Orthodoxy 101  Session 1 – March 13, 2019

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and Of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

O Heavenly King the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who are in all places and fill all things, treasurer of blessings and giver of life. Come and dwell within us and cleanse us from every blemish and save our souls, O Blessed One.

In the Name of the Father and Of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Glory Be to Jesus Christ.

Introductory Remarks

Good evening, I want to start by saying that I do not claim to be a great theologian, or by any means an expert in the ways of Holy Orthodoxy, but rather, I pray as an Orthodox Pastor, I will be able to help you gain a deeper appreciation for the beauty, power and depth of the Orthodox Christian Way of Life and instill in you a desire to learn and experience more.

My intent this evening is to speak for about 45 minutes to an hour and then take your questions.
If you look at the course syllabus that I have posted on-line, you will see over the next seven weeks we will be covering the following aspects of the faith: Church History, Holy Tradition, Doctrine and Dogma, Prayer, Ethics and Morality and Living the Faith – the Christian Vocation. Tonight, I would like to begin by giving a few introductory remarks about the Orthodox Christian Faith and speak in some detail about our God’s plan of salvation, which is the foundation of the Orthodox Christian Faith.

Now where to begin? I stand before you this evening, humbled. Humbled that you have taken the time to listen and learn about what I like to describe as the pearl of great price, the treasury of blessings that the Orthodox Christian Faith has been for me. As an Orthodox Priest, I am privileged to have an up close and personal view of the Orthodox Christian way of life. Standing as an unworthy priest before the holy altar, leading the faithful in prayer, adoration, thanksgiving and supplication, I am called upon to invoke the most Holy Spirit to come and bless and sanctify the gifts of bread and wine, and transform them into the sacred Body and Blood of Christ. I have been given the great blessing to feed the faithful of this parish with the food of immortality, the Holy Eucharist. I also am able to witness how my spiritual children who love the Lord, are able to grow in faith, hope and love, by participating in the Orthodox Way of Life, praying fasting,
doing good works, and most importantly reflecting the love of Christ in all that
they do. I love being a priest, I love serving you, I love praying with you, for in
you, I see Jesus Christ. The truth be told, over the years I have learned so much
about the Orthodox Faith from my parishioners and how their faith in Jesus Christ
upholds and strengthens them, and how they strive to imitate him by their love and
care for others.

I caution you and I this evening as we begin the Study of Orthodox Christianity,
that although it is important that we learn about the faith, our knowledge is
useless if it is not put into practice, if it is not lived. As we learn about
Orthodoxy, we will see that to refer to Orthodoxy as a religion is to limit its
power. Hopefully we will see that it is instead a way of life, a continual movement
in the words of St. Paul from Glory to Glory.

A few years back, Conciliar Press, came out with a wonderful little brochure, that
is intended to be placed in a pamphlet rack in the entry of the Church. It was
called, “What on earth is the Orthodox Church” I love this title because, it
highlights what many Converts to Orthodoxy have said about the Orthodox Faith,
that it is the best kept secret. Indeed many of you are here tonight and hopefully
for the next 5 weeks looking for an answer to this question, “What on earth is the
Orthodox Church,” as it seems from the outside so mysterious, so different and perhaps even odd.

Lets start by speaking about the name of the Church, the Orthodox Christian Church. The Word Orthodox literally means right teaching or right worship and is derived from two greek words *orthos* (right or correct) *doxa* (teaching or worship)

True to its name in Orthodoxy faith and worship are intimately linked. According to the fourth-century monk, Evagrius of Pontus, "a theologian is one who prays truly." Orthodoxy is by very definition an experiential faith. It is not a set of rational beliefs, held more or less abstractly, but as I said earlier it is an - encompassing way of life. For Orthodoxy, the touchstone of this life and faith is her liturgy, her corporate and public worship. Her worship has never lost its direct continuity with the worship of the ancient Church; the central hymn of the Church's service of evening prayer was referred to by St Basil the Great in the fourth century as being so ancient that no one remembered who composed it.

Orthodoxy experiences this liturgical faithfulness as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Far from being a lifeless adherence to the past, her liturgy is a miraculous wellspring of the inspiration which God has bestowed on generations of faithful men and women: prophets and poets, ascetics and visionaries. Orthodox liturgy binds together the whole people of God, living and departed, present, past and future,
into the communion of love which is the very life of the Holy Trinity. This sacred world of prayer is a world of unparalleled depth and beauty, a world within which countless Orthodox have found "the one thing needful," and have reached the heights of spiritual life. When in the tenth century envoys of Great Prince Vladimir of Kiev first experienced the Divine Liturgy in the Great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, they reported that they did not know if they were in heaven or on earth. An open heart can experience this heavenly beauty, this living, mysterious presence of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, even in the humblest parish church.

