

The Truth that Liberates: The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Lives of Orthodox Priests

“...When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth.”¹

“...If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”²

¹ John 16:13.

² John 8:31-2.

**Dumitru Cornilescu:
Former Priest of the Romanian Orthodox Church**

Dumitru Cornilescu was born in 1891 in the village of Slasoma in the Mehedinti province. His father was a teacher, and his grandfathers both on his mother's and father's side were priests. He felt the call to enter the priesthood and went to Bucharest to study theology.

Dumitru was unhappy with the formalism and rituals. He desired to undertake serious study in order to gain a proper understanding of Christianity. The director of the theological seminary saw his desire and gave him a list of foreign religious literature. He proposed that he obtain and read them. This began the process for Dumitru of becoming a true believer.

He read books in English, French, and German. He determined that they all described one specific form of Christian living completely distinct from the religious life that he witnessed in his country. Soon he got the idea to translate these books and bind them into a modern journal. He produced an entire volume of these works from translations of authors such as Frank Thomas, F. Bettex, R.A. Torrey, S.D. Gordon, J.H.M. Conkey, George Muller, C.H. MacIntosh, and others.

During the years of his theological study, Dumitru Cornilescu attached himself to the church of St. Stefan in Bucharest, which at that time was called "the Stork's Nest". The priest at that church was Tudor Popescu, a youth with strong moral conduct and a talented gift of speech. His sermons attracted many people, among whom were renowned intellectuals from major cities. Tudor Popescu appointed Cornilescu as deacon and gave him the authority to publish books under the church's name.

Among other books that he read and translated carefully, Cornilescu paid special attention to passages from the Bible. Specifically, he tried to read the Bible in the Romanian language, but he was unable to do so. Even though he did not understand these pages, he had a strange affection for the authors of the Bible. Gradually, he realized the problem was not with the Bible, but rather the Romanian translation. The idea came to the passionate translator: why not create a new translation of the Bible, one that the common man could understand? He also realized, though, that such a task would require many years of work. He could not afford such an effort himself.

However, God was working in many areas at the same time. Just in time, a lady from the upper class of Romanian society named Princess Raluka Kalimaki was in Switzerland with her husband Kantakuzin Pashkanie. He was chairman of the Conservative Chamber of Romania at that time.

The Princess attended religious fellowships in Geneva and repented through personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. She realized the great value for her nation in understanding the Bible. She had just received a large inheritance from her mother and decided to invest it in printing the Bible in Romanian.

Once she returned to Romania, she began negotiations with several church officials to realize this project. Some of them told her that a new Bible translation into Romanian from the existing Old Church Slavonic translation was unnecessary. They told her she should consider funding an entirely new Bible translation from the original Hebrew and Greek languages into modern Romanian language.

The Princess began her search for a translation and found Dumitru Cornilescu. He had finished college in 1916 and was ordained as a celibate priest in Husa. According to the agreement between Princess Kalimaki and Bishop Nicodemus, two days after his ordination, Cornilescu moved to the village of Staucesti in the region of Botostani. There he began to translate the Bible.

After continuous work for four years, he was ready to release his translation of the Bible. In the year 1920, he published in Bucharest Psalms, or "Psalms of King David", under the auspices of the Romanian Evangelical Society under Gutenberg Publishing. He published the entire New Testament in 1921 and a complete Bible later that same year.

While working on the translation of the Bible, Cornilescu read other books to help him understand the biblical text. This reading brought Cornilescu to an understanding of the work God has done through His Son Jesus Christ for our salvation and how this salvation can be made available.

Fortunately for us, Cornilescu later wrote a book in which he describes how he came to the knowledge of divine truth. Here are some quotes from his book *How I Turned to God and Told Others About It*:

"I studied in school to become a priest. I did not know what it meant to have a personal Savior. I had love for Him, but I did not know Him. One day, the director of the school gave me a catalog with many religious books from abroad. I was shocked to see how many titles of Christian books existed, when at that time we had access to very few.

I ordered them and began to read them. As I read them, I saw that all discussed one special way of Christian living which was quite different from the religious life around us. More and more, I got excited about this life and told myself, 'This will be my ministry when I become a priest: to make known this life to our people.' But how?

I could not wait to become a priest, so I immediately began to translate passages and sometimes even whole books and sent them to all the religious journals in our country. I waited to see the life of which they had spoken, but this life did not come. I began to read and think deeply. I became aware that these spokes spoke of a single book: the Bible. They said that everyone should have a Bible, to read it daily, and to live according to its teachings. Up to that time, I had done this and began to read the Bible on a daily basis. After several days, I did not enjoy the Bible. The Bible translation which I read was very awkward and difficult to understand. But when I began to read it in another language, I began to understand and truly enjoy it.

I said to myself that if my people need to learn the Christian way of life from the Bible, then they should be able to read a translation they can understand. So I started to think that I should translate it myself.

I began to translate the Gospel of Matthew for myself. Quickly it became apparent that I did not have enough money to publish it.

At that time, I constantly did translations and printed a little booklet. I printed one such calendar with a Christian devotional for each day. Someone sent the calendar to Princess Kalimaki in Geneva, and she was very excited. When she returned to Romania, she asked me to visit her. I told her that I was considering making a new translation of the Bible. 'That is exactly what I was thinking about,' she responded. She had inherited a large sum of money that she was devoting toward exactly this goal: spreading the Bible throughout our country.

When I was working on the translation of the New Testament, I was supposed to look up the meaning of every word in the Greek dictionary. Then I came to the conclusion that my ideas of the simplest spiritual terms were changing. For example, I discovered that the Bible says very much about sin. I recognized that sin is something very terrible in the eyes of God since He says so much about it.

I had always believed that sin was something bad in the eyes of God, but I did not know exactly what. I thought murders were sinners who belonged in jail. But then I read in the Bible: '*But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother [without a cause] shall be in danger of the judgment.*' (Matthew 5:22) I was stunned for I knew that everyone was angry with someone every day.

When I came to the verse in Romans which states that "*all have sinned*" (Romans 3:23), I was not able to reconcile myself with it. I said, 'I do not understand why the Bible says that all have sinned. Even if I do not know someone else, I know myself. I have never killed anyone, nor have I been in prison, so I cannot consider myself a sinner.' I did not understand that verse and moved on.

Then I came to the verse: '*No one is righteous... There is no one who does good.*' (Romans 3:11a, 12b) I was a little bit angry at the verse. 'I cannot believe this,' I said. I know many people who have done many good things. And if you do not know someone else, I know myself. I myself have done many good things, such as sharing books, contributing charity on behalf of God, and others. And now, I am doing one very good work: translating the Bible into the language of my people. Why then does the Bible say, '*No one does good*'?

I did not understand, so I moved on. Later I reached the verse that states '*the wages of sin is death*'. I smiled and responded, 'It is impossible to believe such things, for the whole world is dying: both good and evil people. What sort of wages do the good receive?' Only when I came to the verse in Revelations 20:14 that mentions '*the second death*', in other words the Lake of Fire, I understood: this is the death for the wages of sin. It was frightening. I wanted to know who was included in the Lake of Fire. When I saw that it included murderers (Revelation 20:8), I said, 'Very well, murderers deserve to be there because they are sinners.'

I took another look and, to my great surprise, there were also liars. So is lying such a great sin that it merits the same punishment as murder? But everyone tells a lie every single day, and not only one lie, but many different lies. If that is the case, well I have told many lies in my life. Now I was firmly convinced that I was a sinner, but I was not such a sinner who deserved to go to the Lake of Fire. Fear seized me and I kept saying, 'I do not want to go there.'

