



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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# From Foma

## ✠ Letter from a Reader: "So, Why is Confession Necessary?"

Having been baptized three years ago, I thought I had fulfilled all my obligations to the Church. I also felt that the Church should stimulate my interest so that I would find it attractive. If the Church couldn't fulfil this, then I felt I could still believe in God without any help from it. And that's how it turned out; my faith consisted of nothing more than discussions and judgments of church rituals and the behavior of priests and simple believers. Three years later nothing in me had changed at all; I had not acquired any virtues, and could only speak badly of others. Even worse, the majority of my friends took my words and behavior to heart as they formed their impression of the Church.

It is shameful, but I began criticizing the inner workings of the Church without even once taking part in any of its sacraments. In my mind I wanted to go to Confession, because I understood that it is impossible to lead a real Christian life without finding forgiveness for one's sins. Don't think that now I am trying to find something new to criticize. I am totally sincere in my desire to understand the meaning of the sacrament of Confession for man's soul. Perhaps this is the real reason for my *not* wanting to go to Confession. The most important thing for me is not the striving to rid myself of my sins or to admit my inadequacies, but rather a desire to logically prove the necessity of this sacrament. But can one come to a sacrament without being aware of its meaning and without accepting its form?

I tried to understand this by myself. I bought a booklet called "Help For the Penitent," which provides a list of possible sins. I read it, yet I felt a certain irritation rising within me, "Wait a moment, why is this considered a sin? I don't agree." And on it went for a good number of the sins listed. I wanted so badly to throw the book away and made up my mind then and there, "No way am I going to such fanatics." Then the irritation began to recede, but my questions remained. What are we to do with sins that we don't consider sins? Confess them just because we are supposed to? Wait until the awareness of our sinfulness comes to us? Or perhaps, not take everything written in these books as gospel truth?

But let's suppose that I prepared myself for Confession and prepared a list of my sins. What then? Should I confess them to God? Then what is the priest for? Why is a witness necessary? Where did such a ritual come from in the first place? It must have a very serious basis because, if you look at it realistically,

most of the problems associated with Confession arise simply because a priest has to hear it.

There are still few churches and not enough priests, but the number of believers is relatively large. There are huge lines of people waiting to make a confession. What does a person think about while standing in line, especially if he is coming for the first time? More often than not, he wants the whole thing to be over as quickly as possible. . . . At best, he feels he will only weigh down an already tired priest, and will least of all be able to maintain an attitude of repentance. Many end up walking away without even waiting in line.

Of course, there are more and more young priests all the time. And a large percentage of people coming to the faith today are not young kids. I find it psychologically difficult to confess to a priest who is young enough to be my son. It is vitally important for many people not just to have a priest listen to their sins and absolve them. They often need the serious advice of an experienced priest—someone to whom they are important and dear. But such priests are few in number, and it is very difficult to find them.

Here I see a contradiction: at first I said that priests are not necessary for Confession, and then I said that they are vitally important. But I already warned you that I am full of doubts and can't find answers to them all. And there are still the "buts." One of them concerns the sacrament of Confession. Perhaps this is rude, but all the same, is there any guarantee that priests will really not tell anyone what they hear? Near my house there is a rather large church. Four priests serve there. Sometimes I imagine the following happening: their "work day" is over and all four of them gather around a table and begin telling each other: "I had one woman today for Confession who . . ." Even if they don't mention names, all the same it's not very pleasant. Does this ever happen?

To end, I would like to say that a short while ago I tried to go to Confession. I stood in line at our church. When I approached the short, gray-haired priest I had no idea what to say. After a moment he said: "My dear, you are just not prepared. Think a bit more, question yourself and then come back." So I'm questioning. I want to go back to that priest, only prepared next time.

Respectfully,  
Margarita Vyacheslavovna Leskova, 51  
Biology teacher

## ✠ Fr. Artemy Vladimirov Answers Margarita's Letter

After attentively reading this letter, you feel the depth of a soul seriously trying to get to the essence of something as subtle as Confession. At the same time you become aware that this good, kind soul—after being baptized—has still not met an attentive pastor whose words could have enlightened her and who could have served as her spiritual instructor. Unfortunately, this is the way it is in many cases today.

A person who is sincerely seeking will accept Baptism, believing in the depth of his soul that a great event has taken place. The soul takes a step, a watershed experience, but he hasn't yet fully obtained his place in the bosom of our Mother Church. Being literally a small branch on the tree of the Church, he still does not know how to be nurtured by the grace-filled nectar that gives life to the entire trunk. Just like a newborn child, the newly baptized seeks its mother's breast, for in it and through it life is given. But since he is still untaught, he feels himself helpless. The soul enters into a struggle. It recognizes the lack of true life within itself, but it is not able to come to the source of eternal life.

