

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

Outline

1. Introduction
2. My Previous Life and Lifestyle: Greek Orthodox Christian only in Name
 - A. *My Childhood and Early Adult Years*
 - B. *My Hedonistic, Self-Entitled Lifestyle*
3. 1991: God's First Attempt to Allow Me to Visit Mount Athos
4. The Turning Point: The Re-Start on My Orthodox Path
5. 2021: My Pilgrimage Trip and My Journey to Mount Athos
 - A. *My Tamata*
 - B. *My Visit to Mount Athos*
 - i. *Leaving for Mount Athos with Just a Hope and a Prayer*
 - ii. *Being Patient ... A Concept Foreign to Me in my Previous Life*
 - iii. *My Visit to the Holy Monastery of Xenofontos*
6. The Journey Ahead: Staying on my Orthodox Path

1. Introduction

Since June 20, 2018, when I separated for the second and final time from my wife of 24 years, I have been humbled in so many ways ... *and I thank God for his mercy in allowing this.*

I am 53 years old and until recently, I never understood how Christians could retain their faith during and following the tribulations in their lives and *even thank God for those tribulations.*

I do now but, I also pray that God gives me only the tribulations that I can handle; He knows exactly what I can handle and I trust Him to keep humbling me so that I never return to my hedonistic, worldly-focused life.

I am so glad to have re-discovered my beautiful, Eastern Orthodox Christian faith, thanks to the kindness and patience of many people, especially my Mom, my sisters, my parish priest and my other brothers and sisters in Christ whom God has placed in my path since 2018. I know that the "Church" is not fashionable anymore; in fact, people are openly and unabashedly hostile to it. For me, however, my parish church has been a shelter, a solace and a refuge following my final separation from my wife and the worldly fall that ensued.

Make no mistake, I am still a struggling sinner but, I am determined to stay on my Orthodox path every day – while living in this fallen world. St. Paul, in **Ephesians 5:15-17**, says:

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

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“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

The OSB explanation of this epistle is the following:

“The goal is not to abandon the world but, to keep oneself in Christ and salvage as much as possible from the evil world. Christians renounce the fallenness of the world, not creation itself.”

That’s how I try to live these days.

I still fall more often than I would like to but, I get up and get back on my Orthodox path and try to surround myself with fellow journeyers who are also struggling to pursue this path. These fellow brothers and sisters *in Christ* are the “body” of the Church that helps me stay on my path. It’s not an easy path – and life for Christians is not meant to be easy – but, for me, it’s worth it *and God strengthens me the more I commit to this path.*

How I made it back to Orthodoxy – and strengthened my faith through my recent pilgrimages and a visit to the Holy Mountain – may interest you (or even help you) if you are struggling to find meaning in your life and faith.

2. My Previous Life and Lifestyle: Greek Orthodox Christian only in Name

Out of respect to my immediate and extended family, I have only included what I believe are enough details for readers to understand that *everyone* is redeemable, no matter what your lifestyle is (or was) or how far away from God you have strayed.

A. My Childhood and Early Adult Years

My Mom and Dad were Greek immigrants to Montreal in the late 50s. They had three children: my two older sisters and me. We enjoyed a “normal”, middle-class upbringing in the 70s and 80s, which included going to Church on many Sundays and for major Greek Orthodox holidays, like Easter, Christmas, and some big Saint days.

But, as I believe my sisters would admit, we, the children, didn’t really understand what our faith was all about. Look, back then, although there may have been Churches where the Priest served the Divine Liturgy in Greek *and English*, we did not attend a bilingual Church. And, although my Mom tells me that my sisters and I attended “Sunday School”, I don’t remember anything about it.

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

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The net-net is that we were a typical, fair-weather Greek Orthodox Christian family. My parents worked hard to give us the opportunities they didn't have in their homeland. Their focus was on their work but, in fairness, they took us to Church when they could (which is more than I can say for myself, as you will read below.)

Some of my best childhood memories are of lunches at a "souvlaki" restaurant after Church. And herein is a lesson: there are so many collateral benefits to going to Church, including bringing families together. Another thing that really stands out in my mind, throughout my childhood and even after I moved to Toronto for my career, was my Mom's enduring faith in God. She's still got it, *thank God*.

In any event – and glory be to God for this – the Orthodox Christian seed that my parents planted in their children took root *even though it sat dormant for many years until we finally returned to our faith*. Each of us has re-discovered our beautiful faith at slightly different times and because of our individual tribulations. And, let me clarify what I mean by *tribulations*, because it's relative. I have gone through difficult times but, I have not suffered. Maybe I should have suffered but, I didn't because, for whatever reason, God took mercy on me.

In fact, in terms of our health, God has been very merciful to my Mom, my Dad (who died of lung cancer in 2015 at 83 years old), my sisters and me. I know it may seem counter-intuitive to some readers to say that God was merciful to my Dad even though he died of lung cancer. But here's why it's true: my Dad was a smoker for 70 years and despite a tumour that was the size of a golf-ball (which was slowly choking him) by the time he died, he didn't suffer; in fact, he reposed within a two-week hospitalization period without much pain. Any Christian reading this will recognize that God was truly merciful on him. He faced other tribulations in life that led him away from our faith but, we (my Mom, my sisters and I) believe that he was truly repentant in the final stages of his life. Look, if the thief on the cross beside our Lord during his crucifixion can be saved because of his repentance in the final moments of his life, *never, ever* discount the mercy of God on repentant sinners. Nevertheless we, and many others, continue to pray for my Dad's salvation.

So now that you have this background about my Greek Orthodox Christian roots, let me tell you how far I strayed from an Orthodox life and path and how and why I rediscovered it.

B. My Hedonistic, Self-Entitled Lifestyle

God blessed me with a good brain and I used it to excel in school.

I got into McGill Law School directly from CEGEP in 1987 – at the ripe age of 19 years old – and graduated with two law degrees in June 1991. After taking a year off

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

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October 6, 2022 Draft

following graduation – *during which I passed on an opportunity to visit Mount Athos (see below)* – I began my career as a lawyer in 1993.

Again, to be respectful to my now ex-wife and children, I will say only this about my life from 1993 to 2018: I made a lot of money and my wife and I lived a very hedonistic lifestyle.

