

PERSONAL JOURNEYS INTO ORTHODOXY

Over these many years we have also been blessed with individuals and families who have come seeking the Historic Christian Church, and thus found themselves here in Southeastern Idaho and the parish of the Assumption. Once a month, The Epistle Newsletter will feature a family or individual who has embraced the Faith and how they came into Orthodoxy.

Below are testimonies from parishioners. Please take the time to read through some of their personal stories. While every path is unique, we hope you find a connection to your own journey among these testimonies.



The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

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. Protospesbyter 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

JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY

*The Painter Family: Gregory, Olenda (Scholastica), Adam and Tommy,
Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church
Rev. ProtPRESBYTER 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.

Jacque 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. Protospesbyter 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. Protospesbyter 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



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

(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).

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

CAROLINE PETERS' JOURNEY TO ORTHODOXY

*Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church,
Chrismated October 2023*

Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos



I grew up in a Protestant household within the Nazarene denomination. My family would go to church every Sunday and my siblings, and I would attend Sunday school, Youth Group, and Vacation Bible Camps. Unlike many people I know who came into Orthodoxy, I was happy being Nazarene. I was grateful for the guidance and discipleship I had received growing up in a Christian household.

For two years I attended Liberty University, founded by Jerry Falwell, in Lynchburg, Virginia. It is the largest Christian University in the world, and I was proud of being a part of the mission of the school, "Creating Champions for Christ." I took all of the required religious classes: Old Testament, New Testament, Evangelism, Theology; and loved it. Orthodoxy was never mentioned in any of my classes, and I honestly did not even know what it was.

My first time stepping into an Orthodox Church was the Greek Festival in 2022, when I transferred to Idaho State University. I remember gasping when I stepped into the church. It was like stepping back in time, it was ancient, beautiful, and richer than anything I had ever seen before. I tuned out the person introducing visitors to the church, and instead read all of the brochures and pamphlets in the Narthex. After the tour I never thought twice about the Orthodox Church.

Seven months later, I was involved with a protestant campus ministry called Chi Alpha joking about how each name usually has a saint associated with it: Saint Caroline, Saint Olivia, and so on. Most of the Saints were Catholic except for one: Saint Sarah. She was an Orthodox Saint, who fled from persecution by taking a boat with her three young sons to Alexandria. While sailing over, a storm broke out and she feared that her sons would perish unbaptized. She cut her breast and baptized them in the trinity with her blood. Miraculously, the storm calmed down and they were able to get to safety in Alexandria. She found a priest and he assured her that her improvised baptism was valid.

When I read the story, I was fascinated by the fact that she needed the priest to tell her that the baptism was valid. Like most Protestants, Nazarenes believe that baptism is just a symbol, an outward showing of your faith similar to how a wedding ring is an outward sign that a person is married. Eventually I came to the more startling realization of the Eucharist. Instead of crackers and juice being taken in "remembrance of Christ" as a symbol, Orthodox Christians believe that it is the actual Body and Blood of Christ.

After learning about that, I decided to go to Liturgy in February of 2023. When I stepped into the Church, I was terrified that it was right, and I would never be able to go back to being a Protestant. I gave the icon of the Theotokos a respectable nod and lit my candle with a visibly shaking hand and walked into the nave on trembling knees. During the portion of the service where everyone kneels, I prayed "Lord may your will be done, but please may your will be that I do not become Orthodox."

A week later I was in Father's office giving a very weak defense of Sola Scriptura, and he patiently asked me, "What did the disciples do before the Bible was written?" Thus, I began to attend Catechism and Bible Study, meeting Orthodox Christians who encouraged me to begin living the Orthodox way of life.

I could not go back to my Protestant textbooks or listen to sermons without thinking about the Saints or Orthodox teaching. I experienced and still do experience shame and grief for leaving the church of my family and friends. My family was devastated, and it broke my heart that I could not turn back on the journey I unexpectedly stumbled into. Abba Joseph, a desert Father, asked a pilgrim, "Why not become transformed?" I was Chrismated in October 2023 and received the name Catherine.

In my journey of Orthodoxy, I have found solace from my shame and grief through communion. It has given me reassurance in the midst of heartbreak and change, every Sunday Christ reminds me that I am not alone. We can see Christ in the Chalice. A good friend in this parish once told her daughter, "Let's go see Jesus" as they walked up the aisle. Communion is the physical proof that He is always near to us. When I was a Protestant, I was taught that God turned away from humanity after the fall because he could not bear to be near our sinfulness, thus requiring the atonement of Christ. The truth is that humanity turned away from God, and he remained as close to us as he was in Eden. Our divine ascent is learning how to look past our shame back to Christ.

Even the saints demonstrate the same message. The icons on the walls always look at you, they never look away from our sinfulness. We are all united to Christ through Communion. I will never forget being told, "Welcome home," after receiving communion for the first time. I was welcomed into a family that connected me not just to those in the parish but to Orthodox Christians from around the world and made me family members with the Saints written on the walls. We are never alone on our journey in Orthodoxy. Christ is in our midst; He is and always shall be.

*Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church,
Chrismated November 12, 2017
Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos*

FRANK GRANT'S JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

I was born a devout Seventh Day Adventist family. I was 3rd Generation SDA, educated in their school system: fully immersed and indoctrinated. We never missed church Saturday mornings, and the first thing I remember learning was "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy, Exodus 20:8."

We lived several miles out of town, so it was quite a drive into town, but we were always there and I can't remember ever being late. There were a lot of church meetings and so-called "Bible studies."

As early as first grade, we were taught the origins of the Adventist sect, and we were taught the "Third Angel's message," which is derived from the writings of Ellen G. White, a primary founder of the sect.

While Adventists claim, to be followers of the Bible alone, they also believe that Ellen White was a prophet of God. Therefore, they always read Adventism into scripture. Anytime someone reads a passage of scripture that appears to contradict their teaching, Sister White's books known as "The Spirit of Prophecy" are consulted, and her explanation is always the final word. Adventist teachings are about as far as a person could possibly get from Christian Orthodoxy, yet they consider themselves to be Christian.

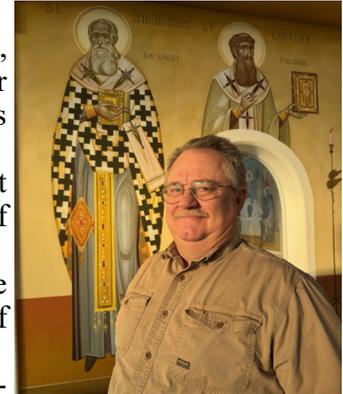
An observant teenager soon learns to compartmentalize unintelligible concepts and then stash them on to little mental shelves to deal with at a later time. My first big epiphany came to me after a very questionable doctrine was proven not to be based upon any scripture, yet the Church in conference decided to continue in this (now known) error on the basis that it was a foundational doctrine of the Adventist sect. I viewed this action as a treasonous and dishonest move against the church laity! I fully understand that we all make mistakes. Doctrinal errors I was completely willing to forgive. But what got me was that they KNEW they were fundamentally in error, and for financial reasons they refused to adjust the official teaching of the church. They were more interested in my future tithe money than they were in my salvation. Yes, it certainly looked like that to me then, and I continue to believe it to this day.

I immediately submitted a letter of resignation and after a fight I finally got it removed. It seems that they like numbers and control. They won't hesitate to kick you out if they catch you drinking beer or eating seafood or pork or breaking the Sabbath. But if you aren't known to be doing those things, they sure don't want the basic numbers going down, especially due to doctrinal issues.

Due to this background, and after becoming a Christian, I began to examine closely the doctrines of various sects within Protestantism. One time my pastor got pretty exasperated with me and exclaimed "Frank, you act like there is a cult hiding underneath every rock," I replied that I was pretty sure that this was indeed the case. Why was it that so many people fell for what seemed to be obvious charlatans? Another issue that began to concern me is the accuracy of biblical interpretation. Having a pretty good grasp of Spanish and having become conversant in German, I became more and more aware that human language is very limited. One doesn't simply learn a new set of words to acquire fluency in a new language. Almost none of the new vocabulary is directly equivalent to its corresponding linguistic mate. To be sure, translation is not impossible. But it will lose some element of the original as it is translated.

