

From Fear to Freedom



by Molly Sabourin

tuneteller as mentally unstable. I knew that I struggled with being a square peg in a round hole, but I figured I would keep looking within Protestant circles for a pew I could nail my heart to.

Looking for a Square Hole

After graduating from high school, I enrolled at Moody Bible Institute, a well-known and respected Bible college in downtown Chicago. The course names on my schedule sounded harmless enough, but I was ill prepared for the mind-blowing experience I would soon enter into as I was trained and tested in the tenets of "Systematic Theology," "Christian Life and Ethics," "Personal Evangelism," and "Church at Work in the World." In every classroom, dorm room, or student lounge, heated debates were testing newfound convictions on women in the Church, speaking in tongues, the end times, faith vs. works, and free will vs. predestination. I was envious of my classmates who were able to pick a path, strap on some blinders, and walk confidently without hemming and hawing at each fork in the road.

My junior year, I started dating a classmate named Troy. We shared similar frustrations and a conviction that Christianity must contain elements we had not experienced thus far. Sometimes we would make the effort to look outside our known circumference by taking in a Lutheran, Episcopalian, or even Catholic service. The pomp with which these traditions handled the Gospel, recited their litanies, and lined up for Communion both intrigued and unnerved me. The God I knew so intimately was being handled with kid gloves, and I questioned the need for such formality.

Later that winter, I was given the assignment to attend a church service and evaluate its musical style. Troy had in his notebook the address of an Orthodox church that he had been

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I can feel it coming, the dramatic pause and raised eyebrow at my response to the conversational inquiry about where my family and I attend church. Especially if this question is a follow-up to the obligatory, "Where did you go to college?" or "Where did you and your husband meet?" I understand the confusion, and try my best to buffer the blow that this Bible college graduate has indeed converted to Orthodox Christianity.

In 1995, "Orthodoxy" was not the controversial buzzword within evangelical circles that it is today. As far as I knew, no other American Protestant had ever before considered living out his or her faith within the confines of this often-stereotyped cultural backwater. If anyone had told me that within a decade I would be praying with icons, taking part in confession, and witnessing the baptism of all four of my babies, I would have shaken my head and walked away, dismissing my for-

given by a student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, whom he had met while conducting religious surveys for class and whose father was an Orthodox priest. Troy had recently read a book by Bishop Kallistos Ware, entitled *The Orthodox Way*, for his History of Doctrine course, and was curious now to see this unfamiliar liturgy in person. The next Sunday, we took the bus to Holy Trinity Cathedral. I will never forget the awe and fear that nearly took my breath away as we opened the heavy wooden doors and peered for the first time into the extravagantly foreign depths of Orthodoxy.

Every church I had attended growing up felt safe and warm in its familiarity. The sanctuaries looked much like my own living room, the kind pastors approachable in their sport coats and dress pants. The choruses were upbeat and melodic. The contrast on that Sunday was shocking. I did not get the sense from Holy Trinity Cathedral that I was welcome to come in and be ministered to. It was I who was expected to do the participating.

The two hours we spent standing in the balcony seemed to drag on forever. My feet were aching, I couldn't understand the order of the service, the smell of incense made my head spin, and the *a cappella* hymns and chanting reminded me of a cultic ritual. The clergy with their synchronized movements in and out of altar doors, swinging censers, and kissing of hands, books, crosses, and icons resembled the mechanized villagers I had once seen dancing in rotation on a giant Swiss cuckoo clock. When Troy and I finally made it out to the safety of the street, I looked at him to confirm my suspicion that whatever was going on in that place was purely heretical. On an otherwise solemn face, however, I found in his eyes a spark that burned like a single twig glowing beneath a pile of dry embers.

Heresy or Ancient Truth?

