

Contours of Conversion and the Ecumenical Movement: Some Personal Reflections

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Christ is “the true light that enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world,” and as Saint John Chrysostom notes, “grace is shed forth upon all, turning itself back neither from Jew, nor Greek, nor Barbarian, nor Scythian, nor free, nor bond, nor male, nor female, nor old, nor young, but admitting all alike, and inviting with an equal regard.”¹ In other words, Christ calls all “to come to the knowledge of the truth.”² Although some of the nations have different names today, Christ still continues His same work drawing many who were born into heterodox communities to the Orthodox Church. Their accounts of how they have come to Orthodoxy are like unto a tapestry woven from the wonderful workings of grace and the mystery of the human heart. There are many reasons why someone in a heterodox confession may come to Orthodoxy, but the most important factor is always the presence and influence of divine grace that acts in various ways and at various times, touching the soul of someone who is receptive to illumination and leading him to seek the Truth and then sell all that he has in order to acquire that pearl of great price, the Orthodox faith.

I believe that I have been asked to speak on this topic, because, by the mercy of God, divine grace has also touched my own heart, initially leading me to the Orthodox Church and eventually to the Holy Mountain of Athos, even though I was lovingly raised in a small Protestant household in a small town in America where I neither encountered a single Orthodox parish nor had any contact with a single Orthodox Christian. In my youth, I was taught that all Christian denominations were basically the same and that the divisions between them were unimportant. Nevertheless, experience, common sense, and illumination from God made me question that teaching central to the ecumenical movement. When I was fourteen years old and attending Methodist Sunday school at the church where my grandfather was formerly the pastor, I asked my Sunday school teacher, why should I be a Methodist and not a Roman Catholic, or a Presbyterian, or a Baptist? How do I know that Methodism is true? My teacher had no good answer for me, and that is when my own long search began. I see my path and search reflected in the many accounts of others who have also turned from heterodoxy to Orthodoxy and from those accounts and my own personal experience I would like first to sketch the general contours of how someone converts to Orthodoxy and then to suggest some of the implications this has for Orthodox involvement in the ecumenical movement.

¹ Saint John Chrysostom, Homily 8 on the Gospel According to Saint John. According to Saint Peter of Damascus, it is God’s providence that does not permit heresy to be concealed forever. Saint Peter of Damaskos, Book II, Twenty four Discourses, XXIV Conscious Awareness in the heart, *Philokalia* 3 (Faber and Faber Press: London, 1984), page 278.

² *1 Timothy* 2:4.

One Church and the Action of Grace

Before proceeding, I should mention that most protestants, like most Christian ecumenists, do not identify the article of the Creed, “I believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church” with any particular community of Christians, much less with the Orthodox Church. They envision the Church as encompassing everyone irrespective of dogmatic differences. From my own experience, I can say that it is difficult for protestants to grasp the idea that Christ founded only one Church, which historically continues to exist today as the Orthodox Church, the only Church that has preserved both historical apostolic succession in its episcopacy and the apostolic, ascetic, and patristic traditions that encompass the sacramental and ascetic life of the believer.³ Protestants recognize that Christ is their Savior, the Noah of the New Covenant, as Saint Cyril of Alexandria refers to our Lord, but they do not realize that the Church is the ark, as real and concrete as an ark of wood and as essential for salvation from the floods of this world as a ship is for those drowning at sea.⁴

Similarly, it is not easy for those outside of the ark of the Church to realize how Divine Grace is uniquely present in the Mysteries of the Orthodox Church. Just as the blazing sun shines without regard on all people, good and bad alike, so God loves, illumines, and touches with His grace also the souls outside of the Church, inviting them in many different ways, comforting them, and even working miracles when they call upon Him in faith. Notwithstanding, these other confessions do not have the means to purify, illumine, and deify the believer through the sacramental and ascetic life.

I recall weeping as a child when my mother would read to me about Christ’s crucifixion and afterwards feeling Christ’s nearness. I also recall being healed of a crippling childhood disease as a direct miraculous answer to prayer.⁵ I attribute both of those experiences to the initial action of external grace upon the soul. Notwithstanding, the grace present in the Orthodox Church involves more than the granting of physical health or proper emotional feelings towards the Savior. The grace of and in the Church is the grace that after Baptism works within the soul purifying us of the passions in conjunction with our own ascetic endeavor, cleansing the image of God within, and thus enabling us to have continuous union with Christ in the heart. This grace, that can produce Saints, is available only in the Orthodox Church to the Orthodox Christian who struggles lawfully to be purified and sanctified and partakes of the life-giving mysteries of the Church. Those who have known a Christian way of life before becoming Orthodox and then after becoming Orthodox struggle lawfully to acquire the grace of the

³ Cf., “It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and [to demonstrate] the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these [heretics] rave about.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book III, chapter 3. “The preaching of the Church is everywhere consistent, and continues in an even course, and receives testimony from the prophets, the apostles, and all the disciples.” *Against Heresies*, book III, chapter 24.

