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# EMBRACING SPRING: THE CHRISTOPOLOUS FAMILY OF IOANNINA

On one of my first pilgrimages, I passed through north-central Greece. Finding myself stranded in Ioannina with the tourist hotels full, I hesitantly called a private phone number given me by friends several times removed. A mature, authoritative voice answered, belonging, I assumed, to Aliko Christopolous. I introduced myself, and before I finished explaining how I had her number, she said, “Are you at the bus station? Stay there. I’ll be right down.” Twenty minutes later a taxi pulled up, and a very self-possessed fourteen-year-old sprite popped out, introduced herself as Marianna and informed me that although her family had gone to a monastery for the weekend, she was at home studying for exams and I was now her guest. And so began my very rich friendship with this remarkable family.

For over a decade, Dimitri and Aliko Christopolous have run a private English-language school in a small village near Ioannina. One evening last year as we sat in their living room discussing Greek church life and their struggles as a Christian family, I realized that what had began as a casual conversation was turning into a remarkable chronicle of the family’s inner life. The next night we began to tape. At the time of our talk, Marianna was 17, Photini 15, Barbara 13, and Georgi 8.

## I.

### Prayer, Family Life, and Our Spiritual Father

RTE: Dimitri and Aliko, what is your background? I know that both of you spent your youth abroad.

DIMITRI: Yes. I’m the child of immigrants. My parents went to Australia in 1962 and all of my teenage years were spent in Australia. I moved to Canada when I was twenty-one years old and went to the university there, so most of my formative years were spent in English-speaking countries. This left a deep impression on my soul. Aliko and I married in 1979 and we came

to Greece two years later. I was a bit of a romantic then and soon after we arrived, I realized that Greece wasn't really what I wanted. I wanted a more organized country like America, because living in Greece means that you have to be humble and accept many things that you wouldn't in other places. Nevertheless, we stayed, and God had mercy on me, because He led me to discover my Orthodox roots.

ALIKI: I was born in Greece. When I was nine my father, who had already emigrated to Canada, came back to Greece to get me and I moved to Canada with him. I lived there for eleven years and studied nursing. It was always my dream to return to Greece and after our marriage we did.

RTE: Your children came along fairly quickly after that. How did you begin to give them a sense of God's presence?

ALIKI: I just told them that every morning when they got up they should thank God that they had awakened healthy, and at mealtime to thank God for the food on the table because many people do not have enough to eat, and again, at night, to thank God for allowing us to live through the day.

DIMITRI: If I may add, we began by disciplining ourselves to pray, because this wasn't a part of our pasts. As we gradually discovered our Orthodox roots, we realized that our God is a living God, He is always there, and that we can feel close to Him through prayer. By disciplining ourselves to pray in front of the icon corner, our children saw it from the time they were very young. They thought it was natural to pray and they would come and stand next to us. Our prayers were rather long, so if they wanted to move around a bit or not stay for a long period, it was fine. The main thing was that *we* were consistently there and they knew it and expected it.

RTE: What do you girls and George remember?

PHOTINI: I remember when we used to come home from visits, my parents would begin to pray aloud in the car. Hearing this in the car and at home, we began to learn some of the hymns and prayers by heart. Their example helped more than the words.

DIMITRI: Of course, in Greece we don't only pray at home. The children also pray in school in rural areas. In the morning the teacher asks one of the children to come forward and say a prayer, usually something like the



*Aliki*

“Our Father.” Poor George is often picked because his classmates know his family is inclined to prayer.

MARIANNA: It is the same all the way through high school; we start with an Orthodox prayer in almost every public school.

RTE: Wonderful. Aliki, do you think that prayer starts even before birth?

ALIKI: I think so, yes, because if you ask for God’s help, your soul is inside of you and your unborn child will feel the effects of your prayer.

DIMITRI: I have memories of my mother praying when I was a young child. She would pray very simple prayers, like the “Our Father” and short things to the saints, and I would wonder at it. I remember it attracted me to her very much and I think that young children, even if they don’t understand the words or are still in the womb, can feel the action of prayer. In Orthodoxy you don’t have to be theologically educated to pray, and I know it was my mother’s prayers that protected me through my youth, my travels, and my later life until I found Orthodoxy for myself. She instinctively knew that with prayer things would go well.

ALIKI: One of the things about prayer is that when you are learning to pray, real prayer isn’t just words. What your soul wants to say is stronger than if you read all the words without understanding what they mean.

MARIANNA: When we go to monasteries where there are nuns who understand and believe what they pray, this environment helps us also. We are influenced by the atmosphere of prayer.

RTE: Do you pray as a family?

DIMITRI: Yes, every night we try to do the *Apodipnos* [Compline] together. On Saturday and Sunday night we make sure we are together, and this is a



*Marianna*

beautiful moment and an important part of our life. We pray together at meals at the table. We avoid eating alone — in fact we never eat alone. We pray at church together, and now, through habit, it is in the children's systems. They need it and they know it. When we pray together we come out so elated, so at peace, that we know a real contact has been made.

RTE: Aliko, I remember the last time I was here, you recited the whole Vespers service to yourself as we drove down the mountain in the car. It seems that you've learned a lot of the services by

heart, so, except for the changeable parts, you can say *Orthos* [Matins] and Vespers from memory.

ALIKI: Yes, I almost never leave home without doing my prayers. If I have to leave early, I do the service while I'm driving. For me the main thing is not to be ungrateful.

