Am I Any More Ready to Receive Christ Today Than Israel Was 2,000 Years Ago?

L
ast week a young man came to me lamenting over not living as if Christ is resurrected and the tomb is empty. I invited him to explore with me what that “living after the Resurrection” should look like. He thought that there should be some peace, arising from a simple understanding that God has accomplished already those things that we fear and dread. We should not need to compete for God’s attention or love. He has come to us’! Therefore we should live without fear. There should be some joy, as we understand that God is with us, cares for us, and is active in our lives. This is why He took on flesh and shared in everything that human life is, from conception to death. There should be freedom to make godly choices, because Christ is the Truth that has set us free. Filled with God, we no longer try to fill our emptiness with food, alcohol, drugs, television or anything else of the world. We have life-giving food from above.

“Yes,” said my young friend. “I believe all these truths, yet I still act as if God has not yet come. I don’t think of Him all the time, I don’t pray enough and I think of Him all the time, has not yet come. I don’t

change our lives to reflect our beliefs and values. This takes some deliberate effort.

The Church has given us two major fasting periods each year to bring us back to the reality of God’s presence. We celebrate His Nativity and Resurrection, preceded by periods of fasting, intensified worship, almsgiving and private prayer. The messages focus on what God does in our lives, and we are called to encounter Him. We can look forward to the messages the Church provides during Advent and Lent.

Having written this, however, the words of my young friend echo in my mind. Yes, I believe, but … changing our ways of living, our habits, if you will, takes practice. Just as a nun dons her habit (puts on her clothes) every day, so we need to practice in “putting God on,” speaking to Him, listening through the Scriptures, and making choices throughout the day that reflect Christ's closeness to us. We need to practice living the truth that God is with us. We change habits by practicing new habits. We gain skills by practice.

It is noteworthy to me that we are not searching around, looking for God. Our God has taken on flesh and showed Himself to us. He comes into our lives and calls us. He knocks at our doors. When Christ knocks at our doors, will we make room for Him in our hearts, or in our garages and barns? Will Jesus be to us an added spice to life, or the essence of life itself? Can we be patient enough with ourselves to look for God around us? We change habits by practicing new habits. We gain skills by practice.

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T
he Gospel accounts of the Nativity are limited to a mere 40 verses. In the Gospel of Matthew, there are 19 verses about the Nativity; the Gospel of Luke has 20. The Gospel of Mark makes no mention of the Nativity, but instead begins with the Baptism of Christ. The Gospel of John summarizes the Nativity in one verse: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.” In Nativity scenes and Christmas pageants, we are so enamored with the figures of the Nativity story — the angels, the shepherds, the Magi — that sometimes we forget the main figure in the story: our Lord Jesus Christ. When we call the feast of Christmas “the birth of Jesus,” this, too, causes confusion. My wife and I have been blessed with one child, who was born in a finite moment in time. Before his birth, we had no son. This is not true for Jesus Christ. Saint John captures this best with the opening chapter of his Gospel:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, all things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.”

Continuing on with John’s Gospel, we read, “And Christ took on flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.” The Feast of the Nativity is the day that the Son of God left His mother’s womb to live among us. He took on flesh in the way that we do. He came into this world as a new-born baby. He didn’t just drop in as an adult. From the time of His Incarnation in the womb of His mother, He followed all the steps that we take. He grew up as we do. He learned to walk. He went to school. He had friends. He had struggles. The difference between us and Him is that throughout His life, He walked in tandem with God. He never ventured away from God, as we do when we sin. He came to show us the path to salvation. He came to show us how to live in God, with God, and for God. And He came to balance the equation, to die for our sins, to open a path back to Paradise for us.

So the Feast of the Nativity celebrates not just the birth of Christ, but the Incarnation of the Son of God in the flesh. It is the day on which the Creator was unveiled to His Creation. It is the day that the uncontained God was shown to be “contained” in a human body.

The scriptural account of the Nativity is captured in the Icon of the Nativity included in today’s reflection. There are three distinct things that this icon depicts. First, it captures the event of the Nativity. Mary gives birth to her first-born Son in a cave, because there is no room at any inn. Joseph is nearby, taking it all in. Second, the icon captures the reality that all of creation worshipped at the Nativity. All of Creation was present and invited to share in the miracle: the poor — the shepherds; the powerful — the Magi; the angels in heaven; the celestial bodies and the star; the earth itself — the cave. All of Creation gathered to worship the Christ in its midst.

Third, the icon serves as an invitation to us to come and worship also. The manger is shown as a tomb, the swaddling bands are burial cloths. This is the Creator, come to save us through the cross and the tomb. His purpose is clear. The cave is heaven; surrounded by jagged rocks, the cave itself is a setting of peace amidst danger. We are called to follow, the way the Magi followed the star. We are all called: the call to the shepherds is the call to everyone. Whatever your stage in life, whatever your status in society, you are welcomed. The heavens declare the glory of God. The angels sing God’s praises and invite us to do the same.

When I study the icon of the Nativity, I find that I relate to the figure of Joseph most of all. He sits at a distance. His thoughts are confused. He has been the loyal protector. He has put his reputation on the line. He has followed and trusted. Yet he is still trying to make sense of the whole thing. That’s okay. He’s still there. He is still trying. It is a lesson to us all to persevere.

Every person in the icon has followed a tough calling: Mary has lost her parent, given many years of her life in the temple, and has given birth to a Son whom she will see killed in a heinous manner. Joseph has risked reputation to be her protector, who is “child” not by him. Joseph won’t live long enough to see Jesus grow into a man.

The Father was well-pleased; the Logos became flesh; God left His mother’s womb to live among us and we beheld His glory. In their supreme sacrifice, in their trust, in their faith, all of Creation were profoundly honored, both by God and now by us. Indeed, John captures the message of the feast in the most succinct way. We are called to behold His glory. This is the message of the Nativity. It is the goal of every human life.
METROPOLITAN JOSEPH VISITS METROPOLITAN TIKHON AT THE OCA CHANCERY

On Thursday, September 29, 2016, His Beatitude Metropolitan TIKHON, Primate of the Orthodox Church in America, welcomed His Eminence Metropolitan JOSEPH of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America on his first official visit to the Chancery of the Orthodox Church in America, in Syosset, New York.

Accompanying Metropolitan JOSEPH was His Grace Bishop JOHN of the Antiochian Diocese of Worcester and New England, and Archpriest Thomas Zain, Vicar General of the Archdiocese. In attendance from the Orthodox Church in America were His Eminence Archbishop MICHAEL, OCA Chancellor; Archpriest Eric G. Tosi, OCA Secretary; and Archdeacon JOSEPH Mustahek, Secretary to Metropolitan TIKHON.

The visit opened with the celebration of a brief Service of Intercession in honor of Saint Raphael of Brooklyn in Saint Sergius of Radonezh Chapel, after which Metropolitan TIKHON awarded the Order of Saint Innocent, Gold Class, to Metropolitan JOSEPH “for his many years of faithful service to Orthodoxy in North America, leadership in the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America, and encouragement of theological education and monasticism throughout this continent.”

“I have personally known Your Eminence for many years, and we have had the opportunity to share our common love for Christ and His Church since the time of my consecration as Bishop of Eastern Pennsylvania and your appointment as Bishop of the Diocese of Los Angeles and the West, which occurred in the same year — 2004,” Metropolitan TIKHON said as he made the presentation. “During that time, I have seen Your Eminence’s faithfulness to Christ and dedication to being a good shepherd for your clergy and your faithful, always in a very personal and direct manner.

“I have also appreciated your good foundation in the monastic and ascetical tradition of our Orthodox Faith and your concern for theological education in North America,” Metropolitan TIKHON continued. “And so, in recognition of all your apostolic labors for Orthodoxy in North America and for the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, especially as you take upon your shoulders the heavy cross of service as Archbishop of New York and Metropolitan of All North America for the Antiochian Church, I am pleased to bestow upon you the Order of Saint Innocent, Gold Class. Mustahek! Axios!”

Metropolitan TIKHON also awarded the Order of Saint Innocent, Gold Class, to Bishop JOHN “for his many years of faithful service to Orthodoxy in North America, the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America and encouragement of pastoral formation throughout this continent.”

In turn, Metropolitan JOSEPH presented a panagia on behalf of the Antiochian Archdiocese to Metropolitan TIKHON, while taking note of the close relationship of the Antiochian Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America. He also recalled that most of the Archdiocese’s seminarians attend Saint Vladimir’s Seminary or Saint Tikhon’s Seminary, while stressing “the historical roots of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA. Building on the experience of the Bilateral Commission of the OCA and the Antiochian Archdiocese, Metropolitans TIKHON and JOSEPH also considered various projects designed to strengthen mutual cooperation.

Lengthy discussions on various topics of mutual interest took place during a luncheon in the Chancery dining room. Among the matters discussed were the mutual concern for the state of Christians in the Middle East and the current refugee crisis. Metropolitans TIKHON and JOSEPH agreed to discuss further methods of cooperation to assist the victims of the crisis, and to take steps to highlight further the seriousness of the situation to the faithful. The Metropolitans also discussed the recent Cena meeting, and the status of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA.

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Preparing for Mass

IN A NOD TO COMEDIAN JEFF FOXWORTHY, SOME WAG HAS OPINED THAT “YOU MIGHT BE ORTHODOX IF YOU SAY A PRAYER BEFORE YOU PRAY.” AS I’VE GATHERED OVER THE YEARS IN THE SACRISTY WITH THE SERVERS AND SACRED MINISTERS TO LEAD THE SHORT PRAYERS BEFORE THE DIVINE OFFICE OR THE “PREPARATION FOR MASS,” THAT DROLL PHRASE OCCASIONALLY DARTS INTO MY MIND. IF I DWELL ON IT TOO LONG, THEN THIS DEVILISH QUESTION INEVITABLY FOLLOWS: “WHY MUST I PRAY BEFORE I PRAY? WHAT IS THE SENSE IN THAT?” THE RATIONAL MIND, PREPARING TO PRAY BY PRAYING SEEMS NOT ONLY REDUNDANT BUT BORDERS ON THE RIDICULOUS.

