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# **Conversion and Converts. The Image of the Orthodox Church through the Lens of recent Conversion Narratives**

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**Cluj-Napoca**

**2025**

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## **Conversion and Converts. The Image of the Orthodox Church through the Lens of recent Conversion Narratives**

### **Presentation of the Topic and Theoretical and Contemporary Context**

The thesis addresses the phenomenon of religious conversion to Orthodoxy and how the image of the Orthodox Church is perceived through the accounts of recent converts. The topic is placed in the context of a contemporary world marked by spiritual pluralism and secularization, where more and more people seek their religious identity. Conversion to Orthodoxy emerges as a relevant phenomenon in this setting: amid the diverse spiritual offerings, some choose Orthodoxy, drawn by doctrinal authenticity and the continuity of apostolic tradition.

The work stands at the confluence of multiple fields (theology, sociology, psychology), since religious conversion is a complex process with both internal and external dimensions. The contemporary context reveals both challenges and opportunities: on the one hand, confessional fragmentation and relativism can generate spiritual confusion; on the other hand, the thirst for the sacred and the need for meaning lead many to seek a faith perceived as true and stable. In this landscape, Orthodoxy is seen as a point of attraction by virtue of the living tradition and spiritual depth it offers. Numerous recent conversion narratives – from both the Romanian milieu and internationally – highlight how people from different backgrounds discover Orthodoxy as a spiritual home and as an answer to their existential struggles.

From a theoretical point of view, the research is based on the specialized literature on conversion, weaving together theological sources (Patristic writings, works of dogmatic theology), psychological sources (psychology of religion, theories of conversion) and sociological sources (studies of religious conversion as a social phenomenon). The current state of research indicates that although conversion to Christianity has been extensively studied in the West, conversions to Orthodoxy are a less explored subject, especially in Romanian academic theology. This doctoral project comes to partially fill this gap by offering an interdisciplinary analysis of conversion to Orthodoxy in the contemporary era and highlighting the role of personal narratives in shaping the image of the Church.

### **Objectives and Research Methodology**

The central objective of the research was to gain a deep understanding of the process of converting to Orthodoxy and of how converts describe and evaluate the Orthodox Church through their experience. To achieve this overall aim, the thesis pursued several specific objectives:

- Theological clarification of the concept of conversion in Orthodoxy and of the doctrinal basis that defines it.
- Psychological analysis of the inner dynamics of conversion: personal motivations, stages of transformation, and identity changes that the convert undergoes.
- Sociological examination of conversion as a contextual phenomenon: the influence of social and cultural factors, and the role of community and relational networks in triggering and sustaining conversion.

- Identification of typologies of conversion to Orthodoxy based on converts' testimonies, in order to highlight recurring patterns of motives and conversion paths.
- Assessment of the image of the Orthodox Church as it emerges from converts' accounts, highlighting the positive aspects (and any negative aspects) that they note.
- Pastoral recommendations for improving the integration of converts into the life of the Church, derived from the conclusions of the analysis.

The methodology used was qualitative and interdisciplinary. A study of theological texts was carried out to establish doctrinal foundations, alongside the interpretation of autobiographical narratives of converts. The research sources included:

- Written testimonies of converts, such as autobiographies, published interviews, articles or collected volumes in which converted persons recount their journey to Orthodoxy.
- Previous academic studies on conversion (from both Romanian and international literature), to frame the phenomenon in a broader context and to identify useful concepts (e.g., *metanoia*, biographical reconstruction, stage-based models of conversion).
- Theological-pastoral observations drawn from the writings of the Holy Fathers and contemporary theologians about returning to faith and the spiritual life of converts.

The interdisciplinary approach meant that theological, psychological, and sociological findings were correlated to provide a unified picture. The main method was narrative analysis of testimonies: examining how converts construct their conversion story, what elements they emphasize, and how they describe the influence of the Orthodox faith on their lives. Through this method, the research captured both the subjective dimension (personal experiences) and the objective-communal dimension (the convert's interaction with the Church and society). At the same time, methodological limitations were kept in mind: those whose narratives are publicly available may not be representative of all converts (there is a potential bias toward those eager to make their story known), and interpreting these narratives requires discernment to distinguish generally valid elements from those purely individual.

