

# **An Introduction to the Apostolic Orthodox Church**

**By**

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## **A Brief History**

In 1983, three years after my ordination to the priesthood, I had the good fortune to visit India as a guest of Mar Kyrillos Kyriakos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. In typical gracious Indian fashion, I was taken on an extensive tour of the Bishop's diocese. On one of our tours, I was introduced to the Abbot of a small monastery in the mountains of the southern state of Kerala, where I was invited for an all-too-short visit. Little did I realize that visit would eventually lead to the founding of the Apostolic Orthodox Church. As Mar Kyrillos and I departed, he remarked that the monastery was a remnant of a community established by those disciples of Saint Thomas the Apostle who had journeyed with him to India from the Holy Land. Upon my return to the United States, I could find no reference to the Bishop's remark, but remained fascinated by it.

In 1986, I was invited to return to the monastery for a longer visit. After a week, the Abbot and I traveled to three other communities, also descended from the disciples of Saint Thomas. I was told that they maintained the theology and teachings of the Saint—which they referred to as the *Sacred Tradition*—in a most pristine form. Living in a modern age and being aware of the pronouncements of the various Church Councils throughout the ages had virtually no effect upon their beliefs. Indeed, they knew that many of their brother and sister Churches would look upon them as living outside the mainstream of Christianity. Because of this, they chose to maintain their distance from the established Churches, preferring a simple, private existence. It seemed incredulous that a facet of the Christian Church could suddenly surface from almost two millennia of obscurity. But, I was to learn that this obscurity existed only outside of India. There, to Christian and non-Christian alike, they were well known as the *Nasrani*: the first Christians of India.

Even before my first visit to India, Saint Thomas intrigued me, probably because there is so little known of him and his mission; and what *is* known is hotly debated among scholars and theologians. We know that he was given the name *Didymus*, meaning “the double,” or “twin,” as his teaching style and personal charisma approximated those of Jesus. Most sources agree that he and his disciples went to Parthia (the area southeast of the Caspian Sea, in modern Iran) and thence to India; but the agreement ends there. One Syriac document, the *Acts of Thomas*, for example, has him sold as a slave to the household of Gundaphar, King of India, and an historical character. But whence came the *Nasrani*? Here is their story, as it was told to me.

The name *Nasrani* is the Indian pronunciation of *Nazarene*, the sect of the Essenes to which Saint Thomas and his disciples belonged. Although he established the Christian Church as did the other Apostles, unlike them he espoused a doctrine of individual salvation that was derived not *solely* through membership in the Church, but through one's own efforts as well. Furthermore, he and his disciples made no effort to actively gain converts, nor did they refute the established religions or destroy their Temples and Images. Rather, they formed their own community and welcomed all that wished to share their life. When a sufficient number of Indians

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had chosen Christianity as their Path, the most spiritually advanced among them were consecrated and ordained. Leaving the Church entirely in their hands, Saint Thomas and his disciples moved on, and the cycle was repeated. After his death, his disciples dispersed throughout Southern India, but the majority remained in the mountainous regions of Kerala, now the seat of the Malankara Church. They had only the most negligible contact with the Church they established, preferring a life of solitude where they could maintain the ways of living a holy life, as taught to them by Saint Thomas, intact for future generations. Since those early days, they have remained much the same. During the first three hundred years of Christianity, others sought them out to learn their ways and to receive instruction. On rare occasions they traveled to participate in the consecration of new Bishops, but other than these isolated incidents, they lived in relative obscurity.

And so it is today. They do not proselytize in an attempt to swell their ranks, yet with those who have “ears to hear,” they share the mystical teachings of Saint Thomas, the *Sacred Tradition*, which has been passed down virtually unchanged as an holy trust. They place one’s personal spiritual evolution second only to the worship of God, and to that end, those farther along the Path to the Father instruct, aid and encourage those who follow behind. Such a method of instruction was practiced in the Essene Community at the time of Jesus and Saint Thomas, and continues today in many spiritual communities and monasteries throughout the world. So, it was into this atmosphere I entered, and what was to be a visit of but a few months lasted almost two years. As I was preparing for my return to the United States, I was commissioned to disseminate the *Sacred Tradition* of Saint Thomas in the West.

