

KOINONIA: A Publication of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- Discovering the Deep Well
By Fr. Eric G. Tosi 1
- Finding the Well
By Connor John DeFehr 2
- Finding the Right Well
By Aaron Thomas 3
- Drinking from the Well:
Excerpt from a Conversation
with St. Seraphim of Sarov 4

Discovering the Deep Well by Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

“Orthodoxy not only invites us to inner beauty, but strives toward beauty of form for the entire life of the Church and of all the faithful. Of course, this external beauty has an inner meaning and impels us in turn toward that which is spiritually beautiful.”

– Professor Serge Verhovskoy

As we continue in these issues of *Koinonia*, we examine stories of people intentionally coming into the Orthodox Church, often after a long search. These stories are not unfamiliar to growing parishes; but they should inspire us to not only understand what compelled these searchers to seek the Church, but ask ourselves: how deep is our own faith?

As we go through these stories throughout the year, we need to find the common link between them all – because they point to what we should be presenting and doing in our own parishes. These journeys provide a powerful glimpse into what outsiders see as they seek the Church. but also allow for our own reflection on how deliberately we prepare for



newcomers. What are we doing to welcome them, and to strengthen *our own life* in the Church?

These new converts’ stories show us that they came to our churches seeking an unchanging theology rooted in the original Christian experience, and a depth and beauty of worship that is consistent with the depth and beauty on the pages of that ancient theology.

For many inquirers, the first critical steps started when they realized that the worship they were experiencing in other traditions lacked the richness they sensed was possible. And this “missing link” prodded them to seek something else, something that would fulfill the

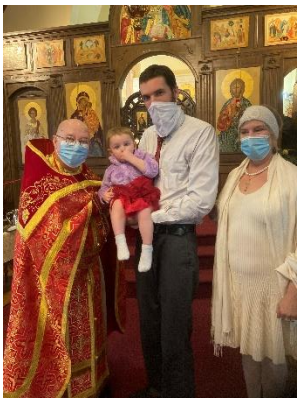
very deepest desire found in each person.

St. Prosper of Aquitaine coined the much-quoted phrase in the 5th century, “*Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*”: That which is prayed is that which is believed and that which is lived. So, what we as Orthodox pray, say, believe and do is critical in how others see Orthodoxy! It is precisely when someone sees this consistency that they discover a well far deeper than they could ever have imagined. They gaze down into that well, seeing more depth ... yet that same deep well always brings the person back to the surface, where they learn to live out the Faith that they have discovered within the family of the Church.

Finding the Well

By Connor John DeFehr

St. John the Baptist Church, Rochester, NY



Chrismation of Connor John and daughter Jovie Christine DeFehr, with Fr. Ken James Stavrevsky and Godmother Jan VanDuyn, December 27, 2020

“Be constantly seeking Christ and thus naturally overflow with Christ into other people’s lives.”

Before I became Orthodox I was a Southern Baptist pastor, leading worship, using many marketing tactics to attract people to the church I was serving. As a pastor at the time, I had a nagging feeling that there was more to the spiritual life that Christ offered His Church; I just had to find the right Church. So I went head first, immersing myself in different denominations to try and find something that would bring further transformation, but all of the cisterns would only run so deep before there wasn’t anything more they could offer. Despite piecing together a quilt of positive aspects from each denomination, I felt lost by the lack of depth and solutions to my inner struggles.

When I first entered an Orthodox church, the priest was at the front. It was an evening service, but they were having Communion. I had heard that you could receive a blessing by going up even before being chrismated, so I did that.

At the front, before the chalice, the priest asked if I was Orthodox. I said that I was not, and he blessed me with the chalice. At that moment, I definitively knew, “There is grace in that chalice,” and felt a presence that was humbling. It was

not contrived, as I had experienced in other traditions’ services.

I started my pursuit of Orthodoxy intellectually, looking online and in Orthodox theology books, despite pursuing a master’s degree at a Protestant seminary. I thought, “I’ll just maintain Orthodox theology in a Protestant Church.” Before long, I realized that I needed to get my theology from the original interpreters of Scripture – the Fathers of the Church. I used the Fathers to discern what to take from my courses and what to discard. By the end, I realized I could no longer in good faith put on the mask of Protestantism.

