GROWING

IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Eparchy of Newton
Office of Educational Services
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*Cover:* Iconography in the apse of Annunciation Cathedral, West Roxbury, Massachusetts illustrates two primary aspects of the Christian life. Christ administering the Eucharist to the apostles points to the centrality of the holy mysteries in our communal worship. The Theotokos with her arms upraised in prayer indicates the importance of prayer in our daily communion with God wherever we may be.
INTRODUCTION

Partakers of divine nature: this is what the Lord calls us to be. On the THEOSIS Weekend, you heard quite a bit about this idea, perhaps for the first time. The initial study segments of this group experience focused on this doctrine of theosis to help us become more conscious of its meaning for our lives. In the second course we looked at the concept of theosis from another standpoint, slightly different, yet the same. We saw Saint Paul speak in his Epistle to the Ephesians of this climactic Christian experience as “being seated in the heavenly places” or “living in the heavenly realm” and then unfold what this means for us in our day to day life.

In the present course we will be reflecting on specific areas of daily life in which we are meant to experience theosis. We do not compartmentalize our Christian life: making it something for ‘churchy’ occasions and separated from our everyday tasks. We are meant to bring our awareness of God’s presence within us into every situation, without exception.

This course is divided into two units. The first is concerned with some basic attitudes which affect our growth in the life in Christ: loving God, loving our neighbor, relying on God alone in faith and experiencing His guidance in the Body of Christ. The second unit speaks of some major obstacles to that growth: the lure of “the world” (the challenge of secular society), “the flesh” (the urgings of the old man within us), and the devil (the work of the Enemy).

The material in this book presents an overview of these topics in the light of Holy Tradition. Thus it relies heavily on the writings of Scripture and the Eastern Fathers, many of whom are quoted in the text. The best use of this text would be made by reading through the entire chapter well in advance of your group meeting, then choosing one of the Scriptural or patristic texts to reflect on each day until the meeting. Thus the word will have a chance to penetrate your mind deeply during that time.

The climax of your time with this material will be at the group session where you will be able to share your insights with other members of the Body of Christ. We do not live in the heavenly realm in isolation from one another. By sharing in all the aspects of the Church’s life, we gradually come to learn what it means to share in the life of the Trinity which is, after all, a Community. The Church reflects the divine life in itself as it worships, as it shares life together in fellowship, as it proclaims God’s Word, as it reaches out in service to others. As a parish or other community deepens its experiences in these dimensions, we who participate in them draw more fully from the life which flows within the Body.
This is why our study is climaxed within the framework of a group gathering. Our meetings are for prayer, for sharing our lives with one another, for expressing commitment to the Lord and His Church. Such commitment presumes the desire to grow continually in the knowledge and love of God. This is why we need a study dimension to our Christian life. But the fruit of this study is multiplied over and over again when we participate with others who are sharing what they have learned through their prayer and study.

The following steps can help you derive the most benefit from your reading:

1. **Begin with prayer.** An opening prayer is suggested at the start of each section in this guide.

2. **Read** the assigned section as indicated in this guide.

3. As you read, **underline** the parts which seem most significant to you. This will give you a sense of what you have gotten from the reading.

4. **Answer the content questions** in this guide. Writing your answers out helps you to be certain that you understand what the author is saying.

5. **Answer the personal reflection questions.** These are meant to help you focus your attention on what you can do to make what you have read be a force in your life.

6. Finally, **choose one of the Scriptural or patristic texts** quoted in this guide. Make it a subject of daily reflection until the next meeting. How is it speaking to you for your life? What does it call you to do? How much does it call you to change in your life? Know it as God’s word to you in a special way during this period.

7. At the meeting **listen closely** to the comments of the other participants. Allow your own answers to be the occasion of a true interaction with your brothers and sisters in the Lord, not just a reading off of what you have written. In this way your study can be the occasion of a significant sharing within the Body, drawing you more intimately into the life of the Community in the Holy Spirit, where we can be transfigured into sharers of the divine nature.

We are indebted to those study groups involved in piloting the Theosis Program who reviewed this material in its initial versions. We hope they will recognize their observations and suggestions in these pages.
SESSION ONE: LOVING GOD

Set our hearts on fire with love for You, O Christ our God, that in its flames we may love You with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul and with all our strength, and our neighbor as ourselves; so that keeping Your commandments, we may glorify You, the Giver of all good gifts.

Kondakion, For the Increase of Love

Our contemporary American society is very goal oriented. The impact of business and other task groups has brought us to see the need for clearly identifying our purposes and the means by which we hope to attain them. But when we look at the way the Church has always approached the spiritual life, we find that a goal-centered approach is not merely a product of our own age.

It is the constant assertion of our Tradition that the goal of human life is to share in the divine nature we call theosis. This was our Creator’s vision for us from the beginning, as expressed in the book of Genesis:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...”
God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:26, 27

Our progress toward this goal was quickly thwarted by the fall but made possible again in Christ. As the Fathers, from St. Irenaeus in the second century on, would say, “God became man, so that man could become divine.” This goal is the only true fulfillment of human nature as its Creator has meant it to be: it is the purpose for which we are made.

How is this goal to be realized? What means are we to use to achieve it? Again, the Church’s Tradition is clear: we cannot achieve it of ourselves. We need to be united to Christ by faith in baptism so that we can be grafted onto Him and share in His divinized humanity. Otherwise, the life we have is no life at all. As Nicholas Cabasilas writes, “To be baptized is to be born according to Christ and to receive our very being and nature, having previously been nothing.” Like our physical existence, life in Christ is a gift: we cannot generate it, we can only respond to it. “This alone we contribute to this life,” Cabasilas continues, “that we accept His gifts, retain His graces, and not reject the crown which God by many toils and labors has prepared for us” (The Life in Christ).
Growing in the Christian Life

Once we have been united to Him and His Spirit dwells within us through this mystery, we are empowered to seek the fulfillment of God’s plan for us. Our task becomes one of synergy: to work along with the Spirit of God so that the life we have been given may blossom into the full maturity that God intends us to have. “To him who has been baptized into Christ, grace has been mysteriously given already. But it acts in proportion to his fulfillment of Christ’s commands. Although this grace never ceases to help us in secret, it lies in our power to do or not to do good according to our own will” (St. Mark the Ascetic).

When we do this, Diadochus of Photike reminds us, our spiritual awareness gradually matures. “From the instant we are baptized, grace is hidden deep within, concealing its presence even from the perception of the intellect itself. When someone begins, however, to love God with full resolve, then in a mysterious way by means of conscious perception, grace communicates something of its riches to his soul. ... For as a person advances, divine grace more and more reveals itself to the intellect.” “In this way our inner man is renewed day by day through the experience of love, and in the perfection of love it finds its own fulfillment” (cf. The Philokalia, #77, 89).

These Fathers clearly indicate the way by which this maturity may come about, by following Christ’s commands and imitating the God who is love Himself. “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with your whole mind ... you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 38). These are the two principal objectives, if you will, by which we will achieve Christian maturity, for when we follow these precepts we come closer and closer to our goal. “Love, the divine gift, perfects human nature until it makes it appear in unity and identity by grace with the divine nature” (St. Maximos the Confessor).

Every other goal in life for which we may strive must fit within this basic framework, must be seen as means of loving so that we can come closer to our fundamental goal. When we seek anything other than God’s goal for us, we experience separation from Him and, ultimately, unhappiness. All around us we see people making success, power, knowledge, pleasure their ultimate goals. Their lives are contrary to God’s design. Christians, too, often subordinate God’s purposes to their own. And so even good purposes, such as the wellbeing of society or our family, can make us fall short of Christian maturity. More often, we simply don’t think about our goals in any unified way. We pursue conflicting aims without seeing the contradictions to what God wants for us. But Christ’s priorities for us are clear, “Seek first His kingship over you, His way of holiness, and all these things will be given you besides” (Matthew 6:33).

Seek Him first... love Him totally... these are radical statements, ideals which seem so far beyond our reach. We may be tempted to put them aside, feeling that we can’t relate to God in this way, and so why bother to try. It is certainly true that, because of our broken human nature, we continually find ourselves unable to love as perfectly as Christ loves. Nevertheless it is the universal experience of
Christians that, unless we attempt to put God first in our lives, nothing significant will happen in our spiritual lives. We may never succeed in the attempt, but without the desire to love God in this way, our religious activities will remain sterile.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LOVE HIM?

Many people are confused about this precept, because they don’t understand what it means to love. For many people love is chiefly an emotional experience: being “in love”. And so when we speak about loving God, they experience regrets at not feeling in love with Him. They will be high when they are feeling blissful, and discouraged when their emotions are not so involved.

For the Christian, however, love (even on the human level) is meant to be more a matter of commitment than emotion. Successful families, for example, are built on the commitment of the members to one another rather than on the feelings of the moment. When marriages are based on emotion, there will probably be more “love” before the wedding than after and more on good days than bad ones.

What makes a marriage work, however, is commitment: the decision to give oneself fully to each other, emotions notwithstanding. One reason why more marriages end in divorce in our society seems to be that people base their relationship on their emotions rather than on a committed decision to the other.

Love for God is meant to be based on the same understanding of love. It includes, but is not dependent on, our emotions. It involves our whole person in a committed decision to love. Nevertheless, as we remain faithful to that commitment, we become more and more conscious of God’s own goodness and love. We see His love in all of creation, in the incarnation of His Son, in His desire to bring us to union with Him. And the more we come to see the depth of God’s love for us, we will find welling up within us the emotion of love as well. As St. John Climacus observes, “Happy the man who loves and longs for God as a smitten lover does for his beloved” (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*). But we are always cautioned in the Tradition to avoid seeking such a feeling as a prerequisite for loving God: Climacus cites this kind of love as the thirtieth step of his ladder!

Theophan the Recluse remarked that to meet God and our neighbor we have to begin by moving out of ourselves. Like most spiritual writers in our Tradition he is teaching that love of God begins with the sometimes wearying process of denying oneself, just as the commitment of marriage involves the daily decision to put the other person first. We begin to grow in love, then, not when we feel the emotion, but when we make the committed decision to “commend ourselves, one another and our whole life to Christ God”.

This verse, to which we so regularly respond in our services, implies that such a commitment should touch our entire life. Our time, our money, our autonomy are
all meant to be offered to God in love, in that living sacrifice of ourselves which is our spiritual worship (cf. Romans 12:1). And so we must look to specific ways to express and nourish our love for God. These, to return to the image used at the beginning of this chapter, become the means of obtaining our objective of fulfilling God’s plan for us.

**Personal Prayer** – As regular communication is the essential basis of a good marriage, the regular practice of personal prayer, communication with God, is fundamental to our growing in the love of God. As St. John Climacus notes, the forms of personal prayer in the Tradition are many; it is the attitude of prayer which is intended for all. And so the form used is not as compelling as the commitment to pray regularly, despite how I may be feeling. As Climacus notes, “Instability is natural to the mind, but God is powerful to establish everything. If you persevere indefatigably in this labor, He who sets the bounds to the sea of the mind will visit you too, and during your prayer will say to the waves: ‘Thus far shall you come and no further’ (Job 38:11)” (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, step 28).

In the Eastern Tradition of the Jesus Prayer we see what is perhaps the most easily attainable way of loving God “with our whole heart”. By practicing this prayer so that it enters into our innermost being, our hearts become so attuned to God’s presence that His name is present to us with every breath. Thus commitment to this prayer draws us to center the very depths of our personality on Him.

**Liturgical Prayer** – The Church is never more clearly the Body of Christ as when it is gathered together glorifying the Father together with its Head by the power of the Holy Spirit whose temple it is. And so a Christian who wants to love God and live in His presence will meet regularly with other Christians for common worship: the festive worship of Sundays and holydays and other, occasional gatherings as well.

**Reading the Scriptures** – Christians will also grow in the love of God with their whole mind the more they listen to His word in the Scriptures and, to a lesser degree, in the writings of the holy Fathers. A number of Eastern spiritual writers note that that, when a person reads the Scriptures regularly and with faith that it is God’s word, the divine energy they contain becomes very perceptible. In them God can reveal Himself more fully and increase the believer’s fervor and dedication. It is especially important for newly committed Christians to make the Scriptures their chief study, so that they might come to know the One to Whom they have committed themselves.

**Dedication of Our Resources** – Another way to grow in love for God is to use our personal resources (our whole strength: time, money, possessions) to serve Him. We have been entrusted with the stewardship of all these gifts by God and the way we use them reflects our love for the One who lent them to us. Managing
these resources wisely and using them generously (e.g. by tithing) is a concrete way of expressing a loving commitment to God.

**Decision Making** – How a person makes decisions reveals what is important to him. A self-sufficient or independent person will probably make decisions by asking, “What do I want to do? What will please me most?” A lover will ask, “What would make John (or Barbara) happy?” Christians fully committed to their relationship to God and seeking to love Him with their whole soul or will, may well ask, “What is God’s will for me? How can I most please Him?”

This is perhaps the most difficult area of our life to entrust to God. This is why the Tradition has given us a regular way to practice giving up our autonomy. Tito Colliander describes it in *The Way of the Ascetics*: “The greatest offering we can present to the Lord is ourself. We cannot do this without giving up our own will. We learn to do this through obedience, and obedience we learn through practice. The best form of practice is that provided by the Church in her prescribed fast days and seasons.”

“Besides fasting we have other masters to whom we can show obedience. They meet us at every step in our daily life, if only we recognize their voices. Your wife wants you to take your raincoat with you: do as she wishes to practice obedience. Your fellow worker asks you to walk with her a little way: go with her to practice obedience. Wordlessly the infant asks you for care and companionship: do as it wishes as far as you can, and thus practice obedience. A novice in a cloister could not find more opportunity for obedience than you in your own home, and likewise at your job and in your dealings with your neighbor.”

**GOD LOVES IN US**

“How can we presume to love God?” we may well ask: we find it difficult to love one another! Only God loves unreservedly, which is why we continually refer to Him as the Lover of mankind. “There is a love like a small lamp, fed by oil, which goes out when the oil is ended; or like a rain fed stream which goes dry, when rain no longer feeds it. But there is a love, like a spring gushing from the earth, never to be exhausted. The first is human love; the second is divine, and has God as its source” (St. Isaac the Syrian, *Philokalia*, #53).

Our practice of love, like our goal of *theosis*, is necessarily a process, spanning our whole lifetime. God has designed things this way and is purely patient with us as we grow according to His design. More importantly He dwells within us through His Holy Spirit and is working to transform our lives. To grow in His love, we must learn to rely daily on the power of the Spirit whose temple we are.
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Content Questions

1. According to the imagery of this chapter, what is the goal of Christian life? What are the objectives by which we pursue this goal? What are the means for attaining the first objective?

2. In the quotation on page 3, Nicholas Cabasilas expresses the idea that we are not fully living our humanity without a relationship to God. According to the Genesis story of creation, why would this be so?

3. According to Diadochus of Photike and Maximos the Confessor, cited on page 4, what does the practice of love release within us?

4. What differences does the author suggest exists between love as a commitment and love as an emotion?
Reflection Questions

1. How do you think developing an attitude of worship in our hearts differs from going to church to fulfill an obligation to worship God?

2. What has been your experience in trying to establish a regular pattern of personal prayer and/or reading the Scriptures?

3. What has been your experience with fasting: have you experienced it as the weapon against autonomy Tito Colliander indicates on page 8?

4. How might we put God first in a lifestyle choice, such as deciding to take a certain job or move to a certain location?

For Prayerful Reading

Choose one of the Scriptural or patristic quotes below or in the body of the chapter for reflection during the week. Record what it says to you in terms of your personal spiritual life.

- The importance of loving God – Matthew 22:34-40
- The call to put God first – Matthew 13:44-46
- God’s work of love within us – Romans 5:5
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1 Thessalonians 5:24
Philippians 1:6
Ephesians 1:16-20
Ephesians 3:20-21

The goodness of God –
Psalm 84: 1, 2
Psalm 27: 4
Psalm 63: 1-8

“God is love, throwing His arrow (His only begotten Son) after He has moistened its three-pronged point with the life-giving Spirit. Its point is faith, which not only brings contact with the arrow, but with the archer as well.”

St. Gregory of Nyssa

“Late have I loved You, O Beauty so ancient and so new: late have I loved You! For behold, You were within me, but I was outside. I sought You outside and in my unlovliness fell upon those lovely things You had made. You were within me, but I was not with You.”

St. Augustine

“It is no small thing that God is going to give to those who yearn, so no half-efforts will get them to that goal. What God is going to give them is not something He has made; He who made all things is going to give them Himself. So strive to lay hold of God; yearn long for what you are going to possess forever.”

St. Augustine
SESSION TWO: LOVING ONE ANOTHER

O Christ, who joined Your apostles in a union of love and have linked us, Your believing servants, to Yourself with the same bond: grant that we may keep Your commandment and love one another without pretense, through the prayers of the Mother of God, O You who alone are the Lover of mankind.

Troparion, For the Increase of Love

In the Gospel According to Matthew Jesus is asked by a Pharisee to name the greatest commandment of the Law. He responds, not with one precept but with two: love God and love your neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40). He does not do this to avoid making a political error, but because the two commandments are actually one. To have a true relationship with God we must love one another.

