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SONGS OF FREEDOM: THE RASTAFARI ROAD TO ORTHODOXY

In an engagingly open interview, Michael and Teresa Wilson of St. Mary of Egypt Serbian Orthodox Church in Kansas City, Missouri, talk about their decades as Rastafarians in America and Jamaica, their path to Orthodoxy, and the lessons they've learned along the way.

RTE: Michael, what was your background? Did you grow up Christian?

MICHAEL: In my family, we didn't usually go to church, except perhaps on Easter. My mother and I prayed some and sang songs, but religion wasn't a guiding force. She tells me now, though, that she knew I wanted a spiritual life, and where I ended up didn't surprise her. Teresa grew up in a Catholic family, with seven brothers and sisters.

RTE: How did you become involved with Rastafari?

MICHAEL: For both Teresa and me, it began with Bob Marley and his music in the late '70's. We were 18, 19 years old, and just married. One of the things that really attracted us was that Bob had this wild hair and dressed like a simple man, but in his lyrics he referred to the Bible, which blew our minds. I was from Manhattan, Kansas, and at the time I thought that people who read the Bible and went to church had to wear a suit and tie, had to look and act a certain way. I was even anti-church because of those images. It was a new awakening for me to realize that the Bible was for everyone, everyone in the world, not just the stuffy suit-and-tie people I'd known.

Opposite: Michael, Teresa and friend at Sunsplash Festival in Jamaica, early 1980's.

So here comes Bob Marley, with his guitar, his dreadlocks, and smoking herb (marijuana), and it all attracted me. He was a person who was there for the poor, the elderly, the kids, and most of all, he was talking about God. At the time it seemed that he was actually reaching us middle and upper-class white Americans more than black Americans. The people he tried to sing for shunned him.

RTE: Why?

MICHAEL: Because he looked poor and low class. Some black Americans were looking towards education as a way to improve things, but in our neighborhood most black people were reaching for the gold chains and fancy cars as a way to feel they'd made it. Then came Bob out of the Jamaican ghetto saying, "You don't need all that. Love your brother, give yourself to God, live simple." That wasn't something they wanted to hear. At the time, Teresa and I were trying to break the cycle we'd grown up in – "me first, out of my way." So, he gave us an image to look up to, and little sayings and words of songs that I later figured out were from the Bible.



Michael Wilson

We knew some of the first reggae artists that came after Bob Marley. You'd go to their hotel room – they'd have been put up in some fancy hotel by the concert promoters – but the TV would be shoved off into the closet and the Bible out on the table. You wouldn't see any beer cans, but you'd see food spread out for everyone that came: greens, potatoes, tonic health drinks the Rastas make from roots.... The essential part of their group was the cook, not a guy to go find the girls or the drugs after the concert.

RTE: Why a cook?

MICHAEL: They were pure vegetarians with a little fish and they relied on their diet. Coming from Jamaica to America they didn't want anything to do

with our fancy fast foods. They came with big boxes of food from home to cook their own.

RTE: Did you know Bob Marley?

MICHAEL: No, we didn't know him, but we saw him once when he played in Lawrence, Kansas. It was one of the most amazing nights of my life. There was a time during the show when he was a definite rock star, but there was also a time when something higher came over him. He talked about those



Teresa Wilson

times and said that he himself didn't know what it was. At the time I said, "God came on him."

So, we started copying our lifestyle from his... things we'd read in *Rolling Stone* magazine, stories we'd hear about him. At the time it was what we longed for, something to hang on to.

RTE: How did it affect your lifestyle?

MICHAEL: It changed it immensely. The next big reggae artist we met was Peter Tosh. He was part of the original Wailers: Bob Marley, Peter Tosh and Bunny Wailer, who afterwards went on to separate careers. One year Peter Tosh stayed at the

same hotel my wife and I were at. He was the first Rasta I actually reasoned with. After the show, we sat into the night talking about spiritual things. Peter showed me parts of the Bible that explained the things that were happening – "wars and rumors of wars." He was the first Rasta we'd met where we could see the practice going on. To me, it was about simplifying the world. We Americans were raised to be the best at everything, but Bob and Peter showed us that you didn't always have to be the best, that sometimes being the least was actually the best.

In fact, that night it was crazy because lots of people came to see Peter. I remember being in his room, and everything getting real confused, people milling around, when all of a sudden he jumps out of his chair and says real

loud, “Everybody out!” He was a big guy, so everybody heads for the door, me included, but he grabs me by the shoulder and says, “Except you!” So, everyone else left, he sat me down, and we reasoned for hours. After that night I quit smoking cigarettes, I quit doing drugs, I quit lusting. It was the first time I’d met someone who cared about me for just being me.

RTE: The impression of an outsider is that Rastas are rather relaxed about life: they sing about peace, smoke marijuana, and have a few girlfriends. But you are saying that there was an attempt at a purer practice among those who were serious.

MICHAEL: Among the serious, yes. As with any movement, at first it was a vehicle for good, but later it became a vehicle for anyone from Jamaica who grew their dreads and played music... Not to take anything away from the later reggae artists, but we came to find out that Bob, Peter, and the early Rastas were some of the last from whom you could learn about real Rasta.

The others were rude boys.... hustlers, music-type people like anywhere. To find the real Rasta, even in Jamaica, you went to the hills, to the mountains. You’d meet ten people to get to the one real guy who worked all day in the fields, took care of his kids, didn’t go to town, didn’t go to reggae shows – he was just living. So when you met some of the elders of Rastafari, they’d tell you that Rastafari wasn’t a religion, but a way of life. That was what we were looking for, a way of life. Religion seemed like a corporation.

Of course, the bigger the Rasta movement got, the more temptation there was to get away from the principles. The people who lived in the mountains were the ones really following the simple lifestyle, but this was also because they were really poor. When Jamaican Rastas get out into the world, they are like the rest of us. Unless you watch yourself, it’s easy to get trapped into wanting this and that.

Teresa’s Story

RTE: Teresa, how did the Rasta movement fit for you?

TERESA: I wasn’t as into the music. What I liked was that they lived a simple life, that they lived “Ital”¹ – no white flour, no white sugar, no pop, nothing processed, no meat. That was something I wanted also; I didn’t

¹ Ital: A Jamaican phrase describing the Rastafarian diet, derived from the word “vital.”

want to eat anything that wasn’t directly from the land (although I must admit that I had a sweet-tooth). Also, to be honest, we were both heavy herb smokers, and with the Rastas we could smoke as much as we wanted. I also liked the idea that we are all created equal. Mike and I both had black and Mexican friends at school and we didn’t fit with the white-only crowds. We didn’t want to go to college and do the career thing, and I didn’t want to contribute to the image of a successful young white American woman. I was fine with being a service worker.

Mike was the one that was into the music. I just loved Mike. My feeling was, “Whatever you want to do, let’s do that – just let me have my garden.” I was happy having a job and friends. I never wanted to *be* anything. I just wanted to be nice to people, to grow our food, and to praise God in my own inner way.

