



## Living the Traditional Orthodox Life

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A popular musician once said that you should never begin a concert with an apology. While this may be good advice for musicians, I don't know if it is good Orthodox theology. When Fr. John Townsend asked me to give this speech, I thought that he was kidding me. When he told me the topic, *Living the Traditional Orthodox Life*, I was convinced that my beloved friend had finally "flipped his scufia," so to speak.

Here is my apology:

I am a recent convert only 9 years old. I have been a priest for almost 8 years. I am supposed to tell you how to live a traditional life? May the Lord have mercy on my presumption and may you forgive the poverty of my words. Still, the Fathers say that we should never give advice unless asked. So, since Fr. John has laid this mantle upon me, I will try do my best.

I can give the long speech, or the short one. Which do you prefer? Here is the short speech:

*If you want to live a truly traditional Orthodox life, then observe my life, and do the opposite.*

*Thank you very much.*



Too short? Then, please pray for me as I continue.

## **What is Orthodoxy?**



My wife and I spent 40 years of our life in Protestantism, and 20 years in the Methodist ministry. Coming to Orthodoxy, by God's mercy, we wanted to experience the full life of the Church of Jesus Christ. The last thing we wanted was to find ourselves in a church that was just like what we had left, but with incense and icons. Authentic Orthodoxy is important to us. What is traditional Orthodoxy?

Almost every Orthodox spiritual writer that I have read emphasizes that true Orthodoxy is a matter of the



heart. Without warmth of heart towards God and neighbor, there can be no true faith. Fr. Seraphim Rose wrote,

*Orthodoxy is not merely a ritual, or belief, or a pattern of behavior, or anything else that a man may possess, thinking that he is thereby a Christian, and be spiritually dead; it is rather an **elemental reality of power** which transforms a man and gives him strength to live in the most difficult and tormenting conditions, and prepares him to depart with peace into eternal life.*

This elemental reality of power of which Fr. Seraphim speaks is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that living and eternal flame of love within the regenerated heart. It is the seal and the promise of our baptism waiting to be fully realized in our lives. Walking in the Spirit is Orthodoxy in its most fundamental reality. St. Seraphim of Sarov told us that the only true purpose, the only real goal of any Orthodox life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.

Traditional Orthodox life is also a life of suffering love, and this is most difficult for North Americans to accept. Even though we are familiar with suffering, we do all that we can to avoid it. Yet, the Lord said that if we were to follow him, we had to take up our cross. The cross cannot be embraced without suffering. A non-suffering Orthodox Christian is a contradiction of terms. A non-suffering Orthodox Christian is on the road to hell.

## Internals and externals

Whenever you discuss a question like “what is Orthodoxy?”, someone will raise the issue of Orthodox externals. Many proclaim that since Christ came to set them free, they will not be entangled with manmade rules about things like attending liturgy, fasting, prescribed prayers, and so on. Why do we need all of this incense and Icons and other external things?

To understand the relationship of internal faith and external rites, I wanted to read a quote that I heard on an audiotape of a recent seminar. It was so good that I wanted to share it with you. Listen carefully to St.



## Theophan the Recluse:

*People concern themselves with Christian upbringing, but leave it incomplete. They neglect the most essential and most difficult side of the Christian life and dwell on what is easiest – the visible and external. This imperfect and misdirected upbringing produces people who observe with the utmost correctness all the formal outward rules for devout conduct, but who pay little or no attention to the inward movements of the heart, and to true improvement of the inner spiritual life. They are strangers to mortal sin, but they do not heed the play of thoughts in the heart. Accordingly, they sometimes pass judgments, give way to boastfulness or pride, sometimes get angry (as if this feeling were justified by the rightness of the cause), and are sometimes distracted by beauty and pleasure, sometimes even offending others in fits of irritation. Sometimes they are too lazy to pray, or lose themselves in useless thoughts while at prayer. They are not upset about doing these things, but regard them without any significance. They've been to church, or prayed at home according to the established rule, they carry out their usual business, and so they are quite content and at peace. But they have little concern for what is happening in the heart. In the meantime, it may be forging evil, thereby taking away the whole value of the correct and pious life.*