By combining these methods, the thesis seeks to make an original contribution on both a theoretical and a practical level. It is anticipated that the results will enrich theological studies on conversion and, at the same time, offer useful perspectives for clergy and Orthodox communities, helping to create a more welcoming and better-prepared environment for the integration of converts.

### **Theological Perspective on Conversion**

From an Orthodox theological perspective, conversion is not conceived as an isolated event, but as a dynamic, long-term spiritual process. The thesis highlights that in the biblical and patristic tradition, conversion is closely linked to the concept of *metanoia* – a profound change of mind and heart, a sincere repentance and turning toward God. This initial *metanoia* marks a moment of illumination and an inner resolve to surrender to God, but true conversion continues

throughout one's entire life. In other words, to be a convert in Orthodoxy does not mean only looking back to a past change, but continuously living in a state of conversion, always orienting oneself toward God and growing spiritually.

The work underscores the Orthodox teaching on **synergy**: conversion (and salvation in general) is the fruit of cooperation between divine grace and human freedom. The theological analysis shows that both Scripture and the Holy Fathers describe conversion as the encounter between God's call/grace and the person's free response – neither grace alone nor will alone is sufficient, but together they work toward the believer's transformation. A classic example is that of the conversions in the Acts of the Apostles (for instance, St. Paul on the road to Damascus), where divine initiative and human response intertwine.

The thesis also examined the concrete way in which the Orthodox tradition understands conversion, drawing on:

- Scriptural examples: biblical conversions (from both the Old and New Testaments) that highlight different aspects of turning to God.
- Patristic writings: for example, the Holy Fathers' commentaries on the Prodigal Son, on the Apostle Paul, or on repentance as a second baptism.
- Contemporary Orthodox dogmatic theology: reference works (such as those by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae) that discuss the notion of conversion and renewal in Christ as a continuous process in the life of the Christian.

The central elements identified include Baptism (the sacramental gateway into the Church) and, in the case of converts already baptized in other denominations, **Chrismation/Confession** as rites of (re)reception. Thus, authentic conversion also has an ecclesial dimension: it is not only an invisible inner change, but entails integration into the mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church. Orthodoxy is presented as a living tradition that offers the convert a sense of apostolic continuity and of the authenticity of the faith. For many converts, it is precisely this perception of the Orthodox faith as unchanging truth and holy life that represents the major theological attraction. The work concludes that, theologically, conversion to Orthodoxy can be understood as a spiritual rebirth through which a person fundamentally changes the orientation of their life, entering onto the path of holiness in the communion of the Church. This solid theological basis will serve as a reference point for interpreting the converts' experiences in later chapters.

## **Psychological Perspective on Conversion**

The chapter dedicated to psychological analysis treats conversion as a process of personal transformation and examines what happens at the level of a convert's mind, emotions, and identity. From the perspective of the psychology of religion, conversion is defined as the process by which a person moves from one set of religious beliefs and practices to another, involving multidimensional changes – cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The work highlights the dynamic model proposed by Lewis R. Rambo, who speaks of “**converting**” in the continuous tense, emphasizing the gradual, ongoing, and multidimensional character of

conversion. Over the course of this process, both inner changes (in beliefs, values, attitudes) and external changes (behaviors, habits, community affiliations) occur, culminating in the shaping of a new religious identity. Rambo describes conversion as a gradual negotiation of the new life orientation, in which the convert and the faith community together adjust the person's thoughts, feelings, and actions to align with the new faith. The thesis separately analyzes these facets of transformation – for example, how cognitive beliefs change (accepting new doctrines, reconfiguring one's worldview) and how emotional-mystical states evolve (the feeling of inner peace, of divine love, of “self-rediscovery” in relation to God).

Another aspect addressed is the different **psychological stages of conversion**. Theory and convert accounts often indicate a succession of phases:

- Seeking phase – a period of inner turmoil, existential questions, dissatisfaction with one's previous life or faith. The convert may experience a spiritual void or a need for meaning that makes them receptive to something new.
- Crisis phase (or turning point) – possibly an existential crisis, a traumatic event (illness, loss, failure) or simply the buildup of inner tension that leads to the decision to change. Often, converts describe a moment of revelation or illumination in which they feel God's intervention or find an answer in Orthodoxy.
- Decision and the conversion proper – the moment of embracing the new faith (intellectually and emotionally) and the break with the past. Psychologically, this is accompanied by intense feelings: joy, liberation, the feeling of spiritually “returning home.”
- Consolidation of the new religious identity – the post-conversion period, in which the new believer tries to integrate Orthodox teachings and practices into their life. Here, challenges arise such as adjusting to new habits, persevering in faith, and overcoming any subsequent doubts. The study notes the importance of community support and of a spiritual mentor during this stage, so that the conversion matures into a stable identity.

