

I was not raised in a religious home. My father was a vocal, though polite atheist. My mother was a faithful Episcopalian of a certain kind. The sum total of her devotion to Christian faith was purely aesthetic and devoid of theology. In particular it was music that kept her coming to the church. I accompanied my mother dutifully to Sunday services. My father never attended. The golf course received his undivided attention every weekend morning.

After a three year stint with the men and boys choir (I was blessed with a somewhat sought-after boy soprano voice), and the official Anglican ceremony of confirmation, I decided in favor of my father's skepticism. He was very supportive. My father's atheism, unlike my mother's Christian devotion, was filled with intellectual content. He was a devotee of the Enlightenment; his favorites were Voltaire, Paine, Jefferson. He expounded upon the value of later skeptics and atheists as well. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche both received honorable mentions, but it was the eighteenth-century greats who always figured most prominently in his mental universe. I improved on my father's repertoire by expanding my adolescent mind with twentieth-century French atheists, Sartre and Camus.

At university I came in contact with a friendly circle of evangelical Christians. I read C. S. Lewis, Tolkien, and Chesterton. I learned that Christian faith could include intellectual content, not

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merely aesthetic appreciation. I discovered that there were thoughtful responses to eighteenth-century skepticism and twentieth-century existential atheism. I decided that the emerging realization that I was gay—I had fallen in love with a friend of mine at university—would have to wait. Surely when I found the perfect expression of Christianity, all such minor distractions would be resolved, no?

I began a search for the best version of Christian faith I could find.

The search required more time and effort than I originally expected. Even after much study, a sufficient level of certainty never seemed to emerge. Looking back, I see a lot of misplaced youthful exuberance.

In the end, I followed a trajectory more common than I realized at the time. From a vaguely Protestant, non-religious background, I made my first conscious decision to join a Christian body. At the age of twenty-five, I

became a Roman Catholic. I had studied many early church thinkers (of the East and the West). I had encountered great minds of the Orthodox tradition (Lossky, Florovsky, and others) as well as impressive figures from the Western Christian world. John Henry Newman figured prominently in my thinking. But it was only after hearing Mass on the Boston Common celebrated by the newly elected John Paul II that I made the leap in Rome's direction.

Imagine my disappointment to discover, twenty-two years later, that none of my difficulties (whether intellectual or sexual) had been resolved. Instead of discovering a source for moral certainty, I found a Church mired in a pedophilia scandal, where criminal priests were shuffled around by corrupt bishops to preserve the Church's appearance of moral uprightness. Something in me snapped when a new theory of the problem arose among certain theologians and high officials in the Vatican. The Church did not have a *pedophilia* problem; it had a *homosexuality* problem! Just eliminate homosexuals from the clergy and—snap!—problem solved.

Over the years, my family, friends, and some priests had reacted with support and understanding as I revealed I was gay. I came to a moral, coherent, and—dare I say?—genuinely *ascetical* understanding of my own sexuality. Yet in the Church I had chosen, I found incoherent babble disguised as revealed wisdom; only there did I find embarrassing moral lapses long since exposed by those who followed my father's Enlightenment principles. The Church claimed infallibility in

both faith and morals. I could no longer attach any meaningful sense to the second of these terms.

I resolved early in 2002 to take at least a year off from all things church.

My father died in the spring of 2003. As he lay in the hospital bed that last night, we chatted about the value of skepticism—the importance of confidence in the truth, but humility when considering one's possession of it. After thirty years we had come full circle; we were pretty much on the same page again. I had not attended a church service of any kind in over a year.

But I couldn't quite put the whole Christian faith behind me. Maybe I was just stubborn: could I accept that I had dedicated decades in pursuit of something that had proved itself unworthy of my time? On a walk not far from my home, I spotted a sign for an Orthodox chapel that was hosted in a large Episcopal church building. I attended Divine Liturgy on a Sunday morning in the summer of 2003.

I discovered that the chapel was a thoroughly non-canonical affair, operated by a former Greek Old Calendarist bishop. Whatever he lacked in canonical status he made up for with genuine Orthodox Christian faith. I became reacquainted with a faith that insists on the divine *kenosis* in order to rescue humankind from sin and death, not on moral programs for culture wars. I rediscovered the faith that had animated Father Alexander Schmemmann and Olivier Clément.

After two years in non-canonical limbo, I found a parish in the OCA where I could flourish. It was a place where the cross of Christ proved that the gospel is discovered in weakness, not in power. Most importantly, it was during my sixteen years there that I experienced the liturgical life of the Church. This became the foundation of my ecclesiastical existence.

That should be the end of the story, right? Then came February 24th, 2022.

It turns out I was almost as naive in my embrace of the Orthodox Church as I had been in my life as a Catholic. Please note: *almost* as naive. Though I had departed from the papal vision of church order, I knew that the Orthodox East had never reconciled itself to a post-Constantinian existence. Although there was no exact equivalent of a papal encyclical in the Orthodox East, I knew that a certain entrenched traditionalism easily allowed moral programs to trump the gospel. The Catholic Church might have promoted incoherent solutions to modern problems, but the Orthodox Church had hardly wrestled with modernity at all.

There were so many warnings. There were the right wing American evangelicals who fell over themselves to endorse the public morality campaign of Putin's patriarchal Church. Surely we all noticed that this did not reflect well on the spiritual health of Orthodoxy in Russia? So many of us let it slide, thinking it couldn't be as bad as all that. Of course, it was so much worse.

Patriarch Kirill's March 6 sermon will certainly go down in history as a monument to ecclesiastical malfeasance.

The Vatican's dishonesty in 2002 pales before the Russian Patriarch's depravity in 2022. The Vatican sought merely to deflect unwelcome scrutiny away from corrupt clergy and hierarchs; Moscow has decided that the mass murder of innocents is a small price to pay for ever expanding opposition to "gay parades."

Yet I feel less inclined to "jump ship" in 2022 than I was in 2002. The all-encompassing imperial church model is dead—whether Eastern and patriarchal or Western and papal in its inspiration. It has been so discredited that some hope for Jeremiah's vision, read every Holy Saturday at the Vespereal Liturgy of Saint Basil, remains in place:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31–34) ✽