Perhaps this question also crosses the minds of the faithful who enter the nave, genuflect, and kneel to say a short prayer before we pray together. It might be argued that the mental or whispered prayers that we say individually are superior to the spoken prayer forms for putting one in the right frame of mind to worship. So, perhaps, that is where the problem lies: that the officiant is mandated to lead the clergy in vocal preparatory prayers rather than letting each one prepare himself in his own way. Certainly, in the earliest centuries, prayers of preparation were more spontaneous—which, to our American minds, rings more genuine and authentic and so, by implication, more meaningful. The evidence, however indicates that, even early on, the bishop gathered with his clergy for responsive prayer in preparation for leading the liturgy. In fact, as eminent liturgical scholar Josef Jungmann states, “That the soul must be prepared for the celebration of the Eucharist is one of those self-explaining requirements which were already insisted upon in the primitive Church. This requirement applies not only to the priests, but to [the] whole Christian people.”

This, then, may be the place to begin our reflection: not by trying to grasp the sense in praying, but in understanding what prayer is and why we pray. Very simply put, prayer is the intimate communion of the soul with God. It is the primary act of our relationship with the Divine. To speak even more grandly, prayer is “contemplative tarrying in the world of the supernatural.” We pray, then, because we are created, and our faith impels us, to stand before God. This is why Simeon, the first Christian to stand in the Lord’s presence, was moved to sing: “Now has he shown to all the nations the splendor of his grace.” Or, as those who have been graciously compelled to come in the world of the supernatural.” We pray, then, because we are created, and our faith impels us, to stand before God. This is why Simeon, the first Christian to stand in the Lord’s presence, was moved to sing: “Now has he shown to all the nations the splendor of his grace.” Or, as those who have been graciously compelled to come in the presence of the Lord, “Father, I have kept your word.”

The desire to pray, then, ought to revolve around an equal desire to be prepared. The best preparation begins by acknowledging that, when we speak, we will stammer, both because of awe and because of unworthiness. So pray we must, in order to pray well. Pray we must, so that our responses may be apt and fitting to what is said. And pray we must, especially if we will be leading and guiding others to pray. Therefore, it seems only meet and right that “with mind alert and with a consciousness of the grandeur of the mystery; [we] draw near to the sacrifice . . . to worship in spirit and truth.”

THE SACRAMENT OF PRIESTHOOD

A GRADUAL ASCENT

Too often we are too rash with our words, too quick to argue, too bold to declare, too impulsive to opine. Yet the Spirit, in the Church, knows all too well that prayer should neither be rushed nor urged. And so, in her wisdom, our Holy Mother teaches us that our souls need to enter into the intimate communion with God by making a gradual ascent. For both laity and clergy, the first step in that ascent begins with humility, humility that is both verbal and non-verbally. Non-verbally, the soul is prepared when the body confesses, through fasting, that it too easily succumbs to ungodly passions, and so is in need of the teacher named priest. By restraining our bodily urges, we can delve more deeply into our soul, where communication with the divine occurs. As we delve into our soul, our verbal humility begins by an act of confession, either through the Sacrament of Penance, or (when that is not readily at hand) through self-examination. In this two-fold method of fasting and confession, we begin to prepare to stand before the Lord. It should be no great surprise, then, that the first of the rites to be observed is that “the priest who will celebrate Mass will have fasted from midnight, and made a sacramental confession if necessary.” Yet since the celebration is not merely done by the priest but is a liturgy of the whole Church, the royal priesthood is equally enjoined to follow the Eucharistic fast and to go to confession regularly and, before Mass, do some act of confession.

A King needs his advisors. Likewise, the royal priests must have the proper preparation. This is why, in the days before the Liturgical Books were published, the bishops insisted that the priests prepare not only by making their own private confession as priests, but also by going to the Sacrament of Penance. In the Augsburg Constitution, it is stated: “The priests should make confession and receive communion.” And, just as in the present day, the Spirit of the Church, which is not bound to time nor place, reminds us that “the priest who will celebrate Mass will have fasted from midnight, and made a sacramental confession if necessary.”

Who will approach and draw near to God to the Lord and then reply, without clearing the clutter from his mind? Who will approach and draw near to God without first being reminded that we stand in His presence as those who have been graciously compelled to come in the presence of the Lord, “Father, I have kept your word.”

The Office of Morning Prayer

The requirement for all “priests in the Western churches “there was no evidence of any preparation before going to the Altar, other than the canonical hours.” Then, as now, it is understood that the Monastic Matins aids in sharpening the soul’s focus on the Mass. The Nocturn lessons on Sundays and major feasts, in particular, help us see the several nuances that the Church has in mind for that day’s celebration. More often than not, the two different patterns exemplify not only the influence of the Monastic Office, but also the psalms, prayers, and lessons by exposing the richness of the Lord’s Word. The office of Lauds or Morning Prayer, which in our Archdiocese “must be celebrated publicly before the Sunday Mass,” builds upon the themes that were introduced at Vespers or Evensong. As with the evening office, the met of the morning office is found in the Antiphons, most especially the Antiphon for the Benedictus, which always highlights, sometimes in a surprising way, a significant aspect of the Mass Gospel. By praying these offices with hearts cleansed “from all vain, evil and wandering thoughts,” both clergy and laity are enabled and prepared “with attention and devotion” to be made “meet to hear before [the] divine Majesties” not only during these offices, but also during the upcoming Mass. For that is the ultimate purpose of the office: not to increase our burden, but to introduce, undergird and enlighten the awe-filled adoration of both clergy and laity, as they graciously stand in the Spirit at the convocation of heaven and earth.

While it is incumbent upon the clergy, and commended to the laity, to prepare for Mass utilizing the church’s formal prayers, Dr. Pius Parsch commends two other personal and devotional methods for preparing the heart and mind. The first is to begin meditatively to read the Gospel for the upcoming Mass, followed by reflecting on the Lesson, outlining the structure, and even repeating the Psalms, helps to highlight and draw our attention to the theme of the upcoming Mass. Most often, that theme is announced in the Magnificat Antiphon and reinforced in the Collect. As we hear these words prayed, especially as the antiphonal chant plays on our heartstrings while focusing our soul’s attentions, our minds are gradually prepared not merely to “get something” out of the Mass, but more importantly to attend truly to what Our Lord bequests.

The requirement for all “priests in the Western tradition, regardless of use or rite, [is] to read Matins from the Monastic Diurnal (or at least the Lessons from Nocturns) for the day or feast!” and then also Lauds or Morning Prayer. An ancient obligation. Moreover, the requirement to say Matins and Lauds reveals the original prayers of preparation for the clergy; for, until the Ninth Century, in the Western churches “there was no evidence of any preparatory prayer before going to the Altar, other than the canonical hours.” Then, as now, it is understood that the Monastic Matins aids in sharpening the soul’s focus on the Mass. The Nocturn lessons on Sundays and major feasts, in particular, help us see the several nuances that the Church has in mind for that day’s celebration. More often than not, the two different patterns exemplify not only the influence of the Monastic Office, but also the psalms, prayers, and lessons by exposing the richness of the Lord’s Word. The office of Lauds or Morning Prayer, which in our Archdiocese “must be celebrated publicly before the Sunday Mass,” builds upon the themes that were introduced at Vespers or Evensong. As with the evening office, the met of the morning office is found in the Antiphons, most especially the Antiphon for the Benedictus, which always highlights, sometimes in a surprising way, a significant aspect of the Mass Gospel. By praying these offices with hearts cleansed “from all vain, evil and wandering thoughts,” both clergy and laity are enabled and prepared “with attention and devotion” to be made “meet to hear before [the] divine Majesties” not only during these offices, but also during the upcoming Mass. For that is the ultimate purpose of the office: not to increase our burden, but to introduce, undergird and enlighten the awe-filled adoration of both clergy and laity, as they graciously stand in the Spirit at the convocation of heaven and earth.
both to experience more richly that Mass, and to be open to any nuances that exceed the basic textual and ceremonial features. While commended to the laity, I have found myself intuitively following one or the other of these methods as I both mark and review the prayers in the Missal.

Fasting, praying the Divine Office, and meditating upon the prayers – all of these matters are preliminary to what the missal and prayer books title “Preparation for Mass.” They are, without a doubt, the prayer before the prayer before we pray. Permit, however, one more preliminary pre-preparation, not of the mind and heart and soul, but of the body – a preparation that probably goes without saying. “The priest who is about to celebrate Mass,” and the layperson who will assist at the Mass by prayerfully giving heed to the words and ceremonies, “should attend to the cleanliness of his person, and of his clothing.”

Such attention helps us recall that our worship is not primarily a mental exercise or done chiefly with the spirit. The centrality of the incarnation should suggest to us that physical hygiene is also part of our preparation in the same way that the ceremonies – the gestures and movements – are not nothing or indifferent, but are just as much tied to our worship and adoration as the words we speak and hear since we will not only hear, but also see, look upon, and most importantly, handle and consume the Word of Life who is with the Father and who has appeared to us.

At the very least, then, at the beginning of his preparation, the clergy will wash their hands saying the prayer, “Give strength to my hands, O Lord…”

What I have just described as the gradual ascent to our intimate communion in prayer with our Lord God is aptly summarized with these words: “Preparation to celebrate the Sunday or Holy Mass (or any Mass offered before 1 p.m.) begins the evening before the Mass is celebrated. The priest must have fasted from the previous evening, or eaten a light supper, and have read Vespers… and have a clean body and conscience.”

