

## My Journey to Orthodoxy by Andrew Moreno

It all began with a prayer rope and the Jesus Prayer. That's what I tell people when they ask how I came to Holy Orthodoxy. That's the simple answer but the full story is quite inspiring and amazing. It's a story I hope helps you in your own spiritual journey and that I am very humbled and honored to share with you my parish family.

My Christian journey began when I was nineteen. I had been out of high school for a year and was still figuring out what I wanted to do with my life. Didn't have any money for college and didn't know what I even wanted to major in, so I was just working selling shoes at Kohls. My folks had just divorced and it felt everything was falling apart. All my childhood I had been taught Christian values and scripture from my mom who had been raised Christian and grew up in Church. Mom and I would say little prayers together and encouraged me to pray before bed. She had planted the seeds of faith in my heart which I thank God for and told her several times I am so grateful for. Little did I know at the time by my mom's prayers and God's grace they would sprout and bear fruit. We were never a part of a Church when I was growing up, my dad was agnostic-atheist and didn't have a good view of Christianity and religion all together. The only time I had been in a Church was for my parents wedding back in Pennsylvania.

It was on a Sunday morning in early spring of 2016 I heard God's voice calling to me. It was a beautiful morning, the birds were singing and the sun was shining brightly while the air seemed to be filled with the fragrance of Divine Love. Mom had walked into my room and asked if I wanted to come to Church with her that morning. I said "Yes". The Church's name was Mountain View, a small non-denominational protestant church. I was taken in by the beautiful hymns, the sermon and the words of the scriptures. That Sunday had been communion Sunday and they invited all to come to receive the wine and bread. I had known of the meaning of the Eucharist as Christ's commandment to remember His saving sacrifice on the Cross. A commandment given to His apostles at the Last Supper before His Passion, but never had I received communion before until then. It was in the breaking of the bread and partaking of the wine that I came to believe, know and confess Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Once I had eaten the bread I heard God's voice saying this "This has taken away your sin and your iniquity has been atoned for", the very words from Isaiah I had just read in the old family Bible. That moment I felt so bright like a star was being born in my heart and that pure goodness was going through me. After that I asked Mom if we could come back next week and we did. I told her the revelation I had and she was thrilled and praised God. In just a few weeks we both were baptized together. I will never forget the feeling of when I went into the water and felt all my sins just wash away and felt like a new person. After I was all dried off and put on my newly baptized clothes, I said to my mom "My soul belongs to God now Mom! I am saved. We're saved"! I experienced a lot of grace and everything -people, plants, animals, the sky, the stars and all of creation - called me to praise God my Heavenly Father, who sent His Son to save us. By God's grace I began to pray better, understand the Bible better and could connect to God in worship better.

Later that year I enlisted in the Navy where I felt God was calling me to go. I continued to grow and mature in my faith and experience more of God's grace. Through the challenges of basic training and navy life in the fleet, which tested me again and again amidst it all, I kept faith and trust in God and wanted to know Him more. I was being tried by fire and forged by the salty ocean waves. In my uniform pocket I carried it with me everywhere. A cross was always worn around my neck upon my chest. I was very involved with the religious life of the ship on which I was stationed,, taking care of the chapel and leading Bible studies and prayer services for the Chaplain when he was on leave or busy with other command duties.

It was in the Navy I discovered the Holy Orthodox Church. One of my mentors, Lt. Chaplain Dawson of the San Diego Base Chapel, introduced me to Orthodox Christian spirituality and the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers. While talking with him one day about handling my depression and stress better, God had placed in my heart, in the midst of the constant hustle and bustle of being a sailor, a desire to find a way to have more heartfelt prayer. He recommended for my depression and prayer life that I say the Jesus prayer everyday. He started me off with a prayer rule where for three days, I was only allowed to say the prayer three times. Then after the fourth day I was to add one more each day until I reached thirty three, the years of Christ's time on earth. Once I had finished this prayer rule I could say it as much as I wanted. As I was traveling upon this pilgrimage I began to read the sayings of the desert fathers and mothers. My mentor had given me a copy of "The Way of a Pilgrim", the famous Orthodox novel of a Russian peasant journeying through 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia trying to find a way to fulfill St. Paul's instructions to the Thessalonians, to "Pray without ceasing". As I said the prayer and read the book I felt I was on the journey with him. I had also begun to learn more about the Orthodox Church as the pilgrim was an Orthodox Christian.

Before this time, I had learned about Holy Orthodoxy through school, my personal reading and from film. I had never thought to learn about the traditions and teachings of the Orthodox Church for myself until then. My chaplain recommended I visit an Orthodox Church. So one Sunday I decided to visit St.Spyridon's Greek Orthodox Church in San Diego, not far from the 32<sup>nd</sup> Street Naval Base. It was the Sunday of Thomas of 2018 when I first visited. Once I entered the doors I was completely in awe and wonder. I stopped and beheld all the beauty as I felt like I had finally come home. The smell of the incense filled my nose and moved my mind upward toward Heaven. Strengthening my prayers was the holiness of the sanctuary and the flickering of beeswax candles, the melodies of the hymns treated my ears to a sweet sound I had longed to hear in worship, the bright colors and gold leaf of the icons brought me into a sacred place where Heaven and Earth overlapped. The Divine Liturgy was such a joy to experience and wasn't like other Church services I had attended. I asked God if this was the place I should be a part of. So I prayed about it and visited the Church again on Ascension Day for the Liturgy. I felt such a connection to Holy Orthodoxy and felt I could grow so much in my relationship with Christ here. That following June I went on leave to my home in Pennsylvania. There I made the decision, after weeks of praying and asking God for His guidance, to become an Orthodox Christian. I wanted to be a part of the faith of the apostles, the holy fathers and the saints. The Orthodox Church showed me the most

purest form of Christianity I had never experienced in the Protestant or Roman Catholic Churches. So when I got back from leave I entered the doors of the Church for the third time and told Fr. Andrew, the parish priest and the one who would baptize and chrismate me, "I would like to be trained as a catechumen". He was thrilled and for nine months I studied and learned all the dogmas, teachings, and traditions of the Church. I read the lives of the saints, Orthodox Bible commentary, and even read the liturgical texts for all the services and every other book I could get my hands on. My godparents, who were the first people I met at St. Spryidon's, helped me along the way to grow in my faith and felt that it was being built on a strong foundation. It was a another pilgrimage in itself to learn, pray and live the Orthodox Christian way. I couldn't get enough of the Church services and I heard the melody of the Divine Liturgy always echoing inside my head. I finally felt I found what I had been looking for. During this time, I received my first prayer rope that would be my strongest weapon on this journey.

On April 10<sup>th</sup> 2019 I was brought into the Orthodox faith, coincidentally on my and my mom's baptismal anniversary, a divine appointment I thought. My mom came to San Diego for the service and it was such a happy day. Once the holy chrism anointed me I felt the fire of the Holy Spirit seal me and felt such grace and love from God. I have been Orthodox for over six years now and I am continually growing in my faith. Since then I have learned to write icons, chant, be a reader and make prosphoron bread. I have also felt the call to serve our Holy Church in the priesthood and have begun my religious studies degree program at Holy Cross School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts. I hope my story has encouraged you to grow more in your faith and walk with God. When people ask now why I am an Orthodox Christian, I give them the first answer along with the words from the service for the Sunday of Orthodoxy when we process around the Church with the holy icons: "This is the faith of the apostles. This is the faith of the fathers. This is the faith of the Orthodox. This is the faith on which the world is established." Thank you all for reading my story and may the grace of God be with you always.