⁴ Cf., Metropolitan Meletios of Nikopoleos, “Οίδατε τί ατείσθε;” Synaxis, issue 90, April - June 2004 [in Greek], pages 6-7 and PG 69, page 68 B.

⁵ When I was fourteen years of age after six months of bed rest, I was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis in Philadelphia’s children’s hospital. My mother went to a small congregation where everyone present prayed for me and by God’s grace. The external symptoms as well as the results from further blood-work tests were reversed overnight.

Holy Spirit through the immaculate mysteries and the ascetic life humbly lived can offer empirical proof for these statements by comparing their lives before and after entering the Orthodox Church.

It should be clear from what we have just said that in our relations with those outside of the Church, it is imperative that we do not act in a way that hinders the initial workings of the grace of illumination in their lives. Of course, our own struggle to attract divine grace can give us the sensitivity and knowledge, which will prepare us to discern how to provide the appropriate conditions for this initial grace to act. Being able to recognize the characteristics of the activity of grace that are observed in many who are turning from heterodoxy to Orthodoxy will also enable us to recognize when we should speak and when we should keep silent. In most people who turn to Orthodoxy, myself included, we find the very characteristics that are present in those who have received the gift of repentance. We already know these characteristics from our own personal repentance. They include: the pain of a broken and humble heart, a determination to find the Truth regardless of the costs, a humble mindset that makes it possible to consider another perspective and hear another voice apart from the voice of one's own self-centeredness, a willingness to make comparisons between what one has known and what is being revealed, and a determination to make a change in one's life.

Unfavorable Conditions: Those Who Do not Convert

Of course, as the ecumenical movement and involvement in the World Council of Churches clearly show, not everyone who is exposed to Orthodoxy necessarily converts, even if many admire certain aspects of the Orthodox faith. In fact, Frank Schaeffer asks the question, "How many converts have the ecumenists made amongst the heterodox in the last sixty years? How many evangelistic efforts have they mounted to reach Protestants, Roman Catholics, and others with Orthodoxy? The answer to both questions is 'none.'"⁶ Outside of the universal failure of ecumenism to bring people to the faith, human factors like thorns can choke the seed, deluded notions like birds can take the seed away, and an improper approach like shallow soil can prevent the seed from ever putting down roots.

We can all empathize with the human factors that choke the seed making a conversion to Orthodoxy difficult. For many heterodox, their ties to their confession are emotionally powerful with associations that span a lifetime. A former American protestant admitted, "Whenever I visit an old Episcopalian Church I am flooded with nostalgia. I think of my mother."⁷ Someone else struggling to decide wrote, "My father, I thought, would have been deeply hurt by what he would have seen as my rejection of the Church of my upbringing."⁸ Things seemingly wise, such as the writings of Thomas Aquinas,⁹ things beautiful, such a Gothic Cathedral, and things familiar such as friends

⁶ Frank Schaeffer, *Letters to Father Aristotle: A Journey through Contemporary American Orthodoxy*, (Regina Orthodox Press: Salisbury, MA, 1995), page 70.

⁷ Larry Uzzel, "Beyond Canterbury," *Again Magazine*, volume 13, number 3: September 1990, page 23.

⁸ Father Athanasios Ledwich, "Cracks in the Cathedral," *Again Magazine*, volume 13, number 3: September 1990 page 20.

⁹ Father Alistair Anderson, "Forty Years Later," *Martyria* of the Holy Metropolis of Kidonia and Apokoronos [in Greek], issue 52, 2001, pages 90-91.

in one's community are hard to walk away from.¹⁰ My own mother wept when she saw me rejecting the religion of my childhood, but now by the grace of God, she too is an Orthodox Christian. For those in the clergy, practical considerations such as a promising career and a high salary make the choice seem exceedingly difficult.¹¹ Of course, such considerations stem from a worldly mindset that must be discarded for a healthy entry into the Orthodox Church. We need to humbly encourage these people to acquire a strong enough faith to truly believe that "there is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions, and in the world to come eternal life."¹² Of course, this means that we must show these people that we are their brethren and that heterodox confessions are houses to be left behind. Naturally, ecumenism would tell them to remain in their own houses.

