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CARRYING THE COMMON TRADITION

Conversion and Orthodox Parish Life in Today's Sweden

Elisabeth (Maria) Olsson is a native Swedish convert to Orthodoxy and a graduate student in Russian Language and Literature at Uppsala University in Sweden. After two years at St. Ignatios Theological Academy in Södertälje, Maria agreed to share her observations on her journey to the Orthodox Church and Sweden's growing Orthodox parishes.

RTE: Maria, can you tell us about your journey to Orthodoxy?

MARIA: Yes, but first I'd like to mention that I've just attended a lecture by Russian Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev at Uppsala University on "The Church Tradition and Scientific Theology." His critique of Protestant academic theology was very clear, both to me and to those of other faiths and traditions. In fact his statement, "...a Church that rejects Tradition and accepts Scripture selectively ceases to be a Church," was close to what I'd realized when I started on my way to Orthodoxy some years ago after struggling with faith and a lack of solid ground. I still struggle, but not in the same way, because in Orthodoxy there is always something to lean on. For me the key was Orthodoxy's shared common prayers and Church Tradition.

RTE: So your search began earlier?

MARIA: Yes, I believed in God already as a young girl, although my parents did not. When I was ten years old, I joined the local scouting organisation

Opposite: Elisabeth (Maria) Olsson.

where I came to know more about God and faith. In 1997, at fourteen, I made the decision to tell my scouting leaders that I believed in Jesus. It wasn't an overwhelming moment because such decisions are a long process for me, and I hadn't arrived at belief suddenly.

It was then that my struggles began. I couldn't understand why Christians weren't getting along (the Bible told me they should) or why each church had different answers to questions about Holy Communion, baptism, and the Holy Trinity. I also had a problem with prayer—I couldn't manage the spontaneous "free prayers." For many years I used a child's prayer and the "Our Father" every night before going to sleep. I knew I had to pray, and this set prayer was the only thing I could do. In some way, perhaps, it was also my first step towards Orthodoxy.

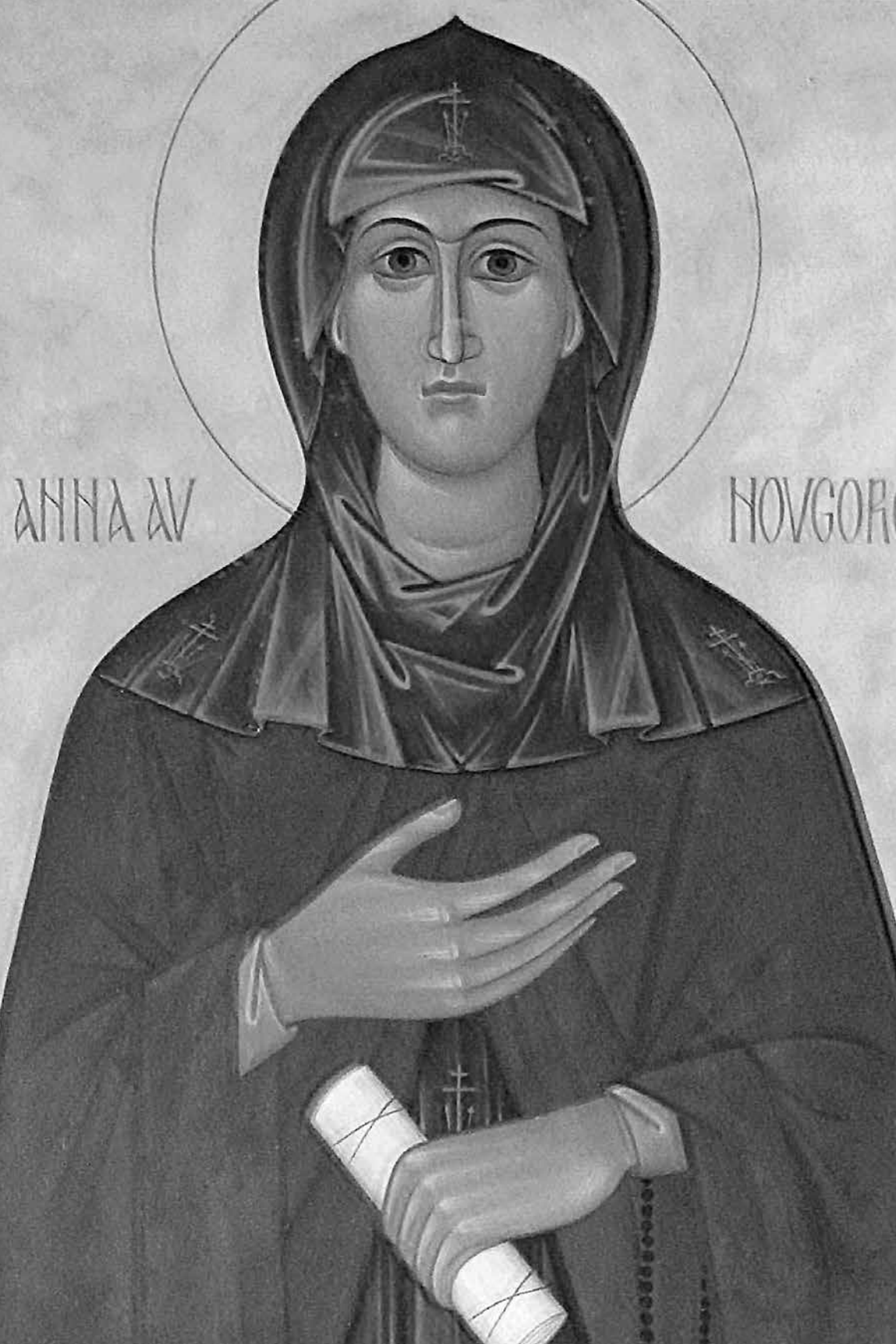
By 2005, at twenty-two, I still didn't have any certainty, so I applied for a year-long Bible college in Örebro, saying to God: "I'll give you one more chance to prove that You exist, because I'm not sure that I truly believe in You. If I get in, I'll give You this school year to prove Your existence." I was admitted. This year was special in many ways, but particularly important was the Divine Liturgy that I attended at Saint Anna of Novgorod's congregation in Örebro. I knew that I would return, but it didn't happen at once.

