

On Orthodox Formation & Convert Burnout

The Village Is Not the Backdrop to Your Spiritual Life

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A few days ago, a man named Edwin Robinson [published a frank, courageous essay about his six years as an Orthodox Christian](#). He came in on fire. He read the books, listened to the podcasts, built the icon corner, learned to defend his faith against Evangelical and Catholic interlocutors alike. He was baptized within six months of his first inquiry. And now, six years later, he describes

himself as burned out. He finds himself exhausted, spiritually dry, wondering whether any of it was worth it.

His essay went modestly viral in certain corners of the internet and Matt Fradd of *Pints with Aquinas* fame noted that Robinson “[put his finger on what many enthusiastic converts — not just to Orthodoxy but to Catholicism as well — are currently experiencing, but don’t know how to articulate.](#)” And I concur. The burnout Robinson describes is not unique to him. It is a pattern. And patterns have causes.

What follows is an attempt to name some of those causes. And to suggest that the deepest one has less to do with theology or practice than with a fundamentally mistaken understanding of what the Church is, and what the convert is actually joining when they enter it.

Before I begin, it’s important to note that I use “village” and “parish” sometimes interchangeably here and at times may use them as verbs. Second, I’ll note that this is not in any way a critique of Mr. Robinson’s offering. Even if it were aimed at him, it would do him no good. It’s evident that he’s now tasked with putting something back together that was probably broken to begin with. If anything, I offer my heartfelt gratitude and prayers. His article is respectful, important, insightful, and heartfelt. Finally, this article is not directed at long time converts like Edwin. More so, it is directed at catechists, priests, and parishioners as a potential path forward. I do think that this article may be especially useful for those new and enthusiastic inquirers, catechumens, and converts.

The Individualist Trap

Robinson’s burnout has a specific texture. It is not the burnout of someone who tried community and found it wanting. It is the burnout of someone who pursued Orthodoxy largely as a solo endeavor. He did all the stuff you do to get into Orthodoxy now. You consume the content, monitor your interior state, measure your spiritual progress against standards drawn from monastic literature. And eventually you hit the wall that every solo endeavor hits.

This is not *his* failure. It is a *formation* failure. And it reflects something deeper: most Western converts arrive in Orthodoxy with an essentially individualist soteriology baked into them, even when they have intellectually rejected it. Even though it looks pretty Orthodox on the outside, the question lurking beneath all their activity remains a Protestant question: *How am I doing spiritually? Am I progressing? Is this working for me?*

Orthodoxy, ironically, has enough individual ascetic content to feed this impulse rather than break it. Prayer rules. Fasting metrics. The collected works of the Desert Fathers on the interior life. The endless literature of hesychasm and theosis. A convert can spend years doing very Orthodox-looking things while remaining, in their fundamental orientation, a spiritual individualist. Gone unchecked, the faithful end up pursuing private transformation inside an ancient Church that was built for exactly the opposite. And, Robinson notes in his article that he often felt the pursuit of his faith worked against the pursuit of his family.

This is the tell.

When a man feels that giving time to his faith robs time from his family, it indicates that his faith has remained, at its core, a private, siloed project (even if he doesn't want it to be). A way of life that the community shares is not in competition with family. It includes it. It holds it. The conflict Robinson describes is real, and it is painful. But it is partly a symptom of never having been invited into the full meaning of what he joined in the first place.

I. You Were Placed Here

A culture that has forgotten how to *marry, family, and village*, will yield inquirers that are *spiritual individualists*. The Church must be ready to receive them and guide them.

Here is the thing that needs to be said plainly, early, and repeatedly in catechumen formation (and perhaps Robinson never had the opportunity to hear it):

You are not coming to Orthodoxy to optimize your personal spiritual metrics. You are being woven into a body. God placed you in this zip code, in this town, in this parish, among these specific people. These people *will* irritate you for reasons that have to do with your salvation and theirs. Your job is to show up and participate in the village. You are a parishioner.

This is not a modern therapeutic reframe. It is not a Protestant “small groups” idea smuggled into Orthodox clothing. It goes straight to the theological root.

The Church is not a collection of individuals pursuing private salvation who happen to share a building. It is the Body of Christ. That means one organism and one life. St. Paul is not being poetic when he writes this. He means it ontologically. The eye cannot say to the hand “I have no need of you.” Your

salvation and mine are genuinely entangled. The Eucharist itself enacts this. We do not each receive Christ privately. We become one body by partaking of the one Bread.

