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THE STONE IN THE BLENDER

Orthodox Greece and Contemporary Europe

Part II

An Interview with Nicholas Karellos

In our Winter 2002 issue, we presented the first half of this interview where Nicholas Karellos, our Greek correspondent from Athens, spoke of the events that have shaped Greek Orthodoxy in this century; his country's close ties to the Orthodox Balkans and Kosovo, the changes accompanying Greek membership in the European Union, the calendar controversy and contemporary church life. In this issue we continue with his reflections on his own missionary efforts, the great spiritual wealth that still exists in Greece and his experience of working with Greek and Western Orthodox pilgrims.

RTE: Nicholas, last time we spoke about the overall situation in Greece and how the events of the last century have affected the Church. Can you tell us now about the Orthodox Mission Service (OMS) and the Mission Shop? How did you start it and what have you accomplished?

NICHOLAS: I became involved with it gradually. It wasn't like, "What shall I do now?" and then I came up with the idea; I started it because there was a need. The first time I thought I should do something was back in 1991 in Estonia, which was still under the Soviet Union. I realized that for very little money you could build a church there. When the Soviet Union collapsed, I began writing letters to newspapers, foundations, and charitable groups and said, "Now is the time to help Romania, Estonia, Bulgaria, Russia." You could buy a house at that time for \$1,000. We were able to buy property and buildings for churches of the eastern block countries.

Also, I was a founding member of the Balkan Orthodox Youth Association in 1992 and its treasurer for the first three years. We helped publish the first Romanian religious schoolbook, organized icon-painting classes in seminaries

in Bulgaria and Romania, and collected much humanitarian aid for Serbia during the Bosnian war. I have very close connections with the Serbs and, through the years, my wife Marita and I have built friendships with many Serbian seminarians who have since become priests. Some of them were guests at our home for weeks during the war, and later they showed us friendship and hospitality in our visits to Serbia, always in difficult conditions

This was one thing. The second was, because of Marita's conversion to Orthodoxy from Lutheranism, I understood how important it is when someone from the West converts to Orthodoxy, and I realized that there were many people like my wife visiting Greece to find the roots of Christianity. I felt that everything I was doing was for my wife, or for someone like my wife.

RTE: What other kinds of things were you doing?

NICHOLAS: Small unimportant things, like picking up the phone and finding out where the bus station to Meteora was. Little practical things that would save people a lot of trouble. For instance, there was an old Russian émigré woman from Australia who came to venerate the relics of St. John the Russian, but had no idea where they were. We met her at her hotel and arranged for a Russian-speaking student to escort her to St. John the



Tarja-Marita's baptism at Vytouma Monastery near Meteora

Russian in Evia and then to Aegina to venerate the relics of St. Nectarios.

Later, I began helping missionary bookstores, people who had started little Orthodox refuges, like the mission bookstore in Amsterdam, and wanted books and church supplies from Greece. At the time I was also meeting many foreigners in Greece who, as now, were interested in Orthodoxy. It might be a Dutch lady married to a Greek, or a Finnish woman like my wife, or a Russian immigrant to Greece who wanted to be baptized, or even an Albanian or Arabic-speaking Moslem who had become acquainted with the Orthodox Church but had many questions. He may want to be catechized, but most priests don't know either his

language or English. A few years ago there were hardly any Orthodox books here in any language other than Greek and they were very difficult to find, as you know yourself. And, of course, there are always foreign tourists or pilgrims to Greece who want to find some spiritual depth or renewal in a monastery. Along with supporting bookstores and reaching out to foreigners, I also am very interested in supporting Orthodox missions abroad, and I don't mean just India and Africa. The need is as great in Brussels and New York. For me, they are the same.

I also am very interested in supporting Orthodox missions abroad, and I don't mean just India and Africa. The need is as great in Brussels and New York. For me, they are the same.

So, how we began to help the bookstores abroad with Greek literature is that Marita tried to gather all of the books that were previously published here in English, French or German. Although some of them were very important, they often had a small print run, no publicity, and were simply forgotten. We are making them available. Now we are also sponsoring and encouraging the publication of Greek Orthodox literature into Albanian, Estonian, Bulgarian and Russian, as well as English, German, and French.

RTE: So much of your work now is supplying Greek books and church supplies by mail order to other countries?

NICHOLAS: Yes. At first this shop was only used to send out mail order, but then we decided to make the front of it into a little retail store where an Albanian, for instance, or a Russian, or even a neighborhood Greek could come in and talk or ask for help. So far we have had many people come,

and parishes call when they have Albanian refugee families with problems and they don't know how to help them. We have also been involved with the baptisms of foreigners who were living in Greece, or had come to Greece specifically to be baptized, or who came here to visit and met the Church. After they left, some of them even began their own missionary bookstores abroad.

RTE: And what about your plans to lead pilgrimages?

NICHOLAS: (*laughs*) Well, people can find their way, of course, even without me. The idea actually started in 1991 when I first visited Estonia with a group of Finnish tourists. Although the group wasn't religious, I wandered around alone to find out about Estonian Orthodoxy, and I experienced for myself what it is like to search for Orthodox churches or find out about saints in a country where you don't speak the language and don't know how to get around.

I visited Estonia twice afterwards, in 1994 and 1998, and got to know many priests and parishes. Later, two Estonian priests asked me to help them organize a pilgrimage to Greece with their parishioners. The same



American pilgrims at Meteora.

happened with two Orthodox choirs from Finland who gave concerts here, as well as Finnish Orthodox youth groups on pilgrimage. The most unusual thing we've done was to arrange the weddings of two Finnish Orthodox couples who thought it would be romantic to get married in Greece. I assure you that it wasn't romantic at all for me as I had to deal with the Greek bureaucracy.

So now I occasionally organize pilgrimages and tours and sometimes lead them as well, because I know where all the monasteries and holy places are in Greece and how to get there.

RTE: And what have you have received from taking OMS on?