At that time, I did not know the way to salvation. I did not know what to do to escape the Lake of Fire. I investigated further. When I came to the verse in Romans that states '*being justified freely*', I thought to myself: bizarre! This book is full of contradictions. So far, I see that all are sinners, condemned to death, and now suddenly they are '*justified freely*'. I wondered: what is going on here?

I read the verse very carefully and noted a difference. Yes, '*justified freely by His grace – on the basis of the redemption of Jesus Christ, whom God sent forth as propitiation by His blood.*' (Romans 3:24b-25) I said to myself, 'Did Jesus Christ die for sin? I was taught in school that He died for the sin of the whole world (1 John 2:2)! But what benefit do I have if I am a sinner and my sins are not forgiven? However, if He died for the sins of the whole world, then He also died for my sins. I see in this book that there is forgiveness of sin if Christ died for me.' This was the first step.

The second step was the revelation that we do not have a dead but a living Savior with whom we can have contact. He died for our sins, but He also resurrected to justify us. And now He is the living Savior. I encountered the greatest joy in knowing that He is not only a living friend with whom I could converse, but with the power of the living Savior, I have the power to conquer sin, for He broke the power of my enemy through His resurrection.

I thought about our sinful nature, that we cannot be otherwise, we want to sin, but I experienced my joy when it was revealed to me that there exists such a strong force to conquer sin. I accepted Him as my living Savior.

Finally, I realized that He is Lord. Lord means master. He is the Master, and I am His slave. No longer belonging to myself, but everything I have and am belongs to Him. So I accepted Him as Lord and personal Master, whose commands I should obey and listen. He is such a wonderful Lord and Master in whom you can completely trust!

In this manner I came to God! Now I knew that I was born again, that I was a child of God. I no longer read the Bible with the doubts I had earlier: Is it possible? Is it true? Now the questions were utterly different: 'Do I live up to what this Book requires of me? Do I share the motives that this Book teaches?'

However, there was one difficulty. I was the only person who dedicated his life to the new way. I read other books which confirmed all of this. But all of it was – books. I began to think, 'This way of life is very nice. But perhaps it is just my imagination, for I only received this life through reading and studying the Bible?'

However, now I started to look at verses in a new light. Immediately one verse came to mind in Philippians 4:6: *‘But in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God.’* I said, ‘Lord, I cannot say that I am an unbeliever. I believe everything You say. But I do not know if I am on the right path. Please give me a chance to see some soul who comes to you in the same way, so that I can be convinced that I am on the right path.’

I prayed. After three months, one morning, two young men from military school came to ask me how to prepare best for death. They went to the front and did not know whether they would return dead or alive. Truthfully, they were ready to die! As a priest, I needed to know that they were ready for death. I answered, ‘Yes, it is good that you have come now, for if you had come three months ago, I would not have known how to answer you. Christ died for your sins, and if you believe in Him and accept Him for yourselves, if you surrender your hearts and lives into His hands, you will have forgiveness sins and be saved. If you go to the front and die, the Savior will await you and receive you unto Himself. But if you return alive, you will have the obligation to tell others so that they too might be saved from death.’

They received the news with joy. They accepted it, returned to the barracks, and told others they were saved and their sins were forgiven. Some of them laughed, but others wanted to hear more. The following week, they brought other men, and I told them about the truth. Some of them decided to follow the Lord. After some period of time, a good number of souls were chosen for the Lord...”

The Bible translation of Dimitru Cornilescu today is the most popular translation used among Protestants and Neoprottestants. This translation is not approved by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church because Cornilescu had left the church and became one of the founders of the Romanian Evangelical Church. The popularity of this translation is demonstrated by its large number of republications (1931, 1942, 1946, new revision in 1989 with republications in 1990, 1996, 2000, 2002, and 2005).

The translation of the Bible into modern Romanian language, the same language spoken in the first quarter of the twentieth century, was done by Cornilescu because of the difficulty of the other existing Bible translation at the time. The existing translation was in archaic Romanian in Old Slavonic letters.

After major doctrinal disputes with people of higher theological circles at that time, Cornilescu was advised by Patriarch Miron Kristea himself to flee Romania. For this reason, Cornilescu moved to Switzerland in 1923 and remained there until his death in 1975.

Cornilescu devoted his whole live to preaching and writing about the need to return to God. Pastors and believers from many churches in Romania and the US wrote him letters with deep gratitude to God. They expressed great appreciation for the blessings brought into their lives and the lives of the Romanian people by his Bible translation. Believers expressed their respect for the one who put into the hands of the Romanian people in the homeland and diaspora the Bible, the Book of Books, God’s Word, in the clearest and most beautiful Romanian language.

Millions of copies of Cornilescu's Bible translation have been printed. It is present everywhere in the world where the Romanian language is spoken.

For this reason, Cornilescu became known as "the Luther of Romania."

**Tudor Popescu:
Former Priest of the Romanian Orthodox Church**

Tudor Popescu was a priest in the "Stork's Nest" Church in Bucharest, where he introduced a new way of gospel preaching. He experienced great success with such preaching as well as strong opposition from other priests. Several priests most likely out of jealousy of Popescu's rising popularity with the Bucharest public began to accuse him of preaching Protestantism. It was difficult for them to prove anything because Popescu limited his preaching to the explanation and interpretation of the Bible. These priests sent spies to the "Stork's Nest" Church in an attempt to catch Popescu in something they could prove as heresy.

Their hopes were fulfilled in the very end. The priest Tudor Popescu who was very careful about what he said in the text of the liturgy one day made a remark about a problem. In the text of the liturgy there was a prayer in which the priest asks for people's sins to be forgiven based upon the prayers of the saints to God in Heaven. Then he thought: "I preach to the people in accord with the Bible, which teaches that forgiveness of sins is based upon the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross for us and our faith in His sacrifice. How then could I ask God to forgive us our sins on the basis of prayers from dead saints? This is an obvious contradiction!"

So Popescu chose to omit this prayer in the liturgy. The spies present in the church immediately noticed this omission. Someone asked Popescu why he omitted the prayer. Popescu replied that he omitted it because he did not believe that we receive forgiveness based on the prayers of dead saints, but rather because of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Patriarchate immediately charged Popescu with heresy because he did not believe in the role of saints as intercessors, nor did he venerate them. The Patriarchate demanded an explanation. Here are some excerpts from Popescu's defense:

"I know that they have provided biased and false information about me to you, but I will tell you the way things truly are.

Regarding the veneration of the Holy Virgin Mary and the saints, I stand in the general Orthodox formula which states: Worship God and respect the saints. I think the Orthodox Church found the appropriate formulation, and thus I mention it. I stand in this formula and think any other teaching is contrary to true Orthodoxy. And may that be the case. We worship God for he is omnipresent. He sees everything and hears everything. The saints, having gone into Heaven, do not possess divine attributes. They do not hear the prayers of people from different sides of the earth. Omnipresence and omniscience belong only to God Himself. The veneration of saints is even prohibited by the saints themselves whom God had inspired. (Acts 10:25-6; 14:1-5) The role of intercessor

before God does not belong to the saints, but only to Jesus Christ. *“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.”* (1 Timothy 2:5-6) Only Jesus Christ is said to be praying for us: *“Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”* (Hebrews 7:25)

In practice, adoration or veneration of the saints is very easy and without moral obligations. Any person can venerate the saints, but only the honor that goes in their footsteps. It seems very easy to venerate some saint, but if your life is not affected by his life, such veneration is shameful. How many people who address prayers to the saints have changed their lives after that? No one. Of course this prayer called ‘Akathist’ makes a profit, but it does not produce the Christian life. But that is what we need.

