

THE ORTHODOX WAY OF LIFE



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Note: This introductory catechism was compiled by Fr. Deacon Charles Joiner of St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Greenville, South Carolina. It has been edited for use at St. Michael's Orthodox Church in Wilmington, Delaware by Fr. Silouan Burns.

INTRODUCTION

Why do you want to become Orthodox? There are many answers one might give to this question, but the main answer should be related to communion with God, your Creator (see quote below). There are many other “churches” in this world that teach their version of Christianity and what they believe “Truth” is. The Orthodox Church claims to be THE Church, the “fullness of Christianity” that is handed down by Christ and His apostles. One who is seeking to be Orthodox should be doing so because “...you come here and find Christ here. If you come to the conclusion that Christ is here and that this is Christ’s Church, then whatever the Church is teaching, if this is Christ’s Church, is the truth.” (Fr. Stephen DeYoung). The following guide is assuming that in looking to join the Orthodox Church, you have already come to this conclusion or are close to it. This guide is not about proving that the Orthodox Church is THE Church of Christ (see the suggested reading at the end of this guide if you need some more convincing or speak with Father.) This guide is about teaching one how to get started living the life of a Christian and learning to be in communion with Christ and His Body, the Church.

*The final goal of man is communion with God.
The path to this communion has been precisely defined:
faith, and walking in the Commandments with the help of God’s grace.
-St. Theophan the Recluse*

Most of us never take the time to reflect on the purpose of our lives. Often, we don’t do this until someone we love departs from this life, especially if unexpectedly. During this moment of grief, our soul has our attention, and we begin to think about what life is all about. In one way, life is about death. We all know that our time will come to die, but all too often we refuse to think about it seriously because of the unknown and the fear it presents.

The purpose of life taught by the Apostles and the Church Fathers is one of finding union with God, what we call Theosis. Jesus came to save us and to open the gates of heaven for us. He showed us how to live through His teaching and example. He showed us that while facing death can be fearful, it is not something we need to despair about, for He has defeated death.

The Orthodox way of life is given to us by Christ Himself through His Church. It is a proven way of life, but not an easy one; however, it will bring you closer to God. As you come closer to God, you increase your capability to deal with any difficulties in life you may face. You increase your ability to live according to the virtues.

The 10 points presented in what follows are only an outline on how to find union with God. However, if you follow them, you will have a solid beginning in your journey to be like Christ. Study each one of them and examine your current life. Seek ways to make the necessary changes in your life to incorporate them. Always pray for God’s help in this and seek the guidance of your priest.

I. PRAYING DAILY

Prayer is the foundation of the Orthodox way of life. What is Prayer? It is a dialogue between you and God. It unites your soul with God. It is through prayer that you unite with God and receive the gift of His grace to aid you in overcoming your passions and living life based on love. Through prayer you also learn to control the distractions of your mind, allowing you to become more watchful and focused in your daily activities. Prayer is the key to entering a life based on the virtues.

How do you pray? First, establish a regular time and a private place. You should have a specific rule for both morning and evening. Don't try to "wing it." This is not a relaxation exercise, but a path of communion with your God. You will benefit from having a specific set of guidelines that you follow each time with no excuses for shortcutting them. In your rule, incorporate standing, prostrations, kneeling, making the sign of the cross, reading, and at times singing. Use prayer books and written prayers. The Orthodox prayer books are filled with prayers that have been well-tested and used for hundreds of years. Prayer does not need to be a creative activity. Above all, you need to be sincere. Keep your awareness in your heart and concentrate on the words of the prayer. Once you establish a rule, always keep it. Work with your spiritual Father on this. *(See the end of this guide for a basic prayer rule. -Fr. Silouan)*

You begin praying by focusing your consciousness in your heart and forcibly gathering there all the powers of your soul and body. Before you start your prayers, take time to quiet yourself and to concentrate your energies in your heart. Christ says, "Enter into thy closet and ... shut thy door" (Mt 6:6). Remove all activities that could disrupt your inner descent. Set aside, to the best of your ability, all of your problems of the day and your worries for tomorrow. This is not a time for thinking or worrying. When you are preparing to pray, stand, sit or walk a few minutes and steady your mind to concentrate on God. Reflect on who it is that you will be addressing. Remember, it is God Himself, the Creator of All, with whom you are about to talk. Try to hold in your heart a feeling of humility and reverent awe. If you are able, make some prostrations before you begin. *(What is a prostration? It is humble bowing your entire body to the ground like groveling – if you are unsure, ask Father or a "man in black" for an example.)*

As you begin to pray, enter into every word of the prayer. Bring the meaning of the words down into your heart. Do not rush through the prayers like you are in a hurry to finish them. Let the words of the prayer slowly drop into the depths of your heart with humility and awe of God. You need to slow your mind down so you can concentrate solely on your prayer. It's somewhat like driving a car. When you are going 90 miles per hour down the highway, you may feel exhilarated, powerful and in control. But, at high speeds things can go wrong quickly. But, when you slow down and drive at a speed of twenty-five miles per hour, the car handles easily and if someone makes a dangerous maneuver you can easily avoid it. The mind works the same way. You want to train it to slow down so it will not cause you an unneeded accident and you can open your heart to God's presence. So, in prayer say the words slowly so you can gain the full meaning of them and allow them to penetrate your consciousness and to bring to your heart feelings of love and reverence for God. Beware of the tendency to rush to complete them hurriedly. When this happens, you have turned your prayer into an obligation, another task to complete, and it is no longer true prayer. Don't worry if you catch yourself doing this. It is normal at first – when you catch your

mind wandering; just stop, slow down, ask God's forgiveness and help, then continue where you left off. You will eventually find the right pace for yourself. Also, study the prayers before you use them, so you know the meaning of each word. Eventually you will want to memorize them and probably will without even trying hard.

As mentioned, you might find that your mind and thoughts wander very easily – this is very natural, especially in our technological age that stimulates or minds to be overactive. Regardless of the reason, this means you are still driving at a high speed. Work constantly to improve your ability to concentrate your attention on God and your prayer. When your mind does wander, be gentle with yourself. Think of God and how He loves you and go back to recite again what you said while your mind was elsewhere. Bring yourself back to concentrate on God and the words of the prayer. Sometimes it helps to say your prayers out loud for a while to help you concentrate. The mind is quite skilled at trying to do more than one thing at a time. But in reality, you only concentrate on one thing at a time. You can easily be deceived by the mind as it leaves prayer to focus on other matters. These wanderings of the mind show you the dimensions of your busy life and where you need to find ways to make it quieter so you can be always mindful of God. Prayer is NOT the time to focus on these worldly activities, because this will only further distract you from prayer. Work to concentrate your attention more and more each time you pray. Each day you will gain in your attentiveness during prayer.

When you finish your prayers, stand for a few moments. Consider to what your prayer life commits you. Try to hold in your heart what has been given to you. Treasure it for a few moments.

It is important to make your prayer life one that is a firm rule, a desired habit, and not something that is done occasionally, sporadically or casually. Be consistent! Pray each and every morning and evening for fifteen minutes at a minimum. Your prayer rule should include specific prayers (*again, see the example at the end of this document, but consult with Father for more specific guidance.*) Commit to doing your rule each and every day, just like you are committed to daily personal hygiene tasks such as brushing your teeth. You don't forget to do them each day. You need to make prayer a similar habit, one that you never forget. Just like brushing our teeth is essential for the health of our gums and teeth, prayer is essential for the health of our soul. Persistence and patience in prayer will prepare you for God's grace to work within you.

