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Yelena Popovic, from Hollywood to faith: Man can never be happy if he doesn’t have God in his heart

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“Man can never be happy if he doesn’t have God in his heart,” says Yelena Popovic, who fled the war in former Yugoslavia and made herself a life in Los Angeles and an acting career at Hollywood. She discovered Orthodoxy in America, or, rather said, she re-tapped to her inner spiritual identity inherited from her Serbian family.

This spiritual breakthrough changed her life for the better. Now she has come to write, direct and produce a movie about the life of a saint – one much beloved by Romanians: St Nectarios.

Yelena Popovic has recently sat down with Basilica.ro, telling the story of her spiritual path: a girl born in a former communist country, she was not baptized before she fled to America. But she was raised by tapping into the spiritual treasure of the Serbian people’s reverence for the saints.

A relationship with the saints
“I couldn’t say that I was Orthodox. I was not baptized, according to my parents, you know, at the time, communism was still very present and a lot of people feared the social consequences of going to church,” she explains.

“My parents were not against God, but they simply weren’t practicing Christians. However, for whatever reason, I always had faith in God, I always knew that He existed,” she says.

“When I left Yugoslavia, I did not know who Jesus Christ was, I did not know who the Mother of God was. But I knew who St. Nicholas was, because he was celebrated in Serbia. We had slavas, saints celebrations. My father’s family had, for many generations, celebrated St. Nicholas. So, I knew who the saints were. I also knew of St. Paraskeva.”

“There was a spring dedicated to her. I remember we were, 10-12, we will take a bus and go there to pray to St Paraskeva. I always felt there was this other world,

but I did not know the details," he recalls.

"Imagine I didn't know who Jesus Christ was! I found that out in America. People that were Protestant gave me the first Bible to read. And I must say that I truly fell in love with Jesus at the time. He was always in my mind. I was very high on that love, you know."

Life in Hollywood
As a Hollywood actress, she became friends with a lot of artists.

"Those were people that I liked hanging out with. A lot of them – and I'm not saying this from judgment, because I have a lot of love and respect for them – were into different substances. They would, unfortunately use drugs or alcohol. I personally didn't have any desire for that. I like to be the way I am even if it doesn't feel good," she confesses.

"But I used to be around them a lot. And I used to talk to them about Jesus. But they knew I really did it from my heart."

An improbable advice from a former addict
"There was a Serbian lady I met at that time, who unfortunately had a terrible substance addiction and used heavy drugs. A few years later, she called me and said, among other things: 'Yelena, where are you going to church? You need to come to the Orthodox Church. I remember you talking about Jesus all the time, but you need to be part of the Church,'" says Yelena Popovic.

"I was 25 years old. Three years before, I had gotten baptized into the Serbian Church, because I wanted to do what my ancestors had done. But I didn't really live an Orthodox life. I did that because I felt I had to be part of the Church, but I never went to Confession and Communion."

"I went to Father Peter in the Serbian Church of Saint Sava. And I said I wanted to have my first Confession and Communion," she recalls.

"I came with a huge list. I have always been very honest. I'm not afraid to say it, I can say it in front of 1000 people. Maybe there's something about me, I say it the way it is. So I just unloaded everything, without any shame."

"I mean, of course, I'm ashamed of my sins. But I said: Okay, if Christ is standing there, I will shame the devil big time right now. I remember till today, there was a spider that was going around the icon of Christ while I was confessing," she adds.

"After the first Communion, I experienced grace for six to seven hours. I was crying

and laughing at the same time. When I called my best friend, Meredith, she thought I had gotten drunk for the first time in my life.”

Doing good, fighting the good fight

“From that moment on, I said: Now I am not looking back and I’m going full forward. I read all the books: the Holy Fathers, the Philokalia,” remembers Yelena.

“I can share this with people, especially young people that get on this path: Once you get on that path, the spiritual struggle is so powerful. I asked my spiritual father why I seemed to be much worse than before.”

He said not to worry and that she was entering a different phase, when spiritual attacks come.

“It was year 2000 when my conversion happened and I was lucky because of my reading of Philokalia. I fell in love with St. Anthony the Great because he was a warrior fighting the demons. We, Serbs, are warriors, too. When I heard there was a monastery of St. Anthony somewhere in Arizona, which is not far from California, I was obsessed to get there.”

“I was always attracted to monastic life, not necessarily that I wanted to be a nun, but they’ve helped me to find my spiritual path. I think monasteries are very important, because not only they pray for us and for the whole world, but they can really help people,” she adds.

“I met Gheronda Ephraim from Arizona, I met the monks and until today I’m very close to them. My mind was shaped between them and my father who was closest to me in Los Angeles, where I was able to go every day. As a beginner, I needed to have a church nearby.”

“I was going through a lot of pain, a lot of suffering and a lot of struggle, so I really needed to get on my knees and pray and to go to religious services”, Yelena Popovic explains.

“But look, 12 years later after all this, I’m married and have another son, Nikolai.”

And, in addition to all that, she has become professionally accomplished, completing an Orthodox film which tells the story of St Nectarios of Aegina.

A film connected to the memory of her father

She thinks the trigger was the memory of her father: “He never went to church, but was a very righteous man. He never transgressed God’s commandments. And I’ve heard all my life that he should not have done that”.

Her father was the chief civil engineer of Serbia, but did not want to steal or lie, which made him lose his job from the highly-corrupted communist environment. He worked a modest job in a very small factory after that.

“When he died, in 2011, I couldn’t go to his funeral because of my immigration status. When I was able to go to Belgrade, in July 2012, I saw this book about St Nectarios in a monastery.”

She bought it to read on the plane. “Before reading it, I had never thought of making a film about a saint!”

But at the time she did know she wanted to make films “to help the humanity, to bring light, to do something good as a Christian and as a person who believes in good”.

“I wanted to counteract all the darkness around and especially if you are in Hollywood, you would know what I’m talking about,” she says.

This is how the “Man of God” movie came to being – a project that matured for eight years before becoming reality, with the support of Mount Athos’ Vatopaidi Monastery.

The movie is released in Romania on November 29, 2022.

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