**PREPARATIO AD MISSAM: PSALMS**

At least one to two centuries before the so-called “Great Schism” between Rome and Constantinople, prayer practices followed the Divine Office. This form of preparation apparently came from the oriental churches through the Benedictines and others, and went through various permutations here and there until the pattern we now know was settled by in the Thirteenth Century. In some places, the preparation prayers consisted of 15 psalms, the 7 penitential psalms, an introduction to interior recollection, a prayer concerning the Passion of Our Lord, several other prayers, and then a little office built around the prayers which we know. In yet another place, the preparatory prayers begin with an excerpt from the Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great. Regardless of the particular differences between time periods and regions, the standard core for preparation is psalmody followed by other prayers. It is not a novelty, then, but an established tradition, that after praying the Office, before he puts on the garments that are designed to cause him to decrease so that Christ may increase, the priest is enjoined to pray the way because: I cannot find any other place in which it is set forth by the author that the psalm consists of 15 psalms and the Antiphon prayer is added. Moreover, the Antiphon surely places us at the beginning of Lent, the time when we humble ourselves, as they bring to our minds these words from the Wisdom of Solomon, one which is not simply the form for the opening words of the Mass for the First Day in Lent:

**But thou hast mercy upon all, because thou canst do all things, and overlookest the sins of men for the sake of repentance. For thou lovest all things that are, and hast not reproved none of the things which thou hast made: for thou didst not appoint, or make any thing hating it. And how could any thing endure, if thou wouldest not be preserved, if not called by thee. But thou sparest all: because they are thine, O Lord, who lovest souls (Wisdom 11:24-27).**

It is certain that, the more we know our weaknesses and failings, the more they ought to produce in us the fear of our sins and misdeeds make us both unworthy to be in persona Christi and even to approach Our Father as we enter the sanctuary, to re-present and handle Christ’s actual and spiritual sacrifice. In this way, we stand before the icon of the Mother of God and cry out, “Have mercy and hear my prayer, even though I deserve to be ignored by thee;” so now we beg Our Lord to hear, to instruct and to be compassionate – and to wrap all of this in the crumbs which fall from the Master’s table. For with these shall we be well pleased. So the heart of this preparatory prayer is expressed in the end, where we plead that our Lord “show some token for good.”

As these Three Psalms lead us nearer to the sanctuary, we now proclaim our heartfelt desire to receive devils lies and fantasies tied to perishable food, and to favor instead the Blood which streamed into and is nourished in the holy Chalice. We do so because, after fasting and prayer, we hunger and thirst for righteousness in the same way that King Hezekiah was famished after recovering from his death-bed. So we repeat with the same heartfelt gratitude what, in Jewish tradition, is his prayer (Psalm 115 [116:10ff.]):

**Most gracious, indeed, it is that the cup of the Lord has become the cup of salvation, and as the wine-press and cry out, “Have mercy and hear my prayer, even though I deserve to be ignored by thee;” so now we beg Our Lord to hear, to instruct and to be compassionate – and to wrap all of this in the crumbs which fall from the Master’s table. For with these shall we be well pleased. So the heart of this preparatory prayer is expressed in the end, where we plead that our Lord “show some token for good.”

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**Most gracious, indeed, it is that the cup of the Lord has become the cup of salvation, and as the wine-press and**
Preparing For Mass

we ponder that the cup we desire is the cup of suffering which Our Lord willingly drinks. Our inclination to recoil, however, is halted as we recall that “right dear in the sight of all the Angels who feed upon it fully. Yet therapy, so that this Holy Bread may be truly sweet and delightful, Healing of both our appetites and our weaknesses is needed. The summary of this preparatory prayer is provided in the “Saturday” section. Here we implore that this holy of Holiws with “tears of devotion, with reverence and trembling” so that this sacrifice may be pleased receiving for both the living and the departed. The “Tuesday” section begins with a seeing question that every person – clergy or lay – should seriously and daily consider: apart from God’s grace, who is worthy to celebrate this Holy Sacrifice? as you know, is not the only motif or singular end of the Eucharist. We also desire Christ’s Holy Body to enter into the interior of flesh “which may love thee, prefer thee, delight in thee, follow thee, and enjoy thee.” Those five verbs – to love, to the altar, and thereby receive all the good that it promises and delivers for both the living and the departed. (Permit me to note that, regardless of the day, I always pray this section whenever I celebrate a Requiem Mass.) Impressed especially on my mind is the confession that the faithful departed enjoy with us, at every Mass, the great and abundant feast of that living Bread which gives life to the world. At this point, the Church through this prayer stacks up three key confessions of the holy Host which we receive: first, it is Christ’s holy and blessed Flesh; second, it is the actual Flesh born of the Virgin Mary; and third, it is the Flesh whose Sacred Heart produced the Fountain of mercy when spared by the soldier’s lance. Our prayer is that, by this Flesh, our blessed dead may rejoin us in Christ’s praise and glory. Our remembrance of the faithful departed recalls that we are united with both the living and the departed in the Eucharist by the Spirit. Following this logic, the “Friday” section then gives us an invocation, or epiclesis, of the Holy Spirit which brings to mind the epicles or over the water at both the Paschal Vigil and the Pentecost Vigil and which, frankly, exceeds in richness those we have been asked to insert into our Canon. Consider this prayer: “May there also ascend the invisible and incomprehensible majesty of this Holy Spirit, as it is came down of old on the sacrifices of the fathers; which will both make our obligations thy Body and Blood.” Our prayer is that this invocation may not only change the bread and wine, but that it may also teach us to handle this Holy of Holiws with “tears of devotion, with reverence and trembling” so that this sacrifice may be pleased received for both the living and the departed. The summary of this preparatory prayer is provided in the “Saturday” section. Here we implore that this holy Mystery, which makes us partakers of the Divine Nature, may grant us the grace to draw nearer to the holy altar, and thereby receive all the good that it promises and bestows. That good, we are reminded, is forthrightly stated by our Lord in his discourse on the Bread of Life, which proclaims that life comes through the Blessed Sacrament. Healing of both our appetites and our weaknesses is needed so that this Holy Bread may be truly sweet and delightful, just as it is to the Angels who feed upon it fully. Yet therapy, as you know, is not the only motif or singular end of the Eucharist. We also desire Christ’s Holy Body to enter into our soul so that it may purify, protect, nourish, satisfy, prove worthy.
Preparing For Mass

The wondrous rich prayer ascribed to St. Ambrose concludes the prayers that were established and obligatory by the Eleventh Century.\(^{25}\) What follows, then, are two shorter prayers which are established well before the Council of Trent. The first of these, also ascribed to St. Ambrose, tacks in the direction of repentance. We acknowledge that to this Table, alone, we must turn to be healed and protected not by a judge who frightens but by a Savior who embraces. Realizing that this Eucharist depends on our Savior’s crucifixion and the precious Blood which streams from his side, we ask for purity and devotion, that we humbly wash our wounds, that His shameful death covers our shame, and that our fear be chased away by hope in His unending mercies. Pinning our hopes to this Victim of Salvation, we then boldly confess our desire to amend, and by His purifying mercy, to taste of Him, the Holy of Holies. At last, only as we make our petition: this Most Blessed Sacrament may remit sins, cleanse faults, repel shameful thoughts, renew godly passions, grant the health to do well, and protect our entire being against every evil.

Fittingly, this prayer of repentance is followed by a prayer of worthy access to the Holy Sacrament. Acknowledging to the heavenly Father that we are sick, unclean, blind, and poor and needy, we implore His mercy so that we may receive His Son “with such reverence and humility, such contrition and devotion, such purity and faith, and with such intention and purpose as shall be expedient for the health of [our soul].”\(^{20}\) Above all, however, this prayer uniquely asks that we receive both the substance and strength bestowed in the Sacrament and Blood which was both born of the Virgin Mary and which constitutes the Holy Church. Characteristic of his theology, this prayer ascribed to the Angelic Doctor, Thomas Aquinas, concludes by asking for our Father to grant, by this Sacrament, the vocation to belong to Our Lord and God and Savior face to face.

In the year 1604, the remaining prayers provided in our booklet appear universally in the Roman Missal and, therefore, are not of obligation in our local (Vicariate) use.\(^{27}\) For these reasons, Jesus Christ offered Himself to God the Father; and for these reasons, we prepare to offer and receive the Supreme High Priest and true Pontiff.

PREPARATORY AD MASSA: OTHER PRAYERS AND INTENTIONS

Two million people in Aleppo, Syria, have no access to running water after intensified fighting in the city damaged electrical networks needed to pump water into family homes. Lack of access to safe water in war-torn communities such as Aleppo has created a humanitarian emergency for Syrian families caught in the conflict. Many have resorted to collecting water from unsafe sources, leaving them vulnerable to life-threatening waterborne diseases. International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) with its partner in Syria, DERD, the humanitarian arm of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, has been working in communities throughout Syria during the course of the war to ensure access to safe water for families by digging new wells, restoring damaged water systems, and distributing water storage tanks and purification filters.

The situation is especially critical in displaced families with small children, like Mohammad. He fled with his wife and seven small children to a safer area of Aleppo last spring when their neighborhood came under attack. “We escaped from the fighting and now suffer from such extreme poverty,” he said.

Mohammad supports his wife and his seven children with wages earned as a day-laborer, but work isn’t available every day. His greatest worry is that he can’t provide safe water for his children and is forced to keep water in an old rusty barrel. “I know that when one of my children drinks from the water stored in a rusty barrel, he will get sick. However, I have no other choice – the tanks are so expensive and I cannot pay for them.”

In Aleppo, IOCC has responded to the urgent water needs of displaced Syrians like Mohammad by distributing heavy-duty plastic storage tanks to 225 displaced families. The two sizes of tanks distributed hold up to 132 gallons or 263 gallons of water. For Mohammad, the tank has eased concerns about the health of his children. “I received a big, clean water tank. I stored in a rusty barrel, he will get sick. However, I have no other choice – the tanks are so expensive and I cannot pay for them.”

In the year 1604, the remaining prayers provided in our booklet appear universally in the Roman Missal and, therefore, are not of obligation in our local (Vicariate) use. These prayers include a prayer to the Holy Mother of God, an Antiphon and prayer to St. Joseph, a prayer to all the Angels and Saints, and a prayer to the Saint(s) in whose honor Mass is celebrated. The prayer to the Virgin Mother asks that she be near all communicants in the same way that she stood near her Son as He hung bleeding on the Cross, so that our sacrifice may be pure and acceptable. The Antiphon venerates Joseph’s merits as foster father and guardian of the Divine Child, and then beseeches God to help us fulfill worthy our royal Priesthood as we celebrate and receive the Most Sacred Body and Blood of Christ. The prayer to the Angels and Saints simply expands the audience in the usual dialogue at the Offertory between the celebrant and his clergy; namely, that by their intercessions, the sacrifice may be worthily offered to the praise and glory of God’s holy Name, and for the benefit of His Holy Church. The prayer to the Saint whose mass is celebrated is, of course, used occasionally, and asks the same as the previous prayer, adding that by this great Sacrifice, we may praise Our Lord eternally with this particular Saint and all the elect.