Another set of stumbling blocks that resemble birds that remove the seed arise from misconceptions and deluded notions about the heresy with which one is associated and about the nature of Orthodoxy; many of these notions are intentionally promulgated by ecumenists themselves. Many sincere heterodox Christians, if not the majority of them, continue in their confession on the basis of false assumptions about their confession. One former Anglican priest felt for years that "the Church of England taught the full Orthodox faith."¹³ Another would ignore the heresy clearly present in his confession.¹⁴ Another still would even harbor false hopes that ecumenism would unite Anglicans with the Orthodox.¹⁵ To such people, we are obliged to reveal the Truth with discretion, even though it will be painful for them and again in opposition to the approach of ecumenism that shies away from painful subjects.

Perhaps, the most difficult problem involves those who approach Orthodoxy with a level of complacency with respect to their heterodox confession that does not permit them to put down roots and probe Orthodoxy, but only to judge Orthodoxy according to appearance. If such was not the case of the respected historian Sir Steven Runciman, it certainly is the case of the protestant theologian, Daniel Clendenin. Both men have written books in admiration of much in Orthodoxy, but never taken the step to become Orthodox. In particular, Clendenin's pitfall involves the acceptance of the false and

¹⁰ Father Chad Hatfield, "Will Holy Orthodoxy Fail in Her Pastoral and Evangelical Responsibilities to These Homeless Christians Because She is not Prepared, or Willing, to Deal with Large Groups of Converts," *Again Magazine*, volume 17, number 4: December 1994, page 9.

¹¹ Father Chad Hatfield, "Will Holy Orthodoxy Fail," pages 8-9. It should be noted that others fighting to preserve what they loved in their tradition could hardly direct their attention to investigate Orthodoxy while those wearied from fighting would often be afraid to dare to love again. (Father William Olenhausen, "A Broader Vision: New Horizons for an Episcopal Reformer," *Again Magazine*, volume 14, number 3: September 1991, page 23.) As Father Athanasios Ledwich put it, "It is difficult to appreciate the beauties of the harbor and its surrounding countryside when you are struggling to swim at sea." "Cracks in the Cathedral," page 22.

¹² *Mark* 10:29-30.

¹³ Father Athanasios Ledwich, "Cracks in the Cathedral," *Again Magazine*, volume 13, number 3: September 1990 page 22.

¹⁴ Father William Olenhausen, "A Broader Vision: New Horizons for an Episcopal Reformer," *Again Magazine*, volume 14, number 3: September 1991, page 23.

¹⁵ Father Alistair Anderson, "Forty Years Later," *Martyria* of the Holy Metropolis of Kidonia and Apokoronos [in Greek], issue 52, 2001, page 87.

superficial ecumenical view that the Orthodox and evangelicals hold the ecumenical councils in common and his distant investigation of Orthodoxy without a personal commitment.¹⁶ His position of admiration without commitment is common to those in the ecumenical movement who seek unity, but not salvation.¹⁷ It's not enough, however, to admire the Truth. It must be embraced. And in fact those who simply admire the Truth don't really believe it is the Truth, but simply one truth among many others also worthy of admiration.

The Possibility for Conversion: a Broken and Contrite Heart

Those who do convert to Orthodoxy, like all of us whom God leads to genuine repentance, can overcome human factors such as personal and family ties, break through false conceptions about the Truth, and approach the Truth properly, because of what David the Prophet king calls "a broken and contrite heart,"¹⁸ leading to what Saint Gregory the Theologian calls "the beautiful conversion" in which "the more blissful comes out of the painful."¹⁹ It is "pain of heart" that enables those in heterodoxy to no longer trust their own reasoning, views and emotions,²⁰ so that they can take the claims of Orthodoxy seriously, critique their own beliefs, and ask themselves what matters most in life.²¹ In fact, Saint Barsanuphios the Great says, "without pain of heart no one receives the gift of discerning thoughts."²² And this applies to the entire spectrum of discernment. The trials, the tribulations, the sorrows, the crises that bring about this pain of heart are among the greatest blessings from God, for they bring about that due season in which views can be reexamined and a turning towards Orthodoxy can take place.²³

For many, the first steps towards Orthodoxy are made by recourse to God on account of physical and emotional pain. An American black woman describes her life in the inner city in terms of drinking, fighting, and broken marriages. In the midst of terrible back pain, she turned to Christ and earnest prayer that eventually led her to Orthodoxy.²⁴ Father Moses Berry's journey to Orthodoxy began when he was alone in his prison cell facing a ten-year sentence. With great pain of heart, he called for Christ's help

¹⁶ Clark Carlton, *The Way: What Every Protestant Should Know About the Orthodox Church* (Regina Press: Salisbury MA, 1997), pages 20 and 22-23. Another example is offered by Archbishop Louis Falk of the traditional Anglicans. When he was asked why he did not become Orthodox, he answered that it was because "in its many New World iterations, it is very ethnic in character. It is liturgically beautiful, theologically astute, and ecclesiologically appealing to Anglicans, but it is uncompromisingly Eastern and I am quite utterly Western." "Interview with Archbishop Louis W Falk, Primate of the Traditional Anglican Communion," *The Rock: A Journal For Anglican Traditionalists*, volume 21, number 4, December 15, 2003, page 8.