In essence, I spoiled all of us with many worldly luxuries but, I denied my family the grace of God by being the most embarrassing example of a fair-weather Orthodox Christian possible. For example, if the weather was cold during Easter, I would, *literally*, do a “drive-by” to All Saints Church to light our “lambades”. As well, in keeping with my “important” station in life, I made the “executive decision” to take my kids out of Sunday school because it interfered with their rep hockey. And, perhaps, as the ultimate example of my pride and arrogance at the height of my law practice – *when the devil was really enjoying himself because of the hold he had on me through my worldly indulgences* – I remember thinking: “*Who needs God?*” That’s how despicable I was back then. And still, He never abandoned me.

The hedonistic lifestyle that I chose, as the *patriarch* of my family, gave the devil and his band of fallen angels (who exploit our passions and weaknesses) many rights over me *and my family members*. In my life to date, I was wildly successful in many categories that worldly people revere but, as the patriarch of my family (i.e. my “little Church”), I failed miserably before God *and that’s something I must live with and never repeat*.

***Sidebar 1:** I know that some readers, even, perhaps, some “modern” Orthodox Christian women, will condemn my use of the word patriarch and label me as a “chauvinist”, a “sexist”, a “misogynist”, etc. ... Good! And, let me be crystal clear on this point: **Have at it!** It would not be the first time I have been attacked for standing up for what’s right according to my moral code – and now my faith – and I will never shy away from this obligation. I specifically chose the word patriarch because it means something in my faith, just like matriarch does. And, for the feminists out there who may use this article to try to attack Orthodox Christianity in general, **St. Paul** (1957 years ago) and **St. John Chrysostom** (1614 years ago) have already explained how spouses are equal within an Orthodox Christian marriage. I cannot do justice to their eloquence, so I will just give you, the reader, two sources that explain the tenets of the Orthodox Christian faith on marriage and equality within it: St John Chrysostom **On Marriage and Family Life**, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Translated by Catherine P. Roth & David Anderson, Translation ©1986); see also **Marriage: A Spiritual Arena** (Bilingual Edition) by Archimandrite Vassilios Bakoyiannis, Translated by Constance Tagopoulos, Attica Editions Inc. © 2014.)*

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

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In any event, my hedonistic lifestyle eventually led to a fall for our family in early 2013 and culminated in my first separation from my wife. But, still, God was there and He was merciful: He allowed us to reconcile within about six months. Beginning in July of 2013, we had the chance to turn our lives to God and start walking an Orthodox path, as a family. God knows I tried but, God also knows that I gave up too quickly.

Look, by 2013, I had spoiled my wife and kids to the point where they resisted change and ridiculed my efforts. (Yes, the devil has certain powers here on earth ... but, God is more powerful *if you invite Him into your life and truly trust in Him.*) We didn't do either and I will take responsibility because I am a strong character and, in my past life, I used that character for many evil purposes so there is really no excuse for me; only repentance and, hopefully, continued mercy from our Lord.

Basically, we, as a family, fell back into old routines and one of our kids has really suffered (and is still suffering) from his entitled upbringing. We did not come together as a couple to intervene in his life *in the way and at the time we should have*; I now fear that the path back to humility for this son will be harsh. I pray for him daily.

The net result of not sticking to my Orthodox path after my reconciliation with my wife is that, by mid 2018, my life and my kids' lives were not right with God and I could not take it anymore. My wife and I separated for the second and final time. It was painful for all of us but, by God's grace, this separation restarted my journey back to Orthodoxy, which I describe in more detail below.

But first, a bit more about my failure to visit Mount Athos the first time I had an opportunity to do so.

3. 1991: God's First Attempt to Allow Me to Visit Mount Athos

After law school, I deferred my "articling" year (i.e. an apprentice year) until September 1992 and I took off for Greece on September 17, 1991. Ostensibly, I went to meet my extended family but, really, I was keen on exploring the Greek islands and the much-hyped "freedom" they offered.

But, before getting to the islands, the first part of my trip involved a 10-day scholarship to learn about Greece and its place in the EU (which was just getting started at the time), at **Aristotelian University in Thessaloniki**, which is the second largest city in Greece, located in the North. (Northern Greece borders Albania, North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Turkey and is a combination of breathtaking mountainous regions and stunning beaches, the latter in the area called Chalkidiki.)

The programme was attended by various students from all over the EU, including beautiful Scandinavian, Italian and Spanish women (and there's a reason I mention

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

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Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

this). As part of the programme, we visited ancient sites in Northern Greece and for the male students, there was a guided-tour trip to Mount Athos.

Now, if you've read this far, you can probably guess whether I went on the Mount Athos trip in September 1991. *Of course not.* Instead, I chose to blow-off this trip and stay by the hotel pool just to hang out with the female students who could not attend. *Can you get any shallower than this?* For the love of God, it was just an overnight trip and I couldn't even give Him that back then. Back then, my free will was geared towards hedonism only. (It's still a daily battle! And yet God continues to be merciful to me. For example, after having no contact with my youngest son for about 2.5 years, he now lives with me.)

After my second and final separation, discussed in detail below, I read many books, all types, including books on the lives of our Saints. One such book is called ***Saint Paisios of Mount Athos***, by Hieromonk Isaac Translated and Edited by Hieromonk Isacc, 2nd Edition, Holy Monastery of Saint Arsenios the Cappadocian, © 2016.

This book is a "must read" for Orthodox Christians because St. Paisios is a modern-day saint (he reposed on July 12, 1994 and was formally recognized as a Saint of the Orthodox Church on January 12, 2015) and his counsels are very applicable to the times in which we now live.

For me, reading about St. Paisios' life was life-changing but also very sad because it brought me to the devastating realization that, in September of 1991, this holy man was alive, had not yet left Mount Athos (due to his illness), and I *may* have had the chance to meet him and get his advice and wisdom. This realization physically sickened me because so many people struggled to make the journey to see St. Paisios when he was alive and I *voluntarily* exercised my free will to turn-away from this opportunity. And still, God did not abandon me.

4. The Turning Point: the Re-Start on My Orthodox Path

On June 20, 2018, I made the very difficult decision to leave my wife of 24 years.

I didn't make it lightly but, I felt it had to be made because after our first separation in 2013, I tried, for five years to change our family's way of life. I failed and I felt that if I stayed, I was going to lose my soul.

It was a gut-wrenching decision and time will tell if it was the right one; however, I do know that I am on a better path now in terms of striving for salvation.