2. WORSHIPPING AND PARTICIPATING IN THE SACRAMENTS

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: I desire mercy and not sacrifice. For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. -Our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt 9:12-13)

Along with our personal prayer we need to participate in corporate prayer, or prayer that is offered during a worship service. Worship in the Church is an essential part of a life in Christ. The Church is the body of Christ on earth. When we all gather for worship, we are united with the angels and saints (the whole counsel of God) in our prayer to worship and glorify God.

We enter the place of worship humbly, knowing that we are not worthy to be in union with God, but, we enter with a strong yearning, with zeal, to come closer to Him. We enter with the understanding that through the sacraments, teachings, and practices of the Church we will grow spiritually. While we may find social benefits of joining the Church, this social activity is not the sole purpose of the Church. It is better described as a spiritual hospital (*St. John Chrysostom*) where we come for spiritual healing. By joining the assembly of believers in Jesus Christ, we find this healing and are shown a step-by-step process whereby we can receive God's helps to come closer in union with Him.

The Holy Spirit works in the Church and provides spiritual nourishment through the sacraments of the Church. A sacrament involves God pouring out His grace in some form or fashion by His Holy Spirit. It is important to participate in them because they have been given to us by God for our spiritual well-being, for our healing and growth in becoming like Christ.

Major Sacraments of the Church:

Holy Communion

*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.
– Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (John 6:53-56)*

The Divine Liturgy is the climax of the liturgical cycle. Within the service, bread and wine is offered up to our Lord. Through the Holy Spirit, these simple gifts are mysteriously transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. They still look and taste like bread and wine, but we accept the paradox and mystery of the sacrament that our Lord, Himself instituted at the Last Supper, saying of the bread and wine they partook of, “this is my body...” and “this is my blood...” Holy Communion is spiritual food and medicine – take note of the words of Christ above: by eating his flesh and blood, we are united with Him – he abides in us and we in Him. This is why you should come to church, at a *bare minimum*, each Sunday to be renewed and strengthened through participation in Holy Communion. You need to regularly partake of this gift that God offers to us

all for our spiritual benefit. As you develop your personal prayer life you will no longer see this as an obligation, but as something you want and need to do for your spiritual benefit. Make regular attendance at the Divine Liturgy, and ideally Great Vespers on Saturday evening a part of your prayer rule for Saturday evening and Sunday morning (*in ancient times, the setting of the sun was the beginning of the new day – so Sunday, liturgically speaking, begins Saturday evening – Great Vespers is a prayer service that helps us focus on the Divine Liturgy.*)

Holy Confession & Holy Unction (Anointing)

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders (original translation is presbyters – which is priests in English) of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

-Holy Apostle James, the brother of our Lord (James 5:13-16)

Confession is considered the sacrament of repentance. We are all called to repent of our sins; to turn away from them and make our target Christ. By your participation in this sacrament, you renew your Baptism (*at the end of confession, the priest puts his stole over your head, signifying going under the waters of baptism again and the rising again with your sins washed away*) and you are freed from all your sinfulness in the eyes of God. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you do not sin. None of us lives without sinning and St. John the Theologian even tells us that if we say we are without sin, we lie to ourselves (1 John 1:8-10). This sacrament involves standing before an icon of Christ with a contrite heart, asking God for forgiveness for all the times you have not lived up to what He has made you capable, with the priest by your side as your witness (*confessing before others, as mentioned by St. James above – a presbyter is a priest*). You should do this on a regular basis, every four to six weeks. The normal routine is to confess after Great Vespers on Saturday evenings. You'll notice there are usually several people waiting to do so after the service. (*Note: this can be done after our weekday services too, or if you would like to do it before the service, just let me know. I can also do appointments in situations where it is very difficult to make it to a weekday service.* -Fr. Silouan)

St. James also mentions anointing the sick – not just physically but spiritually too. In Holy Unction, you are anointed with oil that has been blessed to give you strength in healing physical and spiritual sickness. The full version of this service (it is lengthy) is offered on Holy Wednesday, but oil from this service is saved and used throughout the year as needed by the clergy.

Marriage

In the sacrament of marriage, a couple stands in front of God, commits themselves to a union and are united in the eyes of God. This is a path set forth for the benefit of their spiritual growth and union with God – we “crown” those who get married symbolizing both the husband and wife ruling together over their household, but they are also considered the crowns of martyrdom – of dying to ourselves and each other. Much more can be said on marriage and *must* be said if you are considering marriage. There are a number of requirements that have to be met – you can't just

marry anyone, at least not in the Church. Don't get too far into a relationship with someone else without first asking Father about those requirements and what is involved.

Ordination

Throughout Holy Scripture we see ordination of those who can administer or assist in the administration of the sacraments, from the priests in the Old Testament to the Holy Apostles (continued in the line of bishops today) and the priests who represent the bishops and the deacons who assist. Like marriage, much more can be said. For the major clerical ranks (Bishop, Priest, Deacon) there are strict requirements and commitments, which begin with the Holy Apostle Paul's own lists (1 Timothy 3:1-13 & Titus 1:5-9.) There are also lesser orders, that of Reader and Subdeacon. The requirements are not as stringent, but they are necessary steps to the major orders. (at some point, every bishop and priest was once a Reader.)

Baptism and Chrismation

*He who believes and is baptized will be saved.
-Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, (Mark 16:16)*

Baptism is the beginning of the Orthodox Christian life, where one is cleansed from all past sins and sealed with the Holy Spirit. It is how one joins the Church and becomes part of the body of Christ and becomes able to participate in all the Sacraments for spiritual benefit. Chrismation is the anointing of the Holy Chrism, which is the seal of the Holy Spirit. It is a sacrament normally done right after Baptism.

Holy Communion, Confession and Holy Unction are interrelated because they serve for the healing of the body and soul. Strive to make participation in worship and the sacraments of the Church a regular and integral part of your life.

Funeral

A funeral is not considered one of the sacraments as there is technically not an action of the Holy Spirit occurring. At the same time, like the sacraments, it is a service reserved for those who are members of the Body of Christ, the Church. The Orthodox view of death is that it is unnatural – it shouldn't happen. It is a consequence of our sin and our distancing ourselves from God, the source of life. Our funeral service mourns the departed and offers up prayers of repentance and hope on behalf of the departed. It also has a "silver-lining" because we do have hope thanks to the resurrection of our Lord. Christ has defeated sin, death, and the devil. We look forward to the day where all of us will be resurrected and have an incorruptible body.

3. HONORING THE LITURGICAL CYCLE

The Church in Her Holy wisdom offers us a cycle of fasting and feasting. This cycle is based on the life of Christ. The key is to learn to follow it, to participate in it, and not to allow other activities in life to be viewed as more important. Follow the prescribed fast times. Participate in the major feast days of the Church. Plan your schedule to make this a reality.

The Church year begins in September, specifically on September 1st – the liturgical New Year. This initiates a period of preparation for the celebration of the Nativity and Baptism of Christ. As we approach Christmas there is a 40-day Nativity Fast (*fasting means giving up meat and dairy products – being vegan – why we fast is covered under point 7.*) Participate in it and consciously prepare for this important spiritual event. This will counteract the commercial madness we normally experience at this time of year. Following the Nativity, there is a feasting period (the twelve days of Christmas) capped by the celebration of Theophany - the Baptism of Jesus, on January 6th. Celebrate with others during this period. Make an effort to tune your life to this cycle of fasting and feasting.

