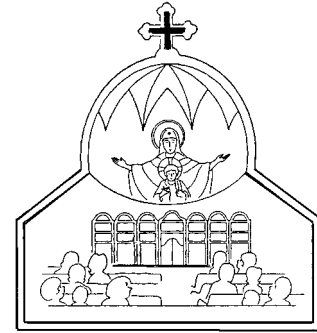


Answer the Question: Who Are You Orthodox?

Based on “*Has Orthodoxy Triumphed?*” by Father Radu Bordeianu
Edited by Phyllis Meshel Onest, M.Div.



In the sermon “*Has Orthodoxy Triumphed?*” **Father Radu Bordeianu, Assistant Priest at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Pittsburgh, PA**, talks about interacting with non-Orthodox who want to learn about Orthodoxy. I found his approach both meaningful and interesting. His two main points are:

- ✝ It is important to know the ways in which Orthodoxy is a meaningful presence in American society. When asked, “Who are you Orthodox?” we can use any of the following in our responses.
- ✝ Focus on our sense of tradition, our history, our worship, and our good Christian lives.

Father tells a story about answering THE QUESTION and in the end the person asked if he was Jewish! This is a common occurrence among Orthodox Christians. Regardless of what we tell the inquirers, they have no starting point, no basic knowledge to build upon. We have to tell them something, but what? The answer must be meaningful to someone in 21st century America and given in five minutes. That is even less time than a Sunday sermon!

Father Radu taught an Eastern Christianity class at Duquesne University this past spring (2007). The class composition was 18-23-year-old non-Orthodox American students. At the end of the term, the **Final Exam essay** was to respond to the following question: “**How should the Orthodox faithful present their faith in today’s American context?**” Points to include:

- ✝ What elements of their history, faith, and worship should they emphasize in order to prove that Orthodoxy could bring a contribution to today’s society?
- ✝ What would “catch the ear” of Americans today? Why?
- ✝ What are the grounds for agreement and tension between American mentality and Orthodoxy, so that they would become interested in Orthodoxy?”

Here are some of the students’ answers:

Please Note: [1] For this article, “Americans” refers to non-Orthodox individuals in our American society. Most of us who are “Orthodox” are also American citizens. [2] Text in brackets are my addition. [3] The teacher in me reformatted the answers for discussion purposes. Included is a lesson plan for Teens. [4] To read the actual sermon “Has Orthodoxy Triumphed?” go to <http://www.holytrinitypgh.org/herald/index.html> then locate the June-July 2007 issue of the *HOLY TRINITY HERALD*.

Their answers were placed under 7 Categories: [1] Heritage of Witness and Martyrdom, [2] The Victory of Hope, [3] The Apostolic Faith Preserved, [4] Icons: An Emotional and Spiritual Experience, [5] Orthodox Unity and Diversity, [6] Come and See – How Worship Fits In, [7] Making It Real

I. HERITAGE OF WITNESS AND MARTYRDOM – From the History of Our Church

1. **The Church has endured throughout the centuries** despite “the terror that almost destroyed them during the tyranny of the Bolshevik Revolution and the rule of Stalin” who killed over 30 million people. The idea of endurance is a contribution to our society today.” [Orthodox from the Balkans can add surviving the Ottoman overlords for 500 years.]

2. **The Orthodox faithful never gave up on what they believed. They would not take ‘no’ as an answer.** Orthodoxy was and forever will be a possible dream. People in our society who are willing to give up and take the back seat of mediocrity need to look at what the Orthodox Church endured. This is a reminder that with a mixture of [faith], hope and hard work, nothing can stop a dream from becoming a reality.

II. The Victory of Hope

1. The Orthodox people should emphasize the longevity of the Church’s existence despite persecution because it illustrates the strength of faith.
 - ✠ Strength of faith demonstrates how hope and trust are greater than any circumstance no matter how oppressive.
 - ✠ This is a major contribution to American society plagued with depression and overemphasizing problems.
 - ✠ The saints were not depressed or sad about experiencing difficulty [and martyrdom] because they knew there was something greater than the trouble around them.
2. Because Orthodoxy emphasizes the Resurrection of Jesus, rather than His victimization, one can see a parallel between Orthodoxy and U.S. history. Pilgrims and settlers came to this new land, established a new homeland, and then accomplished what seemed impossible, a revolution against the British rule to earn its freedom. [I think the student equates the Victory of Hope for American Freedom to the Orthodox Victory of Hope of the Resurrection.]
 - ✠ America today focuses not on the oppressed, but overcoming oppression.
 - ✠ Orthodoxy needs to teach American society that with a great victory come responsibilities to make the united Body the best it can be.

