Orthodox Convert Survey – A Summary

A summary of a survey of 194 Orthodox converts in America.

Demographics of Converts Taking Survey

- Age when journey to Orthodoxy began
  - 21-30 – 37%; 31-40 – 26%; 41-50 – 15%
- Marital status
  - 53% Married; 31% Never Married; 9% Divorced
- Motivator
  - Dissatisfied with current religious affiliation -15%
  - Seeking deeper spiritual life 15%
  - Read something about Orthodoxy 10%
  - Had contact with Orthodox person - 10%
  - Invited to Orthodox service 8%
- Why – factors that started respondents on their journey to Orthodoxy
  - Dissatisfied with current religious affiliation -15%
  - Seeking deeper spiritual life 15%
  - Read something about Orthodoxy 10%
  - Had contact with Orthodox person - 10%
  - Invited to Orthodox service 8%
- What they find attractive about the Orthodoxy
  - 92% - Historical continuity
  - 83% - Structured/unchanging Liturgy
  - 81% - Orthodoxy embodies “fullness of faith”
  - 76% - Centrality of tradition
  - 75% - Theology is mystical in nature
- Other
  - 60% male
  - Almost entirely Caucasian
“What did you find most attractive about Orthodoxy?”

A summary of survey responses. Below in a word cloud of 80 words.

Then in verbatim “chunklets”

Worship

- “Authentic worship”
- “Worship encompassing the five senses.”
- “The fact that the whole body became part of the worship” (prostrations, sign of the cross, kneeling.)
- “a sensory, mystical, beautiful experience”
- involves the whole person, mind, body and soul.
- "solemn"
- experience of awe
- sacred
- Praying the Scriptures
- I was awed by the beauty of the worship. It kept drawing me in, throughout all my doubts.
- We pray for everything and everyone every service.
- The Liturgy is all about God, not me. Everyone worships and prays facing the altar.
- After our first visit we just had the feeling that this is true worship. The beauty of the service and the sense of entering the presence of God were amazing to us.

“Basically summing up... the deep, mystical spirituality, the sense that the Early Church was as close as yesterday, the consistency of belief (Holy Tradition), and the feeling that I had both finally reached the end of my near life-long quest for the fullness of the Christian Faith and the beginning of a new road into my future.”
• The order and structure brought something into my life that I had never had before. The services of Lent, Holy Week, and Pascha mean so much to me that I cannot imagine being without them now.

• Lack of musical instruments.

• Focus on the crucified and risen Lord (i.e. Eucharist), and not on how I was supposed to be a moral and good person.

• The beauty and truthfulness of the Divine Liturgy... embodies more basic truths than 1000 Protestant sermons combined.

• I was converted entirely by the services of the Church. I sensed instantly that this was ancient, authentic and alive. The words "We have found the true faith" in the Divine Liturgy sum it all up.

• The music, the music and the music. And did I say the music? It was so different than what I was used to.

• ...what really drew me in was the ability to sing as a form of prayer. I can’t express to you the joy I have in singing the various services.

• an understanding of beauty as an integral part of worship

• The devotion I saw among Orthodox worshipers.

• Corporate prayer. The daily cycle of worship and prayer.

• Orthodoxy is a way of life and the liturgy is experienced, not just attended and watched.

• Everyone can participate on a day-to-day basis - lectionary, saint's days, the feasts and fasts - in general, the calendar. It helps make the faith a practicing one, in a structured way, every day of the week, not just on Sundays.

• The experience of Christ "in our midst."

• I did not have to maintain a defensive stance as I had to in Protestant Churches. I could trust the Liturgy for it produced the fruit of many Saints. The practical pursuit of living a God pleasing life. The ways of the world are not as mixed up in Orthodoxy as in Protestantism.

**Spiritual Life**

• The organic, structured spiritual life

• Depth of spirituality - fullness of life in Christ.

• The mysterious nature of Orthodox faith.

• The mysticism: we have no need to explain everything.

• There is a transcendent beauty & also this pervasive feeling of "rightness".

• The holistic approach of Orthodoxy which embraces the entirety of the human person; strong emphasis on communion with God, in Christ; the ability for us to encounter God right now, here, today.