The prescribed “Preparation for Mass” concludes with the Declaration of Intent, by which the celebrant proclaims his desire and purpose to celebrate the Lord’s Holy Sacrifice in obedience with the received tradition of the Church. Additionally, he names those in particular for whom he will pray during this Mass. At this point, in my practice, I lift a page from the Byzantine predecessor prayers by naming the bishop who ordained me, my own bishop, my sponsors at ordination, those whom I’ve sponsored, as well as all others who have requested my prayers. This intention ends with a blessing that the Lord benefit us at this Mass to live the life of repentance.

VESTING

The final act of preparation is when the priest, and other sacred ministers, put on their liturgical vestments, accompanied by specific prayers for each article. Archimandrite Irenei Steinberg, in his presentation this year to the clergy of the Diocese of the West, rightly reminds us that when the clergy, and particularly the bishop and priest, don the liturgical vestments, they are covering up their own person so that the person of Christ may come to the fore.\(^{26}\) For this reason, the prayers which accompany this action speak of us putting on Christ. Since this is the case, Archimandrite Irenei urges us to let all ancillary and unnecessary conversation cease until the vestments are properly removed during the prayers for the Thanksgiving after Mass.

Graciously, well and as to the beatific vision. For these reasons, Jesus Christ offered Himself to God the Father; and for these reasons, we prepare to offer and receive the Supreme High Priest and true Pontiff.
earning that the topic of this year’s Parish Life Conference was a familiar verse from the book of Joshua. I was excited because it was a verse that I really needed to reflect upon. A plaque with this verse from Joshua: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

As a teen growing up in North America, I began to think about the influence my family’s home has had on me. Some of the first memories I have are of my parents reading me Bible stories from the very beginning. We had a doll named Faith who said a little prayer when you placed her hands in a praying position. She prayed sweetly: “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. Guide and guard me through the night and wake me with the morning’s light.” This was the first prayer I learned. I don’t remember who gave her to me or when I did; however, I remember what she taught me and how I’ve grown every time I’ve seen her.

My parents have always tried to guard me and let my eyes and ears perceive good things. When I was young, I had my own TV remote. If I remember correctly, it had five buttons with pre-programmed channels and volume control. When I asked why I couldn’t see other channels on TV, my parents explained that they were not good to watch. As Saint Paisios explained: “When your children are still small, you have to help them understand what is good. That is the deepest meaning of life.” I loved my little remote, and now I love and appreciate the fact that my parents wanted to protect my eyes and ears.

The older I become, the more difficult are the choices between serving the Lord and not serving Him. I know that serving Christ is not something I should only do on Sundays, but every day and in everything I do. One of the things I do is participate in Community Theater. I enjoy performing on stage, especially in musicals. However, it was easier to decide what to audition for when I was younger, simply because the options were plays such as, “Mulan,” “The Jungle Book,” and “Willy Wonka.” As a teen, the choices are more difficult because the content isn’t always clearly right or wrong. Many times there is a gray area and I think to myself “Perhaps it isn’t that bad and I’m only acting. It isn’t really me doing this or saying that or wearing that costume.” But the truth is, it really is me and I wouldn’t be serving the Lord.

Recently, in fact, I had to make a decision I’ve never had to make before. I auditioned for a family friendly musical and there was a chance I could have been considered for the main role simply because she’s a teenage girl. Part of me thought about how exciting it would be if I was the star. But then, I had to wake up from my daydream. At one point in the play, this main character is kissed by a boy she likes. Knowing that I promised myself that my first kiss would be given to someone very special, I could not accept the part. This may be the first time I’ve had to make such a choice, but I know it won’t be the last. I won’t pretend it was an easy decision either. There are many parts I wouldn’t be able to accept for this and other reasons. But as a teen surrounded by temptations, I need to follow the example of those who have overcome them. As recorded in Luke’s Gospel, Christ Himself was tempted by Satan and He resisted it. “The devil tried hopelessly to get Christ to bow down before him: “And Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.’” (Luke 4:8)

I must be very careful that theatre doesn’t become a god to me. So, that way I don’t accept a part that would force me to do things that I would be uncomfortable doing. When making a decision I need to ask myself, if I looked out in the audience and saw Christ sitting in the front row, would I be happy He was there or would I be ashamed? He saw me? I must remember that He really is everywhere at all times.

The Lord has given each one of us talents and He expects us to use them for His Glory. I can use these same talents to glorify God by singing in the church choir and reading during Vespers when I have the opportunity, rather than singing obscene songs or reciting inappropriate lines in a play. I enjoy dancing as well, but this is an area that presents its own challenges. As a teen, I am sometimes torn by wondering whether or not to dance because of the music being played and some of the dance moves. I applaud the answer that a Christian adult gave to a girl when she asked how she should dance: “Dance in such a way that you enjoy yourself; but enjoy yourself in such a way that when you come home to your room, you can face the icon of the Lord and thank Him—not so that you come home and feel ashamed to look upon His face”. I admire the way that this was explained and I will try to remember this adult’s advice when I am faced with the same situation.

If it is the Lord’s will that I have a family, I hope that my future husband and I will follow the same advice from Saint John Chrysostom that my parents did. “Fathers and mothers: Go and lead your child by the hand into the church.” I hope we will have in our home a plaque with Joshua 24:15 written on it. By exposing our children to Church services, prayers, and hymns, I hope we will encourage them to be strong and courageous as well as to love and honor God. As they grow and experience more and more temptations, I hope their love of Christ will keep them anchored in the Orthodox Faith. I pray they will endure any and all trials that they may face. I also pray that when they are grown, they too will have a plaque in their homes that reads, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15).
Experts “Re-think” Sacred Arts at St. Vladimir’s Seminary

Highly influential global scholars and artists took seriously the task of “Re-thinking Sacred Arts” at a weekend symposium entitled the same and held at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, September 16–18, 2016. Participants drew from their respective disciplines and expertise in exploring both historic categories and new ways of thinking about “sacrality” and “art.”

The symposium, which included a public Panel Discussion on Saturday evening attended by 75 people, was the first in a series of events planned between Fall 2016 and Spring 2018 by the Seminary. These are all part of its Sacred Arts Initiative (SAI), funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation. Peter C. Bouteneff, professor of Systematic Theology at the Seminary and director of the SAI, coordinated the symposium, along with Dn. Evan Freeman, seminary alumnus and Ph.D. candidate in the Department of the History of Art at Yale University; Richard Schneider, professor of Iconology and a candidate in the Department of the History of Art at Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Divinity School; and George Kordis, iconographer and former professor in Iconography (Theory and Practice) at the University of Athens.

Other participants represented a wide spectrum of confessional beliefs and disciplines, and included: Goodson Graham, Henry Luce III Professor of Philosophy and the Arts, Princeton Theological Seminary; Helen C. Evans, Mary and Michael Jaharis Curator for Byzantine Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Annemarie Weyl Carr, University Distinguished Professor of Art History, Southern Methodist University (Emerita); Peter Jeffrey, Michael P. Grace Chair in Medieval Studies and Professor of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Notre Dame University; Margot Fassler, Keough-Hesburgh Professor of Musicology and Ethnomusicology, Notre Dame University; and George R. Carey, Church of England Bishop of Durham, with Dn. Evan Freeman, seminary alumnus and Ph.D. candidate in the Department of the History of Art at Yale University. The symposium entitled, “Sounding the Sacred,” May 1–4, 2017, and will continue the work of the Arvo Pärt Project at St. Vladimir’s Seminary.

Helping Women Saves Lives

“FOR YOU CREATED MY INMOST BEING; YOU KNIT ME TOGETHER IN MY MOTHER’S WOMB.
I PRAISE YOU BECAUSE I AM FEARFULLY AND WONDERFULLY MADE; . . . MY FRAME WAS WRITTEN IN YOUR BOOK BEFORE ONE OF THEM CAME TO BE.”
PSALM 139:13–16

Every one of us is made in the image of God. That “making” began at conception, and conception is mysterious. That mystery, however, is nothing compared to the conception of the God-Man Jesus Christ. Assuming that He followed our human path right from the beginning, the God who created the universe was once a single cell in it. Talk about humble beginnings! At about sixteen days, His heart began to beat. At about thirty weeks, His teeth began to grow. At nine weeks, His hand with a hair, He would grasp it. In these very human ways the perfect image of God “took on flesh for us.”

We bear the image of God, but, as we know, each of us has defaced that image in one way or another. Abortion is one of those ways, but thankfully Christians across our country are helping abortion-vulnerable women make the right choice. Often, too, those choices are key to turning their hearts towards God. We bear the image of God, but, as we know, each of us has defaced that image in one way or another. Abortion is one of those ways, but thankfully Christians across our country are helping abortion-vulnerable women make the right choice. Often, too, those choices are key to turning their hearts towards God. We bear the image of God, but, as we know, each of us has defaced that image in one way or another. Abortion is one of those ways, but thankfully Christians across our country are helping abortion-vulnerable women make the right choice. Often, too, those choices are key to turning their hearts towards God. We bear the image of God, but, as we know, each of us has defaced that image in one way or another. Abortion is one of those ways, but thankfully Christians across our country are helping abortion-vulnerable women make the right choice. Often, too, those choices are key to turning their hearts towards God.

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involved. See, for example, the work of The Tree House in Wichita, Kansas (wichtreehouse.org), the Martha and Mary Maternity House in the western suburbs of Chicago (www.marthamarchemyicago.org), and Zoe House near Cleveland (www.zoehouseonline.org/zoehouse.htm).

