

SERMON on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, March 8, 2020

Why do we call ourselves “Orthodox” Christians? Actually, in the Book of Acts, the followers of our Lord Jesus Christ first called their faith “the Way.” Notice that they didn’t say “a way,” but “*the Way*,” which implies that there is only one way and no other. In John 14:6 our Savior says, “no one comes to the Father, but by me.” Later, in the Book of Acts, we learn that the term “Christian” is first used in Antioch. It is not enough to merely say that we believe in our Lord Jesus Christ. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’ It is clear that it is imperative that we must correctly and rightly understand who Jesus Christ is and we must rightly understand our faith so that we can distinguish *the Way* from *false ways*, and the one, authentic and true Christ from false Christs. Before, during and after the life of our Savior on the earth, there were many individuals who claimed to be the messiah. Yet we know that there can only be one messiah, and that is our Lord Jesus Christ. “For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray” (Matthew 24:5). “For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:24). The holy Apostle Paul warns us, “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:6-8). Furthermore, St. Paul says that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). The Creed, the Symbol of our Faith, is the foundational exposition of what we believe as Orthodox Christians. In the Creed we declare that we believe in “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.” So back to our original question, why do we call ourselves “Orthodox” Christians? We call ourselves Orthodox in order to distinguish ourselves from all of the other beliefs which teach contrary to the one Christian faith which has been handed down to us by our Savior through the Holy Apostles and other great Fathers of the Church who rightly taught and explained our faith, or as we say in the Divine Liturgy, who “rightly divided the word of truth.” The choice of a false teaching about our Savior and our Holy Faith is called a *heresy*. The devil inspires men to be proud, to have big egos, and to teach falsely about our Savior, because through this the devil hopes to cause division in the Church and to lead the pious faithful off of the straight and narrow path of salvation. Our faith, and the path to salvation, is much more than merely a set of general rules about being good and kind and nice people. If that were the case, then our faith would be nothing more than a philosophy. In fact, people have tried this. They said, “We don’t need God to be good.” So they created a philosophy called *humanism** which teaches us to be good boys and good girls and to show love and kindness to

each other without any faith in God at all, that religious faith is unnecessary. We know from history that this attempt failed miserably. It behooves us, brothers and sisters, much more than I could ever express to you, to know our faith, to understand what we believe, to be able to distinguish between the Orthodox faith and false teachings and heresies and, as the holy Apostle St. Peter admonishes us, “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). On this first Sunday of the Great Fast as we celebrate our veneration of the Holy Icons and our Holy Faith itself, I leave you with these wise words of the priest Philip Lemasters: “Even as we turn away from what diminishes us in the Divine likeness, we must also feast on what helps us embrace more fully our true identity in Christ. That means putting our souls on a steady diet of prayer; of reading the Bible, the lives of the Saints, and other spiritually edifying works; and of mindfulness in all things such that we remain alert to the spiritual significance of what we think, say, and do. The more that we fill ourselves with holy things, the less appetite we will have for unholy things. The journey of Lent is not about punishment or legalism, but instead about helping us grow personally into our exalted identity as those called to share in the eternal life of our Lord. It is about turning away from the idolatry of self-centeredness in order to become a more beautiful icon of the Divine glory. It is about refusing to set our sights low concerning what it means to be a human being in God’s image and likeness. It is about crucifying our self-centered desires so that we may enter into the holy mystery of the Lord’s Cross and Resurrection. For it is through His Passion that we will “see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” Amen.

* See the video “**Solzhenitsyn, on Civilization, Self-Restraint and Right Living**” posted on YouTube.