I find this very important. As a mother, because I have more time than my children, who spend long hours in school and studying, I am obliged to pray more often on their behalf. Maybe they don't yet feel the importance, the urgency, to thank God through the day, so I thank Him for them. Personally, it also fulfills me, but our prayers are not only for our family; they are for every Orthodox person, and even for those who are not Orthodox and who don't know how to pray. I am sure that people were praying for me like this before I was consciously Orthodox, and I have to do it for other people now. Maybe their time hasn't come yet to believe, but until they can do it for themselves, we have to pray for them.

MARIANNA: When we were little and went to the monastery we saw that the sisters were repeating the *Akathistos* by heart as they worked, so we taped it and listened to it until we knew it as well.

ALIKI: Memorizing the services isn't any different than having your mind continually on God. For example, you can say *Kyrie Eleison* for someone who is far away and needs help if you can't be there. God knows what is best for his soul. I might even make a mistake if I am there in person, but God doesn't make mistakes.

DIMITRI: What Aliki says came only gradually to me. At first my prayers were very individualistic because I was desperately searching to find God in my life. When I first realized the existence of God, I only asked Him to do things for me, but in time I realized that prayer is more encompassing and that you have to pray for others as well. It's not enough to keep asking for things for yourself; it becomes empty. I have to add everyone's name, because I want us all to be in Paradise. I can't imagine my being in Paradise and you not being there.

ALIKI: I also think that it is very important in the morning to honor the saint of the day, because he loved our Lord more than we do and gave his life for Him. We have to ask the saints to pray for us that God will give us the charisma to love Him as much as they did.

**Real prayer isn't just words. What your soul wants to say is stronger than if you read all the words without understanding what they mean.**

DIMITRI: The other side of prayer is that you realize that there is a war going on. You want to stand in front of the icons, but thoughts besiege you to tear you away. For example, for the last year or so I've been doing the *Akathistos* to the Mother of God every morning, without missing a morning. There are times when I said, "Oh, I don't have time," and yet I force myself, and that is when prayer is a difficult struggle. I'm very interested in current events, but at night I began saying to myself, "Why spend an hour watching the news? If anything important happens, you will know it tomorrow. Why not go to the prayer corner at 9:00 and do Compline? Why not get up a little earlier and do your morning prayers?" I realized that I had to change my way of life to accommodate prayer, and that is where the sacrifice came in. But what is the choice, anyway? Between eternity and emptiness.

Another thing that I've found is that after I began disciplining myself, I began enjoying prayer, but until I gained the habit, it was a difficult struggle.

ALIKI: God has been very kind to me, because many people have to go to work early in the morning, but He has given me the opportunity to stay home; I only have to work a few hours a day in our school office. I feel very responsible about this time, and there is no excuse for me not to thank Him enough, not to honor the saint of the day, not to pray for our neighbors or people we know with problems. Since God gave me this opportunity, I have to use it properly.

**I realized that I had to change my way of life to accommodate prayer, and that is where the sacrifice came in. But what is the choice, anyway? Between eternity and emptiness.**

PHOTINI: Barbara once said to one of her favorite nuns, "Oh, sister, I want to speak to you more often but I live so far away." And the nun said, "Just pray for me. Let us pray for each other at 10:00 every night, and we will have contact like this." And Barbara did this for a long time.

RTE: Barbara, did it work?

BARBARA: Yes, I often see her in my dreams.

RTE: I know your family has a spiritual father, Father Pangratos. What part does he play in the life of your family?

DIMITRI: I had my "conversion" when my heart cracked one day when I was about thirty years old. The next day I went to church, where there were two or three priests, and I said to one of them, "I want to confess." He looked me in the eyes and said, "Listen, this is not a psychological session, it is not philosophy, and it is not a debate," as if he knew this was part of my past. "This is a *mysterion* (a sacrament)." I said, "Whatever it is, I want it." After the services we talked for almost three hours. I emptied my heart and I've been with him ever since; there was an inner quality that initially attracted me to the sacrament and to him. Later, he turned out to not only be able to advise me in theology, but I soon realized how much I needed to be cleansed under his *epitrachelion*. There were times that I came out of confession so light, so vibrant. I knew that it worked, and that God had given him to me.



Of course, I asked him not only about questions of religion, but about decisions I had to make as well. A friend of mine once said, “Why do you have to consult him so much? Do you even ask if you should tie your shoelaces?” I said, “Even that, if I thought it might hurt my soul.”

My spiritual father plays a very important part in my life because his presence makes me hungry to want to know, to find out the will of our Lord and the depths of my own soul. That hunger cuts out the egotism which is the root of most of our problems.

RTE: Do you girls and George also feel that you need a spiritual father, or is that something just for adults?

BARBARA: I think a spiritual father is very important for our life because he gives us spiritual advice. It’s also good to have one spiritual father in your family because he knows everyone very well and he can understand the way we live and can guide us.



*Barbara*

PHOTINI: I was delighted with my first confessions with Fr. Pangratios, because after I finished I felt that something bad had left me. I want to have a spiritual father, not just as a duty for my spiritual life, but because his advice is blessed. Sometimes, my mother and father might even be wrong, but he has the Holy Spirit through his ordination. I believe that what he says is what God wants to tell me. Also, I prefer to speak to him about some things rather than my parents because it’s more reassuring, more comfortable.

MARIANNA: Also, none of us ever went to confession because we were told to. We all felt when we needed to confess, so we asked to go, and went. Of course, we also saw our parents going to confession and they spoke to us about the importance of it, but deep down, we went because we wanted to, not because we felt that we should go.

BARBARA: Fr. Pangratios is our spiritual father and we love him very much, and we feel that he is a member of our family. We call him Grandpa.

GEORGE: (*whispers to his sister in Greek*)

BARBARA: George told me that he first wanted to confess when he was very small.