With no immediate or extended family in Toronto, I decided that first Sunday after my final separation, to start going to my parish Church (which I had neglected for about 25

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

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Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

years) on a regular basis. I also began fasting (on Wednesdays and Fridays and during the four major fasting periods in the Orthodox calendar, sometimes strictly and at other times, as best as I could), and praying, and confessing and receiving Holy Communion.

No matter where I have found myself in the world in the last three years, I have sought out and attended the Divine Liturgy because I felt (and feel) that it recharges my spiritual batteries, which the world drains every week. (May God continue to bless my parish priest, Father Hari because on that first Sunday back in church, his homily was about this topic – *and I have never forgotten it.*) Sticking to this for the last three years – no matter how late I may stay up on a Saturday night – has made all the difference in my life. Back in 2013, I tried to change my life's path and my family's but, *I neither set nor stuck to a regular path.* Back then, I did not make a true commitment that involves trying to *live* a sacramental life according to our faith, every day.

My decision to leave my wife brought another tribulation to my life – and to our entire family. Unfortunately, my wife chose the litigation route, which was a disastrous decision that ended up backfiring on her.

Again, out of respect to her – and my kids – I will only provide limited details about my litigation (to make certain points) and say this, as an overall comment, for the benefit of others who are facing this choice now: in every litigation, *only the lawyers win* ... even if you win one, two or most of the battles during it.

I know because I took over my case from my family lawyer friend and, without any experience in family law, became a “mini-expert” in this area of law and *won* a key “long motion”. Although it was an important victory (because it gutted my wife's case against me), it was also a pyrrhic one (because, by the summer of 2019, *we were both losers*, in terms of the damage already done to our family finances and the emotional scars inflicted on our kids).

I want to share a bit more about this awful litigation experience so that you can refer to what the Christian faith says (in **Luke 18:27**) about obstacles that seem impossible to overcome in life:

“... Things which are impossible with men are possible with God”

Under Ontario family law, a long motion is a formal court procedure where you and the other side prepare and present certain significant aspects of your case, such as spousal support, child support, sale of the matrimonial home, etc. to a judge and ask her/him for a preliminary ruling on these points *before* trial. If a long motion goes against you, your case could be over – *in essence* – at that point. In my case, my wife was asking for certain things that, if granted, would have ruined me financially.

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

All of my lawyer friends told me that, without an experienced family law lawyer representing me for this motion, it would be *impossible* to win. Here are the obstacles I was facing:

- Zero experience in family law and procedure
- Opposing counsel who was a well-known, 30-year veteran family law litigator, and the head of the family law department of a large Toronto law firm
- A false narrative about me presented by my wife's lawyer just because they knew that they could not win without lying
- A hostile family law court system geared towards grinding up and spitting out self-represented litigants
- A hostile judiciary who have nothing but contempt for self-represented litigants (and especially those who are lawyers)

I remember so many sleepless nights alone and struggling to learn family law and procedure. It was still early in my journey back to Orthodoxy but, I remember getting down on my knees in front of my icons and asking God for help. I pleaded with our Lord and told Him that whatever His will was, I would accept it but, in the meantime, to give me the words for my legal brief and the words in court when it came time to "argue" the long motion. And, that's exactly what He did and why I "won" my motion.

I am sure that non-believers who may read this article or even people who believe in God *but do not know Him (or His Son)*, will think, "Awww, it's so cute that he really believes that God helped him win his motion." That's OK, it is enough that I know Who helped me.

***Sidebar 2:** As a quick aside, the judge in my long motion took 5 months to render his decision. He released it at 4:59 PM on December 31, 2019. I'm not kidding. The decision was a whopping 31-pager in which he embarrassed my wife and I for wasting so much court time and resources. But it wasn't quite over even though I had "gutted" my wife's case by my "win". Her lawyers milked her for 11 more months and we only settled and signed our formal Separation Agreement on November 27, 2020. Brutal, I know and I need to say this about family law lawyers who exploit women in shock whom they know to have money, either in the estate or family money: **they represent the nadir of my profession.** I know that I will get hate mail because of this statement but, it wouldn't be the first time and I stand by it fully and completely. Over my 27 years as a lawyer, I have seen the good and evil in my profession. It is one of the reasons I chose not to be a litigator and even though I am forced to litigate sometimes, I hold my nose and I do it. In **Luke 11:42-46**, the Lord says "**Woe to you lawyers also. For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers.**"*

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

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October 6, 2022 Draft

For those that may be going through a litigation as they read this article, I urge you to stay the course with your faith.

I never lost my faith in God, even though I had many significant fights with the devil (and I don't mean my wife) during my divorce battle. The devil filled my mind with evil, hateful things and, admittedly, he won many parts of many days during this sub-battle but, when I asked God, His Son, Jesus Christ, the Theotokos, and various Saints for help, They filled me with the strength to realize what was happening and helped me put a stop to being hateful. They kept me company on those sleepless nights while I learned family law the hard way. They gave me the patience, the strength, and the words I used in court to win my long motion. They helped me pray, fast and continue going to Church, which were my weapons in this sub-battle and I made certain vows, promises (called "Tamata") to Them for this help.

So, what seemed impossible when I took over my family case became possible with God – and I truly hope that my sharing of this painful experience helps at least one reader of this article.

My "win" of my long motion was just another miracle in my life, among the many I have experienced. The fact is that *God has always shown me mercy when I have truly put my trust in Him.*

And, my small way of glorifying Him for this help was to take the time to fulfill the "Tamata" I made during my divorce battle.

5. 2021: My Pilgrimage Trip and My Journey to Mount Athos

By May 2021, I decided that it was time to go on my pilgrimage trip to fulfill my Tamata and to visit Mount Athos.

I left for Greece on September 1, 2021 for these two purposes *with no return ticket booked.*

I wasn't really sure where, exactly, my travels would take me or when I was coming back to Toronto. (I had also planned to go to Jerusalem but, I ended up coming back earlier than expected because my youngest son asked me to.)

A. My Tamata

Apart from reading thousands of pages on various family law issues during my divorce battle, I read about the lives of three "walking Saints", **St. Dionysios, St. Gerassimos, and St. Spyridon** and I also read **St. Paisios'** biography.

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

I decided to fulfill my Tamata by visiting and venerating these four Saints.

