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1.What is the meaning of the Feast of the Exaltation (or Elevation) of the Precious and Lifegiving Cross? This Feast on the 14th of September commemorates the finding of the Precious and Lifegiving Cross by St. Helen, mother of St. Constantine, in the fourth century, as well as its recovery from the Persians by Emperor Heraclius in the seventh century. It was at this time that it was 'elevated' in the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem, and the icon of the feast shows St. Makarios, Bishop of Jerusalem, raising the Cross high above the crowd for veneration. One of the things we saw as we visited early Christian (and Orthodox) church sites on one of our holidays was the foot of a fine Saxon Cross at St. Paul's, Jarrow. It bears an inscription which translates 'In this unique sign, life is restored to the world.' Our forbears therefore fully understood their relationship with the lifegiving Cross. On this Feast Day, and every day of our lives, we can reaffirm ours. In the words of Fr. Thomas Hopko, "the Cross is held up as the only symbol worthy of our total allegiance."

2.Why do we use incense?

We worship God with our whole being; not just with our lips or in our minds. Our five senses are part of our whole being, so we bring all of them into our worship. We see the message of the icons, the colour of the vestments, the rising smoke of the incense, and the gold of the vessels. We hear the singing of the Liturgy, and the bells of the censer. We touch and embrace each other. We taste the warmth, nourishment and sweetness of the Holy Gifts at communion. We smell the perfume of the incense. All this draws us into our worship, rather than having us stand apart like an audience of outsiders. So as the priest blesses the incense he says: 'Incense we offer unto thee, O Christ our God, as a savour of spiritual sweetness, which do thou receive upon thy most heavenly altar, and send down upon us in return the grace of thine all-holy Spirit'.

3.What should we do when reverencing icons, the Gospel Book, the Shroud etc., during our various services?

The action that comes into all those occasions when we reverence things, is the 'metania'. To do this we bow, and then make the sign of the cross when we straiten up. (That's the Antiochian way; most Orthodox do it the other way around). The normal procedure for reverencing an icon, the Gospel Book, the Shroud etc., is as follows:

1. Stand and face whatever is to be revered. 2. Make two metanias. 3. Kiss whatever is being revered. 4. Make a final metania.

(In Lent, and at times of repentance, the bow in the metania is made right down to the floor)

4.Should I kiss the cup after receiving Communion?

There are differing customs within the Orthodox Churches about what we do when we receive communion, including whether we kiss the chalice afterwards. Since members of our community come from many traditions, we may express our devotions differently when we meet our Lord and God at Communion. As far as common Antiochian practice goes,

our bishop explains it in a beautiful way. He says that when we receive the Holy Gifts we are the chalice, so there is no need to kiss it. Whatever we choose to do, we should follow the tradition that we have been taught, and not be watching others.

5. In the Liturgy we pray that our Metropolitan will be 'rightly dividing the word of thy truth'. What does 'divide' mean in this context?

One meaning of this word, as in the Oxford English Dictionary, is 'to distribute or share'. Since one of a bishop's tasks is to teach and spread the Orthodox Faith, then we pray that he will indeed rightly 'distribute or share' the word of God's truth.

6. The Sunday Matins service seems rather complicated: could you explain some of its meaning?

The correct time for Matins is at dawn; but like many small Orthodox parishes, we serve it before the Liturgy. Its central theme is the Resurrection, and the main parts are as follows.

We start with the lamps unlit. After the usual opening with the Trisagion Prayers, the temple and the sanctuary are censed. The reader then reads the Six Psalms (3, 37, 62, 87, 102 and 142). During which all stand in silence, making no gestures, since we have yet to know the joy of the Resurrection.

Then, after the reading of the Six Psalms, the service gathers in momentum and joy at the coming of the Resurrection. The priest leads the Great Litany, the lamps are lit, and we sing 'God is the Lord and hath appeared unto us . . . the stone, which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner . . . ' whilst the Troparion for the Sunday reinforces the Resurrection theme.