Shortly after Theophany, there begins the period to prepare us for what we call the Feast of feasts, Great & Holy Pascha (*called Easter in the west, but the word is Greek for Passover – it is the Jewish Passover fulfilled in Christ.*) The cycle begins with a preparatory three-week period prior to the Great Fast beginning (also called Great Lent). Use this period and the teachings designated for the four Sundays during this period to help you get into the right attitude for the Great Fast. When Lent begins, fast to the best of your ability, keeping in mind the fasting guidelines of the Church for this period. The fast leads up to Holy Week, which is the most intense period in the Church Liturgical cycle. Holy Week takes us through the Passion of Christ and His Crucifixion and leads us to His glorious Resurrection and victory over sin, death, and the demons (*if Christianity is new to you, please take some time to read the short book: “Arise O God” by Fr. Andrew Damick. He provides a great explanation of what the Gospel is.*) Take time off from normal activities this week to participate in these beautiful services. You will find new meaning in the Resurrection as you break the fast with the joyous announcement of the Resurrection at midnight with the shout of “Christ is risen!” Following Passover (Pascha), plan for another period of feasting and celebration with family and friends for “Bright Week.” The entire week following that Sunday is considered one liturgical day – all of it is Pascha. Next, we await the Ascension of Jesus, which comes 40 days after Pascha. The Ascension celebrates our humanity, now part of the second person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son (Jesus Christ), being enthroned in Heaven. Ten days later, we celebrate yet another Great Feast – Pentecost. During Pentecost we commemorate the sending forth of the third person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, upon all believers. Pentecost is considered the birth of the Church (also called the Body of Christ) here on earth.

In addition to the cycle of Great Feasts, there is a weekly cycle and even a daily cycle of services. These cycles help us to lead what we call a “liturgical life.” It is a life where the Christ and his Church play a central role to all we do; all the plans we make. For example, part of living the liturgical life outside of the fasting periods, such as Great Lent, is how a regular week is structured during the year – we fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. Make a commitment to remember to control your eating habits by restraining them on these two days in remembrance of our God. On

Wednesday we remember that our Lord was betrayed and arrested. On Friday we remember his death upon the cross.

In addition to the morning (Matins / Orthros) and the evening (Vespers) prayers, the Church prays additionally on what are called the Hours: the 1st, 3rd, 6th, and 9th Hour (6 A.M., 9 A.M., Noon, and 3 P.M.) It is not uncommon to find these grouped up. For example, a parish may pray the 3rd and 6th hours before a Divine Liturgy and pray the 9th Hour before a Vespers service.

The liturgical cycle provides for periods where you can more intensely focus on your spiritual needs, especially fasting days and seasons, such as Great Lent. The time of Great Lent takes precedence among all the fasting periods. It provides a time to withdraw from your busy life, to limit your normal activities, to increase your time in prayer and reading of Scriptures, and to concentrate on your inner self, seeking what is most important for your soul to become united with God.

Here are the **12 Major Feast Days of the Church** – remember the year begins September 1st:

September 8: The Nativity of the Theotokos – Theotokos is a Greek word meaning “God Bearer” – she who bore God within her – this feast celebrates the birth of the Virgin Mary.

September 14: The Exaltation of the Life-giving and Precious Cross - finding of the cross Christ was crucified on.

November 21: The Entrance into the Holy Temple by the Theotokos - the Virgin Mary is dedicated to God and lives at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

December 25: The Nativity of Christ – Popularly called Christmas (the Christ Mass), the birth of Christ. (What the Roman Catholics call “Mass” we call the Divine Liturgy.)

January 6: Theophany – specifically this celebrates the baptism of Christ, and more broadly, the renewal of all creation (such as the waters – we bless water on this day.)

February 2: The Presentation of Christ in the Holy Temple - Christ taken to be presented at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, per the Old Testament Law, at 40-days old.

March 25: The Annunciation of the Theotokos – celebrating the announcement by the Holy Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary she, if willing, will become the Theotokos – the God bearer.

Variable Dates in the Spring (they change each year):

Palm Sunday – the entrance of Christ into Jerusalem, one week before Pascha.

Great and Holy Pascha – the Resurrection of our Lord celebrating his defeat of sin, death, and forces of darkness.

The Ascension of Christ – the Ascension of Christ, who is now fully God and also fully man, having taken on our humanity, bringing it to the throne of God – to Heaven.

Holy Pentecost – the sending of the third person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit upon believers – the birth of the Church.

August 6: The Transfiguration of Christ – celebration of when our Lord was transfigured (his very appearance as a man was changed – glorified) before the Holy Apostles Peter, James and John. Christ's Transfiguration is the goal for us all as humans.

August 15: The Dormition of the Theotokos – the death of the Virgin Mary and her ascension into heaven.

To the best of your ability, arrange your schedule so you can participate in all these services. Each of them has both a Great Vespers (on the evening before) and a Divine Liturgy connected to them. The Divine Liturgy is typically served on the morning of the feast day.

It will be a challenge to give priority to the schedule of the Church and not to allow it to become secondary to all other activities. *Always keep in mind that union with God is your aim in life and that through your full participation in the Liturgical cycle of the Church you will be helped to continually grow closer to Him.* This commitment is difficult in a society which does not pay any attention to the liturgical cycle of the Church. But if you plan ahead, even if you have a very busy schedule, just like you can fit in your entertainment, physical fitness activities, time with your children and other non-work/school-related activities, you can find ways to build your schedule around the key events in the Church's liturgical cycle. Think about how you plan to fit other activities into your schedule, like a vacation, school, or sports, and make the same effort for these spiritual events.

4. THE JESUS PRAYER

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.”

This prayer has the potential to transform your consciousness and bring you closer to God. It is a prayer rooted deeply in the tradition of the Church. It is a prayer to be repeated over and over, many times. You can begin to develop the use of this prayer by incorporating a number of repetitions in your daily prayer rule. It is a simple prayer and you can learn to say it everywhere and at any time. In fact, your aim should be to make it an unending prayer, to help you do as St. Paul commands, to pray without ceasing. In this way, your whole life becomes a life of prayer.

Recognize, however, that this prayer is incredibly difficult to practice even though it seems to be very simple. In its practice, you continually recite it so that it permeates your heart and focuses your mind, predisposing you to follow God’s will instead of your own ego-directed will.

Start by repeating it for ten minutes in the morning or evening. Begin by saying it out loud or at least by moving your lips. Eventually you will repeat it mentally, but start with a verbal prayer. If you don’t have one yet, a great aid in saying this prayer, and an ancient one at that, is a prayer rope. They typically come in sizes of 33 knots, 50 knots, and 100 knots (*we usually have some available in the parish bookstore – ask Father or any of our clergy how to use it in prayer*) The practice is to say the Jesus Prayer for each knot. Begin with working through your prayer rope once, but then add more repetitions, slowly building up the time you are able to concentrate on the prayer. When your mind wanders, bring it back to the prayer. Concentrate, but do not be harsh on yourself. This is not something you will master with your self-will. *Ask God to help you conquer the restlessness of your mind.* With persistence, humility and patience, the practice of this prayer will prepare your soul for God’s grace to work actively within you.