Just because I do not venerate saints does not mean that I do not respect them. On the contrary, when I live according to the Gospel and comprehend what is sacred, only then do I admire and love them. As proof of their strong faith, they laid their lives down for Christ and did not abandon Him. Rather, they chose to die rather than to live a lie: it would have been easy for them to placate the government by denying Christ, even if they were to serve Him in their thoughts.

The concept that dead saints could save us through prayer is utterly foreign to the Lord’s Gospel. It clearly shows that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ, which involves living faith, faith manifested in good works. *‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ asked the Philippian jailer. ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.’* (Acts 16:30-1) We also read in Acts 4:12 that: *‘Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.’*

Someone could say that Sacred Tradition preaches otherwise! If this is true, then Holy Scripture stands in contradiction with Sacred Tradition. Only one of these authorities is right: either Holy Scripture or Sacred Tradition! Both cannot be correct. One should accept one and reject the other.

However, John’s Revelation discusses the prayers of the saints. It is good to see how they pray. Revelation 6:9-12 reveals that they seek God’s judgment upon those who dwell upon the earth when He comes. Are the saints praying for their salvation or their punishment? The second place that mentions the prayers of the saints is found in Revelation 8:3-5. The consequence of those prayers is tribulation on the earth. The third place is found in Revelation 5:8-10 where the saints are worshipping the Lamb.

The only thing that follows this is to bring souls to Christ. We say to every person: Sir/madam, you are a dying sinner! Christ died for sinners so they might be saved. Do you truly believe in Him? You are saved! Do you not believe? You are lost! What is your attitude toward Jesus Christ? Do you accept Him as Lord and Savior? On this question depends your whole eternity! Decide in all areas of your life to follow Him, or

else do not carry anymore His name (of Christian). This is the content of each of my sermons.

I have never lost sight of the fact that Christ never sent me to do high liturgy, but to preach, not to recite prayers, but to teach. My primary duty is to preach the gospel, and I will do that so long as I live. If preaching the gospel means that I must diverge from the path of Eastern Orthodoxy, then I have truly departed. I am lost! However, I believe that whoever does not believe the gospel, nor lives it, nor preaches it, is truly the lost one.”

Despite his defense, the priest Tudor Popescu was found guilty of heresy and defrocked in 1924. He never ceased preaching the gospel. He rented a hall and began his “congregation” there. On the model of this congregation, others were started in Muntenia and Oltenia. During the time of Communism, these fellowships had to join an officially registered denomination, so these fellowships united under the group “Christians by the Gospel”.

Cornilescu wrote this about the priest Popescu:

“In Bucharest I had a friend who was a priest. He was a widower. After the death of his wife, he was tormented by the thought of how to bring souls to Christ. He did not know how. He heard about my conversion and activity. I wrote him a few things, but he did not understand. When I came to Bucharest, we talked about the gospel. He could not understand how he, a priest, honest, one of the better ones, could actually be sinful. He could not believe that we needed to turn to God: he was sure he was too good for that! After many conversations and rage, he wanted to hear me preach in his church. He wanted to see what it would take for ‘more people to turn to God.’ After several of my sermons, he wanted to preach about ‘turning to God.’ I explained to him that if he wished to preach that way, he himself would need to repent before God.

One week as we talked about the stark reality of the terror of sin, he became convicted of his own sinfulness and repented before God. Since then, he began to preach in the power of God’s Spirit. Slowly, more and more people began to attend these meetings. I finished the translation and publication of the Bible along with tracts and books teaching about the progress of the Christian life. We launched a magazine called ‘Christian Truth’ for the purpose of evangelization. We asked many people whether they were saved or not, and some of them turned to God by reading the tracts, books, and magazines.

Many of the converted people were divine testimonies of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Some of them learned to read just so they could read the New Testament.”

**Josif Trifa:
Former Priest of the Romanian Orthodox Church**

Josif Trifa was born in 1888 in the village Certede, next to Kmpeni in the Western mountains. He attended gymnasium in Bejus and then studied theology in Sibiu. He returned to his home village as a teacher and later was consecrated as a priest. In 1921 Metropolitan Balan invited

him to Sibiu to become spiritual advisor to the Department of Theology. In 1922 the Metropolitan of Sibiu decided to start a magazine on religious education in Romanian villages. Priest Trifa was responsible for publishing it. He called the magazine “Light of the Village”. It was intended for common people and issued weekly. The first issue came out on January 2, 1922.

Among other things, Trifa wrote in the first issue:

“On the basis of the new order in the country – and in our nation – we ought to behave in the fear of God and obedience to His Word. To start at the beginning: faith and love of God – because without this beginning, nothing permanent or excellent can be accomplished... Only one balm can give the world and our nation health and salvation to: that people and nations would turn to Jesus, His teachings, and His commandments of love. Then peace will flow permanently among the nations.”

Recall that at that time, Transylvania had been united with the mother country for just three years. Romanians in Transylvania possessed huge hopes for unification, but many of them were disappointed. The process of improving the situation in the villages went very slowly. Although nothing improved on the economic side, the situation in the moral and spiritual side was even worse. Josif Trifa found it necessary to write articles in the magazine “Light to the Villages” about evil in Romanian society, especially the plight of the villages.

The poet Traian Dorz, disciple of the priest Trifa and leader of “The Lord’s Army” after his death, described the movement with the title: “History of One Sacrifice: a Testimony to the Start and the first 12 years of the Lord’s Army.” This work was never published. There are only two typed manuscripts from which we can draw information about Josif Trifa and the Lord’s Army.

Here is what Traian Dorz writes about the first years of Trifa’s activity in “Light to the Villages”:

“Instead of bland ‘committee’ articles which were soon completely withdrawn – from the pages of the magazine came forth his rebukes and denunciations of sin, politicians’ greed, judges’ partiality, injustice of laws, the decay of society, and the absence of the church. While orphans were dying, invalids were begging, people were suffering, faith was dying, poverty was spreading, foreigners were enriching themselves, and the devil was laughing – the Church sat silent and waiting.”

The voice of “Light to the Villages” in the whole war against evil was not the only one to cry out and inform people. But he was the only person who deeply believed that only spiritual rebirth could stop the destruction and bring salvation. The voice that said only a strong and complete turning to Christ can save and renew. Only faith and believing in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross as the sole way of salvation from death and condemnation could work.

While others offered all sorts of “solutions” and prescribed various “remedies” against the ailments of society, priest Josif insisted the only life-saving remedy was Christ.

After a year of writing for the magazine, Josif realized that he spoke in vain: no one responded to his call. This man reached a point of crisis on New Year's Eve. This crisis gave birth to an initiative to invite people to fight against sin. Out of this call sprang the movement "The Lord's Army". Seeing the sin and downfall of the nation, Josif Trifa asked, "What have I done to help these unfortunate drunkards and revilers to understand their state of hopelessness and sin? What have I done so that Christ draw near to them and they would draw near to Christ? This is the only way for the salvation of an individual soul or for an entire nation."

Trifa was very stricken and called upon the whole Romanian nation and all Christians to make a major decision:

"As we enter the New Year, let us come as Christians to commit to a mutual struggle against swearing, drunkenness..."

Writing with the same zeal, he published the Declaration to be signed by those who opted for such a lifestyle. In the Easter 1923 issue, Trifa published the list of names of the first "soldiers" who wrote him that they agreed to sign the Declaration and abstain from swearing, drunkenness, and other sins. He advised that it was not enough just to say "no" to some sins, but that progress needed to be made toward the gift and light of our Savior Jesus Christ from the New Testament.

