



Diocese of South-West America
Sunday School

12th Grade

My Life in Heaven & on Earth



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LESSON 1 - THE HOLY TRINITY

Objective: To understand the importance of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in our lives

The dogma of the Holy Trinity is fundamental to Christianity. It is also one of the most difficult teachings to comprehend, and throughout history we see doctrinal struggles over the question of the Trinity.

In the fourth century, a priest in Alexandria by the name of Arius, attacked the historical faith of the Church with the belief that, “There was a time when the Son of God was not.” He insisted that the Son of God was not truly God; He was merely the highest of created beings, and in that sense we could call him a god. This belief is virtually identical to the present day heresy of the Jehovah’s Witness.

The Church, so it seemed, appeared to be almost split into two; for up to that time, there were no significant divisions in all of Christendom. A great council of the whole Church, the Council of Nicea, finally had to be called in A.D. 325 in the city of Nicea (near what is present day Istanbul, Turkey). More than three hundred bishops gathered, plus hundreds of priests and deacons from all over the Roman Empire.

At the Council of Nicea, the Church affirmed the dogma of the Holy Trinity is of vital importance to our understanding of Redemption and Salvation. That is, it is not just a matter of difference in opinion and interpretation, but that the whole of our understanding of Redemption and Salvation is built upon the correct doctrine of the Holy Trinity. This is why such a heresy in the early Church as to the Divinity of Christ brought so much attention and uproar.

Understanding the Holy Trinity

God is one in Essence but three persons. As we sing in the Maneesa of St Severus (the opening hymn of the Divine Liturgy) –



*“Christ who is our Lord and God;
Who trampled death – by His death
And destroyed our death;
Who is one person of the
Holy Trinity
And is worshipped equally
With His Father and Spirit.”*

A working definition of two terms is invaluable to our comprehension—both in mind and in heart—of the Trinity. These two words are: **essence** (**ousia** or nature) and **person** (**hypostasis**).

Three Persons in One Essence

God is one in essence (ousia), yet three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in persons (hypostasis). There is eternally in God true unity, combined with genuinely personal differentiation: the term ‘essence’, ‘substance’, ‘being’, or ‘nature’ indicates the unity, and the term person indicates the differentiation.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in essence, not merely in the sense that all three are examples of the same group or general class (as with human beings), but in the sense that they form a single, unique, specific reality. Humans, however closely they co-operate, each retain their own will and their own energy. In short, they are three men and not one man. But in the case of the three persons of the Trinity, there is distinction but never separation. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, have only ONE will and not three, only ONE energy and not three. None of the three ever acts separately, apart from the other two. They are not three Gods, but one God.

Yet, although the three persons never act apart from each other, there is in God genuine diversity as well as specific unity. We believe that this threefold differentiation in God’s outward action reflects a threefold differentiation in His inner life. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not just “modes” or “moods” of the Divinity, not just masks God assumes for a time in His dealings with creation and then lays aside. They are on the contrary coequal and coeternal persons.

A human father is older than his child, but when speaking of God as ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ we are not to interpret the terms in this literal sense. We affirm of the Son, “There was never a time when he was not.” And the same is said of the Holy Spirit.

Personal Attributes of the Divine Persons

The Father

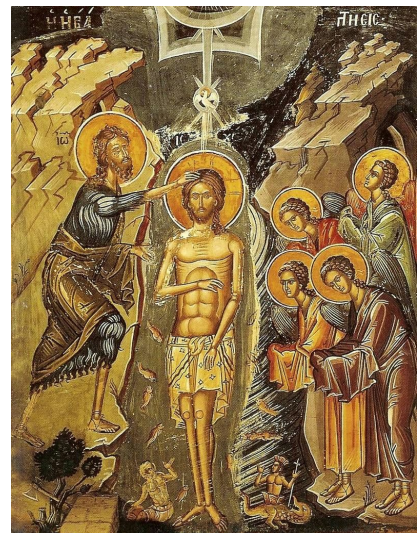
The Father is the Fountainhead of the Holy Trinity. He is not an unapproachable, vague, religious substance far removed from earth in some distant, dark, recess of heaven. He is a person who is ever-present, who knows and loves, and who is to be known and loved. Christ said, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (**John 14:23**).

The other two persons are each defined in terms of their relationship to the Father: the Son is ‘begotten’ by the Father, the Spirit ‘proceeds’ from the Father. Both ‘begetting’ and ‘procession’ are from all eternity, outside of time. The dogma of the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father shows the mystical inner relations of the Persons in God and the life of God within Himself.

We must never forget that one of our Lord Jesus Christ’s objectives was to bring people to His Father as well as Himself. He said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (**John 14:6**).

The Son

The second Person of the Holy Trinity is the Son of God, His ‘Word’, or ‘Logos’. The concept or name “Word” has its foundation in the first chapter of the Gospel of St. John. St. Dionysius of Alexandria explains, “Our thought utters from itself the word according to what the Prophet has said: ‘My heart hath poured forth a good word’ (**Ps. 45:1**). Thought and word are separate one from the other, and each occupies its special and separate place: while thought remains and moves the heart, the word is on the tongue and the lips. However, they are inseparable, and not for one moment are they deprived of each other. Thought does not exist without word, nor word without thought, having received its existence in thought. Thought is, as it were, a word hidden within, and word is thought which has come without. Thought is transformed into word, and word transmits thought to the hearers. In this way, though, with the help of the word, is instilled in the souls of the listeners, entering them together with the word. Thought, coming from itself, is as it were the father of the word: and the word is, as it were, the son of the thought. Before the thought the word was impossible, and the word does not come from anywhere outside, but rather from the thought itself.



Thus also, the Father, the greatest and all-embracing Thought, has a Son, the Word, His first Interpreter and Herald.”

The Holy Spirit

The third Person is the Holy Spirit, the ‘wind’, or ‘breath’ of God. While understanding the inadequacy of neat classifications, we can say that the Spirit is God within us, the Son is God with us, and the Father God above or beyond us. Just as the Son shows us the Father, so it is the Spirit who shows us the Son, making Him present to us.

Christ said, “But when the Helper (i.e. the Holy Spirit) comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me” **(John 15:26)**.

He also made it clear that the Holy Spirit can be known personally when He said concerning Him, “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you” **(John 14:16, 17)**.

There is a well known and loved prayer that the Orthodox Church offers to the Holy Spirit. It expresses our constant dependence upon this divine person for His work in our Lives, and it is a prayer all sincere Christians should know and use:

“O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth who is present in all places and fills all, the treasury of good things and the Life-Giver, graciously come, and dwell in us and purify us from all defilement, O Good One, and save our souls” (The Agpeya – Third Hour).

The Two Hands of God

Let us try to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity by looking at the Triadic patterns in salvation history and in our own life of prayer.

The three persons, as we saw, work always together, and possess but a single will and energy. St. Irenaeus speaks of the Son and the Spirit as the ‘two hands’ of God the Father; and in every creative and sanctifying act the Father is using both these hands at once:

1. Creation - By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth **(Ps. 33:6)**. God the Father creates through His Word or

Logos (the second person) and through His Breath or Spirit (the third person). The ‘two hands’ of the Father work together in the shaping of the universe. Of the Logos it is said, all things were made through Him (**John 1:3**); of the Spirit it is said at the creation He brooded or moved upon the face of the deep (**Gen. 1:2**). All created things are marked by the seal of the Trinity.

2. Incarnation - At the annunciation the Father sends the Holy Spirit upon the Blessed Virgin Mary, and she conceives of the eternal Son of God (**Luke 1:35**). So God’s taking of our humanity is a Trinitarian work.

3. The Baptism of Christ - In the Orthodox tradition this is seen as a revelation of the Trinity. The Father’s voice from heaven bears witness to the Son, saying, This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased; and at the same moment the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends from the Father and rests upon the Son (**Matt. 3:16-17**).

4. The Transfiguration of Christ - This also is a Trinitarian happening. The same relationship prevails between the three persons as at the Baptism. The Father testifies from heaven, This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased; hear Him (**Matt. 17:5**), while as before the Spirit descends upon the Son, this time in the form of a cloud of light (**Luke 9:34**).

5. The Eucharistic Epiclesis - The same Triadic pattern as is evident at the Annunciation, the Baptism and the Transfiguration, is apparent likewise at the culminating moment of the Eucharist, the epiclesis or invocation of the Holy Spirit. In words addressed to the Father, the priest says in the Liturgy of St. Basil:

“And we ask You, O Lord, our God, we, Your sinful and unworthy servants. We worship You by the pleasure of Your goodness, that Your Holy Spirit descend upon us and upon these gifts set forth, and purify them, change them, and manifest them as a sanctification of Your saints. Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, given for the remission of sins and eternal life to those who shall partake of Him.”

The Father sends down the Holy Spirit, to effect the Son’s presence in the consecrated gifts. Here, as always, the three persons of the Trinity are working together.

Holy Trinity in the Scripture

Old Testament

Genesis 1:26: “And God said, Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness.” The plural number here indicates that God is not one Person.

Genesis 3:22: “And the Lord God said, Behold, Adam is become as one of us, to know good and evil.” (These are the words of God before the banishment of our ancestors from Paradise.)

Genesis 11:6-7: Prior to the confusion of tongues at the building of the tower of Babylon, the Lord said, “Let us go down, and there confound their language.”

The New Testament

We have already discussed the manifestation of God in Trinity in the Incarnation, at the Baptism, and at the Transfiguration.

Matt. 28:19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” St. Ambrose of Milan notes: “The Lord said, ‘In the name’ and not ‘in the names,’ because God is One.”

2 Cor. 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.”

1 John 5:7: “For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one.”

Living The Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity should not be pushed into the corner and treated as a piece of theology only of interest to specialists. It should have a tremendous impact on our daily lives.

Made after the image of God the Trinity, human beings are called to reproduce on earth the mystery of mutual love that the Trinity lives in heaven. Each social unit—the family, the school, the workplace, the parish, the universal Church—is to be made an icon (image) of the Triunity. Because we know that God is three in one, each of us is committed to living sacrificially in and for the other; each is committed to a life of practical service, of active compassion.

St. John Chrysostom says, “The most perfect rule of Christianity, its exact definition, its highest summit, is this: to seek what is for the benefit of all. I cannot believe that it is possible for man to be saved if he does not labor for the salvation of his neighbor.” Such are the practical implications of the dogma of the Trinity. That is what it means to live the Trinity.

*Adapted from an article written by Fr. Kyrillos Ibrahim for [coptic hymns.net](http://lacopty.org/orthodoxy/our-faith/the-holy-trinity)
(<http://lacopty.org/orthodoxy/our-faith/the-holy-trinity>)*



LESSON 2 – COMMUNION

Objective: To identify God as Communion and understand our communion with God

The entire faith of the Church is built on the fact that God is the Lord and has revealed Himself unto us.

God has revealed Himself! He has not merely talked to us about some aspects about Himself, or given us some fact sheets that explain His divine existence and purposes. He has shown forth Himself and has given Himself to men for divine communion.

If communion with God is not possible, then there is no premise for Christian faith and certainly no Orthodoxy.

According to Orthodoxy, the ultimate goal in our lives is to be in communion with God. God is the end of all longing, the fulfillment of all desire. He is the source and the goal of our very humanity, which is made in God's divine image and likeness.

The Most Reverend John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon explains, "Only in communion can God be what God is". The teaching of God as Communion emphasizes God as Trinity, where three distinct Persons are One.

Through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, man comes to living communion with God the Father Himself. There is no other meaning and purpose to the Church and to life itself. Man and all creation with him must come to be divine by sharing the being and life and action of God Himself.

In our Church, this communion is observed through the Divine Liturgy. The Divine Liturgy is called the "sacrament of sacraments" in the Orthodox tradition. It is also called the "sacrament of the Church." The Liturgy is the center of the Church's life. Everything in the Church leads to the Eucharist, and all things flow from it. It is an experience of communion with the Living God in which prayer, music, gestures, material creation, art, and architecture come into full orchestration. The Eucharist is a celebration of faith which touches not only the mind but also the emotions and the senses.

Communion finds expression in love - “Love is not an emanation or 'property' of the substance of God ... but is constitutive of his substance, i.e. it is that which makes God what he is, the one God. Thus love ceases to be a qualifying property of being and becomes the supreme ontological predicate. Love as God’s mode of existence constitutes His being”. In simpler terms, God is Love!

Love not only constitutes God's being. Love also constitutes our being and thus we are given freedom through love. Thus, it is only in the church, in incorporation into Christ, that human beings can find their true expression as persons restored to the image and likeness of God. **Theosis** is the transformation of ourselves to be like Christ, and this in turn brings us to closer communion with God - we are to be like God, so we can become One with God.



All of the attributes of divinity—as one saint put it—must become ours; eternal life, truth, goodness, holiness, purity, joy... all perfections summed up in the greatest which is Love.

How then, do we see this communion take this place in our daily lives and bring ourselves in closer communion with God? We witness God’s revelation and experience this communion through every act of love. We should grow in love and faith with one another in the Church, expressing acts of loving kindness, as taught to us by Christ’s example. As we constantly grow in love and faith, we are transformed to be more like Christ and attain communion with Him.