Along with saying this prayer as part of your prayer rule, try to say it whenever and wherever you can. You can do this while walking, while waiting in the doctor’s office, in line at the grocery store, or while waiting to board a plane. You can say it when doing dishes or yard work. You can say it when you are stressed, afraid, or nervous. When you become angry, repeat this prayer over and over until your anger subsides. Do this whenever your mind is agitated, and you will find that it will calm your mind. When you do say it, be sure to think of God and His endless love and seek His mercy.

The practice of the Jesus Prayer is different than pagan Buddhist, Hindu, or Sufi practice. In Buddhism, a common practice is to constantly repeat a mantra such as “Om mani padme hum.” The aim of Buddhism is to free oneself from all suffering and attain what the Buddha called “Nirvana” or the perfect peace of mind. This peace of mind is achieved through various meditation techniques. *The Jesus Prayer is not a technique.*

The Buddha never taught about any form of God. Many practice this form of meditation to gain calmness in their lives. Sufism is a branch of Islam that also employs forms of meditation. Sufi scholars define Sufism as “a science whose objective is the reparation of the heart and turning it away from all else but God.” In meditation they aim to reach an awareness of their oneness with the universe, believing that in doing so they can attain fundamental truths that are within us, but

often remain hidden. They do not believe that Jesus is God but view Him as only a prophet. In Hinduism the chief aim is to gain release from the cycle of reincarnation caused by karma – the consequences of past actions, in this or in previous lives through meditation techniques that release some kind of absolute Truth. Many of these approaches have been adapted by our modern culture to serve as means of relaxation or ways to lessen the stress of our over-active lives via modern mystics and even yoga (*exercise caution with yoga – it can border close to pagan practice.*) These techniques are taught without any specific aim of repentance, nor the purpose of doing the will of God, nor of seeking union with Christ.

The reason the Jesus Prayer is not a technique because it is not a formula or method that somehow triggers God or His creation to do something in return. The Jesus Prayer is done with an attitude of repentance and humility seeking an encounter with the living Christian God, Jesus Christ. We *may* gain benefits of relaxation or reduced stress, but *this is not the aim* of our effort. Union with God is. *It is not a mantra* to simply quiet the mind. You will also gain this benefit if you learn to repeat it hundreds of times, but it is important that you truly feel contrition for your sinfulness and seek God's mercy as you repeat it. *All prayer is about a personal relationship with God.*

“Just as it is impossible to fight battles without weapons, or to swim a great sea with clothes on, or to live without breathing, so without humility and the constant prayer to Christ it is impossible to master the art of inward spiritual warfare or to set about it and pursue it skillfully.”

-St. Hesychios

5. SLOWING DOWN AND ORDERING YOUR LIFE

Modern life is a too-busy life. We are all driven to work faster and faster and more and more efficiently. Our kids are involved in multiple activities with demanding schedules. With all the demands of work and family, there is little time left for reflection and prayer. As a result, we can become insensitive to the needs of others and feel the burden of stress. Such a fast-paced, hi-tech life makes us feel tense, inefficient, insecure, and even superficial.

There are many ways you can slow down and simplify your life. To start the process, you can begin by getting up earlier (*which means you also need to go to bed earlier.*) When you get up in the morning, your first activity should be prayer. Make thirty minutes your goal (*start with 10 minutes, then start to add 5 more minutes every few months until you work up to 30 minutes.*) This includes prayers of thanksgiving, repentance, and intercession (*praying for others.*) You also should include the practice of the Jesus Prayer at this time as well as some Scripture (Bible) reading. After you have prayed and you have taken care of all your personal hygiene needs, you should plan time for your other responsibilities such as getting the kids ready for school. You should allow time for a leisurely breakfast. Help others in your household get off to a peaceful start of the day. You do not want to start the day being pressured by time. Anxious people create anxious people and calm people create calm people. If you don't start the day with calmness there is not much chance that the rest of the day will be calm.

The easiest way to find this time is to examine the way you spend time entertaining yourself - streaming services, cell phone & internet use, television, etc. Media usage places a huge burden on all our lives. Various research firms now show the average time spent on one's cell phone - "screentime" - is over 2 hours a day now - some claim more than double than that is the norm. This is the prime area to look to reallocate your use of time so you can make time to pray - to be with God - but also to allocate time to be with family and friends, to help others in need, perhaps to help you find time to make it to more Church services. Often, we lean on our electronic devices to help us cope with stress and to "unwind." That is ok, to a degree, but if it replaces prayer and time with God; and likewise, replaces time with your own family and friends, then there is a problem.

Identify things or areas in your life that do not promote your spiritual growth; especially those that conflict with the Orthodox way of life. At work you carefully set priorities and make sure you are doing those things that are the most important. Do the same for your personal life. At the end of the workday, you need to separate yourself from the work activities. If you leave work at work, then you can better enjoy your friends and family when you are off work. You will be able to take time to listen to your children and your spouse. The end of the day should be one of slowing down until it is time for your regular period for prayer, to read some Scripture, or to read from the works of the Church Fathers. Have your conversation with God, and then go to bed focused on His love and great mercy. Organize your life so this period after work is a leisure time detached from all work activities.

Do not confuse slowing down with being lazy or slothful. These are quite different things. Laziness leads to procrastination and inefficiency. A lazy person will not make the effort to organize time for prayer. As you slow down you will find you pay more attention to the details. Concentrate on

even the smallest things you are doing. The quality of your actions will improve in everything you do.

Jesus constantly warns against having anxiety about material things, even food and clothing. God knows and provides everything you need, but most likely you have taken your needs and exaggerated them beyond what are your basic necessities. To follow Jesus, He asks you to abandon your attachment to possessions and the priority you are placing on things of this created world, and to take on a simpler lifestyle focused on God where you are not encumbered with excessive demands to accumulate material things for your happiness. The key is a balance; by slowing down or simplifying our lives we are not talking about being less productive or rejecting the whole of this material world. We are simply being more effective, balanced, and doing what we do with much greater care, which includes the exercise of the moral imperatives that God has laid down for us.

There is no magic formula to slowing down and simplifying your life. The possibilities are endless. Start by clarifying your priority values - make a list of all your activities. Take time to reflect on what you spend your time on and determine which ones fit the priorities of Christ and His Church. Think about what you can eliminate or at least lower on your priority list. Begin to consciously reengineer your pattern of life. Experiment with ways to slow down and simplify and you will find yourself coming closer to God in your daily activities. Through your prayers, seek God's help in this task.

6. BEING WATCHFUL

Watchfulness is the action to guard us from our automatic reactions to thoughts stimulated by our senses. It is being attentive to your inner self. The Greek word that is translated as watchfulness is “Nepsis”. It comes from “nepho,” which means to guard, inspect, examine, watch over and keep under surveillance. Watchfulness has been described by Elder Ephriam of Philotheou as “the axe which shatters the large trees, hitting their roots. When the root is struck, it doesn’t spring up again.”

St. Hesychios defines watchfulness as follows:

Watchfulness is a continual fixing and halting of thought at the entrance to the heart... If we are conscientious in this, we can gain much experience and knowledge of spiritual warfare.

He shows us that this involves an effort to examine our thoughts, not to just quickly accept them and “own” them. Something unique to our spirituality is that we do not believe we are our thoughts. It is common in western psychotherapy to identify an individual with his or her thoughts. We see thoughts as external – we can either choose to accept them or not. Thoughts can be from the enemy and often are! It is when we start to mull over and indulge the thought that it can lead to sin. Our goal is to shine the commandments of our Lord on our thoughts. He emphasizes the importance of this by calling it warfare. We know in warfare we need to have effective weapons that are stronger than those of the enemy.

