

## LETTER TO AN INQUIRER

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your e-mail inquiring about Holy Cross parish and the Orthodox Church. You seem to be a genuine seeker so I am not surprised that you have visited a lot of different churches over the past few years. I remember many years ago I read a tract from Campus Crusade for Christ called *The Four Spiritual Laws*. The tract sought to lead people to make a decision for Christ and then directed them to find a Bible-believing church. But how does a new believer, I asked myself, know if a church is in fact Bible-believing? How do even mature believers know? Each of the now more than 30,000 disagreeing, competing and often internally conflicted denominations, and every one of the vast number of non-denominational, interdenominational and independent churches, all profess to go by the Bible. Even pseudo-Christian groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses claim to go by the Bible; and the Mormons make the same claim at least "as far as it is accurately translated."

So how does one find the correct Church? Our Lord established His Church during His earthly ministry (Matt. 16:18), promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18), commanded His followers to "hear the church" (Matt. 18:17), and sent the Holy Spirit to lead it into all truth (John 16:13). "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). The Church Christ founded "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine [the faith once delivered unto the saints' (Jude 3)] and fellowship, and in breaking of bread [the Holy Eucharist] and in prayers" (Acts 2:42).

For the first thousand years of Christianity there was essentially one Church. Whether you were a Christian in Jerusalem, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, the continent of Europe, or all the way West to the British Isles, you belonged to the same Church. As the Church grew it developed into five Patriarchates or regional centers for administrative purposes: Rome; Constantinople, the New Rome; Alexandria in Egypt; Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians; and Jerusalem. History records that the Gospel was brought to Britain by St. Joseph of Arimathea directly from Jerusalem in AD 37, and St. Aristobulus of whom St. Paul writes in the New Testament (Rom. 16:10) later became the first bishop there.

In 1054 there was a tragic division in the Church. The Patriarchate of Rome changed the Nicene Creed and used that change to enforce a novel claim of its bishop to be the head of the Church. This attempt failed and Rome found itself separate from the other four Patriarchates, and thus the Roman Church began a separate existence eventually becoming known as the Roman Catholic Church. The other four Patriarchates continued on unchanged and unchanging, as the Orthodox (correct doctrine/correct worship) Catholic Church.

After making the innovations that caused the schism in 1054, Rome continued to change the Faith. Over time they added purgatory and indulgences among other novel doctrines and practices, leading to an explosion called the Protestant Reformation in 1517. For a thousand years there was essentially one Church, for the next four and a half centuries there were two: the Orthodox Church consisting of four of the original five Patriarchates, and the separated Roman Church.

Then in 1517, Martin Luther, a Roman priest in Germany, began the "Reformation" which shattered the Roman Church like a hammer blow hitting a glass window. Five hundred years later there are an estimated 30,000 "denominations" in the West, with five new ones being formed every week, plus uncountable numbers of non-denominational, interdenominational and independent churches. The Protestant revolt eliminated one pope, but through the novel Protestant doctrines of Sola Scriptura and the Private Interpretation of the Holy Scriptures made every Protestant a pope. These autogenetic groups were not started by or authorized by Christ, and even with the best of intentions they are merely human inventions and organizations. Besides this denominational chaos in the West, there is the 300 million-member Orthodox Catholic Church.

At the time of the Great Schism in 1054, the Church in the British Isles sided with the four Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem against the innovations of Rome. That is what led to the Norman invasion of England in 1066. England was conquered by the Normans, all but one of the English bishops were replaced by Normans, and the English Church (*ecclesia anglicana*) was subjected to papal domination by force of arms.

In 1534, the English Reformation began. The English Reformation was very different from what happened on the Continent. Rather than being a revolt against the Church, it was an effort led by the bishops of the English Church (*ecclesia anglicana*: the Anglican Church) to reform the Church and restore the beliefs and practices of the undivided Church. For more information on this you can go to our parish website ([www.holycrossomaha.net](http://www.holycrossomaha.net)). There, you will find an article on the Sidebar called Orthodox Anglicanism and Christian Reunion: The Time Is Now.

Unfortunately, over the centuries many Anglicans have lost sight of this goal and came to see their Church as essentially a denomination. With the loss of understanding that the Anglican Church was merely a separated branch of the whole, seeking to restore the beliefs and practices of the undivided Church, Anglicanism lost its way theologically, morally and ecclesialogically, making corporate reunion impossible. However, beginning in the latter part of the 20th century large numbers of Orthodox-minded Anglicans have been reunited with the Orthodox Church from which their forefathers in the Faith were torn away in 1066, by the Norman Conquest. At first they joined Eastern Rite parishes or even established a few, but in recent years the Western Rite has been restored and there are now dozens of Western Orthodox parishes like Holy Cross.

Christ founded His Church during His earthly ministry, To be the Church Christ founded a Church has to be almost 2,000 years old. That eliminates some 29,998 denominations out of an estimated 30,000 in existence today, and leaves only two candidates: the Orthodox Catholic Church (four of the five original patriarchates) and the Roman Catholic Church (one of the original patriarchates). A study of history quickly reveals which of these two candidates changed the Faith in 1054, leading to the Great Schism, continued to innovate in doctrine leading to the explosion of 1517, and continues to innovate (immaculate conception, 1854; papal infallibility, 1870, etc.) in doctrine and practice to this very day.