NICHOLAS: Of course there have been moments of disappointment as, for example, when someone who was supposed to start an Orthodox bookstore in Brussels disappeared after ordering \$2,000 worth of merchandise from us, and someone else in England with a \$1,000 debt. We face continual financial problems, lack of capital, and a lack of support for new businesses from the Greek state, but I decided to take this path — and even resigned as the creative director of an advertising agency to do so, because I realized that I would go crazy if I worked at



Orthodox Finnish wedding in Athens.

something by day that was actually opposed to what I was doing at night. I felt like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I decided to “follow my heart,” as they say, and I feel that I learn something from everyone I meet. It may seem as if I am the one helping, but then later I find that I’ve been helped as well. I learn through each person’s experience, and I share in the great joy of baptism and weddings of people who have come to Orthodoxy through the mission. There are miracles of conversions, and even visions and signs, in the case of an Italian friend of ours who was an active atheistic communist.

We need prayers, of course, and we need material support for more translations into languages such as Albanian, Estonian, Bulgarian, and particularly English. We get many requests for books from other countries. As an example, an Orthodox priest from Taiwan told me that he has seen huge queues of people waiting in line to buy books in English from other Christian denominations, but because he only has books in Greek, he didn’t have anything to offer. He is begging me for books because English is spoken from India to Africa, and throughout Asia. So we need sponsors and translators to make these books available. We don’t have anyone backing us, we just live and work from month to month.

Another problem we face is a lack of translators from Greek to English who know Orthodox, or at least Christian, terminology and who would not expect a fortune to do the work. There are at least a dozen books to be translated into English and other publishers we cooperate with are also

begging for Greek/English translators who are native English speakers or Greek-Americans.

RTE: Speaking of the Greek priest in Taiwan, one thing that has always interested me about Orthodox Greece is its pride, in a very nice way, for its own traditions and culture. Sometimes, however, it reaches a point where old Greek women on the islands have naively said to me, “Dear, it’s so very nice that you want to be Orthodox, but, you know, you’re not Greek ...” meaning, of course, that I could never really be Orthodox. Of course, this is an extreme example – many more Greeks have been very welcoming. But, on the other hand Greece is also the most active Orthodox country today in mission work, particularly in Africa, Asia and India. Can you explain this contradiction?

NICHOLAS: I think it is a coincidence that Greeks are the most active in missions, and it is because Greece is the only Orthodox country that was not under Communist domination. I’m certain, for example, that there are many Romanians who would be willing to be missionaries, but they don’t have the means. Russians had missions under the tsars, but after the Communists came to power they were closed. We don’t know what the Serbs, Bulgarians or Romanians would do if they had the funds and the mechanism.

Of course, if we think of things as they are and not as they could be, recognizing the fact that Greeks are the only Orthodox who can do mission, we have to say there have been some positive moves by the Greeks. I don’t say the Greek Church, because we have to remember that the Alexandrian Patriarchate is also in some ways still Greek, and that Greeks from Australia and the U.S. have also helped.

However, I expect more. There are only a few priests who have this call to be missionaries and not many people actively back them. The state Church of Greece has a supporting mechanism set up by Archbishop Anastasius of Albania, who was the Archbishop of Kenya for years. But this was put in motion by one man, not by a synodal decision. It is always individuals who change things. Although there are many people involved, the awareness hasn’t become church-wide. Plus, there are other problems arising. For example, many of the Africans who have been converted by Greek missionaries now look to Greece as their ecclesiastical homeland, but I’m not sure that Greece has recognized this role. Just as immigrants see America as the land of milk and honey, so here, when people move to Greece they are often badly disappointed. They find themselves having to struggle hard, without

even the support of their own culture. There must be more awareness in Greece of the importance of missions and of helping those who come here for education or as refugees. I would like to see the same thing happen here as has happened in Finland, where each Lutheran parish supports one missionary or one mission. This is my goal, at least.

RTE: Is there a great move on the part of Greek missionaries to develop a native clergy? Fr. Daniel Byantoro in Indonesia, also under the Greek Archdiocese, is a good example of someone who is successfully establishing Orthodoxy as part of a country's culture. He has several native Indonesian priests, and more in seminary. It seems that the era of ecclesiastical colonialism has passed.

NICHOLAS: There is such a problem, but I'm not sure that colonialism so much affects the local people. There are many native African clergy and two African bishops. It does, however, affect relations with the other Orthodox European churches. For example, I don't know if a Serbian or Romanian missionary would go under a Greek bishop in Africa, or if a Greek bishop would easily accept a non-Greek to work under him.

Another point about the Greek missions. It is funny that you almost always think of a missionary as someone who leaves his country and goes abroad. In Greece now we have one million foreigners. You can stay in the middle of Athens and do missionary work. There are more Albanian Orthodox in Greece than in Albania right now. There are now hun-

dreds of thousands of Russian-speaking people here as well. I think that the Church of Greece has to take advantage of this, to reach out to these people. If they don't, others will. There are also Indian gurus coming to Greece who have Bulgarian and Russian-speaking translators to reach out to these new immigrants. The other day, when the Archbishop of Albania visited Athens, we were able to see him and briefly discuss this problem. He asked us to distribute the official newspaper of the Albanian Orthodox Church in Greece and we are now considering that, although it won't be easy for us.

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Bulgarian Orthodox Youth Association members, Smaragda Karagiorgos, President, center.

But one of our problems in reaching beyond ourselves is that Greece, like other Orthodox countries, is a battlefield. We don't have the ordered prosperity of Finland's Orthodox minority to easily support such endeavors. We live in a contradiction. On the one hand you see so much corruption, such problems and poverty, and on the other hand so much holiness. Every day I feel that the devil is attacking Serbia, Greece, Russia, to corrupt Orthodoxy. At the same time, God and His angels are struggling to save people and keep them from danger. You don't feel this in a more civilized secular country like Holland or Belgium, where everything looks very orderly, safe and humane, but here you can see the two extremes; holiness and corruption. When you live in Greece you absolutely have to fight, to struggle spiritually. You have no other choice.

Of course, everywhere people have to put up a spiritual fight, but here it is as if you are thrown into the deep sea and you have to swim. If we say that the world is a shipwreck, then we see that our monasteries and spiritual fathers are like lifeboats, rescuing people and taking them to shore.

RTE: In more outwardly prosperous countries you often don't have to struggle as much materially, but Orthodox people who live there say it is much harder to stay awake spiritually. Without the outer struggle you can just slip into a busy but sufficient life-style, which leaves many people depressed and confused.