LESSON 3 – AN ORTHODOX PARISH

Objective: To understand the existence and function of your parish

An Orthodox parish has only one God-given reason for being. It exists to be the **One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ**.

Whatever the original reasons and conditions for its founding, whatever other services and activities it may provide, whatever other desires and needs it may fulfill for its members, a community of Orthodox Christians must be Christ's one holy Church. If it is not, then it is neither Christian nor Orthodox, whatever else it may be and do.

A parish must be the Church of Christ, and not simply a church, because, according to the Orthodox faith, every local community of Orthodox Christians with a priest must be, and theologically understood actually is the one Church of Christ. Theologically speaking, there are not many Orthodox Churches; there is only one.

An Orthodox parish is this **one** Church or it is not an Orthodox church at all. Each parish, therefore, must be the one and only Church of Christ. The parish must be **holy** because Christ's Church is holy. Everything in the parish, and everything about it, must be holy because God and Christ are holy. There can be no part of a parish that is not sanctified by the holiness of God and His Son Jesus Christ, "the holy One of God." There can be no aspect of a parish not inspired and empowered by God's Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of God and of Christ.

Everything in and about a parish—its organization, structure, administration, finances and properties, as well as its theological and moral teachings and practices, and its liturgical and sacramental rites and services – must be of God. They must be determined by God, inspired by God and submitted to God for His glory and the good of His people. The Christian parish must also be catholic. For the parish to be "**catholic**" means that it is full, complete and whole, lacking nothing in its mystical and sacramental being and life as Christ's holy Church. In an Orthodox Christian parish the whole fullness of God must dwell, as in Christ's body, with all the fullness of life and grace and truth, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The word catholic literally means full or whole or complete. It does not, in this instance, mean universal or worldwide. Thus every local Christian community, every "parish" in the contemporary American meaning of the word, theologically, mystically, and

sacramentally is “Christ’s body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” (**Ephesians 1:23**) It is the “household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” (**1 Timothy 3:15**)

Everything expresses this. Everything testifies to this. This obviously does not mean that a parish will not be particular and limited in its human elements and cultural form. It has to be, since it is made up of human beings. But all of a parish’s particular aspects, with all of its teachings, services and activities, if they are Orthodox and Christian, will be open to the boundless fullness of God and will thereby be inclusive to everyone and everything that is good and holy and true.

And, according to the understanding of Christ’s Church in the Nicene creed, the Orthodox parish that is truly Christian will not only be the same Church of Christ with every other parish - one with God’s unity, holy with God’s holiness, and catholic with God’s fullness. It will also be **apostolic** with God’s own apostolicity which is found in the Church of Christ in all times and places. An Orthodox parish, if it is Christ’s one holy Church, will be apostolic in at least two meanings of the term. It will be apostolic because it is founded upon Christ’s apostles and firmly rooted in apostolic doctrine and tradition. It will keep and live “the faith which was once and for all delivered to the saints.” (**Jude 3**) It will preserve and pass on the apostolic “deposit” (**paratheke**) which has been guarded and developed by Orthodox Christians, particularly through their bishops, in all times and places, from apostolic times to the present. (cf. **1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:12, 14**)

An Orthodox parish is apostolic also because it exists with God’s mission, which is the mission of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the apostles of all ages, beginning with Christ’s own. The Greek word **apostolo**, from which the words apostle and apostolic are derived, means “to send.” So does the Latin word **mitto**, from which are derived the words mission and missionary.

According to the scriptures, Jesus the Messiah is himself “the apostle.” (**Hebrews 3:1**) According to his scriptural testimony, especially the Gospel according to St. John, Jesus speaks the words, does the work, and accomplishes the will “of the Father, the One, who sent Him.” (cf. **John 6:29, 44; 7:28,33; 17:3,18**) In the same scriptures, the apostles, being filled with the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and is sent by the Son, are themselves sent into the world by Jesus to proclaim the gospel of God’s Kingdom. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you...Receive the Holy Spirit.” (**John 20:21**)

An Orthodox Christian parish, however it was founded and for whatever purpose it was organized, must understand itself to be an apostolic community with a missionary purpose. Its members, especially its leaders, must be conscious of themselves as people sent by Christ from God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring God's unity, holiness and fullness to all human beings in this divided, sinful and fragmented world. If a parish has no awareness and consciousness of being "sent" by God to speak His words, to do His work, and to accomplish His will in this world, then it is not an Orthodox Christian parish. At best it is a bunch of decent people carrying on a bundle of benign activities for their own benefit. At worst, to use apocalyptic words, it is a "synagogue of Satan" perverting God's gospel by its "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (which) will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." (**Revelation 2:9, 3:9; Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:28**)

The members of an Orthodox parish must be motivated to keep God's commandments as their essential and ultimately exclusive reason for being. The life and activity of an Orthodox parish should be perfectly described by Jesus' answer to the question concerning the first and great commandment of the law of God.

And one of the scribes...asked him, "Which commandment is first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your Neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (**Mark 12:28-31**)

In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus teaches that "on these two commandments (**Deut. 6:5** and **Leviticus 19:18**) depend all the law and the prophets. (**Matthew 22:40**) For our present purposes we can also say that on these two commandments depend the whole being and life of an Orthodox Christian parish.

Whatever confusions and difficulties confront the Indian Orthodox Christianity in North America, whatever their origins and causes, and whatever temptations and trials they bring to believers, there is no good reason why our Orthodox Christian parishes in the United States or Canada cannot be Christ's holy Church.

All that is required is for us to be firmly resolved to have it so. Our afflictions will be great, as Christ has promised, but our successes are assured by His victory. "In the world you have tribulation," Jesus says to his apostles, "but take courage, I have overcome the world." (**John 16:33**)

"For what is impossible with men is possible with God." (Luke 18:27)

Adapted from "The Orthodox Parish in North America" by V. Rev. Fr. Thomas Hopko, presented at the 13th All American Council of the Orthodox Church of America (2002)



LESSON 4 – THE OUTSIDERS

Objective: To learn the Orthodox attitude toward those not in communion with the Church

During the **Diptychs (Thubdens)** of the Divine Liturgy, we have intercessory prayers for the living and departed. In the prayers for the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, we say – *“Let us remember all those who before them, and with them, and after them, have kept, entrusted, and delivered to us the one genuine and uncorrupted faith”*.

As Orthodox Christians, we believe we are the one true Church of Christ. This is our confession of faith. The popular sentiment is to say something like:

“Well, all churches are the same.”

“No one can claim the truth.”

“Different churches have different things.”

“We really shouldn’t be so proud and so arrogant as to say that our church is the only church or the only true church.”

However, this is truly the teaching of the Holy Scripture, the Ecumenical Councils and certainly of the Holy Fathers and the saints. This is dogma – that the Orthodox Church possesses the fullness of the Faith and is truly the one Church of Christ.

We say the Creed, and in the Creed we say not only, *“We believe in one true God, the Father Almighty ... And in One Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God ... And in the one Living Holy Spirit, the life-giving Lord of all, Who proceeds from the Father and Who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified”* (i.e., Holy Trinity), but we affirm that *we believe in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church*. We say there is One True Church.

This Church is not the Roman Catholic Church. It’s not one of the Protestant churches. It’s not the Anglican Church. It’s the Orthodox Church which, on this Earth is a communion of self-governing Orthodox churches, who are in communion, one with another, and claim that this is the Church that we believe in when we say the Nicene Creed.

What does that mean? Are we going to heaven while they going to hell? Absolutely not!

It is very important to understand that as an Orthodox Christian, we firmly believe that Christ is the judge. We do not know who will feel heaven or hell in the eternal life because we are working our own salvation in fear and trembling (**Philippians 2:12**) The members of that Church are all sinners, and our Church Fathers always preached that the Church is a Hospital. There are very good people in the Church, and there are very bad people in the Church, but the Church is where we work on our Salvation, perfecting ourselves to be true icons of Christ. It is true that the closer you come to God, the more you realize your sin, your wretchedness, your misery, your failures, your weaknesses. That's simply a law of the spiritual life. The Apostle Paul said, "his is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." (**1 Timothy 1:15**)

The Church is a concrete body of people. It's not an invisible thing. At the end of the ages, there'll be no church, because everything will be Church. The Church on earth is the experience of the creation as God's kingdom until it comes in glory by grace and by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the indwelling of the word of God.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann liked to say that the Church is not an organization or an institution with teachings and sacraments, mysteries, but it's a mystery; it's a great sacrament; it's a teaching; it's a Gospel that has organizations and has institutions. When we confess, "I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church," we are saying things about God. We are saying that the Church is one because there is one God; there is one Lord, there is one Holy Spirit; there is one faith; there is one baptism; there is one body. It has to be of one mind and one heart. That's what we confess, because, as far as God is concerned and by his action, the Church is one with the unity of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When we say the Church is holy, it is holy because God consecrated and hallowed it, because God is holy. If we say the Church is catholic, it means that the Church is full, complete, and whole; there's absolutely nothing lacking to the Church of Christ as far as the possibility to our communion with God is concerned.

And then to say that the Church is apostolic not only means that it's built on the apostles of Jesus—those who are sent—and is built on Jesus himself as the last and final apostle—"apostolos" means "one who has been sent"—so the Father sent his Son into the world and Jesus said, "As the Father sent me, so I also send you." So the Church is sent; it has a mission; it is evangelical. The Church is sent with the mission of Christ, a mission of God himself, but it's because of God we enter into it.

So God gives the Church. God institutes the Church. God makes the Church to be the Church. God gives his Gospel. God gives his commandments. God gives his teaching. God gives the worship. We worship God in the ways that God has commanded us to worship. And we have concrete forms of worship that begin in the law of Moses with the tabernacle, with the Temple, with the sacrificial system, with the feast days and fast days, with the lambs that are slain and the blood—but all this is fulfilled in Christ and in the New Testament Church, the Israel of God, there is the commandments and the teaching and the good news and the forms of worship that God has given, and these are kept by the faithful people.

We try to be as holy and righteous as we can, but we're certainly not perfect. Here, Fr. George Florovsky often used to say, "The true Church is not the perfect Church, humanly speaking." Institutionally speaking, the Church on earth is never perfect as far as the members are concerned, but it's certainly perfect as far as God is concerned, and as far as the teachings and the worship are concerned.

St. Paul writes to preserve sound, healthy doctrine which he received from Christ and has given to the Church. St. Paul urges us to cling to **paradosis** (the tradition), the apostolic deposit given to us. He urges us to keep and never change the Gospel. **(2 Timothy 1:13, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 1 Corinthians 11:2)**

The Orthodox Church truly believes that we have through history held firm what was given to us. It's as we sing during the Divine Liturgy:

*In oblations and in pray'rs
We remember our father, those who
Taught us in their life to be
The children of God.*

How should we treat our friends and families who are not be members of the Orthodox Church?

It is true that many people in those non-Orthodox churches may be in God's eyes a lot holier than we are: more righteous, more virtuous, more caring about the poor, more fighting their passions. God knows those things, and He will judge accordingly. It is not our place or our position to be the judge. That is only Christ. But, if asked, we must with humility affirm that the other churches have errors in doctrine and worship. In St. Paul's words, you'll be following ultimately another gospel. **(Galatians 1:6-9)**. It is why we choose to remain in the Orthodox Church – not because of parents or friends, but

because here we find Truth. As Fr. John Behr reminds, "Each person has to be responsible for themselves coming to Church and being a member of the Church. Why are you coming to this Church is what we should ask people ... just because my parents did and my parents before that did? Or is it because I believe that here I encounter the Lord of all Creation of this history, the one sitting at the right hand of the Father, tangibly... perceptibly .. and become His Body"

So, how do we treat those outside our Church?

In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it is very clear – we must love! We are to pray, forgive, bless, feed everyone including those outside of our Church. This is without exception!

"I exhort therefore that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth."

"Let every prayer of ours, then, be accompanied with thanksgiving. And if we are commanded to pray for our neighbors, not only for the faithful, but for the unbelieving also, consider how wrong it is to pray against your brethren. What? Has He commanded you to pray for your enemies, and do you pray against your brother? But your prayer is not against him, but against yourself. For you provoke God by uttering those impious words, "Show him the same!" "So do to him!" "Smite him!" "Recompense him!" Far be such words from the disciple of Christ, who should be meek and mild. From the mouth that has been vouchsafed such holy Mysteries, let nothing bitter proceed. Let not the tongue that has touched the Lord's Body utter anything offensive, let it be kept pure, let not curses be borne upon it.

Let us learn at last to be Christians! If we know not how to pray, which is a very simple and easy thing, what else shall we know? Let us learn to pray like Christians. Those are the prayers of Gentiles, the supplications of Jews (i.e., who pray only for their own). The Christian's are the reverse, for the forgiveness and forgetting of offenses against us. "Being reviled," it is said, "we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it; being defamed, we entreat.") Hear Stephen saying, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Instead of praying against them, he prayed for them."

