

My Journey to Orthodoxy

As we begin I ask your prayers that God will have mercy on me a sinner, in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Tonight I will be reflecting on why I converted from Protestant "Bible-Only" Christianity to historic, Orthodox Christianity. By this I mean the one holy catholic and apostolic Church -of which the Church of Armenia is an integral part. I'm not a theologian but, by the grace of God, I have come to know what we believe and why we believe it. Since coming to the knowledge of the great truth of our Orthodox Faith, it has always been one of my strong desires to share it with others who are willing to listen. As Jesus said, "No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket. Rather he puts it on a stand so that all may be illumined by it" (St. Lk.11:33). So it is with great joy and humility that I stand before you tonight and reflect a little on "the light of the knowledge of God..." - the great treasure of our holy Orthodox Faith.

First a little background:

My Armenian grandmother, like many in our Church, had a very limited understanding of her Orthodox faith. Therefore as an adult she was accepted the Protestant faith of her in-laws and actually became a very strong believer. I was raised in this same "Bible-only" Christian faith. I was taught such things as:

1. The Bible Alone is our sole rule of faith (2 Tim 3:16) -so we rejected any notion of an authoritative Tradition passed on from the Apostles. We believed all tradition was condemned by our Lord as "traditions of men" (St. Mt. 15:6).
2. We believed "Salvation is by Faith Alone" (Rom 3:28) -so works play no part in our Salvation.
3. Since we did not believe in Sacraments, we did not baptize infants. We only baptized believers (based on the book of Acts) because baptism, for us, was just a public testimony of one's faith.
4. We did not believe in Baptismal Regeneration. Rather, one is *born again* by accepting Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior.
5. We believed the bread and wine of Communion were mere symbols of our Lord -and not truly His Body and Blood;
6. We believed that since the book of Hebrews states Jesus' Sacrifice was once for all, -to speak of any further Sacrifice was to imply our Lord's work on the Cross was insufficient and incomplete. Yet Catholics and Orthodox refer to the Mass or Divine Liturgy as a Sacrifice. The Armenian word "Badarak," for instance, means "sacrifice."
7. Also, I was taught we should pray only to God -honoring and praying to saints like Jesus' mother Mary for us was wrong and near to idolatry.

Well... then God threw me a "curve ball." He sent to me a beautiful Italian Catholic girl -with whom I fell madly in love. We soon married (and I'm happy to say I'm still madly in love with her). My wife and I were both believers and didn't think our religious differences would be important enough to cause any difficulties. But after a year of marriage, our first child Veronica came along, and our different beliefs began to

matter. Her family, being Catholic, believed that parents had a religious obligation before God to baptize their child as soon as reasonably possible. And with good reason... even in the Armenian Church, Baptism on the eighth day is our oldest and most authentic Tradition shared by all ancient Churches. Yet my family and I, as "Bible-only" Christians, didn't believe a baby had any reason to be baptized. At this point there was no possible compromise: we either were going to baptize her or we weren't.

As I studied this question of Infant Baptism, I came across some surprising discoveries through Catholic apologetical material. The word "apologetics" comes from the Greek the word "apologia" meaning "to give a defense" for something. It's meaning and Biblical mandate are given in a single Scriptural verse: St. Peter, in his *First Epistle*, instructs Christians to "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you" (3:15). In other words Orthodox Christians should know what we believe and why we believe it -first for our own sake and then in order to share it with others. This apologetical material introduced me to the faith of the early Church. The question was presented to me like this: "Who would understand the Bible better: we living 2000 years later in a totally different culture, using a totally different language -or- those who received the Holy Scriptures from the very hands of the Apostles... as well as their Apostolic instruction?"

At this point, while continuing my study of Scripture, I began to also study the writings of these men known as the Apostolic Fathers. Men like St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Clement of Rome, St. Barnabas, St. Justin the Martyr, St. Irenaeus (to name a few). Many of these men were chosen and ordained by the Apostles themselves to transmit the true faith. Most of them, like the Apostles, defended our Holy Faith with their lives through martyrdom.

Around this same time, one day while meandering through my college library, I came across two books which changed my life forever: *Introducing the Orthodox Church* by Fr. Anthony Coniaris, and *The Orthodox Way* by Bp. Kallistos Ware. After reading these two works I fell in love with the Orthodox Faith. This love only fueled the fire of my studies on the early Church. The results of these studies, for me, were staggering. I was amazed by the fact that so much of what I was taught to believe as a "Bible-believing" Christian was directly contradicted by the Faith of the early Church and their understanding of the Scriptures. It then dawned on me that the key to understanding the Holy Scriptures correctly was to understand them in accord with the early Church -and not just the early Church- but the same historic Church which has existed in every century to our day -as can be proved by historical documents.

Tonight I would like to go into what I found -and am still finding, but for lack of time, I can't. I promised Der Hayr to keep my talk to ten minutes and I'm keeping my promise. In lieu of this, I have printed a very basic refutation of the doctrines mentioned earlier in my talk -giving a few Scriptures and sayings of the early Church Fathers to show that our faith is the faith of the Bible and the faith of the early Church. As a subdeacon ordained to serve the faithful of the Armenian Church, I am committed to continue to share this Good News, following the example of the first deacon and martyr, St. Stephen, and the countless other "*ooghapar sargavakats*" (or orthodox deacons) throughout Church history. It's my conviction that if I am not willing to spread and defend this faith, -even with my life if necessary- I have no business wearing this orar.