¹⁷ Frank Schaeffer, *Letters to Father Aristotole*, page 68.

¹⁸ *Psalms* 50:19.

¹⁹ Oration Thirty-eight.

²⁰ Hieromonk Damascene, *Father Seraphim Rose: His Life and Works*, (Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood: Platina, 2003), page 844.

²¹ Clark Carlton, *The Way*, page 24.

²² Answer 265 of Saint Barsanuphios, *BARSANOUIFIOU KAI IWANNOU KEIMENA DIAKRITIKA KAI HSUCASTIKA (ERWTAPOKRISEIS)* TOMOS B (EKDOSEIS ETOIMASIA, KAREAS 1996), pages 118-119.

²³ Cf., Saint John Chrysostom, Homily LXXXVIII on Mathew.

²⁴ Thelma Michaila Altschul, "31st and Troost: An Orthodox Mission Flowers in the Inner City," *Again Magazine*, volume 17, number 2: June 1994, page 24.

promising to serve Him, and on that very day he was released.²⁵ For a feminist and practicing witch named Catherine, the pain of broken marriages and being haunted by evil humbled her to the point of seeking Baptism into the Orthodox Church.²⁶

For those more deeply involved in their heterodox confession, pain of heart is often generated by a personal crisis in response to the failure of that confession to reflect the Christianity of the gospels. A goodly number of Episcopalian laymen and clergy began looking outside of Anglicanism in response to the crises over the ordination of women to the priesthood²⁷ and the proclamation of clearly heretical teachings by their bishops.²⁸ Protestant pastors from other confessions likewise came “to the conclusion that the mainline Protestant denominations were theologically bankrupt,”²⁹ a conclusion that led them to Orthodoxy. Other protestant pastors would become “tremendously” disillusioned by serving a mainline Protestant denomination³⁰ if they were not already disillusioned with Protestantism by their exposure to it in seminary, as was the case with the now Orthodox writer Clark Carlton.³¹ For former evangelicals such as Peter Guilquist involved in the missionary organization, Campus Crusade, their failure to bring about lasting conversions to Christ made them question the value and effectiveness of their missionary organization, leading them on a search for the New Testament Church, a search that ended in 1987 with their reception into Holy Orthodoxy.³² In my case, I recall being in graduate school in religious studies, and yet I didn’t feel as though being a protestant Christian changed my entire way of life. I felt guilt and sorrow over my failure to live as Christ would desire, without the alleviation or the hope found in the mystery of confession, and I began to question if I could find real help anywhere. Some of my professors only aggravated my condition, since some of them would even make the most blasphemous remarks about Christ. Our merciful Lord, however, used all of this to push me to seek out and to read about other “types” of Christianity, including the genuine Christianity of the Orthodox Church. What struck me particularly and encouraged me was the unashamed confession of the Truth in the works of certain Orthodox writers I read.

²⁵ Father Moses Berry, “An Encounter with a Saint,” *Again Magazine*, volume 17, number 2: June 1994, page 26.

²⁶ Sarah Elizabeth Cowie, *More Spirited than Lions: An Orthodox Response and a Practical Guide to the Spiritual Life of Women* (Regina Press: Salisbury, MA, 2001) pages 286-289. Another woman named Alice realized that her attempt to govern herself via feminism was a failure, filling her with anger and drawing her into a world of evil. In this pain, she turned to Christianity. (Sarah Elizabeth Cowie, *More Spirited than Lions*, pages 292-293.)

²⁷ Father Alistair Anderson, “Forty Years Later,” pages 88-89.

²⁸ Father Athanasios Ledwich, “Cracks in the Cathedral,” page 21. Examples of such heretical teachings include denying such creedal beliefs as the Incarnation, Virgin Birth, and the Resurrection. One Episcopalian priest, who was already attracted to Orthodoxy and teaching Orthodox doctrine to his parish, was offered by his bishop “the choice of resignation or an ecclesiastical trial on the grounds of apostasy.” Father William Olenhausen, “A Broader Vision,” page 24.

²⁹ Father Thomas Renfree, “A Funny Thing Happened to Me at a Baptists Seminary” *Again Magazine*, volume 14, number 3: September 1991 page 16.

³⁰ Father Andrew Harmon, “Ashbury Dreams and Orthodox Realities,” *Again Magazine*, Volume 14, Number 3: September 1991, page 1.

³¹ Clark Carlton, *The Way*, page 46.

