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Topic #3

*How do you respond to people who question your belief in God and participation in the life of the Church?*

How do **you** know God is real? Why do you go to church all the time? At some point in our lives, we've all been challenged by questions that make us think about who we are as Orthodox Christians and what we believe in. These questions not only give *us* the opportunity to explore our faith but also gives *others* the chance to be enlightened.

Before I unwrap my lunch at school, I cross myself and say a few quiet words of thanksgiving. My friend flashes me a smirk, and asks "Why'd you do that?" Well, it's a simple answer really – I want God to bless me and my food and I want to give thanks for what he has put on my plate. It's easy to take our blessings for granted, but I never want to pass up an opportunity to express how grateful I am, even if it *is* just a granola bar.

God's existence is affirmed every time we remember His life, death, and resurrection during the Divine Liturgy. His miracles continue to this day as well as those performed by His Holy Mother, the Theotokos and His saints. Go to Kefalonia and see the holy snakes of the Panagia, which have crosses on their heads and appear only during her fast in August at her church. They are easy to handle, friendly, and temporary as they disappear on August 15th, the feast of the Dormition. Go to the church of the Holy Sepulchre on Holy Saturday to see the miracle of the Holy Fire that suddenly appears for the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem and the people in attendance. For up to twenty minutes the fire does not burn anything put in it including hands and hair. Many have tried to discredit this oldest, continual miracle. All have failed. Google it; it's there! Go to Corfu and see St. Spyridon who lived in the fourth century yet is still known today as the walking saint; his worn out slippers need to be replaced every year as he labors to answer our prayers! Yes, miracles are still happening all around us. They're not the stuff of history books; ours is a living God and a living church!

Ours is also an interactive faith. The topic question is aptly put with the wording "participation" in the life of the church. We participate; we don't sit there and just *listen* to Bible passages or ministers' homilies. We are blessed and forgiven, we bestow peace on the spirit of our priest who bids us peace as well. We participate in the sacraments, receiving Christ's blessing in marriage, forgiveness in Confession and Holy Unction, body and blood in the Holy Eucharist, and Holy Spirit in Baptism. As a result, in the words of Saint Paul, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20).

One of the greatest challenges I face is adjusting my sports schedule so that I can attend Sunday morning church services. Teammates have told me that they need to focus on athletics and academics and God will understand why they skip church. They need to concentrate on getting into a good school and God is everywhere, so they don't need to go to a church to pray. Unfortunately, they couldn't be more wrong and they are distancing themselves from God. I find that although a good lacrosse game feeds my

body, attending church feeds my soul, and ultimately, that's what it's all about. St. Paul tells us in first Corinthians, verse 27 "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. That body is Christ's church and, together, we make it whole." Additionally, Christ, Himself, tells us in Matthew, 18:20, that "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there with them."

So, to answer those who question my faith, being an Orthodox Christian does matter. Our church comes to life through its rich history and spiritual tradition. Whether we are questioned or we are the ones questioning, Orthodox Christianity is part of our identity and we need to live it, breathe it and own it. How wonderful it is when we gather together in worship. Instead of avoiding those who may question or mock our faith, let us, instead, invite them to join us. Remember, the Lord's prayer given to us by Christ, himself, begins with "Our Father", not **my** Father.