

After the Chrism Dries

Some Pitfalls Awaiting Converts to the Orthodox Church

by Father David Tillman

Our merciful Lord says, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13, 14).

Coming into Orthodoxy may look like the end of a long journey home, but on another plane it is just the beginning of another journey—the journey into the Kingdom of heaven. This pilgrimage is the hard way, the way of the Cross, and it is fraught with dangers and pitfalls.

There is a steady stream of souls coming into the Orthodox Church, but, alas, there is also a persistent trickle of those going out. Some are scandalized, disillusioned, and heartbroken; some are rebellious, defiant, and—may God rescue them and us—perhaps lost forever. Joy comes only through the Cross, and all are tempted to flee from it. Let us take refuge in the divinely inspired promise of the Holy

Apostle John that "as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12).

Let's get some basic doctrine down before we have a sober look at the journey after the chrism dries and the baptismal garment is folded and put away. I believe in One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, and the Orthodox Church is it. What the Orthodox Church has received from the Lord (the prayers, the liturgies, the Bible, the Mysteries, the Councils, the Fathers, the icons, the canons—in sum, the entire Tradition) is absolutely trustworthy. To reject these things in their proper place and order in the Church is to reject Christ as Head of the Church. To gain these things through Jesus in the communion of the Orthodox Church is worth every sacrifice.

The Pitfall of Expecting Sinless People

What we have received is absolutely trustworthy. The way we incarnate it in this world as individuals, parishes, dioceses,

and the like can be an affront to God. If one flees to the Orthodox Church never expecting to encounter sinners again, one is deluded. Sinners are to be found in abundance not only among the laity, but among the clergy as well. St. John Chrysostom taught that the roads of hell are paved with the skulls of erring Orthodox priests, and erring Orthodox bishops are the lampposts!

In fact, even whole churches can fall into sin. The current Bishop of Corinth is reputed to say often that his church has not improved that much since the Apostle Paul left. And we must never forget that the seven churches described in St. John's Apocalypse (the Book of Revelation) were Orthodox churches! They're gone now. Their lampstands may well have been removed forever. Whether this is due to the vicissitudes of Greco-Turkish politics or to a deeper cause, we know that God preserves the Orthodox Church where she is faithful.

There are real live sinners in the Orthodox Church, and anyone that enters thinking to escape them will be terribly disappointed. He might have better luck entering a hospital in order to avoid sick folks.

One escapes nothing by coming into the Orthodox Church. What happens is that everything is intensified, but with a new clarity. The late Flannery O'Connor (a Roman Catholic writer of the first rank and native of the Deep South) was once asked why her stories, and those of so many Southerners, were peopled by such freaks. She replied to the effect that perhaps the Southerner's advantage is that he can still recognize a freak. The Orthodox Christian's advantage is that he can still recognize sin when most of the world would like to deny its existence.

There are sinners pedestrian and venal in the Orthodox Church. There are sinners who have damaged and torn lives and consciences. There are sinners intellectual and simple. One healthy sign amidst so much that is unhealthy, even dangerous, is that there is an unchangeable vocabulary of sin, repentance, accountability, and God's coming judgment in Orthodoxy. One can hide from it, but one cannot escape it. The Orthodox Church still recognizes sin and celebrates virtue, even to the judgment and condemnation of some who would count themselves members in good

standing, with medals and citations to prove it.

The Pitfall of Magical Thinking

Many come to the Orthodox Church with impossibly high expectations of her. Some of these expectations are quasi-magical. One can be baptized, chrismated, and communed with utmost care in Orthodoxy and still go to hell. The Holy Mysteries grant us an encounter with the Most Holy Trinity; they are not magic. They cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. A sinner who will not cooperate with this grace will be condemned by it.

Many a recovering drunk will say of his recovery program, "It works if you work it!" The Mysteries of the Church (which is itself the Great Mystery) work if you work them. One can be baptized in the deepest font made and be held under a good long time in each immersion and still end up in hell, for the lack of daily trying to die to self so that one can truly die with Christ and rise with Him. So many fixate on the outer form to the exclusion of the very presence of God in the Mysteries. The Lord is present to empower us to be faithful, not to magically transform us into lovers of Himself and our neighbors without struggle on our part. We must make the effort to "lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us" (Hebrews 12:1).

An excessive fixation on the ultra-correct celebration of the services of the Church can be the result of this magical thinking. Some seem to be thinking that if the services are just done right (and there are wildly divergent definitions of "done right") then the struggles will be over. Magic lusts after mere power. Alas, many prefer magic to grace and are disappointed that Simon the Magician was never canonized in the Orthodox Church! So they leave, or worse, stay and drive off the weaker brethren.

It is heartbreaking to see people scandalized by the sins of others and/or their own sins and struggles. The antidote to this in faith is the foundational virtue of humility. When all is said and done, all that is wrong with the Church in her earthly pilgrimage (remember, there's nothing wrong with her Head) can be discovered by looking in a mirror.

Every Orthodox Christian from the Apostolic Age until today must say at ev-

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ery Divine Liturgy that he himself is the chief of sinners. After many years of saying it, many come to believe it. Of those who believe it, many begin to do something about it. It is at this point that one begins to see and experience the Messianic miracles in abundance. At least on the moral plane one begins to witness, if not personally experience, the disfigured lepers being cleansed, the lame walking, the blind seeing, the dumb speaking, the demons being banished, and the dead being raised.

