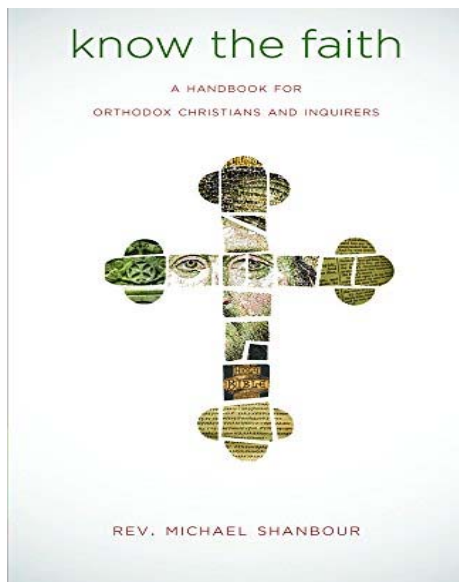


**Rev. Michael Shanbour, *Know the Faith: A Handbook for Orthodox Christians and Inquirers*. Chesterton, Indiana: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2016.**



*By Dn. Lasha Tchantouridzé*

Father Michael has written an excellent book. This is a kind of volume that should be available in every parish for both the catechumens and regular reviews of various topics of interest in Christian life. Father Michael a missionary parish priest and pastor of Three Hierarchs Orthodox Mission in Wenatchee, Washington. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from St.

Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, and has been a priest since 2001. In the introduction of his book, Fr. Michael states that his "main purpose in writing this book is to accurately present the Orthodox Christian Tradition and teaching in a way accessible to most Orthodox Christians and inquirers."

Father Michael takes the story of the conversion of Cornelius and his family (Acts 10), the first Gentile converts, and imagines what they should have encountered through their conversion and membership in the earliest church. The scriptural account of Cornelius' conversion ends with his baptism, and Father Michael uses educated guess and historical evidence to articulate what his family's life may have looked like after their baptism. Each chapter of the book opens with a brief discussion of the topic in question from Cornelius' own point of view.

Eleven thematic chapters of the volume discuss all the major themes that inquirers may have questions about. The inquiry starts with the question of the church: when Cornelius was baptized, which church did he join? Father Michael emphasizes in several places that "the Christian faith is not primarily a set of doctrines or moral teachings, but a new way of life inspired and made possible by the reality of the Resurrection." The chapters of the volume address each fundamental aspect of this new way of life that Cornelius entered with his family, and their applicability in the contemporary Orthodox Church, and distinct visions of the same by the Roman Catholic and the mainstream Protestant churches.

The chapter on God's grace is especially well written. Fr. Michael compares and contrasts the Orthodox Church's understanding of grace with those by the Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant churches. This is a very difficult topic to discuss and summarize accurately, especially when it comes to contrasting the Orthodox Church position with others. St. Gregory Palamas' discussion with a scholastic priest Barlaam of Calabria helps clarify the fundamental differences between the Orthodox and the Roman churches. The Protestant teaching on grace, just like most other teachings addressed in this book, arose as a reaction to the Roman Catholic teachings of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, which designated works with associated "merits" and indulgencies as a way to God's grace.

The chapter dedicated to the question of salvation not only explores the Orthodox position, but explains how the 'false dilemma' developed during the Reformation in Western Europe between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestants. Again, the dispute was the question whether the Christians were saved by their works or their faith. Due to the Roman abuses at that time, *sola fide*, or by faith alone became the battle cry of the Protestants and it remains so to this day. In contrast to this false dilemma, the author explains that according to the Orthodox teaching, that although both faith and works are important as they open the doors for salvation, it is Grace of God that saves, not faith alone or works alone or even both of them together.

The chapter titled "Justification by Faith" is primarily addressed to the inquirers with Protestant backgrounds to show what is the Orthodox understanding of this concept, and how justified is the concept scripturally. The volume underlines distinctly major differences between Orthodox Church and Protestant churches, but the differences between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church doctrines and practices are very well outlined as well.

Major differences between Rome and the Orthodox Church are found in almost every topic considered in the book, most tellingly when it comes to the subject of salvation (the Orthodox Church does not recognize such Roman Catholic innovations as the doctrine of purgatory, universality of guilt, indulgences, the satisfaction theory of atonement, temporal punishment for sins, etc.), grace, and even the nature of ordination and the role of the priest. One practical example: when the Roman Catholic Priest hears a confession by a penitent, he states: "I absolve you," while the Orthodox priest states something different: "may God forgive you, through me, a sinner."

