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## The Orthodox Church of Finland

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The Finnish Orthodox Church (Finnish: Suomen ortodoksinen kirkko; Swedish: Finska Ortodoxa Kyrkan) is an autonomous Orthodox archdiocese of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Church has a legal position as a national church in the country, along with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.



With its roots in the medieval Novgorodian missionary work in Karelia, the Finnish Orthodox Church was a part of the Russian Orthodox Church until 1923. Today the church has three dioceses and 58,000 members that account for 1.1 percent of the population of Finland. The parish of Helsinki has the most adherents.

Although it appears that the earliest Christians in Finland were Byzantines, most of the country received the Christian faith in the Latin tradition through the activity of Swedish missionaries in the 12th century. The easternmost Finnish province of Karelia, however, was evangelized by Byzantine monks from the ancient monastery of Valamo (“Valaam” in Russian) located on an island in Lake Ladoga.

In the 13th century Finland was a battleground between Catholic Sweden and Orthodox Russia. Eventually Sweden gained control of most of Finland, but Karelia came under Russian control.

In 1617 Karelia was also taken over by Sweden, which had in the meantime become Lutheran. The Swedes persecuted the Orthodox for a time, but conditions gradually improved.

Karelia was again occupied by Russia in 1721, and in 1809 the Tsar conquered all of Finland, which then became an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire. Later in the 19th century Orthodox Karelians began to assert their national identity. The liturgy and many Orthodox theological and spiritual works were translated into Finnish, which remains the liturgical language of this church.

In 1917 Finland gained independence from Russia, and in 1918 the Orthodox in Finland declared themselves an autonomous church in relation to Moscow. Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow recognized this status in 1921. On July 6, 1923, the Finnish Orthodox Church was received by the Patriarchate of Constantinople as an autonomous archbishopric.

The 1939-1940 Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union, and the subsequent annexation of most of Karelia by the USSR, resulted in the loss of 90% of the property belonging to the Finnish Orthodox Church. Most Orthodox Finns were evacuated to other parts of Finland and began new lives scattered across the country.

In 1957 the Moscow Patriarchate recognized the Finnish Orthodox Church’s autonomy under the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In 1980 the General Assembly of the Finnish Orthodox Church voted to seek autocephalous status from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, but no action has been taken on this proposal.

There is a long history of Finnish Orthodox monasticism in Karelia, but the monasteries had to be evacuated during the Russo-Finnish War as the Soviets gained control of the area. The famous Valamo Monastery was refounded at Heinävesi in central Finland under the name New Valamo. The community also

included monks from other Karelian monasteries. The last of the original monks from Valamo died in 1981. Lintula Convent was also refounded near New Valamo. Today these two monasteries are important centers of Finnish Orthodox spiritual life, and have become national pilgrimage centers.

The disintegration of the Soviet state facilitated the development of better relations between the Finnish and Russian Orthodox churches. In 1994 six pastoral teams, each headed by a priest, were sent by the Finnish church to provide Christmas and Holy Week services in Orthodox parishes in the Russian section of Karelia. In September 1994 Russian Patriarch Aleksy II visited Finland and thanked the local Orthodox church for giving hospitality to the Valamo community during the persecutions. The Finnish church also contributed to the restoration of the original Valamo monastery in Russia.

*Source: [orthodox-finland.blogspot.gr](http://orthodox-finland.blogspot.gr)*