***Sidebar 3:** St. Dionysios, St. Gerassimos, and St. Spyridon are the patron saints of the islands of Zakynthos, Kefalonia and Kerkira, respectively, which form a natural “border” between Greece and Italy. And, because of this, Saint Paisios calls them the Guardians of Orthodoxy against the “Latin invaders” (i.e. Western Christianity influences and influencers). These invaders attempted, at various times in the history of Christianity, to change or dilute the Orthodox Christian faith that had been passed down from our Lord Jesus Christ to the Apostles (the 11 and the 70), many of whom became the first bishops of our Church. If you read about the lives of these three Saints, you’ll understand why they are known as “walking Saints” and why the word “Guardian” is a very fitting reference to them.)*

Each visit touched my soul. As I stood before the relics and tombs of these Saints, I remembered what I had read about their lives and what they suffered for God’s sake. I was filled with such humility and my thoughts turned to what it would have been like to have met them during their lives.

For anyone who has had the opportunity to visit and venerate the relics of these Saints (or other Saints), you will know the feeling I am describing. For anyone thinking about it, just do it.

In the case of St. Gerassimos’ relics, I was also blessed to be in his Church during the hour, once a day, when one of Sisters of his monastery – **the Holy Monastery of Saint Gerassimos: “New Jerusalem”** in Homala - Kefalania, Greece – open his glass reliquary so that pilgrims may kiss his blanket-covered feet.

When it was my turn, I looked at the body of this Saint – *which remains incorrupt after 442 years* – and understood more about the *Glory of God* as manifested in his Saints! To a non-Orthodox Christian, the site of this Saint is probably scarier than anything Hollywood has conjured up for a bad horror movie but to those of us *of the Orthodox faith*, this Saint is awe-inspiring and soul-edifying.

Sidebar 4:** By the way, for anyone reading this who believes that science can explain how a 442-year old body (kept in a non-hermetically sealed reliquary and paraded in the streets of Kefalonia during certain feast days) has not disintegrated, please take in this quote from page 115 of the biography titled **SAINT GERASSIMOS of Kefalonia** published in July 2012 by the Holy Monastery of Saint Gerassimos: “**Many people have investigated this miracle [the incorrupt body of St. Gerassimos] and tried to give a scientific explanation, at various times, but were in the

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

end forced to yield and to confess that ‘the explanation of the indestructibility of the Body of the Saint lies beyond the sphere of logic and science’ according to the confession of surgeons at the Conference of 1967 in Argostoli.”

I have so much to say about each of my pilgrimages to St. Dionysios, St. Gerassimos, St. Spyridon and St. Paisios but, it is just too much for the scope of this article (which is already too long). However, if anyone is interested in visiting these Saints, please contact me and I will gladly tell you more about my pilgrimage.

B. My Visit to Mount Athos

In September 2021, the world was still in various states of “lockdown” and with respect to Mount Athos, instead of the usual daily allowance of 10 non-orthodox visitors and 100 Greeks and orthodox visitors, no one was allowed to visit unless he was invited by one of the 20 monasteries of Mount Athos.

Before I left for Greece, I had researched Mount Athos and had written to the **Holy Executive of The Holy Mount Athos – Pilgrims’ Bureau**, located in Thessaloniki. It responded with a message to the following effect: *“Sorry, Mt. Athos is in lockdown and if you don’t have an invitation from a monastery, we can’t help you.”*

I then contacted uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends in Canada (and in Greece) but none of them had any contacts at any of the Mount Athos monasteries.

In fact, all of the people in Greece with whom I spoke about my plan to visit the Holy Mountain were doubtful that I would be allowed to visit... and truthfully, I had my doubts too.

At this point (on September 14, 2021, after having been in Greece for two weeks and trying everything to secure a visit to Mount Athos), I felt discouraged but, not defeated ... *and God was listening!*

On the night before I left for Thessaloniki, I remembered the words of one of the ladies from my Mom’s parish (in Montreal) who brought me several letters to deliver to the “Geronda” (i.e. the Abbott) of whatever monastery I was allowed to visit: *Don’t worry, God will make it happen.*

i. Leaving for Mount Athos with Just a Hope and a Prayer

Still feeling a bit uncertain at this point (on September 14) what did I do?

Well, I kept it simple: *Just go to Thessaloniki for three days with the following goals:*

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

- **Thursday, September 16:** Pilgrimage to the tomb of St. Paisios in Souroti-Vasilika, near Thessaloniki;
- **Friday, September 17:** Go to the Mount Athos Pilgrims' Bureau in downtown Thessaloniki to "plead my case" for a Mount Athos "Visitors Visa"; and
- **Saturday, September 18:** Visit Mount Athos.

And so, I left for Thessaloniki on a beautiful Wednesday morning (September 15) for the 568-kilometre journey from my Mom's home in Pyrgos (Southern Greece) to my hotel, with literally *just a hope, a prayer and a prayer rope!*

During my drive, I remember thinking that after 30 years between my first chance to visit Mount Athos and this one, almost to the day, I would not return home without seeing some of the beautiful monasteries with my own eyes ... even if this meant just doing a tourist boat tour of the Mount Athos Pelagos.

On late Thursday morning (September 16), after venerating St. Paisios at his tomb at the Monastery of St. John the Theologian, I decided to drive to the Mount Athos Pilgrims' Bureau instead of waiting until the next day.

I arrived at this office with a determination to convince someone "in authority", an "executive" preferably, to let me visit Mount Athos. I had notes and reasons and my Ontario Bar ID to show anyone who would listen that I was "important" and needed to visit. (By the way, this is a typical arrogant-lawyer demeanour and boy, did it fail.)

The clerk who received visitors was very nice but, really didn't care that I had come from Toronto and *especially that I was a lawyer*. His response was also very clear and matter of fact, which I paraphrase as follows: **Sorry, no invitation, no visit! There is no "executive" to "appeal" to. And thank you very much for coming to the office but, there's the door.**

But, by the grace of God – before the clerk ushered me out – he gave me a directory of telephone numbers of the monasteries of Mount Athos and showed me a big wall map of their location on the peninsula. I made a mental note of the ones closest to the port city of Ouranoupolis, which is known as the gateway to Mount Athos because of its proximity to the Athos "border", thanked him, and left.

