

American Orthodoxy's Farthest-Reaching Institution

Nick Tabor

It's been fifteen years since the Maddexes, a plucky Midwestern family who had recently joined the Orthodox Church, launched Ancient Faith Radio with two computers on their back porch. At first it was a streaming station, full of liturgical music they had uploaded from their friends' CD collections. But in the years since, as the medium of podcasting has come into its own, AFR has grown so rapidly—in its catalogue, its contributor base, and its audience—that it has far eclipsed every Orthodox institution in North America, aside from the archdioceses themselves, in terms of its reach, if not its influence.

Even on this continent, AFR stands alone for being so thoroughly American, not to say Protestant, in its origins and sensibilities. If Saint Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery in Arizona is modeled after Mount Athos, and Saint Vladimir's Seminary takes after Saint Sergius in Paris, the model for Ancient Faith is closer to home. The organization's principle founder and CEO, John Maddex, spent almost his entire life at the Moody Bible Institute's radio division before he left in 2007 and devoted himself to AFR completely.

The enterprise is shot through with evangelical culture. Its self-stated purpose is to carry out "the Great Commission," the notion that it's incum-

bent on all of us to convert the world to Christianity. The phrase is imported from Baptist culture, though for Ancient Faith's leadership, it seems to be implied that conversion here means joining the Orthodox Church—usually from Protestantism. To this end, the podcasts tend to emphasize the basics: ecclesiology, soteriology, mariology, and how to read the Scriptures. There are many testimonies about it working, about spiritual seekers who hear about Orthodoxy through Ancient Faith and then join their local parishes.

Meanwhile, thousands more converts depend on the podcasts for ongoing instruction on their faith. During the last decade of his life, Father Thomas Hopko recorded an exhaustive series on theology and church history, with topics ranging from remarriage to Clean Week to the ecumenical councils. And as the contributors have multiplied, the offerings have become more esoteric; there are now podcasts on vestments, bioethics, Byzantine chant, and American Orthodox history, to name just a few. "It's kind of a barometer, in some respects, of where the American Orthodox scene is," said Peter Bouteneff, who teaches a course on Orthodox identity at Saint Vladimir's and hosted his own AFR podcast from 2009 to 2011. "It's being pretty true to its own constituency, while also recognizing that Orthodoxy is bigger than that constituency."

Nevertheless, if church hierarchs and scholars were to design a platform for mass catechesis, from the ground up, it would not necessarily look like AFR. A key to the network's rapid growth has been the relative openness of its submission process. One priest told me that clergy sometimes joke, "Who *doesn't* have a podcast on Ancient Faith Radio?" In terms of its curation, it's somewhat analogous to the website *Medium*: a platform where writers can self-publish essays, with an elegant design but no professional editing, and with no money changing hands in either direction. Like internet Orthodoxy more broadly, AFR is a platform that rewards self-promotion. Moreover, the vision of Orthodox Christianity that it projects to the world is often colored by culture-war conservatism, and a recurring theme across the podcasts is that we live in a singularly godless age, where Christianity is under attack.

At this stage in AFR's development, it's worthwhile to take stock of the organization: its history, its procedures, and its role in ecclesial and intellectual life.



John Maddex, who is now sixty-nine, spent most of his childhood in Chicago, where his father worked for the Moody Bible Institute's radio division. Maddex and the rest of Ancient Faith's leadership declined to speak for this story apart from providing a brief emailed statement, but in interviews broadcast on the network, he has reminisced about appearing on the radio for the first time, on a show called KYB—Know Your Bible—when he was four. The family was devoted to its Baptist church, where his father directed the choir and oversaw the Sunday School. Every Sunday, "we were there first, and the last to leave," he recalled in a 2008 interview.

After high school and a stint in the Air National Guard, Maddex married his sweetheart from youth group—Tonya, now his wife of more than fifty years—and started working at the Christian radio station in Springfield, Ohio. This gave him a springboard back to Moody Radio, where he stayed for the next several decades, leaving only for a hiatus at Focus on the Family from roughly 1986 to 1989. "I felt then," he said in 2009, summarizing his career, "and I still feel, that [radio] is the most effective tool for evangelism that there is—even more than television." During their years in Chicago, the couple raised two kids: Bobby, who was born in 1973, and Molly, born three years later.