To summarize in the words of Fr. Thomas Hopko, “We will answer for what we are given, and that’s a teaching of Jesus. Everyone will give an account, according to what they have received.

Those who have received much are going to have to answer for much. God will know what to do with us, and God will know what to do with every human being in the whole of creation. That’s His business. Our business is to remain faithful to the truth.”

Based on Fr. Thomas Hopko’s talk on [The One True Church](http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230606.htm), and St. John Chrysostom’s Homily 6 on 1 Timothy 2:1-4 (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230606.htm>)



LESSON 5 – SEALED WITH THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

Objective: To understand the sacrament of Holy Chrismation

In the sacrament of **Chrismation** we receive “the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit” (**Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 6; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22**). If Baptism is our personal participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, then Chrismation is our personal participation in Pentecost—the coming of the Holy Spirit upon us.

Throughout the Bible, we see the anointing of priests, kings, and prophets. The term "Jesus Christ" means "the anointed Savior". The consecrated oil that is mainly used in Holy Baptism and consecration of church buildings are usually called "**Mooron**" and in some other regions of the world it is called "**Chrism**". Every Christian is called to receive the anointment of the Chrism at the time of his Baptism. As Easter has no meaning for the world without Pentecost, Baptism has no meaning for the Christian without Chrismation. In this understanding and practice, the Orthodox Church differs from the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches where the two sacraments are often separated and given other interpretations than those found in traditional Orthodoxy.

Chrismation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, is performed in the Orthodox Church by anointing all parts of the person’s body with the special oil called Holy Chrism. This oil, also called **mooron** (or myrrh) is prepared by the bishops of the Church. Used for consecrations and Chrismation, it is prepared by mixing pure olive oil perfumed with spices and pure balsamic oil.

Mooron is a Greek term which has its original connotation to 'perfumed oil' used by the people of the Orient in ancient times. The term is used in the New Testament for the costly oil brought by Mary to anoint the body of Christ. The early Christian writers consider the anointment with the Holy Oil as an old practice. Among the Church Fathers, St. Ignatius of Antioch is the first to use the term, "Mooron." St. Cyril of Jerusalem is the first among the Fathers to give a long and profound exposition of the Holy Oil. St. Cyril undoubtedly considers the perfection of baptism only through the holy ointment. Retaining the gifts of Mooron is the operative condition at all times which will enable us to grow into the true Christian stature.

The Holy Chrism signifies for the newly baptized, the sign and seal of baptism, the perfection of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the perfume of Jesus, the anointed of the Father. It is used in chrismation to show that the gift of the Spirit was originally given to men through the apostles of Christ, whose formal successors in the world are the bishops of the Church (**Acts 8:14; 19:1-7**).

In Chrismation, a person is given the “power from on high” (**Acts 1-2**), the gift of the Spirit of God, in order to live the new life received in baptism. He is anointed, just as Christ the Messiah is the Anointed One of God. He becomes—as the fathers of the Church dared to put it—a “christ” together with Jesus. Thus, through Chrismation we become a “christ,” a son of God, a person upon whom the Holy Spirit dwells, a person in whom the Holy Spirit lives and acts—as long as we want Him and cooperate with His powerful and holy inspiration. Thus, it is only after our chrismation that the baptismal procession is made and that we hear the epistle and the gospel of our salvation and illumination in Christ.

There was a practice that we don’t see too often in the Indian Orthodox Church called **churching**. Together with being baptized and chrismated, a newborn child is also “churched.” The rite of churching imitates the offering of male children to the temple according to the law of the Old Testament, particularly the offering of Christ on the fortieth day after his birth (**Luke 2:22**). Because of this fact, baptism traditionally came to be prescribed for the fortieth day or thereabouts. In the New Testament Church, both male and female children are formally presented to God in the Church with special prayers at this time.

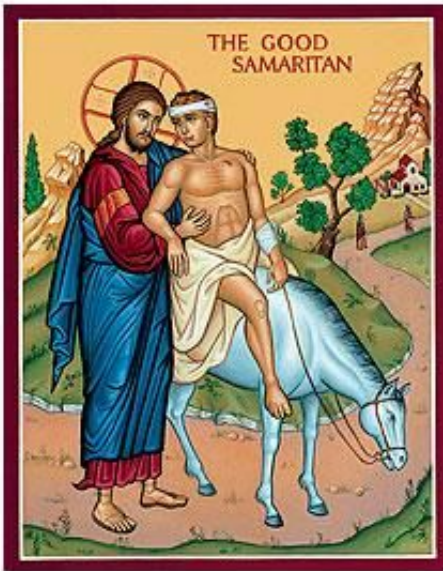
It is also the Orthodox tradition that the mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation, called officially “**Holy Illumination**,” are fulfilled when the “newly-enlightened” immediately receives Holy Qurbana in the Divine Liturgy of the Church. This is the case with infants as well as adults.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit imparted on us at the time of Chrismation enable us to face adversities successfully in our march towards spiritual perfection. When the priest signs the cross on us with the Mooron and later anoints us fully with Mooron, he mentions the powers and virtues that we receive: faith, tolerance, self-control, the grace to walk in the path that is designed for us by the Lord, etc. As the forces of evil work their way into our lives and begin their destructive efforts, we get power of the Spirit to defeat Satan.

LESSON 6 – SALVATION AS HEALING

Objective: To define the Church as a place of healing and understand how it relates to our salvation.

The Greek word for salvation designates “healing.” The Orthodox understanding of life in Christ views sin and salvation in terms of illness and healing of the soul. The whole life of the Orthodox Church is given as a means to this restoration of spiritual health, i.e. to bring the human person into an authentic union with God, to become Christ-like, and to be more and more open to the Spirit of God. The life of the Church is nothing other than this life of salvation and grace accessible to all who would avail themselves of it.



A fundamental teaching of the Holy Fathers is that the Church is a "Hospital" which cures the wounded man. In many passages of Holy Scripture such language is used. One such passage is that of the parable of the Good Samaritan: "But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you'" (**Luke**

10:33-35).

In this parable, the Samaritan represents Christ who cured the wounded man and led him to the Inn, or to the "Hospital" which is the Church. It is evident here that Christ is presented as the Healer, the physician who cures man's maladies; and the Church is the true Hospital.

It is very characteristic that Saint John Chrysostom, analyzing this parable, presents these truths emphasized above - Man's life "in Paradise" was reduced to a life governed by the devil and his wiles. "And fell among thieves," refers to the hands of the devil and of all the hostile powers. The wounds man suffered are the various sins, as the prophet David says, "My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness" (**Psalms 37**),

for "every sin causes a bruise and a wound." The Samaritan is Christ Himself who descended to earth from Heaven in order to cure the wounded man. He used oil and wine to "treat" the wounds; in other words, by "mingling His blood with the Holy Spirit, he brought man to life." According to another interpretation, oil corresponds to the comforting word and wine to the harsh word. Mingled together they have the power to unify the scattered mind. "He set him in His own beast," that is He assumed human flesh on "the shoulders" of His divinity and ascended incarnate to His Father in Heaven. Then the Good Samaritan, Christ, took man to the grand, wondrous and spacious inn - to the Church. He handed man over to the innkeeper, who is the Apostle Paul, and through the Apostle Paul to all bishops and priests, saying: "Take care of the Gentile people, whom I have handed over to you in the Church. They suffer illness wounded by sin, so cure them, using as remedies the words of the Prophets and the teaching of the Gospel; make them healthy through the admonitions and comforting word of the Old and New Testaments." Thus, according to Saint Chrysostom, Paul is he who maintains the Churches of God, "curing all people by his spiritual admonitions and offering to each one of them what they really need."

In the interpretation of this parable by Saint John Chrysostom, it is clearly shown that the Church is a Hospital which cures people wounded by sin; and the bishops and priests are the therapists of the people of God.

So, how should an Orthodox Christian respond if asked the question, "are you saved?"

Molly Sabourin summarized well -

"I was originally saved over two thousand years ago when God the Son took on human flesh and offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice for all of mankind, defeating the power of sin by suffering on the Cross and destroying death through His miraculous Resurrection.

I am being saved daily through my intentional decisions to follow Jesus' example within each situation that I find myself, viewing paradise not as just a someday destination but as the everyday experience of self-denial, of being filled, through the Eucharist, obedience, and love for others, with Christ.

I will, (Lord have mercy), be saved at the Great and final Judgment when I give an account for a lifetime of actions, when it becomes clear whether or not I cooperated with the grace so generously bestowed upon me. Who of us, having been blessed beyond all comprehension, should feel the need to insure that

regardless of our choices a reward will be ours free and clear? Who of us dare to sit idle with our assurances, interpreting the conditions of the Bridegroom's invitation while our lamps for illuminating the darkness run out of oil?

My individual salvation is being worked out with fear and trembling through the unique responsibilities God deemed best to set before me. Based upon the model of the publican who beat his breast and begged for leniency, I am careful to not assume I have a handle on the spiritual state of others. I would do best, rather, to stay focused on my own flagrant shortcomings, reverencing both friends and enemies, all of whom were created in God's image, as living icons of Christ Jesus.

I share my faith, yes, but not out of obligation; a soul that's found its meaning cannot help but be a witness to such joy. My ongoing testimony is presented through acts of service, in accordance with Christ's commandment to love God by loving your neighbor.

I pray ceaselessly for the courage to fight the good fight, staying faithful until my very last breath upon this earth."

Adapted from writings of Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, and a podcast by Molly Sabourin

LESSON 7 – VENERATION OF THE SAINTS

Objective: To understand the importance of intercession, veneration, and the role of St. Mary and all the Saints.

St. Basil the Great teaches about the invocation of Saints, and their images – “According to the blameless faith of the Christians which we have obtained from God, I confess and agree that I believe in one God the Father Almighty; God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost; I adore and worship one God, the Three. I confess to the economy of the Son in the flesh, and that the holy Mary, who gave birth to Him according to the flesh, was Mother of God. I acknowledge also the holy apostles, prophets, and martyrs; and I invoke them to supplication to God, that through them, that is, through their mediation, the merciful God may be propitious to me, and that a ransom may be made and given me for my sins. Wherefore also I honor and kiss the features of their images, inasmuch as they have been handed down from the holy apostles, and are not forbidden, but are in all our churches.”

One of the first things that one notices when visiting an Orthodox Church is the image and icons of the Blessed Virgin Mary and other Saints, particularly St. Thomas and St. Gregorios of Parumala. At home, we may icons of the Blessed Virgin and the Saints. We frequently mention our Saints in hymns and prayers and request for intercession at every important moment of their lives. Why?

The Orthodox devotion to the Theotokos and all the Saints is not merely a matter of piety - it is an expression of the central teaching of the Orthodox Church, the doctrine of the Incarnation of Christ. As Orthodox Christians, we hold the Holy Scriptures in highest regard and consider the Bible as divinely inspired. We also look beyond our sacred texts to the totality of the life of the Church as expressed in the Holy Tradition of the Church. The words used during prayer and worship are very important and also very personal manifestation of this Holy Tradition.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote, “In early times the Church knew full well that the **lex credendi** (rule of faith) and the **lex orandi** (rule of prayer) were inseparable and that they [validated] each other — that, in the words of St. Irenaeus, ‘our teaching is in harmony with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist confirms our teaching.’” Orthodox theologians do not draw a sharp distinction between Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition or between written and unwritten Tradition. Instead, they consider the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and those expressed by the prayers of the Church, the decisions of the

Ecumenical Councils, and the consensus of ancient and modern theologians as manifestations of the same Holy Tradition. Orthodox Christians believe that, throughout the centuries, the Holy Spirit has led the Church to preserve the teachings of Christ and His Apostles through the life of the Church.

The role of prayer and Holy Qurbana (liturgy) in transmitting teachings concerning St. Mary and all the Saints illustrate a very important aspect of the Orthodox understanding of the Church. Orthodox Christians believe that the Church is first and foremost a Eucharistic or worshipping assembly. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote, “The Eucharist, we repeat, is not ‘one of the sacraments’ or one of the services, but the very manifestation and fulfillment of the Church in all her power, sanctity and fullness.” Thus, from an Orthodox point of view, liturgy and worship are not just one expression of the life of the Church to Orthodox. They are the very essence of the Church. To Orthodox Christians, everything flows from the Eucharist and the worship of the Church. Even charitable and social works are a means to manifest to the world the presence of Christ that the faithful experience during the Divine Liturgy.

The place of liturgical hymns and prayers in expressing the teachings of the Church concerning the Saints illustrate the Orthodox approach to theology. We are not praying to the Saints, but rather our **venerating** (Greek word: **proskynesis**) is a major role in the preservation of our Christian doctrine, because we have been taught by the Apostles that the honor paid to the Saints is an expression of the Christology or doctrine concerning Christ of the Church. In particular, St. Mary’s most important title of “**Theotokos**,” which means “God Bearer,” or “Birthgiver of God” is more a glorification of Christ rather than St. Mary. In iconography, very often an icon of St. Mary with Christ is not referred to as an icon of St. Mary but rather an icon of Christ.