Analysis of the narratives reveals several major psychological motivations that can lead individuals toward Orthodoxy:

- The need for meaning and authenticity: Many converts were in search of a deeper meaning in life or a solid spiritual truth. Orthodoxy, with its traditional and mystical character, gave them the sense of an eternal truth and an existential purpose.
- Seeking inner peace and healing: Some come to faith out of a desire to overcome anxiety, depression, or personal traumas. In their accounts, Orthodoxy appears as a path of spiritual healing through Confession, prayer, and participation in the sacramental life.
- Desire for belonging: Conversion can be motivated by a thirst for community and love. People feel the need to belong to a spiritual family; the Orthodox Church is seen as a unified community in which the convert finds brothers and sisters in faith and a feeling of home.



- **Aesthetic and mystical attraction:** As mentioned, the beauty of Orthodox rituals and services plays a crucial role in some conversions. The liturgical experience – the chants, the icons, the mystery of the Eucharist – can strike a sensitive chord in the soul more than any intellectual argument. Converts often report that their first contact with the Orthodox liturgy produced in them an overwhelming sacred emotion, convincing them that they had found an earthly reflection of heavenly reality and a living communion with the Divine.
- **Overcoming a personal crisis:** In other cases, life's crises (suffering, illness, loss, addictions) led them to faith when worldly solutions seemed exhausted. Such existential conversions are often dramatic, marking a reinvention of the self: from the chaos of a troubled life, the person "is reborn" spiritually through the encounter with Christ, finding in Orthodoxy a refuge and a new direction in life.

From a psychological perspective, the thesis also emphasizes the impact of conversion on identity. Conversion involves a redefinition of the self – the convert reorganizes their own biography around a "before" and "after" conversion. This biographical reconstruction means reinterpreting the past (events that once seemed random now take on the sense of providential guidance toward truth), as well as rearranging one's values and life priorities. Many narratives reveal how converts view their existence before conversion as incomplete or astray, and their life after conversion as fulfilled and ordered by their relationship with God. Psychologically, this translates into greater emotional stability and sense of purpose, along with a continuous need to strengthen their new identity through religious practices and the gradual assimilation of church culture.

In conclusion, the psychological perspective offers a detailed understanding of the inner dynamics of conversion, highlighting that the act of conversion is not limited to an intellectual change, but profoundly transforms one's personality, addressing deep psychological and spiritual needs. This level complements the theological perspective, bringing to light the convert's inner spiritual experiences – from turmoil and searching, to the joy of finding God and to the effort of consolidating a new life in faith.

### **Sociological Perspective on Conversion**

Viewed sociologically, conversion to Orthodoxy is a contextual and relational phenomenon, not just an isolated individual choice. This chapter examines how external factors – family, friends, the religious community, the culture of society – influence the course of conversion. The study starts from the premise that no one converts "in a vacuum": every conversion takes place in a certain social environment that can either stimulate it or hinder it.

A first aspect analyzed is the role of social networks and community in conversion. The accounts indicate that, often, interactions with people already integrated into Orthodoxy are essential:

- **Family and close relationships:** There are cases where conversion occurs through family influence – for example, a husband or wife of a different confession who adopts the Orthodox faith of their spouse, or young people who return to Orthodoxy by the

example of grandparents or relatives. Relational conversion, as the thesis calls it, happens thanks to the love and trust in the relationship with a loved one: drawing closer to that person gradually becomes a drawing closer to God. In these situations, the baptismal sponsor (godparent) or the spiritual father also play key roles as mentors guiding the newcomer's steps in the faith.

- Friends and groups: Belonging to a Bible study group, a circle of religious friends, or even interacting on online religious forums can serve as mediators of conversion. The thesis shows how welcoming parish communities or Orthodox youth groups, through their atmosphere of brotherhood and shared purpose, provide a space in which seekers can experience fellowship and become familiar with Orthodox life. Often, conversion is facilitated by the personal example of Orthodox believers who inspire admiration and interest (a charismatic priest, or a layperson with an impressive moral life, etc.).
- Online networks and mass media: Although the work focuses more on direct relationships, it does not ignore recent phenomena such as searching for religious information on the internet, watching lectures by Orthodox theologians or video testimonies of converts, which can reach a wide audience and plant the first seeds of interest in Orthodoxy.