ALIKI: When George was tiny, maybe even three, and he first began to speak... if he knew that he had done something wrong, he would go by himself into the altar and he would say to our spiritual father, "I would like to confess now."

(*General laughter*)



George

DIMITRI: Sometimes, he would pick up the phone and say, "I want to confess, I have a very bad feeling inside of me," and Fr. Pangratos would laugh and absolve him.

BARBARA: (*more whispering from George*) George says that the bad things he's done go away. Confession helps his sorrow.

RTE: That's true for all of us, George. Dimitri and Alik, since you have one spiritual father for your whole family, have you ever found that his advice to the children is different than what you thought was right for them?

ALIKI: The thing about Fr. Pangratos is that he says, "This is what it says to do in the Bible about your question." He never says, "You have to do this." He always lets us decide for ourselves.

DIMITRI: When I first came back to the Church, I was so empty inside that I took everything he said in trust, very deeply inside myself. I was willing to surrender myself and that is why it turned out so well. Until then I used my logic, my own will, and it always led me astray, but when I began listening to what he said, the Lord saw my willingness and accepted it. Things began to turn out better, and never did I have a moment of consternation or discomfort. Of course, it was a great blessing that he was the first priest I went to. Often people have to search and try several spiritual fathers until they find the one that consoles their soul.

RTE: You are very fortunate in having had Father Pangratos for twenty years.

ALIKI: He is not physically so close now. Last year he went to become a monk on the Holy Mountain, but he is still our spiritual father and we call him very often.

RTE: How would you suggest that people go about finding their own spiritual father?

ALIKI: The Bible says, “Seek and ye shall find.”

DIMITRI: Yes, that’s the answer. You might have to travel long distances, but you will find him. Sister Gavriilia, who was the spiritual daughter of Mother Gavriilia who lived among the lepers in India, told us that Mother Gavriilia would travel across India for three days to find an Orthodox confessor. God honored that. When I go to Mount Athos on pilgrimage, the monks there often say, “It’s a long way from Ioannina, but the angels count your steps. The more difficult it is to come, the more of a reward you will receive here.” It’s the same in the United States. If someone finds that there is a good confessor in San Francisco, or New York and gets on a plane and goes to him, he will get more reward than if he had him next door like Fr. Pangratos was for us for twenty years.



*Photini*

If people hear that there is a doctor who can cure them of cancer, they will fly to the other side of the world to find him, but these are doctors who cure us of more than cancer. The excuse, “It is not so easy to find a spiritual father,” is true only up to a point.

Confession is the cornerstone of life for an Orthodox. Without it one cannot approach the Cup of Life. How dare we receive the Lord in a dwelling reeking with the imprint of the evil one’s presence? It’s both spiritually fatal and a betrayal. Moreover, confession is the root of all joy and happiness. An abbot on the Holy Mountain told me that each sin contaminates the soul in a tangible way. The contaminated spot is considered by the evil one as “conquered territory,” over which he has rights, and

through which he has “access” into us. Where the evil one goes, of course, there follows stench, fear, darkness, anger, and depression. Confession is the “washing machine” of the soul. It cleanses all the contaminated areas so the soul is ready to receive the Lord and where the Lord resides there is joy, no fear, no sorrow, but only peace, hope, love, light.

RTE: Yes. Now, how do you deal with the daily or weekly routines of Orthodoxy? Many families feel it is difficult to keep the fasts, especially with children in school and parents like Dimitri and yourself working long hours. How does this work out for you?

ALIKI: If we have difficulties we ask for the blessing of our spiritual father and do as he tells us. Also, there are many things I can do. If the children are finding it hard I can make a cake without eggs and milk, or give them a piece of fruit or some juice. It’s not a problem for our family at all.

PHOTINI: I personally feel that in the end it’s a matter of habit. I know that it’s a special tradition that we are following, and I don’t think that following the fast makes me a great person, or even that I am missing out on anything.

MARIANNA: Our confessor has helped us to understand that holding ourselves back from something we like makes us stronger, like heroes, you know. Then, you have a victory over yourself. Of course, sometimes if there is something going on where we can’t fast, mother knows.

PHOTINI: For instance, we aren’t as strict now that we are studying for exams.

MARIANNA: Studying for these final exams in Greece means an extra four or five hours in a special tutoring school after our regular school day for several years before graduation, on Saturdays all year long, and then studying sometimes past midnight for months before the exams themselves.

ALIKI: What the schools now expect from these children is not normal. They cannot have a normal life if they hope to get into a university.

DIMITRI: Fasting is just like prayer – the parents should set the example for the children to see. There is a Greek story, about a king who had a child, and six years later he called a philosopher to educate the child. The philosopher said, “It’s too late.” When the next child was born, the king called the



*Christopolous family and guest.*

philosopher when the child was six months old. The philosopher said, “It is too late.” For the third child, the king called the philosopher the day he was born, but the philosopher again said, “It’s too late.” The king said, “Tell me, when was the time?!” The philosopher said, “When you were a child, you should have called me then.” The point is that first you have to discipline yourself, and then your children. Love requires sacrifice and how can you love the Lord without sacrifice?

You also have to talk to your child about fasting, why it is a special day. Also, fasting isn’t only abstaining from food. You have to accompany it with less conversation and more prayer because when it is deprived, the body comes back like a beast. You have to join the fasting with prayer for it to be successful.

PHOTINI: It gives meaning to the days. This day is for the Cross, this is for the angels...

RTE: I know you also go on pilgrimages together. Do you think it’s important for the family to go to holy places?