That is how the movement "the Lord's Army" got started. There took place some conferences, meetings in the villages, and special groups of "soldiers" who gathered together to study the Bible and encourage one another.

The priest Josif Trifa as spiritual leader of the movement saw the need to define the basic principles of the movement. Traian Dorz noted the three basic principles as: acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal savior, spiritual rebirth, and the Bible as the only source of Christian faith.

Josif understood from the beginning that the secret and power of victory only could and would stand in Christ, in the living sacrifice of the crucified Christ. He stated, "All the work of our salvation, from the beginning I tell you, stood and stands only in the sacrifice of the crucified Jesus."

The miracle of the revelation of Christ produces in our soul another miracle: the secret and divine work of spiritual rebirth. The mystery of repentance is a work of the Holy Spirit. It is the divine act that is necessary for every person to obey, the Holy Spirit and the Holy Word. That mysterious work and change is produced by God's Word in the life of one who believes along with God's Spirit. Our healing and salvation as individuals and as a nation will never amount to anything apart from the knowledge of and living in harmony with Holy Scripture.

Josif Trifa constantly insisted that people should center their attention on Jesus Christ:

"The foundation of our salvation is in the crucified Jesus. All Scripture speaks of this (John 3:16; Acts 4:12). If one seeks salvation outside of the Source, he is wasting his time and forfeits salvation... Seeking salvation apart from Jesus Christ is akin to kneading bread without flour... This is a major weakness of modern Christians: omitting Christ from the equation of their

salvation... The devil is very deceptive. He leaves Christians all the rules, all the practices, all the forms. He fights for only one thing: that he removes the flour from the bread, that he removes the honey from the comb, that he removes Jesus Christ from their salvation.

It is said that in no place does the devil sleep so peacefully than where people zealously adhere to all the rules and traditions, yet they lack the crucified and living Christ... We constantly proclaim only the crucified Jesus, regardless of whatever opposition appears... Because we know and believe that only in His Name and the power of His cross do we truly have salvation and life..."

"The Lord's Army" rapidly developed into a movement among the masses. In 1934, several accusations were made against this movement. Among them, one priest wrote: "The Lord's Army in the beginning was good because it campaigned with propaganda against debauchery. But ever since they preached the sermon about 'The Ignorant Ones' with regard to spiritual rebirth, the movement became dangerous and no longer deserves our support." (Cited from Traian Dorz, *History of the Lord's Army*, 334.)

The priest making this accusation was very familiar with Orthodox theology. He knew the Orthodox teaching that spiritual rebirth occurs through baptism. Because little children are baptized, thus every Orthodox Christian who was baptized in infancy is considered to be spiritually reborn.

"The preaching on spiritual rebirth that occurs only when one comprehends the meaning of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus and receiving Him as Savior thus denies the power of baptism to produce spiritual rebirth! When someone preaches in the Orthodox Church that the act of spiritual rebirth occurs only later, when a person in faith turns to God, in reality they teach something that contradicts one very crucial Orthodox dogma. But the priest Trifa, who has studied what the Holy Scriptures teach about spiritual rebirth and wants to be faithful to the Scriptures, had no other way out. He preached a doctrine that was in contradiction with the dogma of the church to which he belonged."

The main accusation against the priest Josif Trifa was his refusal to allow the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church to take over the leadership of the Lord's Army. Several years ago, the official Orthodox hierarchy attempted to shift power to the official church organs. However, Josif realized that those who wanted to seize control of the Army with the goal of transforming the Lord's Army from a movement of spiritual renewal into a type of cultural society.

To avert such a catastrophe, Josif Trifa abdicated his priestly role with the intent of remaining the leader of the Lord's Army and editor of "Light to the Villages". However, the Metropolitan of Sibiu informed him that the moment he resigned the priesthood, he would forfeit control of the Army and the magazine.

The "heresy" of the priest Trifa sounded thus:

"In preaching about the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, inviting people to accept Jesus as their personal Savior, and teaching personal contact between sinful people and Jesus

Christ, the priest Josif Trifa denied one of the most central dogmas of the Orthodox Church.”

Metropolitan Nikolae Balan denied any possibility for repentant sinners to have any contact with the Savior in any manner apart from the mediation of the Church!

The previous testimonies revealed to us the experience of these priests: Dumitru Cornilescu, Tudor Popescu, and Josif Trifa. Let us repeat the main themes of their activity:

First, the translation of the Bible into the modern Romanian language, without any deviation from the original text, was viewed as a “Protestant” action.

Then, when these people preached personal salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, they contradicted the Orthodox teaching that the Church is the organ that dispenses salvation.

When Tudor Popescu turned to the Biblical doctrine that states Jesus is the sole mediator between man and God, the Orthodox Church accused him of denying the Orthodox dogma of the intercession of saints between man and God.

When Josif Trifa preached about spiritual rebirth as a result of accepting Jesus Christ with sincere faith, he was accused of denying the Orthodox dogma of spiritual rebirth through infant baptism.

Dumitru Cornilescu and Tudor Popescu joined Evangelical-Protestant church fellowships. Many members of the Lord’s Army did the same. This solution to which more Romanian Orthodox members have increasingly resorted has made them unite with Baptists, Pentecostals, and other groups. These church fellowships today amount to more than half a million members. More and more Romanians are joining these churches.

This is also the situation with the next person. Following is an excerpt from the autobiography of Daniel Cristian Florea, a former Romanian Orthodox priest and believer.

**Daniel Cristian Florea,
Former Priest of the Romanian Orthodox Church**

I was born in the city of Aiud in the Alba region in December of the year 1974 to a family of Orthodox believers. Our family lived a middle-class life.

I remember my father, who sat in the first row in church and did not bother other people. We ourselves put father first in our life. Mother sat with other women and was very proud of us, her children. My older brothers, Marcel and Mircea, put me between them, and I got into all sorts of trouble, including grabbing things and complaining. Through our participation in church life, we became acquainted with ministers and priests as we regularly attended the Holy Church. We began to learn the texts of church songs... At home, we regularly prayed and sang the songs that

we knew. In the evening, my father put us all on his knees, praying and reciting the prayer "Our Father." The practice of my family would influence my life.

1989 was a turning point both in the life of our country and our family. In the summer of that year, my brother Marcel came down with bone cancer. In one year, the disease spread throughout his entire body. Our family's harmony disintegrated, and there was no spiritual or moral barrier that could shield my parents from these difficult moments. My father took refuge in drinking alcohol, while my mother was pounding the pavement back and forth to hospitals in Cluj. Back then, I was 14 years old. Also in the year 1989, the Romanian dictator Ceausescu was overthrown in a bloody revolution. In my soul, I suffered along with those who lost parents or children. Then I recognized my other circumstances. My soul in those days was full of pain. I thought about the day my brother Marcel fell ill as well those who died in the Revolution. In those days, I cried: "God is with us" and "God exists." Then I looked up to heaven, I sought the God in whom my family and the Romanian people believed. I would sit at home for hours with my first prayer book in my hand and then on my knees as I prayed to God, the Blessed Virgin, and the Saints to intervene in our lives to replace bitterness with hope, shortcomings with hope, unbelief with faith, yet nothing happened. Days went by, and after a while I noticed that the smile and pleasant nature that had characterized me disappeared. Then I realized that I had prematurely aged. Over a long period of time, I attended liturgy at the Rimet Monastery, I attended many Liturgies and Anointings.