This sense that love of God and love of neighbor are one pervades the entire New Testament. Perhaps no statement on this theme is as uncompromising as that which we read in 1 John 4:20-21, “If anyone says, ‘My love is fixed on God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. One who has no love for the brother he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen. The commandment we have from Him is this: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

The Scriptures, echoed by the Fathers and the whole Tradition, uncompromisingly assert that it is impossible to know God in a relationship of love without loving others. Otherwise, as St. John Climacus notes, our love of God is a fantasy: “The man who claims to love the Lord but is angry with his neighbor is like someone who dreams he is running” (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, step 30). The Fathers often portray love of one’s neighbor as a stepping stone to loving God. No one, they write, is able to achieve love of God without gaining love of neighbor first of all. St. Basil the Great would even go further, saying, “He who loves his neighbor, is fulfilling the commandment to love God”.

Elsewhere in Scripture we see why these two precepts are so absolutely indivisible. Love is so much at the heart of the divine essence that ignorance of the experience of love effectively bars us from truly knowing God. As St. John would say, “The man without love has known nothing of God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7,8). We cannot claim to have any significant experience of God without sharing in that love which is at the heart of His being. If He is love, then to know Him we must know love. “God is truly God,” writes St. Basil the Great, “only to those who are united to Him through love” (On Psalm 29:3).
Because we are created after the image and called to reflect the likeness of the One who is love, we have the capacity to love and, therefore, to know Him. This is why St. Basil says that love is not something we are taught: it is with us as a basic desire. We are predisposed to love, because we are in the image of the Lover of mankind. We grow in love when, as Basil says, “This seed is received into the school of God’s commandments, where it is carefully cultivated” (Long Rules, 2). By growing in love, according to Evagrius of Pontus, we who are in the image of God become as nearly like our Prototype as possible, no matter what the demons may do to defile that likeness (cf. Praktikos, 89).

Not only are we called to love because it is natural for us as the New Creation, we also love because others are loveable. Everyone, without exception, is created after the image of God and so “The task of love is to behave towards every person bearing God’s image, almost as it does towards the Prototype” (Evagrius, Praktikos, 89). This understanding is what prompted St. Seraphim of Sarov, for example, to welcome visitors by bowing in veneration of them as living icons, just as he would to icons in the church. It is what brought St. Simeon the New Theologian to say that “Each one should look on his brother and his neighbor as his very God, and consider himself the least of all, not in regard to his neighbor, but to his Maker” (Third Chapter, 96).

AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Because there is no one who is not made according to God’s image, there is no one whom we are not called to love. Christ made that clear in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). And yet, because of our culture’s distorted understanding of love, we find it difficult to imagine how we can love everyone, especially people we don’t like. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Christian love is not primarily a matter of emotions or feelings. Positive emotions may be helpful in motivating us to love, but they are not love in themselves. Such feelings can, in fact, disguise selfish or complacent attitudes. Feelings come and go, as St. Maximos the Confessor noted, because they are related to our passions or the cravings of our broken nature. For the Christian, love for those made in the image of God is expressed more in terms of care, concern and service. This love is more a matter of commitment than emotion.

Christ proposes His own love for us as our model for what love should be: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. Such as My love has been for you, so must your love be for each other” (John 13:34). It is important that He presents this model at the Last Supper, after He had washed the disciples’ feet and knowing that He was about to be betrayed and abandoned by them: hardly the time for ‘warm fuzzy’ feelings. In this He is calling us to love when feelings fail, or when they tell us to do anything but love.
This is not to say that Christian love is meant to be dry or impersonal. Christian love does not spring from or depend on feelings, but it should express emotional acceptance and support. St. Seraphim counsels that “If you are giving to someone who asks, see that a joyful face precedes your gift and comfort his sorrow with good words” (Spiritual Instructions, 17). In the next section of the same work he advises, “You must strive to encourage the spirit of a disturbed or desponding man by a word of love”. And as we begin to express our commitment to love regardless of our feelings, we will find that our feelings will begin to support our commitment.

Many people today seem to believe that love can be expressed the same way in every type of relationship. We feel led, even impelled, to treat employers or employees as chums, or to relate to first time acquaintances as to a spouse. The Scriptures rather espouse the perspective of traditional societies in which love is expressed differently according to the sex, age, position of authority and family status of the persons concerned. In such a perspective, for example, you would no more treat your son as a peer than you would try to spank your employees. There are different ways of loving appropriate to different situations.

The English word love is used indiscriminately for all kinds of relationships. In the Tradition, however, different Greek words are used for sexual love (eros), brotherly love (philia), and the uniquely Christian love after Christ’s model (agape). Agape love is not meant to be the same kind of love which we have for our families, for example, or for those who are closest to us. We can only be expected to have the closeness of affection with only a few. This, for example, is why St. Nilus of Sora is reputed to have stressed that true monastic life is possible only with a small circle of friends. We are called, however, to have agape love for all who are made in God’s image.

**HOW TO LOVE AS A CHRISTIAN**

Another factor affecting the way we love is the distinction made in the Scriptures between the people of God (the laos) and those outside the household of faith, the nations (the ethne). While everyone is made in God’s image, not everyone is living in that unique relationship to God in Christ brought about by baptism. It is not that we love only the brethren, but that the manner of loving is different. We can and should sense a commitment to serve non-Christians, especially on the material level: “While giving alms, one should not distinguish between believer and unbeliever, but help everyone” (Nikon of the Black Mountain, Pandects, 21). Nevertheless, a different type of relationship exists between Christians because of their brotherhood in Christ. As we have a special relationship with our brother or sister by birth, so also we have a unique tie to those with whom we share the one Bread and the one Cup, and that should influence the way we love.
Growing in the Christian Life

Relationships in the Church should include a circle within which we can express our need to be loved and trusted and to whom we can express our faith life in a special way. This is necessary if we hope to be able to extend our agape love with consistency and fidelity. According to John Cassian, one of the founders of monasticism in the West, “True love set in order is that which, while it hates no one, yet loves some still more because of the excellence of their qualities or merits ... and loves these with a special affection; and which from this number makes a second choice through which are singled out some who are preferred to others in affection” (Conferences, 16). We need a circle in which we can share our faith and our trials, our blessings and our weaknesses in ways we cannot do outside the community of faith. We need to be able to confess our sins to one another (cf. James 5:16), secure that our brethren will “cover our nakedness,” as St. Isaac the Syrian advises. Having such a circle enables us to reach out from it in new ways of service in Christ because we have experienced His love ourselves in this way.

The most important manifestation of agape love according to the Tradition is expressed in concern for the salvation of our neighbors. Believers who have learned to love come to “weep over Jerusalem” as Christ did. This is why St. Basil could not understand how a good monk could relax and enjoy himself when he sees how many are going to die in sin. “Weep over sin,” he advises, “for it is the sickness of the soul, the death of that which is immortal; it calls for mourning and inconsolable laments. ... This is the weeping and mourning which the Word calls ‘Blessed’ – not a tendency to depression or weepiness” (Homily 9, On the Martyr Julitta).

This concern is expressed first of all in prayer. Our hearts should echo the Church’s prayer for the salvation of all: the sick, the suffering, the captive, the wandering. As St. Theodore the Studite urges, “Let the true disciples lament the denials of their fellow servants. It is for this reason that the great apostle orders us to make petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings for everyone. ... we should not be concerned just with ourselves, but also lament and pray for the whole world” (Small Catechesis). Many believers make regular intercession for the brethren and for all mankind an important part of their prayer life.

This concern may lead a person to work actively for the salvation of others, but more commonly it is our faithfulness to serve God rather than to be public witnesses which will bring about other’s salvation. “Be an example of sincere faith and of a life pleasing to God, and, like the apostles, you will be the fragrance of Christ, drawing people to follow Him” (Unseen Warfare, 19). The Lord may lead us to specific works, but these will be fruitful only if they come from Him and not from our own wish to do something for Him: “You are not to sow anything of your own accord; all you have to do is to offer to God the earth of your heart, free of all tares and thistles, and He will sow the seed in it, how and when He wills. This seed will bring fruit in its proper time.”
Session Two: Loving One Another

A second way in which we can express agape love for those made in God’s image is through almsgiving. As the Scriptures indicate, good wishes are not enough when a person is in need. “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no food for the day, and you say to them, ‘Goodbye and good luck! Keep warm and well fed’ but do not meet their bodily needs, what good is that?” (James 2:15, 16). The Fathers continually emphasize that the way we treat others made in God’s image is the way we are treating Him. “We must therefore welcome our neighbor as Christ. We should honor him and put all our resources at his disposal, just as Christ our God emptied out His own blood for our salvation” (St. Simeon the New Theologian, Third Chapter, 96).

Many of the Fathers seem radical in their insistence that any surplus goods we have at our disposal should be used for others who need them. They are, however, only echoing Christ’s own identification with the poor (Matthew 25:31-46). Whenever we ignore the needs of others we are ignoring Christ. Sharing is not meant to be something done only at Thanksgiving or Christmas to lessen our guilt at self-indulgence, but a regular attitude that pervades our daily life in Christ.

The Scriptures indicate one basic way in which believers can express their love for neighbor in a way that compares with loving God with our whole strength. That way is hospitality, the placing of our most basic resources (home and home life) at the disposal of others. “Do not neglect to show hospitality,” we are told, “for by that means some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2), referring to the hospitality shown by Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. By hospitality is meant sharing with those who are in need of what our household may have to offer: a place to stay, a meal, the companionship and atmosphere of a Christian home. By sharing these most basic resources in a welcoming spirit we give of the best we have in the name of Him who has taken us into His family by adopting us as His children by grace.

The Fathers issue one caution about love of neighbor, however. It must not take precedence over love of God. Commenting on Christ’s instruction that “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:37), St. Seraphim of Sarov notes that “One may see love in a Christian that is untrue to God when he makes a creature equal to the Creator or when he reveres a creature more than the Creator. True love, however, may be seen where the Creator alone is loved and preferred above any creature” (Spiritual Instructions, 18). Clearly there have always been Christians who have been drawn by their commitment to humanity away from love of God. This is an example of an assault of the evil one who works to divert us from the Good One even through good works, as indicated in the Unseen Warfare, 19: “Love for one’s neighbor must have its bounds and limits. If you do not keep it within the right limits, it may turn you away from the love of God, cause you great harm and cast you into perdition. ... Do all your works in a manner simple and holy, with nothing in view except to
Growing in the Christian Life

please God; and this will protect you from any false steps in actions dictated by love for your neighbor."

Content Questions

1. What is St. John Climacus’ imagery suggesting in the quotation on page 11?

2. What traditional teaching in Eastern Christian thought would justify St. Simeon the New Theologian telling us to look on our neighbor as on God Himself (page 15)?

3. Why do you think St. Maximos the Confessor would say that feelings of love stem from our broken humanity?

4. What is the difference in Christian thought between eros, philia and agape? For whom is each of these kinds of love appropriate?
Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think that love for others is the ultimate mirroring of God’s love for us?

2. Why would a commitment to Christian love be essential to theosis, or partaking of the divine nature?

3. If there is a difference between love for the brethren (i.e. in the Church) and love for those outside the Body of Christ, what would you consider an appropriate act of love for a fellow Christian which would not be desirable with someone outside the Church? And vice versa?

4. How is the relationship of the brethren with one another dependent upon and rooted in the mysteries of baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist?
Growing in the Christian Life

For Prayerful Reading

Choose one of the Scriptural or patristic quotes below or in the body of the chapter for reflection during the week. Record what it says to you in terms of your personal spiritual life.

Love as the guiding force in Christian life – 1 Corinthians 13
Love your neighbor as yourself – Mathew 22:34-40
God’s love as a model for ours – 1 John 4:7-12
Romans 5:6-8
Christian relationships – Ephesians 5:21, 6:9 Colossians 3:18, 4:6
1 Thessalonians 4:12
Love for the brethren – Galatians 6:10
1 Peter 1:22
John 13:34, 35
John 17:23
Relating to elders and juniors – 1 Timothy 5:1-4
Christian hospitality – 1 Peter 4:9
Hebrews 13:1, 2
Relationships with unbelievers – Colossians 4:5
1 Peter 2:12, 13; 3:7; 5:1-5
Hebrews 13:7, 17

“This is the most perfect norm of Christianity, the landmark exactly laid down, the point that stands the highest of all: the seeking of which brings good for all. For nothing can so make us imitators of Christ as caring for our neighbor.

“No, even if you should fast or sleep on the ground or punish yourself but take no thought for your neighbor, you have done nothing great. Even while doing these things you still stand far from His Image.”

St John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians

“My neighbor is a person with rights equal to mine, a man like me, also made after the image of God. As he is the same as I am, I must love him as I love myself. Therefore I must watch over him as over my own flesh and blood, behave lovingly, gently, and kindly to him, forgiving his thoughts as I willingly
forgive my own: for I long for forgiveness and indulgence from others toward my own weaknesses, I wish that others not even notice them as though they did not exist, or that, if they do notice them, it be gently, kindly, pleasantly and benevolently.”

St. John of Kronstadt, *Spiritual Counsels*

“Christians love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them, if one of them has something, he gives freely to the one who has nothing. If they see a stranger, Christians take him home and are happy, as though he were a real brother. They don’t consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit of God. And if they hear that one of them is in jail or persecuted for professing the name of the Redeemer, they all give him what he needs. If it is possible, they bail him out. If one of them is poor and there isn’t enough food to go around, they fast several days to give him the food he needs. ... This is really a new kind of person: there is something divine in them.”

Aristedes, *Defense of Christians*
SESSION THREE: GROWING IN FAITH

Faith can accomplish great things! Through it the three holy young men rejoice in the flames as if they had been in refreshing water, and Daniel in the midst of lions is like a shepherd among his sheep. Through their intercession, O Christ God, save our souls.

Troparion, Sunday of the Geneology

The Christian life has often been seen as a recurring cycle of God loving us and our responding to that love. He initiates this life in us by the gift of His Son; we respond to that love by accepting His gift in faith. He confirms our faith at baptism by actually joining us to the Body of Christ in the Church. Our answer to this great gift is the love we offer Him directly or through our love for one another. He in turn then builds up our faith to the degree that we respond to His love.

This is why the Scripture often says the same thing about the mysteries, about faith and about love. In one place we read that we are justified by faith (cf. Romans 5:12); in another we are told that it is our love for one another which enables us to pass from death to life (cf. 1 John 3:14); in a third we see that salvation comes from believing and being baptized (cf. Mark 16:16); in a fourth eternal life comes from continual Eucharistic union with Christ (cf. John 6:54-56). These statements are not contradictory, and opposing them destroys the fuller, catholic understanding of basic Christian life. The entire Tradition insists that our actions do not earn us divine life, which is a gift we mystically receive, but that this life does not flourish within us without our reaching out in faith and love.

It is because we have both been gifted and respond in this way, as St. John Chrysostom says, that we are called believers. “You are called faithful both because you believe in God and have given over to Him your almsgiving, your prayers, your temperance and every other virtue in return for what God has entrusted to your keeping: the justification, holiness, purity of soul, filial adoption, and the kingdom of heaven: all of which you have as a pledge from Him” (Second Baptismal Instruction, 2). Faith, then, according to Chrysostom, means all three: to receive God’s love, to believe, and to respond in love.

It has often been a temptation for religious people to stress faith without seeing that it includes love and that, if you have faith without love, then what you have is not faith at all. Thus St. Paul needed to remind the Corinthians that all the spiritual gifts they had, including great faith, were meaningless without love for one another (1 Corinthians 12, 13). It is because we love that we believe, as St. 20
Simeon the New Theologian said, “All faith comes from [love] and is built on its foundation; on it hope is based. Apart from love nothing whatever has existed, nor ever will” (Discourse One, On Love, 2).

Today we see the opposite tendency. Many see Christianity as a simple echo of the popular song, “All You Need Is Love”: it doesn’t matter what you believe. They point to love in Christ’s story of the last judgment (Matthew 25) as the ultimate criterion for Christians, forgetting that Christ is applying it, not to believers, but to “the nations” who never knew Him. The Tradition avoids both these misunderstandings, insisting that faith and love are one. The two indivisible marks of authentic holiness, according to the Tradition are an orthodox faith and a life in conformity with God’s commandments.

Perhaps the connection between faith and love was best expressed by Diadochus of Photike when he wrote, “He who loves God both believes truly and performs the works of faith reverently. But he who only believes and does not love, lacks even the faith he thinks he has; for he believes merely with a certain superficiality of intellect and is not energized by the full force of love’s glory. The chief part of virtue, then, is faith energized by love” (On Spiritual Knowledge).

According to Diadochus, and the entire Tradition, faith which is not “energized by love” is not faith at all, but a certain mental assent to intellectual propositions. This, unfortunately, is what many people understand religious faith to mean: accepting with the mind what God reveals, what the Creed proposes, what the Church teaches. Mental assent, however, is not faith. True faith implies action upon what is believed, living in accord with what we profess. Mental assent is simply agreeing that such and such a teaching is true, but this is void of action. When many people say that they believe in God, all they mean is that they agree that God exists.

Mental assent does not make a believer. As the Scripture says, “My brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it? ...Do you believe that God is one? You are quite right. The demons believe that, and shudder” (James 2:14, 19). Evil spirits are well aware that there is but one God, but since it does not affect their behavior, they do not have faith. Recognition of the true God in the mind must lead to worshipping Him in the spirit. For faith to be real, then, it must be acted upon.

