

If this is not a testimony to the effectiveness of a Library Project, I don't know what is.

Dear Father Salem,

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is James Early. I am 33 years old and was a missionary with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, serving in Banja Luka, Bosnia, from 1996 until April of this year. My wife and I were Southern Baptists for 12 years. My wife Jennifer was raised Southern Baptist, and has been so all her life. I was raised as a very nominal Episcopalian but later became a true follower of Jesus in 1989, at which time I was baptized into a Southern Baptist church. Later we sensed God's call into full-time missions service, and we began our missionary career with the IMB immediately after I graduated from Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Last fall, in an effort to get to know the Serb people better, I began to read a little about Orthodoxy. I had read some before, but had not been personally attracted to Orthodoxy. That began to change when a colleague let me borrow a copy of Peter Gillquist's book *Becoming Orthodox*. I was fascinated, even gripped, by that book, reading the whole book in one day. The book caused me to question much of what I had always been taught about the Bible, Christian doctrine, Church history, and worship. For the first time, I began to question whether the church of which I was a member was truly the New Testament Church. I realized, as Fr. Peter, Fr. Gordon, and their friends found out through their study of the Bible, theology and church history, that the Church of the New Testament was liturgical, hierarchical, and sacramental. I was forced to admit that Baptists are "0 for 3" in regard to these aspects of early church doctrine and life! During this time, we also began to visit one of the local Serbian Orthodox Churches and were captivated by the beauty of the liturgy.

From then on, I decided to study more. Fr. Peter's book was like an appetizer, and I was ready for a meal. I began to study the Scriptures again, attempting to take them at face value and without the interpretive grid that Baptists place on them. I also read Jordan Bajis' book *Common Ground: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity for the Western Christian*. Fr. Jordan convinced me that much of what I had believed and practiced did not agree with the teaching of the Scriptures nor with the practice of the early church. Then, since my family and I were about to go back to the U. S. for a month of vacation, I began to explore Orthodoxy on the Internet and ended up ordering about a dozen other books, having them shipped to my parents' address. I went on somewhat of a reading binge while we were in the U. S. One more book which I found very helpful was *The Way: What Every Protestant Should Know About the Orthodox Church* by Clark Carlton. This book is very powerful and pretty much served as the nail in the coffin for Protestantism (evangelical or not), at least as far as Jennifer and I were concerned.

We returned to Bosnia in late January of this year. By that time I was definitely Orthodox in my heart, and Jennifer "converted" in her heart soon afterward. I had just been made a supervisor, working for the missions arm of the SBC, while in my heart I was Orthodox, as was Jennifer! What to do? If we were to go home immediately and convert, I would suffer a pretty heavy financial penalty, complicated somewhat by the fact that my wife was expecting our third child in June. But if I were to stay, I would be forced to live a double life and to be a leader in promoting a cause (the spreading of Baptist churches) in which I no longer believed. At first, I decided to stay on for at least another year, after which time the financial penalty for going home early would be greatly reduced. But then I sensed the Lord's voice, spoken through both my wife and through a dear friend and colleague in Banja Luka, saying that I needed to go ahead and go home and enter the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. So, we spoke to our supervisor about this. He did not take it very well and spent hours trying to talk us out of it. But at the end, he agreed that it would be best that we go ahead and leave.

We officially announced our resignation on March 30 and returned to the Houston area April 22. From then until July 15, we split time between Texarkana, where Jennifer's parents live, and Pasadena, where I grew up and where I went through a summer program to help me be certified as a school teacher in the Pasadena School District. We now live in southeast Houston, near I-45 South and the South Belt. We have visited St. Joseph's a few times as well as your church and would like to talk to you about going through the catechumen process and joining St. George's. We are planning to come to the Liturgy this Sunday, Lord willing, so maybe after then we could spend a little time with you if you are not too busy. If not, maybe we could work out another time.

One other thing: this time next year, I plan to start the St. Stephen's program of studies and work toward becoming ordained in the Antiochian Diocese. My calling to full-time ministry has not changed, just my church! I hope to teach for four or five years, learning more about Orthodoxy and working toward ordination. Then I hope to become a priest. I apologize for the length of this note, but I wanted you to know our full story before I meet with you in person. I look forward to hearing from you.

Your fellow servant of Christ,

James Early