NICHOLAS: Yes, it doesn't match up. Finland, which has one of the highest standards of living in the world and very good social welfare, also has one of the highest alcoholic and suicide rates in the world, as does Canada. They are asleep, certainly, but their souls are awake and they don't understand what is going on. Here we are aware of our spiritual illness, but there people are often unaware, and might even think they are completely healthy.

RTE: Nicholas, although you struggle with the daily problems of running the OMS, and the hardships of people who come to you, you also speak very warmly of the help of the saints and the righteous spiritual fathers of this last century. Whom do you pray to when you need inspiration?

NICHOLAS: It's very strange, but the saint that you feel the closest too — I'm not sure whether you pick him or he picks you; that is, he chooses you for some reason you don't know. I have a Serbian friend who was not very religious and has many problems, but one night she had a dream of a saint who said, "Don't worry about your troubles. I am with you and I will help you through them." After she asked around for a few days, she realized that it was St. Ephraim of Nea Makri. Also, my wife has seen St. Ephraim. On the other hand there is sometimes something in a saint's personality or their life that you feel deeply drawn to. For instance, I like St. Seraphim of Sarov without any particular reason. I also feel close to some elders who lived during the past decade, Elder Porphyrios and Elder Paisios, although I never met them. I've only read books and talked to people who knew them.

After we started the Mission Shop and I had to make the decision to quit my career in advertising, I began to feel close to Prophet Elias and Prophet Moses because they both made their choice to leave their corrupted societies and wander in the desert in difficulties, because that was the right thing to do before God. They were "not of this world" so they preferred struggle and poverty to the unholy wealth of the land of Pharaoh. Nowadays, every Christian has to do the same, as our times are pretty similar to theirs. One day I even realized that these were the same two prophets who appeared with Christ at His Transfiguration.

If you just see the name of a saint and a date in the calendar, you usually don't feel very close to him, but if you read about him, go to where he lived, venerate his relics, maybe even talk to people who knew him, of course you feel close to him. But sometimes, as I said, he picks you. One night, for instance, Father Paisios of Mount Athos appeared to my little daughter.

RTE: Can you tell us about that?

NICHOLAS: Yes. When he was in the hospital before he died, he gave a small cross to a nun who later gave it to us. I had never met him and didn't even know what he looked like. Sometime later I fell asleep with his cross in my hand, and when I woke up it had fallen somewhere. We looked everywhere, but couldn't find it. When his book was published some months later, I read it and prayed to him saying, "I'm so sorry I never met you, and I'm sorry that I even lost your cross. I have nothing from you." The next morning my four-year-old daughter Eva came and sat beside me, and pointing to a photograph in the



Eva Karellos at Fr. Paisios' grave.

book said, "I know this father." I said, "How do you know him?" She said, "He was here last night." I said, "Are you sure? Which one is he?" "Here with the white beard." So, I tried to confuse her by showing her pictures of different old elders, and she insisted, "No, it's not them, it's him." Then I showed her a picture of many Athonite monks, young and old, and she immediately picked out Fr. Paisios. I said, "How did he come here?" She said, "He walked into my room and sat in the chair. When I woke up he was there looking at me and he was smiling. He said, 'Why did you wake up?' He was holding a big rope, and was counting it like this (she moved her thumb like she was flicking a lighter). He told me to read the "old books" and then he blessed me and said something about a cross. Then I went to sleep again." Afterwards I tried to check that this was not her imagination, but it couldn't have been because she had never seen a picture of him before, or a big prayer rope like the one she had described. She had never even seen me using a prayer rope. We searched again the next day, and as I looked through a drawer, the cross fell out from between two pieces of furniture. Probably I had had it in my hand late at night, and it had fallen so that we couldn't see it.

But more interesting even – when I went to the monastery where Fr. Paisios is buried and told the sisters about Eva’s dream, they were attentive, but not very surprised, and they asked me to write down the story. As soon as they saw that my daughter’s name was Eva they said, “Is this a nickname or a baptismal name?” I said, “A baptismal name.” They said, “Which saint is she named after.” I said, “Eva, the wife of Adam, the first woman.” The sisters looked at me in surprise and then at each other and said, “You know, when the elder was alive he was always trying to convince young couples to baptize their daughters Eva...” Well, of course, either they had other names in mind, or they were prejudiced like, ‘Oh, the Fall was all her fault. It all happened because of her.’

No one ever did him this favor while he was alive, so perhaps that is why he visited my Eva after he died...

RTE: He was pleased to finally find one.

NICHOLAS: ...Yes, probably the only one in all of Greece. After the nuns heard this, they were very sure that she had seen him. They blessed me to sleep in the elder’s cell that night and I saw his prayer rope. It was indeed very big, 300 knots and very thick. The nuns told me that because he had arthritis in his thumb he would make this very exaggerated gesture in counting the knots, the same gesture that Eva noticed.

RTE: Wonderful. Thank you. Speaking of elders, in America and parts of Europe we converts are usually very independent, yet so spiritually hungry that you often see two extremes, people giving themselves blindly to spiritual fathers or elders and then hanging onto their coattails in an unhealthy way, or saying, “I don’t need anyone. It’s just me and God.” What would you say is the golden mean?

NICHOLAS: This is also being discussed in Greece, as some people have become rather hysterical – running after Elder Paisios, Elder Porphyrios, or this other elder, and are completely unable to decide for themselves. This is spiritually sick. These elders helped people out with specific problems, but they didn’t try to make followers like a guru, demanding obedience and giving advice on what to cook today.

I think the right thing to do is to make up our minds to struggle, to try to find out what God wants us to do, and what we want to do according to our

personality, and then to ask for a blessing. If the elder or spiritual father has an objection, he will tell us. If we can't come up with a right decision, then we can ask.

But on the other hand, I don't think you can live like an island, completely isolated. You have to have some advice, even if it is turning to a very good spiritual friend. Even better is a spiritual father, who, once he gets to know you well, might be able to help you see things in a different way. He is able to see your inner world, inspect you as a spiritual doctor, prescribe medicine, and of course, wipe away the guilt of your sins.