• Confession

• The experiential nature of liturgy, the mysticism; depth of asceticism, it's communal nature, the soundness of it's doctrine, the rock solidness and depth of the church's traditions and teachings.

**Theology/Doctrine**

• Sound theology

• Theological answers
• Depth of Orthodox theology... always pointing back to the origin of the faith: Christ, Jesus.
• Not merely ethical or social Christianity.
• Doctrine of fall of man vs. western "total depravity and judicial notions of atonement."
• Salvation: Instead of the legalistic "He paid the penalty for our sin" is the beautiful "He became man, suffered, died and arose to destroy death and make it possible for us to become like Him."
• No original sin, no legalism
• Lack of arbitrary rules
• Centering on Christ and the Eucharist rather than the priest
• The communion of saints was particularly attractive. I loved seeing icons of the Saints... that brought back scripture from Hebrews concerning the "communion of saints."
• ...a realistic acknowledgement of free will at the heart of even the most faithful adherent of tradition.
• The concept of being "outside time". Realizing there was a whole different "world view" other than "Western", with an emphasis on mysticism (vs. rationalism). Emphasis on mercy vs. condemnation/judgment.
• a whole new perspective (loving & merciful) on who God really is and who He is not.
• ...clear teachings concerning morals and theology.
• understanding of sin and sanctity helped me to realize how much of a sinner I was. This led to a more complete and joyful repentance.
• Less power given to individual's personal theology.
• Christ did not found a religion but brought the kingdom of God.
• ...answers to questions that the Protestant denominations can't agree on and which are different in each denomination.
• When attending the classes, I knew I was being given the Truth. As opposed to the Catholic RCIA program where on the first day, we were told to draw a picture of God and were treated like elementary school children. The (Catholic) priest, not once, taught a class and they focused on social programs.

Historical roots/Changeless
• The rootedness in the Bible and tradition.
• Historical roots of Orthodoxy, in light of evangelicalism which essentially has no such roots.
• “...connection with ancient Christianity”
• “the sense of continuity with the church throughout history”
• “Historical continuity with the early church.”
• The historical continuity. The Truth, unwavering and yet non-polemical or argumentative, historical continuity with Christ and the Apostles.
• The continuity from the Apostles, thru the Councils, to the present. Firm beliefs not subject to votes every year. Having a Biblical basis for every part of the Liturgy
• Apostolic succession of Bishops

Common words used by respondents to describe Orthodox theology and doctrine:
• “sound”
• “depth”
• “not arbitrary”
• Christ centric”
• “timeless”
• “Mystical not rational”
• “Loving”
• “Resurrectinal”
• “Settled”
• “Truth”
• “Joyful”

History
Common words used by respondents to describe Orthodox authenticity:
• “rooted”
• “changeless”
• “Connected”
• “Apostolic”
• “Continuity”
• “Consistent”
• “Worldwide”
• Understanding scriptures by what the Fathers had to say about them. No theological fads
• Intention to be consistent with faith and teaching of the very first Christians.
• “Unchanging nature of the church” • “did not change according to current society” • “changeless adherence to the Resurrection”
• the worldwide aspect of the church
• Sense of belonging to something that has continued with few changes since the time of the first Apostles.
• The diligence to preserve the tradition and doctrinal truths as handed down by the Apostles.
• The structure of the Liturgy, beauty of the Church, Apostolic tradition, ancient nature of the faith that is ongoing back to the time of Christ.
• I loved seeing the connection between Christian and Jewish Liturgical worship.