Troy and I continued to date, becoming more serious over time. The topic of Orthodoxy sprang up with greater frequency in our conversations, and Troy's factual tidbits began gnawing their way into my psyche, distorting my assumptions of what defined "the Church." We read with heightened interest about the Great Schism of 1054, when the original Church established by the apostles split East from West over the final issue of the *filioque* (the addition made by the West to the Nicene Creed). While the Western church went on to split thousands of additional times, starting with the Reformation, the Eastern Church had remained intact, using the same liturgy, sacraments, and structure of leadership as she had for the previous 1,500 years. The Orthodox Church was indeed out of touch with modern culture. Walking through the doors of Holy Trinity, I had entered a time warp and encountered a living artifact of antiquity.

Partly out of curiosity and partly out of love for Troy, I agreed to a few occasional visits over the next couple of months. Armed now with some basic knowledge and historical context, I wavered between heartfelt appreciation for this symbolically saturated sneak peek into early Christianity, and feelings of cold, clammy terror that even this silent observation could be a blasphemous act of betrayal. I mumbled along to the Nicene Creed, the litanies, and the Lord's Prayer, but my lips snapped shut at the mention of Mary, and my arms stiffened in protest at the notion that I should join others in crossing myself. "What do You want from me?" I prayed over and over again, without any real hope of an answer.

After liturgy, Orthodox Church members gather for a time of fellowship aptly named "coffee hour." Troy and I initially avoided getting lured

into one of these, but after about four non-consecutive Sundays of hiding in the balcony, we were waved down by a gray-bearded doctor named Peter. He was so kind and animated, we didn't have the heart to refuse him, and so we tagged along to meet in person the church body that my egotistical young brain had already summed up as distant and superstitious.

Dr. Peter set us down at a table next to a couple not much older than Troy and I. Joshua was welcoming, friendly, and quick-witted. His wife, Janine, was very sweet and sincerely interested in who we were and how we had ended up at the fellowship hour of an Orthodox church. Joshua's father had been a priest, so he was very knowledgeable about church rubrics, Tradition, fasts, and feasts. He had also briefly attended Wheaton College, a non-denominational conservative Christian university, before returning to Orthodoxy as a young adult. To our relief, he was comfortingly aware of what would most alarm us and what aspects of the faith would require a thorough explanation. Before we left, Troy and I scheduled a time to get together at their small apartment just two blocks away.

Lunch that next Sunday was laced with inner tension. I was there to put Orthodoxy on trial. Why did they use icons? Why did they venerate Mary? Why did they believe in intercessory prayer? Never once did they turn the tables and rub in my face the disjointed factions within modern evangelicalism or the unchecked freedom it had claimed to spawn updated views of the Gospel, changing the medium and the message as it saw fit. Joshua calmly provided clear, historical, and logical reasons for each practice I questioned.

I started to understand that lining up Protestantism alongside Orthodoxy was like trying to compare apples and oranges. Orthodoxy was planted and

grew in persecuted nations, comfortable with the allowance of mystery. For example, if you asked an Orthodox Christian whether he or she was "saved," you would not get a neat, cut-and-dried, yes or no answer. Christianity for the Orthodox is an organic whole, no one discipline or principle being defined outside the context of another. In the booklet, "Am I Saved?" (Light and Life Publishers), Father Theodore Bobosh explains salvation this way:

The question, "Are you saved?" appears to some to be shallow. It seems to imply all that is needed is to say yes or no. Yet we also know that Christ taught us to take up our cross daily and to follow Him. Christ told us to *strive* to enter into Salvation (Luke 13:24). Christ has indeed accomplished His work for our Salvation, but ours is just beginning.

This answer, borderless and free-flowing, did not come with a money-back guarantee that my name would be written with permanent ink in the Book of Life, but it certainly did seem to make good sense. If salvation were just a one-shot deal, why go through the grueling effort to counteract every innate tendency toward self-preservation in order to become empty vessels for Christ? Why did St. Paul describe salvation as a race to be run with perseverance?