Whatever Mike is into he researches to the nth degree, but I’m not like that. I wait for things to come to me. While he was reading Rasta, I was reading other things like the *Baghavad Gita*, the writings of the Catholic priest Henri Nouwen, books on Zen Buddhism, whatever came my way. I was having a very hard time with the concepts of war, suffering, racism, class distinctions, and these books helped me. At the time I thought, “Maybe I’m Rasta, maybe I’m not.”

Rasta did give me a sense of womanhood though. On our first trip to Jamaica, I saw a woman with a long dress and with her hair covered, and I thought, “Now that’s beautiful. That’s me. That’s the image I want to have. I want to be seen as a roots woman: natural, loving, kind, compassionate, spiritual.”

So, although we were married, lived together, and loved each other, we also had our own spiritual identities. Michael is loving and our relationship has always allowed for individuality.

RTE: How did you maintain your lifestyle?

TERESA: We’ve tried to keep things simple by eating healthy, buying our clothes and things second-hand, growing as much of our own food as possible, learning how to self-medicate with herbs instead of prescription drugs, not having anything we can’t buy with cash...nothing on credit cards. Besides the garden and raising our son, I’ve had general service jobs like being a produce stocker at the local grocery store, a field worker picking vegetables and flowers, and at one time I produced tofu, a staple food for vegetarians. Now, I’m a home health aide.

RTE: And you Michael?

MICHAEL: I work at an old theatre called Liberty Hall in Lawrence, Kansas. When it was built, it was one of only two theatres in a four-state area, and played W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy. We still do movies, but now we also have live shows. We have a little theatre with 300 seats, and a big theatre with 700, and feature everything from classical music to Bob Marley's kids. I've worked there for seventeen years as the janitor. I take care of the building.

RTE: When you began, how did the Rasta movement break down ethnically?

MICHAEL: It was very small and, here in the U.S., about 90 percent white. In Jamaica it was almost all black, with only a few whites. Rasta wasn't organized, although there were some independent elders and a few different factions: "The Twelve Tribes of Israel," who were mostly professionals (doctors, lawyers, teachers, and their children); the "Ethiopian World Federation," which includes some of the older people from the Garvey era who were still in communication with Ethiopia; and the "Nyabinghi" Rasta, who were more militant. They had ceremonies that lasted up to a week, revolving around certain Ethiopian holidays, or His Majesty Haile Selassie's life. They would drum and sing what I've come to understand were old Christian spirituals, songs that they'd learned in church when they were young. They would take the word "God" out, and replace it with "Rastafari" or "Jah," from Jehovah. But we weren't aware of those origins in the early days; to us they wrote those songs.

The Rastafari Movement

RTE: So, what is Rastafari, and how did it begin?

MICHAEL: In my understanding, Rastafari is an Ethiopian word – *Ras* means "head, chief, or king"; *tafari* means "Creator" or "the One to be feared." Ras Tafari was His Majesty Haile Selassie's name before he became the emperor of Ethiopia. The word "dread" means "God-fearer," so people who were serious about the practice grew their hair into dreadlocks (letting long locks of hair just naturally grow together) as a sign of reverence for God. Later, it became more of a fashion, like a badge.

The movement began in 1928, when the British were still in Jamaica. Some people say it was sparked by Marcus Garvey, others say by Leonard Howell. Both were Jamaican preachers: Garvey preached a "Back to Africa" movement, and Howell was the first to proclaim His Majesty as the Messiah. They were revivalists, and encouraged people to reclaim their African roots. In 1930, when Haile Selassie was crowned the "Emperor of Ethiopia, King of Kings, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah," it was flashed around the world. Diplomats and leaders from many nations came to his coronation.

Finally, there was a great African king. So, you can imagine that for a simple Jamaican whose ancestors were slaves, seeing pictures of this African man being crowned and the European powers going there to acknowledge him was a huge thing. Marcus Garvey had said that the day of redemption, the day when black people would begin to regain their humanity, would be at hand when you saw a black man crowned. So, the black Jamaicans were ready.

The coronation was on the front page of all the Jamaican papers. I've seen a copy of it, and this was when the movement really began. A lot of people took on "Ethiopianism," – wearing the red, gold, and green of Ethiopia's national colors. Interestingly, the dreadlocks really had nothing to do with His Majesty. Dreadlocks were first introduced to Jamaica from a *National Geographic* photo of an Ethiopian Coptic monk with dreads who had come from his monastery down to the city to preach the Gospel. So, in 1930's Jamaica, when people saw this picture of a monk with his Bible, his staff, and his dreadlocks, they began doing the same things that we came to as Rastas in the '70's – growing their dreads, reading their Bibles. They could see there was something real in these pictures and they tried to reach it by copying what they saw, just as I did fifty years later.

Another thing about the coronation of His Majesty was that *National Geographic* covered it², and these were the first color pictures that were ever used in the magazine. In Jamaica, almost every Rasta family I met had that issue of the *National Geographic* somewhere in their house.

These first Rastas became their own entity in the midst of a British colony, just as we American youth, years later, looked for something more in our own society. It was wild how that happened. Once my wife and I became Rasta, we went on like that for years, just trying to live a really simple life in

² *National Geographic*, June, 1931. Haile Selassie was also named *Time Magazine's* Man of the Year in its Jan. 6, 1936 issue.



America, me as a janitor and Teresa as a maid, agricultural worker, and later as a nurse's aide.

RTE: And you did this out of choice.

MICHAEL: Yes, it was our choice. More money was the last thing we wanted. We were trying to get closer to God, so we dreaded our hair and took on the images we saw of Rastas, even though we'd hear things like, "You're white, you can't be Rasta," or "You're Americans, you shouldn't do this." The Jim Jones tragedy had already happened in Guyana, so the cult thing and the marijuana were always held over our head. We didn't hide anything, even the smoking, because we felt so real about it. For Rastas, smoking was a kind of ceremony, and they sometimes even called it a "sacrament." Serious Rastas didn't just smoke for recreation; it was something more. They would say that when you smoked you all came to the same level, the social differences were broken down. And, of course, it represented the opposite of alcohol.

RTE: How was that? To most of us, the two seem to go together.

MICHAEL: The way we saw it, alcohol was Babylon, the world. Alcohol paid taxes to the government, the government ran the whole thing. But the marijuana, we ran. No taxes, it was our thing. "They" didn't have anything to do with it, and in fact "they" said it was wrong, that you could go to jail for it, and that you'd have deformed babies. But there weren't deformed babies from marijuana, so we saw them lying. Then, when we looked to the Bible, it said, "Every herb-bearing seed is good for the use of man." So, we believed we had the Bible to back us up. It was against Babylon, it fit the whole life-style.

RTE: Were most of the people you knew in Jamaica Rastas?

MICHAEL: Not really. Perhaps only in the way that you would say that most people here are Christian. If you ask eight out of ten people here in Kansas City, they will probably say, "Yes, I'm Christian." But do they practice being Christian, do they think about what it means to be Christian? In Jamaica, maybe somewhere around 80 percent would say that they are Rasta. It was a youth movement. Among the older Jamaicans, there was more of the Christianity that we knew growing up, the British style of dressing and

Opposite: Michael, Teresa and Nesta.

attending established churches. If their son became Rasta their reaction was often like it was here, that it was a bad thing. They were afraid that he'd become a bum.