Logically, this becomes a massive problem when one believes in the nearly universal doctrine of "Sola Scriptura" (scripture alone) which originated in the legendary debate between Martin Luther and German Cardinal Ecke. (Most interesting here, is that this foundational doctrine began life as a witty quip, and has no biblical foundation which makes it itself an oxymoron). However, if all Christian doctrine must be based on scripture alone, you have to make sure that the translation you are using is dead accurate. And the translator's response is a good one. Gather up all the willing Scholars you can find from as many different traditions as possible. Put them all in the same room together with the original Greek Aramaic, or Hebrew text. And let them hash it out. Although a good idea, it doesn't work. The translation variations are too numerous to list. All of them are different and they also differ in key areas.

Due to my unshakable belief in absolute truth, I've always been considered to be a "Right Winger." I Left the religion of my childhood because it could be demonstrated to be a fraud. But I made a lot of mistakes in the way. And have always moved in the direction most likely to be true. First, I came into a Spanish speak-



Frank Grant with
Saint Athanasios,
his patron saint

speaking Protestant Mission, then for the next 20 or so years into the Southern Baptist association. I was asked to leave them because I wasn't onboard with their current mission scheme. It always seemed that if one wanted to share the Gospel, then that Gospel ought to be central. And the music in worship is merely supportive. Modern evangelicalism has that concept backward. Rather, currently they attract folks with a band and all kinds of attractions. Youth programs, social programs, concerts and whatever else church leadership can dream up which they use to draw people in in order to "reach them with the gospel" I was extremely reluctant to participate. And was asked to leave. So, I went over to the Lutherans. The Lutheran Church was different. WAAAY different. Crucifixes all over the walls, people making the sign of the cross. But the most interesting thing, these guys were really superstitious they actually believed that the Blood and Body of Our Lord was actually in the elements of Holy Communion. Furthermore, you weren't supposed to partake unless you were also of the same opinion. I was most definitely not in agreement with THAT idea.

While most Evangelical Protestants claim to live strictly by "Sola Scriptura," I have to this day never come across an argument from Scripture which refutes the notion of consubstantiality nor of transubstantiation, two nearly identical concepts: the idea that the Holy Communion is actually the blood and Body of Christ. Evangelicals will argue from a faith alone (Sola Fide) position, but that is merely in an effort to refute Catholic Synergism which they associate with Pelagianism. They insist that Salvation comes from faith without benefit of any kind of works, they can't afford to budge one iota on this. However, I don't know of any who don't believe that our Earth and solar system weren't created in an instant by the Word of God! They also insist that Jesus is God and has all the attributes of God. And if that is true it is ridiculous to believe that Jesus could say the words of institution without those words having effect. To claim that he didn't intend them in that way is equally unviable.

I couldn't disprove the Lutheran position from the bible alone, but neither could I at the time verify it. So I chose to simply take Jesus at his word. But this was also problematic! We served Communion only twice a month. An attempt to make it less "common." Yet if this truly were the Blood and Body of Christ, **why weren't we trying to get as much of it as we could possibly get?** By this time I'd given some thought to the dogma of "Sola Scriptura" and realized that Scripture simply doesn't support it. But that left another dilemma. If scripture isn't the final word what or who is? I give up!!

I'm calling a Priest.

I started out about as far on the left as any so-called Christian sect could get. But the fundamentalist that I am, I kept moving right until I couldn't go any farther right. You simply can't get any closer to biblical teaching than that afforded to us by Orthodoxy. That is what the English word "Orthodox" actually means. If Jesus actually did rise from death, and I'm convinced that He did, then I'm simply going to follow in the way prepared for us by the fellows (Apostles) which HE taught. The ever-unchanging Gospel brought forward through history and the historic Orthodox Church.

I also want to share with you that I love my Assumption Parish and all the people in it.



JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY ***by Philip Homan, Goldie Homan and Wilma Homan***

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church, December 20th, 2015
Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos

Journey into Orthodoxy—Philip Anthony Homan

On December 20, 2015, the Sunday Before the Nativity of the Lord, my mother, Wilma, my sister, Goldie, and I were all Chrismated into the Orthodox Church at Assumption Greek Orthodox Church in Pocatello. The Christmas pageant and Agape Fellowship meal that we enjoyed after Divine Liturgy both seemed planned just for us! As we stepped into the church hall for the meal, one of the longtime Greek-American members of the parish embraced us and said, “Welcome to our family!”

Goldie and I had been attending services at Assumption for some time. Although Mom became a Catholic only some years after marrying our father, Goldie and I were both raised Roman Catholic. Goldie had been an active member of St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Pocatello, while Mom, who still lived in the family home in Filer, in the Magic Valley, attended Mass at St. Edwards in Twin Falls.

I was working on a PhD in Theology at Fordham University in The Bronx, New York, majoring in Biblical studies. My dissertation research was on the theology and history of the Jewish Christians in Rome through the lens of Romans 14:1–15:13. Here in his letter, the Apostle Paul addresses the tensions between the so-called “weak” Jewish Christians and “strong” Gentile Christians, scolds them for judging each other, and tells them what they must do to celebrate together the Agape Fellowship, which is an integral part of the Divine Liturgy in Orthodoxy. My interest in, respect for, and defense of Judaism and Jewish Christianity earned me the nickname of “The Judaizer” among my colleagues in Fordham’s Theology Department!

At Fordham, I had a number of Orthodox friends and Catholic friends interested in Orthodoxy. We attended Divine Liturgy at St. Vladimir’s Seminary occasionally, and a fellow Fordham doctoral student, formerly a seminarian at St. Vlad’s and now an Orthodox priest in the Orthodox Church in America, gave me a copy of Bishop Kallistos Ware’s *The Orthodox Church* to read.

Moreover, my year’s study in Jerusalem at the Christian Center of Jewish Studies in the Ratisbonne Monastery and at Hebrew University sealed my love not only of Judaism but also of Orthodoxy. In fact, I visited St. Catherine’s Monastery twice and climbed Mount Sinai on the back of a bedouin camel the second time!

Throughout all these years, as I encountered the beauty of Orthodox Christianity, I grew increasingly dissatisfied with the Novus Ordo imposed upon the Roman Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. Therefore, when I returned from Israel to New York City, I began attending the Tridentine Mass at St. Agnes Church near Grand Central Station in Manhattan. The Mass was beautiful! The choir chanted in Gregorian chant the Ordinary of each Mass—that part of the Mass that remains the same each week, such as the Creed and Lord’s Prayer—and they sang Palestrina, Vivaldi, and Mozart Masses, among others, for the Propers—those parts that change each week. I didn’t know that Catholic liturgical music could actually be beautiful!

After I returned to Pocatello to take my current faculty position at Idaho State University, I wasn't happy at St. Anthony's or St. Joseph's, and Goldie wasn't, either. We therefore started attending a Tridentine Mass at a private chapel in Idaho Falls, where we met Brock Johns, now Father Seraphim of Assumption Greek Orthodox Church in Price, Utah. Goldie and I loved the Traditional Mass, made friends there, and were happy, but the chapel closed when the owner passed away, and our little Traditional Catholic community dissolved. At the risk of using an overused word, I now believe that Traditional Catholicism isn't sustainable.

With nowhere else to go, we started attending Divine Liturgy at Assumption in Pocatello. Although I was more familiar with Orthodoxy, Goldie was more acquainted with the Greek-Americans in Pocatello. We both grew to love the Divine Liturgy and the members of Assumption.

Nevertheless, in spite of our conversations about Orthodoxy with Fr. Seraphim, I still considered myself a Catholic in exile. It's not so much that I'd left the Catholic Church; the Catholic Church had left me. It seemed to me that by adopting the culture of late-twentieth-century America in order to become relevant, it had, in fact, made itself irrelevant. As the sign on my colleague's office door in the Fordham Theology Department said, "The Church That Marries the Spirit of This Age Will Find Herself Divorced in the Next Age."

