



## *Our Journey to the Orthodox Church!*

Christmas, 2020

Dear family and friends,

Many of you reading this letter will be as surprised as we ourselves to discover that “Hsiang Ping (Champagne) Chang” and “Frank Erdman” are now “Matushka Photini Erdman” and “Father Photie Erdman” serving as a matushka and priest in the Orthodox Church! So how did it happen? Good question!

We first met back in 2002 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, at a language school where I was teaching international executives business English, and Champagne, in another program, was a Chinese student from Taiwan learning English. We were both single at the time and God was the last thing on either of our minds. We were each living in the moment, and in that moment, we liked each other a lot. Nevertheless, after a few months and a tearful farewell, Champagne finished her studies and returned to her life in Taiwan, while I did the same in Florida.

Later, in 2006, she would come back to visit, this time in New York for a couple of months, but still we recognized that our lives, like our worlds, were far apart. God, however, had begun to awaken me to a new life that I had never known before.

This life actually had begun for me earlier in Florida when two successive deadly hurricanes followed one another so quickly that we were forced to leave our windows boarded up after the first one hit our coast in anticipation of the second’s soon arrival. In the meantime,

we waited in the darkness both day and night without electricity. Darkness... this, I thought, must be what hell is like!

At that moment a craving for light was born in me. The second hurricane came and went, our windows were unboarded at last, and the electricity was restored. All was well! Or so I thought. Strangely, however, my craving for light only intensified.

To try to satisfy this craving, I went back to verses I remembered in the Bible about the Light. At Christmas time we think, of course, of the Star the wisemen saw in the east that led them to Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Later Jesus Christ Himself would say: "I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life!"

This is exactly what I wanted: to be delivered from the growing darkness I had first felt in my soul in Florida during those hurricanes and which threatened to overwhelm me forever, and to have instead the Light of Life! But how could I do this?

Before this time, I had found out about something I had never even heard of growing up in Princeton, New Jersey: The Orthodox Church. My family had all been Presbyterians, with generations of Presbyterian ministers. Erdman Hall at Princeton University, in fact, had been named after my grandfather's brother, Charles Erdman. Not only was it tacitly expected, it actually seemed almost predestined, that I would become a Presbyterian minister too.

And so become one I did! I knew, however, that this was not the Church I read about in the Bible. I just assumed that Church didn't exist anymore! How wrong could I be?!

Years later, when I was in my late 30's, I found myself talking on the phone with an ex-Episcopalian priest who had converted to Orthodoxy. As I was recounting to him my spiritual pilgrimage, he said to me words I will never forget: "Frank, the Church you have been looking for all your life, has existed for 2000 years!"

Right then and there, I began my journey to discover the Orthodox Church for myself! This journey was not easy. It would include my turning down an opportunity to become an Orthodox priest immediately. I turned it down because it seemed too ethnic for me, and my family was horrified. After all, I was a Presbyterian American who grew up in Princeton, and certainly neither Greek nor Russian! As it turned out, rejecting the Orthodox Church at that time was the biggest mistake I would ever make in my life.

Not only did I lose the Church, but, ultimately, I even lost my faith in God. It was during this period of my life that Champagne and I had met in Florida back in 2002. But it was now 2007 and we had said our farewells to each other for the last time the year earlier, in 2006. I was now finally alone in the darkness, and this darkness was quickly closing in all around me.

That was when I began to pray.

As I did Bible randomly reading about a Samaria who was had had many an unquenchable something

That was Jesus at a well. her for a drink, he was hitting on suddenly he said, Gift of God, and you for a drink, asked Him, and given you Living

This tracks. And it mine as well. wanted more than it was what I anything else too.

As I read that the “Gift of ability actually to lives, and that the talking to, Jesus actually God become a man at us, for this me!



*The Orthodox Chapel of the Seven Holy Youths!*

This knowledge would change my life forever, taking me out of the darkness and leading me to Christ’s unspeakable, uncreated Light which I had first heard about in the Orthodox Church!

Later that Spring of 2007, Champagne flew back to New York from Taiwan because she wanted to say goodbye to me forever in person. I was very pleased with this because I couldn’t wait to introduce her to the Samaritan woman I had met in the Bible who had introduced me in turn to the discovery of the uncreated Light in Christ! By the way, when that woman from Samaria was later baptized as a Christian, she was given the Christian name of “Photini,” which means in Greek, “the Enlightened One!”

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on, I discovered God” was the know God in our person she was Christ, was Himself who had Christmas time for woman and for

To her amazement, to her Taoist/pagan family's amazement, and to all her friends' amazement, Champagne was baptized in the Orthodox Church here in New York later that year and given as her baptismal name, "Photini!" It would still take me several more years, but in 2011, I too was baptized into the Orthodox Church and given the name "Photie," the male version of "Photini!" Glory to God for His amazing grace!

In 2012, Photini and I were married in the Orthodox Church here in New York. Later I would become a Reader, and then a Deacon, and finally, in 2018, I was ordained to the Holy Priesthood at the Cathedral Church of the monastery in Jordanville, New York, by his Eminence, Metropolitan Hilarion. After serving as a priest there in Jordanville for a year, I was blessed by the Metropolitan to begin a new Orthodox Mission in Morris, New York: The Orthodox Chapel of the Seven Holy Youths of Ephesus, where Matushka Photini and I are pictured in the photos above!

What both Matushka Photini and I desire more than anything else is for others to come and learn about the Orthodox Church as we have! This, I can speak from personal experience, is absolutely the best kept secret in America! I have discovered that the Orthodox Church is not in reality either Greek or Russian at all! It is rather the very same Church we read about in the book of Acts which Christ came to found some 2000 years ago!

And so Matushka Photini and I invite you, as Jesus did the first disciples, to "come and see" this Church which is alive and well in all the world today! When we invite you "to come and see" this Church, we literally mean come and visit us here for a weekend retreat where you can experience for yourself our services, be able to talk about your own spiritual pilgrimages, and learn first-hand about this best-kept secret, the Orthodox Church! Don't wait until half of your life is over to find out about the Orthodox Church as we had to do – come now!

We look forward God-willing to welcoming you soon to the Orthodox Chapel of the Seven Holy Youths of Ephesus!

Wishing you all a very Merry Christmas, and God's Blessings in your lives in the New Year ahead!

With love in Christ,

Fr. Photie and Mat. Photini

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