

The Apostle

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Theophany Special

The 6th January is a very important feast day for the Orthodox. On this day (in some Church references, 'Epiphany') we celebrate, not the Three Wise Men (as in the west) but rather the Baptism of Christ. After the Liturgy we have the Great Blessing of the Waters when the priest invokes God's blessing on copious supplies of water in the church, sprinkling the people as they renew their own baptismal commitments to Christ. The people then take the holy (or Jordan) water home for their own drinking and sprinkling. After the feast, and throughout January, they will also have the opportunity of having their homes blessed by the priest (*see page 11*)

This edition of The Apostle features baptism and our entry into the Church and all other associated matters.

God bless you! *Fr Gregory*

In this issue:

Page 2: Theophany — Liturgical

Pages 3 & 4: Renewed at Theophany

Page 5: The Catechumenate

Pages 6 to 8: The Church's Policies of Reception

Page 9 & 10: Fortress Orthodoxy

Page 11: House Blessings

Page 12: Children's Corner

Theophany — Liturgical

When Thou, O Lord, wast baptized in the Jordan,
 The worship of the Trinity was made manifest!
 For the voice of the Father bore witness to Thee,
 And called Thee His beloved Son! And the Spirit, in the form of a dove,
 Confirmed the truthfulness of His word.

O Christ our God, Who hast revealed Thyself
 And hast enlightened the world, glory to Thee! (TROPARION)

Today Thou hast appeared to the universe
 and Thy Light, O Lord, has shone on us
 who with understanding praise Thee:
 Thou hast come and revealed Thyself
 O Light Unapproachable! (KONTAKION)

The voice of the Lord cries over the waters, saying:
 Come all ye, receive the Spirit of wisdom,
 the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of the fear of God,
 even Christ who is made manifest.

Today the nature of water is sanctified.
 Jordan is divided in two and turns back the stream of its waters
 beholding the Master being baptised.

As a man Thou didst come to that river ...
 O Christ our King, and dost hasten O Good One,
 to receive the baptism of a servant
 at the hands of the Forerunner,
 because of our sins, O Lover of Man. (GREAT BLESSING OF THE WATERS)

Renewed at Theophany



We Orthodox celebrate the Feast of the Theophany on January 6th. On this day we commemorate the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan by St. John the Baptist (Mark 1:9-11). This, however, is only one example of a theophany. The Orthodox Study Bible defines a theophany as a 'manifestation of God in His uncreated glory'. Other examples range from the Burning Bush (Exodus 3:1-6) to the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13). The act of Baptism and the words spoken by God 'You are My beloved Son in whom I am well

pleased', together with the Spirit descending upon Christ in the form of a dove, was indeed a manifestation of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - one in essence and undivided.

The use of water to effect Baptism symbolizes many things. Water - together with earth, air and fire - was considered by the ancients to be the elemental source of the Universe. In the Old Testament, both Ezekiel (Chapter 47) and Isaiah (Chapters 12, 35 and 55) make much of water as a sustainer of life - the quencher of thirst and the irrigator of crops. Water is a gift of God which is essential to the preservation of life.

As to the spiritual symbolism of water, there are several aspects of the Baptism of Christ, which are crucially important.

Firstly, water, essential as we have seen for all forms of temporal life, when in conjunction with the power of the Holy Spirit becomes, through the act of immersion, equally essential for