Without a doubt, this letter is a testimony "from the other side" that true spirituality requires the development of both mind and heart. The mind is bursting with questions—one more important than the other—but the heart, which has not yet acquired the experience of God's grace, both agrees and disagrees with the mind.

Of course, God's servant Margarita is right when she states the necessity of finding an experienced priest—a person to whom she is important and dear. I think all these psychological obstacles would disappear by themselves if she prayed and received from God such a spiritual friendship with an experienced pastor. So, I call on Margarita Vyacheslavovna, not only to pray, but also to seek such a pastor. If her soul is bothered by the crowd of people around a priest, then I think nothing prevents her from going up to the priest and asking to meet with him apart—a so-called general confession—which is necessary when one enters the Church. I want to believe that Margarita will find such a possibility and that God Himself will comfort her with a talk with an experienced pastor.

Various thoughts trouble her soul: "*I thought I had fulfilled my obligations with regard to the Church.*" Does a newborn child feel he has fulfilled his obligations to his mother?! The relationship with his mother is not so much a duty and obligation as it is a vital necessity! A child does not exist without his mother. He will never learn to walk, to eat, or to think correctly if he is raised "apart," if he doesn't feel the warmth of his mother's touch or hear her lullabies over his little bed.

This is how we should think about ourselves and about the Church after the sacrament of Baptism. A Sunday spent outside the Lord's Church, truthfully, grows dark in our eyes—for a single “Lord have mercy” spoken in church, is greater than any podvig at home or prayer in one's monastic cell. Just as a child comes alive, thrives and feels safe, protected and happy in the presence of his mother, so we are called to peer into the endlessly dear face of Mother Church, penetrated with light and holiness, with vital warmth, to know her and to try to become living stones in this magnificent temple, which is comprised of all tribes and peoples and exists outside space and time.



*Priest hearing confessions at a Moscow church*

“But I also felt that the Church should do something for me, like stimulate my curiosity so that I would find it attractive.” But how will the Church attract you if you don't go there? How can it interest you if, instead of having contact with her, you turn your nose away! Experience teaches that three Sunday liturgies completely change the way a person feels about the world. Church Slavonic, hitherto difficult to understand, becomes completely transparent—Church singing becomes intelligible. The soul is invisibly nourished by God's grace and, freed from deadly passions and sinful thoughts, it opens up like a flower under the warm rays of the sun.

“I can believe in God without any help from the Church.” St. Cyprian of Carthage (+258) said: “A man cannot have God as his Father if he does not have the Church as his Mother.” How then will you believe without help from the Church, when the main object of faith is the Last Supper of Christ, which is served inside the Church? “Take, eat, this is My Body. . .” says the Lord to His disciples and followers. If you believe in Christ—in God—but don't partake of His Holy Chalice, then you only think about pleasing God. In reality you are still at the crossroads.

“I reproach both priests and simple believers for their behavior. . .” But is this path of general condemnation the correct one to take? If you are so morally pure and free of all human sinfulness and weakness, then, on the contrary, you should be displaying generosity of soul and the ability to co-suffer, instead of lethal irony and merciless criticism. There is a saying that the devil gives special binoculars to one who condemns, binoculars which decrease all that we see around us to the most insignificant size, but exaggerate what is within to unbelievable proportions. Our “me” swells up as if it were a soap bubble. A man is not able to look at himself critically when he regards the worth of his fellow man as something totally insignificant. We try to see in others something bad, selfish, insincere, in a literal sense—transferring ideas from a sick head to a healthy one.

Can it be that all priests are ceremonious and mercenary? Can it be that there is not one modest, humble labourer left in Christ's fields who will offer his soul for his sheep? I very much hope and believe that Margarita sooner or later will obtain such a good pastor, one who will be an authentic authority for her and whose service will correspond to the greatest possible degree to the standard of spirituality—Christ the Saviour.

“The sacrament of Confession - I know that this is something we have to do, although I am not fully aware of its meaning. And why do I need an intermediary anyway? - asks the soul. I ask in return: “Can you repent of your sins? Do you understand your life differently? Do you value things differently? Do you reproach yourself for the mistakes you have made in life? Does your soul grieve over the sins of your early years?” Obviously, the response of a reasonable reader can only be positive.

But, can you forgive yourself? Having forgiven yourself, can you regain for your soul the lost virtues of purity, joy, wisdom, love, peace, meekness, patience, lightness? I think that the answer would be—“No.”

We can—and should—reproach ourselves without any priest, but no one has the power to FORGIVE himself, for only God—before Whom we have

sinned—can forgive sins. For this purpose He placed His chosen witnesses—the Apostles, then the priests who carry the grace-filled gift of Christ Himself on their shoulders, to witness in the name of the Lord to the forgiveness of sins, to pray for the rebirth of the penitent.