Orthodoxy is the only place where I found the same level of seriousness that Christ demonstrates in the Gospels. I was intellectually convinced enough to begin following pious practices: to acquire some icons, wear a prayer rope, say the Jesus Prayer, etc. These practices changed my level of openness for the better. A pastor gave me an analogy, “Many of us go through ministry getting filled by God and pouring out that water elsewhere.” But the ideal way, he said, was this: He put a glass of water into a large bowl and poured a pitcher

of water into the glass. The water overflowed into the bowl. He said, “Be constantly seeking Christ and thus naturally overflow with Christ into other people’s lives.”

What drew me to Orthodoxy, beyond intellectual study and arguments, were the examples of holy people – people who embodied Christ, whose prayers for me were powerful. It was not that they “argued” for Orthodoxy, but first and foremost their hearts were on fire, seeking God in prayer so that they could embody Christ.

These were people whose love for Christ and others fulfilled everything they said about Orthodoxy, sharpening what they said because it came from loving souls. As Solomon would say, “If the iron is dull and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom brings success” (Ecclesiastes 10:10).

Through the prayers of the Mother of God and all the Saints, may Christ enable us to open our hearts ever more fully to Him, shining His light through our lives as an example of the transformative power of our Faith.

Finding the Right Well

By Aaron Thomas

St. Basil the Great Church, Watervliet, NY

I grew up in suburban Connecticut with my parents, who were raised as Roman Catholics, but became evangelical Protestants in their twenties. When I was born, they were attending an Episcopal church, where I was baptized. Soon after, we joined a United Methodist church. We attended regularly and were involved with youth fellowship, retreats, mission trips, etc. I was fine with participating in activities, but I didn't take much of it very seriously. My religion was in fantasy books: the *Narnia* books, *Lord of the Rings*, and Madeleine L'Engle's stories spoke to me more than what I experienced in church, and I often would fantasize about living in those worlds instead of the real one. God seemed closer and more interesting in those stories than in the real world, which seemed totally devoid of enchantment.

After graduating from high school, I went to college, and I abruptly ended my involvement with the church. I devoted myself to animation and filmmaking, which was my main interest and major. However, by the time I earned my degree, I felt burnt out, and I had little interest in pursuing a career in animation. My life was aimless for several years, but I would keep going back to C.S. Lewis and Tolkien. This was the one remnant of Christianity that I held onto for many years. I thought that nothing in the real world

could match up to these stories, that real-life Christianity was stale and lifeless. The gulf between what I loved about those books and what I experienced was too great, and I felt it was not possible to really encounter anything holy or sacred or transcendent outside of books.

After a few years of wandering, I ended up getting into organic farming, which I pursued with the same passion as I had once devoted to filmmaking. Like before, it seemed that I was finding fulfillment. But after a few years, the initial excitement faded away. I had a strong feeling that I was missing the main point of life, that time was running out, and I was drifting further out to sea.

Around this time, I became interested in Perennialism. Perennialism is very intellectual, and after a year or two I felt I couldn't just keep reading about tradition. At the same time, I started to notice that Orthodox Christians were popping up around me. A columnist I was reading at the time happened to be Orthodox. I was also enjoying listening to a podcast about J.R.R. Tolkien that turned out to be hosted by an Orthodox priest. I remember listening to the Divine Liturgy on internet radio for the first time, and it felt like something that had been frozen inside of me started to melt. Could it be that the One Whom I had loved only in stories is actually real?