Everything changed when we got a telephone call from Fr. Constantine asking us, basically, "What are you two waiting for?" Goldie was eager to join the Orthodox Church, so I followed, and Mom said, "You ain't leaving me behind!" Therefore, standing before the iconostasis in the sunlight coming through the stained glass windows of our Assumption Greek Orthodox Church, we were all Chrismated together on that December day of 2015.

The reason for my desire for Chrismation into Orthodoxy was not intellectual but rather aesthetic. I found in the Orthodox Church the unabashed beauty that used to be in the Catholic Church but that I could no longer find there. However, the beauty of Orthodoxy soon led me to appreciate the superiority of Orthodox theology, too.

Therefore, I've tried not to drag my former faith into my new Orthodox faith, as converts to Orthodoxy can tend to do. After all, I'm now Orthodox, no longer a Catholic. In fact, Orthodoxy made me appreciate the objections of Protestants with the Catholic Church.

Nevertheless, Catholicism and Protestantism are still two sides of the same coin, as Kallistos Ware says in his book. That made me mad when I first read it as a Catholic, but I see the truth of it as an Orthodox Christian.

Western Christianity seems so much to have all the answers that there's no need for faith. Nowhere have I encountered such honesty, humility, and generosity as I have in Eastern Orthodoxy. What other churches pray every week before Holy Communion, "I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Who didst come into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first"? Think about it! Every one of us acknowledges before God that we're "the first among sinners"!

Moreover, what other Christians pray every year, during Great Lent, with St. Ephrem the Syrian, "Yea, Lord and King! Grant me to see my own errors and not to judge my brother, for Thou art blessed unto the ages of ages"?

Only our Orthodox Church, I've found.

JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY by JONATHAN Harris

*Embraced the Orthodox Faith on December 31, 2020
Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church
Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos*

I came into Orthodoxy at the end of 2020, but my conversion is best understood knowing what came before it. I was raised Mormon in California and was taught the basics of Christianity through the Latter Day Saints lens. When I became a teenager, I learned more about the history and doctrines of the church I was raised in, and things began to feel uneasy for me. I realized then that the Latter Day Saints church may not be true, but that was not a conclusion I was hoping for, and intentionally avoided arriving at that conclusion for many years.

Shortly after starting college at BYU-Idaho (Brigham Young University), the facts I discovered became too overwhelming and I came to know with certainty that the Latter Day Saints Church was false in many of its core claims. I was devastated to learn this and became angry, feeling as though religion had lied to me. I immediately lost faith in God's existence, since I had associated belief in God with belief in the Latter Day Saints Church for so long.



Alongside my loss of faith came a deepening depression that had begun as a teenager. I saw the meaninglessness of a finite life without God, and felt in my core the words of Ecclesiastes "all is vanity". My depression worsened alongside my nihilism, and for years I was caught up in a narrative that I had some sort of genetic cause to my depression that would never cure. This thankfully was not the case, and I later realized that my depression was not caused by anything genetic, but by a hole in my heart that only God could fill.

At the beginning of 2020 I got a construction job in California. During this job I had an aging Coptic Orthodox coworker, and we began talking about Christianity as we worked with our hands. I pressed him with objections to Christianity both from an agnostic and Mormon perspective, but found his answers compelling, thoughtful, and impactful. I could clearly see his love for God and the seriousness with which he took his faith, and I realized that Christianity was more robust than I had previously thought.

He invited me to read the gospel of John, and doing so changed my life forever. I fell in love with God while reading that gospel. I called out to God as my Father and felt Him embrace me. Christ's teachings in that book were so different from what I thought they would be, and I came to believe that the Bible taught the trinity and gained a desire to be baptized.

As the lockdowns were beginning, the world was in a panic, but I fell into the bliss of having found God. I did not care if I died from a virus, and I did not mind that the world seemed to be collapsing around me. I had finally found peace in knowing that God was real and that he cared for me. Over the rest of the year, thanks to the free time caused by covid, I sank my teeth into the Bible, Christian history, and comparative theology. I saw how historic orthodoxy was and its connection to the earliest Christians, which led me to choose it over other forms of Christianity.

That year I found a wonderful Orthodox community in Temecula, California, and learned the basics of worship through attending church and making friends. I soon discovered a nearby monastery where I could work the land in exchange for meals and lessons in theology. I simply could not get enough of orthodoxy that year, and I am happy to say that was the year my depression vanished.

I was baptized on December 31, 2020, and it was the best day of my life up to this point. I felt as though I were walking on clouds and wrapped in God's love.

I have since found my way to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church in Pocatello, Idaho, where I continue in the faith as I learn and grow. Orthodoxy has helped me connect to Christ in a substantial and meaningful relationship, in large part due to practices, prayers, and sacraments in our church. I love the community here and the friends I've made, and I thank everyone who's looked out for me, given me advice, or helped me in any way. And of course, I thank God for loving me and guiding me throughout all of this.

Jonathan Harris

JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY by SCOTT EAMES

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church

Embraced the Orthodox Faith on March 12th, 2022

Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos



I was born and raised in Kirkland, Washington, a suburb of Seattle. As a youth, my mother began taking my brother and I to an LDS church just down the road. She was a member, of course, as was my father. He rarely attended services, but Mom was pretty devout. At the age of 9 (48 years ago) she had me baptized. That was my spiritual home, to some extent, for the next decade or so until I started questioning the validity of LDS doctrine as a young man of 22. I can remember distinctly in the past that various LDS individuals, family or otherwise, informed me that questioning the doctrine of the Mormon Church or reading about other religions and their beliefs could "open the door to letting Satan in." I don't believe this was an actual LDS church position, but the resulting impact made me wonder exactly why these well-intentioned people held such a closed-off mindset. This bothered me, among many, many, other issues that arose in my head about it all, and in response, I started to reduce my attendance and I eventually quit going altogether, unless there was a wedding or funeral. Time passed and I soon fell into complete unbelief, which left a gaping hole in my heart, one of emptiness and longing. I still believed in God, and I wasn't agnostic, but does/did He have a true church? What would this church look like? Is/was it even Christian - whatever that was supposed to mean? Frustrated, I left these questions in a back corner of my mind untouched for the next 20 years, until a series of personal events in my life changed everything.

A decade passed and I was living with my then girlfriend. We just recently had a baby boy (named Jack) together, but without going into the (now hazy) details of it, our relationship disintegrated. It wasn't an amicable parting of ways, and we pursued each other legally for custody of our son. It was heartbreaking and ugly, and in the midst of it, I, in the very worst decision of my life, allowed her and her new husband to take complete custody, and in his case, to adopt my son. I was a broken man, and I regrettably accepted terms that forbid any visitation, although I had done nothing to deserve it. After signing the legal papers, I immediately realized that I was wrong to do so, and there was no turning back. The sorrow that haunted me was unbearable and it was relentless. As time marched forward, the only way I could handle it was by letting myself fall into a grey, apathetic fog where I didn't care whether I lived or died. I wasn't suicidal, but that was my reality. I still lived, worked and functioned, but I kept my sorrow buried deep inside where no one could see it. I desperately wanted to find peace.

About 8 years later I found out that my former girlfriend had died of cancer. It hit me hard, even though we never saw each other again. My son was now being raised by a complete stranger. I had no way of reversing the past and becoming part of his life. What was I doing? Is this all that life is going to offer me? Turning away from what I couldn't control, I decided it was far past time to find God. I jettisoned what I had known and began reading about various religions to discover for myself what they had to offer. Someway, somehow, I was going to find peace, no matter what. To my surprise, I found myself drawn to Islam. At that time, and without going into a long-winded explanation of what Islam is, three elements about it appealed to me. First off, there seemed to be a direct connection with God and the believer. It was an organized, spiritual path that had many similarities with Christianity, but without all the confusion that I came across here in the West. Second, it was very ritualistic. I felt that this was something that God would have

set up in his religion. Finally, Islam seemed unchanged. The concept of timelessness was (and still is) important to me. After a fair amount of research that lasted a few years, I became a Muslim. I worshipped at a Mosque in Salt Lake City. I was relatively happy with it, and was a member for several years, but something bothered me, and it wouldn't leave me alone. Finally, I couldn't ignore it any longer and I left, never to return.