The Scripture makes the following comparison, cited in the previous chapter, to say what faith is meant to be: “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and no food for the day, and you say to them, ‘Goodbye and good luck! Keep warm and well fed,’ but do not meet their bodily needs, what good is that? So it is with the faith that does nothing in practice. It is thoroughly lifeless” (James 2:15-17). Many today have interpreted this to mean that faith must be supported by acts of charity. This is not the meaning at all. Rather the author is saying
that, just as good wishes must be acted on to be sincere, so too, faith must have practical effects if it is to be real.

**PERSONAL FAITH AS TRUST**

When we believe in a person, we have more than an intellectual opinion about him. In telling someone, “I believe in you,” we are expressing a whole range of feelings and understandings because belief, even on a human, natural level, includes more than the mind. There is a relationship built on trust: an affection for, a confidence in the other person. Belief at the deeper level of our being, then, is more a matter of trust or confidence than it is the mental acceptance of an abstract truth.

The same understanding of faith operates with ordinary elements of our daily life in which we believe. Thus people put their trust in their abilities, their health, their accomplishments, the culture, etc. In all these areas belief is more than an opinion, more than a mental attitude; rather it is a confidence which leads to action. It is on this level that St. Cyril of Jerusalem sees faith when he says, “Agriculture is founded on faith; for no one who did not believe that he should gather in the increase of the fruits of the earth, would undertake the labor of husbandry. Mariners are guided by faith when they entrust their fate to a bit of wood, choosing the agitation of unstable water over the more stable element of the earth” (*Catechesis*, 5).

When religious faith is at the depths of our being, not simply in the mind, it is expressed as trust: confidence in the God whose name we profess. This involves much more than simply agreeing that God exists. It is rather a process of saying to Him, “I believe in You, I rely upon You, I put all my trust in You”, and then acting on the basis of that trust. As Bishop Kallistos (Timothy Ware) has noted, “Faith is not the supposition that something might be true, but the assurance that Someone is there” (*The Orthodox Way*, p. 19).

This is what we mean in the Nicene Creed when we say “I believe in” God the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. At one and the same time we are trusting that God is truthful when He says that He is Trinity, and we are also expressing confidence that we can trust Him as a Father, follow Him as our Lord, rely on Him as our Advocate who dwells in the Church. Only in this way will the doctrines we profess in the creed penetrate our lives and truly become faith in us.

We do not believe in a generic God, but in One who has shown us that He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our personal faith, then, is in Him as Trinity, as He has revealed Himself. In Christian faith there is a clear identity between what God says about Himself and how we entrust ourselves to Him.

The most basic thing Christ tells us about God is that He is Father, meaning that He is both the Source of all things, and one upon whom we can rely with the
confidence of a child toward his father. It was with such assurance that the first Christians called God *Abba*, using the Aramaic term which was the child’s first way of calling out to his father, much like our “daddy”. It is this same sense of confidence which we pray the Eucharist will bring us in the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, “...make us worthy to partake of Your heavenly and awesome mysteries of this sacred and spiritual table ... for intimate confidence in You...” (Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer).

This confidence is expressed in a number of ways, the first being that we trust in His divine plan of salvation: through Christ we have union with Him, *theosis*, the resurrection, the life of the world to come. “Since the blood of Jesus assures our entrance into the sanctuary by the new and living path He has opened up for us through the veil (the ‘veil’ meaning His flesh), and since we have a great priest who is over the house of God, let us draw near in utter sincerity and absolute confidence, our hearts sprinkled clean from the evil which lay on our conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. Let us hold unwaveringly to our profession which gives us hope, for He who made the promise deserves our trust” {Hebrews 10:19-23). We know with confidence that our Father wants all to be saved, that He has united us to His Son, adopting us as His own, and that because of that union we have already passed from death to life. We may be uncertain of our own fidelity to His love, but will never have reason to doubt His fidelity to His promises.

Another sign of His love in which we can have confidence is His presence to us in every circumstance of life. He will never abandon His own and is with us no matter what befalls us. St. Paul expressed it clearly, “We know that in all things God works for good for those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). His sense of assurance was so strong that he could face any hardship, knowing that the Father’s love would be with him in anything. “I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor powers, neither height nor depth nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

Often Christians lose a sense of God’s presence in hardship because they see God’s presence as a kind of good luck charm. If their luck is bad, the “charm” must not be working. Others may look on hardship or tragedy as “God’s will,” as if He desires us to suffer or die. St. Paul’s approach above is much more in line with the kind of Father we know God to be. He neither abandons us in hardship nor causes evil in our lives. Rather He is always present, always working in the midst even of hardship and sin to bring us closer to Him. Thus He even works in death to call a person to eternal life, even though He is not the author of death. This is why St. Paul could urge us, “Rejoice always, never cease praying, render constant thanks; such is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians
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5:17). Thanksgiving is always appropriate, even when we are experiencing hardship, because the Father is always there, even in the midst of it.

BRINGING US TO PERFECTION

A third example of God’s concern for us in which we can trust is His desire to lead us personally along the path of *theosis*. Not only does He wish that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, He has brought us personally to where we stand on the road to the heavenly realm and seeks to lead us ever further on the path to Himself. This is why St. Paul could say, “I am sure of this much: that He who has begun the good work in you will carry it through to completion right up to the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). We can be confident that the Lord wants to make us full partakers of His divine nature, ultimately through the resurrection on the “day of Christ Jesus”.

It is God’s goodness and love which prompts us to this assurance. We have experienced His love in being called to live His life. We know He did not call us to toy with us, but because He means to bring us to a share in His promises. “How is it possible that our good Shepherd, who for three years went in search of sheep that had gone astray, calling so loudly that His throat became parched, and following ways so hard and thorny that He shed all His blood and gave up His life; how is it possible, I repeat, that now, if His sheep follow Him, turn to Him with love and call for His help with hope, He should fail to turn His eyes to the lost sheep, take it into His divine arms and, placing it among the heavenly angels, make a welcoming feast for its sake?” (*Unseen Warfare*, 3)

Many Eastern spiritual writers have stressed that, not only can we trust in God to complete this work, we must trust in Him. Holiness is not a task we can achieve of ourselves: our holiness is never anything more than a share in His. Yet, we tend to think very highly of ourselves and our own efforts, despite our daily experience to the contrary. Though we fall constantly and fail to achieve our goals, we still rely on our minds and wills for achieving successes in life. This is true in every level of life, including the spiritual life. We will do this and that, and that will make us closer to God.

But “How can grace, which comes to help and enlighten us, enter that man who thinks of himself that he is something great, that he himself knows everything and needs no outside help?” (*Unseen Warfare*, 2). This is why many Eastern writers say the first step to growth in the spiritual life is fostering the realization that, “Since He is the source of all good, nothing truly good can ever come from ourselves” (*Unseen Warfare*, 2). This seems morbid to us today, for several reasons. Contemporary society strives for achievement, assertiveness, going for the gusto. This may work in areas where human effort can reasonably be expected to reach its goals. In the life of holiness, however, we are operating on a
completely different plane: one in which by definition we cannot generate our own life; we must receive it from the Giver of all good gifts.

A second characteristic of modern society finds great difficulty understanding the Fathers’ teaching that we should see no good in ourselves. Many people today have been raised to feel that, as persons, they are worthless, not as good as their brothers or sisters, failures in their parents eyes, etc. As a result many have a low sense of self worth on a purely human level. When such a person confronts the Fathers’ teaching on this subject he says, “Yes, that’s right, I am no good ... unlike that person over there”.

This is certainly not what these authors mean. They are not comparing one person to another, but saying that none of us are capable of functioning on a level in which we are powerless. It is interesting to see that all those movements which have successfully dealt with compulsive behavior (alcoholism, drug addiction, overeating, sexual disorders) have seen the same premise as their first step. The person must give up thinking that he or she can achieve wholeness in this area, they must trust in God. It has been said that, all believers are also compulsives: we are sinners and, like alcoholics, are never cured, simply not active. We can only hope to remain that way by trusting, not in our own efforts, but in God. It is in this sense that the author of Unseen Warfare understands St. John Chrysostom when he says, “He alone knows himself in the best way possible who thinks of himself as being nothing.”

One way we become aware of our natural incapacity for holiness is by our sinfulness. When we sin our weakness becomes obvious, even to ourselves. This is an example of how God can work, even in the midst of sin, in this case to teach us that we need to trust on His strength, as we have none of our own. This is also why these writers say that we should not be surprised when we fall, because we are human: only God can be trusted to be perfectly holy. The more we are shocked and reproachful of ourselves when we do fall, the more we can be sure that we trust in our righteousness, not God’s. We are seeing, in effect, the graven image of our own strength fallen and powerless and this is why we are astounded. On the other hand, “If a man does not rely on himself but puts his trust in God, when he falls he is not greatly surprised and is not overcome with excessive grief, for he knows that it is the result of his own impotence and, above all, of the weakness of his trust in God” (Unseen Warfare, 4).

GROWING IN FAITH

While we do not generate life or even faith, which is a gift of God, we are called to contribute to our growth in faith. “Faith comes, not through pondering, but through action. Not words and speculation but experience teaches us what God is. To let in fresh air we have to open a window; to get tanned we must go out into the sunshine. Achieving faith is no different” (Tito Colliander, The Way of
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*the Ascetics*, 1). We cannot build our own faith, but God cannot build it without our cooperation, our letting the sun or the air reach us. The following steps have long been seen as effective ways to immerse ourselves in an atmosphere of faith:

**Awareness of our Insufficiency** – While being aware of your personal worth as a being made in God’s image, pray for an awareness of the fact that by ourselves we can do nothing worthy of divine grace, and reflect on it frequently. This is often what the Fathers mean by “humility”: knowing deeply that only God is God and that we cannot do His work. Frequent use of prostrations or the Jesus Prayer will keep this truth in mind.

**Awareness of God’s Faithfulness** – This comes by regular reading of the Scriptures or the lives of saints with an eye to seeing how God’s love has been shown forth in these His servants. “Look at the generations of old and see: did ever any trust in the Lord and be confounded?” (Ecclesiastes 2:10, cited in *Unseen Warfare*, 3).

**An Environment of Faith** – Since each person’s spiritual or mental energy to reflect on these things is limited, God has placed us within a community of faith, the Church, to strengthen each one’s reliance on the one Lord. Make associating with those people who will foster growth in faith a priority in your life. Much of our time is spent in an environment hostile to trust in God. Take the time you can dispose of freely to place yourself within a strongly supportive environment of faith.

Many people are put off by such a description of faith. They feel it is too much for them and they feel guilty that their faith is not stronger. When we feel this way we are forgetting that *theosis* is a process: we should not expect to be perfect in faith from the first moment we believe. By the same token we should not resist doing what it takes to grow.

The patriarch Abraham is a perfect illustration of growth in faith (Genesis 12-22). God called him to leave his relatives and go where God would lead. Abraham trusted, but not enough to leave Lot and other relatives behind. It was not until Abraham finally split with them that he could move ahead. God promised that He would give Abraham a land; Abraham trusted, but still tried to make a place for himself in Egypt. This too did not work and he was forced to leave. God promised him a son, but he was beginning to doubt so he took a concubine. Here again his faith was not perfect. Only at the end of his life, when at last he trusted God to provide a sacrifice instead of his son Isaac, was his trust complete.

Since then the Scriptures have seen Abraham as the model of faith. His faith was not perfect at the start of his journey, but it grew to the degree that he trusted God. We should not expect our faith to be better than his, but we are clearly called to open ourselves to God’s care so that we too can deepen our trust in the God who loves us with an everlasting love.
Content Questions

1. In what does St. John Chrysostom say faith consists (page 20)?

2. What might Diadochus of Photike have in mind when he describes some people's faith as merely "a certain superficiality of intellect" (page 21)?

3. How does trust in God relate to the Creed's statement that we believe in God the Father?

4. How would 1 Thessalonians 5:17 relate to trust in God?

Reflection Questions

1. If trust is acted-on faith that God is Father, what might constitute acted-on faith that Christ is Lord?
2. How might a deepened faith that God is faithful to His promised work of salvation change or intensify your life?

3. In what areas of your life have you found it most difficult to be thankful to God? How might He have been working there anyway?

4. What is your reaction to the frequent references to us as sinners in our liturgical prayers? How might this relate to the need to trust in God's holiness?

For Prayerful Reading

Choose one of the Scriptural or patristic quotes below or in the body of the chapter for reflection during the week. Record what it says to you in terms of your personal spiritual life.

Faith is the mark of holy men and women – Hebrews 11

Faith as the cornerstone of Christian life – Colossians 2: 6-7

Faith as the key to intercessory prayer – James 1:5-8

Faith as union with the mind of Christ – John 14:12-14
“Faith comes by hearing’ (Romans 10:17), for by hearing the divine Scriptures we believe in the teaching of the Holy Spirit. It is perfected by doing all the things enjoined by Christ: relying on His work, cultivating piety, and keeping the commandments of Him who has restored us.”

St. John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*

“A brother questioned Abba Poemen, saying, ‘What is faith?’ The old man said, ‘Faith is to live humbly and to give alms’.”

*Sayings of the Fathers*
SESSION FOUR:
FOLLOWING THE SPIRIT’S LEAD

“Since we live by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s lead.”
(Galatians 5:25)

The Scriptures uphold Abraham as the father of believers by reason of his trust in God. But the New Testament also stresses that, despite the greatness of Abraham and other Old Testament giants of faith, “God had made a better plan, a plan which included us. Without us, they were not to be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:40).

That plan was, of course, our restoration in Christ: a plan which was climaxed in His bestowal of the Holy Spirit to be with us forever. The Spirit, we believe, came upon the community of believers at Pentecost, making of the Church a holy temple, the dwelling place of God. This is why St. Paul would warn the Corinthians, “Are you not aware that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

At the same time Paul would use the same image to describe the individual Christian. Not only is the Church God’s temple, but each Christian is as well. Because we have been baptized into Christ and sealed with the Spirit in chrismation, God dwells mystically within each of us: “You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, which is within: the Spirit you have received from God” (1 Corinthians 6:19). This is why we can say that we are already participating in theosis: we live the divine life because the Spirit dwells in us.

When Christ promised the Spirit to His disciples, He told them that this Spirit would be for them a Paraclete. This Greek term is difficult to translate by one English word. A paraclete was a kind of helper or guide who accompanied a person in need of assistance of favors or benefits from the judges and rulers of the day. It became an image for the Spirit who guides us along the way to God, praying for us, teaching us, showing us His path of truth. In prayers the word is often translated as Advocate, Comforter, or Consoler or simply left in the Greek form, Paraclete.

Since the Spirit dwells both in the Church as a body and in the Christian as well, He is present to guide us both as community and as individuals. God wants to
reveal His plan for us, His people, and so He has given His Spirit to the Church. The various aspects of Holy Tradition (Scriptures, liturgy, Councils, writings of the Fathers, etc.) are all signs that the Spirit has been active throughout the history of the Church unfolding that plan. In the same way the Spirit is present to us because God wants each of us to know His plan for our individual lives. He loves us both as a people and as persons and wants to reveal His will to all who will trust in Him. Christians who know that the Holy Spirit dwells in them should expect that this Spirit will show them God’s plan for their lives.

We are all aware of some general directions that God has for all His people. We do not need a special revelation from the Spirit telling us not to commit adultery, for example. Beyond the level of the Ten Commandments, however, many Christians see God’s guidance as simply a general set of principles left for us to apply to situations as we see fit. As we grow in awareness that Christian life is actually a relationship with the Spirit who dwells in us, we come to see God’s guidance for us in a more personal way. We begin to discern that living a fuller Christian life, deepening our relationship with Him, includes looking to Him for guidance in all aspects of our personal lives. This is part of what we mean in worship when we agree to commend “our whole life to Christ God”.

Almost every time we gather for worship we make this commendation of ourselves to the Lord. This is meant to remind us that a Christian does not entrust his life to the Lord only once: it is a commitment we need to reconfirm time after time. As we do this we also need to seek the Spirit’s guidance to show us just what this commitment means for us today or at this stage of our life. In our prayer tradition, we ask daily for this kind of direction. “Blessed are You, O Lord: teach me Your statutes,” we frequently repeat. In the traditional Morning Prayers we ask, “teach me Your commandments, help me to do Your will,” referring, not to the general principles which we learned long ago, but to the ways in which the Lord would lead us in our personal lives.

Our first reaction to such a concept is often “How can I know what God wants of me?” Perhaps before we ask that question we need to decide to obey His will whatever it is. We often assume a “wait and see” attitude, postponing our decision to obey until we know what is asked. This is natural, as God often asks us to do things which we would not choose to do on our own. This is why our daily prayer cited above asks for help in doing as well as knowing what God wants of us. It is not enough to learn His commandments: we must be willing to execute them as well.

HOW THE SPIRIT GUIDES US

The Spirit, we believe, dwells in the Church. He has made of us living stones brought together to build His temple, to form His people. Because he has joined the Christian people together through baptism in the one Lord, He has led us into
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a place of spiritual unity and interdependence. It may be expected that He who has made us one in this way also uses us to guide each other in the Body. The indwelling Spirit works through us, the members of the Church, to guide one another and this deepens our spiritual unity even more.

The first way that the Spirit works in the Church to guide us is by the common teaching of the Church. As was mentioned above, all the outward forms of Holy Tradition are the work of the Holy Spirit in the believers. Through the countless Christians of past ages who contributed to the formation of the Scriptures, the liturgical services, and the acts of ecumenical councils, the Spirit has been active in guiding the Body of Christ. Through them we come to know that the Lord is calling all of us to continual prayer, to fast, to give alms, to enter wholeheartedly in the life of the Church, and the like.