Without this, you may grow up selfishly, with a wrong impression of yourself. It is extremely important to humble yourself and admit things that you don't really want to admit, not just recite a list of sins but give a real confession. We sometimes think that we can correct our own faults. Theoretically, this may be true, but practically it almost never happens. And even if we do manage to correct ourselves, we have only ourselves to apologize to. I've seen many people who finally left the Church because of this. This doesn't mean, though, that we have to submit our will in an unhealthy way. Spiritual life is very delicate and there are edges and limits that we shouldn't pass. One has to be aware of where he stands at every minute.

RTE: The other thing that I've noticed is that English-speaking Orthodox often don't realize that although the English translation for Geronda is "Elder," it is not necessarily in the Russian sense of "Staretz," meaning a clairvoyant elder. When a Greek-American says, "Oh, I went to Elder So-and-so," we often think this must be someone on the pinnacle of holiness, whereas the actual term "Geronda" doesn't usually mean that, does it?

NICHOLAS: No, it's the common title for the head of a monastery. In fact, you can call any monk, even a young one, "Geronda," out of respect. It's like saying, "Sir." And any nun can be called "Gerondissa," not only an abbess.

RTE: What characteristics do you see in new western Orthodox converts that are hopeful and will be good for the Church, and what things do you think may stand in their way of developing an Orthodox mind and heart?

NICHOLAS: First of all, their zeal to discover things is wonderful, and I often think they have been chosen, picked by God. The next thing of great benefit is their wish to strictly follow Orthodox practices. Sometimes, I have been

very much ashamed when they visit us at home and start noticing things that we don't do. I'm embarrassed at being such a bad example. So, I have to take care that they won't be disappointed with Greece, but also with me.

On the other hand, it is good if they realize that there is a difference between Orthodoxy and the army. The rules are there to help us. If, for example, you don't fast one day, this is not the most important thing. The absolute necessity of following rules, behaving, dressing, praying in a certain way, is a more Protestant, puritanical way of thinking. Orthodoxy is freedom; the things you do are an offering to God, and if you are obeying an elder or church regulations, you do it to kill your own selfishness. There is a reason why you do it.

But the zeal that many Western converts have is very important. It is missing from our country, and I think that they can be ambassadors of Christ and of Orthodoxy in their own countries. The only thing they have to work on is to deeply understand the difference in mentality, not just belief, between a pious Protestant and a pious Orthodox Christian.

RTE: What would you say is the difference?

NICHOLAS: First of all, it doesn't have to do with logic, with things that you must or must not do. This is the greatest difference in my opinion. It is an attitude towards sacrifice and suffering, towards inner spiritual life, and towards judging things in a different way. For example, the Lutheran churches, which I know through my wife, are somehow founded on logic. Of course, God created everyone's heart the same, but the Lutherans have a spirituality founded on practice: if you read the Bible, believe in Christ, and do some social work, you are saved, everything is alright with you. In Orthodoxy, the most important thing is having Holy Communion, and secondly, confession and cleansing yourself through spiritual warfare. Then what you do outwardly comes as a fruit, as a result of your inner situation. It is the sacraments and the spiritual struggle that give your actions power and life.

RTE: Rather than just a planned outer program.

These elders helped people out with specific problems, but they didn't try to make followers like a guru, demanding obedience and giving advice on what to cook today.

NICHOLAS: Yes. This is why although Protestant churches may be active and well-organized, their numbers are steadily decreasing in Europe. You cannot compare Europe to America because America is a multi-national, multi-religious country. In Holland, Sweden, and Norway, people have become almost completely irreligious, although they have lots of money and can even support missions. It's like washing the outside of the vessel. In Serbia and Russia churches were filled even when they were being persecuted, when they were being bombed.

RTE: Earlier you were talking about this inner freedom that Orthodoxy gives you. In the West we are very careful of our political freedoms, but one Russian priest made the surprising remark that we don't seem very advanced in realizing our inner freedom.

NICHOLAS: This secular type of freedom is focused on oneself. "I'm free to do this, I'm free to do that." In Orthodoxy the freedom is about not doing certain things, or doing things for someone else. For example, I wouldn't do something in public that would scandalize someone. Also, as a people, we Greeks are very helpful, but our attempts to help are very much misunderstood by western people, who think we are interfering in their lives. I think they build fences around themselves, "This is my territory," and I don't know if this is healthy. The Orthodox point is not demanding your own rights, but making a struggle for someone else's rights.

RTE: This whole idea of freedom in Orthodoxy is intriguing because from the outside it looks as if you are entering into a spiritual practice that is much stricter than most of us have followed before. You are called to a high moral level, and then the fasting, the preparation for the sacraments, the daily prayers – everything takes time and effort. The rules seem to govern many aspects of our outer lives, but at the same time these rules co-exist with this wonderful inner freedom that you don't experience until you enter the Church.

NICHOLAS: The difference between Orthodoxy and eastern religions or even strict sectarian Christian groups, is that someone there is directing your mind and giving instructions, while in Orthodoxy the rules apply equally to everyone. We are all subject to the same rules, which support the social structure of the Church. For example I could say, "Why can't I choose to fast on Tuesday and Thursday, instead of Wednesday and Friday?" We have to find out why we fast on Wednesday and Friday, and how it supports the whole Church.

I will give you another example. I broke the fast one Saturday during Great Lent this year and ate meat, and this was because the Albanian immigrants next door decided to baptize their children Orthodox. It was such a wonderful occasion. I brought them Orthodox Albanian books and it was a great, great joy. The parents, who still know almost nothing about Orthodoxy, were even talking about baptism for themselves! After the baptism the parents wanted to do something for the people they were close to, so they invited us to a restaurant that only served meat. They had paid a lot of money to share their joy. So what was I to do? Be so Orthodox that I threw the meat away? Or should I eat it and share the joy? If I didn't touch the meat, they would have been insulted, it would have been a refusal of their hospitality, and this was not the time to explain the theology of fasting. So, I ate it and this is the freedom. You don't do something out of your own will; you abstain for the sake of God and for your own inner struggle. But as St. Paul says, if it is going to scandalize your brother, you eat.

So this is freedom. I am free to submit my desires to God, and again, if there is a reason, I am free not to do it. However, even if I don't fast, the focus is on God, not on my own desire or secret wish to break the fast. If I had been at a *taverna* eating meat for my own pleasure, or had eaten it at my mother's, it would have been a sin, or at least a failure.