The Islamic concept of Jesus is simply that he is a prophet of God, but not divine in any way. For some reason I couldn't explain at the time, I started to disagree with that. My journey had to begin again, and after a few years of not finding what I was looking for, I threw up my hands and thought, "Maybe God doesn't have a church." But, as if out of nowhere, I recalled hearing about so-called "Eastern Catholics." I don't remember where I heard or read about them, but I did think that there might be something special I missed. Why I didn't look into it long ago has me scratching my head, even to this day. I ended up purchasing a book titled "The Mountain of Silence" by Kyriacos C. Markides. This book changed my life. I couldn't put it down, and it led me to buy book after book about Orthodoxy. I studied this faith on and off for around 10 years. I discovered then that this IS God's church. It had all the elements I wanted and then some. I also began praying Orthodox prayers at home and elsewhere. The peace and joy I experienced from it was unlike anything I ever attempted in the past. I knew I had found what I was looking for. But... there is more...

One day back in 2018, at a local Starbucks coffeehouse, I was quietly reading on my iPhone (probably about The Orthodox Church, I'm sure) when a woman pulled up a seat at my table and sat directly across from me. I was surprised to see she was the younger sister of my son's deceased mother, his aunt. I hadn't seen her for at least a decade. Smiling, she immediately began to tell me about Jack, my son — how he walks, talks, and looks like me... and that he wanted to meet me. My eyes teared up and I gave her my phone number to give to him. I couldn't believe it. I was (hopefully) going to finally meet my son... and as if God said to me, "Scott, you've suffered enough," Jack soon contacted me. We met at that very same Starbucks, and we hit it off. He's been a part of my life ever since.

How does getting back together with my son relate to my joining the Orthodox Church? I am absolutely convinced that God answered my prayers, and it has everything to do with those Orthodox prayers. Funny thing, I wasn't praying for myself. I was too ashamed to directly ask for anything. Still, God knew what I needed and He delivered. So many good things happened to me during that time, many of which I don't have words to explain. Why did he do this for me? I deserve none of it. Yet, he did it anyway. I get tears in my eyes every time I think about it. This left me with no choice. I contacted Father Constantine via email. I didn't know what to expect. He must have been sitting next to his computer or phone, because he wasted no time getting back with me. I was quickly typing my reply, but he beat me to it and called me first. The rest is history.

There is so, so, much more to this story... so much. The darkness and apathy are long gone. I have my son back. I met my beautiful wife Becky right here in this congregation (another beautiful story)! I was blessed to experience a wonderful Orthodox Christian wedding right here in this stunning church with the love of my life. I went from being a complete isolationist to feeling the love of a fellow body of believers in a church whose love seems to know no bounds. The Orthodox Church has given me so much more than I've given, and my journey just keeps going. The only difference is that it's within the light of God's church, not stumbling around in the dark. I've been so humbled. God is great!

ANNE SCHULZE - JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

*Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church
Embraced the Faith on November 3, 2024
Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos*



I was born in a traditional loving Austrian family in Portland Oregon and being the second generation in America, I came from a long line of devout Catholics. Our family was a bit like the Von Trapp Family in the Sound of Music. Regimented, yet I was given and exposed to all the comforts this world had to offer. My sisters and I attended Parochial Catholic school for our education, and went to church on Sundays, wearing our Sunday best, I thought my childhood was perfect.

I would say the Frank Sinatra song “I did it My Way” encapsulated my upbringing in its very essence. I lived Anne’s way of life and only Anne’s way. Essentially, I was living life by my passions, life was fun and exciting, and I didn’t want to miss out on any of it.

Fast forwarding a little after I graduated from High School, I was introduced to my future husband Bradley by a mutual friend. He just got out of the military, looking handsome and mischievous. I was drawn towards him as he came from a completely different walk of life than I originated from. My husband was raised by a single mother, in charge of bringing up three boys. She was not a believer of any sort, and neither were her sons. This unknown territory seemed adventurous. I was around people that had money all my life and they seemed so unhappy. In my mind I assumed that someone that didn’t have it must have been the opposite. At this time in my life my rebellious side had shown through and made itself more evident saying, “this man would never be truly accepted by my parents, and instead would prove as the perfect excuse for not going to that private college that I was destined for.”

Brad and I didn’t get married in the Catholic Church, and we did not even think twice about making that decision. My new life just begun and we settled down two years later, having our oldest daughter Melissa, who was born in 1993.

In 1997 we began our new journey to the last frontier, heading up to Juneau Alaska to experience a simpler way of life. Our son Karl was born in 1999, and we were not done exploring, so, we went to the remote town of Haines, Alaska, living outside of it seven miles from the British Columbia border. This was exciting to me. I always loved watching “Little House on the Prairie” as a kid. They seemed so happy.

We lived in Haines for fifteen years, living our dream. Being self-sufficient, cutting firewood, fishing and smoking salmon, making sure to can some for the winter. You could say we were preppers before it became popular. Our family grew and Matthew, Laura, and Valerie were born. This whole time I thought that everything seemed so wonderful. I thought I was in control of it all.

In 2010, on Thanksgiving Day, I found to my surprise I was living in a state of delusion. Brad was cleaning out the chimney of our house that was built on stilts. Sliding off of the roof, he fell 20 ft. landing on frozen hard ground, ultimately shattering both of his heels. At that moment, all of our lives

had changed. He had emergency surgery on both of his feet and ended up being out of work for two years. I started coming to my senses and realizing that I am not in control of anything. I had found this the most humbling of experiences. At that solemn moment in my life, when destitution and sorrow had taken hold of my very being, I cried out to Jesus to take over everything. I found my prayers answered almost instantaneously. There was a peace that came down upon me. It was something I had never felt before, unexplainable, and irrefutable, for I knew exactly where it came from, and I knew it was what I was searching for my whole life. After this moment I started confessing all of my sins. It would be a lie if I didn't say that there were many, and I hadn't the slightest idea where I was storing them all.

It was three days later when I opened the Bible for the first time, in a very long time. I simply could not put it down because I was so hungry for God's word. Life drastically slowed down from this point on. We moved out of Alaska in 2018, and came down to Idaho Falls, to be centrally located closer to family members in the lower 48. To this day my husband still works in Alaska for Hecla Mining Company, running the powerhouse. He flies back and forth every two weeks.

The children and I started attending Christ Community Church right down the street from our house. The children enjoyed the youth group, and we met a lot of nice people. I thought it very important that they preached directly from the bible.

I was introduced to the Greek Orthodox Church by my son Karl, who just recently got out of the military. He was introduced to Orthodoxy in his travels to Greece and Turkey. Karl then searched out the Greek Orthodox Church in Pocatello and invited me to visit for the first time in January 2024. As soon as I entered the church I saw that it was beautiful, and that it felt similar but in no means the same as the Catholic Church of my youth. I felt something special and desired to continue to attend and learn more.

After I had attended a couple of times and seen the vibrant iconography and listened to the divine chants and readings, I saw what true worship was for the first time. I knew that the Spirit of God was there, and I felt the Spirit draw me to the church, to the true gospel of Jesus Christ and I recognized the tie back to my most sincere prayer for help to Jesus, to guide us after my husband's accident.

OUR JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY by

Clarence (Gregory) (Baptized 2024) and Vivian (Paraskevi) (Chrismated 2007) Close

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church

Rev. Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Constantine A. Zozos



Our journey to Orthodoxy took two very different paths.