Sidebar 5: For those who may not know, since the year 1054, under Greek law, Mount Athos has been (and still is today) an "autonomous monastic state" reserved for male, Eastern Orthodox monastics and male-only pilgrims (i.e. visitors). It is also a recognized UNESCO World Heritage "Mixed Site" (i.e. cultural and natural). Finally, although there is a 10 KM land border that

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

runs across the peninsula, just below the city of Ouranoupolis, one cannot drive into Mount Athos to visit the monasteries; they are accessible only by boat.

Now, even though the information the clerk gave me was publicly available through an Internet search (which I had done before leaving for Greece and again when I got to Greece), it was the combination of the one-page info sheet and seeing the map of Mount Athos monasteries in the Pilgrims' Bureau that *got me thinking*. (See Map below)



I rushed back to my hotel and contacted, via telephone and e-mail, the three coastal monasteries closest to Ouranoupolis: ***H.M. Dochiariou, H.M. Xenofontos, H.M. Aghios Panteleimon.***

And then I waited all day (on Thursday, September 16) for a response ... that never came.

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

ii. Being Patient ... A Concept Foreign to Me in my Previous Life

By the time I went to bed (on Friday, September 17), which was about 1 AM, I felt defeated, and I just figured that God had His reasons for not allowing me to visit Mount Athos on this trip.

Sidebar 6: True Christians understand that just because we, as *His* creation, may not understand *His* ways, *His* schedule, or *His* justice, it does not mean that *He* is not there. In your life, how many times have you heard the following question, after a personal or cosmic tragedy: *Where was God?* For anyone who is a fair-weather Christian only, he or she may not recognize this as a classic atheist “trap question” that causes angst and doubt, *which is exactly what it is designed to do*. For devout Christians, however, we politely explain that He is always there because we trust in Him and His will and His ways *always and no matter what life throws at us*. The Bible (the Old and New Testaments), the writings of the Church Fathers and the lives of Saints (recognized as such by the Eastern Orthodox Church) provide numerous examples of situations where people never lost their faith despite suffering horrendous tribulations. (See the *Book of Job*, as the ultimate case study.) Personally, it took me a long time to understand this and even though I sometimes have momentary lapses after I suffer a fall, I get back on my Orthodox path and keep walking. I trust *Him*, like a child trusts a father (or mother), to show me the way. Many will think this is naïve, a “*sucker’s attitude*”, but, if you knew me – and many other successful (by worldly measures) Orthodox Christians – that theory just doesn’t hold water. In fact, those who knew me as a super-aggressive, hyper-type “A”, over-achieving lawyer with a burning superiority complex to prove anyone and everyone wrong, probably think that I have suffered a stroke. But I assure you, to borrow a phrase from a once-celebrated but now deemed “politically incorrect” American author: “... *the reports of my [demise] have been greatly exaggerated.*” I think my worldly life will now be harder because of the choice I have made to follow my Orthodox path but, for me, it’s worth it. Father Spyridon Bailey, in his book titled ***The Ancient Path***, published in 2014 by *FeedARead.com Publishing* makes the following point about being a Christian today (at Page 11 of the *Introduction*): ***“Authentic Christianity is not easy, it requires struggle and it goes against all that we are told is right. ... We must hold down jobs, bring up our children, get on with our neighbours; do all the natural and good things that Christians have always done. But now we are in an age, like the early Church which found itself living in a pagan society, where our values and our thinking must be very different from the prevailing trends around us.”*** Although not as violent as the assault on Christianity during its first 300 years, the last decade, due to social media, has been, metaphorically speaking, just as

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

brutal on Christians, Christian values, and the continued, open practice of the Christian faith. And I fear that there is much worse to come, fueled by various technological advances, including the astonishing level of surveillance to which we are subject every minute of every day. *Will there be a place to hide to worship if that ever becomes necessary?* In the past, Christianity survived in caves, catacombs and in lone Christian homes. *Is that possible today?* I don't know but, for those who may think I am *exaggerating* the state of the attack on Christian values, I would urge you to read ***Live Not by Lies ... A Manual for Christian Dissidents*** by Rod Dreher, Sentinel (An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC), 2020. But I digress.)

Late on Thursday night (September 16), I remember checking the Mount Athos boat tour schedule for Friday morning and thinking,

“Well, if I can't actually visit Mount Athos, I am going to do a boat tour of the monasteries on the western side of the Mount Athos' peninsula (see map above) just so that I can see some of these holy and majestic structures with my own eyes.”

I woke early on Friday morning and completed the 129-kilometre drive from Thessaloniki to Ouranoupolis.

The boat tour was spectacular: the day was beautiful, the Mount Athos Pelagos was calm and the views were breathtaking.

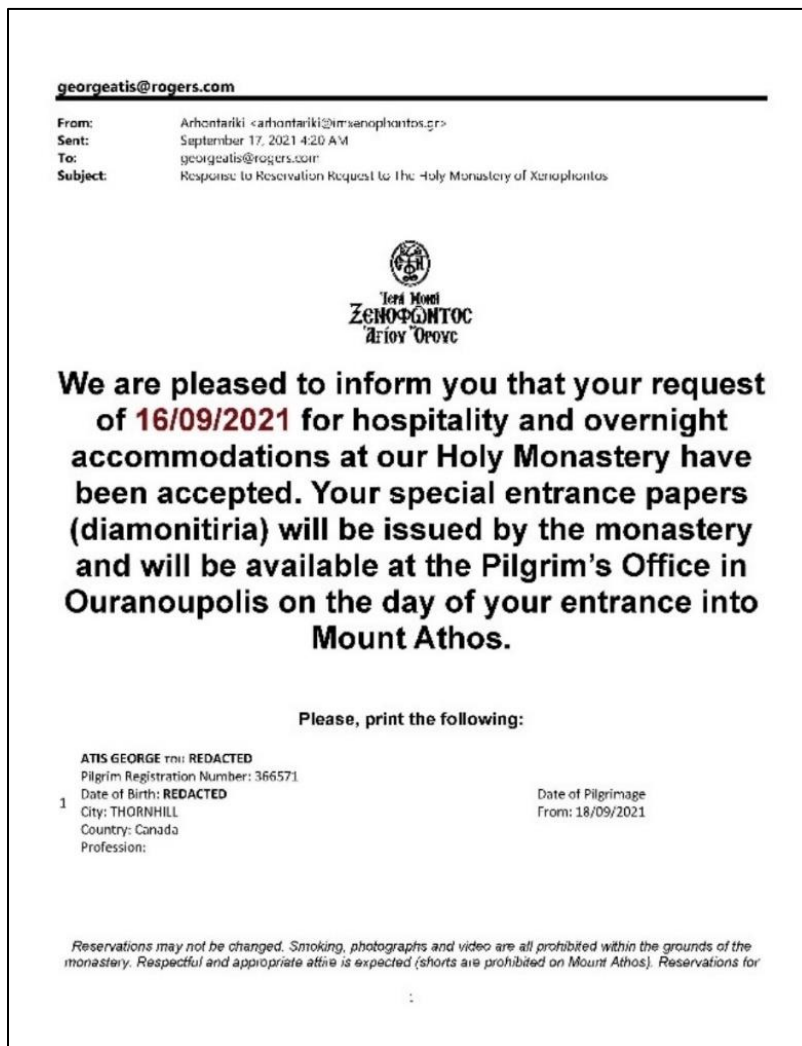
I snapped many pictures of the monasteries on my iPhone so that I could remember them after the tour was over.