My hope for new converts is that they understand what the inner spiritual life is, why the rules are like this and what they are there for. Sooner or later, I've learned that in Orthodoxy everything, absolutely everything has a reason. I found this out myself when I had to explain things to my wife in my own house. Why do we love the Mother of God? Why do we have icons? I soon realized that there is a meaning to everything. Some Protestants think that they are traditional because they are behaving the way they think the Church did in the year 33 AD, but it's not the same. We've faced so many problems, heresies, dogmas since then... and each time the Church has had to make a new rule, a new standard to protect the faith, to prevent the same problem from cropping up in the future. The reason that all of these new heresies have arisen is that people think, "The Bible according to me." The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, is a selection of two thousand years of heresies rolled into one. That is what happens when you "just read the Bible and pray." That is why we hold onto our tradition. But this doesn't mean that you have to understand a rule or regulation before you follow it. Begin to follow it and you will understand.

I think Americans could use their love of freedom, their sense of fighting for their rights in a good way. For instance, in modern Greece people have become so absorbed in their own problems that they don't care much about the rights of their neighbors. Religious people do, but not nonbelievers. In Greece we don't have massive pro-life movements or organized boycotts. If a convert has this national characteristic of asserting human rights, he could use it in a very positive way if he struggles for the rights of his fellow man, if he fights for spirituality, if he fights in prayer. He can use this urge to achieve something spiritual and practical in Orthodoxy.

RTE: Yes, I think so too. Speaking of national and ethnic characteristics, can we go back to something you mentioned at the beginning of the interview? Knowing Greece's long history under Islam, and also knowing that the treatment of Christians within the Ottoman Empire varied from benign tolerance to occasional outright persecution, what is your attitude towards Moslems?

NICHOLAS: I think that Islam has many pious peaceful individuals, and sometimes I am very jealous of how dedicated and kind they are, and how they so often completely fulfill the practices of their religion, while we do not. They often have softer hearts than we do as Christians. Also a Moslem individual often has a much higher standard of morals. But if we are talking about Islam dominating a society, it can become very oppressive, either like the totalitarian Islamic republics, or like the corrupt society of Saudi Arabia, which is completely false. In Saudi Arabia you find all the corruption that exists in the West underneath a surface of Islamic piety. It's a country of Pharisees. Even the worst western countries are like paradise compared to this. Iran is clearer, you see it's an Islamic republic and everything works according to that system, but Saudi Arabia is an awful mixture. I would not mind having a Moslem as a neighbor, but I would definitely be afraid if I had to live in a Moslem country.

PHOTO CAPTIONS OPPOSITE:

Top: American pilgrims at Meteora.

Bottom Left: Pilgrims at Mt. Athos.

Middle Right: Estonian Fr. Meletius Ulm, Ethiopian Orthodox Deacon Melchizedek, George Alexandrou, N. Karellos during educational trip to Orthodox Ethiopian Church . (Pro-Chalcedonian).

Bottom Right: Finnish OMS member discussing plans with Karellos.



RTE: It's interesting how intertwined relations were between the Moslems and Christians during the Ottoman occupation. Sometimes you had Turkish and Albanian Moslems helping rebuild churches and at other times martyring Christians.

NICHOLAS: Islam, like Christianity, has many different facets. There are some Islamic peoples who have been very influenced by Orthodoxy especially in Turkey, such as the Sufi movement, which adopted things like monasticism, inner prayer... I would even dare to say that Islam is a Christian heresy. They are much closer to Orthodoxy than the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example.

Of course some Moslems are also fanatical and stupid and if given the chance will desecrate churches, but sometimes they show even more respect to our saints and to our religion than some baptized Greeks. They are often very close to Orthodoxy, and I believe that if conditions changed in Turkey, for instance, we would see massive numbers of baptisms taking place.

They respect Christ, they respect the Mother of God, they believe in St. George. I've heard several stories from Constantinople [modern-day Istanbul] about pious Moslem people. For example, a few years ago there was a Moslem ferryman with a little boat going between Constantinople and the islands. He could see St. George on his horse on the shore of the island of Halki (of which St. George is the patron). He could even hear the noise of the horse's hooves as St. George rode along the shore protecting the island, while the Greek Orthodox who were in the same boat couldn't hear or see anything.

A Greek friend from Constantinople also told me the story of a Turkish friend of his with serious family problems who decided to seek help from an Orthodox priest instead of a Muslim. The elder, who was clairvoyant, told him that someone had been doing black magic against his home. He even located the tools of the magic, which had been hidden inside a step of their wooden staircase, and took care of the effects with an Orthodox exorcism service.

Another example is the wonder-working, "Quick-to-Hear" Icon of the Mother of God that was miraculously revealed in Evia, Greece about twenty

years ago. The nun who found the icon had a revelation in which she felt that she should build a monastery on this spot, and when they dug the foundations for it, they found this icon. On the icon are two tiny faces painted one on each side of the Mother of God, of a Turkish leader and his wife. They had prayed to the Mother of God for some problem, and when their prayers were answered they had this “Quick-to-Hear” icon painted. The monastery is called by the same name. Also, the eighteenth century Ali Pasha of Ioannina was a Moslem tyrant, but he went to St. Cosmas of Aitolia for advice.

There have also been many healings of Turkish Moslem people by saints or the Mother of God, or Turks who were seeking advice from Orthodox priests, elders and saints. So this shows that in many cases there is a reverence for Christian holy things. Of course some Moslems are also fanatical and stupid and if given the chance will desecrate churches, but sometimes they show even more respect to our saints and to our religion than some baptized Greeks. They are often very close to Orthodoxy, and I believe that if conditions changed in Turkey, for instance, we would see massive numbers of baptisms taking place.

RTE: What conditions would have to change?

NICHOLAS: Well, first of all, Turkey is one of the least democratic countries in the world, by any kind of western standard. There is some political freedom, but religious or minority rights are out of the question. But if they would allow freedoms like those already enjoyed in Greece, in Europe, in the U.S., people could say, “We are Turkish citizens of Greek origin and we would like to be Orthodox Christians again,” or simply “Orthodox Turks.” There would be no persecution. One hundred years ago their parents were probably Orthodox.

