

# Orthodox Literary Growth Advocates RELISH *Hungry Orthodox Christian Reader*

CHICAGO — Several members of Orthodox Literary Growth Advocates (OLGA), a group of Orthodox Christians from various Orthodox jurisdictions across the United States, met recently in Chicago to discuss their new book, *Hungry Orthodox Christian Reader*, published by OLGA Press.

INTERVIEW HOST: Why this book?

OLGA-1: There's a great deal of material out there, Orthodox writings, I mean, that so many people are unaware of. I don't mean scholars. **This book is for lay people.** Let's start again. What is the *Reader*? It's an anthology: pieces gathered together from various sources, compiled in such a way that the whole delivers a greater understanding than the individual parts. The book is not a collection of "my favorite readings," but a survey of a wide range of material—from the first century to the present, from Palestine to Greece through the Balkans to Russia and even to England and America. The bottom line is this: this is real Orthodox stuff that you're probably not going to find in your parish. That's the whole point of the book, to let people know—the hungry people who want to know—what's available to them. In English.

HOST: Hungry, you say, as in *Hungry Orthodox Christian Reader*. Tell us more about that.

OLGA-1: Hungry. Just that. Spiritually hungry. People who go to church on Sunday morning and find themselves saying, "Ho hum," and know that that's not the appropriate response. Or people who want to pray but don't know how

or how-to, or they need more structure or some sort of plan. That's why the chapter called "Short Hours" is so great. It's a way to carry prayer into the workplace, to bring you back to God, to remember, re-focus on, what's really important. It's so easy to get bogged down, completely immersed in work, that God is completely forgotten or put aside until—when? when it's convenient? when this project is out of the way? when, or if, I get to my evening prayers? But wouldn't work, or whatever you're doing, go better with God's help? The Short Hours are simply the kontakia of the Hours: First Hour, Third Hour, Sixth Hour, Ninth Hour, three short troparia for each hour that take less than a minute to pray. But it gives a structure and a reminder. They can be adapted to a person's routine, like, say the First Hour on the way to work, the other hours if your job provides regular rest breaks, or if not, between meetings or sales calls, or whatever your job entails. Not completely haphazard but with some attempt at a greater or lesser consistency.

HOST: Does the "Weekday Hymnal" follow the same idea?

OLGA-1: It does. I mean, you can look at a church calendar and see that Monday has something to do with the angels, Tuesday with John the Baptist, and so on. You look at it and say, "Oh, that's nice." Or, with the Weekday Hymnal, you can do something about it. On Monday you can sing a troparion to the angels, on Tuesday to St John the Baptist. It's not just about remembering God but the heavenly realities. This is our home. This is our hope. These are our friends and helpers. The Hours and the hymns sanctify the time, the days, our life as we muddle our way through time.

What they're saying about the Reader

*"...such a refreshingly unique approach, very engaging!"*

— a nun

OLGA-2: But it's more than that, the Hymnal. The Church has vast reams of hymnography. How much of it touches our daily lives? We hear some tunes on Sunday morning, and that's about it. It's unnatural. You can laugh at the Protestants and their hymns, if you want, but I bet most Orthodox in America know more Protestant hymns than Orthodox hymns. And we possess the largest hymnal in the world! This is just wrong. It's dysfunctional. Singing to God is not just a Sunday morning thing or a specially-trained-cantor-only thing, but a natural Christian response every hour of every day. We're hoping that some knowledgeable, musical Orthodox will pick up this idea and do something with it. Not new words and melodies, but making more of the existing hymnal accessible to people who live in the world.

HOST: You think it would catch on?

OLGA-1: You were asking about hunger, hungry. This is the sort of thing hungry people are looking for. They want Orthodoxy to be a real part of their life, and they want to know how to do that. They want an Orthodox culture. In America, Orthodox Christians will always be swimming upstream, I mean, against the current. But a developing culture, a more accessible, more immediate, more tangible Orthodox camaraderie or united effort—even if we can't see each other, at least to know that you're not alone—makes this effort easier. It adds a confidence or encouragement to the struggle. And who is hungry? You know, we received a bishop's blessing to do the work of this book. But our overzealous convert OLGA...

OLGA-2: They're everywhere, those converts. They spoil everything.

OLGA-1: Sad but true, even OLGA has been infiltrated by an overzealous convert. He was talking to another bishop who told him—vehemently, wasn't it?

OLGA-OZC: Vehemently.

OLGA-1: What did he tell you?

OLGA-OZC: That the Orthodox in America are just fine, and they don't need, don't want, any convert telling them how to be Orthodox.

