In the sixth century, a monk living in the Egyptian desert by the name of St. John Climacus wrote a book outlining the stages of the spiritual life. He based his entire work on the image of a ladder with thirty rungs (corresponding to the age of Jesus at His baptism) stretching from earth to heaven. Each rung described a step in the pursuit of virtue and the spiritual life. Since it was first written, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* has been a central part of monastic formation and standard for Orthodox asceticism.
On Study

My son, if you receive my words,
And treasure my commands within you,
So that you incline your ear to wisdom,
And apply your heart to understanding;
   Yes, if you cry out for discernment,
   And lift up your voice for understanding,
If you seek her as silver,
And search for her as for hidden treasures;
Then you will understand the fear of the Lord,
   And find the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom;
   From His mouth come knowledge and understanding;
He stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
   He is a shield to those who walk uprightly;
He guards the paths of justice,
   And preserves the way of His saints.
– Proverbs 2:1–8 (NKJV)

On Almsgiving

...Do good, and evil will not find you. Prayer is good with fasting, almsgiving and righteousness. A few prayers with righteousness are better than many with wrongdoing. It is better to do almsgiving than to lay up gold. For almsgiving rescues one from death, and it will wash away every sin. Those who do almsgiving and are righteous will be full of life.
– Tobit 12:7–9 (SAAS)

On Fasting

Through greed we underwent the first stripping, overcome by the bitter tasting of the fruit, and we became exiles from God. But let us turn back to repentance and, fasting from the food that gives us pleasure, let us cleanse our senses on which the enemy makes war. Let us strengthen our hearts with the hope of grace, and not with foods, which brought no benefit to those who trusted in them. Our food shall be the Lamb of God, on the holy and radiant night of His awakening: the victim offered for us, given in communion to the disciples on the evening of the mystery...
– Vespers on the evening of the Sunday of the Last Judgment, from The Lenten Triodion, translated by Mother Mary and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (1978)

On Prayer

We shouldn’t blackmail God with our prayers. We shouldn’t ask God to release us from something, from an illness, for example, or to solve our problems, but we should ask for strength and support from Him to bear what we have to bear. Just as He knocks discreetly at the door of our soul, so we should ask discreetly for what we desire and if the Lord does not respond, we should cease to ask. When God does not give us something that we ask for insistently, then He has His reasons ...

We shouldn’t continue relentlessly in order to acquire what we want; rather we should leave things to the will of God. Because the more we pursue something, the more it runs away from us. So what is required is patience, faith and composure. And if we forget it, the Lord never forgets; and if it is for our good, He will give us what we require when we require it.
– St. Porphyrios the Kapsokalyvite, from Wounded by Love, compiled by the Sisters of the Holy Convent of Chrysopigi (2005)
Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For Orthodox Christians the spiritual disciplines are essential to our relationship with God, our well-being, and our journey of faith throughout our lives. Prayer and worship, fasting, reading and studying the Holy Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and serving and giving to those in need are practices that help us connect with God. They are guides that nurture our souls in divine wisdom and truth. They renew our strength and fill us with power, assurance and hope.

In our daily lives the spiritual disciplines connect us to our Creator, our Source of life, and our Redeemer. Through worship we give praise and thanksgiving to God. Through prayer in His presence, we seek His will, confess our sins and receive forgiveness and grace. As we practice and live our spiritual lives, we encounter and are transformed by His abiding love.

In prayer, fasting and study, we are offered spiritual guidance. In these disciplines we ask and we seek; and we find the way, the truth and the life in our Resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ. By His example we are led in compassionate service to others, a spiritual discipline that guides us in dedicating our time and resources in showing the grace of God to others.

Through the daily, disciplined praxis of the vital elements of our faith—namely prayer, fasting, study and service—we are equipped to serve and to share, we are emboldened in the Gospel, and we are filled with assurance and hope in the promises of God.

As you read and contemplate the engaging articles in this issue of PRAXIS, I encourage you to reflect on the role that spiritual disciplines have in your life. As priests and teachers affirm that these disciplines are essential to the life in Christ, so that you can continue to provide practical guidance and emphasize their value. In addition, as you follow these disciplines, you will know the power, assurance and blessings offered to us by God, and you will be faithful witnesses of a spiritually abundant and creative life.

With paternal love in Christ,
Dear PRAXIS Readers,

I have always found it interesting that the words “disciple” and “discipline” are related through their connections to being a learner and follower, and to the work of teaching and learning. As I connect the words and apply them to our lives as Orthodox Christians, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ means that we are committed to the work of learning and being taught first by Jesus Himself, and then by more-experienced disciples. These disciples have named prayer, fasting, philanthropy (or almsgiving and charity) and study as “the work” that we must follow.

Jesus Himself included these dimensions in His ministry. We know from Scripture that He prayed and fasted. We know that He was philanthropic; He loved humanity, demonstrating this most profoundly in his passion, crucifixion and resurrection, as well as in His many miracles of healing and feeding. We can infer from Scripture that He knew His own Jewish tradition very well, because the crowds marveled at His teachings and He often confounded critics with His wisdom. We find in the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles and the early history of the Church that the first Christians were “devoted” to the disciplines of prayer, fasting, philanthropy and study (see Acts 2:42–46). These practices created the fertile soil for the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of those first Christians, and all Christians since, to live the Christian life and to grow the Christian Church throughout the world.

Some scholars have described our attitude to religion as “whatever-ism.” Whatever you want to do is okay; whatever you believe is okay. This should not be our approach as Orthodox Christians. From the examples of the saints, our role models in Christian living, we see discipline and discipleship as central characteristics of their lives. The saints did not have a “whatever” you want approach. They did not put their Christianity on display for a few hours per week or when a church leader was present. They were Christians 24/7, as we would say today. They were disciplined in their prayer, fasting, philanthropy and study.

We don’t believe you have to “go it alone” in the discipline of Christian life. The Church, the community of faith, is our guide and support in these efforts. It is meant to be a community of people who are dedicated to these disciplines. Many of them are done as a community. We pray together. We follow the same guidelines for fasting as a parish. We can study in classes organized by our parish. We work together to do good works in the world and in our parish.

I’m grateful that this issue of PRAXIS is raising the disciplines of our Christian life for us to learn more about and to offer practical guidance in them. Over the summer, when parish life typically slows down, attending to improving our practice of these disciplines should be a worthwhile activity for each of us.

With love in Christ,

† GERASIMOS
Metropolitan of San Francisco
SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Submissions should be 1,000–2,000 words in length and directly discuss education in the theology and tradition of the Orthodox Christian churches. Lesson aids or graphic enhancements may accompany the articles submitted. We also encourage the submission of photographs relevant to parish life (praxis). Please also provide a biographical sketch of the author not exceeding fifty words.

PRAXIS Magazine is seeking submissions of lesson plans based on articles from previous or current issues of PRAXIS. Submissions should use the article as the text/background of the lesson plan. Lesson plans are welcome for any or several age groups. Please send submissions in a Word document with a length of 1,000–2,000 words to tvrame@goarch.org.

Material previously published or under consideration for publication elsewhere will not be considered without prior consent of the editor. We reserve the right to edit for usage and style; all accepted manuscripts are subject to editorial modification. Articles sent by mail should be accompanied by an electronic version on CD-ROM in Microsoft Word for Windows or for Macintosh. Articles in Microsoft Word may also be e-mailed as an attachment to tvrame@goarch.org.

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36  FROM THE DIRECTOR:
    The Practices of Faith
    Anton C. Vrame
A basic theme of this essay is that the mechanistic worldview we have inherited from the nineteenth century is no longer tenable, and in light of current scientific developments it is outdated. Likewise, the belief that only concrete matter is real and that only that which is accessible to our five senses, with the aid of scientific instruments, is true can no longer be supported even by science itself. In fact, science today, for an increasing number of leading scientists (such as Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project and director of National Institutes of Health) and other modern, thinking people, has become a vehicle for spiritual wonder, discovery and renewal.
My personal transformation from agnosticism and skepticism to faith and spiritual practice was based on a variety of factors such as: 1) my exposure to the mystical traditions of all the major religions; 2) the emerging new understanding of science beyond the mechanistic model of the universe, the new paradigm that radically challenges the Newtonian assumptions about how the world works; and 3) scientific studies related to death itself (particularly the accumulated literature on near-death experiences), the evidence on the nonlocality of mind, and the so-called “shamanic state of consciousness.” I would like to elaborate on these three factors, which I believe are contributing to bridging the gap between science and religion.

1. MYSTICAL TRADITIONS

It is impressive to note, as philosopher Huston Smith, the leading scholar on comparative religions, has brought to our attention, that the mystics of all the world’s religions, in spite of their great diversity of beliefs, are in agreement that the physical, observable universe is only a very small part of a wider reality that cannot be apprehended by our physical senses. All the religions agree that there is a reality that includes and transcends the natural world and that this reality can be approached and experienced through mystical ecstasy. It has been called by various names: God, Allah, Yahweh, Brahman, the Absolute Ground of Being, the Great Spirit and so on. Furthermore, with the exception of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers like Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Russell and Sartre, most of the world’s greatest sages—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plotinus, Kant, Hegel, Shankara—based their philosophies on this fundamental presupposition about the fabric of reality, that is, that the physical universe is not all there is. It is the mystics from the various religious traditions who have invented ways of rigorous spiritual practice to approach and come to know this transcendent, and radically transforming, Ultimate Reality. In ancient Greece there were the mystery schools like those of Pythagoras that influenced Plato and Socrates. In Hinduism we find various yoga practices, such as Bhakti, Giani, Raja and Karma. In Christianity there is the hesychast tradition of Mt. Athos, the spiritual methodology of inner silence (hesychia) practiced by hermits and monks since the early years of Christianity. In the Christian Orthodox tradition, for example, God will reveal Himself to us only when, after valiant spiritual struggles and systematic prayer, we cleanse our heart of egotistical desires and passions. Once this is done, the struggling soul may experience what the Fathers of the Church call the “Uncreated Light of God.” It is an ecstatic experience of union with divinity, of theosis, which transforms the person totally. Such experience has little to do with cerebral, intellectual knowledge.

2. NEW DISCOVERIES AND PARADIGMS

An increasing number of scientists are questioning the basic assumptions upon which modern science is built. It seems to me that the new set of assumptions they propose—the emerging “paradigm”—supports a view of the world that cannot be explained by itself. Let’s examine the new cosmological understanding of Creation. Since the mid-1960s, virtually all astrophysicists have come to accept the Big Bang theory of the creation of the universe. This theory stipulates that the universe came into being about 13.8 billion years ago as the result of a primordial explosion. The matter that would form 100 billion galaxies of the known universe was compressed into an area infinitely smaller than an atom. Practically the universe came into being ex nihilo in that primordial explosion. The dust of particles that were generated created, through an evolutionary process, this stupendous and finely tuned system of creation. How then can we explain this primordial explosion?—keep in mind that the physical universe, that is, the more than 100 billion galaxies, comprise, according to modern science, only 3 percent of physical reality. The other 97 percent is dark matter that we know virtually nothing about!