And here is the best part: as we were making our way back to port, I heard the familiar “ding” of an incoming e-mail. (During the tour, the boat stayed reasonably close to the coastline, so we had great cell reception throughout.)

And, to my surprise and joy, I received the following invitation:

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft



I was so thankful that I cried and gave glory to God for this invitation.

Again, to a non-believer (or to a skeptic, like I was), the fact that my e-mail was received, and I got my invitation is *just chance*.

For me, it is yet another small miracle in my life (and there have been many) for which I have prayed.

The way that I see it is as follows: *the Lord, in His mercy and wisdom, knew that it would be good for my soul to visit The Garden of the Theotokos... and, perhaps, the souls for which I pray daily ... and so, He made it happen.*

And, just in case someone is on the fence about whether this was divine intervention in my life, consider this:

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

- think about the state of the world-wide lock down in September 2021, especially in Europe;
- think about what I was told by the Pilgrims' Bureau, by e-mail (before I left for Greece) and in person;
- think about the fact that neither I nor any of my friends or family had any contacts at any Mount Athos monasteries from whom to request an invitation;
- think about the fact that people wait weeks to hear back from a monastery for a visit that, if granted, is scheduled weeks down the road; and
- finally, think of the ridiculously short, three-day window that I gave myself to be in Thessaloniki to accomplish my Mount Athos visit.

Do you really believe all the above fell into place for me by *chance*?

As I said, I know the answer but, if you're still skeptical, just think about it ... and let God do the rest.

iii. My Visit to the Holy Monastery of Xenofontos

I arrived at the **Holy Monastery of Xenofontos** (<https://mountathos360.com/en/360/iera-monh-xenofwntos/>) at approximately 9:35 AM (local time) on Saturday, September 18.

There were about 10 other pilgrims who disembarked with me at this monastery.

Just stepping onto the Monastery grounds was surreal.

There were no monks there to greet us at the time we disembarked ... so I just followed two other pilgrims to the monastery's Guest House (called the *Arhontariki*).

I signed my name to the register book and waited in a grand, old room in the Guest House adorned with several icons, including one of St. George, to whom this Monastery is dedicated, *which I didn't know until I got there!* (I guess this is just another coincidence in my journey to Mount Athos: *that I ended up at a monastery that has my namesake as its patron Saint.*)

Within about 20 minutes, the monk assigned to greet pilgrims at the Arhontariki on that day (Jeremiah, born in West Texas and a resident monk at this monastery for 23 years) greeted us, told us about the Monastery and showed us to our accommodations: a room with four single beds. It was a clean, functional and modest room; it was nicer than I expected.

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

My roommates were: a man from Athens named Petros, an older man named George from Crete, and another younger man named George from Serres (a beautiful city just north of Thessaloniki).

We settled in and chatted for a bit before another Monk (whose name I forgot to ask) came by and asked if we were hungry. The hospitality at monasteries is legendary; it is part of the Greek *Philotimo*, ingrained in most of us.

*Sidebar 7: By the way, if you're interested in what *Philotimo* really means, here is a link to a must-see **YouTube** video (produced by the Washington "Greek Oxi Day" Foundation), in which prominent Greek-Americans explain this word: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyOlqzVKLT4>).*

This monk showed us to the dining hall, where we had vegan moussaka, bread and water and fruit. It was absolutely delicious.

We went back to our rooms at about 1 pm and chatted a bit before taking a short, afternoon siesta so that we were rested for the 5 pm Vespers service.

The Vespers service was held in the main church, called a *Katholicon* which, as mentioned above, is called *St. George's*. This church is magnificent. The icons, the gold, the carvings, were beautiful but not grandiose. The acoustics in the Church – which had no electricity and hence, no microphones – were astounding and made the chanting of the monks sound like Angels singing.

But, more impressive than the physical beauty of this Church was the presence of God and the Panagia in it, which was palpable to me. This is what made the biggest impression on me, directly in my soul. The peace and humility I felt in my soul in this Church melted away my worldly cares, at least while I was there.

After Vespers, the final meal was served: stuffed peppers, potatoes, coleslaw, bread and red wine. Again, absolutely delectable, including the home-made wine.

After dinner, we went back into the Church to venerate the relics that this monastery has on site, which are impressive:

- **pieces of the actual Holy Cross;**
- **pieces of the right hand and the cranium of St. George;**
- blood from the Holy Precursor and St. Demetrios;
- **a large piece of the cranium of the great, first-martyr Stefanos;**
- **the right hand of St. Marina;**
- relics of St. Xenofont the Senator and the lower jaw of his son, the holy Arkadios;

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

- a piece of the sacred relics of the apostles, Saints Andrew, Filippus and Bartholomaios, and St. Varnava;
- a piece of the cranium of St Anna the Theopromitoros (i.e. the Grandmother of God the Son); and
- the foot of St. Theodoros of Tironos.

I was privileged to see and venerate four of these relics (whose names are bolded).

It was another *not-of-this-world* experience. For example, the craniums of St. George and St. Stefanos were soft and warm; they reminded me of how my baby boys' heads felt when I would gently kiss them during their naps. (You must understand that some of these relics are close to two thousand years old and yet totally *incorrupt* and "living".)