Imagine a rusty pipe through which the water of life flows. The personal imperfections of the pastor do not hinder God's grace, as long as we have faith in the Church and in Christ, the Head of the Church, to flow through the prayer and the priestly functions of the pastor.

Confession can be likened to an operation. A sick man is diagnosed with an abscess. The only way to save him is to remove it. The sick man goes voluntarily to the operating room, as if crucifying himself, so that by means of the doctor's scalpel the abscess can be removed. So it is with the sacrament of Confession. Christ Himself acts through the hands and the mouth of the priest, healing the sincerely repentant soul by His Divine grace.

The Blood of Christ invisibly washes the heart of the Christian, burning up in him the very thorns of vice. Having received remission of his sins, the Christian makes a vow to God to guard himself from his confessed transgressions. As a reward for such determination, the Lord bestows upon the soul His Divine grace, that moral force without which not one of us can follow the law of good and truth.

The priest is like a nurse who meets the patient, helps him prepare himself for the examination, and perhaps even for an operation. The nurse herself doesn't heal, but much depends on her: the way the sick man prepares for the operation will determine its outcome.

The pastor is not an arbitrator or a bureaucrat from the Department of Religion with a rulebook in his hands to determine what our punishment will be. He also experiences what we are going through, prays, repents, sympathizes with the sinner, and in some way, together with him, takes upon himself the burden of his sins.

The pamphlet "Help for the Penitent" is good, but one must understand that every book approved by the Church is intended for a specific readership and therefore one must use discrimination when studying it. A portion of the material that went into this publication was written in the nineteenth century; even the vocabulary differs in many ways from contemporary usage. Many sins discussed in it relate primarily to Confession by monastics, such as moving from one cell to another, something that can hardly be imagined of as a sin by a modern day teacher. Monastics should indeed spend time in church as well as their cell, but spending time in empty activities in a neighboring cell is considered a breach of monastic practice. Therefore, we recommend that everyone preparing themselves for Confession use various texts, particularly "An Attempt at Making a Confession" by Fr. John Krestyankin, for each

spiritual father has a specific flock: monastics, Orthodox Christians living in rural areas, or those living in the city. You don't need to treat such brochures like you would the Holy Scriptures, or think that they are the final word on how we should make our confession.

In the seventeenth century young priests did not hear confessions. And even now in Greece one must receive special permission to hear people's confessions. In Russia it was the tradition for only old priests to hear confessions. Young priests wouldn't dare. We are now living in a special period in this regard. Each priest, regardless of his age, is called to hear confessions, which, of course, are fraught at times with all types of embarrassments and perplexities for newly formed Christians. Therefore we require reason and wisdom, and most importantly—faith that our confession is received by Christ Himself, the priest being only a witness placed there to absolve the sins of the sincere penitent.

Little by little, as the Christian becomes used to making confessions he will gain experience and will learn not to mix up the divine and human elements in a priest's actions. He will also understand that the priest must decrease, so that Christ can increase. It is one thing to confess one's sins, but it is another thing to find a spiritual confessor, a pastor whose counsels will serve as a guide for you and with whom you will obtain full spiritual happiness and feel yourself to be a true member of Mother Church.

The confession dies with the priest. The pictures painted in Margarita's mind certainly do not match reality. Priests do not reveal the names of those confessing and if they consult one another as to perplexing and difficult situations, they do it in such a way that their fellow priest cannot guess whom they are talking about.

You have attempted to make a confession—which is already a good thing. Your pastor spoke good words to you: "Pray, my dear, question yourself and then come back." Certainly one must prepare oneself for Confession—and prepare oneself deeply, turning to those texts that you are familiar with. It is a good thing to write down your sins, knowing that you will most certainly be nervous during Confession. As you read them, you may hear the priest asking questions in order to better define the circumstances of your life and confirm your steps on the road to piety.

I wish that you, Margarita, and all those who have a hard time going to Confession, will all the same come to this saving sacrament and obtain true spiritual healing, for God's mercy is greater than any sin. Every sincere penitent will be received by the Lord, justified and reborn into life eternal.

I sincerely hope that my thoughts on Margarita's letter will be useful for all young people reading this Orthodox journal, for those who question, and who, little by little, are moving from doubt to a clear and concrete faith. ✠

## ✝ The House Blessing

*This story was submitted to Foma by twenty-two year old journalist Xenia Legoida, the wife of our co-editor Vladimir Legoida.*

I have a friend whose name is Peter. He's really into rave music and for the past three years we've studied together at an institute here in Moscow. He always tells interesting stories about the various nightclubs and discotheques he spends his evenings at. He is constantly on the move: listening to rave music, wearing bright fancy clothes...and with his light, almost dancing way of walking – he is the epitome of the young generation.... To tell you truth, I really thought that hanging out in nightclubs with cool people was the only thing that interested him, until recently something took place that surprised me and made me take another look—not only at my friend, but at myself as well.

