

I have tried again and again to fit my journey to the Orthodox Church into an elevator speech- one short, quick answer to the question “what brought you here?” If I boiled my conversion and faith down to the pure essence, what would be left? The truth is, I am here not because of me, at all.

I had a strong faith as a child. I loved church. As a teenager, I taught church school, and my favorite high school subjects were Old Testament and Church History. Despite this, after high school, I slowly drifted away from church, from any faith- I decided that I knew better, I wanted to be independent, and I resented the authority of the church. It was easy to stay away once that distance had been established. I made many poor choices, and found myself at twenty-five living in Los Angeles, far away from my family, and in the middle of a very painful but unavoidable divorce.

I was lost, and I knew it. I tried attending the local Roman Catholic Church, but I never felt that I belonged there. Some friends welcomed me into their home, and treated me as one of the family. They were Orthodox, but their parents were Byzantine Catholic. I began alternating services between the two churches. I was urged to take the sacraments at the Byzantine church, and although I desperately wanted to do so, my burdens weighed heavy on me, and I was unable to approach the priest to request confession. This went on for about a year.

In 1999, as I attended Holy Week services, I felt more at home, but other than being burdened and worn down by my sins, I had done very little to prepare, save for attending services sporadically. As a child, I had been especially touched by the “stations of the cross,” and looking for parallels, I made sure to attend the Orthodox services on the evening of Holy Thursday.

As I walked into the church, it was completely dark but for candlelight. I stood in the very back of the church. My friends’ father, Scott, handed me a candle of my own as the service began, and as the service began I was comforted to hear the familiar passion gospels. Something suddenly changed, and I cried with relief and joyful sorrow as I listened to the Gospel. As Peter heard the cock crow, I knew without a doubt that no matter my sin, no matter my burden, if I asked- if I only chose to follow Christ, even if I had denied Him as many times as I had, that I could be forgiven, that there was room for me in the Church. All I had to do was His will. The next day I asked to begin the Catechumenate, and I was received in the Church just before I left for Navy boot camp late that summer.

I would like to say that that was the end- that I have never turned from Christ since that moment. The truth is, that I have turned away, I have fallen- and not infrequently. Just as I could not be whole when I chose only my own will, it is not because of me when I am successful at anything- be it my faith, my family or my life. I am not here because of any virtues, but because of my brokenness. And the more I am here, the more I realize I am here only by the grace of God.