I wept quietly and glorified God for being graced with this experience. I wondered why I deserved to have it.

We then went back to our rooms and chatted at length with my roommates, George, George and Petros. I remember looking at the time and it was about 10 PM, close to when I planned to go to sleep so that I could wake at about 4:30 AM to attend the Orthros service and then the Divine Liturgy. (The services at Mount Athos monasteries are long, about 4-5 hours ... *but they don't feel long.*)

I also remember thinking that I still had not delivered the letters from the ladies of my mother's parish to the Abbott (whose name I learned was Alexios) or to a monk that could give them to him.

Right about this time, a monk – Pater Theonas – who knew Petros from a previous visit came looking for him in our dorm room. (Petros spoke highly of this monk.)

Pater Theonas introduced himself and asked us (the three Georges who did not know him) about ourselves and why we were here. I explained that I was from Toronto, how I had received my invitation to the Monastery and that I had letters to give to Abbott Alexios. He informed me that the Abbot was visiting Athens until Monday but, that he would deliver the letters for me.

We said our goodnights to Pater Theonas and chatted till about 10:30 PM. I slept until 3:30 AM and from then to about 5 AM, I sat quietly in the hallway of our dorm area to think about and pray for many people, including myself. It was so peaceful. Below is a picture of the view from a balcony of our dorm at about 4:30 AM, just before I left to attend the Sunday services.

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft



The picture does not do justice to what my eyes saw. I am not sure if it was a full moon that night but, the light it emitted was like a spotlight on the balcony of this Monastery that faced the [Gulf of Ayion Óros](#). It was such a beautiful, serene, soul-calming scene.

The walk from the dormitory to *St. George's* was dark but not *scary*. As you will notice from the picture, it was very close to pitch black but, the moonlight lit the way.

The Church's door was closed but I could hear faint chanting coming from inside. I lit a candle, venerated the icon of *St. George*, and proceeded inside.

It was dark but I made my way to the main part of the church to the *Stasidia*, which are individual "stalls" against the walls of the Church with armrests and wooden planks that fold down into a seat, so one can stand and sit during different parts of the services. There were also individual chairs set up as pews, to accommodate the times when many pilgrims were allowed to visit. I found a *Stasidi* nearest the main entrance of the main Church and settled in.

Before my eyes had fully adjusted to the dark, I could see an outline of what was happening during the Orthros service and it was magnificent to behold: the monks moved here and there, lighting and extinguishing candles, and taking turns chanting. It was a divine opera, which astounded my eyes, pleased my ears and calmed my soul. Again, the presence of the Holy Trinity and the Theotokos was manifest and palpable as I absorbed the words and melodies of this beautiful service.

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

Nevertheless, I began to get tired at about 6:30 AM and my thoughts strayed a bit and my eyelids closed intermittently. By now, the Church was filled with priestmonks, monks and pilgrims (I think about 25 of us) and I contemplated slipping out quietly and going back to my dorm for a quick nap before returning for the Divine Liturgy

Just then, a monk went up to a man sitting in front of me and I saw him say “No” by the shake of his head. He then turned, came up to me and asked if I was “George from Toronto”. I said “Yes” and then I realized that it was Pater Theonas. (I wondered how he would have found me if I had not taken up a Stasidi nearest the main entrance ... and I know what non-believers are thinking about this: *it is just another coincidence that I chose that particular Stasidi*. Look, think what you want. I know why it happened the way it did.) Pater Theonas asked me to follow him and, for a moment, I was apprehensive but, then I remembered what the Apostles did when Christ asked them to follow him: they just trusted him and obeyed. I had no idea why he had called on me to follow him or where we were going but, I followed.

We left *St. George's* and proceeded into a building close by and down a hallway into a very small room that I could barely get into which, upon entering, revealed itself as a tiny, breathtakingly-beautiful church. This tiny church was called *Agioi Anargyroi* and it was only about 1000 years old or so.

Sidebar 8: Agioi Anargyroi means Holy Unmercenaries, a number of Christian saints, especially doctors, who are so-called because they did not accept payment for their good deeds or healing.

Pater Theonas sat me down and spoke to me about the letters I had given him. He told me that he opened them and read them just in case there was anything in them that he needed to speak to me about before I left tomorrow (Sunday, September 19).

He said that he read my letter about my divorce battle, my troubles with my kids, and about a few other things in my life, and that he wanted to talk to me. This was unexpected but welcomed. He was very understanding and kind and asked me if I wanted to confess (an important sacrament or “mystery” of our faith), which I did. Pater Theonas administered the sacramental forgiveness prayer and told me that I could take Holy Communion.

I was overwhelmed by this because I had not prepared myself to do so – which I told him.

He said that it was OK and that I should receive.

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

I felt a deep gratitude and a relief in my soul that our Lord had arranged things to give me the chance to confess *and* take Holy Communion on Mount Athos *and* in a Church called St. George's! (Yes, I know, *just chance*.)

Sunday afternoon came and it was time to board the boat back to Ouranoupolis.

It was a long boat ride back and I was sad to leave but I knew that my place was in the world (but no longer *of the world*) to continue on the new, better path I had chosen since my final separation.

I cannot help but wonder what would have happened in my life had I visited Mount Athos thirty years earlier. But that's in the past and I trust that God will help me stay on a good path going forward, for however many years I have left in the world.

At this point in my life, I say *glory be to God for allowing me to benefit from a visit to Mount Athos*. It has strengthened my resolve to stay on my Orthodox path.

6. The Journey Ahead: Staying on my Orthodox Path

So, where do I go from here?

Well, it's *simple* but, *not easy* (and regarding the latter, Christians, in general, acknowledge and accept that trials and tribulations are how we grow in our faith).

My path is *simple* in the sense that my Orthodox faith defines it for me and all I have to do is obey and follow it.

At the same time, it's *not easy* because walking an Orthodox path requires difficult choices. In fact, as Father Spyridon points out in his book (see [Sidebar 6](#), above), and as many other thoughtful Orthodox commentators of our time are telling us, it's becoming more difficult every day.

With all respect to my Western Christian brothers and sisters, the hardest thing to do on an Orthodox path is avoid the temptations to *customize* it to suit *you* and *rationalize* your life choices based on *your individual* needs. You see, Orthodoxy is totally contrary to what *pop psychology*, *woke culture*, *social justice warriors* and *the politicians who pander to these groups*, tell us every day, especially in this social media dominated age: *that you are entitled to your own facts and your own reality, and that truth is relative*. We, as Orthodox Christians, reject this latest "modern" view and we are OK *standing fast* in our faith, which has not changed in over 2000 years.