And so we find guidance first of all in the Scriptures and in the other forms of Holy Tradition. By reading and reflecting on the Scriptures or the writings of the Fathers we come to discern what God wants of His people in general and sometimes of us in particular. Saints like Anthony the Great, Augustine, and Francis of Assisi all had the experience of having their lives turned around because they believed that a call they read or heard in the Gospel was personally addressed to them. In our own day Metropolitan Anthony Bloom tells how, as a young agnostic student, he decided to read one of the Gospels for the purpose of refuting a speaker he had heard. “I expected nothing good from my reading, so I counted the chapters of the four Gospels to be sure I read the shortest, not to waste time unnecessarily. I started to read St. Mark’s Gospel. While I was reading the beginning of St. Mark’s Gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I suddenly became aware that on the other side of my desk there was a Presence. And the certainty was so strong that it was Christ standing there that it has never left me” (Beginning to Pray, introduction). That reading turned an agnostic into a believer and eventually an archbishop.

More often, however, we find that our reading does not speak to us so clearly and the spiritual leadings we see there are not so clear. We realize, for example, that we should fast, but how much is appropriate for me at this point of my life? I know I should pray: does that mean that I should practice the Jesus Prayer, attend church services daily, or focus on yet a different prayer form? For whom should I be praying? and so on.

Here the Tradition speaks very clearly. The spectrum of Christian life is so broad, the opportunities for serving God so numerous that we can expect to feel lost as to where to concentrate our energies. As the Hieromonk Macarius of the Optina Monastery wrote in the 1850s to one of his spiritual children, “It is admirable that you should be reading the Fathers. Bear in mind, however, that their writing is like a thick forest: venturing there unprotected without knowledge and without guidance, we easily go astray and may even run into grave dangers”
when we attempt to apply in our life practices for which we are not ready.

Besides books, then, we need the guidance of the Church in a more specific, more personal way than general reading can ordinarily provide. As St. John Climacus said, we need a Moses to help us escape Pharaoh and get to the Promised Land. We need the guidance of a living member of the community of faith through whom the Spirit can work to show us His way for our life. We need an elder in the spiritual life to help show us the way.

The elder (Gr: geron, Slav: staretz) in the Eastern Churches is a person whose own relationship with God has progressed to such a degree that he or she can help to guide others on their spiritual journey. An elder is not someone who has a degree in how to give spiritual direction. Rather an elder is a person who has sought to be one with the Lord. And one product of a long reliance in faith on the Lord is that such persons cannot but help to influence others who see the fruit of the Spirit in them. As St. Seraphim of Sarov said, “Acquire inward peace and a multitude of men around you will find their salvation”.

Elders, then, are not appointed, assigned or ordained. Their ministry in the Church can only be the fruit of their own personal immersion into a relationship with God. It is the reality of this relationship which gives power or authority to an elder’s guidance. People listen to an elder because the truth of his teaching is first of all seen in his life. This is why the ministry of elders has always been seen as being a charismatic service to the Church: one directly imbued by the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is such a ministry that St. John Climacus is describing when he writes, “A genuine teacher of this kind is one who has received the tablets of spiritual knowledge from God inscribed by His divine finger, that is by an inner illumination, and who therefore has no need of books” (To the Shepherd, 5).

Because this ministry depends on the depth of a person’s relationship with God, it has often been the case that monastics, both men and women, have surfaced as elders of the spiritual life in the Church. Such people have as their sole task in life the developing of this relationship and it has often borne fruit in the number of elders connected with the monastic life.

Another place where elders have often been raised up is among people deeply devoted to serving the Lord in the poor. The tale among the monastic Fathers in the Egyptian desert was that it had been revealed to St. Anthony the Great that he had a spiritual equal living in the heart of the city. This man was a physician who gave to the poor whatever he had beyond his needs and “every day sang the Trisagion with the angels” (Sayings of the Fathers). In our own day we see people like Mother Teresa in India, Catherine Doherty and Dorothy Day, and Jean Vanier whose transparent lives have brought many to follow them in discovering the Lord through ministry to those in the direst need.

The first way in which elders such as these guide their disciples is by their lifestyle. The disciple sees how the elder lives, what values and virtues the elder
seeks, and wants to realize the same way of life. This is very much like the way of teaching of the rabbis in Christ’s day, a method the Lord Himself used. His followers did not simply come to hear an occasional sermon: they attached themselves to Him, stayed with Him, and absorbed as much as possible of His way of life. Those who respond to this kind of teaching are usually drawn to adopt the same way of life as the elder.

Even more people are attracted by the elder’s teachings than actually take up his or her lifestyle. People seek out an elder for help in determining their vocation in life, how to deal with particular circumstances of living, or how best to observe the practices of the faith in their circumstances of life. It is often the fact that people do come to a person for guidance that is the first sign that the Spirit is giving that person the ministry of elder. Because of the elder’s deep love for mankind and especially for his disciples, he or she will often spend hours receiving people who come seeking advice or counsel about their Christian life. Thus a nineteenth century parish priest in a working class suburb of St. Petersburg, St. John of Kronstadt, came to be known during his lifetime as the “Pastor of All Russia”.

One reason people come to an experienced elder is that they perceive he has the gift of insight or discernment: the ability to know intuitively the secrets of another’s heart. Sometimes, in remarkable elders, this has been a kind of clairvoyance, where the elder tells of circumstances of which they have not been told or which have yet to take place. Thus, when the lively and boisterous teacher Alexander Grenkov consulted the hermit Hilarion about his future, the elder told him to enter the Optina Monastery, then famous for its elders, saying mysteriously, “You are needed there.” Grenkov did that and ultimately became one of the most remarkable elders in the monastery.

More often the gift of discernment is experienced as the ability to read between the lines and see what is behind a person’s external behavior. This is the way Hieromonk Macarius of Optina answered one letter from a spiritual son, “The most important thing in your letter is one that you never stress, one on which you ask no instructions, one which you never formulate clearly, but which comes out in every line: the growing hostility between you and your wife” (Russian Letters of Direction, 7:1). He then went on to advise his correspondent on this matter which the elder had discerned was the most important issue to be dealt with in the man’s life.

Besides knowing what the problem or circumstances might be, the elder should be able to speak what the individual needs to hear. The gift of wisdom would often prompt an elder to moderate his comments or to say nothing at all, thereby writing volumes. An example can be drawn from the life of Father Amvrossy, a nineteenth century Russian elder. A group of society girls once came to see him purely out of boredom and curiosity, as they would go to a party or the theater. Although he had been discussing spiritual matters with other visitors, Amvrossy
immediately began to discuss women’s fashions with the girls, talking at great length about parasols and hats to such a degree that, without censuring them, he made them aware of the emptiness of their usual interests.

This elder’s delicacy in dealing with the spiritually immature is a typical example of the deep love for people which the well known elders in the Church always seem to manifest. Amvrossy’s love for those who came to him was so great that he received people almost uninterruptedly for twelve hours every day, taking time out only for brief meals and for prayer. This activity was constant for almost thirty years, although the elder was sick for much of that time. Even though he knew that people often came to see him out of curiosity or for trifles, he simply could not turn them away. His attitude resembled that of another famous elder, Silouan, who wrote, “I am an old man awaiting death. I write the truth for love of God’s people over whom my soul grieves. If I should help but a single soul to salvation I will give thanks to God; but my heart aches for the whole world, and I pray and shed tears for the whole world, that all may repent and know God, live in love, and delight in the freedom of God” (The Undistorted Image). It is this kind of love that revealed many elders as Fathers or Mothers in fact as well as in name.

Besides the gifts of discernment and wisdom they have received from the Spirit, elders rely on the Spirit’s working in Tradition for their teaching. It is recorded of many elders that they never claimed to teach on the basis of their own insights, but were simply repeating the Fathers. The secret to the elders’ use of the Fathers is that they also know what in the Fathers’ works best suited the needs of the person at hand. In The Way of a Pilgrim, chapter two, an elder outlines a progressive reading schedule on interior prayer for his disciple, “An inexperienced person wanting to learn should read the Philokalia in the following order: first, the book of Nicephorus the Solitary, in the second part; then the book of Gregory of Sinai with the exception of the short chapters; third, Simeon the New Theologian about the three forms of prayer and the lesson on faith; then the book of Callistos and Ignatius. ...If, however, you desire even simpler information on interior prayer, then find the summarized version of Patriarch Callistos of Constantinople in the fourth part of the book”. The Elder Macarius, writing to someone else, advised that those works should be avoided and the disciple concentrate instead on the writings of St. John of Damascus, John Cassian, and Mark the Ascetic. Thus disciples, who were happy to plunge into the book willy-nilly, learned the best way to approach these Fathers appropriate to their individual background and previous experience in these matters.

The first elders naturally ministered to those who lived nearby. Often monasteries grew up around them as people decided to live their entire lives in the shadow of the elder so that they would be able to share their daily thoughts as well as the critical issues of life. In the nineteenth century, when the modern postal system was developed, people often took to maintaining contact with their elders by
correspondence as well as occasional visits. People often wrote lengthy letters, as was the style at the time, to which the elder would respond. Some of these have been preserved and collected, giving us a glimpse of these elders’ ministry.

OTHER FORMS OF GUIDANCE

While God always raises up such people in the Church, elders like Amvrossy or Macarius are not all that common. How else has the Spirit arranged to give us the specific guidance we need for our personal lives? Many elders have recommended establishing a regular relationship with a priest in the mystery of repentance. They felt that the charism of discernment was not as important as the willingness to submit one’s will and mind to another that would bring about growth. Father Silouan of Mount Athos counseled, “If your father confessor has not himself trodden the path of prayer, nevertheless seek counsel of him, and because of your humility the Lord will have mercy on you and keep you from all untruth. But if you think to yourself, ‘My confessor lacks experience and is occupied with vain things: I will be my own guide with the help of books,’ then your foot is set upon a perilous path and you are not far from being beguiled and going astray” (Wisdom from Mount Athos: the Writings of Staretz Silouan, 7).

Others suggest consulting with one’s spiritual brethren in the absence of an elder for the same reason: going it alone is prideful and the Spirit will more likely touch us through another as inexperienced as ourselves as through the meanderings of our own mind. As St. Simeon the New Theologian expressed it, “It is better for you to be called a disciple of a disciple rather than to live by your own devices and gather the worthless fruits of your own will” (The Discourses). This is why the Church came to bless the spiritual relationships of laypeople to provide opportunities for mutual love and growth in the Spirit for those living in secular society as well as for those in monastic fraternities.

Somewhat comparable is the modern concept of the support group. The Spirit is not averse to working in a circle of believers which gathers to reflect on the Scriptures or the writings of the Fathers and to share aspects of their personal lives. People should know, however, that in such situations it is easier to arrest our own growth by dwelling on those aspects of the Tradition which seem to confirm our own tendencies. Thus a person who likes the sound of his own voice will respond quite readily to the general call to preach the Gospel and the shy person will take refuge in those texts which speak of self-abasement. Support groups should be aware of this tendency within all of us to stick with those elements of the Christian life which support our individual characteristics and thereby inhibit real growth.
WE SEE WITH NEW EYES

As we grow in our relationship with God, we often come to sense that He wants us to do a certain thing, pray for a certain person or the like. This is often the work of the Spirit, using our increased spiritual sensitivity to prompt us to new levels of faith. Such movements can especially be trusted as being of God when they confirm existing commitments, such as family life. Thus a married couple may be moved to begin praying seriously for their children’s future after experiencing a deepening of their own personal spiritual lives.

A person whose relationship with the Lord is maturing will find that all the circumstances of life, even our weaknesses and sinfulness, are vehicles in which the Lord can work to guide us to a deeper experience of His love. Many people, such as John of Kronstadt, have kept spiritual journals or diaries to record their perceptions of how the Lord was leading them through the circumstances of life. This practice has become popular again today.

Often inexperienced people are deluded in their perceptions, however, of how the Lord acts because of their lack of familiarity with the Tradition. They may begin to see signs and visions and all kinds of spiritual manifestations, for example. The Fathers teach that visions, wonders and the like should normally be seen as delusions: trickery of the enemy designed to make us feel oh, so holy, and invariably feeding on our pride. This is why it is so important to discuss such experiences with an elder or confessor who knows the Tradition so that we can learn how to better distinguish the Lord’s work from the enemy’s.

God wants us to develop such a level of spiritual maturity that we can instinctively seek out and do His will. As we begin to grow in this way we will surely make mistakes. We will need the counsel of both our local Church community (elder, confessor, brethren) and the Tradition. But He who calls us to grow spiritually already knows all this. He will honor our desire to do His will and lead us to a greater awareness of how we can serve Him, who is always at work for our salvation.

Content Questions

1. In what ways do believers experience the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the Church’s Paraclete?
2. What are the three chief characteristics of a charismatic elder according to the Tradition?

3. Why does St. John Climacus, in the quotation on page 33, say that the elder “has no need of books” in his ministry?

4. According to the Tradition, what should be our first reaction to spiritual phenomena (visions, etc.)? To what sinful tendency does the Tradition connect such experiences?

**Reflection Questions**

1. Who gives the direction in the various aspects of your life (family relationships, work situation, inner life, etc.)?

2. How have you experienced personal guidance in the Church? What did it do for your Christian life?
3. Is the idea of guidance by the Spirit as described in this chapter something with which you feel comfortable? Why/why not?

4. What has the notion of humility meant to you in the past? How does that compare with the understanding of humility expressed on pages 36ff?

For Prayerful Reading

Choose one of the Scriptural or patristic quotes below or in the body of the chapter for reflection during the week. Record what it says to you in terms of your personal spiritual life.

The Holy Spirit is our guide – John 14: 16-17, 26-27
Praying for guidance – Luke 6: 12-16
James 1:5
Studying God’s word in Tradition – Psalm 119: 15-16, 97
Sirach 6: 37
Listening to advice – Proverbs 11: 14; 12:15
Sirach 6: 33-36

“Constantly call on God that he may show you someone who is able to direct you well, one whom you ought to obey as if he were God Himself, whose instruction you carry out without hesitation, even if what he tells you seems repugnant and harmful.”

St. Simeon the New Theologian, The Discourses 39
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"It is certainly a great consolation, and a great help on the way, to find a director under whose wise guidance our will is cured of self-will and our mind of self-regard."

Macarius of Optina
“Since you have been raised to life with Christ, set your heart on what pertains to higher realms where Christ is seated at God’s right hand. Be intent on things above rather than on things of earth. After all, you have died! Your life is hidden now with Christ in God. When Christ our life appears, then you shall appear with Him in glory. So put to death whatever in your nature is rooted in the earth...”

Colossians 3:1-5

God has called us to theosis, to a share in His divine nature. We enter into that life in baptism, where we die with Christ through burial in the water so that we may rise with Him to a new life. The rite of baptism presents us with several images which suggest this change: we die and are raised to life, we are reborn in the womb of the Holy Spirit, we strip off the old man with our old clothing and are clothed anew in Christ.

Our new clothing is described in different ways in the Scriptures. It is the radiant garment of the elect (Revelation 7:9) which we represent with our baptismal garment and the Church’s liturgical robe (sticharion). But since we are not yet in the glory to come, this garment is also the armor of light (Romans 13:12), the battle dress of the saints. For not only have we been clothed in Him who has overcome the prince of this world, we have also been charged to continue in our own lives His campaign against the enemy.

While the heart of Christian living is not the dealing with obstacles to that life, but with its Source, the Lord Himself, we still must acknowledge that there are obstacles and we must come to deal with them. This is why every proclamation of our glorious life in Christ which we find in the Scriptures is balanced with a call to remain faithful to that gift every day. We are told that we are seated with Christ in the heavenly realm, but also that we are still racing to grasp the prize which awaits us, life on high in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:14). We are victorious in Christ, but we are still struggling in a spiritual warfare, seeking the defeat in our own lives of the enemy whom Christ has conquered. Here we see the tension in our life in Christ which is at the same time a present reality and the object of future hope.

Our spiritual warfare is waged on several fronts. Christ Himself experienced the assaults of the enemy in a number of ways. Besides confronting him directly, the Lord recognized his attacks in the ways of the society around Him, what He
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called “the world”. He warned His disciples to expect similar trials, but exhorted
them to be strong when their faith would lead them into conflict with their society. “If you find that the world hates you, know it has hated Me before you. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own; the reason it hates you is that you do not belong to the world ... But take courage! I have overcome the world” (John 15: 18-19; 16:33).

Since then one of the principal arenas for the Christian’s spiritual warfare has been described as “the world”, which the Scriptures contrast sharply with the kingdom of God. “Have no love for the world, nor the things that the world affords. If anyone loves the world, the Father’s love has no place in him, for nothing that the world affords comes from the Father” (1 John 2:15-16). How can the Scriptures say that nothing of the world comes from the Father whom we know to be the Creator of all things visible and invisible?

As we study the Tradition, it becomes clear that “the world” used in this way does not refer to the material creation, which comes from God, or to mankind in general, which God so loves that He gave His only begotten Son for it. St. Simeon the New Theologian explains this passage in the following way: “What is the world? What are the things that are in the world? Listen, it is not gold or silver, horses or mules. All these things that serve our physical needs we possess ourselves. It is not meat nor bread nor wine, for we ourselves partake of these things and eat them in moderation. It is not houses nor baths nor fields nor vineyards nor suburban properties ...” (Discourses). He goes on to show that rather “the world” is a value system which sees the creation, rather than the Creator, as the giver of all good gifts. Things exist without reference to God as their Author and the One to whom they tend. In this “world”, real life has nothing to do with serving God. It may be directly opposed to Him or may simply ignore Him, but in either case He is not the center of it.

