

## **My Journey to Orthodoxy**

*By Noah Nektarios Corraliza*

Why do we believe what we believe? This is the most important question we should ask ourselves, whether we're Orthodox or non-Orthodox. I asked myself this question at the age of 18 when I pondered many ideas concerning life. Up to when I discovered Orthodoxy, my life, my soul, my mind, and body had suffered much, and I wanted to know if there was something more to life than what I'd known. Could something (or someone) fill this void in my heart since I didn't believe in God.

I didn't really know if I believed there was a God. I never really thought about it. Maybe I disregarded the existence of God seeing it as some sort of conspiracy theory or as an excuse for people to have hope and not fear death, or maybe believing in God was a way to explain the tough questions posed in life. As I reflect back a little, I think the reason I didn't believe in God, or didn't want to believe in Him, was because I loved the world so much. Believing in God would mean that I wouldn't be able to do the things I wanted. I wouldn't be able to really "live life" the way I wanted. Little did I know that a person can't love the world and God, "*Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God continues to live forever*" (I Jn. 2:15-17). What I regarded as life was not true life, but my way of life.

I would tell myself that I was at peace, but I really wasn't. When I think about it, living life the way I wanted didn't even bring me comfort or love, and it certainly didn't provide me a way out of my sins, not that I was looking for that. I would tell myself "I'm a good person," but I deep down don't think I believed it. The life I was living brought me pleasure, but also suffering, and little peace. I knew only one way to live, an endless cycle of which I saw no way out. Then one day, I was in an automobile accident and ended up in the hospital. Thankfully I didn't suffer any serious injuries, but as I was laying in the hospital bed I thought about my life and I thought, "what am I going to do with my life." I thought I was living the American dream with a new car and a new job. I was young, ambitious and had a girlfriend and plans for my life. But this accident shook me, and I thought to myself; "What's the point of all this? I could have died and yet I didn't. Why am I here? And if I get the answer, what will I do about it?"

I was a young man with many questions, which is good, if I could only be guided by wisdom and truth. This sent me on a quest, and I began to search the world's major religions and some less popular ones when I got out of the hospital. Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, New Age, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. After studying some of the doctrines and beliefs of these religions regarding their faith, philosophy, and theology I settled in my mind that Christianity made the most sense to me. At the time, I didn't know much about Roman Catholicism and Protestantism and their differences, and I didn't even know the Orthodox Church existed. Eventually, I ended up in a non-denominational church where I began to learn more about the Christian faith.

When I was a sophomore in High School, I was "baptized" in this non-denominational church. Because I was so young, and not able to give adequate responses to questions posed by my peers,

I soon fell away. But I came back and got re-baptized because I didn't feel like my previous one was authentic. Fast forward, I began investing a lot of time in order to learn as much as I could about my new-found Christian faith and read my bible like there was no tomorrow. I read the entire New Testament and most of the Old Testament and focused especially on areas of apologetics, theology, and philosophy. During this time, I became a zealous street preacher, either on my own or with a group, traveling around Arizona and California, believing I was preaching the gospel. I became a youth teacher at my church and did this for about 2-3 years until I thought there was not much more to learn about Christianity except for Church history.

I began studying the writings of John Calvin, one of the founding fathers of Protestantism, and it all made sense to me at the time. That is, until I discovered the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. A friend of mine (a street preacher as well) had introduced me to them and let me borrow one of his books that contained their letters. I marveled at what they wrote. I was "blown away" by the writings of St. Ignatius, St. Polycarp, the Shepherd of Hermes, the Didache and the epistles of Barnabas and St. Clement of Alexandria. Their writings concerning the Christian faith was night and day compared to what I had learned in the Protestant church. As I read their works, I felt that I'd been spiritually deprived, but realized that I was being given by the Protestant faith what they had to give. I had heard about Orthodoxy from some friends, but they weren't very knowledgeable about it. They simply said the Orthodox pray to saints, have priests, bishops, liturgies, etc., so I ignored it seeing it basically as a form of Roman Catholicism. I knew very little about church history and consequently slandered Orthodoxy when I came across Orthodox Christians while I was street preaching. However, as God has His ways, I continued to read the bible and reflecting on what I read from the Apostolic Fathers. I began to feel conflicted about what I believed, or at least, what the Protestant views were of Christianity. So I asked myself those two important questions; "What do I believe and why do I believe it?"

I started digging some more and began reading about Martin Luther and other early Reformers. One thing I discovered is that Protestants didn't have all the books of the Bible because Martin Luther removed 10 of them (The Deuterocanonical books). When I learned this and learned about the biblical canon formation (the process of deciding what books are to be included in the bible), I became conflicted and began to doubt my faith again because I didn't know what was true anymore. After all, how can one man decide what books are to be included in the Bible? I pushed on and found some explanations in the Roman Catholic church that made sense to me and became attracted to Roman Catholicism because of their reverence in the Mass and their traditions.

I continued to research Roman Catholicism, attempting to verify their claims, looking even further into church history. I once again came across Orthodoxy, but this time began to look closely at it. While I was doing all this research, I was still Protestant and reading a book by R.C. Sproul about holiness. At this point I was trying to find a reason to remain a Protestant. I was also wanting to know how one becomes holy and what that even looked like. I found it nowhere in Protestantism. Then I ended up coming across a movie called "Man of God" on Amazon Prime video, the life of St. Nektarios of Aegina. I wept during this movie because I realized how unholy I was as I learned about this Saint's humility. I felt I was nowhere near living a Christian life. This eventually led me to read more about his life, which led me to pay a visit to St. Katherine's Greek Orthodox Church in 2022, where I attended my first Divine Liturgy. It was the

most grace-filled and reverent experience I'd ever had! I felt I was in a completely different world. That same day I met my future god-father Dimitri Ntatsos, brother-in-law of Fr. Timothy, who is now my spiritual father. I am blessed to have both these men in my life. By the mercy and grace of God I was baptized on Holy Saturday of 2023, and took the name Nektarios. I am further blessed to serve in the holy Altar alongside my spiritual father and brothers in Christ.

Why do I believe what I believe? Because Orthodox Christianity shows me the faith of the Apostles and the early Church, unchanged, unadulterated. It is the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church established by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. True man and True God, who became incarnate inside the womb of a virgin, the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary. He lived life perfectly and without sin. He loves all mankind whom He created in His own image. Out of His love for us, He conquered death by His death. He descended into Hades setting free all the righteous men and women of old, placing them back into Paradise.

Made in His image we are all provided with an exodus from sin and death if we truly desire to be free from the slavery of the passions and live a holy life dedicated to our Lord. He has left us with the holy and life-giving mysteries to heal and renew us. The Orthodox faith was deposited first to the Apostles, who have passed it on to those after them, and through every generation up to this point and time in history, to us. And we are to pass it on to the next generation, and they to the next, and so on until the coming of our Lord.

Truly, the Church is the hospital for souls and Orthodox Christianity is indeed a way of life, a narrow and difficult path, yet possible for all to walk through Him who strengthens us. God loves those who desire Him and seek after Him. He provides the necessary grace so we may fight the good fight and acquire communion with Him for all of eternity. He gives us all that He is, that we may attain likeness to Him and find our final resting place among the Saints where there is no pain, sorrow, or suffering. Glory be to Christ our God, His eternal Father, and his life-giving Spirit. Amen!