

Becoming Orthodox
By Charles Davis

My journey to Orthodoxy began when I was in the fourth grade with my childhood friend who lived down the street from me, whose family were a members of the Bow Baptist Church somewhere near Springfield. I was invited along a number of times and we road on a bus which the church operated to pick up it's parishioners. I heard recently that it had been sold since then. I remember one dark evening we were on our way home. Someone had given me an harmonica which I played, and sounded good to me... but probably not so good to everyone else, but it didn't matter to me then. By the summer prior to entering fifth grade Patrick moved away, and I no longer went to church. Two younger gentlemen from the church came one day to ask my parents if I could still go, but my mom had said no. She said I could go with my grandmother, which I think I did once, but did not like it. Perhaps her motherly wisdom was correct in not allowing me to go with people she did not know... but perhaps she could have gone with me, I did not think to ask. I prayed to God to bring me one day back to His true church. I feel, even to this day, He answered that prayer by introducing me to the Orthodox Church.

About seven years later, with a friend of mine since first grade, I joined an environmental club, cross-country ski club and Amnesty International my senior year. Through these activities I met a new group of friends, who a couple later invited me to the Orthodox Church in Springfield. It was Fall of 1990 that I began going to the Holy Trinity Orthodox Church. The first retreat I went on was the winter youth-rally reunion where we stayed at the Bishop's house for the weekend. I met a number of other teenagers and made new friends both Orthodox and non-orthodox. The comradeship and plain ordinary teenage fun of these road trips brought me closer to the church and God in an indirect way.

When I first entered the church I noticed how many of the people stood throughout the entire service, but I also stood without complaint while the choir sang and the priest chanted. I became close with the priest, enduring long explanations which I learned to love. His advice and guidance became most valuable for me during my time of transition to Orthodoxy and especially coming to adulthood. With encouragement, I became an 'alter boy' and the services seemed to become shorter and I began to learn more about the Liturgy from behind the curtain. I spent many hours with the priest outside of the church, helping around the church property or traveling with him to visit the elderly on a few occasions. I have a vague memory of visiting a monastery somewhere with him. Another important person during my conversion was the sub deacon of the church, who I learned a great deal about both in the church service as well as outside in developing my writing skill.

I was Baptized and Chrismated Lazarus Saturday 1991. It was indoors because of the temperatures outside, but in a chilly steel indoor basin filled with holy water. It was embarrassing to stand there in my bathing suite in the middle of the church, but that was part of the point, humility. During the process of learning about Orthodoxy, I learned we venerated saints, the first story I remember hearing was that of

Saint Mary of Egypt, which recently on my fifteenth anniversary of becoming Orthodox I purchased an icon of Saint Mary of Egypt with scenes from her life. When I was first becoming Orthodox, I had so many questions which I asked many people including the priest and other members of the church. I studied much on the sayings of the Desert Fathers, history of the church, and quotes from the saints. There are several books I read from: 'The Way of the Ascetics', 'The Orthodox Church', 'Saints Barsanuphius and John', 'Pillars of the Church', 'Feast of Faith', 'Ancient Fathers' and 'Spiritual Counsels' to name a few which inspired me. My patron saint was chosen by my priest to be Martyr and Philosopher Saint Justin. He is considered one of the great apologetics of the church, since his writings are important historical documents describing early worship, and especially his defense of Christianity. Obviously his icon is one of the first I received, together with the icon of the raising of Lazarus. Soon after I bought copies of the three primary icons of Holy Trinity Church: The trinity icon, Jesus and Theotokos. I was given two bibles, one from Matushka also my God Mother (NRSV Bible with Apocrypha), and the other a leather bound NKJV Bible from the priest. Over time I had accumulated almost ten bibles, though I have now given away all but the mentioned two. I even donated the small pocket bible my Baptist childhood friend had given me hoping someone else might find a greater need for it.

I visited other churches on base during my time in the military, Catholic and several different Protestant/Baptist type churches, but none felt like home as the Orthodox Church does. Some would say that is because I was in a distant land from home, naturally I wouldn't feel comfortable there, but I did a little. I remember one church I went to, while very charismatic, the leader was a black man who was very joyful. It isn't necessarily the 'place' that is what made me feel at home in the Church, I feel just as at home in any of the churches I've been to. To feel at home somewhere, it comes from the people and their 'love of thy neighbor,' not the building or location. The impressions I had of Orthodoxy was how different it all was from any other churches I had been to. The choir with no accompanying music, yet so beautiful; the scent of incense as the priest censens the people and the icons; the candles lining the church before the icons, and the big candle stands behind each of the three primary icons of the church; the icons covering the walls, the iconostasis, the three primary icons: center icon of the Holy Trinity, Jesus icon set back just in front of the iconostasis on the right, and the Theotokos directly to the left on the other side of the Holy Doors. The church engaged all five senses: sight, smell, sound, touch (veneration of the icons) and taste even (communion), and to a certain extent you could almost taste the incense if enough was being used.