*Let us now take the case of one who has been falling somewhat short in the work of salvation. He or she becomes aware of this incompleteness and sees the incorrectness of their way of life, and the instability of his or her efforts. And so they turn from outward to inward piety. They're lead either by reading books about spiritual life or by talking with those who know what the essence of Christian life is, by dissatisfaction of their own efforts, by a certain intuition that something is lacking and that all is not going as it should be. Despite all of his correctness, he has no inner peace. He lacks what was promised true Christians-peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.... He comes to understand that the essence of the Christian life consists in establishing himself with the mind in the heart before God in the Lord Jesus Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit . In this way, he is enabled to control all inward movements and all outward actions so as to transform everything in himself whether great or small into the service of God and the Trinity, consciously and freely offering himself wholly to God.*

*"... establishing himself with the mind in the heart before God in the Lord Jesus Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit."* Surely, this is what we all want. Is St. Theophan saying that the disciplines of a pious life are of no value? Anyone who has read his work knows that this is not the case. How else can we establish the mind in the heart without them? But there is three possibilities concerning the disciplines of piety: a) no piety at all, b) pious practice but without heart, and c) pious practice which establishes the mind in the heart before God in the Lord Jesus Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit. The first option is atheism; the



second is pharisaic. Certainly, the last option is what authentic, traditional Orthodoxy is all about.

You might feel that keeping the mind in the heart before God and controlling all of our inward movements is too much to ask. That's fine for monasticism, but what about those of us who must work, raise children, and pay our taxes. What do we do? Consider the vision of St. Macarius:

*The inhabitants of this world, the children of this age, are like wheat in a sieve. They are being sifted by restless thoughts of this world. They are constantly tossed to and fro by earthly care, desire and absorption in a variety of material concerns. Satan tosses such souls as a sifter sifts wheat.... By these concerns he disturbs men, keeps them anxious and in a state of nervous motion.*

St. Macarius lived in the 4th century, but he clearly describes our situation today. An Orthodox priest looks out upon his congregation and sees the tired, the nervous, the harried, the hurried, the fearful and the sifted. You see joyless faces at Liturgy and you no longer wonder why non-orthodox observers argue that our piety is external, unnecessary, and detrimental to a true life of faith.

Does Orthodoxy really have an answer for the tired, frazzled, fearful and sifted people who enter her doors?

## **The Hospital**

I am sure that most of you are familiar with the works of His Grace, Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos and St. Vlasios. In the journal, *Divine Ascent*, he reflects upon an important patristic image of the Church:



*The true Church's existence is demonstrated by its success in curing man. We know from the teaching of the holy Fathers that the Church is the spiritual health center, the spiritual hospital that cures man.*

The Church is a spiritual hospital. It is exactly the place where the tired and fearful and sifted need to be. What it offers is a cure with therapies, which we call the spiritual disciplines. Doing them helps to make us well. Does this therapy work? Each Sunday when I enter the Sanctuary, pictures of former patients who were cured surround me. This hospital has a record of almost 2000 years of successfully curing the sick in heart.

When I am ill and I arrive at the hospital, I expect that there will be certain procedures and services that will be performed to help me get better. There will be doctors and nurses, food service, the cleaning staff, the pharmacy, physical therapists, and so on. Don't you think that it would be a bit odd that when I checked in, I informed the hospital staff that all such services were externals and not necessary to my recovery? The psychiatric floor would be my next stop!

We do the same thing when we neglect our spiritual therapies. Often, in confession, we go over the same old laundry list of sins. I hear folks say that they just aren't getting any better. Is it because the spiritual disciplines don't work? Well, I think of how infrequently they have attended Vigil, how often they have broken or forgotten the fast, how little they pray, how little scripture they read, how little they tithe or give alms, and how infrequently they receive the medicine of Heaven, the Holy Body and Blood of Christ.

Traditional Orthodox Christians know that this is a foolish and dangerous thing to do. Through our baptism, we have checked into the spiritual health center. All of the therapies necessary for wholeness and spiritual well-being are available to us. Successfully using these therapies is entirely up to us.