So in summary then, in answering what on earth the Orthodox Church is, the Orthodox Christian would undoubtedly answer, heaven on earth – a living experience of the Kingdom of heaven, which encompasses both past, present and future.

A second question that one might ask about the Orthodox Faith is when did It begin and what distinguishes it from other Christian Traditions. The Orthodox Christian Church was born on Pentecost in AD 33 with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles (see Acts 2:2-4). To be fair, in those days, the Church was simply known as the Church or perhaps the Catholic or Universal Church. At the time of the great schism between the East and the West in the year
1054, the Church of Rome took the name the Roman Catholic Church and the Churches of the four other centers of Christianity, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch, used the term Orthodox Catholic to emphasize the fact that they maintained the faith of the Apostles unchanged. So this is where the title of Our church the Orthodox Catholic Church came into being. From the Roman Catholic Church, we know that several other divisions took place, beginning in the 16th century which formed what we refer to as Protestant Churches, who protested against the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

After the day of Pentecost, through the missionary labors and witness of countless men and women martyrs, of the Truth, and through the unbroken handing-down of the pure apostolic faith, Christianity spread to every corner of the world: first the Near East, then Europe, Africa, and Asia. Orthodoxy was planted in North America in the late 18th century by monastic missionaries from Russia. Today the worldwide Orthodox Church has more than 300 million members. Each national Church (Russian, Greek, Serbian, etc.) is independent and self-administering, but is united in faith and sacraments with all the others. Some five million Orthodox from diverse ethnic backgrounds now live in the United States and Canada.

Orthodoxy believes that the eternal truth of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is preserved in its full integrity in the living tradition of the Church, under the
guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This living tradition is grounded in sacred scripture and further illuminated and strengthened by the decisions of the councils of the Church, and expressed in the liturgical and spiritual life of the Church. Orthodox Christians recognize that other Christian groups have maintained many elements of the apostolic faith but with profound humility and a consciousness of her own weakness and her responsibility before God, Orthodoxy believes and proclaims that the complete and integral faith delivered to the saints by Jesus Christ has been preserved without alteration or distortion within the communion of the Orthodox Church. Through the turbulent early centuries of the Church's life, this faith was articulated and defended by councils of bishops. When false gospels were in circulation, the bishops of the Church compiled and proclaimed the true canon of Scripture, giving us the Bible read by all Christians to this day. When the apostolic faith was attacked and distorted, the bishops spoke with one voice, defending the truth with divinely-inspired depth and clarity. Whether they know it or not, all Christians today are the inheritors of this tradition whenever they acknowledge Christ as the incarnate Son of God, or offer praise to the Holy Trinity.

Orthodox Christianity remains steadfastly committed to a moral life consistent with holy Scripture and with traditional Christian faith, and therefore resists in the strongest terms the characteristic evils of our age: abortion, euthanasia, and all
manifestations of a disregard for human life; sexual immorality and the
disintegration of the family; the destruction of human community and the
debauching of the human spirit in idolatrous commercialism and materialism; the
tragic waste of human life and work in the demonic enterprise of war. These two
inseparable aspects of the life of Orthodoxy - an unbending adherence to
traditional moral life, doctrine, and worship, and the mysterious presence of the
beauty, simplicity, and holiness of the ancient Church - have led many seekers and
converts to embrace the Orthodox faith. No longer confined to immigrant
communities, Orthodox Christianity in America has taken her proper place as a
faith for all people. As the Apostle Philip said to Nathaniel who was sitting under
the sycamore tree, "Come and see..." (St John 1:46). The Orthodox Church extends
this invitation to everyone, she invites all who are weary and heavy laden to come
and see the priceless treasure that is Orthodoxy: a gift of which none is worthy, but
which God in His rich mercy bestows upon us.

The Orthodox Church then, is first and foremost centered on and founded by Jesus
Christ. The Church is referred in the hymns we sing as being his bride. Christ the
bridegroom has an intense love for his bride the Church and for all of his children. The Church was given to us, to help lead us into the kingdom of Heaven,
to assist us in our struggle in the words of St. Paul to “work out our salvation in
fear and in trembling.” (Philippians 2:12) The sole purpose of the Church is to
keep our hearts and minds rooted in Christ Jesus, so that we can grow in the likeness of God.