Christian Behavior
• People were “for real” in their faith, excited about their life in Christ within Orthodox Church!
• The sincerity of most Orthodox that I met about their religion.
• Seriousness “…the whole faith is taken so seriously & God is held in such awe & deep reverence.”
• the love and joyfulness of various Orthodox Christians… they had something different in their lives, which was different from mine. So, I wanted to have whatever they were having.
• Very friendly parish community and deeply devout traditions.
• A way of life that is lived—or, promised to. • I was drawn to the Orthodoxy as truly a way of living day to day, not just something you did on Sundays. • The Orthodox say what they do and do what they say.
• Warmth of the people • The friendliness of the people • Warmth and friendliness of the people … willingness to include me in the life of the parish.
• … the community was so tremendously warm, welcoming and loving. It was the quality of Christian life that I encountered in the parish that really convinced me.
• Sense of family and community
• Without a doubt the most extraordinary draw was meeting people who were truly living out their faith. There was no pressure to join them, just warm welcomes and offers to explain any questions we had. The relationships among the priest and the parish members reflected that of a family who were on a common journey of faith. They were not perfect, but expressed the utmost sincerity in their support of each other. I felt incredibly blessed that they welcomed me and my husband to join their journey.
• the calm demeanor of Orthodox believers, Priests & Monastics
• Fervor: Priests on fire for God as they pray,
• The humbleness of the faith
• …that children are blessings and not annoyances at services.
• Actually it was the social group and the camaraderie that first attracted me. Being embraced by a group of like minded young adults.

A Few Integrated Answers

• The emphasis on prayer. A depth of Christian worship and faith. A pastor who preached from the Bible and applied it to everyday life. A small mission community who were very welcoming. Being asked to join the choir and sing. A pastor/priest who exemplified the Christian life. The sheer depth of Christian faith and practice.

• Basically summing up: the deep, mystical spirituality, the sense that the Early Church was as close as yesterday, the consistency of belief (Holy Tradition), and the feeling that I had both finally reached the end of my near life-long quest for the fullness of the Christian Faith and the beginning of a new road into my future.

• I attended the church my wife-to-be attended since my Lutheran "roots" were far behind me. I became immersed in all the Orthodox activities (singing in the choir, participating in Bible studies, financial contributions, allowing my children to be baptized Orthodox, etc.) and ultimately decided to convert after 11 years of marriage.

• The timelessness of the Church and the consistency of the Faith. As a singer I was thrilled about an all sung Liturgy. This was only done in the Episcopal church when I was a little girl and only for high Holy Days. I also loved the chanting it reminded me of Temple. (I grew up in a split tradition - luke warm Christianity and strong cultural Judaism.

• Continuity, fullness of faith (not exclusion), community of believers (not individualistic and not "chain of command"), My experiences with my first Parish Priest were completely positive and the parish community was not just welcoming but thrilled to see us each time.

The continuity of practice and theology from the time of Christ. The Tradition and traditions of the Church. The family type atmosphere of our parish. The services; beauty, length, meaning.

• The beauty of the Liturgy, the unchanging unbroken history, being the original Church.
What was most difficult?

What elements of the Orthodox faith and your experience in the Orthodox Church were most difficult for you when you first started investigating Eastern Orthodoxy?

Mary, Saints, Icons

- Since I was evangelical for the past twenty years, by far the hardest adjustment was Mary and the Saints. It's still hard, though I'm doing much better, since Mary, Saints, and Icons are ultimately about Christ.

- Not so much veneration of Mary, but the insistence upon: Her "sinlessness"

- Her perpetual virginity, ie. her lack of sexual relations with Joseph after Christ's birth

- Her virginity in childbirth ("In giving birth/You preserved your virginity")

- How Mary figured into the church & why she is so highly regarded.

- Veneration of saints and the Theotokos. I completely understood respecting them, especially the Theotokos, but the degree of devotion confused me. In the same line, kissing the priest's hand was difficult.

- The role of Saints and the Virgin Mary are hard for me. Having gone to a church who would not even call anyone Saint except Paul and the 12, I'm still getting used to all the concepts.

- Praying to Saints. When I read the theology of the Church on venerating and praying to the Saints and the Theotokos it makes sense. Some of the prayers I have read seem like they go beyond veneration and become worship.

- I still have trouble with venerating icons. I understand the concept...but I'm not 100% sure it is correct. The attitude regarding saints is fine with me. But there is a potential for abuse there that I find disturbing and I think the Orthodox Church needs to provide instruction to cradle-born Orthodox as well we converts on this matter to prevent abuse.

