The Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity, also known as Russian Orthodoxy, was established in the tenth century. Since then it has been a dominant force in Russian society. Similar to the Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy is based on sacred rituals and saints. From the beginning, the Orthodox church functioned with many levels of rank ranging from archbishops and bishops (at the top) to village priests (at the bottom). In the 1800s, life in Russia still revolved around church rituals, such as a weekly mass (worship service) and numerous religious holidays throughout the year. Consequently, the priest was a central figure in both the cities and in Russian villages.

The clergy (those who performed religious services) was divided into two groups: monks, who wore black robes, and village priests, who wore white robes. Priests would send one or two of their sons to study theology (the study of religion), Latin, and Greek in a seminary. Seminary students were among the lucky few in Russia to receive secondary education. After earning their degrees, the most advanced and disciplined students usually joined a monastery (a secluded religious community for monks), while others married and became common parish priests.

Monks lived a simple life centered around prayer and study of the Bible. Marriage, drinking alcohol, and eating meat were forbidden. Monasteries also owned land, and most monks worked in the fields just as peasants did. The Russian people respected monks as sources of learning and spiritual power. Monks were believed to perform miracles, and many people visited monasteries seeking healing or advice. Some monasteries even ran hospitals and orphanages. Archbishops, bishops, and other high church officials were elite priests who left monastery life to help run the church in other places.

- What were the two groups of clergy in the Russian Orthodox Church?
- How did monks gain the respect of the Russian people?
- What was life in a monastery like?

Men who became village priests lived very differently from the monks. Such men were required to marry before they could be ordained as priests. They also had to wear beards and long hair. During worship services, priests wore a hat that pointed upward, long white robes, and a large silver cross on a chain around their neck. At other times, they generally wore their cross and a simple, dark tunic (long, plain, loose jacket or shirt with a high collar).

Village priests generally lived difficult lives. The people of a parish usually did not treat their priest as a wise spiritual leader; he was considered just another member of the village.
Like their peasant neighbors, the priest and his family lived in a small wooden hut and worked hard to survive. Priests received a small salary from the church, along with donations for performing rituals for members of the parish, but these earnings could not feed a family. Most priests and their families had to do farm work on the side to make ends meet.

- How did village priests dress?
- What made life difficult for village priests?
- What was life like for village priests?

After being married and ordained, most priests were assigned by church officials to a village parish where they would live and work for the rest of their lives. The village priest’s main responsibility was to lead worship services. Each village had a wooden church where all the peasants would assemble each Sunday, standing, to recite the mass. There were no pews. The mass was a simple ceremony consisting of singing a few hymns, reciting the liturgy (sacred texts), and ritual sharing of bread and wine. Since most peasants could not read, the priest’s main task was to read the service aloud.

The priest’s other major responsibility was to travel throughout the parish (local church community) and perform ritual ceremonies, such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. In addition to these Christian ceremonies, peasants also called on priests to perform rituals based on other traditional beliefs. For example, villagers might ask the priest to perform a special prayer for rain or to protect a new hut against fire. If a mouse fell into a barrel of sauerkraut, the family considered the food unclean until a priest blessed it. After the mouse was removed, the priest would say a special prayer, wave his cross over the barrel three times, and then taste the sauerkraut. After that, the family believed the food was clean. The peasants would give the priest a small fee of money, bread, or perhaps vodka for his services.

- What were the main tasks of the village priests?
- What Christian ceremonies did village priests perform?
- What other types of rituals did priests perform?

Priests also held special services on religious holidays. Each village had a patron saint (a saint to whom the village was specially dedicated) and held a festival every year on that saint’s day. People would bring icons (statues or paintings of figures such as Jesus, Mary, or a saint) and candles. Peasants would visit from surrounding areas to take part in mass in the morning, followed by games, music, dancing, and food during the rest of the day. The priest also led the village in observing the numerous fasts and holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. During the Easter celebration, women of the village would make kulich, an Easter cake, and paskha, a sweet cake made of sugar, cheese, butter, and raisins. These religious ceremonies helped bring a sense of community to villages all across Russia.

- What services were priests involved with during religious holidays?
- What did villagers do during religious holidays?