OLGA-2: Did he say “uppity” convert? “Overzealous”?

OLGA-OZC: Vehemently.

OLGA-1: But of course, the *Reader* is not intended for those people. The *Reader* is intended for people who want more. And the book is not in the business of telling anybody how to be Orthodox. It simply offers a wide range of materials—emphasizing their sources—to those who want to know. As I say, stuff they probably won't find in their parish. It might also be useful to clergy to help them help their flock.

HOST: You say that the book...

OLGA-2: Can you edit out the overzealous convert? He's obnoxious. Pestilent, really. Let's pretend he isn't here.

HOST: You've just said that the book doesn't tell anybody how to be Orthodox, but the back cover blurb states specifically that “the various selections deal not so much with *what* Orthodox believe, but rather *how* Orthodox believe.”

OLGA-1: Yes, and that's a very big deal, isn't it? But how do you go about telling people how to be Orthodox? Do you make lists of what to eat and what not to eat during Great Lent? Those become ridiculous and impossible. And look at the reaction to them. It often takes the form of Lenten cookbooks: how to gorge voluptuously within the prescribed lists of ingredients. But of course, this sensual stimulation and gratification, this luxurious indulgence is the very thing we want to throw out, to overcome.

OLGA-2: But it's an *Orthodox* cookbook!

OLGA-1: You see the problem. The chapter in the *Reader* on fasting, which comes from the *Evergetinos*, the wisdom of the desert fathers of the fourth through tenth centuries, talks about how to approach food and eating in a holistic way. It doesn't give hard-and-fast rules but explains the point of fasting and gives general strategies for approaching, maintaining, and advancing in the discipline of fasting. Moreover, this approach addresses people as individual humans, not as faceless, soulless automata to be programmed into righteousness. So, we're not telling anyone how to be Orthodox, OLGA is not, nor even our

overzealous convert here, who, by definition, wants to cram Orthodoxy down everyone's throat. No, the *Reader* simply provides resources for those hungry people who want greater understanding of Orthodoxy. We emphasize again and again that the book points to the sources. The *Reader* is just the first step. The reader of the *Reader* can then follow up however they choose.

HOST: Then you're saying that the more you read, the more Orthodox you become?

OLGA-1: Orthodoxy is not a matter of reading but of doing. But in order to do something, one often needs to see an example of how the thing is done. This is why most of the selections in the *Reader* are by saints. They've been there and done that and they can show us by example, as well as by their instruction and exhortation, which is based on their own experience. The saints don't speculate. They know. St John Chrysostom says continually that right faith without right living is useless, and so is right living without right faith. Salvation requires both: Orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Both of which, in America, require swimming against the current—strenuously. Books, you might say, reading the right books provides flotation and propulsion. And know-how. The saints know how.

HOST: It sounds like this might lead us into the structure of the *Reader*, specifically the section titles: A View to Salvation, A Different Way of Seeing, A Different Way of Knowing....

OLGA-2: Don't stop there, you're doing very well.

HOST: Well, okay, seeing, knowing, A Different Association, A Different Attitude, Divine Service, Daily Nurture, Daily Struggle, Environmental Review.

OLGA-2: That was excellent. Did it answer your question?

HOST: Well, no. I was hoping you might expand a little more on why that particular structure for the book. What are you trying to convey?

OLGA-2: The first section, A View to Salvation, well, where else can you start? Our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ, our Salvation is what this whole Church and Orthodoxy business is all about. Without Him, nothing else makes sense. We have been reconciled with God. So what? What does that mean? God did the whole thing Himself through the Person of Jesus Christ. And now He's waiting for our response.

HOST: And what is that response?

OLGA-2: That seems to be the challenge. It is so dark down here that most people don't recognize that there is a problem. We complain about war and murder and injustice and how our co-workers are impossible to get along with, but we continue to insist on doing things our own way. And that mean, old God better keep His nose out of it, because we know better. Even in church, it's obvious that I'm a lot more holy than our overzealous convert. And look at him: he's way, way, way holier than you. So the first

thing, and constant thing, is to look at ourselves and our situation. And to change our mind about things.

OLGA-1: Repent.

