

WHAT EASTERN CHRISTIANS BELIEVE

The mystery that God is with us is a fact in our lives. His presence has been experienced by people from the beginning right to our own day. People have reflected on this mystery and tried to express it in words: what we call **theology**. Some of these teachings have been recognized by the Church as authentic reflections of its experience of God. These are the doctrines of the Church, which serve much like route markers for us, keeping us along the right road to God. Chief of these are those summarized below: the core teachings of our Church.

THE MYSTERY OF GOD

God's inner life is unknowable, because it is beyond our capacity to understand. He is the Holy One: so unique and perfect that He cannot be compared with others. Using our own reasoning we can only assume that He is the most excellent perfection of everything we know to be holy, true, good and beautiful. But how he is we do not know, because He is beyond all our experience, even beyond existence as we know it. As the Divine Liturgy expresses it, He is *"beyond our grasp or understanding, beyond sight or comprehension."*

"We should certainly avoid too human an image of God, as someone sitting on a throne with his feet on a footstool. His throne and footstool are His infinite omni-potence which embraces everything in the hollow of His hand. The imagery borrowed from created things signifies that God exists in them and outside them, that He both transcends and pervades them, that He surpasses all creatures and yet dwells in them."

(St. Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity*)

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF

God, who is so far beyond us, has reached out to us, revealing to us something of Himself. Everyone can look about and see in the wonders of nature the Creator, whose very Word causes them to be. More especially we catch a glimpse of Him by looking at people, made in His image and likeness. But we get our clearest picture of God because He has directly communicated himself to us in what we call Divine Revelation.

He has freely opened himself to us so that we may share in His divine life. Forming a people, Israel, God dealt with them through judges and kings, priests and prophets. He fed them, protected them, liberated them, loved them, corrected, punished and forgave them. He taught them that He alone is God, compassionate and true to His promises. He showed himself, not only as the Holy One, but as our Father as well.

GOD ACTS IN CHRIST

These signs of God's presence and revelations of His love find their climax in the coming of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, into the world. *"God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him may not die, but may have eternal life"* (John 3:16). The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the supreme expression of God's revelation to us. In Christ we see God as the Lover of mankind, emptying Himself for us. We see Him as the victorious Lord, trampling upon Death and giving life to those in the tomb of separation from God. We see Him as the King of Glory, fully alive and in union with His Father – the definitive and irrevocable communication of God to us.

THE HOLY SPIRIT: GOD WITH US

At the close of His earthy ministry Christ promised His followers that He would send them Another in His place who would be with them forever: *"the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father"* (John 15:26). This Spirit came upon the Church at Pentecost and remains with us as the seal and Guarantee of the Kingdom to come, the power of God working among us. It is the Holy Spirit who *"provides every gift. He is the One who inspires prophecy and perfects the priesthood; it is He who grants wisdom to the illiterate and turns simple*

fishermen into wise theologians. Through Him divine order comes into the organization of the Church" (Vesper Hymn for Pentecost).

THE HOLY TRINITY

And so God the Unknowable has reached out to us in love, revealing Himself in the process as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus mankind's deepest experience God has shown us something of the Living Reality of God which we could never have discovered on our own. We see that God is One, and yet at the same time Three. He is one in essence and being, one in activity and power, but three in person. The Fathers of the Church described this mystery as the Holy Trinity, the sacred community calling us to share in the riches of God-life. They recognized that, by God revealing Himself in this way, we have been given a glance at the very nature of the Unknowable One, so that we might desire fellowship with Him.

THE CHURCH

This fellowship with the Holy Trinity comes to us in the Church, the assembly of those whom God has called to be His people. While the Holy Spirit is the continuation of Christ's divine presence among us, the Church is His Body: the extension of His physical presence in the world. The Church is thus the Temple of God in which the Spirit dwells, as the human body is the dwelling place of the human spirit.

"Christ makes a single body out of this one and that. Thus he who lives in Rome looks on the Indians as his own members. Is there any union to be compared with that? Christ is the Head of all."

(St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 61*)

The Fathers called the Church "the communion in the Holy Spirit," the fellowship He builds which joins us to God in a divine community. Our mission as Church, our purpose for being is *"to proclaim the wonderful acts of God"* (1 Peter 2:9): to be a witness of God's revealing love to all mankind. As members of the Church

we are part of Christ's Body, inseparably joined in Him to the Trinity, the living stones which make up God's temple. In this is our life.

THE HOLY MYSTERIES

We take this life through many ways. Most ways in which the Spirit enlivens us are the holy mysteries or sacraments. A mystery is a prayer of the Church in which we ask the Lord to transform a natural situation into a vehicle of His saving grace: a prayer which, because it is made in His Body's name, is unfailingly answered. Thus water and the re-enacting of Christ's death and resurrection become a way of entering into an intimate relationship with Christ (*baptism*). In the same way, invoking the Holy Spirit over bread and wine enables us to achieve a physical union with Him in His Body (*Eucharist*). Through all the mysteries and the Church's other prayers of blessing, every aspect of our life can be transformed and set apart as a means of praise to the One who calls us to share His life.

"He is the bread of life. Whoever eats life cannot die. ... Go to Him and take your fill, for He is the bread of life. Go to Him and drink, for He is the spring. Go to Him and be enlightened, for He is the light. Go to Him and become free, for where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

(St Ambrose of Milan, *Commentary on Psalm 118*)

THEOSIS

The greatest gift of God to us is the gift of sharing His life. We have been made "*partakers of the divine nature*" (2 Peter 1:4): a process begun in us at our christening.

When we live a life of faith, this relationship is deepened, furthering the process of our divinization or theosis. This movement continues in us through life and death and will not be complete until the resurrection of all mankind on the last day. Then our risen bodies as well as our spirits will share in the resurrection life and partake in glory. "*We know we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is*" (1 John 3:2).

THE THEOTOKOS

In our worship special honor is continually given to the Virgin Mary. This is not simply a matter of pious devotion, In honoring her as *Theotokos* (Mother of God) the Church is affirming two basic aspects of Christian faith: a) that the Jesus whom she bore is truly the Son of God incarnate, dwelling in our midst as true man; and b) that the journey of *theosis* which was opened to us through her assent to Gabriel's message (cf. Luke 1:26-38) has been realized in her person. "*...for this all ages to come shall call me blessed*" (Luke 1:48). Thus it is that we place the icon of the Theotokos containing Christ in her womb on the eastern wall of our churches. This image, placed as it were between heaven and earth, recalls that it is through the Theotokos that God and mankind are joined in Christ.

EXPERIENCING GOD'S REVELATION

We have been brought to experience God's self revelation and to become sharers in His very nature. This is our glory and our joy. This is also the core of the Christian message, the Good News we proclaim at our christening and re-affirm whenever we confess the Nicene Creed. This is the heart of our faith and the source of our confident assurance and trust in God who will complete what He has begun in us as He leads us to an ever greater intimacy with Him.

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