

My STORY of conversion to Orthodox Christianity is short...the JOURNEY to my conversion was long...54 years to be exact. Today you will hear the abbreviated version, I promise.

I'm from a big, blessed Texas family. My parents lovingly raised their five children in a Christian home with Christian values. Mainly to satisfy my parents' deepest desire, I was baptized in their church at age 12. I would live my next 42 years as a "once saved, always saved" lukewarm Christian. Attending church wasn't a priority...after all, I believed in Jesus Christ, I said my prayers, I was a good person who tried never to be unkind. And, truthfully, until I married at age 35, I lived my blessed, fun-loving life somewhat carelessly. My Guardian Angel worked overtime.

My spiritual journey to Orthodoxy started early on. I had Roman Catholic friends and sorority sisters who always seemed at peace with their beliefs. I admired that about them. I attended midnight Masses at Christmas to enjoy the sheer beauty of the Cathedrals. I toured many Cathedrals and Basilicas throughout the years in dozens of countries. Having been raised in a non-liturgical low Protestant church, the beauty, history, Holiness and traditions of these churches fascinated me. While in line to tour St Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, a Russian woman in front of me began to admire a broach I was wearing. Knowing how few possessions most Russians had, I gave her my broach. She started crying, and to my amazement took a pendant off her necklace and gave it me. It was an icon of Theotokos and Christ Child. She would never know that her gift was so much greater than mine. Honoring the Virgin Mary was foreign to me, but I cherished this little pendant in my jewelry box. Once baptized into the Orthodox faith years later, I excitedly put it on the chain with the cross Presbytera Danielle had given me.

Fast forward to age 50. God opened my eyes to see something was missing in my life. My husband, James, and I agreed we should begin attending church. But where? What would we be looking for? Would it be something we would feel? Could we agree? So, the next chapter of my journey was to navigate through a mountain of choices for the following four years or so. Since neither of us were spiritually prepared for Roman Catholicism, we visited many Protestant churches of different Christian faiths. The Pastors delivered good sermons. The members were welcoming. The choirs were well-rehearsed and the soloists performed for admiring audiences...often followed by applause. After some time, we attended a lively evangelical mega church that definitely provided a lot of entertainment. This seemed to satisfy us for a while although neither of us cared for the contemporary praise band and overall casualness, but the pastor kept our attention and made us laugh. So, when he wasn't present to preach, we were disappointed. Eventually we began to lose interest and had to admit we were attending this church to be entertained and to walk out feeling good... but not necessarily whole again. To quote from some of my reading, our search for a church home had provided "good food that wasn't sticking to the ribs". I felt discouraged and now very confused. We had attended several churches with different doctrines and different ways of worshipping...each believing they possessed the most scripturally correct way and were at odds with their fellow Christians over these differences. Logic told me that they could not ALL be right. Ephesians 4:4-6 told me there was unity in the body of Christ. "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism". Christ is the head of His church and His body was never meant to be separated and so divided. Then, where WAS the truth??? I could only hope that God would make this clear one day.

I would soon come to know what was the one thing needful.

The next Christmas season, I decided to attend the Tri Church Festival. That year, the choir and performances were in front of St Paul's Greek Orthodox Church and the audience sat on the steps of Bull Street Baptist. After the program, the churches were opened for tours. When the doors opened, I got a glimpse into this church and hurried over to see all of the interior. I stepped inside the Narthex and was literally paralyzed with awe. My feet felt like lead. I couldn't move. I knew instantly this was a Holy place... a place of reverence that was foreign to me yet felt very familiar. And then a voice so loud, so CLEAR I honestly thought everyone heard it... "welcome home".

Since that moment, I have read other converts having such an experience. So, at least I know I didn't just imagine it. God had given me the clarity I'd hoped and prayed for and my feet had been planted firmly on the right path. Now came the time to explore this new revelation. James was not with me the night of the Tri Church Festival and he was good with me exploring my revelation alone.

I attended a weekday Divine Liturgy quietly taking it all in and grateful when English was spoken. All my senses were fully engaged in this worship service. At my first and almost every Liturgy since, I was moved to tears during Twice Holy. Tears flowed again as congregates knelt for the Transubstantiation. And, then, there it was.....the one thing needful....the Eucharist....the TRUE body and blood of Christ... approached and received in the most humble, contrite and reverent way imaginable. This was not "symbolic"...this was REAL. I had found the true faith and way of the Apostles.

I was blessed that James was immediately enlightened as well and my journey to becoming Orthodox continued with my husband on the same spiritual path. We are both so grateful for the wonderful guidance of a truly humble, Holy man, Father Vasile, and a truly humble and knowledgeable man, Eddie Lambros. I have learned that to fully embrace Orthodoxy can take a lifetime. It is a way of life that is not always easy. It requires discipline and patience. It requires worthy participation in God's Sacraments and prayerful fasting. For the Holy Spirit to live within us, we must forgive and continuously ask for forgiveness as we pray. It requires that we draw near to our Triune God with fear and love. It requires that we love others more than ourselves and that we take care of those less fortunate. It requires understanding that we are BEING saved through Christ our Lord and Savior and that we cannot take God's grace for granted. I have learned that it is proper and right to honor the Mother of God and Saints so as to ask for their intercessions.

Yes, you may see me cry during the Divine Liturgy as tears are prayers, too. Tearful prayers are healing and cleansing. They are my way of thanking God that He placed me on THIS path and has given me the privilege to serve Him and His church, to partake of His Divine Liturgy and to receive His precious and life-giving Eucharist. The Orthodox Christian faith is truly fullness of faith and solidly grounded in correct understanding of scripture. The Divine Liturgy is perfection and offered to the Glory of God. The Eucharist is truly the Pearl of Great Price...none of which this convert will ever take for granted.

In closing, I wish to say that these conversion stories, mine and the three before me, have been a tribute to those families who built and have supported this beautiful house of worship and fellowship through many decades. In this Greek Orthodox Church, many converts have come to know the Orthodox Christian faith. St Paul's is a beacon of light for converts and Orthodox Christians from many cultures. We ALL must pledge to do our part in preserving our church, this awesome Holy place, for future generations of cradle Orthodox and converts alike through our combined efforts of time, talent and treasure. For every time the doors are opened, someone on their soul's journey may step in and hear God's life-changing words "welcome home".