³² Clark Carlton, *The Way*, page 25. They realized, as Father John Braun put it, that “God’s program for his people was not a para-church, something created alongside the Church, but the Church.” Father Jon Braun, “The Early Years: Parachurch to Church,” *Again Magazine*, volume 20, number 1: March/April 1997, page 11.

For others, the very encounter with Orthodoxy brings about a crisis that makes them question their own beliefs. There have been a number of converts to Orthodoxy that started out by attempting to prove Orthodoxy wrong, such as Father Thomas Avramis who was raised in a Greek Orthodox home, but became involved with Protestant groups in high school and college. In order to be able to “convert the Orthodox” and be convinced that Orthodoxy was false, he began to read about Orthodoxy until he instead became convinced that Orthodoxy was in fact true.³³ Another convert to Orthodoxy, Father Seraphim Bell, was a pastor who started to study Orthodoxy history and theology in order to prove that the Orthodox speaker Frank Schaeffer, author of *Dancing Alone*, was wrong, only to discover that he was in fact right.³⁴

Of course, there are many people who suffer crises of all kinds in this world without converting to Orthodoxy, because the fullness of time has not come for them or because they pridefully respond to their pain with anger and self-indignation, instead of that humility, which would make them receptive to the grace of God that both initiates and completes the process of a person’s conversion.³⁵ Now humility and heresy are generally mutually exclusive categories, but in fact “most Western Christians are not conscious, willful heretics.” Neither any of my relatives nor I knew anything about the Orthodox Church until I started investigating it systematically in graduate school. Peter Gilquist, the leader of a large group of Protestant communities that entered the Church, notes that the Antiochian Orthodox Church “provided a home for people such as the Evangelical Orthodox Church ~ Christians who for so long didn’t even know this Church existed.”³⁶ Since these people were unconsciously in heresy out of ignorance, Saint Cyprian of Carthage’s teaching would seem apropos: “one who errs by simplicity [of mind] may be pardoned as the blessed Apostle Paul says of himself, ‘I who at first was a blasphemer, and a persecutor and injurious; yet obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly.’”³⁷ And although the Saint’s remarks do not change how the sacred canons should be applied, it does make it possible for some of these people to be compared to “New Testament God-fearers like Cornelius” or Candace’s eunuch who “neither believed aright concerning God, nor taught others the truth,” but because they humbly and diligently sought Christ, they were particularly worthy of a special help.³⁸

³³ Clark Carlton, *The Way*, page 26.

³⁴ Father Seraphim Bell, “O Lord, Establish this Vineyard,” *Again Magazine*, volume 20, number 1: March/April 1997, page 52.

³⁵ Saint John Cassian, *The Conferences*, Conference III of the Abbot Paphnutios, chapter XV.

³⁶ Father Peter E. Gillquist, “Our Ten years in Orthodoxy,” *Again Magazine*, volume 20, number 1: March/April 1997, page 43.

³⁷ Patrick Barnes, *The Non-Orthodox: The Orthodox Teaching on Christians Outside of the Church* (Regina Press: Salisbury MA, 1999), pages 46-47. One may also include other examples from Church history of those who were attached to heresy, because of simplicity of mind, and later repented and returned to Orthodoxy, such as Saint Ioannicios (November 14).

³⁸ Patrick Barnes, *The Non-Orthodox*, pages 49 and 73. Saint John Chrysostom remarks that both Cornelius and Candace’s eunuch were remarkable for their piety seen in the pilgrimage and study of the one and the almsgiving and prayer of the other (Homily XXII on Acts). Saint Jerome in his 108th letter to Eustochios claims that the eunuch “was so great a lover of the Law and of divine knowledge that he read the Holy Scriptures even in his chariot. And although he had the book in his hand and took into his mind the words of the Lord, nay even had them on his tongue and uttered them with his lips, he still knew not Him, whom — not knowing — he worshipped in the book.” Even in his ignorance, his intense love for the good was reckoned in his favor by the Just Judge and later rewarded.

The Path towards Conversion: A Humble and Diligent Search

This humble and diligent seeking of Christ can be seen in the questions those who would convert to Orthodoxy would ask themselves or others. Father Edward Wilson, for example, recalls asking his friend the question, “if we saw God at work doing something that was different from what we were doing, would we have the good sense to join it?”³⁹ Another Orthodox priest when taught in Methodist seminary not to accept any authority, but to decide on his own what to believe, asked himself, “Who was I to invent or even re-invent the Christian religion? I needed someone or something higher and wiser than I.”⁴⁰ Humbly seeking in turn gives way to humbly submitting to the Truth, once the Truth has been found. Frank Schaeffer puts it in this way: “I no longer believed it was my duty to stand in arrogant judgment over the historical Church... as if it were merely a matter of personal taste, amusement, or comfort. Rather I began to see that it was the Holy Tradition of the historic Church that stood in judgment over me... This is no theoretical or theological assertion, but a very practical one, since as a moral cripple I need the crutches – this historical certainty—offered by the historic community of belief.”⁴¹ When Father Peter Gilquist was asked what prompted him to leave the Protestant world, he gave a similar response, “ultimately the change came for us when we stopped trying to judge and re-evaluate Church history, and for once invited Church history to judge and evaluate us.”⁴²