In the spring of 1990, my brother died and my family along with him. I looked to heaven, but heaven was silent toward my cries. No Liturgy nor Anointing nor intercession by the Holy Mother, nothing got through to God. That summer I joined the church choir of St. Simon Barnutiu, where Tokanel Joan served as archpriest. My grandmother praised him a lot for his preaching. In 1990 the choir went to Moldova. Then I discovered the beauty of Orthodoxy, expressed in the paintings of the monasteries, the beautiful churches built in Moldovan style, and the songs sung by monks or nuns. Oh, what joy I felt to be a part of this nation and its church with its many believers, many monks, many ministers, and divine priests adorned in gold. Back home, I was attached to something beyond faith in the songs and teaching of the Holy Church. I believed that God was hidden somewhere.

At age 16 I bought the first three books that would influence my adolescence and later adult life. These books included: the Egyptian Fathers, the Psalter, and Holy Scripture. These books had such great influence on my spiritual life that I will never forget them.

At that time I heard that there were Christian groups among us, which we derisively called "proselytes".

Those people, who despise the Virgin Mary, despise the Holy Cross, and despise many of us. I heard worse things about them, that they were enemies of the Romanian people and were trying to bring us doctrine imported from America, which would ruin us, our ordinances, customs, and the traditions inherited from our forefathers...

Orthodox priests generally do not recommend independent reading and Bible study. However, I possessed a strong desire to read. At the advice of my rector, I began to read Psalms. Later, I began to read the gospels but with deep concern, for we were taught that we, ordinary people,

should not read these books that are difficult to comprehend. We could fall away into apostasy if we misinterpreted them! Since I ardently desired to meet with God, I continued to read but very carefully, for I could not find God on the wrong path. The Gospel of John talked about the meeting of the teacher Nicodemus with the Lord Jesus. I naturally asked how I could be sure if I were born again. I never had heard about this in a sermon. I was upset and asked myself many questions.

In the spring of 1994, I prepared for seminary to become a servant closer to God - a servant over which the bishop would lay hands and grant the grace of sanctification to touch God. We studied doctrinal, Romanian, and universal church history, Old and New Testaments, Romanian language and literature, and music. Afterwards I moved to Sibiu in the oasis of Orthodox Transylvania. My mother was very happy that her youngest child wanted to become a priest.

However, the early days of my studies brought disappointment. Many students cheated during the entrance exams. On the other hand, I managed to pass the exams and earn a merit scholarship. . I went into the temple, went on my knees, and thanked God with all my heart. The largest expenses would pay for books, doing pilgrimages to monasteries all over the country, and participation in conferences in student centers around the country. Yet my coursework fell short of my expectations. I went to college first to solve my soul's problems and then to get ready. I was preparing for something pleasant and important, but it was even more important to know God and His love, so I thought.

During summer vacation before my fourth year, I attended the Mihai Viteazul Church in Sibiu, where I met my future wife. She was like a girl who came from another planet, a place of purity, tenderness, and beauty. We spent my fourth year of seminary together and then we got married. In 1998, I graduated from the university. That summer, I went to the mountain village of Ponor Geogel, where I took a pastoral position. My ordination as a priest occurred at the monastery in Rimet in the municipality of Alba. . For my wife, it was the dream of entering into another phase of her life, that of having a man who earned a living, mastered a profession, and started life as a couple in the mountain parish. . All my other friends and relatives also celebrated my accomplishment.

I wanted to look like my parishioners. We integrated our lives with the village, came to know the hardships of daily life by living through them ourselves. . I purchased sheep from a shepherd in the village. We kept goats and went out with them to graze on the nearby hills. I went to the fairs in the area and gained a reputation with many people in other villages for my attachment to the mountain people.

As I got to know them, I realized that they did not live a true Christian life. Rather, they merely practiced traditional customs without understanding their meaning. They sang songs in the ancient Romanian language that neither I nor they themselves could understand. But I had the opportunity to listen to some old folk poetry and stories of truly extraordinary heroes. I also enjoyed listening to some of them several times. I kept thinking of the possibility that my parishioners could live the Christian life as taught in the Bible. Now this presented to me a conflict: Holy Scripture or sacred tradition. Even within sacred tradition, I had two traditions:

that of my parents that no one was able to keep, or that of the Romanian village that was rife with paganism from ethnographic and folk literature which I had studied extensively.

Unfortunately, people did not change. I was disappointed. Lord, what do we Romanians have to show you after 2,000 years of Christianity? When people came to the parsonage to perform rituals, I saw no solutions to any of their problems as a result. I realized that these rituals had only short-term effects but brought no long-term solutions. As I kept thinking about it, my wife proposed that we move to another parish. I liked the idea, thinking that we moved to another parish, we would find a community of people with holy customs and traditions that are truly Christian. I figure that in two years we gained some experience and our ministry would gain even more power. From the Diocese of Caras-Severin, we were assigned two parishes somewhere in Banat, in the Oravita, about 300 km from my hometown. There were so few people at church that I started to cry. . If they do not care now, why would they even turn out for the Holy Liturgy, the most valuable ministry of the Orthodox Church?

The parish home in which we were supposed to live was very run down. We decided to renovate the house, but from the very beginning, we ran into opposition. People claimed that the church had no money to pay for repairs. My wife began to cry. As a man and head of the house, I pondered different solutions. As I stood one day deep in thought, I heard a knock on the door of the parish house. A local Baptist church deacon came to tell me: "Peace of the Lord, brother." I looked long at him and said, "God help us, but we are not brothers. Orthodox are not brothers to sectarians." "If you are not my brother, then I could be your friend." I agreed, but under the condition that he would not evangelize my congregants. Otherwise, I would get mad. I asked him if he knew someone who could help me in my trouble, and he offered himself. The next day, he had already fulfilled my request and did so without discussing any price. My parish members never even lifted a finger to help me. Yet, this unrepentant man the alleged enemy of our faith and our Romanian Orthodox nation did everything. My most loyal friend to help me to become better became Paul Laes, deacon of the Baptist Church. As winter came and the nights became longer, I went on to tell my friend the deacon about Scripture. He was the only man truly concerned about my family. When we got bogged down in discussions, he would take a songbook of "Gospel Hymns" and sing. His wife, Sister Rodica, always prepared tea and doughnuts which she served with great pleasure. I started to read their lives as a living epistle.

The spiritual condition in my parishes was disastrous. Usually, those who attended our evening services consisted of me, my wife, and the deacon. Then I suggested that it would be better to attend the Baptist Church where people worship the Lord. They worshiped the Lord in their own way, and our people in our way. In any event, it would be better to be among people who worship God instead of gossiping. When the deacon saw me enter the meeting, he immediately invited me to the front of the church toward the pulpit. He told me to speak the Word to the people. When I preached in my own church in the morning and evening, I wanted to preach faith and repentance as strongly as the Baptists did. I was careful not to offend their faith and to preach only what was in the Bible. During those evening sermons I gradually realized that in fact the ancient tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy demanded a genuine return to Scripture.

In 2002, a week of evangelism took place in the villages where I was priest. The deacon with whom I was friends came to me one afternoon and invited me to attend one of the evangelistic

meetings in our village. I could not reject him because he always responded to my calls. One evening, a young man who was 35 years old came. It turned out he was a former priest of the Orthodox Church a few years ago who had repented. The following week, I was summoned by the Bishop of Caransebes to give an explanation about my participation in the Baptist evangelistic campaign. Even though I gave logical explanations, the bishop ordered me to forget that meeting with the former priest. The bishop even forced me to inform him if that former priest ever visited our local area again.

Then the bishop also requested that I dissolve any relationship with the Baptist deacon. I ignored the bishop's man as I was a free man who could make up his own decisions.