This is in sharp contrast to the Christian view of the world which we put forth in the icon of Pentecost. Here the world is shown, not as alluring and beautiful, but as a shriveled, empty old man with hands outstretched, waiting to receive divine life through the Spirit-filled disciples. The world, now captive to the enemy, is meant to be brought into the Kingdom of God, the place where God’s reign is recognized, proclaimed, and honored openly. The Church’s view of the world fulfilled is that of the classic Byzantine church building where all, under the lordship of the Pantokrator, are gathered in communion in the Holy Spirit before the throne of God.

Our ordinary society is, by definition, secular or “of this world”: it is living for other than God. Its values, principles and structures come from the experiences of its citizens, who are drawn from all and no belief systems. In some areas the contrast between the way Christians are expected to live and the way others do is clear, as in the questions of abortion and the so called sexual revolution, or the nonstop pursuit of material possessions, power or pleasure which characterizes
the lives of many in the world. The description of Christians in the first century *Letter to Diognetus* shows that similar contrasts were evident in the pagan Roman Empire: “Like all others, [the Christians] marry and beget children; but they do not expose their offspring. Their table is set for all, but not their bed.”

In other areas the contrast between Christians and the world is less evident. When Christ began preparing His disciples to see the extent of His conflict with the world which would lead to the cross, Peter took Him aside and tried to downplay this tension. Christ’s response was swift, “Get out of My sight, you satan! You are trying to make me trip and fall. You are not judging by God’s standards but by man’s” (Matthew 16:23). Thus even the Church may be led to operate by worldly principles rather than the Gospel, such as when Robert’s Rules or unwritten agendas rather than evangelical principles govern parish meetings.

A subtler but even more insidious example may be seen in the almost universal way in which American Christians have accepted a secular view of religion. This vision sees faith as a private, individualistic, interior quality which each person is free to hold as long as the common good is not adversely affected. As a result, people see religion as totally subjective, with sincerity being the only criterion for judgment. It is quite consistent in this view for people to practice Christianity, which is essentially a communal religion, in an individualistic way, going so far as to pick and choose which of the community’s teachings they will accept. By the same token they agree that religion has no place in the public forum: it belongs at the dinner table and behind stained glass on Sunday mornings.

Another consequence of the worldly view of religion which many Christians accept as “normal” is that the life in Christ be eclipsed by many aspects of American social life. Secular society has its own morality, its own vehicles for transmitting culture, its own pursuits and values. Since society makes no judgment on religious truth, people have the right to an abortion, to propagate pornography, to counterfeit religion. The entertainment media (TV, music, movies, magazines) continually promote such values, sometimes affecting the thinking of believers without their realizing it. Thus it is “the world” which is the source of values which many Christians hold.

A further effect of this trend is that people in the Churches are often unable to realize that many of the alternative values and ways of life in our society actually sap the vitality of their vision of Church. Greater affluence means that many Christian families can habitually take weekend vacations, thus effectively distancing them from their parish community. And, since the Lord’s Day or the Great Feasts of the Church do not form the basis of our business or workday cycle, these events are minimized or forgotten. The exception, of course, is Christmas which the secular society celebrates in a frenzy because it’s “good for business”. The spirit of the Tradition is clearly opposed to this embracing of the world. “If a man leaves God out and gives his attention to nothing but his

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business, then he is inevitably opposed to God” (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Lord’s Prayer*).

Young people are quickly drawn into the same secular lifestyle. School sports competitions are increasingly held on Sunday mornings, drawing many of them away from church attendance or Sunday school. When a young person outgrows such pastimes, he or she graduates to a weekend job in a convenience store or fast food restaurant. At best church is relegated to times when there’s nothing better to do. How could young people living this way not be “blinded by the god of this present age” (2 Corinthians 4:4) from seeing that their fulfillment as persons comes only from living in Christ. Thus even those things which may not be intrinsically evil draw us away from the Kingdom, a way of life in which God is continually glorified as King.

Also affected is the way we deal with one another. More often than not, interpersonal relationships between Christians are governed by the world rather than by the Gospel. Manipulation and exploitation rather than mutual Love may dominate our dealings with one another in social as well as business circles. Competition or one-upmanship becomes a way of life in all areas except the one proposed in the Scriptures, “Outdo one another in showing respect” (Romans 12:10).

In the same way we do not follow the Gospel precepts for confronting one another when wrongdoing is detected or for forgiving one another when it is repented. Often we do not even know that the Gospel has something to say on such topics, because we have taken the world as our model in these areas of life. Thus many Christians are more comfortable with the model set in *Love Story* (“Love is never having to say ‘I’m sorry’”) than the one in the Sermon on the Mount (“If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” - Matthew 5:23-24).

Clearly “the world” exists all around us as it always has. There was never a time when Christians have lived totally in the atmosphere of the Kingdom. That still awaits us in the future. But, as Christ Himself said, we should expect to be in the world but not of the world: to live surrounded by secular society, but given over to proclaiming the lordship of Christ in all that we do. Those who seek to be on the path of theosis thereby echo the understanding of Scripture which sees Christians as pilgrims heading for the heavenly realm, not citizens of any secular society. “Here we have no lasting city; we are seeking one which is to come” (Hebrews 13:11).

**ROLE OF CHRISTIANS IN THE WORLD**

While putting on Christ in baptism demands that we put off the old man of this world, it does not expect that we flee the world: that is impossible. Instead our
stripping takes us back to Eden where Adam’s nakedness was a royal garment, the robe of creation’s priest, called to make of the world an offering to its Creator. The Christian’s task in the world is to transform it by relating it to God. Everything can be brought into the kingdom when it is placed in the proper perspective of God’s plan: material resources, food and drink, sexuality, human relationships, talents, all these things belong in the kingdom. They were created by God to be a part of His realm; it is the Enemy who has diverted them from their true purpose.

One way in which we bring all creation into the perspective of the kingdom is to bless it, to set it aside for God’s glory. The Church’s celebration of the Theophany is our annual proclamation that all of creation has the potential to be part of the kingdom. The Tradition sees Christ’s manifestation at the Jordan as visualizing His presence in and reign over all things. By coming into our world (represented by His stepping into the Jordan), He has begun its transformation. One of the hymns of this feast expresses this thought as Christ’s words to John the Baptist, “Come, Prophet, and baptize Me ... I am in a hurry to destroy the enemy hidden in the waters, the prince of darkness, in order to deliver the world from his nets in granting it eternal life in my love for mankind” (ideomelon, sixth hour).

Christ’s presence in the water makes creation a vehicle of God’s presence and power. This is why we bless water on this feast, drink of it and sprinkle it about. We bless our homes, proclaiming His presence in our lives and setting them apart from the world as under His rule. Whenever we bless anything – our food, our work, our marriages and childbirths, our comings and goings – we are acknowledging the lordship of Christ over them and dedicating their use to His glory. In our Tradition there are liturgical services for many of these circumstances. There is also the common practice to begin or seal any work with the sign of the cross, a dedication which anyone can make at any time. Thus we can function as the priests of our households or jobs, bringing everything into the Kingdom. “So the Christian directs every action, small or great, according to the will of God ... thus observing the precept, ‘Whether you eat or drink or whatever else you do, do all to the glory of God’” (St. Basil the Great, Long Rule, 5).

There is another way for us to deal with the world in which we live. By consciously bringing our actions, relationships and material goods into the Kingdom of God in this way, their purpose in our sight is transformed. We find ourselves seeing all these things with new eyes. We stop seeing them as directed to our own self satisfaction, but to God’s glory. We see them more in terms of how they relate to Him than to ourselves. Thus they become for us even richer invitations to glorify their Creator and Lord.

Thus in the Unseen Warfare, chapter 21, we are urged to see every created thing as a witness to the beauty and goodness of the Creator. Whenever we see or
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hear, smell, taste or touch anything it is a call to “Think how impossible it is for its being and all it contains to come from itself, but that all In it is the work of God ... Then the being and structure of everything created will be for you a book of theology and, while living in this sensory world, you will share in the knowledge belonging to the world beyond this world.”

A third way of dealing with the world as a Christian is to look discerningly at the values, principles, and priorities of our culture. If we see that certain facets of our ordinary way of life do not contribute to the building up of the Kingdom, then we can take steps to change them. If we find that our ordinary diet will slowly cause us a major health problem, we usually attempt to change our diet. In the same way if we begin to discern that our daily TV fare or the way we budget our time is making us less sensitive to Gospel values, then we know that we are bound to change that as well.

ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Fighting the world alone is not simply an uphill battle, it is impossible. No individual Christian or even Christian family can live outside of a human community. This is why, from the beginning, the Christian community has been seen as the place where the Kingdom of God can best be realized. This is why we begin the Divine Liturgy, that supreme expression of the Church’s unity, with the exclamation, “Blessed is the Kingdom” of God: the kingdom made present in this Eucharistic gathering.

When we speak of the liturgical assembly as the realization of the Kingdom, we do not see it in isolation from the rest of the community’s life together. If the Sunday Liturgy is the only time that the community comes together, it is not a community at all: certainly not one which can be seen as a counter culture to the world. For a community of Christians to realize the Kingdom in its way of life, a much greater commitment of energies is demanded: what Eastern writers have often called “interiorized monasticism” (St. Tikhon of Zadonsk).

By interiorized monasticism is not meant a flight into the desert after the manner of the Egyptian hermits. If a model from “exteriorized” monasticism must be chosen, it should probably be the monastic republic of Mount Athos, a society in which people are free to live as fully as possible by the values of the Gospel: values which touch the way they deal with material goods and relationships according to the Kingdom. Such a society can openly proclaim the Lordship of Christ in all the aspects of a life shared together.

Interiorized monasticism does not refer to forms of prayer or worship as much as to a commitment to the monastic ideal of a communal experience of Christian values. The commitment to one another which should characterize such a community parallels the monastic brotherhood where personal relationships extend beyond formal activities into daily life. Members of the community rely
upon one another for daily support through frequent contact, including informal socializing and the sharing of their material resources. Thus the love within a Christian community cannot be confined to a few organized events, but overflows to envelop all of a person’s life.

The commitment which community living is meant to support has customarily been expressed in the terms of the three monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Through these vows the monastic seeks to bring his use of material goods as well as his relationships under the reign of Christ. The same principles affect the life of the Christian in the world, though in different ways. Interiorized monasticism includes the right ordering of possessions. This means that the Christian undertakes to live independently of the need to have for its own sake. As Christians, our attitude to ownership ought to be based on our true material needs. We do not seek to be destitute, but to recognize that what we have been given, over and above what we need, is to be used for the Kingdom. Living in a mature Christian community, we can be free to do this because we are no longer in competition with others to possess more than they do. Our need for personal fulfillment is also satisfied in other ways than shopping sprees. The poverty of interiorized monasticism frees us to love creation as belonging to God, liberating us from the need to own as much of it as we can.

Interiorized monasticism also enables us to apply Gospel values to our relationships. Chastity in this expression is the freedom to relate to one another in the body of Christ as they truly are, our brothers and sisters, rather than objects to be used or manipulated on the one hand, or kept at a distance on the other. Because we have all been adopted by the Father through our baptism, we are deeply united in a way beyond any fellowship the world knows. When the awareness of that relationship is strong in us, we treat one another in new ways, the ways of the kingdom.

Finally, obedience also finds an expression in the interiorized monasticism of the Church which can free us from bondage to this world. By obeying the precepts of the King of the ages, we are freed from social or peer group pressures to conform to the standards of this age. “Everybody’s doing it” carries no weight with those who have committed themselves to the values of the Gospel. By keeping to the lifestyle laid down in the Tradition, such as the cycle of feasts and fasts, we are also liberated from the dictates of many elements in our culture to which many people feel enslaved. “I’m sure we’d love to come, but it’s the Fast and we make it a practice not to make any social commitments during the Fast” offers a liberation which many would envy.

Another example of obedience in the interiorized monasticism of Christians is the relationship with an elder, spiritual father, or confessor as described in the last chapter. As we begin to rely more confidently on the Christian community rather than on the world to provide the guidance in our lives this aspect of the Tradition will begin to make more and more sense.
Historically many monastic communities have formed groups of associates (oblates, tertiaries, etc.) to extend these principles of interiorized monasticism into the lives of ordinary Christians, so that not only people who dwell together could live the kingdom lifestyle. Any grouping of Christians in a parish, support group or other setting could become such a synodia if the commitment to support one another in this lifestyle is present. In such an environment people can observe, learn and practice these new ways of thinking and relating and thereby grow out of worldly patterns and into the patterns of the Kingdom of God.

Living fully by the Gospel in such an environment will free us from bondage to the world but also offer life to the world in Christ’s name. By being in the world but not of it, the Christian community can be a sign to the otherness of theosis. For, while God’s Kingdom is not of this world, it is in fact most deeply loving the world when it is combating the broken ways of the world; for Christ is not satisfied with driving out the prince of this world: He does nothing less than draw all to Himself in love (cf. John 12: 31-32).

Content Questions

1. What does the Tradition, beginning with the Scriptures, mean when it speaks of “the world”? 

2. What is the chief characteristic of the “Kingdom of God” used in this chapter?

3. In what three ways indicated in the chapter can the Christian transform elements of the world into elements of the kingdom?
4. What is the meaning of the term “interiorized monasticism” and what are its main characteristics?

Reflection Questions

1. Give some examples of secular values which are directly contrary or opposed to the kingdom of God.

2. Give some examples of secular values which ignore or bypass the kingdom of God, and which thereby draw us away from it.

3. What aspects of your life, now dictated by the world, do you feel called to change?

4. How might you build up your Christian community so that it may be an effective support for Christians living a more committed faith life?
For Prayerful Reading

Choose one of the Scriptural or patristic quotes below or in the body of the chapter for reflection during the week. Record what it says to you in terms of your personal spiritual life.

Friendship with the world is enmity with God – 1 John 2: 15-17
James 4: 4-5

The world is in Satan’s power – 1 John 5: 19

God’s wisdom is different from the world’s – 1 Corinthians 1: 20-21
1 Corinthians 3: 18-19

Being in the world, not of it – John 14: 14-18

The world of Christians is of a special kind: their style of living, their thinking, their speech and all their actions. That of men of this world is completely different. There is a great difference between them. The inhabitants of this world, the children of this age, are like wheat in a sieve, they are being sifted by restless thoughts of this world, constantly tossed to and fro by earthly cares and desires and absorbed by a variety of material concerns.

Christians live in another world, eat from another table, are clothed differently, enjoy different enjoyment, different conversation, different mentality. They exceed all other men because of this: through the Holy Spirit they are considered worthy to enjoy the power of God in their souls.

Pseudo-Macarius, The Spiritual Homilies, 5

We are made up of soul and body; the two cannot be separated in our conduct. Let the physical, therefore, come to your aid. Christ knows our weakness and for our sake uses words and gestures, spittle and earth as media.

Therefore use all that is of the earth as a staff of remembrance on your troublesome wandering along the narrow way. May the whiteness of the snow and the blue of the heavens, the jeweled eye of the fly and the scorching of the flame, and all of creation that meets your senses remind you of your Creator.

Especially make use of what the Church offers you to help you: “Surrender yourselves entirely as servants of righteousness unto holiness” (Romans 6:19). First of all, the Lord’s Holy Communion, but likewise the other mysteries or
sacraments, and the Holy Spirit. The Church also offers you the holy icons of the Mother of God, the angels and the saints, candles and incense, holy water and the gleam of gold, and the singing. Receive all this with gratitude and use it all for your upbuilding, encouragement, improvement, and benefit as you travel.

Tito Colliander, *The Way of the Ascetics*
Session Six: Spiritual Warfare and the Flesh

May the God of peace make you perfect in holiness. May He preserve you whole and entire — spirit, soul, and body — irreproachable at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls us is trustworthy, therefore He will do it.

2 Thessalonians 5:23-24

As people who have become part of the new creation in Christ, we believers find ourselves at odds with the world. Part of our spiritual combat, as indicated in the last chapter, consists in discerning which of the world’s values and habits tends to draw us away from the kingdom of God and thus to oppose it. In addition to the world, which is outside of us, we have another arena for this warfare, one which is never absent to us, our own flesh.

We have seen that “the world” in the Tradition does not refer to the material creation, but to those aspects of it which create an environment hostile to the Lord. In the same way “flesh” in the Tradition does not simply refer to the body or to human nature in itself. Rather, beginning with the New Testament, which tells us, “Do not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16), the Tradition uses this term to mean whatever within us is broken, separated from God, functioning apart from Him and therefore acting in opposition to His kingdom.

