



Personal Evangelism

A brief guide for Orthodox Christians

An excerpt from *Bringing America to Orthodoxy: A Manual*

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The individual Christian proclaiming and defending his or her faith in God and Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of Orthodox Christian evangelism. It is the duty of every clergyman and layman to bear witness to the light of Christ, and be prepared to give a defense for the hope that is in us. Every Orthodox Christian should be familiar with and prepared to use the information presented here. These are some basic techniques for sharing one's faith with a family member, friend, co-worker, neighbor or new acquaintance.

The personal witness

Jesus said to His disciples, "You shall be witnesses unto me" (Acts 1:8). The simplest way to share one's faith is through one's personal testimony, or personal spiritual journey...."my story". Tell someone else about how you became a Christian, or Orthodox, or what God means to you. Prepare your story in advance, and have the key parts memorized (though not word for word, so that it sounds canned). Get together with a partner to help each other prepare and practice giving your testimonies, or maybe even have a Church class work on this as a project. Most often the personal journey is something presented in a one-to-one encounter, but many people feel comfortable offering it in front of a group, such as when the parish hosts an outreach event (see the Department of Missions and Evangelism publication, "Outreach Events").

As Orthodox Christians, we know better than to buy the line that a personal witness to Christ is a "Protestant phenomenon". Think through the many instances in the New Testament where St. Paul tells and re-tells of his conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus. A quick reading of Acts 20-28 also reveals that he tells his story much the same each time.

Although advance preparation is important, you will never give the exact same testimony twice. For one thing, unless you have it memorized verbatim you naturally will use different words and phrases, or even leave out some points, each time you give your testimony. For another, each listener is different. Consider the person with whom you are speaking, and consider how you might emphasize certain points to best impact him or her.

There are two major advantages to the personal testimony. First, it's your own life experiences, so it is easy to remember and comfortable to present to others. Second, it's very difficult for the listener to argue against what you are saying. Because this is your own anecdotal experience of God, there is going to be very little room for objection.

Consider these points when preparing your testimony:

- Keep it brief — three minutes is good.
- Make it personal. Remember, this is your *testimony*, your story, not a “preach-imony”.
- Put it into a story or dialogue format. For example, “I began my journey to Christ riding on the school bus...”, and “I asked my friend, ‘Why does your family go to church every Sunday?’, to which he replied, ‘Because we want to worship God’.”
- Include elements to which the listener can relate. Have a variety of side points prepared that you can insert into your testimony when appropriate.
- Include “3 reasons why...”. For instance, “There are three reasons why I became Orthodox. First...”
- What has been the most significant event or influence on the journey?
- Be candid with struggles along the way.

Digging deeper

One’s personal testimony almost always sparks the listener’s curiosity, and inevitably more questions follow. This is the time when we need to draw on our knowledge of the faith, not just our own personal experience.

Every Orthodox Christian, clergy or laity, should feel comfortable and be equipped to explain to an inquirer at least the basic tenets of the Orthodox Faith. If you are a layman, and a friend or maybe a visitor to your Church asks you a question, answer the question as best you can . . . and be bold! If you don’t know the answer, admit it but offer to find the information. Tell the person, “I’m sorry, I don’t know that. Let me do some homework and I’ll get you an answer as quickly as possible.”

If such a conversation occurs at Church, bring the person over to the priest, a deacon, or a well educated layman. Don’t be afraid to answer to the best of your ability, but don’t be afraid to look for help either. Most visitors to Orthodox Churches will appreciate getting answers from laity; it’s a good indicator that the parishioners know their faith and take it seriously. Some visitors also might feel intimidated by a priest at first.

In order to answer others’ questions and defend our faith, we have to know our faith well. Daily readings from the Scriptures and study of books on theology, Church history, worship and other Christian topics are very helpful. Subscriptions to Orthodox magazines, retreats, parish adult education classes, and correspondence courses all can help beef up one’s knowledge of the faith.

Using literature

Literature is a very helpful tool for outreach, especially when handed to an inquirer in the context of a personal conversation. When speaking with a potential convert, get literature into his or her hands, and then follow up to get their reaction and make further contact.

Familiarize the parish members with Church publications, such as *The Word Magazine*, and standard evangelistic and catechetical works like Fr. Thomas Hopko’s *The Orthodox Faith* series and Conciliar Press booklets and pamphlets. Have these and other visitor-oriented publications on display in a bookstore, book table, or near where coffee hour is held so that visitors may see or be directed to them easily.

When visiting inquirers or potential members in their homes, leave inexpensive pamphlets or explanatory material such as the “Welcome” brochure supplied by Conciliar Press. Encourage members to buy and keep on hand materials to pass out to potential members. A good tactic is to loan someone a book or other piece of literature rather than giving it away. Then you have an excuse to get in touch with the person again. Your parish evangelism

committee might want to assemble small packets of recommended literature for this purpose.

There is nothing like a third party endorsement to give your mission or Church credibility. If the local newspaper carries an article about the parish, distribute neatly printed copies to potential members.

Distribute literature wisely. Be selective; give out literature appropriate to the inquirer's needs, and don't give too much at one time. For some ideas as to what introductory literature to have on hand for visitors and inquirers, see the Department of Missions and Evangelism Recommended Reading List, and examine the Conciliar Press book catalog.

