

# Returning to the Ancient Faith

By Kristen Michaelis

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When the emissaries of Prince Vladimir of Kiev described their first visit to an Orthodox Christian church in Constantinople 1,000 years ago, they reported: "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you. Only this we know, that God dwells there among men, and that their service surpasses the worship of all other places, for we cannot forget that beauty." When Carol Kitamura of Ashland visited her first Orthodox service nearly a decade ago, she said she was "overwhelmed with the timelessness and transcendence of Orthodox worship. The services are filled with living symbolism in language, incense, art, and music." A millennium has passed between these two events, and yet their experiences of Orthodoxy are strikingly similar.

Orthodoxy traces its roots back to the Apostles and the Lord Christ in one continuous, unbroken line. The Eastern Orthodox Church is the oldest, most ancient Christian Church. In the Bible, we read that the apostles founded churches in Antioch, Jerusalem, and Thessalonika. Those churches are still there -- and are Orthodox. This continuity deeply moved Carol as she realized that "for nearly two millennia Christians have been praying these prayers [of the liturgy] which cover every concern we might have individually and for humanity."

Western Christians generally trace their faith heritage back to Protestant Reformers or the Roman Catholic Church and are largely unfamiliar with Orthodoxy. But Christianity has its roots in Eastern thought, in the Hellenistic/Hebraic understanding of the world. The scriptures which compose the Bible were originally penned in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Thus, the very context of Biblical thought is Eastern.

For many Western converts to the Orthodox faith, the very Easternness of Orthodoxy is the treasure that attracts them. Eastern theology and worship is organic and holistic, seeking to speak to the whole person: heart, mind, soul, and body. Father Isaac Skidmore, the priest at St. Gabriel Orthodox Church in Ashland, said that in Orthodoxy he "saw an organism more than an institution. Christianity is in fact Oriental, and has as much to say about the fulfillment of the aspirations of Lao Tzu as it does about the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophets." Coming out of an Orthodox worship service, you're likely to find that your hair and clothes still bear the fragrance of incense, the taste of bread and wine is still in your mouth, the chanted tunes of the liturgy are still resounding in your ears, and the image of candles burning before icons is fresh in your memory. Much like the liturgical worship God instituted in the Old Testament (in which He ordered everything, down to what color of thread be used to embroider the priest's vestments), the Eastern liturgy is purposefully rich with symbolic details.

This conservatism to "right doctrine" and "right worship" (what the word "Orthodox" means) is often thought to be a "negative" by those in our culture. But, it is one of many things that converts say drew them to Orthodoxy, including Fr. Isaac. "The

conservatism of Orthodoxy exists for the sake of conveying a great liberality," he said. "A scuba-diver is very conservative in the way he arranges his tanks, tubes and valves so that he might be able to do some very unconservative, radical things underwater. The dogma of the Church is not arbitrarily altered, not because we worship sameness or uniformity, but because it is the vehicle through which God's unspeakable liberality towards us has been conveyed to us as human beings, enabling us to attain God-like heights in our humanity."

St. Gabriel Orthodox Church, which Father Isaac pastors, meets every Sunday morning at 9am in the Newman Center's Chapel on the SOU campus. This community is a mission of the Orthodox Church in America. As such, Father Isaac describes the church as an "American parish, made up mostly of people who were born and raised in this culture, many of whom come from Protestant, Catholic or non-church backgrounds." Besides Sunday morning worship, St. Gabriel's also offers mid-week services followed by classes, women's and men's fellowships that meet in parishoner's homes, and youth and family activities. The parishoners place a great deal of emphasis on community and fellowship, for the love of God is experientially known through loving and serving others. "People come with real lives and a great deal of hope that the church will have something to say to them. Together we explore how the teachings of Christ can provide an entire perspective for life."