I know many in our Church have loved ones who have left the faith b/c they didn't understand it. With God's help, I hope to do my part to help prevent others from doing the same. With this goal in mind, I have spent a good deal of the last ten years of my life researching and developing a website which presents and defends our holy Faith. So I guess the rest of my story is there. You're always welcome to visit it and explore what I found. If there is ever any way I can be of any help, please let me know. I am committed, as St. Jude said, to helping others be "built up on the foundation of their most holy faith" (1:20).

TO CONCLUDE:

Many of my family and friends mistakenly think that I became Orthodox because of my Armenian, Eastern Christian heritage. Actually the opposite is true. I first fell in love with the Orthodox Faith and then realized that my own Armenian ancestors were Orthodox, which provided me with an avenue of Orthodox expression in my life. So my coming to the Armenian Church was not an "ethnic thing," although I love my Armenian heritage. It was rather "a religious thing." I'm here because I believe.

During this holy season of Medz Bahk (the Great Fast) may God grant us all the grace to renew our commitment to learning the depths and wisdom of our holy Orthodox faith which is available to us in abundance through Orthodox Bibles, books, recorded talks and the internet. I am so very thankful for being allowed to see the light of the knowledge of this truth. Let us all offer a prayer of thanks to God for the gift of being Orthodox Christians. Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

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A brief Refutation of Bible-Only Christian Doctrines mentioned in my talk:

1. The Bible Alone is the Sole Rule of Faith (Sola Scriptura): This Protestant doctrine ignores what St. Paul teaches in Scripture: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle" (2 Thess. 2:15). The Apostles did not just pass on Holy Scripture but also their authoritative instructions. This is part of Holy Tradition deposited and maintained by the historic Church (1 Tim 6:20). As St. Epiphanius wrote in his Panacea (A.D. 374): "It is needful to make use of Tradition; for not everything can be gotten from Sacred Scripture. The holy Apostles handed down some things in the Scriptures, other things in Tradition" (61.6).

2. Salvation is by Faith Alone (Sola Fide). Martin Luther, to support his doctrine, arbitrarily inserted the word "alone" into his translation of Romans 3:28. This doctrine ignores what St. Paul wrote, "...work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12-13) and what St. James wrote, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone." (2:24). As St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote in Homilies on Ecclesiastes (390 A.D.), "For faith without works of justice is not sufficient for salvation; neither however is righteous living secure in itself of salvation, if it is disjoined from faith" (8).

3. That Baptism is for adult believers only: This ignores the fact that the book of Acts records several times the Baptism of whole households which likely included children (e.g. Acts 16:15, 32; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16). As St. Hippolytus wrote in The Apostolic Tradition (A.D. 215), "Baptize first the children; and if they can speak for themselves, let them do so. Otherwise, let their parents or other relatives speak for them" (21).

4. Baptismal Regeneration: "Jesus answered, Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (St. Jn. 3-3:5, cf. Titus 3:4-7). As St. Justin the Martyr wrote in his First Apology (A.D. 145), "They are led by us to a place where there is water; and there they are reborn in the same kind of rebirth in which we ourselves were reborn... they receive the washing with water. For Christ said, 'Unless you be reborn, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' The reason for doing this we have learned from the Apostles" (61).

Note: The phrase "accepting Jesus as one's personal Lord and Savior" is nowhere found in the Bible... nor was it used by the early or historic Church.

5. That Holy Communion is truly the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ: "Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink." (St. Jn. 6:53-54). As St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote in his Letter to the Smyrnaeans (A.D. 110), "Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God. They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do

not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, Flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His goodness, raised up again." (6-7).

6. The Re-Presentation of the Sacrifice of our Lord: When we offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Divine Liturgy we are not offering a different Sacrifice but participating in that "once for all Sacrifice" of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is referred to by St. Paul when he compares the sacrifice of pagans to the Holy Sacrifice which Christians offer on their Altar tables: "Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? But I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons." (1 Cor. 10:18-21). As St. Clement of Rome wrote in his Letter to the Corinthians (A.D. 96) "Our sin will not be small if we eject from the episcopate those who blamelessly and holily have offered its Sacrifices" (44:1). Also, St. Cyprian of Carthage, in his Letter to the People of Thibar, (A.D. 253) writes, "If Christ Jesus, our Lord and God, is Himself the High Priest of God the Father, and if He offered Himself as a sacrifice to the Father; and if He commanded that this be done in commemoration of Himself - then certainly the priest, who imitates that which Christ did, truly functions in place of Christ." (63,14).

7. Praying and invoking the Intercession of the Saints: The Book of Revelation gives a vision of heaven where we read, "...I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' And a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed" (6:9-11). Here we see martyrs in heaven aware of the Church on earth and interceding on behalf of it. (Also see the stories of the Rich Man and Lazarus (St. Lk. 16:19-31); the Transfiguration (St. Mt. 17:3); and the Apparition of the Old Testament Prophet, St. Jeremiah (Maccabees 15:12-14). As St. Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 350) states in his Catechetical Lectures, on the Divine Liturgy: "Then we make mention also of those who have already fallen asleep: first, the patriarchs, prophets, Apostles, and martyrs, that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petition; next, we make mention also of the holy fathers and bishops who have already fallen asleep, and, to put it simply, of all among us who have already fallen asleep; for we believe that it will be of very great benefit to the souls of those for whom the petition is carried up, while this holy and most solemn Sacrifice is laid out."

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