

## 12 Questions and Answers

# NOTES ON ORTHODOX WORSHIP

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### 1. WHY DO THE CHURCH'S PRAYERS SAY THAT GOD IS "CONDESCENDING" TOWARD US?

When we use this word about God, it has a very positive meaning. It's a way of describing His incredibly gracious humility. God, our Creator, is willing to come among His creatures, and be one with us.

### 2. IN CHURCH WE SAY "LORD HAVE MERCY" 3, 12 OR 40 TIMES. IS THAT LIKE THE "HEAPING UP EMPTY PHRASES OR "VAIN REPETITIONS" THAT MATTHEW 6:7 WARNS US AGAINST?

Repeating "Lord have mercy" reminds us that God is merciful. We fill our hearts and minds with the truth of the phrase by saying it again and again. The repetition helps us "slow down" and realize how true it is.

We are always in need of God's mercy, so we are also asking Him for mercy by repeating this phrase as a request. Someone once said that a drowning person doesn't yell "Help!" just once. We also should ask God for His mercy not just once, but many times, with sincerity, confidence and deep respect.

The numbers 3, 12 and 40 have significance in Scripture, which is why they appear many times in our worship and in the physical appearance of our churches.

### 3. SPEAKING OF THE PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF ORTHODOX CHURCHES, WHY ARE THEY SO "GRAND" AND FULL OF COLOR?

The Book of Exodus gives God's specific instructions for the materials and construction the Hebrew people were to use in creating their place of worship. For example, see Exodus 30:34-38 on incense, Exodus 28 on priestly vestments, and Exodus 25:31-37 on the lampstand, tabernacle and curtain.

Then in Hebrews 8:5 we read:

*They [the priests] offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent [of meeting] was warned, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain."*

And Wisdom of Solomon 9: 8 tells us:

*You [God] have given a command to build a temple on Your holy mountain, and an altar in the city of Your habitation, a copy of the holy tent that You prepared from the beginning.*

God calls us to worship Him with the best and most beautiful things we have, doing so with humble and sincere hearts. At the same time, of course, He absolutely requires us to care for each other and provide for those in need.

**4. IN MANY ORTHODOX PRAYERS WE HEAR THE WORDS, “MOST HOLY THEOTOKOS, SAVE US.”  
ARE WE ASCRIBING TO MARY, A MORTAL HUMAN BEING, THE POWER TO SAVE US?**

Only Jesus Christ can save us. We ask Mary to intercede for us. We believe, as some prayers state, that “the entreaty of a mother has great power to win the favor of the Master.” A Biblical basis for this is the wedding at Cana (John 2: 1-11) when Mary interceded for the host who had no wine, and Jesus responded by providing it.

**5. SOME CHURCH PRAYERS REFER TO GOD AS “UNAPPROACHABLE.”  
BUT AREN’T WE SUPPOSED TO APPROACH GOD IN PRAYER?**

That word “unapproachable” is a way of describing God, by emphasizing that nobody and nothing comes close to God’s eternal and ultimate power, beauty, goodness and mercy. We can and should approach God in prayer, always with confidence but never casually.

**6. “UNCIRCUMSCRIBED” IS ANOTHER WORD WE USE FOR GOD. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?**

To circumscribe something means to put limits or boundaries on it. God has no limits, no boundaries on His authority or His mercy. (Be careful not to confuse this word with the name of the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ, which celebrates His fulfillment of the Old Testament Law.)

**7. “INEFFABLE” IS ANOTHER OF THE NOT-SO-COMMON WORDS THE ORTHODOX CHURCH USES TO DESCRIBE  
GOD. HOW ABOUT THE MEANING OF THIS ONE?**

Orthodox theology teaches that God is so far beyond human words that sometimes the only way to describe Him is to say what He is not. “Ineffable” is one example. It means that something is impossible to express or describe in words. Two other words we’ve talked about—“uncircumscribed” and “unapproachable”—also describe God by saying what He is not.