Fr. Georges Florovsky speaks of something similar called *sobornost*. This is the *conciliar, communal* nature of the Church. Conciliar. Communal. One cannot be Orthodox alone. The entire liturgical grammar is plural from its first breath: *In peace, let us pray to the Lord*. Not “I.” Us.

Perhaps there is an even more crucial thing to include here. Something that must be said with precision: the *village* or the *parish* is not a rival to the Liturgy, nor does it run alongside it as a parallel track. It flows from the Liturgy. The Divine Liturgy is the spring; the community is the river it feeds. When we receive the Body and Blood together at the chalice, we are not merely concluding a worship service. We are a single body that then goes out the doors and lives as such. The coffee hour, the property cleanup, the social events, the Sunday school, the choir, the parish council, the shared meals, the showing up for one another: these are not programs the parish adds on top of the Liturgy because they are nice. One could argue, that they are what the Liturgy produces, the shape it takes in the world *between* Liturgies. To be absent from the community while attending the services is, in a real sense, to receive the Liturgy and then refuse its fruit.

The monastery is sometimes misread as the model of individual spiritual achievement. But monks are not doing parallel prayer in isolation. There is often a shared table, obedience to the abbot, the friction of living in close quarters with difficult brothers. Here the monk can be transformed. The village parish is the lay equivalent. We do not get to opt out of the crucible and do only the interior parts.

II. Participation Is Physical (and Liturgical)

A culture that values left-brained “*nerd outs*” will yield inquirers that are good at independent thinking, but struggle at *doing* and *participating*. The Church must be prepared to receive and guide them.

Here is where the insight becomes practical and urgent: participation in the life of the parish is not primarily intellectual. Nor can it be experienced on the internet. It is bodily. It is concrete. It is the faith made flesh. This is fitting because the entire tradition rests on the scandal of Incarnation. God did not save us through ideas. He showed up with a body and used it.

Consider what the body does inside the Liturgy. It stands for hours (longer at Pascha). It bows. It makes the sign of the Cross. It prostrates fully, forehead to floor, in an act of self-offering that no amount of theological reading can replicate. It receives bread and wine. Actual bread and actual wine. It is anointed with oil, washed with water, censured with fragrant smoke. The Liturgy is not a lecture illustrated by ritual. It is the body being trained, week by week, in the posture of worship. The body is the student.

And then the doors open. And the body walks out. And, this is the moment that most formation programs miss.

What happens to that trained, consecrated, Eucharist-bearing body when it leaves the nave? Is it taught that reading more books and listening to more podcasts is the way? Or, does it host a coffee hour? Hug an elderly parishioner? Lift a child? Empty a trash can? Bring a meal to a family in need? Shovel the church steps in February without being asked? Learn to sing? Learn to celebrate (see “[Georgian Supra](#)”)? Learn to dance? ([Yes! Ethnic dances do matter. And they are a God-send.](#))

These acts are not interruptions of the Liturgy. They are its continuation. The same body that stood before the altar now stands before a neighbor. The same hands that received the chalice now carry someone else’s burden or toasts a neighbor. The Liturgy does not end when the priest says “Let us depart in peace.” It disperses into the week, into the neighborhood, into the ten thousand ordinary moments where the Body of Christ meets the world wearing your face.

Am I getting holier? Why don’t I feel closer to God? Is any of this doing anything? These are real questions. They are important to an extent. But a shift to physical parish participation offers a question that can actually be answered: *Did I show up? Do these people know me? Am I needed here? Am I moving into them? Or, away from them?* That is not a lesser form of spirituality. It is the Word made flesh, continuing its work through ordinary hands.

III. This Won’t Always Be Stimulating (And That’s The Best Part)

A culture that values stimulation and consumption will yield inquirers who are looking to satisfy a new obsession, but may not be invested when that obsession leaves. The Church should be ready to receive them and guide them.

Orthodoxy is not a hobby. It is not a puzzle to be solved, a system to be

mastered, or an intellectual thrill to be chased from one podcast to the next. Robinson himself notes the marital strain that follows in the wake of a conversion like his. Wives, *wisely*, see it coming before their husbands do.

She has watched him do this before.

The obsession cycle is familiar. The stack of new books, the sudden vocabulary, the hours disappearing into a screen or days away at conferences. And so she braces. Not because she is hostile to faith, but because she is wise. She has learned to recognize the signs of another all-consuming, novel fascination that will burn bright for two years and then quietly join a graveyard of prior enthusiasms. She reasonably expects “Orthodoxy” to die with Nintendo 64 video games, sourdough making, (bad) bass guitar, bee keeping, baseball cards, CrossFit, stoicism, craft brewing...you get the picture.