Traditional means, then, "to guard" or "to protect." What we protect is our hospital and its mission to heal the sick. Traditional does not mean conservative. Conservative means "to stop the flow, to create an image and maintain it, to archive it." Church is a hospital, not a museum.

## **The Narrow Way**



The Lord said, "...narrow is the way that leads to life, and few there be who find it." (Matt. 7:14)

My wife and I always felt that Christianity offered an alternative to the world and its ways. After all, I had spent 20 years preaching about the Cross of Christ. Yet, what did self-denial mean to kind, decent, patriotic, comfortable, middle-class Americans who had worked hard to gain a small measure of comfort and financial security. They didn't fornicate, tried not to cuss or smoke or drink. They were patriotic and had served in the War, they worked hard and were honest, gave to their church in time and money, believed in Christ, made Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets for the poor, taught Sunday School, gave money to missions, raised their children as best they could and attended church most Sunday mornings. For heaven's sake, preacher, what else do you want? I also wondered because my family and I lived the exact same lifestyle. We all knew that suffering and misfortune could come at any time, but we were all dedicated to the pursuit of happiness. How could one embrace suffering and be happy? Inconceivable! Still there was that bothersome business of the Cross. It gave you this uneasy feeling that something was not being realized.

Metropolitan Laurus, in his lecture, "The Ascetic Podvig of Living in the World," writes the following,

*Christianity is an ascetic religion. Christianity is a teaching about the gradual extirpation of the passions, about the means and conditions of the gradual acquisition of virtues. And this Podvig, this struggle comes as we begin to separate ourselves from the world.*

So, there it is. As long as we are comfortable with the world, there is little struggle. Try to separate from the world and the battle really begins. This is what was wrong with all of my good, solid, middle-class Methodist people. Though we deplored some of the things of the world, we were also so very comfortable with it and while we complained about it, we rarely struggled with it.

## **The World**



St. Macarius said that we must fight, and our war is fought on two fronts. One front is within the heart where we fight not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual armies of evil. The second front is in the world where we deal with the material affairs of life. Let's take a moment to examine this battlefield on which the war is fought.

What is this *world* from which we are to separate? With their usual precision, the Greeks define it for us. The Greek word for world is *cosmos* and it has two meanings. First, the cosmos is the physical and material world that God created. This physical world is not evil. God proclaimed it as good. This creation even includes our physical bodies, which we sometimes treat with such disdain.

The second meaning of *cosmos* is the world of sin. St. John warns us:

*Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world, if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.*





All right, I am not to love this world of sin. But where is it? St. John points to it:

*The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world (1 John 2:15 -16).*

There is a world in my soul, a world of desire, rebellion, self-sufficiency, and pride and it separates me from God. It is my world. I am god in my world. I created it and I love it and I sustain it. There is another God there also, and He will have no other gods before Him. The Lord said that the Kingdom of God is within us. So, this is where I fight the most profound battles of the heart.

I've been Orthodox for 9 years. You'd think, being a priest, hearing confessions, taking communion every Sunday, I should be quite advanced? Well, I'm not. I might wonder why my cure is taking so long? I have a clue. Let's say that you find out that I have been ill for some time. You come by to visit to express your sympathy, and I inform you that I've been going to the hospital once a week for years. You ask me how I am doing, and I tell you that I haven't improved at all. Puzzled, you follow me one day and observe that all I do is enter the lobby and stand there. After a while, I turn and leave. You approach me, and say, "Is this all you do? No wonder you aren't getting any better." Angrily, I reply, "Well, I go every week. What else do you want?"

Standing in the lobby won't cure you. Being a member of an Orthodox Church won't save you. Even being a priest will not save you. St. James said that hearing the Word of God is a great blessing, but hearing alone isn't enough. We must also be doers of the Word. I must confess that sometimes I do my spiritual disciplines, sometimes not. Sometimes, I come to Church with a broken heart seeking to be made whole. Sometimes, I just come and stand in the lobby. I worship God with my lips, but my heart is elsewhere.

