

# Entering the Orthodox Church

## Fourth Catechism

### The Church and Her Work

#### Outline

1. The Church - the New Paradise
2. Outside the Church there is Waste
3. Return to the New Paradise
4. The Three Central Sacraments
5. The Church is the Real Body of Christ.

Since man's true life is found with God he must return to his father's house. So far, we have said that this house is Paradise and it is man's communion with God. Following the Fall, this communion takes place within the Church, which is the true Paradise. Consequently, fallen man must return to his house again; this house is the Church. In the following section, we will look at the ecclesial and Eucharistic dimension of the parable of the prodigal son, as analysed by St. John Chrysostom.

This analysis is given to the Christians and the Catechumens, specifically, to those who were preparing for Baptism, the "illumined", as they were known. For this reason, it has strong Eucharistic content. It is a fact that during the Triodion season, Lent, the Church prepared the Catechumens for Baptism more intensively. St. John Chrysostom says that we should consider God's love for man, especially during this period. This is both for common gain

and for the benefit it will give the future shining stars who will rise up from the baptismal font, because the grace of the Holy Spirit illuminates them. God is a brilliant sun and those who are baptised receive the light of the noetic sun of righteousness.

Wherever the wheat of prudence and the vine of self-control are not cultivated great hunger prevails, a great famine. This, of course, means that outside the Church, there is famine and spiritual deprivation. Whoever experiences this reality decides to return to the home that he left. His benevolent father is waiting for him. He is ready to show him His love and compassion. It is not a commercial transaction, but an overflow of love and charity. Naturally, this love and communion takes place within the sacraments of the Church. All that follows, including the orders the father gave, demonstrate this reality:

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the first robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry’ (Luke 15:22-24)

The robe, which the father ordered them to dress the son in, is the spiritual robe that was made from the fire of the Holy Spirit. This robe is woven in baptismal water and shows that man is naked apart from God and he loses his beauty. God’s grace dresses him and adorns him. According to St. John Chrysostom, the Father is represented as saying, characteristically, “adorn the dearest members of my son. I can no longer bear to see him unadorned. I can no bear to have my own image abandoned naked.” Through Holy Baptism, one puts on God’s grace. This is why we chant, “All those who have been baptised in Christ, have put on Christ.” Moreover, through Holy Baptism the image, which was blackened and darkened,

is cleansed.

The ring that they put on his hand denotes the spiritual betrothal and that he is guarded by the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of adoption. When he wears this ring, all God's enemies fear him. It demonstrates his communion with God. Even from a distance, it shows that he is the son of God by grace.

The shoes that they put on his feet are God's strength, so that the evil one will not find his heel naked and strike him again. Instead, the baptised person will trample upon the dragon and crush him.

The fatted calf is Christ Himself, who sacrificed Himself for the human race. He is "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). This symbolises the Divine Eucharist, where man is gladdened spiritually and gains new life. Beyond the Church and the Divine Eucharist is the world of corruption and sin.

According to Nicholas Cabasilas, there are three basic sacraments that make up spiritual life. The first is Baptism, the second, Chrismation and the third, is the Divine Eucharist. Through Baptism, man is born spiritually, since the baptismal font is the spiritual womb of the Church. Just as we acquire biological life within our mother's womb, likewise, we acquire spiritual life in the Church's womb, the sacred font. Chrism is the movement that activates the grace, which we received with Holy Baptism. It is not only necessary for someone to be born; he must also live after the birth. This takes place with Holy Chrism. The Divine Eucharist is also life, because we partake of the Body and Blood of Christ.

We are baptised and chrismated, so that we can become members of the Church, commune the immaculate mysteries and live. This is why the Divine Eucharist and Holy

Communion should follow Holy Baptism. The Divine Eucharist is the centre of all the sacraments and the whole of Church life. It is what shows that the Church is the Body of Christ. A materialist philosopher once said, “you are what you eat.” He wanted to demolish metaphysics and all its theories, and stress that the only reality is material. We can also accept this phrase in the sense that when man eats only material food, he is carnal, or materialistic. When he eats spiritual food, the flesh of the Son of man, he is spiritual, i.e. mature and whole.

After examining this Eucharistic dimension of the parable of the prodigal son, St. John Chrysostom concludes by exhorting both the baptised and the illumined, who were at the threshold of Baptism. He admonishes them to reject “every foreign thought” and to direct their souls towards the heavenly Bridegroom, in order to enjoy the grace of the Holy Spirit. “The Redeemer is standing at the door. The physician is in attendance to the faithful. The surgery is open. The medicine is available. The font welcomes all. Grace has spread out. The spiritual robe has been woven by the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Blessed are those who are considered worthy to wear the robe.”

Here we find the opportunity to stress that the Church is not a human organism. It is not a social and charitable organisation. It is the Theanthropic Body of Christ. This means that there is inner spiritual communion between Christians and Christ. Christians are not members of a corporation, but members of the Body of Christ.

In the West, a theory has been developed that differentiates between two kinds of Body. It says that the mystical Body of Christ, where those baptised are members, is one thing. Whereas, the real Body of Christ, which is the Eucharist bread,

found on the Altar Table, is another. However, in the Orthodox Church there is no such distinction. We stress that the Church is the Body of Christ. At the same time it is the body, which He received from the Virgin Mary, deified, and resurrected, it is the Eucharist bread found on the Altar Table, and it is the saints who make up the members of Christ's Body. Thus, we fully comprehend the value of being a Christian, a member of the Body of Christ. In this perspective, we really feel the great gift of Holy Baptism and of the Divine Eucharist.

With Holy Baptism, our members become members of the Body of Christ. This means that each personal sin has weighty significance. St. Paul says that when we sin, we sin against Christ of Whom we are members. We do not own ourselves; we belong to Christ, who made us holy and attached us to Him. It is a sin to trample upon the Body of Christ, which is found in the Holy Chalice. Also, it is a sin to trample upon and ignore the tabernacle (artophorion). What is more, it is just as much of a sin when we sin with our bodies, which are members of the Body of Christ.

We should regard the Church as a house of celebration, where the fatted calf is sacrificed and spiritual gladness prevails. The Church is the spiritual charity of all mankind, "an assembly of heaven and earth".