

JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY

The Kade (Patrick) & Devyn (Juliana) Schmalz and their children, Keeva (Katherine), Adelaide (Abigail), and Phineas.

*Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church, March 12th, 2022
Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos*

My wife and I were both raised in Idaho Falls and in the predominate religion of the area, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. We both loved our upbringing in the LDS church, I



The Kade & Devyn Schmalz Family, and Godparents: Erin & Gus Nicklos & family and Poppy Semons-Short

was always a little more liberal with my beliefs and my wife was a little more staunch. Up until our wedding neither of us thought we would ever leave the religion of our childhood, but that began to change after we were married. We were always taught that we were very much the same as every other Christian faith, but we just had the fullest truth so there was essentially no need to question things or look at what others truly believed. But, after questions arose sur-

rounded the experience we had with our LDS wedding (along with questions my older brother was also having at this time) we began to look at what other Christians truly believed. Well, this sent us on a journey which seemed to open whole new worlds for us. We began to realize that we were really quite ignorant of what other Christians believed, I was doing most of the research and then would discuss what I was finding with Devyn. I soon found that I just could not get enough of researching other Christian beliefs, it was so exciting learning about beliefs that I never knew about.

The research was also influenced by the fact I was nearing completion of a bachelor's degree in history and I would learn things such as the Puritan influence of colonial New England which would lead me to seek out more information on Reformed theology and it's roots in Europe in the 1500's. I was never enamored with Reformed theology, but the history was still fun to learn about. I learned more about Lutherans and their founding in the 1500's, the Anglicans founding in the 1500's, the Anabaptists from the 1500's, and the Methodist founding in the 1700's. I knew the fundamental knowledge of how these groups grew out of a reaction to the Catholic church and I always sympathized with them to some extent, but I was also put off by the fact that they all were founded so recently (I was not a fan of the thought that something needed to be restored to be correct, couldn't God keep a church from falling apart so badly?) so I began to look into the Catholic church and it's roots and when I followed the Christian family tree back I ran across the Great Schism of 1054 which reminded me that there was one branch of the Christian family I knew very little about and that was Eastern Orthodoxy.

Researching Eastern Orthodoxy opened a whole new world to me just like all the other western forms of Christianity had done for me before, and the new world I encountered is exactly why I'm Orthodox today. While I appreciate the roots of the Orthodox Church that run back to the apostles (much like the Catholic Church) it was theological differences that sealed the deal for me. With every one of the Protestant faiths that I explored there were relatively minor differences and one very common theme, that theme being one of legalism. God cannot allow man to live with Him because they have missed the juridical mark set before them and only once someone has paid the death penalty from missing this mark can they ever be forgiven for their sins. This viewpoint always seemed a bit strange, but there is seemingly some biblical validation for this especially if you are reading with this viewpoint already in mind. Though with Orthodoxy I was exposed to a reading of scripture that was just a touch different but that difference, which is still very biblical, allows a whole new worldview to unfold.

I began to read and hear things such like yes man has missed the mark (to sin means to miss the mark) but the mark was not an arbitrary law, the mark was what we were made to be, what humans are meant to be, the image and likeness of God. This little change in how I viewed sin was the end of searching for me. I finally found a faith which had an understanding of man and sin that could make Jesus and his sacrifice make sense to me. Instead of an angry God punishing Jesus for the sins of the world, I found a loving God that condescended to become man that while in the form of man He would share in death "that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" Hebrews 2:14. With Orthodoxy I had finally found the God of the Prodigal Son, nothing was asked of the Prodigal Son, no sacrifice, his missing this mark can they ever be forgiven for their sins. This viewpoint always seemed a bit strange, but there is seemingly some biblical validation for this especially if you are reading with this viewpoint already in mind. Though with Orthodoxy I was exposed to a reading of scripture that was just a touch different but that difference, which is still very biblical, allows a whole new worldview to unfold.

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into Orthodoxy. With many of the western faiths there is a nod to some sort of sanctification, but in the Orthodox Church there is a full expectation that God will restore in us His image and likeness. This process will not be completed in this life, but it very much begins in this life. This view of Theosis again plays into how the Orthodox view sin and salvation, which begins in this life. I remember a quote from an Orthodox priest that said those in the West always ask if you have been saved, where the Orthodox would say I am being saved, much like Saint Paul “to us who are being saved” 1 Corinthians 1:18. All these views answered so many questions I had regarding my faith and where I needed to go to find home, I needed God the way that he has always been known to those in Orthodoxy. After confirming that these beliefs were held by the Church all the way back to the first three centuries of Christianity (again thanks to research I did completing my History Degree) I decided I must find an Orthodox Church to attend for myself.