If we are to fully understand Orthodox Christianity then, we must have a clear understanding of how the Church views salvation. And for the remainder of tonight’s session, I would like to speak about the Orthodox understanding of God’s plan of salvation, or as it is often referred to as the history of salvation. My goal of this discussion is to give you the big picture of where Orthodox Christianity fits, within God’s plan of salvation as illuminated in Holy Scripture. We will speak about how the world was created; the fall of Adam and Eve, the promise of God to send a Savior, the preparation of mankind for the coming of Christ through the voice of the prophets, the redemption of mankind by Christ, the establishment of the Church and the age of the Holy Spirit where we presently await the Second Coming of Christ.

After our discussion of salvation history, I believe you will be better able to process the immense amount of information you will be exposed to regarding the Orthodox Faith over the next few weeks.
In speaking of the History of Salvation, there are eight important subsections which are as follows:

1. The Creation of the World
2. The Fall - Adam and Eve
3. The Promise of New Life - Noah and Abraham
4. The Preparation to Return to God – The Prophets come
5. The Incarnation - The birth of Jesus Christ
6. Redemption- Christ’s death and third day Resurrection
8. The Kingdom of God - Salvation – Second Coming

Now let us begin with creation....

1. In the beginning: The Holy Fathers of the Church teach us the fundamental truth that there was never a time when God did not exist. The hymns of the Church, which we sing on the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, echo this understanding in referring to Christ as the Pre-Eternal God. We know from Sacred Scripture that In the Beginning God created out of nothing the heavens and earth, the sea and all that is in it. He also created man (Adam) out of the dust of the earth and woman, (Eve) from the rib of Adam and placed them into a Paradise of delight, the Garden
of Eden. It is very important that we remember that God referred to his creation as being Good. Orthodoxy is very clear in affirming the inherent goodness of God’s creation and humanity.

Adam and Eve were truly blessed in the Garden of Eden, for there was no pain, sickness or death – they instead enjoyed true peace, walking with God in the coolness of the night. Adam was given dominion over creation and was allowed to name the animals. They were pure and innocent. They were given one restriction: not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit. Immediately, their eyes were opened and they became aware of their nakedness and hid. As a consequence of their sin, God cast them out of the garden, closing its gates and left an angel with a fiery sword to guard its entrance. He did so to prevent them from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life and live forever in their fallen state. It is interesting that the hymnology of the Church compares the cross of Christ to the Tree of Life.

2. This is what is known as the Fall. From this time on, Adam and Eve and their descendants began to experience sickness, pain, physical death and separation from God. Indeed from the time of the Fall of Adam and Eve until our Lord’s Death on the Cross and Third-Day Resurrection, all who died, even the Righteous, were not
permitted to enter Heaven, but instead awaited the Lord’s Descent into Hades and conquering Death by death. The only exceptions were Enoch and Elijah who were taken directly to Heaven upon their deaths.

Here it is important that we speak for a moment about the Orthodox understanding of the so called original Sin. Orthodoxy refers to Adam and Eve’s disobedience of the God as being the original or primordial sin. The Orthodox speak of the consequences of sin being inherited, sickness, pain, struggle, death, agony of choosing between good and evil. The west takes this a bit further and teaches that the guilt of Adam and Eve’s sin is inherited and is passed along in the act of procreation. Orthodoxy does not go there. And that is why, without going into too much detail, the Orthodox Church rejects the Catholic teaching of the Immaculate conception of Mary. The Orthodox Church believes that the Mother of God, inherited the consequences of the fall (she eventually did die) but not the guilt. We will get into more of this later.

The history of Adam and Eve and their descendants was a difficult one – a time of lament and longing for a return to full communion with God, yet many misused their God-given gift of free will and lived an evil life – so evil that God caused a great flood on the earth to destroy all of mankind except the righteous Noah and his family as well as two of each species of animal who were safely aboard the
Ark. After the Flood, God caused a great Rainbow to form in the skies as a sign of His promise to never again destroy creation.

3. This is known as the **Promise** where seeking to restore communion with mankind, God worked with a faithful remnant, the People of Israel, to bring this about. He worked patiently to teach humility and obedience by sending them the Law through the Prophet Moses. He sent His special messengers, the Prophets, to encourage those who had fallen away to return to the worship of the One, True God and to announce the coming of Christ, the Messiah who would save them.