For the next six years, I lectured extensively, but the concept of a *Church* based upon the teachings and way of life of the *Nasrani* weighed upon me. In 1993, I discussed this idea with four Independent Bishops, who in turn offered me Consecration to the Holy Episcopate in order to make this dream a reality. And so on October 16, 1994, the **Apostolic Orthodox Church** was born. Although we have no official ties with the *Nasrani*, our spiritual bonds are very strong, and the Apostolic Orthodox Church has their approval and blessing. As to the future, we place that in God’s hands. Those few of us who have given our lives to the Church know the “pearl of great price” with which we have been entrusted; we pray to be worthy of such a gift.

## Sacred Tradition

Throughout our literature, the reader will happen upon the phrase *Sacred Tradition*, or simply, *Tradition*. The “T” will always be in the upper case, to differentiate it from those other traditions with which we are familiar—family, ritualistic, etc. Rather, that which we call the *Sacred Tradition* is the complete, original teaching imparted by Jesus to Saint Thomas (and, of course, to His other Apostles as well), from him to those disciples who formed the first communities in India, and thence through the following millennia to the present day. To many “modern” and “intellectual” Christians (myself included at one time, I must confess) it may seem questionable that such a transmittal of knowledge took place. But is it?

Jewish sacred history speaks of Moses receiving unwritten instructions from God on Mount Sinai when he received the written Decalogue, and such instructions were transmitted to Aaron and the priesthood. In like manner, the same may be said of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism; in

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fact, all religions known to man, extinct or extant, have their *Sacred Traditions*. It is now the consensus of many theologians that Jesus traveled to and studied in Egypt, India and Persia at some time during the so-called “lost years,” between the ages of twelve and thirty. Indeed, an unbiased comparison of the ancient Scriptures of those lands with those of Christianity reveals more similarity than variance. (For fascinating insight into these similarities, the reader is referred to *Bible Myths and Their Parallels in Other Religions*, by T. W. Doane, University Books, 1971.)

But, is there written proof, from a respected Christian source, that such unwritten Tradition does indeed exist in Christianity, and that it was passed from Jesus to His Apostles, and from them to others? No better proof could be provided than by one of the greatest theologians in the history of the Church, Saint Clement of Alexandria, in his *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, Book VI, Chapter VII:

If, then, we assert that Christ Himself is Wisdom, and that it showed itself in the prophets, by which the Gnostic Tradition may be learned, as He Himself taught the Apostles during His presence; then it follows that the Gnosis, which is the knowledge and apprehension of things present, future and past, which is sure and reliable, as being imparted and revealed by the Son of God, is Wisdom.

And the Gnosis itself is that which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted unwritten by the Apostles.

In the above passage, Saint Clement uses the word *Gnosis* to indicate knowledge that transcends the mere intellectual assembly of facts to the level of the soul. And this is *Sacred Tradition*. It is not so much a set of things, ideas, etc., which can be precisely passed down, but rather it is a frame of mind, of soul, of being. It is the context within which you live your life. It is the ground from which your answers and reactions to questions and situations arise. It is part and parcel of everything you are or hope to be. What can be passed on as Tradition was never given as a set of lectures, but rather as answers to questions, as it is the question which touches the *Indwelling Tradition* within the instructor, giving the student the answer.

## Orthodoxy

Although the Church uses the term *Orthodox* as a descriptive term in its name, it must not be confused with others who call themselves Orthodox. Most are familiar with at least the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches (also called *Byzantine* or *Greater Orthodox*), as these are quite visible in the West. There are other Orthodox Churches (the so-called *Lesser Orthodox*) which are not as visible—the Malankara, Syrian, Armenian, Chaldean or Nestorian, Coptic (Egyptian) and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches. With the Apostolic Orthodox Church, both Greater and Lesser Churches use the term *Orthodox* to differentiate themselves and their theological positions from the Roman Catholic Church and those Eastern Churches that are under the Roman Pope (*Uniates*). Orthodox Churches also use ethnic denominators, such as *Greek*, *Russian*, etc. and represent the traditional Patriarchates (other than Rome) of Jerusalem, Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria. The Apostolic Orthodox Church, however, makes no such claim; it is completely autonomous. Unlike its other Orthodox brethren, the Church does not concern itself with dogma, those tenets which one *must* believe in order to remain a member of a particular Church. The earliest Christian Churches imposed no such requirements upon their members, thus

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the Apostolic Orthodox Church prefers to follow their example, saying not, “Thou shalt believe,” but rather, in the words of Jesus, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” (Lk 8:8) For the Church believes that only by freely opening one’s ears, mind and heart to Christ Within, can one truly be Orthodox and offer “right glory and worship” to God.