St. Paisios, a more modern saint, tells us about some of the consequences of not being watchful:

“When our soul lives carelessly without watching over its thoughts, it will consequently fill up with dirty and sly thoughts. As a result, people start developing psychological problems which gradually pile up.... Some people, while they are found in this situation and come face to face with the problem itself, they do not realize it, and thus are unable to humbly confess to their spiritual father their fall. Instead, they look for a “secular” solution and consult a psychiatrist, who will inevitably prescribe medication... The only solution is to become aware of the problem and confess it to a spiritual father and then humbly follow his advice.

In our days, people have lost control over their lives, and they do not know what they are doing. The reason being, that they do not wish to be guided; they want to live undisturbed, following their own free will, which will eventually bring their total destruction... when man uses his freedom and independence without taking into consideration his human weakness, he becomes deceived; he experiences and interprets everything by using his own logic. Instead of God’s grace, human logic rules his life, and his mind is in confusion. This is terrible.”

It is essential to develop self-control over the inner workings of our mind. Most importantly, you can learn to harness the actions of your mind which tends to run wild and unchecked. This unbridled condition leads you to rely on mental programming that needs to be changed if you are going to live the Orthodox life.

Being watchful means you have the necessary self-discipline to guard the inner sanctuary of your heart from being invaded by thoughts stimulated by your senses that lead you to sinful actions such as anger. It is an ability to intervene in the process of choosing how to act based on any kind of stimulus that leads to a thought. It is a capacity to intervene in real time in your thought process.

How do you experience the distractions in your mind? Reflect on the times you notice that you were distracted in your daily activities. Was it due to an argument? Was it due to having too many commitments and you could not live up to all of them? Was it a recurring worry? Did it come from a feeling of guilt? Was it sadness that distracted you? Maybe you felt lonely and began to feel sorry for yourself. Was it a fear of something? Maybe you wanted something you don't have? Each of us will have our own set of issues that are distracting us and keeping us separated from God.

A mind that is left to its own devices will remain untrained. An untrained mind is impossible to control. It will remain jumping from one thought to another just like a butterfly in a field of flowers. It will quickly jump from one flower to the another in what seems like a random pattern. To develop mindfulness or watchfulness requires ascetic disciplines, such as prayer and fasting, as well as help from the Holy Spirit.

Doing one thing at a time is a good way to become more watchful. Focus totally on each activity. Don't let your mind wander. Make this a discipline until you feel you have this capacity of watchfulness. Of course, the regular reciting of the Jesus prayer will help develop this ability. Ordering your life will also help you create a less distracted life situation. Participating in worship and the liturgical cycle of the church will help to keep your mind focused on God. As long as you insist on living life as if you can do many things at the same time without any regard for God, you will remain scattered in your mind and you will not remember Him when you need God the most. Slow down, order your life, and focus on one thing at a time. Turn your whole life into a prayer.

With God's help, in the context of the Church, you can train your mind to become focused and pointed so it acts more like a laser beam, with the power of the Holy Spirit.

7. TAMING THE PASSIONS

Passions are initiated by our senses. If you are to become truly free and learn to live by God's will, you need to learn to control the passions that result from the way you react to your senses. For example, you may crave certain foods. When you are deprived of them you become disturbed and possibly even angry. Gaining freedom from these likes and dislikes is what we mean by taming the passions. When you are able to do this, you gain the freedom to do God's will and to love others by being less focused on your own desires. This does not mean you need to deprive yourself of good food or entertainment. Everything God created is good. It means you should enjoy what is necessary for your welfare but also forego all the indulgences based on your desires for sensual pleasure. You cannot simply ignore the passions. You need to recognize them and then train them to come under the control of your soul and mind. This is how you can live in ways that do not undermine your health, security, or freedom from sinful tendencies such as anger. With untrained passions it is like having a team of wild horses pulling your wagon. You think you are the driver, but the horses decide to go where they want. These wild horses are the untamed passions. The challenge is to harness and train your passions so they will follow your commands, just like a trained team of horses is obedient to the commands of the driver.

This task begins with acknowledging that you *are* often controlled by your likes and dislikes. Begin by learning to say "no" when you are being led to indulge in something you know is not good for you. Gaining discipline in what you eat is a good first place to start. This is one of the benefits of the fasting we are advised to do. By choosing not to eat certain foods, you are, in effect, training your mind to be more obedient. When it becomes obedient, then it will be more capable of doing God's will. You will gain greater freedom. In the tradition of the Church, fasting was always one of the first disciplines taught after prayer. This was taught to us by Christ Himself. The first thing He did after His Baptism was to go into the desert to fast and pray for forty days. Since He was both fully human and fully divine, He set the example for us on how to tame the human passions.

As was discussed earlier, the Orthodox way of life involves many fasting periods and days. There is the longest of our fasting periods – the Great Fast (Great Lent) before Pascha; outside of fasting periods, we fast almost every Wednesday and Friday; and we observe the "Eucharistic Fast" before receiving Holy Communion (The Eucharistic fast, unless otherwise blessed by your priest for medical reasons, involves no food or water the morning you will take communion). You can follow the church calendar for fasting guidelines that have been established by the Church to help you in your efforts to tame your passions. Always seek the advice of your priest on what is appropriate for your personal situation.

Often you find that you are stuck in a rut and so conditioned to a particular like or dislike that you cannot bear even the thought of tearing yourself free from it. It is like there is a deep groove engraved in your mind, like a rut, that you cannot get out of. You do the same thing over and over without even thinking. These ruts need to be identified and eliminated so you are free to choose. When you are stuck with following your own desires that are automatically stimulated by your senses, and your ear takes in something another person says that triggers anger in you, you are headed for conflict. At the moment when you react with anger, you are unable to love as God commands; in fact the fall into sin immediately separates you from God, who is Love.

Try to become observant of all your likes and dislikes and recognize the passions they trigger. This means being able to appropriately say “yes” and to “no” as a rational choice, not based on an automatic response. The answer is not necessarily abstinence. We want to go beyond relying on abstinence, but abstinence may be necessary as a start to break a pattern that controls us. Avoidance of situations that trigger your passions is one approach, but as you develop some of the other points presented here you will be able to intervene in the moment they are aroused and choose more appropriate courses of action. You want to be able to intervene in your thought process when desires arise. This is where watchfulness and the practice of the Jesus prayer are most important. Instead of reacting like a robot, you can condition your mind to call upon the prayer to interrupt and lift you out of the rut. As you identify your main ruts, you can pray for God’s help. If you maintain a regular prayer life, participate regularly in worship services and the sacraments, God will help you.

Our passions are like a pet. If you have ever had a puppy you will remember how they take a shoe or other item and chew on it and tear it apart. They growl when you try to take it from them. This is normal behavior for a young pup, but not one we want to have continue. If we do not train the puppy in the beginning, it will stay wild and even turn against us later. Our passions are like puppies. Unfortunately, many of us have grown up without properly training our passions. When we try to confront them, they are not eager to cooperate. They rebel like angry pups now grown into unruly dogs. Controlling them becomes a difficult task but one that is essential to a virtuous life.