Although I was in a Bible college, I still didn't feel that I had a foundation. I had many friends who prayed and shared their stories about what Jesus had done in their lives, and I even thought that I'd experienced Him myself once in a while, but I was still struggling with how to think of baptism, Holy Communion, and the theology that we expressed through scripture study, music, and in other ways. Unclear as I was, I wanted to find a church that believed the way that I believed. One of my main difficulties was Holy Communion. So many people didn't understand the meaning and importance of it, and this broke my heart. Whether it is only seen as a remembrance or as the true Body and Blood of Christ, I knew that it should be done with reverence, because it is holy. My Christian friends were real believers and had had an experience of Christ, but I knew there was something lacking in our worship.

In 2006 I moved to Uppsala to study linguistics, and there I had to find a new church to belong to. Over the next three years, I was in four different congregations—and by that I mean four different "traditions"—but all of my earlier struggles were back. Finally, after hearing a public talk about another person's path to Orthodoxy, I took a course on Orthodox life and tradition, and

Opposite: Maria Olsson in front of St. Ignatios Academy, Södertälje, Sweden.





began attending Saint Anna of Novgorod's Orthodox congregation in Stockholm. I realised that I had met this congregation before and that I had said that I would return. In the end it was their view of Holy Communion, along with other things I had learned about the Church, that made me Orthodox.

On Holy Easter of 2011 I had my first Orthodox Holy Communion, after which my unnecessary struggles disappeared. I finally had solid ground under my feet! That autumn, I began my studies at St. Ignatios' Orthodox Theological Academy where I found an academic theology grounded in Tradition that we attempted to live out daily. There are now five people who have finished the course and passed the exams, including two women: myself from the Byzantine Orthodox tradition and one from the Syriac Orthodox tradition. Hopefully there will be four or five more graduates this year, both men and women.

RTE: And what did you bring away from your time at St. Ignatios?

MARIA: After two years of studies I've ended with more questions than I started with, but they are different now. I no longer wonder about the structure of the Church or the Holy Mysteries. I still don't fully understand the theology of the Holy Trinity, but at least I now have Church Fathers and theologians saying what I always believed, that the Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father. I did my exams in liturgics and church music, and I understand the meaning behind what we pray and sing in church. And finally: no one will ever again force me to pray "free prayers," but no one will stop me from it either.

