

TALKS WITH ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS

My Road to Emmaus

There are times in our lives when – like the two disciples on the *Road to Emmaus* – we find ourselves in situations where our eyes are opened to Christ's presence. We asked Orthodox believers to share with us some instances that affected their lives and helped to set them on their spiritual search.

Ludmilla Nikolaevna, 55, Kiev, Ukraine

There were three children in my family—myself, a younger sister and a younger brother. Our father died early on and our mother, who still lives with me, is totally blind. I never married. I guess I had too many worries helping my mother and just trying to survive. My sister was married young and had a daughter, but she later divorced and became very sad. We tried our best to help her through this period, but she fell into deeper and deeper depression. She worked as a waitress in a hotel restaurant, but the pay never seemed to be enough. Several years ago she jumped off the balcony and fell seven stories to her death. We were all in shock.

We never heard about God when we were growing up. We only heard about some kind of socialist-style paradise that was always just around the corner. I met an Orthodox believer once who asked me how I could deal with all these things in my life without faith in God, seeing that there had to be more meaning to life than just living and dying. I had never given it any thought; it was all so foreign to me. But after my sister's death, I experienced a terrible urgency to make sense of everything that had occurred. That's the moment my spiritual life began. I now go to church and thank God for the little light I do see in my life.

Andrei Valerievich, 21, Ivanovo

Last year I received an honorable discharge after serving in the Army. My time spent there started out as a nightmare. I worked with an Army construction crew on projects in Moscow, and on our work crew were two soldiers who hazed all the new recruits. No one had any money to buy anything and these soldiers would force two of us recruits to walk about the streets all day begging for money. Everything we received had to be turned over to them. In the beginning we only had to collect a bit, but the amount we had to bring back grew each day and if we failed to meet our quota, we were beaten up. The other soldier on the work crew told our captain of these threats. He was already aware of the situation, and was maybe even taking part of the money himself because the two soldiers were told who had reported them. They beat the guy up so badly he had to be hospitalized and not a thing was done about it. It was an “accident.” One day, I was in despair. It was winter in Moscow and my boots were soaking wet from the slush. I was freezing cold but I had to endure it or be beaten.

Then one day I went up to a man to ask him for money. It turned out he was an Orthodox believer. He spoke to me about faith, invited me in for something to eat and a hot cup of tea and allowed me to call my mother, whom I hadn’t seen for six months. All I can remember is crying a lot. It was like I was given new life that day. This person then helped me get a transfer to another battalion where things became much better for me. I was baptized as a young boy, but it was only after this experience that I really began wearing a cross. That was when I became a believer.

Ekaterina Lavrentievna, 57, Kishinev (Moldavia)

I am 57 years old. All my life I’ve lived in Kishinev. My father was a good man, but had no faith in God and dealt with his emptiness by drinking. My mother raised five children in very difficult circumstances and two of whom died early in life. I was married when I was seventeen and had a son whom I secretly had baptized at an early age.

God was something we never learned about in the Soviet years. No one ever told us that God was real. How to explain this? I had no logical proof,

but somehow I knew He was real. I think it was my grandmother's quiet faith that inspired me. She always made the sign of the cross over us whenever we went out. At first it seemed like just a motion of her hands, but a warm feeling always stayed with me from that.

Maria Vladimirovna, 32, Smolensk

I remember the day and everything that happened afterwards very well. It was in the spring, eleven years ago – in May, to be exact. I lived in Moscow at the time and was returning home from Smolensk, where my four-year-old daughter Anastasia and I had been visiting my parents. When we arrived home, my husband Vadim was not there, but he arrived shortly after we finished having breakfast. As soon as he looked at me, I knew right away that something was bothering him and that he wanted to talk. As soon as we were alone, Vadim told me that he was planning to leave me. I was in shock. Even though we had often had arguments and our family life was not always easy, I wasn't ready for this. Questions flooded my mind: How will I live? Where? What about our daughter?

My husband left. I was now alone. It was a beautiful, clear, sunny spring day outside – and I was completely alone with an inconsolable pain inside me. I remember several days at home, going out only once or twice to do some shopping. Thoughts and hurt filled my head.

One evening soon after I turned on the television and watched a documentary on the life of Anastasia Tsvetaeva (the sister of the famous poetess, Marina Tsvetaeva). She was already an old woman, but kind and full of life. I remember her sitting on a park bench and sharing some of her life and memories. But then, she suddenly spoke of how each year she would visit a wonderful monastery with a healing spring and how each winter she would bathe in this water and feel absolutely renewed. Her story interested me very much, perhaps because it helped me forget my own pain a little. Later, I tried hard but couldn't recall the name of the monastery she was speaking of. All I remembered was that it was in Estonia. Then I went to sleep.

I awoke the next morning to a beautiful, sunny day. The thought flashed in my mind that somehow I had to find this monastery. I made up my mind to do this, and a great burden seemed to fall from my shoulders, as

if this was the answer! (At the time I didn't realize that this was really my Salvation; not just salvation in one particular situation.) I felt so much better that I fell back asleep.

On another beautiful, sunny day in May, I left for Tallin, the capital of Estonia – which at that time was still a part of the Soviet Union. I had no idea where the monastery was located or even what it was called, but somehow I knew I would find it. Just as soon as the train had crossed over into Estonia a fellow passenger in my compartment said: “Not far from here is a wonderful women's monastery. And how the nuns there can sing!” I tried hard to remember the name of the station we had just passed. I thought it was Johvi.

