



TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF CONVERSION

by Fr Alexander Garklavs

The history and character of the Orthodox Church in America has been defined by conversion. Orthodoxy in America began as missionary activity in Alaska. Later, conversions of Eastern Rite Roman Catholics brought about the establishment of numerous Orthodox parishes. North American heterogeneity has made mixed marriages common and many conversions have occurred to conform to a spouse's religious practices. Indeed, our parishes are filled with good parishioners who are there only because they married an Orthodox person. There have also been spiritual and intellectual seekers of genuine Christianity who have found the answer in Orthodoxy. During the past thirty years or so, we have seen several different *en masse* "movements" become Orthodox. There has also been an emergence of a "convert syndrome," which has less to do with spiritual life than with cultural and external manifestations.

In Eastern Europe today conversion has become a complicated issue. The good news is that there are successful conversions, bringing back to the Orthodox Church hundreds of thousands of people who were formerly restricted by atheistic regimes. When confronting similar efforts by Roman Catholics and other Western Christians, conversion to Orthodoxy becomes a principle of ethnic identity. This is not altogether bad, if conversion provides a maturational environment for spiritual growth; but deeply ingrained nationalistic sentiments often preclude a healthy spirituality.

A reflection on conversion raises some questions for the Orthodox pastor. What is the aim and purpose of conversion? What are the require-

ments of conversion? Is it a solitary act or on-going process? Christian conversion means becoming a member of the body of Christ, of the Church, but does that require an affirmation of allegiance to an institution, with its traditions and customs? In short, what is our theology of conversion?



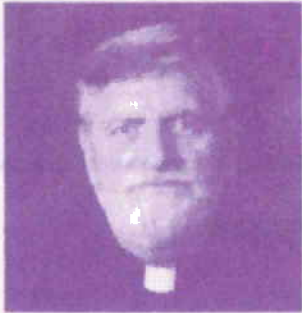
Jesus Christ is "the true light that enlightens every man" that comes into the world. Not everyone receives Him, but "to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God" (*Jn. 1.9,12*). Conversion is the actualization of a reciprocal exchange: God's love, power and grace encountered by man's hunger, humility and repentance. The Bible, the story of God and man, is the story of conversion. It is an account of how man, created in God's image and likeness, lost that image and disfigured the likeness, how God makes it possible for him to be restored, to convert, to the image and likeness, and how man chooses, or chooses to ignore, conversion. Though it is mysterious, conversion involves a conscious participation in the process and it involves a radical transformation. "Unless a man be born

from above he cannot see the kingdom of God" (*Jn. 3.3*).

The Old Testament is full of vivid conversion stories (e.g., Moses and the burning bush, Isaiah's vision in the temple), but the overarching theme is the "covenant conversion" of Israel. Called to be God's people, Israel repeatedly rejects that calling and receives various misfortunes as a consequence. The prophetic appeal for conversion resounds throughout the Old Testament: "O house of Israel, repent. Cast away your transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!" (*Ezk. 18.31*). It is here that the connection between conversion and repentance is firmly established. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that He may have mercy on him, for He will abundantly pardon" (*Is. 55.7*). When conversion occurs, there is an experience of love and joy, moving descriptions of which are found in the Psalms. "I delight to do Your will, O my God, .. all who seek You rejoice and are glad in You" (*Ps. 40.8,16*).

In the New Testament Jesus Christ becomes the active agent of the conversion process. The curious crowd listening to St. Peter's Pentecost sermon asks, "what shall we do?" The reply is simple: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him" (*Acts 2.39*). Conversion is not linked to a tribe or nation but is an indivi-

(over)



"Thoughts and Recollections"

"Pastors to Pastors" looks to another of the "elders" of the Church for guidance and inspiration. We are pleased herein to share our interview with

Fr John Kuchta

Rector, St Nicholas Church, Joliet, Illinois

Q. Fr. John, could you tell us about your background and how you were influenced to become a priest?

A. Our family was always involved in the life of the Church. As members of St. Nicholas Greek Catholic Church in McKeesport, PA, we participated in all the services by singing the responses with the entire congregation and were active in the social events. As students of the church school we gathered after classes in the auditorium to rehearse singing the hymns. The cantor selected several young men to study Church Slavonic, the order of services and plain chant, and I felt privileged to be so chosen. After my father passed-away we accompanied my grandfather to services at the Dormition of the Theotokos Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church, a block and a half from St. Nicholas Church. The parish was very small but active. The entire congregation sang plain chant, which made us feel very much at home. Here too the cantor invited young men to the kliros to help with reading and chanting during the services. At that time I had no idea of ever becoming a priest but I loved the services and the parish became an important part of my life. Fr. Peter M. and Matushka Anna J. Kreta were our spiritual parents and directed us with love and concern. Fr. Peter suggested that I think about entering the seminary. After some thought, and with Fr. Peter's positive encouragement, I applied to St. Tikhon's Seminary. To this day, I appreciate his spiritual guidance and feel that he served as a model for me to emulate.

