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Start With the Basics
By Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

"Since, also, there is but one unbegotten Being, God, even the Father; and one only-begotten Son, God, the Word and man; and one Comforter, the Spirit of truth; and also one preaching, and one faith, and one baptism."

– St. Ignatius of Antioch

I have been asked what noticeable change I have seen in catechumens coming into the Church. The answer may surprise you, but clearly the most noticeable change is the lack of understanding of Christ and the Trinity. This basic understanding of the Christian Faith has been so distorted or even ignored by people that I discovered that I had to change my catechism classes to focus on the very basic tenants of the Faith.

In the past, there was at least a passing understanding, but in a "post-Christian" society, this simply has been ignored. In the early Church, and throughout the Church's history, the foundational understanding of the Trinity and Christ was hotly debated and theologically defined through the Church Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils. Controversies came and went with Church always righting Herself. When these principles were forgotten or ignored, the basic foundation beneath other denominations crumbled.

Personally, I think this presents an opportunity for all catechists because we do not have to undo bad theology but rather have the opportunity to teach the theology from the very beginning. We should start all catechesis with the very foundational document of the Church, the Nicene Creed. We need to teach people what the hard-won foundational document says in order to truly understand what we believe. Start with the Creed!

We also need to connect that Creed with what we do in the Church. The Creed is not just some intellectual exercise on the Trinity but rather it is embedded in our very worship. The entire liturgical life of the Church is infused with the theology of the Trinity. So in catechism, participation in the liturgical life assists in a better understanding of the Trinity.

Finally, discussions of the Trinity can veer off into complicated or even obscure discussions. Keep it simple and direct (as difficult as that can be). We can get lost in the weeds and we must remind ourselves as St. Gregory of Nyssa teaches, ultimately any discussion of the Trinity leads us to silence. We understand the Trinity through experience in the life of the Church. This experience leads us to revelation.

Contemplating the Trinity

By Saint Gregory Nazianzus

"No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One."

Besides all this and before all, keep I pray you the good deposit, by which I live and work, and which I desire to have as the companion of my departure; with which I endure all that is so distressful, and despise all delights; the confession of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. This I commit unto you today; with this I will baptize you and make you grow. This I give you to share, and to defend all your life, the One Godhead and Power, found in the Three in Unity, and comprising the Three separately, not unequal, in substances or natures, neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite conjunction of Three Infinite Ones, Each God when considered in Himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three One God when contemplated together; Each God because Consubstantial; One God because of the

Monarchia. No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking of escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of That One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the Rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light.

Do you fear to speak of Generation lest you should attribute anything of passion to the impassible God? I on the other hand fear to speak of Creation, lest I should destroy God by the insult and the untrue division, either cutting the Son away from the Father, or from the Son the Substance of the Spirit. For this paradox is involved, that not only is a created Life foisted into the Godhead by those who measure Godhead badly; but even this created life is divided against itself. For as these low earthly minds make the Son subject to the Father, so again is the rank of the Spirit made inferior to that of the Son, until both God and created life are insulted by the new Theology. No, my friends, there is nothing servile in the Trinity, nothing created, nothing accidental, as I have heard one of the wise say.

From St. Gregory Nazianzus, Orations Number 40:41-42.

Introduction to the Holy Trinity

By Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not merely an "article of faith" which men are called to "believe." It is not simply a dogma which the Church requires its good members to "accept on faith." Neither is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity the invention of scholars and academicians, the result of intellectual speculation and philosophical thinking.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity arises from man's deepest experiences with God. It comes from the genuine living knowledge of those who have come to know God in faith.

The paragraphs which follow are intended to show something of what God has revealed of Himself to the saints of the Church. To grasp the words and concepts of the doctrine of the Trinity is one thing; to know the Living Reality of God behind these words and concepts is something else. We must work and pray so that we might pass beyond every word and concept about God and to come to know Him for ourselves in our own living union with Him: "The Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit" (Eph 2: 18–22) […]

The saints of the Church are unanimous in their claim that Christian life is the participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity in the most genuine and realistic way. It is the life of men becoming divine. In the smallest aspects of everyday life Christians are called to live the life of God the Father, which is communicated to them by Christ, the Son of God, and made possible for them by the Holy Spirit who lives and acts within them.

From Fr. Thomas Hopko the Orthodox Faith Vol. 1

"The doctrine of the Holy Trinity arises from man's deepest experiences with God. It comes from the genuine living knowledge of those who have come to know God in faith."

The Trinity as the Source of Faith

By Priest Thomas Fitzgerald, Th.D.