On March 8, 2003, this brother invited me to the Baptist church near Oravita for Women's Day. My wife and I were very curious to see how they could spend the day in church. It rained that day. They did not spend their time playing or dancing. Instead, everyone was praying to God and asking that His presence would bring peace, joy and happiness. The prayers I heard that day from the mouth of ordinary people I had never heard from any leader of the Orthodox Church. What could I say to my parishioners? The women prayed to God so openly and with firm faith that He would answer. Then on that day my wife and I both realized that we did not know how to pray to God based on a personal relationship with Him according to His Word. After the time of prayer, there was a woman's Bible study in commemoration of Women's Day. This study was led by sister Tatiana Gongola, a graduate of the Surd Bible Institute near Lugoj. They would ask her questions: what, when, where, why, who, how? She immediately answered the questions by appealing to the Word of God.

The idea was to ask my questions and seek answers in the Word of God, just like the woman had done on March 8. I had never thought about seeking answers to my questions directly from God's Word.

One of the Baptist brothers insisted that we go the Bible Institute in Surd to study the Scriptures and said that I would find the truth with the help of the light of God. For this reason, I suggested to my wife that we take two weeks off to spend at the Institute. We had not taken a vacation for five years. We would return just in time for Lent, and I would have more preaching material for Easter. A few days later, my wife gave her consent but warned me not to let the evangelical believers seduce me as they had the other Orthodox priest.

On April 7, my wife and I arrived at the Institute in Surd. . There we were warmly welcomed with brotherly love. The title of the book they were using was *Finding Your Direction in Life*. I smiled ironically and told myself that my direction in life was already set. This book would not help me at all. We started to study the Bible. With pen in hand, we studied the Old Covenant, which God made with Noah, Abraham, Jacob and other patriarchs. I discovered a personal God, a God who promises that he will bless those who obey him. I encountered a God who promises to keep His promises. The theme of Scripture ran all the way to the blessings of Jesus, Who Himself was sacrificed as a blessing. He came to erase our sins, He humbled and offered Himself as a lamb to the slaughter by His blood that we might receive forgiveness of sins. Now I discovered that Jesus came to reconcile us as new people with God, to bring us into a personal relationship with Him. The scales began to fall from my eyes.

God's Son died in my place.

Through His blood, my sins can be forgiven.

God's mercy brings me to repentance. Repentance is God's commandment.

Jesus offers Himself as a sacrifice once and for all. Through faith in Him as Savior, we obtain His righteousness.

Jesus is the new Adam. For my salvation, Jesus suffered death on the cross.

The Father accepts me as a son through faith in becoming the brother of Jesus Christ.

When these facts confronted me, I could do nothing but believe in them. I could only accept God's grace. He joined me in a personal relationship with Him. In our Orthodox "**religion**", the Orthodox Jesus was never presented as Lord and Master of my heart, nor as the one Who has absolute authority in my private life or ministry. Not His words, but the men known as the Church Fathers demanded absolute obedience. The words of these men had absolute authority in matters of faith.

As a man who thinks logically, I immediately asked a few questions. "Whose servant am I?" I answered, "God's." And if I am the servant of God, then to whose words do I have to listen? To whom does a servant listen? His master. And if He is my Lord and Master, to whose words do I have to listen? God's. This discovery demolished my entire Eastern Orthodox worldview since my birth and taught in my college years.

My wife was stunned and did not know what to believe or say. I explained to her that salvation is personal and only by heartfelt faith and the will of God could she make a covenant with the Lord. She reminded me of the uncertainty that would await us:

"You know that the parish will expel us. You will no longer be a priest, you will no longer have a job, nor will we have anywhere to live. Where shall we go? What shall we do? You damage the future of us and our children. What will be the consequences of your decision on our future? Do not think that you are all alone. Your decision also impacts the three of us along with you."

On Sunday morning, I woke up with deep anxiety. An invisible war raged within my entire being. This war ensued on two levels: material and spiritual. The material level: how would I resolve the problems of earning a living which my wife brought up and now appeared to be more realistic issues. The spiritual level brought doubts about my ability to serve in a position that is not godly, where continuing on as an Orthodox priest would mean teaching and feeding people with false and misleading hope.

Easter holiday was on the horizon, and people would have to perform confession. However, I realized that confession is not of God because people have sinned against God and need to be reconciled with Him if they are to be forgiven and saved. Yet, if people asked me to grant them reconciliation, then it meant that Jesus died in vain. Instead of coming to Jesus, they came to me, the priest, and a thousand people would thank me for their forgiveness and not God.

Furthermore, through my prayers, people thought the dead souls would enter the kingdom of God. But now I knew that only through faith can a living person inherit the kingdom of Heaven. After Easter, I baptized an infant who was six weeks old. I knew that he was unable to consciously know the Lord Jesus and could not receive Him as Lord and Savior.

That morning a minibus from the Institute went to Grace Baptist Church in Lugoj. I went for the ride. In the car I began to pray to my God and my Lord and asked him: "Please speak to me today and put words in the mouth of the pastor to speak to me, speak through him about how to solve my problems through Your wisdom which has already solved these problems. Lord, please give my heart reassurance. I want Your solution for my life. You see that I want to follow you, but how do I solve my problems?"

As I listened to the sermons, I found the answers to my mental turmoil. I started to smile and thank the Lord who is alive because He showed His love through speaking to me in such a pleasant and direct manner. No person or thing could reverse my decision now.

In the afternoon, we visited another church in the village, and the Lord spoke to my wife. She stood up and stated that she did not want to be merely a listener, but also a doer of God's Word.

We spoke with a brother preacher about our desire not to leave until we confirmed our covenant with the Lord Jesus Christ through baptism in water. We discussed many things about our lives here at the Institute, how we came to understand the New Covenant, and that baptism should be performed only at adulthood. On Wednesday, April 16, they organized the baptism in a Baptist church in a nearby village. I realized that there is great joy in heaven over one sinner, even an Orthodox priest, who turns to the Lord.

On Thursday, we returned to our parish. Our parishioners heard of our baptism. My superior confirmed it with me and said he would throw us out of the church. In the market, a seller looked at me with anger and threw me out of the store as she said I had denied the holy Mother of God, saints, crosses, icons, all of our customs...

I realized that the pressure would be immense and prayed for a calm reaction. On Friday afternoon at 2 PM, my wife's uncle arrived. He was also a priest and advisor to the Bishop of Caransebes. He came with the priest from Oravice, my direct superior. The conversation was peaceful, a direct answer to my prayer.

Then they rose and asked me to give them the priestly clothes, keys, and documents of the church with the church teachings, minutes, and books. We went to the temple to conclude our discussions. I handed them the keys and documents as other advisers went away. They had a commitment to keep me in the parish house and pay me until I was expelled.

The priests came to the parish house and told me that it was time for me to leave. I asked them to give me ten days' notice to move, but they were not persuaded. They told me that I was a traitor to Orthodoxy and had no right to sleep in a house belonging to the Orthodoxy Church! Our neighbors intervened and told them not to throw us out on the street! He also said that the Orthodox priests were behaving worse than the Communists. It got to them, so they allowed us to stay for three days.

The Lord was at work that night. Our brothers came to visit us in the parish house. . The first man to come was the pastor of the village asking if we needed help. Then came the deacon who had helped us before with the parish house. Then he came with a policeman. For a moment, I

was upset because I thought he had come to arrest me. In fact, the policeman was also a believer who had come to help. When everyone had left, I looked at my wife. We cried together.

What a great God we have!

