

Holy Orders A Mother's Reflections on Her Son's Ordination

When our family came to Orthodoxy nearly seven years ago, we were often asked by worried Protestants whether or not we still believed in “the Trinity.” This always dumbfounded us, until we remembered that few, if any, of these questioners had ever attended an Orthodox liturgy. How could they know? How could they know that beginning with “Blessed is the Kingdom, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” the Trinity is mentioned – and worshipped – more often in a single service than occurs in a month of Sundays elsewhere. We appreciated their concern, but assured them that our beliefs about God were most definitely still Trinitarian.

This past Super Bowl Sunday, however, caused me to reflect on the phrase “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” in a new way. On that day, February 5, 2012, my son, John, was ordained a priest at St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. During the Divine Liturgy, shortly after the Great Entrance, Father Steven Mathewes and Father Gregory Hogg led John in front of the altar and down into a kneeling position, presenting him as a candidate for ordination to the priesthood of the Holy Orthodox Church. Father Gregory Hogg: that would be my husband, and John’s biological father.

At this moment, it is impossible not to think of one of our favorite family stories. I had stopped by work to drop off a few papers and my four-year-old son, John, was sitting on the counter of the nurses’ station, surrounded by my co-workers, when he suddenly asked, “Mommy, do you know who my real father is?” All heads snapped up and I began to feel my face turn red as I assured my son that of course I know – it’s Daddy, you know, that man who lives with us. “No, he’s not,” he said, shaking his head soberly. Back and forth we went, me trying to convince and reassure him, my co-workers teasing me until John finally said, “I guess I’ll have to tell you who my real father is.” A dramatic pause. “It’s God.”

As Bishop JOHN’s hands are now laid on my son’s head for the actual ordination, I also think of one of our parishioners, a fellow convert from Lutheranism, who tells his mother about the first Christian church, the Cave Church of St. Peter, in Antioch (originally part of Syria but now 12 miles across the border in Turkey). Antioch is where Jesus’s followers were first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26) and this church is still in existence today. Think of it – the very first Christian church, two thousand years old, still in existence and still used for worship! Our friend rejoices that if he were to visit that church today, he would be able to commune there. Would his mother? No, she tells him, because her doctrine is different from theirs. He just smiles sadly.

This is why we came to Orthodoxy. My husband pulled on doctrines as if they were strings, trying to find the ones that went all the way back. I remember him saying that if he pulled one and it only went back four or five hundred years, it wasn’t good enough; it had “come up short.” But now, one of the consequences of that decision for our family is here, and the magnitude of it can scarcely be taken in – the historical fact of unbroken

apostolic succession coming to rest on the head of my young son. This bishop whose hands are resting on John's head and blessing him had hands laid on him by a bishop, who had hands laid on him by a bishop ... and backward it flows, one hundred years, four hundred years, a thousand years, two thousand years, all the way back to the original apostles, and preserving their unaltered teachings.

The liturgy this day is blessed by the presence of not one, but two of the three new auxiliary bishops, Bishops JOHN and NICHOLAS. It is a moving service, full of the rich symbolism I have come to appreciate in a normal Orthodox liturgy, with the additional beauty of a hierarchical liturgy. One bishop blesses the people with three candles bound together, representing the Holy Trinity; the other bishop blesses us with two candles bound together, representing the two natures of Christ. This symbolism has always been easy for me to understand. It is only when Sunday School lessons delve deeper into these mysteries about the Trinity, discussing natures and persons, that I sometimes get a bit muddled. But here, in front of me, God provides a picture to help me understand. Not a perfect picture, for in this life we only "see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12): a father; his son; both of the same nature – human; the son in some way "from" the father. (And in this case, so alike in looks and tone of voice that, once again, "to know the son is to know the father"!) But two distinct persons.

I watch with a mixture of feelings – awe, pride, joy, trepidation ... and mirth. Why mirth? Because I know this young man now becoming a priest. How can he, so recently toddling around our home (or so it seems!) be on the verge of accepting one of the most difficult jobs on the planet? I know his faults and his weaknesses, but I also know how wise he is spiritually. His father and I used to say he was 'granite' – very difficult to chisel into, but whenever we succeeded, we knew it was there to stay. But I realize there is room for very little pride this day. We may have brought him to church every Sunday, placed him where he needed to be to hear God's word, but it was the Holy Spirit who did the work.

Every day, as part of the Trisagion prayers, we Orthodox Christians pray, "All holy Trinity, have mercy on us; Lord, cleanse us from our sins; Master, pardon our iniquities; Holy God, visit and heal our infirmities, for Thy name's sake." For some reason, I always love this last line. Yes, I want forgiveness of sins, but I also want God to "visit and heal my infirmities": all those places in my life that aren't actually sinful, just weak. Come, visit, shore me up, strengthen my backbone and my will; do your good work of theosis in my life, Lord.

I know this prayer will take on new meaning for my son in the days ahead. Many times he will not feel sinful so much as weak in performing the duties and meeting the needs God is calling him to handle. But my son will come to know – just as every Christian before him has come to know – that God will provide the strength he needs.

John is wearing his priestly vestments now. For the remainder of the liturgy, I watch as father and son do a holy dance, moving in and out around the altar, rubbing shoulders with the other concelebrants. It is time for the Eucharist. Watching my husband and son

serve communion, side by side, I begin to tear up, gratitude welling up within me. A father. His son. And the Holy Spirit lovingly working in both of their lives.

There is a luncheon afterward. Sunlight from an unexpectedly bright mid-winter day floods the hall, bathing the room in a golden glow. Our older son, Chip, has flown up from Baltimore for the ordination. I look with pride at my two sons, one with a doctorate in physics and now the other an Orthodox priest, but I also remember them as little boys, always pretending to be super heroes like Batman and Superman. "I guess John is the one who got to keep the cape!" quips Chip, referring to his brother's new vestments. We all laugh. John's wife, Darcy, is with us. Two of his friends have also flown in for the occasion. People we don't know come up to us throughout the luncheon to congratulate us.

Yes, this son is following in his father's footsteps. It is a happy day. But stepping back, I can see the bigger picture. Both father and son are following in the footsteps of their fathers, the fathers of our faith, picking up the baton that was handed to them and working hard not to drop it before it is their turn to hand it off. And always, day by day, decade by decade, century by century, the Holy Spirit is at work to preserve the faith.

Lord, bless this father and his son. Bless all fathers and sons, and fathers and daughters, and mothers and sons, and every daughter, and every son, along this journey of faith, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.