OLGA-2: And what does that mean? Well, it helps a lot if you're Orthodox. This is where the following sections pick up: A Different Way of Seeing, Knowing, A Different Association, Attitude. It's a matter of sensitizing oneself to what's real. Or look at it like this. It requires a certain enculturation process. For example. Say that you fly into Tokyo. Now this is going to sound culturally insensitive, but that's actually the point. Say that you're an American from the Midwest and have only seen a few Asians in your entire life. You fly into Tokyo and you see nothing but Asians. You don't see Japanese people, just a bunch of Asians. They all look alike. If a Japanese person introduced himself to you, you wouldn't recognize him ten seconds later, you wouldn't be able to differentiate him from all those other Asians. Beyond that, they do things weird. "That ain't American," or, "We aren't in Kansas anymore, Toto." Now fast forward. You've been living in

What they're saying about the *Reader*

*"...wonderfully put together and expresses the depths of our Orthodox Faith."*

— a monk

Tokyo for a few months. You've picked up on some of their customs, but more important, you have become familiar enough with the people that now there is no problem in recognizing one person from another. In fact, you have probably come, by this time, to appreciate the Japanese physiognomy and can distinguish Japanese from Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, Malaysians, Thai, whatever. Now, contrast that with a good American in America. The ideal American citizen doesn't discriminate based on race, color, creed, whatever, but accepts every person as equal to everyone else. This is a good thing—when dealing with people. It is not a good thing when dealing with ideas or beliefs. And this is the point of all this indelicate rambling. It seems that in American Orthodoxy, all ideas, all beliefs, are equal. So that, whether one is like a first-timer in Tokyo and *cannot* distinguish between ideas, or like a good American and *will not* distinguish between ideas, Orthodoxy is inundated with heterodoxy, or, let's say it, heresy. One hears this from all quarters. This is why the *Reader* stresses immersion in Orthodoxy. Like the first-timer in Tokyo, recognition comes with growing familiarity. At first all ideas may look the same, but as you become more familiar with what is authentically Orthodox, then you can distinguish between what is Orthodox and what is not. And heterodoxy becomes quite distasteful. And perhaps, with growing familiarity, you come to recognize the value of "discrimination"—a bad word in America—and understand that without this discrimination and the backbone to take a stand for Orthodoxy, Orthodoxy would have disappeared from the face of the earth two thousand years ago. I say again that this is as much a cradle problem as a convert problem. It's astonishing what you hear at coffee hour.

HOST: So, the *Reader* is trying to point people to different ways, that is, the Orthodox way, of seeing, knowing, and the rest of it, and at the same time pointing them to, or providing them with, the literary resources to help them?

OLGA-2: Marvelously put. Very succinct. Very elegant.

OLGA-1: For cradles as well as converts.

OLGA-2: Absolutely. And we know that it works. Take our overzealous convert, for example. As he was introduced to the wide range of available Orthodox writings—as exemplified in the *Reader*, naturally—he became much less obnoxious. It didn't damp his zeal at all but simply rechanneled it. It fed him the Orthodox nourishment he so craved. Isn't that right, overzealous convert?

OLGA-OZC: Yes, that's true.

OLGA-2: You see?

OLGA-OZC: But I sure wish everybody else would hurry up and get with the program.

OLGA-2: Ohhh! and we were doing so well! Be sure to edit that out.

HOST: In putting together the *Reader*, all of you must have read quite a bit of Orthodox material. Do you consider yourselves more Orthodox than the average Orthodox?

OLGA-2: It would be fair to say that we probably have read more than the average Orthodox, but not that we *are* more Orthodox. We OLGAs are a pretty sorry lot. Surely you know this story from the Fathers. The path to salvation is narrow and tortuous and steep, crowded and overhung and obscured by razor-sharp thorns and entangling vines and poisonous plants, with all kinds of diverging forks leading off the path into oblivion and doom. At a certain point along the path, a traveler comes across a pit of quicksand. On the surface sits only the hat of its latest victim. That's OLGA, under the hat. But you see, next to the hat is a pole sticking straight up out of the sand, and on that pole is a sign, a helpful warning for those who follow, that says, "Don't come this way! The path is over there!" And the arrow on that sign which points to the right path is, naturally, the *Reader*.

HOST: I'm not sure that says much for your credentials.

OLGA-2: Our credentials to publish this book are that the credentialed people didn't.

