

"Four Principles That Define the Church"

"God's Church is like a large, holy family in which God is the Father, the Holy Mother our mother, the Angels and saints our elder brothers and sisters, and we are all brothers and sisters, born by the Church in one font, baptized by the Holy Spirit." (St. John of Kronstadt)

In St. John of Kronstadt's definition, the Holy Church is marked by four truths: (1) the Church belongs to God, (2) it is a spiritual family, (3) God is the head of the Church, and (4) the Virgin Mary is the mother of all the faithful.

The first distinguishing feature of the Church is that it belongs to God. Does the word Church, then, refer to a building or to the people? Often, we confuse the Church with a physical building constructed of materials like stone or brick. In reality, the "stones" of the church are our souls. We who consider ourselves Orthodox Christians are the "eklesia" - the ones called to gather in His name.

To belong to God means three things. It means that our will is being conformed to His will through repentance, that our hearts love Him through prayer and worship, and that our bodies serve His mission in the world.

We, the Church named after the Feast of the Falling Asleep of the Virgin Mary, are very close to making a major step in our growth- the building of a Holy Temple dedicated to the worship of God. The "building" will never be something that belongs to us. It, along with us, will always be the possession of God. As long as our will, heart, and works are serving Christ through repentance, worship, and actions, we will have a proper relationship with the accomplishments of our community. As soon as something is accomplished, it becomes God's to be used to glorify Him alone!

The second aspect of the Church is that the members make up a spiritual family. As we know from practical experience, families that are related by blood have problems. In the Church, however, we have a bond stronger than blood; we are related by the blood of Christ.

The death and resurrection of Christ bind the members of a Church together. The death of Christ calls upon us to put to death all that is sinful.

"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice" (Eph 4:30-31).

The resurrection of Christ calls upon us to walk in the Spirit.

" . . . and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 4:33-5:2).

As a spiritual family, the Church has a greater likelihood of manifesting peace and grace than a family that has not made Christ its head.

The third aspect of the Church is that the head is God the Holy Trinity. The Trinity exists in a definite expression. God is actually three and at the same time One. God is the Father, who is the "fountain-head" of the Trinity. God is the Son, born from eternity, by whom we are saved. God is the Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Father by whom we are made Holy. There is a definite order in the Trinity and at the same time equality.

In the Church, Christ appointed Bishops to be the head of the local communities. The priest are servants of the Bishops and the deacons are servants of the priests. The three together manifest a Trinitarian relationship. All are clergy, but each has a distinct role. The "people of God," those baptized and chrismated in the Church, are members of an order that is to work in cooperation with the clergy.

"But you (the people) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Within the royal priesthood, each has a role to play.

"For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." (Romans 12:4-8)
Each member of the Church has been gifted with a specific ministry. With this understanding, whoever is not involved in a ministry is not fulfilling his or her membership.

The fourth aspect of the Church is that the Virgin Mary is our Spiritual mother. Every Orthodox Church is gifted with a special advocate or patron. The mother of our Lord is the advocate of our community. She is someone whom we turn to in prayer for protection, guidance, and inspiration. The sweet love of the presence of our Lord's mother has permeated the Orthodox Church throughout history. Her example of having fulfilled the prayer, "Thy will be done," serves as the ultimate lesson for Christians. The Church belongs to God, and we are his spiritual family. He is the head, and the Mother of our Lord watches over us. These guiding principles have safe-guarded the Church

throughout time. They have always been the recourse when communities seem to lose their way.

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