- Protestants hammer home the "shall worship graven images", icons and symbols were difficult.
• Length of services, though not a problem now. The icon screen seemed alienating, though not now. The veneration of the icons seemed strange, though not now. Being excluded from communion was odd, but now it makes sense. Really, the more one learns, the more it all makes sense.

• Many things were difficult - the standing, veneration of Mary, kissing everything and everyone - but the people in the parish went out of their way to explain things, sometimes even before I would ask a question. They made sure I never felt embarrassed to ask something.

• Big 3: Mary, Saints, Icons.

Confession and Fasting
• Confessing your sins was difficult as I was untrained.
• Face to face confessions,
• Fasting and confession. Still are.
• Conforming my life to the life of the Church by means of fasting & confession, it's a process.
• Extreme difference in service, fasting & confession
• Confession - difficult 20+ years ago and still difficult today.
• Just like anything else, understanding that it is ok to not know everything. To just trust God and believe that the truth will be revealed

Doctrine
• It was difficult to understand why I couldn't receive communion at first.

• Closed communion was a new and difficult concept for me, but it was explained to me well and I came to understand the reasons. I had to learn to accept tradition rather than demanding a detailed rule of "this is what you must do and believe." Orthodoxy is nuanced and flexible, not black-and-white. While this was hard to comprehend at first, it is also an abiding attraction of Orthodoxy.

• The most difficult thing for me to understand was the idea of salvation. I had learned in the past that once a person is "saved," everything is done and over with. It was hard for me to learn and understand that salvation is an ongoing process.

• Having been un-churched when I first investigated Orthodoxy, I found basic elements of Christology and Trinitarian theology very hard to understand. Also, coming from a New Age background, the "scandal of particularity" in terms of the Incarnation was very difficult to grasp and come to terms with.

• The claims as the true faith.

• The "arrogance" of the Orthodox Church in their refusal to acknowledge the presence of Christ in Protestant churches. I first found Christ in a Protestant church. My experience is that I found Christ in more fullness in the Orthodox Church than in the church of my childhood. The phrase "The True Church" is difficult for me to understand.

• Many of Orthodoxy's statements and practices (the idea of "embodying the fullness of faith", lack of communion with other churches, exclusion from the Eucharist) seem to assert the belief that "Orthodox are the only real Christians in the world." While there is a real and understandable sense in which this is true from the Orthodox point of view, this attitude may be one of the greatest obstacles for non-Orthodox persons who *know* they fully believe in and have committed their lives to Christ.

• Having standards to live by was probably the most difficult. Not being able to do whatever without any feedback was difficult.

• Of course, I had to wrap my brain around the Body and Blood of Christ actually BEING the Body and Blood of Christ!
• I did not have a good understanding of obedience. This had to be taught to me by the priest who chrismated me before my chrismation. A very difficult lesson.

• Having to learn to re-interpret the scriptures in the Orthodox perspective

• Apophatic theology, Tradition, not just the bible (it was a safety blanket), Mary, kissing icons (now I paint them! go figure)

• I would say that the Orthodox Church never needs to apologize for its differences with Western Christian theological and ecclesiastical principles. On the other hand, it also needs to acknowledge that the entire world has become "westernized" to the degree that all thought is now regarded as dynamic and capable of change. There is no such thing as a "fixed truth" that the human mind can comprehend, let alone formulate.

• I still have trouble with the notions of not ordaining women, and also the attitude of the church towards homosexuals, but these are not significant enough to curb my interest. I also believe that there is room for change yet in the Orthodox Church.

• Complicated, not too many straight answers.

• Trying to find answers to every question and instead being told to wait, to have patience, to understand via faith and prayer.

• It’s complexity and my absolute ignorance. My western mind did not grasp the spirituality, history doctrine, the total sobriety, none of it. It was all foreign (not ethnically), but theologically and spiritually foreign. But, it felt right.

**Worship**

• Length of services. Use of Slavonic when not really many people understand or speak it.

• The first divine liturgy I attended seemed totally foreign, weird, and intimidating. I didn't know the proper church etiquette, which made me feel ill at ease. I didn’t want to be membered, but always an outsider, because I was "plain old American". I found some of the music to be repetitive and dry. Since then, my heart has grown to love the church and it’s practices, wooed by love and acceptance.