As Vladimir Lossky has written, “Orthodox theology never thinks of the Church apart from Christ and from the Holy Spirit.” As the Holy Scriptures teach, “Christ is the head of the Church.” The Church is the Body of Christ. Thus, in order to understand what the Church is, one must understand who Christ is. Our devotion to the Theotokos and the Saints is relevant to our own Sacramental theology. For example, St. Mary’s obedience is our example of synergy, or cooperation, with God. The concept of synergy is essential to the Orthodox understanding of salvation. As understood by Orthodox Christians, **synergy** is the exercise of our free will to accept God’s gift of grace. In our hymns and our prayers, the Orthodox Church calls Mary “immaculate,” and “all pure,” as a manifestation of the Orthodox understanding of salvation as deification. Orthodox Christians believe that only through the grace of God St. Mary has been deified or made by grace what God is by nature or, as St. Paul wrote, “And we all, with unveiled face,

beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another ...”. Salvation for Orthodox theology is more than the forgiveness of sins or justification, but is also the transformation of the believer by the grace of God to become a partaker of the Divine Nature.

Orthodox Christians acknowledge that realization of salvation in the veneration of St. Mary and the Saints, and express our hope for our own salvation as well.

In the original Greek, the word “Church,” or “**ecclesia**,” literally means a gathering or assembly. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote that properly an Orthodox Church building (temple) “is experienced perceived as sober, as the gathering together of heaven and earth and all creation in Christ — which constitutes the essence and purpose of the Church itself.” To Orthodox Christians, the Church is not just an assembly of humans, but is a participation in the worship of the Saints and angels before the throne of God. This is also why there are references to the angelic hosts during the Orthodox Divine Liturgy (Holy Qurbana). Again, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote, “The Eucharist is always a going out from ‘this world’ and an ascent to heaven ...” Thus, Orthodox Christians believe that through the Liturgy, the faithful mystically ascend to heaven and join the company of the faithful departed before God. This assembly of the entire company of heaven before the throne of God through the Eucharist creates a relationship between the living and the departed in Christ. This is manifested by the prayers of the living for intercession of Mary and the Saints, who are mystically present in the lives of the faithful through the mystery of the Church. This mystery transcends the boundaries between heaven and earth and unites those on earth with those in heaven.

Therefore, Orthodox veneration to St. Mary and all the Saints is a manifestation of the most essential doctrines of the Orthodox Faith. The prominent place played by St. Mary in Orthodoxy also shows the importance of worship as the essence of the Church and the chief means whereby the Church transmits and preserves the Gospel for future generations. This veneration shows that the promises of Christ are real, for, through Christ, those who follow Him will share the experience of God’s deifying grace that is manifested by the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Saints. Finally, the familiar way in which Orthodox Christians ask St. Mary and the other Saints for their intercessions, illustrates the very meaning of “Church,” which is an assembly of the faithful, those on earth and those in heaven, with the angels before the throne of God.

*Lesson includes the thesis work of Fr. Abey George (<http://www.ds-wa.org/educational.html>), and “The Holy Tradition and the Veneration of Mary and other Saints in the Orthodox Church” by Fr. John Morris (<http://www.antiochian.org/node/17079>), June 2007 issue of *The Word* magazine*

LESSON 8 - THE BELIEF OF SAINT THOMAS

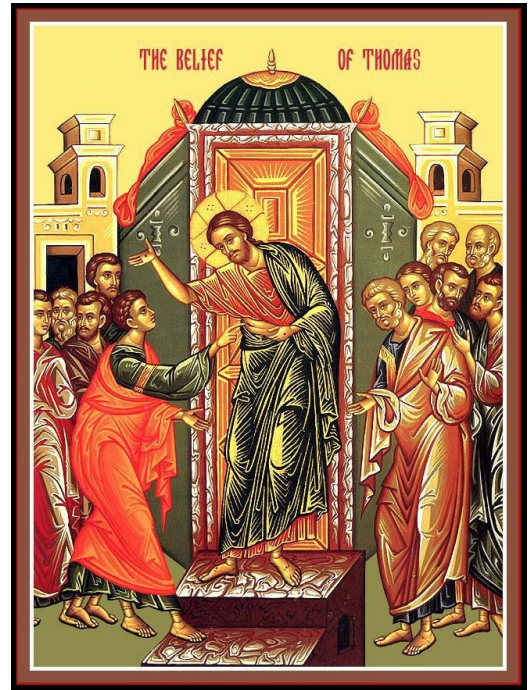
Objective: To gain a deeper understanding of the encounter between St. Thomas and the resurrected Christ.

On the eighth day after the Resurrection, the Lord appeared to the Apostle Thomas and showed him His wounds. “My Lord and my God,” the Apostle cried out (**John 20:28**). St. Thomas is often called “Doubting Thomas”, on account of his initial refusal to believe the accounts of the other disciples. Some icons also label this as “The Doubting Thomas.” This is incorrect. In Greek, the inscription reads, “The Touching of Thomas.” In Slavonic, it says, “The Belief of Thomas.” When St. Thomas touched the Life-giving side of the Lord, he no longer had any doubts.

“Thomas, being once weaker in faith than the other apostles,” says St John Chrysostom, “toiled through the grace of God more bravely, more zealously and tirelessly than them all, so that he went preaching over nearly all the earth, not fearing to proclaim the Word of God to nations.”

The faith of St. Thomas was so great that he traveled to India, which was no easy venture, to preach the Gospel. The confession of St. Thomas that Jesus Christ is “Lord and God” was also a greater confession of faith than any of the Apostles had previously uttered. Sometimes this confession of faith is held in Thomas’ hands in the Holy Icons that depict him, though more commonly it is the scroll denoting his rank of Apostle that is shown. In scenes that show St. Thomas with Christ, he is shown as a beardless youth as he was younger, and is something to consider when reading about his initial doubts which turned into a faith as strong as any Apostle.

A deeper study of Scripture and the Holy Icon shows profound truths of the Church. “And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, “Peace to you!”



Eight is an important number in Scripture, and represents the restoration of Creation (as God had created and rested in seven days). Eight is the fullness day, the day of the Kingdom. The shut doors are also symbolic as it represents that this mystery of faith belongs inside the Church. In olden days, after the Liturgy of the Word when the Gospel was read, the deacon would bring the censer up through the aisle to indicate to all those who were not baptized to leave the Church as the Liturgy of the Eucharist was about to be celebrated. This was not done by the Church to offend, but rather to protect those who were not full members of the Church as participating in the most Holy Mystery of the Eucharist without preparation would do harm for the non-believer (**1 Corinthians 11:27**). This was how strong the belief in the Body and Blood of Christ, as well as the love for those who were not members of the Church. Mysteries such as the Eucharist, St. Mary as the Theotokos, the Holy Trinity, etc. all belong to the inner life of the Church and are shared with those who have been baptized and prepared. The discernment of how we share the Faith is also taught directly to us by Christ - "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God, but to those who are outside, all things come in parables" (**Mark 4:11**).

For those inside the closed doors, for those inside the Church, we clearly see the confession of St. Thomas on Christ's divinity, addressing Jesus as my Lord and my God. We see the relationship of the Almighty to us, and how we should see Christ as He stands before us - He is my Lord, and He is my God.

The Gospel of John is the theological Gospel, as compared to Matthew, Mark, and Luke which are the Synoptic Gospels and retell the narrative of Christ's life. The Gospel of John begins with the deep mystery - "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (**John 1:1**). And near the end, we see the recapitulation of the Gospel with the words, "My Lord and My God".

We are to bear witness to Jesus Christ. For since God became man, and we are united with Him in Holy Baptism, we experience His Incarnation in our lives. Our faith should be as strong as the Holy Apostle who believed so strongly that he brought the Gospel to India, and eventually gave up his earthly life for the love of Christ.

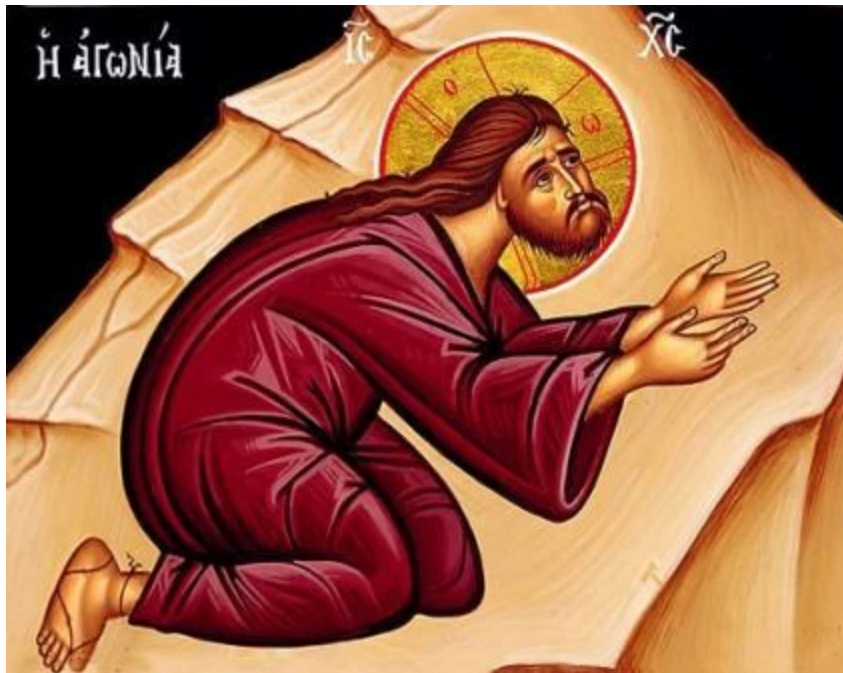
Adapted from a podcast by Fr. Thomas Hopko on "Thomas Sunday",
http://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/hopko/thomas_sunday

LESSON 9 – THE SHEHIMO PRAYERS

Objective: To gain an overview of the common prayers and hours

Prayer. It's our standard answer to all the problems that we deal with in our life. But as much as we talk about prayer, it's easier said than done. Have we ever thought to wonder, what does the Church recommend to us for a prayer life? Does the Church have anything to say about how much we should pray, and what are we to pray during the week? As many people may not be familiar with the canonical hours of prayer, this hopes to be a basic introduction to the Common Hours of Prayer, or the "Shehimo" prayers.

The primary purpose of prayer is to offer praise and adoration to our Lord. In fact, when we do request anything from God, our main request is mercy. We beseech Christ for mercy and compassion for the sins that we have committed against Him. However, the prayers are not just about repentance, but communion with God. In our communion with God, we are also brought into communion with those who loved God throughout their life: the Saints and the faithful departed as well as our faithful brethren on this earth. So prayer, while being personal, is not independent. Prayer for the Orthodox is personal, yet communal. The Shehimo Prayers helps approach our Lord humbly in communal, personal prayer.



“**Shehimo**” is the Syriac word for “common” or “ordinary.” It simply refers to the prayers that are done on ordinary days when there is not a Feast of the Church being celebrated.

There are Shehimo prayers for each day of the week except Sunday, which is considered a festal day commemorating the Resurrection of our Lord. On Sunday, only the

Qyomtho Prayers should be used. It should be noted that some Churches have the practice of using the Qyomtho prayers only on the Sundays from the Feast of the Resurrection (Qyomtho) of our Lord until the Feast of the Holy Cross (September 14th), and thereafter the Sleebea (Cross) prayers, but the Sleebea Prayers are essentially the Shehimo prayer for Wednesday.

The Shehimo prayers consist primarily of Psalms and hymns. The hymns are set to Syriac tones and are filled with beautiful, rich theology and heart-moving petitions, which make the hymns a hallmark of our worship. The Shehimo has been translated from Syriac into Malayalam in both prose and song. Bede Griffiths, a monk from the Kurisumala Ashram, has translated the Shehimo from Syriac into English prose. The English Shehimo prose has also been put into the meter of the Syriac tone.

As a child, we may have heard that we are supposed to pray a total of 7 times a day. But, where did the idea of 7 times a day come from? It was King David, the Psalmist, who wrote “Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments” (Psalm 118:164 OSB).

In correlation with David’s model of prayer, the Church has developed seven hours of prayer and they are as follows:

1. Evening Prayer (Ramsho or Vespers) – 6PM
2. Bedtime Prayer (Soutoro or Compline) - 9PM
3. Night Prayers (Lilio or Nocturns, with three “watches” or Quamos) – 12AM
4. Morning Prayer (Sapro or Matins) – 6AM
5. 3rd Hour Prayer - 9AM
6. 6th Hour Prayer - 12PM
7. 9th Hour Prayer - 3PM

The Hours of Prayer help us to meditate on the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord. For example, at the 3rd Hour (9 AM), we are reminded of the time when Christ was put to trial and of his journey to Calvary. At the 6th Hour (12 PM), we are reminded of the time when Christ was hung on the Cross. At the 9th Hour (3 PM), we are reminded of the time when Christ gave up His spirit on the Cross. In the Night Prayer, we proclaim “Halleluia, Halleluia, Halleluia, Glory be to You, O God!” As we pray this, we are reminded of the triumphant Resurrection of our Lord. So, the times of prayer have significance in that they remind us daily of the saving work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Shehimo Prayers also have general themes for each day of the week:

Monday and Tuesday – Repentance
Wednesday – The Theotokos
Thursday – The Holy Apostles, Saints
Friday – The Holy Cross, Martyrs, Confessors
Saturday – The Faithful Departed

On Friday, we remember the Cross, as it was on Friday when our Lord was crucified. We also remember the Martyrs and Confessors who suffered for love of Christ. Saturday, we remember the departed as it was on Saturday when our Lord entered into Hades and preached the Gospel to the departed. Every Sunday we celebrate the feast of feasts, the Resurrection of our Lord. Praying the Shehimo helps us to assimilate our lives to the life of the Church.