In Pittsburgh, we are doing something a little different. We have great pregnancy medical centers in our city, that lead the country in their innovative services and approaches – Women's Choice Network, Choices Pregnancy Services, and Pregnancy Resource Center of the South Hills. I am convinced, however, that the big challenge today is making abortion-vulnerable women aware that these pregnancy help centers are in their neighborhoods. I bet that you – well, a majority of readers – don't know any of them in your area. That's not surprising. Unlike the maternity homes of the past, they are not big, imposing institutions, where women live. Instead, they are more like doctors' offices. How do young women facing an unexpected pregnancy find out that they're there? Advertising.

Vision for Life – Pittsburgh started in 2010 with TV and bus shelter ads, and ads on buses and in bus interiors. Soon we gravitated to the Web, as six million searches for "abortion" and related terms are made on the World Wide Web every month, and Google Adwords advertising is very effective in reaching our audience. Our ads direct these abortion-vulnerable women to the pregnancy resource center.
Orthodox Christian Witness through a Vibrant Parish Spiritual Life

BISHOP THOMAS ADDRESSES THE ST. STEPHEN’S PROGRAM STUDENTS AT THE HOUSE OF STUDIES

IN THE PAST, ORTHODOX COMMUNITIES WERE MARKED BY A PROFOUNDLY SPIRITUAL IDENTITY THAT PUNCTUATED AND INFLUENCED EVERY OTHER ASPECT OF DAILY LIFE. NO AMOUNT OF GOOD PREACHING, SOCIAL ACTIVITIES, SOCIAL PROGRAMS, COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT, OR YOUTH PROGRAMS CAN SUPPLANT THE EFFECT OF A SPIRITUALLY VIBRANT PARISH. IF OUR PEOPLE ARE TO SHAPE THEIR LIVES AROUND THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH, THE LOCAL CHURCH MUST OFFER THEM SOMETHING AROUND WHICH TO SHAPE AND FORM THEIR LIVES. THIS MEANS WE MUST OFFER MORE THAN SATURDAY VESPERS AND SUNDAY LITURGY. DAILY SERVICES, WHETHER IN THE FORM OF ORTHROS, VESPERS, OR AN AKATHIST, MUST BECOME THE NORM IN PARISH LIFE. THIS IS BY NO MEANS AN EASY TASK. THE GOSPEL, HOWEVER, DOESN’T CALL US TO WHAT IS EASY. IT CALLS US TO FIDELITY TO CHRIST AND THE WORSHIP OF HIM. SAINT JOHN OF KRONSTADT OFFERED THE LITURGY EVERY SINGLE DAY. IT WAS THE CENTER AROUND WHICH HE LIVED HIS LIFE, A LIFE THAT LED HIM TO THEOSIS AND SANCTITY. SAINT JOHN SAID, “IF YOU ONLY PRAY WHEN YOU ARE INCLINED TO, YOU WILL COMPLETELY CEASE PRAYING; THIS IS WHAT THE FLESH DESIRES. THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN SUFFERS VIOLENCE. YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION WITHOUT FORCING YOURSELF.”

You may have to start in a modest fashion, such as offering the Divine Liturgy on Wednesday, or Vespers on certain evenings, and slowly adding services to fill in the week. You will need the required service books, such as the Horologion, the 12-volume Menas, the Octoechos, and the Palter. These are liturgical books that are indispensable for a vibrant spiritual life in the parish. You will need to instruct the choir and the laity on how to use these books. I suspect you will find that the Menas and the Octoechos have sufficient catechetical material to instruct your entire parish. Some of these resources are accessible online. All are available in one form or another in print. Further, there are edifying and useful supplementary readings, for example, the lives of the saints as laid out in the Prologue from Ochrid of Saint Nikolai of Zicha.

If we ask our parishioners to re-orient their lives around the life and liturgical cycle of the Church, how can we not do this? Depending upon the make-up of your particular parish, you may find that evening services are more amenable to the majority of your parishioners. Or, you may find that an early morning Matins service, prior to the work day, fits well. Whatever it may be, offer your flock something to which they can orient their lives in a contemporary world devoid of God. If the spiritual becomes a priority in your parish, Orthodox Christian witness, such as outreach efforts, will flow from that. Otherwise, our outreach efforts become exercises in social work, which is not a bad thing in and of itself, but is not who we are as a Church. A vibrant, daily spiritual life will attract others who are searching. They will find in the services of the Church an inexhaustible treasury of spiritual resources from which they can lead their lives. As Orthodox Christians, this is our greatest treasure. The primary purpose of the Church is to worship and glorify God; if we are deficient in worship, then our work in the world, no matter how fruitful, is misdirected.

The fact that we have a different understanding of Christian witness from the West does not in any way excuse us from the task of Orthodox Christian witness. Christ commanded us to “preach the Gospel.” Given this imperative, the first thing we must ask ourselves is how do we go about doing that? How do we evangelize in a manner that reflects our Orthodox faith?

The first clue lies in our self-understanding. The church is a hospital for the soul. As such, our methods of Orthodox Christian witness are treatments designed to heal the sick. We must be willing to go to the sick and offer them treatment. If they don’t come to us, we go to them. After all, an empty hospital is a useless one. Further, we must remember that, even as we work to heal others, we ourselves are not well. We are being healed, but we are still sick. In witnessing to Christ in the wider world, we must take on the role of the “wounded healer,” extending to others the healing that we ourselves are experiencing in the life of the Church, and recognizing our limitations. The worst damage we can do to our cause is deluding ourselves about our own spiritual state. We must make ourselves available in an unobtrusive fashion. We don’t overtly preach the Gospel with our words but with our actions. We do the necessary spiritual triage. We bind wounds, comfort the sick and dying, clothe the naked, and feed the homeless. We visit hospitals, we help out at soup kitchens. If our community doesn’t have a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter, we start one. We visit nursing homes. Essentially, we make ourselves available to the spiritually sick, wherever they may be. This will vary depending upon the community in which your parish is located. I guarantee, however, that there are spiritually sick people who need us in our own communities. We need only seek them out.

While there are many ways to perform this triage, I will focus my remarks on three areas: the hospital/nursing home setting, the homeless/soup kitchen, and outreach to different cultures. However, once you demonstrate a willingness to evangelize, the Lord will show you what He wants you to do.

HOSPITAL/NURSING HOMES

While the priest is responsible for administering the Holy Mysteries to the sick and dying, our Orthodox laity can and should be trained to visit the sick, elderly, and dying. If the laity visit a certain place long enough, it will become clear that there are people who receive no visitors, no family, and no friends. We can reach out to them, offer them a prayer of comfort and healing, if they are so inclined. At this stage, we make a personal connection with the sick or elderly person by our mere
Josiah Trenham, has established an active “burial society” for elderly person.

I think the body of the Lord Jesus was cared for by Ss. Joseph and Nicodemus, who were trained by a local mortuary with whom St. Andrew Church has an abiding relationship, each team of parishioners (one male for male deceased, and one female for female deceased) have been trained to perform the art of basic burial preparation. This ministry starts at the request of the family of the dying or deceased. Parish families make contact with the parish office, and our Burial Society makes the initial contact with the family to assess their needs and wishes. The one who is dying is visited, and at the request of the ailing or family members, members of the clergy pray with and for the ailing person until he falls asleep in the Lord. Prayers are said and bedside vigil is held to usher the dying into the hands of his/her Guardian Angel who will take the deceased into the presence of the Lord. The prayers begin before death and continue through the forty-day memorial and beyond.

After the Burial Society prepares the body according Orthodox tradition: Praying for the departed, bathing and anointing the body with oils, arranging the body in repose (this is an involved process), dressing the deceased in baptismal garments or the garments of choice, helping in the preparation for the wake/visitation, funeral services, and burial. The St. Andrew Burial Society has arranged to work alongside a local mortuary whose services are employed for the securing of the death and bodily transport certificates, as well as for transporting the deceased to the church and/ or cemetery per the family’s request. Following the funeral and burial rites the departed is put into a Necrology, which is a Book that has a record of every parishioner who has fallen asleep in the Lord and whose memory we keep in the St. Andrew Family. The book records where each of the departed is buried so that each year the Burial Society arranges for visitations to and blessing of the parish graves. The Burial Society also provides the clergy of the church with notification for forty-day and annual memorials of the repose.

By employing the Burial Society, the family of the deceased is able to significantly reduce the costs for after-death care and burial from a typical $12,000 to under $5,000. Coffins are secured by the Burial Society and kept at the parish from a local Orthodox Monastery for between $800-$2,000. Using the Burial Society allows parishioners to reduce their mortuary costs to approximately $700. If a grave is secured with Evergreen Cemetery with whom St. Andrew has an abiding relationship, each grave may be purchased for approximately $2,500.

SOUP KITCHENS AND HOMELESS SHELTERS

In the Gospel, Christ specifically commands us to "feed the hungry and clothe the naked." If the community has a soup kitchen and/or homeless shelters, members of the parish should be active members. If not, consider starting something on a small scale to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. Just as the hospital/nursing home/burial society are initiatives in which the clergy are chiefly responsible, the parish priest will offer direction and guidance in these endeavors. Saint John Chrysostom said that such a ministry is double-sided, effective, and universal. This ministry will provide sustenance for the poor man and provides spiritual benefit for the helper.

OUTREACH TO DIFFERENT CULTURES

In speaking about the important and urgent topic of Orthodox Christian witness, I want to address two important constituencies: those who consider themselves Orthodox Christians but are essentially unchurched; and those who would follow Christ if they recognized Him in our midst. First, however, let me address the term "witness" in the Christian context. The Holy Gospels are full of references to the term. We know, for instance, that Christ commanded His disciples to preach the Gospel to all the nations, to evangelize all peoples. Further, in Luke 21, Christ tells us that even in persecution, our trials and perhaps even non-English-speaking minority communities. In our own context, there is a mingling of jurisdictions within each large city. This is an anomaly within Orthodoxy itself and can lead to certain pastoral issues. Where there are issues, however, opportunities abound. These may present themselves in the ordinary, mundane life of the local community. Immigration, social justice, English as a second language, and so forth, all present themselves to us as opportunities to introduce ourselves and Orthodoxy to different cultures. If you know your particular community, it won’t be difficult to recognize opportunities. It may even start with the simplest of things, such as offering the parish hall for an immigration lecture or an AA meeting. The key to becoming involved with the different cultures that exist around the parish is knowledge of your surroundings and your community. If the surrounding population primarily speaks a language other than English, try to familiarize yourself with some of the language, and use it for parts of the Liturgy.

