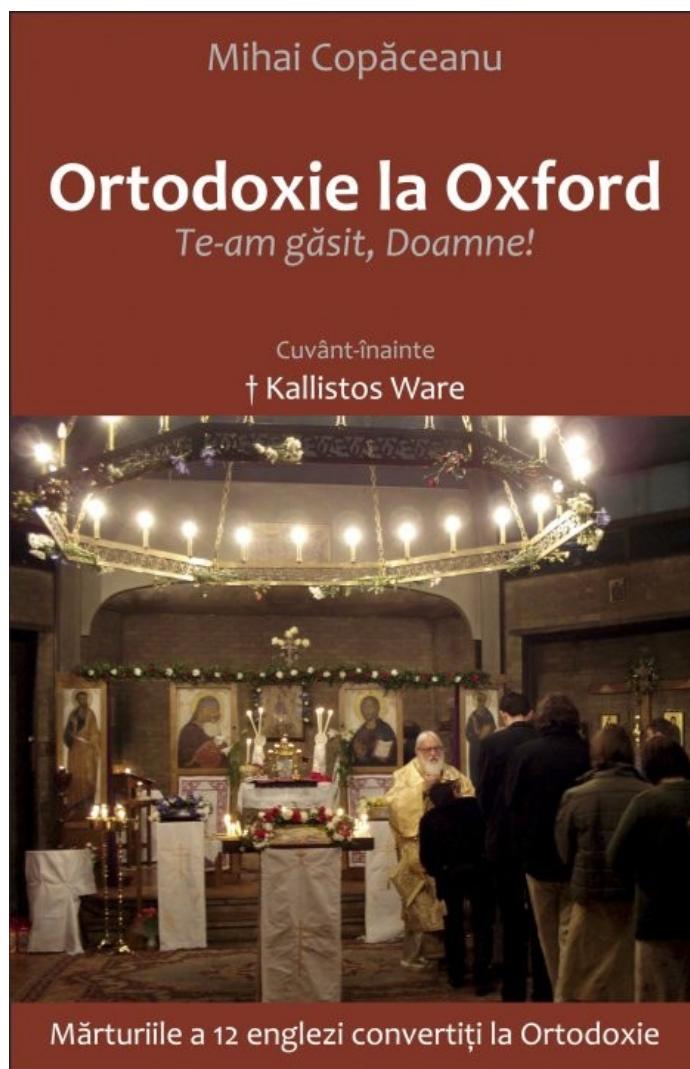


A Witness in Romanian

Two weeks ago there appeared in Romanian a new book, which gives interviews with twelve Western people about Orthodoxy. These are listed as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, Dr Basil Osborne, Richard Swinburne, Fr Ian Graham, Fr Steven Platt, Fr Seraphim Vänttinen Newton, Fr Andrew Phillips, Gladys Bland, Wendy Robinson, James Hyndman, Fr Paul Elliot and James Morton. The short interview with the editor is printed in English below.



1. The first question is about your childhood, your family, place of birth and friends.

I was born in Colchester and lived in a nearby village in the country, between two farms. My family were very simple people, with no religion, though five years ago I discovered that my mother's grandmother had come from the Carpathians. My mother, who died in 2001, did not know this. I have two elder brothers. My grandparents had worked on the land or been close to it. My early childhood, until the age of about seven, was very happy, but without a Church. My friends were the fields, the trees, the clouds, the sky and the birds.

2. Please describe you personality and your activities as a teenager? (Hobbies, favourite books/music/ vacation). Education.

I read a lot, I worked in the garden, I played in the fields. I was very independent. I had always liked the sounds of words and languages and when I was 12 I began to teach myself Russian. I do not know why, but I had always felt attracted to Russia and Russian things.

3. What was your first contact with Orthodoxy?

Through books, the Russian language and literature. I felt in them the same atmosphere that I had known in my early childhood.

4. What kind of people influenced you (authors, priests)?

Nobody. I did not know any priests. Just God influenced me.

When you decided exactly to enter the Orthodox Church? Why Orthodoxy? Why the Russian Church? Your preparation? Spiritual fathers.