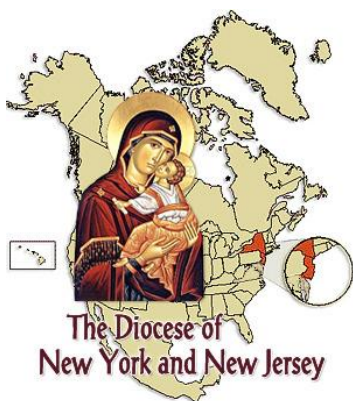
I felt like I had to go to an actual church, that I couldn't put it off any longer. So I went to an Anglican church at first. It was more familiar to me. I was still learning about Christianity and the history of the Church, and when I came to understand that the Orthodox Church is still faithful to the traditions passed down from the Apostles, it was hard to ignore. For a long time I was intimidated by the different ethnic churches. Would they even speak English? What if I did something wrong and made a fool of myself? Would they ask me if I'm Russian or Greek? I have one Arab grandfather, but I definitely can't pass as an Arab. Once I got over my fears, I finally found a parish to visit. The services seemed complicated and overwhelming, but there was a sense of holiness and attention to God that struck me.

After a few weeks, the priest approached me and talked to me about the process of becoming a catechumen. Soon after, I was made a catechumen, and we had regular meetings. It was very helpful to meet one on one with my priest, because I could ask him anything I wanted, and I didn't feel like I was being rushed into anything, but I could take as much time as I needed. These experiences helped show me how Christ is a concrete reality in this world and not a fantasy, but that He is humble enough to use fantasy to draw me to His Church and ultimately to Him.



Chrismation of Aaron Thomas, with Father Peter Olsen and Godfather Chris Hartford, June 26, 2021

"I remember listening to the Divine Liturgy on internet radio for the first time, and it felt like something that had been frozen inside of me started to melt. Could it be that the One Whom I had loved only in stories is actually real?"



Diocese of New York and New Jersey

His Eminence
 Archbishop Michael
 33 Hewitt Avenue
 Bronxville, NY 10708

Phone: 914-779-6580
Fax: 914-779-6581

Commission on Missions and Evangelism

Archpriest Eric G. Tosi, DMin
 1500 Route 376
 Wappingers Falls, NY 12590

Phone: 845-462-3887
Cell: 516-314-0836
Email: egtosi@gmail.com

We're on the Web!
<https://www.nynjoca.org>

Drinking From the Well

Excerpt from a Conversation with St. Seraphim of Sarov

"The Lord has revealed to me," said the great elder, "that in your childhood you had a great desire to know the aim of our Christian life, and that you have continually asked many great spiritual persons about it."

I must admit that from the age of twelve, this thought had constantly troubled me. In fact, I had approached many clergy about it; however, their answers had not satisfied me. This could not have been known to the elder.

"But no one," continued St. Seraphim, "has given you a precise answer. They have said to you: 'Go to church, pray to God, do the commandments of God, do good—that is the aim of the Christian life.' Some were even indignant with you for being occupied with such profane curiosity and said to you, 'Do not seek things which are beyond you.' But they did not speak as they should. Now humble Seraphim will explain to you of what this aim really consists.

"However good prayer, fasting, vigil and all the other Christian practices may be, they do not constitute the aim of our Christian life. Although it is true that they serve as



the indispensable means of reaching this end, the true aim of our Christian life consists of the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ's sake, they are only means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God. Mark my words, only good deeds done for Christ's sake bring us the fruits of the Holy Spirit. All that is not done for Christ's sake, even though it be good, brings neither reward in the future life nor the grace of God in this life. That is why our Lord Jesus Christ said: 'He who does not gather with Me scatters' (Luke 11:23). Not that a good deed can be called anything but gathering; even though a deed is not done for Christ's sake, it is still considered good. The Scriptures say: 'In every

nation he who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to Him' (Acts 10:35). ...

"That is it, your Godliness. Acquiring the Spirit of God is the true aim of our Christian life, while prayer, fasting, almsgiving and other good works done for Christ's sake are merely means for acquiring the Spirit of God. ...

"Acquiring is the same as obtaining ... Do you understand, what acquiring money means? The aim in life of ordinary worldly people is to acquire or make money ... The acquisition of God's Spirit is also capital, but grace-giving and eternal."

From "Nicholas Motovilov's Conversation with St. Seraphim", available online at: <https://orthochristian.com/47866.html>