DIMITRI: I began going on pilgrimages a few years after I became a regular

churchgoer. I found that this helped me greatly because on pilgrimage you meet people who are vivid examples of living faith. They give you impressions of things that you want to do because you see it in practice, and then you come back and try to live them in the world. Of course, the inspiration eventually diminishes, and you go back again to replenish yourself. This goes on your whole life. More than that, these holy places are the secret of our Christian existence. You feel so happy there, and the blessing leaves you with something inside for later.

One monk told me,  
“The only thing  
that is mine is my  
God and my sins.  
Everything else  
is a gift.”

RTE: Although monasticism was at a low point in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s, and some people feared that it might even die out on the Holy Mountain, it is actually increasing now, isn’t it?

DIMITRI: I go to the Holy Mountain on pilgrimage three times a year, and I can say that on Mt. Athos and in other monasteries it is on the increase. But that is in the monasteries. I can’t say that there is an increase in the numbers of men becoming priests or in church attendance. I’m not sure why this is happening. One reason may be that the Holy Mountain is more accessible. Our transportation is better than fifty years ago, and more people visit and are touched by the holiness of the place. Another reason may be that the youth are experiencing the dead end of other choices earlier, and some are brave enough to admit it.

PHOTINI: People are getting fed up earlier with worldliness, and understand that it doesn’t work. I think that we are at the end of the world. I can’t judge the time, but I think the fallen angels are being replaced.

DIMITRI: What Photini is referring to is a Greek tradition that before the end of the world the number of fallen angels will be replaced on earth by the same number of those who have become monks and nuns. So, the greater the increase in monasticism, the closer we are to the end times. That may be one reason why monasticism is flourishing.

RTE: How would you and Aliko feel if one of your girls or George decided to become a monastic?

DIMITRI: It would be an honor. We would be totally honored if one of our children was called to serve God. Can you imagine having the Lord as your “boss?”

MARIANNA: My father is very happy that you even asked this question, and as for us, we would also feel honored if God called us to be nuns, or for George to be a monk or priest.

DIMITRI: Once, when I became worried about my family while I was on Mt. Athos, Fr. Athanasios said, “Why do you worry? Now that you are here, they are safer than if you were with them out there.” The psalm says, “If the Lord doesn’t guard the city, in vain is it guarded.”

RTE: I’ve heard stories of Greek parents fighting to keep their children out of monasteries, and of young novices who were even drugged and kidnapped by their relatives. Why is there such strong resistance to children of Orthodox parents going to monasteries in an Orthodox country?

DIMITRI: My confessor said, “When God builds a church, the devil builds a chapel.” The tempter is going to fight, not the child itself but the parents, because he knows that is where the weak spot is. He’s going to come to the tooth that hurts you and push on it.

ALIKI: I think it’s because we don’t see these children as being lent to us by God. They are not our children, and when He asks us to give them back in any way, perhaps not in monasticism but even in death, it is very difficult to accept.

DIMITRI: It is a continuation of our materialism. We grow up thinking that everything is mine, mine, mine. One monk told me, “The only thing that is mine is my God and my sins. Everything else is a gift.”

RTE: It is obvious that you have a very open communication as a family. Is this a Greek trait or is it something that comes from being Orthodox?

DIMITRI: Let’s take the second part first. Orthodoxy is open, it’s revealed, and we open our hearts. The things we keep hidden are usually the things that are not Orthodox. In iconography we see that all the faces of the saints are fully to the front, none of them are to the side or to the back, everything is open. Even if our hearts aren’t open, God will see them in the end, so





what is the point of hiding things? Greeks, of course, also tend to be a little philosophical and we like to talk.

PHOTINI: Also, our religion is not part of our life, it is our life, so we cannot communicate any other way. At least we try to make it our life.

## II.

### Youth, Faith and Temptation

RTE: Then can I ask how you girls and George relate to the other students at school? While almost everyone in Greece is baptized Orthodox, your family is particularly strong, and that is probably obvious to outsiders as well.

*(After the question is translated to him, George talks softly to his father in Greek.)*

DIMITRI: George says that they both accept and reject him when he reveals his religious side. They don't accept him completely.

ALIKI: One day he came from school and asked me, "Are you sure that there is a God? I said, "Why are you asking this, George?" "Well, because, most of the kids at school don't believe in God." Then I had to speak to him as deeply as he could understand. Unfortunately, in Greece now many people aren't very close to the Church.

RTE: Why do you think it is that in a country that has had Orthodoxy longer than almost any country on earth, people are now losing faith? Greeks believed through five hundred years of Ottoman occupation, and Turkish rule came to an end less than a century ago here in Ioannina.

ALIKI: I think that with the borders being opened to other cultures and the media, materialism has crept in. People have forgotten everything. They are just worried about how to get a second car, how to get the best brand of TV, and they've become very materialistic.

RTE: Don't you think that this is a natural reaction to the terrible century that Greece has been through — two world wars, a civil war, a military dictatorship, and unstable governments?

ALIKI: No, I think that when people have everything, they forget Who gave them those things. When you are poor or when you are in pain you seek help from God, but when everything becomes easy and our desires are centered on, “I must have the best brand of shoes for my children because all the other children have them,” then we forget God.

RTE: What kind of people in modern Greece remain believers and go to church regularly?

DIMITRI: There is a difference between a believer and a churchgoer. I think that deep down most Greeks do believe, but those who implement it into active worship and maintain a sacramental life are a small percent. The majority who believe in God cross themselves when they go by churches, but they won't go inside.

RTE: Yes, I see that even in Athens. When the bus or train goes by a church, many of the people on the bus cross themselves.

DIMITRI: This is going to have an effect on later generations, because, as people keep withdrawing from church, later they won't even make their cross outside the church. The present government in Greece is not helping this. They want to separate the Church from the state. And some people are thinking, “Why not?”