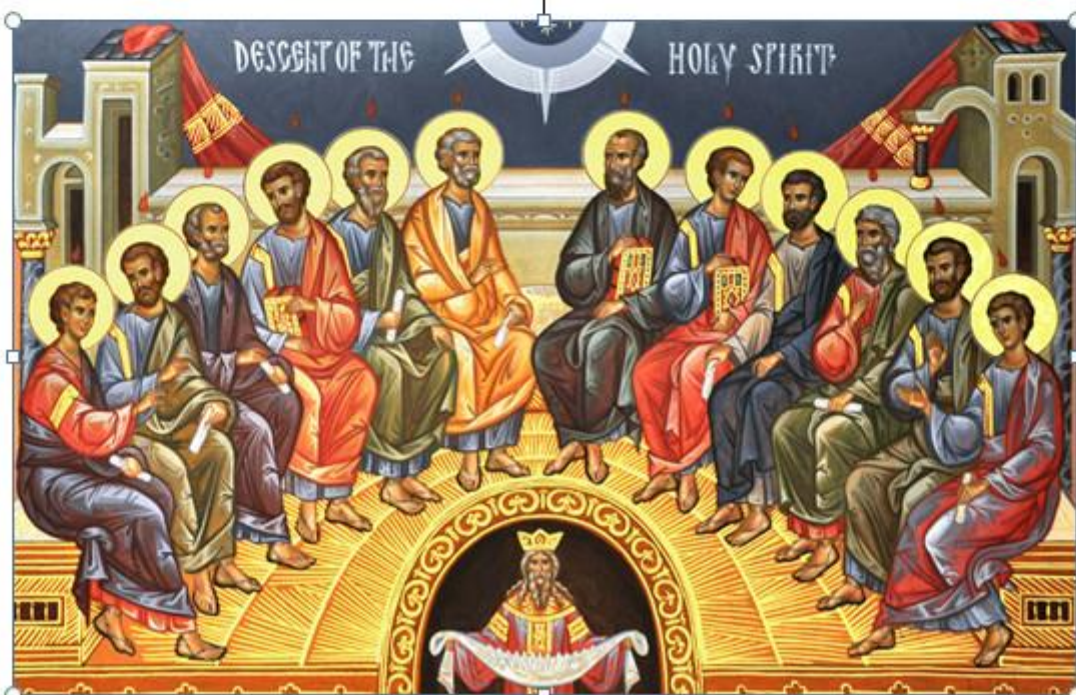
eternal life because it confers incorporation in Christ. Our Lord who allowed Himself to be baptised by St. John the Baptist (the last prophet of the Old, Mosaic Covenant), so that this water in Him might become Life-Giving in the New Covenant of the Church.

Secondly, the act of triple immersion during Baptism, representing the Trinity, constitutes us as members of Christ's Church.

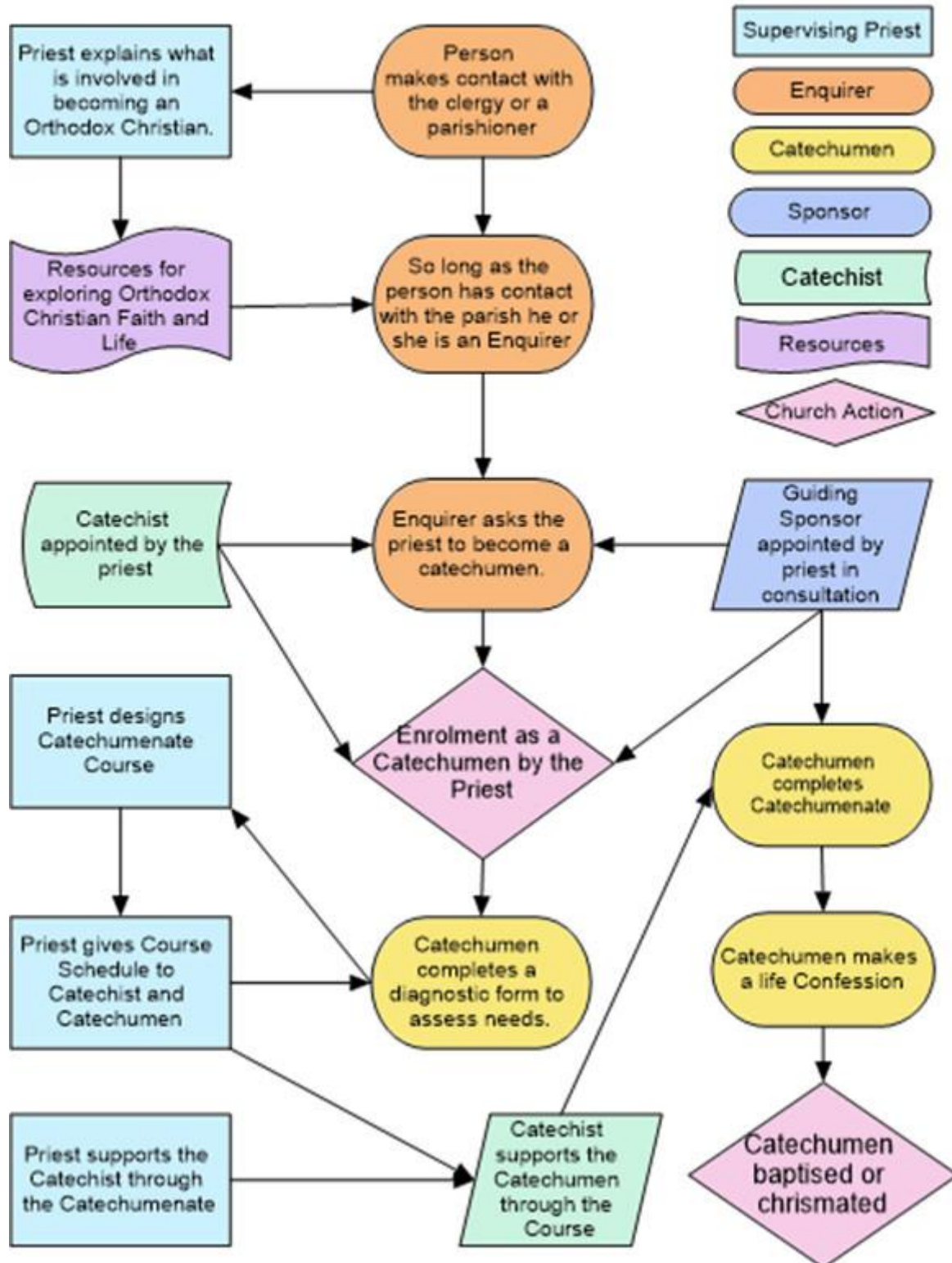
Thirdly, baptism by water brings about our death and rebirth in God so that being crucified in Christ we find that it is no longer ourselves that lives but Christ in us by the power of the Holy Spirit, (Galatians 2:20a).