In parallel, the sociological analysis takes into account macro-social factors. In Westernized societies, secularization has eroded religious participation overall; paradoxically, however, it has left a spiritual void that some people try to fill by returning to tradition. The thesis argues that Orthodoxy can exert a fascination precisely as an alternative to secular consumerist culture, offering the experience of the sacred and of authentic communion in a world perceived as increasingly fragmented and individualistic. It also mentions the phenomenon of a “rediscovery of spirituality” among certain segments of the contemporary population, a trend that favors conversions: people disappointed by materialism or by moral relativism are open to a religious framework that claims immutable truth and intense spiritual life.

Another important theme is the integration of converts into the Orthodox community. Sociologically speaking, conversion only reaches a practical fulfillment when the convert becomes a full and active member of the church community. The thesis discusses the challenges that new members may face:

- Adapting to a community with well-established traditions: An adult convert, not having been “raised” in Orthodox culture, might find some customs or mentalities different from what they were used to. For example, the mode of veneration, the length of services, fasting practices, the way of addressing the clergy, etc., may require adjustment. Here the community's role is to gradually initiate the convert into these aspects, ideally through patience and willingness to answer questions.
- Attitude of the community toward converts: The work notes that, generally, converts are received with joy, as a sign of the Church's missionary work. However, prejudices or unrealistic expectations can also exist on the part of the community. Sometimes converts are viewed either with excessive curiosity or – on the contrary – with a certain

reserve (for example, some might wonder whether the convert will remain steadfast or if perhaps they come with “unorthodox” ideas). The thesis emphasizes the importance of an open and loving attitude: the Church should avoid both naïve enthusiasm and unfounded suspicion, treating the convert as a full brother or sister in the faith. In communities where converts have been guided by spiritual mentors and involved in parish activities (choir, volunteering, pilgrimages), integration has proven easier.

- Institutional support: The study suggests that broader ecclesial structures (dioceses, missionary organizations) should also develop post-conversion catechesis programs or support groups for converts, recognizing their specific needs. There are situations, especially in the diaspora, where converts make up a significant proportion of a parish, and priests together with the community have initiated ongoing catechism courses, Bible study circles, or meetings dedicated to new members.

Essentially, the sociological perspective shows that conversion is rooted in social and cultural networks. It is not just “the meeting of a soul with God,” but also joining a group and reconfiguring a person’s position in society (for example, someone assumes a new identity: becoming “Orthodox” in an environment where previously they were “Catholic,” “Neo-Protestant,” or “non-believer”). Both the context preceding conversion and the context after conversion matter: favorable environments (faithful friends, vibrant communities) can ignite and sustain the flame of faith, whereas hostile or indifferent environments can extinguish the initial enthusiasm. The thesis concludes that for the fruit of conversion to be complete, social and ecclesial integration must be cultivated consciously. Conversion and integration are two sides of the same coin: the act of coming to faith achieves its purpose only through full integration into the life of the Church. This requires effort both on the part of the convert and on the part of the Church, which is called to be a welcoming community, united in love and mission.

### **Typologies of Conversion to Orthodoxy (Analysis of Narratives)**

An essential contribution of the research is the identification of five dominant typologies of conversion to Orthodoxy, derived from the analysis of converts’ narratives. These typologies illustrate distinct patterns in the motivations and experiences of conversion and help to gain a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. They are not rigid categories, but rather analytical guideposts – in practice, many converts combine elements from multiple types. With this caveat, the five identified typologies are:

1. Identity/Ecclesial Conversion – The main motivation here is the search for the true Church and continuity with apostolic faith. Converts of this type, often coming from confessionally fragmented Christian backgrounds, became dissatisfied with doctrinal innovations or the lack of unity in their former communities. They find in Orthodoxy the doctrinal and traditional authenticity they were seeking, identifying the Orthodox Church as the unaltered repository of the original faith. Their conversion involves a radical change of religious identity: they leave their old denomination and join Orthodoxy as a spiritual family and as the guarantor of true faith. Such converts

emphasize the feeling of returning to the roots and of fulfilling the desire for unity with the one Church of Christ.