PHOTINI: I would say that modern times have influenced us, and that people feel that our Orthodox religion belongs to the past. They try to taste other things, like Buddhism, yoga... they are interested in new things.

I also want to go back and answer your question about how other students look at us in school. Usually, they respect us. Sometimes if my friends curse, they say, “Oh, I'm sorry for saying that word,” because they feel that it doesn't sit well with me. But everyone has his own belief, so I don't mind so much about the others.

MARIANNA: It depends on the school and the kind of people you have to deal with. Sometimes they are influenced by our belief, but don't want to accept it yet. Still, it remains in their minds, and somehow, sometime it will grow. Like Photini said, I feel that people generally respect me for what I am, and if I am present they will not say or do certain things.

DIMITRI: But let's not forget that you have had temptations in school, too. Even teachers have made fun of what you believe. The girls were ridiculed by both children and teachers, but, thank God, this made them stronger and didn't turn them against the Church.

PHOTINI: You do feel the pressure, you know. They often don't say it to your face, but you feel the unspoken pressure. I feel this very strongly, but I know I have to overcome it.

MARIANNA: Even when it was difficult I felt proud that I had problems because of my beliefs. I was fighting for something that I believed in.

ALIKI: That is why it is very important for the mother, while she is cooking or washing dishes, to say, "Please, keep them on Your road," because you never know what they are going through at that moment. I can't be there at school to tell Marianna, "Look, defend yourself like this, answer back like that." God must tell her what to do.

PHOTINI: There is a Greek saying: "a single swallow doesn't bring spring," but it certainly reminds us of it.

DIMITRI: The origin of this saying is that the swallows return with the spring, and if you see a single swallow you will know that spring is close.

PHOTINI: In the same way, we can't bring religion to school, but we try to be a reminder that it exists.

RTE: Marianna and Photini, you were both speaking of pressure at school. What kind of pressure was this and how did you handle it?

MARIANNA: Well, for example, when I was very young, in primary school, I had a teacher who knew that I believed in God and fought the idea. He tried to isolate me from the whole class and would say things like, "We are now going to speak about silk, a fabric out of which you make brides' dresses. I'm not speaking to you, Marianna, I'm speaking to the rest of the class ..." meaning, mockingly of course, "...she's going to be a nun, she doesn't belong here."

DIMITRI: This happened a lot...the teacher's desire to single her out, or maybe even to humiliate her. When he did this, the children themselves began to look at her differently.

MARIANNA: I have a very anxious character and once before writing exams in primary school my mother said to me, “When you go to the exam, take a little icon with you to put on your desk so that you can look at the face of the Virgin Mary and take courage.” When we got there the teacher wanted me to move my desk, and said in front of everyone, “Get up — take your picture of the Virgin Mary, and move to another place.” He said things so sarcastically that he made you feel like nothing.”

RTE: What did you do?

MARIANNA: When I was younger, I couldn’t do anything, I just didn’t pay attention. In high school it was easier for me to fight because I was older.

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and said what I believed.  
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vinced anyone, but I did  
what I should have done.**

One time, for example, we were to write an essay on Christmas, and I wrote that I thought the world would be better if we had Christ in our hearts. But when the teacher read it, he turned to me, almost shouting, and asked how this could happen. “If I enclose Christ in my

heart, how can He bring peace to the world?” So, I stood up for myself and said what I believed. I don’t know that I convinced anyone, but I did what I should have done.

RTE: What about the Orthodox brotherhoods of Sotir and Zoe? Do you feel drawn to them? They are rather family-oriented, aren’t they?

MARIANNA: They don’t have many people now because they went to extremes. This is an example for us. They concentrated on the external, not on the internal.

DIMITRI: If you go there they make you feel that you are one of the “elect,” that if you don’t belong to this group, you are somehow just part of the crowd of sinners. One of these brotherhoods has clubs or gatherings for young Orthodox people here in Ioannina, but we soon distanced ourselves from them because they seemed to be intent on dominating the children’s thoughts, as if the father and mother didn’t matter any more. In their enthusiasm to catechize the children, they were giving the little ones the

impression that they (the catechists) were to be trusted more than the “ignorant” parents.

This isn’t right because even in families that don’t have a sense of religion, the love between a child and his mother cannot be replaced by anyone else or by anything that they have to give. Later, the child will realize that an unbelieving mother was wrong in this regard, but if at this early moment in his life you succeed in breaking the tie between the child and his parents, are you willing to take responsibility for that child’s life? No, you are only playing out your theology on them, and if, without realizing it, they lose confidence in their parents, the consequences will be disastrous. These brotherhoods remind me of Protestant lodges and secret societies.

MARIANNA: You have to be careful because it’s always easy to be aggressive towards others. Our confessor says that we should approach people with discretion, that extremes don’t help anyone, but if you follow the golden middle path you will convince people and you will know yourself that you are on the right road.

RTE: What do you girls do about external, practical things, like clothes?

MARIANNA: We wear pants to school like everyone else. It may be more proper to wear skirts, but because we already seem different to other people we don’t want to distance ourselves any further. Our spiritual father said, “Skirts aren’t the most important thing, wear pants if everyone else is doing it. Don’t make a show of yourselves and your belief.” Also, I’m not sure I have the strength to go against everything. It is hard as it is, and wearing skirts or dresses would cut us off from normal school life. Of course, we wear skirts to church and in the monastery.

RTE: Barbara, do you have anything you want to say?

BARBARA: Many times when I return home [the children I am walking with] want to say something bad, but then they say, “We can’t talk about this now, because we have a nice girl here.” It’s hard to talk to them sometimes because they know that my beliefs are different from theirs, and even if they know that they are doing something wrong, they don’t want to believe it.