There are times when I get spiritually lazy because I don't see instantaneous results for the little I have attempted. We moderns don't like to wait. We tire quickly when efforts don't produce results. Let's understand – there will be no quick fix. Spiritual disciplines can be difficult, time consuming, even boring. The Fathers tell us that prayer is the most difficult task that anyone can attempt. Give it a try; it's simple to



understand – “Be still, and know that I am God.” It’s easy to understand, but hard to do. You find that being truly still in heart and mind still is not easy to do at all.

We can’t give up because the alternative is to stay ill in our hearts until finally, we have no relationship with God at all. Sometimes I tell myself, and I would like to tell others in my care, a message I picked up in the great movie, *The Shawshank Redemption* – “You either get busy living, or you get busy dying.” To change that thought a little, we either get busy growing in the Spirit, or we get busy dying in the flesh.

## Culture

War in the heart is a mighty battle, but it is not the only arena of conflict. There is another place to fight. The inner world of sin has a greater expression than what resides in my heart or in yours alone. I can join my inner world to yours and collectively, we create what we call culture or society. What is the nature of this warfare?

A desert Father once said that the devil majored in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds. If nothing else, the noise has grown louder, the pace of life faster, and the crowds larger. Life is filled with stress and demands and worry.

I recently read an article in the journal *First Things*, written by R.R. Reno, entitled “Fighting the Noonday Devil.” The spiritual state of *acedia* means to be “without care.” This sound pretty good, but what it means is that we don’t care about anything. We don’t have the energy or drive to pray, we don’t care to fast, we don’t care to read Scriptures; we don’t care to attend the services of the Church. How many of us have experienced this state?

Reflecting on the sin of *acedia*, the writer makes the following insightful observation of how a sorrowful state of the spirit has become a cultural value:

*Most of us want to be left alone so that we can get on with our lives. Most of us want to be safe. We want to find a cocoon, a spiritually, psychologically, economically, and physically gated community*



*in which to live without danger or disturbance. The carefree life, a life a-cedia (without care) is our cultural idea. Pride may be at the root of all evil, but in our day, the trunk, branches, and leaves of evil are characterized by a belief that moral responsibility, spiritual effort, and religious discipline are empty burdens, ineffective and archaic demands that cannot lead us forward, inaccessible ideals that, even if we believe in them, are beyond our capacity.*

Is this true? Is living a carefree life our highest priority? Our birthright as Americans is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and we will not be denied. The problem is that happiness forever eludes us no matter how much money we have or how many gadgets we hold in our hand. But we continue to strive because we will not give up the idea that happiness means getting ahead, and that means a bigger house, a promotion, a nicer car – maybe two cars, more gadgets, nicer clothes, a secure retirement package, and so on. To gain a carefree life, we enter a world of care. We enter the ranks of the sifted, the overworked, the tired, the anxious, the indebted, and the stressed. The when the priest comes along and adds the demands of the Church, and our knees buckle.

Besides being a priest, I am a father and a husband. Since I became Orthodox, I have worked many different jobs as well as establish a mission and raise a family. Priests get as tired as anyone else and I know what a struggle life can be. As a priest you really want to help these stressed people find some measure of peace, so you mention that the spiritual disciplines might help with the demands of life. This is the kind of response you usually hear: “Look, Father. Cathy has piano lessons; Tom’s got soccer; I work late; Jack has his Scout meeting on Thursday nights; I have my class; We both work; By the time we get home, there’s dinner, homework, and getting the kids to bed; I hardly get a moment to myself, much less spend time with the husband or wife. Pray? Sure, we pray over meals. And you want me to come to Vigil? Saturday night is our only free time for family. You know, rest, relax, a little TV maybe. I know it’s a Feast day this week, Father, but we are having visitors from out of town (family, you know), and we must entertain them.”

Well, suppose I put an ad in the paper that on Saturday night I was going to give a 4-day Caribbean cruise to everyone who came and stayed for Vigil. Tired or not, stressed or not, family visiting or not, the parking lot would be full hours before the service. We would have to fight off the crowds. Yet, we offer something more valuable than gold, or silver, or precious stones. Why then is the Church virtually empty on Saturday nights, or poorly attended even on Sundays? You begin to wonder what our priorities truly are.

