What is Orthodoxy understanding of assurance of salvation?

Assurance of salvation is quite a famous doctrine amongst Evangelicals.  Even though they say it is different than “once saved, always saved”, it leads to the same result.  In its fundamentals, there are really no differences as far as I can see.  It leads to a false sense of reassurance that the heavenly inheritance is a done deal.  This leads to pride, lack of struggle in one’s life with God, and ultimately sin that prevents us from the kingdom of heaven.

Evangelicals go through this circular argument of:  “Yes, we sin, but we have to have faith in God’s work in our lives and that He assured us of the kingdom of heaven”.  Yes, but if we sin, and continue in sin we certainly cannot be sure of the kingdom of heaven.  Even many times we commit the sin and do not realize the sin that we committed.  We are still responsible for these in front of God.  In the Old Testament, the sin of ignorance still required a sacrifice to be offered for it.  In the absolution in the Divine Liturgy, the priest asks for God to forgive “my sins and the ignorance of your people”.  The priest is supposed to know the law, but the people may not.  So even if they sinned, they are still in need of forgiveness.

There are certain things that we are sure of concerning salvation – that through the redemption on the Cross, God has granted us salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life.  However, this is not a done deal.  In fact, there are many verses that speak about how that salvation on the Cross becomes transferred to me and how I must struggle and work to the last breath with the grace of God:

1)  “He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.  All things that the Father has are Mine.  Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14-15).  We believe that this occurs in the sacraments of the Church.  The Holy Spirit takes of the saving work of the Cross, and transfers it to us through the sacraments.

2)  “But he who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13).  The word “saved” is used in many different contexts in the Holy Bible.  There are many instances like this verse where it is used to describe something in the future that has not happened yet.

3)  “Now ‘If the righteous one is scarcely saved, where will the ungodly and the sinner appear?’” (1Peter 4:18 quoting Proverbs 11:31).

4)  “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (1Corinthians 9:27).  He is still struggling and it is possible for him to fall and lose his salvation.

5)  St. Paul further tells us, “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13).  These verses come after the portion where he speaks about the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of our Lord.  He is also speaking to people who already believe in Christ.  In spite of all this, they still need to work out their own salvation and God is the One working in them.

6)  In the book of Revelation, the messages to the seven churches reveal that it is not just apostasy that would keep us from the kingdom of heaven, but many other sins, even “losing our first love”.

7)  Many people believe in Christ, believe that they have inherited the kingdom, and even do miracles in His name, but Christ teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount:  “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.  Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’  And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

There are many verses in the Holy Bible that speak about this.  But another important point here is not just thinking about the sins we committed and how they keep us from the kingdom of heaven, but also that if I do not allow the Holy Spirit to work in my life for the sake of doing positive things, it is also a sin and I will be judged for this as well.  “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:2).

Along with this, our Lord Jesus Christ gives us in Matthew 25 the parables of the ten virgins, the talents, and the image of the judgment in the Last Day.  In each case, those who worked and were prepared inherited the kingdom of heaven.  However, those who did not, even though they believed, because they did not work and produce fruits and were not prepared, did not inherit the kingdom of heaven but quite the opposite.

An analogy that we use sometimes is that if someone is freely granting me one million dollars, I have several different options.  I may not take it at all; I may take it and not use it; or I may take it and invest in it.  The person who takes it and does not use it is the same as the one who does not take it because one million dollars means nothing unless it is used and invested in.  Yes, God promises me the kingdom of heaven provided I remain in Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit my entire life to the very end.  I believe in God’s promise to me, but it is certainly not assured because it does not all depend on Him, but rather my free choice to have Him continually in life to the very end and for Him to work in me to the very end.  Every relationship is two-sided.

I pray that this was not too wordy and that it answers the question.

Pray for me.

In Christ,

Antonios