III. The Apostolic Faith Preserved

1. The teachings of the Orthodox Church were and are guarded and transmitted faithfully from the beginning of Christianity.
 - ✠ The bishops are not the sole guardians of the true faith. They proclaim the truth while the people, the Faithful, are guardians of the truth throughout the centuries.
 - ✠ Orthodoxy preserved the teachings of the Apostolic Church without addition or omission. [Note: When we make this statement, understand that the entire Christian Church codified the teachings especially at the seven Ecumenical Councils. For example, the Apostles taught that Jesus was both God and human. Yet, in the fourth century Arius questioned this belief. The Church had to make a formal statement of what she had always believed in The Nicene Creed. In addition, the Ecumenical Councils did not discuss other teachings such as Theosis, Mysteries/Sacraments, etc. pmo]

IV. Icons: An Emotional and Spiritual Experience - concerning our worship

1. Orthodox worship experience includes both emotional and spiritual involvement.
2. Icons provide a vision of the spiritual world and arouse emotions.
3. Icons can fill us with awe because we know that we stand in a holy place, the place where God is present.
4. Icons can provide constant reminders of the faith and its history.
5. A Presbyterian student, whose church does not use icons, sees them as very powerful tools.

V. Orthodox Unity and Diversity

1. The various Orthodox national churches provide much diversity in worship, customs, and traditions.

- ✝ For example, while worship in the Russian Orthodox Church dictates that one stand throughout the Liturgy, in the African churches the Faithful sing loudly and even dance during worship.
- 2. Diversity respects cultures and traditions of the different ethnic groups that make up the Orthodox Church.
 - ✝ The Orthodox churches do not require all of the different ethnicities to change their entire cultures in order to worship. [Some] aspects of their native culture or former religion are incorporated. [Note: “Christianized” – are integrated, thus creating ritual diversity. pmo]
 - ✝ [As Orthodoxy brought Christianity to new countries,] the language of the Liturgy was the vernacular, the language of the people.
- 3. This diversity in worship among ethnic groups is very important to American society.
 - ✝ In this democratic nation, all people – regardless of race or ethnic background - all make various contributions to society and all forms of religious belief are equal and to be respected.
 - ✝ In Orthodoxy among the culturally diverse Orthodox Churches, all [are equal], have value and build up the Body of Christ.

VI. Come and See – Advice by the Students

1. Orthodox iconography, architecture, and the Divine Liturgy are powerful testimonies to who are the Orthodox. This argument seems to be more effective than any theological discourse.
2. When speaking theologically, always explain the Faith with patience and love.
3. Orthodox should invite a non-Orthodox person to come to church, so that the non-Orthodox can truly experience the indescribable with words.
4. Do not be shy in inviting friends to experience your worship.

VII. Making It Real – Father Radu: All of this talking is meaningless if we do not live up to our faith. We need to be Orthodox in actions. According to the students:

1. Orthodox should first expose the character of Christ outside of the church by their actions, especially by genuinely caring for people.
2. People may not understand all of the traditions of Orthodoxy, but they can recognize and be drawn to places where they find genuine love.
3. Creating outreach ministries will draw people into the structure and order of the church.
4. Presenting words can be effective, but presenting actions is even more powerful.

Bringing It all Together – Father Radu’s summary.

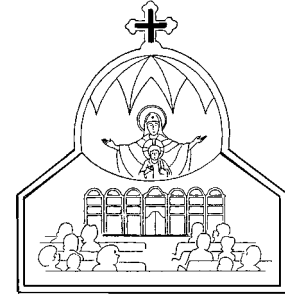
1. We all need to be prepared to proclaim our faith in a way that will be meaningful to our partners of discussion.
2. We need to present them with aspects that are relevant to them as Americans.
3. Our answers will differ depending on the person with whom we are talking.
4. Emphasize our history that proves our faithfulness to Jesus and the Apostles throughout 2000 years of Church history. This exemplifies our endurance and sends a message of hope in the midst of hardships.
5. Emphasize the truthfulness of our teachings, showing that this is the responsibility of the entire Church [the Faithful Orthodox], not only of the hierarchy.
6. We should invite our dialogue partners to experience our worship, which is a wonderful, deeply spiritual way of showing who we are.
7. Most important of all, we need to live as good Christians, worthy heirs of the great treasure that is our faith, Orthodoxy.