Allan Sandage, one of the most influential astronomers of the twentieth century and best known for determining the age of the universe, declared that the Big Bang could only be considered a miracle. And this miracle gave birth to another contemporary scientific understanding of human creation. It has been called the “anthropic cosmological principle,” meaning that the universe evolved in a way that made the appearance of humanity possible. The universe’s creation, that is to say, and its evolution have as their inner purpose the emergence of self-conscious beings like us. This is a spiritual understanding of Creation. Patrick Glynn, after diligently and systematically surveying all of the modern scientific theories about cre-
ation, concludes in his book *God: The Evidence* that “in effect, the anthropic principle says that humanity is (apparently) the final cause of the universe. The most basic explanation of the universe is that it seems to be a process orchestrated to achieve the end or goal of creating human beings.” Modern science is now offering a vision of reality that is radically different from that which was dominant during the nineteenth century and the time of Darwin, when the universe was understood to be a random, lifeless machine without any inner purpose. It seems that what science teaches today about the nature of reality and what the great religions have been teaching through the ages are not that far apart! Think about and compare, for example, the opening paragraph of Genesis and the Big Bang theory!

Alongside these developments in cosmology, there were changes coming from scientists studying the subatomic level, that is, quantum physics. Again, in this mysterious microcosm, scientists discovered that their own minds are integral parts of what they are observing. After repeated experiments they discovered that a particle behaves like a particle when the observing scientist expects it to behave like a particle, and it behaves like a wave if the experimenting scientist expects it to behave like a wave. This “observer effect” means our own consciousness is mysteriously in communication with physical matter. On this subtle, subatomic level, our thoughts may affect the way matter behaves. It seems that there is an ongoing and unconscious interaction between our thoughts and feelings and the material universe, which we assumed was simply dead matter—in this light, think of the spiritual logic behind the blessing of waters during Epiphany.

It is also important to point out that scientific research today has supported the practice of prayer as a form of medicine. It appears that the universe is permeated with spiritual energy, a notion that is in full agreement with the theology of St. Gregory Palamas and all other mystical traditions from around the world. Richard Tarnas, a leading contemporary Harvard-trained philosopher and historian, concluded after a thirty-year exploration that evidence indicates our universe is, in his words, “informed by a powerful, creative intelligence, and an ordering principle of truly astonishing power, complexity and beauty.”

### 3. CONSCIOUSNESS, DEATH AND THE MIND

Raymond Moody triggered a revolution in consciousness and in our understanding of the so-called “near-death experience” that offers further support to the claim that there is more to reality than physical matter. Moody, a professor of philosophy and a medical doctor, investigated more than 1,500 cases of people who were declared clinically dead who then “returned” to tell us about their experiences “beyond the grave.” A large number reported finding themselves outside their bodies, seeing their bodies lying dead below, then traveling through a tunnel and on the other side being welcomed by dead relatives and by a radiant being who showed them total and unconditional love. At some point they experienced panoramic reviews of their lives in minute detail and saw how their actions affected other people in both positive and negative ways. Those who had such experiences reported that they felt they went “home” and wished to stay there permanently. It was the Christ-like being who instructed them to return to their bodies because they still had “unfinished business” in this life. What originally stunned Moody, a former skeptic, were the patients who reported knowledge of episodes and events that took
place while they were considered clinically dead. This aspect of the near-death experience cannot be explained through mainstream psychology, biology or chemistry, raising the question of the existence of consciousness outside the material body. It suggests that our minds and personalities may be independent of the brain, i.e., that our physical bodies and brains are only necessary for us to live in this world. People who have such experiences as a rule lose their fear of death and become better and more loving, compassionate human beings. What Moody’s work suggests, therefore, is scientific evidence for (but not necessarily proof of) the ancient belief in life after death, a foundational belief of all the leading religions. It also suggests that we as human beings are not merely our bodies. One can exist, feel, think, have memories and observe events happening in this world while one’s body is clinically dead. Some contemporary researchers, such as Larry Dossey, have coined the term "non-locality of mind," meaning that our brain is simply the instrument for the expression of our mind and personality within the physical world of the five senses. Similarly, anthropologists, such as Michael Harner of the New School of Social Research, have coined the term “shamanic state of consciousness” to address the phenomenon of ecstatic states that field researchers have observed in the study of tribal shamans. These are states of consciousness that cannot be reduced to any other states, such as sleep, clinical hallucinations or mental illness. Such states observed cross-culturally are sui generis, irreducible to other forms of consciousness suggesting, again, that there is more to reality than the physical universe.

In conclusion, I would like to add that my personal field research and observations during the last thirty or so years with living Christian mystics, hermits and saints provide, at least for me, powerful support that we may be at the beginning of the end of hostilities between science and religion. We live at a critical point in history of a new enlightenment that would dwarf the Western Enlightenment of the seventeenth century. It may be the time when the best of science and the best of religion will come together, offering us a radically new vision of reality and, I should add, a more optimistic and holistic vision. I am also convinced that within this historical context, Orthodox Christianity as expressed in the practices and lives of its great saints can play a leading role.

Kyriacos C. Markides, PhD, is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maine and author of nine books. Six of his books, including The Mountain of Silence, Gifts of the Desert and his latest, Inner River: A Pilgrimage to the Heart of Christian Spirituality, are on Christian mystics spiritual guides and elders of Eastern Christianity and are published by Random House/Image Books. His books have been translated and published in twelve other countries and languages. He has given regular lectures and workshops around the United States, Canada and overseas, and he has appeared on national and international television and radio programs. Professor Markides was awarded the 2006 Presidential Research and Creative Achievement Award at the University of Maine. He lives in Stillwater, ME, with his wife, Emily J. Markides, who is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Peace and Reconciliation Studies at the University of Maine.
LET US PRAY TO THE LORD

TIMOTHY PATITSAS

In peace let us pray to the Lord,” is a refrain that continually echoes in our ears as Orthodox Christians. What are we to pray for, once we have found peace? “For the peace from above, and for the salvation of our souls, let us pray to the Lord.” And again, “For the peace of the whole world, the good estate of the holy churches of God, and the union of all, let us pray to the Lord.”

Truly, the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is a pure testament to the life in Christ, the Spirit-filled life, the summation of worship and praise of the Triune God. And this Liturgy shows us the importance of peace as both a prerequisite to prayer, and as one of the most important objects of our prayer.

If it is hard to pray in our day and age, it is because we have only partially the peace upon which prayer depends, and because we have only a small portion of the belief that God can restore our inner world and our outer world to peace. We lead full lives, but lives that lack certain dimensions of freedom; we describe ourselves as servants, who “have so much to do.” We seem to know so much about the complexities of the world’s sorrows, the obstinacy of others and the practical difficulties of addressing both. We may actually not believe that it is prayer above all that brings peace.

Where are we to find the peace that precedes prayer, as well as the faith that prayer itself will bring peace? For each person, the answer is somehow different. For one Christian, it is the memory of a treasured elderly relative whose devotion to Christ was unshakeable. For another person, it is reading the Gospels and the Epistles that brings such peace. Another person takes comfort in the lives of the saints, or in miracle stories, or in nature’s mute yet overpowering testimony to God’s goodness. Still another person looks upon the stories of those who do good in the world, while yet another finds that the key to a prayer life is to light the oil candle, prepare the incense burner and gaze upon holy icons. For other people it is the chanting in the Church that brings them the peace they need to pray. Some of us find that fasting is an indispensable aid to prayer. Or we may find that, for us, the key to prayer is communal support, that we need another person to push us along.

Whatever preparation it is that helps us toward prayer is always a blessing, as St. Porphyrios said, “to warm up the heart before prayer.” It is good to gather our thoughts, arrange our surroundings, and allow our troubled minds to descend into our deepest heart. There we find Christ, the object of our prayer, and the author of our hope. In our hearts we find the treasure of the grace we each received at baptism, a treasure that the more it is spent, the more it increases, and which can never be exhausted.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is within you,” says our Savior.

Prayer then becomes a simple and artless affair. “We look at him, and he looks at us,” said Anthony Bloom (who is considered by many to be a saint). We are tempted to bring up all our problems at once, to insist on describing them in detail and to press for immediate answers. We should try to resist this urge, and sit quietly with our Lord. Soon enough—within just a few minutes—the peace that had been fleeing us returns. We are “saved,” for the moment, for this day and in this present struggle. The Lord may bid us to work and to make good use
of our time. But He also blesses us to rest, and this is our pure Sabbath: to sit quietly with God, allowing the world to run itself without our assistance for just a few moments.

Thereafter everything is different. Out of this mini-retreat, this small pilgrimage to Christ, we bring with us an atmosphere of prayer. We may not be saying any particular words, but we cultivate the peace that prayer has brought us, and we remain mindful of God, of His gracious goodness, and of our own smallness.

Fr. Roman Braga, who passed from this earth several months ago, used to say that prayer is more than concrete words. Rather, it is living our lives in Christ, living always in the presence of his mercy, that constitutes the condition of “praying without ceasing” (although some add to this the practice of reciting the Jesus Prayer at all times).

Prayer can become a way of life, once we have tasted its sweetness, and once we finally begin to understand the futility of so many of our thoughts. In time, we learn to long for the ultimate source of existence on an ongoing basis, and to make the awareness of God part of the fabric of more and more of our moments. No other person can fill us with life as God does, and it is for Life that we were created.

Yes, we, each of us, are sinners and strugglers, each with our own weaknesses. But by the same token, whatever the spiritual life is supposed to be, it can't be meant only for those who are so perfect that they are beyond all temptation.

Somehow, it is in the midst of our confusions, fears, distractions, temptations and habitual mistakes that we are meant to pursue that “one thing needful”: a living relationship with the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, and to love Him who is “the express image of the Father,” and who is also the one “upon whom the Spirit of the Father descends and remains.” Even those saints who reached the blessed state of apatheia, of no longer sinning even while in the body, still continued to face the trials of this life.

Let’s discuss, then, some insights that can help us to succeed at this most important of all our kinds of labor. We all want to pray; we all face the same obstacles that prevent us from praying. How are these to be overcome?

**MAKING TIME BY PRAYER**

The first challenge we each face is that we don’t have much time to pray. Or, so we think. Of course, we have plenty of time when we want to do less-fruitful things. And on some days, time even can seem to go on and on, with no purpose and no movement.

So, the first issue is to turn the matter around and use prayer to “make time.” Once we begin to pray regularly, we find that the challenges of daily life often go more smoothly. Things might even seem to slow down. We aren’t spending as much time in frustrating pursuits and thus are freer. Rather than making time for prayer, we have made time through prayer.

But how do we start this habit?

**A FIRST PRAYER IF WE FEEL STUCK**

Every day for thirty days, kneel in front of your icons before God, and ask Christ to grant you “a spiritual awakening” by the power of his Holy Spirit. Do not permit yourself any mental picture or image of what a “spiritual awakening” would look like—leave that to Him.

St. Gregory Palamas prayed in a similar way, asking God continually, “Enlighten my darkness!” But St. Gregory prayed in this way for more than twenty years...