2. Intellectual/Rational Conversion – This characterizes people drawn to Orthodoxy as a result of a rational, scholarly quest. Usually, these are intellectuals, people of culture, or spiritual seekers who have studied in depth the history of Christianity, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the theology of the undivided Church of the first millennium. Fascinated by theological coherence, the depth of patristic thought, and the spiritual richness of the Philokalia, they come to recognize in Orthodoxy the living continuity of the original faith. Their conversion occurs when, being rationally convinced of the truth of Orthodoxy, they choose to embrace it in practice. These converts place emphasis on truth and doctrinal clarity; often their testimonies recount a “journey of knowledge” that led them to the Orthodox Church as the logical conclusion of their intellectual searches. They exemplify the fact that the mind, not just the heart, can be an organ of conversion – correct understanding of Christian teaching ignited in them the desire to live in accordance with that understanding.
3. Liturgical/Aesthetic Conversion – In this type, the trigger for conversion is the experience of the sacred beauty in Orthodoxy. Many converts testify that their first contact with Orthodox services – whether hearing Byzantine chant, attending the Divine Liturgy, the fragrance of incense, or venerating icons – touched their heart more deeply than any intellectual argument. They come to Orthodoxy driven by a thirst for an authentic liturgical experience, considering that in Orthodox worship they have found an earthly foretaste of heavenly reality and a living communion with the divine which was previously missing. For these converts, beauty is not something peripheral, but a path to truth: the senses and aesthetics become ways of knowing God. Liturgical conversion is frequently seen in people coming either from austere religious environments (who discover the richness of Orthodox worship), or from secular/artistic milieus (people for whom beauty has intrinsic value and who find it transfigured in Orthodoxy). This type highlights the central role of aesthetic and mystical experience in drawing souls to the Church.
4. Existential/Crisis Conversion – This typology covers conversion generated by life’s crises and a profound need for help and meaning at critical moments. In such cases, suffering, illness, the loss of a loved one, addictions, or despair become the context for a radical transformation: having reached the limit of their own strength, the person discovers God as their only hope and support. Existential conversion is often dramatic and deep, marking a rebirth: from the chaos and darkness of a troubled life, the person “comes back to life” spiritually through the encounter with Christ. Many such converts recount how, at the brink of despair, a sincere prayer, a witnessed miracle, or the simple reading of the Gospel ignited their faith. Orthodoxy appears to them as a refuge and a new direction, a place where they find inner healing, forgiveness, and the power to rebuild their lives on solid spiritual foundations. This type of conversion highlights the power of grace to act in moments of crisis and underscores modern man’s need to go beyond the flatness of consumerist life in order to live a transfigured life.

5. Relational Conversion – The fifth major typology identified is conversion that takes place through the decisive influence of close human relationships. This includes situations in which someone converts due to the example, love, and guidance of an important person in their life. It may be the case of an Orthodox spouse who brings their partner to the faith, of a close friend or colleague who becomes a model and spiritual guide, or of the disciple–spiritual father relationship (an experienced spiritual father awakens in a seeker the desire to embrace Orthodoxy). In such situations, the existing emotional bond makes the seeker’s heart open to the message of faith. In practice, the conversion becomes an encounter between human love and divine love: drawing closer to the beloved person leads, step by step, to drawing closer to God. The thesis highlights that this form of conversion through love fits well into pastoral theology patterns, since the family or community becomes a “small laboratory” in which living faith is transmitted from one person to another. Concrete examples include religiously mixed families or close friendships where dialogue and common prayer have borne fruit in conversions.

These typologies should not be viewed in isolation. In reality, conversion motives are often mixed: for example, a convert may simultaneously have intellectual and liturgical motivations (being fascinated both by profound theology and by the beauty of worship), or identity-driven motivations combined with a crisis experience. Nevertheless, identifying these typological frameworks, derived from concrete testimonies, helps us to understand in a more nuanced way why different people choose Orthodoxy and how they narrate that “why.” This typological analysis is one of the original contributions of the work, offering a conceptual tool useful for future studies on conversion: a priest can recognize the dominant patterns in a conversion story and thus respond more appropriately to the convert’s needs (for instance, those of the intellectual type will appreciate systematic doctrinal catechesis, those of the liturgical type will be most edified by the beauty of worship, etc.). The important point, as mentioned, is that these typologies should not become fixed labels, but rather starting points in understanding the complexity of each soul that comes to faith.