By the early 1990s, Bobby had gone off to Wheaton College, often called "Harvard for evangelicals" or the "fundamentalist Harvard," and Molly was a student at Moody. As empty-nesters, John and Tonya Maddex started to rethink their Sunday worship routine. John Maddex has said he was happily immersed in Calvinist theology at the time, via authors like R. C. Sproul and John Piper; but for a church experience, he was beginning to long for "something more reverential, more majestic." They tried attending an Episcopal church, and found that they liked the hymns and the *Book of Common Prayer*, but were scandalized to see women ordained as priests and gay fellowship groups meeting with the church's explicit blessing.

They ultimately found the Orthodox Church through their future son-in-law, Troy Sabourin. Sabourin had learned about Eastern Christianity in a church history class at Moody, and together he and Molly Maddex started attending Holy Trinity, the OCA cathedral on Chicago's West Side. John Maddex was initially upset at this news. "I

had assumed it was at least as bad as Roman Catholic, if not worse," he recalled in one interview. The first time he attended a service at Holy Trinity himself, he found it alienating.

A turning point was when Sabourin brought him to see Father Peter Gillquist speak at All Saints, the Antiochian parish in Chicago where Father Patrick Reardon is now the rector. "So here's Father Peter Gillquist, with his study Bible under his arm, talking like an evangelical," Maddex later recalled. "It was an expression, and a way of communicating, that I was far more accustomed to." He was glad to realize ninety-nine percent of the other parishioners were ex-evangelicals too. He and Tonya started meeting with Reardon independently, and ultimately converted in 2000. A short time later, both of their children were chrismated with their spouses.

AFR was born as an experiment in December of 2004. Maddex had asked other parishioners at All Saints to bring sacks full of liturgical music CDs, and had borrowed thirty or forty to upload. At home he set up an internet radio station to broadcast the MP3s. The moment he managed to stream the music through a separate computer, he was moved to tears. "I mean, it was so overwhelming," he recalled in one interview. "I called the kids in and said, 'Come here! Listen to this! We're doing it! This is on the internet right now!'" The websites *Liturgica* and *Musica Russica* sent the family more CDs to upload, and the Maddexes recruited volunteers to read passages from the Psalms and the lives of the saints. They also borrowed lectures from the now-defunct Orthodox Christian Cassettes, a mail-order service run by a building contractor in Arkansas. In 2005, AFR ventured into the nascent field of podcasting, posting Reardon's weekly homilies to an RSS feed.

The name of their new operation was telling. "'Ancient' is an important identifying marker for many people—especially people who convert to the Orthodox faith," Bouteneff told me. He said it speaks to "the sense that they're converting to something older, and therefore truer." It's akin to the many convert-heavy Antiochian parishes that name themselves Saint Ignatius, to mark their connection with the generation that was taught directly by Saints Peter and Paul.

In 2007, Moody forced Maddex to leave, apparently because of his divergence from the school's theology (which includes rigid adherence to the inerrancy of scripture). Maddex was invited by the board of Conciliar Press, the book-publishing wing of the Antiochian Archdiocese, to merge AFR's operations with theirs. He took over as the CEO, and Bobby Maddex, who had been editing a small conservative magazine, took over the radio network. "I volunteered," Bobby recalled in a 2013 interview. "I said, 'If the board will allow it, I would be willing to leave my editor job and take over day-to-day operations of the station, so you can fulfill your role as CEO. I realized there was something of a legacy for my parents, and I wanted to help preserve that.'"

By all appearances, the network is more like a semi-independent partner of the archdiocese than a ministry under its direct charge. Bobby Maddex has said that AFR receives "oversight" from Metropolitan Joseph Al-Zahlaoui, the chief Antiochian hierarch of North America, as well as from Bishop Anthony Michaels, whose jurisdiction is the Midwest, and from Father Nabil Hanna, the rector of St. George Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church, in the Indianapolis suburbs. "I'm sure there have been conversations about the vision of the organization," said

Father Michael Gillis, an Antiochian priest in Vancouver who hosts the podcast *Praying in the Rain* and knows the organization well. “And they really want to be what Metropolitan Joseph wants them to be.” He added that it’s not hard to imagine the metropolitan calling the Maddexes if he objected to something specific—“but I’ve never heard of that happening.”