Having my mind made up intellectually still did not mean that I was ready to simply join the Orthodox Church, I needed to go to a Divine Liturgy for myself and see what it was all about. When my wife and I first attended a Liturgy, it was shortly before Christmas in 2019 and it was very strange to us since all we knew was the LDS faith and a few visits to a non-denominational church. We agreed to go a few more times to try to understand the whole process before making any decisions and it took a while to even understand the flow of the Liturgy and feel like we weren't lost the whole time. During this time, we went through the Catechism Class and were set to get Baptized but still did not feel ready (partly due to the fact that our young twins made attending church while being able to pay full attention nearly impossible) so we let Father Constantine know that we needed more time. This extra time paid off because it came during the Covid scare which is when livestreams began, and my wife and I would watch on Sunday from the comfort of our own home without worry of our kids making a scene. This gave us a chance to fall in love with the Liturgy as we began to grasp more and more of what was going on. During this time our family also grew with the birth of Phineas which pushed off our returning to church in person for a bit, but we finally decided to start attending in person again during October of 2021. This time around we knew the Liturgy better and we were able to enjoy it, so in March of 2022 we were finally Baptized and Chrismated.

Our journey to Orthodoxy was a slow winding one, but our love for the church and its community has just continued to grow and grow with each passing week. We had talks before joining about how it is an hour drive and that the cost of gas is so high that maybe we would plan on going twice a month, now we feel like we have missed so much if we do not make it every Sunday, and we lament the fact that there are not more weekday services to attend!

We have no great story for why this is the case, it is something that I cannot explain, and it was a slow transition, but we feel we have finally started to encounter God and we cannot get enough. I suppose the best way to put it is the way we all put it after receiving communion at the Divine Liturgy, “We have seen the True Light! We have received the Heavenly

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*The Painter Family: Gregory, Olenda (Scholastica), Adam and Tommy,
Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church
Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos*



THE PAINTERS

Adam, Olenda and Gregory



Tommy Painter

“The proverbs of Solomon. A wise son maketh a glad father” Proverbs 10:1

God has truly blessed us with the gift of a spiritually wise son, for he opened our eyes to the grace and truth that is the Holy Orthodox Church.

The number of different denominations of Christian churches we have attended searching for a true worship experience is quite long – Presbyterian, Nazarene, Friends, Calvary Chapel, Church of Christ, Congregational, Non Denominational, and perhaps a few I have forgotten. All of them had their good points and I don’t want to demean them, but all left us feeling that there should be a more genuine encounter

with the one true God. This feeling never left us, and so we never succeeded in finding a true spiritual home, despite attending churches consistently.

As we continued our search from church to church, our son Adam was attending a small Christian school that was affiliated with the Church of Christ, where Olenda was a teacher. It was a good school, centered on Biblical principles, with its doctrine based in the concept of sola scriptura, meaning that the Bible alone is the source of authority for faith and life. This teaching aligned with my understanding of faith at that time, and it was a good foundation for Adam, but we learned later that it missed so much of what the complete faith present in Orthodoxy has to offer.

When Adam was about 17, he surprised us by asking if we would be interested in attending an Orthodox Church. He had been exploring on the internet, and had watched several videos on Orthodoxy, and he wanted to visit and become more familiar with what he had seen online.

Adam shares his thoughts, “When I first asked my parents if they would be willing to visit an Orthodox Church, I was quite nervous. But to my surprise, they agreed to go. Prior to this, I had done some searching online for different churches as I wasn’t satisfied with what I was going to and wanted something more. I then came across information about the Orthodox Church and was instantly interested by the history of it. I then watched many videos explaining details and the theology of the church and at that point I knew I wanted to visit an Orthodox parish and never looked back afterwards.”

As we were not satisfied with the church we were attending at that time, a non-denominational mega church that featured rock Christian concerts with stadium seating complete with cup holders. And yes, they were happy to sell you a latte on your way into church! So we were agreeable to taking what we thought would be a few Sundays off to see what might be in store at an Orthodox church. As it turned out, we never went back to that mega church or any other Protestant church!

We went to Liturgy, and then Orthros and Liturgy, then Great Vespers on Saturday and finally Wednesday Vespers at St Barnabas in Costa Mesa, California. I clearly remember driving there early one Sunday morning thinking the service (which was about 2½ hours long) was going to be way too long, as I was used to services lasting about 50 to 60 minutes. But as the service approached its end, my heart wanted it to go on and on, and I realized this is what I have been looking for all my life. It wasn't an intellectual decision based on deep theological reasoning, it was the fact that Christ's presence was there, in the service, reflected in the people's faces faith lived out in the people's actions and their clearly apparent love for one another. It was simply stunning. I had never seen anything like it before.

We then began the journey through catechism and became members of the Orthodox church. Several of our family members thought we had lost our minds, but there is just no way we could turn back from what is so evidently true. It reminds me of when Peter said to the Lord "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." To me it is clear that the Orthodox church is where we truly strive to live the Lord's words of eternal life.

The beauty and power of the Divine Liturgy are obvious and available to all people that have an open heart, regardless of religious background, race, creed, nationality or education level. Our son Tommy, who is quite autistic, attended catechism classes with us, was baptized and Chrismated, and he enjoys attending services when he is in town. Does he understand everything about the Orthodox faith and divine Liturgy? Obviously, no. What he does know is that God's love is alive in the Liturgy and in God's people, and he is immersed in that love despite his autistic quirks and limitations. Throughout the week after services, he hums the songs he has heard in church the previous Sunday, which is a blessing for himself and our whole household.

