



# A Candid Interview

## With a Coptic Orthodox Convert

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ἐτῆκκλῆσιᾶ ἡρεμῆχῆμ

»»»—Written by A Mighty Arrow—>

*Conducted by a Mighty Arrow St. Mary and Archangel Michael  
Houston, TX*

### **1. What was your understanding about Orthodoxy before you began the process of conversion?**

I was introduced to the Church by my fiancé before we were married. Seventeen years ago, everything was in Arabic and Coptic so I had no real understanding regarding the Coptic Church and at the time, my fiancé was not able to answer the questions I had, so I assumed it was “ethnic” Catholic.

### **2. What were the most difficult aspects which you were forced to consider during your conversion process?**

The reason for my conversion was marriage, NOT a deep (or even cursory for that matter) understanding and the most difficult thing for me was why I had to be the one who converted. As I mentioned, my fiancé couldn’t explain things to me and Abouna’s language was love not English. To be honest, I did not research to learn much either. What I was able to determine was that the most basic beliefs were in line so I chose to become Orthodox not really considering it a conversion because nothing inside me had changed. Looking back, I regret entering the Church this way because many precious years were lost in a lukewarm, ignorant state.

### **3. What were the main points of difference between Orthodoxy and your particular religious upbringing?**

At the time, I didn’t really know enough about the tenets of my own faith to discern any differences. While I was sincere in my relationship with our Lord, the way I practiced was very individualistic and to be blunt- rebellious. I had bought into the lie that Priests were unnecessary because we are all priests (which is true- but the most effective lies have part truth) and that I could confess directly to God (again part of the truth) and that the Eucharist was symbolic.

Understand that I had come to “reject” these things despite my having been brought up partaking of the Sacraments ministered by a Priest.

But in His goodness, God looked beyond my sin and rebellion and saw a heart seeking Him and responded by bringing me to His people who would bless me with a right understanding of Him and lovingly encourage me in striving for a deeper, true communion with Him. Then, though, I was totally unaware and unappreciative of the place God brought me. It is only in the past few years that I am able to communicate an underlying difference between Orthodoxy and how I was brought up.

My upbringing was very moral based on Godly principles and God was presented as the Judge. There was always fear of punishment or displeasing Him which would break the relationship with Him. Salvation was even presented with a legalistic slant. How refreshing and freeing it has been to be growing with people who walk in a different understanding of God. Namely that He is our Father and one who desires an intimate relationship with us and while it is true that He is the Judge and sin will break communion with Him, He pursues us and is continually giving us tools by which we can be closer to Him. People who relate to God with an Orthodox understanding are different. In those more spiritually mature, it is remarkable to see the wholeness that God brings through His servants where mercy and truth have met together.

### **4. Having gone through this process, how would you counsel someone else who is about to begin the conversion journey which you recently completed?**

While I was brought into the Church 13 years ago,



my conversion began only 4 years ago and is yet to be completed. Three years prior, God ignited a fire in me to know Him deeper and presumably take me out of the lukewarm category (reading Revelation 3:16 always terrified me). For the first time, I read His word- ALL of it and began attending Holy Bible studies. As this continued, it was becoming apparent that I could no longer continue in my hypocrisy of attending Orthodox worship (monthly) and keeping my own ideas. I prayed that God would show me where His truth was.

Then I began to read from the Father's of the Church ([www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)) and saw that they believed VERY differently from me. Then I began to research with intensity because I really desired to know God more. I began looking at the history of the Church and was astounded with what I read.

Then I came across a book that was pivotal. It was a book written by an American convert to the Orthodox faith called *Becoming Orthodox* by Peter Gilquist. This gave me even more avenues for research. Each one, ended at the door of the Orthodox Church. Slowly, God was renewing my mind. Another book, *Common Ground: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity for the American Christian* by Jordon Bajis was extremely beneficial. I would also recommend spending as much time with spiritually mature Christians as possible to learn from their lives and of course, sit at the feet of Abouna (something I have not done b/c of the distance we live from the church but something I wish I could do). If this isn't possible, the internet is a wealth of information now. The DC church is hosting a site filled with English sermons ([www.orthodoxsermons.org](http://www.orthodoxsermons.org)). Fill time not reading by listening. Also, seeking out American converts can be both comforting and edifying.

