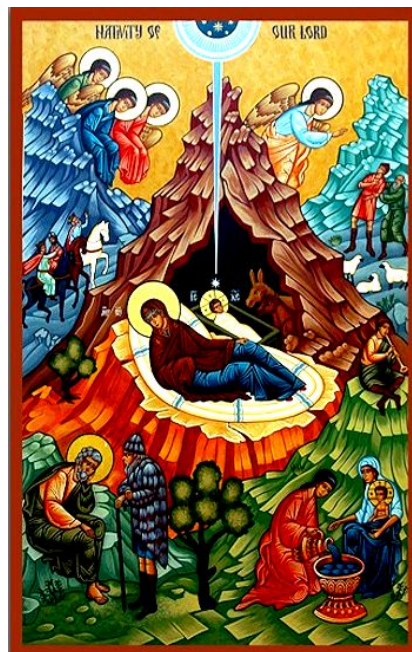


“The One Lord Jesus Christ”

We confess in the Nicene Creed that we believe in “the One Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God.” Jesus Christ is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, “begotten of the Father, before all worlds.” Christ is the pre-existent and eternal Son of God. He is fully God, being “one in essence with

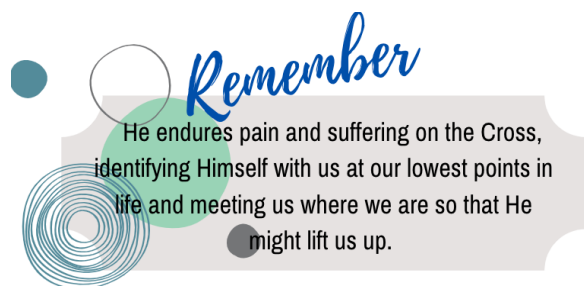
the Father.” Christ has the same Divine Nature as the Father and Holy Spirit. Christ is uncreated, existing without beginning or end.

We later say in the Creed that Christ came down from heaven for our salvation. The Feast of the Nativity marks this event, the **Incarnation** of Christ. It is the Incarnation of Christ that unites mankind with Christ. Christ dwells in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, through the Holy Spirit, and becomes Man. Through the Incarnation, Christ is fully God and fully Man. He does not lose His Divine Nature and there is no change in Himself, but rather He joins all of humanity to Himself. The Incarnation of Christ is the true mystery of Christ. How could God become Man in the womb of a virgin? This is an indescribable mystery, but one that is necessary for our salvation. Without the Incarnation, communion with God is impossible.

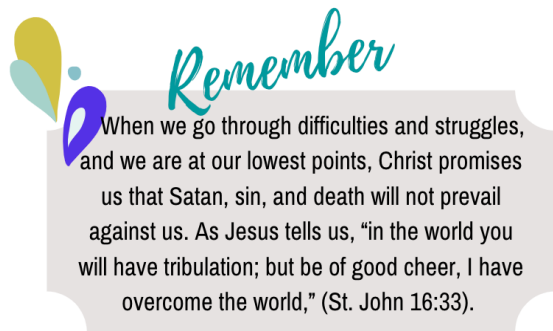


The fourth century saint and prominent Church father, St. Athanasius of Alexandria (mentioned in the fifth thubden of the Holy Qurbona), wrote extensively, in his work *On the Incarnation*, about the birth of our Lord and its significance in our salvation. He writes “God became man so that man might become god.” This statement is foundational in the Orthodox doctrine known as *theosis*. To “become god” most certainly does not mean we become God in essence (note the lowercase “g”, see also Psalm 82:1). Rather St. Athanasius says this to emphasize that Christ descends to the level of humanity so that we can ascend to His divinity. We are becoming god through His grace and He is God by His nature. It is union with God, by which our whole being becomes enveloped in the divinity of God.

In the Creed, the account of the Incarnation is immediately followed by the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ. Along with the Incarnation, these events in the life of Christ make up the **economy of Christ**, or the working of our salvation. Everything that Christ did and continues to do is always for our salvation. Nothing Christ does is for His own benefit and everything He does is always for us. Christ became Incarnate so that He might die for our salvation. Christ takes death upon Himself



for the sake of all mankind so that we might have eternal life in Him. He endures pain and suffering on the Cross, identifying Himself with us at our lowest points in life and meeting us where we are so that He might lift us up. The Resurrection of Christ marks the victory of life over death, of Christ over Hades. Death and corruption have no more power over us

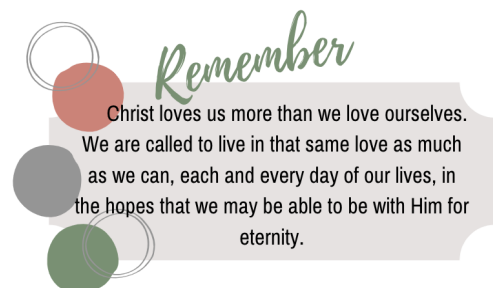


because Christ, being the essence of life itself, tramples Death by His own death. Through the Resurrection of Christ, all of humanity is able to experience the same resurrection. The joy of this great victory over death is ultimately a joy in Christ Himself. After the Resurrection, Christ remained with His Disciples for 40 days. After these 40 days had passed, Christ ascended unto heaven, and now eternally "sits at the right hand of His Father." Even in the Ascension of Christ,

we see the great love that He has for us. Since Christ is perfect God and perfect Man, when He ascended unto heaven, He brought human nature itself to the right hand of God the Father. This is how much He loves us, that He has brought us to the throne of God to be with Him for all eternity. How great does God value us! Not only did Christ, God Himself, become Man and die for us, He but also defeated death and elevated us to the heights of the heavens. Our true worth as human beings is seen in the Person of Christ. How much is our life worth? It is the life of Christ itself.

Christ in our Life

Our understanding of Christ is crucial if we wish to understand our true purpose in life. We are called to participate in the life of Christ so that we can be in eternal communion with Him in the Kingdom of Heaven. Every aspect of our life should be centered around Christ. And why should we love Him? As St. John the Apostle writes, "*we love Him because He first loved us,*" (1 John 4:19). In the life of Christ, we have seen how much Christ loves us through His salvific economy (plan of salvation). In a world full of struggles and difficulties, it is Christ who gives us strength and hope. Christ has given us eternal joy through His Resurrection. As Jesus told Peter, the gates of Hades shall not prevail against the Church. However, Jesus' response does not refer just to the Church. Christ is the foundation of not only the Church, but of our very lives. When we go through difficulties and struggles, and we are at our lowest points, Christ promises us that Satan, sin, and death will not prevail against us. As



Jesus tells us, *“in the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world,”* (St. John 16:33). Christ was born into a dark world, illuminating all of creation with His eternal Light. Likewise, it is in our darkest and most difficult moments of life that Christ illuminates our hearts. It is impossible to fully explain how much Christ has blessed us in our lives and how much more we should desire to love and be with the One who has given us everything. Christ loves us more than we love ourselves. We are called to live in that same love as much as we can, each and every day of our lives, in the hopes that we may be able to be with Him for eternity.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the True Rock of Faith that Peter proclaimed?
2. Briefly summarize the life of Christ, based on the Nicene Creed.
3. How can we participate in the life of Christ on a daily basis?