

KOINONIA:

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TELLING OUR STORIES

by Archpriest Eric G. Tosi

The world is made of stories. Of course the world is made of things as well, but mostly, let's say, most significantly, it is held together by stories.

Jonathan Pageau

The Church is a great place to tell stories. Our liturgical services are permeated with them. From great Biblical narratives to the lives of the Saints and the iconography, stories are everywhere. They find their ultimate expression during Holy Week when we walk the path, liturgically, from the Lord's Entrance into Jerusalem to Gethsemane, to Golgotha, to the Empty Tomb. Throughout the year we are telling stories.

But stories can also be on a personal level. They reveal the life, the struggles and the journey that we have been on, leading us to where we are now. Stories are powerful reminders that our journey, while personal, is not a lonely journey. Many have walked these same paths and found comfort in reaching the end. The Prophet Jeremiah wrote



"Thus says the Lord: 'Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls.'" (Jer. 6:16)

This year's issues of *Koinonia* will focus on stories from people around the Diocese who have discovered Orthodoxy, have walked "the old paths", and have been received into the Church. We heard some of these stories at the last Diocesan Assembly. They provide a captivating witness to what is happening in our parishes, our Diocese and our Church.

Especially inspiring was the commonality among

these new converts. They each sought to find Christ in a fuller and deeper relationship. Each was attracted to the Liturgy, the unchangeable theology, the adherence to the Bible, the witness of the Church Fathers – all of which moved them along a path they had not known existed. This ultimately led them to the Orthodox Church and to their local parishes.

Jonathan Pageau continues, "A story is a series of facts, facts chosen amid an indefinite amount of possible facts. These facts are characters, places and objects interacting in a string of events threaded together in a pattern of meaning. The pattern of a story is the invisible part, the hidden secret in a story."

May we all understand the hidden secret in the stories of these persons so we can understand the story which is the life of the Orthodox Church.

Quotes from Jonathan Pageau, Divine Patterns in Story and Image pt. 1 – Orthodox Arts Journal: <https://orthodoxartsjournal.org/divine-patterns-in-story-and-image/>

Finding the Church in Darkness

By Trudy (Athanasia) Ellmore

My family of origin is Roman Catholic, the faith I practiced until I was 18. My love of God was deep and personal. However, many other questions went unanswered within myself, not having a relationship with any clergy member to talk with and with a difficult family life.

I turned away from my childhood church to a non-denominational fundamentalist church. There I met my first husband, a Navy deep-sea diver and new Christian. Following our marriage and birth of our son, we found ourselves in Panama City Beach, FL, and became involved in a Southern Baptist church where we both were baptized. Upon completion of school, we settled in San Diego, CA.

Three months after our move to California, I found myself widowed with an infant son after only 26 months of marriage. Bereft, lost and deeply angry at God, my infant and I returned to my hometown. I joined an American Baptist church, where I was befriended by a woman who took me and my son under her wing. It was also there I met my current husband, who was attending a Baptist seminary and served as a pastor for five years.



For the next 20 years, it was in the American Baptist denomination where my faith and love of God was nurtured and grew deeper and deeper. It is also where I was challenged by a small-group Bible study leader to “be the church of the Book of Acts.” That simple phrase started my quest to discover “where” that church was or if it “even was still around”.

Simultaneously, I returned to college to finish my Bachelor’s degree. Majoring in history and taking every class possible that dealt with church history became the road which led me to the Orthodox Church. I discovered the Church Fathers and early Church worship.

The history professor, whose class reading lists were permeated with Orthodox literature, invited our class to Midnight Paschal Divine Liturgy at his parish. When I walked into the church, illuminated only by candles surrounding

Christ’s tomb, I was shocked into silence. At midnight when the priest, Fr. Eugene Vansuch of blessed memory, lifted the icon of Christ in the tomb aloft and carried it into the Sanctuary, my heart skipped – He had really risen from the dead! What I had always believed came alive in front of my eyes. I knew right then, in that second, that the Orthodox Church contained that which would heal and save me. Fourteen months later, on the Feast Day of the Holy Cross – September 14, 2004 – I was Chrismated.

That was 20 years ago. It was one of the hardest decisions of my life, and not for one second have I ever regretted the sacrifice to gain the Pearl of Great Price. It has been healing. The Church has given me tools of the Sacraments that help me manage my mental, physical and spiritual health.

As I look back over my entire life, I see God in all the workings of my life. I remain deeply thankful to God, Who by the prayers of my Patron Saint, Athanasius, led me into the Holy Orthodox Church.

The Church has, in fact, saved my life.

“He had really risen from the dead! What I had always believed came alive in front of my eyes.”

Encountering God in Stories

By Jonathan Pageau

The world is made of stories. Of course the world is made of things as well, but mostly, let's say, most significantly, it is held together by stories.