In calling our broken humanity “flesh”, the Tradition is not saying that the body is broken, while the spirit is not. Our entire humanity has been affected by sin, and the conflict between the ways of God and the ways of the flesh touch every aspect of human activity. The New Testament, in fact, often uses two different words to distinguish between the fleshly and the physical. It describes our brokenness as flesh (sarx) and our physical dimension as body (soma). The flesh is perishable and cannot inherit the kingdom of God. The body, on the other hand, is a temple of the Holy Spirit through which the Spirit’s divine gifts can be expected to work. “The gift of diversity of tongues and their interpretation, which Paul recommends us to acquire by prayer, shows that certain charisms operate through the body. ... The same is true of the word of instruction, the gift of healing, the performing of miracles, and Paul’s laying on of hands by which he communicated the Holy Spirit.” (St. Gregory Palamas, The Triads, 2:2) Thus the body, meant to be raised like Christ’s own body, is something intended to be filled with God.
It is this vision of the body transformed by the grace of God which has determined the way the saints are depicted in icons. The saints are so deeply in touch with the life of the Holy Spirit within them that His radiance overflows into their bodies, making them glow with the divine light. Like the transfigured Christ on Mount Tabor, they have become lamps shining in body as well as in spirit with the light of God.

Thus the term “flesh” rather refers to a deep-seated and universal disorder in the human condition. As illustrated by the quotation which begins this chapter, the Tradition understands our whole being as encompassing spirit, soul, and body. That whole being is intended to share in the holiness of God in fulfillment of the divine plan. In that plan the body and soul are meant to function under the direction of the spirit, with our human spirit subject to the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. As St. Gregory Palamas indicates, “The divinity of the Word of God incarnate is common to His soul and body. Through the mediation of His spirit He has divinized His flesh so that it too accomplishes the work of God. In the same way, in the spiritual person, the grace of the Spirit is transmitted to the body through the soul, thereby granting to the body an experience of things divine” (The Triads, 2:2).

Because of sin, our makeup is disordered. The body and the soul are often at war with the spirit, refusing to be subject to it. That which is meant to serve our growing in the likeness of God now is determined to rule, direct or control. When the body or the mind are in revolt against the spirit, they become fleshly or carnal. Thus they are not divinized through the spirit; rather they weigh the spirit down from drawing life from God and causing us to live on a plane which is lower than that intended by God.

In our culture we often hear that “it’s OK”, it’s natural for us to satisfy body or mind at the expense of the spirit. The Tradition rejects such thinking. This is not the way things are meant to be: it is the way things have become because of sin. Rather than our whole person being “flesh”, it is intended to become spiritual, guided by the Spirit of God. Thus, in the saint, “The spiritual joy that comes from the spirit into the body ... transforms the body and makes it spiritual ... so that the whole man becomes spirit according to what is written, ‘He who is born of the Spirit is spirit’ (John 3: 8)” (St. Gregory Palamas, The Triads, 2).

There is a further confusion about the term “flesh” in our society, where it is often associated with sexuality. When the Tradition uses the term it can refer to any aspect of our being which is not under the direction of the spirit: our emotions, our intellect, our will, and the rest. However the driving passion often associated with sexuality does prove a good illustration of the body dominating the mind or the spirit and thus becoming “flesh”.

This term “flesh”, then, does not refer to any particular aspect of human nature, either the body itself or sexuality, as these were created by God. “From nature no evil thought enters because we were not in the beginning created evil, rather...
Lord sowed good seed in His field” (Evagrius of Pontus, Praktikos). Rather this term is used to indicate whatever in us, touched by the disorder coming from our brokenness, functions apart from God.

St. Paul, describing the lifestyle of the old man, points to this disorder as its chief characteristic: “We once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2:3). Paul here reaffirms that it is the following of the body and mind rather than the spirit which constitutes “the flesh” in us. He also introduces us to “the passions”, a second term connected with this reality, which signifies those manifestations of the flesh which witness to our brokenness by being directly opposed to the lead of the Holy Spirit in us.

This term was to appear frequently in the writings of Eastern Fathers. With it they would describe how the desires of our mind and body could and often did become our lord. Through a misguided love of self we become in fact slaves of inclinations which serve us well when they are kept in control, but tyrannize us if they are left unchecked. We think that by indulging them we will get what we want or need. In reality it is these passions which demand that we serve them, often without regard for our true well being.

The Fathers compiled many lists of the passions, offering way of dealing with them and keeping them subdued. Perhaps the clearest of these classifications is that of those Fathers who identified some as “passions of the body”, because they arise from our natural needs, and others as “passions of the soul”, because they stem from our human relationships.

In the first group St. John of Damascus includes hedonism, gluttony, drunkenness, fornication, theft, gambling, idleness, and occult practices. It is not that pleasure, food and drink, sexuality, possessions, comfort and knowledge are evil; it is rather a desire for them in ways or amounts which are disordered that brings us to the brink of destruction.

The disorder evident in the passions becomes even clearer in the passions of the soul which John numbers. Impiety and blasphemy express the disorder in a person’s relationship with God. Anger, bitterness, gossip, hypocrisy, ingratitude, insensitivity, vanity, flattery, grief, fear, and the like manifest the chaos in our human relationships. At the root of all these passions, however, is the one that St. John calls “their most evil mother,” pride.

Because a person conceives of himself as something great, or at least better than others, he seeks a certain level of respect, admiration, affection from those around him. He also looks to enjoy the best life has to offer. After all, he deserves it. When these are not forthcoming to the degree anticipated, he seeks to take them in anyway he can or to avenge himself on those who stand in the way. Thus, to one degree or another, the individual takes God's place as the “center of the universe” and sees creation as at his service.
One of the passions often mentioned by the Fathers is spiritual torpor, or *accidia*. This tendency is described as boredom with spiritual matters in general, or with one’s vocation, one’s fellows in a monastery or parish, or one’s Christian service. St. John Cassian paints a vivid picture of how this passion develops in a monastic setting, equating it with the demon of noontide spoken of in Psalm 90. “It begets aversion to one’s place, boredom with one’s cell, and scorn and contempt for one’s brethren, whether they be dwelling with one or some way off, as careless and unspiritually minded persons. We also become listless and inert toward any work that may be done within the enclosure of one’s own lair. We cannot stand to stay in our cell, or to attend to our reading, lamenting that we have made no progress. We complain that, bereft of sympathetic fellowship, we have no spiritual fruit. Here we, who could be guiding others and be of value to multitudes, are living vacant and useless lives, edifying no one and enriching no one by our teaching and example.” (*Institutes*, 10, 10).

So rarely described in these terms today, this passion is very much akin to the kinds of depression popular psychology is calling “burnout” or the “mid-life crisis”, where people, bored with their work or families, see their lives being wasted. This kind of noon day demon prompts people to drop out of church membership after years of activity. Sometimes people abandon their families after many years for a “new start” with someone else, strikingly paralleling Cassian’s description of the monastic equivalent. “We praise other and far distant monasteries, describing them as more helpful to one’s progress, more congenial to one’s soul’s health. We contrast the fellowship of the brethren, the pleasantness, the richness of spiritual conversation there with the harshness of all that is at hand. ... Finally we conclude that there is no health for us so long as we stay in this place...” (*Institutes* 10, 10).

Other passions, much more innocent in themselves, can also hinder our service of the kingdom or prevent it altogether. We can be drawn to work, amusements, or other kinds of commitments which monopolize our time or drain our energies, leaving little or nothing for the Lord. Here the objects of our desires are not bad in themselves but our attachment to them distorts our values, sometimes to such a degree that we abandon even regular worship for the sake of these other interests. “Thus it does not pay to come to grips with the hard-to-master great vices and bad habits you have acquired without at the same time overcoming your small ‘innocent’ weaknesses: your taste for sweets, your urge to talk, your curiosity, your meddling. For finally, all our desires are built on the same foundation, our unchecked habit of satisfying only our own will.” (*The Way of the Ascetics*, 5)

**DEALING WITH THE PASSIONS**

The world often protests against our attempts to deal with these passions, calling it repression, because it has accepted them as part of its system. Self-advancement books extol “The Virtue of Selfishness”. A prominent executive
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(later to be indicted for manipulative business practices) tells the audience at a college commencement that greed is OK. Psychologists encourage people to express and affirm all their feelings as naturally good. Thus pressures from the world second the movements of flesh, convincing us that we should follow our passions.

The Tradition, too, tells us not to repress our passions, but it stresses that denying them for what they are, a distortion of the original creation, is the ultimate repression. It urges us instead to deal with them as with all the elements of our makeup: by transforming them.

Many Fathers see the passions as dynamic impulses originally placed in us by God, gifts from Him intended to motivate us to do His will. Christ Himself is described in the New Testament as a man of passion. Thus He looks forward to the mystical supper with yearning, "I have greatly desired (lit: passionately longed) to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). St. Paul too describes his own passion to be with the Lord in heaven (Philippians 1:23), a desire which the Lord was not ready to grant at that time. Although these passions have been distorted by sin, they are fundamentally good. The proper Christian response, then, is neither to repress them nor to deny their brokenness, but to transfigure them by redirecting their energies to the service of the kingdom. In this way, as St. Maximos the Confessor says, "Even the passions become useful to studious and virtuous people each time they make use of them to acquire spiritual goods. ... As I said, the passions become good by reason of their use for the person whose thought and will are kept in obedience to Christ" ("First Century on Various Texts" 65, in The Philokalia).

Usually our passions are directed to some form of self-gratification, and therefore unrighteous. Our experience of anger, for example, is usually that of a passion out of control. We have been crossed in some little way and so become indignant that our will has been thwarted. St. Gregory of Nyssa suggests that this passion can become righteous by being directed against the sins of our society, a passion for justice. Likewise sexual passion can be redirected into love for one’s family in marriage or for Christ throughout the members of His Body, the Church. According to this thinking, the Lord does not want us to be free of all desires. Rather He wants us to order them rightly within the context of the Kingdom.

Thus, while many ascetics in the early Church were influenced by stoic philosophy to reject the passions in all circumstances, the Tradition has generally seen transfiguration as a way of dealing with them which is more in harmony with our goal of theosis. By focusing our lives on the Kingdom, we bring our desires in line with God’s and thereby keep our passions in proper perspective. As St. Gregory Palamas saw it, "It is not the person who has killed the passionate part of his soul who has the preeminence, for such a person would have no momentum or activity to acquire a divine state of right dispositions and relationship with God. Rather the prize goes to the one who has put that part of
his soul under subjection, so that by its obedience to the mind, which is by nature appointed to rule, it may ever tend toward God” (The Triads, 2,2).

The process of redirecting our passions by subjecting our desires to the values of the Kingdom and the will of God has long been the goal of the ascetic life. Byzantine spiritual writers often expressed this goal by the term *apatheia.* Literally this word means “passionlessness,” but has often been translated as “tranquility” (St. John Cassian) or “inner peace”: the freedom from disordered desires. By redirecting our passions through ascetic practices we can come to this tranquil state in which we are not compulsively agitated by either the prospect or the memory of fleshly behavior.

**ASCETICAL STRATEGIES**

When sincere servants of God first experience the pull of the passions or learn of the need to redirect them for the fuller Christian life, they usually react by trying to control the passions. Once they perceive the need for such control, they try to implement it by will power. They are, in effect, operating by a Do-It-Yourself approach: this is what I must do, this is what I must avoid.

In his Epistle to the Romans St. Paul pointed out that this approach, associated in his time with the Jewish Law, inevitably leads to frustration. “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want; but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:14-15). I am frustrated, not because the precepts themselves are wrong, but because, left to my own power, I am unable to implement them, precisely because of my fleshly or carnal condition. Besides the qualities in me created by God, there is also the flesh, that element of brokenness which mars our ability to respond to God. The transformation of our passions for which we strive, then, is essentially beyond our human powers to achieve. When Paul reflected on this he asked, “Who can free me from this fatal condition in my body?” and then answered his own question, avowing that it had been done: “All praise to God! It is through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25).

Thus the first step in Christian asceticism is the recognition that this work can only be accomplished by entrusting ourselves fully to the power of God in Christ. We believe that through Christ the Holy Spirit is dwelling in us to transform us into partakers of the divine nature. Our part in this transformation is to grow continually in the conscious recognition of the Spirit’s presence and submission to His guidance (synergy). Just as being in the presence of God in the heavenly kingdom will transfigure us eternally, so too, recognizing His mystical presence in the here and now will transform our consciousness as well. The more that we focus our attention on this presence of the Holy Spirit in us and make the recognition of that presence a priority in our daily lives, the more we are letting God into areas where the flesh has ruled. “Greater is He that is in you than he that
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is in the world” (1 John 4:4), and as we deepen our conscious relationship with Him, we find it affecting the totality of our being.

Since the flesh is always with us, we need to make our awareness of the Spirit’s presence just as constant a dimension in our life. This is why the cultivation of the uninterrupted use of the Jesus Prayer has been such an important part of Eastern asceticism. In fostering continued recollection of the presence of God, it lessens the room in us given over to the flesh and helps to keep the passions under control.

The second strategy, working along with the first, is to recognize just how the flesh distorts the passions within us. All of us experience some movements of the flesh within us, but often we do not recognize them or admit them even to ourselves. Sometimes this is because we are ashamed of our hidden passions and try to ignore or repress them. Another kind of denial is to see them as anything more than minor quirks: “We all have faults, we’re only human, etc.” While this is true, it does not make for growth when it becomes an excuse for doing nothing. Sometimes we compare ourselves with others whose faults we find more glaring and, taking comfort in their weaknesses, ignore our own. It is much easier, as Christ said, to see the splinter in another’s eye than the beam in our own. Because we can find so many opportunities for denying our brokenness St Isaac the Syrian went so far as to say, “The one who sees his sin is greater than the one who raises the dead” (Sentences).

It is here that the Fathers see the importance of humility: not in the sense of a false denial of one’s own strengths but rather seeing them in a proper perspective. When compared both to the greatness of God and our own potential as sharers of His nature, our present performance always falls short. This is why St. John Chrysostom would say that humility is when one sees many great things in himself, but does not imagine himself to be great (cf. Homily on Philippians 5:6).

Many Christians have used various devices to help them be aware of the movements of their desires. Some have suggested the early morning as a time to prepare for the various encounters we may have during the day and prepare a strategy to meet them. “Make it a rule every morning, while you still sit at home, to review in your mind all the occasions you may meet within the course of the day, both favorable and unfavorable, and visualize the passionate impulses, lusts and impulses they may provoke; then prepare in yourself beforehand how to stifle them at the very inception without allowing them to develop” (Unseen Warfare, 18). Then, at the end of the day, they would review the progress of the day and thank God both for the successes they may have had and the recognition in the failures that we are always weak and sinful in the face of His holiness. In this way we develop an attitude which the Fathers called “watchfulness” (nepsis), rather than sleeping through our lives with little concern for how we may prepare ourselves to meet the Lord.
Such a practice is not useful for people prone to dwell on their own inadequacies, but for those more likely to bury such issues rather than face them. This is why a person should be under the direction of an elder or spiritual father, so that the best approach for their particular personality can be brought to bear in dealing with the various movements of the flesh they may be experiencing.

As we become aware of how the passions work in us, we can oppose them, not simply by resisting them but also by developing the opposite characteristics. Here we deliberately undertake actions which represent attitudes directly opposed to our passions. “For instance, to conquer avarice we should give money away freely; to fight pride we should choose some degrading task; to overcome a craving for amusement we should stay at home, and so on.” (St. Theophan the Recluse, *War With the Passions*). The examples could be multiplied. When we find ourselves resenting another person or group, we can make a special effort to pray for them whenever feelings of resentment arise in us or make a special effort at kindnesses to them. By embracing the opposite value in a positive way we first of all minimize the tendency to acting on the basis of our passions. In time we may find that we have so interiorized the new values that the interior movements of the passions are minimized as well.

As we work on redirecting our passions we may find that there are areas of our life or personality we really don’t want to see changed. We enjoy one or another disorder or at least are more comfortable with it than with the effort required to deal with it. Here we need to give over this particular area to the Lord’s direction in a specific way. In cases where indulging a particular passion has become a long standing habit, we may need a course of special prayer, perhaps including Holy Unction, to deal with what has become a compulsion. “It is no mean struggle to gain mastery over our usual ways of acting, for custom maintained through a long period takes on the force of nature” (St. Basil the Great, *Long Rules*, 6).

Such a struggle rarely produces instantaneous results. Dealing with the movements of the flesh in us is an ongoing activity which believers should foresee as a lifelong task. The ascetic life, being a dimension of *theosis*, is necessarily part of a process. Realizing this, we can easily become discouraged by the difficulty of the struggle. But this continual dynamic in our lives can also become for us the opportunity to see God working, either to transfigure our passions or make us aware of His love even in the midst of our weaknesses. Thus we can rejoice in all circumstances, including the awareness of the flesh in us, and this in turn will help free us from the most debilitating of the passions: the feeling that any goal, including freedom from the flesh, is more important than His presence.
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Content Questions

1. What, according to the Tradition is the meaning of the term “flesh”? List some non-bodily examples of the flesh which operate in our lives.

2. What is the element of disorder in the way our passions ordinarily function?

3. What are some of the “innocent passions” referred to on page 56 which can deflect us from the service of God?

4. How does focusing on the presence of God within us help to transform our passions?
Reflection Questions

1. Have you encountered attitudes among Christians that equate the flesh and the body? Explain.

2. Does St. John Cassian's description of *acedia* in the monastic life resemble anything in your experience?

3. Consider St. John Chrysostom's explanation of humility (p. 58). What great things are there in us? How might an awareness of our passions keep us from imagining ourselves to be great?

4. Have you had any experience paralleling St. Theophan the Recluse's strategy for redirecting passions (cf. p. 59)? Might you apply this strategy in any area of your life?
For Prayerful Reading

Choose one of the Scriptural or patristic quotes below or in the body of the chapter for reflection during the week. Record what it says to you in terms of your personal spiritual life.

