

## From Wonder to the Will of God: A Story of Holy Ordination



He was fifteen years old. A slight rail of a teenager, a wisp of experience, Sam found himself drawn to the Greek Festival at Saints Constantine and Helen Cathedral in Richmond, Virginia. He came from rural Virginia, Powhatan to be exact, and was raised by a family dedicated to Bible teaching. Though he was more accustomed to country ham and biscuits, traditional fare of the Old Dominion, Sam was soon satiated by the pleasures of Greek cuisine. Allowing himself to be allured by curiosity, Sam ventured with a sense of adventure into the nave of the church, where his eyes soaked in the beauty all around him. His curiosity took over from there. Like an eagle that had just found its prey, he was focused, attentive, never ceasing to gaze and gape with wonder. Rapt with awe, Sam's eyes leapt as if they had a mind of their own, leaping from one fascinating item to the next. Beholding the icons, the iconostasis, the long columns and barreled ceiling with wide-eyed vision, Sam was like a child who had just discovered a chocolate fountain in his backyard. He could not help himself. Sam was spell-bound, transfixed by haloes and incense, candles, the monumental simplicity of the building itself, the solemnity and mystery of the holy sanctuary. He who had been seeking, now discovered a new and exhilarating find. His journey had begun.

I was there to witness his enchantment. I could "hear" the dialogue that was going

on inside him, “I have found it! (Eureka!),” Words echoing within him, “I have finally found what I have been looking for, the true Faith, to which I am now compelled to explore.” And explore he did. As an assistant priest at this historic church, I was privileged to witness Sam’s determined trek into the depths of our Orthodox Christian heritage, an odyssey that would take up the greater part of two decades. Starting with regularly attending the Divine Liturgy and followed up by sitting in on catechism classes, Sam delved deeply into the teachings and practices of the Orthodox Christian Faith. Unlike his peers, Sam eschewed the usual vagaries of teen life—the mall, parties, dances, and so forth—and instead focused himself on the pursuit of learning. He devoured books and articles and websites with an insatiable hunger, an enthusiasm that just had to know more and more, to go deeper and deeper into the blessed inheritance of The True Faith we have received.

Serious and dedicated to his quest, Sam chose to become Orthodox not long after his initial forays into the faith. He chose as his Godfather a certain Professor, Dr. Andrew Sharp, who himself was drawn to Orthodoxy some years earlier. An academic, Dr. Sharp was able to respond to Sam’s ceaselessly challenging questions. Sam was also an orbital of my own family. Indeed, every Pascha for some twenty years, Sam had a place at our family table following the Resurrection service, where we never tired of breaking the long fast with avgolemeno soup and keftethes, and even some Chik-FilA chicken strips. He was easily an adopted son.

In hindsight, Sam’s footsteps were undoubtedly guided by the Holy Spirit, an insight that is obvious to me now, but not so apparent to me back then. All I knew, and felt committed to, was the idea of being hospitable and welcoming. I would do the best I could to offer him my understanding of The Faith, and see where all this teaching and guidance would lead. But it was he himself who took up the mantle of investigation, and searched diligently and doggedly for the answers to his unending questions. Hindsight now reveals startling conclusions to me, namely that it was clearly the Holy Spirit at work, far beyond my comprehension to absorb.

During the course of Sam’s spiritual development, I would become his “Pneumatikos,” an intriguing Greek word meaning his “Confessor” or “Spiritual Father.” As such, I would see Sam, and listen to his many concerns, through his years at high school, college, and eventually at the Holy Cross Seminary itself. There were the usual host of issues common to young adults, and other dilemmas to encounter, as we would spend hours upon hours in dialogue and prayer. But through time we were able to cross the Rubicon of understanding, when Sam found himself a graduate and ready to serve. Then the great void appeared, the challenge of the unknown “What’s next” so pervasive among young people, and we

knew that his next “real life” level education was now upon us. Unsure where to go, but committed to serving others in need, Sam took a social work job with the Latino community in Philadelphia, Pa. Ever the polyglot, Sam quickly learned how to converse and read in Spanish, but still hungered to serve more directly. He then offered his talents to the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in Wyckoff, New Jersey, where he had the great benefit to be mentored by Father Bill Gikas, a talented and brilliant clergyman of the Metropolis of New Jersey. There Sam learned how to hone his talents and direct youth in a disciplined and organized manner as a “Pastoral Assistant,” while also chanting and leading them in worship. His three years there were most fruitful, as Sam was blessed to learn from an experienced priest how to touch the lives of people there.