Yet some persist in wanting—may we say lusting for—a guaranteed magic rather than grace. Those healed by the Lord had to get up, get to work, and get home. Who are we to demand more? Jesus gives us His grace, the presence of the Holy Spirit, to walk the narrow way. He doesn't send a taxi to get us!

The Pitfall of Losing Our Balance

Being faithful is a struggle on both the individual and the corporate levels. Some give up the battle and settle for a worldly comfort. This is true for individual souls, parishes, dioceses, and patriarchates. None of us is immune to the desire to take the rest appointed for the Last Day right now. North Americans and Western Europeans have a great struggle with the devil's most subtle weapon: prosperity. Again on every level, there are those of us so seduced by prosperity that we create a huge stumbling

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block to many souls. Worldly prosperity and numerical growth are not always signs of spiritual growth. After all, cancer cells grow much faster than normal cells.

The antidote to the comfy poison of prosperity is ascetic effort. Ascetic effort is the directed and controlled violence of war against the passions. Ascetic effort can be derailed by pride, publicity, and legalism. There are times we Orthodox, again on both the individual and corporate levels, can simultaneously make the Pharisee blush and the publican despair. There are some who deny the centrality of ascetic effort, especially fasting. There are others who can keep a Lenten kitchen more fastidiously than any scribe or lawyer of old could ever have hoped to keep Kosher. Where humility and mercy are lacking, God is banished in the name of Orthodoxy, and souls are led astray.

The Lord grants us grace step by step so that we can walk a balanced walk. When we are confronted with fellow sinners, we need not despair and begin looking for a Church more Orthodox than God. This is a temptation. Neither do we need to say, "Well, no one else is fighting sin in his life, so I am off the hook." In balance we can be grateful to God that He brought us to the Orthodox Church, but we need not have any illusions that the Church would be diminished without us or is enriched by us. With sobriety we can do what grace makes possible and bless the Lord.

Unbalanced enthusiasm is another pitfall. One of the finest teachers in the North

American Church tells the story of his enthusiasm in his first assignment as a parish priest. At one point his bishop reminded him, "Father, the Church saves you. You don't save the Church." This is a saving balance and sobriety in the Christian walk. There is nothing extreme in it. Passionate and intemperate enthusiasm can be purified and tamed to become patient and long-suffering zeal. Being on fire with love for the Lord is absolutely necessary, but it must be a controlled burn.

The Pitfall of Ingratitude

One of the signs that we are getting off the narrow way of the Cross is ingratitude toward or condemnation of our origins. For those of us who came to Orthodoxy from the Western denominations, this is a major and serious temptation. One must enter Orthodoxy walking forward singing, not retreating backward shouting. It is the height of ingratitude to be without at least a prayer for the folks that taught one to call on the name of Jesus.

In the entryways of many an ancient church building (called the exonarthex) one could see pictures of Plato and Aristotle. The Church knew that the philosophies of the pagan Greeks were inadequate to the mystery of faith in Christ. The Church knew that too many had attempted to subordinate the Tradition to pagan categories and had been lost because of it. Despite all of this she allowed a beautiful expression of gratitude to Plato and Aristotle as seekers of Truth, sometimes even referring to them as "the Moseses of the [pagan] Greeks." In this we see sober, open-eyed, and Christ-enlightened gratitude.

Truth is truth wherever it is found, and it always has some relationship to Jesus, who is, of course, the Truth Incarnate. Ingratitude for whatever glimmer of truth came to us from even the most doubtful of sources is a singularly evil symptom of profound spiritual malaise. From the denominational perspective, there are few bodies more inadequate than the snake-handling sects, but their call for total commitment and focus is laudatory. On Judgment Day one can speculate that a rattlesnake-handling sect may fare better because of its hundred-percent commitment, albeit in ignorance, than an Orthodox parish that has it all, at least on paper, but is only thirty percent committed. Where ingratitude is found, judgments abound, and presump-

tion cannot be far behind.

Having said these things, we must be careful not to teeter off the other side of the narrow way by saying, "It does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere and committed." Although God is "everywhere present and fills all things" (as we say in our opening invocation to the Holy Spirit before nearly every private or public prayer of the Orthodox Church), He condescended to be objective—describable, touchable, knowable—in the Incarnation. The Faith has an objective content.

The Lord did not come to give us mere propositions. He came to restore our relationship to Him by freeing us from the tyranny of sin, decay, and death. Nevertheless, this relationship can be described accurately in ways He chose. There is right theology with attendant right practice. The Lord entrusts us with the Faith to equip us to walk the narrow way He pioneered. When we treat the Faith in presumption as our right, we distort it and disfigure it. The light in us becomes darkness, and we cause scandal and harm even though we may be members in good standing of the Orthodox Church.

A Bridge over Pitfalls—the Cross

What should be said in conclusion? Simply this: The Lord came to save us from the reality of rebellion, sin, death, and decay in every facet of our being. The only way to be saved is to take up our cross and follow Him in obedient death to self and sin. If, in reality, our following Him is a charade, then all the tools and arsenal the Lord has provided for our salvation and sanctification will condemn us. Coming into the Orthodox Church does not take away the necessity of genuine repentance. It's a matter of grace, not magic.

In reality, if we have not died with Christ and risen with Him, we will find the Marriage Supper of the Lamb intolerable. The real God makes real repentance possible so that people can enter into the real Kingdom of heaven. It requires a genuine walk in faith with the power of our God, who cannot be fooled. The journey is not over yet.

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