The Matins readings from the Psalter are usually omitted on Sundays, and we move straight on in our celebration with a censing and the Polyeleos (Psalms 134 and 135): 'Praise ye the name of the Lord; O ye servants, praise the Lord. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia'. With the Evlogitaria we reflect on the awesome events of the Resurrection: 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord, teach me Thy statutes . . . the assembly of Angels was amazed. . . the myrrh-bearing women came to Thy tomb . . . as God He is risen from the tomb.' After a Little Litany, the words of the Hypakoe and the Antiphons build on this wonder.

A Prokeimenon in the Sunday Tone ushers in the reading of one of the eleven Eothinon Gospels which recount the events of the Resurrection. After the reading, during the chanting of 'In that we have beheld the resurrection of Christ . . .' and Psalm 50, the Gospel Book is offered for the faithful to venerate. The priest then blesses the faithful with the Gospel Book, and enters the sanctuary through the Holy Doors. Brief petitions to the Apostles and the Theotokos conclude with message of the Resurrection: 'Jesus, having risen from the grave as he foretold, hath given unto us life eternal and great mercy'.

Having witnessed the events of the Resurrection, we now turn to petition and praise. Beginning with 'O Lord, Save thy People and Bless Thine Inheritance', the priest (deacon) beseeches the Lord to hear our petitions through prayers of all His saints, and especially of those who have 'shone forth in the English Land'.

The Canon is a series of hymn-like verses, or troparia, divided into nine sections, or Odes. (Outside Lent, the Second Ode is omitted). Each Ode relates the theme of the Sunday to one of the great biblical canticles, such as the Ode of Moses (Exodus 15:1-19) for Ode 1, or the Prayer of the Three Holy Children (Daniel 3:26-56), for Ode 7. At the end of the Eighth Ode, the priest (deacon) comes to the Holy Doors and proclaims 'the Theotokos

and Mother of the Light let us honour and magnify in song'. We then sing 'More honourable than the Cherubim . . .' with verses from the Magnificat.

The curtains of the Sanctuary are closed, whilst our normal Sunday Matins concludes with the Praises: 'Let every breath praise the Lord . . .' The final verses are interspersed with other verses, or stichera, proclaiming the themes of the Sunday. At the conclusion, the curtains are re-opened, and the priest declares: 'Glory to thee, who hast shown us the light'. We then sing the Great Doxology: 'Glory to God in the Highest . . .' for the gift of the Resurrection, and Matins concludes.

7. It is hard to know how to pray to God when we see so much sickness and distress around us.

When we talk about God, we need to remember that we cannot talk about him behind his back. God is not some academic theory to be argued about, investigated by reading a book, or studying at a university. He is a Person, friend, and lover; who is everywhere present, and whom we can accept into our lives. If we want to learn about God, we need to look with our hearts and minds together.

When we do this; we see his image reflected, albeit imperfectly, in our fellow human beings. We hear his voice talking to us personally in the scriptures. We begin to learn of his love through the experience of love that comes from our spouses, families, friends; and even from complete strangers. We are also able to see the footprints of God in the glory and beauty of Creation.

Yet we also see that much has gone wrong. People can act in evil ways, and Nature can be 'red in tooth and claw'. But seeing how the whole of creation, including ourselves, has gone wrong; can be our starting point.

If we want to discover a message that God has planted in our hearts, we need to ask: Why does evil matter? What is this thing within me that makes me angry with injustice, or grieved by suffering? That is a key question; and if I try to explain it by being 'objective' or 'rational', it doesn't seem to work. Do I really believe that the only difference between a suffering child and a healthy one, is just an arrangement of biological cells? Is my anger and pity about such things, just electric dynamics in the neurons of my brain? It is not that scientific explanations are necessarily wrong, it's just that they are incomplete, because they leave out our hearts.