To Jamaica

RTE: What was your experience in Jamaica?

MICHAEL: I went to Jamaica seven times, and once Teresa and I moved there to settle. Our son, Nesta, had just been born and we'd saved money to buy a piece of land. There was also a big reggae music festival there called "Sunsplash," where I went to work. Back in the U.S., I'd begun selling things like t-shirts, books, and all sorts of paraphernalia having to do with Rastafari. I worked different reggae shows vending, and I did the same thing at Sunsplash. But we had a bad experience on this trip. I was mugged, and we heard of people getting ripped off in land deals. Having a one-year-old baby was tough, too. We were using cloth diapers, and here we were in a country that had almost no diapers and very few water spigots, so just keeping clean was a whole new world we weren't ready for.

RTE: I remember seeing a documentary on Bob Marley that showed some voodoo-type spirituality in backcountry Jamaica. Was that part of the Rasta practice? Also, can you comment on the reports one hears about Rastas being anti-Catholic?

MICHAEL: I never saw any voodoo elements in Rasta – in Jamaica, yes, that's part of the hill culture, but not with Rastas! As for Catholicism, in Jamaica hard feelings developed during and after WWII, when pictures circulated of the pope supposedly blessing Italian gas bombs that were later dropped on Ethiopia – whether that was true or not, I'm not sure. But we also have a later picture of Haile Selassie kissing the pope's ring out of respect. I always felt that he was showing everyone that he had forgiven, and that they should forgive too. To tell you the truth, I've seen much more anti-Catholic feeling among Orthodox than I have among Rasta people.

RTE: How did the Jamaicans treat you?

MICHAEL: The response was varied. The older Jamaicans accepted us as lost kids; they felt sorry for us and tried to help us out. On the other end, there

were a number of people who made you feel like, "You're coming to steal our culture," that Rastafari was their thing and we were co-opting it. Even here in America, some blacks would come up and say, "Why do you dress like that, why are you wearing dreads? That's our African culture." But meanwhile, they were standing there in European clothes and jerry curls. The true Rastas, though, couldn't care less who you were. You were just another child of God.

When we returned to Kansas from Jamaica, people thought this was the end of us as Rastas, but it actually made us stronger. We lived it right here in our own backyard.

RTE: And it probably grounded you, because you'd seen the reality of Rasta life in Jamaica and you had to make a choice to either drop it or go deeper into what was good.

MICHAEL: Yes. That was a big dilemma with us because we were totally trying not to rely on the system. But we'd been to Jamaica and what came clear for us was our son Nesta. If we stayed, what choices would he have? So now we found ourselves wanting the world a little bit for our son, but not agreeing with the world. We were trying to do this balanced walk between the two. That was our mindset when we returned. We kept up the practice and I started grounding, and slowly became a kind of rallying point. People began coming to me to seek out Rasta.

RTE: You were one of the leaders for it in the Midwest.

MICHAEL: Maybe I did become that to some. I eventually got a radio show that exposed me to a lot of people who were seeking Rasta, or a different way of life. We also started doing a yearly Rasta Revival Campout on a YMCA campground near Lawrence, where we lived. I always stressed the spiritual side of Rasta, and that's what people counted on me for. Other Rastas, even Jamaican reggae musicians, would send people to me: "I'll tell you about playing the chords on the guitar and singing the songs, but if you want to know all about the spiritual side, go to Ras Mike."

At the campouts we would set up book tables, talk to folks who came, encourage people to find out about His Majesty Haile Selassie... I had every book, every tape on Rasta, everything, and all of it referred over and over to the Bible and His Majesty's speeches. We'd blow up poster-size pictures of His Majesty in his crown.

RTE: It became a badge among '80's American youth to identify with Marley, like being a hippie twenty years before. But some of those hippies were real spiritual seekers. They tried to help out, and ended up in good solid places later. Did you find that among the young Rastas as well, or were they mostly music tourists?

MICHAEL: There were some true seekers, and there were others who were lost and this was just the latest phase. There were a lot of reggae "heads" who liked the music but weren't interested in spirituality, but many of us were seeking more than just a good time on the beach.

RTE: What did you gain from being Rastafarian?

MICHAEL: I'm grateful to many Rastas for the things I learned. The real principles of Rasta are concentrated on helping one another. You love your brother and your sister and those things come first. Life isn't about your job, your career, having a nice car, or any of that. You are God's children and He accepts you wherever you are.

One Rasta group that I followed for awhile, "The Twelve Tribes of Israel," has "mansions" as they call them, from the Gospel where the Lord said, "In my Father's house are many mansions." These Rasta houses are all over the world, even in Australia and New Zealand, and until he passed away, they had a Prophet Gad whom they looked to for spiritual guidance. One of their main practices is to read a chapter a day of the Bible. That was the first thing you did as a "Twelve Tribes" member – you read the whole Bible. They used to preach, "A chapter a day keeps the devil away." It takes three-and-a-half years to do a chapter a day, so it was a long process. I have to say that I didn't get a lot out of it, because of everything else going on in my life, but because I'd never read the Bible before, it was really a positive experience. I discovered that it's a friendly book.

The other thing that I got from Rastafari, and which eventually led me to Orthodoxy, were Ethiopian icons. To this day they speak to me. Some of the reggae albums started having icons on their covers, and this was where I first saw them. The greatest thing that reggae gave me, though, was His Majesty Haile Selassie, that amazing man whom I love very much.

Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia

RTE: Can you tell us about him? Many of us know that he was the king of Ethiopia, but not much more. He had quite a powerful influence on Jamaica, didn't he?

MICHAEL: He is loved throughout the world. Of course, he had already passed on by the time I heard of him, but we had a yearly celebration of His Majesty's birthday here in Kansas City. We called it "Birthstrum," and linked it up with music. We had a reggae store on 47th and Troost and

we blocked off the back parking lot and had bands and booths and food. A lot of older white people would come by, see his picture and say, "You know, we remember that guy." I'd say, "What do you remember?" and they'd say, "He was that little king who was walking with the Kennedys at the funeral." And this was true. When Kennedy was assassinated, His Majesty walked in the funeral procession, holding Jacqueline Kennedy's arm. You can see him in all the pictures. He was small, about 5 feet, 4 inches tall. He had his imperial uniform on, all the medals and awards.³



Teresa and Nesta with picture of Emperor Haile Selassie I.

RTE: And why did he come to the funeral?

MICHAEL: He and Kennedy were close, and that's how Americans knew of him. He was born in Ethiopia in 1887, and his father, Ras Makonnen, was the right hand of King Menalek of Ethiopia. Ras Makonnen was the first African dignitary to go abroad to Europe. He was studying different forms

³ As the longest-serving head of state, Emperor Haile Selassie I took diplomatic precedence in all international gatherings of state leaders, such as the funerals of President John Kennedy, Charles DeGaulle, and the formal ceremonies marking the 2500th anniversary of the Persian Empire. Besides being the longest-serving head of state, the Ethiopian Emperor was also the latest in the line of the longest-lived dynasty in world history. He was also the only head of state to ever address both the United Nations (Oct. 6, 1963) and its predecessor, the League of Nations (June, 1936).

of government, and Ras Tafari, his son, often went with him, so from childhood he was exposed to different cultures and people. From the age of six he had two tutors, one an Ethiopian Coptic priest, and the other a Frenchman. His father was aware that the future of Ethiopia depended on learning to work and to communicate with different people, so by the time His Majesty was twelve, he spoke several languages fluently.

