
I'm Not Ukrainian...

What Does This Church Offer Me?

Over the past several years our parishes have seen many non-Ukrainians coming through their doors. Some are married to Ukrainian Orthodox Christians. Others have heard of Orthodoxy and come for a closer look. Still others just drop by, checking things out. Regardless of how they come, sooner or later they ask the same question: "What does a Ukrainian parish have to offer me?" This becomes a particularly poignant question in mixed marriages, in which the non-Ukrainian sees the Orthodox Church as his/her spouse's Church, but not his/her own.

First, it must be said that Orthodoxy is a faith tradition that is no exclusive to any one nation. Along with Ukraine, Greece and the other historical European centres of Orthodoxy, there are indigenous (i.e., non-immigrant) Orthodox communities in Alaska, Africa, China, Korea, Finland, France, Great Britain, Lebanon, Mexico and Palestine, to name but a few. In other words, you don't have to be a Ukrainian to be Orthodox. The Ukrainian Orthodox is the Orthodox Church which expresses Her faith through the traditions and culture of the Ukrainian people.

What does this expression of the faith through the Ukrainian culture offer a non-Ukrainian? Quite a lot, actually. Consider this: Orthodox Christianity has been in Canada for just under 100 years. Over that time, the Orthodox peoples who came to Canada

have been identifying themselves more and more as Canadians. As this identification continues, Orthodoxy in Canada will also develop its own particular tone or "feel". This tone will be rooted in the traditions of our forebears, but will also reflect the social and cultural particularities of "our home and native land".

The continued emergence of a Canadian Orthodox identity involves two things. First, we must look at the historical Orthodox cultures and see which of their expressions of the Faith are fruitful for us, and which ones are unique to a different place or time. The articulation of the Faith through language, for example, is something that changes. Saints Cyril and Methodius, the Greek brothers, who were the missionaries to the Slavs, did not expect the Slavic people to worship and learn the Gospel in Greek. They learned the Slavonic language and went about translating the Divine Services and Holy Scriptures into the language of the people.

However, in liturgical language we can clearly see that maintaining a connection to our past is an important part of our Holy Tradition. To this end, we sing the Hebrew word "Alleluia" and not "Praise the Lord", which is what "Alleluia" means. We call out "Amen," not "So be it." This connection through language is a vital, concrete expression of our spiritual legacy; it is a way that we pay homage to our forebears, the great Palestinian, Greek and Slavic martyrs who shed their blood that we may be able to embrace, celebrate and proclaim Christ's Good News of salvation.

The key is that the maintenance of a cultural legacy does not become an end itself. We cannot allow our cultural experience to impair the

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Gospel from being proclaimed — whether through sermons, Bible studies or through the most profound and effective medium of all, the liturgy (let us not forget there was a Divine Liturgy 300 years before there was the collection of books we now call the New Testament).

The second element in nurturing a unique Orthodox identity in this country is perhaps the more important of the two. This element involves discerning which aspects of the culture are appropriate to the Faith and which ones are not. Looking back into our Church history, certain aspects of the Greek or Slavic cultures remained as these peoples grew in the Faith, while others did not. In the ancient Roman Empire, the gladiatorial games were a staple part of Greco-Roman entertainment. Needless to say, bloodshed and murder are not a fitting cultural expressions of Faith. On the other hand, the great Roman cultural traditions of mosaic and fresco painting form a basic technical foundation for Orthodox iconography.

As Orthodoxy develops in our Canadian culture (and indeed as our Canadian culture itself continues to develop) we will go through the work of finding fitting cultural expressions of the Faith. Without proper

grounding, however, we run the risk of trying to turn Orthodoxy into a clone of one of the "English" Churches that we are familiar with in this land. These faith traditions, of course, are not Orthodox; consequently, the cultural expressions they have engendered are shaped by theologies which in some cases directly oppose the Orthodox world view. It makes no sense taking on something which is not grounded in the Faith you embrace.

Fortunately, as we engage in the ongoing development of our Church here in Canada, we do not have to fumble around in the dark. We have the historical cultures of the Orthodox world as our examples. The early Christians had Judaism as a template for their development. The Slavs had Byzantine Orthodoxy. We, in turn, can look to a 2000-year legacy of culture transfigured by the Faith, and Faith expressed through culture.

There is great value, then, for non-Ukrainians in a Ukrainian Orthodox parish that is open and receptive to them. The Ukrainian people have been Orthodox for over 1000 years. This deep grounding in the Faith offers a wealth of guidance to the Canadian interested in the Orthodox Church.

The Ukrainian ties of our community offer you a blueprint for understand how Orthodoxy is lived in concrete, day-to-day ways. This blueprint has held fast for more than ten centuries; it

has withstood the test of foreign invasion, civil unrest and the militant atheism of the USSR. Surely anything that has stayed standing through all of that has great intrinsic value.

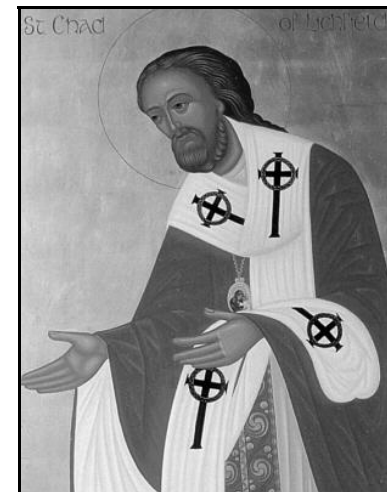
If you are not Ukrainian and are interested in Orthodox Christianity, please know you are welcome here. At the same time, we would ask that you honour the fact that we have a great respect for our heritage and for the people who brought the Faith with them, making it possible for us to be Orthodox today.

One of the great marks of Ukrainian Orthodoxy is hospitality. We will receive you as kin. We will give you a house of worship where you experience Jesus' life-bearing words and acts in a way that is both meaningful and accessible to you. We will also teach you hymns of praise and glory in the tongue of our ancestors; words that have been passed from generation to generation for a millennium. We will give you not only a place to come and pray on Sunday mornings, but a place that nurtures every aspect of your life — spiritual, social, emotional, intellectual and physical (in the eyes of the Orthodox, they are all holy). We will offer you our spiritual and cultural treasures, and we know that your presence among us will add to those treasures.

Welcome home.

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*St. Chad of Lichfield,
Orthodox Christian Bishop
(d. 672)*

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Rev. Fr. Andrew Jarmus, Director