To me, the most striking difference present in Orthodoxy compared to the Protestant churches, can be summed up in this – You attend Protestant churches, but you live Orthodoxy. We have a long way to go to really achieve the goal of living Orthodoxy and working towards Theosis, but that is what we are striving towards. Yes, we fall repeatedly, but we find the strength to get back up and take another step on the one true path towards our Lord and our God. Please join our family on this most precious journey, we can stumble, and help each other back up, we can share each other's burdens, laugh together, cry together, and each day we will take a step closer to the perfection that is our Lord Jesus Christ.

JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY by

*Skylar (Irenaeus) & Karen (Rebecca) McManus and their children Rylie (Macrina),
Daniel (Gregory), and twins Alistair (Cyril), Logan (Methodius)*

*Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church APRIL 1st, 2023
Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos*

Our religious upbringing was filled with claims about how it was "apostolic" (historic descendants of the Apostles). In fact, we couldn't attend a single Oneness Pentecostal "revival" service without hearing the reminder that we were "apostolics." This hallmark of the Oneness movement is ironically what led us to Orthodoxy.

Oneness Pentecostals baptize in the name of Jesus only, rather than "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). It was a supposed "revelation" about how to reconcile this verse with Acts 2:38 that started the movement in the early 1900s. As a result of this baptismal practice, Oneness Pentecostals teach that the only divine Person is the Father, and that it is the Father who became incarnate as the Son, Jesus Christ. The movement only truly exists because it denies that the one God is the Trinity.

As I turned to the early Church, I found that none of the earliest writings accepted what Oneness Pentecostalism claims about baptism, nor the Trinity. Christians were baptized in the way Matthew 28:19 says and confessed their belief in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at baptism. They also believed the divine Son, not the Father, appeared to the patriarchs in the Old Testament because no one has seen the Father except the Son (John 6:46). It became clear to me that Oneness was not truly apostolic on these subjects after all.

We left behind our Oneness church, and our entire religious histories since young ages, in August 2018. But we left without a sense of where to go next. We spent about the next year attending differ-

ent services from various denominations until we settled on a church whose origin belonged to the Calvary Chapel group.

Somewhere in that time I became occupied with a new question: Whose Christian worship would be recognized by the apostles? Calvary's? The Reformed? Perhaps the Roman Catholics? The answer came to me in a way I never expected.

Through discussions about the Trinity online, I discovered an Orthodox professor who was open to speaking with me. He then put me in contact with another young man who had been recently baptized. It was because of them that I stepped into an Orthodox church for the first time.

Their friendship wasn't the unexpected part, however. I've made my side of our trajectory sound largely like an intellectual journey. But it finally became something else when I brought my daughter Rylie (Macrina) to the Divine Liturgy one Sunday. To my surprise, she was with me during the entire Liturgy. Children also partook of the Eucharist. And after we left, she asked me when we would go back to "Caelyn's church" [St. Katherine Orthodox Church]. This was the first time she had ever mentioned a church friend by name, and on the first Sunday! All of these things made me feel that this form of Christian worship was truly familial. I realized I'd be a fool of a father if I ignored this, so I kept attending Liturgy and learning as much as I could.

After attending about two liturgical cycles at this parish, I had finally been convinced—not simply or even largely intellectually any longer—that the apostles would recognize Orthodox Christian worship. I and our four children were baptized in August 2021, which was almost exactly 3 years since we left Oneness Pentecostalism.

My wife Karen (Kassiani) was baptized after we began attending The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Pocatello, Idaho. She was already open to Orthodoxy when I and the children were baptized, but her own acclimation took longer for a number of reasons. Practically speaking, our living situation (especially after the twins were born) made it very difficult for our entire family to attend church regularly. Spiritually speaking, she had to face problems from our background that I never experienced.

The way that women are expected to behave in Oneness Pentecostal circles is far more stringent than how men are expected to behave. This is especially the case when women's families are involved in the main roles of the church. In Karen's case, her pastor for most of her life was her uncle. She was also intimately involved in the church's music from a very early age until the time we left. In retrospect, she says the only brief way to describe her overall experience is "religious trauma."

Due to these past experiences, she wanted to be convinced that her decision to become Orthodox was not caused by any sort of coercion. She wanted that decision to be her own—one not even caused by the fact that I wanted to become Orthodox. So she patiently continued to observe the Church's teaching and practices. In particular, she was drawn to the Church because of two realizations: that the Theotokos is the most exalted solely human being, and that the Church's worship is focused entirely on God rather than on results and emotional manipulation. She realized that the Church's view of women and how it worships God are both apostolic.

A few months after we moved from Washington to Idaho, Father Constantine Zozos asked Karen after Catechism Class if she felt ready to be baptized. By that time, our practical and her spiritual concerns had both been addressed, so she knew that agreeing was her own choice. She was baptized before Pascha in April of this year.