RTE: Ethiopia had been fairly closed before then, hadn't it?

MICHAEL: Yes, and the only thing that most Westerners knew about Ethiopia was that, centuries ago, it was on the Spice Route. When the Egyptians moved further south, Ethiopia became isolated, the spice caravans rerouted, and there was a long period of seclusion. But they were already Christian. They adopted Christianity before Rome did. You think of Ethiopia today with photos of civil unrest, people starving, but it is really a very spiritual country, and the people there are among the most wonderful people I've ever met.

RTE: So Haile Selassie was already being groomed to be the next emperor? Didn't King Menalek have an heir?

MICHAEL: Islam had already penetrated into Ethiopia, and when King Menalek's son became Muslim, he was no longer a candidate for the throne. The king had to be Christian. The throne passed to Menalek's daughter, who became queen, but she died soon after, and then Haile Selassie was chosen. To be in line for the throne, you had to be able to trace your lineage back to King Solomon, which he could do to the satisfaction of the Ethiopians through his paternal grandfather. You also had to be Ethiopian Orthodox.

When His Majesty came to power, he not only gave his people their first constitution, but he brought Ethiopia into the League of Nations and abolished slavery. More importantly, the Church came to the forefront again. He was very devout. Until now one of my biggest regrets as a Rasta is that when I read his speeches, he always spoke of Jesus Christ, but I couldn't really acknowledge that. I just took what fit into my own world, and when you do that you don't hear everything.

RTE: Was he Coptic or was he Ethiopian Orthodox?

MICHAEL: When he first came to the throne, the Ethiopian Church was under Egyptian Coptic bishops, including one who barely spoke Ethiopian. Later, the Ethiopians had their own patriarch, although they were still Coptic, and later they became Ethiopian Orthodox, which is still one of the monophysite churches. There has been some movement towards reunion and I'm hoping that eventually they can reunite with the Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches – the Russian, Greek, Antiochean, Serbian, Bulgarian....

But the main influence on us was His Majesty. He would rise at 4:00 a.m., and after two hours of prayer, he would go to church for liturgy and then work in his garden before starting on meetings and state matters. Even when the Italians invaded Ethiopia and he was exiled for five years, he risked his life to make a pilgrimage to Lalibela, the great Ethiopian monastic complex, to pray before he left. In his photos from that period you can see that he was at peace, even during the war. I remember the first time I ever saw film footage of him – one of those frames had been copied as a photo all over the Rasta world – and now here I was watching the living man.

During his own lifetime, Rasta people were saying he was Christ. Marcus Garvey had said, "When a black king will be crowned, he will be the returning messiah," and people took that in a literal way. Between Garvey's words, His Majesty's traditional lineage back to King Solomon, and Ethiopia being mentioned in the Bible, many Jamaicans came to the conclusion that he was the Lord. At his coronation, his traditional title as an Ethiopian monarch, "King of Kings, Conquering Lion of Judah," also helped strengthen this belief. These are actually the Lord's titles from the Bible that were used by later Ethiopian Christian kings, just as the kings of Europe used ceremonial titles, but we didn't know this. We centered it all in Haile Selassie. For us, he stood out as someone special in history.

Another thing that struck me about him was that he was a black African man who was in touch with the rest of the world. He was his nationality, but he was more. When he built a hospital, for example, he brought in the best surgeons, the best doctors, of whatever nationality or color. He didn't seem to see color. At the time I was dealing with my own experience of racism in being a white Rasta, and I really looked to his example, "This is him, this is what he says." Bob Marley's most famous song was "War," and its lyrics were from a speech of His Majesty's that said, "Until the color of a man's skin is no more significant than the color of his eyes, there will be war." That line spoke to me as a white man.



In photos, you'd see him first with a beggar, and in the next with a head of state, like Kennedy. I was impressed at how he walked so easily between these two worlds, as a monarch and ruler of a country, but also as meek as a lamb. There are many stories about him, and to Westerners, his court seemed exotic. For instance, lions roamed the grounds of the palace. Reporters and guests would come to see the king, and while they waited, would find themselves face to face with a lion. They'd freeze until His Majesty came to find them, but he could treat the lions like housecats. Animals knew him.

RTE: Did he ever visit Jamaica?

MICHAEL: In 1966, he came to Trinidad, Tobago, and Jamaica on a Caribbean tour. He was invited by Michael Manley, the Jamaican prime minister, probably to correct this image that people had of him. As you would expect, there was a huge response from the Rasta community. Two hundred thousand people came to the airport to meet him. The Rasta side of the story was that when His Majesty's airplane landed, doves flew up around him, the sun came out, and he wept on seeing "his" children. But I've read from his granddaughter, and in other books, that he actually wept at them mistakenly thinking he was Jesus Christ.

People traveled all the way across Jamaica on foot to see him. Bob Marley was in America at the time, working at the Ford plant in Detroit, but Rita his wife was home in Jamaica, a young teenage Christian girl, and she went to see this king that the Rastas were claiming was the Messiah. She said that when she first saw him she thought, "How could such a little guy be a great king?" But when he drove by in the motorcade and waved his hand, in the middle of his palm she saw a scar. In fact, there was a scar in the palm of the hand he was waving, but you can imagine what people made of that. That was a sign for her, and from that day on she was Rasta. Bob got it from her.

RTE: What a tragedy for His Majesty. How did he respond?

MICHAEL: He met with the Rastafari leaders and urged them to become Ethiopian Orthodox. He advised them to build up Jamaica. As soon as His Majesty returned to Ethiopia, he sent an Ethiopian *abba*, Archbishop Yesehaq, to Jamaica to straighten out the Rastas' mistaken beliefs and teach

Opposite: Michael with poster of Bob Marley.

them about Christianity and Ethiopian Orthodoxy. He also gave money to buy land for an Ethiopian Church. Abba Yesehaq was the one who helped Rita convert. She's Ethiopian Orthodox now. Many people see His Majesty as a kind of prophet, although others still see him as a messiah figure and some folks in "The Twelve Tribes" continue to believe he is Jesus Christ.

RTE: But if he said he wasn't the Lord, why would they keep on believing this?

MICHAEL: Because some of the Rasta elders still insist that it is true. They say that if God came to earth He wouldn't proclaim Himself because He wouldn't want anything to do with worldly honor and acclaim. Also, there wasn't a lot of information around. People were used to being lied to in the news, by the government, by the world. They didn't believe what came in from the outside. But this time, it was the fault of the Rasta elders.