RTE: Earlier, you mentioned secret Christian populations in Turkey that appear Moslem but hold Orthodox beliefs?

NICHOLAS: Yes, the CIA has a report on it. Also, I have the documents of the secret services of the Greek state. They have recorded the numbers and locations of communities of Turks of Greek origin who are possibly crypto-Christians. Some of them go to Constantinople as if to shop or on business, and then they go to the Patriarchate or to some small parish and are secretly baptized, without any registration or documents. There may be even half a million people like this, in a country of 55 million. We don't know for sure.



Through the internet I was in touch with a Moslem in Cappadocia who has a hotel in one of the old caves there. He has a library with much information about Byzantine Cappadocia, and himself studied Byzantine history at the university in Constantinople. He is hoping that things will change so that Greeks can more easily come to Turkey on pilgrimage. These kinds of people are actually very close to us and if there was a priest and a parish nearby, I think that many of them would become Orthodox, particularly the intellectuals.

RTE: Is there any chance that they will be allowed to start opening parishes?

NICHOLAS: They already have made some steps, although not as parishes. During the past two or three years the Patriarch of Constantinople was allowed to serve liturgy in several monasteries that had been closed for decades. He was very well received by both the local Turkish communities and the authorities. I don't know if it was an orchestrated welcome on the part of the government, curiosity, or real interest. Personally, unless I was really interested, I wouldn't go if a Moslem leader or the Dalai Lama came to Athens.

RTE: How do you think an Orthodox Christian should behave towards a Muslim?

NICHOLAS: I think an Orthodox Christian should behave towards the Muslim, as Mother Gavrilia says, as a potential Orthodox Christian. With great care. For example, a Muslim will understand much better than a Protestant why we are fasting because they fast too, and why we do vespers – Moslems have to kneel and pray at sunset. So outwardly we are not that far apart and we can easily build bridges that could bring them to Orthodoxy or at least foster a peaceful co-existence. For instance Orthodox Palestinians and Muslim Palestinians must learn to live together in peace, as well as the

PHOTO CAPTIONS OPPOSITE:

Top: OMS member children.

Middle Left: Marita and Nichlas Karellos – Pascha morning.

Middle Right: Finnish liturgy in Athens.

Bottom Left: Nicholas with journalists and newcasters at Church of Greece Radio.

Bottom Right: Marita Karellos, Presbyteria Evangelia from Zaire, Ludmilla from Sebastopol, Ukraine, Dana Zozulaki from Slovakia.

Muslims and the Orthodox in Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania. But on the other hand, if western Europe begins to create Moslem countries within Europe, it will cause many problems.

To the administration of the European Union it doesn't matter if you are Moslem or Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, so long as you are a consumer. I'm not sure what their attitudes are towards Bosnia and Kosovo and Turkey, the Moslem strongholds – perhaps they want to exploit them economically as more potential consumers. I think that the belief and mentality of these people is still very strong though, in the good sense, and I am not sure they will be so easily corrupted. The mentality of the Orthodox used to be even stronger. Very often over the past few years we have said in Greece that what is happening in Russia, in Serbia, in Romania – this corruption of the countries and their economies – might be one more step towards breaking this backbone of Orthodox community and faith. These countries have been very oppressed by tyrannies in this century. We Greeks are rebels and have it in our genes to resist something that oppresses us. The EU does not want to have citizens who are not obedient and so they are trying to break our resistance. So far they are doing pretty well at making us consumers. In Serbia they did it by bombing. In Russia it is total economic chaos, people will eventually be so desperate that they will only be thinking of survival.

RTE: Yes. The situation in Russia is becoming worse, and it is very obvious when you get outside of Moscow. This is changing the subject, but over the past couple of years you've begun leading pilgrimages, of Greeks, Finns and Americans to places like Mount Athos. Can you tell us about this?

NICHOLAS: Yes, I was recently on a radio show for the Church of Greece where I spoke about a group of American Orthodox converts that I took to Mount Athos. Greek people who called in were very interested in what religions they had been previously and why they had changed. One old monk on Mount Athos, though, could hardly believe that Americans could be Orthodox, because most of the western visitors to Mount Athos are just tourists. They go to see nature, or out of curiosity. They like the history and art, but almost never show any spiritual interest.

RTE: What did you see as the differences between the Greek, Finnish and American Orthodox?

NICHOLAS: Of course, people visiting Mount Athos can be very different even if they belong to the same ethnic group. Concerning the Greeks, some are pious and go there for spiritual revival. Others are very stupid. They don't understand what is going on, behave badly, ask silly questions. Others are externally noisy and seem to be misbehaving, but when you come to know them better, you can be surprised at how much they respect God, although their appearances might fool you.

For many years I was mad at the Greeks and embarrassed that they feel so comfortable and don't always seem to show respect to holy places, that they don't know how to behave. But in watching the foreigners, particularly the Americans, who were outwardly more pious than the average Greek, I began to see things differently. I've become more tolerant.

Once, I saw a small non-Orthodox group from Scandinavia that was behaving very well, they were very discreet and quiet, unlike the Greeks. But does this mean that they were more pious, more faithful? Silence may also be a sign of indifference, or an inability to understand. I was really hoping that they would feel something deeper than just viewing the frescoes, the architecture and the nature.

The Americans I led, who were very pious people and more faithful than many Greeks (at least more than myself), sometimes seemed to be trying to discover the right way to behave on Mount Athos, or in church, or on pilgrimage, etc., and sometimes they got stuck in small details which weren't actually important. These details may help you to build a spiritual life, but they are only the means, not the goal. I noticed they were trying to decide how they should act, how they should talk, what they should do... this looks pious, this doesn't look pious, like when you buy a new appliance and are reading the instructions on its use: Step 1, Step 2, Step 3. They seemed to be trying to find a manual of spiritual behavior, of Orthodox spirituality. Such a thing doesn't exist.

The Greeks, on the other hand, have been using the machine since they were kids. It was their father's and they saw their father using it. They may even treat it casually, like teenagers leaving the stereo on all night, or not covering the machine. When I saw this I realized that it's not that the Greeks aren't pious, but that they feel at home. Orthodoxy is their home.