In the year that we have lived here, we have already seen this parish grow and gain even more children than it has had in its recent history. The familial nature of Orthodoxy that convinced me to stay in the first parish I ever visited is the same one that encourages me about our future here. Our children have a place to become Christians with other Orthodox children for many years. And now that we are a family of Orthodox Christians, we finally have a place to confess that we believe in "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church."

by Steven and Jacque (Veronica) Swanson

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church APRIL 28th, 2019

Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos



Steven and Jacque Swanson

I grew up in a family that was not sure what to believe. My grandparent, aunts, and uncles had come out of Mormonism before I was born, and they relied on the Bible as their only source of authority. We hardly went to church, but we talked about God a lot and had basic Christian morals. Jacque's family, on the other hand, was deeply committed to the Roman Catholic faith. She was taken to Mass frequently, and her family was centered around their church life.

Despite the differences, we both have open hearts that desire to worship God in Spirit and in truth. This has led us both to wander into forms of Christianity that we were not raised in. Jacque craved a deeper relationship with Jesus and wanted a less distant and ritualistic experience. When she left Roman Catholicism as a young adult, she almost lost her whole family. It was a trying time for her. I was a completely blank slate and went through several Protestant denominations trying to find the most accurate expression of the Christian faith. On this journey I lost and gained a lot of good friends along the way. I guess we both took seriously the warning that Christ gave:

Matthew 10:37 "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."

As a young adult I had a great desire for ministry. I was consistently involved in teaching bible studies, catechism classes, and helping with outreach activities. Eventually I went to seminary to get a degree so I could serve as a Youth Pastor. During seminary, I learned many things that the professors did not intend. We had a heavy emphasis on church history and theology, and as I read the early church fathers, I noticed their perspectives were very different from what I had been exposed to. On top of that, the Lord graciously introduced me to a family that was becoming Orthodox, and they pointed me to the Ancient Faith Radio podcasts. Through those activities I became deeply impressed with the Orthodox Church and began to consider her claim to be the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

Jacquie moved to Idaho and joined Calvary Chapel in Idaho Falls where she worshipped for 15

years and I returned from seminary and joined Calvary Chapel as well. By God's grace, a mutual friend introduced us to one another and we began dating. As dedicated Christians, we talked a lot about Christ and theology. I started sharing with Jacque about some of the things I had been learning about Orthodoxy, but she was very reluctant - due to her past in Roman Catholicism.

As time went on, we desired to take the relationship to the next level and got engaged. As we drew closer together, I became more interested in possibly attending the Orthodox church in

Pocatello. Jacque struggled with this decision and felt the relationship was about to become unequally yoked (see 2 Corinthians 6:14). She prayed a lot and realized she needed to let God take control of the likely life changes, which also meant, a possible end to our engagement.

I slowly began to introduce my favorite podcasts from Ancient Faith Radio, videos from YouTube, and gave her an Orthodox Study Bible. Over time, by the grace of God, she started to see the validity of the Orthodox Church, just as I was. A handful of months before we got married, we started attending church services at Assumption, to be certain this is where God was leading us. To our delight, it was!

We have been Orthodox for almost 5 years now. It is such a blessing to be a part of a church that has an unbroken tradition going all the way back to the apostles. There is great comfort in knowing that during these difficult times in our land, our church will not change. By God's grace, the Orthodox Church, has not changed in almost 2,000 years.

For sure there have been moments when new practices have seemed strange to us. But we take comfort during these times by recognizing that the scriptures witness to the church receiving many teachings that were not written in the Bible (see John 21:25, 1 Corinthians 11:2, and 2 Thessalonians 2:15). Furthermore, now that we can see the Orthodox Church is the original church, we can rest in her as our ultimate authority (see 1 Timothy 3:15).

We are so thankful to be a part of a loving family that knows us and desires to be with us. Now we are **disciples** of the historic Christian church – resting in her guidance, just as Jesus wanted. In Matthew 28: 18-20, And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

**THE TARASAU FAMILY'S JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY:
Alex (St. Paisios), Ashley (St. Nina), Benjamin, and Charlotte (St. Natalia)**

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church, , March 12th, 2022

Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos

Originally, I grew up in the predominantly Orthodox country of Belarus. My mother did not



Adam Painter Godparent to Ben, Tony Hoskin Godparent to Alex, Fr Constantine, Svetlana Hoskin Godparent to Charlotte, Ashley and Godparent Tressa Rockwood.

take us to any church when I was little and growing up. In many post-Soviet countries, a lot of the Orthodox members are not very active. They are baptized as infants and attend a few times a year. Many of my friends growing up, especially when I left Belarus, were protestants and what always impressed me was how firm and devoted they seemed about their religious convictions, having a perfect explanation for any possible theological questions. Their way of worship seemed a bit strange to me though, as I was longing for more than just the look and feel of a Marriott's Conference Center. The atmosphere of blank walls, and the very way people dressed, spoke, and the music they played had no indications of the spiritual

built into them whatsoever. It looked, smelled, and felt like a place one would go to see a Queen cover band and not a place of worship. The reformed churches were changed, but definitely not improved.