**RETURN FROM WORK WELL-RESTED**

In our cars on the way home from work, we frequently are too tired to think of anything serious. We may switch among radio stations, looking for something to renew us, but we come up empty. So why not devote some of those minutes to four simple prayers: Thanking God for all He has given you; praying for all the enemies and others who have hurt you; praying for your friends and family; and asking God for your own needs.

Because these four requests can become quite vast, I always just count. First, I praise God for ten things. Then, I thank God for ten things. Then I pray for ten “enemies” (“enemies” is a technical term, meaning “people whose faults have momentarily distracted me from my own, greater faults”). After that, I am at peace, and I pray for ten people whom I deeply love (there is usually some overlap between the list of “enemies” and this second list, so some people get prayed for twice, the second time with more warmth). Then I pray for myself, and after that I am ready to drive on in peace, and walk through the front door from work well-rested.

In peace let us pray to the Lord!

Timothy Patitsas, PhD, is Assistant Professor at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, where he also plans and leads the annual St. Helen’s Pilgrimage to Greece, Mt. Athos and Constantinople. Educated at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, his research interests include social ethics, economics and theology. He is currently working on an introduction to the mystical ethics of the Orthodox Church.
NOT BY BREAD ALONE

FASTING TODAY IN THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN WAY

REV. FR. PETER A. CHAMBERAS

The venerable and sacred discipline of fasting began in
the Old Testament (OT), continued into the New
Testament (NT), was developed by the early Church
into a highly refined spiritual art and remains to this day an
integral element in the spiritual life of Orthodox Christians.
Although western Christianity has over the centuries down-
graded the ascetic spirit of the early Church, even to the point
of rejecting fasting altogether, the Orthodox Church contin-
ues to uphold this sacred tradition with great reverence, even
when many of her members do not fully practice this discipline
today. The present neglect and misunderstanding over fasting
should not be a surprise to anyone, simply because this sacred
discipline was always a challenge from the very beginning, re-
quiring constant clarification and reaffirmation throughout its
long history, in order to be properly understood and practiced
as an essential and important element in a godly way of life.
Fasting is, of course, about food and what we choose to put
into our mouth by way of nourishment for our physical health
and well-being, but it is not only about food; it is also about
practicing discipline and self-control. Fasting can never be only
about physical and natural food; it must always also be about
that other food of God, the "spiritual" food that sustains our
spiritual nature. Fasting then is inseparable from prayer and re-
pentance, obedience to and communion with God. In times
past, believers took fasting for granted and generally knew
when, how and why they were fasting. Today, as with other as-
pects of the sacred tradition of the Orthodox Church, fasting requires some clarification and reaffirmation. By drawing from the sacred tradition of the Orthodox Church, this article will attempt to highlight the true nature of fasting and show how it can be practiced today in the Orthodox Christian way unto the glory of God and our spiritual edification.

To begin with some definitions are in order. The Orthodox Church has two types of fasting: a) the total fast from all food and drink that is by its very nature short in duration, and b) the ascetical fast that is extended over longer but specific periods of time throughout the liturgical year of the Church. The total fast is also known as the Eucharistic fast and will normally be about twelve hours, or, in other words, from the evening meal (or even from midnight) to the time Holy Communion is received at the end of the Divine Liturgy on the next day. In the case of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, celebrated in the early evening, the total fast may begin in the morning after a very light Lenten meal or at least from noon. The ascetical fast varies both in duration of time and in dietary strictness, depending upon the particular day or the Lenten season that is being observed in the liturgical life of the Church. Both fasts are an integral part of a personal spiritual life in the Orthodox Church.

From the earliest apostolic age, Wednesday and Friday of each week were associated with the betrayal and the passion of the Lord, respectively, and designated to be days of prayer and fasting for the Christians after the Church had separated from the synagogue. The 69th Apostolic Canon confirms this practice and even imposes the sanction of being discharged from clerical duties for clergy and excommunication for laity. Today the Wednesday and Friday fast means that meats, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy products, olive oil and wine are usually excluded from the food partaken on these days by Orthodox Christians. This strict weekly fast is especially observed during the four Lenten seasons of the Church, but suspended altogether during the four fast-free weeks of the Church year. Apart from these exceptions, a more moderate fast is practiced on Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year that may include vegetables, pasta and shellfish (shrimp, crab, scallops, squid, calamari) cooked with olive or vegetable oil.

In addition to the weekly fasting, the early Church began introducing other recurring periods of fasting on an annual basis. The earliest such fasting is the one associated with the annual commemoration of the passion and resurrection of Christ. At first the time of fasting before Pascha was neither long—one or two days of total fasting—nor the same throughout the various regions of the ever growing and expanding Church. By 325 AD, however, according to the 5th Canon of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, a forty-day period of fasting had already become a well-established tradition throughout the entire early Church. As the fasting period before Pascha gradually increased from several days of strict fasting to the entire Holy Week, and then, on top of that, to the forty-day fast of Great Lent, the initial total fast of only several days was naturally replaced by an ascetical fast that excluded certain foods, such as meats and fish, and other animal products, such as milk, cheese and eggs. During the time of a prolonged ascetical fast, the Church, in her pastoral wisdom and experience, allows for certain personal exceptions to be made for the very old, the very young, the sick, the nursing mothers and other people in extraordinary circumstances or with special needs. Such exceptions are to be made with discretion and appropriate guidance by the parish priest, avoiding scandal and maintaining the edifying nature of the corporate discipline of the whole Church.

Knowing that the long and arduous discipline of fasting is both challenging and yet essential for the spiritual life of the faithful, the Church long ago also devised a reasonable and well-defined corporate pattern for all the faithful to follow. Before Great Lent actually begins, the theme is gradually introduced and fasting begins incrementally: The first week of the Triodion is without any fasting at all, including Wednesday and Friday; the second week of the Prodigal Son includes the usual fast on Wednesday and Friday, but all foods are eaten freely during the rest of the week; the third week of Meatfare or Judgment Sunday—marking the last day to eat meat before Pascha—fish, dairy products, eggs, olive oil and wine are consumed freely throughout the week including Wednesday and Friday. Great Lent actually begins after Cheesefare or Forgiveness Sunday, on Clean Monday, which is observed very strictly as a day of spiritual retreat, spending most of the time in prayer and reflection, while food intake is kept to a minimum, consisting of uncooked vegetables, fruit, dry nuts, bread, water and fruit juices. Sometimes, those who may be able to endure a more rigorous discipline will keep a total fast from all food for the first three days of Great Lent, drinking only water or fruit juices, and breaking this very strict fast after receiving Holy Communion on Wednesday evening at the first Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. The remainder of the first week of Great Lent is also kept with a strict fast, which excludes even the use of olive oil and wine. The use of olive oil and wine, however, may be used to moderate the strictness of the fast on the Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays of the other weeks of Great
Lent, based on any special personal and discretionary needs.

From the early centuries of Church history, three more Lenten seasons were gradually introduced into the annual liturgical cycle of the Church:

A. The Christmas fast for the Nativity of Christ includes a period of forty days, beginning on November 15. Meat, poultry and meat products are entirely excluded during this period of forty days. However, from November 15 to December 12, the Feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, which allows for the inclusion of fish and eggs; and from December 12 to January 5, the Fast of the Holy Cross, which includes only olive oil, wine and fish. During these two days, the fast is broken by adding only olive oil, wine and fish to the festive meal.

B. The Fast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul on June 29, and of all the Twelve Apostles on June 30, will vary in duration each year because it begins on the Monday after the Sunday of All Saints, following the Sunday after Pentecost, which comes fifty days after Pascha, and the movable feast falling on a different day each year. If the Fast of the Holy Apostles is only a few days in duration, then it should be kept as strictly as possible, and if it is several weeks long, then meat, poultry and meat products, dairy products and eggs are excluded. Fish is allowed on all days except Wednesdays and Fridays.

C. The fifteen-day fast of August precedes the Feast of the Transfiguration of Christ on August 6 and the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos on August 15. This two-week fast is kept rather strictly, meaning that olive oil and wine are partaken only on the Saturdays and Sundays that fall within this period. On the Feast of the Transfiguration the fast is broken by adding only olive oil, wine and fish to the festive meal.

A peculiar characteristic of the Orthodox Christian fasting is the treatment of each Saturday and Sunday that happens to fall within the longer periods of ascetical fasting during the four Lenten seasons of the year. Saturdays and Sundays are never to be strict fasting days, except for Holy Saturday. In fact, the rule requires that the fast be suspended during these two days by simply adding something special to the Lenten meals, such as olive oil and wine. This is the case because Sunday is always the day of the Lord par excellence, reminding Christians of the Lord’s resurrection, the day when the faithful gather for public worship, celebrating the Holy Eucharist and having communion with the risen Christ. Saturday also remains in the mind of the Church as the special Sabbath day, when God rested from his work of creation. The special standing of these two days of the week in the life of the Church requires that they not be days of mourning and strict fasting, even during the otherwise strict and long periods of Lenten fasting.

The very first commandment of God at the beginning of human life was one of fasting: “From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you may not eat...” (Genesis 2:16–17). St. Basil the Great reminds us that Adam and Eve were given this stern rule to practice self-control and obedience to the divine will. While called to strive for spiritual maturity and perfection, they disobeyed God’s first commandment and lost Paradise by not fasting. Moses fasted an extraordinary fast of forty days, not only once but twice, as a spiritual preparation while ascending the mountain to receive the revelation of God in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:27–28; Deuteronomy 9:9–11, 16–18). In setting this precedent, Moses clearly projected the religious importance of fasting as an expression of sinful man’s total orientation toward God. Through the physical ordeal of fasting and the inner compunction of repentance, man willingly afflicts and humbles himself before God, and this enables him to appeal more fervently in prayer for the mercy and the forgiveness of God, but also to be vigilant and receptive to the revelation of God. Centuries after Moses, the...
Prophet Elijah, “being zealous for the Lord Almighty,” kept a forty-day fast in the desert over the sins of Israel, and as a result the presence and power of God was finally revealed to him “in the sound of a gentle breeze” (cf. 3 Kings 19:8–12). Other prophets and pious people of the OT fasted for one reason or another (cf. Daniel 10:2–9; 1 Kings 28:20; 2 Kings 12:17; Leviticus 16:29–30; Numbers 29:7; Nehemiah 9:1–2; 1 Ezra 9:1–2; Psalm 34:13; Psalm 68:11; 108:24; Esther 4:16–17; Judith 8:5–6; Joel 2:12–15; Zechariah 7:5–12).

When the prophets of Israel referred to fasting in their preaching, they were invariably critical in their remarks. However, they did not condemn fasting itself as a religious practice, but rather the religious hypocrisy of the people in keeping the fast only externally and superficially, without the benefit of real mourning and true repentance over their sins, and, moreover, without the benefit of any works of mercy, righteousness and prayer that should have always accompanied their proper observance of the discipline of fasting. The Prophet Isaiah especially sounded the warning against such formalized fasting and enumerated those elements that make fasting authentic and acceptable to God: “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Put away the evils from your souls before my eyes…Learn to do good…Defend the orphan and justify the widow” (Isaiah 1:13–17). The prophet went on to define the will of God with reference to the true nature of fasting that must be complimented with a proper spiritual and moral content: “I did not choose such a fast,” says the Lord; “Rather, loose every bond of wrongdoing; untie the knots of violent dealings; cancel the debts of the oppressed; and tear apart every unjust contract. Break your bread for the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house…Then you shall cry out, and God will hear you…God shall be with you continually…” (Isaiah 58:6–11).