We were given an assignment in our journalism class. Everyone had to write about a recent event in their life—something that really made an impression. Many students wrote about their friends, birthdays they attended, summer holidays. I wrote about how I was the bridesmaid at a girlfriend's wedding. When it was Peter's turn, I had no doubt that he would tell us another story about the nightclub scene.

But he wrote about something totally different...he wrote about having his apartment blessed. I couldn't believe my ears. Yes, he was really telling everyone what he experienced: how he felt shy in front of the priest (whom he called "Batiushka" —something beyond my expectation since it was so unlike Peter), how the prayerful songs rang out—not so much in his apartment as in his own soul—and how this unforgettable feeling made him think about the meaning of life.

He spoke of sitting around the table at the meal following the blessing, how Batiushka told everyone such interesting things, and how the small choir sang a folk song about mothers. He even wrote down the words of the



*Blessing an apartment  
in Moscow*

song—which he had heard only once, yet fully remembered. You should have seen his eyes as he talked about how he stood in his room with only a candle burning, the smell of incense lingering in the air, his family nearby, and how, as he listened to the music, he quietly wept.

As our class listened to his story we were amazed at how little we really know the people around us, people whom we assume we know so well. The last line of his story was: "I felt that I wanted to live more simply, and that there really is something higher than all of us..." ✝

## ✝ What Have I Done?

*A 1998 interview with John Cowie, a British Orthodox psychiatric nurse in Oxford, England, conducted by Vladimir Legoida, co-editor of Foma.*

**Vladimir:** Why don't you introduce yourself, tell us what you're doing now and how you became Orthodox.

**Johnny:** My name is Johnny. I'm 34 years old, married, and I'm a psychiatric nurse—which I've been for about ten years. I became Orthodox and was received into the Church three years ago. I went through a period of training as a catechumen before that. I didn't come from another Church tradition. I was an atheist beforehand and quite virulently anti-church.

**Vladimir:** So, why did you become Orthodox? Why not Anglican? Or Roman Catholic?

**Johnny:** Well, for starters, I'd been a communist for some time. Not a mem-



*Johnny Cowie (collage from **Foma**)*

ber of the Communist party, but I was quite involved with politics, so I had a sympathy with the old Soviet regime, I suppose. Then I became more and more disenchanted with political solutions. You see, I was very involved with political conflicts. I participated in the miners' strikes and was caught up in their struggles. There was quite a lot of violent confrontation involved in my kind of political activity, and I slowly became aware that I was becoming somehow more... actually, that it was doing something to me. I was more and more thinking of myself as surrounded by enemies, and believed that violence and conflict was the only way of achieving anything. As socialism declined around the world, and our own country failed to improve, it became clear that I was only becoming more bitter, and inward looking. What had led me into politics was a concern for morality, a concern for mankind, a concern for peace, and so on; but in fact, I had become a very hostile, very isolated person. So, there was a crisis there for me. A moral crisis.

Because I was involved in nursing, I was working with a lot of handicapped people. At that time, just prior to my conversion, I worked with profoundly handicapped people, both physically and mentally. I had become more and more dissatisfied with any kind of rational explanation of what it was to be a human being, because it was clear that there were people whose humanity was just as valid as my own, and yet who didn't appear to have any intellectual capabilities, weren't able to contribute in a tangible way to society—all the measurable things about humanity were missing. Yet I was experiencing that it was possible to love, and also to be loved by people who.... well, there is just no way to explain the humanity there. So, this was pushing me into a position where I seemed to be developing a conviction about the sanctity of life, of human life in particular—"personhood" if you like. I couldn't sustain that within my political philosophy so I was in torment. Then one day I took a hospital patient to a small chapel service—it was an Anglican service in the hospital chapel.

**Vladimir:** Did he ask you to?

**Johnny:** Yes. This was a slightly more able person. I had many different jobs, and this one was with elderly people who were more aware. So we went to the chapel. It was an Anglican service. As you may know, the Anglican Church is much more permissive about Communion, it's not so exclusive. This was particularly so because it was a hospital chapel for disabled people. Instead of people going up to receive Communion, the priest would come around. So, I sat through this church service. I had been increasingly drawn to church services—much to my distress—because philosophically I continued to think that this was the most awful, hocus-pocus nonsense...reactionary, right-wing,

etc. But I found myself in church because of my work. I was taking people to church and feeling something. Anyway, this short Anglican service was full of talk about the shepherd leading his sheep to pastures, and water from the stream, and the language of it really affected me, until I was feeling, “I really want to have a drink of this water, and I want to go to this pasture, and I need a shepherd to look after me.” So, emotionally there was something very powerful there.