Is this how an Orthodox person should think and live? I propose to you that Traditional Orthodoxy is not about the pursuit of happiness. It is about the pursuit of holiness. Holiness requires a different style of



living than what the world proposes. It might mean living with one car instead of two, or staying in a smaller house, or passing up that promotion so that one parent can stay home with the kids or so that you can have the time and the freedom to seek the Kingdom of God . I heard of an Orthodox couple that decided to give up a lucrative job promotion because it meant moving to a place where there was no Orthodox Church. The couple's parents were livid. How stupid not to move because there is no Orthodox Church? Can't you pray at home?

We may also think that the decision this young couple made was naive or maybe stupid because we have ourselves bought into this society's idea of the pursuit of happiness. Holiness will have to wait a bit, but I promise, Lord, that as soon as I get my affairs in order, you and I will finally get together. Maybe we can do lunch sometime.

What does all of this hot pursuit for material well being teach our children? We teach them how to behave in Church and how to be pious, but do we also fill their heads with visions of the "good life?" Our children are watching us and they hear us mouth platitudes about how God should be first in our lives and how important Orthodoxy is. That isn't what they see, and what they see is a more powerful lesson than what they hear. We need to help our children understand, by example, that the pursuit of happiness is vanity and death to the soul. Only the pursuit of holiness will bring true, everlasting joy and peace that cannot be taken away by the ever-changing situations of life. Happiness flees away at the first sign of trouble. Joy, as Jesus came to give us, resides in the deep parts of the soul and brings peace and contentment to our lives. This is what our children must understand and this is the heritage that we need to give to them, but they will only take this with them if they see that it is a joyous reality for us.

When we talk to our children about their future life, do we encourage them to think about becoming readers, deacons, priests, and even monastics? Perhaps all we talk to them about is being doctors and lawyers. I think that if we do not begin to encourage religious vocations, our church will face a crisis in the near future.

Beloved, Christ came to set us free from having to live up to the expectations of this modern and materialistic culture. It means choosing a lifestyle that allows us the freedom to pursue holiness. If we are not pursuing holiness, then we are not traditional Orthodox Christians. And by the way, it means telling the folks that they are welcome to visit this weekend, but that you will be at Liturgy and Vigil. They, of course, are invited to come with you.

## **Worldly Cares**



Perhaps, we still can't see how to become holy in a work oriented, 9-5 world with all of its cares and concerns. Again, I would like to quote from St. Theophan the Recluse.

*There is a widely-accepted misconception among us: that when one becomes involved in work at home or in business, immediately one steps out of the godly realm and away from God-pleasing activities. From this idea, it follows that once the desire to strive toward God germinates, and talk turns toward the spiritual life, then the idea inevitably surfaces: one must run from society, from the home to the wilderness, to the forest. Both are erroneous.*

*Homes and communities depend on concerns of daily life and society. These are God-given obligations; fulfilling them is not a step toward the ungodly, but is a walking in the way of the Lord. All who cleave to these erroneous premises fall into the bad habit of thinking that once they accept worldly obligations, they no longer need to strive towards God.*

*... Cast them aside and grasp the concept that everything you do, inside and outside your home, concerning social life, as a daughter, as a sister, as a Muscovite, is godly and God-pleasing... Your misconceptions truly make them ungodly, because you fulfill your daily tasks with an attitude contrary to the one God intended you to have.*

*... Once you adjust yourself to this outlook, no worldly duty will distract you from God. Instead, it will bring you close to Him. We are all servants of our God. God has assigned to each his place and responsibilities, and He watches to see how each approaches his assignment. He is everywhere. And He watches over you. Keep this in mind and do each deed as if it were assigned to you directly by God, no matter what it is.*

*Do your housework in this manner. When someone comes to visit, keep in mind that God has sent you this visitor, and is watching. When you have to leave the house, keep in mind that God has sent you out on an errand, and is watching. Will you complete it as He wishes?*

*By orienting yourself to God at all times, your chores at home and responsibilities outside the house*



*will not distract your attention from God, but, on the contrary, will keep you intent on completing all tasks in a God-pleasing manner. All will be performed with the fear of God, and this fear will keep your attention unswervingly on God.*

This is remarkable advice from someone who, though once active in the world, became known as a recluse. But it demonstrates that we too often excuse our weekday worldliness because, after all, “one cannot be holy where I work.”

