

Fr. Matthew Penney's Introduction to the Greek Orthodox Church Summary

As filmed by Angeline Boswell in August 2018

At Kingston's Koimisis Tis Theotokou Greek Orthodox Church

- Koimisis Tis Theotokou Greek Orthodox Church - Dormition of the Theotokos
- Orthodoxy is the second largest Christian denomination
 - mainly in Eastern Europe and Mediterranean Region
- This is a Greek Orthodox Church, but it is the same as all other sister Orthodox churches, apart from the language spoken, ethnic celebrations and foods, etc.
 - but the faith is the faith that is shared by people all over the world. You need not be a certain ethnicity to feel welcome in the church
- The Orthodox church is the longest continuous church, thought to be established by Jesus and his apostles
- Orthodoxy has two meanings: right worship, and right belief
 - these two things are combined in Orthodoxy: maintaining two sides of the coin is important. Proper worship in order to maintain proper belief
- When you first enter into the church, you enter into the **narthex**
 - it serves as the bridge between our every day life - our earthly life - and the kingdom of heaven; bridge between what is going on out there in our earthly lives, and *in here* in a space of divine worship. It shows our position in the in-between; in the very "**threshold of heaven**"
 - Our church was not originally orthodox, it was transformed into an orthodox church, so our Narthex is unusual.
 - It would be larger, so there would be a divided space to have the two sets of candles (one for the living and one for the dead), and the icons.
 - The most important of which is the icon for the church (ours is the Koimisis of Theotokou); the icon allows the person to thank not only God (as there is also an icon of Christ), but also the saint or life event of Christ that this church is dedicated to.
 - In our church, the Dormition of the Virgin Mary is depicted.
 - The narthex is also a place for us to gather ourselves in; to quiet ourselves, and enter into this holy place. To unburden ourselves. So traditionally we take some time in the Narthex, take a deep breath, etc.
 - One way we prepare ourselves is by kissing the icons, to greet them. It is called a Veneration. We do our cross, bow, do the cross again, bow, and then kiss the icons, do the cross, then bow.
 - The purpose is to show our love for these people in the icons.
 - **ICONS** are "theology in colour"
 - every aspect of the icon is in accordance with a standard; standard of the gospel and of tradition. There are characteristics in icons that you will always find present.
- The main part of the Church is the **nave**. The nave represents entering in the very kingdom of heaven
 - in an Orthodox church, you are meant to see richness and gold. You are meant to be overwhelmed sensually - the church is supposed to be a "foretaste" of what the glory of the Kingdom of heaven is.
 - Around the church there are many large icons of important scenes in the life of the saints.
 - Traditionally, every bit of wall space is covered in "splendour"
 - Church is a place where all can belong, can feel like they are not alone.
 - Churches "feed a person's soul" (this is why the splendour is important, for people who are inside of it)

- Pews are not traditional; that is a Western phenomenon
- In the front part of the church, we are almost entering into the altar - or the "holy of holy's"
- The front of the church is the space before the Iconostas (icon wall separating the altar from the church). The church is laid out to be **ascending**, so that the spaces from the narthex to the altar increase in importance... the front of the church is then the third most important space
 - the architecture even shows this, as there is a staircase before this section. Every aspect of the orthodox church means something - it holds symbolic value.
 - In this space, we have our church singers - chanters. There is a chanter's stand. **hymnography is an essential part of the faith** - there is nothing we do in the church that does not involve continuous singing. This is because in the tradition of the psalms, we *lift up our voices to God*. In the orthodox church, the hymns are essential in carry out the services in the church.
 - Each hymn is a "paragraph of theology", because there is so much packed into it.
 - We don't use instruments so that we do not become distracted from the words in the hymns.
 - This space also has the Bishop's throne, where he will sit when he comes to visit his churches; there is one bishop in the geographical area who is responsible for all the churches in the area.
- The third space is the **altar area**, or the "holy of holy's"
 - much of our worship here is looking forwards towards it. This space represents the very throne of the Holy Trinity.
 - The Orthodox church's architecture is very similar to the Temple of Jerusalem in the New Testament. Like in the temple, the Holy of Holy's was the most sacred of places, which was only allowed to be entered into by the high Priest and only once a year.
 - The only people allowed to enter into the altar are those who have been given a particular task in the space, and have a function to perform in the liturgical worship of God.
 - There are many similarities between the objects found within the Orthodox altar and the objects found within the Old Testament's Temple.
 - In the altar, we have the gospel, a cross, a tabernacle (with the communion bread), and much more.
 - The Orthodox church is very **alive to its tradition**, not only as the early Christian church but also as a continuation to the Old Testament Israel; it is a fulfillment.
- The **iconostasis** (icon wall or icon stand) is the wall before the altar. It represents a threshold into the most holy space; and so on it we see icons depicting the most holy figures. First and foremost, Jesus Christ; On either side of him are the figures most significant to him in his earth life - the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist. The icon beside the Virgin Mary's is the icon of the saint of the Church (ours is the Dormition Tis Theotokou). Above the doorway to the altar is an icon depicting the last supper, and around them are icons of the holy apostles.
- The priest's vestments are very adorned; each vestment represents *putting on the glory of God*. As himself, Fr. Matthew has no ability to come before the throne and do this, but as *Father*, he is blessed and charged with the task of leading the divine services. The Priest is also meant to be the icon of Christ to the people; this is why they dress in the long clothing, why they have beards and long hair. It is a visual reflection of Christ.
- The material aspects are the least important part. The Priest's role is to **lead the liturgical worship, to stand as a representative for the people, and also as a representative of Christ to the people.**

On the Church's role in the community:

- the life of the church is **central** to the life of the community. This is natural because the church is our home; and the church is not just the building but also the gathering of people within it. The Greek word for church, Ecclesia, is “the gathering”.
- In the Greek community, all important events in one’s life is celebrated inside the church.
- In this church we have...
 - The Koimisis Tree of Life, showing the families in the church
 - Plaques of commemoration to those who have offered great contributions to our community (such as chanters)
 - immediately connected to our church are our two church halls; in here we celebrate all our big events like weddings and baptisms. We have dances here, coffee here, lunches here...
 - we have a board displaying news in our community – individual accomplishments, historical facts, announcements, etc.
 - our main hall can be rented out to the public; we are not seeking to serve only the Greeks in our community, but rather extend ourselves to the wider public.
 - Upstairs, we have the Priest’s office, and the rooms for the Sunday School and Greek school.