Another way to look at it is this: Take your Bible and look at the churches in the New Testament. What Church are the New Testament churches part of today? Nazarene, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Vineyard, Roman Catholic? Some other denomination? The indigenous Christians in Jerusalem are Orthodox. The indigenous Christians in Antioch "where they were first called Christians" are Orthodox. The Christians of Cyprus and Crete are Orthodox. The Christians of Asia Minor are Orthodox. The Christians of Corinth, Athens and other Greek cities where the Apostle Paul founded churches and to whom he wrote epistles are all Orthodox. All of these churches are, and always have been, Orthodox. The only church spoken of in the entire New Testament that is not Orthodox today is Rome, and Rome was fully Orthodox for a thousand years before falling away into schism in 1054. Rome was Orthodox for longer than she has been separated from Orthodoxy.

Our Lord Jesus Christ established one Church. All of the others are man-made denominations, or as in the case of Rome, a schism. A human foundation means a human organization, and a human organization means a human and therefore a changing Faith. I do not say this to judge the sincerity of their members, belittle their personal faith, denigrate the good work that they may do, or to imply that God does not love these precious souls. It is merely an undeniable fact of history. The good news is that vast numbers of these sincere and Divinely beloved believers from virtually every Western Christian tradition have, by the grace of God, found their way home to the Orthodox Church, — and more are coming home every day.

The original Church that Christ established cannot fall away into apostasy and need recreating by a Reformer, theologian, teacher or prophet, because Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would lead His Church into all truth and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. We have His word on it. The only question is, do we trust Him?

You cannot found a church "on the Bible" because the Church preceded the New Testament. The canon of the New Testament was not finally set until the end of the fourth century. If the Church became apostate after the death of the last apostle or at the time of Constantine, as many Protestants like to claim, then you cannot trust the New Testament that an apostate Church gave us long after the death of Constantine. The truth is though, that without the Orthodox Church the 30,000 competing denominations of today would not even have a common New Testament!

The Orthodox Church is not just another denomination whose doctrinal statement, programs and worship style can be reviewed and compared in the consumer oriented Christian culture of the West today. It is the one, original Church founded by our Lord Jesus Christ as history clearly demonstrates.

The Orthodox Church is a visible, living organism of which Christ is the head, and its members are His body. It has an unchanging deposit of Faith, a divinely instituted ministry in Apostolic Succession, authority ("hear the church"), and Sacraments that are objective means of grace. The spiritual life of the Orthodox Church today continues to accurately reflect the spiritual life of the earliest Church found in Acts 2:42.

The Church is both Divine and human, and the human element is fully human. The Church is a hospital for sinners and not a country club for saints. Orthodox Christians, both lay and clerical, are not perfect, and there will always be problems in the Church. To think that the true Church must be sinless is to misunderstand the nature of the Church. Sanctification is a lifelong process, and sometimes it is two steps forward and one step back. Sometimes the lives of Christians look like chicken tracks, apparently moving in all directions, but as St. Augustine reminds us, "God writes straight with crooked lines." The Church is made up of both wheat and tares. The good news is though that through grace even a tare can become a new creation and end up as wheat! Christ never gives up on anyone and neither does His Church.

The Orthodox Church isn't somewhere you go to worship because you agree with its doctrinal positions, or because it has good programs, a likable pastor or you like the Liturgy. All of these are important, but not good enough. The Orthodox Church is the Mystical Body of Christ which was founded personally by Him nearly 2,000 years ago, in which we are called to be members (Acts 2:47).

The Orthodox Church is a Eucharistic community. The Holy Eucharist is the center and summit of our spirituality. It is Christ in our midst in a real and objective way. To really understand Orthodox Christianity you have to experience it. If you want to know where Jesus dwells I can only say, "Come and see" (John 1:39).

I have written you this long letter because I think you are sincere and serious. You say that you are attracted to the Orthodox Church, but are concerned about personal and cultural issues. Many Western people have successfully transitioned to the Eastern Rite, culture and traditions which have dominated the Orthodox Church since Rome fell away in 1054. People do it every day. However, the Orthodox Church is not just an Eastern Church, it is the Orthodox Catholic Church, and maintains unity in diversity. You don't have to adopt a new culture to be Orthodox. With the resurgence of Western Orthodoxy your cultural concerns are not serious issues. At Holy Cross parish we are fully Orthodox in Faith and a canonical parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, in full union with the 300 million-member Orthodox Church worldwide, while at the same time we are thoroughly Western in culture, worship and patrimony. St. John the Wonderworker of San Francisco (d. 1966) said, "Never, never, never let anyone tell

you that, in order to be Orthodox, you must be Eastern. The West was fully Orthodox for a thousand years...”

There are Western Orthodox parishes, ministries and monasteries throughout North America, in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and on the continent of Europe, and our numbers are growing. In addition to the Eastern Rite, Orthodox Christians worship according to the Roman Rite (Liturgy of St. Gregory the Great), the English Rite (Liturgy of St. Tikhon), and the Gallican Rite (Liturgy of St. Germanus of Paris). In June of 2014, a Vietnamese Anglican congregation in San Diego was received into the Orthodox Church and is now a Vietnamese Orthodox parish. The Orthodox Church is the Catholic Church and is made up of people of all races, nations and cultures. There are Orthodox Christians on every continent of the earth. The door to the Orthodox Church is wide open and everyone is welcome!

At Holy Cross Orthodox Church we celebrate the Liturgy of the Holy Eucharist every Sunday at 10:00 AM, with fellowship and refreshments in our parish hall after the Liturgy, and a potluck luncheon on the last Sunday of every month. Other Services and activities are as announced. You can visit our parish website ([www.holycrossomaha.net](http://www.holycrossomaha.net)) for more information. We are a faithful, friendly, active and welcoming congregation, and we have a place for you. I hope to see you on Sunday!

Wishing you every grace and blessing,

Fr. Victor+