Vivian: I grew up in the Methodist church, in a very church- and Faith-focused family. Mother played the organ for services and my father was the treasurer. I sang in the choir from age 12 onward, and attended Methodist Youth Fellowship Sunday meetings and summer camps, as did my siblings.

When I married, I became Lutheran, following my husband's lifelong affiliation. As a couple, we were also church- and Faith-focused: I sang in the choir, my then-husband played the organ for services, and we participated in a Baroque instrumental music ensemble that played the offertory. We remained Lutheran until the Parish Council began changing the Liturgy.

My husband began researching the origins of the Liturgy to find evidence to stop the changes, and through following the history of the Liturgy and thus Christianity back to its origins, found the Orthodox church. We had never even heard of the Orthodox church before and were astounded at its very existence. We decided to attend a service at the nearest Orthodox church: Assumption in Pocatello.

When I entered Assumption the first time, I felt immediately that I was home. This really surprised me, considering the change from the plain, unadorned churches I had always attended, and the immediate beauty and formality of an Orthodox church and service: from there, it made so much sense, I never looked back. The authority of the Orthodox church, coming to us today directly and unchanged from the lifetime of Christ and the disciples, is undeniable and overwhelming. We began Catechism classes with Fr Elias, who came up from Salt Lake City once a month, as Assumption had no priest in residence at the time. Fr Elias Chrismated us in 2007, and I have been here ever since. In about 2016 or so, we bought a home here in Pocatello—we had been living and working in Idaho Falls for 40+ years at the time--so that we could be here on weekends, regardless of weather and road conditions--for services, and all week for Holy Week and Festival week, i.e., participate fully in the life of the church. We started the choir, and all was well until my then-husband declared he was divorcing me, completely blindsiding me. I had married at age 21 and been happily married for more than 50 years. I didn't know who I was without him, and it was the Assumption church--the care of the Lord through Fr Constantine and the support of our wonderful parishioners--that pulled me through this impossibly dark and difficult time. After I figured out who I really am as a single adult, I began going to a gym--knowing that as an elderly woman alone, with a big house, yard, and a Doberman which was necessary for me to sleep at night--I needed to be fairly strong physically, and there I met Clarence, starting a whole new life.

Clarence: When I was a child under my parents roof, until I turned 19, my exposure to Christianity

was minimal as my Father said "You can choose anything you want" so I was somewhat directionless. As a teen I was invited by my neighbor Clif and through him attended Methodist Youth Fellowship, and occasionally would go to church, but I do not recall anyone telling me about Jesus or salvation. I am sure there were messages on Sunday morning along with hymns but the day was more of a social event rather than a learning experience. In high school, for a year or so I attended church and fellowship with friends, still just walking on the edge of Christianity and not really understanding why I would need it in my life. Graduation came and our group of friends went in all different directions. After leaving the military, I renewed my friendship with two of my high school friends, Clif and Pat, who were examples in my life of believing Christians living their faith. I graduated from the university and after being a VISTA volunteer in Arizona using my degree in Architecture to some extent, I ended up working for the Environmental Research Lab where I met Rudy Grassley. This friendship began my first real exposure to a new Christian who was getting his life stabilized under his new-found faith, and seeing as how my life was a mess, I was intrigued, even to the point of going to The Church of Christ with him a few times. I traveled back to Oregon, visiting with a college buddy and his wife, where she loaned me a little book called "The Screwtape Letters" by C.S. Lewis, which I read through with interest. Funny how God brought things to me at my time of need, as He worked to nudge me, not necessarily in a straight line, onto His path.

I ended my job there and drove to my folk's home state while listening, really listening, to an old time radio preacher, J. Vernon McGee, as I traveled. I spent a few days under the roof of a Christian college buddy before I got my first job and apartment. He and his wife invited me to their church, a growing non-denominational church. My girlfriend and I decided to make the trip and attend. What we found was something we had never experienced: congregants loving one another and loving the Lord, who shared with us their faith. We continued to attend services and, through the prayers of the faithful, the guidance of the pastors and the demonstrable love and care of the congregation we found ourselves drawn to God's salvation. The year was 1980. Two years later we were married and continued to attend, studying, absorbing, participating as much as was offered as that God-sized hole in our hearts was filled with the only thing that fit.

We moved to Idaho for a business partnership in 1994 and for a time we tried a number of Christian churches in the Pocatello area, finally settling on another non-denominational church which taught from the Bible every Sunday. We also attended home Bible studies for years. Sadly, due to some physical and mental issues my wife chose not to regularly attend any services or Bible studies but I continued on, hungry to learn and grow in the Word, in more than one congregation. I prayed daily and read through my Bible, front to back over time. as I found myself spending alone time every morning due to my wife's late hours and growing ill health. Looking back, I can see now that other than my regular morning Bible readings, I was flat lining in my growth and just marching in place. The congregation are really great people, in love with the Lord and caring for each other, but I wasn't growing anymore.

A few years ago my wife of almost 40 years died and I became a widower. Strange thing, that word: I really never expected she would go first, but I had spent so many years taking care of her needs that without her I lost my purpose. What do I do now? What is my purpose? I didn't think I wanted to

make another run at marriage but I did ask God if He had something for me. Surprise, surprise! He did!

I had been attending the local gym since they opened their doors and was a regular there five days a week. I grieved for my wife and felt a loss in my life. Creating regular patterns in my life helped. After almost a year, being the friendly fellow I was, I nodded to this lady as she came into the gym with her friend for her thrice weekly exercise. Gradually, I became more comfortable, smiling and talking with her briefly. Vivian invited me to the Pascha Retreat last year and Presbytera Jeannie's presentation overturned a lot of my understandings of Christianity. Her discussion of Orthodox phronema and its implications and applications opened my heart and started me on a much deeper grasp of Christian Orthodoxy. During the lunch break, Father introduced me to Presbytera Jeannie, who asked me "So how did you come to Orthodoxy?" My simple reply to her was "Vivian." You see, I found that Vivian is a gentle spirit, caring of others, and a committed Christian. We both shared humor, experiences and an occasional meal, finding that time together was just what we craved. Over coffee, Vivian and I had mutual daily reading and discussion of "The Crucifixion of the King of Glory" by Presbytera Jeannie, significantly furthering my understanding of the depth of Orthodoxy. Also I started Catechism classes and the Bible study of the Divine Liturgy.

Vivian invited me to some Christmas and Lenten services at Assumption and I invited her to some services and special events at my church in return. After a time she offered to attend my Sunday church services for a couple of weeks, then I would attend her church services for the next two weeks, which seemed reasonable as we both had church family and were reluctant to leave either one. One day Father Constantine asked me if I could continue to go to my earlier church service and join Vivian at Assumption's Liturgy afterwards, as he needed her in the choir. Gradually, through attendance at Assumption, catechumen and Bible studies, conversations with Father and the love of my fiancée (yes, I proposed to her even though I had told her I wasn't going to get married again), I left my Nazarene church family and came full time into Orthodoxy. My previous devotion to "Sola Scriptura" has been modified by learning that there are additional sources of authentic historical information available through Orthodoxy that can direct and help us. Also we have the direct connection of the apostles and the unaltered practices and guidance that have come down to us today in Orthodoxy.

Clarence and Vivian: We continue to attend the catechumen classes, although we "graduated" long ago, because we are still learning about and deepening our faith together, and there is so much to learn that we can't absorb it all in one pass. The Bible study about the Divine Liturgy is also invaluable in this goal. Studying and praying together and discussing what we have read also help our understanding. For example, we are now working our way through Vol two of Elder Cleopas' "The Truth of Our Faith." We have a deep love for this Faith and those on the Orthodox path around the world, knowing that we are all worshipping in the same Truth and guidance kept for us through the centuries.

JOURNEY TO ORTHODOXY: EVAN MYERS

I was born in December of 1999 in Monroe, Washington, to a non-religious family. We never really talked about religion growing up, although my mother was into tarot cards, astrology, and that variety of “spirituality.”