If I accepted the Orthodox position of salvation as a process, it would not be within my jurisdiction to make judgments on the sincerity of my fellow athletes. Rather, I would be chiefly responsible for evaluating how effectively I was using *my* unique gifts and situations to glorify God, working out *my own* salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). Of course I would still believe in God's goodness and limitless mercy. I would remember my place, however, as a servant and never

assume ownership of such an amazing gift.

Being so accustomed to arrogantly picking apart everyone else's faith, I had never realized the toll it was taking on my own spiritual life. I had lost, or perhaps had never even discovered, the awesome and mysteriously indefinable Gospel message. Perhaps Christianity needn't be pinned down and organized in outline form. Maybe Christ's teachings didn't fit neatly in my predictable square box. That day my view of God exploded, shattering the barriers I had placed around Him and opening doors I never knew existed, hidden behind the heavy tapestries of Western culture.

My hunger for this bigger God compelled me to take another step forward, but I wanted to carry along my evangelical safety net, even as it tangled around my feet and hindered my movement. I desperately desired the best of *both* worlds. Troy, in the meantime, had silently cut ties with his past and prepared to venture forward, come what may. This tension loomed

between us, threatening a permanent separation. I couldn't go back, but didn't think I had it in me to move onward. The more confident Troy became in his conviction to join the Orthodox Church, the more I resented his courage, my fear, and even God Himself, for presenting these choices without identifying the correct one with a big green checkmark.

Holy Trinity was offering catechism classes for those who were interested in learning more about the Orthodox faith. These were taught by a good-natured, frighteningly intelligent, and refreshingly rational long-time social worker named Tom. Together we went through *The Orthodox Church* by Bishop Kallistos Ware. Tom was funny and unbelievably knowledgeable. I still cannot fathom how one head could contain the ocean of facts he knew, not just about Orthodoxy, but about history, literature, and culture as well.

Tom's approachability helped me relax, and I felt confident asking tough questions, knowing he was incapable

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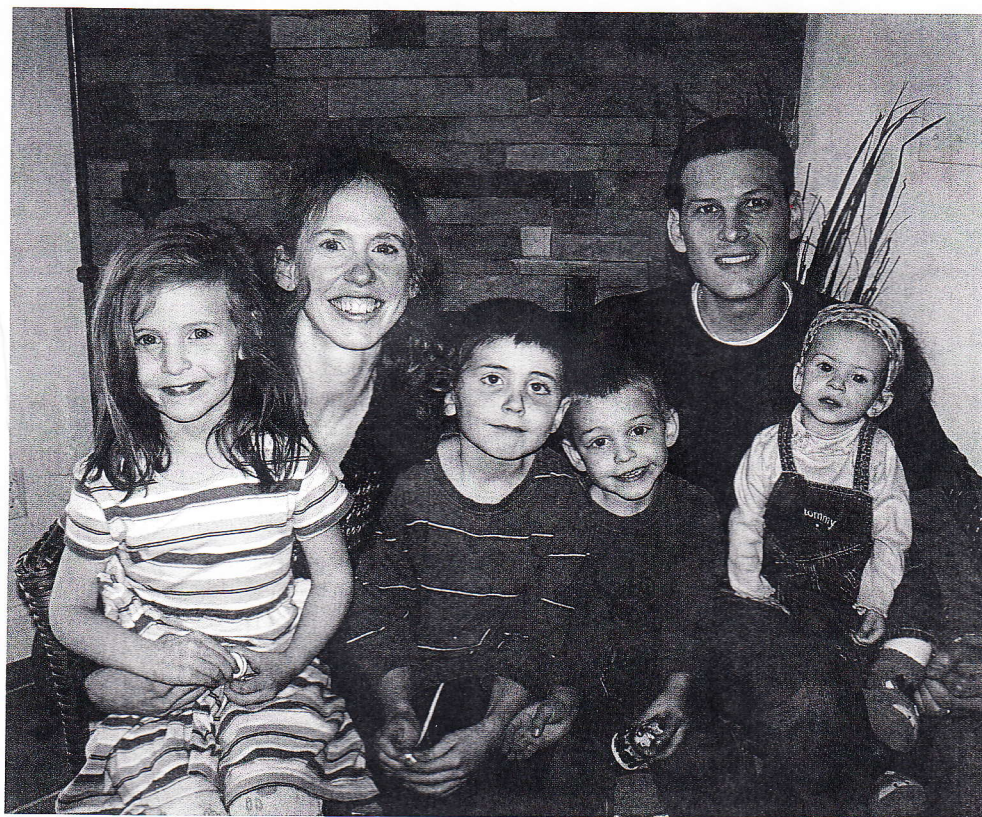
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of being offended. When asked why all the emphasis on Mary, he explained how her role as Theotokos, or "God-bearer," protected the dogma of Christ being fully human and fully divine, which had been called into question during the early centuries of Christianity. Mary had always been revered as the first Christian and as the supreme example of submission. When the Roman Church introduced the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, Protestants overreacted by reducing Mary's place in the plan of salvation to a seasonal backdrop for Christ's glory.