After arriving in Tallin the next morning, I immediately went to the bus station where I bought a ticket to Johvi. Once in Johvi, I was told I had to go just a bit farther to a place called Kuremäe where I would find the famous Pühtitsa Monastery. I spent three weeks there and didn't want to leave. Everyone was so nice to me. It was as if they knew I was having a hard time in my life and did everything they could to be kind to me.

I was convinced that I would be coming here often, but things turned out quite differently. An old pilgrim visiting Pühtitsa told me about another monastery and its spiritual father. At the time I paid very little attention to his words, but two months after returning home to my parents and daughter, I felt a strong desire to return once again to Pühtitsa. I thought that it would be a good idea to stop along the way and pay a visit to the monastery that the pilgrim had spoken to me about, Rizhskaya Pustyn, where I met Archimandrite Peter, the priest who was to become my spiritual father and open up spiritual life to me.

Vladimir Romanovich, 26, Moscow

When I was a child I spent each summer in the country with my grand parents. They were Baptists and would always take me along with them to church on Sunday. There for the first time I heard of God, the Bible and Jesus Christ. At home I loved to play “church” with my grandparents – I would read the Bible out loud, interrupting my reading with amusing remarks like: “Don’t fall asleep, brother!,” something which I had heard when I was at their church. My grandparents gladly played along with me, considering such a naive and child-like acceptance of their faith as something quite positive. Once my uncle, who was living with my grandmother in the same village, asked me: “Don’t tell me you believe all of grandmother’s fairy tales? Don’t you know that cosmonauts flew into space and didn’t see God there?” I don’t remember whether my faith was really shaken at the time; I only remember that I wasn’t able to give him an answer.

Then there was the time when the Commission from our local Public Education Department came to our first-grade class and asked the seven-year-olds whether any of us believed in God. I got scared and kept quiet, remembering the story about the cosmonauts. Then someone from the Commission asked another question: “Do your parents or any of your relatives believe in God?” This time my hand shot up into the air. I was an honest child, who had always been taught to tell the truth. After I answered, “Yes, my grandmother believes in God,” an awkward silence hung over the classroom. The teacher tried to remedy the situation, assuring the members of the Commission that I had gotten something mixed up. That evening she phoned my home and spoke with my mother for a long time, saying that she had never expected such a thing from me – such an excellent and exemplary pupil. After her talk with my parents I began to suspect that something was wrong in the world of adults if they forced you to lie while teaching you to be honest.

After this experience, my parents, who until then hadn’t minded my going to church with my grandparents, forbade my grandmother to take me with her. Then came the Pioneer gatherings of my childhood, the Komsomol meetings of my youth, and perestroika, with its attempt to change the world. I began to forget about God, and was keen on reading books about spies and revolutionaries. But the euphoria over glasnost and perestroika

quickly subsided and I saw once again that the world of adults (I myself had just finished school) was as false as before. They spoke of perestroika, democracy and freedom, but these were only words. Once I was even called to appear before the Local Committee of the Komsomol for having used the Biblical metaphor about not pouring new wine into old wineskins at a local meeting of Komsomol activists and Party bosses. They reprimanded me for talking about the “opium of the people...”

At that time I became interested in philosophy and wanted to enter the Philosophy Department at the University of the Urals. In order to acquaint ourselves with university life, some friends and I traveled to Sverdlovsk (now called Ekaterinburg), where we spent a few days. We went to lectures, spoke with students, ate in the student cafeterias, and so forth. I became deeply disenchanted with the philosophy majors, however, because they were engaged in everything but philosophy, which, as far as I was concerned, was supposed to attempt to answer the question about the meaning of life. At that time the main criteria for philosophy majors at the University of the Urals was participation in the Urals People’s Political Front. I understood then that I wouldn’t be entering this university.

Soon my older friend and teacher, with whom I read and discussed philosophical books, began to talk to me about Christianity. Under his influence I began to study the Bible again, reading one that my grandmother had given me as a gift. I began to try to find in life that which I called “moral purity in the ideal.” Reading the Bible, I understood that if that moral purity I was seeking really existed on earth, then it had to be Christianity. All of this took place rather smoothly, without any particular experiences or events. My reasoning was more or less this: if there is no God, I won’t lose anything by living according to Christian laws; but if He does exist, I will acquire something that I will never be able to receive anywhere else.

I was still far from Orthodoxy at that time; moreover, my Baptist background had inculcated in me a rather critical attitude towards fasting, priests and icons. Even all the Christian literature that I had read up until then was not in the least Orthodox. They were either Protestant books or good classical works on religion. Leo Tolstoy’s *Confession* made a very strong impression on me, as did Francois Mauriac’s *Life of Christ*, I continue to find highly interesting and useful. I came to Orthodoxy quietly, without any mental anguish.

Then a friend of mine who was getting married asked me if I would be a witness. Seeing that I had been baptized Orthodox as a child, I was only required to wear a cross around my neck. I put it on, and from that moment I have never taken off that cross. It just seemed necessary to keep wearing it. There was nothing mystical about the feeling, I can't even call it a deeply thought out step. I simply decided that, "I will be with the cross."

It was later, after I entered the institute, that I began going to church: I wore a cross, considered myself Orthodox, and went to church. In addition to attending church on Sundays, I began reading the new Orthodox literature that was beginning to appear, and spent more and more time in church. The spiritual treasure of Orthodoxy began to open itself up to me. It was at this time, also, that I began experiencing my first serious difficulties and temptations.

I cannot say that everything is easy and that I never have had second thoughts about the rightness of my decision. But when I look back on the past, I see a very deep meaning in this simple path which I have described. I see how my life continues to be transformed, filled with meaning, and I joyfully say: "Thank God that this world has been opened up to me, this treasure has been given to me so freely." Simply because I once wore a cross. ✦