OLGA-1: Before we get completely away from discussing the structure of the book, you might note that the order of things seems backward. I think this reflects the strange situation of

American Orthodoxy. What I mean by this is that the first sections, as has been discussed, deal with developing a more Orthodox way of seeing, a certain worldview, and if I may say it this way, a more Orthodox culture: whether one means by that a social milieu as in our churches or groups or families, or the internal culture of an individual's way of perceiving and doing and being. The sections we haven't discussed, Divine Service, Daily Nurture, Daily Struggle, deal with very basic and specific aspects of that culture, like Lives of Saints, the services, fasting, the war of thoughts. On the one hand, you would say that this makes sense: you present the overview, the big ideas, and then provide the building blocks. On the other hand, looking at the kinds of articles that are within the first sections and the later sections, you see that the book begins with more "intellectual" types of articles and ends with basic piety. This is why it seems backward. You would think that an Orthodox Christian

would be grounded, deeply rooted, in basic Orthodox piety first, and after that to bother with the more highfalutin stuff. But in America — where Orthodoxy is so besotted with the Western mindset, and basic Orthodox piety has become so disparaged, diminished, devalued— you have to engage the

Western mindset first in order to *lead it up* to the basics, basic piety, the spiritual essentials. Then you can read the highfalutin stuff in a new way. Let's try again. We move from the intellectual assent, the *what* we believe, to Orthodox piety, the *how* we believe, and from there, the *what* we believe becomes a whole new thing. You see how topsy-turvy it is.

HOST: Do you offer any solutions?

OLGA-1: The *Reader*, of course.

HOST: Of course. What can you tell us about the artwork on the book cover?

OLGA-2: Is she there?

OLGA-1: OLGA? OLGA on the cellphone? That's your cue. Hello?

OLGA-2: Maybe the Tokyo business offended her.

OLGA-1: Maybe we should edit it out.

OLGA-2: No way. It was brilliant. A little insensitive, possibly, but not offensively overzealous.

OLGA-1: We're quite proud of the artwork, actually.

OLGA-2: Thank you for asking.

OLGA-1: I mean, you get tired of seeing the same old church domes and generic icons on Orthodox book covers. It makes you wonder about Orthodox creativity.

OLGA-2: Should stained glass on an Orthodox book cover be interpreted as "edgy"?

HOST: Is it real stained glass or a stylistic drawing?

OLGA-1: It's a real stained glass window. You should see it in person. We didn't...

OLGA-3: Hi! I'm here! Hello! Can you hear me?

HOST: Loud and clear.

OLGA-3: Sorry. I couldn't find the mute button to unmute. Sorry. You know how you think you know how to work the phone, and then you need to do it, and

then it's not like you thought, and there you are and.... Oh, what a panic!

OLGA-1: We understand. No problem. Was there anything you wanted to tell us about the stained glass?

OLGA-3: Oh. Yes. Where should I start? No. You see, we agreed on the hymn. Wait. I should say that the artwork is based on a hymn. From the *Triodion*, from Holy Week. We thought about it and agreed that the blood and the water. Well, you see, the hymn talks about the blood and the water that came from Christ's side when they jabbed Him with a spear. So the blood and water flow down and then. Well, the hymn talks about how the blood and water flow into the Church and then flows out to cover the world. Well, not exactly that, but flows out to,

What they're saying about the Reader  
 "...a very useful text on many levels....  
 Your notes and explanations are very  
 fresh, conveying your personal  
 appreciation for the various  
 (and wonderfully varied) texts  
 you introduce and bringing the older  
 texts into a contemporary focus...."  
 — a "cradle" Orthodox editor

from the Church, you see, flows out to the ends of the world. Or the universe. Well, you know what I mean. So we agreed on the hymn and that the red and blue, the blood and water, should somehow start in the middle and then swoosh to the four corners of the book cover, the four corners of the world, you see. Or the universe. Well, we all thought that was a grand idea, but none of us is an artist, so we had to go find one. An artist. So we searched around and, well, we all liked the idea, it was obvious to us, but the artists, I don't know, I guess they didn't get it. We tried Orthodox artists, non-Orthodox artists, artists that specialized in book covers, artists that didn't. Oh, dear. And they all took so long to turn us down. It took forever. You know, like rejection on a long-term basis. So after the eighth artist turned us away, well, by that time I was feeling totally dejected, so I was having lunch at the Two-Way Grill, a real greasy spoon, a favorite of mine, it closed down not too long ago and was replaced by a slightly up-the-scale greasy spoon, but it's not at all the same, and just no fun to go to, I mean, it's okay, the food won't kill you or anything, but. Well anyway, Fred's shop is across the street from there. See, we'd never considered stained glass. It never occurred to us. So I went in and asked Fred if he could make a book cover for me. At first he thought I meant like one of those cloth or leather cover thingies that you put around a book, you know, like in school when you cut down a grocery sack to tape around your science book. He thought a glass book cover would be a little strange, who wouldn't? but he was polite about it and even seemed game to do it. Must have been a slow day or something, I don't know. So I had to explain, No, no, like a real book cover, I mean, the artwork for a book cover. We have this idea, you see, and we want to put it on a book cover. Well, he got the idea right away. You can see from the cover that he really got it. We had to arm wrestle a couple of times, you know, I couldn't draw it myself, so I had to explain, and I guess I didn't explain it very well, and oh, poor Fred, he could instantly do artistically whatever I asked, but I couldn't say it quite right. Oh, that poor man. He was so patient. But look at the results! He hammered it! So lovely. I don't know if I should say "hammered it" about stained