The transition of true fasting from the OT into the NT is beautifully illustrated by two personalities. The Prophetess Anna, who “never left the Temple, but worshipped God day and night with fasting and prayer” (Luke 2:36), was blessed to see, together with the righteous Simeon, the forty-day old child Jesus brought to the Temple. St. John the Baptist, preached fervently for the people to return to God with repentance and fasting, lived a most austere and ascetic life in the desert.

When Jesus himself was about to begin His public ministry, the Holy Spirit led Him into the desert and there, “He fasted for forty days and nights” (Matthew 4:1–2; Luke 4:2; cf. Mark 1:12). When Jesus became hungry, after fasting, He was tempted by Satan: “If you are the Son of God, command these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:3–4; cf. Deuteronomy 8:3). In rejecting this first temptation, Jesus reversed not only the disobedience of Adam, but also that of the Israelites, who often proved disobedient and rebellious to the will of God. Thus Jesus Christ not only confirmed the discipline of fasting of the OT, but He also gave us His personal example to emulate. In addition, Jesus also gave us a new and specific teaching about fasting, first by correcting the abuses of the Pharisees of his time, and then by reintroducing the teaching of the prophets, and finally by adding the specifically Christian element to the tradition of fasting.

The Pharisees, who represented the epitome of Jewish piety at that time and who “fasted twice a week” (Luke 19:12), did this only hypocritically, merely “to appear before the people as fasting” (Matthew 6:16), as the Lord himself indicated. Like the prophets of old, Jesus did not condemn the discipline of fasting as such, but rather preached against the insincerity with which it was being practiced. Here is His first teaching on fasting: “When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Matthew 6:16–18; cf. Luke 18:9–14). Here again it is clear that Jesus is teaching, like the prophets of the OT, that fasting, like every other practice of religious piety, must not be a mere external display of nonexistent piety, but rather the authentic expression of a person’s love for God and man that motivates one to do everything that one does, including fasting.

At one point, the disciples of John the Baptist posed a question to Jesus about fasting: “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” (Matthew 9:14–15; Mark 2:18–20; Luke 5:33–35). Jesus answered like this: “Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matthew 9:15). Here, again, Jesus not only accepts fasting as a proper religious discipline, but He also proclaims its future necessity for His own disciples. The presence of the Messiah with His disciples is a time of joy and gladness, not a time of mourning and fasting. A time will come, however, when the bridegroom of the Church will be taken away, and then the people of the Church...
SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

will mourn and fast. Clearly the question is not if the disciples are to fast, but rather when and why they are to fast.

A new reality has indeed come into the world with the teaching, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, as well as with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the creation of the Church. This new reality in the Church of Jesus Christ cannot be simply assimilated to an old and unredeemed way of life, much like “a new patch” cannot be superficially attached on “an old garment.” It is also unwise and impracticable for “new wine” to be placed into “old wineskins” (cf. Matthew 9:14–17; Mark 2:18–22; Luke 5:33–38). Christ is the New Man, who now demands a new way of life with new requirements and a new righteousness. The new Christian fasting, like the new teaching of Christ, will need to belong rather organically and properly to the new man in Christ and to the new Christian way of life. The Christian gospel is not a mere external corrective to some of the elements of Judaism, but rather something strikingly new. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). This expression of St. Paul the Apostle is an excellent commentary on this new Christian way of life. Christianity is the “new wine” and “the good wine” (John 2:6–10) that requires “new wineskins,” new men and women of faith in Christ, not only to accept it and contain it, but also to live by it properly and successfully with Christian humility and obedience to God.

Moreover, Jesus Christ did not come to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17–18), and He did this both in His teaching and in His person as the Savior of the world, who inaugurated the Kingdom of God and initiated the Christian way of life in His Church. As the Christian Church grew and expanded into the pagan world, the holy apostles, martyrs and fathers included in their teaching, among other important matters, the biblical tradition of fasting as noted above. The focus, however, was clearly on the ascetical spirit that characterized the Christian way of life from the very beginning, and particularly after the fourth century, when the persecutions had ended and large numbers of people were coming into the Church and needed to be instructed and guided into the truly new Christian faith and way of life.

During those early centuries of Church history, the ascetic ideal of Christian living was especially taken up and developed by the new Christian institution of monasticism, which introduced even more rigorous disciplines into its own way of life. With this in mind, we must be careful not to make a common mistake and assume that the strict discipline of Orthodox fast-
moral human beings, but rather to transfigure and transform the whole person, body and soul, according to the measure made possible by God the Father in Jesus Christ the Son, through the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church.

The Christian asceticism of Orthodox fasting can be adapted to the new realities and circumstances of modern life by including a disciplined time to find peace and quiet, to really focus on prayer, to become aware and sensitive to the presence and needs of other human beings around us. Such Orthodox fasting has the capacity to raise a prophetic voice and oppose the temptations of our secular culture. “Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit...glorify God in your body and in your spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

Orthodox asceticism is not perfection itself; it is a way to perfection. It is an expression of our dependence upon God, our existential hunger and thirst for God and His righteousness. It is the humble yet earnest seeking for the ultimate goal of human life: the kingdom of God. Fasting, the simple control of what we put into our mouth, goes hand in hand with self-control in general, with bodily and mental vigilance, humility, obedience, repentance and tears of contrition—all these are means, all reasonable efforts on the part of the conscientious believer to approach the ultimate goal and participate in the holiness of God.

Clearly then the asceticism of the Orthodox Church does not seek to punish, to deprive, to torment; it does not seek to reject or diminish human nature. Rather it seeks its therapy and purification, its unfettering and liberation from every sinful bond and passion that hinders and frustrates true and eternal life in God. It is a ceaseless effort of the whole person, body and soul, seeking to abolish and destroy the roots of evil, to do battle against Satan and his primeval deceptions and influences. It is the necessary orientation of life, requiring constant denial and renewal and ceaseless effort, toward transcendence, toward the evangelical way of transfiguration and restoration of human nature to its original beauty, glory and honor, and to its being truly in the image and likeness of God.

No ascetic effort by itself suffices, however, without the love revealed in Christ, to bring us close to God. We must avoid the ever-tempting hypocrisy of false religiosity and direct the secondary elements of all ascetic efforts and fasting to their primary goals: the purity and humility of the heart and to the purity and fullness of our love for God and for humankind. Fasting is one of the classic forms of asceticism, ever reminding all Christians of their fallen state of being. On the contrary, without fasting one becomes indolent, negligent and weak in other spiritual struggles, allowing the victory to go to Satan, who is an ever-vigilant and ever-fasting deceiver, who catches us off guard without our proper armor and weaponry. One who is thus well armed and well disciplined in fasting and prayer will acquire the firmness of mind and body to be ready and adequate to respond and repel every sinful temptation or passion.

Here is a beautiful excerpt from St. John Chrysostom’s Homilies on Fasting to conclude this article:

“The period of bodily fasting comes to an end, yes, but the period of spiritual fasting never ends! This spiritual fasting is superior to the bodily fasting, which has been established in the Church for the sake of this ongoing spiritual fasting. Earlier, when you were fasting, I often warned you that it is possible to be fasting and yet to be not truly fasting. Now, after the fast, I can again say that it is possible to be not fasting, but in fact to be truly fasting! How does one truly fast without fasting? When one eats and partakes freely of all foods, one must also continue in spiritual sobriety and virtue by abstaining from anything that is sinful. It is in this manner, therefore, that we can be truly fasting while not fasting. Sometimes, however, when trying to fast strictly from foods, we may readily find some excuses to adjust or to avoid such ascetic efforts. This is permissible in some cases and for certain people. Although we may sometimes suspend our ascetic fasting from foods, no one can ever have an excuse to suspend or interrupt their spiritual fast, which seeks to avoid sin and to practice virtue!”

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Almsgiving plays an indispensable role in the spiritual growth of the individual Christian and the local and diocesan Church. Not fully heeding the call to care for the “least of our brethren” can help explain the spiritual stagnation and dis-integration Orthodox Christians sometimes feel, as they do all the “right things”—pray, fast, worship, etc.—without experiencing the change of heart they desire. A fuller understanding of almsgiving can reshape and renew both the believer and the corporate Church.

The contemporary clamor for systemic change, for “social justice,” has often been undermined by anger and even violence, to the great dismay of many Orthodox. Orthodoxy provides a unique and soothing tonic to the efforts for structural change that advocates espouse. It does so by actualizing the potential for systemic change in a way that is both personal, focusing on each person (which is Trinitarian in nature), and communal, as the Church (which is also Trinitarian in nature). It does this by focusing less on a justice that comes from “rights” and more on a justice that is based in love. In doing so, the Church, in her humility, takes on the cross, developing not a vainly sought-after utopia, but a justice based in the faith in and hope of an ever-compassionate God.

The Disconnected Cross: Philanthropy and Almsgiving

NICHOLAS METRAKOS
In the face of human pain and suffering, the call to action that Orthodox Christians hear is the echo of the lament, “My soul yearns after God and I seek Him in tears.”1 We are called to love our fellow man only because God has first loved us, and, through His example on the cross, taught us how to love. The Orthodox spiritual tradition often uses the cross as a visual metaphor to illustrate the interdependence between our love for God (vertical love) and our love for neighbor (horizontal love). When we separate (usually unintentionally) our love for God and love for our fellow man, our good works can leave us feeling empty. The volunteer who worships on Sundays and works at a soup kitchen on Tuesdays without deliberately connecting these two events knows firsthand the spiritual malnutrition of this fractured worldview. The cross pulls us toward God vertically and toward our fellow man horizontally. In almsgiving the two loves are joined together and cannot be separated.

PHILANTHROPY AND ALMSGIVING

For many the word *philanthropy* has come to mean “financial assistance to those less fortunate.” Giving aid to the needy is honorable but is not itself the fullness of philanthropy. Philanthropy is more than action but an illumined state of being (1 John 2:10) where we feel complete love for our fellow man. Almsgiving consists of actions that we do for the benefit of someone else, but as Orthodox Christians our almsgiving should always be done with philanthropy—with authentic love for the ones being served.

Because man is both spiritual and physical, our almsgiving should be targeted to help both spiritual and physical needs. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ tells us that those who minister to the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned will be called blessed of the Father and become inheritors of the Kingdom (Matthew 25:34). All of these epithets apply to both our body and our soul: The prison chaplain ministers to those physically imprisoned who may also feel spiritually confined (Psalm 141:8). The soup kitchen provides sustenance to persons who might also be spiritually hungry. Those who are insufficiently clothed need protection from the elements and to feel the warmth of Christian love.

Jesus Christ teaches us to invest in celestial treasuries (Matthew 6:20). By offering physical alms we make a sound investment for eternity. Performing acts of mercy that have physical and spiritual benefit doubles that investment making us even more profitable spiritual economists.