4. This time in the History of Salvation is known as the **Preparation of Mankind to Return to God.**

The History of the People of Israel was a difficult one and involved slavery in Egypt and deliverance and captivity by many other hostile nations. They experienced the triumphal building of the Temple in Jerusalem, under King Solomon, and its destruction during the Babylonian Captivity and rebuilding thereafter. Following the death of King Solomon, the twelve tribes of Israel became separated leaving a division between the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah.
In the fullness of time God the Father sent His Only-Begotten Son, Jesus Christ into the world to teach and preach and lead those who had ears to hear to return to the Kingdom of Heaven, through the faithful living of the spirit of the Law which is love, mercy, forgiveness, and repentance.

5. This is known as the **Inarnation** – the taking on of Flesh by Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity.

Having completed His three year public ministry Christ, whom the Church refers to as the New Adam, gave His life on the Cross, for the life and salvation of the world. Upon His death, while His body rested in the Tomb, His soul descended to Hell where He loosed the bonds of those that had been held captive there. He opened the gates of Paradise that had been closed since the Fall of Adam. Through his Third-Day Resurrection and appearance to the Apostles, Christ demonstrated the power of love, over darkness and the triumph of good over evil.

6. This is known as the **Redemption**

Upon His Ascension to Heaven on the fortieth day, Our Lord sent the Most-Holy Spirit down upon the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost to embolden them to fearlessly preach the Gospel to all nations. On this day the New Testament Church, was born to be the Ark of Salvation for those who wish to journey to the Kingdom of Heaven. The Fathers of the Church, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, met in
Councils during the first eight centuries to formulate the dogmas and teachings of 
the Church. In the twenty centuries since the establishment of the Church, the Holy 
Spirit has led her from the expression of the faith of the apostles to what we 
experience today in the beauty of our Church and the richness of Her Divine 
Services.

7. This is known as the Age of the Church – which we are living in right now.
We await, as we proclaim in the Creed, our Symbol of Faith, the Second Coming 
of Christ at the end of the world to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven in its fullness. 
When we joyfully participate in the rich life of the Church, in her Iconography, 
Music and Liturgy, we foretaste the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven and 
commune with God Himself.

8. This is the Age to Come, Eternity, the Kingdom of God, Salvation Which is the 
Goal of the Christian Life the Mission of the Church

The life in Christ is a joyful struggle. It is in the Church that we seek and find 
Paradise which our first parents Adam and Eve enjoyed for only a short time. It is 
in the Church that we grow in the Likeness of God. Truly in the Church, we move, 
in the words of St. Paul from Glory to Glory.”
Finally, I’d like to make a few points regarding God’s plan of Salvation.

- First and foremost, we understand as is stated in the book of Genesis, we are created in the image and likeness of God. Our task in life, our response to the great gift of life is to struggle with the help of God to perfect the likeness, to become more Christ like each and every day.

- Free Will: We were given the great gift of free will, without it we would be incapable of loving, we would not be able to become by Grace what God is by nature. This gift is our greatest strength and our greatest challenge,

- We are called to mirror the love of the Most Holy Trinity, and live in community with others in the Church, reflecting the love of God and living for others, emulating the self-sacrificial love of Christ, to lay down our life for our neighbor.

In Conclusion, by our brief study of the history of salvation, we understand God gives us freedom to accept or reject Him. He does so realizing that freedom is the true ingredient of love. This gift of freedom is often misunderstood as indifference, for example we might say if God really loved us, he would save us from ourselves and prevent us from making wrong choices. While giving us freedom, he is always willing to help us, if we ask him. He never forces himself
on us. There is a joke that is told about a man who is caught in a flood. The police come to his house and tell him to evacuate, the man answers, God will save him and refuses to leave. The waters start coming up higher and a fireman comes by in a boat and offers to rescue him. He refuses, the water gets us so high the man has to go onto the roof. A helicopter comes to save him and he refuses, believing God will come and save him. Finally, he ends up drowning and later in heaven, he asks God, why He did not save him. God answers, what do you mean, I sent a policeman, a fireman, a boat and a helicopter and you didn’t let me help you.

It is said in the Orthodox Church, that the Church is the ark of salvation, it is a life raft. The Orthodox Church extends a helping hand to all to come on board and take refuge from the stormy seas of life.

In the weeks ahead, we will look in more depth at the history, teachings and life of the Orthodox Church – and its vocation of leading us into the Kingdom of heaven, of fulfilling God’s plan of salvation. I hope and pray that you found tonight’s class helpful and understandable. I now open up the floor to any questions.