

The Sunday Feature

Orthodox Christians throw a party

Small but active Eastern congregation hosts fall festival

PHARR—Although it is one of the major Christian denominations, and perhaps the oldest, the Orthodox Catholic Church is little known in the Valley.

But it is the dominant faith in Southeastern Europe and the USSR, and is the principal Christian denomination of the Middle East. In fact, the world's oldest Christian nation, Armenia, is Orthodox. The second oldest, Ethiopia is Coptic, which is an offshoot of Orthodoxy.

The fact that it is essentially an Eastern faith is one reason why it is so little known in the Valley, where most people come from Western Europe or Spanish America.

The Valley's Orthodox Parish, St. George the Great Martyr in Pharr, has about 40 members. They gathered recently for a Byzantine festival, featuring Greek dancing, Eastern European food, and a general good time.

"This is an annual event, not connected with any specific Church holiday," the Rev. John Reeves, pastor, explained. "It gives every Orthodox nationality a chance to keep their home cooking alive."

He said that in larger metropolitan areas, the various Orthodox nationalities have their own groups, and often their own congregations. But the community here is so small that Greeks, Lebanese, Ukrainians, Rumanians, Serbs, Bulgarians and others are thrown together in a single parish.

"All services are in English," Reeves said. Traditionally, Orthodox services have been held in the vernacular. However, he said Greeks still consider Greek to be the vernacular, Russians prefer Church Slavonic and other groups, their own languages.

"I doubt a majority of Orthodox parishes in this country use English yet," he continued. "But it is a founding principal in this parish that the only way we were going to have an Orthodox community was to use English. It is the unifier."

Mission work in the Valley began in 1979, with the church formally organized in 1980. The sanctuary was constructed in 1981, and the hall in 1986.

Looking back over the history of the Church, Reeves pointed out that the Orthodox Catholic and Roman Catholic Churches were originally a single denomination. But divisions began over several issues, including the central authority of the pope.

He pointed out that by the 11th Century, the Papacy was dominated by the German emperors, who were trying to extend their influence over the Slavic people of the East.

"The Eastern people resisted this," he said. "The Pope may have been first among equals but he had no authority."

Then there were doctrinal problems, such as the Orthodox belief in a married clergy, its use of icons and its insistence on using a language the people understood instead of Latin. In 1054, the two churches split. In 1204, when Roman Catholics of the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople, center of the Orthodox faith, the rift became complete.

In the 1960s, Pope Paul VI and Athenagoras III, patriarch of Constantinople, rescinded the mutual excommunications which had been in effect since 1054. However, Reeves said they have not reestablished Communion. The Roman Catholic Church does allow an Orthodox Catholic to take Communion, but if he does, that divorces him from the Orthodox Church.

Another point of contention is Rome's retention of the Eastern Rite in some parts of Eastern Europe where it has influence. Reeves indicated the

Orthodox Church considers this to be an affront to its rituals.

There is no single leader of the Orthodox Church comparable to the Pope. Instead, Reeves said there are five "ancient patriarchs" in Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria and Moscow, who are ranked in precedence.

Likewise, they never had the political power of the Pope or the Western clergy. Reeves explained that when Rome fell in the West, that left a political void which could only be filled by Church leaders. But in the

East, the Roman government continued to function until 1453, when it was replaced by the Ottoman Turks. Consequently, there has always been a separate political power, which allowed Orthodox leaders to concentrate on spiritual affairs.

"The East had a functioning government, so that there was no need for a political Church," he said. "In the West," bishops headed armies."

The interior of the church is dominated by icons of Jesus and of Mary as Theotokos (the

bearer of Christ), whom Westerners call Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Explaining the icons, Reeves said, "We believe that God came to earth as Christ in human form. Therefore he can be depicted."

There are also icons of saints and apostles. Their purpose is to teach and provide spiritual inspiration. Their forms are stylized and one dimensional, since they are shown as transfigured by God.

"We venerate them, but we do not worship them," Reeves said.

Easter is the major holiday of the Orthodox Church, since it considers the Resurrection to have been the whole point of Christ's existence on earth. It often varies from the traditional Western Easter, since on the Church calendar, it must always follow Passover, as it did in the Gospels.

"Our services have as much reference to Resurrection every Sunday as the average church does on Easter," Reeves said.

Reeves is a former Episcopal priest who converted to Orthodoxy about 10 years ago. He is married.

He said that priests are allowed to marry, but bishops cannot. However, he said a priest must be married before his ordination. If he is a bachelor when he is ordained, he must remain celibate. Likewise, if his wife dies, he may never remarry.

If a married man wishes to become a priest, his wife must give permission for him to be ordained.

"The feeling is that not only is he dedicating his life to being a priest, but she is dedicating hers to being a priest's wife," Reeves explained.



Members of the youth group at St. George's show traditional dances of Greece. The group was invited to perform in last year's Riofest, but declined since it fell during Lent, the most solemn period of the Orthodox calendar.



One little girl reaches for baklava (lower right) with her brother points and an older sister waits to be served as a pastry table. The families of St. George's Parish trace their ethnic heritage to Eastern Europe, Asia Minor, East Africa and the USSR, the traditional strongholds of the Eastern Church.



A mother in Greek regional dress feeds her baby at a table displaying icons, books and handicrafts. The icons are based on the ancient Byzantine style, which depicts saints and apostles transfigured by God, rather than in a more human form.



St. George the Great Martyr Eastern Orthodox Church looks like a little Greek country church. But instead of the olive trees of the Hellenes, it is set among the mesquites of the Valley.