Answer the Question: Who Are You Orthodox? LESSON PLAN

By Phyllis Meshel Onest

INTRODUCTION

This Lesson can go two or three weeks depending on the amount of discussion and the students' interest. Do not rush. Encourage the students to share their experiences. Remind them that this question does not go away, unless, of course, they sever themselves from the Orthodox Church, and that would be a sad situation. Whether they go to college or off to work, the non-Orthodox and non-Christian people they date or meet will ask this question.



OBJECTIVES

1. The student will be able to identify 2 or 3 answers from the article for the question **“How should the Orthodox faithful present their faith in today’s American context?”**
2. The student will be able to identify and explain one of the seven categories listed in this article.

MATERIALS

1. Copy of a worksheet that lists the 7 categories
2. Copy of the article: *Answer the Question: Who Are You Orthodox?*
3. Pencils or Pens
4. Paper
5. 3 Poster boards [2 extra if need space-opt]
6. Marker[s]

BEFORE CLASS: Write the Question in Objective 1 on the 1st poster boards. Italicized text is script for the facilitator.

LESSON

1. *What have your friends or other people said when they learned you are an Orthodox Christian? Do you have any funny stories? Let's have _____ write them on this poster board.[#2] We will need your answers later.*
2. Place the 1st poster board with the Question: *How should the Orthodox...?* where it is visible to all students.
3. Read the question aloud.
4. *Do you have a good answer to use that you can share with us? For the next 5-7 minutes, we will brainstorm for responses to the question “How should the Orthodox...?”*
5. This time _____ will serve as Scribe.
6. Write their answers on the 3rd poster board. Let them know they may write comments on paper.
7. Distribute the Worksheet *Answer the Question: Who Are You Orthodox?* with the 7 categories.
7. Read the list of categories. *What do you think each category has to do with sharing our faith with others?* [COOPERATIVE LEARNING: Do this in small groups, then report to the main group.]
8. Monitor the discussion time. This may become a two or three week lesson.
9. **Option 1** Wait until discussing all 7 categories and then write the number of the category for which each of the students' answers qualifies on the poster board.
10. **Option 2:** At the end of each category discussion, identify which of the students' answers would qualify under that category. Write the number of that category next to the answer on the poster board.
11. *Are your responses what you really want to tell someone about the Orthodox Church? Will they have an idea about who we are?*
12. Distribute the *article*. *The information beneath each category came from non-Orthodox college students who studied Eastern Christianity in college.*
13. If any points are on the poster board lists or came up during the discussion, repeat them now.
14. *What do you think? Did you know any of these answers? Is it important to you?*
15. *These college students probably know more about the Orthodox Church than you do and most, if not all of you, grew up in the Orthodox Church.*
 - † *How do you feel about this? Are you missing something you think you should know?*
 - † *Do you feel challenged to learn more?*
 - † *At this moment, do you think it is more important than you did when you walked into the room? No hands up for this. You need to answer that question for yourself. It is your choice*

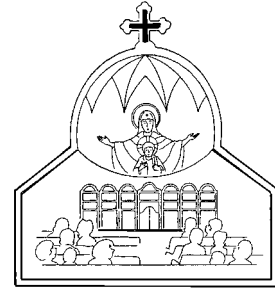
Answer the Question: Who Are You Orthodox? Handout

QUESTION:

“How should the Orthodox faithful present their faith in today’s American context?”

CATEGORIES OF ANSWERS:

[1] Heritage of Witness and Martyrdom



[2] The Victory of Hope

[3] The Apostolic Faith Preserved

[4] Icons: An Emotional and Spiritual Experience

[5] Orthodoxy Unity and Diversity

[6] Come and See – How Worship Fits In

[7] Making It Real