"You can not have God as your Father if you do not have the Church as your Mother". By this statement, Saint Cyprian of Carthage meant that God is personal, and not simply a philosophical idea. Humanity is made in God's image, but the opposite is not true. God has revealed Himself to us, and the truth of that revelation is preserved and perpetuated in the Church.

The Church of the Trinity

The Orthodox Church believes in one God known in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Orthodox services are shot through with hymns and prayers to the Trinity, and rarely does the Church speak or think of one Person without the others, like Saint Patrick's famous shamrock: the three leaves can not be thought of in isolation, for they constitute one leaf.

The Church of the Incarnation

While the Orthodox Church always thinks of the three persons of the Trinity together, it is the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, Who entered human history and became a human being like us. Because humanity had separated itself from God through sin and disobedience and was unable as a result to become one with God, God Himself became one with us, thus reconciling God to humanity, because Christ is at once both God and man. He is not a sort of demigod, but fully God and fully man. It is because of this unshakeable belief in the Mystery of the Incarnation that the Orthodox Church has such a high regard for the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. We venerate the Mother because we worship the Son. All Orthodox services contain prayers to the Mother of God. She is the protector of all Orthodox Christians. She is humanity's offering to God from whom He took flesh for our sake.

The Church of the Gospel

The accounts of Christ's life on earth are preserved in the four gospels. It is often thought that the Orthodox Church does not pay much attention to the word of God, but this is not true at all. The Gospel is read at every liturgy and at other services, and the Book of the Gospels is venerated by the people. The Gospel is the greatest written revelation of God's truth to humanity. The Epistles and Acts of the Apostles are also read at the liturgy and other services, and the hymns and services are shot through with passages from the Old and New Testaments, particularly the psalms. As an Anglican priest once said, after attending the Orthodox service of the Akathist Hymn (Salutations to the Mother of God): "I have never heard such a biblical service in all my life!"

The Church of the Cross and Resurrection

The Cross and Resurrection are central to Orthodox belief and practice. Christ's crucifixion and resurrection is the ultimate act of human salvation. Christ, as the sacrificial lamb, gave Himself up to suffering and death in our stead; the Giver of Life endured death and thereby destroyed the power of death and, as the Source of Life, He rose from the dead, granting resurrection to the world. He ascended into heaven, thus taking human nature to God the Father, to paradise. Since we share in Christ's humanity, we too can take that path through death to life – to God in heaven. Every Sunday is dedicated to the Resurrection and the greatest feast of the Orthodox Church is Easter, the Resurrection of our Lord. In the Orthodox Church the crucifixion and resurrection are scarcely thought of in isolation from one another. One of the first things a stranger to the Orthodox Church would notice on attending an Orthodox service is how often people make the sign of the cross, and the Orthodox services make no less mention of the cross and crucifixion than they do of the resurrection.

A Hierarchical Church

The Church, from its very early days (as we can see from the Epistles) had developed a hierarchical structure of bishops, priests and deacons, and so it remains today. The bishop is the chief pastor of the local community, and each bishop has priests and deacons to assist him in his ministry. Each bishop in the Orthodox Church is equal. Some speak of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople as the 'pope of the Orthodox', but he has no such position. His position is closer to that of the Archbishop of Canterbury in the worldwide Anglican communion.

A "High" Church

A Protestant Christian once asked, "Is the Orthodox Church a high church?" The response he got was: "The highest!" One of the things that strike a non-Orthodox on first attending an Orthodox service is the splendour of Orthodox worship. An Orthodox Church is normally covered in icons and frescoes, the clergy are adorned often in elaborate vestments and the faithful light candles as part of their prayer, if you can see it all through the clouds of incense! At an Orthodox service, all the human senses are used. Our gaze is drawn by the sight of the icons, our hearing is drawn to the chanting and readings (no instruments are used in Orthodox services, and even the readings are often read in a style of plain chant), we smell the incense which rises up to heaven with our prayers, we taste the bread and wine which is the Body and Blood of Christ, the Eucharist, which is the prime act of Orthodox worship and the centre of Orthodox life and practice: Christ becomes truly present for us, now in the form of bread and wine, and in eating and drinking His Body and Blood we become one with Christ and with one another, since we all eat and drink of the same Body and Blood.

The Church of the Saints

The Orthodox Church prays to its saints. The saints are those who have attained a union with God that we all hope to achieve. Every day of the Orthodox year is dedicated to numerous saints. A Christian should always be named after a saint with whom he or she has a special relationship. Churches are named after a saint or after a feast of the Lord or of His Mother, and such feast days are often observed with splendour.

A Church of Sinners

In the Orthodox Church we are in great company: the Angels, Apostles, Martyrs, Prophets, the Mother of God, Christ Himself; we will find them in the Orthodox Church, if our hearts are open to God. But we will also find sinners, for whom Christ came into the world. A Christian should never forget that he is one of those sinners.

THE NICENE CREED

I believe in one God, Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages. Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made; for our sake and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man; he was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried; he rose again on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father; he is coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead; and his kingdom will have no end. And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and together glorified; who spoke through the Prophets. In one, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church; I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins. I await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come. Amen.

(*Translated from the Greek by Fr Ephrem Lash*)