How to present the Gospel to non-Christians

When speaking to anyone, especially non-Christians, about the Orthodox Christian Faith, try to see how God already has been working in the person's life. Has he or she come to find life in this world somehow empty and hopeless? Is the person a man or woman of good character who is seeking truth? If the person is an adherent to a religion, learn what you can about their teachings and practices. What in the person's belief system agrees with Orthodoxy? Start there, and help the person understand how Orthodox Christianity completes and fulfills what they already know about God.

The Conciliar Press booklet *Entering God's Kingdom* is a good place to start with a non-Christian. Also, reading the Bible with him or her can have a profound impact. Emphasize key passages in the Old Testament prophesying the coming of the Messiah, and point out how these prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Books such as *Way of a Pilgrim*, *Divine Energy*, *Coming Home*, or *Mere Christianity* (by C.S. Lewis) are often helpful as well.

We already have discussed the power of your personal story or confession of coming to faith in Christ. If you have a point-in-time conversion like St. Paul, tell about it. If you have been instructed to believe from childhood like St. Timothy, tell about that background.

Rather than simply inviting a person to visit, pick him or her up and take the person to Church; let them experience Orthodox worship. Often a service like Vespers is the best initial introduction to Orthodox worship. Bring them to an Orthodox Bible Study, to hear an Orthodox speaker, to an Orthodox campus gathering . . . and ultimately to the priest for catechism.

How to present Orthodoxy to non-Orthodox Christians

Most of the visitors to your Church will be non-Orthodox Christians, both faithfully practicing and nominal. Though they may believe in the Trinity and the deity of Christ as do the Orthodox, they will need to be educated about the Church and various points of Orthodox theology. Many today are into what could be called "Christianity Lite".

Most of the publications from the Conciliar Press topical booklets series are geared toward non-Orthodox Christians, as are many of their other brochures and books. *Becoming Orthodox* and *Coming Home* are two excellent publications. *Facing East* and *At the Corner of East and Now* by Frederica Mathewes-Green, and several publications from Light and Life Publishing and St. Vladimir's Seminary Press are very good for non-Orthodox Christians as well. *The Orthodox Church* by Metropolitan Kallistos (Timothy) Ware is a standard.

Most Protestants inquiring about Orthodoxy have a strong reverence for and understanding of the Bible. For them, if it doesn't say it in the Bible, it just isn't so. Thus, it is important for the Orthodox to be well versed in the Scriptures. We'll be way more effective convincing evangelical and charismatic Protestants of the truth of Orthodoxy if we show them how the Bible backs up our claims.

There are a few common questions which Protestants who are exploring Orthodoxy often ask. The Department of Missions and Evangelism publication, "Answering Tough Questions", shows how six of the most common and most critical questions about Orthodoxy can be

answered from the Scriptures. Try to commit these and other key verses to memory. Memorization of Scripture will help you recall and use verses from the Bible to support your arguments when speaking with inquirers, plus it impresses many Protestants and lends overall credibility to your message.

Maintaining parish enthusiasm and commitment

The bedrock of personal evangelism is personal commitment to the One whom we preach. Without this commitment, our words become hollow and will fall on deaf ears.

In homilies, the priest must call often for renewed commitment to Christ and the Church. After all, we end most of our litanies of prayer with, "...let us commit ourselves, and each other, and *all our life* to Christ our God." We preach not only for instruction but also for decision. Emphasize (1) our union with Christ and (2) the central themes of the faith.

Encourage by word and example full participation in the Orthodox rhythm of prayer — daily, weekly, yearly. Mark and maintain with zeal the fasts and the feasts. Preach and teach intermittently on the meaning of the Divine Liturgy, the sacraments, and other services so people appreciate and understand why we worship the way we do.

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of studying the Holy Scriptures, both personally and in a parish-sponsored Bible study. The Orthodox Study Bible is a magnificent tool for this purpose.

Establish an annual parish retreat and an annual speakers series. Both of these should be designed to bring new depth of faith and enthusiasm to parishioners, and they can also be used as outreach events.

Enthusiasm for the Church means enthusiasm for each other, which grows through both social interaction and common works. Be sure there are periodic social events, picnics, outings and other events that build the people into each others best friends. Give parishioners the opportunity to reach out in the community through work with the needy, evangelism, neighborhood Bible studies, children's programs and other avenues of Christian service. Your parish may establish some of these types of programs itself, or parishioners might participate in community programs run by others.

Finally, encourage the faithful to attend an Orthodox Conference on Missions and Evangelism, run by the Department of Missions and Evangelism and sponsored by the Orthodox Christian Mission Center. Your parish even might want to collaborate with other Orthodox parishes in your area and consider hosting the Conference locally. Parishioners not only will receive excellent training in evangelism, but also will meet other Orthodox Christians who are interested in evangelism and domestic missions. They will return refreshed with new ideas for parish outreach, and better equipped to spread the good news of Jesus Christ!

For further information on Orthodox Christian missions and evangelism,
or to learn more about the Orthodox Christian Church, please contact:

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