Finally, the chaplain came forward with the chalice, and before I knew it, I was drinking from the chalice. At that moment it seemed wrong to refuse. But the moment I had done this, I was thrown into even greater confusion. I thought, “What have I done here? I’m not a member of the Church. I don’t even believe in God, and I’ve done this thing. What does this mean? Have I received Communion? Or have I merely had some wine? Or have I committed some blasphemous act?” I was so very upset by this and I didn’t know what to do. So, I thought, “I must talk to a priest.”

I’ve always been a kind of “all or nothing” sort of a person—throwing myself into things. I found it difficult to accept that Communion was only a symbol of Christian togetherness—even when I was an atheist. Either this is all true, or it’s all rubbish. Either He is the Son of God and this is His Body and Blood, or it’s a story. And it’s a silly story. So, the idea that you could be somewhere in the middle, I couldn’t deal with. So, once I drank from the chalice I had to know what it was. Is it nothing, or is it everything? And I knew that I wasn’t going to get that clear of an answer from most Anglican ministers I knew. So, I telephoned the Black Friars, a Roman Catholic friary, and said, “I need to speak to a priest.” And the lady on the phone said: “I’ll send you a form and we can make you an appointment.” I was in such a state.

**Vladimir:** Why did you decide to talk to a Roman Catholic priest and not someone else?

**Johnny:** You see, there was a lot going on that I’ve had to make sense of since. But although I didn’t know how to talk about it then, what I would say now is that it had to do with the Apostolic succession, the feeling that there could only be One Church... It really doesn’t make a lot of sense. But I thought at that time, “If this act has occurred, then this is an act that has to do with me and the Church. And where is that Church?” I thought, “Well, it must be the Roman Catholic Church.”

So, anyway, this lady was going to arrange an appointment for me, but I was really freaking out. I suppose my fantasy at the time was that she would say: “Stay by the phone. We’ll send a friar.” That sort of thing. I thought there would be some guy with a cross who would come and it would all be

O.K. But this didn’t happen. So, I spoke to a friend who had been brought up Catholic. I asked him about it and he said, “Well, as it happens, I’ve been going to see an Orthodox bishop and I’ve been preparing to be received into the Orthodox Church.” I didn’t know anything about this at all. He didn’t talk much about it. He just said, “You can talk to him. I don’t think you need to make an appointment. Just give him a ring and see.” So, I phoned Bishop Basil and he said, “Come over.”

The following day I went to see him. I sat there and burst into tears and said, “I’ve done a terrible thing. I drank from the Communion chalice and I don’t even believe in God, and I think that I’m in a mess, and what’s the state of my soul? I need you to make sense of this for me.” He said, “So, you don’t believe in God?” I said, “No. That’s the worst of it.” He said: “Well, you do.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “If you didn’t believe in God you wouldn’t be so worried.” I said, “Really. You mean I do believe?” And he said: “That would appear to be the case.” So, that was fantastic. I said, “Right. Well, what do I do?” He replied: “Come to church.”

So, I did. I went to Vespers that weekend. I didn’t know what was going on, it was all in Greek. I didn’t speak any Greek then and I still don’t. And there was this strange chant; it was nothing like any church service I have ever been to before. Yet I felt I had come to the right place. One of the unique things about being Orthodox in Oxford is that there is a Greek parish and a Russian parish, and over half of the services are either in Slavonic or in Greek. For me that has been a good thing, because it means that although half the time I can understand every word of the service in English and relate to what’s going on intellectually, at other times I am completely unable to, which means that I have to attend more to the intuitive, the visual, the bodily.

Actually, that is one of the things that I’ve come to see as characterizing Orthodoxy for me, as opposed to the Anglican tradition that I experienced at school. In the West religion is approached as if it is an intellectual affair—intellectual or emotional—but that somehow the body and the heart, the “physicality,” is excluded. It’s not corporate. In two ways it’s not corporate. It’s not corporate because there is this turning away from the body, but also because it is so individualistic. The Protestant tradition is all to do with Me, I, and not Us. I always liked scripture, I was always interested in the Bible, you see, and I knew enough about the Bible to remember: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name...” Nothing about: whenever one of you... Right? Two or three.

Since then, of course, as I’ve grown into the Faith, the Tradition, I’ve been able to make sense of that in terms of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and its central place in the Church, whereas my experience before finding Orthodoxy

was that, “Trinitarian theology is embarrassing and we don’t really know what it’s all about.” Of course, we don’t know what it’s about, but that doesn’t stop us from thinking about it all the time and trying to make more sense of it. Yes, it is a mystery. And the mystery is preserved in Orthodoxy, whereas in the West, it seems to me that the mystery is thought of as a problem to be overcome.