• Never feeling comfortable with the little things, like knowing what to do when. The long and confusing liturgy.

• The length of the services, the fasting. It STILL is the most difficult part.

• Standing through a service.

• I come from a Lutheran background which has a much fuller and more ecumenical hymnody. I still miss that. I also was put off by the lack of easy to follow Liturgical resources in the pews.

• The length of standing and the rigors of fasting.

• The liturgy was confusing at first, but I fell in love with the music.

• The anti-Semitic undercurrents of the Holy Friday services. If I had been exposed to the flagrant anti-Semitism of much of Holy Friday matins earlier on in my conversion I would have run a mile.

• Wondering if I would get used to the chanting (OCA). It took me a month before I heard the words first and not the music. Then I joined the choir. In the church I now attend (Antiochian), there is no choir, only a couple of voices leading the chant--that too has been difficult. But the church is growing and before long we too will have a choir.

• The Eastern Rite Liturgy was most confusing.

• Bowing

• Understanding the Liturgy and what I should be doing, what it meant

• Chanting
Standing for so long. Seemed so foreign in many ways. Was very worried that I might be insulting or rejecting the faith I had grown up with. Only when a priest explained that it was not repudiating that faith but going beyond to the fullness of Christ's church that I was able to seriously consider converting.

I had the most trouble with the music. Troparians, etc. and the tones. I found it most difficult to learn the tones (especially a capella) and in our parish there were so many papers to keep shuffling and I couldn't follow well at all.

Getting lost in the Liturgy

Ethnic Qualities/Hospitality

Culture shock

The entire ethnic feel that can come with Orthodoxy sometimes gives the impression that Orthodoxy is more about culture than the gospel.

It was very difficult at first to not be "ethnic" in a very ethnic church. People were mostly very kind and accepting but I was obviously "different". I also missed not having the opportunity to grow up Orthodox.

Ethnicity, language, traditionalism, false monasticism.

It was difficult breaking the ice socially. I also struggled a little with the ethnic component. I must say, though, that the church I attend is not very ethnic as Orthodox parishes go.

The feeling that it was an ethnic club we could never really belong to because our last name has only one syllable

The ethnicity. At times I felt feelings of judgment or skepticism, when I was only trying to learn and find my way.

I attend an old parish that was founded by Eastern Europeans. Many of the parishioners at the parish I attend do not and never will accept anyone who is even slightly different. They frequently argue that the church should go back to using Slavonic, which I see as their attempt to drive out any converts. As I was told, it is important to find people who will do things the way they have always been done at our parish.

The indifferent hospitality of Orthodox laity.

Ethnicity, esp. as concerned language of service. Multi-jurisdictionalism in NA: a priest answered the question "Am I converting to Orthodoxy or, specifically, to Serbian Orthodoxy?" with "Serbian Orthodoxy." Hmmm...

Nobody would really talk to me because I was not Russian.

In your face ethnic nationalism. The way some Orthodox folks seem to see the church as their own private ethnic culture club, praying in a language I don't understand. My conversion has also caused estrangement and alienation from my heterodox friends and family. My Dad still seems to think I've joined a cult.

Ethnicity - also overcoming my own families' anxiety about joining a Russian Church. An Ethnic group (not the Church) that had some very difficult history in dealing with the West (cold war), of which family didn't separate this out. Also there were members who would remind me of the organized pogroms against the Jews.

The Slavonic. I wanted to understand what was being said. The fasts. In the Serbian church frequent Communion wasn't done, a fact that I still find hard to understand. I attend an OCA church now so neither is a problem.

Why it is more important to be ethnic than Christian.

Hostility of Greeks toward non-Greeks

Initially I wanted to be a bit inconspicuous, but in reality I felt very much an outsider. A few folks were very kind, but overall I did not feel welcome. The ethnic tradition seemed (and at times still seems) too tightly entwined with the Faith, and that was something I could not accept, given that Orthodoxy was supposed to
be universal. My ex-wife did not want our children to go to "my" church, as it smacked of the Roman church she rejected, and Orthodoxy was almost a cult to her.