After moving to France in 2004 I met and befriended some LDS missionaries. I became a good friend with a local bishop and sadly fell into heresy and joined their ranks. When I joined the Mormon church, I was told I needed to either hurry and serve a mission or find a wife as I was getting old (24). I felt pushed into getting married as quickly as possible to someone I barely even knew. It obviously ended in divorce. They do not care so much that you find someone you relate to and have a connection with as much as they just want you paying tithing and multiplying so they can gather more money for their “one, true, and restored religion”. I never really understood their unusual Temple rituals.

Those who come from Mormon backgrounds will know exactly what I am talking about. I do not believe I will need to know a secret handshake to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. How can a religion claim to be “the only true one” while totally ignoring Pascha?! “Easter” Sunday was like any other Sunday. They did nothing special to commemorate the event. I guess I

shouldn't have been surprised as they also do not want their members wearing a cross as they "do not wish to focus" on Christ's death but rather his resurrection. That logic still boggles our minds as the cross represents Christ overcoming death. LDS doctrine is bizarre and emotionally bare. An ecstatic elevation of happiness is not a virtue. Christ dying on a Cross commends us to have empathy and compassion, not senseless laughter. Mormon culture seems to focus on showing everyone just how happy you are. They want you to convey this mask of having a perfect life and never struggling because you are blessed by belonging to the one "true" church. Being happy is great, of course, but expecting cheerfulness as a marker of faith is that those who are somehow saddened or who struggle in any way, are somehow viewed as perilously close to morally failing.

Ashley, having been born into and grown up in Mormonism all her life really struggled with accepting the LDS religion. She was always confused when reading the bible in Seminary because God and Jesus seemed like the same person but Mormon doctrine taught them that Jesus Christ was their older brother. They absolutely do not believe in the Trinity. The Mormon church relies heavily on gaslighting members until they start to think they are the issue, not the religion. Having come from pioneer ancestors going back many generations, all of her family members, friends, and neighbors were Mormons. It was easier just to push down the thoughts and questions and assume you were just missing something. She saw a lot of red flags and had questions that she could never get answered to her satisfaction. She was devout, graduated from seminary, paid tithing and serving many callings in her church to appease family and friends. She threw them all for a loop when she dated and married someone who was not a member of the LDS church. By the time she met Alex, she too had been divorced and many family and friends alluded to the fact that it was because she had married outside of the Mormon church.

We actually met on a Mormon dating website because we had been convinced we just weren't trying hard enough and exercising enough faith in our religion. We thought if we met the right person they could help us work through our concerns and address our "red flags". We both shared the same struggles and decided to give it one last go. We hoped that together we could find truth and gain a testimony of faith in The Church of Latter-Day Saints (as they wish to be called now LOL). We tried really hard for about a year and decided there was no way it could be true. We were taught to take your concerns and put them in a little box up on a shelf in your brain. Our "shelves" started to break when we found several online resources that validated basically all of our concerns and feelings. After leaving the LDS church in 2012 we did not go to any church for a few years. I think we felt burned by the LDS church and it made it hard to trust in any organized religion. We had to work through some issues on our own. We still read the bible and taught our kids to pray but they were missing the connection with other Christians. As time went on, we both knew in our hearts we truly believed in God and longed for a more personal relationship with Him. I cannot imagine living in this day and age and not having my faith in God. It was something we also felt very strongly our children needed even more. We knew growing up in this crazy world our children needed to have a firm faith in God

and know what this temporary life is truly about.

We started attending the Lutheran Church in American Falls and felt we got much more spiritually out of those services than we ever did attending the Mormon church but it still just did not feel quite right. Then we attended Pocatello's Annual Greek Festival in 2021, with a tour and explanation of the faith. The next day on our Wedding Anniversary, we attended the Liturgy at the Assumption Greek Orthodox Church, Pocatello, Idaho. Within a couple of weeks, we became catechumens, and the rest, as they say, is history. We consider ourselves blessed every day to be able to have found the Orthodox church. The sense of peace and purpose that it has brought into our family's life is an immeasurable blessing. From the first time I came into our Orthodox church I knew I was home. Certain things I can't explain, but I do feel they are correct in the historical Orthodox church and are not in other denominations. The Mormons are good people but intentionally misdirected. It is okay in the Orthodox Faith to not understand everything and some things remain a mystery. To the Eastern mindset if you do not have a perfect explanation for everything it is a mystery, to the Western one it is ignorance.