Also, the theology of the icon. When I first venerated an icon I had a very strong feeling that I was being permitted physically to embrace God, and that when I kissed the wood of the icon, the matter which is me was lifted up. This is vital to me. I couldn’t be a Christian without those pieces of wood. It’s not just a style thing: “These marvelous Russian works of art.” A battered old icon cut out of a magazine is good enough for me. But especially these pieces of wood. [*Johnny taps on wood.*] It’s physical. It means that if God can become this in Christ, and if the legacy of that are these bits of wood with pictures on them, and I can kiss the pictures, then the bit of wood that I am is not held in contempt by God and is not to be held in contempt by anyone else. And this explains why if you sit facing a human being, then the material presence is enough. A human being doesn’t have to justify himself. This is important to me because I work with people who are thrown away. So, that’s part of it.

Also, there was an occasion a few years before all this, when I was in New York with some friends. I won’t tell the whole story, but there was something quite morally terrible happening and I was on the verge of participating in something that I would have very deeply regretted. I’ve done many bad things in my life, but mainly I can look back on these things and feel the... well, this was different. It would have been very, very bad indeed and I would have found it very difficult to live with, somehow. I was also very drunk at the time. But I had a vision of the Mother of God, and at the time this was enough to make me stop what I was about to do. At first, I thought of it as just being a strange thing that had happened when I was drunk, but after becoming Orthodox I thought, “Well, no—whatever that was, you know, I’m not going to look into it too much, but it did happen to me.” This was my experience—that I would have taken a very, very wrong path, and then the Mother of God saved me... It stayed with me and that was probably why, after I received that first Communion, it was the Catholic Church that I went to.

**Vladimir:** At the time you had this vision, did you know it was the Mother of God?

**Johnny:** I recognized her. Actually, I recognized her from Renaissance paintings. She appeared the way the Virgin is depicted in the Western tradition. Of course, that was the language that I understood at the time. So, I knew who she was. I can’t see who else would have appeared on the fire escape of a

New York apartment building just at that moment and said what she said. It clearly wasn’t anyone else.... I spent three years struggling to find out what it all meant. It happened in a rush, without my making sense of it. It was like, “I’m not going to question this.” It was beyond that.

...I think I’m probably quite unusual in the congregation here, because most of the people have come from another church and have probably been converted because of subtle, but important aspects of theology—theological differences. But for me it was absolutely jumping in from being completely outside the Church to seeing that I just have to be here. There was no doubt from the beginning, from the moment that I knew that the Orthodox Church was here in Oxford, I knew that this is the Catholic and Apostolic Church and this is where I have to be, no matter how absurd that might seem.

I also read a lot of Dostoyevsky, and Dostoyevsky continues to speak to me. In particular, Dostoyevsky shows people who are full of sin and weakness and folly and madness, and who are fully engaged with God in their madness and their sinfulness. I hadn’t realized that there was a living Christian tradition that would allow me in the door, because I’m like that. I was sort of a crazy, wicked, stupid guy. And I always thought, “Christianity, that’s not for me because I’m not good enough.” It seemed that way to me. It seemed that Christianity was for good people and I had the feeling that if I became a Christian, if I managed to be *that* good, then I’d somehow not really be alive anymore. I’d become one of these *good* people. But, you know, here I am, I’m Orthodox, and I’m still the same and it’s this constant mess. I expect to be in this constant mess until I die. Christianity isn’t about becoming safe and snug and free from suffering. I probably suffer even more these days than I did before, because I realize the importance of life, the importance of my life, in a way that I didn’t then. I realize that it matters. Everything matters.

I think of it somehow like a lighthouse. There’s this lighthouse. Christ is a lighthouse. I’m still in the same stormy sea, but I can see the lighthouse, and this means that I can see where I am. This might mean knowing how far I am from the lighthouse. It might mean being able to perceive just how bad my situation is, just how far I have to go, just how strong I’m going to have to be to swim that far... And sometimes, to realize that I’m swimming with all my strength *away* from the lighthouse. But the lighthouse is there. The lighthouse isn’t going to go anywhere. It’s been there for two thousand years, and whatever happens to me, there is still going to be this body of people who continue to point the way to the lighthouse. Particularly, the monks who have been chanting for centuries—they’re going to be chanting after I’m gone. So, I can place myself somehow; in spiritual terms, because of the lighthouse, and in worldly terms because of those monks. The Body of the Church is here—just a bus ride away. I can go there and be in the real presence of God, in the Body of the Church, which is fantastic.