MARIANNA: The hardest thing for all of us is that we are isolated.

RTE: It's good that you have each other, then.

MARIANNA: Yes, I think it is God's blessing because we try so hard to be ourselves at school, but the social isolation is difficult. In youth, you feel the need of friends and it is very hard to find true friends who understand and think the way you do.

DIMITRI: In fact, the whole family is a little isolated because sometimes even our family friends, after they get to know us, begin to drop away because

I think that if young people don't have brothers and sisters or parents who can talk to them as ours do, God is actually closer to them than He is to us, because they need Him more.

they don't want to share what is important to us. If I have a friend, and if, after a time of getting to know each other, I can't talk to him about my beliefs, my inner feelings, I have very little left to say. You can't have small talk forever.

PHOTINI: I used to be sad because we didn't have friends, and I told Marianna, "There isn't anyone at school like me," but then a nun from a monastery told me, "Just pray to God and He will send you a friend." And I realized that I do have close friends, even if they are in other towns. Maybe that is the way God wants it, so that I will be stronger. He has all these people around me, but they aren't close to me.

ALIKI: Personally, I don't feel that way. Our house is always open to everyone, whether they believe or don't believe. We have to try and think of our own pasts, when we were far away from church and someone else opened the door for us. You have to make these people feel good. It doesn't matter if they don't go to church every Sunday like we do. They could be better than us even without church. So you go slowly, and as you get to know each other, you reveal who you are. But our house is filled with people and if they drop away, it is their choice — they know they are always welcome here. But we can't be anything other than what we are.

DIMITRI: Of course, when we and the children talk about friends we are talking about people we can really share with. We have many, many

acquaintances and we have lots of patience with them. We go very slowly. Many times this works because they respect the fact that although I believe, I don't try to have a conversation about it unless I feel they want to.

ALIKI: It took me about four years to get my neighbor, who was baptized Orthodox like all of us, to light a *kandili* [lampada]. I went to her house the first time when we moved to this neighborhood. She came here and saw my *kandili* in the kitchen. She said, "Every day you light your *kandili*?" I said, "Yes, don't you have one?" She said, "No, I don't have one. I just have a glass and sometimes I light it." So on her namesday, as a present I brought her a *kandili*. Her next namesday I bought her a little house censer. It's been about ten years now, but many times I look through my window and I see her *kandili* lit. Also, she used to cook meat on Wednesday and on Thursday, beans. On Friday she would have meat again, and Saturday she would have fish. One day, after we had known each other for some time and she had opened her heart to me and trusted me, I said to her, "Since today is Friday, why don't you make the beans today, and tomorrow have the meat. Since we are Orthodox that is what our church says." "OK," she said, and she's done it ever since. But you have to go slowly because if someone had come up to me years ago and said, "Aliko, on Wednesdays and Fridays you shouldn't eat meat," I would have done the opposite. You must go very slowly. God was so patient with me; how can I be impatient with others?

DIMITRI: You never want to give the impression that others are sinners and we are better. We are worse than anyone else. I simply want to share what I've found, and I can only do that with people who want to hear it.

ALIKI: We have to always take into account if a person's parents believed, if they even have a family...

DIMITRI: Yes, we must always give them the benefit of the doubt because someday they may surpass us all. They are children of God, He loves them, He waits for them, and He isn't harsh with them. We should be the same. Never make the mistake of comparing yourself with others. Even the worst of them may be like the good thief who went to Paradise first. What they do doesn't really matter to us, as long as we try to keep close to Christ and raise a little prayer for them.

ALIKI: We must be compassionate because maybe the mother and father both have to work, and they don't have time to spend speaking about God.

Maybe they don't have time to think about God or even to go to church. Maybe they don't know how to speak to their children, because everything is a gift from God. The fact that I can stay home part of the day is a gift from God to me. The fact that I can sit down and talk to my children is also a gift.

Also, my girls may go to church or have a confessor, they may behave and not use bad language, but this is all external, what other people see. What is their real relationship with God? Me with God, Photini with God, Marianna with God? You answer to yourself how good you are. It's not because a neighbor says, "Oh, you are such a good person." No, that may be a standard for her, but for me it is deeper, not just my outward behavior. The question is, "What is my relationship with God?" That is what I try to tell the girls.

BARBARA: Also, some children would like to follow us in religion, but they are afraid that the others will laugh at them. It is very difficult to break away.

RTE: Do you think that in their hearts they want to believe?

BARBARA: Yes.

MARIANNA: You know, earlier when we were talking about isolation, actually, people isolate us, we don't isolate ourselves. Our confessor said, "Your beliefs should not take you away from people." We still love people. Also, I'm not sure that isolation is the right word. What we mean is that we don't have many friends that we can speak to freely about our inner life.

ALIKI: I thought isolation wasn't the right word. My God, on Dimitri's namesday we had over a hundred people in the house. There are always people here. We may not speak so deeply with all of them, we may only speak lightly, but they are all our guests and they are all welcome.

DIMITRI: Yes, isolation was a bad choice of words. What I should have said earlier was that you can only reveal your soul to intimate friends.

PHOTINI: If you love the Lord, you have to love other people. Up to this year, I felt different from others, but this year I saw it from another perspective. I thought of the Bible quotation: "The first shall be last and the last shall be first." So, when I watched my classmates, I didn't think any more that I was better, but that it somehow wasn't yet time for them to come to religion, maybe a little later. So, I started praying for them more inside myself. We do keep company; we have many friends in that way.



RTE: Marianna, Photini and Barbara, what would you suggest to teenagers whose family have become Orthodox, but perhaps they don't have brothers and sisters at home, or even like-minded friends. How would you encourage them?