It is hard to explain, but both Ashley and I feel like a weight is lifted off our shoulders when we enter the church each week. It truly is heaven on earth and we feel at complete peace. From the moment we enter the door and are greeted by the smell of the incense and beautiful iconography, we truly are able to leave our earthly cares behind. Our family is eternally grateful to Father Constantine for all the educational efforts he puts forth and make sure our kids feel, participate, and understand the mysteries of our church and the beauty of the true and historic Orthodox Church. We have never felt so instantly connected and loved as we do at the Assumption. We love our parish family, you have truly become like family to us. Charlotte (8) asked that we include her journey. She loves her Godmother Svitlana and enjoys learning all about our faith in Sunday school. Her favorite part is receiving Communion and being able to sing. She especially loves all of her friends in Sunday school, knowing that they all believe in the same thing. All of her friends at school do not go to any church or are Mormon. They always ask her why she wears her cross. In second grade, she took her children's divine liturgy book that Goldie Homan got her to school, and tried to teach them what we believe. That was a proud parent moment that we have the church to thank for. Ben (11) didn't have much to add besides he enjoys serving in the altar with Father and says he has the best Godparent ever! Our Godparents were vital in our journey, and we would like to thank them for all they do for us! Their example, love, and acceptance they give us. Thank you, Tony Hoskin (Alex), Tressa Rockwood (Ashley), Adam Painter (Benjamin), and Svitlana (Charlotte). We love our parish family; you have truly become family to us.

OUR JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY

***THE BEAL FAMILY** Fulton, Melissa, and their children: Emma (Emmelia), Molly (Barbara), Rosalyn (Nina), Jack (John).*

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church, April, 1, 2023

Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos



Fulton (Nectarios), Molly (Barbara), Godmother Jacque Swanson, Fr. Constantine, Emma (Emmelia), Godmother Corri Yanase, Rosalyn (Nina), Godparents Gus & Erin Nicklos, Melissa (Mary) holding Jake (John), Godfather Gregory Painter

WHY WE LIVE AS ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS—Melissa Beal

Melaleuca offered me a job as an analytical chemist in February 2020, so my family moved from Goldendale, Washington, to Idaho Falls. My husband and I were not looking for Orthodoxy. I loved my Roman Catholic faith, and my husband Fulton had been on the fence for 3 years. We attended the Divine Liturgy for the first time two weeks before Great Lent this last year. Our nanny Becky Swanson was a man, so, out of curiosity, we went with her to Liturgy. Little did we

know that Assumption would soon become our second home.

Our first experience with the Liturgy was striking. For me, I experienced the living presence of Christ during the Liturgy. His presence seemed to consume me, and for the first time in my life, I felt peace. His existence and His love for me were undeniable. I knew after that Liturgy that I would become Orthodox.

Fulton and I attended mass at the Roman Catholic church in Idaho Falls on Saturday nights and drove to Pocatello for Liturgy Sunday mornings. After two or three weeks of this schedule, we decided to no longer worship God in both places. Inside the embrace of Great Lent, we left our Roman Catholic upbringing and fully committed to embracing the Orthodox faith.

While the decision for me was almost instantaneous, my husband's heart opened up gradually over the course of Great Lent. The study of ancient church history in our catechism classes ignited his hunt for truth. The dogmatic changes that the Roman Catholic Church established, almost flippantly, offended him deeply. Each Sunday, on our drive back to Idaho Falls, he would discuss another element of the Liturgy that affected him. First, the reverence towards

the precious gifts. Then, the depth of the prayers and how even the infants partook of Christ's body and blood. Most often, though, he commented on how the parish was "real". The people that met for fellowship sincerely cared for one and other, and did not cover up their brokenness, nor wallow in it. Rather, they honestly expressed their shared experience of living as an Orthodox Christian. It seemed to permeate more than just the Sunday hours of communal worship.

On April 1st, our four children were Chrismated. It was the feast day of my patron saint, Mary of Egypt. For two weeks, we brought the children up for communion, while eagerly awaiting our own first communion. Finally, at midnight on April 15th, Fulton and I received the Sacrament of Chrismation. I thank God that He led us to Orthodoxy through the Assumption parish. The intellectual ladder I thought was required to approach God is no longer needed. I don't have to depend on rosary beads or prayers for indulgences in order to enter God's presence. Somehow, He is right here with us, and we can be fully with Him right now, too. that He led us to Orthodoxy through the Assumption parish. The intellectual ladder I thought was required to approach God is no longer needed. I don't have to depend on rosary beads or prayers for indulgences in order to enter God's presence. Somehow, He is right here with us, and we can be fully with Him right now, too.

OUR JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY

THE SCHOENROCK FAMILY: Ian (John), Chayla (Martha), Olivia and Phoebe

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church, March 31, 2024

Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos



Godmother Ashley Tarasau, Phoebe, Ian (John), Father Constantine, Chayla (Martha), Godmother Carrie Thienes, Olivia, Godmother Devyn Schmalz

Both Chayla and I grew up in active Mormon households and had been members for most of our lives. I served as a missionary for the Mormon church in Russia, where I was first introduced to Orthodoxy. Because we were missionaries for the Mormon church, we were seldom given permission by the mission president to enter any of the churches or talk to the priests so I never had much of an understanding of what Orthodoxy was during that time even though I was surrounded by it.