**Vladimir:** It's hard enough to be a Christian. But in Western countries I think it's even harder than in Russia where there is an on-going thousand year-old Orthodox tradition. How do you find your situation now that you're Orthodox and you still have to meet the same people that you knew before you became Christian? Is it hard for you to communicate with them? How do they look at you now? Do they think you're some kind of weird guy who became some kind of weird Christian?

**Johnny:** I *am* some kind of weird guy... and always have been. And everybody knows that and everybody likes me partly for that reason. So, that's O.K. I don't go on and on about it. I don't preach to people. Outwardly I haven't changed a huge amount. So, it's been O.K. really. I've abused people less. That's good. I haven't become boring, because that's not required. You don't have to become boring to be a Christian. Although I have the same impulses I always did, I think I'm much less violent. I was never going around beating up people really, but somehow, I hope I've become more harmless. At my job, I now work with very disturbed people with severe psychiatric problems. There's a lot of suffering, a lot of anger, a lot of conflict going on there, and I think people tend to feel safe with me, even when they're probably not feeling safe in any other way. I think that's somehow to do with being in the Church.

The modern way of thinking is that death and suffering are like bad accidents—it would be nice if there were no suffering and no death. “There can't be a God because if there was a God, then why is there all this suffering and death?” Well, this is the wrong way around. There *is* suffering and death. So, we have to start from there. And when you start from there and start taking the answers that Christianity has to offer seriously, then you can see that no one's suffering is without meaning. Suffering is never without meaning. My suffering and other people's suffering. Part of what I do at work, but also what I do in life, is to be able to endure suffering and to meet other people in suffering. Not to make me sound better than I am, because I still hate pain and I want everything to be nice and cozy. I want to go to bed and pull the cover over my head. But I know that there's going to be suffering, and it's not going to go away. The worst thing you can do is deny it. Sooner or later, if you deny suffering, you deny suffering people, and you end up locking suffering people away or killing suffering people so that the world is prettier. I don't have to do that any more. I don't have to participate in that. I still work in this hospital and a lot of what we do, a lot of what the hospital does, is to take away the suffering from view so that people don't have to look at it. But I still go there and I look at it. I see people and try to be with people. I don't do anything amazing. I have cups of tea and cigarettes with people whose lives are torn to

bits. But, you know, I have a cigarette with them. And that's another way I can talk about Christianity.

In a way, Christianity has torn *my* life to bits. I suppose I'm quite a clever sort of guy. I read a lot and have always been interested in ideas and I've been all sorts of things throughout my life. I've been a Communist, a psychiatric nurse, been interested in psychoanalysis and philosophy and so on. I studied philosophy and I can get my head around it. Do you know the phrase: “to get your head around something?” When you get your head around something, it shows that it's smaller than your head. Christianity is *not* smaller than my head. If I try to get my head around Christianity, my head will break. So, Christ is somebody I worship because He's bigger than me. I'd never met anybody or anything that was bigger than me, stronger than me, but I'd always been looking for something bigger and stronger than me to worship. Because I've always been anti-authoritarian, I disobeyed anybody who told me what to do, and anyone who tried to stop me, I'd fight. Now, here's a guy I can't fight. So, He deserves my worship. It's fantastic to behold. And now I know my size. My size is that I'm smaller than God. The idea that is so popular these days, that there is nothing above man, is completely wrong. Man doesn't know that he's a man until he meets the Person who is greater than a man. A cat is smaller than a man, and a man is smaller than God. And this is where I am at. The cats can't open the tin of food. They need me to open the tin of food. It's no dishonor to the cats that they need me to open the tin for them. It's a privilege for me to do it and we love the cats... Jesus Christ is the top of that chain between heaven and earth and, you know, I fit into it, too. I'm not lost anymore. I'm not without scale.

**Vladimir:** This is very interesting, thank you. Now I have another question. I realize that you don't have problems communicating with people who are not Orthodox, but how about those who are? You're different. For Russians you look a little strange.

**Johnny:** It's a mixed group of people who go to the church in Canterbury Road and some people are very respectable and some people aren't. I suppose I'm at one end of that spectrum. But people are very accepting of me and I try to be accepting of other people. I've been amazed at how accepted I've been. Over the years I've discovered an increasing role in the church. Mundane, practical things. I've slowly been invited into the community around the church. I do little things in the church service—I stop the candles from getting out of control, and when the Gospel is brought in procession, I'm the one who takes the icon from the stand and moves it so that the Gospel can be placed there. Clearly, people are happy to have me do those little things, and so I have a real

place somehow. And, even though some people feel comfortable with being very conservative in how they conduct themselves, I don't think that that's the heart of it—even for the people who are the most strict in that way.

