

An Introduction to Orthodox Christianity

Each year YFU host families welcome Orthodox Christian students. Outlined here are some basics about the Orthodox Christian faith to understand and prepare for this facet of your student's life.

Things to Keep in Mind to support your Orthodox Christian YFU student:



Ancient Orthodox icon

- Orthodox Christians follow the Christian faith as defined by the first seven Ecumenical Councils.
- There are many churches within the Orthodox Christian community which may have slightly differing values.
- Prayers are considered very important. Some Orthodox Christians may pray multiple times a day, especially at sunset and dawn.
- Orthodox masses are sung or chanted and incorporate all of the senses. Orthodox churches also practice “closed communion.”
- Some may fast on certain days in the year. They may also do this every Wednesday and Friday. While no foods are prohibited by the Orthodox faith, some Orthodox Christians may avoid certain foods on fasting days including such items as meat, fish, eggs, dairy products, and oils.
- Icons, especially paintings of Jesus Christ and Mary, are considered very sacred and signify the presence of the person who is depicted in the icon.
- The Orthodox calendar runs from September 1st to August 31st. Each day is considered a saint's day, meaning that some may honor a saint every day.

Important Dates for 2025/2026:

Below are some of the more significant days in Orthodox Christianity and their dates. It is important to clarify with your student whether he or she observes these dates and if there are any others.

January 7, 2026 Christmas – Many Orthodox Christians celebrate Christmas thirteen days after other Christians. Some may also perform a 40 day fast until this date.

February 23, 2026 Great Lent – The start of one of the four main periods of fasting.

April 12, 2026 Pascha (Easter) – The day that many believe Jesus Christ resurrected. Often considered the most important event in the Church's calendar. Some Orthodox Christians may fast during the 40 days leading up to this date. They may also want to attend a liturgy, or worship. Many Orthodox Christians celebrate Easter on the same day as other Christians.

May 21, 2026 Ascension – Commemorates the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven. Some Orthodox Christians celebrate it on the same day as other Christians.

June 1, 2026 Pentecost – Celebrated with a great feast. Sometimes followed by a fast, beginning eight days later.



Background:

The Orthodox Church is one of the three largest Christian groups, the others being Roman Catholic and Protestant. There are about 260 million Orthodox Christians worldwide and between 3 and 6 million Orthodox Christians in North America. However, the Church is generally split into two factions: Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox. Within these factions, there are many smaller churches, specific to different countries and regions.

History:

The Orthodox Church's view of Christianity is heavily based on that of the Eastern Roman Empire. It is also influenced by Greek, Middle-Eastern, Russian, and Slav cultural features. The Church's doctrine was established around 325 AD during the Ecumenical Councils where representatives from the different Christian communities congressed.

The Eastern Church broke away from the Western Church over the course of a few centuries as the Roman Empire weakened. However, the Churches actively split around 1054 AD during what is called the Great Schism. Differences over the authority of the Pope and certain doctrines led to this. While the Eastern Church maintained its stance of adhering to the local languages of communities, the Western Church adopted Latin. Orthodox Christianity came out of the Eastern Church.

Orthodox Christianity generally shares similar beliefs with the rest of the Christian population. However, it puts a greater emphasis on worship and follows the Greek translation of the Old Testament written in ancient Jewish, not Hebrew.

The word *orthodox* comes from the Greek words *ortho* and *doxa*, roughly translating to 'right or correct belief'. Orthodox Christianity is sometimes referred to as Byzantine Christianity. Countries with large Orthodox populations include: Russia, Syria, India, Egypt, Ukraine, and many others.



Painting of the Orthodox Church of the Holy Apostles

Other Resources:

More information on Orthodoxy: <http://www.religionfacts.com/orthodox-christianity>

Comparison of Christian beliefs: <http://www.religionfacts.com/compare/christian-denominations-beliefs>

References

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