The works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit – Galatians 5:16-24

The law, the flesh and the Spirit – Romans 7, 8

God will complete His work in us – 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Philippians 1:6

Continual prayer and rejoicing – 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18

What is the flesh, then? You ought not to imagine it as something tangibly sinful. St. Macarius of Egypt explains it as a veil of dark flames that surrounds the heart and shuts it out from the tree of life: everything that holds us and satisfies us on the level of the senses, that within us which has not known God (John 17:25).

To it belong our desires and impulses. St. Isaac the Syrian enumerates them:
- a weakness for wealth or for collecting and owning things of different kinds;
- the urge for physical (sensory) enjoyment;
- the longing for honor, which is the root of envy;
- the desire to conquer or to be the deciding factor;
- pride in the glory of power;
- the urge to adorn oneself and to be liked;
- the craving for praise;
- concern and anxiety for physical well being.

All these are carnal: they combine deceitfully to hold us in heavy bonds.

Tito Colliander, *The Way of the Ascetics*
SESSION SEVEN:
SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND THE DEVIL

Now since the children of men are blood and flesh, Jesus has likewise a full share in our nature, that by His death He might rob the devil, the prince of death, of his power and free those who through fear of death had been slaves their whole life long.

Hebrews 2: 11-15

In the past sessions we have looked at two fronts on which we are called to wage spiritual warfare, the world and the flesh. The New Testament suggests a third front as well, one which is in fact at the root of the evil in the world and the flesh. As followers of Christ we are by definition at odds with the prince of this world, the prince of death, the devil.

Satan, evil spirits, and wickedness in general always seem to fascinate us. The music and literature of every land are filled with tales of the devil. One of the most common in western culture tells of Faust, a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for the riches and pleasures of this world. At the appointed time the devil comes to claim Faust’s soul. He is filled with terror and remorse, but is dragged off to hell nevertheless. This story, told again and again in plays, poems, operas, and dance, is merely one example of our flirtation with evil spirits. A glance at the paperback book or video cassette rack in any store will reveal that tales of possession, exorcism, haunted houses, and the like still arouse our interest, perhaps more than any other subject.

Yet, for all that, today’s Christians are by and large unconvinced of the reality of evil spirits and their work in the world. Some explicitly deny the existence of satan. Others, while accepting the reality of the devil in theory, do not take his activity at all seriously. In that we are certainly reacting against the mania of previous generations which saw the demonic in everything they could not understand. Yet, if we deny or ignore the existence of satan and evil spirits, we are certainly putting aside a significant feature of the Christian understanding of things and calling into question the effects of Christ’s saving work for us.

Our secular society looks at the devil as a medieval superstition, like ghosts and goblins, fit only for display on Halloween. Their reaction is understandable because the secular worldview rejects all spiritual realities, God and satan alike. They are consistent in their denial of anything which is not material in origin. We, however, are totally illogical when we affirm the reality of God and the saving work of His Son but deny the existence of satan of whom Christ speaks and from whose power He delivers us.

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The Scriptures do not tell us much about evil spirits in themselves. They do speak of them as personal beings, not just a personification of evil. They are described as angelic powers created by God, and therefore originally good, but radically fallen through sin, as the Savior said, “I watched satan fall from the sky like lightning” (Luke 10:18). Since then they have sought through an infinite variety of means to seduce others of God’s creatures to join them in their rebellion. This is described poetically in chapter 12 of the book of Revelation where the “dragon”, expelled from heaven by the archangel Michael, is portrayed as the “seducer of the whole world”, at constant war with God’s people (the woman clothed with the sun).

While the devil and other evil spirits are constantly assaulting believers, they have no ultimate power over us. Christ has defeated them and given us a share in His victory. Like us in all things except sin, Jesus was subjected to temptation by satan, but did not succumb to it. He experienced frustration, isolation, and opposition. He suffered from the sins of His enemies, but never sinned against them in return. Victorious over sin, Christ could not be subject to the power of the devil, because His union with God had not been broken. The icon of His resurrection shows this victory, as Death could not hold in its grasp either Him or those who cling to Him. As we sing at Pascha, “By His death He has trampled upon Death and has given life to those who were in the tomb” (Troparion of Pascha).

Although satan’s ultimate power has been annulled, the devil still assaults God’s people every day. And while he can never win the war, he can take skirmishes and battles. This is why awareness of the power of evil spirits has always been an important part of the Christian life. This is exemplified in the rite of baptism. Its many elements point to aspects of what life in Christ is all about, and many of these elements are connected with the warfare against satan. In the exorcisms evil spirits are driven from us. Then, after we have forcefully renounced satan in the baptismal vows, we are anointed in preparation for the battle which is the Christian life. While we confess that satan’s ultimate power has been destroyed by Christ, we know only too well that he continues to ambush us in the hope of taking away our share in His victory. This is why St. John Chrysostom would tell his catechumens, “After baptism we are going to strip for the combat against him; he will be our opponent in the boxing bout and the fight. Let us learn, then, during this time of training, the grips he uses, the source of his wickedness, and how he can easily hurt us. Then, when the contest comes, we will not be caught unaware or be frightened, as we would be if we were seeing new wrestling holds; because we have practiced among ourselves and have learned all his artifices, we will confidently join grips with him in combat” (Ninth Baptismal Instruction, 29).
THE WORKS OF THE ENEMY

The artifices of satan of which Chrysostom speaks are many and varied. He takes everything in creation and distorts its purposes so that it can become a means of turning a believer from the true service of God. It is satan who has taken the world around us and led us to weave of it a value system contrary to the plan of God (cf. Session Five). This is why St. Paul often speaks of the devil and evil spirits as the rulers of this world, an office which, it has been said, they achieved by popular election.

The flesh is also the dominion of the enemy. He has taken even the image of God and brought disorder into its very makeup (cf. Session Six). Instead of being blessed with the inner peace which comes from fulfilling our nature, we are too often in physical, mental or emotional bondage as body and mind war against the spirit for control of us. Besides these ways in which satan has used our weaknesses to distort us and everything around us, there are other examples of his work which are more direct. Some of them are obvious while others are more obscure. Most of them are not as bizarre as we may see on the Midnight Movie; they are all real and we may even recognize some of them from our own lives.

The Scriptures use a number of names for the evil one, some of which we have already mentioned in this chapter (the devil, satan, the prince of death, the ruler of this world, the enemy, demon, evil spirit). Some of these names describe ways in which the enemy works among us and help us to see him for what he is. Thus both the Hebrew word satan and the Greek word devil mean "accuser" or "slanderer", one who tears us down by attacking our character. This points to a significant aspect of the devil’s direct operation within us.

Often we find that, if we have sinned or failed repeatedly in attempting to improve ourselves, we find ourselves enveloped by an almost unshakable sense of self condemnation. We are no good, we will never succeed, we will never overcome this weakness, and the like. Similarly if we begin to discern that the Lord is calling us to deepen our commitment to Him by accepting a prominent role in the Church such as a teacher, we often find ourselves questioning our worthiness or our abilities in a persistent way. “Who am I to do this, who do I think I am?” We are not like the others in the family or the Church: we have nothing of any real value to contribute. Dwelling on such thoughts keeps us from moving ahead, trusting in God’s presence within us to supply what is wanting in us. This kind of thinking is the work of the accuser who tries to make us think that we are alone in the struggle and that we have only our own resources on which to rely.

The accusations of the devil are different from the conviction that can come from God. When the Lord wants to lead us to repentance, He may make us aware of our sins and weaknesses, but in such a way as to draw us closer to Him. This was the way He dealt with Peter who had denied Him. Judas, however, was deceived
Growing in the Christian Life

by the accuser into thinking there was no hope for him and so he followed satan to death. The accuser makes us aware of our weaknesses, not to lead us to repentance but to lure us into despair. For this reason he is also described in Scripture as the deceiver or seducer.

Another way in which the accuser deludes us into feeling that we are alone is to plague us through our irrational fears. When confronted with heights, crowds, strange places, the inevitability of death or even animals, many people find themselves all but crippled by fear. The enemy is working in this to say, “See, God is not with you, you have no security, you will perish.” Often these fears drive us to impulsive actions which destroy our way of life and lay us open for further inroads by the enemy.

The one whom Jesus calls “the father of lies” (John 8:44) also deceives us through temptation. He suggests that a certain action is good when in fact it is not, that a particular object will make us happy when it ultimately cannot. This is the ploy used on Eve in the Genesis story, and it still works. The aim of such temptations is suggested by Evagrius of Pontus: “Why do the demons wish to commit acts of gluttony, impurity, avarice, wrath, resentment and the other evil passions in us? Here is the reason: that our spirit in this way should become dull and consequently rendered unfit to pray. For when our irrational passions are thriving, we are not free to pray and to seek the word of God” (Praktikos, 50).

Another golden oldie in satan’s arsenal of lies is, “The Lord won’t mind”. He makes us insensitive to the reality of our action’s sinfulness so that it becomes more and more habitual in us. St. John Climacus identifies this deception in the context of sexual sins, where it is still a favorite strategy. “Our relentless enemy, the teacher of fornication, whispers that God is lenient and particularly merciful to this passion, since it is so very natural. Yet if we watch the wiles of the demons we will observe that, after we have actually sinned, they will affirm that God is a just and inexorable judge. They say one thing to lead us into sin, another to overwhelm us in despair.”

Yet another favorite delusion of satan plays on our almost universal tendency to procrastinate. Bookra, mañana, tomorrow, next time, when my ship comes in, when I get around to it – we say things like this in so many aspects of our lives. It may not prove a problem when we’re talking about cleaning out a closet or shampooing a carpet; when we bring that attitude to our relationship with God we are on thinner ice. “This is the net of the devil, my brother, with which he catches a great many, and holds the whole world in his hands. ...Now, this moment, is in my hands; tomorrow and later are in the hands of God. Even if God will grant me tomorrow and later, can I be sure that tomorrow I shall have the same good thought urging me to mend my ways? How senseless it is when, for example, a sure remedy is offered for curing one’s illness, to say, ‘Wait, let me be sick a little longer!’ A person who delays the work of salvation does exactly this” (Unseen Warfare, 31).
Perhaps the most effective delusions which the evil one uses with believers concern religion itself. The enemy can work within our religious practices and attitudes, turning them into a parody of true faith. In this is the greatest imposture of all. We come to trust less in God than in other powers and strengths such as:

Our Own Righteousness – This is the deception of the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14) who sees himself as better than the publican because of his religious actions. His trust is not in God but in his tithes and fasts. To some degree we are all touched by this delusion, for as soon as we say, “I’m not like that,” we make ourselves Pharisees, trusting in our modern ideas, our better knowledge of Scripture or the Tradition, and the like versus those who trust in tithes and fasts. As St. John Climacus says, “The forces against us are so abominable that they can even turn the mothers of virtue into the parents of vice, and they can turn into pride those very things that should produce humility in us” (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step Seven). Thus people who see their tightness with God as connected with their own beliefs or practices generally go on to judging other believers or Christian groups from the standpoint, not of Christ’s love, but their own perceptions.

Elements of Religious Practice – Closely related with this is the delusion that it is one or another element of Christian practice rather than an ongoing relationship with God to which we are called. Satan continues to deceive believers in this way using every possible outward form of faith to draw us away from the One to whom they are meant to point. For Protestants it has often been the Bible or social action which satan has turned to being ends in themselves; for Roman Catholics it has more often been the Mother of God, the saints, or the pope who have become antichrists (replacements for Christ) in their faith lives. It is more likely for us to be deluded into seeing the liturgy, the icons, or the Church Fathers as the center of our Christian life. All these elements of the Tradition are good in the right perspective, but satan, who “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14), deludes us into seeing them as the end of the journey of faith rather than merely being road signs along the way.

The Occult – Many people who consider themselves Christians (not to speak of those who do not) are putting increasing trust in what St. Paul calls, “the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above” (Ephesians 6:12). By this is meant attempting to gain spiritual knowledge or power from sources other than God. Many Christians think that the Church denies that such powers exist. Then, discovering that they do exist, they turn to them.

The Tradition has never denied that such powers exist. Rather it has said that they are not the work of gods but demons and that Christians are not to trust in them. There is only one Lord for us, Jesus Christ. He is the One in whom we trust, not in other powers, whether they be of men or of evil spirits.
The examples of contemporary occult practices are many and should not be taken lightly. Perhaps the most popular are horoscopes, psychics, and “lucky” charms or amulets. St. John Chrysostom, describing the ones popular in his day, asks, “What would you say of those who use incantations and amulets or tie bronze coins of Alexander of Macedon around their heads and feet? Tell me, are these the things in which we place our hopes? After our Master died for us on the cross, will we put our hope for salvation in the image of a Greek king? Do you not know how many wrongs the cross has set right? Did it not destroy death, did it not blot out sin, did it not end the power of the devil, does it not suffice for the well being of our body? Did it restore the whole world and yet you have no trust in it?” (Twelfth Baptismal Instruction, 57) Were this Father to see today’s Christians wearing both crosses and charms, often on the same chain, he would surely react as strongly.

Other examples of spiritual powers with which Christians are toying may be as modern as Mind Control or as old fashioned as witchcraft. In Salem, Massachusetts, where so many were tried as witches in Puritan days, a coven of white or “good” witches now meets regularly in the town hall! Many of them find witchcraft compatible with Christianity. It seems more likely that they understand neither.

People are less likely to try blending the Gospel with satanism. Nevertheless there are a number of satan-worshipping “churches” and groups in contemporary America. Satanism is touted by several rock musicians and youth oriented games, such as Dungeons and Dragons, seemingly not without effect. Believers need to know that such forces are at work in our society and prayerfully oppose them.

A final example of the work of evil spirits in our lives has been seen in oppression where people find themselves “in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods” (Galatians 4:8). Here the enemy works with broken aspects of our nature to bind us in addictions and other compulsive behavior. It is no accident that the programs with greatest success in delivering people from alcoholism, drug addiction, homosexuality and other compulsions have been Christian efforts which recognize the demonic aspect to these disorders and incorporate prayer for deliverance into their treatment.

DEALING WITH SATAN’S WORKS

The specific examples of the enemy’s strategies cited above are but a few of the ways he works to weaken or destroy in us our life in Christ. Nevertheless they do suggest the variety of ways we are confronted with the power of the prince of death in our daily lives. How do we deal with the forces of satan? What do we do to combat the enemy’s wiles?

The first and most basic element in the spiritual warfare applies here, as well as in every area: we do not rely on our own strength. If we actually believe that
baptism united us to God in Christ and that His Holy Spirit dwells in us divinizing us, then we must know that we are not alone in this combat. The power of God, which is stronger than the power of the enemy, is available to us whenever we call on Him. He comes to our aid if we call on Him when we experience the assaults of the enemy. He offers us forgiveness if we find we have succumbed to these attacks. We are not alone. As St. John Chrysostom reminds us, “In the Olympic combats the judge stands impartially aloof from the combatants, favoring neither one nor the other, but awaiting the outcome. He stands in the middle because his judgment is impartial. But in our combat with the devil, Christ does not stand aloof but is wholly on our side.

"How true it is that Christ does not stand aloof but is entirely on our side you may see from this: He anointed us as we went into the combat, but He fettered the devil. He anointed us with the oil of gladness, but He bound the devil with fetters which cannot be broken to keep him shackled hand and foot for the combat. And if I happen to slip, He stretches out His hand, lifts me up from my fall, and sets me on my feet again.” (Third Baptismal Instruction, 9).

To begin drawing on this divine power, by which believers live, we can take the following steps:

1. Reaffirm our baptismal renunciation of satan and his works. This is especially important if we have been involved with any of the occult practices mentioned above. All items connected with such practices (books, charms, horoscopes, etc.) should be destroyed without exception.

In the same way, if we detect that a particular movement of our mind or external temptation may be from the enemy, we can denounce him and explicitly reject his leading. Just as we spit upon satan during our christening, we can do it whenever we sense his activity.

2. Reaffirm our baptismal faith in Christ alone. This is not a single moment but a life long process. Ephesians 6 shows how various examples of the ordinary Christian life are important in the spiritual warfare. Eastern Tradition also emphasizes the Jesus Prayer as a weapon in this struggle. By deepening our awareness of the constant presence of God through the Prayer, we become more sensitive to any assaults on our relationship with God. This is why the prayer rope used with the Jesus Prayer is often called “the sword of the Spirit.”

3. While we do not need any specific guidance to take the two steps mentioned above, we do need help in discerning any movement of the deceiver more subtle than occult practices and clear temptation to outright sinful behavior. Here the relationship we have with an experienced spiritual guide or discerning confessor is essential. Most of us cannot see our own spiritual condition with perfect clarity. We should not expect to, as the Christian life is meant to be lived in the Body of Christ, the Church. The Lord would not give the gift of spiritual discernment to elders if it were not meant to be used. When we freely discuss our
spiritual life with a guide steeped in the Tradition of the Church we are more apt to uncover any delusions the enemy may be working in our inner life.

One thing which the entire Tradition affirms resoundingly: Jesus Christ is victorious in the warfare against satan. The devil is real, he is powerful, he binds much of the world by his lies. Nevertheless, the power of God is far greater than the power of a fallen spirit. We proclaim this on Great Saturday when our liturgical chants place these words in the mouth of the prince of death, "My power has been trampled upon. The Shepherd has been crucified and He has raised up Adam. I have been deprived of those over whom I ruled, and all those whom I swallowed in my strength I have disgorged. He who was crucified has cleared the tombs, and the power of Death avails no more" (sticheron at vespers).