When I was 7 years old, my mother got hooked on prescription drugs. As a result of this, my father left and was unable to gain custody of me and my older brother. Things quickly deteriorated, we lost our home and moved into my maternal grandmother’s house in Index, Washington. We ended up bouncing around various houses on Whidbey Island.

I don’t want to go into details, but my childhood ended up being quite rough, and a lot of bad things happened. As a result of these experiences, I hated God and became a militant atheist at a very young age. Getting introduced to marijuana and alcohol at age 12 didn’t help. It gave me a coping mechanism that ended up taking a grip over my life for years. I was overwhelmed by feelings of hatred for everyone and ended up becoming quite reclusive and antisocial: it felt as though I could not relate to anyone.

At age 15, my brother and I moved in with our dad, (at the time) stepmom and the revolving tribe of people who lived with them in Arlington, Washington. I finally started to open up a bit more and became more social in high school and made quite a few friends. While working on the apple orchards in Mattawa (Central Washington) over the Summer, I was forced by the orchard owner to attend his evangelical Protestant church. This was my first time ever entering a Christian church of any kind, and I was not convinced. Later, I started regularly attending another evangelical “non-denominational” church in Arlington in order to spend more time with a girl that I liked. Again, I was not moved at all and was still firmly atheist.

In 2018, upon graduating from high school, I was accepted into the University of Washington in Seattle, where my intention was to major in Physics or Neurobiology; however, I made the mistake of joining a fraternity. Instead of going to class and doing my homework, I preferred to day drink, skip class, and then continue drinking well into the night. This is also where I began to use nicotine far more frequently.

Once finals season rolled around, I knew I had irreparably damaged my academic performance (or so I thought), and therefore I decided to drop out. I was so disgusted with myself, I felt like such a failure, so I just wanted to disappear. Shortly thereafter, I contacted a Marine Corps recruiter and signed a contract to become an 06xx (the general designator for communications/radio), as I desired to become a Field Radio Operator (0621). I had read on the internet that radio operators had a very short life expectancy in combat, which was desirable for me at the time.



In basic training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, I started reading the New Testament regularly and attended the non-denominational services on Sundays. Funny how we usually only seek God once we're in a bad spot. At this time, I took a test called the Defense Language Aptitude Battery, which tests one's ability to acquire a new language. I received a high score and so was asked if I wanted to become a Cryptologic Language Analyst (linguist). They didn't tell me what this really entailed, but it sounded interesting, so I agreed.

Upon graduating basic training, I dropped the whole Christianity thing. Through combat training at Camp Pendleton, and language training in Monterey (where I learned Pashto), I didn't go to a single church service of any kind. During Signals Intelligence and Electronic Warfare training in San Angelo, Texas, however, I decided that the logical thing to do was to start practicing Germanic Paganism. This was the beginning of 2021, so the social and political climate was quite tense, and I identified Abrahamic religions as being problematic.

After nearly two-and-a-half years of training, I finally reached the Fleet Marine Force (the real Marine Corps) and was assigned to 2nd Radio Battalion in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Only a couple of months after getting to the Fleet, we started the evacuation from Afghanistan. I worked continuous language operations for two weeks (from the States), providing Indications and Warning support for troops on the ground. Then, suddenly, the war was over. My language was now useless, so I joined the Light Armored Vehicle - Electronic Warfare Platoon (LAV-EW); essentially, we operated these terrible eight-wheeled vehicles from the early 1980s outfitted with a bunch of expensive intelligence and radio gear.

It was here that my friend Nathaniel Bourque introduced me to Orthodox Christianity. I had known Bourque since language school, as he was a Spanish linguist. He had recently become a catechumen, and asked if I would like to join him at Divine Liturgy at the Orthodox Chapel on base (Saint Nicholas Orthodox Chapel in Camp Lejeune). It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I wasn't immediately convinced, of course, but I was definitely interested. The more I researched, the more I realized that this was the original Church, no question. I found out later that the original priest I met there was a Nestorian, but soon after he was replaced with a new priest (Father Ambrose, or Jeffrey A. Perry, a Navy Chaplain).

On Christmas night of 2021, while Bourque, a Mormon friend named Lucas and I were all on barracks duty, it finally clicked. I decided to embrace the Orthodox faith, and a couple months later officially became a catechumen. In Divine Liturgy, I felt a sense of peace that I had never experienced. It drove me to tears on quite a few occasions and still does out of nowhere.

By this time, Russia had invaded Ukraine, and in early May of 2022 I was sent to Europe to assist Task Force Dragon, headed by the Army's 18th Airborne Corps. Being so far from my home church, it made being a catechumen exceedingly difficult. I attended one Liturgy at a Greek church in Wiesbaden, Germany, during my 7 months in Europe, but that was it. I did far too much drinking and fighting, as was usual for me, and began to experience intense spiritual warfare: shadowy figures that would appear as I attempted to sleep. These plagued me until I moved out here to Pocatello, and placed icons of the Theotokos, Saint Paisios of Mount Athos, and Saint Gabriel Urgebazde in my bedroom.

After returning home, I continued to attend Catechesis and was baptized by Father Ambrose on

I've learned is that God will allow you to fall as many times as is necessary for your salvation.

In late November of 2023, I was honorably discharged, having served my five-year contract. Washington State had banned most of my guns, so I decided to move to Idaho. At that time, my intention was to become a CNC Machinist, and Idaho State University was the only university in Idaho offering such a program; additionally, I wanted to live somewhere with an Orthodox church, and thankfully Pocatello was home to our lovely parish. Even though I ended up in the Mechanical Engineering program instead, I am still happy to be here.

I am truly blessed to have this community and have attempted to make it the cornerstone of my life here in Pocatello. All of you make this my home.

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30).

THE BLACK'S JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY by Brandon Black,

November 2024

***Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church,
Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Father Constantine A. Zozos***

***The Black Family: Brandon (St. Jerome), Melissa (Mary the Theotokos), their children
August (St. George), Buchanon (St. John Chrysostom), and Juniper (St Sophia).***



Our move to the quiet streets of Rigby, Idaho in 2018 was our big push to flee the depraved carnival of Reno, Nevada; to put down roots and raise a family. We knew the region was heavily populated by Mormons, which was fine by us, as we knew they made great neighbors and we even threw around the idea of becoming Mormon. While faith was in the back of our minds, our journey into Orthodoxy began when we gave up on organized religion.

Melissa and I were both raised in the central valley of California. Despite an eight-year age difference, we found a common thread of shared careers and similar local experiences on which to build our relationship. One element we didn't have in common was our religious history. She was raised as something we jokingly call a “Basic Christian”- meaning, when asked about her faith, she would answer “I believe in God.” and that would be the extent of it.

Unlike her, I was baptized and raised in a Methodist home. My family went to church every Sunday. What I remember about Methodism was being bored and not understanding why I had to dress up in too-tight corduroy pants to sit around stuffy people who were unnaturally friendly. It all seemed perfunctory and I hated it. I also hated that my family would spend all week outside of church engaged in a variety of abuses and criminality that ultimately blossomed into divorce. A couple years after my family withered away, I witnessed our Pastor boldly perform a same-sex marriage that detonated our congregation. This was in the mid-90's, and that was the last straw for me. At age 12, I refused to attend any longer and proudly thought that I'd freed myself of stifling hypocrisy. The reality was I cast myself adrift in an ocean of hedonism and nihilism, following any “spiritual” wind (mostly evil) that caught my sails. Roughly 30 years of spiritual truth seeking passed in this way; culminating in a strict adherence to Atheistic Rational Philosophy- the belief that reason and evidence are the primary sources of knowledge and that spirituality was irrelevant to a happy life. And that's what I brought into my relationship with my young wife.

We embraced the idea that modern psychological theory could sufficiently explain away the irrational, or even sinful, behaviors we'd engage in. The questions of creation and afterlife became moot as they were beyond our concerns in daily life. Spiritual perspectives were unprovable and therefore anecdotal... so they could be ignored. We were satisfied with ethics and morality, arrived at through evidence and rational discourse. Killing, rape, and theft were objectively bad for humanity and that knowledge was good enough. Building self-esteem through mental health was of primary importance. We'd replaced God with clever argumentation and, so doing, we reasoned ourselves out of anything transcendental. That worldview worked until we became pregnant.

