

## What is the difference between an orthodox person and a convert? (Fr. Stephen Powley)

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*Cradle Orthodox*

You no doubt mean someone who is born into an Orthodox family and is baptized as an infant versus someone who converts to the Orthodox Faith from some other religion. As far as the Orthodox Church is concerned there is no difference. They are both members of the Holy Orthodox Faith and have the opportunity to grow toward Theosis and salvation through a Sacramental life of faith. Both of these individuals have positive and negative possibilities for their spiritual lives.

On the positive side, a cradle Orthodox has the wonderful opportunity of growing in the Orthodox life and faith from their earliest years. They have the opportunity to partake in the Holy Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ Himself, each week

throughout their lives. They can also be blessed with other Sacraments of the Faith such as Holy Confession and Holy Unction regularly. They live in a community of Faith where they can find a spouse one day and participate in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. They also can witness some of the community being ordained to the Holy Priesthood or be tonsured as Monastics. They also experience the support of the entire Orthodox family when a loved one falls asleep in the Lord and is provided an Orthodox funeral. Their whole lives they are in an environment where they can learn and grow in their spiritual lives to become mature Orthodox Christians.

On the negative side, the cradle Orthodox may be raised in a very nominal home, where the Faith is not practiced or even talked about. They can think of themselves as Orthodox because they show up at Church on Pascha and Christmas, but they know very, very little of what it means to be a practicing Orthodox Christian. The cradle Orthodox may be raised in a home where they do go to Church most Sundays, but it has become more of a «club» that they belong to without ever learning about their Faith. They enjoy their friends and family, but they do not enter into an Orthodox life. Because of this, they can sometimes resent the «converts» or «seekers» who come to the Church and may actually discourage visitors from the pursuit of Orthodoxy. Some cradle Orthodox may even fall away from the Faith when they become teenagers or while in college. Some return later when they marry, but some end up becoming «converts» to a different religion because they never really knew what Orthodoxy believed. Others may continue to go to Church, but they never have a hunger to learn more about their Faith.

On the positive side, some «converts» may become Orthodox because they have studied the Faith and have come to believe with all their hearts that the Orthodox Church is indeed the very Church that Christ started on this earth. They bring a hunger and a zeal for the Faith that is often infectious to many others in their Church. They are excited to serve the Lord and His Church in any way they can. They often recognize the need to support the Church with both their time and their finances. Some of them also bring a love of the Holy Scriptures and of the writings of the Early Fathers to the Church. «Converts» may also share their Orthodox Faith with others and help them to eventually become members of the Faith as well. Because this is a conscious decision they made, they are very committed to living and growing in their faith.

On the negative side, some «converts» become Orthodox for the sake of marrying an Orthodox person. They have no desire to learn about or practice the Faith. They simply wanted to get married. They are likely not to be seen much around the

Church until their children need baptism or someone needs a funeral. Some “converts” become overzealous, taking on a legalistic, “super-Orthodox” approach to the Faith. They fast, pray, and attend Church better than anyone and can become judgmental of those who are not following the Faith as they are doing. There are other «converts» who come to Orthodoxy but do not leave behind their previous religious beliefs. They can become argumentative and divisive within the Church. Some have even left Orthodoxy and taken others with them to some other religion. Some other «converts» have come to Orthodoxy because they loved the services, but when their Faith was tested by someone or something, they leave because they were never really convinced that this is the Church that Jesus started on this earth.

On a side note, since the Church does not view cradle Orthodox and «converts» as being spiritually different, why should the members of the Church see a difference? Being Orthodox Christians in good standing with the Church and practicing the Faith to the best of their abilities is what is really important. The date of baptism/chrisamation is simply the starting line to the glorious race that God has called us to run with perseverance:

***“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.”***

It is the finish line that all of us should be concerned about. With that in mind, perhaps we should drop the term «converts» and simply view each other as brothers and sisters, helping each other on the path to salvation. At what point should the term «convert» be dropped: one year, ten years ...30 years... at their funeral?? Perhaps it should be dropped when they come up out of the Baptismal waters and/or Holy Chrism is applied. At that point, they are Orthodox believers, very much a part of the household of Faith!

*By Fr. Stephen Powley*

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