

One Family, One Church

by Fr. Don Hock

As I sat at the restaurant table waiting for my luncheon appointment to appear, my mind was preoccupied with potential questions I needed to ask my guest.

“How long have you been coming to the church? What do you know about Orthodoxy?” And, perhaps most bluntly, “Why, after having been faithfully involved for many years, have you not converted to the Orthodox Faith?”

That last question intrigued me the most, for as the newly assigned priest in this parish, I had been told that the man I was about to meet—the non-Orthodox husband of a parishioner—had been “hanging around” the parish for quite some time.

Upon his arrival we exchanged greetings. Anxious to hear his responses, I soon began asking him about his life and his relationship to God and the Church. When at last I came to the question I had most wanted to ask—why he had never become Orthodox despite all those years of faithful attendance—the husband looked me in the eye and responded with a straightforward answer I will not soon forget.

“I was never asked.”

Incredulous, I struggled under the implications of that response. How could it be that despite years of involvement and participation in the life of the church, no one had thought to invite this sincere man to become a member? Why were people content to leave him standing on the outside spiritually, separated from the Eucharist and from the treasures of fellowship with the Church?

I fear this type of situation has occurred all too often in Orthodox parishes. Whatever the causes (and I do not believe that they can always be easily identified or blame assigned), I am grateful to say that the times are beginning to change for Orthodoxy in North America. I believe we are beginning to witness a quiet but powerful movement of the Holy Spirit—a movement toward evangelism and outreach, a desire to share the hidden treasure of Orthodoxy with those around us. A wonderful by-product of this awakening is that many non-Orthodox spouses of Orthodox believers are now experiencing life-changing conversions to the Orthodox Faith.

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR CONVERSION

In my present parish—Saint Mary Orthodox Church in Omaha, Nebraska—several non-Orthodox spouses have recently converted to Orthodoxy. Many of these spouses had been involved in the parish for many years prior to coming to the Faith. When asked what it was that brought them to their decision to become Orthodox, the most common answer they gave was, “I was not ready before, but now I am.”

What are some of the factors that make a non-Orthodox spouse “ready” to convert? Are there certain key elements in the life of the parish that can help to create an environment for a spouse to consider conversion?

I have discovered from experience that there are indeed numerous elements that contribute to the non-Orthodox spouse's desire to become a part of the Church. Although I don't have space to list all of them, allow me to mention a few ingredients I have found to be essential.

1) The work of the Holy Spirit

First and foremost, it must be said that any true desire to join the Church is the result of the Holy Spirit of God moving in the heart of an individual. The Scriptures and the Holy Fathers of the Church teach us that it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to draw men and women to Jesus Christ and to the fullness of His Holy Church. I have witnessed this Spirit-led attraction producing a deep spiritual hunger—not only for the Orthodox Faith specifically, but more importantly, for God and for loving Him above all things. As our Lord Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

This spiritual hunger for righteousness and the fullness of the Kingdom of God propels many non-Orthodox spouses into the Church. This is the point at which they are the most receptive to the gospel. They are waiting to be evangelized! Ministries in the parish such as inquirers' classes, outreach teams, men's and women's ministries, or simply the sensitivity of the priest and/or members of the parish in spending personal time with the husband or wife—all these can be crucial in drawing the person into the Church.

It has been my experience that as these seekers embrace the rich and abiding truths of Orthodoxy, they often experience a true "conversion of the heart" which manifests itself in a strong commitment to Christ and an insatiable desire to experience the depths of His Kingdom in the Holy Orthodox Church. Even though these husbands or wives may have been present for many years in the worshiping community, it is only when the Holy Spirit touches them that they are truly "ready."

2) Inner renewal.

Simultaneously with the working of the Holy Spirit in the convert's heart, there often occurs a transformation in the life of the Orthodox spouse, or another member of the family. The presence of God in everyday life becomes more real; the sacraments take on a more meaningful and devotional aspect; prayer, spiritual discipline, and the development of the virtues are more evident and consistent. All these elements combine to bring about a very real conversion, not only in the life of the convert, but also in the life of the Orthodox spouse. This in turn inspires the non-Orthodox partner to draw closer to the Church as he or she observes the transformation in the other.

This has happened in our parish on numerous occasions, and it has been an indescribable joy to see it occur as individuals, marriages, and families have been strengthened and brought to greater spiritual depths as a result of God working in their lives. Households are affected in a profound way as the grace of God is brought into the family through both parents. The household itself then becomes a church, as Saint John Chrysostom tells us. The devil is driven off and the grace of the Holy Spirit rests there instead, surrounding the inhabitants with peace and harmony. I have found it to be true that when father and mother are both committed to the Orthodox Faith and seek to create this environment in the home where the Faith is taught and lived out, then the

children will grow in the grace of God and be more likely to remain in the Church their entire lives.

3) An atmosphere of welcome.

Other factors that contribute to the non-Orthodox spouse's desire to become a part of the Church revolve around numerous dynamics in the parish community that attract the seeker to the Church.

If the services, Liturgies, and instruction classes are communicated in a language the seeker can understand, an atmosphere is created that encourages the person to hear and understand. Also, if the precious gems of the Truth of the Gospel are presented in an understandable fashion relevant to the seeker's daily life, that person may feel more comfortable in proceeding with his or her spiritual journey in that context.

In addition, if the parish community reaches out in Christian love, acceptance, and hospitality to the non-Orthodox spouse and gives the person the opportunity to be involved, he or she will sense a feeling of belonging and thrive in this environment of warmth and acceptance. There will exist no pressure to convert prematurely; the spouse (or the priest) will sense the time when the person is ready.

If there exists in the parish an understanding of the non-Orthodox spouse's religious background and acceptance of ethnic and/or social diversities, the seeker will feel at ease in opening his or her heart to God and the parish community.

Finally, if the priest and the parishioners possess a vision to see the parish grow and they pursue the non-Orthodox spouse (and are equipped to do so), the seeker will observe visitors and other new members continually coming into the Church, and may be enkindled with yet a greater desire to become a member of the parish community.

REACHING OUT

Yes, there is a quiet yet powerful movement of the Holy Spirit occurring in many Orthodox churches across North America. In the process of this awakening, non-Orthodox spouses from diverse backgrounds are now experiencing the joy of "coming home" to the fullness and depth of the Holy Orthodox Faith.

As a pastor who is committed both to the Church and to the Great Commission of our Lord to go and make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:19), I believe that we as faithful and longstanding Orthodox clergy and laity need to recognize this movement of God. We must sensitize ourselves to the special needs of these non-Orthodox spouses in our own midst who are seeking the Kingdom of God. As individual members of the parish, it is our responsibility to provide the type of environment which draws them in, loves and accepts them, and at the proper time invites them to partake of the depths of the Kingdom by becoming Orthodox Christians.

We should be tenderhearted toward them and their families, realizing that the Holy Spirit is accomplishing His purposes in their hearts. It is our duty to glorify God together with them and encourage them to "run the race" faithfully. On the community level, the services, Liturgies, and instruction classes should be understandable to them, and the Truth presented on Sunday should be relevant to them (and to all) on Monday and all other days of their lives.

We should lovingly extend Christian hospitality and warmth to them, seeking to understand their spiritual journey and special uniqueness in the eyes of God. Being involved in the parish (in whatever capacity they can be) may be important to them, so we must be willing to open up our doors to let them have a place in the parish with us.

All in all, the vision to expand the Kingdom of God, leading others to Christ and especially starting with those who are closest to us, should be of utmost priority in these days. Let us all make that blessed commitment to the glory of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

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