Some chapters have a section of clarifications. for instance, the chapter on Tradition and Scripture clarifies how these two relate to each other. Most Protestant movements reject Tradition or do not give much credence to it. But did the Scripture come first in the form of the New Testament or was it Tradition? Obviously, it was Tradition, as it starts forming during the lifetime of Christ, with the very important scriptural elements following much later. According to the Orthodox Church, the New Testament is a written part of Tradition. The Protestant dictum *sola scriptura*, proclaiming sufficiency of the Holy Scripture, was born out of the religious clashes during the Reformation, but it did reject the most fundamental aspects of the story of the church.

All chapters contain the references found in the Holy Scriptures on the given topic. these are especially important for the chapters on Ordination and Priesthood, Confession and Repentance, Icons, Veneration and Worship, Intercessions of the Saints, and Veneration of the Virgin Mary (Theotokos). It is very fitting to provide numerous scriptural references for these topics: there is a fundamental difference between Orthodox Church and Protestant denominations, especially Evangelicals, on the subject of priesthood and ordination. Protestants normally refer to Matthew 23:9 to deny the validity of priesthood and the tradition of referring to them as "father:" "Do not call anyone on earth your father, for One is your Father, He who is in heaven." At the same time, the apostles often refer to the saints of the Old Testament as "fathers," and address others in their correspondence as "beloved children." The author explains that "the Lord's teaching in Matthew 23:9 has always been understood in a spiritual manner – as an admonition never to exalt any man to the level of God the Father, who is the true father of us all... If we were to apply this teaching strictly and literally, no Christian could even address his biological father with this title."

All chapters have the quotations from the church fathers, e.g. Epistle of Barnabas (AD 74) on confession: "You shall confess your sin. You shall not go to prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of light." St. John of Damascus defends the holy icons: "In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when god is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God who I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake." St Athanasius the Great of Alexandria (AD 296-373): "We the faithful do not worship images as gods as did the heathen Greeks – God forbid! – but our only purpose is to see in the image a reflection of the facial form of the beloved."

The chapter on salvation has a question and answer section. This is, perhaps, the most important chapter of the volume: nothing in the Christian way of life makes much sense without salvation. Some other chapters contain sections of clarifications that are composed to answer the most common misperceptions held by Protestants and Roman Catholics about the Orthodox Church. The objections and responses sections are to be found in the chapters that discuss the topics that are the most objected to by the contemporary Protestants.

The chapter on the Eucharist and the Liturgical Worship has a section with Martin Luther's early opinions on Eucharist that actually sound like something an Orthodox priest may have said. This is Martin Luther on the Virgin Mary: "the veneration of Mary is inscribed in the very depths of the human heart," and [she is the] "highest woman and the noblest gem in Christianity after Christ..." Other notable reformers, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli are also cited and their positions clarified on the topics discussed in the book. Among other authorities cited in the book is Origen, a third-century Christian scholar, who advised the faithful that a sinner should "not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine." Tertullian is also cited, but among the church fathers, among whom Origen is also mentioned. Additionally, Father Michael relies on historical and archaeological records and evidence available to us, for instance, "the practice of [early Christians] requesting the intercessions of departed Christians is also attested to by the inscriptions on tombs in the catacombs, both those of martyrs and those of other departed Christians, including children and even baptized infants."

The book is divided by topics for a better organization and structure, but at the same time it is eminently clear that all of the topics discussed here are

interconnected: salvation is impossible without grace of God, there is no ordination of the servants of the church without God's grace, confessions and repentance are done with salvation in mind, the intercessions of the saints makes no sense without grace and salvation, and the Orthodox Church cannot exist without God's grace.

Father Michael Shanbour's *Know the Faith* is a highly recommended read for anyone interested in the Orthodox Church or comparative theology. It is available from Amazon in paperback and a Kindle edition, from the publisher and other booksellers. There are only minor editorial issues in the volume, and it definitely deserves a second edition, perhaps, with a more expanded coverage of the questions that may arise from the discussions of the current edition.

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