For example, there were tapes circulating of public talks that His Majesty had given, and one was an interview from 1967 when he made a state visit to Canada to negotiate a Canadian-Ethiopian agricultural project. We had a tape of the interview. It was mostly about political issues, but we listened to it sometimes just to hear His Majesty's voice. Years later, I got another copy of the same tape, but there was another question in it, where he was asked, "You know, your Imperial Majesty, there are many people in Jamaica and abroad who see you as the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. How do you feel about that?" He said bluntly, right there in public, that he was not God, that he was not Jesus. The Rasta elders had simply edited it out of the earlier version.

They claimed it was the other way around, that Babylon, the worldly forces, had altered the tape to make it sound like he said he wasn't the Messiah. It's the same with pictures we have of His Majesty kissing the pope's ring when he met him – or of confessing in church, which shows that the Ethiopian Church has Christian sacraments. When we show these to some Rastas, they say that we've doctored the pictures. You can't force people to believe.

RTE: What do you still appreciate about Haile Selassie, now that you are an Orthodox Christian?

MICHAEL: I appreciate everything I know about him. He brought me to the Orthodox Church. He gave the Ethiopian Church a presence in the world. He built churches, hospitals and clinics, and sent students to study abroad.

In fact, the communist dictator who overthrew him, and was probably responsible for his death (it's believed that he was smothered), was one of the students whom he had sent to study in America. Through the Emperor, the whole world knew Ethiopia. He spoke to the United Nations and was well-known as a Christian. That was the source of his influence on me, that he was a deeply Christian man.

RTE: He was probably the last openly Christian monarch we've had. Some of the European constitutional monarchs are Christian by persuasion, but don't speak about it publicly as he did. Do you feel that there is a parallel here with the Russian Tsar Martyr Nicholas II?

MICHAEL: Definitely. There was a great similarity in how the people of Ethiopia and Russia saw these rulers (how they really saw them, not how the communists portrayed them later), and how these two monarchs tried to protect their Christian countries. I remember seeing pictures of the Tsar and feeling that the two had the same spirit. I didn't know anything about Orthodoxy, but I sensed the connection. It's also important that they were both anointed kings murdered by a communist regime. It is easy for me to understand the veneration that Russian Orthodox feel for the last tsar and his family.

RTE: Yes. It was an easier bridge for you to cross than for most American converts.

MICHAEL: To this day Rasta people ask me why I still have Haile Selassie's picture in my chapel, and I talk about how he was an Orthodox king, and how he brought me to Orthodoxy. I know it's the same in Russia, where people look to the Russian royal family.

When they buried His Majesty, thousands of people came out. Because of the communist regime, they couldn't say a word aloud, but they touched his coffin. There were many stories about him, but they couldn't be told publicly. It was the same under the succeeding government, which didn't call itself communist but was made up of the same people.

The Reggae Revival Show

RTE: Can you tell us now about your radio show? I've heard that it was the most influential reggae program in the Midwest.

MICHAEL: I'm sure it was far from the most influential, but I'm glad you heard that. Glory to God. The radio show came to an end about two years ago. It was on the air for ten years. When I started it, there were four or five different reggae shows around the country, but mine was the only Rasta show.

RTE: What is the difference? Isn't reggae Rasta music?

MICHAEL: Rasta, to me, was the spiritual side. Reggae could deal with the spiritual, but also with finding a girl, smoking herb, etc. Rasta, although it dealt with smoking, talked about it in terms of being at peace in the midst of Babylon, while reggae put marijuana into a social, dance scene, which creates its own kind of worldliness. Although you could also dance to the music I played, it would more likely make you think about what life means, about how you should be. I was always looking for the next song to inspire someone.

Many, many times I got calls at the radio station, saying, "That song you just played made me pick up my Bible," or, "It made me remember my Mom who died twelve years ago, and what she told me about the saints." Those phone calls were what inspired me to drive up here every week and do the show. Later, I invited an Orthodox priest, Fr. Paisius Altschul, and a few nuns from St. Mary of Egypt Church to speak about Orthodoxy, particularly about the African roots of ancient Christianity, and the conference they still have every year.⁴

As the radio audience grew, it became a struggle for me personally. I'd be in a grocery store asking where the greens were, and someone would turn around and say, "You're Ras Mike!," just from my voice. That was different.

There are Rastas all over the world now. Six years ago at the Sunsplash festival in Jamaica there were already well-established reggae bands playing from Japan and Taiwan, including three young Japanese men with the longest, most beautiful black dreads – they had to have been growing them for at least a decade. In Taiwan there's a Bob Marley bar, with a sign that's 100 feet tall. Friends of mine have heard Bob Marley music at Buddhist monasteries in Nepal. Among English speakers, there's probably

⁴ For information about the African Roots of Ancient Christianity Conferences, visit www.stmaryofegypt.net.

more interest now in places like Australia. They are where we were at with reggae in the '70's and '80's.

Reggae as a whole has changed a lot; it used to be more earthy, more peace-loving and "one for all." Now it's turned into something like hip-hop. Damian Marley, the youngest of Bob's kids, was in Lawrence recently, but his music is hip-hop, it's a different thing. He's reaching a whole new set of kids, though, and some of his dad's message is getting through as well.



Michael and Nesta

RTE: What is it about reggae that has such universal appeal?

MICHAEL: For Bob it was because he spoke for the people. The background of reggae music is the drums and bass, and its rhythm is based on the heartbeat. If you get in tune with that, you get in tune with your heart.

RTE: Some American Christians have put down African music wholesale, saying the beat has a dark influence, but I don't believe you can condemn the music of an entire continent. If we're honest, few of us have ever heard Coptic or Ethiopian ecclesiastical music, or even real African folk music.

MICHAEL: African music is very diverse, and while drums can sometimes be hypnotic and lead you to bad places, reggae is not part of that. Reggae's roots are in Africa, but also in old Jamaican Christian slave songs. The lyrics talk about God and society, about poor people, about the government holding people down, the wrongs of your town – but you are also able to dance to it and come out uplifted.

RTE: Is there any room for Orthodox reggae?

MICHAEL: Absolutely. There's a big Christian movement in reggae now. That's what I played the last two years, Gospel reggae. At one point I

dropped the Rasta part and called it, *The Reggae Revival Show*. I questioned myself representing Rasta since I had become Orthodox. People were saying, “Well, are you this, or that?” I tried to say, “I’m the same... I’ve just moved on to practice what His Majesty believed in.”

RTE: What was their response?

MICHAEL: People who had known me all those years would say, “Well then, what about Jesus?” So, I’d bring out the teachings of His Majesty on the Lord. I’d talk about the Gospel, about how Haile Selassie really lived. He was baptized, he read the Bible, he worshipped the Holy Trinity and Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Saviour. All of the things he did were Orthodox. They weren’t Rasta. He didn’t smoke herb, he didn’t listen to reggae music, he didn’t do those things we did as Rasta people.

RTE: Do you think kids are as interested in finding God as we were in the ‘60’s and ‘70’s?

MICHAEL: I think they are more interested than when we were young. I think that everyone senses that something is happening, that the last days are coming and that we need to find something more. Also, there are a lot of good things on the internet – it’s a blessing as well as a curse – and I’ve found that Orthodox book tables are a big outreach.

