

Stewardship Talk

I'm a recovering alcoholic. This fact about me is at the center of what brought me to the church, and what keeps me coming back, and giving back. Because what I found in recovery was an understanding that I was a man who had lost all sense of humanity—I was disconnected from my fellows. I had utterly cut myself off from everyone who cared about me. Friends and family members had given up on trying to change me. And why not. I wouldn't listen to any of them. But I knew something was wrong. That I needed to change. But no matter how much I tried (reading self-help books, changing friends, changing jobs, swearing off the drink more times than I could count), no matter how miserable and alone I found myself, I couldn't change. Nothing worked. Until finally, I found myself sitting alone one morning when the undeniable realization hit me that I was lost. That my life was basically over. That I'd spend whatever time I had left on a slow, downward path to a lonely and pathetic death. And I gave up.

But, unbeknownst to me at the time, that was my salvation. The four horsemen of alcoholism (terror, bewilderment, frustration, and despair) had brought me to a place where I was willing to admit that I couldn't solve this problem on my own. I had to seek help. And so, I reached out and grabbed hold the hands of a group of people in an anonymous fellowship who helped to pull me up and out of the terrible state I was in. And the central belief, the abiding principle in this newfound fellowship was the concept that no human power could relieve me of my suffering. That power had to come from God. And at first, it didn't matter what particular sect of religion I might follow, as long as I could honestly admit to myself that there was a God, and it wasn't me.

Over the next eighteen years, I worked in this fellowship, trying to learn and apply the principles and concepts of a good life to my daily activities and thoughts. And I began to search for an organized religion that seemed to follow those principles that I was learning. I visited churches, read books, and prayed. But was never satisfied with what I found.

Then in 2001, not long after 09/11, while visiting my in-laws, I came across a book by Karen Armstrong, a religious scholar who'd written a book call: *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, about the long and complex history of monotheistic religions. I'd been trying for year to unravel the strange tension between the various major religions that confessed a belief in one unified Godhead—but whose theological differences had kept them all at war with one another. How could one find the truth amongst all of these divergent belief systems I'd often wondered. More importantly, how could I find a home in which I could place all my faith and learn a practice of worship that satisfied my spiritual and intellectual needs. And it was here, in this text, that I encountered 1st Century Christianity (the roots of Orthodoxy).

What I discovered there was exciting. So much of what I read matched up with my own to understanding God. The idea that God was in us all. That each of our imperfections could be made perfect for God's purposes if we could but confess our faults and work diligently to do God's will. That our egos—so full of selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-seeking—could be tamed only by allowing ourselves to admit our shortcomings and let God's spirit move us closer

to perfection through a process of continued renewal received through the power of confession and contrition. That the key to serenity was the dedication of service to others. That the lowest among us were really the blessings of our lives since they gave us the most opportunity to practice selflessness and humility. This, and more, I found in my readings about the Orthodox Church. I decided that I'd make an effort to attend a service. But I was apprehensive. Would I be accepted into the community? Would there be cultural or social obstacles? My experience with mostly Protestant churches had not prepared me at all for the more liturgically structured practices of the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, I made up my mind to further explore this new avenue.

In 2004, I had moved to Savannah to take a position at Armstrong Atlantic State University. I was living in a carriage house close to Forsyth Park. Not long after, I was walking the neighborhood, I stumbled on St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church. This was my opportunity, I thought. So that Sunday, I dressed up and walked down to the corner of Bull St. and Anderson St. As I stepped into the Narthex, I was immediately filled with awe. The icons, the beautiful chanting, the smell of incense, the vaulted architecture---all of it immediately struck me as the right and good way to worship. Eddy Lambros met me at the door, welcomed me with a warm smile ushered me into the nave. As I sat, listening to the liturgy (at the time, almost all in Greek---so I didn't understand a word, but somehow knew it was holy), I had the strangest feeling that I had found a home for my spiritual needs.

After the service, Eddy talked to me for a while and introduced me to a couple of other folks who were just as friendly and kind. It was just about a week out from the Greek Festival, and I was invited to come on out and join in the festivities. From my experience in the other fellowship, I guess I figured that meant I'd be joining in to help. So, the next week, I showed up and said: "What can I do?" And for the next three days, I had the time of my life. Helping on the salad line with Pete, keeping the lines filled, doing whatever I could to help. And in the process, I got to know some of the best folks I'd ever met. Everyone (at least it seemed to me at the time) were welcoming and accepting of my presence---I knew I belonged. Not long after, I spoke to Father Vasile about becoming a member. He set up a date for Catechism, and I began my journey into this life in earnest.

Since then, I have tried to move as humble as I can toward a deeper understanding of God's will for me in this world through the practice of worship that the Orthodox Church encourages. Every day, I try to find gratitude in the knowledge that it is only through divine grace that I am alive, sober, and able to be a contributor to life---instead of a taker. A wise man once told me: "Tony, you've been taking out of the stream of life for thirty-one years. It's time you start putting something back in." Through God and this church, I am no longer lost. I have found my way back into humanity. I have reconnected with my fellows. I am no longer cut off from everyone who cared about me. I am a source of love, care, and affection to my friends and family.

I'm grateful that I have been given the opportunity to support St. Paul's Orthodox Church. And *you* are that Church. So folks, thanks for all the comfort, solace, companionship, and joy you've given me over the years. Anything I can do in my small way to contribute to the health and prosperity of this church, I will do. I hope you will, too.