In Holy Scripture almsgiving is linked with eternal life. It is clear, almost uncomfortably so, that in order to be worthy inheritors of the Kingdom, we must provide for the physical and spiritual needs of our brothers and sisters.

THE OIL OF MERCY

There is a common Orthodox pun made between the Greek words mercy (*τὸ ἔλεος*) and oil (*ὁ ἔλαιος*). St. Symeon of Thessaloniki succinctly explains that “oil is the type of divine compassion and mercy.”3 The “oil of mercy” is an extremely effective tool for our personal spiritual growth. Holy oil is used as a part of our repentance, and almsgiving can be a useful tool for cleansing ourselves of sin. Holy Chrism is used to protect us against assaults of the enemy and to sanctify us. Similarly the “oil of mercy” or almsgiving when combined with fragrant, Christ-like love, becomes protective and sanctifying.

ALMSGIVING FOR PURIFICATION

In the Old Testament, Daniel instructs the wayward Nebuchadnezzar to atone for his “sins with alms” and his “wrongdoings with compassion for the poor” (Daniel 4:27). The Archangel Raphael teaches Tobit and his son Tobias that almsgiving “washes away every sin” (Tobit 12:9). In the New Testament, Christ rebukes the Pharisees because the “inward part is full of greed and wickedness” (Luke 11:39). As a method of cleansing Christ tells them to “give alms of such things as you have” (Luke 11:41). In Matthew 6:1–18, Christ links together a “trinity” of almsgiving, prayer and fasting, and He instructs us how to do each of the three correctly. We know from listening to the often-read Sunday Gospel that through prayer and fasting, demons are cast out (Matthew 17:21), but we sometimes forget that almsgiving also offers an opportunity for greater purification.

ALMSGIVING AS A DEFENSE AGAINST THE DEVIL

The sage Sirach teaches us that “More than a mighty shield and better than a strong spear, almsgiving will fight for you against your enemy” (Wisdom of Sirach 29:13). As the stadium of the virtues opens, the hymnographer instructs us as spiritual warriors to take up “mercy as a helmet.”4 Surely we would not engage in battle without our shield, spear and helmet—almsgiving. With a spear we keep our attacker far away, with a shield our hearts are guarded from his arrows, and with a helmet our minds are protected. Experience teaches that almsgiving with true love for our neighbor is a powerful defense against temptations.
ALMSGIVING AS A MEANS TO ACHIEVE HOLINESS

Tradition holds that the righteous ancestors of God, Joachim and Anna, who because of their holy lifestyle became the parents of the Panagia, gave one-third of their livelihood to the poor. In Acts of the Apostles, the centurion Cornelius gave alms and was in continual prayer, and because of his alms and godly way of life, it was afforded to him to see an angel (Acts 10:2–4). The life of St. Silouan the Athonite moves us because of his abounding love for God and his brethren, which he manifested through service. As a result of these loves it was given to him “to know mysteries and foresee things to come.” Through almsgiving with integrated love, prayer and fasting, people have been given such holiness: to bear the Mother of God, to see angels, and to know the mysteries of God.

PRAXIS: THEOLOGY IN ACTION

Practicing almsgiving also renews the local church. Seven years ago San Francisco’s Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church had less-than-robust Sunday attendance, a substantial debt that seemed at times hopeless, and an outflow of cash and participating members. While many might have looked at this situation and expected almsgiving to be the last priority for the parish, it was in fact near the top of the list. As Holy Trinity reshaped her mission, vision and values, an investment in philanthropy became a top priority. Today the parish is blessed with financial stability and steady growth. Here are some of the activities in which this church is engaged:

As a suburban parish Holy Trinity is geographically separated from the city’s poor. Consequently, Holy Trinity has focused on bringing alms to the homeless in downtown San Francisco through the Street Outreach program. Parishioners are able to convey their love when they personally deliver food and bags of personal necessities to the homeless.

Holy Trinity participates in Help Portrait, a compassionate movement that validates the personhood of society’s marginalized populations. This outreach brings together volunteer photographers, photo editors, cosmetologists and cooks (hospitality is always extended) to provide persons of limited means with studio-quality individual or family portraits. Again, because of the parish’s geography, arrangements are made with social service agencies and urban ministries to bring those being served to the church.

Internationally, Holy Trinity supports communities of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Philippines through Philippines Connection and annually sends a sizeable group of youth and young adults to Project Mexico. Both of these efforts resonate locally because of the large Filippino and Latino communities found in and around San Francisco. The parish also sponsors both short- and long-term missionaries, including the parish’s proistamenos, who will lead an OCMC team to Moldova this year.

Almsgiving is shaping the future of the Metropolis of San Francisco. With the blessing and leadership of His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos, the Metropolis has undertaken the challenge to develop and implement a strategic plan. Expanding philanthropic outreach at the parish level is one of its chief objectives.

The Metropolis of San Francisco Philoptochos Society and many local Philoptochos chapters have a long and well-established tradition of service. In cooperation with the
Philoptochos, the Strategic Plan is working to support existing ministries and foster the creation of new parish philanthropic activities. An information exchange is encouraging persons engaged in philanthropic outreach to share ideas, successes and lessons learned with other faithful from throughout the Metropolis.

Another goal of the Strategic Plan’s philanthropic outreach is the development of an Orthodox Christian service learning curriculum. A spin-off of a well-established trend in secular education, Orthodox service learning encourages groups to formulate and implement ministries that help their neighbor, and it places those activities within the context of the parish’s religious education program. For example, service participants can do a guided study of the lives of missionary saints and then organize a benefit for OCMC. Other parishioners could read about the life of St. Luke the Surgeon and then volunteer at a local health clinic. Metropolis service learning workshops equip clergy and lay leaders to integrate existing philanthropic and educational ministries, identify needs that the parish could address, and begin designing ministries to meet those needs.

CONNECTING THE CROSS

Almsgiving and charity are not optional activities for Orthodox Christians. We should constantly seek opportunities to minister to others physically and spiritually. Most importantly, our charitable acts must flow from a sense of authentic Christian philanthropy, because without love, almsgiving is like “a flower lacking beauty and fragrance.” The loves typified in the connected cross cannot be separated. Our goal as Orthodox Christians should not be to advance secular values through cold social justice but rather to become sources of light fueled by divine compassion. When parishes or metropolises create philanthropic outreach opportunities based in a love for God and an authentic love for humankind, the Lord’s commandment is fulfilled, the faithful are spiritually strengthened, communities are improved, and the warmth of Orthodoxy spreads.

1 Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, “Yearning for God” in St. Silouan the Athonite (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1999), 269.
2 To perform acts of mercy (ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη, from τό ἔλεος, meaning mercy or pity).
4 2nd Sticheron Idiomelon from the Orthros. Sunday of Forgiveness.
5 1st Kathismos, Orthros. St. Silouan the Athonite.
Prayer, fasting and philanthropy are usually named as the traditional spiritual disciplines. They have been part of Christian life since its founding. They involved our whole being: mind, body and spirit. We also approach them holistically because these are overlapping dimensions of our existence. Prayer nourishes the spirit and can involve the body. Fasting is training of the body. Philanthropy is also activity of the body, especially involving our hands as we care for others. Of course, our minds are involved with all of them.

But what engages and feeds the mind? Study. For many years, I have argued that there is an additional spiritual discipline, that of study.

When I was writing my doctoral dissertation, the discipline of study was essential. Four or five evenings per week (I was working full-time at the time), two to three hours had to be dedicated to reading, research, library work, and then writing, rewriting and editing. This was a continual pattern for nearly two years, in order to complete the project. There was little extra time, just some necessary breaks. After I had earned my degree, I bumped into a friend who asked me, “Where have you been?” Indeed, I had pretty much slipped out of view for that period. But I was engaged in the intense discipline of study.

ANTON C. VRAME
I am not suggesting that everyone write a doctoral dissertation to learn the habit and discipline of study. Rather I am affirming that study is a spiritual discipline, one that I had to master at an intense level to earn my doctorate (and of course, all my educational experiences prior to it had prepared me for this), but one that is also necessary to grow in our spiritual lives. It is a true ascesis with rich historical antecedents, an essential part of our Church history.

What are the elements of this discipline?

The dictionary defines study as “a state of contemplation” and the “application of the mental faculties to the acquisition of knowledge.” For most of us, especially when it comes to matters of faith, religion and theology, the acquisition of knowledge usually begins by reading a book or some other significant text. But from the definition, we can see that one can also study natural phenomena—a work of art, a piece of music, even a building. For ease, we’ll use the book as our example.

A book is an extended presentation by an author, with information and further commentary on that information, meant to convince you of its accuracy and wisdom, and lead you to a new way of understanding. A book is a conversation between the author and you separated by time and space. When you read a Father of the Church, you are in a conversation with that Father, even though he lived centuries ago in a distant land. But the conversation is not one-way because you are able to form your own thoughts, reactions, questions, insights and conclusions about the topic. You can be taking notes in the margins, with that yellow highlighter, or in a separate notebook. In a sense, you are writing your own book about the same topic.

You have an advantage over the author you are reading, because he or she only had the use of sources that existed before that book was written. You have access to all the writings and knowledge that have come after that. For example, I completed my dissertation in 1997. In the eighteen years since, many more books have been written on the topics I investigated. How would they influence my dissertation if I were writing it today?

Study involves time. Have you ever started a book, read chapter one, put it down for a month, and then tried to read chapter two? That’s not really study! Study involves creating a predictable, regular schedule and adhering to it as best as possible. Just like a “prayer rule” involves set times for prayer, a study rule is needed to become skilled at study. Creating a schedule and setting a time is important. Will it be one hour per week or thirty minutes twice a week? In my dissertation example, I studied four to five evenings per week. I always set Thursday and Saturday evenings as my free evenings, and depending on other things, one other night could be a free night or a study night.

Study often involves repetition, revisiting the same material. Once is usually not enough. You can read the same passage in the Bible repeatedly and learn something new each time. The same is true for a book or other object of study. In order to grasp what an author is presenting, you will probably return to it many times.

Study can be done alone or in a group. This is the purpose of a class. I worked on my dissertation alone, but I had regular meetings with my advisors. We didn’t study together, but they commented on every page and idea I wrote. The comments fell under three categories: 1) You should look into this issue further. Read the following… 2) Are you sure you really want to say that?; and 3) You are on the right track. Keep going! When a group studies a text together, not only are you having a conversation with the author, you are also having a conversation with a teacher, someone who has looked into the matter more closely and can guide you. You are also in a discussion with the group, gaining from their perspectives and having your perspectives questioned, challenged or affirmed.

Study often leads to more study. Once you get involved with a text, questions and ideas will emerge that will require further study. Imagine reading a passage in the Bible and a patristic commentary about it, then reading a new father on the same passage, then reading a contemporary scholar on the same passage. Was there an idea that you needed to know more about because you lacked the background? Was there a particular idea that you wanted to explore further because you found it so interesting? Did you want to examine the ideas of those who disagree with or have a different perspective on the ideas that you were studying?

Study is an act of contemplation, per the dictionary. Study invites us to reflect on what we are learning so that we can “recreate” and deeply appropriate what we have learned in our heads, hearts, and hands. Study is a catalyst for the work of the Church.

