

The publication *The Orthodox Study Bible* begs a question: exactly what is the Orthodox Church? Many people have heard of the Russian Orthodox Church which celebrated its 100th birthday in 1988, or the Greek Orthodox Church which was born centuries earlier. But Orthodoxy itself - what is it, and what are its historic roots?

### ***THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT***

To answer the question, let us go back to the pages of the New Testament, specifically to the Book of Acts and the birth of the Church at Pentecost. For on that day the Holy Spirit descended on the twelve apostles in the Upper Room, and by afternoon some 3000 souls believed in Christ and were baptized. The scriptures record that when the first Christian community began, "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

From Jerusalem, the faith in Christ spread throughout Judea, to Samaria (Acts 8:5-39), to Antioch and the Gentiles (Acts 11:19-26). We find new converts and new Churches throughout Asia Minor and the Roman Empire as recorded in Acts and the Epistles.

The Church, of course, was not simply another organization in Roman society. The Lord Jesus Christ had given the promise of the Holy Spirit "to lead you into all truth" (Jn 16:13). With the fulfillment of that promise beginning with Pentecost, the Church was born far beyond mere institutional status. She was not an organization with mystery, but a mystery with organization. St. Paul called the Church "a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Eph 2:22). The Church was a dynamic organism, the living Body of Jesus Christ. She had an indelible impact in the world, and those who lived in her life and faith were personally transformed.

But we also discover in the New Testament itself that the Church had her share of problems. All was not perfection. Some individuals even within the Church sought to lead her off the path the apostles established, and they had to be dealt with along with the errors they invented. Even whole local communities lapsed on occasion and were called to repentance. The Church in Laodicea is a vivid example (Rev 3:14-22). Discipline was administered for the sake of purity in the church. But there was growth and maturation, even as the Church was attacked from within and without. The same Spirit who gave her birth gave her power for purity and correction, and she stood strong and grew, eventually invading the whole of the Roman Empire.