Q. You have been an Orthodox pastor for forty-six years, all at your first assignment. What changes have you seen?

A. My ministry has not changed in all these years. I continue to serve the services and to do my best to fulfill the spiritual needs of my faithful flock. A special joy is that I now marry the children I baptized, and baptize the grandchildren of parishioners that I married!

Very helpful to me as a young priest was the brotherly fellowship we had at deanery meetings. I appreciated those gatherings and especially the presence of older clergy. We were able to learn a lot by listening to them relate their pastoral experiences. Now that I am older I enjoy listening to young priests, because they have such high ideals and are able to present some positive new ideas.

An important change in the life of the Orthodox Church in America was the decentralization of the administration. The Diocese of the Midwest implemented the Normal Statutes which were formulated by the All American Councils in the 1950s. Our Diocesan Bishop encouraged parishes to send pastors and lay delegates to a Diocesan Assembly in Chicago. There a Diocesan Council was elected which began assisting the Bishop in establishing a functioning diocese. A budget was drawn up and means to meet the budget were established. For the first time the Diocese assumed the charge of funding diocesan projects and supporting the diocesan bishop. Eventually a Diocesan Center was

purchased which symbolized the active growth of our Diocese.

Q. Your parish is almost a hundred years old. Tell us a little bit about its history.

A. The parish is old, but the faithful are young at heart. St. Nicholas Parish began as the spiritual center for Carpatho-Russian Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox and Serbian Orthodox Christians. As the numbers of faithful grew, they were able to organize a congregation of their own. The first place of worship was a plain house that was converted into a small frame church building by the men of the parish. A two-story house was moved to the parish property from another location and became the rectory and church hall. All the interior walls were removed on the first floor and this made one large meeting room which was the parish hall. This served as a dining room for parish affairs, a social center for dances and a church school, with dividers forming class areas. The rectory was on the second floor.

However, a new church building was a dream of the faithful for many years. As early as 1927 they began setting money aside for a building fund, but the great depression came and the funds had to be used to maintain the church and pastor. In 1948 the building fund was reestablished. Finally in 1959 two and a half acres were purchased on the West side of Joliet. A new rectory was built in the Spring of 1965 and ground was broken for a new church.

(Fr Kuchta, to page 4)

dual's acceptance of Jesus Christ and becoming like Him. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3.27). The book of Acts contains many depictions of Christian conversion (e.g., the eunuch converted by St. Philip, St. Paul's conversion, the conversion of Cornelius and his associates, etc.) What is clear is that there is no uniform pattern. When St. Paul, himself an convert, begins preaching conversion he does so differently for different people.

In the infrequent cases where conversion is mentioned in the Fathers, it is always in Biblical terms as a penitential "turning back" or "turning around." Inasmuch as repentance (Confession) becomes a repeatable act, conversion is not an isolated, one-time-only event. In his classic *"Path to Salvation,"* St. Theophan the Recluse discusses conversion in detail, looking at the particular states of the soul, prior to conversion, the actual act and its fulfillment. Conversion is a manifold process, which can have a specific beginning but infrequently reaches finality. "The goal towards which

the convert should direct all his attention and labors is the final goal of man and the economy of salvation, namely: pleasing God, a living unity with God, becoming worthy of His kingdom." Non-Orthodox Christian studies echo this idea. William James, in *"The Varieties of Religious Experience,"* examines conversion at length. For it to be meaningful it cannot be an isolated incident, but a moment or moments that possess a lasting permanence. The conversion experience "should for even a short time show a human being what the high water mark of his spiritual capacity is, this is what constitutes its importance — an importance which backsliding cannot diminish, although persistence might increase it."

Although Christian conversion is a personal and individual act, it cannot be considered apart from the Church. It is a personal act by means of which one becomes a member of a community, the body of Christ. The convert to Christianity is a "fellow citizen with the saints and member of the household of God" (Eph. 2.19). So conversion is impossible without the Church, which is effectively illustrated by the role of sponsors (Godparents) in the rites of Christian initiation. One cannot be a Christian without the Church. As the New-Martyr, St. Hilarion (Troitsky) wrote, "Outside the Church, Christian life is impossible and the growth of the Church is at the same time the growth of its members."

