

When Orthodox Christians Pray and Worship God They Turn Towards the East*

*“The Dayspring from on
high hath visited us”*
(St. Luke 1:78)



I

Because We Possess a Twofold Nature, We Offer a Twofold Worship

ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS¹ teaches us that we do not worship facing East without reason or fortuitously, but that because our nature is compound—that is, visible and invisible, noetic and sensible—we also offer our Creator a twofold worship: our soul is turned noetically towards God, and at the same time our body worships facing East.

This twofold manner, noetic and sensible, of our oblation to the Lord is apparent in other instances as well: we chant with our mind and at the same time with our bodily lips; we are Baptized both in water and in the Holy Spirit—that is, we are united to our Lord in two ways: by participating in the Holy Mysteries and by the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

II

Christ is Named the “Orient”

OUR LORD AND GOD is the noetic Light: “God is light”²; He is also the “Sun of righteousness”³; He is the “light of the world,”⁴ the “great light”⁵ and the “Dayspring” or “Orient”⁶ which “visited us from on high,”⁷ and by His Grace and Truth He enlightens mankind, which was sitting “in the darkness” of ignorance, “in the region and shadow of death”⁸ of sin.

For precisely this reason, we must dedicate the East to Christ for worship, because we must render every good thing to God, from Whom proceeds every good thing.

And the Divine David says: “Sing unto God, ye kingdoms of the earth, chant ye unto the Lord, unto Him that rideth upon the heaven of heaven towards the East,”⁹ because the Lord began His works at the setting of the Sun and completes them “in the East,” at the source of light. Likewise, Holy Scripture says: “God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and placed there the man whom He had formed,”¹⁰ and when man transgressed the commandment, he was exiled “over against the garden of delight,”¹¹ that is, in the West.

III

We Seek Our Ancient Homeland in the East

WE WORSHIP GOD, then, seeking our ancient homeland and fixing our gaze upon it; this reminds us also of the Tabernacle of Witness in the Old Testament, which had the “veil”¹² and the “mercy-seat”¹³ turned towards the East. And the tribe of Judah, because it enjoyed greater honor, was encamped “towards the East.”¹⁴ And in the renowned Temple of Solomon, the gate of the Lord “looked towards the East.”¹⁵

Our Lord Himself, when on the Cross, looked towards the West; therefore, when we worship Him, we look towards Him, that is, turned towards the East. During his Ascension, He was carried up eastward, and thus did His Apostles worship Him.¹⁶ Just as they saw Him being taken up into Heaven,¹⁷ so in the same manner will He come again, as the Lord Himself said: “As the lightning cometh out of the East and shineth even unto the West, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be.”¹⁸

Therefore, in expectation of the Second Coming of our Savior, “we worship facing East.”

IV

Unwritten Tradition

THIS TRADITION is an unwritten one and derives from the Holy Apostles, because “they have handed many things down to us not in writing.”

On the basis, moreover, of this unwritten Tradition, the Holy Altar in Orthodox Churches faces East, so that the Priest and Faithful alike are turned eastward, presenting an image of the new people of God, who, coming out of the Egypt of the passions and worldly darkness, journey towards the easterly Land of Promise, the heavenly homeland, while walking ahead of them, as a guide, is the new Moses, the Priest and Shepherd praying before the Altar, that noetic throne of the Divine Majesty.

For exactly the same reason, there prevails the good, beautiful, and symbolic custom of placing the dead, both during the funeral service in the Church as well as in their tombs, so that they face East.

Furthermore, pious Orthodox Christians—or so they did in the past, at any rate—, when lying down to sleep, make sure that they are facing East: calling to mind the “garden eastward in Eden”¹⁹ and praying, they hand themselves over with trust to Divine Providence and to the repose of sleep.



*Source: *Άγιος Κυπριανός*, No. 297 (July-August 2000), pp. 321-322.

Notes

1. St. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book IV, ch. 12, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCIV, cols. 1133B-1136B.
2. I St. John 1:5.
3. Malachi 4:2.
4. St. John 8:12.
5. Isaiah 9:2; St. Mathew 4:16.
6. Jeremiah 23: 5, Zachariah 3:8, St. Luke 1:78.
7. See note 6.
8. See note 5.
9. Psalm 67: 33-34 (*Septuaginta*).
10. Genesis 2:8
11. Genesis 3:24
12. Exodus 37:5
13. Leviticus 16:14
14. Numbers 2:3
15. Ezekiel 44: 1
16. St. Luke 24:52
17. Acts 1:11
18. St. Matthew 24:27
19. See note 10.