Toward the end of 2019, my wife and I left the LDS church and became atheist and I even went as far as being anti-theist but we were not very vocal about our religious beliefs during this time. Our journey into Orthodoxy seems a little strange in retrospect because I actively was trying to

stay away from religion. In 2022 I became frustrated with where my life was. Although I was doing very well with my career and felt outwardly successful, I felt like I was slowly decaying inwardly but I had no idea why. During this time, I was well read in western philosophy and felt like I had the tools to be happy, but not the practice.

I decided to implement a very rigid structure into my life to see how extreme self discipline would affect my life. I was surprised to find that although this structure was very difficult, my life began to improve dramatically in all aspects. I was confident that someone had to have taught a lifestyle that is centered around denying your indulgences, shouldering your responsibilities, and following a moral code of conduct. Much of my personal philosophies were still uncertain, but given how drastically discipline improved my life I knew for certainty that if there is truth then these concepts would be highlighted.

My wife was still very anti-religion so I knew that I would have to do most of this research myself and then I could tell her what I found. I spent a month studying Buddhism and then Islam but never found those concepts clearly highlighted or they felt lacking. I knew Christianity was next but because of the betrayal I felt from the LDS church, I was scared about looking into Christianity again; but I decided to go for it. Part of this process is that while I was studying a religion, I would try to practice it as closely as I could based on what I found while studying.

I had no idea how to do that, so I decided that in the morning before I read the bible I would find a picture of Christ, light a candle in front of it, read a Psalm, and read the Lord's prayer. I had never worshiped like this before and to my knowledge at the time no one did, but I finally felt like I was worshiping Jesus Christ as God and not just drawing lessons from Him as a philosopher. While I was reading the Bible I was shocked to start seeing early on how much Jesus pushed through suffering, how much He encouraged His followers to do the same, and the values He taught while He did it. It felt like I was rediscovering Christianity for the first time. Then I read one day when Jesus said "if anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Taking up a cross probably sounded extremely grim to the Apostles, given the fact that they had just learned for the first time what was going to happen only a few verses prior. Feeling the weight of those words and finding out that the prescription to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Christ was written in three different books really highlighted the importance of this concept in Christianity and fully encompassed how to practice discipline in a way that is positive and meaningful.

I knew that I wanted to follow Jesus Christ, to worship Him as God, and to follow his teachings; but I didn't know where to start. I decided that the Lutheran church was a great place to start since I started to develop a Trinitarian view on theology and I felt like I had room to develop my own theological understanding without too much outside pressure. history. After telling my wife these things about Christianity she started to warm up to the possibility of attending a church. I decided that Lutheranism was a great starting point so I was baptized secretly with only my wife knowing (my kids were with their grandparents that night). I didn't discuss this much with the kids either because I wanted to make sure that my wife felt comfortable living her own spirituality without me influencing the kids too much in my direction. I was fully willing to be the only Christian in my family, but my wife started to be interested, so we started attending Lutheran services as a family.

I tried to go back and figure out what churches could claim the clearest line back to the Apostles and Orthodoxy showed up. I was very concerned and put off by just about everything that I saw but figured I would look up a local priest. I called Father Constantine at the Orthodox Church and when he answered I hung up because I got spooked and didn't know what to say. My wife was curious but did not want to be actively involved, so I kept going down this journey on my own but with her support. I started to look into Orthodoxy and was very surprised how much I didn't know about the history, traditions, rituals, and the personal practice. I started to notice that the Lutheran services would sneak Greek words in or there was Orthodox terminology peppered into the homilies, so I started to seriously investigate Orthodoxy again and this time I decided to go to Pocatello and attend the Assumption Greek Orthodox Church and bring my wife.

I was overwhelmed by the iconography and had never seen a church like The Assumption before in my life. I thought this would certainly scare my wife, but she liked it even more than I

did. My first Divine Liturgy was so confusing that I left halfway through. I had no idea what was going on the entire time and didn't even know where to follow along. After coming a few more times I finally made it through a full service, and I started to understand it more. I'm not sure what it was, but in May of 2023, I had my first spiritual feeling in at least five years during the liturgy and I realized that Orthodoxy, contained the fullness in theology, tradition, sacraments, and personal practice. This realization is what really tied everything together and resolved any doubts or concerns that I had left.

The last major hurdle was to get over driving down to Pocatello for church from Idaho Falls. That was very difficult for me since I never drove more than five minutes to get to church no matter what state I lived in, but my wife had really started to warm up to Christianity and Orthodoxy at a very surprising rate, and knew I had to make a decision. Once I decided that I was going to make that drive every Sunday, we decided to start making the active steps into becoming Orthodox and began weekly Catechism for a second time in late 2023.

