

Lived Experience and Personal Encounter

The Church is not simply an institution. She is a “mode of existence,” *a way of being*. If this is so, then what follows cannot be an abstract presentation of ideas, but an invitation to enter a way of life. The question is not only what Orthodoxy teaches, but what it means to exist as Orthodox—to see, to live, and to become. The mystery of the Church—even in its institutional dimension—is deeply bound to the being of the human person, to the being of the world, and to the very being of God.

In the first place, ecclesial being is bound to the being of God Himself. In the Church, the human person realizes the image of God in its fullness, entering into communion with God and participating in the “way of being” revealed in the Holy Trinity. This is not a moral achievement, something attained through effort. It is a relational reality—a mode of existence in communion with the world, with others, and with God. For this reason, it cannot be realized as the accomplishment of an isolated individual, but only as an ecclesial event.

Defining the reality of the Church—what we call ecclesiology—is therefore fundamental for the life and teaching of the Church. And yet it is often absent from catechetical formation. Many of the faithful learn little about what the Church truly is. This may explain the lack of ecclesial awareness, even of ecclesial consciousness, among many contemporary Orthodox Christians. For this reason, it is essential that the Church herself be placed at the center of catechesis.

This becomes all the more important when we consider that the Church is the primary space in which faith is lived. In contrast to forms of Christianity that have developed more individualistic ways of experiencing faith, the Orthodox tradition knows

no authentic Christian life outside the Church. To believe as an Orthodox Christian is to believe as a member of the Church, as part of a community. Orthodoxy is not an ideology; it is the Church—it is communion. What matters is not simply what one believes as an individual, but what one believes as a member of the Body. In our time, however, there is the growing danger that Orthodoxy may be reduced to an ideology, to a system of correct individual beliefs. Against this, we must insist that to be Orthodox is not merely to hold true opinions, but to participate in the life of the Church.

At this point, we must also overcome the widespread misconception that the Church is merely an institution. Certainly, the Church has structure, order, and canonical form. But she is not primarily an institution. She is a way of existence—a way in which one lives and is. This will become clearer as we proceed.

Before moving further, however, we must clarify what we mean by “lived experience.” What does it mean to say that we experience something? In modern usage, the term “experience” has largely taken on psychological and ethical connotations. Influenced by Western philosophy and Protestant theology, it is often understood as something individual—what one feels inwardly and expresses through moral action. In this sense, experience becomes a matter of emotion and will, something subjective and inward.

Historically, this understanding is closely tied to the opposition between rationalism and pietism. On the one hand, rationalism emphasizes the intellect and the primacy of thought. On the other hand, pietism reacts by placing emphasis on the heart, on feeling, and on inner experience. Yet both approaches, despite their differences, share a common assumption: that experience is ultimately centered in the individual. These developments, however, arise outside the Orthodox tradition.

This leads us, then, to a decisive question: How does the Orthodox Church understand lived experience? If experience in the Church is not a private or psychological event, but a participa-

tion in a shared mode of existence, then faith itself cannot be understood as an individual conviction alone. It must be something lived, confessed, and received within the communion of the Church. For this reason, the question of experience leads us naturally to the question of faith—not as opinion, but as confession. And the Church expresses this not in isolation, but together, in the simple yet profound words: “I believe.”

“I Believe”

The first fundamental aspect of the Orthodox understanding of experience is what we may call personal faith, in contrast to mere intellectual or rational assent. When we say, as the Creed begins, “I believe,” this phrase can be understood in two distinct ways.

On the one hand, “I believe” may be taken as a formal agreement, an intellectual acceptance of the truths expressed in the Creed—that God is Triune, that Christ possesses two natures, and so forth. In this sense, belief becomes the acknowledgment of doctrinal statements, and one may consider oneself a believer simply by affirming them.

Yet there is a deeper meaning. To say “I believe in one God” is not merely to accept monotheism as a correct idea—a rational acknowledgment that God is one, as opposed to the idea that there are many gods, as the pagans believe. One must go further and understand that saying “I believe” implies the creation of a deep, personal relationship and commitment to the One called “God.” Without this personal relationship, faith remains incomplete. It may exist as a rational affirmation of truth, but it does not yet become life.

To say “I believe” therefore is not simply to affirm something about God, but to entrust oneself to Him. It is an act that involves the whole existence of the human being—freedom, hope, and expectation. Faith looks not only to what is given, but to what is promised; it opens the person toward the future of God, toward the Kingdom. True faith, therefore, is not exhausted in intellectual agreement. It is realized as a personal commitment, a living relationship with God. It is this dimension that reveals what the Orthodox tradition understands as experience—not

something subjective and isolated, but something existential and relational.

