

To explain this tradition, we share the following passage from “The Orthodox Church” by Timothy Ware, an English bishop and theologian of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford:

"An Orthodox church today is filled with icons: dividing the sanctuary from the body of the building there is a solid screen, the iconostasis, entirely covered with icons, while other icons are placed in special shrines around the church; and perhaps the walls are covered with icons in fresco or mosaic. An Orthodox prostrates himself before these icons, he kisses them and burns candles in front of them; they are censed by the priest and carried in procession. What do these gestures and actions mean? When an Orthodox kisses an icon or prostrates himself before it, he is not guilty of idolatry. The icon is not an idol but a symbol. The veneration shown to images is directed, not towards stone, wood and paint, but towards the person depicted.

Iconoclasts and Iconodules agreed that God cannot be represented in His eternal nature, but the Iconodules continued, the Incarnation has made a representational religious art possible: God can be depicted because He became human and took flesh. The Iconoclasts wanted a religion freed from all contact with what is material; for they thought that what is spiritual must be non-material. But this allows no place to Christ's humanity, to His body.

The Orthodox doctrine of icons is bound up with the Orthodox belief that the whole of God's creation, material as well as spiritual, is to be redeemed and glorified. In the words of Nicolas Zernov, what he says of Russians is true of all Orthodox: 'Icons were for the Russians not merely paintings. They were dynamic manifestations of man's spiritual power to redeem creation through beauty and art.'

LIGHT A CANDLE

Upon entering an Orthodox Church, it is customary to light candles and offer prayers for one's personal needs or loved ones. We invite you to light a candle in St Sophia.

THE SERVICE

A Greek Orthodox baptism involves several distinct steps.

The ceremony begins with the preparation of the baptismal font, filled with water. The Godparents, who play a significant role, are present alongside the parents and the child.

The Godparents, holding the child, stand at the entrance of the church and renounce Satan and all his works. The Orthodox Godparent turns towards the altar and affirms their faith in Christ by reciting the *Nicene Creed*.

Once the Priest has blessed the water in the font, the Orthodox Godparent will offer a small bottle of olive oil over which a prayer for the banishment of evil is read. The Priest then pours the oil three times in the shape of a cross, on the water in the font to render the consecration of the water complete.

Olive oil (and not any other oil) is used to represent the olive branch returned to Noah and is used as a sign of grace to the newly anointed.

The Godparents are now required to undress the child who will then be anointed with the Holy Oil on the forehead, nose, ears, mouth, chest, legs, feet, hands and back, symbolising the strength and protection of the Holy Spirit.

The child is immersed three times in the baptismal font, symbolising the three days Christ spent in the tomb. This event is a re-enactment of Christ's baptism, death and resurrection.

After immersion, the Priest places the child in the open arms of the Godparent, who holds a new white sheet as a symbol of the soul's purity.

Immediately after, the Priest administers a second sacrament: Chrismation.

The Priest anoints the child with Holy Chrism, making the signs of the cross in the same parts of the body as the anointing prior to the baptism, thereby bestowing the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

After the Baptism and Chrismation, the Priest will tonsure the child by cutting three small locks of his hair in the shape of a cross.

The Priest now blesses the child and places a “garment of righteousness” on it. The child will then be taken by the Godparents to be dressed in his baptismal outfit.

While the child is being dressed, the baptismal candles will be lit, and the Priest will read additional prayers.

The child returns to the front of the church fully dressed and is prayed over with a symbolic washing away of the oil, receiving the blessing of Christ. The Priest then places a cross around the child’s neck as a sign of protection.

The Godparent, holding the child, and followed by the other Godparent holding the baptismal candle (*lambada*), will then be led three times around the baptismal font. The Procession, conducted in the form of the Cross around the font, is a joyous occasion. It is an act of rejoicing with the angels in heaven and with the other Christians present at the addition of one more member into the flock of Christ.

Bible readings follow, from the Epistle of St Paul to the Romans (6: 3-11) where Paul makes the comparison between the immersion and emersion with the Burial and Resurrection of Christ, and from the Gospel according to St. Matthew (28:16-20) where the Divine Institution of Baptism was established.

The Priest then reads the Conclusion prayers and administer the third sacrament to the child, his first Holy Communion.

The mother of the baptised child will then be called by the Priest to make the sign of the Cross and kiss the icon of Christ thanking Him for the great blessing of rendering her child a member of His Church.

The service is now concluded and the child and lambada is passed back to the parents. They will then be asked to kiss the hand of the Godparent as a sign of respect and gratitude for taking on the high responsibility of assisting in the spiritual development of the child throughout his life.

These steps culminate in the child's full initiation into the Greek Orthodox faith.

THE ROLE OF TRADITION

Orthodox chanting is part of the baptism, however, no other singing or playing of music is allowed.

The Priest is unable to customise the service, as he does not have the authority to change the nature of the Orthodox ceremony. The specifics of the ritual of the sacrament of baptism cannot be altered and follow a strict code that is not open to compromise.

This is part of the idea of living continuity. *"We do not change the everlasting boundaries which our fathers have set, but we keep the Tradition, just as we received it,"* wrote John of Damascus.

To borrow the words of Timothy Ware again, *"Orthodox Christians of today see themselves as heirs and guardians to a rich inheritance received from the past, and they believe that it is their duty to transmit this inheritance unimpaired to the future."*

THE CELEBRATION

Martyrika, or witness pins, are handed out at the end of the ceremony and worn by guests as proof of witnessing the baptism.