Thus our baptism initiates a process whereby we are saved through Christ's once-for-all sacrifice, and then go on to grow in spiritual strength through the sacramental life of the Church and finally provide a good defence before the dread judgement seat of Christ, to whom we have united ourselves in baptism.

Theophany is, therefore, an opportune time to renew our baptismal vows and take up again our own cross. In this way we can receive the purifying waters of forgiveness with a good conscience and proceed to be empowered by the wind and fire of Pentecost, the seal of the Spirit in each one of us.



How the Process of becoming Orthodox Works in the Catechumenate





The Church's Policies of Reception

The truth from history is that the Church has always employed various ways of receiving the heterodox, schismatics and irregular communities back into her communion. It is a grave mistake to think that there was, and is, only one way of doing this to the exclusion of all others.

Circumstances alter cases.

There are two principles that the Orthodox apply to any given situation in which there are legitimate but different options. These principles are often misquoted and misunderstood, sometimes in ways that are quite opposite to what they mean. These two principles are (in Greek) "acriveia" and "economia". The simplest definitions of these might be "economia" means "house rules" and "acriveia" means "the strictest house rule." Two common misconceptions are to think that economia means a dispensation and that acriveia is the norm. In fact, economia means ALL the possible rules of the household, acriveia being the strictest of those. In more detail, these definitions will suffice:

ECONOMIA is applying the rules to the household and is the norm. The rules can either be strict or accommodating according to the needs of salvation of the person or a group of persons.

ACRIVEIA is applying the strictest of the rules and is only one of the options available in meeting the needs of salvation of the person or group of persons.

The pastoral and dogmatic decisions that have applied throughout history

to the reception of the heterodox have, in turn, been informed by the Church's self-understanding as the identifiable body of Christ, her ecclesiology. Sometimes there has been a stronger insistence on the grace of salvation within that body alone; at other times a stronger insistence on the ubiquity of divine grace operating in the hearts and lives of all men. There is truth in both positions, according to Scripture and Tradition, and one view should not be set in opposition to the other.