But even this is not sufficient. Orthodox experience is not only personal; it is also communal. It is one thing to say "I believe" as an individual—at home, in private, or within the inner life of one's thoughts. It is something altogether different to confess this faith together with others, to be united not only with God, but with fellow believers, within a shared life. Faith, in this sense, binds us not only vertically to God, but also horizontally to one another.

Such communion, however, does not arise automatically. It requires purification—a liberation from the passions, whose deepest root is egocentrism and individualism. As long as a person remains enclosed within the self, communion cannot be realized. Thus, the path toward communal faith necessarily involves a struggle against everything that isolates us from others and from God. This purification constitutes the negative aspect of the spiritual life—the release from self-centeredness. But there is also a positive dimension: the entrance into a new mode of existence, a network of relationships centered not on the self, but on God. This is the movement of love—the turning of the person toward the other, and ultimately toward the Absolute Other, God Himself.

Faith does not precede communion; it takes place within it. It is a gift of the Spirit given through the Church. We can say "I believe" only as part of "We believe." Any faith that does not involve communion is not truly Christian. In confessing Christ, we confess the Church. Faith begins in the "I" and finds its fulfillment in the "we." In this way, lived faith leads beyond the individual and becomes participation in a shared life. It leads into the life of the Church.

But what is the Church, and how is it to be experienced? If we are to move beyond the notion of the Church as merely an institution and begin to understand it as a way of existence, then we must pause here and reflect more deeply. For only then can

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we begin to approach this great and living mystery. For if faith finds its true form only in communion, then the Church is not something external to faith, but its very condition and fulfillment. To understand faith, therefore, we must now ask: what is the Church?

What Makes the Orthodox Church Unique?

If faith leads us into the life of the Church, we must now ask: What kind of reality is this Church into which we are called? What distinguishes her life, her structure, and her witness?

First, the Church is one and only one, and she exists in *history*. The unity of the Church is not an abstract or invisible idea, nor merely a “spiritual” bond among individuals. It is something concrete, embodied, and visible. The Orthodox tradition cannot be satisfied with the notion of an invisible Church, but insists that unity must be realized and manifested within history. For this reason, the call to visible unity remains essential—not only for Orthodoxy, but for all who seek the fullness of the Church’s life.

At the same time, the Church is not only historical; she is also *eschatological*. Her existence in time is constantly oriented toward the future, toward the Kingdom of God. This is not a statement to replace the previous one concerning the historical character of the Church. The Church is called to be an image and foretaste of that Kingdom. Without this eschatological vision, even the most sincere efforts at unity risk becoming reduced to purely human or secular concerns. The Church, therefore, lives always between what is and what is to come, judged not only by her present condition, but by the fullness to which she is called.

Furthermore, the Church is a *relational* reality. She is not a static entity, preserved as a relic of the past, but a living communion. Tradition, therefore, is not the mere conservation of what has been handed down, but its continual reception and re-reception within the life of the Church. What we inherit from the Fathers—dogma, liturgy, ethos—must become existentially present, not simply remembered or repeated. In this way, the past is not lost, but lives again in the present and opens toward the future.

This relational character also shapes the structure and ministry of the Church. The Church is not without order, nor is she an unstructured community. Yet her structures do not exist for their own sake. They exist to express and serve communion—*koinonia*. The same is true of her ministries: they are not autonomous functions, but manifestations of the life of communion. Here, Trinitarian theology, and especially the work of the Holy Spirit, provides the foundation for understanding the Church as a living network of relationships grounded in divine life.

If the Church is truly a sacramental reality, then her life cannot be understood in abstraction, but only through the concrete events in which this life is given and received. It is in Baptism and in the Eucharist that the Church becomes what she is—revealed not as an idea, but as life shared. We must therefore now turn to these fundamental experiences through which the mystery of the Church is made present.

Orthodoxy is not, by its nature, confrontational. It is not merely tolerant, but “communal” and loving. It does not fear difference; it does not fear the “other.” The fear of the other arises from the fall of Adam—it is identical with sin. “Perfect love casts out fear.” Fear of the other reveals insecurity. One who truly believes is not afraid of the other. In this way, Orthodoxy possesses an immeasurable treasure to offer to future generations. If it preserves and cultivates this treasure, it has nothing to fear from living together with others.

What makes the Orthodox Church unique, therefore, is that it preserves, through her worship and theology, the authentic revelation of God as a communion of persons and offers it to the world not as a relic of the past, but as a living way of existence. Rooted in the Incarnation and the experience of the early Church, shaped by the Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils, and expressed in her liturgical, ascetic, and communal life, she unites universality with fidelity to tradition. Without withdrawing from history, she maintains an eschatological vision of the Kingdom, affirming the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of

creation, and thus offers to the modern world not merely a cultural heritage, but a path of life grounded in communion, love, and participation in the life of God.