### **The Image of the Orthodox Church from the Perspective of Converts**

A major aim of the thesis was to find out how converts see the Orthodox Church and what image they project of it through their narratives. The analysis of testimonies reveals an overall very bright and positive image of the Church as seen through the eyes of those who have come to Orthodoxy. Converts describe Orthodoxy using terms with great affective and existential weight, such as “truth,” “home,” “fullness,” “healing,” “joy.” For them, the Orthodox Church appears as the place of encounter with revealed Truth and with the authenticity of faith. The testimonies often insist on the feeling that in Orthodoxy they have finally found the true and complete faith – the concept of the *fullness* of faith is frequently used, as opposed to what they felt was partial or diluted before. Likewise, the Church is perceived as a spiritual family in which the convert truly feels at home, integrated into the communion of saints of all places and times.

A remarkable characteristic is that Orthodoxy is seen as an ancient yet living and current faith. Converts emphasize the apostolic roots and the uninterrupted tradition of the Church, which assures them of its truth, but at the same time they speak about how relevant Orthodoxy is to their modern lives. From their perspective, the Orthodox Church manages to be both ancestral and contemporary: tradition is not perceived as archaic, but as a source of stability and meaning in a changing world. One of the conclusions of the work is that, from the perspective of conversion narratives, the image of Orthodoxy today is configured as one of living and loving tradition: an ancient faith that continues to transform modern hearts. In other words, converts see Orthodoxy as a present, transformative force, capable of responding to the spiritual struggles of contemporary people.

Many testimonies place emphasis on the transfiguring liturgical beauty of the Church. The Orthodox Liturgy, with its sacred atmosphere, is often described as an encounter with heaven on earth, and the Church as the space of God's presence. This beauty of Orthodoxy shines all the more brightly in the darkness of secularism; converts feel the contrast between an empty worldly life and the light they found in church life. For example, the fact that so many converts were drawn by the real chance of uniting with God indicates the modern person's thirst to transcend the banality of a consumerist life and to live a life transfigured in Christ. The Church, in the converts' view, is living and sanctifying – an environment where grace works concretely, not just an institution or an empty tradition.

It is also relevant how converts perceive the Orthodox community. In general, the testimonies speak about the kindness and hospitality with which they were received, about the unity in faith that transcends social or ethnic differences. In the diaspora, converts highlight the beauty of finding in the Orthodox parish an oasis of spirituality and communion in an otherwise secular environment. However, some have mentioned more difficult aspects: for example, Western converts integrating into a parish predominantly made up of Eastern European immigrants have sometimes felt cultural differences (language, preaching style, customs adjacent to worship). Over time though, the majority overcome these barriers, considering them minor compared to the spiritual richness they found.

One major implication is that converts, coming with the perspective of a newcomer, can identify both the wonderful things in the Church and the areas that need improvement. The work emphasizes that converts use a fresh language to describe the faith – they speak of fulfillment, healing, living truth, unconditional love – terms that sometimes touch the hearts of others better than abstract theological language. Thus, conversion testimonies become not just simple individual stories, but veritable pastoral-missionary resources. They can be used (with discernment) in sermons, catechesis or in dialogues with those seeking faith, precisely because the way a convert today tells the story of their encounter with God can resonate better with the contemporary person than strictly didactic language. Converts manage to describe Orthodoxy by focusing on existential experience – which can even refresh the Church's internal discourse, making it more sensitive to the current struggles of people.

In short, the image of the Orthodox Church reflected in converts' narratives is profoundly bright and attractive: the Church is seen as a holy and healing community, faithful to tradition yet

relevant to the present, the place where divine Truth and Beauty are within reach of the seeker. This optimistic and enthusiastic perception of the converts constitutes both a confirmation of the perennial values of Orthodoxy and an impetus for the Church to cultivate these values, so as to better respond to the spiritual thirst of people today.

### **General Conclusions and Theological-Pastoral Contributions**

The work concludes with a series of conclusions that synthesize the research findings and highlight the original contributions to the theological and pastoral field. In light of the analysis undertaken, it can be stated that:

Conversion to Orthodoxy is a complex, continuous, and multi-dimensional process that involves a profound inner transformation and a (re)integration into community. From a theological perspective, conversion is configured as the beginning of a path of discipleship, not as an end of the search. The enthusiastic beginning of the return to faith must be continuously cultivated through sacramental life, ongoing catechesis, and spiritual growth, so that conversion becomes an ongoing educative and transformative process (as Orthodox ascetic literature emphasizes). The Church itself constantly stresses the necessity of continual repentance, and converts are guided to persevere, viewing their conversion not as a past event to remember nostalgically, but as a living, present commitment to live in Christ.