(I once heard of a priest who said to an enthusiastic husband whose wife was not enthusiastic: "The most Orthodox thing you can be right now is to not be Orthodox.")

She is not wrong to worry. Wives are routinely the window into a reality. And her worry is itself a form of data. And it wouldn't hurt for the catechumen, the priest, and the parish (and her husband, of course) to take her worry seriously. If Orthodoxy is only a sophisticated intellectual q-tip that we stab our brains with, it will eventually stop being stimulating. The puzzle will feel solved. The novelty will fade. And when it does, what remains? If the answer is only habit and obligation, most people will quietly drift.

But...*but*...if what remains is a *real* village that they *really* participated in with *real* relationships with the *real* faces of the *real* people who *really* need you and you *really* need them, well, then *reality* is what is left over. *Reality* is where our faith does its best work.

IV. The Protestant Hangover: Expecting to Be Chased

A culture that is forever sold and marketed to will yield inquirers that think they are being ignored or unwanted when they are not pursued. The Church should be ready to receive them and guide them.

There is another dimension to Robinson's account that deserves thought, because it affects converts from Evangelical backgrounds in particular.

Our culture is built around marketing. Evangelical churches are built around

pursuit. They advertise. They welcome newcomers with extraordinary warmth and deliberateness. They follow up. They have greeters, welcome packets, newcomer brunches, assimilation pastors. The entire institutional machinery is oriented toward bringing people in and keeping them engaged. If you stop coming, someone calls.

Orthodoxy does not work this way. Robinson notes it with some pain: “It exerts a very loose grip on you. If you want to leave, walk away, drop out, you don’t get much in the way of pushback. You can disappear, and nobody really seems to care.”

Some converts experience this as indifference, even rejection. And why wouldn’t they? After years of being actively recruited and retained by Protestant institutions, the Orthodox parish’s quietness can feel like a cold shoulder. Where is my newcomer packet? Why didn’t anyone follow up? Don’t they want me?

The honest answer is that the Orthodox parish is operating on a different model entirely. Frankly, it’s an ancient one, sometimes inherited from village and immigrant community life, where membership was assumed, belonging was demonstrated by showing up, and no one needed to be sold on attending because the Church was the center of the community. “Church” is simply what the community *did* and *had done* for centuries. That model has real virtues. It does not produce the manipulative retention machinery of megachurch culture. But it also leaves people to slip through the cracks in silence, and in an American context where almost no one arrives already embedded in Orthodox community life, it can amount to a pastoral failure.

Catechumens and new converts need to be warned clearly: The Church will not pursue you the way your last church did. That is not a sign that you are unwanted. It is a sign that you are expected to invest beyond what is intellectually, metrically, and individually stimulating to you. You are expected to show up, introduce yourself, stay for coffee, come back next week and the week after. Orthodoxy is ancient. It cares little for what the culture prescribes and precedes it by *millennia*. Belonging here is something you build, not something you are handed.

Yes...joining the Orthodox Church is the ***real and different*** kind of deal.

That reframe, offered early and honestly, may prevent a great deal of unnecessary hurt. Clarity is kindness.

V. The Church Must Also Be Ready

But this cannot all be placed on the convert. The parish has its own obligations, and intellectual honesty requires acting on them.

A church that watches people slip away quietly, that offers no robust formation, that baptizes inquirers after five months because they seem eager and well-read will have its issues. It is failing in its pastoral duty. Robinson says it plainly: he should not have been baptized when he was. He needed more time, more honest preparation, more pastoral relationship. He received almost none of those things, and six years later he is paying the price.

Needless to say, there is an influx of Western converts to Orthodoxy in recent years. It's exciting. Many of these inquirers are intelligent, serious, spiritually hungry people. This is an extraordinary opportunity. Glory to God! But it's a serious responsibility. These are people who have genuinely encountered the Church and found it compelling. They deserve to be received well. They deserve to be cared for. They deserve the truth.

That means a catechism that goes beyond theology into the practical reality of day-to-day Orthodox life. That might mean coaching on how to fast with a non-Orthodox spouse, manage prayer rules with small children, temper one's enthusiastic inclinations, navigate the long dry middle years after the honeymoon fades. It means honest conversation about the timeline of baptism, and the courage to slow it down when a family situation is unresolved or a catechumen is still in the honeymoon phase. It means someone (anyone?) making a phone call when a face disappears.