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INTRODUCTION: FOUNDATIONS OF A COURSE

During about twenty of the past thirty or so years, I have had the distinct privilege of serving on the theological faculty of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology as an adjunct professor. For almost a decade until today, I have enjoyed teaching “Spirituality and Addiction,” a course that strives to look at addiction and essential aspects of the addictive process through an Orthodox Christian theological and spiritual perspective. The course is also designed in a manner that will introduce the student to addiction in the contemporary world. The benefits of the “12-Step” approach to recovery are particularly appreciated and highlighted, as numerous aspects of this approach originate from the spiritual tradition of the ancient undivided Church. During the first half of the semester, students are required to visit 12-Step meetings as part of the “field assignment” component of the class.

The study of addiction, addictive processes and trauma over the past twenty-plus years have quickly and deeply come into focus both in medicine and psychology. There is much that cannot be addressed in an introductory, graduate-level seminary course such as the one I teach. Nevertheless, exposing students to this topic is vitally important. At the same time, it is even more important that the Orthodox Christian Church as human “family” commits to becoming more sensitive to this issue.

STUDENT COMPOSITION: GOD IS IN THE MIX

In brief, the course strives to offer a constructive overview of addiction and point to an Orthodox response that is “in the world, but not of the world” with humility and compassion. Typically, I have found that a large portion of seminary students select to attend this class with benign good will. They sense that there may be “some people out there” whom they will be engaging in future ministries battling various aspects of addiction. The underlying focus is on the word “some,” as this word usually implies “not too many.” I have been told on more than one occasion, “I don’t expected to pastor a large, metropolitan parish, Presvytera, so immersing myself in the topic to the degree you wish us busy seminarians do really does not apply to me.” My response tends to be, “My husband serves a wonderful,
very small, semi-rural community in New Hampshire that we love very much. The pain and destruction of addiction most certainly is there! How can you be so sure that the souls who one day may comprise your potential future parish will be the exception?”

Other times, students know very well what certain addictions look like because they grew up with or are presently dealing with loved ones who suffer from an active addiction. They come to class earnestly seeking answers to deep-seated questions like, “What is the Orthodox Christian response to this?” or “How can I help my loved ones?” and even “This deeply affects me in ways I do not like. How do I help myself?”

And still another group of persons elects to take the course because they are actively struggling against an addiction, an addictive disorder and/or a “dual diagnosis.” By the grace of God and their hard work, some of these persons may have advanced deeply into their journey toward healing, enjoying many fruits of long-term recovery. Over the years, usually to their surprise, their new life in sobriety turns out to also lead to a new or renewed life in Christ. This may eventually lead them to dedicating themselves to lifelong ministry and coming to study at seminary. These persons in particular have my respect and admiration. And finally, other students attend this seminary course minimizing, and some even cleverly avoiding, just how “infected” they may really be with anything closely related to an addiction. With this last group, the minimizers and deniers, there seems to be a general similarity among them, that whatever is wrong from their perspective, is never their fault. Sadly, more often than not, although they may complete the class, it appears to me as if they change very little.

Nevertheless, most students do elect to remain in this class for the whole semester. The vast majority seem to have in common two important qualities: courage and openness to growth (i.e., change). The course reading material and other assignments intentionally invite, inspire and even provoke to some degree the student to study this illness as closely and personally as they are comfortably able to do. By the time the semester is completed, most students find themselves joining me in a) realizing that we all are “infected” and b) joining the struggle of respecting the countless parallels of 12-Step recovery with various practices and insights from Orthodox spirituality, without necessarily equating one with the other. For me, this prods us to continue trusting that by the power of the Holy Spirit, the compassionate, risen Lord is in the mix.

**BRIEF OBSERVATIONS OF TODAY’S CONTEXT**

Definitions regarding addiction and the addictive process until not too long ago applied only to alcohol and the abuse of other chemical substances. For example, the most popularly respected, non-medical vehicle for self-definition of an “addict” in this society comes to us largely from perspectives of the 12-Step community (founded in the tenets of Alcoholic Anonymous [AA]). From the perspective of the 12-Step community, addiction is identified primarily as a spiritual illness that affects the person holistically; in other words, persons are “infected,” so to speak, simultaneously through several domains to varying degrees, including the physical, behavioral, cognitive, psychological, relational, and, most importantly, the spiritual. For Orthodox Christians, the 12-Step approach may reflect a more holistic and healthier view than a rigidly legalistic, i.e., “moral” definition of addiction, or a strictly mid-twentieth-century medical definition, i.e., an approach identified with clinical measurement of chemical intake and resulting physical dependence. Many of the recent developments in the study of addiction are based in widening the field of study in the scientific, medical and psychological communities, as well as recent technological advances, particularly in brain-imaging science.

The bottom line for self-definition of addiction concerns persons acknowledging that their lives had become “totally unmanageable” because of the disease. This understanding, for me at least, seems to have a somewhat close affinity with the patristic appreciation for acknowledging the sin of *lemargia,* or “madness of the palette.” This term refers to the profound, self-inflicted suffering that results from reacting to inward, *insati able* “fury” or “madness” and its corresponding external behaviors. While often involving food, a *lemargia* can also refer to an “appetite” for many things. From a more precise Orthodox spiritual perspective, the *lemargia*’s fixation is on the “oral” and less so in the “intake” of quantity. From the level of the “deep heart” or *nous,* this term identifies an out-of-control craving to “take things in” on the *experiential level* yet never experience satiety. Our side of the healing effort or ascesis prods us to step-by-step encounter our own uncharted, “terrible” inner depths while simultaneously and unconditionally trusting our entire being into “the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:31). This is a hunger that only God can fill.

And so, during the past twenty-five to thirty years in the world of addiction treatment, help, and studies, the scope of the lens of addiction has been widening to include much more
than alcohol and substance dependence. Codependency, pornography, relationship and sex addiction, eating and body dysmorphic disorders, cutting, hair-pulling and other forms of self-mutilation— as well as gambling, spending, hoarding, professional success, celebrity, popularity and personal image, “excitement,” the Internet, “explosive disorders” and the like—are now also being examined through this lens. These virtually beg to be considered seriously through the lens of addiction.

Is it possible for us to become “addicted” to ourselves? To our image? To our always being “right” at the expense of others? To religion and religious scrupulosity? An Orthodox Christian approach and the 12-Step addiction model, through their respective lenses of exploration, would both unequivocally respond with yes. We bear in mind the Lord’s words: “I have come to give life, life in abundance” (John 10:10).

**THE VERY BOTTOM LINE**

Patrick Carnes, a pioneering scholar in the field of addiction, especially regarding sex addiction and clergy sexual misconduct, in past decades has often been heard by his friends to joke, “Don’t kid yourself: the first and most dangerous addiction of all is the addiction to power (i.e., power and control over
Others). About twenty years ago, I had the honor of being included in one of these circles of Dr. Carnes’s friends at meetings of the board of the Inter-Faith Sexual Trauma Institute (ISTI) in Collegeville, MN. At the moment I heard him say this, I was stunned by his insightful closeness to the Orthodox Christian theological understanding of the “first sin.” Briefly, the Orthodox teach that the Fall of Adam and Eve is founded in a crisis of love, where they freely chose to disobey the Lord’s directives in the garden, “desiring (or loving) to be god without God.” By ignoring the directive of the all-compassionate God in the garden, our fore-parents chose “in-authentic relationship” so they would become God without God, seeking for themselves His position and power (i.e., His “power, glory and honor”). Orthodox Christianity traditionally identifies this same phenomenon as the sin of pride.

From the Christian perspective, authentic and abundant life begins after repentance (metanoia). The Lord’s first recorded words in His earthly ministry were a call to repentance: “repent for the Kingdom (basileia) of God is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). The Lord bids us to “first seek the Kingdom...and all these things will be given to you, as well” (Matthew 6:33). The new life in Christ is established in repentance, a radical turning away from false gods. That which disables us as individual persons and communally from “abiding” in the Lord first and foremost is related to sin. Seeking anything else that sets itself above the Lord’s directive is ultimately idolatry, and idols offer no real life. In class, we tend to spend a lot of time discussing the difference between authentic life and relationships reflective of the “life in abundance” with the various ways we can become “high” off our “personal drugs of choice.” These range from real chemical substances to and/or through our own “terminally unique” delusions of grandeur, i.e., pride.

The 12-Step model strongly asserts that genuine recovery can only begin with each person only after the bravest act of courage and humility, when the “penitent” unconditionally acknowledges his or her powerlessness over this activity. These persons must declare that their lives have become “totally unmanageable” because of their addiction and that God alone is able to restore life to sanity. As a result of this unconditional surrender, they immediately turn their lives over to Him before taking another step forward. And this act is repeated one day at a time, day after day. For me as an Orthodox Christian living in contemporary society, this approach to repentance feels eerily familiar...usually, in a very good way.

**FOR ON-GOING CONSIDERATION**

*In this reflection outlining essential “take-away lessons” from teaching this course, I wish to conclude by offering five important assumptions that are engaged frequently through the semester: 1. It is all about authentic relationship.*

Beginning with a thoughtful discussion about the Holy Trinity, the class is founded in a theological model stressing the importance of personhood, where no one is redundant and where, paradoxically, we find the fullness of our unique personhood through growing communion (koinonia). The class begins to explore the importance of the lifelong effort of cultivating authentic relationships in the Lord.

2. **Addiction is a disease, and no one is uninfected.** Although every person is fully responsible for his or her actions, addiction is a disease. No one is “uninfected” by the “illness.” This distracts and is even “life-effacing” from the cultivation of authentic relationships. Through the centuries, Orthodox Christian spirituality traditionally understands sin and death as the end product of this process of mutation. Addiction in its full-blown and most visibly destructive, deadly expressions. All other intermediate stages between fully alive and fully mutated involve a degree of sickness, or “infection.” Outside of theosis, we are all infected to some degree. Hearing a few Orthodox today promote themselves as “former” or “healed” addicts is for me like hearing them say, “I am no longer a sinner.” This is delusional.

3. **Attachments and the passions undergird every addiction and addictive process.** Spiritual attachments are all of those priorities that would be God in our lives; they are all idols and although we may experience some kind of temporary “high” from them, these ultimately offer no real life. This phenomenon is intimately associated with the Orthodox Christian understanding of the passions. They are rooted in both the attachment and the external imbalanced reaction the “patient” has when his or her attach-
ment causes challenges and this sin-sick reactivity has become an embedded, imbalanced noticeable pattern. The Fathers are full of examples depicting this process. A quick, hopefully humorous, non-patristic example to illustrate the above may be to warn you not to take my cherished morning cup of coffee away from me. If you were to grab and take away my cup of coffee, my (quite imbalanced) reaction would probably not be very pretty; nor in that moment does my reaction serve to build my side of relationship with the Lord or you. This demonstrates an embedded “love” that values the gift more than the Giver of the gift. This indicates a deeper distraction impeding my “seeking first the Kingdom.”