God is the source of faith in the Orthodox Church. Orthodoxy believes that God has revealed Himself to us, most especially in the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom we know as the Son of God. This Revelation of God, His love, and His purpose, is constantly made manifest and contemporary in the life of the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Orthodox Faith does not begin with mankind's religious speculations, nor so-called "proofs" for the existence of God, nor with a human quest for the Divine.

The origin of the Orthodox Christian Faith is the Self-disclosure of God. Each day, the Church's Morning Prayer affirms and reminds us of this by declaring, "God is the Lord and has revealed Himself to us." While the inner Being of God always remains unknown and unapproachable, God has manifested Himself to us; and the Church has experienced Him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which is central to the Orthodox Faith, is not a result of pious speculation, but of the overwhelming experience of God.

The doctrine affirms that there is only One God, in whom there are three distinct Persons. In other words, when we encounter the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, we are truly experiencing contact with God. While the Holy Trinity is a mystery which can never be fully comprehended, Orthodoxy believes that we can truly participate in the Trinity through the life of the Church, especially through our celebration of the Eucharist and the Sacraments, as well as the non-sacramental services.

From http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith7052.

"The doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which is central to the Orthodox Faith, is not a result of pious speculation, but of the overwhelming experience of God."

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Organizing a Catechetical Program

By Archpriest Matthew Markewich

Most of our parishes are experiencing a strong influx of new converts all in need of good catechism. We might take for granted that our own catechetical programs are sufficient, and what we did 20 years ago is as effective today. However, we always need to reevaluate if old methods remain good methods. Dn. Seraphim Rohlin of the Orthodox Studies Institute said in a recent video that, if a catechumen were only required to read a book and then join the Church, there is only a 60% chance he would remain Orthodox; but, if that same person would convert through a structured catechetical program, there is a more than 90% chance he would remain Orthodox. Our goal can't just be to generate new Orthodox Christians; our goal, instead, is to raise up committed disciples who are determined to live as Orthodox Christians the rest of their lives. Therefore, the best method for receiving Orthodox catechumens is a thorough catechetical program.

But what should be in that catechetical program? I believe there are three important standards to which we must hold catechumens. At my parish, these standards are: 1) Frequent service attendance. 2) Monthly meetings with the priest. 3) Attendance at catechism classes.

So what does frequent service attendance look like? When a person is an inquirer, I explain to them that they must attend Sunday Liturgy for three months before they are eligible to become catechumens. After those three months, I explain that Sundays were just the foundation; as a catechumen, other services are also required. Depending on the individual convert's circumstances, we then make a personalized

plan for attending Saturday evenings, Feast Days, Lenten services, and Holy Week services. The catechumen writes down the plan we agree to and I hold them accountable to it. This high level of expectation is vitally important, as our converts need to come to experience and become convinced of the transformative power of the Church's services. By far, this is the most important standard that catechumens must be held to.

Monthly meetings help me to get to know the person's spiritual struggle and help us to form a relationship. As the catechumenate usually lasts a year, we end up meeting about twelve times. During our discussions, we go over the catechumen's sins, struggles, prayer rule, and fasting rule. We talk about hangups they may have and questions on their minds, spiritual books they are reading and online videos they are watching. Basically, I am there to offer advice and direction. These meetings are essential to change our converts from zealous newcomers into committed disciples. In my experience, these meetings are sources of encouragement for catechumens and give them next steps to work towards. I recommend that, if the number of catechumens becomes too great for the priest to manage alone, he recruit parish deacons and spiritually mature, well-trained laymen to assist him.

Finally (and least in importance), catechumens need some kind of formal teaching setting. I provide 16 weeks of catechism using my own material. These lessons absolutely should not be focused solely on theology; after all, half of our converts already have plenty of theological training from the internet. I construct most of my lessons to include a theological teaching followed by a practical section on prayer, fasting, almsgiving, or the Ten Commandments. We even have entire lessons on marriage and family, the teachings and practices surrounding death, and pious practices during services. *Orthopraxy* (how we live as Christians) is as important as *Orthodoxy* (what we believe).

These are the most important standards for catechumens, but there is actually one more standard for priests. The onus is on the priest to hold catechumens accountable. Priests need to show love and compassion for catechumens when circumstances arise that keep them from fulfilling the above three standards. At the same time, priests need to be ready to correct catechumens or even extend their catechumenate if necessary.

If we hold our catechumens to these three standards, we will find that they are transformed into committed and faithful disciples of Christ, prepared not only for reception into the Church, but for a lifetime of Orthodox Christian discipleship.

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