Orthodoxy has given a fullness in spirituality and communion with God to us and our family that would have been impossible in our previously held belief systems. The Orthodox lifestyle truly manifests itself as the original Christian church not just with academic proof and rich history, but most importantly, in the lifestyle and the depth of spiritual growth that comes from putting into practice the traditions and words of the saints. By doing this, I have been able to experience a daily communion with Christ where the benefits are visible to me in myself and my relationship with my family. This journey has been incredible, and we are so glad that we are where we are, but we know that baptism is where the real journey begins and we couldn't be more excited.

THE HARRIS FAMILY JOURNEY TO ORTHODOXY:

Seth (Nicodemus) & Brooke (Sophia) Harris and their children, Gwendolyn (Hermione), Torren (Alexander)

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church, , March 9th, 2024

Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos

Our journey to Orthodoxy sounds similar to many others we've read. Brooke and I were both



Sacrament of Baptism (l-r) Torren Harris (St. Alexander the Patriarch), Alex Tarasau, Godparent, Steven Swanson, Godparent, Seth Harris, (St. Nicodemus), Fr. Constantine, Brooke Harris (St. Sophia), Jacque Swanson, Godparent, Gwendolyn Harris, (St. Hermione), Ashley Tarasau, (Godparent).

raised in families of Jehovah's Witnesses (JW's), though our upbringings and experience in that denomination were slightly different.

My father was an elder that oversaw what was known as the "Theocratic Ministry School", the teaching arm of our local congregation and, as a result, I was raised to be a public speaker and gave many talks to the congregation starting at the age of 5. At the age of 12 I was baptized, however, I only accepted baptism because it was the thing to do, and it was common to be relatively disparaged if you didn't. The culture that permeates JW's is one that requires its members to go-along to get-along. By the age of 13 or 14, I started to realize there

was a lot I didn't previously know about the religion, especially doctrinal changes over the years that fundamentally changed what JW's would refer to as "the truth." It was around this time that Brooke and I met and became friends, although we lost touch around the age of 17 (more to that story later).

By the age of 16, I could no longer accept the beliefs as true, nor could I give any more talks pretending to believe. I told my parents exactly that and was kicked out of the house. From this point on I prepared to join the military in order to fully escape and joined the U.S. Army just after turning 19. At this point, I was "disfellowshipped," which is to be exiled from your family and JW community entirely. Needless to say, this way of doing things didn't help prove that the JW's were members of God's chosen organization as they claim, and I swore off God entirely, becoming what can only be described as hardcore atheist.

After being stationed in Fort Carson, Colorado, Brooke called me out of the blue and happened to be living just north of the base, so we met up that weekend and that was it for us. We were

to be living just north of the base, so we met up that weekend and that was it for us. We were married a little over a year later. She was no longer a practicing JW and because she married someone that was disfellowshipped (not to mention a Soldier) she was also disfellowshipped. We stayed non-religious up until our daughter, Gwen, was born when Brooke decided to give the JW's another shot and applied for reinstatement. She continued to be a JW for the next seven years.

It is difficult to describe those seven years. The easiest way is to say they were tumultuous. The harmony in the family was slowly eroded by the JW influence and I only became more resentful and anti-religious. Over time, Brooke started to see that things did not add up in the doctrine, and that the "friendships" were entirely conditional. It's common to hear stories in JW circles about wives turning unbelieving husbands into devout JW's, so much so, that it's nearly expected to happen. I refused to even meet any of them. So, they treated her as an outcast, someone unworthy to truly befriend. She ended up leaving the JW's near the end of 2019 and we decided to begin anew and forge a better, more united path.

Over the years that followed, we became closer than ever, but it was also clear that we as individuals and as a family were still missing something, and though I suspected it might be God's presence and guidance it took time to admit that. Joining a church was just not an option, especially as I saw them all as American-made based entirely on someone's interpretation or opinions on the bible. Eventually, I admitted to myself that I had never done any research on the formation of Christianity in the very beginning. So, with that, the decision was made to explore any and all denominations with the purpose of finding the original and authentic church.

I knew of a couple of Orthodox Christians and decided to research the church and was so blown away by what I found, there were so many times you could have heard me yell, "How did I not know about this?!" Never having heard of the ecumenical councils or the great schism, or the early Christian traditions changed my entire perspective and realized that what we had experienced was Protestantism at its worst. It was not God I was angry with, it was false doctrines and teachings that claimed to be true. It became clear it was time to revive a relationship with Christ and lead the family in the same endeavor, but this time, it would be done through the original, holy, and apostolic church. I called Father Constantine, and he invited us to church and then to become catechumens.

The liturgies were certainly confusing at first, and we realized there was *a lot* to learn, but it was at the Assumption I found the missing pieces of a puzzle that I once thought impossible to solve. Oddly enough this felt a little bit uncomfortable at first because it meant shedding other beliefs and ideas once held so closely and with so much certainty that it's difficult to know who you are without them. That release began with a lot of prayer, and what a relief it turned out to be. With Orthodoxy, we have discovered a fullness of faith that requires *living it*, not just making proclamations, and going through the motions to look good. It's different than anything we were ever used to but that's the point, *it is unlike anything else*, and we have fully embraced it, recognizing that what we found is true Christianity in its original form