4. Radical humility “in the presence of God” is the antidote to pride.
In our fallen, self-preserving tendencies, we—the broken ones and sinners when unrepentant—easily judge others. It is as if the tiny mote is in our own eye and a log is in eyes of almost everyone else. This depicts a symptom of the sin of pride or “grandiosity” of the infected person. There is a popular 12-Step therapeutic slogan that states, “We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by what we see through their behaviors.” From an Orthodox Christian spiritual perspective, this phenomenon usually indicates an astounding degree of “hardness of heart” resulting in a growing inability for compassion for others. The antidote to this includes the radical cultivation of humility, resting on utter dependence on God. This process leads us to new discoveries related to our personal spiritual poverty (cf. Matthew 5:3) and what we often call in class “humility, that living (wakeful) quality of being right-sized in the presence of God.” Authentic humility serves the “life in abundance” (John 10:10) and functions as the royal road to sobriety and love.

5. Confront our addicted random thoughts and concepts (logismoi).
The practices promoted by the 12-Step model, each in their own way combat the random thoughts and concepts (logismoi) that vie for our internal attention, through to our resulting behaviors. These are combatted against by the encouragement of frequent personal prayer, mutual accountability, the use of therapeutic slogans, such as encouragement to “pick up the 500 pound phone,” to share personal pain and wrongdoing (i.e., sin) with at least one other person, and/or to attend a meeting to be with others on this path. These practical, “non-cerebral” actions help form a kind of humble-yet-powerful, psycho-physical “scaffolding” to guide the growth of the person toward his or her sobriety, through which God will do His work. These techniques are very helpful for persons motivated to grow in their sobriety. As a result of this on-going, day-to-day discipline and process, we discover that we are as “powerless” over the disease as we are over the miracle. The simplicity of these vital practices when compared to the rich, superabundant resources filling the life of the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit, Who always points to Christ, however, are no match for the fullness of Orthodox Christian spirituality. Nevertheless, almost every year there is a student, not infrequently a seasoned member of the clergy, describing his experience with the 12-Step community to the class by stating that “their honesty, sharing and humility becomes a kind of group confession, reminiscent of the early Church, and my faith as an Orthodox Christian is renewed.”

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Father of Compassion and the God of all comfort. (2 Corinthians 1:3)

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For an example of an Orthodox Christian addiction support group, check out the blog and videos of the Give Back Group at Holy Apostles Church in Shoreline, WA: www.holy apostlesgo.org/give-back-addiction-support-group

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1. This article is dedicated to Fr. Nicholas Triantafillou, President of Hellenic College-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, 2001–2015, who encouraged me to develop and teach this course.
3. Or “Higher Power,” as is said alternatively today.
4. That is, glorified in the presence of the living God (also known as soteria).
5. While not unrelated, this type of psycho-spiritual “attachment” is different than contemporary developmental, psychological attachment theory.
Our culture bombards us with images of marriage. Websites and magazines tantalize us with stories and images of how the royal couple met, whether the actors’ wedding ceremony was timeless or tasteless, and why the politicians decided to divorce or stay together after the scandal. This “news” often frames our discussion of values concerning intimacy and relationships.

Does the Church hold up any paradigms for marriage to provide the framework for a Christ-centered marriage? Indeed it does. The Church offers three icons from which we can learn how to live the married life: Christ the Bridegroom, Sts. Joachim and Anna, and the Wedding at Cana. These icons represent the three dimensions of marriage, the personal, the intimate and the communal, respectively. Collectively they give us an Orthodox model for marriage.

Living these three dimensions daily is part of the grace and challenge of married life. We have a “personal” life, that is, who we are and who we are becoming in Christ. Yes, we become “one flesh” in marriage, but we do not become “one person.” Husband and wife remain distinct persons in the marriage relationship. Secondly, husband and wife share an exclusive personal and intimate relationship. Finally, the couple lives the married life in relationship with others, not in isolation.

Christ the Bridegroom:
THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

First and most important is the icon of Christ the Bridegroom, who married us, His bride, the Church, supremely through His suffering and death in the ultimate act of love. He offers himself to us as the perfect model of the perfect spouse.

Our initial response to being challenged to love our spouse as Christ loves us might be, “He was God; I am human.” However, to be fully human, in fact, means to be like Christ, by grace, through faith.

Let us pause and reflect on Jesus’s humanity. During the three years of His public ministry, He regularly took time to
be alone or with His Father in prayer. We also know that He had an inner circle of fellow workers and friends, which began with Peter, James and John and extended to the twelve disciples and a larger group of followers. Additionally, Jesus had other dear friends, most notably Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Finally, following the natural rhythm of life in His day, we can deduce that Jesus ate a healthy Mediterranean diet and walked a lot. He lived, what we call in contemporary terms, an active, healthy lifestyle.

This may seem like a stretch, but we can conclude that Jesus exemplified “healthy, holy self-care” in His daily life. He was a healthy, holy person. When He ministered to others through miracles, teaching and preaching, Jesus acted in love from a place of fullness. He was secure in His relationship with His Father and others (even though many opposed Him), and He knew His purpose in life. Then, in His final act of love for His bride, His suffering and death, Jesus was able to give everything He had, himself.

How can we become a better husband or wife? By living and growing in Christ and allowing His grace to grow in us, so that His love works through us in loving our spouse. None of us is capable of loving our spouse with the perfect love of our Bridegroom. However, by God’s grace and faithfully looking to Jesus as the model spouse, we can intentionally enter into the process of holy, healthy self-care through prayer, solitude, worship, learning, healthful eating, physical activity, appropriate rest and leisure, fellowship with others, and attending to any unhealthy habits or addictions we may have. Thus, we will become healthy, holy persons, who, by God’s grace and our cooperation, grow to love our spouses from a place of fullness.

Sts. Joachim and Anna:
THE INTIMATE DIMENSION

The second dimension of marriage, the intimate relationship of husband and wife, is beautifully depicted in the icon of Sts. Joachim and Anna, portrayed as an older couple tenderly embracing each other. This is the private domain of the couple, which involves how husband and wife communicate with one another, resolve conflict, manage finances, navigate personality differences, parent their children, share responsibilities, make decisions, enjoy leisure, show affection and share physical intimacy. Sometimes we take these areas for granted and do not seek to grow them. At other times we struggle with them. When these difficulties arise, what do we do? Do we attend to them, avoid dealing with them, or allow them to grow and fester?

The tenderness and love depicted in the icon of Sts. Joachim and Anna can only come through a lifetime of a dynamic, maturing marriage. The seed of love that is planted in marriage has the awesome potential, by God’s grace and our cooperation, to become a most magnificent flower. If not nurtured, it will wither and possibly die.
The Wedding at Cana: 
THE COMMUNAL DIMENSION

Finally, each couple lives in relationship to “community,” pictured in the icon of the Wedding at Cana, with Christ and the Theotokos as the honored guests. The sacrament of marriage and the celebration that follows are always in the context of a community, showing that we do not live our married lives in isolation but as part of a larger body, which includes extended family, koumbari, fellow parishioners, neighbors, colleagues and friends. If and when we are blessed with children, they become part of the community of the home, the fruit of the love of the husband and wife in Christ.

Furthermore, as we live out marriage in the context of “community,” we may be challenged to put other relationships ahead of our marriages. Once we are married, we would do well, however, to remember that after Christ, the most important relationship we have is with our spouse.

CONCLUSION

Collectively, the icons of Christ the Bridegroom, Sts. Joachim and Anna, and the Wedding at Cana encapsulate the meaning of a wholesome and meaningful marriage. In the icon of Christ the Bridegroom, we are given the image of the perfect spouse who unconditionally and sacrificially loves His beloved from a place of fullness and wholeness, grounded in His relationship with the Father and emulating, in His humanity, personal and relational self-care. This icon holds up for us both who we are and who we are becoming. In the icon of Sts. Joachim and Anna, we are given the image of the tender, loving, affectionate embrace of the couple, signifying the exclusive intimate relationship of husband and wife. Finally, in the icon of the Wedding at Cana, we see the married couple in the context of all of those who constitute the communities in which they live, reminding us that in marriage we do not live in isolation and that we are responsible to hold up marriage as the primary human relationship in our lives while maintaining and growing loving relationships with others.

In marriage, the festive joy of the first day should last for the whole of life: every day should be a feast day; every day husband and wife should appear to each other as new, extraordinary beings. The only way of achieving this: let both deepen their spiritual life and strive hard in the task of self-development.

– Fr. Alexander Elchaninov, from The Diary of a Russian Priest

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REV. DN. PAUL ZAHARAS

Over the past several decades the external pressures and challenges associated with parenting teenagers have been varied. Whether it was the introduction of rock and roll music, the “social scourge” of the 1950s, or the pervasiveness of today’s social networking explosion, parents have faced the challenge of helping their children bridge the chasm that stands between childhood and adulthood. As Christian parents we recognize the importance of raising Godly-minded children, and we must take appropriate steps to help them in their journey toward Him.

Society today, through media and peer influence, can convey norms that do not coincide with the teachings of Orthodox Christianity. In fact, oftentimes, the messages that our teen children receive from the world are in direct contradiction to the saving message of Jesus Christ. Experiencing sleepless nights worrying about their children falling into substance use and abuse, sexual promiscuity and perversion, “over-connectedness” to social media, materialism, and myriad other harmful behaviors, parents at times feel overwhelmed by the challenge of addressing all of these issues with their teens.

In the Book of Proverbs we read, “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (22:6). This sounds simple enough, but given the variety of challenges that life throws at our young people, how can parents successfully prepare their teens for every situation? The simple answer is that you can’t address each and every possible circumstance that your child will face. We know from our own experience as well that there isn’t always someone standing by, watching our every move and steering us clear of mistakes and miscues. What we can offer to our children, however, are the tools necessary for them to constructively address challenges on their own.

The Church teaches us that each individual is created in the image of God, but what does this really mean? Without venturing into deep theological discussion, we can understand being created in the image of God to mean that we possess two of His specific attributes: intellect and free will. First of all, we have intellect, the ability to think. Scientists tell us that humans have the same type of “fight or flight” instincts that lower animals do; however, we also have the capacity for higher thought in the form of problem-solving and comprehension. Likewise, God has granted to us free will, the ability to make conscious choices, rather than being subject to mere reflex reactions.

With this in mind, the challenge given by the directive found in Proverbs to “train up a child in the way he should go” is much more attainable. If we are able to teach teens to utilize their God-given intellect and free will to make decisions that are physically and spiritually healthy, we are training them up in the way they should go.

This being said, teenagers are notorious for making poor decisions. Certainly this can be attributed to many causes, two of which are that decision-making centers of the brain are not fully developed at this stage in life, and the fact that teenagers are still trying desperately to establish their own identities. For this reason, Christian decision-making is a skill set that needs some instruction and practice. Here are some steps that you can take with your teenager:
1. It is vital to impress on our teens the importance of making quality decisions. They need to be well aware that decisions have consequences, and that consequences have ripples. What this means is that the choices they make generate real results, positive or negative, and those results affect not only the individual, but also those people and things around them. An example that is easy to understand is underage drinking. The decision to illegally drink alcohol can lead to health problems, trouble with the law and at home, and physical harm to oneself or others. Likewise, those consequences spread and affect a teen’s parents, family and peers. In a greater sense, sinful behavior separates us from God, and this separation has a negative effect on our relationships with others and our overall well-being.