So, when I attended this lecture by Metropolitan Hilarion at Uppsala University, I found myself smiling at his critique, because he was so clearly explaining all of the reasons I had become Orthodox.

RTE: St. Anna of Novgorod seems to have had a part to play in your conversion. What can you tell us about her?

MARIA: Saint Anna (originally Ingegärd) was chosen as the patron saint for the congregation as she is our first native Swedish Orthodox saint. Both she and her father, King Olof Skötkonung, are of great importance for Christianity in Sweden, but often go unnoticed here. Olof was the first Swedish king to remain Christian, and Anna, who was baptized with him, is viewed among the

Opposite: St. Anna of Novgorod.



Church of St. Anna of Novgorod, Eskilstuna, Sweden.



Chapel, St. Ignatios Theological Academy, Södertälje, Sweden.



Orthodox as Sweden's patron saint. Her story isn't well known in Sweden—only that she was the daughter of Olof Skötkonung, and that upon her marriage to Yaroslav the Wise she moved to Russia. There are accounts of her life before she moved to Russia in the old Scandinavian texts by Snorri Sturluson, and later in Russian Orthodox literature. Although baptized as Ingegärd, after her marriage she took the Russian name Irina, and when she became a nun after her husband's death, she was tonsured as Anna. She died in 1050 and there has been some discussion about whether she was buried in Novgorod or Kiev, but it is now believed to have been in Kiev, alongside her husband. Ingegärd-Anna was later declared a saint by the Russian Orthodox Church.

RTE: Part of the confusion about her burial might be that she is called St. Anna of Novgorod because her husband not only ruled Ukraine, but was also the hereditary prince of Novgorod, and in fact, of all of medieval Rus,' which attests to the common heritage of Ukraine and Russia from the tenth century. Also, now that she is a saint, we should be able to add her original name of Ingegärd to the list of saints' names for baptism. Can you tell us now about the Orthodox congregations named after St. Anna?

MARIA: During the 1960s, Saint Nicolas Estonian Orthodox Church in Stockholm began celebrating liturgies in Swedish and out of this practice, in November of 1969, a group of people met in Vadstena, a town in the south of Sweden, to establish the Saint Anna of Novgorod Orthodox Congregation under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Some years later, St. Anna's Congregation came under the Serbian Patriarchate. The establishment of this congregation was part of a progression toward regular services in Swedish, both for the growing number of native Swedes who were becoming Orthodox and the children and grandchildren of Orthodox immigrants to Sweden who were slowly losing their ethnic languages. It would also be a way for Swedish Christians and non-Christians who had become interested in Orthodoxy to enter into the universal Orthodox faith. We have a relic of St. Anna now in Eskilstuna.

RTE: It sounds as if the original St. Anna's that was first agreed on in Vadstena, and the congregations you met in Örebro, in Stockholm, and now Eskilstuna, are all part of the same group. How does that work?

Opposite: Husaby Church, Husaby, Sweden, near the spring where King Olof Skötkonung and Ingegärd were baptized.

MARIA: St. Anna's congregation is one parish with missions in more than one city. A few different congregations do this in the Nordic region, and organizationally, they call it one parish, but there are local groups in several cities. For instance, St. Anna's is in and around Stockholm, and eastern and northern Sweden, while St. Demetrios' congregation is in Kristianstad, Lund, and Malmö. St. Mary Magdalene's is in Göteborg only, for whom the priest is Archimandrite Gabriel from Holy Trinity Monastery, a Swedish-language monastery under the Swedish mission arm of the Serbian diocese. All of St. Anna's Swedish-speaking parishes are under the Serbian Patriarchate.

The Antiochians also have a Swedish-language mission in Göteborg, with a number of Antiochian families from Syria and Lebanon, a large congregation in Södertälje, one in Upplands Väsby and one in Gävle. They have two priests and one deacon, and the priest in Södertälje, Father Jean, is the Antiochian Patriarchal Vicar.