When you first begin to tame your passions, you may experience inner irritation. As you wrestle with them, you will find that the block is in the mind. Also, as you mature in your prayer life, you will find that you have increasing means to overcome the ruts conditioned into your mind. As you seek God’s help, you will be aided in this struggle. Through regular prayer, especially repetition of the Jesus Prayer, you will even be able to create new ruts that are beneficial to the health of your soul, new patterns that are stronger than the old ones. Eventually the soul will regain its normal position of being in control. The mind then becomes a powerful and useful tool under the enlightened direction of the soul for living the life that God desires for us.

8. PUTTING OTHERS FIRST

“Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition^{or} or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well.”

St. Paul – Philippians 2:3-4

As you begin to slow down your life, reorder your priorities, become more watchful, and gain freedom from the chains of your likes and dislikes, you will also begin to see changes taking place in your relationships.

It is selfless relationships that lead us to true joy and a life close to God. This is what Christ meant when He asked us to love our neighbor as ourselves. You cannot act as an isolated being and be close to God. When you dwell on yourself you only build a wall between yourself, others, and God. Those who insist on thinking about their own needs, their wants, plans, and ideas only become lonely and feel insecure. They separate themselves from God.

A powerful approach to learning to love is to practice putting others first. You can begin with your own family and close friends and coworkers. As you try to understand the needs of your spouse or best friend, and to begin to consider their needs before you insist on your own, you will find that you move closer together. This kind of action weakens the negative aspect of your ego-centeredness and opens deeper relationships with others.

There is a ripple effect that begins with your closest relationships. As your closest relationships grow, you will find that those further removed will also grow closer. Your love ripples outward. At the same time, you will find yourself growing closer to God. So, begin this practice with those who are closest to you.

Most of us find that we are all puffed up by our ego. We see the world based on what we like and dislike. We think everyone has the same hopes and fears, likes and dislikes that we do. Too often we expect others to behave just like ourselves. But, when they don't and they expect us to act the way they do, we run into conflicts. This is the reality of the world. Try to allow yourself to think in the way others think, to appreciate their likes and dislikes, to look at things from their perspective. Then you will find that your relationships blossom.

The block to knowing God is the same as the one that blocks us from loving others. It is our self-will. We grow spiritually when we learn how to eliminate our self-will. This is the aim of putting others first. This is the example that Christ has set out before us. This is the accomplishment of the Saints of the Church. This is what Jesus meant when He said, *“If you want to find your life, you have to lose it.”* One of the two great commandments He gave us is to love our neighbor as yourself. Why? Because he wants us to be able to love Him. God is present in all of us and when we love each other we are loving God. It is through our love of others that we can come to know the love of God.

The ability to put others first demands patience – a calm and controlled mind. This virtue only comes with a disciplined life based on a foundation of daily prayer where you gain strength to control your passions and get beyond your own likes and dislikes. Continually ask for God’s mercy and His help to overcome your self-willed nature (being selfish). When you are patient and able to think of the needs of others, an unkind word will not agitate you and trigger anger. As you become more watchful and your life more ordered, then you can support others even when they are angry with you.

You can practice putting others first even at work or school. Learn to accept that others may have good ideas even if they are different from your own. When you no longer expect everyone to be or think like you, and when you recognize their likes and dislikes without judgment, you will begin to build loving relationships. Work or school is a great place to get rid of the sharp edges of your personality. As you learn to love in that environment, your example will be seen by others for the benefit of all.

Some will say that putting others first will only make you like a door mat and subject you to abuse. This is not what putting others first is about. You do not automatically say yes to everything others want. What we are saying is to put the other person’s welfare before your own desires, not necessarily all their wants. There are times when it is in the best interests of the other person to say “no.” And there are other times when we say “yes” even when it goes against one of our own desires, because we know it is what is best for them. This is the essence of godly love. You are putting others first when the other person’s welfare means more than your own desires. It is like the love a mother naturally has for her infant child. This is the sacrifice that Christ made on the Cross. He willingly gave His own life for our salvation. Again, often in a relationship it is necessary to say “no” when we know it is not in the best interests of the other person and “yes” when it does not meet our own desires.

You can also mend broken relationships with love. It is the act of forgiveness that is the most powerful healing power. Forgiveness makes both parties whole. When you forgive those who have done wrong to you, you also forgive yourself for your wrongs of the past. This brings up another benefit we have in the Church, the sacrament of Confession. In this sacrament, Christ asks us to confess our sins – the selfish and passionate struggles we have – before another person, a priest. By this sacrament you are not only cleansed by the Holy Spirit, but you also gain accountability and spiritual guidance to help you overcome the passion(s) you find difficult to control. The idea of confessing our sins to others is ancient. It was done by the Jewish people and continued into the age of the Church. St. James, in his epistle tells us to confess our sins to one another. In fact, the Jews and the early Church practiced confession publicly (you confessed your sins in front of many). Now we keep it a little more private with it only being done before one man (the priest).

Confession is a crucial part of the Christian life. It is like hitting a reset button, but it does require you to humble yourself before God and your priest – to admit your weaknesses. The final part of confession is when the priest, representing Christ, prays the prayer of absolution over you. In this prayer, the priest pronounces forgiveness of your sins in the name of Christ. You are washed clean, your baptism is renewed, you may have fallen but now you get back up and continue the “good fight” or the “race” as the Holy Apostle Paul puts it.

9. SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP

Those you spend your time with influence your thinking and behavior. If you associate with those who share your values, then they will be reinforced. You want to develop a circle of friends that lifts you up to higher ideals, specifically those of our Orthodox faith – those of Christ. It is best to avoid those who negatively influence you. You need to look for the goodness in others when choosing your friends and consciously choose who you spend your time with on a regular basis. When you find others who share your spiritual values then you should find ways to spend more time with them. (Note: we also need to be a “light in the darkness,” a witness of Christ to others – the point is we shouldn’t be willingly spending most of our time in that darkness.)

When you are engaged in making changes in your way of life, you need the support of friends with whom you interact regularly. This is the value of the Church community. It is a place where we all share the same ideals. We come together at least once a week for common worship. We can participate in Catechism (Foundations – always open to all no matter how long one is Orthodox), Bible Study and Church School where we can continue to learn together.

Seek out those who are also trying to live an Orthodox way of life – take advantage of ministries and fellowship times at Church. It is also good to meet with them outside of Church - go out to eat together, do fun activities together (sports, games, hiking, etc.), read the same books and discuss them, and an important one: do service projects together. A service project involves working together for a selfless goal. It could be helping a family in our parish in some for or fashion – maybe they are moving, maybe they need a repair in their home, and you know how to help, and so on. It can be helping those out in the public, such as the poor and hungry and a group of you in our parish volunteering. It could be a group of you cleaning up trash off the roadside to help beautify our Lord’s creation. The list can go on and on. When you work with others on a project that does not involve any expectations of reward or recognition (it is important to have that mindset) you will find that it is rewarding in the sense that you will see the Lord in it. To humble ourselves and serve others is to become like Christ.

In your spiritual growth you are like a tree seedling. At first a new seedling needs to be protected in a safe environment and even fenced off to protect it from the grazing animals. When it matures, however, it can survive on its own. In the beginning you too need a safe environment, your emerging Orthodox way of life needs protection. As you mature spiritually you can then enter into any company and not fear being uprooted. As your relationship with God grows, you will have less need for this protection, as you will have the Holy Spirit supporting you. You then can become a source of protection for a new emerging seedling.

The Apostle Paul sees our spiritual path as one that involves struggle and requires endurance. He says, *“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.”* He explains that we are involved in a struggle with our desires and the Spirit, *“The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.”* He then shows us that we need to be involved supporting each other in this struggle. *“Therefore, brethren..., by a new and living way which He consecrated for us... Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in*

order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.” Our spiritual companionship should be of such a nature that we can strongly encourage each other.