Furthermore, always be willing to encounter people. I know a Catholic priest who was re-assigned to an inner-city parish and the first thing he did upon arrival was walk the neighborhoods, introducing himself to the people around him. Orthodox Christian witness requires a human touch, a human encounter. It requires a willingness to offer a helping hand without the expectation of return. This is how Orthodox Christian witness begins. Read the beginning of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and you’ll find the Lord Christ did the same thing with His disciples.

In speaking about the important and urgent topic of Orthodox Christian witness, I want to address two important constituencies: those who consider themselves Orthodox Christians but are essentially unchurched; and those who would follow Christ if they recognized Him in our midst. First, however, let me address the term “witness” in the Christian context. The Holy Gospels are full of references to the term. We know, for instance, that Christ commanded His disciples to preach the Gospel to all the nations, to evangelize all peoples. Further, in Luke 21, Christ tells us that even in persecution, our trials and perhaps even non-English-speaking minority communities. In our own context, there is a mingling of jurisdictions within each large city. This is an anomaly within Orthodoxy itself and can lead to certain pastoral issues. Where there are issues, however, opportunities abound. These may present themselves in the ordinary, mundane life of the local community. Immigration, social justice, English as a second language, and so forth, all present themselves to us as opportunities to introduce ourselves and Orthodoxy to different cultures. If you know your particular community, it won’t be difficult to recognize opportunities. It may even start with the simplest of things, such as offering the parish hall for an immigration lecture or an AA meeting. The key to becoming involved with the different cultures that exist around the parish is knowledge of your surroundings and your community. If the surrounding population primarily speaks a language other than English, try to familiarize yourself with some of the language, and use it for parts of the Liturgy.

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There are historical reasons that this has not occurred in our Orthodox churches. There are also, however, theological reasons for this. For Protestants and Catholics, Christian witness is primarily the transmission of information to those who do not know Christ. This transmission comes in the forms of tracts, catechisms, sermons, and logical arguments intended to sway the intellect to a particular point of view. In the West, especially since the Reformation and its loss of the spiritual tradition, faith has been treated as an act of the mind. To be a Christian, in much of the West, is simply to assent mentally to a certain catalogue of dogmas and doctrinal positions; no further action is required.

While the Orthodox Church has its dogmas and teachings from the Ecumenical Councils, and we believe them to be of utmost importance, logical proofs or systematic argumentation are not the methods in which we choose to engage those seeking Christ. As Saint John Chrysostom notes, the church is a hospital for the soul. The sickness is rooted in the nous, that faculty of the heart which, when functioning properly, governs the intellect and guides it. The goal of the Christian life is not simply to fill the intellect with facts, but to revivify the nous, which has become twisted and deformed by the Fall. Protestants and Catholics adopted a scholastic method which sought intellectual arguments to prove God’s existence. Scholastic theology tried to understand logically the Revelation of God and make it conform to philosophical methods. In the Orthodox Church, as expressed by the Holy Fathers, faith is God revealing Himself to man. We accept faith by hearing it, not so that we can understand it rationally, but so that we can cleanse our hearts, our attitude to faith by theoria and experience the Revelation of God. This is an important distinction which must not be overlooked. One attempts to impart knowledge, while the other offers healing. Protestants and Catholics do not have a “therapeutic treatment” tradition. They tend to assume that assenting intellectually to truths about God constitutes salvation. While faith is not a matter of intellectual acceptance of truth. According to Metropolitan Hierotheos, “The three disciples of Christ (Peter, James and John) beheld the glory of Christ on Mount Tabor; they heard at once the voice of the Father, “This is My beloved Son,” and saw the coming of the Holy Spirit in a cloud, for the cloud is the presence of the Holy Spirit, as Saint Gregory Palamas says. Thus the disciples of Christ acquired the knowledge of the Triune God in theoria (vision of God) and by revelation. It was revealed to them that God is one essence in three hypostases.” Further, Orthodoxy doesn’t attempt to load down the unchurched with everything all at once. Looking again to the Transfiguration, we remember that Christ revealed His glory to his disciples “as far as they could bear.” If He had revealed to them the fullness of His glory, they wouldn’t have been able to survive it.

This dichotomy between the head and the heart, as well as the divergent paths of Eastern and Western spirituality, is most clearly seen in the 19th-century Orthodox writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky. In his writings, Dostoevsky warns against man’s continuous attempts to usurp God’s power and place in the universe. Professor Seraphim Foltz, an Orthodox convert himself, writes, “Like Ivan, the Inquisitor turns against Christ, even though he knows that Christ is divine – that is what Dostoevsky called the ‘God-man.’ The Inquisitor, and Ivan with him, choose not the ‘God-man’ or divine humanity – humanity as it is humbly and unselfishly joined in mystical union with God – but rather the ‘Man god’; humanity usurping the role of God, and redesigning in Promethean fashion not only nature and society, but its own nature as well. ‘The kiss burns in his heart, but the old man holds to his former idea’ (p. 262). Thus, the young man Ivan, like the old Inquisitor, is divided between heart and mind, and in the end both choose the latter over the former. It is this triumph of thoughts and ideas over the heart that is the downfall of all Dostoevsky’s tragic characters: Raskolnikov’s utilitarian plan to kill a wretched old pawnbroker and put the stolen money to better use; the “demonic” resurrection of the state which they (and often sound like modern terrorist operatives) who are driven by their ideas and ideologies; and Ivan’sathentic insistence that, without God, “everything is permitted,” and that leads him later in the novel to a kind of insanity or “brain fever.”

I suspect this is why our Orthodox parishes have never adopted evangelization programs that feature slick marketing and entertainment as enticements to faith. Ultimately, metanoia or conversion of the heart belongs to God and Him alone.

There is a second theological reason that we have not appropriated such evangelization methods for our Orthodox context. This is our emphasis on personal transformation through the process of purification, illumination, and theoria. The tried-and-true therapeutic method comes to us from the Fathers, who constantly remind us of the need for our own repentance. On the level of common sense this rings true, for “you can’t give what you don’t have.” The famous phrase from Saint Seraphim of Sarov echoes this notion, “Acquire the Spirit of peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved.” In the midst of our contemporary society’s love for novelty and change, our Orthodox faith remains unchanged. Our spiritual method and our services are essentially the same today because they are what has been handed down to us by those God-sees, the enlightened ones who have experienced and known the Uncreated Light.

This is a long preamble but a necessary one, I believe. If we are to speak of Orthodox Christian witness, we have to speak of it in the context of our holy Orthodox faith. We can and must preach the Gospel of Christ “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2). In determining how to evangelize this post-modern, post-Christian culture, we may be able to find a few helpful hints from those who’ve gone before us, those who’ve lived the faith in culture imbued with an Orthodox ethos. Permit me to quote a few lines from an interview given by Alexander Solzhenitsyn:

“In its past, Russia did know a time when the social ideal was not fame, or riches, or material success, but a pious way of life. Russia was then steeped in an Orthodox Christianity which remained true to the Church of the first centuries. The Orthodox of that time knew how to safeguard its people under the yoke of a foreign occupation that lasted more than two centuries, while at the same time fending off inquisitorial blows from the swords of Western crusaders. During those centuries the Orthodox faith in our country became part of the very pattern of thought and the personality of our people, the forms of daily life, the work calendar, the priorities in every undertaking, the organization of the week and of the year. Faith was the shaping and unifying force of the nation.”

I think there are at least two points here that require further attention and consideration. First, Solzhenitsyn noted that the “social ideal” was not fame, riches, or material success, but a pious way of life. Could this be a place to start in our efforts to witness? A well-known self-help organization has as one of its most recognizable slogans, “Attraction rather than promotion.” Posses lived in the midst of parish life would be a powerfully attractive evangelical tool. The witness of a pious life is a powerful influence on those who are seeking the Truth. As the Scripture says, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” Just look at some of our contemporary Orthodox saints like Saint Paisios the Athonite or Saint Porphyrios. These are men who spent the majority of their lives in monasteries hidden from the world. Yet, they attracted thousands of seekers to them by the example of their piety and love for Christ.

The second point I’d like to highlight concerns the shaping of our daily lives. I’ll repeat Solzhenitsyn: “During those centuries, the Orthodox faith in our country became part of the very pattern of thought and the personality of our people, the forms of daily life, the work calendar, the priorities in every undertaking, the organization of the week and of the year. Faith was the shaping and unifying force of the nation.”

As we continue discussing the important topic of Orthodox Christian witness, we necessarily turn our attention to offering our parishes tools through which they can deepen and broaden their faith. A parish bookstore or gift shop and/or library is a topic worthy of further attention to offering our parishioners tools through which they can deepen and broaden their faith. A parish bookstore or gift shop and/or library is a topic worthy of further attention to offering our parishioners tools through which they can deepen and broaden their faith. It seems to me this is where Orthodox Christian witness needs to begin. Once we can nod our heads in agreement with Solzhenitsyn we can bring the Word of Truth to others.

This means evangelizing our own people. We will have to work hard and offer more services so that our people become accustomed to the liturgical rhythm of the church calendar. We know we will have accomplished something when our people see a date on the calendar like September 8th and first think, “Nativity of the Most Holy Theotokos.” We may then be able to nod our heads in agreement with Solzhenitsyn we can bring the Word of Truth to others.

The Wood 27

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Vibrant Spiritual Life

which the survey was conducted, its small sample size, one can and perhaps should question the manner in which the survey was conducted. Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution.

Orthodox Christians believe that homosexuality should not be condoned, and they should not be allowed to express their beliefs openly. However, this belief is not shared by all Orthodox Christians, and there is much diversity in opinion on this issue. As a result, it is important to continue to conduct surveys and to engage in dialogue with Orthodox Christians to better understand their beliefs and practices.

