

What is an Orthodox Christian?¹

Fr. John W. Konkle

An Orthodox Christian is one who is learning to die properly, that is, learning to die with Christ rather than dying alone. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. He is with us in every event of our life from conception on, through all the joys and sorrows of life. But his presence would be entirely for nought were he not with us, and we with him, in our death. *The* consequence of sin is death; it is to death that we are ultimately in bondage, and it is from the bondage of death that Christ comes to free us by dying with us (Heb 2:14-15). We receive his invitation to freedom by willingly dying with him.

Jesus' counter-intuitive approach to obtaining life is emphasized when he tells all those who want to follow him that to do so they must deny themselves and take up their cross (Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34). The cross is an instrument of death, and thus the way that we truly follow him is to be co-crucified with him, co-buried with him, so that we might be co-raised with him, as is so beautifully expressed in our baptismal mystery (Rom 6:3ff). The instrument of death becomes *the life-giving cross* when we willingly die on it with him.

Luke includes in Jesus' instructions that we are to take up our cross *daily* (καθ' ἡμέραν; Lk 9:23). St. Paul picks up this emphasis when he says to the Corinthians, "I die *daily*" (καθ' ἡμέραν ἀποθνῄσκω; 1Cor 15:31; emphasis added). And again:

We are ... *always* (πάντοτε) carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are *always* (ἀεὶ) delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor 4:8-11; emphasis added)

Our cross, *learning* to die with our Lord, is not a once and done experience, but a way of life. How, then, do we learn to die properly, that is, to die with him? In three arenas: the Mysteries of the Church, the ascetic practices of the Church, and the daily trials of life.

If we are prayerfully attentive to the hymns and actions of the services for baptism, chrismation, communion, confession, and the rest of the mysteries, we'll see that in every case—even in the mystery of marriage—we are being united to the crucified Christ who is inviting us to die with him so that he might fill us with his life.

We prepare for and participate in these mysteries by relentless engagement in four ascetic practices: acts of mercy, prayer, fasting, and spiritual reading (Mt 6:1-18; Ps 118). In all four of

¹ First delivered as a talk at the Flint Area Dinner, 2025.01.23, and slightly modified for the *Burning Bush*, Spring 2025, entitled "What is an Orthodox Christian?"

these activities we are learning to experience *voluntarily* that without Christ we can do nothing (Jn 15:5), and that to be with Christ, to be abiding with him as a branch abides in the vine, we have to die to ourselves and the things of this world so that the fruit produced in us is produced by him (Jn 15:1-8).

The third arena in which we learn to die with Christ is the trials and tribulations—large and small—that we encounter daily: God’s 24/7 schoolroom. Such afflictions are, by their very nature, *involuntary*, but when they are *voluntarily* embraced with joy, which we can do because we have learned voluntary suffering from our ascetic practices, we become yoked to Christ our teacher who trains us in the way of divinely infused endurance which in turn engenders our perfection in the fruit of the Spirit (Jam 1:2-4; Mt 11:28-30; Gal 5:22-23).

Innumerable saints, a great cloud of witnesses, have walked this path before us, and they invite us to join them:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* (Heb 12:1-2; emphasis added)

In summary, because of our sin, we are all going to die. Those who die alone find hell to be a destination. Those who die with Christ find hell to be a doorway into Paradise. Let us receive our Lord’s invitation to practice death through the Mysteries, ascetic activities, and the joyful embrace of involuntary trials, so that at a time we do not expect, we will find ourselves dying with him, being raised into Life, and sitting together with him at the right hand of the throne of our Father.

For Further Reading

Stăniloae, St. Dumitru. 1970. “The Victory of the Cross.” Fairacres Publications. 24 pages.

An extraordinarily insightful booklet, first delivered as a talk to the nuns at Fairacres in 1970, that explores the variety of contexts in which we experience the cross in our daily life, and how embracing the cross in these situations is the only way we come to be united to Christ and transformed into his likeness.

Palamas, St. Gregory. 2009. “Homily 11,” especially §7 of *The Homilies*. Mount Thabor Publishing.

I have a brief article on this entitled, “The Mysteries of the Cross” available online: <https://dormitionmonastery.org/files/fjwk/burningbush/BB34.1Spring2021mysteriesOfTheCrossPalamas.pdf>