

**Their Church, Our Church:  
Discovering the Living Heritage of Orthodoxy**

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I'd like to share with you today some of my own experiences in discovering the Orthodox Church, and reflect a bit concerning what it means to encounter the living heritage of Orthodox Christianity in today's world.

To begin, let's go back to the autumn of 111 AD, when a wealthy and well-connected Roman administrator named Pliny sent a letter to his boss, the emperor Trajan. Pliny was an especially conscientious and hard-working bureaucrat, and he had been sent by Trajan to reorganize the administration of the Roman province of Bithynia, in what is today northwestern Turkey. In his letter, Pliny informs the emperor that he had recently encountered a group of people known as Christians. Despite his long experience as a Roman administrator, Christianity was a new phenomenon to Pliny, and he sought the emperor's advice on how to treat these people. Was the mere profession of Christianity punishable by Roman law? Or only the commission of unspecified criminal acts that were associated with Christianity?

Although he sought Trajan's advice on how to deal with these Christians, Pliny undertook his own investigation to determine the guilt or innocence of those Christians who had come to his attention. In Pliny's words:

They affirmed that the sum total of their guilt, or their error, was, that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as if to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to perform any wicked deeds, never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble together to partake of food but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.

This last remark of Pliny's refers to the common Roman belief that the early Christians were, in fact, cannibals, since it was rumored that they ate the flesh and drank the blood of a son of man. Pliny is certainly not sympathetic to the Christians, but in this letter, one of the very first discussions of Christianity by an outsider, we find recognition of several essential qualities of the earliest Christian church in Bithynia. First and foremost is the fact that the Church is

fundamentally a worshipping community. The Church is depicted gathering together regularly to worship the risen Christ, offering to Him songs of praise that proclaimed his divine status. Secondly, Pliny noticed that the entire context for the moral behavior of individual Christians was community oriented -- “They bound themselves by a solemn oath,” “they reassembled together to partake of food” – early testimony to the joy of sharing in a common feast, perhaps a reference to both the practice of Holy Communion and also to sharing meals together on special feast days.

Some nine hundred years later, another non-believer had a similar experience of encountering Christianity. In the 980’s, a diplomatic mission was dispatched by the vigorous young ruler of Kiev, Prince Vladimir. This was an unusual mission, for the ambassadors were sent to neighboring kingdoms to investigate their respective religions and report back to Vladimir who was seeking a better religion for himself and for his people. The ambassadors were singularly unimpressed as they encountered the belief systems of various peoples. Then, they came to Constantinople. The emperor and the patriarch knew how to deal with these earnest inquirers. Instead of sitting the Kieven ambassadors down to a long discussion of theology, they were ushered into the great church of Hagia Sophia, at that time the largest church on the planet, where they witnessed a celebration of the Divine Liturgy, that is, the Orthodox communion service. In his report to Prince Vladimir, one of the ambassadors said:

“We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwells there among humans, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places. For we cannot forget that beauty.”

Once again, we see outsiders struck by the worship of the Christians, in this case, the Orthodox Christians of the Byzantine empire. That was enough for Prince Vladimir. In due course, he and his kingdom embraced Orthodox Christianity, inaugurating over a millennium of Christianity in the Russian lands of the north. Time and again, and in radically different cultural contexts, we find that outsiders encountering Orthodox Christianity remember first and foremost the experience of Orthodox worship, a style of worship in which the participants are invited to experience nothing less than the kingdom of God. In Orthodox churches, the Divine Liturgy commences with the proclamation, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Not someday in the sweet by and by, or in some vague allegorical spiritualized

sense, but really and truly, here are now, we experience the presence of God's kingdom through the act of worship.