I remember once we stopped along a trail in the forest. A group of noisy Greeks were sitting a few meters from us. They had taken off their shirts because it was a hot day, they made the sign of the cross, and then began eat-

ing and talking loudly to each other. We stopped nearby, and the Americans immediately felt they had to read a spiritual book aloud, even as they rested. I left my group and went and sat in between, turning my head right and left, watching them both, and I realized that both the Greeks and the Americans were doing something to please God. The Greeks were very noisy, rejoicing in the Lord, shouting, “Well, brother, how are you? Where did you go, George?” (It reminded me of the warm-heartedness of African-Americans). They were very conscious of their brotherhood as Christians and it was as if the Garden of the Mother of God was their grandmother’s backyard. If you are a stranger and are invited for the first time to someone’s house you are on your best behavior, you watch carefully how you use the fork and knife, but if you are visiting grandma you are even allowed to break a glass or a plate.

With the Americans it was more like a very reverent educational trip, and at some points I worried about whether they were missing this freedom of Orthodox belief, which is like visiting good friends. At a friend’s house you are allowed to take a nap, sleep on the sofa, take off your shoes. This is not a judgement and they didn’t do anything wrong, but this is the difference between American converts and Greeks. The Romanians and Serbians are just like us. The Russians, maybe, are more quiet and reserved.

So, if I have to summarize the two examples, it is not that the Greeks misbehaved, they were just on familiar territory, while the Americans were still searching to find their place in the Orthodox Church and they were trying extra hard. Because they are cautious the Americans seem to be more pious and attentive. Of course, Greek familiarity can also be dangerous. For the Greeks it’s like a marriage—you’ve been married to a person so many years that you feel you can do whatever you like to your spouse—but if you are not attentive, this can end in divorce. Unfortunately many of the Greek visitors to Mount Athos have divorced from spiritual life, not to mention our society as a whole.

I think that Americans in general have very good hearts. My experience of them, and I am not referring exclusively to pilgrims, is that by nature they are often noisy and might look a little childish but this means that their souls are simple, like children, as Christ expects from us. The average American seems rather innocent, even naive, which explains why your “public opinion” can be easily manipulated by governmental policy or you can follow so many unbelievably strange religions. But this is also the fault of the Orthodox, because where our Orthodox Church does not work, the



Nicholas walking to St. Andrews Skete on Mt. Athos.

devil works overtime. Before God, I think your souls are really childlike, and therefore open to the message of Christ and Orthodoxy.

However, I also realize that American Orthodox converts, although having childlike hearts, are often sophisticated and mature. Sometimes, though, I've seen them try to act "proper," as if they feel guilty for being American. "Now we are Orthodox, so we have to behave like Russians or Greeks." That isn't right. You are Americans, but Orthodox Americans. It doesn't change your character, it changes your belief and your spiritual struggle. I would suggest that Americans take all of the good in their own country and themselves and attach that to Orthodox belief.

This might even be easier for you in America than for us Greeks who have the idea that we know it all, while we don't. The point is that we need each other. The New World needs to return to the Orthodox roots, and for us Greeks to rediscover ourselves as Orthodox we have to show the path we are walking on together. This has happened to me when I guided our American

You are Americans, but Orthodox Americans. It doesn't change your character, it changes your belief and your spiritual struggle. I would suggest that Americans take all of the good in their own country and themselves and attach that to Orthodox belief.

brothers. It might not be an exaggeration to admit that I was the one who gained the most spiritually from that trip.

RTE: You say that we have to take all of the good of our own country and attach ourselves to Orthodox belief. How do we do that?

NICHOLAS: God will lead people. Being humble is the most important thing, and knowing that one doesn't know anything. There are plenty of converts I've met who are going on

in a good way. They just have to go through these periods of growth, as we all do. The only thing they should not do is to make up their own theories. One has to get used to living in Orthodoxy. In Lutheranism and maybe other Protestant churches it seems to me that belief is a room in your house, while in Orthodoxy it's the house itself. You have the icons in every room, in your car, in your wallet. It follows you.

Much of becoming Orthodox is a question of time. Also, there may be some remnants of Protestant thinking: "I became Orthodox and now I

am saved.” I don’t feel that I am yet truly Orthodox although I was born Orthodox. Maybe I am more Orthodox now than when I was ten years old, but basically you belong to the Church and you struggle your whole life to become Orthodox, hoping to be saved. If you don’t understand this you will be the blind leading the blind. We have to be humble and realize that we cannot teach anyone. Just look around and learn the practical lessons that are not only theoretical or from books.

One of the best ways to learn these lessons for converts is through pilgrimage. People should try to travel and stay in Orthodox countries as much as they can before it is too late. Orthodox countries are becoming more and more like the secular West, and I am afraid that the spirit of Orthodoxy will soon be left to individuals and small groups; it won’t be found any longer in whole countries. You will have to search for Orthodox people, whether you are in Russia or America.

RTE: Are the ethnic Orthodox ready to receive us if we do search for them?

NICHOLAS: Yes. The Greeks on Mount Athos accepted the Americans with great interest, like, “Now you have become one of us, you are one of our people.” But even so it is a balance, and I don’t think that anyone is a giver and not a taker. We Greeks will gain much from the interchange. It’s like when you become a mother or a father – you suddenly become more responsible because you have to take care of someone outside of yourself.

But in a larger view, it seems to me that English-speaking converts face one very big pitfall of misunderstanding. They live in countries where things are easy in comparison to the rest of the world, whereas in every Orthodox country, people have known terrible suffering and oppression in the recent past. We have very different mentalities because of this. I think that Orthodox Christians from the West have to learn how to support one another. Not just because, “This may happen to me and I have to be prepared in case I am in his place.” No, we Orthodox have different kinds of links. You can’t imagine how outraged people were in Greece when NATO and the U.S. bombed Serbia. Millions of people were out in the streets protesting. We have been bombed and have had a war every thirty or forty years. We know what it is to have had blockades. In Athens alone, 150,000 people died of starvation during the German occupation. We know what suffering is and this suffering purifies people in their relationships. So, even though we have fallen into

consumerism, we also somehow understand that it can all be taken away in a moment and that we have to be there for each other.