Humility entered our lives when we realized we didn't want our children to inherit spiritual

emptiness. Love became something more than our “involuntary response to virtue in others” when we looked into our first son's eyes and felt the scary-deep, vulnerable love parents are often inspired to have for a child's mere existence. We'd glimpsed Christ's love for us in our love for our child. We turned back toward Christ when we saw what we'd been trying to do all along: to be Christian without Christ.

A grand parade of local Catholic churches and Protestant denominations ensued as we attended all the services we could manage. The Mormons love-bombed us relentlessly and we were nearly recruited. The prohibition of coffee, the endless busy work of a high-demand religion just to maintain Temple worthiness, and mandatory tithing to a multi-billion-dollar organization were enough to ward us off. We finally gave up on finding a church home when we attended Watersprings Church in Idaho Falls one Easter and we heard the Pastor in his sermon encourage the faithful to “... come on into church even if you've just smoked a joint! (laughs, applause) and don't worry about your loud kids. If they get out of hand, just whoop on them a little bit... Pastor says it's okay! (more laughs, applause) and that will straighten them out... We want you HERE being SAVED!” Much of what we saw in a variety of churches wasn't love. It was irreverent, felt spiritually empty, and seemed to serve egos and church finances. None of it made sense and it felt like we were being played.

Decisively finished with church, we resigned ourselves to prayer and Bible reading at home. It was a visit from an old friend who unexpectedly brought up their interest in the Eastern Orthodox faith that held the key for us. We already knew of the church in Pocatello, but questioned who in their right mind would drive an hour, both ways, every Sunday to attend what was likely to be more of the same hollow let-down? I believe the Holy Spirit acted on our behalf that day, inspiring our friend to bravely and lovingly deliver His message of Faith and Wisdom at a time when we'd abandoned hope. Glory to God, we heard the message through our apathy. My dear friend explained to me the pre-biblical history of the Ancient Church, the purpose of Christian life being Theosis-that “God became man so that man might become God through Grace.” and the spiritual value of asceticism. In the light of these revelations, a hour drive no longer sounded so bad.

I knew immediately on a gut level that Orthodoxy presented a truth about life and Christianity that I'd wandered the wilderness in search of for decades. To this day, the more I learn about our ancient faith, the more it all makes sense. Orthodoxy is the place where the full truth of our Christian Faith is nurtured. Orthodoxy is where we are free to ask ANY question of our faith and find a suitable, honest, and wise answer. Orthodoxy is where God's love and plan for us can be clearly understood and fully experienced. Orthodoxy is where our souls can find rest and work toward refinement. We knew we had found a church home after our first Divine Liturgy. For the first time in our lives we look forward to worshiping as often as possible and growing with our church family. My wife and I are confident that we're endowing our children with the priceless lifelong gifts of Faith, Hope, and Love.

Over these past six years, our parish has had an influx of families and individuals migrating from the Northwest and California. We have also been blessed with many who have come seeking the Historic Christian Church, and thus found themselves here in Southeastern Idaho and the parish of the Assumption. Once a month, The Epistle will feature a family or individual who has embraced the Faith and how they came to Orthodoxy.

***JOURNEY TO ORTHODOXY: NATE MOUNTAIN
EMBRACED THE ORTHODOX FAITH OCTOBER 18th, 2025.***

My journey to the Orthodox faith began about three years ago. Like many, I had zero interaction and awareness of Orthodoxy until I found it online. In my case, through a Facebook group which had formal debates with different members defending their denomination of Christianity, I was first introduced to the early church fathers. At the time, I was and had always been active in the LDS faith. Whether politics or religion or any other topic, I have always enjoyed a friendly debate, and had found debating was a practical way to test if my beliefs could hold under some pressure.

Long story short, the early church fathers were a source and topic that I had no experience with, they were a whole new library from which I could inform my faith. Somehow I had not heard of these pious men, such as St. Polycarp of Smyrna, St. Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus, St. Ignatius, St. Clement of Rome, and others. I was particularly interested in the fathers found in the generation after the apostles. Their closeness to the apostles and the early ministry of Christ was fascinating to me. I wanted to believe what they believed, I wanted to understand Biblical passages as they did, I wanted to worship how they worshiped.



It was truly eye opening reading the letters of these fathers for the first time. The devotion they gave to the faith often sealed with their own lives, their steadfastness in preserving and teaching the faith, and the incredible uniformity of their teachings all impacted me greatly. There were particular doctrines such as the Real Presence in the Eucharist, the role and need of the Episcopate, among others that really stuck out to me. Their writings opened up the Bible in an incredible way. Passages that I had understood one way began to have a whole new meaning. These beliefs led me to begin to realize the claims of Holy Orthodoxy, that the church has preserved and guarded the fulness of the faith and kept it pure through the ages since Christ's ministry, might actually be true and legitimate. This was a very captivating time reading these church fathers, but also a perplexing time as I tried to discern what all this new information meant for my own faith.

After some time of continued reading and research, I decided to attend my first Divine Liturgy. From the moment of entering the narthex, something stirred in my soul. To be honest, I walked in the church hoping to see something obviously incorrect, so that I could dismiss this predicament I found myself in. That way I could remain in the faith tradition of my upbringing, find a way to make the church fathers fit that theology, as that would be incredibly more convenient. How foolish I was.

Despite how foreign and different the iconography, incense, and chanting was to me, I felt at home. It felt like my soul could take a deep breath and be at peace in a way that I was not expecting and had never experienced before. Much of the Liturgy was a blur as it was so much to take in. But I can vividly remember hearing the chanters sing "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal have mercy on us" for the first time. Something about that hymn struck deep and was unforgettable. I knew I was witnessing worship of God and my heart longed to participate.

A few months after this visit, it was Holy Week. I knew very little at the time about Lent or how Pascha was celebrated in Orthodoxy, but I had heard about the unique services during Holy Week. Luckily I was able to make it to a few of the services that year which were all memorable, but the Matins of Good Friday was particularly meaningful. At the time, crossing myself and venerating icons were still very new to me. The prospect at the end of the service of venerating the icon of the crucified Lord was a bit daunting. But I decided to give it a go. That was the clincher for me. Everything still felt foreign and new. But I remember realizing that I had encountered the Lord Jesus Christ in a way I never had before. And I wanted more of that.

Another moment that was extremely impactful was discovering the Jesus Prayer. It seems so simple, only a few words. But for me it was an answer to many pleas of my soul in previous experiences of my life. There had been many episodes of my life where my prayer life was not at all what it needed to be, and I always struggled with how to overcome that obstacle. The Jesus Prayer was the answer I had been looking for. If I did not know what to pray for, or my mind wondered as I attempted to pray and became distracted, or if I had a thought that I could not find the words to express, or to combat an intrusive temptation, the Jesus Prayer was incredibly impactful. Upon this discovery I realized not only did Orthodoxy have the historical answers to the questions I had, but it was directly impacting my walk with Christ.

I ended up going through catechism class a couple times as I was discerning when to be baptized. My wife, and both sides of our families are LDS. As I began to share my journey with them, it was quite the surprise and shock to some of them. I am ashamed to say I attempted to engage in theological debates with some of them, attempting to help them see what was clear to me, but as you could imagine, that was not particularly effective. Lesson learned.

I wanted to have my wife's blessing if possible and be able to work out the details of potentially having a home and a marriage that is split in faith traditions. It was a challenging time, as I desperately wanted to participate in the sacraments of the Church but also wanted to be patient and mindful of my spouse. After a period of prayer and many late night discussions, the time came when my wife endorsed my choice to get baptized. I am very grateful for her support. She joins me frequently for Liturgy and is currently discerning where God intends her to be.