The next day, as the news spread, many people gathered. I told everyone: “People, I do not want to go. I want to stay here with you, but you have to change our lives. We will not go to another church, but here in our church we will serve God. Whoever wants to repent and come to our church cannot give confession to me, but he must confess before God. You have sinned against Him. He is good and just and will show pity to cleanse your sins. Then if someone wants to enter into covenant with the Lord Jesus, he can receive Him as Lord and Savior. I will henceforth preach only the Bible and all who want to listen can stay with me.”

At that time, my parishioners were divided into two camps. Some wanted to remain, while others wanted us to go. Then a large car driven by some brothers from Oravice arrived to help us wrap furniture and things and to vacate the parish house.

Suddenly, two cars arrived and stopped in front of the crowd gathered in front of the house. People were pushed aside as the bishop entered the parish house without speaking to anyone. The bishop and his escort growled with offensive words for the brothers to get out of the office. They wanted to have a private discussion with me inside the house. The bishop’s face was black with anger. I objected and said that since there was nothing to hide that we should talk openly before the people. I am certain that he came to convince me to give up on my new faith. But when he saw that all the furniture was loaded and the people were troubled, he invented a calculated ruse and told the audience, “We want him to remain as a priest here, only if he is willing.” “Of course,” I replied. “But you can remain under one condition: you must deny the covenant you have made.” “Thank you, your Grace, but nothing in the whole world could ever make me deny it because I cannot be unfaithful to God. Yesterday, I said yes to God, and I cannot say no to Him today. May this never be.” “Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Anything else comes from the Evil One. May all the curses of the Orthodox Church come upon you and your children,” said the bishop. When the women heard these curses, they covered their mouths with their hands. I asked him, “Most Holy Father, is the Orthodox Church the Church of curses? Does she curse her sons who have served it from childhood until now, even the most humble of them?” One of his advisers looked at me and the Reverend Father and said, “Look at how his face and eyes shine. Satan has entered into him. That shows this man is possessed by demons.” My wife looked at me and said, “Come, dear, let us sing.” “Do you mean that song?” “Yes.” So together we sang. “I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. I renounce the world, but Jesus I will not give back.”

Since that time, I have been traveling around the country to encouraged evangelical churches and to invite Orthodox believers to enter into eternal covenant with the Lord Jesus by believing in Him alone and only on the basis of biblical revelation, rejecting all other later teachings.

The testimonies of these former Romanian Orthodox priests (in summary form) come from the magazine “Scripture and Tradition” in the Romanian language, issues 1, 6, 7, and 8, published in the year 2009. The persons to which these testimonies refer can be found on the Internet at Wikipedia and other Internet sites.

Stylianos I. Charalambakis (1916-2009)
Former Priest of the Greek Orthodox Church

The Apostle Paul writes in the Bible:

1 Corinthians 13:11 *When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*

Man is born into this world, immersed in ignorance and without knowledge, unable to recognize himself or his environment. Inherent to his nature is childhood ignorance. However, as the years go by, with God’s power, man can move from insensitivity and callousness to feeling and awareness, and from ignorance to knowledge, and such was I. Indeed, I started to learn about myself, my background and upbringing, and the values which my parents held. I always upheld the strong religious convictions which I formed under the influence of my parents and teachers. All these things in my youth taught me to fear God. Thus, I decided to become a monk, thinking I would save my soul whilst serving the Lord.

Although at the monastery I realized that I was actually far from serving God and saving my soul, they still considered me suitable for the priesthood. On 13 June 1943, I was ordained a priest and remained in the Greek Orthodox priesthood for the next 12 years.

But how could I be certain that I believed in God’s truth and not in the religious institutions and traditions added by men over the centuries? How do I know that I have not been deceived along with my parents and others in my society? There is an old [Greek] adage which says, “Among men, to know yourself is most difficult”. This proverb testifies and shows that people are in complete ignorance and do not know the nature of God or man. Consequently, they have neither rendered to God the adoration which He truly deserves, nor to man the honour he deserves. Ignorance has planted false doctrines in their hearts, leading them astray and deceiving them not only from matters of life but also in regard to the true worship of God.

I was exactly in such a condition albeit unwittingly. Thankfully, God did not leave me to wander about in my poverty stricken spirit. Help came and, as I studied His divine word, He showed me the way to become a servant of the spirit and not of the letter.

Matthew 5:3 says, “Blessed *are* the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Those words were truly the start of my spiritual journey. The Lord taught me that with the power of the Holy Spirit, I must free myself of all manner of selfishness and pride, and become like a

harmless and innocent child. I discovered true worship (John 4:24) and my real vocation in life (Matt28:19, Mark 16:15) by systematically researching the Bible and as a result of the light which the Divine Light-Giver was giving to my heart.

The word of God now began to work in my heart and gave me the absolute certainty that the doctrines which we inherited from our forefathers, with all the emphasis on empty formalities and rituals, were not taught by the Lord and the Apostles. The Bible informs us that “God is a Spirit” (John 4:24). Worshipping and serving God must conform to His nature. Surely the material things, like ecclesiastical vessels, priestly vestments, etc., get in the way of true worship, because their physical nature is not at all like the spiritual nature of God.

The early apostolic Church never used religious ceremonies and rituals such as those performed by the Greek Orthodox priests. Neither did they use material objects or other items to convey their worship. Instead, the believers “continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” (Acts 2:42).

As soon as the Lord revealed these truths to me, I stopped believing in the Greek Orthodox traditions and oral teachings. Of course, when my bishop branded me as a “heretic”, I began to face difficult persecution. Nevertheless, the Word of God gave me much comfort since He would not allow me to be tempted more than I could bear (1Cor 10:13). I would always loudly repeat with boldness those encouraging words of the Apostle Paul, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” Philippians 4:13.

I realised that I had to pass through a furnace in order to strengthen my character and prove my trust in God. I was certain that a lamb, under the watchful eye of God, will not be eaten by a wolf.

Serious issues continued to occupy my mind. It was not just that the ritualistic way of worship was not in agreement with the Word of God, but the priesthood should no longer exist. The sacrifice of our Lord abolished the need for the Old Testament priesthood. The sacrifices which were performed by the priests of the Old Testament foreshadowed the unique sacrifice of Christ. Since the Lord Himself made that sacrifice, we must accept that the priesthood was transferred to Him. This is what the Bible emphasises in Heb. 7:23-25 and 9:12. Christ's death on the cross fulfilled the propitiation, thus removing the need for priests. They should no longer exist because no more sacrifices are made. The word of God is clear about this matter. **Hebrews 10:12-14** ¹² *But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God;* ¹³ *From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool.* ¹⁴ *For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.*

According to the Bible, there should be no priesthood. Ever since Christ was sacrificed on the cross there exists “a royal priesthood” (1Peter 2:9) made up of all believers in the Redeemer Jesus who “hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father” (Revelation 1:6).

Furthermore, human priests cannot forgive sins but only Christ can. He was sacrificed in order to forgive sinners. **Matthew 9:6** “The Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins.” Salvation is granted by believing in the redeeming work which Christ did on the cross. **Ephesians 2:8-9** ⁸ *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: ⁹ Not of works, lest any man should boast.*

Consequently, the priestly clergy are not the custodians and distributors of divine grace. Orthodox doctrine is wrong when it claims the priests have the authority to bind and loose (Matt 18:18). The Orthodox Church misinterprets this verse in applying the function to the priests. The New Testament nowhere mentions that the Apostles ever made use of this authority. They never invited people to come and confess their sins to them. The authority of binding and loosing which the Lord gave his Apostles was in relation to matters of discipline in the Christian community.