It is a sad reality that in recent times, the use of Shehimo is becoming limited to seminaries, monasteries, and aramanas. While these prayers were designed to be done at their designated times, nowadays, these 7 times are often grouped together to make two times of prayer. For example, in the Diocese of South-West America Urshlem (Aramana), the 7 offices of prayer are observed in two separate times daily:

6 AM – Night Prayer, Morning Prayer, 3rd Hour, 6th Hour Prayers
6 PM – 9th Hour, Evening, & Compline Prayers

(At 12:30 PM a Noon prayer, and at 10 PM a prayer before retiring to sleep is observed)

In our busy and chaotic lives, it is hard for us to find time to pray. It is not easy to start implementing the Shehimo in our lives, but we can try to the best of our ability.

Here are three things we can do to get acquainted with the Hours of prayer.

1. Be sure to get a copy of the newly published “Shehimo Book of Common Prayer” which has all of the hours of prayer versified in song. When we meet together for conferences, MGOCSM events, Sunday School events or meetings, let us make an effort to use the Shehimo in communal prayer.
2. If possible, get a copy of The Book of Common Prayer of the Syrian Church, Bede Griffiths, translator. This will be a great resource to pray, meditate, learn, and experience the faith and worship of the Church through prose prayer. There is an

app available online under the MGOCSM of North America. Search “Praying the Sh’himo” under iTunes.

3. Be aware of the seven times of prayer, and make a regimen to observe them throughout the day. It could be as simple as saying the Qauma (Holy art Thou, O God...) or maybe making the sign of the Cross, or saying a small prayer (for example: “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”) at each hour throughout the day.

The idea is not to limit ourselves to just praying before bed or right when we wake up. Rather, we should start feeling the need and desire to pray all throughout the day. Our life as a Christian should be organized around prayer. After all, that is what observing the hours of prayer is all about. It is not simply to follow a rule for the sake of following it. Rather, the Shehimo prayers are a tool to strengthen our communion with our Lord and Savior.

May the intercession of King David who prayed, “Seven times a day I praise You”, and all the Holy Saints be with us as we strive for a life of prayer and communion with God.

From the article “Seven Times a Day I Praise You” by Fr. Jake Kurian



LESSON 10 – SHUBQONO

Objective: To learn about the liturgical aspects and meaning of Shubqono

The Church, begins Great Lent with **Shubqono**, the ‘Day of Forgiveness,’ and sets her journey into penitence. And so, kneeling and prostrating, her people look ahead to Kymtho, the great feast of the Light.

The service of reconciliation is conducted on Monday, the first day is the Great Lent, at the end of third hour. The Service of Reconciliation or shubqono, stands at the ‘threshold of Great Lent.’ The service marks the actual doorway into Lent, the threshold on the other side of which stands the fullest measure of asceticism that the Church metes out to the whole of her faithful throughout the world. As we stand at the threshold of the fast, we sing of him who stood before the gates of Eden. As we make ready to enter in to this season of preparation, we sing often:

O merciful and compassionate Lord, to You I cry aloud: I am fallen! Have mercy on me! Your grace has shown forth, O Lord, it has shone forth and given light to our souls. Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the season of repentance. Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light, that having sailed across the great sea of the Fast, we may reach the third-day Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of our souls.

The scene painted by the hymns of the day is one of a great and terrible sorrow. We lament the loss of so great a gift – the gift to be children of God. Our sins have forced us to be exiles from glory. We are in want. No more can we look upon the Lord our God and Maker. As Great Lent begins, we are reminded in language stronger and more direct than ever before of the gravity of our condition in sin:

‘Woe is me, what have I suffered in my misery! I transgressed the commandments of the Master, and now I am deprived of every blessing.’ Then the Savior said: ‘I desire not the loss of the creature which I fashioned, but that he should be saved and come to knowledge of the truth; and when he comes to me I will not cast him out.’

By the transgression of the will of God we threw aside the gift of grace and blessings. However, we have a God who loves us and is abundant in His mercy.

‘I will not cast him out.’ God’s words in this are already the words of salvation. They are words of calling, of beckoning, of reconciliation. But they are also words of directive: ‘when he comes to me...’ God does not take fallen man and, with a divine fiat that would mean little to the long-term well-being of humankind, magically place him back into glory from which we ourselves have exiled. God knows that it is our heart that most desperately needs to be healed, needs to be turned away from the desire for its own ends and back to a desire for the heart of God Himself. And so the Savior whispers to us, *‘When you come back to me, I will not cast you out’*.

Our prayer must be:

Come, my wretched soul, and weep today over your acts, remembering how once you were stripped naked in Eden and cast out from delight and unending joy.

Lent is beginning, and as the personal tone of the hymns professes, this is to be my Fast, my exile, and my return. I cannot of myself escape from Adam’s condition. But through the Church, I need not suffer alone the whole torment of Adam. ‘Let us love abstinence, that we may not weep as he did outside Paradise, but may enter through the gate.’ Great Lent is also a harbor, a safe port wherein we may suffer our repentance in the surety of divine grace and tender compassion. Thus do we petition the Lord:

O God of all, Lord of mercy, look down compassionately upon my lowliness and do not send me far away from Eden; but may I perceive the glory from which I have fallen, and hasten with lamentations to regain what I have lost

We are called to amend and to change our ways of living, thinking and acting from within the full scope of our lives in Christ. During Lent we are thrust into a forum for change, wherein our greatest aid is the incarnate and resurrected Son of God Himself.

The arena of the virtues has been opened. Let all who wish to struggle for the prize now enter, girding themselves for the noble contest of the Fast; for those that strive lawfully are justly crowned. Taking up the armor of the Cross, let us make war against the enemy. Let us have as our invisible rampart the Faith, prayer as our breastplate, and as our helmet almsgiving; and as our sword let us use fasting that cuts away all evil from our heart. If we do this, we shall receive the true crown from Christ the King of all at the Day of Judgment.

‘Let us use fasting that cuts away all evil from our heart.’ The entrance into Great Lent is made as the entrance into the full fray of the spiritual and physical battle we must

each wage on the journey into the Kingdom of God. And though this is a battle we must each wage ourselves, we do not enter into it alone. As an invisible rampart, we have the truth of God revealed in His Son and in all the economy of space and time, borne alive in our hearts through the illumination of baptism. And as a visible rampart we have the Church, though here, too, there is the reality of the invisible. It is within the community of all the faithful, past and present, that we struggle towards resurrection, towards Kymtho. It is amidst our neighbors that we stand in this arena and wage this battle. 'If we do this, we shall receive the true crown.' From the usual context of 'I' and 'You' in which we communicate day by day, Great Lent calls us to stand before the gates of Paradise in solidarity as the great family of humankind, the united children on the one God.

And so, forgiveness. The first step in our journey through Lent must be this act of mutual forgiveness, of reconciling ourselves to one another in the context of the holy community in which we shall grow and advance together. If we set out upon the season of inner repentance without beginning here, in an act of fraternal repentance, then we will certainly find ourselves committing sin while singing hymns with our tongues.' The gate of Paradise will only be more firmly shut. But if this moment of mutual forgiveness is embraced and made real in our lives, then we shall be readily equipped both as individuals and as a community to fight worthily the battle before us. It shall not be we alone in the arena, but we the united Church who stand together in the contest that leads to all the brightness of the third-day Resurrection. And from within this community we will be able to find in our own selves the authentic voice of our genuine individuality, and shall be able to cry out and say:

Cleanse me in the waters of repentance, and through prayer and fasting make me shine with light, for Thou alone art merciful. Abhor me not, O Benefactor of all, supreme in love.

Ashwalan moryo aloho b'tayboothok l'hoosoyo d'hawbai w'shoobqono dahtohai b'hono yawmo qadisho d'ithaw shooroyo d'soomoyeekh qadisho.

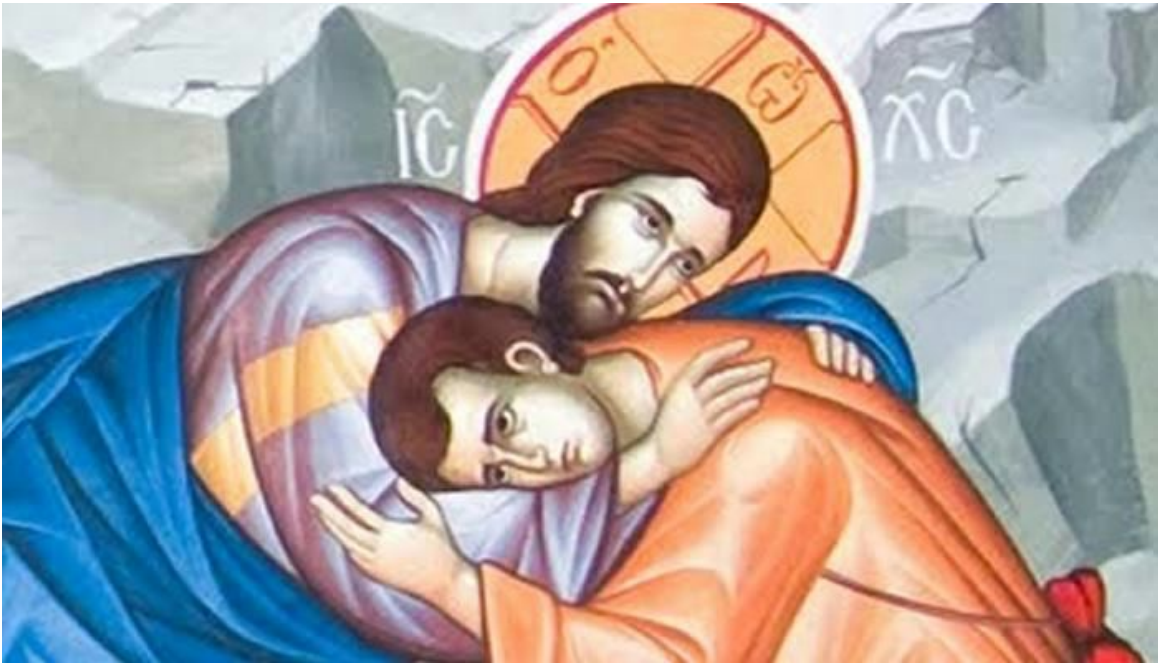
Make us worthy, O Lord God, by Your abundant grace, for the remission of sins and the forgiveness of debts on this holy day, which is the beginning of Your Holy Fast.

Prayer

Lord, the voices of our request knocks on the door of Your mercy. Do not discard the needs of those who adore You. The sinful woman prayed to You in tears and received deliverance. Be kind to Your Church at the tears of the priests of Your Church, which

you have earned. Lord, we know that we have sinned and that our transgressions are increasing. O Good One, in Your mercy be compassionate and cleanse us from the filth of all unrighteousness.

From the reflection on the 1st Monday of the Great Lent, by Fr. Tenny Thomas



LESSON 11 - THE GREAT LENT

Objective: To understand the essence and aim of lent

The Great Lent is a time that many people look forward to for reflection and rejuvenation in our relationship with Christ. As we make this journey to the Cross this Lenten season, let us be mindful of our words, our actions and even our thoughts. Let this be a fast not only for our stomach but also for our tongues, our minds and our hearts.

The center of the liturgical year in the Orthodox Church is Qyomtho, the celebration of Christ's Resurrection. It is extolled in the services as the Feast of feasts and Triumph of triumphs. Justifiably so, for as the Apostle Paul declares, if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain (**1 Corinthians 15:14**). The sense of resurrection joy forms the foundation of all the worship of the Orthodox Church; it is the one and only basis for our Christian life and hope. Through His redeeming Passion, Christ freed us from the tyranny of death and opened for us the door to Paradise and eternal life. This is the goal of our life-long spiritual journey, a journey from death to life, from darkness to light – a restoration to paradise from which we have departed. It is a long journey and we travelers get weary; we get distracted and wander off or even lose sight of the road. To help keep us focused, the Church every year compresses for us this journey as it prepares us to greet the Feast of Christ's Resurrection. This preparatory time is the joyous period of Great Lent. Without this preparation, without this expectant waiting, the deeper meaning of the Easter celebration will be lost.

The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God.

It is to lead us to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition; to bring to us, that is, to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, 'Without Me you can do nothing' (**John 15:5**). During the Great Lent, we have to strip ourselves from the specious assurance of the Pharisee who fasted, it is true, but not in the right spirit. Lenten abstinence gives us the saving self-dissatisfaction of the Publican (**Luke 18:10-13**).