Center Study on the beliefs of Orthodox Christians in the United States

We are losing the battle because we aren’t capturing the human heart. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in The Gulag Archipelago, “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

While we don’t want to destroy the human heart, that is the battlefield. Education in the faith will not help us win this battle unless it is accompanied and nourished by prayer, specifically, the prayer of the heart or the Jesus Prayer. Elder Sophrony once noted, “People in the West live with their brain: their lives are centered on reason. Prayer is our weapon against all forces antithetical to the Orthodox faith should be responsible for its operation. A parish that has a supply of Orthodox books and other materials is fulfilling a great need to inform and nourish our parishioners. Such a library would have other materials as well, such as those of the larger Orthodox seminaries: St Tikhon’s, St Vladimir’s, and Holy Cross. Most offer discounts to churches for their libraries and bookstores.

A parish which has a supply of Orthodox books and other materials is fulfilling a great need to inform and nourish our parishioners. Such a library would have Orthodox prayer books, books of Akathists, lives of the saints, the writings of the Fathers, and a selection of the many excellent audio and video resources available. A bookstore or gift shop could also include icons and prayer ropes. Since the quality of materials available at the parish bookstore or library is more important than the quantity, a person knowledgeable about the Orthodox faith should be responsible for its operation.

THE JESUS PRAYER

As I was preparing these talks on Christian witness, I received the disturbing results of a 2014 Pew Research Center Study on the beliefs of Orthodox Christians in the United States. The survey showed that 62 percent of Orthodox Christians believe that homosexuality should be accepted. In response to a question about same-sex unions, fifty-four percent strongly favor them. Now, one can and perhaps should question the manner in which the survey was conducted, its small sample size, as well as the wording of the survey questions. It can’t be denied, however, that the prevailing secular culture influences our Orthodox faithful to a greater extent than the teachings of the Gospel and the Orthodox Church. Those who hold steadfastly to an authentic Orthodox faith are in the minority and are deluged daily with what they watch on television, read in magazines, and hear in conversations in the workplace.

While faith education is important, it can’t supplant the powerful cultural forces that have swayed our society. We are losing the battle because we aren’t capturing the human heart. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in The Gulag Archipelago, “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

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At the time, Archbishop Anthony served the Orthodox Church under very difficult circumstances in the former Soviet Union and was arrested seven times. During his imprisonment, he wrote to the faithful living in the world about the importance of prayer, particularly the Jesus Prayer.

The Holy Fathers, those teachers and doers of true repentance, chose for their main weapon the concise Jesus Prayer, which was received from the Holy Spirit, giving it preference over all other prayers. All existing Orthodox Church prayers are efficient and saving, yet the prayer ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,’ containing in itself the Name of Lord Christ and the entirety of the repenting sinner, is always attractive to the minds of those who are working on their salvation. Some of the Holy Fathers continuously said other short prayers, yet the majority was engaged primarily in The Jesus Prayer. Everyone wishing to work for the Lord in doing this Prayer can, because of its shortness, acquire through labor a free flight of prayer without forcing the tongue, and this free flow of prayer will gradually attract to itself both mind and emotions.

Archbishop Anthony encouraged his spiritual children to impulse the Lord to send them a wise guide in order to instruct them in the Jesus Prayer so as to avoid delusion (plane/molot) and pride. He is quick to point out, however, that if no such guide is available, then the person should faithfully persevere in the Jesus Prayer, for the spiritual work is about “cleaning the mind from darkness, purification of the soul from passions, and learning the skill of the warfare.”

When we speak of Orthodox Christian witness, there is no better witness than the one who knows the mind constantly in the remembrance of God. This remembrance of God necessarily leads to repentance. This state of being is incompatible with the one who is influenced and swayed by the passing societal trends. This is precisely why the Jesus Prayer is so vital that is feasible for almost all people, with such a multitude of benefit and opportunity for success, than this small prayer.

Undoubtedly, the greatest Christian witness we can offer the world is our own relationship with Christ. If He dwells in our hearts through the practice of the Jesus Prayer, countless others will be attracted to us and the message of the Gospel.
Communities in Action

BISHOP THOMAS VISITS ST. MARY, WILKES-BARRE

Over the weekend of August 19–20, 2016, His Grace Bishop THOMAS visited St. Mary in Wilkes-Barre. Sayidna arrived on Thursday afternoon so that he could be present on Friday for the parish’s annual golf tournament. After bringing his vestments to the church on Friday morning, Sayidna came to the tournament, held at Sands Springs Golf Club. There were fourteen foursomes golfing, and an additional 25 people who came to help with the organization of the event and to encourage the golfers. Sayidna and Fr. David rode in a golf cart, blessing the golfers, many of whom were seeking prayers for God’s help as they golfed.

Saturday morning, Sayidna went to his cousin’s golfing restaurant to reminisce about his visits to the Dwyer’s golfing restaurant. He observed that his grandmother would scold him for eating hot dogs before coming to her house. “Do you not think I have enough food for you and your father?”

On Saturday evening, Sayidna presided over Great Vespers, together with Father David, Deacon John, and everyone who could be present on Friday for the retirement of Fr. Joseph Shaheen. Sayidna spoke about Father Joseph’s devoted service to the Archdiocese, Father Joseph Shaheen, and the Twentieth Anniversary of the founding of the Naples parish. After 57 years of devoted service to the Archdiocese, Father Joseph Shaheen will retire. “I wish Father Joseph Shaheen health and to continue to reside in Naples. The retirement date is planned to coincide with the annual Founder’s Weekend celebration in sunny Naples in February 2017. Guests and parishioners of St. Paul will be honored by the attendance of His Grace Bishop ANTOUN, Diocese of Miami and the Southeast, for this special weekend. For more information, contact Ed Edge, Co-Chairman, at ededge57@gmail.com or by phone at 317-418-5300.

BISHOPS ANTOUN AND BASIL VISIT ST. JOHN CHURCH, MEMPHIS, FOR RETIREMENT

Their Grace Bishop ANTOUN and Bishop BASIL blessed the faithful of St. John Orthodox Church in Memphis with their presence on the weekend of the retirement of Archpriest Fr. John Troy Mashburn. Before arriving in Memphis, Bishop ANTOUN said that he would like to visit St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital in downtown Memphis. On Thursday, July 28, Bishop ANTOUN, the V. Rev. Fr. John Mashburn, the V. Rev. Father Philip Rogers, and the Rev. Father Alexander Mckoul toured the hospital, beginning with an exhibit that showcased the hospital’s history. The exhibit included audio, pictures, and memoirs of Danny Thomas (the Arab-American entertainer and founder of St. Jude’s). The story goes that Danny prayed to St. Jude during a tough period in his acting career and asked the saint to “help me find my way in life, and I will build you a shrine.” Danny turned out to be a pretty successful entrepreneur and by 1955 he began fundraising for his dream, a cancer treatment and research facility dedicated to St. Jude. In the process, he turned many Arab-Americans for financial help. In 1957 he founded ALSAC (American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities), today the world’s second largest health-care charity).

As His Grace walked the grounds of the hospital, he noticed many plaques on the walls, honoring those who donated to support St. Jude’s. He was taken aback by how many identified members of our Archdiocese and churches in our Archdiocese who gave significant contributions. Just as he was leaving one of the buildings his eyes caught something on the wall, which caused him to stop, point, and reminisce.

“I would put a plaque dedicated to your friend, colleague, and brother hierarch, His Eminence Metropolitan Philip of Thessalonica’s Blessed Memory. Bishop ANTOUN said repeatedly that he felt as though he was walking, through history. The deep connection between the Antiochian Archdiocese and St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital was presented before very his eyes. As we continued on our tour through the hospital, we admired the many beautiful works of art which were created by the children undertaking treatment. The clergy were all very moved by their interaction with the children and the history of St. Jude’s. We look forward to volunteering at St. Jude’s in the future.”

On Friday afternoon Bishop ANTOUN, Fr. John Mashburn, Fr. Philip Rogers, and Fr. Alexander Mckoul drove out to Jackson, Tennessee, to visit the newly renovated St. Nicholas Orthodox Church. The evening began with Great Vespers, which was beautifully sung by the choir of St. Nicholas. His Grace Bishop ANTOUN’s divinity and beauty of the choir, the beauty of the newly renovated church, and the progress of the church, which was granted mission status only two years ago. The church community has come a long way in two years and it has caught the attention of the City of Jackson. A reporter from the Jackson Sun (the local newspaper) attended the service and interviewed His Grace and Fr. Matthew Snowden (pastor since 2015). The evening continued with dinner in the hall, where parishioners got a chance to spend time with His Grace. The evening ended after the children (to His Grace’s delight) joined together in a roving performance of “You are my Sunshine.”

His Grace Bishop BASIL arrived in Memphis on Saturday afternoon and served alongside His Grace Bishop ANTOUN at the Divine Liturgy on Sunday morning. Also visiting from out of town and serving that morning were the V. Rev. Father Gregory Rogers (pastor of St. Barnabas and St. Catherine Missions in South Carolina) and the Rev. Hierodeacon Bedir Adrimeht (headmaster at Christ the Savior Academy in Kansas). The community was delighted to welcome back their previous bishop and previous youth director. At the end of the Divine Liturgy, Bishop ANTOUN presented an epigramation of St. John the Evangelist (commissioned by the parishioners of St. John) to Fr. John Mashburn for his many years of selfless dedication and service to the church. Fr. John was a founding member of the community when St. John Orthodox Church first started with only 35 people. Thanks to God’s grace and the work of Fr. John and the parishioners at St. John, their community has grown to over 350 people in 25 years. The church community has also been very active in the founding of St. Paul Mission in Tupelo, Mississippi, and St. Nicholas Mission in Jackson, Tennessee. At the end of the service Bishop ANTOUN also elevated St. John’s new pastor, Fr. Philip Rogers, to Archpriest. Fr. Philip has served the church faithfully for over ten years as a parish priest (previously as pastor at Archangel Gabriel Church in Lafayette, Louisiana) and as the camp director of Camp St. Thekla. The faithful of the Sr. John Orthodox Church hosted an extended coffee hour in honor of the visiting clergy in honor of the great accomplishments of their own local clergy.