**5. What are the elements of Orthodoxy which you found to be particularly attractive to you personally?**

The primary attraction is that the treasury of the

TRUTH in its entirety resides, is understood, is experienced and is passed down (without compromise) here. This is what I know to be true now. Seventeen years ago, the thing that had the biggest impact on me was Abouna Isaac's love. We couldn't communicate well with the spoken language but He was different from anyone I had experienced before—he exuded love and that spoke to my heart.

**6. What are the elements of Orthodoxy which you found to be unattractive?**

It's interesting that the things I found unattractive have nothing to do with Orthodoxy per se. The biggest hurdle was language during worship. I wasn't bothered by the lack of English at social times but when I had no clue what was going on during the Divine Liturgy, why it was happening, trying to keep track of the bowing times and the standing times was a bit daunting without ANY language cues to help. The Divine Liturgy books were good when I could figure out where Abouna was. Also, the seeming lack of respect and/or lack of discipline of the believers regarding time, and conduct in God's house proved a stumbling block for me.

Both of these, however, have been or are being worked on by both Abouna and the faithful. With the screens (which are a huge blessing and have added tremendously to my worship) and the increase in English and the improved organization, I don't see these things being unattractive for a convert today.

**7. What would you recommend that the Orthodox Church do here in America to actively present Orthodoxy as a viable spiritual option?**

I no longer look at Orthodoxy as an option but as the birthright of every Christian believer—it is THE faith and as such should no longer be “the best kept secret in America.” To this end, the Church would need to go through some “birth pains” from serving the immigrant community only to accepting its place in fulfilling its evangelistic commission.



The thing needed to attract Americans, in my view, is a spiritually mature, loving, repentant body of believers who are able to communicate their faith in ENGLISH. The first step is for the “Orthodox” to actually be Orthodox and have true Life to share. Sayedna Anba Youssef is addressing this by his choosing Priests like our beloved Abouna Younan, Abouna Athanasius, Abouna Timotheous and many others whose ministries exhort us to live a repentant, intimate life with our Lord which will produce fruit. The next part is to have a body that is able to communicate their faith- this would necessitate education. Again, His Grace is instituting this in the diocese. The third part, I can’t stress enough—we need to speak the language of the land in which we live. Once the majority of the faithful are comfortable with English and no longer regard its use an imposition or burden, then there are other things that can be done to encourage Americans to come home to the Church- like monthly information nights introducing the Church through history or small group studies (either Holy Bible studies, Church father studies or spiritual book studies) geared toward building relationships with seekers and beginning converts, or “adopting” families outside the Church who are in need thereby sharing our gifts as good stewards.

**8. In what ways has Orthodoxy either enriched or hindered your spiritual growth since your conversion?**

The many mysteries by which God graces us (partaking of His Body and Blood, receiving absolution, and the spiritual connection with all in His Body) as well as praying and fasting communally have definitely enriched my spiritual growth. It is as if before I was looking at a picture and now that picture is taking 3 dimensional form (albeit very slowly).

Also, God’s servants, past and present, have greatly enriched my spiritual growth. For example reading the Holy Bible, reading commentary of the Church Fathers, Holy Bible studies with His Grace, Holy Bible studies with Abouna, counseling I receive from Abouna during confession times, visiting the monastery, serving and the way certain individuals in our church live their life have all worked together with

the Holy Spirit to help grow my relationship with God since the beginning of my conversion. God is revealing many things about me that I didn’t know were there and are a barrier to a deeper relationship with Him. While this is challenging and often times painful, I am encouraged by the lives and prayers of the many who have walked this path ahead of me and bless me with the fruit of their experience.

**9. Orthodoxy claims to be an active link between the present and the era of the Apostles. Do you share this view and why or why not?**

I do believe that the faith (beliefs) of the Apostles is the same faith that has been passed down to this generation but I think that there are few in this generation who possess the same understanding and depth of those beliefs as in the era of the Apostles and Church Fathers.

**10. Do you presently feel that the Orthodox Church is the home in which you obtain shelter and rest or do you still feel that you are the same stranger who first walked into a very different building and was exposed to an entirely foreign faith system? Why?**

I am so glad you are asking me this question now, and not 5 years ago. Understanding more of the doctrine of the Church made me feel more comfortable but believing, participating and sharing my life with other believers has made this my home. Now, not a day goes by that I don’t thank God for His leading me to His One, True Faith and even more specifically to the Coptic expression of the Church. For as much as I may tease my Egyptian brothers and sisters about some of the more “challenging” (for me anyway) cultural differences, I am humbled by the generous, hospitable, kind, FAITHFUL, simple (i.e. readily accepting God’s realities), and truly spiritual people who are here.

