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*“Why do we do so many things three times in the Orthodox Church?”*

Only a small percentage of our learning is at the conscious and cognitive level. So much that we know and think and believe, good and bad, is learned at a deeper level. Think of all the habits children pick up from their parents and other adults, often without the adults intentionally teaching these things. A mother teaching her children to read inevitably teaches them also patience or impatience, attention to detail or carelessness. A father teaching his children to ride a bike teaches them also gentleness or irritability, perseverance or laziness. Through these habits, virtues or passions are nurtured in the child’s soul quietly and -- usually -- unconsciously. Hence, the old expression “more is caught than is taught.”

This is the case in the Church, as well. It is not without reason that Christians used to say, “You cannot have God as your Father if you do not have the Church as your mother.” And through the little acts of piety -- the *way* we do things; not only that we pray but *how* we pray -- Mother Church reinforces our faith in God and instills virtue, reverence, and all good things in us. The three-fold repetition (“doing things three times”) is one example of this.

The number three and the three-fold repetition of liturgical and spiritual actions reinforces our faith in God the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As Christians we are taught and confess the Holy Trinity. For example, when we say the Creed, or when we end our prayers with “...of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, we are consciously affirming our faith in the Holy Trinity. The three-fold repetition cultivates our faith in the Holy Trinity as well, less conscious perhaps (at first), but reinforcing our faith so that, over time, we grow to a greater and greater consciousness and awareness of God that blossoms forth into prayer.

A different, but complementary, explanation of the three-fold repetition is that it can signify the highest, superlative quality or degree of a thing. The English language often modifies adjectives and adverbs with “-est” to indicate the superlative (or highest) degree: i.e. biggest; fastest; smartest; holiest; etc. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, on the other hand, to say “most holy”, one might say, as the angels do, “Holy! Holy! Holy!” The number three, in this instance, signifies that God is the ultimately Holy One, the Holiest.

The Orthodox tendency toward three-fold repetition (“doing things three times”) might very well reflect this use of the superlative degree, not only in what we say but in what we do. Consider, for example, how there are three processions around the Font at a Baptism, the Holy Table at an ordination, or the tetrapod, on which lies the Gospel, at a wedding. Three cycles or processions, in these instances, might well indicate a superlative degree: completeness; wholeness; perfection. It is as if we are saying, “this child is most baptized”; “this man is most ordained”; “this man and woman is most married”. It sounds odd when we say it like that, but the theological meaning is pretty clear: God doesn’t do things half-way. He intends to bring His work to completion and perfection.

So, then, in all we do and say and think, let us do all to the glory of the thrice-holy God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to Whom is due all glory now and forever! Amen.