Once someone has humbly accepted the universality of the Orthodox Church as the unique theanthropic body that is authoritative in his life on matters of salvation, the movement from an assent in the mind and heart to the actual act of converting to the faith requires another virtue that Saint Clement of Rome calls “strength of devotion and of purpose.”⁴³ This realization that nothing is more important than properly entering the Church and pushing towards that goal is necessary for the person who is seeking the Church to be able to overcome the obstacles that the evil one will surely put in his way. We can see this “strength of devotion” in many of the accounts of those coming to Orthodoxy. Father Jack Sparks, for example, spoke of being “committed to finding that Church and becoming part of it, no matter what the cost.”⁴⁴ Father Peter Gilquist saw Ruth the Moabite as a model for entering the Church, in which following God meant humbly making His people (that is, the members of the Orthodox Church) your people, regardless of the conditions.⁴⁵ I remember after six months of reading nearly every book on Orthodoxy that I could find in the University of Chicago library and before even visiting an Orthodox parish, I told myself, “I will do whatever it takes to become

³⁹ Father Edward Wilson “In God’s Lampstand: Looking Back on Twenty Years at Saint Barnabas Church,” *Again Magazine*, volume 20, number 1: March/April 1997, page 43.

⁴⁰ Father William Olenhausen, “A Broader Vision,” page 22.

⁴¹ Frank Schaeffer “On Why I became Orthodox,” *Again Magazine*, volume 14, number 4: December 1991, page 15.

⁴² Father Peter E. Gilquist, “Sealed! 5 Years Later,” *Again Magazine*, volume 15, number 1: March 1992, page 7.

⁴³ “Do not suppose that the proof of conversion is shown by length of time, but by strength of devotion and of purpose. For minds are manifest to God; and He does not take account of times, but of hearts.” Recognitions of Clement, book X, chapter XLIV. Earnestness.

⁴⁴ Father Jack Sparks, “The Middle Years: A New Foundation,” *Again Magazine*, volume 20, number 1: March/April 1997, page 29. Father Jon Braun recalled, “we wanted the Church, and we meant to find it.” In “The Early Years: Para-church to Church,” page 12.

⁴⁵ Father Peter E. Gilquist, “Sealed! 5 Years Later,” page 7.

Orthodox, even if I have to become a Russian or a Greek, or learn to speak Russian or Greek in order to do so.” To a certain extent, I ended up doing both.

The Cause of Conversion: the Action of Grace

As important as it is to humbly seek the Truth with a contrite heart and to submit to it with determination, the chief factor at any conversion is always the working of divine grace. “Saint Athanasios the Great, in his *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* states, ‘The Saviour is working mightily among men, every day He is invisibly persuading numbers of people all over the world, both within and beyond the Greek speaking world, to accept His faith and be obedient to His teaching.’”⁴⁶ And while according to the Fathers, grace does not work on man from within the soul prior to Orthodox Baptism, it can and does move the unbaptised person towards the good from without.⁴⁷

Of course, grace acts in a multitude of ways on souls that are prepared and receptive, and it would seem helpful to enumerate some of them. In some cases, it is the right book falling in the right hands at the right time. In my first year of college, I read the *Brothers Karamazov* and was amazed by the beauty of a Christianity I had never encountered before. This is when I was first conscientiously attracted towards Orthodoxy. For others, it is cumulative effect of reading many books on the Orthodox faith.⁴⁸ When a Roman Catholic seminarian in Africa was awaiting ordination, he encountered a woman who told him about Orthodoxy, and after reading some books and praying, he understood that the Truth of Christ is found only in Orthodoxy.⁴⁹ For others, it was the study of Church history that brought them to the doorstep of the Church.⁵⁰

Apart from reading, many have felt the pull of grace by attending liturgical services. For example, one former protestant seminarian, now an Orthodox priest, found “the presence and power of the Kingdom of God in the Church as a Eucharistic community.”⁵¹ Others have inadvertently entered an Orthodox Church and been captivated by the beauty and holiness of the icons. When I first entered an Orthodox Church and saw the icon of Christ and heard the priest exclaim “let us commend ourselves and one another to Christ our God,” I knew that I had found my place and in fact the Church I had been seeking from my youth. One protestant woman spoke of her first visit to an Orthodox Church in this way, “I stared into the faces of Michael the

⁴⁶ Chapter 30, The Reality of the Resurrection.