Wanting to be closer to family, Sam moved to Virginia, where he served as my “Pastoral Assistant” at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in Virginia Beach. I would be blessed to have him as my “wing-man” for the next six years, during which the size and dynamism of our parish doubled. An excellent instructor, speaker, presenter, and apologist for the Orthodox Faith, Sam would bring in a number of “Newly Illumined” (Orthodox lingo for “Converts”) to the Orthodox Faith. Among these were various seekers, young adults, and even whole families who were drawn by Sam’s ability to connect with them, given their origins, mostly from the Protestant and Evangelical world. But I know, as well, that it was his kindness and approachable manner that drew people to him. They could sense in him, just as I have, that Sam is “The Real Deal,” a true Christian. What a magnet of the Holy Spirit! Glory to God! For it is God alone Who calls such earnest individuals, Faith Multipliers, into the Church. And so these were years where our community could count on having a translator, a chanter, an administrator, a youth director, a confidant, a counselor, an exemplar of the life in Christ all in one person. I will always be grateful that our paths would cross so well.

But then, when “The fullness of time had come,” with the pastoral visit of His Eminence Metropolitan Apostolos, Sam’s life would turn dramatically. Knowing that Sam was devoted to becoming a celibate priest, His Eminence wisely assigned Sam to further his education alongside a worthy veteran of the Archimandrite world, Father Nektarios Cottros, the Proistamenos of the St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Piscataway, New Jersey and now the Chancellor of our holy Metropolis. Deeply knowledgeable about the rubrics of liturgical life and the ins and outs of large parish life, as well as navigating the world of monastic life, Father Nektarios was commissioned to mentor the willing Sam. He would prove to be a great teacher for Sam, so that in a very short period of time, Sam was ordained to the Holy Diaconate at his newly adopted home in New Jersey, and would also receive the

blessing of the monastic schema at the same time. He would be given the noble name of “Symeon,” the “God-Receiver ” by His Eminence Metropolitan Apostolos, whose choice was led by the Holy Spirit. Everyone present at the ordination was uplifted by such a breath-taking name! Soon thereafter, the newly minted Deacon Symeon would ascend to the rank of the Holy Priesthood, again by the hand of the noble Metropolitan, in the church where he was originally received into the Orthodox Faith, the Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Richmond, Virginia.

As I pen these words, I am filled with such immense gratitude to God. For I have been blessed to witness eight ordinations in the last four years, all of which have revolved around young men close to my heart. Along with my own two sons and son-in-law, all of whom have entered the holy priesthood, Sam had also become one of my own family. On a personal note, I would like to say that during these blessed Ordination services, the patterns of which I was growing well accustomed, I was always available to help or console or to lift up one of these young men whenever they needed the boost. I would watch them carefully to see that they were composed and able to manage themselves through the long rite of Apostolic Succession. I might, for instance, just give a brief touch or say a kind word, anything I could to offer encouragement at that particularly daunting hour. And so during Deacon Symeon’s Ordination service to the holy priesthood, I constantly looked toward him to see if I could ascertain some hint of need or anxiety. I had grown accustomed to being the helper, the father, the counselor, the healer. But as the movements of the liturgy went on, I never saw even a glint of need from my spiritual son. He was at peace, calm and collected. He did not need me. That doe-eyed fifteen year old had become a man. He was now a priest forever according to the will of God. He was now, as he always was, in the hands of God. Thank God! Now, therefore, I offer these words with extreme humility, and admittedly with some pride as well, some rejoicing, and mostly with gratitude. For the Holy Spirit watches over The Church. Glory to God for all things! From newly illumined to newly chosen, Axios to Father Symeon Williams, servant of the Lord!

Father John Manuel

Photo: Greek Orthodox Metropolis of New Jersey

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