Between donations and sales of merchandise, including liturgical items, jewelry, and books, their budget was up to two million dollars as of 2017. It’s enough to fund a staff of approximately seven full-time employees and eight more part-timers. The Maddexes now live in Chesterton, Indiana, along the I-80 corridor between South Bend and Gary, but their employees are spread out across the country. The publishing division also relies on two full-time editors and occasional help from freelancers. As for its podcast audience, as of 2015, seventy-seven percent of listeners said they were Orthodox, split more or less evenly between the OCA and the Antiochian and Greek archdioceses. Another nine percent were catechumens or inquirers.

The boom in AFR’s podcast division began in 2007. Among the early contributors were Father Joseph Huneycutt, a ROCOR priest in Texas; Clark Carlton, a philosophy professor at Tennessee Tech University; and Frederica Mathewes-Green. But it was Hopko who quickly became a symbol of the network, a status he retains four years after his death. “Their keystone, their signature, their foundation, the pillar that holds the thing together is Father Tom Hopko,” said Albert Rossi, a psychologist who teaches at Saint Vladimir’s and hosts the podcast *Becoming a Healing Presence*. “They give him prime time. I would say the rest of us are in his shadow.”

In the early days, John and Bobby Maddex often traveled to Orthodox conferences as well, where they could record presentations and interview participants. But as audio equipment became cheaper, and AFR’s popularity grew, more churches and seminaries started doing their own recording. And the contributors kept multiplying; as of this fall, the site was up to 131 podcasts, not counting inactive series that have been taken down over the years. Even for more academically-minded listeners, there’s an abundance of quality material scattered throughout the archives, including interviews and lectures with Father John McGuckin, Father Andrew Louth, Father John Behr, Sister Vassa Larin, and the Byzantinist Alice-Mary Talbot, among many other serious scholars.

The podcast submission process is simple. The network always makes sure the prospective contributor has a blessing from her priest, Bobby Maddex has said, and then it typically asks for a few samples. In rare cases it has sent the contributors audio equipment, but most buy their own. Once the audio is uploaded, Bobby Maddex edits and produces it. All the contributors I spoke with said AFR had never asked them to change anything they recorded. “Whatever I say, they take,” Rossi said. “Never has one word been challenged.”

The organization has been clear about its doctrinal standards. In a contributor policy that Bobby Maddex provided, the leaders insist that contributors adhere to the teachings expressed in the Nicene Creed and in the public declarations of the Assembly of Bishops of the Orthodox Church, which includes condemnations of abortion and homosexual activity. Bobby Maddex added in a separate statement that the organization also consults with “a vast num-

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ber of priests and theologians whenever potentially questionable material” is submitted for publication. Its supervision extends to any public statements its contributors make, apart from AFR, including on personal websites and social media. At the same time, according to the contributor policy, AFR does “not necessarily endorse all the content” on its website, and the leaders say there are “certainly some liberties our presenters can enjoy.”

Occasionally these standards have meant siding against hardliners. For instance, when Bouteneff was running his podcast *Sweeter Than Honey* from 2009 to 2011, he received some flack for two episodes he recorded on ecumenism. One critic pitched an entire AFR series where he would have inveighed against ecumenism in every episode. Maddex was immediately “antithetical” to the notion, Bouteneff said, and it helped when Bouteneff pointed out that “support of ecumenism is the official position of the Church.” Ultimately the entire Ancient Faith board decided to reject it. “I always felt that he was really fair, and generally took my side,” Bouteneff said.

