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## Just Plain American Orthodox (Frederica Mathewes-Green)

[Ξένες γλώσσες](#) / [In English](#)





Deep in the heart of a typical American city there is a magnificent old Orthodox church. The community housed here was founded about a hundred years ago, a gathering of families who had emigrated from Greece, Russia, Syria, or some other ethnically-Orthodox land.

These newcomers found America vast, confusing, and intimidating. They banded together and formed a congregation, then called a priest from the "old country." The growing parish was an island of familiarity, a place where they could not only worship in the language they longed all week to hear, but also share news from home, enjoy the foods and dancing that eased homesickness, and choose mates for their growing children.

Time passed. The parishioners saved up and bought a church building from a Protestant congregation. They beautified it lavishly, with icons that looked vaguely Italian, in a 19th century devotional style. They look more like the kind of art that Americans think is beautiful than the austere Eastern icon style. There were other adaptations, too. In the old country, they had sung all the hymns a capella, but this church building came with an organ, so they learned to play it. Back home, there were no pews, just a few benches along the walls for the elderly; during worship everyone stands in the presence of God, just as they would before a king. But this building came with pews, so they learned to sit down between prayers. They

wanted to be good Americans.

As decades passed, feasts and weddings and funerals were celebrated in this building, and it was imbued with a thousand dear memories. But today, on a typical Sunday, the pews are about a third full. Most of the heads in the congregation are gray.

On the outskirts of town, in a strip shopping mall, there is an Orthodox mission. Three years ago this priest was a Protestant pastor. He was able to do most of his theological training by correspondence, while still working in his previous congregation, and spent just one year in residence at an Orthodox seminary. On the day of his chrismation (the service that makes a person a member of the Orthodox church), a couple of dozen members of that old congregation came with him. They are enthusiastic about this new faith, strongly committed to each other, and exhilarated by this adventure. They will talk to friends and neighbors about the excellence of Orthodoxy whether the others want to listen or not.

The small community located cheap rental space, and decked it with readymade icons purchased on the internet, carefully chosen for their historic significance and beauty. They taught themselves to sing hymns to the ancient melodies. They spurn the idea of pews or an organ. They aren't interested in looking like typical Americans; they want to be Orthodox in the classic style, and when this means being countercultural, they rather enjoy it. On a typical Sunday, most of the attendees are their 30's, and many dads hold toddlers on their shoulders. The room is packed to the walls.

What happened?

The beautiful old church downtown is suffering loss due to changing needs in the congregation. While it was vital to emphasize the ethnic mother tongue and ties to the old country a hundred, or even fifty, years ago, recent generations have felt less of this need. It seems to them that the only place where ethnic identity even comes up is at church; everywhere else they go they are just plain Americans. Most younger people like it that way. They see no reason to marry within the community. The only place they encounter the old language is at church or grandma's house. While they are proud of their heritage, it doesn't dominate their daily lives any more.

Unfortunately, some will discard their faith as well. Perhaps they attended church every week all their childhood, but never understood what was being said in worship. Orthodox faith looked like a matter of going through the motions, and it's

easy enough for them to drift away as adults. Some sleep in on Sunday mornings, while others transfer membership to established mainline churches, as a way of completing their transition to upscale American life.

Others will visit the churches of their evangelical friends and be surprised and moved by the content of fervent hymns and prayers. They might feel, with some bitterness, that a faith this vibrant has never been presented to them before. They might decide that the Orthodox church of their childhood is nothing but dead ritual, and gladly switch allegiance to a livelier church.

Zooming past them on the other side of the beltway are the mostly-young families flowing into Orthodoxy from other backgrounds. The range among these converts is vast. Some are leaving “low-church” congregations, because they find that ancient liturgical worship satisfies a longing to worship God with awe and beauty. Some are leaving mainline congregations, because they find Orthodoxy’s structural foundation in the early church’s faith and practice guarantees stability. Some are leaving a heady, intellectual Christianity for one which provides access to mystery and sacrament. Some are leaving an exuberant Spirit-filled background for one which provides careful discernment, accountability, and spiritual direction – not to mention two millennia of experience – yet is comfortable with miracles, angels, and visions. And some who have been involved in Eastern religions find that Orthodoxy offers a similarly ancient tradition of spiritual transformation, but centered in the compelling presence of the God-man Jesus Christ.