A Note on Godparents

The godparent relationship, properly understood, is precisely the mechanism by which the convert is given a guide into the village. A godparent is not a ceremonial figure. They are the person who holds the convert's hand through the first years, who introduces them, brings them to the dances and cookouts, calls them when they haven't been seen, and models the ordinary, unselfconscious faith of someone who has been Orthodox for decades. This role, taken seriously, may address more of what Robinson needed than almost any curriculum could.

There is also a subtler obligation.

The parish that receives converts must be willing to examine whether it is actually a community. It cannot merely be a congregation of people doing parallel individual piety in the same building. It cannot be an ethnic country

club with icons. If there is no coffee, no shared meals, no events, no openness, no genuine mutual knowledge among parishioners (or only among some and not others) — if there is nothing the Liturgy can *spill* into — then the convert who was promised a village will find only a beautiful service and a parking lot. Converts who arrive with energy and longing to belong cannot be left standing idle at the edge of parish life, watching from a distance while an established inner circle does everything. Somewhere a trashcan needs emptying. A dish to wash. An elderly person to give a ride to. A task that is genuinely theirs. Not busywork and not a test of commitment. Real physical participation is how belonging is built, and belonging cannot be built in a vacuum.

This means longstanding parishioners need to think concretely and deliberately on how to integrate new converts. Doing coffee hour? Invite that new convert couple to bring the napkins and silverware. Parish work day? Say something to that newly chrismated guy with a truck. Ethnic dance festival? A welcoming 45-minute how-to-dance session for new people a week or so beforehand wouldn't hurt.

These are not administrative details.

They are the architecture of community. They are the slots into which a new person or family can step in and, in stepping, become someone the parish knows and *needs*. A convert who has been given a job, however small, has been given a place. A convert left without one will eventually stop coming, quietly, and no one will quite know why.

Perhaps the most effective thing a parish can do for a new convert is not to give them another book. It is to hand them a broom and show them where the supply closet is.

And if a parishioner or convert “doesn't have time” for those opportunities or “it doesn't stimulate or speak to them” then they will have proven the point being made here.

Short and succinctly: Converts should be warned that they are expected *to be parishioners*, the *parish* should open themselves to make that possible.

The Turn

Robinson's burnout is, at its core, the burnout of a good man who was measuring the wrong things. He was asking: *Am I getting holier? Is Orthodoxy working on me? Do I feel closer to God?* These are great questions. But they are

questions that the interior life, measured privately, almost never answers satisfactorily. Real transformation is often slow, under-stimulating, hidden, and usually invisible to the person undergoing it.

The village question is different, and it is answerable: *Am I here? Do I know these people? Am I carrying anything for anyone? Am I bringing anything? Is there a face I can brighten today? Is this about me? Or is it about them?*

The widow in the third pew who needs a ride. The young family drowning in toddlers and newborns who need a meal dropped on their porch. The teenager who needs a man to take him seriously. The newcomer standing alone after the service who doesn't yet know anyone. These are not distractions from your spiritual life. They are your spiritual life. The form it takes when it moves from the icon corner into the world, from private aspiration into incarnate love.

This is not a soft, therapeutic substitute for rigorous Orthodox asceticism. It is the same asceticism, wearing different clothes. The Desert Fathers left the city to find God in the silence. Most of us are called to find Him here, in the noise and need of the parish we were placed in. Not as a backdrop to our spiritual journey, but as its very substance.

Our contemporary culture we all return to after every Liturgy *has not built us for what we are trying to become.*

It rewards isolation, makes physical work and relationships feel optional, and will not stop pulling after baptism. Which means the parish that simply receives a convert and steps back has done the easiest part and left out the most important. There must be a village worth entering, inroads not just open doors, and someone honest enough to say: the world you live in is pulling against everything you just signed up for. Formation does not end at the font. Perhaps this is precisely where it begins.

For the newly converted and enthusiastic inquirer: The question worth sitting with is not whether Orthodoxy is true or beautiful or ancient. By now you know it is. The deeper question is whether the faith will have roots deep enough to hold. The parish does not save you. Christ does. But He placed you *here*, among *these people*, in *this* story. How do you die a faithful Orthodox Christian? You die having added something to the story of where you *are*. You die having been, unmistakably, of this place and of these people.

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and asking why they tend to break the same way. He writes at [Fractology](#), where that pattern recognition meets something ancient.