## Joy and Fear

I believe that one hallmark of Orthodox Christianity is joy. Frankly, I'm losing patience with joyless Orthodox Christians. Jesus said that he came so that we might share in His joy. Sometimes, joy is mighty hard to find in an Orthodox Church. I'm not talking about becoming some fake hand clapping, foot-stomping, guitar-strumming, sentimental Church; but I know that our children and youth are naturally drawn to joy and life. If they find none in us and in our Church, will they want to stay?

How important is joy? The Scriptures explains that the Lord Jesus was able to endure the Cross “because of the joy set before him.” Imagine, as he faced the horror of the Cross, he looked beyond it to behold joy. Maybe, beyond the Cross, he saw you and me and it filled Him with joy. How then is it possible for us to claim that we share in His life, and at the same time, be so joyless?

St. Nectarios wrote the following to Abbess Xenia:

*Realize that your cheerfulness gladdens the faces of the Sisters and renders the Convent a paradise. On the other hand, your depression and sullenness are transmitted to the other Sisters, and joyfulness is banished from that paradise. Learn, therefore, that the joy and cheerfulness of the Sisters depend upon you, and it is your duty to preserve these in their hearts. Do this even at times by forcing yourself, because this greatly depresses the hearts of the Sisters. Your reward will be great if you become to them a cause of cheerfulness. I give you this advice because I myself have it as a principle*



*in my life. And I want my disciples also to have it as a principle. When you gladden the heart of your neighbor, much more of your Sister nun who has renounced everything, you may be sure that you please God much more than when you occupy yourself with extreme forms of askesis.*

Look! I know that we all can have a bad day and I don't mean that you have to walk around with a goofy smile on your face all of the time. But let's be honest with ourselves. Is our home and our Church a paradise of joy; or is it, at least when it comes to Faith, a sullen dreary place where prayer and spiritual disciplines and vigils are just things that must be endured? Maybe its time that we forced ourselves to smile and gladden the hearts of our children, our spouses, our fellow church members, and even our troublesome neighbor next door. As St. Nectarios said, the payback will be more than you can imagine.

I recently came across a statement made by the son of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann. He said that never in his whole life did his father demand that his children attend church, pray, fast, read the bible, or do anything spiritual at all. But, he said, his father went to Church with such joy and anticipation that the children wanted to go with dad, wanted to pray with dad, even wanted to fast with dad. What a testimony. I wonder if my son feels the same; or does he drag to church because dad drags to church? God help me.

If you are having difficulty with the idea of joy, then let's consider fear. I believe that another hallmark of traditional Orthodoxy is fear of the Lord. Now what does this mean? Let me share a personal story with you that might illustrate what fear truly is.

I've been happily married for 25 years. Actually, I've been married for 28, but happily for 25. Just kidding. Over the years, I've performed a lot of weddings and I've seen a lot of nervous and fearful brides and grooms. The day I got married, I wasn't nervous at all. I sat in the back room with my dad, who was my best man, and we chatted and joked and I felt really good. I had no doubts that this was the woman for me and that we would have a good life together. Then, the wedding march started, and my father and I went out to the front of the Church. The various bridesmaids and groomsmen processed down the aisle, followed by the flower girl and ring bearer. The music announced the appearance of the bride. I still had no nervousness or fear at all. My wife rounded the corner on her dad's arm in her wedding dress.

My knees buckled!!!



Was I suddenly hit with the fear that I was doing the wrong thing? No, but I couldn't catch my breath. She was a vision of absolute beauty and grace and I trembled before it. Oh, by the way, even today, when she smiles at me, my knees buckle.

True fear is not terror, but awe and reverence in the presence of absolute beauty and grace. This is what St. Paul means when he says "at the Name of Jesus, every knee shall bow." A professor of the Bible once said that in some circles this idea of the knees bowing to Jesus means that one day, God will look down upon all of the sinners in Hell, and he will angrily say, "All right, all you rotten worms – ON YOUR KNEES!!!" No, it is not this way at all. When people finally see the beauty of holiness and the radiant love of God in the face of Christ, knees will buckle. All you can say at that moment is... WOW!!!

