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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?

“Remember this date: 1054 AD. Because that is the day the Orthodox Church broke off from the Catholic Church. You’re Orthodox, right? This is when your church started.” Hold on a second. Did I hear that right? The Orthodox Church broke off from the Catholic Church? Yes, that is exactly what my European history teacher, told my whole class one day last October. It kind of surprised me that a teacher would get the facts wrong. I wanted to speak up and correct him, but fear of being judged by my peers silenced me. Then I started thinking, what if I’m wrong? This is when it hit me that I need to know more about my Orthodox faith so I can defend it with confidence. If I couldn’t answer that simple question, then how would I answer others in the future? That day, I realized that I don’t like to share religious matters and opinions. If I had spoken up, what should I have said? How are we as Orthodox Christians expected to respond? I do know this: Jesus wants us to be strong in our faith and defend his teachings.

When I got home from school that day, I immediately told my parents what happened in my history class. If only I could’ve spoken up in class as my parents spoke to me. One of the reasons why I don’t like to talk about my faith is because it’s too complicated to express how I feel. For example, how can I explain the feeling I had when I was at my yiayia and papou’s church, as the sun was coming through the stain-glass windows and sunshine was spilling onto the pews. As the priest censed the icons, I noticed the incense move its way toward the people until I was enveloped in its sweet smell. I truly felt that the incense was lifting our prayers up to the heavens. Yet, if I try to explain this in simpler terms, I am at a loss for words; however, we should be reminded, as Jesus says in Matthew 10:19, “...do not worry about how or what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.” Once we put our faith in God, we will no longer be afraid; but have full confidence with God’s teachings as our guide.

That day in October, it was wonderful to be able to come home and talk with my parents. But what happens when I don’t have my parents to consult with; specifically, when I leave for college? This is when we step out into the real world and are challenged by our peers and others on a daily basis. We overbook our schedules, diminishing time for prayer and church. If we remain uneducated about our faith, we will seem weak to those questioning Orthodoxy. Jesus tells us, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matthew 10:16). We must know our faith in order to protect it, not shy away from sharing the Truth.

Now how do we defend our faith, spread God’s love, and share God’s word in the busy world we live in? Daily life hardly gives us time to stop and think, which is why we may feel pressured to ignore those that challenge us. Thankfully, God gives us great examples that we can follow: the Martyrs of our Church. We must remember that martyrs

went through so much more than we do. Martyrs were judged, tortured and persecuted. There are thousands of martyrs, yet they all have one thing in common; they never gave up or lost faith, even as they faced death. Similarly, we cannot give up on Christ, even when people stand in our way. Though we might not reach martyrdom in our own lives, we can witness God's love through our interactions with others. When people question us, it's an opportunity to challenge ourselves, so that, through our actions and words, we can be examples of God's love.

Orthodox Christians must respond to this call for action; the call to share and educate those around us, and to live our faith as examples for others. The next time someone questions me, I won't doubt myself like I did that day in history class. Instead, I will stand up and face my teacher, just as a martyr would stand firm and proclaim victory in the Lord. If we can all rise up as martyrs and proclaim Orthodoxy, we can become voices of influence. We can be a beacon of God's light in the darkness.