AFR’s standards can mean accepting some extremely inflammatory material, though, particularly about LGBT matters. One example is from Father Christophe Lepoutre’s series *Healing Addictions: The Orthodox Method of Treatment*. Lepoutre, a ROCOR priest living in central Virginia, has a background in pastoral counseling. In a 2016 episode devoted to homosexuality, Lepoutre claims the condition is an “illness” that typically results from either “generations of unrepentant sin” or “a marriage that had been highly dysfunctional.” He concludes that gay people must submit to conversion therapy, adding that his own pastoral

experience has shown it works. As an authority, he cites the guidelines of Sexaholics Anonymous, which were penned by an anonymous (and presumably uncredentialed) sex addict in the 1970s. While the Assembly of Bishops of the Orthodox Church has never issued statements one way or the other on conversion therapy, numerous professional organizations—including the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Counseling Association—have all declared it unfounded and unethical.

Another example is Father Josiah Trenham, the rector of a Southern California parish under the Antiochian Archdiocese. Trenham is an arch-conservative who joined the Orthodox Church shortly after graduating from the Calvinist school Westminster Seminary, and has become one of the most incendiary voices on LGBT matters in the Orthodox world. He attracted the attention of the Southern Law Poverty Center in 2016, when he gave an address in Tbilisi, Georgia, titled “Gay Iconoclasm: Holding the Line against the Radical LGBT Agenda.” In the speech, Trenham called the LGBT movement in the US “an explosion of vulgarity and perversion unheard of in the history of the West that makes the barbarian invasions of the fifth to the ninth centuries, popularly known as the Dark Ages, look timid.” Trenham claimed gay activists were trying to remake American society in ways that would prove “suicidal,” and he urged his audience not to let it happen in Georgia. “Do not give in or your cities will become like San Francisco, where there are eighty thousand more dogs in the city limits than there are children,” he concluded. “Tell the LGBT tolerance tyrants, this lavender mafia, these homofascists, these rainbow radicals, that they are not welcome to promote their

anti-religious and anti-civilizational propaganda in your nations.” As of the autumn of 2019, the speech was still available on AFR.

If AFR’s criteria for acceptable content seems to reflect the sensibilities of its leaders, it also reflects those of its primary audience. Take the converse example of a 2015 podcast episode by Father Serafim Aldea, the founder and abbot of a small monastery in the Scottish isles. Aldea was in Paris at the time of the terror attacks that killed 130 people. In a reflection he posted about what he’d witnessed, Aldea concluded by denouncing violence in all forms and discouraging the stockpiling of weapons. The blowback was so harsh that he couldn’t bring himself to record another episode for two months. “I have received such *horrible* comments,” he said when he ultimately came back on the air. “What paralyzed me was the reality, which I hadn’t grasped until then, the reality of the fact that there is a huge number of Christians in the world who truly believe that it is all right to kill a human being.”

But far more often, AFR contributors receive warm thank-you letters, they’ve told me. The organization has posted a selection of listener emails on its website, some from listeners who are homebound and listen to AFR in lieu of being able to attend services. One listener wrote last year that he was in Wales, where there were almost no Orthodox services in English, so AFR had become for him a “true Godsend.” “Thank you for your

tremendous ministry,” another wrote in 2017. “I could go into many paragraphs about how it has utterly changed my life. Suffice it to say, I’ve surely listened to thousands of hours of AFR podcasts in the last six to seven years and it has been a complete and total joy in my life.”

Bouteneff said the network is “being true to its own constituency, while also recognizing that Orthodoxy is larger than that constituency.” Meanwhile, for American Orthodox who are outside that constituency, especially those who are appalled by Trenham’s rhetoric and don’t share the Maddexes’ politics or cultural sensibilities, it’s an open question whether the best approach is to tune out—or try to join it. Gillis, for one, believes the leadership would welcome a broader array of perspectives, at least within certain limits. “I’m probably one of the more liberal contributors,” he said, “and they keep telling me they love my stuff, and they wish they had more people who were writing from my perspective. (By “liberal,” he added, he meant he’s not a “Biblical fundamentalist,” “or even a patristic fundamentalist.”) And in some respects, the fairly low bar AFR sets for contributors could be an advantage. Given the blowback Aldea received for his declaration of pacifism, and given how the leadership polices contributors on social media, for some people this will be a nonstarter. But as Gillis said, AFR can “only use what people are willing to produce for them.” And for better or worse, there’s no larger platform in the American Orthodox world. ✪



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