My own experience is separated by thousands of years and thousands of miles from those of the Roman administrator and the Kievan ambassador. And yet, it is not so very different. For the sake of time, let me give you the short version of the journey which finally led me nearly 15 years ago to walk through those doors. I grew up in Kansas City, and my formative years were during the late 60's and early 70's when our country was rocked by political and cultural turmoil. As a teenager, I marched in Washington with half a million other people in April of 1971 against the Vietnam War, and I was on hand just over two years later to watch President Nixon's helicopter take off from the White House after the Watergate scandal forced him to resign. However the one phenomenon of those years that effected me most profoundly was the so-called Jesus Movement, a grass-roots revival among young people which swept the nation. In Kansas City, our informal fellowship numbered nearly 500 people in their teens and early twenties. Guitars, long hair, intense study of the Bible, and passionate street evangelism were the hallmarks of the movement. The "elders" were maybe 5 or 10 years older than the rest of us. (Just as an aside, one of those young elders is now an Orthodox priest serving a parish in one of Kansas City's poorest neighborhoods). Why did I jump into this movement? To be honest, it made me feel good and it gave me an instantaneous set of friends. At the same time, we were distrustful of all institutional religion, except for small Pentecostal-type churches who opened their doors to us.

When I went off to college, I lived in a Christian commune with two dozen other like-minded people. There I encountered a slice of life far different from my childhood in a golden ghetto in suburban Kansas City. The people from this commune eventually merged with a home Bible-study fellowship led by an older professor and a small Pentecostal oriented church was formed which still exists today. My time there brought me two great blessings: first and foremost was meeting my future wife, Barb. Secondly, a senior-year research project led me to examine the outlandish historical claims of a fringe Protestant group nearby that was often described as a cult. In order to treat their fabricated notions about the NT and early Church, I had to start reading early Christian literature for myself, leading eventually to the other great love of my life.

Barb and I got engaged, and after graduation, I went off to Wheaton College in suburban Chicago to pursue graduate study in church history. Wheaton is sometimes half-jokingly

referred to as the evangelical Vatican, since it was the alma mater of Billy Graham. During my first year there I had the good fortune to live with a distinguished old professor who was one of world's leading evangelical scholars of the New Testament. It was at that time that I started reading the Desert Fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> centuries and I began to appreciate the richness of Orthodox spirituality. All in all, my time in Wheaton was marked by a three-fold division in my Christian life, even after Barb and I got married and she joined me there. On the one hand, I was taking classes at a deeply evangelical institution. Meanwhile, I was reading a variety of Orthodox writers from the past 2,000 years of the Church's history. And on Sundays, we (along with many of my fellow students) started attending a very high church Episcopal parish. "Bells and smells" as they say, largely I think for the sake of doing something radically different from the evangelical culture surrounding us. At about that time, the professor I had lived with, Dr. Merrill Tenney, said something that stayed with me through the years. He remarked that the liturgical churches were essentially the evangelical and charismatic churches of long ago. Of course, that set me wondering if there were deeper continuities with the past than simply outward forms of worship.

The next fifteen years can be summed up pretty quickly. We moved first to Ann Arbor and then to suburban Philadelphia. All the while we looked for churches that glorified Christ and that expressed God's love through a vibrant community life. This led us to some surprising places. In Ann Arbor we drifted from an Episcopal church to a Church of Christ campus fellowship to a Presbyterian Church. We even had a phase with the Catholic Word of God Community before settling into a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church that was involved in the charismatic movement. We eventually came to Philadelphia for my job at Villanova, a Catholic university where I've been teaching now for 22 years. When we first arrived, I called a local Lutheran pastor for church advice and he quite candidly told me that most people when they moved to the Main Line became Episcopalians. Hesitant to move in that direction again, we spent time at an evangelical mega-church before we settled in for several years at a tiny charismatic Mennonite church. Becoming dissatisfied with the mercurial fads of the charismatic movement, we finally became established in a huge, evangelically oriented Episcopal church.