During this time Father Constatine was patient with me as I frequently bombarded him with various questions about the Orthodox faith. He has always been a very helpful guide and a great source of encouragement. He also can attest to my stubbornness, as he experienced it first hand with my desire to be baptized by immersion. That had never been done in all the years of Father baptizing converts. I do not know how many times I asked him, "Well, can I be there first?" but it was not an insignificant amount. Father could have easily brushed my desire aside as the mode has no impact on the validity of the baptism. However, he agreed to make that happen for me which was an act of kindness I will always be grateful for.

As my baptism approached I was incredibly excited. The parish here from the very beginning was very welcoming to me and my family and I have become great friends with many here. I looked forward to officially joining the family that had welcomed me in. I will never forget the day of my baptism and chrismation. Everything I had experienced and gone through in my life seemed to have led up to this moment. Similar to experiencing a Liturgy for the first time, there was much to take in. But there really are not adequate words to describe the experience besides it was the best decision I have made in my 32 years of life. For those who are looking into Orthodoxy, there will be obstacles in your way of joining the Body of Christ. But whatever they are, participating in the Sacraments are worth whatever the sacrifice may be.

Over these past six years, our parish has had an influx of families and individuals migrating from the Northwest and California. We have also been blessed with many who have come seeking the Historic Christian Church, and thus found themselves here in Southeastern Idaho and the parish of the Assumption. Once a month The Epistle will feature a family or individual who has embraced the Faith and how they came to Orthodoxy. '

**JACOB DENTON'S JOURNEY INTO ORTHODOXY by Jacob Denton,
Embraced Orthodoxy-March 23, 2024
Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Greek Orthodox Church,
Protopresbyter of the Ecumenical Throne Father Constantine A. Zozos**



Jacob Denton with Sponsor
Jonathan Harris

My story isn't anything crazy or even all that scholarly as I didn't come out of initial research because Orthodoxy was the "True Church." I actually came first as someone filling an obligation to a significant other. It sounds strange but I came because my girlfriend invited me. After we had split up I started attending to try and see and talk to her again because of how big the hole in my heart was. I really was just lost, angry, and heartbroken, I wasn't able to navigate anything as I should have, I led with my heart that was already broken and I continued to break it, but I broke my Savior's heart far more. I kept distancing myself from God but I still went to Church hoping that I would see the woman. It would be in vain, and I was left empty more and more. After some time though, things began to click into place, and I started seeing Holy Orthodoxy on my social media pages without seeking them out, Father Spyridon Bailey was really my first experience with online Orthodoxy, and he guided me so much in the spiritual aspects of the faith, the general questions I had were being answered by other priests on "Roots of Orthodoxy" and apologetics were there as well. The more I learned the more I started to enjoy the faith and knowing more about it.

I started to listen to the "Bible in a Year" podcast with Father Mike Schmitz, and the Old Testament started making sense. I would listen to the prayers and novenas of the Roman church and would generally just get a little closer bit by bit. After an experience I had as a "look how this will help you," drug I began going further and further into Orthodoxy just because of how terrible that experience was, and it drove me deeper and deeper into prayer and things, eventually leading me to having my first ever prayer book (thank you Steven) and I would continue to struggle, doubt, and stumble my way into catechism and when the time actually came for baptism I initially declined because I saw myself as "unready." My unreadiness was because I was heartbroken and didn't understand how to use the feelings I was carrying. When Orthodoxy finally, truly clicked for me was at, of all places, a Roman Catholic Mass. The Christmas service was held late in the night and the church was encompassed by four massive white walls and silence. The altar was a cloth covered table that faced the people, the crucifix hung above the priests as they began the prayers for the service. As I sat in the front row with my mother and older brother, I completely blanked out, the liturgy was going through my mind constantly, hearing the Kyrie Eleison of the Liturgy against the quiet and uniformed prayers of the church I sat in was something I couldn't describe. The feeling and desire for Christ in the place I had seen His body grew more and more, and I hadn't felt that way about the Liturgy before. It was just a place I went in order to try and see a girl, and that bench next to my family was the place where it became the place I needed to be because Christ was there. Whatever emptiness I had felt before that moment was gone because I now knew where Christ was, and where he would offer me His Body and Blood for me of all people, a sacrifice so grand that I couldn't help but burst into tears right then and there.

Father Constantine pulled me into his office in about February of 2023 after a half a year of Catechism and asked me, "are you ready to be baptized?" I replied back quickly, "Father, I don't think I'm ready." He looked at me in almost confusion, and asked "why?"

"I don't think I'm ready Father." Father looked even more confused, "are you not committed?" I felt ashamed immediately because I never really told him why I was there. "That's the thing, I think I'm committed but I just don't know." Father laughed slightly and told me, "if you aren't committed then why have you come to catechism?" I thought about it and I couldn't answer him. I left and went back home thinking about what he had said. Eventually Father told me that I was ready to be baptized, and despite my initial objection, Father calmly told me that I was ready. So when he asked me about who my patron saint was to be he said, "you'll be baptized as Prophet Jacob of the Old Testament." I quickly corrected Father (to my detriment) that I wanted to be baptized under Saint Joseph the Betrothed. Father looked at me and with a calm gentleness, smiled and told me while nodding his head, "Prophet Jacob of the Old Testament." I left a little confused but also understanding that Father probably wanted a name he could remember so I just stuck with it.

By this time I was already acclimated with some of the parishioners and I had been invited to someone's house for fellowship. So I went, it was a really nice time getting to pray with everybody and enjoy some food and talk with people who are FAR more knowledgeable than me. The one thing that kept catching my eye though was an icon of an angel, the angel wore white and blue robes with its hands crossed over its chest. In the halo of the icon there were seven thorn shapes, there were four blue ones that formed an "X" shape around the head of the angel while three of them were bright red. The tallest of the red thorns went up while the other two went out to the sides. I asked after contemplating it for a minute, "what's this icon?" The person whose house I was at stood up and came over to observe which one I was seeing, he pointed at it, "that one?" I answered yes quickly. "That's the Angel of Great Counsel," I sat confused for a moment because I had no idea what he was talking about. "Do you know the story of Jacob?" A chill shot down my spine quickly, "yeah?" I asked quietly. "This is the Angel that Jacob wrestled with, when he said, 'I've seen the face of God,' this is what he was talking about. This isn't just an angel, this is a prefigurement of Christ." That statement immediately sent me searching. I began reading about the Prophet Jacob, working through his story, while thinking about how horrible he was to those around him, especially Rachel and Esau. I started listening to "Bible in a Year," again so I could figure out what was going on, and when I heard that the story of Jacob and Esau was the first example of forgiveness in the entirety of scripture it blew my mind. For me this was enough of a sign, and so I continued on my journey.

The night before my baptism though, I was struggling a lot with having Prophet Jacob represent me, because I wanted to be anybody but myself. I rotted in my bed that night, scrolling through videos on Instagram when I had the thought, "I don't think I could be Prophet Jacob of the Old Testament." A video came onto my feed with no likes, no shares, no comments, not even a title, I thought it was weird, especially because it was a clip of Jordan Peterson (a modern philosopher) whom I don't watch and most times ignore. The clip starts out like this, "When Jacob is wrestling with God that's worship, that's true worship, that's why he's awarded the name Israel." I couldn't break the smile that practically forced my lips apart from pure joy and love. Jordan continues, "he's the leader of the chosen people because he wrestles with God. So, that's a mana for the suffering. Because it means that if you're genuinely suffering then God's there, in your grasp, right there with you. That's a good way of thinking about it. Everyone wrestles with God, now the question is in what spirit should you wrestle with God? I would say remember who you're wrestling with, have a little humility, or a lot... plenty, enough to strip you of your deadwood." I wept at these words and laughed. Each laugh was forcing more of me out of myself, all I could say was "thank you" each and every time I was able to work up some kind of word to express my gratitude. Any doubt I had was forcibly melted away, making a place for gratitude and thankfulness day on to take over. I was baptized the following March 23, 2024