It’s also important that old Rastas like us haven’t changed completely even though we’ve become Orthodox. We don’t smoke herb, but we still have our dreadlocks, we have our beards, we go among the kids. Not to call names, but many people only see Christianity in terms of television evangelists. Kids see that as something fake, and we need to be out there to show a more authentic Christianity. For example, here in Kansas City, many kids on the street know Fr. Paisius, the priest of our church, and many Rasta people claim him as theirs.

I feel that perhaps I am a bridge, not by choice, but I’m glad to do it. I use the opportunities that come when people approach me as a Rasta. Of course, I’ll talk to anyone, not just to Rastas.

Encountering Orthodoxy

RTE: What finally brought you to Orthodoxy?

MICHAEL: All through my Rasta years, my reason for being there was to get closer to God. I think it was just God working with me through the Rasta movement. As I said earlier, in everything you read about His Majesty, in every speech, every proclamation, he talked about the Church, the Gospels, the saints, and especially about Jesus Christ, but I didn’t focus on those things.

The first Orthodox encounter I had was at the reggae fest here in Kansas City ten years ago. I always had a booth at the festival, and one year there was a man walking around in a long black robe. He was handing out a pamphlet that simply asked, “Do you know what His Imperial Majesty’s faith was?” There were a few lines underneath, and an Ethiopian monk on the front with a cross. The man in the black robe turned out to be Fr. Paisius, who was Orthodox and doing outreach at the festival. He was interested in Rastafari, and we began talking about books. We both knew about a rare set of books in four volumes called, “The Lives of the Ethiopian Saints.” I’d been keeping an eye out for them for years, and had managed to get Volumes I and III. Fr. Paisius, as it turned out, had Volumes II and IV! So, we got together to swap books. I actually walked through these very doors ten years ago. I was floored.

RTE: How so?

MICHAEL: To be honest, that first day all I wanted to do was get the hell out of here. I felt I had found what I needed, and I wasn’t ready for it. It was like, “Oh my gosh, this is what you’ve always wanted, and it’s too real.” Fr. Paisius and I got together a couple of times to swap books, and talk briefly. The next year he came back to the reggae fest, we talked some more, and he invited me to church. Usually, that was the last thing I would have done, but I came that Sunday because I always stayed the festival weekend in Kansas City. I came in the middle of the service, and felt like I was home. I didn’t know what I was feeling, I just knew that it was right and that it was what I’d been looking for my whole life. I still remember that day.

Then it became a thing of books – I’d read one, and Fr. Paisius would hand me the next. I had the radio show at the time, so I was up here a lot, and two of the women at St. Mary’s who had become Orthodox, Mari and Magdalena, were taking care of the bookstore. I’d come every day and we’d



hang out pretty tough. We spent a lot of time together. Mari (now Mother Pachomia) became an Orthodox nun. I'm really grateful to all the Orthodox folks in Kansas City who helped me get there: the parishioners of St. Mary's, especially Magdalena, and the nuns, Mother Pachomia and Mother Brigid, who gave me somewhere to be.

In the beginning, Fr. Paisius gave me *Not of This World*, the biography of Fr. Seraphim Rose, but after a few chapters I brought it back and said, "No, this isn't for me. It's not clicking." So, he gave me *The Way of a Pilgrim*, and it lit something inside of me. I began doing the Jesus Prayer.

After *The Way of a Pilgrim*, I totally got into St. Theophan the Recluse – *Path to Salvation, Unseen Warfare*. The book that really touched me was the letters he wrote to nuns, *Kindling the Divine Spark*. I've read it so many times that it's really the way my Bible should look, completely worn out. Later, I got back to *Not of This World*, and liked it. Other Orthodox writings have also really helped: St. John Chrysostom's writings on marriage, writings of St. Nikolai Velimirovich, the Optina Elders series, some things from the African and Ethiopian traditions such as Matthew the Poor, and Fr. Bishoy Kamel on the Lord's Cross. This past year St. Isaac the Syrian's *Ascetical Homilies* came to me. I'm grateful for all of these.

RTE: How was this time for you, Teresa?

TERESA: Before Michael met Orthodoxy, we'd had a real happy life, but after he started reading, he just didn't seem happy. He wasn't sure of himself anymore. I reminded him, "This is what I left fifteen years ago." That is, I'd more or less stopped going to church, but in my heart of hearts I knew who Christ was, while Mike had never really been Christian. But now I was irritated that he was being taken from me. I'd had Jesus from childhood, we had gone to premarital classes and been married in the Catholic Church, but now he was being led to Jesus Christ through what I saw as these freaky Orthodox nuts and I didn't appreciate that at all. Who did they think they were, intruding on our happy marriage, our beautiful little family, our "simple" lifestyle?

For a long time our marriage had been very solid and we were very proud of it, but when he began going to church and learning about Orthodoxy, it was shaken to the core. The first time Fr. Paisius came up to us at the reggae fest, I took one look at him and understood that everything was up. I felt like screaming, and I prayed to the universe, "Keep that man away from

my husband!" Fr. Paisius still remembers the meeting. He came strolling across the lawn because we had a book table and Michael was burning Ethiopian church incense.

When Mike started becoming Orthodox, I said, "That's it. I'm not doing what you do for my whole life. We can still be married, but I'm doing something else." He said, "That's fine. As long as you love me, it's alright." But inside I was scared, seriously scared. I was afraid I was losing the man I'd loved, borne a child with, and built my life around for the past fifteen years. I was right, too. I did lose that man, and now I have a new man. He's the same, but different. Not better, just different.

RTE: Probably every married woman reading this can feel what you went through, Teresa. When were you finally baptized, Michael?

MICHAEL: About six years after I met Fr. Paisius. I was working towards baptism, going to classes along with our son Nesta, who was to be baptized with me. As I said earlier, we'd been doing this Rasta Revival Campout, with people attending from all over America. One year we had twelve different countries represented at the revival, topping off at 130 people. It was mostly Rasta, and even some pagan people who were sympathetic to Rasta, or thought Rasta was something it wasn't. We sent fliers out, and after that people came by word of mouth.

As I became more attracted to Orthodoxy and it came time for my baptism, Fr. Paisius and I decided to have the baptism at the Rasta Revival Campout. There was a lake there and it was a good setting. I hate to say it, but some saw me as a leader in the Rasta movement in this area, and I thought that a public baptism would be a good way to show the group where I was going and how much this meant to me; to share it with them.

RTE: Your reasoning wasn't so different from Orthodox missions centuries ago in Europe, Siberia, China, where, if the headman was baptized, everyone else followed. You were the head of your own little community.

MICHAEL: Yes, maybe to some, but about a week before the campout, something happened that meant we had to delay it for awhile. I was totally psyched, I really wanted to be baptized and was ready, but it just couldn't happen. Now I believe this was God's will. I went through a long period of reflection, and thoughts came up like, "Maybe God doesn't want me

baptized ...maybe this, maybe that. What do I tell these people who I primed up for the baptism, and who now want to know what happened?" But, over that year I became so strong and so ready, that in the end it was even more powerful.