The image of the Orthodox Church in the eyes of converts is a positive and inspiring one, confirming the vitality and attractiveness of Orthodoxy in the contemporary context. Orthodoxy appears as a living and loving tradition – an ancient faith that can transfigure modern lives when lived authentically. Converts see the Church as a light-bearing environment amid the secular and relativistic darkness of today's society. This is an encouragement for the Church's mission: the beauty of Orthodoxy has the capacity to illuminate souls thirsty for the Absolute, and the converts are living proof. They have seen the light of Christ and have come to it; now the Church is called not to keep the light under a bushel, but to put it on a lampstand for the benefit of all (cf. Matthew 5:15).

The testimonies of converts are precious resources for theology and pastoral care. From a theological point of view, they offer contemporary case studies of the work of grace and the response of faith, enriching the doctrinal understanding of conversion through living examples. From a pastoral point of view, these narratives provide practical lessons about the needs of converts, the obstacles they encounter, and the way faith takes root in souls coming from very diverse backgrounds. An important contribution of the thesis is precisely the highlighting of the fact that converts' testimonies can and should be used in pastoral work – in catechesis, preaching, dialogue with seekers – because their language and experience can touch hearts in a way that conventional church language does not always manage to do.

Integrating converts is as important as conversion itself. The thesis emphasizes that for the joy of conversion to bear full fruit, the Church must give special attention to accompanying converts on the journey of faith. A model of an open and loving Church is proposed, in which conversion is seen as the beginning of a path of growth, not as an end point. In practical terms, it is recommended that clergy be trained to be empathetic and well-prepared spiritual fathers,

capable of understanding the convert's different background and guiding them with patience. The community of believers is urged to act as an extended family for converts, offering acceptance, support, and space for growth without hasty judgments. Likewise, at the level of church structures, developing a unified framework for post-conversion catechesis and mentorship is suggested, so that no soul brought to Orthodoxy is lost along the way. This focus on integration is a valuable practical contribution of the work, since it turns theoretical conclusions into concrete pastoral solutions for a better welcome of converts.

#### Original Academic Contributions:

- It has conducted one of the few systematic analyses of conversions to Orthodoxy, integrating theological, psychological, and sociological perspectives. In doing so, it has enriched pastoral theology studies with a more nuanced understanding of conversion, seen not just as a sacramental act, but as a complex personal and communal phenomenon.
- It has identified and explicitly defined typologies of conversion to Orthodoxy, providing a language and conceptual framework to discuss the different ways in which people come to embrace the Orthodox faith. This constitutes a useful tool for both researchers and practitioners (priests, catechists), allowing them to recognize conversion patterns and to tailor pastoral approaches according to these.
- It has highlighted the importance of narrative as a method of theological investigation: the stories of converts were treated as texts with theological and sociological value, worthy of rigorous analysis. This narrative approach opens the way to new studies (for example, comparing conversion narratives from different periods or cultures, or analyzing the implicit theological language in personal testimonies).
- It has offered useful perspectives for clergy and communities, demonstrating through data and concrete examples what common difficulties converts face and what good practices exist in their integration. In this way, the work serves as a bridge between theory and practice, between research and the life of the Church.

In conclusion, the thesis *“Conversion and Converts. The Image of the Orthodox Church through the Lens of Recent Conversion Narratives”* succeeds in painting a rich and luminous image of Orthodoxy as it is seen through the eyes of those who have chosen it in our times. It is an image of tradition that gives life, and of the Church as the space of encounter with God – an image confirmed by the enthusiastic voices of the converts. At the same time, the work does not hesitate to highlight the responsibility that this reality places on the shoulders of the Church: that of truly being a “loving mother” to her new spiritual children, guiding them, protecting them, and allowing them in turn to become torches that shine – integrated converts themselves become, through their life, witnesses to the beauty of Orthodoxy. Thus, the thesis's contribution is felt not only at the academic level, but also in the realm of the concrete life of the Church, offering both a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of conversion and inspiration for a more effective and loving pastoral ministry.