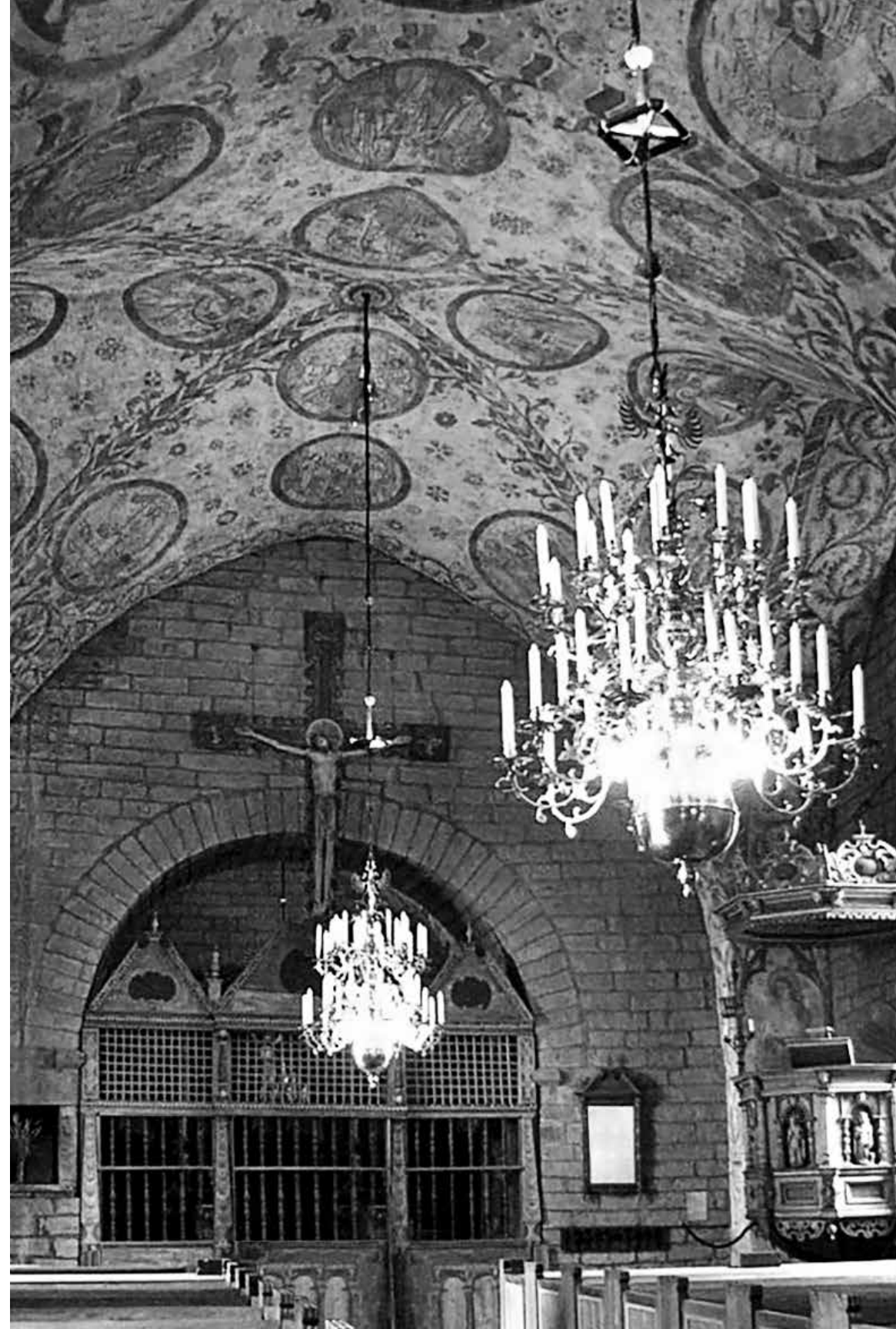
At present there are five mission congregations and at least one "on the way." The mission congregations are all working towards becoming independent congregations that can pay a priest's salary and rent or buy or build a church building. There are even smaller groups in other cities who are working towards becoming missions. To become a mission congregation there have to be at least five Orthodox believers who are wholeheartedly devoted to building up the congregation.

Many other Orthodox Churches—Greek, Russian, Romanian, Finnish—may serve a bit in Swedish, but more often in the traditional languages of their congregation. St. Anna's, which I attend, not only has liturgies in Swedish, but many of its members have a great interest in how Orthodoxy can be enriched by fitting into and participating in Swedish culture without losing or changing Church Tradition. St. Anna's congregation also cooperates with Saint Ignatios Theological Academy, which is the centre for the congregation and where the secretariat is located.