When is the last time you stood in Church and could hardly catch your breath for wonder?

The priest comes out and says, "With fear and faith draw near." Now, my friends, is this just a nice guy with a cup of grape juice stuffed with bread; or, is this an ordained man of God, standing in a long line of apostolic succession that goes all the way back to Christ himself, and is he holding in his hands the true, real Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? At that point, at least in our hearts, there should be knees buckling in awe, wonder, and amazement.

Truthfully, it may be more like this: "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us" YAWN!

## **Orthodox Mind-set**

What I am pleading for is that we strive to obtain a traditional Orthodox mind-set.

Consider this picture of traditional Orthodox Christians. Fr. Thomas Hopko writes:

*When the early Christian martyrs were brought before their persecutors they often answered the*





*threats of their torturers with the simple words: "I am a Christian!"*

*The first Christian believers had no earthly identity. They were dead to this world. They belonged to God's kingdom. In their homeland they were aliens. In foreign lands they were at home. They belonged everywhere and nowhere, for they were "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19).*

*By virtue of their having been baptized into Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit, thereby becoming participants in the Eucharistic supper of God's kingdom, the believers in the Holy Trinity had died to the world. Their lives were "hid with Christ in God." (Col 3:3). They identified themselves- fundamentally and essentially – no longer a Greeks or Jews, slaves or freemen, barbarians or Scythians, or even as men and women. They were now Christians... "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9).*

*This was the spiritual consciousness of Orthodox Christians in the apostolic Church, the consciousness of the Church's saints throughout the ages. This was their deepest personal experience and their steadfast conviction as members of one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ.*

This is the mind-set of a traditional Orthodox Christian in any age- in the world, but not of the world.

It sounds as if Fr. Hopko is suggesting a total separation from our culture. Although the picture he paints is correct and the early believers had died to the world, this did not mean that they became elitist, or cultist. One can read the Fathers and be overwhelmed with the breadth of their experience, classical education, knowledge, and understanding of their culture.

I remember being surprised when I read an article by Fr. Seraphim Rose entitled, *Living an Orthodox World-View*. He said that we should not artificially isolate ourselves from the reality of today's world. He thought it best to inoculate ourselves and our children with a dose of culture. He would take the young men who came to his skete to see Shakespeare. He had them read great novels and listen to classical music. This doesn't mean that we should indiscriminately expose ourselves or our children to this culture, but there are good things in our culture. As Saint Paul said, whatever things are good, and beautiful, we should hold fast



to these. Father Seraphim believed that there were still some good things in our culture, and he believed that anything that was good, always pointed towards God. Too often we so thoroughly protect our children from exposure to culture that when they finally do go out into the world, they cannot fight off the disease of materialism and hedonism.

## The Athlete

I have to admit that at first, my wife and I were put off by the uncompromising moral demands of Orthodoxy, and its insistence on an ascetic lifestyle of prayer and fasting. Being married and still attached to the world, my wife and I had no desire to be monastics. It seemed to us that most Orthodox literature was written by monastics for monastics. We would blanch at the heroic story of some monastic saint whose lifestyle we could never hope to emulate. How could this monastic faith possibly help us with such mundane issues such as being married, raising children, working in a dead-end job with a controlling boss, paying taxes, and the other cares of normal life?

The truth is that few of us are called to the monastic life, but every single one of us is called to an ascetic life. As Vladyka Laurus said, it is an *ascetic* podvig. The word “asceticism” means “the discipline of an athlete.” As St. Paul told us, life is a race; each of us must run the race set before us. No one is exempt and everyone must run. Whether we run well or not depends entirely on how well we train. These days, I couldn’t run a mile if I had to, but I know that if I was required to run a race, I would begin training for it. I would change my eating habits and lose some weight. I would begin getting up early in the morning to jog, short distances at first, then longer ones. I would concentrate on my discipline and focus myself on the task ahead. If I didn’t do these things, then I would be a laughingstock and a spectacle, as I panted and stumbled red-faced around the track. Who knows if I would even finish?