Tom also explained how the Orthodox eagerly petition saints to intercede for them, not because the saints are seen to be equal with Christ in power and authority, but because Orthodox Christians view the afterlife as a curtain rather than a brick wall. Since these holy men and women had fought the good fight and were most definitely in the presence of the living God, Orthodox Christians could ask for their prayers, as we would ask a friend or family member here on earth to pray to God on our behalf.

These controversial issues, when actually studied and poked at, proved to have value and substance. By no means was I on board with everything I heard, but I was at least through assuming that any Orthodox practice I found difficult to understand automatically equaled heresy and spiritual treason. Each week, I was warming up to the idea of giving up the fight and resting in the strong arms of this Church. Troy and I went forward with wedding plans, looking forward to the day when we would be joined together in name and in faith. When it became obvious that a conversion was imminent, our families bravely offered us up to God. Their faith, despite a legitimate fear of the unknown, revealed a deep conviction of Christ's sovereignty.



Growing into the Faith

There was still so much I didn't know. It would take a lifetime to familiarize myself with the symbolism, Church calendar, choir tones, and so forth. At first I was concerned about my lack of passion for Mary, the saints, and weekly fasting. What I had gratefully accepted, however, was a sincere belief that the Orthodox Church held within her unchanging Truth miraculously passed through thousands of hands, both good and evil, in periods of peace and intense persecution, without compromising the teachings of the Church Fathers or bowing to modernity. I was confident that my compliance would be rewarded with a genuine reverence for these Orthodox facets as I grew in knowledge and practice.

Orthodoxy is not easy. Many have jumped with fervor into her fullness, ultimately drowning from a lack of stamina. Orthodoxy should be savored slowly, taking bigger bites as your appetite naturally increases, not swallowed whole in one big zealous gulp. Having a spiritual father was invaluable in helping me to understand the spirit over the letter of the law. My priest lovingly guided me through my transi-

tion from a checklist-driven faith to a fluid, sacramentally fueled devotion to becoming a little more like Christ every second and with every circumstance put before me. Whereas before I had been in the habit of urging God to come down into my life, I now sought to enter into His.

In humble amazement, over the years since our conversion Troy and I have attended the chrismation services of one friend or family member after another. To worship alongside my brother, my parents, my college roommates and their husbands and children is nothing short of miraculous. What once seemed impossible is now the most real thing I know.

My eight-year-old son, running out to meet the bus, stops dead in his tracks and yells, "Mom, what about my blessing!" I approach him, smiling, and make the sign of the cross over his heart. "May the Lord God bless you," I say, "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." I pray as he departs that this small physical act of invoking the Trinity, translated in his mind as motherly love, will stay with him and his siblings, not just today, but for eternity. ←