So what do our hearts tell us? Well, I only saw my father weep once in his life. It was when my mother was diagnosed with the cancer that killed her. My weeping father said: 'I wish it was me instead'. My father was a self-proclaimed agnostic; but in that moment he was a true Christian. Like Christ himself, in his love, he wanted to take on someone else's suffering. Now if we feel the pain of loved ones in that way; how much more does God, who is totally love, completely feel every human pain. And let us remember that the representation of our Orthodox Christian Faith is God as a sinless man crucified. Our God is not 'Him Upstairs'; he is here with every one of us in our suffering.

That brings me to the question about prayer. Prayer is not some kind of mechanical formula to bend the will of a remote God. Our God is neither a bargainer, nor a debt collector. He does not have to be bought. Instead, He is freely with us and will support us. Our prayers should therefore aim at opening up ourselves to God. The Book of Job warns us against standing apart from God and constructing our own explanations, as did Job's 'Comforters'. Yes: we talk to God, we share our feelings with him, we ask for what we think we need; but we don't turn our relationship with him into a commercial deal among equals.

Nor do we expect to turn 'God ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-existing and eternally the same' into a simple explainable model. The purpose of prayer is to change ourselves; not to change God.

Finally, we remember that our ultimate aim is to live in God's Kingdom, which is not of this world. Of course, I thank God for doctors and drugs, just as I thank him for food and drink; but our ultimate and lasting salvation is not in 'princes or the sons of men', nor the things of this world that passes away. In the sacraments of the Church we get a taste of God's Kingdom. So, for example, the sacrament of anointing (Holy Unction) is not an automatic formula for curing disease. Instead, it gives us a taste of sharing in Christ (= the Anointed One).

When faith does bring about a cure, it should be the starting point for our next step towards God; not just a relieved wrapping up of a past problem.

And the miracles in the Bible? Well, they are not Christ's attempt to temporarily patch up a world that has gone wrong. When challenged about his miracles he says: 'But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian'. Clearly, if God's miracles were intended to permanently 'repair' our fallen and broken Creation, then they failed. But that was not their purpose. As the Gospel according to John frequently tells us, they were signs to show us who Christ was. The miracle that will restore us, and the whole of Creation, to how it was intended to be: is the Resurrection.

When we pray to God, therefore, we should pray to someone close to us who is concerned about our humanity. Our hopes and fears, things great and small; all are relevant. But we also remember the ultimate goal, which is not just patching up the here and now, but our living with God in his Kingdom for ever.

8. Why do we fast on Wednesdays as well as Fridays?

On Friday we fast in remembrance of Our Lord's Passion and Crucifixion on that day. Wednesday is also linked to the Passion and Crucifixion, as the day on which Judas Iscariot conspired to betray Our Lord.

9. Does the Orthodox Church have an advent season?

It is sometimes said that we do not have a season of Advent. Whilst this is verbally true, it is quite untrue to say that we do not have a whole season of preparation for the coming ('advent') of God in the flesh at Christmas. From 15th November we prepare with fasting for this great event, and the themes and words of our services increasingly emphasise God's advent in the flesh. I recommend *The Winter Pascha* by Fr Thomas Hopko as an inspiring, and instructional, read on the subject.

10. I have heard of an Orthodox service called Forgiveness Vespers: what is this?

We use this service to prepare ourselves for Lent, by asking forgiveness from each other; as Our Lord tells us in Matthew 6:14-15. The service is essentially the Great Vespers as done on Saturday evenings, with the observance of mutual forgiveness at the end. The service rubric explains what happens at the end of the service: "The priest stands beside the analogion, and the faithful come up one by one and venerate the ikon, after which each makes a prostration before the priest, saying : Forgive me, a sinner. The priest also makes a prostration before each, saying the same words; and then the other receives his blessing and kisses his hand. Meanwhile the choir sings quietly the irmoi of the Canon at Easter Matins. After receiving the priest's blessing, the faithful may also ask forgiveness of one another."