BARBARA: I would say to them that they must continue to pray, because God will send them some person who will give them love and friendship, and who will have the same beliefs. God never leaves a person alone.

MARIANNA: I want to answer my sister's thought. We have each other, but I think that if young people don't have brothers and sisters or parents who can talk to them as ours do, God is actually closer to them than He is to us, because they need Him more directly.

PHOTINI: When I was younger I often felt lonely until one day I thought, "I don't speak to God, that is why He doesn't speak to me," so I started to pray and then I didn't feel so alone. So, if they feel alone they can remember that God is there waiting for them.

MARIANNA: Of course, everyone feels very bad when they are lonely, but our spiritual father said, "You shouldn't pray to God to give you a lighter cross, but for strong shoulders to bear the one you have."

PHOTINI: Of course, they can keep company with other young people whether they are believers or not, but as far as religion is concerned, they should try to find one or two Orthodox friends they can talk to. In any case they shouldn't be anti-social.

RTE: There is also a real pressure in America and western Europe to date very early. It is probably one of the hardest pressures because it surrounds you at school, on television, everywhere. How would you suggest that they handle that? How do you handle it?

ALIKI: Well, our body is our soul's house, and God has made every part of it, and we don't have a right before marriage to harm it. Our duty as Orthodox Christians is to do things that will make God happy, not things that will make people happy and harm the body. You can love someone, but love him for what he is, for what God made Him. You don't have to go any further than that. I'm not saying that a girl can't go out and have coffee with a friend

who is a boy, but we should always remember that God is in our soul, and that our body is our soul's garment.

MARIANNA: The peer pressure here in Greece is the same as anywhere else. But when you do something because you are pressured by your social environment, then it is not pure; you do not feel it deeply, you sense the emptiness of the act. If a friendship is only physical or social, and not spiritual, it doesn't give the relationship its proper value. Another thing is, why should we pressure ourselves into doing things that we don't feel ready for? Why not have friendships and feel that we are sisters and brothers? Why should we have to think about using that person for physical pleasure or having babies? If we do, we will never get to know them deeply. Spiritual love reinforces the worth of each person before God, whereas physical love alone disregards the existence of a soul inside that body.

The Greek author Kazantakis wrote in one of his books that he always used to wonder whether he was made by God or had evolved from animals. Once, feeling this peer pressure, he went with a girl and had an affair. It was at that moment that he decided that he must have evolved from animals. In other words, intercourse outside of marriage is a physical instinct, an animalistic act depriving both partners of any spiritual worth and reducing this union — which is blessed by Church as the moment when the two become one flesh — to a moment of lust and self-gratification. Afterwards, one partner almost always discards the other.

DIMITRI: In other words, he was serving the flesh and could only see himself as flesh. Up to a point the body has an attraction, but it is the inner person that you really love. That is where the real beauty lies and what makes our relationships last.

PHOTINI: We young people also have the right to resist what is going on. We can be rebellious and do the opposite. We don't have to follow everyone else. Some of my classmates respect me more because they know I am free to do what I believe in.

DIMITRI: And this standing up for yourself and resisting pressure when you are young gives you the strength to be something greater in your life than you might have been otherwise.

MARIANNA: Of course this isn't to say that we don't have feelings. We're human too, but we are waiting until the right time, until we are mature enough to handle these things.

ALIKI: A relationship is given from above. There is a duty there, and you have to ask yourself, are you ready for all of those responsibilities?

PHOTINI: Mom says that when you feel that something is beginning to happen in your own heart, or in the heart of the other person, unless you have a serious reason you won't go on because you can hurt him. You should try to be friends instead.

DIMITRI: Also, when you do things in your youth, you will often look back later and say, "Oh God, what I would have given to not have done that." That is what the tempter wants, to make you do something that you will sorrow for, that will leave a stigma on your soul for the rest of your life. Even if they are forgiven, I know that these things leave a tangible mark on your mind and body. It is a weak spot that the evil one and other people will be able to tempt you with later.

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### III.

#### Closeness to Christ in Contemporary Greece

RTE: You know, Orthodox Christians in places such as Russia, Serbia and Romania, respect Greece for its having 2000 years of Orthodoxy. Do you feel that this long history affects you personally? Do these roots somehow strengthen your spiritual life?

DIMITRI: When I was in high school in Australia we studied the Renaissance, and I felt so inferior because I had nothing from my own country to show. We were under the Turks during the Renaissance and the ancient Greeks were so distant. Even when I went to a Canadian university and saw all the advancements in technology, I knew that my country had none of them. I thought, "Why was I born Greek?" It was a deep burden for me, because in comparison to western standards we had nothing to offer. But now when I look back I think, "What else could I have been born?"



*Church of New Martyr George of Ioannina*

Now that I have discovered my roots, I know that even the ancient Greeks had approached (in a shadowy way) those deep things that Our Lord came to tell us. Our forefathers were seekers of divine truth even before it came to the world. When the Lord came and the Church was founded, the Greeks grafted themselves to it and helped make it into a tree that others could also graft themselves onto. That makes me joyful, because it has nothing to do with worldly honors, but with love, with martyrdom, and with persecution. My ancestors did this during the Roman period and later under the Turks. This is what makes me proud that I was born Greek, not because I am better than others, but because my ancestors had the courage to sacrifice all the glory of their classical past, to take this new revelation and give it to the world.

PHOTINI: You know, through the years our religion and our history have been very closely knit, but nowadays it is starting to separate. I'm very proud of our past, but in the present I admire the way that Russian people love God. They are very reverent. Although we are an Orthodox country we can't be compared with them, and I feel very depressed thinking we have changed so much.