All the while, I kept reading the church fathers and developed a growing fascination with Orthodoxy. On the very infrequent occasions when I actually dipped into worship in an Orthodox church, my initial reaction was that it seemed too exotic and too far removed from my experience. While my mind and heart were drawn toward Orthodoxy, my upbringing and

cultural sensibilities prevented me from going any further. Orthodoxy remained in the back of my mind like a half-remembered dream that seemed unobtainable in real life. Of course now, on reflection, I realize that this idealized dream Orthodoxy bore very little resemblance to the real thing.

At this juncture, it might be fair to ask, “OK, so just what is Orthodoxy?” Perhaps one way to approach this question, (and I might add, a very Orthodox way) is to state what it is not. For one thing, it is not simply Roman Catholicism without the Pope. While there is much that is good and true about Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Catholicism have grown apart for over 1200 years. The entire inner ethos and outlook of Orthodoxy is different from Roman Catholicism, which like Protestantism, bears the marks of the Middle Ages, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the intellectual baggage of the Modern and Post-Modern West.

Nor is it Protestantism with some nice liturgical elements and a new-found sense of tradition. Like many American Protestants in the last several decades, I once thought that all a believing Christian needed to do in order to find a more rooted spiritual experience was adopt spiritual practices and forms of worship which were handed down from the church’s past. The Nicene Creed, the use of incense in worship, or the practice of fasting or even praying with icons are all wonderful elements which are being embraced by a variety of Protestants who crave a richer spiritual life. However, what I found was that this kind of smorgasbord approach to spirituality left me as the ultimate and final authority for my own Christian life. What I needed was something far bigger than my own limited perspective.

I had grown up in a binary Christian world, an either/or universe where one was either Catholic or Protestant. It had never occurred to me that there might be an entirely different alternative which was rooted in the ancient past, which maintained an unbroken continuity with the early Church, and yet, which also spoke to the spiritual yearnings of this very modern, western man. In my quest for a vibrant Christianity that was organically connected to the faith and experience of the early Church, I had painted myself into a hyphenated corner. At one point, I described myself as an evangelical, Bible-believing, non-Fundamentalist, Charismatic, liturgically-minded, community-oriented, conservative-leaning Episcopalian. It never occurred to me that I could shed all of these convoluted labels (which ultimately did less to describe me than mark me off from other Christians) and simply become Orthodox.

As with most people, it wasn't some abstract argument or some cleverly-formulated theological statement that led me into Orthodoxy. It was through real people – friends and acquaintances – who showed me the possibility of a whole new way of experiencing life in Christ. First, was a friend from college, whom I met through our Christian student fellowship at school. He was an articulate, intellectual Christian, who later went on to med school and a successful career as a doctor. While I was at Wheaton College, I sent him a Care Package of theology books, most of which were by well-known Orthodox writers. I thought they might stimulate his thinking and broaden his Christian horizons. As a med student, it took him awhile to find time to dig into the box, but when he did, he later described it as a time-bomb that went off in his life. Imagine my shock when he announced that he and his family had joined a local Orthodox Church. My first thought was that this was taking things a bit too far. I expected the books to influence his thinking, not his actual life! It suddenly began to dawn on me that Orthodoxy could be more than an intellectual hobby for a western Christian.

The second milestone that shook my complacency was the experience of a friend who, with his family, had been going to the same Episcopal church along with my family. He had long appreciated the beauty of the Book of Common Prayer and used it in his daily devotions as he commuted to his job at a Center City hospital. His birthday was approaching, and his wife asked me if I had any book recommendations. I helped her secure a copy of “The Path of Prayer” by St. Theophan the Recluse and the Orthodox Prayer Book published by Holy Transfiguration Monastery. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that he fell head over heels in love with Orthodox spirituality. Next thing I knew, he and his family had actually left our church and joined St. Philip's. Once again, a friend who just wouldn't keep things in proportion and seemed to take matters to (what seemed to me to be) an extreme conclusion.