Father Misha Jaksic is the episcopal vicar, and other priests serving in this work are Archimandrite Tikhon Lundell and Father Mikael Liljeström. This work is carried out with the blessing of the Serbian-Orthodox Bishop Dositej of Great Britain and Scandinavia.

RTE: How did St. Anna's parish obtain their relic of St. Anna of Novgorod?

Opposite: Interior, Husaby Church.





Interior, Husaby Church, near Kinnekulle, Sweden.

Psalm 84 frescoed on the wall of Husaby Church, Husaby, Sweden.



MARIA: The relic of Saint Anna came to the congregation through the efforts of Father Nektarije, a Serbian priestmonk from the Serbian Orthodox diocese in Sweden, who had studied in Moscow at the theological academy of Holy Trinity/St. Sergius Lavra in Sergiev Posad from 2003-2006. He already knew about St. Anna and had asked about relics, but people he asked were not quite clear as to whether she had been buried in Kiev or Novgorod.

One day, while in Moscow celebrating the feast of St. Sava the Sanctified with the Serbian Orthodox representative in Russia, Bishop Antonije of Moravica, Fr. Nektarije met Archimandrite Zacchaeus representing the Orthodox Church in America, who told him that in 1970, the patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church had given the OCA parts of relics of western saints that are enshrined in Russia, including St. Anna of Novgorod. After their translation to the US, the relics had been divided again and another part was transferred back to the Orthodox Church of America's podvorye in Moscow.

As Father Nektarije relates, "One day I visited this church to venerate St. Anna's relic, and I knew that somehow she had to return to her native land. When I returned to Sweden in 2007, I was ordained a priestmonk and began making the contacts needed to bring back at least a small part of the holy relics." His Grace Bishop Dositej of Great Britain and Scandinavia officially requested a portion of the relic for Sweden, and Metropolitan Jonah of the Orthodox Church of America approved the request. The relic was brought to Sweden on February 28, 2009 by the Serbian Bishop Antonije of Moravica and Archimandrite Zacchaeus. The relic of St. Anna was received at a Divine Liturgy in Saint Sava's cathedral and about a month later placed in the chapel named after St. Anna in Eskilstuna.

RTE: Maria, what do you hope for the future of Orthodoxy in Sweden? I know that you have ideas involving native Swedish women converts, as well as those taking their first steps toward Orthodoxy.

MARIA: I'm still thinking about the women's groups. Not even a year has passed since I graduated from Saint Ignatios Theological Academy and I need some time to settle down to every-day life again—it's not the same life as at the Academy. Also, the inspiration for these kinds of gatherings must come from the people who will be involved, in this case the women themselves.

Opposite: The Ascension. Medieval ceiling frescoes, Husaby Church, Husaby, Sweden.

As for the future of Orthodoxy, I hope for a true understanding between the Orthodox churches in Sweden. We aren't many, as individuals or as congregations, and we have to be united and stand strong as one Church in Christ, not divided by our differences in ethnicity or language.

During my years at Saint Ignatios I had the privilege of meeting people from different backgrounds. I think especially about the youth that I've met, but also about others. There is a longing to understand what faith and theology are about, what we are praying, and, most importantly, to understand the liturgy. There is a real thirst here for deep nourishment to the roots.

Faith is something we have in common, we don't carry it by ourselves, and once we have this knowledge about faith, we should share it with one another. Evagrius Ponticos said: *Whoever prays in spirit and truth is a theologian, and a theologian is the one who prays in spirit and in truth.* It's the theologian's responsibility to carry this knowledge to the Church, but it is the responsibility of the Church to carry the theologian, so that he or she doesn't risk making God an object. This is what we learned at Saint Ignatios, where prayer and studies are closely connected with every-day work in a place that is both a home and an institution, and where love comes first.

My hope for the Orthodox future is that the youth and everyone in the Church will find ways to nourish our common roots. It is through understanding Tradition that we will find understanding between our churches. We can't carry this knowledge on our own, but we can carry it together. ✝

Opposite: Tower of Husaby Church near Kinnekulle, Sweden.





Staff and students of St. Ignatius Academy with Dean Michael Hfälm visiting Chalcedon. June, 2013.