Are the downtown Orthodox and the strip-mall Orthodox prone to collide? Surprisingly, no. Relations are friendly, and the communities support each other’s events, and worship together in joint services a few times a year. They are in full communion with each other and hold the same moral and theological beliefs. This might seem strange to American Protestants and Catholics, who are used to fierce strife not just between but within denominations, but there is no liberal – conservative divide in Orthodoxy.

This tacit unity arises because Orthodox don’t look to an earthly leader or a malleable text as their authority, but rather to the faith and practice of the early church. This mode of Christianity has not been excavated from the Bible in recent centuries, but has been passed down uninterruptedly, from parent to child, through long unbroken years. And since nobody can change the past, nobody can change the faith. The beliefs, practices, and moral teaching will stay the same from church to church, from country to country, and from century to century. One important mechanism for supporting this continuity is the fact that Orthodox do not revise their worship services. The downtown church and the one in the mall both

celebrate a Sunday liturgy in use since the fourth century, and earlier.

Another reason that converts have been blended into this ancient church so readily is the characteristic friendliness and hospitality of Middle Easterners. This is no doubt one reason why so many of the first wave of converts came in by way of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese, with international headquarters in Damascus. The Antiochian Archdiocese is the second largest Orthodox body (a “jurisdiction,” not a “denomination”) in the United States, one of about a dozen, including Greek, Romanian, Ukrainian, and others.

The Antiochians were ahead of the curve in seeing the need for a way that clergymen in other churches could travel from their current position to an Orthodox pastorate. In the watershed year of 1987 the Antiochians reaped the bounty of this foresight, as dozens of pastors and their congregations – a total of some 2000 individuals nationwide – were chrismated. The other Archdioceses are catching up, and throughout American Orthodoxy well above half the clergy are now converts – a dose of enthusiasm that is leavening the entire church.

A third reason converts have been welcomed rather than snubbed probably can be ascribed to the privileged position of Anglos in American culture. Many ethnic Orthodox feel like outsiders, even after the passage of generations. We get a glimpse of this in the childhood scene in “My Big Fat Greek Wedding,” in which Toula feels that in comparison with the willowy blondes in her class she is too dark, too fat, and eats funny foods. If Episcopalians occupy the top of the social heap, then the sight of Episcopal clergy leaving their careers in order to start over in humble Orthodox missions is something native Orthodox find astounding. They are delighted to welcome in these newcomers, and find new pride in their ancient faith.

Indeed, they may begin to understand their faith for the first time. Converts are usually thoroughly well-read, and champions at book-buying and internet research. They may have digested many volumes of information about Orthodox theology and practice before setting foot in a church. They make zealous and articulate converts, and life-long Orthodox generally find their enthusiasm appealing and affirming. Many also find it contagious, and in the wake of converts there often spring up “reverts,” ethnic Orthodox who are discovering new meaning in the faith they’ve been part of all their lives.

What lies ahead? When immigrants landed on these shores a century or more ago, it was understandable that they would establish congregations based on their language and national background. Much the same happened among Catholic immigrants in the 19th century, who set up separate Italian, German, and Irish

Catholic parishes. But with the passage of time all those coalesced into simply-American Catholic parishes, and Orthodox churches are undergoing a similar process.

The complicating extra step is that each of the dozen-or-so Orthodox jurisdictions was established in relationship with a different authority in the old country. Those connections must be dissolved, and the American entities granted independence, before they are free to merge into one American church. This is bound to be a sometimes-painful process, especially if the old-country church is struggling to survive in conditions of economic stress or even persecution. The process is under way, but it may take some years to complete – not least because Orthodox generally don't share American concepts of efficiency.



ROUMANIAN CHURCH AT REGINA.

Administrative unity also feels less urgent because theological unity already exists.

Unlike Western Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy has not been plagued by denominational splintering; it is already “one church” in the most important ways. Administrative unity will make little difference on Sunday morning. Where divisions occur among Orthodox, it is due to basic human sin – pride, power-hunger, greed – rather than disagreement about what the faith entails.

When Western Christians first examine this faith, it seems “Eastern” indeed – more mystical, more rooted in personal experience of God's presence, less confident of the ability of words to express numinous truth. But as weary Western Christians continue to flood into Orthodoxy, the day is coming when it won't be “Eastern” at all – just American.

*By Frederica Mathewes-Green*

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