At about the same time, I ran into an article in the Inquirer describing the Orthodox celebration of Pascha. The article featured St. Philip's and quoted a guy who worked at a college virtually next door to Villanova. What struck me about the article was the normalcy of Christian life here. You see, in my mind, I had made up that while Orthodoxy might be true, beautiful, and rich in its spiritual heritage, it could never work for me because it was inherently foreign. In other words, it was too exotic and asphyxiatingly ethnic for an American Christian. However, I took the risk, called my work-neighbor out of the blue, and he said, “Come and see.” And if I could paraphrase, “I came, I saw, and I was conquered.” That was almost fifteen years ago. In

the end, it was a combination of actually experiencing Orthodox worship, and encountering a friendly community of people here, that finally impelled us to embrace Orthodox Christianity.

One thing that I found especially appealing was the palpable sense that within Orthodoxy there was a real living connection with the early Christian past. To put it another way, the church fathers are our teachers. For the Orthodox, this is an unremarkable statement. But for me, this was an astonishingly surprising, and genuinely attractive aspect of Orthodoxy. My previous experience was governed by what was new, avant-garde, and trendy in Christian teaching and spirituality. However, I slowly began to realize how much a prisoner I had become of my own culture and of popular trends in Christianity. You see, unless you have some touchstone outside of yourself and your own experience you simply can't escape from this cultural prison all around us. Why? Because you don't even notice it. This is why a fish is the very last one you would want to ask for help in defining the nature of water. The fish knows nothing else. Perhaps my growing unease had something to do with my training as a historian and an awareness of how difficult it is to perceive the peculiarities of one's own culture. It began to dawn on me that constantly searching for the next new thing in Christianity cut me off from any sense of rootedness and permanence. It was a bit like sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office and picking up a copy of *People Magazine* that was several years old. You look at these faces and wonder, "Who are these people and why were we so fascinated by them?" Which always leads to the next question, "I wonder what has ever become of them?" When I stopped and looked at the fleeting fashions of modern spirituality, it gave me the same feeling and left me yearning for more.

Imagine my shock when I encountered Christians who looked to the teachers of the Church's earliest centuries as the best exponents of Christian life and belief. They really meant it when they said of the early Church's Fathers and Mothers, "These are our teachers." They were eager to do more than simply pick stray patristic flowers from the garden of early Christian literature that looked appealing or that confirmed their own previously-held opinions. Let me put it another way. In every other Christian context that I've experienced, the attitude towards the early Church and its teachings was akin to picking up a newspaper, reading the editorial page, and determining who were the good and bad editorial writers. Funny how most of the time, the best writers just happen to be the ones who agree with our own preconceived notions and who articulate particularly well our own long-cherished opinions. It's all too easy to do the

same thing with the Christian past, projecting upon an idealized early Church our own limited perspective.

Now, in all fairness, one could ask, "Aren't you just exchanging a Christian version of a recent People Magazine for one that is just as dated and culture-bound, albeit from the fourth or fifth centuries? Or in the immortal words of the Cowardly Lion, "Wadda dey got dat I ain't got?"

In a word, tradition. Of course, when we use a word like tradition, this immediately calls to mind a number of things, not all of which are appealing.

Free Association:

authoritarianism, oppression, hierarchy, out-of-date, defense of privilege, narrow-minded, dogmatic, Pharisaic, dead, lifeless, fossilized

More benign associations for church-goers:

stained-glass, icons, organs, candles, choirs, vestments, stone-built ivy-covered country churches, lovely liturgical language -- an ecclesiastical aesthetic?

As Americans, we dislike the very notion of tradition because of our deep-seated cultural ideal of the rugged individual: the loner, the self-sufficient person, the trail-blazing pioneer, who fashions his or her world with their own two hands -- without reference to anyone else or any community. The John Wayne type. Why is it that there are more new denominations in the US than anywhere else? It's because of this inbred tendency to say, "Hey, I don't like what you're doing here, so I'm just going to go down the street and found a new church."

