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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?

Jesus did not come to bring peace to the world...He came to bring the world Peace – the capitalized word ‘Peace’. Jesus Christ is Peace, but being a Christian does not always go smoothly in today’s world. As Jesus said in Matthew 10:34, “... *I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother...*” Sometimes participating in the life of the church can provoke questions and pose challenges to our beliefs which can be difficult to respond to. But I find in the end these experiences lead me to grow in my faith.

The “sword” I carry is my belief in God. If I saw somebody walking down the street with a sword in their hand, I would avoid them because carrying a sword is unusual. The same is true for when I am challenged for being an Orthodox Christian. For example, when I talked about Lent and our practice of fasting to a friend she said it was stupid. This made it even more difficult for me to say “no” to that chocolate glazed donut! Although being questioned may cause me to feel different, it is not a bad thing at all. Challenges give insight into how I can bring God’s love to those who do not know it.

Let me explain, when somebody says they do not believe in God, I wonder what the God they do not believe in is like. Is it someone who condemns us for stepping slightly out of line? Because I would not believe in that God either; I believe in Jesus Christ, the ultimate example of unconditional love. For those who do not know God, their perceptions come directly from how the Christians in their life act. So when peers question my faith, before questioning God, I first consider if I have been showing others the love of God; because I may need to open my arms more in response to challenges instead of shying away.

One day I was practicing a speech with my Christ on Campus club sponsor outside of her classroom. Many kids stopped walking to stare because it is so uncommon to see somebody talking about Jesus at school. I felt embarrassed and found it difficult to speak proudly and own my faith. Last December I went to a GOYA Advent Retreat and the theme was “Accept the Challenge”. That thought stuck with me, especially since I found it easier to avoid challenges through silence instead of explaining my faith. 1 Peter 3:15 states, “*But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.*”

Upon entering an Orthodox church, we offer a candle in the Narthex as a prayer to receive God’s light. Jesus Christ is the light in this world but He is not of this world. By igniting His fire in our hearts we will feel strikingly different or even alone at times. John 1:5 explains, “*And the light shines in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not*”. This corresponds with the other sword example. If I saw a person walking down the street carrying a lighted candle and trying to hand it to me, I would avoid them. And the same

goes for when we ignite with the Christian faith. Spreading fire to others or simply holding our flame out in public will most certainly create questions, because who would not be afraid of being burned by an obscure fire? I have learned that although it is difficult, in order to bring others to Christ, I cannot hide God's light in response to controversy. Matthew 5:15-16 teaches, *"Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bow. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven"*.

Because of challenges my faith has become like one of those trick birthday candles; no matter how many people try to blow it out, the flames remain and continue to draw attention. Even though openly following Christ will not always be a peaceful journey, being questioned is the perfect opportunity to spread God's light. Because even a single lighted candle, with a flame big or small, can spread fire to all that it surrounds when somebody knocks it down.