Such is the function of the hunger and the tiredness: to make us 'poor in spirit', aware of our helplessness and of our dependence on God's aid. Abstinence leads to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy.

Lent is a time of joy. It is a time when we come back to life. It is a time when we shake off what is bad and dead in us in order to become able to live, to live with all the vastness, all the depth, and all the intensity to which we are called. We are at the threshold of the Great Lent. We have to believe the power of fasting as it relates to prayer is the spiritual weapon that our Lord has given us to destroy the strongholds of evil. Fasting might seem hard, but with each passing day, God's call will grow stronger and clearer. Finally, we will be convinced that God has called us to fast, and He would not make such a call without a specific reason or purpose. With this conviction, enter the Great Lent with excitement and expectancy mounting in our hearts, praying, Lord, "I have walked away from You and Your precepts. But now I return, merciful Lord, and cry to You: I have sinned."

As we begin to fast, our confidence in the Lord will help us. The longer we fast, the more we sense the presence of the Lord. The Holy Spirit refreshes our soul and spirit, and we experience the joy of the Lord as seldom before. Biblical truths leap at us from the pages of God's Word. Our faith soars as we humble ourselves and cries out to God and rejoices in His presence. Fasting calls on the Holy Spirit and brings us to repentance, prayer and almsgiving. We need to revive our commitment to fasting and prayer and the rest of the Church will respond to this call. Spent time in reading God's word and make your time with the Lord more spiritually rewarding. There is no point in fasting and prayer until it equips you for spiritual awakening. Hope this Great Lent will not slip by without having made a genuine effort to prepare ourselves for the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Savior. "Let us set out with joy upon the season of the Fast, and prepare ourselves for spiritual combat. Let us purify our soul and cleanse our flesh; and as we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. Rejoicing in the virtues of the Spirit may we persevere with love, and so be counted worthy to see the solemn Passion of Christ our God, and with great spiritual gladness to behold His holy Passover."

The whole journey into the Resurrection can become our own if we are able to stand in examination of our lives, see how far we have brought ourselves from the life God intends for us, and then long, truly long to return to our true home, to paradise. We must turn with tears toward the home from which we have sinfully departed and resolutely start our journey back, begging God's forgiveness in our return. True repentance begins with the acknowledgement of self-imposed exile. Such knowledge pains us, but it is a pain that leads to action, and action that leads to reform.

And as Christ re-forms us into His heavenly life, we begin truly to live. Apart from God, there is nothing. We have each experienced this ‘nothing,’ for we have each turned from God. But now, as we prepare to enter into Great Lent, we long for the great ‘something’ that is God’s love and sanctification. Begging His mercy we strive for true repentance, that we may receive His salvation in all joy.

“Behold, O Christ, the affliction of my heart; behold my turning back; behold my tears, O Savior, and despise me not. But embrace me once again in Your compassion and count me with the multitude of the saved, that with thanksgiving I may sing the praises of Your mercy.” I end with the words of Ephrem the Syrian from his hymn ‘On Fasting’: “This is the fast of the First Born, the first of His victories. Let us rejoice in His coming; for in fasting He has overcome. Though He could have overcome by any means, He revealed for us the strength hidden in fasting, Overcomer of All. For by means of it a man can overcome that one who with fruit overcame Adam; He became greedy and gobbled it. Blessed is the First-Born who encompassed our weakness with the wall of His great fasting. Blessed is the King who adorned the Holy Church with Fasting, Prayer and Vigil.”

Rahaim ‘layn aloho abo ahead kool ethraham ‘layn.

From “Great Lent: ‘Restore Me To The Paradise From Which I Departed” by Fr. Tenny Thomas

LESSON 12 – ORTHODOX SPIRITUALITY

Objective: To have a general overview of the spirituality of the Orthodox Church, including humanity's purpose and relationship with God.

The sources of Orthodox spirituality are the Holy Scriptures, sacred Tradition, the dogmatic definitions of the Ecumenical Synods, and the spiritual teachings of the Greek Orthodox Fathers. Orthodox spirituality is mainly expressed through prayer, daily Christian living, and worship, which ultimately lead to union with the divine uncreated Light.

Before we enter into a discussion of the spirituality of the Orthodox Church, let us see what is man's purpose as a creature of God. Man is created in the image and likeness of God. The human destiny is not to achieve mystical union with the essence of God, but rather to attain moral and spiritual perfection by participation in the divine uncreated energies. Man, according to the Orthodox Fathers, was not created perfect from the beginning. Rather he was created with the potential to achieve perfection through grace. This, of course, was not realized because of the fall. In the fullness of time, God sent our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to become man, and through his suffering and resurrection from the dead, restored man to his original state of grace and enabled him to attain perfection. Christ says: "Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect." The ultimate purpose of man, therefore, is to become perfect in God, through love. That is, to attain perfect, selfless love of God and one's fellow human beings.

The Christian Commitment

The life of moral perfection, according to our Bible and the Fathers of the Church, is a call to a life in Christ, that is, a Christ-like life. Consequently, the spirituality of the Orthodox Christian is portrayed as a life in Christ, a life of commitment to the Lord, and a complete submission to his will. One lives only to do everything for Christ's sake, as Christ wants it and as Christ would do it.

The Christian commitment to Christ must be made by an inner, free act and is not compelled by any external force, not even by God. "Man is free and able to enter into relations with both kingdoms - the kingdoms of light and that of darkness." These kingdoms, the spiritual and the satanic, are hidden, not in the mind, but much deeper in the soul - "under the mind, beneath the surface of the thoughts," as Saint Makarios asserts. This fourth-century saint already had the notion of "heart," which is strikingly close to the modern psychological concept of the subconscious.

Moral Perfection Is Life in Christ

Orthodox spirituality is described throughout the centuries as life in Christ, striving for moral and spiritual perfection. The mystical union in Orthodox spirituality is not the "devout life" that some sects claim but the communion of the person with God. In sectarian teachings, the "devout life" is a sentimental and emotional relation to "divinity." The Orthodox Church rejects this concept in favor of one, which envisions the meeting of man with the divine Person in a mystical way. Orthodox spirituality is union with Christ, with God. A spiritual person is one who purifies himself of all worldly and moral defects in order to be united with the love of Christ. The mystical experience takes place in this world, yet the cause, God, is from beyond the material world. Orthodox spirituality, as well as the whole thought of the Church, is based on the revelation found in the Old and New Testaments. Studying the Patristic interpretation of the Christian truths can see this. In the mystical vision of the divine energies of the advanced Christian, he experiences the divine presence within himself, as vision of the uncreated light and of the energies of God. It is especially through the sacrament of the holy Eucharist that we experience mystical union with our Lord.

Philosophy and Divine Knowledge

The important Orthodox doctrine of the incarnation, that is, the divine Logos who became flesh, rendered philosophy and metaphysics irrelevant to our deeper knowledge of the divine truth. Christianity offers access to divine grace for the salvation of mankind through the resurrection of Christ. We cannot speculate about the Logos after the coming of Christ, who is the divine Logos in the flesh, and who sent the Holy Spirit to the world and "teaches us all things." The mystical experience spoken of by the classical Greeks is abstract and conceptual. That is, in ancient Greek philosophic contemplation, the soul or spirit goes outside the body to be liberated. Philosophy plays only a linguistic role in Orthodoxy, lending the use of its terminology after the terms have been transformed and purified of their secular meanings, "Christianized" philosophy and culture, as Father Georges Florovsky used to say. A master of spirituality, a monk of Mount Athos, describes this point in the following manner: "Many of the Greeks tried to philosophize, but only the monks found and learned the true philosophy." The Logos became flesh and revealed to humanity the divine revelation. He is the Truth and through him we can attain knowledge of the divine will. The metaphysical patterns of the philosophic speculation of the Christian revelation distort the divine mission of the incarnate Logos.

Three Ways Upwards

The Fathers of our Holy Church suggest these ways to make progress in our life and attain spiritual perfection:

The way of catharsis or purification

The way of illumination, and

The way of perfection by total union with God.

These ways can bring the Christian who cooperates with divine grace to perfection. Synergy of the individual effort with the help of the grace of God brings us to our ultimate destiny of perfection. Our Lord's death and resurrection achieve for us our end in attaining the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.

The Philokalia speaks of "the increasing knowledge of God decreases knowledge of all else. In other words, the more a man knows God; he knows less of other matters. Not only this, but he begins to realize more and more clearly that neither does he know God." This point is of fundamental importance to Orthodoxy that declares the total mystery and unknowability of the divine essence.

The purpose of man is to achieve moral perfection through the acquisition of the Holy Spirit. In the teachings of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, the Holy Spirit leads the individual through the steps outlined above in order to attain union with the Spirit of Truth.

Monasteries Are Spiritual Centers of Orthodox Spirituality

The spirituality of the Orthodox Church is best exemplified in its spiritual centers, the monasteries. The monk is a "martyr" or "witness" to Christ, the Son of the living God. Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is an excellent example of this spiritual model in the person of Father Zossima. This monastic model eloquently portrays the spirituality of the Orthodox Church. Dostoyevsky distinguishes between worldly freedom and the spiritual person. He says that the worldly or secular people "maintain that the world is getting more and more united, more and more bound together in brotherly community, as it overcomes distance and sets thoughts flying through the air." But in reality the opposite is true, as is evident in international conflicts and wars. This famous Orthodox novelist expressed eloquently the Orthodox view that in spiritual subjugation, that is, in absolute obedience to Christ, one finds limitless freedom. This is especially exemplified in monasteries where spirituality is nurtured.

The Divine Energies

One of the most important aspects of Orthodox spirituality is participation in the divine energies. Briefly stated, this is an Orthodox doctrine of fundamental importance and very often ignored. In Orthodox theology, a distinction is made between the "essence" and "energies" of God. Those who attain perfection do so by uniting with the divine uncreated energies, and not with the divine essence. The Greek Orthodox Fathers, whenever they speak of God, emphasize the unknowability of God's essence and stress the vision of the divine energies, especially the divine uncreated Light. Orthodox spiritual tradition emphasizes the divine Logos indwelling in the world and our ability to attain a spiritual life and mystical union with the Holy Spirit in this world.

Christian contemplation is not "ecstatic," that is, outside ourselves, but it takes place within the Christian person who is the "temple of the Holy Spirit." The divine energies are "within everything and outside everything." All creation is the manifestation of God's energies. Vladimir Lossky says in the *Mystical Theology of the Orthodox Church*: "These divine rays penetrate the whole created universe and are the cause of its existence." The uncreated Light and the knowledge of God in Orthodox tradition "illuminates every man that cometh into this world." It is the same light that the apostles saw on Mount Tabor that penetrates all of creation and transforms it, creating it anew. A modern ascetic says in the *Undistorted Image*: "Uncreated Light is divine energy. Contemplation of Uncreated Light begets, first and foremost, an all absorbing feeling of the living God - an immaterial feeling of the immaterial, an intuitive, not a rational perception - which transports man with irresistible force into another world, but so warily that he neither realizes when it happens nor knows whether he is in or out of the body." This is not a sentimental or emotional feeling or romantic fantasy. It is experience of the divine uncreated Light described by the Fathers. Again, in the words of the same ascetic: "This supramental sensation of the Living God (which is experienced in contemplation) is accompanied by a vision of light, of light essentially different from physical light. Man himself abides in light because, assimilated to the Light which he contemplates, and spiritualized by it, he then neither sees nor feels his own material being or the materiality of the world."

Illumination

God's act is pure light, and when the Lord appears to us, he always appears as Light. In Holy Scripture we read: "In Your Light we shall see light." Only in the state of illumination does divine grace makes possible the contemplation of the divine light. The hidden truths of Holy Scripture are not revealed to everyone, since illumination comes through the special divine gift of revelation. For this reason in the early Church, the holy Bible was read only in the Church and only by a charismatic person. In the Orthodox

Church, we have never experienced "bibliolatry" or "worship of the Book," as in some sects. The Church holds fast to the unadulterated spirit of the Bible as it was delivered to the Saints, and through them, to us.

We are saved by Christ and in Christ. Yet we are still subject to temptation and to sin. Therefore, it is important to mention the fact that to acquire spirituality or moral perfection, we must wage war against the "enemy," that is, sin and the devil. Saint Makarios said: "I have not yet seen a perfect Christian man, one completely free (from the devil and sin)." And "although one is at rest in grace and enters into mysteries and revelations and into the sweetness of grace, still sin is yet present within." Consequently, as long as we live, we must be ready to fight against the dark powers of the devil. And "Satan is never quiet from warring. As long as ever a man lives in this world and wears the flesh, he has to war." The holy Bible is the most necessary means of spiritual warfare against the devil; it is also the chief means of acquiring knowledge of the divine will.

The Role of the Sacraments

We must further emphasize the role and purpose of the holy sacraments in attaining spirituality. In the sacraments, we receive divine grace, and in the case of the holy Eucharist, Christ himself, who aids us in waging war successfully against the satanic powers. As Fr. Sergius Bulgakov says: "The heart of Orthodoxy lies in its rites." All the Orthodox rites and sacraments are meant to combat the powers of evil. The sacramental life of the Church is the chief means toward the attainment of spirituality and of ultimate salvation.