“Later that night, the faithful of St. John Orthodox Church, along with parishioners from all over Tennessee, Arkansas, and Mississippi, met at the Botanical Gardens in Memphis in honor of Fr. John Mashburn. The night began with a video compilation of short messages addressed to Fr. John and Khouria Pamela from the parishioners of St. John and friends. Bishops BASIL and ANTOUN also delivered messages to Fr. John, Kh. Pamela and those present at the party. Bishop BASIL stressed that the best way to truly say thank you to Fr. John was to live a life well-pleasing to God (as Fr. John has taught them), for at the dreadful judgment seat of Christ Fr. John will be held accountable for the souls of his parishioners. Bishop ANTOUN reflected about the time that he christened Fr. John and many of the current parishioners at St. John. His Grace commended Fr. John for all the work and effort that he put into St. John Orthodox Church. He marveled at how far the church had come. It began meeting in Fr. Peter Gilquist’s house and singing worship songs, then began learning about the faith and the church before it created the early Church. Then they were chrismated and worshiped in living rooms, until they were able to build a church (now filled with beautiful iconography). Most recently, they have created a new parish hall.

The night ended with fellowship and a dinner provided from Jets from Fr. John, top one hundred Motown songs. May God grant His Grace Bishop ANTOUN and His Grace Bishop BASIL many years. May He also grant Archpriest Fr. John Mashburn many years in his retirement and newly elevated Archpriest Fr. Philip Rogers many years as the pastor of St. John Orthodox Church in Memphis.
GETTING READY FOR CHRISTMAS, "WHAT SHALL WE OFFER YOU, O CHRIST?"


Now it’s also time to get ready for Thanksgiving, unless you have already celebrated in Canada! Time to start thinking about the holidays. The decorating. The baking. The events on the calendar. Parties! Who is coming, or where are you going? When? How long? Which side of the family? Tired already?

It would be easy to decry the commercialization of Christmas, its materialistic, hedonistic attempt to find meaning in stuff, and overdoing it with food, beverages, and parties. We who call ourselves Orthodox Christians are not immune from the season’s temptations. That is why we can be ever grateful for our Mother, the Church, that gives us a better way to prepare for the celebration of our Lord’s Nativity. In the midst of the commotion of this world, we get the Nativity (or St. Philip’s) Fast to lead us to Christmas! Given all the time and energy it takes to get so many things prepared for the holiday, thank God that we are also guided to prepare our hearts, minds, and souls.

The season known in western Christianity as “Advent” is its purposeful and liturgical way of preparing for the coming of Christ, both the celebration of his birth and the calling to mind of his Second Coming. The word Advent itself means “coming.” Some Orthodox reject that term for our fast, but we are preparing for the celebration of Christ’s coming to us in the flesh, his total manifestation as “God with us.” So if it helps us be more mindful, I am not against using the term!

- For the Nativity, all of humanity offered the Virgin Mary to be the mother of the eternal Son of God, Himself becoming a real human being. Celebrating that event today, the only thing you can offer as the right gift for Christ is yourself. We are the ones who have chosen, through our baptism and christismation, to accept Christ into our very being. Our relationship with Christ means that, by our very lives, Christ’s presence is made manifest in the world every day. Being reminded of that, actively choosing to be “vessels” for God’s presence, we are doing what we pray at almost every service:

  Calling to remembrance our all-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, with all the Saints: let us commend ourselves and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.

- How are we Orthodox taught to prepare ourselves for that calling? What are we supposed to do with all the demands of the world this time of year? Maybe this is easier said than done, but we need to manage the demands, and not let the demands manage us. It might begin with coming to a decision with our families, those living under our roof, about how we are choosing to make the journey to Christmas. That has to be a deliberate decision, and it will probably be tested every day! If we don’t choose to make an effort, why would we be surprised to arrive at December 25 totally drained and too tired to greet Christ? That is why we need to rely on the basic teaching from Christ that fasting, doing acts of mercy (the ubiquitous ‘almsgiving’), and praying are the backbone of our life. During any season of preparation, too – maybe this one especially – we take the level of our endeavor up a notch or two?

- Yes, there are elements of “food-fasting” for us, made very challenging when so much of the world’s preparation for Christmas includes parties, parties, and lots of food! While the Church’s proscription of what we should not put on our plates is not as strict as for Great Lent, we are still called to eliminate meat and dairy from our table. Fish, wine and oil are permitted on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sundays until December 20. By lightening our foods, our bodies and minds can better help us engage the spiritual journey. Every family needs to discern how they will accomplish that, and at what level of fasting. No matter our circumstance, we should be able to make some small effort, and take a step beyond what we may have done last year!

Praying, thinking about spiritual things (like the wonder of God becoming man!), and doing acts of mercy are also part of our preparation. If even Scrooge found his charitable side at Christmas time, it is not surprising that most people are more generous in their charity this time of year. So I am moving along to the third part: what about our prayer life? Liturgically, Advent is quite unlike Great Lent. There is no weekly Presanctified Liturgy or Akathist. No Saturdays of Souls. The specific focus on the Nativity in our services does not even begin until December 20. How then can we put more emphasis on this part of our life? Some practices try to be more mindful by having Compline several evenings a week. We have the feast day of St. Nicholas on December 6 to help us celebrate as community what the living love of God for our neighbor looks like. Some communities and families use an Orthodox version of the Advent wreath and candles to see a movement toward the Nativity. The point is that this part of our life will take a greater deliberate effort. In addition to trying simply to pray more, we can seek things that really nourish us and our faith. As part of that effort – where prayer as communication with God includes listening – we do have some options. My suggestion here is to feed our hearts and souls with spiritual things. It takes practice, however!

This is a great time of year for this kind of “eating” and spiritual exercise! Even ten minutes a day spent reading and reflecting on the “reason for the season” will help us to keep it in mind during all the rushing. First, there are the daily scripture readings of the Church. But our reading can go beyond that. We are also blessed with people who have written good things for us just for the Nativity fast, with an eye toward the advent or coming of the Son of God in the flesh. These short daily readings can be the breath of fresh air we need to keep calm and carry on, by the grace of the Spirit! A brief meditation on a saint can remind us of those who can encourage us, because they have shown us it can be done! These seemingly small pieces of work allow us to keep Christ before us and with us each day of the journey to Bethlehem.

Aren’t we not worth the effort? Don’t our tired and weary selves deserve a little bit of reading to feed our souls? How else are we to keep getting ready for Christmas from overwhelming us? If we don’t make this little bit of time to prepare our heart, soul and very being to greet Christ at the celebration of his birth, what kind of gift will we be? Think about it. Then maybe we can find our way to becoming more of that gift!

Khrouna Steffanie Varghese, Ph.D.

Who for our sales has appeared on the earth as a man?* Every creature which You have made offers You thanks. The angels offer You a song; The heavens, their star; The wise men, their gifts; The shepherds, their wonder; The earth, its cave; The wilderness, the manger; And we offer You a virgin mother. *O Pre-eternal God, have mercy on us!

For the Nativity, all of humanity offered the Virgin Mary to be the mother of the eternal Son of God, Himself becoming a real human being. Celebrating that event today, the only thing you can offer as the right gift for Christ is yourself. We are the ones who have chosen, through our baptism and christismation, to accept Christ into our very being. Our relationship with Christ means that, by our very lives, Christ’s presence is made manifest in the world every day. Being reminded of that, actively choosing to be “vessels” for God’s presence, we are doing what we pray at almost every service:

Calling to remembrance our all-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, with all the Saints: let us commend ourselves and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.

How are we Orthodox taught to prepare ourselves for that calling? What are we supposed to do with all the demands of the world this time of year? Maybe this is easier said than done, but we need to manage the demands, and not let the demands manage us. It might begin with coming to a decision with our families, those living under our roof, about how we are choosing to make the journey to Christmas. That has to be a deliberate decision, and it will probably be tested every day! If we don’t choose to make an effort, why would we be surprised to arrive at December 25 totally drained and too tired to greet Christ? That is why we need to rely on the basic teaching from Christ that fasting, doing acts of mercy (the ubiquitous ‘almsgiving’), and praying are the backbone of our life. During any season of preparation, too – maybe this one especially – we take the level of our endeavor up a notch or two?

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* "Advent"
The author of the popular Meditations for Great Lent takes us through the hymnography, scripture, readings, and iconography for the forty days leading up to the Nativity of Christ, showing how a full understanding of the Incarnation can enrich our spiritual lives. $12.95

The Biggest Birthday Party, Advent Calendar – For youngest ages 3-6

A fun way to help prepare our youngest faithful for the joy of Jesus’ birthday! The activity book includes 4x4” pieces of a Nativity icon, to be colored and assembled on a provided master sheet during the twelve days leading up Christmas. An introduction and suggestions for using the Calendar open the book. References to the appropriate Bible verses for each piece and a narrative related to each section of the icon are included. $6.00, on sale for $3.50

The Book of Akathists – includes St. Nicholas

This new book contains the Akathist Hymns to 30 Saints, including St. Nicholas! Each Hymn is preceded by an icon and brief Life of the Saint meant to enhance one’s experience of prayer and devotion. Since the style of the Akathist itself presents many elements of the Saint’s sanctified personality and spiritual exploits, each is like a vivid icon or mosaic, elements of the Saint’s sanctified personality and spiritual exploits. Each Hymn is preceded by an icon and brief Life of the Saint meant to enhance one’s experience of prayer and devotion. $35.00

All these resources and more are available from the Store of Antiochian Village. For more information and rules on the Oratorical and Bible Bowl Festival, visit www.antiochian.org/festivals

The Diocese of Los Angeles and the West has two teen groups: 13-15 and 16-19. Join the competition in these age groups:

- Pre-teens: Ages 10-12 * Mark
- Teens: Ages 13-19 * Mark
- Adults: Ages 20+

All questions will come from the Gospel of Mark as found in the Orthodox Study Bible. Available from Ancient Faith Publishing and other fine bookstores. A fine bookstores.

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Watch for the Christmas donation envelope for The WORD magazine in the December issue.

Please be generous with your offering.
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"MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS"
MARK 11:17