11. The rules for fasting in the Orthodox Church seem rather confusing: can you explain them?

Here is a selection of the main principles:

1. Fasting: means that we abstain from animal products, oil, and wine. 'Wine' includes all alcohol. Invertebrates do not count as animals.
2. Fast days: means Wednesdays, Fridays, and all days within a Fasting Season.
3. Fasting Seasons: are Great Lent, the Apostles Fast, the Dormition Fast, and the Nativity Fast.
4. Limited fast days: Fasting may be less severe; with 'Wine and Oil', or 'Fish Wine and Oil' allowed. This can occur when the celebration of an important feast coincides with a fast day. An important example of this principle is the allowing of fish, wine and oil for the Feast of the Annunciation during Great Lent.

Also, Tuesdays and Thursdays are limited fast days during the Apostles Fast, the Dormition Fast, and the Nativity Fast; since these fasts are meant to be less severe than Great Lent.

5. Saturdays and Sundays: are never fast days outside Fasting Seasons, and are only limited fast days within them.

12. What's the difference between a Troparion and a Kontakion?

The word Troparion is a general term for hymn. Most commonly, we come across it in two places. Firstly, it refers to the apolytikion (or "dismissal hymn"); the hymn which closes Vespers and serves as a thematic hymn which is repeated through the services of the day. (Remembering that the Church's daily worship cycle begins at Vespers). Secondly, it is used to describe the stanzas which follow opening irmos for each ode of the Canon.

Originally, the Kontakion was an extended homily in verse expanding on the subject of the feast, saint's day etc. It consisted of many stanzas, and the kontakia were so long that the scroll bearing the text was rolled up on a pole for use in the services. The name kontakion relates to 'from the pole' in Greek. In current practice, the kontakion has been shortened to two stanzas, which are sung or read after the Sixth Ode of the Canon at Matins, and to just one stanza; which is sung after the troparia at the Divine Liturgy, and most other services of the daily cycle. The kontakion is not sung at Vespers.

13. Why is it necessary to come to Confession? How often should we come?

In the early Church, Confession was made publicly to one's own local Christian community. As the Church grew, this became impractical, so the priest 'stood in' for the community, as a witness of the penitent's repentance. However, Confession is made to God, not the priest. Confession is one of the Sacraments of the Church, not just a talk shop. So, after hearing a confession, the priest communicates God's forgiveness to the penitent, gives absolution, and reconciles them to the teaching of the Church. Clearly, the priest cannot do this if he doesn't know what is to be forgiven and absolved.

The priest also has a role, having witnessed our confession, of offering pastoral advice. Whilst we may ask anyone for their opinion and advice; confession and reconciliation in the context of an Orthodox sacramental service, has the authority of the Church and her teaching. And we are reminded in the Antiochian Patriarchate's 'Pastoral Guide to the Holy Mysteries' (Article 6.1) that neither a general absolution given by the priest to the whole congregation, nor our repeating of the prayer 'I believe, Lord, and I confess . . . ' is an adequate substitute for correct and proper Confession.

Finally, how often should we confess? Here there is no mechanical rule, but there two questions that should help us decide when to come. First; 'Am I troubled by some wrong I have done?' Second; 'Is this a fasting season when I am asked to review my actions

before approaching communion at a major feast of the Church?' If the answer to either of these questions is, 'Yes'; then the sacrament of Confession and Reconciliation offers a remedy.

14. The Orthodox Church seems to hold itself apart from ecumenical movements like the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Why?

It is important to realise that at every Vespers, Matins, Liturgy, and at other services of our Faith; we petition God in the Great Litany with these words:

'For the peace of the whole world, the good estate of the holy churches of God, and the union of all; let us pray to the Lord'

so in one sense; having a special occasion of 'Prayer for Christian Unity' is unnecessary. But we also remember how much harm has been done to the Unity of the Faith by those, including perhaps ourselves as individuals, who form opinions outside the Apostolic Tradition. We should remember that the word 'heresy' comes from the Greek source that implies concepts like 'faction', and 'to choose'. Let our choice be only that which has been handed down to us from the Apostles.

15. What happens at the Feast of Theophany?

The Feast of the Theophany has two services for the Blessing of the Waters.