DIMITRI: I am afraid that the depth of holiness is quickly disappearing and that we might reach such a low point where we will have to look to the Russians, the Bulgarians, the Serbians to see what it really means to be people of God. I hope that God will have compassion and help us to change things.

ALIKI: The history of Orthodoxy in Greece is a great strength in my spiritual life because of the prayers of our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, back to the beginning. I feel connected to them. My parents were not close to the church, but I am sure it was the prayers of my ancestors and of the people who are now on earth that God responded to on my behalf. In the Hours it says, "May my prayer be written in another generation."

RTE: Is that something that gives you hope for the future of Greece?

ALIKI: Yes. At the end of Vespers it says, "We ask God that He make strong the foundations of our faith for all the Orthodox people of this country, of this city, of this village, of this house."

MARIANNA: Being Greek should give us more faith, because no one would be Greek now unless his ancestors had been Orthodox, too. This is helpful for us because our past enlightens our faith.

RTE: Photini, you said earlier that you don't see much piety now. What hope do you have for the future of Greece?

PHOTINI: I'm very pessimistic for my country when I see how things are going. I think that God will have to send us something, maybe a war, or a struggle in which our religion will suffer. Somehow God will send something to make us realize that things are going wrong, so that people will turn to Him again.

ALIKI: I feel that the things happening now are not coincidental. They are a test for us to see how strongly we believe, and if we are going to give in. When Marianna and Photini were talking about their struggles in school, we have to stop and think, what is more important to us? Our faith, to make our Lord happy, or to have friends? It is a good test for us. If you look at things spiritually, everything that happens is for the good of our soul and a test of where we stand and what we have to do.

RTE: You've spoken several times of love for the Lord and wanting to make Him happy. What kind of advice would you have for those were converted through reading or study, but God still seems a little distant, while friends are right in front of you?

ALIKI: In order to have that feeling in you, I think you have to pray a lot, and then God will give it to you as a gift.

DIMITRI: And I would like to add that little by little as we think about God, we can change some of those abstract pictures of God as something far away and withdrawn, and begin to think of Him as a personal God, as Christ Who listens. On my early trips to the Holy Mountain, my friend Fr. Irenaeus said to me, "You're too cerebral, you're thinking too much. God is a Person, He has feelings and wants us to be close to Him.

ALIKI: Religion is not theory. It is existence. Even as we speak here, God is with us. You have to think that the Lord is with us, the Virgin Mary is with us, our angels are next to us, we are not alone.

DIMITRI: Even Fr. Seraphim Rose said it took him a long time to accept the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, how all the apostles came together from all parts of the world. There is a lot you just have to accept because logic goes against it.



*Ioannina, Greece*

PHOTINI: Somebody said, “Try not to speak about God, but to speak with God.” It is very difficult, and I haven’t yet felt that He is a physical person.

MARIANNA: I remember hearing from a friend of mine that there was an old monk whom he saw doing his prayer rope, who told him that he had finally felt the spiritual happiness that he had been waiting for all day. My friend asked him, “And how long did you do the prayer rope, Father?” He said, “For ten hours, my child.” So, if he had to spend ten hours, how can we expect it in two minutes?

RTE: There are many people now converting to Orthodoxy in America and Europe. Do you have advice for them?

DIMITRI: After I converted (and I mean that literally, because, although I was baptized Orthodox as a child, I went against everything) I received strength from reading the conversion stories of other converts. I say this honestly, because they have innocent eyes and they can see Orthodoxy like babes. These are things that I may not be able to see because I take them for granted from having been Orthodox for many years. I am especially impressed by the struggle converts must have to leave their mother religions and come to another. This would haunt me, and yet these converts have the strength to embrace Orthodoxy and believe in it. There is much

to be said for converts, and God will be more compassionate to them than they might think.

ALIKI: Converts should not be disappointed if they don't quickly receive the desire I spoke of before to make our Lord happy. It needs a lot of prayer and it needs time. God will give it to you when you are ready to receive it because He knows best when to give things. If you give a little baby a piece of meat you will choke him. God sees our efforts, He sees our struggle, He sees how much we suffer for Him, and He will give whatever we ask when we are ready for it. He is patient and we should be too.

DIMITRI: Also, daily reading is important, particularly the saints and their writings. There are two Seraphims that touch me a lot: St. Seraphim of Sarov and Fr. Seraphim Rose. The more we read vivid examples about people like this who suffered and prayed to the Lord, the more strength we receive.

PHOTINI: You know this real happiness and love and belief in the presence of God, the saints themselves tried for years to feel this, but sometimes only at the end of their lives did they come to it. It is like God giving a little candy, a taste of sweetness at first, and then He lets you come to it through your own efforts. Our friends who are nuns tell us that at first God gives novices a great spiritual happiness, then afterwards they have to fight for it.

DIMITRI: Yes, after the first discovery of spiritual truth, you are simply left with the happiness of knowing that He is there, of serving Him and waiting for Him. The greater part of life is fighting against temptation, against all those negative thoughts and feelings.

But I think that the main thing is to keep worshipping the Lord in your own inner temple, and not to fall into the self-satisfaction of only talking about Him. As Photini said earlier, we must talk with Him. This is the way of Christianity. We do not have a religion, we have a revelation.

MARIANNA: As mother says, it is a very hard road to come to love God deeply. Sometimes you need this love but you are handicapped, you are held back by your bad deeds. We have a poem by Ioannis Ritzos about a soldier who lost his arms in the war. He asks, "How can it be spring if you don't have the arms to embrace it?" Sometimes, by our bad deeds, we cut off our arms to



embrace spring, which is God, but spring will come nonetheless for those who have faith and who know how to wait. +