The only thing I worried about was our son. He was fourteen, and didn't understand why we'd had to put it off. We've raised him pretty free, not telling him what to do. Of course, we made suggestions in a parental way, about what we felt was right, and tried to teach by our example. We home-schooled him, and, in a way, let him direct his little life under our protection. Although I had my own questions during that time, I kind of let him be. Finally, when the baptism could happen again, we decided to do it on Theophany.

Before Christmas, I took Nesta aside and said, "I'm going to get baptized on Theophany, and it's up to you if you want to." He instantly said, "On one condition." I said, "What, Nesta? What's your condition?" He said, "Only if Fr. Paisius is doing it." So, I called Fr. Paisius and he said, "Of course." When it happened, it was a very powerful thing. My next-door neighbor came, Teresa's sister came, and Teresa's favorite aunt, who came to witness Nesta's baptism because she had promised Teresa's mother that she would see that the grandchildren were baptized.

Teresa, of course, had been baptized as a baby. When we were baptized Orthodox she came with us to church from time to time but wasn't ready to come in herself. It was a huge change for her because I had been so deeply Rasta. Our whole married life had been built around Rastafari, and now I was changing.

RTE: Teresa, how did you feel about Nesta coming to Orthodoxy?

TERESA: I was really glad to see him baptized. It was something I'd wanted for him, and it happened when he was fourteen. It was his own decision, and marked the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. He's a good boy, really beautiful. It didn't change our relationship. My mother, who had already died, wanted all of her grandchildren baptized, and this fulfilled her dream.

As Michael said, we home-schooled Nesta, structuring his schooling around what he was interested in. When it was dinosaurs, we'd do math and reading around dinosaurs, we'd do everything around dinosaurs. We raised him with the idea that children are born knowing what they need to learn.

Our job as parents is to give them the tools they already sense they will need as adults. We would say, “Nesta, you know what you need. We’re trusting you. You need us to be your guides, but you know what you’ll need as an adult.” I was trusting the universe to lead us both. Every year I’d ask, “Are you ready to go to school this year?” Finally, he did go in the sixth grade and then on through high school. He didn’t do very well grade-wise, but I didn’t care about that. He knows how to work, and he’s got confidence and family warmth behind him. He can do anything he wants.

MICHAEL: Teresa was finally chrismated Orthodox on Palm Sunday in 2005, and in August, on our 25th wedding anniversary, we had our marriage blessed in the Orthodox Church. The day our marriage was blessed was beautiful. Besides the service, which was very powerful for both of us, it meant a lot that my parents and most of Teresa’s large family were there. They stayed through the marriage service and the liturgy, a long haul for non-Orthodox folks. Friends from the church made the food.

RTE: Wonderful. Teresa, has your outlook changed since you’ve become Orthodox?

TERESA: One thing that I felt from all of my reading was that every religion has the same basic principles of loving God, of being kind to others, living simply, being at peace. I was looking for a way to apply these principles, and I thought, “Well, you know, here I am in this marriage forever and ever, I’m not going to leave, so let’s apply it here. Let’s apply what I’ve learned in *this* church.”

Some of the things I’d been reading said that sin is an illusion, and many Orthodox elders express that same principle – not that it doesn’t happen, but that it isn’t what’s eternal. The thing that changed for me when I became Orthodox was that Jesus Christ as God became real. Zen Buddhism didn’t have that, nor did Rasta, Bahai, or Hare Krishna. I also liked the structure of Orthodoxy. I’d always wanted to fast, and I’d always wanted to have a rule of prayer, but I didn’t have the discipline. Now, I have help. Michael encourages me to pray with him every morning and before sleep, and fasting isn’t difficult. I actually like being hungry and the feeling of being empty. I guess I needed a solid reason to do it.

But I have to say that even after I was chrismated, being Orthodox was uncomfortable for a long time. I’d quit every other day, and then decide to try again.

RTE: What didn’t sit right?

TERESA: I realized that I had been chrismated not because I really wanted to be Orthodox, but because I loved Michael. Now, I was struggling with my own identity, and was tired of arguing with Michael over ideas about faith, such as my reading *A Course in Miracles*, which I had loved. I was feeling a void. One day, another home health-care giver, a born-again Christian, stuck her head around the corner of the room I was working in. With tears in her eyes (she had recently reluctantly divorced), she looked at me in the mirror and said, “If you love your husband as much as you say you do, I’d join his church. You have a good marriage, a good husband. Don’t disrespect this gift that God has given you.” Well, that statement sank deep into my heart, into my bones, into my blood, and I cried a steady stream of tears.



Fr. Paisius and Michael.

I realized then that I was fighting against God, and that I was losing the battle, the battle of *my* will, *my* way. I don’t like to lose, I don’t like learning to be humble, I don’t like admitting my sinfulness. I had this grand idea that “I am a good person, I am *not* a sinner!” But in Orthodoxy, losing is gaining. Losing my way, losing my will, admitting my sinfulness is gaining His good grace, gaining “unexpected joy.” It’s not about winning anything.

RTE: I think you’ve just expressed the whole essence of spiritual life. Was there anything you read that helped you along the way?

TERESA: Yes. The first was *Touching Heaven*, about a young man’s pilgrimage to Valaam, then: *The Royal Way of the Cross Leading to Eternal Life; Orthodox Prayer Life; Communion of Love; St. Basil, The Wonderworker of Ostrog; St. Silouan the Athonite, Shepherd of Souls...* also, many of the non-Orthodox spiritual books I read contributed to the way I perceive Orthodoxy. I bring all of that experience with me to what I am today. Most recently I read *The Joy of Full Surrender*. I happened on it in a used bookstore and it’s been very uplifting, especially during Lent.

What I see now is that in Orthodoxy you can be who you are. You can pray morning, noon, and night or you can lead a life in the world and come to church as you can. It's not even about what you want – it's about what Christ wants for you. You just need to let that happen. You don't have to change yourself, you let God change you. This is what's freeing about Orthodoxy. I don't have to change, I just have to be. God will change me if and when He wants to, the way He wants to. Now, I'm at peace with that.

St. Basil of Ostrog

RTE: I understand that both of you have a strong tie to St. Basil of Ostrog. He isn't well-known in the West, so how did that come about?

MICHAEL: A couple of years ago I received a flyer about a book about him called, *The Mystery of the Wonder-worker of Ostrog*. The picture on the flyer drew me to him, and although we didn't get the book at the time, the picture kept surfacing, and I found myself saying, "Holy St. Basil, Wonder-Worker of Ostrog, pray to God for us!" A year later I saw the book at St. Mary's, and I thought, "This is my guy!" He was looking so holy and kind, blessing us from the picture, that I picked up the book and looked through it. A few weeks later Teresa and I stayed overnight at the church and I brought it to our room to read. Shortly into it, the first story mentioned Bob Marley, and I thought, "Now this is amazing – all the way in Serbia, Ol' Bob is moving people!" I took the book home to read, and came home the next day to find Teresa so into it that she couldn't put it down. She read it nonstop for a few days, and I tiptoed around to let her be. I felt St. Basil reaching out to her like he'd already reached to me.