**Vladimir:** Of course not. But the ring you wear through your cheek is really unusual. In Russia it would be something very shocking.

**Johnny:** I understand that marking the body is actually, strictly speaking, forbidden by Orthodox canon law. Now, when I was baptized three years ago I stood in a pair of shorts in the middle of the church and had water poured over me, and I have these tattoos on my back. So, the body that was baptized is the body that has these tattoos. I've been accepted into the Church and this is what I am like. I'm not going to do anything these days that is forbidden by Orthodox canon law, but I was fully received into the Church and this is what I am. So, that's got to be O.K., somehow. Also, you see, I live *here*. I'm not that odd for East Oxford. If you walk down the county road there are lots of guys who look like me. Apart from the fact that I still struggle with who I am—and struggle even more with who I am since becoming Orthodox—I also remain part of this community. If I had suddenly become something very different, then I probably couldn't inhabit the two worlds quite so well. There is a lot in the Gospels and in the letters of St. Paul about standing with one foot in two worlds.

When I was baptized I was baptized Simeon, so my name is Simeon and my name in the world is Johnny. I am in the world, but I'm not of the world... I think one of the things that speaks to me a lot are the letters of St. Paul, which I really love and find very helpful—because here's a guy whose head is blowing up all the time; he's discovering all this stuff for the first time. You read the letters of Paul and sense his state of excitement, his trying to get his head around his experience and sometimes failing to do so, but usually just about managing somehow—it brings the whole thing very much alive to me. In the Letter to the Romans there is the text about being a fool for Christ's sake and that we are the offscourings of humanity. Where we are cursed, we bless. This is very important for me, as I am probably going to continue to be a wretch. It's nearly the year 2000, and we are really becoming very savage. Humanity is becoming savage. We've got TVs, videos, airplanes, and so on, but we are ignorant people—all of us—these days. It's very difficult for us to keep hold of our humanity in all this. I think things are going to become very, very ugly. Biblical prophecy from the Old and New Testaments describes where we are now—the last days. Whether that means that things are going to end next year, I don't know. St. Anthony the Great said there will come a time when all men will be mad, and when they meet somebody who is not mad, they will

set upon him and say: "You're not like us. You're mad."

I think the world is going mad, and I'm in the middle of it. St. Anthony the Great is another person who speaks to me out of the Tradition and he wasn't respectable. All those guys. All the Desert Fathers. They lived in those caves and they didn't have showers. It's a broad Tradition, and I'm a tiny thing within it finding my place. But there is also room for people who wear headscarves, and I have great respect for that. But that is probably not exactly where I'm meant to be. I'm feeling my way. I've met the bishop and am under advice from the bishop and if he were to tell me to do something radically different from what I am doing, I'd do it.

**Vladimir:** Perhaps there is something I haven't asked you that you would like to add?

**Johnny:** Well, you asked before about how people respond to my being Orthodox. Something I've found is that being Orthodox in England is an interesting and exotic thing. I wish it wasn't. Although I feel completely right about being Orthodox, there is one thing that I liked about being Anglican, which was that I could just go to the church down the road with everybody who lives around here. So, that's a problem. I'm not Orthodox to be odd. I'm Orthodox to be Orthodox, for right worship. That's what it's about. I joined the Orthodox Church because the Orthodox Church is the mainstream; it's where the Judeo-Christian tradition is at now.

It's not a funny thing that I'm doing. It's not a hobby. It can appear to be almost cool to be Orthodox, and in some ways I feel like I get an easy ride from people, because if I say too much about being Orthodox, people who might otherwise shun me—like they would if I were an evangelical Christian—say, "That's O.K., it's all right to be Orthodox." Well, sometimes I have to say, "No, look, basically I'm one of those guys that you don't want to be around. You may have to think about this again." You know the little fish sign that "born-again Christians" wear? I got myself one of those the other day, to wear on my jacket. I got it in order to say, "I really am a Christian, not just Orthodox. I'm an Orthodox Christian." When I went into the shop to buy the badge—a little evangelical shop down the road—the woman in the shop looked at me and I said to her: "This is about the only way that a Christian can get himself persecuted these days, you know, by wearing one of these things." She looked at me really strangely and probably thought: "Wow, we've got a nut case here." But it's an important thing. Christians are pushed aside, or persecuted, or people are suspicious of Christians. Part of that is because of the misunderstanding, which Christians are as responsible for as non-Christians, that Christians are "holier than thou." Christians are these *good* people, *smug* people, people who

are *O.K.* because they know that they're saved, but the rest of the people... well. Christians and non-Christians alike have allowed that to happen. But the other side of it is that the devil will see to it that Christians are persecuted. And it's important to receive some of that. You can't be living life right if you don't get a certain amount of it. ✚