- Parishioners seemed to be cold and detached. No real welcome from lay people until I had been there 2 months. Some confusion as to the many jurisdictions. Confusion about how cradle Orthodox were tied up in knots about language - some parishes viewed Slavonic as simply another church element, other parishes screamed bloody murder if anyone used anything other than English - even to the point of telling recent immigrants that they should either learn English or find another parish.

- The difficulty of breaking into a highly ethnic parish where everyone is related. However, our current parish has been great and is pan-Orthodox. Pan-Orthodox parishes are much easier, in my opinion, to break into.

- I did not understand Church Slavonic. I had no interest in learning it. But I wanted one religion in my home. Thank God for the OCA and priests who serve in English.

- Ethnic jingoism; propensity to continue to argue over whose village was better in Macedonia (by people who never lived there), indifference to doctrinal issues on the part of "ethnics", not exactly a welcome but more of a toleration of me.

- The "you’re not Greek, get out!" attitude I experienced when visited GOA parishes. I still avoid them as much as possible. GOA parishes in my area are VERY ethnic and most have services entirely (or mostly) in Greek.

- The converts seem so very intellectual, unlike my memory of the old Russian People whose faith kept them alive. They were all well educated, and lived through the Russian Revolution. I loved their stories about their lives, their faith, their values. They gave so much, shared so much.

- I was always being asked "what are you". I had a very hard time understanding what they meant, and only figured it out after many had walked away from me in disgust. I kept answering - I’m a mother, a wife...... Then, when I finally figured it out, I would answer that I was part Russian Jew and part Scottish. They always would say something like, "Oh okay you are Russian that's good".

- Orthodoxy is not visitor friendly, seems cultish and unattainable for ordinary folks.

- The Church was heavily embedded in the ethnicity of the parishioners, not the religion. Macedonian was spoken during the services which I do not speak.

- Feeling very much like an outsider

- the lack of a unified Orthodox Church here in America. The different jurisdictions are heretically close to protestant denominations. I think the Church is not the place to talk about Greek, Russian or any other culture. We are supposed to worship God. I also think the different jurisdictions in America is deplorable. There should be only one Orthodox Church in America using the English language.

- I was afraid of being viewed as an outsider (ethnically) until I realized that God did not intend the Orthodox Church just for Greeks, Russians, Serbs, etc. (DUH) Also, being from a Protestant background (including Mennonites ) icons were seen as next door to idolatry. Living in Kansas there are few Orthodox. None of my friends or relatives were Orthodox.

**Affect on Friends and Family**

- How it would affect relationships with non-Orthodox family and friends, especially those who would not understand.

- Knowing that I had only a limited fellowship with my non-Orthodox Protestant friends.

- I investigated for a long time. Leaving old friends from my old church was the hardest.

**Behaviors**

- ALL THE WORK! The many services, the fasting, confession etc. It was quite daunting in the beginning. I remember thinking "Am I really up to this level of thinking, am I really up to this level of spiritual commitment"? Being a protestant is much easier.
• Experience in the church: Seeming disinterest in group prayers and conversation regarding experiences of faith and personal conversion.

• The lack of educational materials. The ignorance of the average parishioner as to the Orthodox faith. The lack of Biblical knowledge. The over-emphasis of culture. The lack of desire for spiritual growth and knowledge among the parishioners. The lack of interest in Bible (or any spiritual) studies.

• In our youthful zeal we were unbalanced and ungrounded, often attempting to implement monastic practices in family life, which caused a lot of confusion.

• Many of the people (and priest) let their political views be known in church, literature and church email. They were very conservative. Imagine me, a social worker and my husband an environmentalist in this setting.

• The accepted dictatorship role of the priest in the church. Not having a board of trustees who make the decisions for the church's physical plant and other non-spiritual tasks.

• The Orthodox Church seems more disorganized compared to the other denominations so that a new experience. I adapted however!

• Many in the parish, incl. leadership, were against the priest, who was a good man, and teaching the truth with love.

None

• None really. I truly believe the Holy Spirit moved me to Orthodoxy and that I was to be open to the beliefs of the faith.

• None that I can remember