Bishop Chrysostomos of Oreoi writes:

*No less than a monastic, a lay person should strive to fast... to practice chastity... to seek limited poverty (through almsgiving and through a way of life that is not ostentatious), and to acquire the virtues of humility, love, and obedience that characterize the repentant life.*



This is traditional Orthodoxy and the true Orthodox mind-set. Let others abandon the therapies or forget the disciplines – we cannot. Again, we do these disciplines not because we are required to do them, or because God will hate us if we don't. We do them because they are good for us, they work, and without them we will never get well. Without them, we will not acquire the Holy Spirit. Without them, there will never be true joy.

## **Righteous Ones**

In closing, I want to share a conviction with you. I believe that if we attain holiness in this day and age, we will outshine the saints of old. Consider the following from the *Evergetinos*:

*The Holy Fathers prophesied about the last generation, saying to each other in wonderment: "What have we achieved?" One of them Abba Ischyryon, a great Elder, replied: "We have fulfilled the commandments of God." The others said: "What about those who will come after us, what will they do?" The Elder answered: "They will accomplish half of our work." And again the Fathers asked: "What about those who come after them?" Abba Ischyryon replied: "the men of that generation will accomplish no work at all; temptation will come upon them. But those who are found worthy in that epoch will be greater than us and our Fathers."*

We can be greater than the Fathers! How can this be?

In a book entitled *Paths and Means to Holiness*, by Constantine Cavarnos, he speaks of how people have become saints. The Church lists a number of categories: Apostle, Martyr, Prophet, Hierarch, Monastic, and a Righteous One. Perhaps, in this room, we have a future Apostle, or Martyr or Hierarch. Certainly, becoming a monastic is possible for any of us. But note what he says about being a Righteous One:



*Those who follow the way of the Righteous remain in the world, may be married, and have property. In general, they do not lead as austere a life as the monastics. Such persons attain sanctity by keeping carefully all of the Divine commandments, participating regularly in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, and engaging in other activities dear to God, particularly hospitality and almsgiving.*

All of us, married or not, working or not, father, mother, child, teenager, all of us can do this.

St. Cosmas Aitolos agrees:

*The Martyrs earned paradise with their blood; the Monastics, with their ascetic life. Now we, my brethren, who beget children, how shall we earn paradise? With hospitality, by relieving the poor, the blind, the lame, as Joachim (the father of the Theotokos ) did.... Almsgiving, love, and fasting sanctify man, enrich him in both soul and body, and bring him to a good end; the body and the soul become holy.*

I heard a story recently where a great desert and ascetic father, renowned for his purity and power over demons, was once unable to command a demon that controlled a person who lived in a local village. Then, a man came forward and commanded the demon to leave. Immediately, the demon came out and departed. The Abba was amazed at the spiritual virtue of this man and asked if he might be a monk or ascetic. The Abba was even more amazed to learn that the man was a local merchant with a large family. How was it possible for such a man to be able to command demons that even he could not command? Upon inspection, he discovered that he had encountered a Righteous One. Though living in the world with all of its cares and burdens, this man was devoted to prayer, to his family, to attendance at Church, acts of mercy, and the giving of alms. By these, he had attained purity of heart in a very impure world. Great is the mercy of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **Conclusion**



Traditional Orthodoxy is the pursuit of holiness. A heart aflame with the Holy Spirit is possible for us all, even in this sinful and adulterous generation. To gain it, we must check in to our grace-filled hospital and do our therapies. This requires an Orthodox mindset that challenges the fast and strenuous lifestyle of this generation. May God help us to recover from the vain dream of the pursuit of happiness, a fantasy that grinds us with stress and toil and robs us of our Orthodox birthright – righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit!

Without this striving for holiness, we are traditional in name only – heartsick Pharisees and the most pitiful of people in the world today.

Not only is holiness possible, not only is it the essence of living a traditional Orthodox life, it is an absolute requirement.

Let the Holy Scriptures have the last word: “Without holiness, no one will see the Lord!”

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.