⁴⁷ Saint Diadochos of Photiki writes, “Before Holy Baptism, grace encourages the soul towards good from the outside, while Satan lurks in its depths trying to block the nous’s way of approach to the divine. But from the moment that we are reborn through baptism the demon is outside, grace within.” “On Spiritual Knowledge and Discrimination: One Hundred Texts,” 76, *Philokalia* 1 (Faber and Faber Press: London, 1979), page 279.

⁴⁸ Such was the case with Steven Walker, Kenneth Washburn, Larry Uzzel, and Ron Olson. Cf., Steven Walker, “A Journey to the Orthodox Faith,” *Again Magazine*, volume 17, number 2: June 1994 page 14. Kenneth Washburn, “Thinking It Through,” *Again Magazine*, volume 14, number 3: September 1991, page 12. Larry Uzzel, “Beyond Canterbury,” page 24. Ron Olson, “From Biola to the Barriok,” *Again Magazine*, volume 14, number 3: September 1991, page 20.

⁴⁹ Father John Rakontodrazafy, “How I became Orthodox” *Martyria* of the Holy Metropolis of Kidonia and Apokoronos [in Greek], issue 53, 2001, page 54.

⁵⁰ Father Thomas Renfree, “A Funny Thing Happened to me,” page 17 and Father Andrew Harmon, “Ashbury Dreams,” page 18.

⁵¹ Kenneth E. Hines, “Why This Reformed Seminarian Took The Plunge to the Orthodox Faith,” *Again Magazine*, volume 14, number 3: September 1991, page 15.

Archangel, the Lord Jesus, and the Virgin Mary. It was as if I were being taken right up into heaven with them. It was right then and there that I knew that I had found home; I knew I wanted to become Orthodox.”⁵² Father Moses Berry, describes the first time he walked into an Orthodox Church as a young American black man and how he saw a large icon of Saint Moses the Ethiopian. He writes, “I was stunned by its terrible beauty and other-worldliness. It was as if he were saying to me, ‘Welcome home! Welcome to the Church my son!’ I wanted to cry or shout for joy.”⁵³

In others, the action of grace is even more manifest, such as a family in Africa who were desperately watching their loved one dying and asked an Orthodox priest who happened to be in the hospital to pray for them, and the priest read a prayer and the dying man arose, and with him, his entire family desired to learn about Orthodoxy and be baptized.⁵⁴ Or there is the case of a former Christian who strayed into Buddhism and became a practicing Buddhist who was inexplicably awoken every night at three in the morning. His guru told him to call on the name of a Tibetan deity, but when the man did that, he heard a voice saying, “I am not that.” Shaken, he asked, “Who are you?” and he felt a Light that knew him and loved him and he knew it was Christ, even though he had earlier rejected Christ completely and would not even refer to Christ by name.⁵⁵

The Final Step Before Conversion: Making the Comparison

And in a sense, every convert has this feeling of being awakened by the grace of Christ in one way or another. Like the prodigal son, he comes to himself, makes the comparison between his father’s house and the squalor in which he is now living, and makes his decision to return home. In the words of another convert who has since become an Orthodox priest, “the reality of Orthodoxy is far better than the illusions of life outside.”⁵⁶ Some compare the order and cohesion of Orthodoxy with the confusion of Protestantism. Others contrast the historical continuity of Orthodoxy with the lack of historical connection in modern Protestantism.⁵⁷ Others compare worship rooted in the Holy Spirit’s guidance with the make-it-up-as-you-go-along affair of Western Christendom.⁵⁸ Others contrast the shallow “how to” programs developed over the course of a few short years with two millennium of proven guidance and council.”⁵⁹ Still others note the presence of tools to combat sin in Orthodoxy with their absence in heterodox confessions.⁶⁰ They compare, they contrast, and they come to a decision.

And so the person from another confession completes his catechism and by the grace of God is baptized into the Holy Orthodox Church. From this point onwards, “it should be of no importance to a man who joins the Church what he was,” according to Saint Hilarion, “it is important and saving for him only that he, by becoming united with the

⁵² Thelma Michaila Altschul, “31st and Troost,” page 25.

⁵³ Father Moses Berry, “An Encounter with a Saint,” page 26.

⁵⁴ Metropolitan of Kenya Makarios, “The sick Muslim and the Grace of God,” *Martyria* of the Holy Metropolis of Kidonia and Apokoronos [in Greek], issue 1, page 44.

⁵⁵ Nilus Stryker, “The Sunrise of the East: The Light that Knows my Name,” *The Orthodox Word*, Number 217, 2001, volume 37, number 2, March-April 2001, pages 61-62.

⁵⁶ Father Andrew Harmon, “Ashbury Dreams,” page 19.