The Eucharist as Expression of Spirituality

The question is asked: Is it possible without the holy Eucharist to reach the spiritual state of perfection? The answer is no, because Christ says: "Except you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you." Frequent participation in the most Blessed Sacrament of the holy Eucharist is the preeminent means for our salvation and spiritual perfection. Jesus said: "for my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." Thus, Christ's statement makes clear that the "body and blood" of our Lord is necessary for our spiritual perfection. The Eucharist, therefore, is not received merely as an act of obedience to the command of God or of the Church; it is especially an antidote to sin and death. It is a necessary prerequisite for our perfection in our life in Christ. An important interpretation by Saint John Chrysostom makes this clear when he comments on Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians saying, "it is as if the head were completed by the body, because the body is made up and formed of its various parts. His body is therefore composed by all. Thus, the head is completed and the body rendered perfect when we are all clustered closely together and united"

Paul does not say participation, but communion, because he wishes to express a closer union. For, in receiving Holy Communion, we not only participate in Christ, we unite in him. In fact, as this body is united with Christ, so by bread we are united with Christ. But why do I speak of Communion? Paul says that we are identical with this body. For what is this bread? That is, the body of Christ. And what do we become by receiving this bread? The body of Christ: not many bodies, but only one.

The holy Eucharist serves as the bond of unity in love. The holy Eucharist unites us to Christ and to one another. This is the makeup of the mystical body of Christ: the Church. This concept of the Church as the mystical body of Christ is very dear to our Orthodox tradition because it expresses the reality of Christ in the world and the unity of the Church, which is real only when Christ is the central figure. The Orthodox Church rejects the misconception, of sectarian origin, that Christianity is only a system of morals. It strongly emphasizes the fact that mystical union with Christ is a reality in his Church. The whole life of Saint Paul was "a perpetual system of morals in action." Only because of his personal commitment to Christ and his mystical encounter with the divine Lord, did Saint Paul attain spiritual perfection.

Adapted from article by George C. Papademetriou (<http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith9284>)

LESSON 13 - ORTHODOX MISSIONS

Objective: To understand the changing role of our community and our mission as Orthodox Christians

What is the role and task of Orthodox Christians in North America?

The first Orthodox immigrants to America never thought about all this, for in many ways they continued to live within an organic Orthodox "culture." They were still living within that type of unity because they belonged to what in American sociology is known as a "sub-culture." After the liturgy, the faithful would meet in the hall not only as Orthodox Christians but as Malayalees. The same was seen in the Greek, Russian, Coptic, and other Churches in North America - fellowship was very important as it allowed immigrants to breathe their native culture.

Even today, in many parishes on a given Sunday it is almost as if you are not living in North America. You can live there without knowing very much English, without any real contact with the outside culture. But this chapter of our Church history may very well be coming to an end, as our immigrant community further integrates with the present society and culture we have immersed ourselves in.

The youth of our Church are also growing without the "immigrant" mentality. Orthodoxy for them is not primarily the remembrance of childhood abroad. They will not keep Orthodoxy simply because it is "the faith of their fathers." Suppose we apply this principle to others: Then the Lutherans should keep the Lutheran faith, the Jews the Jewish faith, and finally, the son of an atheist should keep atheism because it was the "faith of his father." If this is the criterion, religion becomes a mere cultural continuity.

But our claim is that our Church is Orthodox, or more simply, the Church, and this is a frightening claim. It implies that it is the faith for all men, for all countries, for all cultures. And unless this implication is kept in mind and heart, our claim to be the true or Orthodox Church becomes hypocrisy, and it would be more honest to call ourselves a society for the perpetuation of the cultural values of a particular geographic region.

The Mission of Orthodoxy

The first condition for mission is a spiritual foundation; we simply cannot move anywhere without faith and a personal commitment to Christian life. Further, it seems

that we must think of our mission in terms of the particular situation we face in North America, in this thoroughly secularized society.

But, what is a mission? Mission is one of those words much used and much abused today. In a sense every Christian is called to be a missionary. Every Christian is sent. When we say "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church," the term "apostolic" means not only the continuity of ministry, as so many people seem to think, but also the apostolicity, i.e., the missionary nature of the Church and of each of her members.

"My being a missionary" can be understood in a threefold way -

In the first place, "I am sent to myself". This means that the new Adam in me is always ready to challenge and to fight the old Adam--the "I" who is still very much "of this world" and subdued to it.

In the second place, "I am sent to others". This again is universal, and is not limited to bishops, priests, and missionaries in the strict sense of the word.

And finally, "I am sent as a missionary to the world". The scope of our vision and faith is always the salvation of all that for which Christ died, and He died "for the life of the world." Thus, one cannot be saved without giving oneself to this mission. Everyone is a missionary.

Yet, as we begin seeking for concrete applications of these general definitions, the idea of mission becomes confused. It is indeed the eternal problem for each Christian individually and for every Christian generation to find their modality of mission--the way God wants them to fulfill their missionary calling. Just as each man is unique, the way of his fulfillment of his vocation is also unique. And just as each historical situation is unique, the Christian mission of each generation is also in a way unique. This is why there are so many disagreements and controversies among Orthodox today. Everyone admits that something needs to be done, but there is no consensus yet on what exactly is to be done and how. The disagreements concern, indeed, the nature of the Orthodox mission today.

The Great Commission

Christ has commanded us to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (**Matthew 28:19-20**).

There are over 4 billion people who do not know the hope, love, and joy of a life in Christ, and it is important to reach out to them where they are. The MGOCSM of North America has been serving on mission trips in America and abroad very consistently, and it is a blessing for all those who participate as well as those who are touched by the love and joy of our youth. If your calling is to serve on a mission trip, this is something that you have access. However, mission work can be right where you live, where you work, or even at home. Too often we think of mission work as someplace far, but very often the most we can witness to others about Christ is right where we are.

Orthodox Evangelism

It is very important to remember as we do mission work that our job is not to bring anyone into the Church. We do not convince people of the Truth, we don't count the number of souls we save. God is the One Who attracts people, Who brings them in the door, Who convicts their hearts, Who brings them to repentance, Who convinces them of the Truth; we do none of this.

Too often in the North American model of evangelism, the individual person is made responsible for doing God's task, but in attempting to do God's work, we neglect our own.

What is our task? Our task is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit (St Seraphim), our task is the working out of our salvation, our task is to repent and weep for our sins, our task is to enter the Kingdom of God. This more than anything else is what we must do. This is an evangelistic task - indeed the primary evangelistic task.

There are other "tasks", however, which derive from this one which are a bit more specific to "evangelism". It is God who brings people to the door of the Church and who convinces them that they should enter - however, we must keep the door to the Church open and visible. Hence, Orthodox evangelism must center on the Church - the beauty of the building, the beauty of the services, the frequency and availability of the services. Orthodox evangelism is served by beautiful icons, gold onion domes and crosses rising against the sky, the smell of incense, the pious and holy singing of the services.

Orthodox evangelism is served by our visibility as Orthodox Christians in the world - the clothing of the clergy (and in these days the modest and humble clothing of the laymen as well) - the sign of the cross as we pray at each juncture of our lives - beginning and ending a task, eating and finishing a meal, starting and ending a trip, etc. Orthodox evangelism is the keeping of icons in our homes, in our offices, in our cars. Orthodox

evangelism is keeping the fast without excuses or compromises. Orthodox evangelism is setting our priorities to forgo the allures of the world in order to be at divine services whenever they are held. Orthodox evangelism is denying ourselves and bearing our cross. Orthodox evangelism is keeping the door of the Church open and visible. While the Holy Spirit is the one who draws the world to Himself, it is you and I who keep the doors of the Church open and who welcome all who come.

The second specific task that we as Orthodox Christians have in evangelism is the practical expression of God's love to mankind. Orthodox evangelism is greeting visitors as they come to the Church and then modeling (neither instructing nor condemning the visitor) for them proper behavior and demeanor in the Church. Orthodox evangelism is hospitality offered to share meals, to provide shelter and clothing as needed. Orthodox evangelism is to pray for our neighbor and to love our neighbor as ourself. Orthodox evangelism is going to the soup kitchen and serving there - Orthodox evangelism is giving to the poor without regard for "how the money will be used".

Orthodox evangelism is visiting the sick in hospitals and praying for them. Orthodox evangelism is going on mission trips to places you haven't been, and just serving and loving the people there as you would at home. Orthodox evangelism is going the prisons (contact your local prison chaplain regarding how this might be done) and offering comfort and kindness to the imprisoned. Orthodox evangelism is loving your enemies (Elder Silouan of Mt Athos says that this is the true mark of a Christian - the love of one's enemies).

Orthodox Evangelism is loving your neighbor as yourself. If we all did these things (and I am a wretched sinner and fall short of all that I have just said) then our Churches would be open and filled with light and glory drawing all who see her by the grace and action of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. We don't have to preach on street corners, we don't have to have "events" or revivals or seminars as evangelistic tools - we simply have to be Orthodox Christians "to the max" without reservation or compromise.

That is Orthodox mission.

Adapted from "The Mission of Orthodoxy", by Father Alexander Schmemmann

LESSON 14 – CHRIST AT WORK: FINDING ONE’S VOCATION

Objective: To find our calling as a Christian in this world.

When we consider the Orthodox Christian understanding of vocation, several points can be made.

Everyone Has a Calling

God creates every human being in His image and likeness for everlasting life. There are no mistakes and no accidents. As the saying goes, “God makes no junk.” Everyone, or, in Biblical language, the “many” are called. But not all are chosen. Some are rejected not because they have no vocation from God, but because they refuse to accept their calling.

Everyone has a vocation. And all vocations are “religious.” This does not mean that everyone is called to serve the church in a professional manner; to be a bishop, priest, deacon, monk, nun, psalmreader or church worker of one sort or another. Obviously not all are called to these specifically ecclesiastical ministries. But everyone is called to serve God and their fellow human beings in some form of life which God Himself wills. This “form of life” is not necessarily a job or profession. For example, some people may be called to suffer on this earth and to bear the results of fallen humanity in the most violent manner; to be victimized by disease, retardation, affliction; to be the objects of other people’s cares, or disdain. This is their vocation, and they are particularly blessed by God and loved by Christ in its acceptance and fulfillment.

In a word, there is a divine plan and purpose for everyone. There is a “predestination,” not in the sense that God programs His creatures or forces His will upon them against their will, but rather that God knows every person from before the foundation of the world and provides their unique life and the specific conditions of their earthly way which are literally the best possible conditions for them (however unacceptable this may seem to us creatures in our limited and fallen state.) And God works together with each one of us so that, by suffering what we must on this earth, we may attain to life everlasting in the age to come.

Everyone Has the Same Calling

In a certain sense every person has the same vocation, which is to be a saint. We are all called to be saints, to be holy as God is holy, to be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect. **(Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Peter. 1:15, Matthew 5:48)** We are all made to fulfill ourselves as creatures made in God’s image and likeness for eternal life.

And we can do so because God not only creates us with this possibility, and indeed, this command; but because He also does everything in His power to guarantee its accomplishment by sending His Son and His Spirit to the world.

Since Christ has been glorified and the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, there is no excuse for those who know and believe this, and experience it in the life of the Christian Church, not to be saints. Everything possible has been done to secure this. There is nothing more that God can do. All is given and all is fulfilled. The rest is up to us. Whatever the Lord may be doing with other people in other places, some things are certain for Christians, and certainly us Orthodox: We can cooperate with God. We can share His holiness. We can become, as the saints themselves teach us, all that God Himself is by His gracious action in our lives. We can become loving, peaceful, joyful, good, wise, true, patient, kind, compassionate, powerful, pure, free, self-determining... Or we can refuse to cooperate with God, never find our true selves, and perish.

Everyone Has His or Her Unique Calling

All are called to be saints, but each person is called to do so in his or her own unique way. No two persons are the same. Each one is different. All are called to partake of God's being and life. All are called to love as He loves, know as He knows, serve as He serves, and live as He lives. But each will do it in his or her own specific manner, according to the concrete conditions and means that God provides.

Some will sanctify their lives being married; others will be single. Some will do it in clerical orders; others as lay people. Some will be monastic; most will live in the everyday secular world. Some will work primarily in a physical way, others will work intellectually. Some will be artists, scientists, business people, or professionals. Others may have no particular job or profession. And some may be called simply to suffer, while others, in terms of this world, will hardly suffer at all. Some will have many temptations, and will bear heavy burdens because of the sins of the world and their particular inheritance of a fallen, broken, distorted humanity. And some may have to fight destructive memories, imaginations, and passions that seem at times impossible to bear.

While others will be greatly blessed by receiving a highly purified humanity, for which they will especially have to answer before God. For, as Jesus taught, "To whom much is given, of him much will be required." (**Luke 12:48**) But each person will have his or her own life to sanctify. And each will answer for what he or she has done. In the eyes of God none is better than the other. None is higher or more praiseworthy. But each must find his or her own way, and glorify God through it. This is all, ultimately, that matters. The rest is details.