**8. ARE ORTHODOX WORSHIP SERVICES RELATED TO THE BIBLE?**

Not just related to the Bible, but completely based on it in language and in imagery. The words are often directly from the Bible—the Psalms, for example, are chanted in full or in part during every service.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are liberally quoted. Lamentations 3:41 gives us the words “Let us lift up our hearts”—these are said by the priest as part of the Anaphora. In Philippians 2:5-7 we read that Christ, “though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant.” Saint Basil’s Liturgy uses these words, sometimes translated a little differently, in the Prayer of Commemoration.

As we’ve seen, Exodus describes the form and manner of worship in Old Testament times. The Book of Revelation describes that form and manner in the Kingdom of God. Orthodox worship is solidly based on these descriptions. We remember and honor the worship of our Old Testament ancestors. We anticipate taking part in the worship of the Kingdom.

**9. BOTH THE PRIEST AND THE CONGREGATION, IN ORTHODOX SERVICES, REFER TO THEMSELVES AS “UNWORTHY.” ARE WE SO WORTHLESS IN GOD’S EYES?**

It’s really important to remember that we are infinitely precious in God’s eyes—He sent His Son to die for us, and His Son did so willingly!

To be unworthy is completely different from being “worthless.” Calling ourselves unworthy is a way of saying that we have received a gift we have no way of earning—the gift of eternal life. Since we can’t earn it, it’s truly a gift, and God loves us so much that He deems us worthy of it. He’s the only One who can do so.

**10. STAND, SIT, KNEEL, BOW TO THE GROUND. WHEN DO WE DO WHAT DURING AN ORTHODOX SERVICE?**

Standing in God’s presence, especially during the Divine Liturgy, is always a more appropriate sign of respect than casually sitting. But anyone who needs to sit at any time should feel free to do so.

Because Sunday is the day of Resurrection, we don’t normally kneel on that day, but kneeling is proper during some parts of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, the “kneeling prayers” of Pentecost, and the Lord’s Prayer during weekday Liturgies. Following the practice of the local church, or reviewing the parish’s practices with the priest, can answer the questions of what-to-do-when.

There are times when Orthodox worshippers might bow to the ground, especially during the penitential prayers of Great Lent. Marva Dawn, a pastoral theologian who is not Orthodox, wrote in her book *A Royal “Waste” of Time* (Eerdmans, 1999): “With all the amazing sights and sounds in our cyberspace world, many of us no longer recognize that if we but catch a glimpse of God—the imperial Lord of the cosmos, the almighty King of the universe—we will be compelled to fall on our faces.” Orthodox worship, we might say, is giving us some practice!

**11. WHEN WE USE THE WORD “IMMORTAL” IN CONVERSATION, IT USUALLY MEANS SOMEONE OR SOMETHING PEOPLE WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER, AS IN “THE IMMORTAL WORDS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.” DOES IT MEAN SOMETHING MORE WHEN WE APPLY IT TO JESUS CHRIST?**

When we call Jesus Christ “immortal” we are saying much more: that He has no beginning or end. There has never been a time when He did not exist, nor will there be a time when His existence ends. There has never been a time when He was not God’s divine Son, and there will never be a time when He is not.

This is the classic Christian teaching. It’s so fundamental that those who do not share it—Mormons, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists among others—cannot be said to believe in the same God and Savior that Christians do.

Jesus Christ is our immortal Savior forever; He calls us to Him at all times. We are invited to “taste the fountain of immortality” every time we receive His Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

Spelling and pronunciation of the word “immortality” are important—the sixth letter, the first “t”, mustn’t be overlooked.

## 12. TWO WORDS THAT LOOK AND SOUND ALMOST THE SAME ARE “EXALT” AND “EXULT.” MEANINGS?

We “exalt” God by praising Him and thanking Him. Psalm 34 reads, “O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together.” (The word “magnify” has a similar meaning.)

In Mary’s song of praise, the Magnificat (Luke 1), God is the One who has “exalted those of low degree.” God exalts or lifts up those who are disdained and ignored by the world.

To “exult” means to rejoice greatly. In that same Magnificat, Mary is exulting. The Paschal hymn *The Angel Cried* is full of this rejoicing: “Exult now, exult and be glad, O Zion.”

Whenever we think of God’s freely-given love and mercy, we can exult!