Who you spend your time with makes a difference. If you choose wisely, you will get the encouragement you need. If you do not, you will find you are encouraged to give up the struggle and instead seek a life of pleasure and self-satisfaction. It is a common saying that you are known by the company you keep. If you associate with those who share your values, then those values will be reinforced. When you associate with those who are also involved in this struggle, their experiences will give you knowledge and strength. They will help you expand your vision, and you will profit from their experience. Since they are also spiritual aspirants like you, they will inspire you, strengthen your resolve, elevate your aim, and enable you to progress more surely on this difficult path.

In addition to spiritual companionship, our faith teaches that Christians should have a spiritual father to guide them on their spiritual journey. This will usually be your parish priest, but sometimes it might be a different priest. This goes back to the earliest days of Christianity. Saint Paul points to the relationship between a spiritual guide and his spiritual children. *“For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus, I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore, I urge you, imitate me.”* He points out that this relationship involves the imitation of life and character of the spiritual father. Later in the 4th century St. Basil the Great encourages each person to find a spiritual father *“who may serve you as a sure guide in the work of leading a holy life”* and warns that *“to say that one does not need counsel is great pride.”* To risk directing your own way is risking that you will fall prey to the most powerful of all sins: pride. We can all easily be misled by our own direction and be tempted to think that we are making great progress, when we are only building up our own ego and our pride.

Each person needs a spiritual father if he or she is sincere in their seeking to do God’s will and growing in faith. The role of the Orthodox spiritual father is leading seekers along the spiritual path, helping them conquer their passions, guiding them in ways of prayer, ascetic disciplines, and participation in the sacraments and leading them to ultimate union with God.

10. READING SCRIPTURE AND HOLY FATHERS

What you watch and read has an impact on the way you think. Think about what you want to let into your mind to influence your thinking. The things you watch and read should be those that have a positive impact on your spiritual growth; that will shape your mind and orient it towards God. The more you fill your mind with the things of God, the more your thoughts will be godly. Your conscience will become more acute, and you will become less and less likely to do those things that feed your passions. Make time to regularly read the Holy Scriptures (Bible – especially the Gospel – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), the writings of the Holy Fathers (Saints of the Church) and the lives of the Saints. You should organize your life so that you can spend at least 15 minutes a day reading. Consider how much time you spend entertaining yourself (online, “screen time” etc.) and see how little 15 minutes is in comparison. Integrating your reading can be done as part of your prayer rule or as family time too.

The spiritual life is challenging. It is like an ascent up a steep slope or mountain side. It is a long and slow pathway with joyful moments along the way. As you move along the path, you gain strength. You can begin to look back and reflect on how far you have come while still seeing that you have much further to travel. As you gain strength, you will be able to face an ever more difficult terrain as well as the uncertainty of storms that you cannot predict. It is often a lonely path, and at times it seems like you will never reach the summit.

As you face these difficulties the readings, especially the lives of the Saints, can inspire you with courage to continue along the path. You can see that others have traveled this path before you, and with persistence and faith, they have reached much higher heights than you can now see. As you turn to those who had an intimate relationship with God, they will give you hope and kindle a spark of warmth in your heart. They will help you keep your head high and your eyes fixed on the summit ahead. They will show you that your capacity to choose, to change, and to endure is a reality. They will show you the way to wisdom and love and the potential to be able to radiate spiritual glory as you discover the uncreated light of God and find yourself in glorious union with Him.

A note on reading the Bible: When you read the Bible, don't try to make up your own interpretation. Scripture is to be interpreted through the Church. In the book of Acts, there is the story of Philip encountering an Ethiopian official reading the Bible in his chariot. Philip asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian replied, “How can I unless someone guides me.” This is the same attitude you should have. Scripture can be difficult to understand, especially because of the context – the time, place, culture, etc. Listen to your priest and his homilies which are on Holy Scripture. Take advantage of bible studies your parish might provide. In this day and age there are a number of good podcasts available that go verse by verse through Scripture – ask your priest about what he might recommend. Use tools such as the notes in the Orthodox Study Bible and commentaries by the Church Fathers. In conclusion, when you have questions or opinions, submit them to the Church for clarification.

CONCLUSION

There is much more to the Orthodox life than is in this 10-point introduction. Being an Orthodox Christian is to be on a path of continual growth. As we come closer to God, we learn more clearly what He expects of us. As we grow closer to Him, He provides us with greater ability to practice His teachings. We are all sinners, and the Church is the place we come for spiritual direction and forgiveness. In God's eyes it is never too late to change our ways. Not only does He expect us to be perfect as He is perfect, but He is most merciful to those who are the greatest sinners.

Reflect on each of these points and seek ways to include them in your current life, no matter how busy or hectic it is, and you will find that you will grow spiritually. As you grow you will find all you need to know. One caution: This is not a list to pick and choose from. It is very important to include ALL the points in your way of life. They are interrelated. Not one of them is sufficient on its own.

APPENDIX A - CATECHISM READING LIST

Must Reads (required):

The Holy Bible & a Prayer Book – this is more than just reading, it is living out our faith. Speak to Father about a prayer rule, which includes reading Holy Scripture (Bible).

The Orthodox Way of Life – This is in PDF format – email Father and he will send it to you. This is a brief overview of the Orthodox Faith and how to live it.

The Good Samaritan: A Children’s Catechism – Ancient Faith Publishing – this book is written for parents, to help them teach their children. It is an easy-to-read book that will give you an in-depth understanding of what Christianity is. If you have children, be sure and read it as a family.

Acquiring the Mind of Christ – St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press – An introduction to the spirituality of the Orthodox Church. Those looking to convert from other Christian sects, especially Reformed ones, should especially spend some time on the chapters: “The Angry God of Anselm” and “St. Augustine and Orthodoxy.”

Strongly Recommend Reads – Going Deeper (not required):

Arise O God – Ancient Faith Publishing – an introduction to the Gospel from an Orthodox Christian perspective – what does the word “Gospel” mean?

Christ Among Us – Newrome Press – This book provides a deeper look at our Divine Liturgy, helping bring understanding to what is going on during each part of the service.

The Orthodox Church – Penguin Books – A classic introduction to the Orthodox Church – Met. Kalistos Ware spends the first half of his book providing a broad overview of the last 2000 years of Church history. The second half provides an introduction the worship and doctrines of the Church.

The Religion of the Apostles – Ancient Faith Publishing – Helps provide an understanding four the Orthodox Church is the original Christian Church. Provides an overview of what is going on in Scripture from Old to New Testament.

God is a Man of War – Ancient Faith Publishing – The Old Testament can be confusing, especially all the violence in it. This short book serves as a good introduction to the Old Testament as well as providing answers to the difficult passages found in it.

The Lord of Spirits – Ancient Faith Publishing – Some overlap with The Religion of the Apostles, but a good introduction to “the unseen world and spiritual warfare.”

Thinking Orthodox – Ancient Faith Publishing – “Understanding and Acquiring the Orthodox Christian Mind” – Presbytera (priest’s wife) / Dr. Eugenia Constantinou strives to help the reader understand that Orthodox Christians have a very different way of thinking.

Strongly Recommend Reads – Going Deeper Spiritually (not required):

This is a small sampling of the many writings that exist of the saints in the Orthodox Church, but these are Father’s “strongly recommended” ones. Before reading any of these books (spiritual books), please speak with Father.

