

# Why Orthodox Christians Should Do Their Genealogy

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Growing up, I barely knew my extended family. My immediate family was pretty small: just my parents, my sister and me. It wasn't until after my parents divorced and remarried that my understanding of family dramatically shifted and expanded. As my family grew with these new marriages, so did my desire to know more about where I came from, to know whose sacrifices made me possible and whose features I saw in the mirror.

What began as a small hobby has become a huge part of my life today. My family tree – filled with extended cousins and distant ancestors – now has over 4,000 individuals. And as I've worked on six other family trees for friends, I have the same excitement each time I learn more about a new member of a family. What was their story? What happened to them?

For me, it seems natural that Orthodox Christians would want to learn more about their families. After all, historically Orthodox cultures tend to put a beautiful emphasis on family and extended family relationships.

What's more, Orthodox teaching itself also suggests that it would be wise to study our personal genealogy.

## 1. The God of our fathers



In the Great Doxology, we sing “Blessed are You, O Lord, the God of our fathers, and praised and glorified is Your name forever, amen!” Each time I sing this prayer (from the Prayer of

Azariah in the Book of Daniel) I'm reminded that our worship as Orthodox Christians is connected to something larger than me. Our God is the God of our fathers, not only of our ancestors but of the Church Fathers and Mothers, those whose sacrifices were the witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Our identity as Orthodox Christians rests in our being a part of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. We are rooted in the work and teachings of the Apostles (Apostolic) and when we are gathered in the local church we are united to the whole Body of Christ (Catholic). We surround ourselves by icons of the saints, reminding ourselves that those who came before us are intimately connected to us today through our union with Christ. And before writing or preaching to our world of today, we study the lives and writings of the saints to see what the Fathers had to say on the topic.

As Orthodox Christians, we move forward confidently only by knowing that we are firmly rooted on the tried and true foundation of our past. We know where we are going only because we know where we've been.

And since the Orthodox Church teaches the dignity of both soul and body, the story of who we are includes both our Orthodox story and our biological family's story. If it is a natural aspect of our spiritual lives as Orthodox Christians to learn about our spiritual family, we ought to also learn about our biological family.

## 2. Attitude of gratitude



Father Alexander Schmemmann taught that man was intended to be not just *Homo sapiens*, but ultimately *Homo adorans*: to offer worship and give praise to God. If individually we offer praise to God, then collectively we give that praise as the Church most clearly in the Liturgy – at the Eucharist. The most Orthodox thing we do is to give thanks (*eucharistia*) every Sunday. But how does this thanksgiving carry out into all aspects of our lives?

We thank God in the Liturgy for all that He has given us. We give thanks during Thanksgiving, and after Christmas, we make sure to thank those who have given us gifts. But have we forgotten our ancestors whose sacrifices and survival made our lives possible? Their gift to us was their survival, their gift to us is that they paved the way for the lives we live today. As the author of *The Art of Manliness* writes, [gratitude has no expiration date](#). Just learning who these people were, discovering something about them, is our way of saying “thank you” for their gifts to us even if we never noticed them before.

Discovering our genealogy helps us to grateful for all of our gifts, for who we are today is because of the prayers, sacrifices, and talents of those who have come before us.

### 3. Relationships matter



As people, we all crave relationships. God is love, and created us in His image. In part, this means that we are created to offer love and to live in relationship with others. In the Church, we are given a community, a place where we can grow closer to God together. Even in a secular context, those who study addiction are finding that “[the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. It is human connection.](#)” So there’s something powerful about the relationships we choose to have in our lives.

In the Orthodox Church, we have a lot of relationships that connect individuals and families in a web of connection. In the Orthodox wedding service, we pray, “Remember also, Lord our God, the parents who have brought them up, for the prayers of parents make firm the foundations of households.” So even in what we tend to think of as a service about two people, we are reminded that a wedding is also about two families coming together.

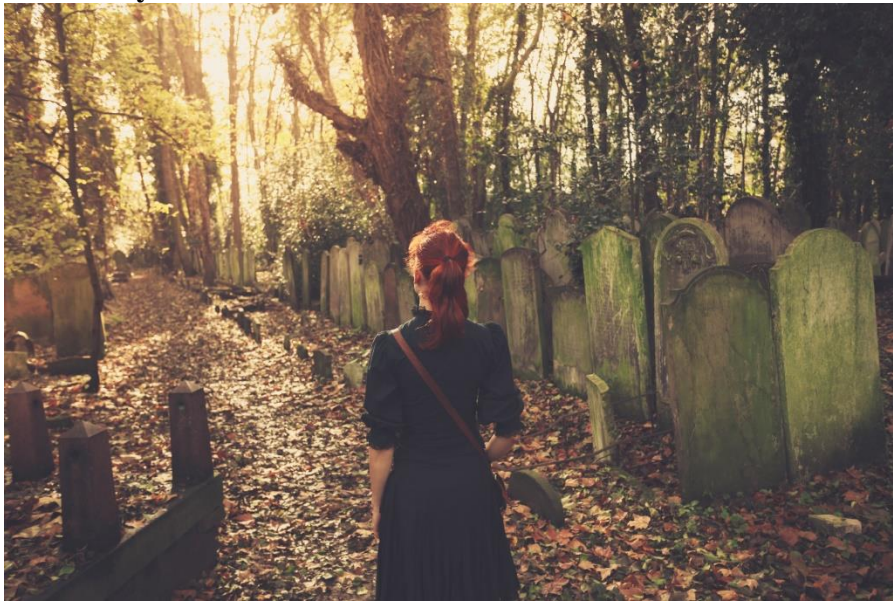
The Church gives us Godparents, and connects us as *koumbaroi* to those who aren’t biologically related to us. Many in the Church actually see *koumbaroi* to be like biological family since there is a tradition that their children shouldn’t marry each other. In the past, the Church also offered the service of “brother-making” where a priest formally blessed the bond between two friends.



So if the Church sees relationships as being powerful, restorative aspects of our lives, what might we benefit by learning about the relationships that came before us? In learning about our ancestors, we will also learn about the relationships they held most dear. Just as we give importance to the web of relationships we have today, so did our ancestors.

We honor our relationship to our ancestors by learning about the relationships that they had, too.

#### 4. Memory Eternal



In the Orthodox Church, we pray that [the memories of our departed loved ones](#) will be eternal. Having faith in the resurrection and hoping that God will keep our loved ones forever in His Kingdom, we pray for the dead knowing that [they are alive in Christ](#).

Our prayer for those who have passed on is one way that we can [work through our sadness and grief](#). Another way that we can work through this grief is to learn more about those who came before us. If we pray for our grandparents, do we pray for their grandparents too? As our tradition as Orthodox is to pray for persons by name, it would help to know our ancestors names to best pray for them. Genealogy helps us not only to discover their names, but to even learn what struggles they might have encountered in their lives.

Just as learning the lives of the saints helps us to identify with their lives, so too can learning the lives of our ancestors help us to better empathize with their struggles and to lift them up in prayer.

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The Orthodox Church teaches us to live lives of gratitude, firmly rooted in the faith of our fathers so that we can offer the world an authentic faith today. In the Church, we discover the importance of relationships and see that our relationships in this life cannot be destroyed by

death. And just as we pray for our loved ones, genealogy offers Orthodox Christians the opportunity to encounter those who have departed from this life.

Do you know the names of your great-grandparents? How might learning the stories of your ancestors help you to better live in gratitude today?

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