That is, if you're a Protestant. If you're a Catholic, you don't vote with your feet, but with your heart, mind, and wallet. In other words, you may be sitting in a Catholic church, but for all practical purposes you're a functional Protestant, i.e., you are your own final authority for belief and practice.

In fact, most of our notions of what constitutes tradition are miles away from the understanding of tradition within the Church. OK then, what is Tradition? Tradition is the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit within the community of the faithful, and the Spirit's continual witness, through the Church, of Christ's saving work. You might say that Tradition is the history of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's ministry of bringing the Church into communion with Christ. In the Holy Scriptures, Tradition is both a precious inheritance, a priceless family heirloom that gives Christians their identity as the family of God, and it is also the dynamic act of receiving it from earlier generations and passing it on to those who come after.

It is both a noun and a verb: receive, keep/guard/hold firmly, entrust/hand over/deliver.

Think of tradition as a relay-race. A relay-race is defined by the baton that is passed, the act of passing it to a team member, and the very idea of running as a team to achieve victory. By its very nature, Tradition provides us with a touchstone outside of ourselves and draws us into communion with the living faith of the saints.

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered ("traditioned") as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures.

1 Cor. 15:1-4

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered ("traditioned") to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread...

1 Cor. 11:23

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all entrusted ("traditioned") to the saints. Jude 3

Since Tradition is the on-going presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. I'm delighted to say that Tradition is much bigger than Christopher Haas's own ideas about what best constitutes Christian belief and practice. Tradition is the witness to the risen Christ of the entire community of faith, through the ages, and across all cultural and national boundaries. I'm not talking about particular local customs and practices that simply get passed down because "we've always done it that way." In the middle of the third century, St. Cyprian of Carthage said that erroneous customs should be corrected: "Custom without truth is but the antiquity of error." Here, he is referring to local customs. The whole Church, however, cannot be in error, since the Holy Spirit remains and dwells in the Church, and Christ promised that the Holy Spirit would "guide you [the Church] into all truth," As Orthodox, we believe that truth and infallibility rests with the Church's tradition as a whole, not with any one part of it and not with any one person. In the words of the fifth century writer, St. Vincent of Lérins, "The universal (or catholic) faith is that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all."

One thing that I discovered about this Orthodox understanding of Tradition is that, by its very nature, Tradition should free us from presumptive arrogance, from believing that we and our group are on the cutting edge of God's revelation in the world today. If you embrace the notion of Tradition, it is impossible for you to become an arrogant, self-assured, dogmatic reactionary. Instead, you recognize the propensity that we all have, given the human condition, to deceive ourselves -- to measure truth by what serves our own interests. If you value tradition, you don't believe that you and yours are the only ones to truly understand the meaning of the Scriptures since the time of the Apostles. Remember: as the Apostle Paul says, we see in a mirror darkly. That kind of blunt self-assessment is not limiting: but paradoxically, it is actually liberating. We possess the Church's tradition, not because we're smarter than anyone else or more spiritually attuned, but because we believe that God has freely given us this gift out of His great love for humanity. One anonymous 2<sup>nd</sup> century writer put it this way, in the so-called Letter to Diognetus:

For, as I said, this was no mere earthly invention which was delivered to them, nor is it a mere human system of opinion, which they judge it right to preserve so carefully, nor has a dispensation of mere human mysteries been committed to them, but truly God Himself, who is almighty, the Creator of all things, and invisible, has sent from heaven, and placed among men, [Christ who is] the truth, and the holy and incomprehensible Word, and has firmly established Him in their hearts.

This is a living tradition that, as Orthodox, informs and shapes our encounter with our world. And it is a lived tradition, that is, it embraces the rhythms of the Church year, with its fasts and feasts, and all of our spiritual practices, from participating in the Divine Liturgy to feeding the poor. This can seem a bit intimidating at first. But a very wise priest more than once has reminded me, "In Orthodoxy, we learn by doing." So I'll conclude by offering two invitations: "Come and see" and then, "Come and do."