Our history with the Orthodox Church in Oxford is quite recent. It began in October 2020, my daughter’s first year at the University as an international student. It was a privilege for me to be in Oxford, with her. At that time the Pandemic was in full swing. But we were living in a wonderful place—at Lady Margaret Hall—and despite the odd times, spending days in the sun in the college’s amazing garden transformed the obligatory quarantine into an unexpected holiday.

On the first Sunday morning after our quarantine ended, we went to the nearest Orthodox Church. My daughter knew, when choosing her college, that a Greek church should be nearby, so we headed there. Everything was new for us, we were still looking on Google Maps to find it. Close to Canterbury Road, we saw a distinguished old man, with white hair and white beard, an elegant simple black coat, and a purple hat. His appearance made us think: “This man is surely going to the Church!”. And indeed, he was. We learned later that the distinguished man was Father Kallistos—the Giant. We hadn’t had the chance to hear him or meet him again later, but it was like he was the one who, in a very gentle way, showed us the way to the Church.

The little, octagonal church, not much bigger than a house, was a few steps away from the College. With the same icons as those at home, in Romania; the same Liturgy as the one we knew, but in English; friendly, kind people. The feeling of being home in the middle of a land far away from home. I felt it as a gift.

Because of Covid, there were strange times when we were not allowed to attend the Sunday service in the church unless by booking a place, in limited number.

Then, during lockdown, the services were not permitted at all; you were only able to enter the Church for personal prayers. Still, I remember with gratitude that in one of my visits to the church just to worship and pray, I found both Father Ian and Father Seraphim, only the two of them in the otherwise empty church. Father Ian, reading a book on the front steps, and Father Seraphim sitting alone in the back. He asked me about us and I was happy to be able to speak to him. I felt warmth and care from Father Seraphim from that very beginning. We were going to go back home in Romania for our winter holiday, so I asked Father Seraphim for a blessing for our travels, and I remember I just felt safe and easy afterwards. In those days filled with anxiety that blessing seemed to me more valuable than usual.

The years following the pandemic we enjoyed normal services and a normal community life. Both Father Ian, with his humour and friendly way, and Father Seraphim, with his warmth and wisdom, made us feel at home. Home not just physically, but deep in the heart.

The Liturgy in three or four languages was something new and precious for me. Hearing prayers -and being able to say “Our Father” - in Romanian felt like a gift for us during the Liturgy.

Later, Father Seraphim became our spiritual father, which meant a lot to me.

Sharing coffee, cakes and sun in the garden after the Liturgy with people from the Church was also very nice, as were the occasional celebrations and lunches in St. Gregory’s house.

And the wonderful friends we made here... truly became friends for life.

I know that I’ll treasure this small, unique church wherever I’ll go. As a home abroad, will be always in my heart.

Columbia Radu,

1st March 2024