The ecclesiology of St Cyprian - which marked a clear boundary between the Church and that which is outside her communion - tied Baptism and Eucharist closely together. There was "no salvation outside the Church." This mandated the exceptional remedy of baptism, NOT as some rigorists today suppose, for ALL the heretics or schismatics, but for some of them.

At the other end of the theological and pastoral spectrum, St Augustine made a distinction between the correct form of baptism (in the name of the Trinity and by triple immersion or pouring) and the efficacious character of the sacrament which could only be guaranteed in the Church, an identifiable Orthodox Catholic communion of local churches with their bishops. This distinction (perhaps more commonly applied in the Orthodox Christian west than the east) enabled the whole Church to discern which schismatic or heretical bodies and persons should be admitted into communion by either Baptism or Chrismation only—after being examined and instructed. Sometimes Christian bodies or persons in a greater degree of agreement in faith and practice with the Orthodox have been received by a simple renunciation of errors and a profession of faith—without either baptism or chrismation.

At certain times in the history of the Church there have always been those who have pressed for baptism to be administered in all cases of those being received into the Orthodox Church from other heterodox Christian bodies and groups. Once, and for a short period of acceptance only - and even in a Synod (Constantinople, 1756) - baptism alone was prescribed for all the heterodox, and this position was supported at the time by no less

than by the great St Nicodemos the Hagiorite. However, this policy was not always implemented and, in Russia, not at all (except in the previous century and for a very brief period). By 1888 the Greek world had formally reverted to the ancient practice of a mixed economy of discernment of spirits and correctness of form, which remains the overwhelmingly common practice of local Orthodox churches today.

More recently we have seen a resurgence of pressure for a baptism only acriveia policy for all non-Orthodox from within a minority and often schismatic tendency in Orthodoxy. Extremists in this group, often very active online, have taken up the same position as Greek Old Calendarist sects, denying the status of all Christians as Orthodox (including priests!) received by Chrismation only. This extreme position has never been endorsed by the canons of the Church in the time of the Fathers, (a study proving this will be available shortly). It has frequently re-emerged when the Orthodox have felt embattled and then died down in more peaceful times.

On the other hand, there has been an equal and opposite danger, perhaps evident in the (as some might say) controversial Council of Crete (2016), which is now the official policy of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, to exclude baptism as an option for those being received into Orthodoxy from certain churches. Although there is precedent for this exclusion in Tradition (for certain groups and bodies only), other local Orthodox churches have demurred at language that they suppose might imply that heterodox Christian bodies are churches in the full Orthodox sense.

The controversial nature of the decisions of the Council of Crete is not new in Church history and arises from the tension between the positions of both St Augustine and St Cyprian when deciding how to receive the heterodox. Church history shows us that we would not be in the mainstream of Tradition to assume only one possible response sacramentally without a careful spiritual consideration of each case in its context. This was the method of the Fathers and the Councils and, therefore, it should be ours also.

Fr Gregory



Fortress Orthodoxy

(image by Christel SAGNIEZ: Pixabay)

The labels conservative, liberal, traditionalist and progressive have no place or meaning within

Orthodox Christianity. When Orthodox Christians use these words of other Orthodox, usually in a disparaging manner, they do not have the excuse that others outside the Church have, namely an ignorance of the ethos of Christian believing and living. They should know better. There are no true versions of being Orthodox, refashioned in politics or culture to the left or to the right; rather we may only speak in terms of a greater or a lesser degree of faithfulness to God.

If the appreciation of the richness and depth of Tradition is impoverished by a myopic and legalistic frame of mind, then Tradition will be grossly distorted and limited beyond recognition. Some religious seekers, are not exempt from a persistent religious fundamentalism in their world view and this gives them a fortress mentality. Some thereby succumb to an irrational fear of the unfamiliar or even a total alienation from the modern world which is seen as evil, full of anti-christs, sexual deviants, persecuting atheists, freedom crushing wokerati, social justice warriors, (as if social justice was wrong!), leftists, heretics, or, simply, 'strange folk'! These poor souls often seek refuge in the Orthodox Church because they (falsely) see it as a haven of ultra-conservatism, a place of purity and safety. In this frame of mind, sermons about the Creation as being good and the Incarnation as God's redemption and enlightenment of the whole world are filtered out of their consciousness. This is why, I believe, we as priests (including myself) must become more discerning gatekeepers. We are not guardians of a fortress but rather spiritual doctors in a hospital for soul recovery.