I decided to join the Orthodox Church when I was 14-15. I had visited Non-Orthodox churches and did not find anything in them. For me they were empty, just museums. To visit an Orthodox Church, I had to wait until I was 16. At once I felt at home, as though I had always been there, I had always thought such things. I found that only the Russian Church would take English people. The Greek Church said, ‘Go away. Only Greeks can be Orthodox’. Other Orthodox Churches also told me that Orthodoxy was a national religion and that therefore English people could not join. In general, this is the same situation today. Only the Russians were different, though not all of them. I prepared myself through praying and reading.

There are no spiritual fathers in the West. The last was St John of Shanghai, who reposed in 1966.

Which was your family attitude? They agree or not? Discussions/conflicts/support?

My family would not allow me to join the Orthodox Church until I was 18. There were no discussions, conflicts or support. I just had to be patient. I joined the Orthodox Church when I was 18.

Did you find anything difficult inside Orthodoxy? For example, I know English people who converted to Orthodoxy but who cannot kiss icons.

Everything was easy, natural. Perhaps this was because I had had no previous religious background in heterodoxy.

How was your life changed by conversion?

I received the support, the grace from the sacraments, to live as a Christian.

The day of you chrismation! Preparation, expectations, feelings.

I had been waiting for years, so I felt that this long preparation was the fulfilment of God’s will. There was a terrible thunderstorm during the service of reception. I felt on that day that at last I

had been allowed to come home. At last I was where I should always have been, but from where people had unnaturally separated me.

Each religion has a cultural influence. How does an Englishman (with English culture and traditions) see “Orthodox behaviour”? I ask you, because I found your books about English spirituality, the 300 saints of England, the early English Church. This implies that you are still English. Some Christians view Orthodoxy as something belonging to Eastern European countries and that it is just for Russians, Greeks, Serbs etc. I am referring to this mixture of culture, nationality and Orthodoxy.

I find ‘Orthodox behaviour’ natural. I believe that the undeformed soul is naturally Christian, naturally Orthodox. This is what the Church Fathers say. If you are Orthodox in your soul, then your culture also becomes Orthodox, whatever language it speaks. England in its childhood was Orthodox, before they invented Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism and all those other things. The main thing about us is not our passport – British, Romanian or whatever – the main thing about us is whether we are Orthodox, whether we have a spiritual passport. Then everything will fall into place, quite naturally.

Your wife is by birth Romanian?

Her grandfather was Romanian, but she has never been to Romania and does not speak Romanian.

What is specific to Russian Orthodox behaviour? For instance I appreciate it very much during the Liturgy before communion when the Russians are always very disciplined with their arms folded on their chests, which is not the case in a Romanian Church where everyone is agitated. What can we learn from Russian discipline (prayer, canons, behaviour, communion only after confession.)

Sometimes Russians can be quite ritualistic. This can be positive (as you have noticed above), but it can also be negative, with an attachment to externals. Ritual helps us, but it is only a means, not the aim. The aim is to acquire the Holy Spirit.

What do you enjoy mostly in Orthodoxy?

Enjoy is the wrong word. In the Orthodox Church I hope to save my soul.

How did you decide to become a priest (after 16 years)?

I did not decide. God decided for me. I just obeyed God, despite the will of others. Man proposes, but God disposes.

5. Give us some example of your favourite Holy Fathers or maybe modern writers.

The Lives of the Saints. This includes recent saints, the New Martyrs and holy elders who have been canonised by the Church.

What do you not like in the Orthodox Church? What do we have to change (behaviour, attitude, response to needs etc)?

The Church does not change. The Church is Christ’s. It is we who must change, so that we live in a Church way.

I regret one thing. This is that so many Orthodox in Eastern Europe are only nominally Orthodox, they do not practise their Faith. In general, whether in Romania, Russia, Greece, Serbia or Bulgaria, most Orthodox are not conscious of the great gift that God has given them – the Church of God. This is spiritually dangerous, because they can lose their Faith – this already happened once under Communism – it can happen again. God will take away from us the Church if we do not value Her, just as He took the Church away from the Jews and gave it to the Gentiles.

What are your recommendations for an English person who wants to become Orthodox?

Go to the services. Follow the Church. Pray. Receive the sacraments. Read the Gospels and the Lives of the Saints. Venerate their icons. Live according to the commandments. Go on pilgrimages to countries where Orthodoxy is still relatively strong.