glass, but you know what I mean. It's perfect. It captures the hymn exactly. I mean, there's all this symbolism stuff going on. You can read about it in the write-up. It's on the website. And the note card is really cool. I've sent out lots of them, and people really like it. You know, it's not an icon really, but it makes a nice card and has the hymn on it and everything. Can you hear me?

OLGA-1: Well done. Yes, we heard every word.

OLGA-3: Oh. Fredrick Stained Glass. Did I say that?

OLGA-1: You just did. Good job. I think you covered the bases. The write-up she mentioned has the hymn and a photo of the glass and explains the symbolism and scriptural references. It's on the website, as she says.

HOST: And that web address?

OLGA-1: [www.OrthodoxReader.com](http://www.OrthodoxReader.com). The note card can also be printed out from there. And other goodies.

OLGA-OZC: There's another thing about the stained glass that I'd like to mention.

OLGA-2: No good can come of this.

HOST: Edit it out, shall I?

OLGA-OZC: No. Look. I was just going to say that icons started out on boards, paint on wooden boards. Then they were painted on walls, like in the catacombs. Then they were transformed into glorious mosaics. Then, in the West, they went from tiles to colored glass, windows, with light shining through them. Then the Protestants came along and removed Christ and the saints but kept the colored glass. They kept the form but threw out the substance. I was at a funeral the other day. An Orthodox funeral. When they got to the funeral canon, they sang the irmos and the refrain, no troparia, of the first, third, sixth, and ninth odes.

OLGA-2: I think we can stop there.

OLGA-OZC: Not that you could understand the words anyway.

HOST: Now there's something you grouse about repeatedly in the *Reader*: not being able to hear the words of the services.

OLGA-1: That's something people will have to decide for themselves, whether or not they want to do something about it. The situation is not going to change overnight, in any case.

OLGA-2: You sound utterly defeated.

OLGA-1: What can I do?

OLGA-2: You can read the *Reader* and get an idea of how beautiful, how totally engaging the services are — or *can* be. That will give you the oomph to want to do something about it.

OLGA-1: Hmmm.

OLGA-2: We heard once about a couple of sisters, siblings, raised in America in an ethnic Orthodox family. They became overzealous about Orthodoxy and had to be shipped off to a nunnery. Okay, I made up that last bit. But really, they decided to become nuns. At the monastery they discovered the beauty of the services, the Lives of the Saints, the many wonderful things about Orthodoxy that they had not been taught while growing up, that they had not found, had never heard of, in their parish. Now they look back at their parish upbringing and say, "We were robbed."

HOST: And all of these wonders can be found in palatable, easily digestible, appetizer form in the new book, *Hungry Orthodox Christian Reader*.

OLGA-2: Hear! Hear!

HOST: Do you have anything to add before we wrap this up?

OLGA-1: *Reader* readers should not be alarmed by the amount of material to which the *Reader* points. The *Reader* is simply an introduction and overview. As we say in the book, not every article will appeal to every person. That's okay. It's good simply to find out about these things. It's where the reader feels a certain resonance—a particular author or genre or topic, whatever might pique your interest—that would be a good place to start looking. We feel fairly confident that at the Final Judgment there will be no written tests or accounting of books read and not read. We OLGAs, however, will be held to a higher standard—that is, liable to a greater punishment—because we

have read all these books and, well, look at us. That's why we ask your prayers—and not for us only, but also for the Church, for Orthodoxy in America, and for our several and scattered bishops. Thankfully, we're not teachers, not held to that standard. No, we're simply sharing things that have been helpful to us and that we hope will be helpful to others: an introduction to the real teachers, the saints. But in any case, if something in the *Reader* appeals to you, somehow strikes your interest, then look into the sources. As girls often say, "Make an effort." Or as St John Chrysostom puts it, "Grant me by Thy grace, O Lord, to make a good start."

— audio file transcription: ozc

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*Hungry Orthodox Christian Reader*

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What they're saying about the *Reader*

*"...a lot of food for thought. I've come to the realization that reading the kinds of pieces you have collected in this book is necessary to my faith and spiritual life."*

— a seasoned convert