

Book Review: The Dramatic Journey of Faith: Orthodox Religious Conversion in America
By Fr. Vasileios Thermos

Reviewed by Steven-John M. Harris, PhD

Fr. Vasileios Thermos has again presented us with a work to help and edify us for years to come. Some books come with all the academic authority and persuasion, and others are meant to offer helpful perspectives intended for everyone, such as we see with pop psychology. This title could be a textbook on the psychology of religion or a popular work introducing important ideas meant to inspire. Happily, this book is neither because it accomplishes so much more. It is well-researched, providing both probing, self-reported data of its population and categorizing the findings into extensive, meaningful, and practical means for clergy and parishioners alike. The author weaves together his research findings and in-depth knowledge of Orthodox theology with his grounding in personality, psychology, and sociology research.

This comprehensive research project, undertaken at the encouragement of His Grace Bishop Maxim Vasiljevic, evolved from 41 questionnaires and 109 interviews of converts conducted over a month in the summer of 2023. The subjects were drawn from thirteen parishes and two monasteries in the Western United States. Their “spiritual adventures,” willingly shared, were meticulously documented and formed into case studies for use in the work.

Further, many books like this relay important theological constructs while saying little about the role of the human subject, while others do just the latter; they become self-help books with psychology, with minimal relation to theology. Fr. Thermos balances theology and psychology effectively in his work *The Dramatic Journey of Faith* without sacrificing either. I am most impressed because his penetrating analysis of critical elements of conversion to the Orthodox Church is not just a matter of curious interest. Fr. Thermos reports and interprets the findings about *why and how converts join the church and the pastoral response; each plays a critical role in the quality, not the quantity*, of faith development.

This study, which informs this short but dense volume, examines persons who change denominations, researches the lives of former atheists and New Age believers, as well as individuals who grew up with trauma and suffered from mental disorders, and compares these and other converts quite deftly with cradle Orthodox at essential junctures in this work. Fr. Thermos demonstrates and amplifies the costs of not assessing each convert's background, motives, and expectations. Next, he examines the kinds of responses they experience from their clergy and parish, which may result in positive or negative outcomes.

This work is a must-read for every hierarch, clergy, and spiritual father. It recognizes the importance of those roles and aims to inform clergy about a long-neglected feature in Orthodox parishes: the subjective life of the parishioner. Christ stands at the door and knocks, but who answers? This book equips clergy with the knowledge of how parishioners look at their faith as cradle Orthodox, convert, and their relationships with each other, and provides clergy with the understanding of how to serve their parishioners better. On this note, I reflected on my own experiences and benefitted from evaluating my faith journey—I urge the reader to do the same.

Fr. Thermos beautifully reports his findings within the framework of Church history and its *eschata*, providing valuable insights into the church's mission. He also provides pastoral guidance on the all-important process of repentance. He wisely concludes late in the work that conversion is the work of a lifetime, because one is always repenting: it is not just a matter of finding the correct theology and religious stance, because both of those can become defensive.

To help achieve these goals, he illustrates a significantly broad range of developments in psychological development and how each of these experiences interacts with the kind of religious experience and its trajectory.

He reminds us that many converts disappear frequently, for various reasons, and that for too long, the church has seemed to blame or ignore the new convert. Fr. Thermos helps us see there is a far more complicated dynamic between convert, clergy, and parish than we might think.

Far from being an indictment of the church or clergy, Fr. Thermos successfully weaves his discussion of the subjective variables of converts as they interact with the theology of the community of believers, the Holy Trinity, repentance, and theosis into the overall eschatological vision of the Church in creation. At the same time, he does not retreat from illustrating and warning us of the dangers of rigid fundamentalism, authoritarianism, shallow involvement in the parish, and of failing to address social forces such as LGBTQ and other matters that converts bring. Fr. Thermos strikingly remarks that while theology is critical, *mere doctrinal teaching remains meaningless to the degree it is not in tune with each one's subjectivity*" (p. 49). He challenges us to consider our *praxis* and how it affects the individual. While the Church's teachings are immutable, Fr. Thermos seems to be saying that a postmodern world brings a wide variety of sensibilities that require great care in learning about them and helping converts understand divine truths. He reminds us of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann's poignant reminder that the Church needs to change to stay the same.

To illustrate the importance of understanding the background of the convert, he conveys the well-researched notion that for abused children, their troubled relationships inform the ways they perceive God. Their attachment patterns may inhibit accepting love, grace, and forgiveness. Also, he illustrates how "Regression can be disguised as a conversion" (p. 65). Religion, we learn, can be an escape, a regression, or a defense against healthy emotional and spiritual growth rather than engagement in relationships, including with God.

When he addresses personality and character traits, we are shown how inevitable traits will play out in the life of the parish, and he cites Studzinski, "Conversion requires a person to discern what is to be left behind and what is to be welcomed."¹ In his sophisticated but precise analysis, Fr. Thermos shows how some individuals recreate the same maladaptive patterns in their new faith while others defensively inflict their defenses and difficulties on others and themselves to their detriment. We witness the paranoid or borderline personality disorder who

¹ Raymond Studzinski, *Spiritual Direction and Midlife Development* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 1069.

attempts to instill fanaticism into the parish's life. Referring to disturbed relationship patterns, he writes, "Establishing a healthy personal relationship with Christ presupposes correcting inner representations about God and, in turn, shapes better the personality" (p. 127), and not just embracing a new doctrine. To this point, he illustrates that true doctrines take hold in individuals who can learn to embrace them more authentically. He balances this with the cherished truth cited by Nissiotis, "The individual choice of Man is only really individual if it is made in the sense of an answer to the call of God."²

Rather boldly, he asks a question that seems to permeate this work, "To what [has] the convert actually converted?" (p. 73). Fr. Thermos does not retreat from the position of psychology's importance to pastoral care. It is clear from this writing that Fr. Thermos is not advocating an alternative approach to religion; instead, he is reporting how clergy can assist converts to practice their faith more meaningfully by understanding some of the basics of human personality.

Beautifully comparing conversion to marriage and all that this commitment entails, he relates the Scripture, "My beloved is mine, and I am His" (Song 2:16) (p. 88).

It isn't easy to sum up the extensive material covered in this 180-page work. Considering the few details I have outlined here, Fr. Thermos has dramatically expanded our idea of the many facets that are going on in the dynamism of the *synergeia*, the work of the parishioner with God, with the assistance of their priest, God's representative, and the whole of the Body of Christ. The initial glimpse into this synergetic dynamic may be seen and shepherded along in the early conversion process. This gift to us all can enhance us. Thermos's detailed study and analyses should be a companion for many Orthodox for years to come.

² Nikos Nissiotis, "Conversion and the Church," *The Ecumenical Review* 19:3 (1967), 264.