There are Orthodox communities, however, where like attracts like; little fortresses against modernity, where clergy teach that evolution is wicked, human created climate change a left wing conspiracy, vaccination the devil's needle, TV

and the internet the jaws of hell, and God forbid, non-Christian friendships a temptation to backslide. The negative impact of these fortress churches cannot be underestimated. Those who do break free of these whitewashed tombs, as Jesus called them (Matthew 23:27), either become militant atheists or simply end up in a spiritual wilderness, alienated from such loathsome travesties of Christianity.

Against such fatal shrinkage of the heart, we set the catholicity of the Church. This is measured by the length, breadth, height and depth of the faith "once for all delivered to the saints," (Jude 3) and in turn is based on the love of God measured in the same way ... in all its "length, breadth, height and depth", indeed infinite in capacity and extent (Ephesians 3:17-19).

The Church in her mission is not an impeccably clean corner in an otherwise dirty room but a glorious and wondrous palace of untold size, fit for the King of Kings, yet populated by sinners such as you or I in the hope of salvation. In here are countless mansions, rooms, corridors, cellars and attics ... many of them unexplored ... and any of these may be inhabited as befits the residents. In this palace there are vast libraries of paper and digital record, of holy persons and sacred places of energies of prayer filling the whole place with Light. Here, there is nothing cramped or ungenerous; nothing hateful or narrow minded. There is no neo-gnostic hatred of the world Christ came to save. There is no fear of the new, no despising of human achievements in the arts, humanities or the sciences. Here questions are welcome; simple pleasures affirmed, life enhancing sexuality embraced and a rich tapestry of stable relationships encouraged. This is Orthodoxy at its best, a place of healing not judgement.

Let us then abandon any vestiges of the fortress mentality in our souls and enter into the generous love of Christ, which is open, costly yet free, and radiant in hope! If there is a true fortress, it is only in our death-conquering God, meaning that we are not here to condemn the world but to transform it utterly by the love of God. There is here, therefore, neither an abandonment of faith nor a surrender to worldly thinking and behaviour, far from it. We do not regard everything outside the fold of the Church as infested with demons. We live in hope as Christians because we have the Light who has come into the world in the flesh, Christ Himself, the Enlightener of all; a Light to bless by rather than a darkness to curse. Who knows where that Light, where Christ, may be found!

Fr Gregory

January House Blessings

Preparing for the Day of the Visit

In anticipation of the arrival of the priest to the house, the oil lamp or candle, hand-censer and incense in the family's icon corner should be prepared. If there is no icon corner, a small table should be placed on the eastern wall of the main room of the dwelling. The table, covered with a white cloth, should be set with one or more icons standing upright, a candle in a candlestand, a hand-censer (if available) and incense. A large bowl along with several sprigs of evergreen bound together with a ribbon should also be placed in the icon corner (or on the table), along with a clearly printed list of the Baptismal names of the members of the household.

Upon the arrival of the Priest, he is to be greeted by all of the family members at home at the time, each Orthodox Christian asking the Priest's blessing before the prayer service begins. Then a family member lights the oil lamp (or candle) and hand-censer and turns off all televisions, radios, etc. in the home. Lights should be turned on in all the rooms of the house that are to be blessed. Then the entire family gathers with the Priest before the icon corner (or the table) to begin the Theophany House Blessing.

Booking the Priest's visit

1. Please complete a house blessing request form at church or send an email to Fr Gregory confirming your address and availability.
2. One of our available clergy will confer the house blessing, but can we suggest please an early booking as, generally speaking, we only do this service during January and demand may be higher this year. Thank you.

Fr Gregory is available mainly on Monday and Friday during the day

Fr Daniel is available all Friday and Saturday and Sunday afternoon.

Fr Emmanuel is available for those living in the Warrington area.

Children's Corner

All the words in this Wordsearch may be found in the account of Jesus' Baptism in the account in St Matthew's Gospel Chapter 3.



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