Until the 3rd century A.D. the Christian Church regarded all believers as priests, without exception. Each believer is a member of the one and only priest, Jesus Christ. This is confirmed in the writings of the Church Fathers, e.g. Tertullian, Justin, Irenaeus of the 2nd century and Origen of the 3rd century. Also other documents such as the *Didache of the Apostles*, *Epistle of Clement* and *Epistle of Polycarp* refer to only two ecclesiastical offices, namely, bishop or elder, and deacon. Only the *Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch* (2nd century) speak about priests and high priests. Balanos, a professor of theology, wrote in his *Patrologia* (pp.48, 51,52) that these epistles were forged in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. However, the Word of God is clear on this, and what those epistles say is unimportant.

Now that I had more Biblical understanding, I had to decline the promotion which my superiors offered me. With my newfound faith, I felt the Lord calling me to resign from the priesthood which had been a big obstacle in my spiritual progress. I sought forgiveness, through the blood of Christ, from my God and Father for all the sins which I committed in my life, including those done in ignorance. Immediately, I lifted up my voice, thanking God for His precious promise that He would not remember my unrighteousness, sins and iniquities anymore. **Hebrews 8:12** *For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.*

I left the [Greek Orthodox] Church which I served for 12 whole years and became part of the Evangelical Church, not so that I would be an enemy of the former but rather its friend. As a Protestant, free from the tyranny of the Bishops who forced me to see only as far they could see, I could, as a Greek citizen respecting the laws, raise my voice in anxiety and pain, and call my former fellow priests to repentance - “Repent and believe the Gospel.”

Now I am a minister of God “... not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). I see the aspiration of my life freed from the dead

formalities. I will hold on to those words which the Lord said to the Samaritan woman, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship *him* in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24)

Those who criticize Charalambakis falsely claim that he was only a deacon and was defrocked because he got engaged. The Orthodox Church allows men who are already married to become deacons and priests. However, if a single man is ordained as a deacon or priest, then he is forbidden to marry.

In fact, Charalambakis reached the rank of Archimandrite and became known as Seraphim. He never mentioned this higher position out of humility.

He was not defrocked by his superiors but because he believed in Christ as his Savior, he resigned from the priesthood of the Church of the Holy Trinity in Ampelokipi, Athens on 14 February 1955. After he became a private citizen, through a mutual friend, he met a fine young lady on 28 April 1955. Three months later, on 28 August 1955, he married Stella at the Church of God, Athens. The ceremony was performed by the then pastor, Nicolas Zazanis. Charalambakis’s marriage lasted until his death in 2009.

G. Dobrovolskiy Former Priest of the Autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Testimony about the work of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of Holy Scripture in the life of the former Orthodox priest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church G. Dobrovolskiy (the text to follow), which constitutes the prologue to his book:

This book is a true document, a personal testimony of a former Orthodox priest who today is a pastor of a church of Evangelical Christian Baptists.

G. Dobrovolskiy, a priest, seriously and of his own free will studied the Gospel by comparing the teachings of Christ with the practice of the Orthodox Church. He saw the flagrant distortion of the Gospel’s teaching that is simple and easily comprehended by anyone regarding the issues of repentance, being born again, and the salvation of sinners. He realized the apostasy of the Orthodox Church and could no longer remain within its confines. Having been born again, he departed Orthodoxy.

With all sincerity and simplicity residing within him, the author offers an analysis of the salient features of the Orthodox catechism, and he examines it in the unblinking light of the Holy Scriptures. Having done this by revelation from on high, the author regards with great sympathy the people who are involved in Orthodoxy. He does not criticize them personally, but he does show the way of salvation according to the Gospel, which is unified and unclouded with man-made church doctrines.

I deeply believe that this book will be a great blessing for every person who ponders the issues seriously and will bring many people to Christ as their personal Savior.

Why I Left

This question bothers many of my friends and acquaintances who were used to seeing me as a priest of the Ukrainian Autonomous Orthodox Church.

For many people, it was normal to see me as a priest, but now when I ceased being a priest, almost everyone abandoned me in breaking off relations, running away from any meetings with me, and even refusing to answer my letters. They condemn me as a traitor to God and to the Ukraine. Several even posed the question, “Will I be moving to Moscow?”³

I do not view this as a tragedy, though I feel badly for these naïve people, who have a poor opinion about me. They express condolences for me as a “sheep gone astray” who will “someday return to the flock”.

These people simply do not realize what they ought to know. If they only had the correct understanding, instead of condemning me, they would rejoice and follow my example.

I do not intend to condemn them for doing evil. Judgment belongs to God alone. I only take the charge upon myself to assert the fact that they are wrong in their attitudes about spiritual matters. I do this task with a great pain in my heart.

My prayer to God Almighty is that He opens their spiritual eyes and allows them to see His truth as it really is: pure, holy, unchanging, free from human invention and distortions. My prayer is that they would see and know it, and by this to know the True and Living God, Creator of Heaven and Earth and all things visible and invisible. Also that they would know God does not require the ministry of human hands, as if He had any need for it, for He Himself possesses all things and gives us everything necessary for life.

The Lord gave us His truths through His chosen prophets in the Old Testament, and later through His One and Only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and His holy apostles. Today He proclaims it to us through His Holy Scriptures, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and useful for us to study, so that we might follow in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul and say, “And we have the mind of Christ.”

God desires that we have in our hearts the love of Christ for Him and for our neighbor. He wants a love that is holy, not hypocritical, unbroken, and warmed by the rays of the Sun of truth. What a blessing it could be for our Ukrainian nation if our leaders would sanctify themselves and possessed these qualities by God’s grace! With these qualities, they would show the people a good example and through them, God would pour out abundant blessings with graceful rain on the whole world.

I have a sincere desire with God’s help in this work to shed light on several questions regarding Orthodox ministry, about which the average layperson has no understanding. The layperson does not know whether one aspect of his worship or another pleases God. Could it be that God

³ The Ukrainian Autonomous Orthodox Church split from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1920 when Ukraine attempted to cede from the Russian Empire after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Dobrovolskiy’s comment refers to the accusation that he was returning to the Russian Orthodox Church (which was obviously not the case!). Tensions between the Ukrainian Autonomous and Russian Orthodox Churches remain to this day.

turns His face away in order to avoid looking at or listening to that which in reality blasphemes His Name?

Let not the reader be frightened. It will be better for him if he reads this book to the end with patience and seriousness and prayerfully meditates on what he reads and takes appropriate action.

According to the Holy Scriptures, worship of God must begin with paying attention to God and obeying His teachings. Only after this can one come to worship Him, according to His will. But in the Orthodox Church, this is far from reality.

In order to shed light on the teachings of the Orthodox Church that conflict with the teaching of the Holy Scriptures, we will attempt to examine several aspects of the Orthodox service, of which there are many. The most important of these is the worship service, also called the Liturgy. Its importance exceeds that of others, such as Communion and the Morning Prayers. These two services combined with some shorter versions are called “Vespers” that are conducted in the evening. We will let them rest for now and will examine in order, starting with the Liturgy, then the Commemoration of the Living, Commemoration of the Dead, Prayers to Saints, Various Purifications, Reading of the Holy Scriptures, Baptisms, and finally some additional rites and traditions.

The entire text of the book of this former Orthodox priest (who became a preacher in the Baptist Church) Dobrovolskiy, who examines a variety of Orthodox beliefs and gives clear Biblical responses, can be found and read in Russian language on <http://www.svetpisanija.ru/> and in English on www.bereanbeacon.org/easternorthodoxy.php .