The Will to Find God's Will is Essential

All that is needed to discover the will of God and to do it is the pure desire to see, to hear, to understand and to obey. God does the rest. When people saw Jesus on earth, and yet did not accept and obey Him in love, the Lord Himself gave the reason, quoting the Prophet Isaiah. He said that the people had eyes but did not see; had ears but did not want to hear; had minds, but refused to understand and be saved. **(Isaiah 6:9-10; Matthew 13:13-14, Mark 8:18; John 12:36-41)**

To find one's vocation demands that one really wants to do so. It sounds simple. And it is. But, to quote the Lord once more, "Few there be who find it." **(Matthew 7:14)** The reason is that it takes courage to allow the Lord to speak, or rather, to hear the Lord when He speaks, and to follow Him. It is also quite painful. Our own will has to go. Our egocentric desires have to be denied. Our ideas about ourselves have to be abandoned. Our personal plans and projects have to be discarded. Our agendas of action have to be thrown away.

We have to say to God: Speak Lord, your servant is ready! We have to respond to God: Let it be to me according to Your word! And we have to mean it. If we do, we will find our way. But if we fight it, and keep craving the things that we want, we will be miserable and unhappy. We will realize, as the song says, that we "can't get no satisfaction." For the heart of the human person is made for God - for truth, for love, for life itself, and not for mere "existence" - and is inevitably unsatisfied, frustrated, confused, distressed, angered, bored...until it comes to rest in Him.

We Need Help On The Way

To will God's will is essential. Without this, nothing can happen. With it, everything. One saint of the desert even dared to say that if a person would will God's will without wavering from sunrise to sunset, by the end of the day he would be "to the measure of God." But to will God's will we need help. We need, first of all, the help of God Himself. This means that we have to pray and to participate in the mystical life of God's Church. Jesus said, "Ask, and you will receive." **(Matthew 7:7)** And the apostle James reminds us that if we do not ask rightly, we will not receive. "You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and you do not receive because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." (Jm. 4:2-3) To find our vocation in life we have to pray to God to show it to us, and to guide us into it for His Name's sake, and ultimately, for our own.

In addition to the direct help of God, so to speak, we also need His help as it comes to us through others. We need the guidance of those who are experienced in His ways,

particularly our fathers and mothers in the faith. “Ask your fathers, and they will show you; your elders and they will teach you.” **(Deut. 32:7)** The saints of the Church love to repeat this line from the song of Moses. To hear God’s voice, to discern His desires for us, to discover His purposes for our lives, we need the help of those who have found Him, or, perhaps more accurately, those who have been found by Him. We receive this help in the life of the Church, first of all by our participation in the services and sacraments. We find it also in the Bible and in the lives and teachings of the saints. And we find it in the pastors and teachers whom God gives us. God promises that those who seek instruction will never be left without it. He Himself will see to it, as the saying goes, that “when the disciple is ready, the Master will appear.” Without obedience to God’s Word and Spirit in the services, sacraments, scriptures and saints of the Church, we who claim to be Christians will never discover our calling in life. For we will have rejected the means that God has given us to find it.

We Must Be Faithful Where We Are

Finally, we are taught that to discover God’s will for us, we must be faithful to Him where we are, faithful to and in the conditions in which He has placed us. One of the greatest obstacles to the discovery of one’s vocation in life, which is a clear expression of our disobedience and self-will, is the desire to be someone else, someplace else, sometime else. We have all heard people say that if only they lived in another place, or in another time, or with other people...then they could be holy. Or, if only they were married. Or, if only they were not married. If only this, and if only that! We must come to see how sinful such an attitude is, how crazy and deluded. It is simply blasphemy. And it may well be the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which Christ says cannot be forgiven, for it dares to tell God that our failures in life are His fault for making us the way we are. **(Cf. Matthew 12:31; Luke 12:10)**

God has made us who we are. He has put us where we are, even when it is our own self-will that has moved us. He has given us our time and our place. He has given us our specific destiny. We must come to the point when we do not merely resign ourselves to these realities, but when we love them, bless them, give thanks to God for them as the conditions for our self-fulfillment as persons, the means to our sanctity and salvation. Being faithful where we are is the basic sign that we will God’s will for our lives. The struggle to “blossom where we are planted,” as the saying goes, is the way to discern God’s presence and power in our lives, to hear His voice, to accomplish His purposes, to share His holiness. Jesus said that only those who are “faithful in little” inherit much and get set over much. Those who are not faithful in the little things of life, and thereby fail to accept and to use what God provides, end up losing the little that they have, or - as Jesus says in St. Luke’s gospel - the little that they think that they have, for even that

“little” may exist only in their own deluded imaginations. **(Cf. Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27, 8:18)**

So the summary of the whole thing is this: We must labor to do the smallest good and to avoid the smallest sin in the smallest, seemingly most insignificant details of life. We must accept who we are, where we are, when we are and how we are, and struggle to sanctify our real state of existence by the grace of God; resisting the world, the flesh and the devil and gaining the Spirit of God through Christ in the Church. We must participate in the services and sacraments, be fed on the scriptures and imitate the saints. We must seek out the help of the experienced, and heed their counsel and advice. And we must go to God Himself and say with a pure heart: “Thy will be done! And He will see that we find our vocation and calling in life, and become the saints that he has willed us to be from the beginning.

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Adapted from the article by Fr. Thomas Hopko at
<http://oca.org/resource-handbook/theology/finding-ones-vocation-in-life>*

LESSON 15 – ORTHODOXY AND SCIENCE

Objective: To understand the Orthodox perspective on the relationship between creation and evolution

A young man once told an Orthodox priest that he could not accept the Faith because of his belief in Science - namely, there were no dinosaurs in the Bible, so Christianity was wrong. His idea was that since dinosaurs obviously existed (their skeletons adorn our museums), then if the Bible was God's Word, he should be able to read about dinosaurs in the Bible. Since he was unable to find them, then obviously the Bible could not be God's Word and he could not remain Orthodox.

The young man was confused by the supposed conflict between Science and Religion, and in this arm-wrestling match, it was clear to him that Science had won. No Biblical dinosaurs, no more church-going.

So, what's the deal about dinosaurs? Why aren't they in the creation stories in Genesis? Apart from the absurdity of supposing they're not there because they aren't mentioned by name (the duck-billed platypus isn't mentioned by name either), it's a valid question, and one that leads us headlong into the question of how to interpret the early chapters of Genesis.



Interpretation of the creation stories too often degenerates into an argument between the theory of evolution vs. what is sometimes called “creation science.” By “evolution” the average non-scientific person means the notion that Man descended from the apes, or from a common ancestor of apes and men. The name “Darwin” is usually thrown about, regardless of how the ideas in his *On the Origin of Species* have fared in the scientific community since Darwin wrote it in 1859, and most people’s knowledge of evolution is confined to looking at the famous evolutionary chart in National

Geographic, showing how smaller hominids kept walking until they became human beings like us.

By “**creation science**” is meant the view that the Genesis stories are to be taken as scientifically or historically factual, so that the earth (often considered to be comparatively young) was created by God in six twenty-four hour days. Since the time of the “Scopes monkey trial”, the argument between “evolutionists” and “creationists” has been going strong, and is often fought in the nation’s courts and departments of education. Arm-wrestling indeed.

Happily, the Orthodox Church does not call for us to take part in this arm-wrestling match, or pick a side.

The creation stories in Genesis were not written to show exactly how God created the world we live. Rather, they were written to reveal something fundamental about the God of Israel and the privileged status of the people who worshipped Him.

Our assumption today is that the ancient Hebrew people wanted to know how we got here, and how we were created. In fact, they were mostly uninterested in such cosmic questions, and the creation myths that existed in the ancient near east spoke to other issues. Most people back then, if they thought of the question of cosmic origins at all, assumed that the world had always existed, and the various gods they worshipped were simply part of that eternal backdrop.

That is where the creation stories were truly revolutionary. Their main point was not merely that God created the world out of nothing; it was that the tribal God of the Jewish people was sovereign over the world. The stories of Israel defeating various people in the Old Testament in fact are a reflection of God’s triumph over false gods.

We take monotheism for granted, and spell “god” with a capital “G”. For us, God is singular and unique by definition. It was otherwise in the ancient near east. That age was populated by different gods, each with his or her own power, agenda, and career. And this is the point: in the Genesis stories, none of these gods are there. In the opening verses we read, “In the beginning God (Hebrew **Elohim**, a Jewish name for their God) created the heavens and the earth” and “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that Yahweh God made earth and heaven.” The creating deity is called “Elohim” and “Yahweh”—the names for the Jewish God. Other rival deities are simply not there. It is as if they do not exist. They had been dethroned

and demoted by their omission from the story. The opening verse of Genesis is a salvo fired into the world of polytheism, a ringing declaration that their gods were nobodies.

We keep reading and discover that this Jewish God made everything that existed by His simple word of command. He simply said, “Light—exist!” (two words in the original Hebrew), and light sprang into existence. In the creation myths of the pagan cultures of that time, the gods created by lots of huffing and puffing (in an Old Babylonian myth, the god Enlil uses a hoe), but not so the God of the Jews. He is above all that. For Him, a simple sovereign word suffices. In fact, in the first chapter of Genesis, all the cosmos was brought into being by Him uttering ten simple commands (yep, it does foreshadow the Ten Commandments, given later).

And Man is portrayed in these stories as the sum and crown of creation, giving the human person a dignity never before known. Man is said to have been made “in the image of God”—a revolutionary statement, since in those days, only kings were thought to be in the divine image. Despite this, Genesis invests the common man with this royal dignity. And even more: it says that woman shares this image and rule with him. In the ancient near east, women were chattel; in Genesis, she is a co-ruler of creation with the man.

The stories of Genesis cannot be read apart from their original cultural context, and when we read them as they were meant to be read, we see that the creation story was a gauntlet thrown down before the prevailing culture of its time. The creation stories affirmed that the Jewish God, the tribal deity of a small and internationally unimportant people, alone made the whole cosmos. That meant that He was able to protect His People. It meant that, properly speaking, all the pagan nations should abandon their old gods and worship Him. These stories affirm that the Jewish God is powerful enough to have created everything by a few simple orders. They affirm that Man is not the mere tool and slave of the gods, whose job it is to feed the deities and care for their temples. Rather, Man is a co-ruler with God, His own image and viceroy on earth. And Woman is not a thing to be sold, inferior to Man. Rather, she shares Man’s calling and dignity. These are the real lessons of Genesis. It has nothing to say, for or against, the theory of evolution. Its true lessons are located elsewhere.

So what about dinosaurs? As Orthodox Christians, we can happily leave them in the museums, to the makers of movies such as Jurassic World, and the writers of National Geographic.

The Biblical creation stories of Genesis gives us lots to ponder and to live up to without multiplying mysteries. As Mark Twain once said, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me; it’s the parts I do understand.”

Adapted from the article “Evolution or Creation Science?”, by Fr. Lawrence Farley
(<http://oca.org/reflections/fr.-lawrence-farley/evolution-or-creation-science>)



LESSON 16 - CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Objective: To establish your role as a Christian leader.

Everything in leadership leads us to Christ and goes back to Christ. Christ taking up human form is a humbling experience.

The Icon illustrating the washing of the disciples' feet is the depiction of servant hood role by Christ. The 12 disciples are spending time with Christ. Christ died and witnessed to the disciples. He humbled himself to the cross. Unfortunately, roles in the Church become sometimes more about us than the growth of the Church.

As you graduate from the Sunday School, the mission of your teachers and parents was to witness the loving presence of Christ to the children and parents. Now as future leaders of the Church, you too need to be witness for Christ.



Psalm 50:12 OSB onwards talks about our repentance. We need to work within ourselves and thus lead ourselves to repentance. Only after repentance can we teach transgressors God's ways. How does this translate into Christian leadership?

We sometimes view Sunday school as just teaching, giving knowledge and information. But the Church teaches that we have to work on our own repentance and salvation. When we work with children, what sticks in their mind is what they see and not necessarily what they hear. What we teach, is it in my life? Do I really rely on God or trust in God? We are required to work on our own individual salvation first. When we work on our own repentance, that process and the results will attract others to Christ.

We have to display the love of Christ to children and parents. Then they will be attracted to the Church, the body of Christ. Negative energy repels and people will be reluctant to take up position. At times, we become very condemning, give off negative energy and thus keep people away from Christ.

Can we become the loving presence of Christ? How we display ourselves is very important. It should never be about us. We are there for our mission. Sunday school is for the children. We are doing it for Christ and His glory. Our abilities are to be used for His glory. What must matter is the satisfaction that we are doing all this is for the glory of God. Thus, we become the abode of Christ and allow Christ to dwell within us. How we function and play is defined by our thoughts, words, and deeds. The children are looking at us as leaders – teachers - and we have to play that role. Let us keep in mind the mission of Christ and build each other up in Christ, portraying the loving presence of Christ.

May the name of God be glorified!

Written by Fr. Abey George