2. Together with your teenager, identify some decisions or conflicts that are applicable to their own lives or to your family. These issues can range from relatively minor items with younger teens, such as what to wear to school, to more life-changing matters and moral questions, such as finding a occupation or vocation. Through this exercise children may recognize choices they did not otherwise realize that they had.

3. Help your child to carefully consider the options that are presented with each decision. Many times young people fail to look at the possible outcomes of their choices prior to making them. By making a conscious effort to weigh the potential positive and negative results of their actions, teens become better equipped in their decision-making process.

4. Clearly the most important point to remember in developing Christian decision-making skills is to make Christ the primary factor in every choice. A number of years ago “What Would Jesus Do?” (WWJD) bracelets were very popular and encouraged wearers to apply that question to their everyday actions. For us as Orthodox Christians, however, a much more basic and important question should be asked: does this particular action lead me closer to or further away from God?

5. Once a teen has considered the options and possible consequences of an action, let him or her make the decision. With your help, your child has used his or her intellect and has become educated about important aspects of a choice, and now it is time to exercise free will and make a decision.

6. After the decision has been made and consequences are realized, speak to your teen about the decision he or she made. By offering constructive feedback, you will enable him or her to better understand what has occurred and how to repeat positive and avoid negative outcomes in the future.

Ultimately, as members of the Body of Christ, we are called to seek after our Lord and His eternal kingdom. In sharing the Christian faith with our teenage children, we, along with the Church, present to them the choice of this path. Enabling them to be good, Christian decision-makers gives them the opportunity and ability to successfully take steps in this journey.

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Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms
Journeys into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East
Gerard Russell

The news about religious minorities in the Middle East and Africa has introduced many of us to communities that we had probably very little previous awareness of. The news has not been good—many horrible stories of persecution and martyrdom. That part of the world is filled with many small religious communities living under threat of extinction in their homelands, if not at the hands of religious persecution, then through the forces of societal pressure, aging populations, and migration for better lives in other parts of the world.

Gerard Russell, formerly a British diplomat and now a policy analyst, introduces the reader of his new book to religious communities that few of us know. He travels through Iran, Iraq, Syria, Palestine/Israel and Egypt to describe seven religious minorities: Mandaeans, Yazidis, Zoroastrians, Druze, Samaritans, Copts and Kalasha. Each chapter chronicles his travels into these communities to talk to believers and their leaders, observe rituals when possible or permitted, and to explore their beliefs. This is not a book of comparative religion or theology, but an anthropological study of the religious lives of little-known communities.

In the book, you will encounter religions that are among the oldest on earth, some with practices and ideas that will feel familiar and fascinated. For example, the Yazidis seem to have been the ones to create the handshake as a gesture of greeting, as a ritual of bonding. The Samaritans are the heirs to the Samaritans of the Bible. They continue to worship on Mount Gerizim as they did in the Gospel of John (chapter 4). The Mandaeans have rites of baptism, and they venerate John the Baptist, seeing him as equal to Jesus. There were also many connections to ancient Greek philosophy and history, a result of Alexander the Great’s conquests in the fourth century BC. The Druze trace their religion to the philosophy and geometry of Pythagoras. They struggle with a precept that limits marriage to within the community, and what that means for their sustainability over time. Zoroastrianism is rooted in ancient Persia (modern Iran); for example, Darius III, who was defeated by Alexander the Great, was most likely a Zoroastrian. One of the most interesting pieces in the book indicates that Greeks who presently support the Kalasha communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan do so because of their ancient connections to Alexander the Great.

A surprising feature of many of the communities was the secretive nature of their beliefs; adherents who have spent their whole lives in the religion have been taught almost nothing about what the religion believes because this knowledge is only for its leaders. They also could not share these secret beliefs with Russell. He was often told to look but not touch. In their homelands, this inability to share and explain the faith places a great deal of pressure on the believers, especially because the adherents face a much larger Islamic culture and can be pressured to convert to Islam (such as in Iran or in Pakistan). Islam has strict laws against blasphemy that can be brought to bear against these smaller communities.

The challenges are even greater outside their traditional lands, such as in the United States.

The last chapter of the book briefly looks into the experiences of those communities that have migrated to the United States. North America has become a welcoming and safe homeland to many of the communities. Many PRAXIS readers in Michigan are probably aware that the Detroit metropolitan area is filled with a sizeable Arab population. Russell situates his chapter there, meeting with Fr. George Shalhoub at the St. Mary Church in Livonia to discuss the connections among the various Arab communities there, Christian and non-Christian. Russell also describes other locations, such as the Yazidi community in Lincoln, NE, and he describes the Yazidi leaders who traveled from Lincoln to visit a few of their members near Buffalo, New York. The first Mandaean baptism ceremony in the New World took place on the banks of the Charles River in Boston in June 1999.

Russell notes the many challenges for these communities: fewer adherents, secularism and simple economic survival in a new place. Many of the leaders of these religions relate the significance of education, often in contrast to their traditional secretive nature. In a sentiment that will sound familiar to many of us, they relate that the important key for these communities to survive in the United States will be their ability to educate their members in order to hand forward the traditions and beliefs to the next generation, teaching them the precepts of the faith.

Anton C. Vrame, PhD, is Director of the Department of Religious Education.

Gerard Russell, Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms: Journeys into the Disappearing Religions of the Middle East (Basic Books, 2014), 320 pages.
The Everyday Parenting Toolkit
The Kazdin Method for Easy, Step-by-Step Lasting Change for You and Your Child

Alan E. Kazdin

As any parent knows, raising children is, to say the least, very challenging. This is exacerbated by unprecedented stressors in the lives of the often two-career, or three- to four-job, parenting units whose free time can be compromised by the technology-assisted expansion of work, which often monopolizes even the smallest increments of free time. To boot, the lack of extended families that historically were essential in child-rearing makes things even tougher for us parents.

An overwhelming number of parenting books, podcasts and advice columns both religious and secular mean to advise parents how to better raise their children in this environment. These books are well intended, and they range from offering authoritative to more permissive parenting styles (with the occasional authoritarian style outlier). Yet almost none of them are based on scientific research.

The strength of Dr. Alan Kazdin’s book is the science behind it. For more than three decades, his dedicated group of physicians, psychologists and clinicians at the Yale Parenting Center have been studying parenting styles clinically, as well as compiling and analyzing various theories, beliefs and practices of others working in the field. Over time, his crew at the Parenting Center has integrated the best of these studies into a cohesive parenting “toolkit.” It is a readable, sensible—and occasionally counterintuitive—and easy-to-apply system to help parents handle the mundane, enervating stressors: the temper tantrums, the refusal to do what is asked (whether it be homework or anything else), and the behavior issues that make childrearing feel more like spiritual warfare than a joyful partnership of growth.

One of Kazdin’s core principles is that of the “positive opposite.” He observed that most parents focused on what their children shouldn’t do rather than on what the parents would rather the children do. Kazdin retrained the parent to focus on compliance rather than defiance. This seemingly small detail is crucial in establishing the framework of his ABC parenting system, an acronym standing for antecedent, behavior and consequence.

One of his more interesting chapters is on antecedents. Most of us hope that our children will fulfill our age-appropriate verbal requests—in general, to just be. When children don’t, they run the risk of being reprimanded, a negative consequence. But what if we could create the optimal condition for success? Antecedents are prompts established by the parent for the child, setting them up to successfully complete the desired behavior. It helps motivate children to do what is asked. For example, by using a calm voice, open body language, a loving touch or smile, and the simple word “please” can, as Kazdin points out, greatly affect the desired behavioral outcome.

His chapter on behavior focuses on how to properly encourage desired behavior by incrementally helping the child effectively engage in that behavior, then praising him or her specifically for it and following it up with some sort of hug or high-five or another form of physical touch. He strongly encourages explicitly practicing desired behaviors.

Dr. Kazdin’s other chapters on consequences focus on how to implement the “positive opposite,” that is, positively praising desired behaviors instead of punishing any negative behaviors. Kazdin indicates that punishment only stops the behavior for the moment that it is delivered. It won’t prevent repetition. Punishment also traps a parent. It locks it into a parent’s repertoire.

Finally Dr. Kazdin offers a number of chapters helping organize the principles he has enumerated. He gives a number of real-life examples and a framework on how to implement all the tools in the kit.

It’s a worthy read. My wife and I have implemented much of it in our home, getting our kids into reading books instead of trying to sneak in another video game or television show. It’s cut down on our nagging and raised voices. It’s also allowed us to pray together as a family in thanksgiving for each other and our blessings—a far cry from the perpetual personal prayers for patience and self-control (and forgiveness) that far outnumbered the former. It seems that those prayers are being answered.

Anestis Jordanoglou is Managing Editor of PRAXIS magazine. He and his wife, Evis, have two children, Harrison, 8, and Maria, 6.

From the Director

The Practices of Faith

Dear Readers,

“Go to church. Say your prayers. Observe the fasts. Do good works. Read your Bible.” These few words, or some variation, were the advice your grandmother probably gave you. It was good advice then; it’s still good advice.

The spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, philanthropy and study are the hallmarks of the Orthodox Christian way of life. They have been taught since the first days of Christianity. These are not abstractions but concrete practices that each one of us can perform, from the youngest to the oldest, from the beginner to the master. For these reasons, we have devoted this issue of PRAXIS to the spiritual practices.

Scholar Dorothy Bass, editor of Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People (Wiley, 2nd ed., 2010), has described and expanded thinking on the practices of faith. Her primary purpose in the book is to introduce people to spiritual practice; for them it is the rediscovery of an old idea. Her definition will sound very simple to many of us, but she writes that “Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world” (page 5).

We can see how this applies to the Orthodox practices. But have we considered the connection between our practice and the life of the world? Do we consider that our fasting practices might influence the whole world? Most PRAXIS readers live very comfortable lives, yet we are called to live simply, to “become poor,” for a season.

Bass also identifies characteristics in these practices that are worth deeper reflection by Orthodox:
• Practices address fundamental human needs and conditions through concrete human acts.
• Practices are done together and over time.
• Practices possess standards of excellence.
• The Christian practices help us see how our daily lives are all tangled up with the things that God is doing in the world.

In study we address the basic need to know and can use study to understand the causes and reasons of the issues of the world. Study can take a lifetime and with dialogue partners. When we meet a wise or well-informed person, we are encountering a person who has mastered the discipline. Study can also help us make connections between faith and life. When we understand the poverty of the world, perhaps our fasting becomes even more meaningful, as it prepares us for the feast of a major Church holiday.

In her book, Bass reminds us that there are other concrete practices of Christian faith: hospitality, forgiveness, keeping the Sabbath and more. These too are worthy of reflection. How might your life be influenced by observing the Sabbath, involving attending Liturgy and being a day for family, usually over the “big family dinner” (as it used to be for so many of us)? I hope that this issue of PRAXIS is raising questions for you about how we practice our faith and the discipline it requires.

Anton C. Vrame, PhD
Director
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