As Orthodox Christians we believe that we can encounter God anywhere and in anything, that in the language of St. Gregory of Palamas, the uncreated divine energies hide behind phenomena. We believe, within the wonderful frame given to us first by St. John the Theologian, and then expanded by St. Maximus the Confessor, that all things have a *logos*, have a hidden purpose, have meaning, and therefore all things are connected, united by their *logos* to each other and ultimately to the Divine *Logos* in love.

When we hear such phrases, about divine energies, uncreated light, *logoi* connecting all things to God, it is easy for the skeptic to see this as esoteric mumbo-jumbo. I can understand that. It resembles New Age vagaries or something so obscure one is expected "to just make a leap of faith".



But really, beyond the somewhat technical wording, it is simply how the world presents itself to us, in fact these truths are so close to us that they permeate all our experiences. And yes, it does begin with faith, not just faith as the mental belief in something, but faith as a commitment to the invisible, faith which leads us to experience how the invisible not only transcends the visible, but is also that which holds the visible world together.

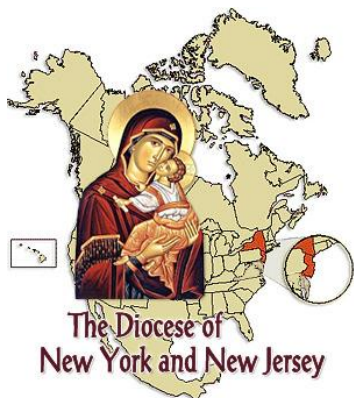
How in the world can the invisible hold the visible together? It can sometimes be quite simple, and stories are one of the most immediate examples of how this happens. A story is a series of facts, facts chosen amid an indefinite amount of possible facts. These

facts are characters, places and objects interacting in a string of events threaded together in a pattern of meaning. The pattern of a story is the invisible part, the hidden secret in a story.

The pattern cannot be found in the individual parts of the story, but appears rather as the reason why the particulars have been brought together. The pattern is not arbitrary, rather it imposes itself to our intuition by how much it is meaningful to us. We know something is a story because it captures our attention, it awakens our humanity...

*Excerpts from Part 1 of the article "Divine Patterns in Stories and Images" found in **Orthodox Arts Journal** (May 10, 2017): <https://orthodoxartsjournal.org/divine-patterns-in-story-and-image/>*

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Breadcrumbs Along the Trail

By Lon (Gregory) Bologna

When asked about my journey into Orthodox Christianity, I rarely give the same answer twice. There are multitudes of situations, experiences, and events that serve as stepping stones on the convert's journey, the spiritual significance of many of these only becoming clear in hindsight. I like to think of these as a trail of breadcrumbs left for us by Christ so that we can find our way back home.

In my case, that path led me to my first Orthodox Liturgy on January 17th, 2021 at St. Gregory the Theologian Church in Wappingers Falls, NY. Within a short time of entering the building, I remember distinctly knowing that I had found my way home, and that my life after that day would not greatly resemble the 36 years that preceded it.

I was born in Connecticut to a wonderful and loving family, Ashkenazi Jewish on my mother's side and Italian Roman-Catholic on my father's. I was raised in Reform Judaism. As a family we attended synagogue regularly and observed the major holidays. I was Bar-Mitzvah'd and attended Jewish school programs once a week all the way through High



School. But by the time I was age 18, I had no interest in being a part of an organized religion. I dropped out of college after one semester and joined a punk/hardcore band as the drummer. We spent about five years touring the U.S. and Europe, followed by five more years playing with a different band, chasing the same dream. I became enamored with the musician's lifestyle. But I must also admit that the longer we spent on the road, the more passionately inclined I became; and I watched many of my friends fall.

To support my floundering music career, I took a job at the private special education school where my mother worked and began my career as a personal aide for children with developmental disabilities. This was a great spiritual training ground.

I began to read books, watch YouTube videos, and listen to podcasts constantly as I tried to find some sense of meaning and direction. I learned the Lord's Prayer from a new-age Youtuber. I began to read small bits of Scripture and copy quotes down on scraps of paper. I learned about the Orthodox Study Bible from a YouTube video and was introduced to the Church Fathers. Soon after I decided that I had to go to an Orthodox Church.

My middle name, Gregory, now my baptismal name, was the breadcrumb that led me to St. Gregory the Theologian Church. Somehow God knew that this would be the right place and time, the right parish with the right group of people, to bring me in close enough to succeed at taking the required leap of faith. From that first Liturgy, I started by realigning my heart, focusing on becoming equipped for spiritual warfare. I began the transition from learning the faith to living the faith. In due time, I was Baptized and Chrismated into the Church on the Feast of Pentecost 2021. The breadcrumbs led me home.