I attended my second youth rally retreat, still not having been to the week-long youth rally held in the summer, but wishing to. I remember many road trips with my friends as we visited different churches around New England, but mostly Massachusetts where we had other friends. I cannot remember clearly the things that went on during any of these trips, which took place through the year except that we had a lot of fun. Then finally came youth rally, summer of 1992 but because of my age, 19, I could not go for free, so instead I went as a volunteer. I remember during youth rally trying to lead a small group of children in some project outside, I think it was clean-up. I remember it didn't go well, and a girl had to help keep the

children working. I don't remember what else I did, I remember watching some skits one evening and I remember the Bishop as he was very active with everyone. Once we traveled to the Cathedral in Boston during one of the Bishop's final weeks of liturgy in New England before his reassignment out west. It was a large building with awesome acoustics. There is another trip I remember, and have pictures from with most of the gang: The first and only Ed day I went to in October 1992 at Saint Vladimir's Seminary in Crestwood, NY. It was a beautiful weekend, we stayed at the house of a woman from youth rally in Connecticut the night before, she was one of the prominent youth rally coordinators or something I can't remember exactly. The Liturgy was long, but the company was wonderful. Today, I miss some of that activity, the road trips to retreats and events. Although I tire of road trips these days, I miss the connection I had with many of the people, even though I did not know them well. It was not about how well we knew each other as much as just being with people who we had something in common with. Sharing a purpose and direction, even if only momentarily.

Beyond the physical presence of everything there seemed to be more depth than that of any other church. At the time my experiences with church was limited, but now many years later through reading and visiting other churches I can see that my assessment of depth is correct. Beyond the religious rituals, censuring icons, chants, blessing objects and homes, etc., there are reasons for these rituals which have drawn me in. It is the structure of the Liturgy that I was drawn into, subconsciously at first until I did some study to learn why things were being done as they are. Furthermore, there is fasting during certain times of the year, and if you were to count all the days they would number over two-hundred. Until I became older, fasting and regular daily prayers escaped me. However attending church did not, at least until I attended college. What depth attracted me to the church? The cultural history at first, the title 'Russian Orthodox' stuck as many are trapped into the cultural definitions of Orthodoxy. The history of the church was fascinating to me at the time, and I enjoyed reading the book 'The Orthodox Church'. In particular interest was the Great Schism of the Church, which separated the Roman church from the others. Religious history at the time became a passion I enjoyed immensely. Being able to connect our worship with those who worship through-out the distant centuries past seemed more true to me than those churches who have only existed over the last few hundred years. While the Liturgy, and services have changed over time, the focus on God has not. While I was unaware of it then, subconsciously, guided by God, I was drawn to the Orthodox faith because the hymns, prayers and worship were focused solely on God. Nothing personally inspirational as many modern churches try to do, their focus being corporeal: 'what am I getting out of this?' or 'How does this pertain to my life?' Instead the prayers, hymns and the sermons even, teach us about the Word of God. It was the culture of Christianity that really kept me in the church, centering our lives around Christ God, and not ourselves. Granted, most Christian churches teach us to help others, to focus on God, although they seem somehow shallow. Now, years later and many books later I've learned a bit more. Orthodoxy has deep roots in history, which makes it strong with consistency in worship. Although from one church to another there are always differences, but the core is the same: God, communion, confession, prayer and fasting. I have a deeper understanding today of why we venerate icons

of the saints, they are not just 'windows to heaven' as I once learned. They are reflections, images of those who should inspire us to lead a more Godly life. Their stories have a lesson to be learned, and hopefully inspiration. Beyond my patron Saint Justin, I've learned to admire and commemorate new saints: New Martyr Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Moscow, who after her husband's death devoted her life to God and the people, living a life of charity and healing the sick. Saint Sava also now holds a place in my heart, as a man of noble birth who left all behind to join a monastery, only to be called back out to help the people of the nation he tried to escape, ultimately converting many, including his family and working many wonders.

Pascha, now my favorite 'holiday'. In Springfield it was wonderful how everyone shared baskets of food after the long midnight service in the early hours of the morning. During my first couple of years at Holy Trinity there was a particularly nice family who shared their Pascha basket with me since I didn't have one. I still visit the church in Springfield as they are my family in Christ. I don't remember the last time I was in Springfield for Pascha though, it was so many years ago now. So many Paschas missed, I don't even remember going much while in college. My time in college was like many teenagers and young adults who first leave home out into the world, who often fall away from the church and family in pursuit of finding themselves.

What strikes me most about Orthodoxy is Lent, the subdued themes, colors and lighting of the church. The enhanced focus on reflection of Christ, our path toward salvation and what is needful for our salvation. Emphasis is on charity and helping others, A 'boot camp' of sort for Christians. Recently, in the last year or two I actually began looking forward to Lent, not entirely because of the feast at the end, but the journey to get there. The biggest point I have learned being an Orthodox Christian, something I had forgotten from when I was newly learning the faith, is unlike other Christian faiths, Orthodoxy teaches that every day is a life in Christ, not just on Sunday. Furthermore, we are not 'saved', it is not our place to judge who is to be saved, including ourselves, although self judgment is a good thing as long as we are focused on our own sins and not on those of others. Our daily lives are an opportunity to draw closer to God, to repent of our sins, and each day is a second chance to do better than the day before.