In his excellent book from 2002 titled ***Thirsting for God in a Land of Shallow Wells***, Ancient Faith Publishing, Matthew Gallatin (who is an Evangelical Protestant convert to

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

Orthodoxy), summarizes the difficult part about the Orthodox path clearly and simply, at pages 179-180:

“The misconception is this: Christianity is essentially a faith that one can individually interpret and apply as one pleases.

...

Thus, true Christianity has no room for personal interpretations, preferences, qualifications, exemptions, or adjustments. Anyone ... who wants to enter into a real relationship with Jesus Christ must accept the fact that the Faith of the Apostles preserved in Holy Orthodoxy is an historical reality, not just a theological school of thought.”

When I first read the words above, I thought: *Well, there goes turning a blind eye to some aspects of my current lifestyle.* This realization required choices, which created more “difficulties” in my *worldly* life. And, as everyone knows, difficult choices come with consequences.

You may lose friends, acquaintances, clients, and sometimes spouses along the way.

Your kids may shun you or think that this is just another phase in your life that you are going through.

Your siblings may ignore you.

Your extended family may distance themselves from you.

And, if that happens, remember ***Luke 18: 28-30***:

“Then Peter said, ‘See, we have left all and followed You.’

So He said to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life.’”

At my age, I am sure some people think that I am just experiencing a “mid-life” crisis. *Been there, done that* in my 30s and I tried to deal with it by seeking worldly pleasures and buying more and more things. During those hedonistic years in my life, I could feel that my soul was restless and, as I stated in the introduction, God humbled me so that I could come to know Him.

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

And even though some of the consequences noted above have occurred in my life, I never think about abandoning my Orthodox path. For me, it boils down to this: *now that I know God, I can't turn my back on Him, His Son, His Spirit, His Mother, His Saints or our faith.*

There's an important message in the **Gospel of Luke** (12:48) about the gift that those who have been born into the Orthodox faith should (in my view) pay attention to:

“To whom much is given, from him much will be required.”

And, to my Christian friends who “argue” with me and ask me about what happens to all those “good people” in the world who are not Orthodox Christians, I say this. That's *none of my business*; that's God's realm and my job is to stay in the lane of my Orthodox path.

Further, what about the non-Orthodox readers who may be thinking: “*See, he has no answer to this common question which clearly means that his faith is just like all of the other faiths that claim that they are the answer to life.*”

Well, first, this point is another “trap” that various people, especially atheists, use to justify why they “reject” religion, in general.

Second, I have actually thought deeply about the cliché: *ignorance is bliss.*

Does this mean that God will not save the ignorant?

Does this mean that fair-weather Orthodox Christians who were born into our faith but, only practice it casually (when it suits their worldly schedule), will not be saved?

Does it mean that all non-Orthodox Christians will not be saved?

What about self-proclaimed pagans?

The answer to all these questions is that *I don't know* – and neither does any other human being, regardless of what they may tell you, especially on television.

And here's the point (to which I alluded in my introduction): in the Christian faith, in general, we know that God is super-merciful, as a father is (or is supposed to be) to his *children.*

Let's take the truly and honestly “ignorant” first, and I don't mean that in a pejorative way; I mean those who have never heard of Jesus Christ and the one true Church that he founded at Pentecost. As an Orthodox Christian, my personal viewpoint about this

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

group of people is that God will be *merciful*. (Ironically, in terms of *worldly* justice, ignorance of the law is no excuse and the *ignorant* are routinely found *guilty* of violating laws of which they were not aware. Imagine if the Christian faith took this viewpoint!)

But to those who know of Christianity and wilfully reject it, ridicule it, persecute it, dabble in it, turn a blind eye to it when it's convenient to do so or voluntarily blow it off for worldly fun instead, I sincerely hope that at the end of the (judgment) day, God applies the maximum mercy possible to find a place for them in one of his "many mansions".

As for me, I can't turn a blind eye to my choices anymore. Even in my former, worldly-only focused life, I was always "all-in" with everything I pursued, whether good or (sadly) evil. How can I now live hypocritically towards my faith when I know better and God has shown me such mercy already?

Look, I know that I will fall along the way as I continue to walk on my Orthodox path.

I know how hard it is to pray and fast and go to Church, in the midst of distractions deliberately planted in my mind by various forces, human and spiritual, temptations of sumptuous foods which I have experienced in my lifetime and many obstacles standing in the way of going to Church on Sundays (like late Saturday nights, brunches with friends and family, hockey games, and a nice warm bed when the weather is fierce outside).

I know how hard it is to turn the other cheek *every* day, in every aspect of my life.

I know how hard it is to forgive people who have done me wrong and *more than that*, to "love" people who actually hate me and want to harm me.

I am certainly not where I want to be with respect to all of the above, *and especially with respect to the last point* but ... let me lighten up a bit from the seriousness of my message and borrow a line from one of my favourite worldly movies (*Pulp Fiction*, 1994) to explain how I approach my Orthodox path, every day:

"I'm trying Ringo, I'm trying real hard ..."

(You can watch Samuel L. Jackson, as the character, Jules Winfield, deliver this line here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFTvENHcobM>)

**I am a lawyer based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada and a member of a Greek Orthodox Church in Toronto that shall remain nameless. I want to thank the Bible study leader of my Church and Stacy T. (a busy *super-mom* and fully-active Orthodox Christian who is always engaged in almsgiving). Both took the time out of their busy lives to read the entire article and suggest subtle but, spot-on edits. Both the Bible study leader and Stacy have this gentle way about them, that St. Paul describes when explaining how we should "instruct" others when discussing our faith. I would also like to thank the Sisters of Holy Theotokos Convent located in Whitchurch-Stouffville, Ontario who have been there for me in down times in my life during my divorce battle and continue to provide guidance to me and prayers for me and my family. Please feel free to contact me through my website (<https://www.georgejatis.ca/>) with any questions,

My Journey Back to Orthodoxy

By George J. Atis**
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
October 6, 2022 Draft

comments or concerns about this article or for more information about my pilgrimages to the Saints mentioned herein or about visiting Mount Athos.