The first service, "The Great Blessing of the Waters", blesses the water that is used in our community throughout the year, both in our homes and in the church. This includes the water used for blessing people, houses, icons, etc.; as well as that used in the Proskomedia before the Liturgy, when the priest prepares the wine, and pours water into the wine saying, "Blessed is the union of Thy holy things". Blessed water may be used to sanctify all that we do with it: drink, wash, water plants, clean our home, or refresh animals and livestock.

In the second service, "The Lesser Blessing of the Waters", we fulfil our responsibility as stewards of God's Creation by blessing the water in the ponds, lakes, rivers, and seas.

16. We hear the words 'rational worship' in the Divine Liturgy service: what does this mean?

The Orthodox Church has always distinguished between mindless, unthinking, animal behaviour; and that required of us human beings who are created in the image of God, and are able to think and know. When I feed my pigs, they push past me without thought, to get at their feed in the trough. Sadly, many human beings have been drawn by their self indulgence, paganism, or belief that they are just a superior ape; into sometimes acting more like such undiscerning animals.

'Rational' has therefore less to do with artificial academic brainwork, and much more to do with us asserting our God-given brains and insight into being His children; able to make decisions, and wanting to be like Him. We therefore worship Him with understanding, consciously knowing that we are His children; not fearful pagan slaves to a bullying god, nor indiscriminating animals full of 'cupboard love'.

17. Why are we asked to chant or read the epistle in a monotone?

The purpose of such apparently impersonal reading is to focus on what is being read, rather than on the person who reads. Once someone tries to read in a way that 'interprets' or puts 'meaning' into the passage, the danger is that we get that person's interpretation or meaning. What they choose to emphasise, where they decide to pause, or what they run over quickly; can turn the reading into a personal statement, rather than a reading. It's also worth noting that the different punctuations we find in various English translations, were not there in the original Greek.

However, it is better to volunteer to read in a simple, plain way; rather than being afraid to read at all, because you can't chant or read on a monotone.

18. There seems to be an awful lot of fasting in the Orthodox Church: isn't this very difficult to deal with?

If we find difficulty in fasting, perhaps it is worth rejecting two false beliefs.

The first is that fasting rules must be obeyed in order to negotiate a deal with a legalistic god. The second is that our faith has nothing to do with our bodies, and is all about 'spirituality'.

Fasting is a form of training for both our bodies and our spirits. It helps us to follow God's will for our salvation, by being sons and daughters of our merciful Father, rather than slaves of animal self-indulgence. So we fast and pray to our God as Father; rather than truculently obeying a set of legalistic rules. Hence true fasting is not just focussing on the label of that 'vegetable' soup packet in order to worry about whether it contains some milk products. Nor should we feel terribly virtuous because we have made do with expensive lobster, which is theoretically correct, rather than eating cheap cheese, which isn't.

But the rules are there to be taken seriously as a support for our efforts. For example, I don't know of any medical condition that requires me to drink alcohol on fast days that are meant to be alcohol free.

19. Why do we make the sign of the cross with our right hand?

Our worship and our scriptures are an important expression of our Orthodox Faith. One of the ways that we receive our Orthodox Faith is through the icons. We normally think of an icon as one of the beautiful images we see around us in the church, but the language of the scriptures can also express in words what the icons express with images.

One example of this is the many uses of the 'right hand' of God as an icon of his strength and power. For example, in the Old Testament, when God has protected the fleeing Israelites by drowning the pursuing Egyptians in the Red Sea, then Moses sings a song of praise to God which includes: 'Thy right hand, O God, hath shattered thine enemies . . . ' (Read the story in Chapters 14 and 15 of Exodus). The priest and deacon also recite from this passage when they put on the right hand cuff of their vestments.

In the New Testament, Our Lord says to the high priest: 'You will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.' (See the story of Our Lord's trial in Matthew 26). This last example also reflects what our worship teaches when we say the Creed together: ' . . . and he sitteth at the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again with glory . . . '

So it is not surprising that we use our right hand to reflect the power and blessing of God when we make the sign of the cross.