

The following text is excerpted from the author's essay in *The Church has Left the Building: Faith, Parish, and Ministry in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael Plekon, Maria Gwyn McDowell, and Elizabeth Schroeder (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016).

*O heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who are everywhere and fill all things, Treasury of Blessings and Giver of life, come and abide in us. Cleanse us of every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One.*

—Orthodox Daily Prayers

I was maybe five, sitting with the older kids on the altar steps watching [a priest] describe his vestments. The cuff cords were so long! Each item meant *something*. I remember wanting to understand.

A few years later the same priest walked my friend and me past the people hanging icons on the bare walls, unrolling rugs, repositioning music stands, icons, and candles, and into the altar. We saw all three sides of the altar, touched the table of preparation, the menorah-like candlestick, saw where the altar boys hung their robes. I was enthralled. He said, "I want you to see this now, before you aren't allowed here anymore."

At church camp, Peter and I both asked questions, shared what we knew. The priests—they liked our curiosity. Everyone said he would make a good priest.

Years passed. Among evangelicals, I fell in love with the God of liberation. Evangelical practices and liturgies were utterly foreign to me. I was comforted by the daily reminder that the Spirit, the

# "I LEFT THE ORTHODOX CHURCH INVOLUNTARILY"

Maria Gwyn McDowell

Comforter, was everywhere and in all things. I was a bit taken aback by the promiscuous love of the Spirit, who was not content to be married only to Orthodoxy, but worked in and through . . . anyone. I went to seminary, *not* to be ordained but because one day, in the basement chapel of a Catholic monastery, God told me to go. I was not pleased, but I went to a place where I was dubbed the "reluctant Protestant."

There was this one priest on campus who I sometimes saw walking towards me, her white collar and black shirt standing out amidst casually-garbed evangelicals. My throat tightened every time I laid eyes on her. I made sure to never cross her path.

Despite my every best intent, the call, the joy, the love I had for ministry in and through the church undeniably grew. My aptitude for preaching, teaching, leading, and gathering a community in prayer became more evident even as my fundamental Orthodox, not Protestant, theological orientation was solidified.

After seminary, I returned to practicing Orthodoxy. It was a painful experience. For many priests, I was a threat: an

equivalently educated and vocationally competent woman who wanted only to exercise her gifts in the church. Even the priest who did everything permitted within the bounds of acceptability to invite me into ministry could not fix the underlying problem: women were excluded for any number of reasons from full participation in the ecclesial life of the Church, especially if that vocation smacked of ordination. I cannot count the number of times it was explicitly or implicitly suggested that I leave Orthodoxy by those who rejected the idea that women could be ordained as deacon, priest, and bishop. Sometimes, the rejection was masked in kindness: "Wouldn't you be happier elsewhere?"

Alexander Schmemmann says that "joy is the only really transforming power in the world." (Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, Crestwood: SVS Press, 1988, 44.)

But my experience as a girl-child always outside the altar, gifts passed over for a similarly gifted boy, as a woman of growing gifts and inclination, was of growing joylessness. Tangible moments of liturgical joy were stripped away as I gazed on the beautiful *iconostasis*, a barrier I was never allowed to cross except for that one childhood moment, which I know now was because it was not yet consecrated, not yet made too holy for my female body.

The liturgy repeatedly reminded me that I was not allowed to participate fully alongside my male peers who shared my interests, my gifts, my joy, but not my body.

My body presents a serious problem for Orthodoxy. It is not possible to believe consistently that human beings are unique and irreducible while simultaneously reducing men and women to sexed roles which proscribe permissible participation. Joy is nurtured through

participation according to the gifts granted to each unique person. When sex-based roles trump gift-based participation, joy is truncated.

I am no longer Orthodox in practice (though ironically, I still am in theology). I left the Orthodox Church involuntarily: I was denied Communion because I came to share a deep love with a woman, now my wife. Because we would not hide the joy the Spirit nurtured in us through our relationship, we were unwelcome to receive Communion or attend any of our local Orthodox parishes. Few experiences have been more excruciating than being repeatedly told I was unwelcome to even set foot among other Orthodox.

I am no longer Orthodox because of a Spirit-filled marriage to a woman, but that is not why I cannot return.

This last Sunday, as we gathered to give thanks for birthdays and anniversaries, my wife invited the congregation forward to pray for me as I enter my fourth anniversary as a priest in God's church.

It turns out that those who so often invited me to leave Orthodoxy were right, even if their motivation was not my joy, but the preservation of their liturgically and theologically misformed beliefs: I am happier elsewhere, even as I grieve the loss of my beloved first home every day.

Joy requires nurture. I still miss the ancient beauty of Orthodox liturgy. But as a priest in God's church my joy is nurtured, and I can nurture joy in others, precisely because my unique and irreducible, female-bodied personhood, is incarnated through a particular set of gifts accompanied by an irresistible desire to use them in the particular vocation of priesthood.

This is the love that makes an *ekklesia*. This is the love that nurtures joy. ✱