Not long after we'd read the book, I dreamt that St. Basil was with us. I felt so light and blessed that I woke Teresa up to tell her, "St. Basil was here!" In my dream he was in our yard, blessing different parts of the garden. I was so excited and felt so good, and so did Teresa. A few days later, we were amazed to see red tulips growing up in each of the spots that I'd told her he had blessed. There were no other tulips near them, and no red ones anywhere else. To this day, we've never had another red tulip. So, we felt strongly that he was there with us. After our son Nesta moved out we turned his room into a chapel, dedicated to St. Basil. Fr. Paisius and some of our parishioners came over this year on his feast day and served the

Divine Liturgy there. The chapel hasn't been the same since. Since then, I carry St. Basil's picture with me, and I've read everything I can find on him. God willing, next year at this time we will be in Montenegro, climbing his Holy Mountain to venerate his relics⁵.

Rastas and Orthodoxy

RTE: I hope you both get there. Looking back, after this wonderful journey, what do you feel that you've brought to Orthodoxy from your Rasta experience that could help other Orthodox converts, especially those from a more middle-class background?

MICHAEL: Living simple. Seeing your brother as yourself. Seeing people not just as a part of you, but as a part of God because He created them. The real Rasta people saw that, and these were the things that first attracted us. I think that Orthodox people as a whole need to do a lot of work on their diet, nutrition, a simple lifestyle. I've attended churches where folks are friendly, but sometimes Orthodox people can look pretty worldly too.

Rastafari was such a part of our spiritual journey that I know I'll be connected to Rastas for the rest of my life. In fact, not long ago, I met a man from a Jamaican Rasta group called the Bobo Dreads. Their founder, Prince Emmanuel, passed on years ago, and if you'd met them in Jamaica you'd have thought they were a black supremacist group, but they were really a Bible-based commune. In the first years of being Rasta, I wrote back and forth to Prince Emmanuel and he prayed for us. When I met this man from the commune, I told him about how years ago I'd written to Prince Emmanuel, and when I said something about my son, Nesta, he looked at me, raised his hands to heaven, prayed aloud, and said, "That's who Nesta is!" For years, there had been a picture of this white baby on their prayer board. No one knew who it was except that his name was Nesta, but because Prince Emmanuel had put it there, they always prayed for him. I felt so blessed by that. They've prayed for him for over twenty years.

RTE: They carried him along. Do you think that Orthodoxy could spread in Jamaica?

⁵ Michael's note: My two favorite books on St. Basil are *The Mystery of the Wonder-worker of Ostrog* and *Healings of Soul and Body, St. Basil of Ostrog*.



MICHAEL: It has, in the form of the Ethiopian tradition. Thousands of Rasta people have been baptized in the last ten years into the Ethiopian Church. Rita Marley built a huge Ethiopian Orthodox church in Kingston and besides the first *abba* that His Majesty sent, there are now many other priests from Ethiopia. I would guess that the Ethiopian Church is probably the second largest church in Jamaica, after the Anglican.

Rastas are becoming aware of Orthodoxy. For example, a well-known Rasta from the group Boom Shaka has been to the St. Herman of Alaska Monastery in Platina. I've heard since that his whole group was baptized, but I don't know the details.

RTE: What do you see in our Chalcedonian Orthodoxy that could appeal to Rastas? How can our middle-class convert and ethnic parishes make them feel welcome?

MICHAEL: Well, be more like St. Mary's – non-judging. The biggest thing with the Rasta people is their dreads and the way they dress. The reason we wore our hair and clothes like that is that we were making a statement, "I'm not of this world," which is what Christianity is really all about. We called this the "Nazarite Vow," to not cut our hair or beard. I know that I've walked into certain Orthodox churches and felt unwelcome because of my appearance.

Also, the idea of "dogma" would be hard at first for most Rastas – it leaves a bad taste in the mouth – but the cycle of Church services, the teachings, the desert fathers and mothers – all of this I can talk to a Rasta about at a first meeting.

There's also self-image to get through. We've conditioned ourselves to be our own entities, "They can't tell us how to think, they can't tell us what to eat." Then, all of a sudden, when you meet Orthodoxy and get closer to God, you find that there are all these rules, traditions, fasts... of course, it's natural that you rebel against it at first. Even though it's what you're seeking, your psyche kicks in and says, "Wait a minute, what's this about?"

For me, it was the initial contact with an Orthodox priest, and then the Ethiopian icons, the multicultural background that made this church special. It was like home. Teresa and I have always been about helping other people, the have-nots, and have lived on the fringe of being have-nots

Opposite: Michael and Teresa's Orthodox wedding, August, 2006.

ourselves. We are all God's children and that's what drew us to God. I volunteer here in the bookstore and I end up handing out bags of food. This is what I love, taking care of people.

In the six years before I was baptized, I would come for a while, and then leave. Once, when I came back after a long absence, Fr. Paisius told me that he likes to think of his church as having a revolving door – you can come, you can go, and you can come back again when you're ready. At St. Mary's it's not about how much you can tithe each week. Here I feel that we are working on our salvation, on getting closer to God. We actually work on our weaknesses. If someone is crying in church, it's not like, "Wow, what was the matter with her today?" We've all been there, we're a family, and we're working out our salvation together.

This is what our lives and Rasta were all about. Teresa and I had always hoped for a spiritual family that wanted to get closer to God, that wanted to pray together, to help people in God's name, and that's why we're here. That's St. Mary's, and this is what would appeal to most serious Rastas.

The biggest connection for a Rasta to Orthodoxy, though, is through Haile Selassie. There are lots of Rasta people who have His Majesty's picture on their wall, but don't have a clue as to who he was and what he believed. If you study his life, you'll become Orthodox. That's what he talked about, and that's what he tells you. Some Rasta people walk with a veil over their face, and when they take that off and see Orthodoxy and His Majesty as he was – that he was a man like us all, a sinner, but a great leader and deeply religious – when they see that, they will become Orthodox themselves.

RTE: If you could say anything to Rastas and non-Rastas about Orthodoxy, what would it be?

MICHAEL: It's home. It's love. It's Christ's love. It's everything. ✦

Note from Michael Wilson: If anyone reading this would like to contact us, our e-mail is: orthodoxlove@yahoo.com. Postal address: Michael and Teresa Wilson, 837 E. 800 Rd., Lawrence, Kansas, 66047.

REDEMPTION SONG

Bob Marley

Old pirates, yes, they rob I;
Sold I to the merchant ships,
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit.
But my hand was made strong
By the 'and of the Almighty.
We forward in this generation
Triumphantly.
Won't you help to sing
These songs of freedom?
'Cause all I ever have:
Redemption songs;
Redemption songs.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;
None but ourselves can free our minds.
Have no fear for atomic energy,
'Cause none of them can stop the time.
How long shall they kill our prophets,
While we stand aside and look? Ooh!
Some say it's just a part of it:
We've got to fulfil de book.

Won't you help to sing
These songs of freedom?
'Cause all I ever have:
Redemption songs;
Redemption songs;
Redemption songs.