Of course, I hope that all these very nice Americans I've met will never face these problems, but here in Greece, in Serbia, in Bulgaria, in Albania, in Russia, you have to demand help from God and your neighbor, because you have no other option. You might not have a regular paycheck that meets your basic needs, or even a steady job. Buying a house or apartment is impossible for most people because, although the prices are close to those of the U.S. and western Europe, the average income here is less than half. It is the same with food, clothes, and rented housing. You have to depend on God and your fellow Christians, and they on you. This teaching of Orthodoxy is exactly the opposite of a comfortable life-style and I'm not sure how easily a convert could adapt to life in an Orthodox country.

RTE: There are a couple of things about America that are hard to realize unless you've been brought up there. One is that Americans are so independent that they often think it almost a sin if they have to ask someone for help, to depend on someone else. You have to support yourself, and if something goes wrong it's a lack in you. It's almost a charitable act not to need your neighbors.

On the other hand, Americans are extremely generous with their time and talents. Much social service work is done by volunteers, by people who don't get paid at all. Housewives, whose husbands make enough to support the family, or retired people, often do many hours of volunteer work every week. There is a great amount of generosity and self-sacrifice but it is allotted in more orderly ways, not with the spontaneity of people in a devastated economy.

NICHOLAS: Yes, that's one of the great strengths of Americans, that they can get together and do something. The Greeks usually cannot work as a team. Our help is usually individual, we don't join together so much, and that is reflected in the Church as well. We aren't as good at organizing or combining our efforts.

What I'm trying to say is that suffering, being in difficulties, purifies and strengthens the soul. Someone may be very rich and give millions of drachmas for a cause, but if he hasn't suffered, he is missing something in the giving. This is why Christ had to suffer. This is just a suggestion of something that Americans might be missing, but it does not mean that something

bad should happen there. We have to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” Things have obviously changed since the 2001 attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center.

RTE: I think the other thing we have to watch out for in our zeal is our tendency to want to teach, to tell other people how to be Orthodox. “I’ve read the books, I know.”

NICHOLAS: In Orthodoxy, the more you know, the less you preach. You don’t go giving out pamphlets. You are just there, and by your being Orthodox, people will understand. An example of this was this pilgrimage to Mount Athos. In one monastery after Sunday liturgy we were invited to the guest room. The abbot was there with all the monks, and we had coffee and a little liqueur and sweets. The American pilgrims were sitting around, thinking that someone was going to give a lecture. The abbot didn’t say a word, just gave a final blessing and when we all left, they asked, “So, aren’t they going to give us a talk?” I said, “That was the talk, the fact that we were all gathered together. They served us and treated us with hospitality.” They didn’t gather us together and give a theoretical lecture on hospitality. The message was obvious without saying a word. We were just there together.

If new converts really want to be a part of the Church it is better if they act Orthodox rather than talk Orthodox. Even the elders did not become famous by giving weekly lectures. They were isolated on mountains and in kellia, in houses. People would walk for days to find them and ask advice. They were useful because they were themselves; they each had their own unique relationship with God that was overflowing with the Holy Spirit, and this drew people to them. This is what we all should do. The real Orthodox spirit is to just be as Orthodox as you can and people will come to you.

RTE: But that is something that was a great obstacle for many of us in our search for Orthodoxy, and why converts want to reach out now. We struggled and searched for years, and yet hardly ever did a Russian or Greek, or Middle Eastern Orthodox friend say a word to us about what they had. Twenty years ago we had to break down the doors. I’ve heard this in Europe too. A French Orthodox friend said that in all the years she was growing up she had Russian émigré friends, she went to school with Russians and socialized with Russians, but not one ever mentioned their faith.

Also, let's face it, not many of us are elders. We may try to live the best Orthodox life we can, but if we remain quiet we often just blend into the crowd, especially in a society where people are used to seeing different faiths and lifestyles. I think that people do have to say something when there is an opening – not in a pushy way, but more like the classic “Come and see.” The church, the icons, the liturgy can speak to people who are seeking, even if we are spiritually tongue-tied.

NICHOLAS: Yes, it's good that Orthodoxy is more apparent. But if I lived in America I would not invite someone to my Greek church to share my Orthodox belief. I would invite him to share my everyday life. Later, I might invite him to church, but not with a view to converting him.

RTE: But we were never invited at all. It was as if the Greeks and Russians we knew were ashamed of their backgrounds.

NICHOLAS: Yes, this is a complexity of the immigration. We know this from Europe also. The children are even ashamed to speak their mother language in public. They try to blend in and not look different so that they will be more easily assimilated into the new country.

Yesterday, a young Albanian boy came into the store, passing out advertisements. He saw my sign on the door and said, “Do you really have Albanian books?” I said, “Yes,” and gave him a few. He said, “That's great. My parents can read and write Albanian, but I can hardly speak it anymore and I can't read or write. His Greek was perfect.

Many Greeks abroad are like this. They try to assimilate into the environment and keep their own secret little church, their beliefs, their Greek traditions, their national holidays, because they might be afraid that people will laugh at them. I don't really blame them. Or, they might think, “This is a really holy thing and we don't want people to come and laugh at it.”

RTE: Father Adrian Rymarenko of Jordanville had a phrase for the good side of that quality: “Holding what is God's in honor.” As Orthodoxy becomes more known, however, perhaps they will feel freer to be more open.

NICHOLAS: I think that the zeal of these convert-pilgrims will stimulate the curiosity of those in the ethnic churches in America who will start wondering, “What is church about, what am I supposed to believe? Is this a church or a cultural center?” More and more books are being translated and print-

ed, largely thanks to converts. Even if the born-Orthodox feel irritated by this invasion of their ethnic churches, they will have to examine themselves and find out where they stand. Converts entering the Church will help awaken many of them from a deep sleep. Here in Greece, the pilgrims help me realize what real Orthodoxy is. By seeing how they try to behave, I find myself wondering how Orthodox I am, and how my fellow-Greeks see them. I believe that through them the Greeks will also realize that Orthodoxy is not only for a small group of people, it is for the world.

I said on the radio that Mount Athos and all the holy places of Greece are like a lighthouse, like beacons for the world. This light can't be hidden in the mountains of Greece. It is shining out to America, to Asia, to Australia. It is something much bigger. +