St. Silouan the Athonite – St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press – The first half is the life of St. Silouan, the second half is a trove of his teachings.

Wounded by Love – Harvey – “The Life and Wisdom of St. Porphyrios”

St. Paisios the Athonite Spiritual Counsels – Holy Hesychasterion – A collection of 6 volumes of questions and answers with St. Paisios.

The Philokalia – Palmer – multi-volume set full of writings from more ancient saints of the Church. The books were not published in order, see Father for a reading guide.

Further Suggested Reading:

Welcome to the Orthodox Church – Paraclete Press – At over 300 pages, it looks hefty but is a quick and easy read. A priest’s wife, Frederica Matthew-Green, provides a comprehensive introduction to Orthodoxy. It covers “its history, theology, worship, spirituality and daily life.”

The Whole Counsel of God – Ancient Faith Publishing – an overview of how what we now call “the Bible” was compiled.

The Hidden Garden, a story of the heart – Ancient Faith Publishing – a children’s book about the weeds that need to be pulled from our heart.

Heaven Meets Earth – Celebrating Pascha and the Twelve Feasts – Ancient Faith Publishing – This short book gives a summary of Pascha and the twelve great feasts we celebrate throughout the year. This is also a great family book.

Two Paths, Orthodoxy & Catholicism – Protecting Veil - a book written to help Roman Catholics convert to Orthodoxy.

APPENDIX B - AM I READY TO BECOME A CATECHUMEN IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH?

The process of joining the Orthodox Church is not too unlike a courtship resulting in marriage. In the first stage, the Inquiring Stage, we are considering our options, examining other denominations/faiths; maybe even attending other churches. In the second stage, the Catechumenate, we are certain that we want the Orthodox Church and no other, but we still have a little learning to do. In the final stage, Membership (baptism into the Church), we are officially received into the Church.

But how do we know if we're ready to commit? Of course there will be personal variables. So this questionnaire is designed to help with the rest. Consider these to be basic requirements for entry. There is no "passing" or "failing". This is not an "official" document of the Orthodox Church. It is meant to help guide and address issues you may have not considered when it comes to embracing the Orthodox Christian faith.

THE CREED

The Nicene Creed is the foundational credal statement of the Orthodox Church. It sums up the most vital elements of our beliefs into one statement. If there is anything in here you don't believe, you might not be ready yet.

✓ - if you believe and agree with this.

? - if you still have some questions but it's not a dealbreaker.

X - if you do not believe and agree with this.

___ I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

Do you believe in only one God?

___ And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God,

___ the Only-begotten, Begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made;

Do you believe the Son of God is not a created being but co-eternal with the Father?

___ of one essence with the Father, by Whom all things were made;

Do you believe Jesus Christ is equally God and man?

___ Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man;

___ And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried.

___ And on the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures.

___ And ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father.

___ And He shall come again with glory to judge the quick and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end.

___ And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets;

(A note for inquiring Roman Catholics: Checking this means you are prepared to reject the filioque that was improperly added by Rome outside of an Ecumenical Council.)

___ And I believe in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Do you believe that God established one Church, and not many?

___ I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.

___ I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the Life of the world to come. Amen.

THE PRE-COMMUNION PRAYER

___ I believe, O Lord, and I confess that thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the living God,
___ who camest into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first.

Do you believe you need to be saved from sin and death?

___ I believe also that this is truly thine own most pure Body, and that this is truly thine own precious Blood.

Do you believe the bread and wine being offered on the altar at your Orthodox Church is truly the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ?

Therefore, I pray thee: Have mercy upon me, and forgive my transgressions, both voluntary and involuntary, of word and of deed, committed in knowledge and in ignorance. And make me worthy to partake without condemnation of thy most pure Mysteries, for the remission of my sins and unto life everlasting. Amen.

Of thy mystical Supper, O Son of God, accept me today as a communicant, for I will not speak of thy Mystery to thine enemies, neither like Judas will I give thee a kiss; but like the thief will I confess thee: Remember me, O Lord, in thy Kingdom. May the communion of Thy Holy Mysteries be neither to my judgment nor to my condemnation, O Lord, but to the healing of soul and body.

SOME OTHER CONSIDERATIONS.

The highest calling in the world is to be an Orthodox Christian. The world does not need any more lukewarm or mediocre Christians. There are plenty who wear the name and do not live the life. The prayers of the Catechumenate call catechumens “newly enlisted warriors” for Christ. Warriors are committed and vigilant.

Christianity is concerned first with the last: The Lord will come to Judge the Living and the Dead. Every day is a dying. Our temporal life is to be lived with the Age to Come always in mind. Living a bona-fide Christian life will lead to a bona-fide Christian ending to our temporal existence.

✓ - if you believe and agree with the section.

? - if you still have some questions but it's not a dealbreaker.

X - if you do not believe and agree with this.

___ I am prepared to commit to an Orthodox Christian lifestyle including regular prayer, fasting, giving of alms, financial support of my local parish, regular attendance at services, consistent participation in the sacraments, and participation in a Eucharistic community made up of real people.

___ An Orthodox Christian is first and foremost a subject of the King of Glory, and a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. I understand the Church is not a place for “party spirit,” “factions,” or personal opinions. An Orthodox Christian follows the teachings of the Church, and, in a state of constant repentance, conforms his or her own opinions to the Way. I am prepared to begin this process of transformation of my life to conform to Christ and His Church in order that I might be saved.

___ I am prepared to stop participating in all other services, prayer gatherings, rituals, rites, ceremonies, etc. at all other so-called Christian denominations as well as non-Christian religions for the rest of my life. Consider the analogy of a traditional monogamous marriage. There are pastoral exceptions to these such as funerals and weddings of loved ones. These should be approached on a case-by-case basis under the guidance of a parish priest.

___ I am prepared to cease forever all spiritual practices that are not a part of the saving Tradition of the Orthodox Church. Things like (but not limited to): yoga, tarot, santaria, ouija boards, seances, santa muerte, occult rituals, effigy burning (Burning Man, Zozobra, etc.), palm reading, soothsaying, idols, images of foreign gods, secret societies (Free Masons, Oddfellows), Native American ritual (pow wows, sun dances) etc.

___ The Church is a hospital. It is a place to find healing. And while perfection is not expected of anyone desiring to enter the Orthodox Church, if the inquirer is fornicating or committing adultery, cohabitating with a boyfriend or girlfriend, he or she need to take the necessary steps to correct the situation – let Father know and work it out with him.

___ This does not apply to me.

___ Connected to this, if the inquirer is tempted by same-sex attraction, or suffers gender dysphoria, he or she must commit to the Christian virtues of chastity, purity, and holiness, according to the longstanding Christian tradition. Fornication of every sort is completely contrary to the Christian life. If this applies to me, I am prepared to commit to these Christian virtues starting today.

___ This does not apply to me.

___ If the inquirer suffers addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex, or pornography, he or she should ask the priest advice on how to fight these addictions, and should follow that advice. If this applies to me, I am willing to begin the conversation about how to fight these addictions.

___ This does not apply to me.

___ I am prepared to give a life confession, when the time is right. A life confession is like a typical confession excluding the prayer of absolution, as the baptism will be the washing away of all those sins. The confession includes all significant, memorable sins.

What remaining questions and concerns do you have, if any? Be sure to ask Father.