It is in this corporate aspect of conversion that certain difficulties developed. While the reception of converts from non-Christian backgrounds is rather straight forward, it became a complicated matter after the East-West schism and the subsequent Reformation. (See the article by Archbishop Peter, *"The Reception of Roman Catholics into Orthodoxy,"* STVQ, vol.24, no.2, [1980].) The concept took a radical turn in the late Middle Ages when it began to be regarded in terms of confessional allegiance to an institution. Renunciation of former religious allegiance

became part of the process, but when pressed hard by political contingencies, conversion required such dramatic steps as re-Baptism and re-Chrismation. The Orthodox Order for Reception of Converts of the seventeenth century was formulated in a highly charged political environment. Conversion, the liberating and fulfilling entrance into the communion of life in Christ, became a rigid and confining initiation. The law rather than the spirit became operative; conditions of custom and history overtook freedom and eschatology. During the last century changes have occurred. While there is no consistent, universal Orthodox practice today, the Orthodox Church in America has adopted a moderate position in its 1989 *Service of Reception of Converts*, though not with overwhelming enthusiasm.

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St Theophan the Recluse

The dilemma is that conversion is an ecclesiological action with certain recognizable standards, but also an extremely personal interaction between God and an individual human being through which he becomes a child of God. Formal external factors cannot guarantee a genuine conversion. Conversion requires a person to search his heart and personally direct his life to fulfill God's will. It means that one comes to love completely and is totally obedient to, grateful to, joyous in, trusting in God. This is, in fact, the essence of our spiritual life and it usually takes up the entire span of one's life. We are converted and re-converted constantly. There are several Orthodox prayers
(Conversion, to page 4)

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(Conversion, continued)

(e.g., a prayer before Communion and one read at the beginning of Great Lent) where "true conversion" is anticipated in the willful recommitment to God.

Pastors know well the "hatch, match and dispatch" phenomenon, where religious rituals are a mere formality. But even many Orthodox Christians, who are baptized as infants and become active parishioners, never experience true conversion. Complacency and apathy are all too common in parishes. Evangelical fervor and

spiritual vitality are absent. We pastors are also guilty. Too much comfort, lack of motivation and a disinclination to learn at times makes us stale and ineffective. A faithfulness to *institutional* Orthodoxy is not a substitute for God-directed, inspired ministry, but in a sense the problem is institutional. Theological reflection and discernment that need to accompany adherence to norms and preservation of tradition are not always present. That humanity hungers for the peace, love and joy that the Trinitarian God has revealed to us, and that the body of Christ

makes this accessible to all, is painfully obvious. All that is required is true conversion, which we, Orthodox pastors and people, need to pray for, work at and exemplify for all to see.

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven"

(Matt 5.16).

(Fr Kuchta, continued)

It was completed and consecrated in Fall, 1966. The debt was paid and the mortgage was burned four years later. Looking back on that, I marvel at how the parishioners met the challenge and believe that it was, with God's blessing, a miracle.

Q. You have been involved in various Pan-Orthodox associations. In your opinion, what is the future of Orthodox unity in America?

A. First of all, the Orthodox Church in America is a Church and not a jurisdiction. We have the responsibility to act as a Church. We all know that eventually there will be a unity of all Orthodox Christians and this will come about if everyone works for this unity. Several years ago the Orthodox clergy in the Chicago

area gathered with their hierarchs to form The Orthodox Christian Clergy Association of Greater Chicago. The goal was to work for the unity of the Orthodox Church and to promulgate the faith to the unchurched. Many ideas were discussed and plans were made for the future. The clergy believed that the work for unity must come from the grass roots. Thank God this organization still exists today.

When word was received of the project to prepare an Orthodox Study Bible of the Old Testament, the Association agreed that this is one project that should be supported and within one year \$53,000 were raised. Another notable accomplishment was hosting several Orthodox patriarchs in Chicago. His Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios twice celebrated the Divine Liturgy in Grant Park, His Holiness, Patriarch Pavle of

Serbia celebrated the Divine Liturgy at Navy Pier, and His Holiness, Patriarch Alexy II. of Russia celebrated the Divine Liturgy at McCormick Place, celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of Orthodox Christianity in North America. All the Orthodox clergy and faithful participated in these important events. A lay organization, Synergy, was organized by the Clergy Association to involve the faithful in the work of promoting Orthodox unity. A Pan-Orthodox Choir was formed to sing the responses of these celebrations, as well as for the Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers, the Akathist Hymn during Great Lent and the Thanksgiving Day Divine Liturgy. The clergy and laity of Chicago have conscientiously accepted the responsibility of working for the unity of Orthodox Christianity in America. □

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