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### Sacraments of Initiation and their Importance

Sacraments are an integral part of the Orthodox Church as they are considered a special revelation of God's presence and a means for one to communicate with Him. Sacraments not only affect one's personal relationship with God but also to one other. The Holy Spirit unites believers through Sacraments to Christ who leads us to the Father. This process, called theosis, takes place within a community of believers who experience the Sacraments together.

Sacraments of Initiation in the Orthodox Church are the steps taken to join the community of believers. While the Orthodox Church considers any action that brings believers closer to the presence of God within the Church community a sacrament, the Sacraments of Initiation are those in which allow believers to join the community. The Sacraments of Initiation are important for that reason and are sacred to the Orthodox Church. These sacraments consist of Baptism, Confirmation/Chrismation, and the Eucharist (Communion). Each of these sacraments are important in their own respective way, and in this paper, I seek to explore their meaning and significance in the context of the Orthodox Church.

Baptism is the first Sacrament of Initiation in the Orthodox Church. Baptism is done by the priest, and this sacrament "incorporates us into the Church, the Body of Christ, and is our introduction to the life of the Holy Trinity" (Alexopoulos, Fitzgerald). Baptism is sacred because

it involves water which symbolizes physical and spiritual cleansing and new life. During baptism, one is submersed in baptismal waters in the Name of the Holy Trinity (The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). One's old self dies to the ways of sin, and one is reborn to a new life in Christ (Fitzgerald). Baptism is important because it is acknowledgement of Christ's Death and Resurrection and is viewed as the remission of one's own sins (Fitzgerald, Emberson). Baptism symbolizes a clean slate in life, a chance to live according to God's Word. While baptism of infants is highly encouraged, adults can still be initiated. The Church regards this sacrament very highly because it is not only the first step of initiation but also the induction of a soul into the Kingdom of God.

The Sacrament of Chrismation, or Confirmation, immediately follows baptism and is performed by the priest and bishop (Fitzgerald, Alexopoulos). Chrismation is often considered one's personal Pentecost (Fitzgerald). In this Sacrament of Initiation, the priest anoints parts of the newly baptized Orthodox Christian with Holy Oil and says "The seal of the gifts of the Holy Spirit" (Fitzgerald). The bishop's role in this sacrament is with the blessing of the Holy Oil (Fitzgerald, Alexopoulos). This second step of initiation is important because it emphasizes that the new member of the Orthodox community is valuable and blessed by the Holy Spirit. The anointing reminds us that one's physical, as well as one's spiritual, body is valuable and very much involved in one's salvation (Fitzgerald). This Sacrament is also important because the new member becomes equipped with the Holy Spirit and can grow in the Church community with this spiritual armor.

The final Sacrament of Initiation is the distribution of Holy Communion, or the Eucharist, to newly baptized members. This will ideally take place within the celebration of the Divine Liturgy which occurs only once a day. Eucharist in Greek means 'Thanksgiving'

(Alexopoulos) and is the foci of Orthodox Christianity. The process of preparing the Eucharist takes place before the liturgy begins. The bread and wine are prepared in a service called the Proskomide (Alexopoulos). The bread is called the prosphora, which means 'offering' in Greek. Typically, women in the church will prepare the prosphora for the priest and stamp it with a seal and the words 'Jesus Christ Conquers' in Greek abbreviated form (Alexopoulos, Emberson). Orthodoxy, as with the Catholic Church, believes that Christ is present in the elements of the Eucharist but does not explain this divine mystery. Nevertheless, the practice is still sacred and only those who have been fully baptized and confirmed can participate in the Eucharist.

During the Eucharist, participants are given both the bread and the wine, and usually the Eucharistic bread is dipped into the wine (Emberson). One requirement of the Eucharist is that one should fast from midnight until the actual service. At the end of the Eucharist, the Antidoron ('instead of the gifts' in Greek) is given to non-Orthodox Christians whose baptism has been recognized by the Church. This bread and wine has been blessed but not consecrated which is an important distinction (Alexopoulos, Emberson). The Eucharist is important because it is the highest form of grace and is communion with God (Alexopoulos). The Eucharist seals the new Orthodox member into the body of Christ and shows their full dedication to the faith.

While these Sacraments of Initiation are important to becoming a member of the Orthodox Church, there are other key sacraments the Church emphasizes. Confession/Penance is an important sacrament because it is one's acknowledgement of their sins and one's vow to be a better Christian (Alexopoulos). Confession is also significant because it is one's chance to communicate with God and ask for His help. It is one's opportunity to put aside pride and allow the Holy Spirit to reign. Holy Orders are another significant sacrament because it is ordination when one becomes a bishop, priest, and deacon (Alexopoulos). This sacrament is significant

because it establishes order in the Church and preserves the special calling God has on certain individuals' lives. Marriage is another important sacrament because it is acknowledgement of God's power to unite two individuals together in mutual love (Alexopoulos). Marriage is not only the union of two individuals but also their relationship is also in unison with God and the Church. A final sacrament that is key to the Orthodox Church is the anointing of the sick, or Holy Unction. Holy Unction is a sacrament that reminds Orthodox Christians that in times of emotional, physical, or even spiritual pain, Christ is with them in the Ministry of the Church (Fitzgerald, Alexopoulos). Holy Unction involves the usage of Holy Oil to anoint the body and a reading of seven epistle lessons, seven gospels, and seven prayers for healing power (Fitzgerald). This sacrament is important because it emphasized God's power and presence in times of need.

In conclusion, sacraments are very sacred to the Orthodox Church. Sacraments of Initiation are the special sacraments which allow members to join the Orthodox community. These sacraments consist of Baptism, Confirmation/Chrismation, and the Eucharist. Each of these sacraments allow one to bond not only with God but also with the new Orthodox community of leaders and other believers in which one will be joining. While these sacraments are important for those who join the Orthodox Church, there are several others that are important for those who are already members of the Church such as Confession/Penance, Holy Orders, Marriage, and Anointing of the Sick/Holy Unction. Sacraments are key to the Orthodox Faith because they allow for Orthodox Christians to connect with and grow in the Holy Spirit and in the Church.

Bibliography

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