⁵⁷ Father Seraphim Bell, “O Lord, Establish this Vineyard,” page 54.

⁵⁸ Frank Schaeffer “On Why I became Orthodox,” page 14.

⁵⁹ Kenneth Washburn, “Thinking It Through,” pages 11-12.

⁶⁰ Franky Schaeffer “On Why I became Orthodox,” page 13.

Church, becomes a member of the Body of Christ.”⁶¹ Following Holy Baptism, the one time process of conversion becomes the life-long process of repentance within the Church.

The Conversion Process and Ecumenism

What we have said about the process of someone’s conversion to Orthodoxy ~ in terms of pain of heart, humbly seeking God’s will, and a determination to do God’s will whatever the cost—must continue in the Church in the life of repentance, because the struggle for purification and sanctification essentially begins with Holy Baptism and because the life of repentance is a similar life of continuously seeking God’s will. Just as it is a fearful sin to do something that would hinder someone’s repentance, it is a fearful sin to hinder someone’s approach to Orthodoxy by our lives, our actions, and our words. An ecumenism that pretends that the real differences between Orthodoxy and heterodoxy are insignificant is precisely such a sin of fearful proportions. It denies the Truth that so many former heterodox Christians have struggled to find and attempts to shut the door to others still searching. We must not be deceived by the smiley mask of ecumenism. Ecumenism is in opposition to someone seeking the Truth and striving to enter the Church of Christ at every single step. Ecumenism encourages feeling good about discovering a superficial unity, not compunction and a life of repentance. Ecumenism discourages a search for the Truth that would mean admitting that there is also falsehood. Ecumenism does not really have the humility to listen to another perspective apart from its own, especially if it suggests that ecumenism is itself a lie. Ecumenism allows for comparisons, but not conclusions that one tradition is more genuine than another. And in the end, ecumenism discourages any decisive action that would be in opposition to its own goals. In truth, Christ’s words to the Pharisees apply to the ecumenists, “But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.”⁶²

Saint John Chrysostom advises each of us how to help those outside of the Church, “thou canst not work miracles, and so convert him. By the means which are in thy power, convert him; by showing him brotherly love, by offering him shelter, by being gentle with him, by dealing kindly him, and by all other means.”⁶³ In other words, we need to reach out to those heterodox Christians outside the Church with that hospitality and love so characteristic of Orthodoxy. This means being able to see whatever virtue is present among those in error even as Saint Peter, not to mention an angel of God, saw virtue in Cornelius prior to his Baptism.⁶⁴ The path to conversion is not an easy one, and those struggling along it need our love, concern, and support. At the same time, however, we must proclaim the “hard saying”⁶⁵ of the Truth, even if it is painful. The truth that the Orthodox Church is the “One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church”⁶⁶ as

⁶¹ Patrick Barnes, *The Non-Orthodox*, page 120.

⁶² *Matthew* 23:13.

⁶³ Saint John Chrysostom, Homily XVIII on *Acts*.

⁶⁴ Patrick Barnes, *The Non-Orthodox*, pages 118-119. “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” *Acts* 10:34-35.

⁶⁵ *John* 6:60.

⁶⁶ Nicene Creed.

well as the unique ark of salvation is “our chief corner stone, elect and precious,” that has always been and will always be “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.”⁶⁷

It should not be surprising that those formerly heterodox Christians who have converted to the Church are the fiercest opponents of ecumenism. For ecumenists, converts to Orthodoxy are clearly an embarrassment, since conversion denies the existence of some middle ground between the Church and heterodox confessions. For converts, their involvement in ecumenism would be the fulfillment of the proverb “as a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly.”⁶⁸ Converts are intimately familiar with the spiritual sickness and suffering caused by infidelity to the teachings of Christ and His Church in heterodox communities. They cannot be duped by soothing words about love that sacrifice the Truth or empty words about a unity that in reality does not and cannot possibly exist. Their repentance over what is wrong in those communities was by the grace of God a fount of knowledge leading to salvation. They will not let ecumenism deny this knowledge to themselves or to others.

And this position of theirs is not a negative position. On the contrary, it springs from love for Christ, love for the Church, love for the Truth, love for those within the Church, and love for those outside of Her bosom. In love, we reject ecumenism, because we want to offer those in heterodoxy precisely what the Lord has graciously given to all of us in the Holy Orthodox Church, the opportunity to become members of the Most Pure Body of Christ, “children of light”⁶⁹ and “heirs of the kingdom which He hath promised to them that love him.”⁷⁰

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⁶⁷ *I Peter* 2:6 and 8.

⁶⁸ *Proverbs* 26:11.

⁶⁹ *Ephesians* 5:8.

⁷⁰ *James* 2:5.