And so to the degree that we are living with the Lord, in communion with His Body the Church, and growing in the Tradition under the guidance of an elder, we can be certain that we share in the Lord’s victory over satan. This is why the words of Theophan the Recluse are still the most appropriate summation of spiritual warfare: “The principal thing is to stand with the mind in the heart before God, and to go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night, until the end of life” (“What Is Prayer?” in Chariton of Valamo, The Art of Prayer).

Content Questions

1. What does the New Testament say is satan’s relationship to this world?

2. How does the text explain the enemy’s continuing influence despite the victory of Christ?
3. The New Testament tells us that we are sharers in Christ's victory, freed from the power of sin and death over us, if we are united to Christ. What established this union in our lives? What maintains it? Explain this in terms of *theosis*.

4. How might the Jesus Prayer function as a weapon against the enemy?

**Reflection Questions**

1. What is your spontaneous reaction to the idea of the existence of satan and evil spirits?

2. Has there been a time when you were turned from serving God through depression, frustration or other feelings? How might this be an example of spiritual warfare?

3. Can you give an example from your own experience where an instance of religious practice became an "antichrist" (replacement for Christ) in the Christian life?
4. What might you have to do to develop a greater sensitivity to the more subtle forms of spiritual warfare recognized in the Tradition?

For Prayerful Reading

Choose one of the Scriptural or patristic quotes below or in the body of the chapter for daily reflection during the week. Record what it says to you in terms of your personal spiritual life.

The world is in satan’s power - 1 John 5:19
Satan is a murderer and a liar – John 8:44
Jesus came to destroy satan’s works – 1 John 3:8
Jesus triumphs over satan – John 12:31
Luke 11:14-22
Jesus passes on his authority – Luke 10:17-20

“Christ did not destroy the devil by the movement of will alone, but left the enemy a certain freedom to move among both the good and the evil. He raised between them a mutual warfare, so that just as the enemy is subjected to shame, being defeated by those who are weaker than he, so also the good are purified like gold in a furnace.”

St. Gregory the Theologian

“God does not prevent the devil from visiting us with temptations, first, so that we will realize that we have become stronger than the devil when we sign ourselves with the life-giving cross in the name of Christ.”

St. John Chrysostom
SESSION EIGHT:
DEALING WITH WRONGDOING

If we say, "We have fellowship with Him," while continuing to walk in darkness, we are liars and do not act in truth. But if we walk in light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of His Son Jesus cleanses us from all sin. If we say, "We are free of the guilt of sin," we deceive ourselves; the truth is not to be found in us. But if we acknowledge our sins, He who is just can be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong. If we say, "We have never sinned," we make Him a liar and His word finds no place in us.

1 John 1: 6-10

In the past three chapters we have been reflecting on several elements of creation which have been distorted from their original purpose in God's plan: the world, the flesh and the devil. All of them, even satan, were created good, but now they seem twisted and capable of crippling us if we follow them unrestrainedly. They touch us in many aspects of our life, affecting our values, our inner desires, our patterns of behavior. It seems that they place unbearable pressure on us to walk in the footsteps of our first parents out of the garden of fellowship with God. No matter how we may try to avoid it, often these forces lead us to wrongdoing, disrupting our relationship with God or with others. "God gave the command to do good and to avoid sin, but opposing powers make us tend toward evil, and it becomes difficult to do this good. These sinful forces are not innate to man's nature, but they are brought in from outside" (Nilus, Ascetical Sermon).

We know that living in such a disjointed way is not God's plan for us. We were created for union with Him and with one another. When this purpose was frustrated, He sent His Son to restore us to fellowship with Him. Whatever interferes with this communion is a perversion of our nature. When our God-intended fellowship with Him is broken, our ability to act as a person is clouded. This perversion is intensified when we welcome it or freely agree to it. When this happens, we can speak of personal sins.

In looking to understand just what sin is, we see that this word is used in the Tradition with more than one meaning. This is evident in the Great Doxology when we sing, "O Lord God, O Lamb of God, O Son of the Father, who take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us, You who take away the sins of the world." On the one hand we are entangled in "the sin of the world" (John 1:29), the brokenness or sinfulness which affects all of humanity and which we have been discussing in the past three chapters. In this sense we are all continually
touched by sin. This is why we can accurately admit that we are always sinners, as we do in the Jesus Prayer, and why the metany, accompanied by the prayer, "O God, be gracious to me, a sinner," is the most basic act of worship in our liturgical practice.

On the other hand, as we state in the Doxology, there are also individual acts of wrongdoing which Christ has come to deal with: those recognized actions which we commit that harm or weaken our relationships with God or with others. Just as our contact with the sin of the world affects us, our personal sins distort our perception of reality even more. "Just as one who is in the dark cannot make out either a friend or an enemy or even the things which are right in front on him, so it is with the sinner. The covetous cannot tell a friend from an enemy. The envious hate like an enemy even their nearest kinsman. In general, every man who lives in sin is just like a drunkard or a madman when it comes to recognizing persons or things" (St. John Chrysostom).

Sometimes those actions we commonly understand to be sinful disrupt our relationships with one another. We steal someone's belongings or slander their reputation. Other actions do not have this kind of effect, and many people would not see them as sinful because "they're not hurting anybody". They would see Christ's comments on the sinful potential of our thoughts an exaggeration (cf. Matthew 5:17-47). Thus many snickered when Jimmy Carter, campaigning for the presidency in 1976, admitted "committing adultery in his heart" (cf. Matthew 5:29). But, as Christ was indicating, even these hidden actions affect our relationship with God in one way or another precisely because they distort our perception of reality and move us away from the mind of God, from His way of understanding the purpose of creation. This is why in the East there was never a system of distinguishing the gravity of sins (e.g. mortal vs. venial). As St. Basil the Great noted, every action which affects our relationship with God is one and the same transgression, because underlying it is a lack of concern for being faithful to God.

Time alone will not repair the damage caused by wrongdoing. If our sins consist of external actions involving others, allowing the rupture they caused to remain unresolved will only promote guilt, mistrust, suspicion, fear, and lack of confidence for the parties involved. If they are sins of lack of concern for God or one another, not dealing with them diminishes our capacity for strengthening these relationships or forming new ones. We need to deal with the wrongs we have done through the twofold process of reconciliation and repentance.

In saying that this process is twofold we mean that to right any wrongs we have done demands that we look both backward and ahead. In looking backward we seek to undo any damage we may have done to others, by asking forgiveness and making up for what had taken place (reconciliation). In repentance we look ahead to changing our way of relating, of acting, of approaching God and others so that we can make a new beginning in our dealings with them.
SOME BASIC ATTITUDES

In the Old Testament era people often represented repentance by tearing their garments, covering themselves with ashes, sitting in dung. These actions expressed remorse at the sins they had committed and the hope against hope quality of their plea for God’s forgiveness. Many Christians approach repentance with the same attitude, although the circumstances of God’s dealings with His people have changed mightily since the days of the Israelite prophets.

Believers who know that the Spirit of God dwells in them look at repentance from a completely different perspective. Because God’s Spirit dwells in us, God recognizes us as His own even when we have sinned against Him, like parents whose love for their children does not depend on whether or not they have been obedient today. We know that we have sinned, but see the Father with ever open arms, ready to welcome us back and help us to share anew in His life. He loves us because we are His children, not because our actions have earned His love.

This is why we approach repentance with confidence rather than remorse. We are not astonished at our own weaknesses, because we know them to be part of our broken creation. Our eyes can be focused more on God’s love for us than on our own sinfulness and this can only bring peace. “If you happen to be wounded by succumbing to some sin ... above all do not dwell on yourself. Do not say, ‘How could I have allowed this to happen?’ This is the cry of a prideful self image. Rather, humble yourself to the Lord, raise your eyes to Him and say with feeling, ‘What else could be expected of me, O Lord? ... If it were not for Your boundless mercy, I would not have stopped at that, but would certainly have fallen into something much worse’” (Unseen Warfare, 28).

This looking at our sinfulness in the light of God’s love is evident in the “gift of tears”, traditionally associated with repentance in the Eastern Churches. The Fathers saw that the ability to perceive the actual effects of our wrongdoing is a spiritual gift, one that provokes the recipient to weep. Over and over again we hear about God’s love and our ingratitude, but spiritual tears begin to flow when the reality of both these sentiments penetrate the believer’s heart. As St. Isaac the Syrian said, “The spiritual life begins to bear fruit when tears water it.”

What happens is something like this: we come to realize the immensity and goodness of God, His acts of love for us, His condescension. At the same time we see our own pettiness, or unwillingness to vary in the slightest the path we have set for ourselves in life, our self-centeredness. As a result we weep both for God’s greatness and our inability to respond to His love. And so, in a single movement, as it were, we pass from knowing ourselves as completely inadequate before God to realizing that we are completely loved by Him.

It is in this spirit that Byzantine Churches begin the season of the Great Fast, for example, singing, “The lenten spring has come: the light of repentance! Brethren,
let us cleanse ourselves from all evil, crying out to the Giver of light, ‘O Lover of mankind, glory to You’” (vespers, Meatfare Wednesday). This does not mean we overlook our own sins, but that, knowing God’s love is greater, we can rejoice as we repent.

A second attitude which is essential in repentance is the recognition that there are such things as sins: actions and attitudes which are objectively wrong. A few years ago, psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled, Whatever Became of Sin? in which he lamented our society’s rejection of the idea that moral standards are objective. Instead modern culture tends to look only at the individual’s sincerity of intention. While this approach may be useful for determining a person’s culpability in a legalistic way, it does not help the person who is seeking to put on the mind of Christ. Believers need first to recognize that Christ’s standards for conduct reflect God’s design for human activity and then to attempt to live by these standards.

A third attitude important for repentance is the willingness to accept responsibility for our actions. We continually try to find extenuating circumstances for ourselves when we catch ourselves doing wrong. This is nothing new. Adam blamed his sin on Eve; Eve blamed the serpent (cf. Genesis 3:12, 13). A father snaps at his child at supper and blames it on the rough day he had at work. A woman holds back from growing in communicating with her husband and blames it on the way her parents raised her. It is easy to “find excuses for sinful deeds” (Psalm 50, LXX). The author of Unseen Warfare continues, “...You must not, however, admit the self indulgent and heedless thought that, since you are what you are, you have as it were a right to behave wrongly. No, in spite of the fact that you are weak and faulty, you are accounted responsible for the wrong things you do. ...Judge and condemn yourself, and only yourself. Do not look around, seeking on whom you could put the blame. Neither the people around you nor the circumstances are guilty of your sin. ... So blame yourself.”

These attitudes are portrayed in the Gospel images of repentance: in the Prodigal Son as he turns from the realization of his fallen state to confidence in his father’s love, in the Publican's recognition that he has sinned, in Zacchaeus’ willingness to accept responsibility for his actions and to try to undo their effects. It is for this reason that these passages form the basis of our liturgical preparation for the Great Fast every year. If we would make a new beginning in our lives, we must first come to understand these attitudes.

**HOW TO REPAIR WRONGDOING**

The Gospel readings mentioned above help us to consider the attitudes proper to repentance. We read them during the first pre-fast weeks of the Triodion. Then we are expected to practice what we have been considering, for awareness of these attitudes is meant to lead us to action: to repentance and reconciliation. In
the same spirit we now move to consider five concrete steps which we can take in repenting and reconciling ourselves when we have sinned. The first three steps, basically taken alone by the person who committed the wrongdoing, are oriented to repentance. The last two steps, taken together with God and anyone we may have wronged, help us in reconciliation.

1 — Acknowledging the Wrongdoing

The first step in the process of repentance is to decide that there is some aspect of our life which is wrong and which needs to be changed. In a process such as this we are not chiefly concerned with determining the degree to which we were responsible for our previous actions or omissions, whether it was a sin or a transgression. Rather we look for a simple affirmation that “This isn’t right”.

2 — Renouncing the Wrongdoing

We can admit to ourselves that something is wrong in our lives and yet not be willing to change it. Repentance is more than remorse or regret for the past; it involves actually abandoning wrong behavior. The person intent on repentance will want to say clearly and specifically, “This was wrong and I don’t want to ever do this again.”

3 — Changing the Behavior in Question

This affirmation marks a turning point in our state of mind. It should also signal a change in our behavior. On one level this may mean that we decide on behavior directly opposed to what we want to change. So if we find ourselves lashing out at a certain person we cannot avoid, we may opt to begin praying for that person whenever we see them.

In other circumstances we may find that a certain condition generally prompts us to act in a way we regret. Then it may be necessary to change our behavior patterns to avoid the circumstances that cause us to do wrong. If going to coffee break with a certain group of workers always leads to talk that we regret, then we may decide to give up the coffee break or to sit with others. Just as committed service is a more authentic sign of love that a romantic feeling, so too a determination to change behavior provides more credible evidence for true repentance than do feelings of sorrow.

4 — Asking Forgiveness

Because wrongdoing is always personal, always involving God and sometimes directly involving others, sincere repentance must involve reconciliation with the injured party. While we might well wish we could forget the past, this is simply another aspect of selfishness which prefers our own feelings over those of others.

Asking forgiveness is just that: requesting the other person to forgive because of this or that act of wrongdoing. This involves more than a generalized expression of regret that the other person was offended. If genuine wrongdoing took place,
then we need to clearly ask forgiveness for a specific act. Some people like to accustom themselves to a specific formula such as, “I have done (such and such). It was wrong. Will you forgive me?” to help them avoid the inclination to rationalize or otherwise excuse themselves. In any case what is needed is the acknowledgement of wrongdoing to the appropriate party and the request for forgiveness.

Whether or not another is directly involved, we need to ask forgiveness of God. This can be done at any time and in any words, but there are certain traditional moments which the Church has considered appropriate for asking forgiveness. Our customary basic rule for Evening Prayer found in the prayerbook contains a time for asking forgiveness for any sins or transgressions committed during the day which has past.

Another customary time for asking forgiveness is before engaging in a particularly significant religious act. Thus the Prayers before Communion contain, besides affirmations of faith in Christ’s Eucharistic presence, the request for forgiveness of sins. These prayers, too, are found in the prayerbook. Many churches have the custom of reciting the prayer, “I believe, Lord, and confess...” before Communion. We can personalize this moment by asking God’s forgiveness for any wrongdoing of which we may be especially aware.

Obedient to the spirit of the Lord’s Prayer, the Tradition is very clear that asking God’s forgiveness does not excuse us from asking the forgiveness of others. It has long been the custom that whenever the Church invites us to ask God’s forgiveness – such as one’s Evening Prayers, or before Confession and Communion – it presumes that we precede it by asking the forgiveness of anyone we may have offended. This is especially clear at Forgiveness Vespers, the first service of the Great Fast, at which everyone in the church is expected to begin the season of repentance by asking the forgiveness of everyone else present. This same concept is the basis for the holy kiss at the Divine Liturgy. It is not simply an exchange of good wishes, but a time for reconciliation before we ask God’s forgiveness in the Eucharist. Let no one who has a quarrel with his friend join you until they are reconciled, lest your sacrifice be profaned” (Didache, 14:2).

Asking forgiveness of another is essential when that person knows he or she has been wronged, whether they know who was responsible or not. If they are not aware of any offense, bringing it to their attention would probably not be doing them a service. Telling someone with whom you have never been on bad terms, “I’m sorry I’ve always thought you were a jerk; will you forgive me?” is at best foolish. At worst it can be a manipulative attempt to put another in our debt.

In the same way it may not be a loving action to ask forgiveness for long forgotten actions, especially in relationships which are no longer active. A believer need not seek out an old flame to repent of some act of wrongdoing. However in families, where continual contact is often clouded by the memory of ancient offences, we may well be obliged to ask forgiveness for long standing
resentments. Many church people have allowed family quarrels to remain unresolved for twenty or thirty years.

The same is true when members of the same parish family harbor resentments. Sitting on different sides of the church or attending different services does not right the wrongs which will continually surface in the affairs of the community. Sometimes this reaches dramatic proportions. Father Elias Chacour had worked for over a year to unite his fractured parish in the Galilean village of Ibllin with no results. Finally, after the Liturgy on Palm Sunday, when the church was at its fullest, he padlocked the door, refusing to let anyone out until they forgave one another. He describes what followed:

"Silence hung. Tight lipped, fists clenched, everyone glared at me as if carved from stone. Three minutes ... five ... ten ... Still no one flinched ... 'Surely I've finished everything,' I chastised myself, 'undone all these months of hard work with my...' Then a sudden movement caught my eye.

"Someone was standing. Abu Mouhib rose and faced the congregation, his head bowed, remorse shining in his eyes. ... 'I'm sorry,' he faltered. All eyes were on him. 'I am the worst one of all. I've hated my own brothers. Hated them so much I wanted to kill them. More than any of you I need forgiveness.' And then he turned to me, 'Can you forgive me too, Abuna?"

"'Come here,' I replied, motioning him to my side. He came, and we greeted each other with the kiss of peace. 'Of course I forgive you,' I said. 'Now go and greet your brothers.'

"Before he was halfway down the aisle, his three brothers had rushed to him. They held each other in a long embrace, each one asking forgiveness of the others.

"In an instant the church was a chaos of embracing and repentance. Cousins who had not spoken to each other in years, wept together openly. Women asked forgiveness for malicious gossip. Men confessed to passing damaging lies about each other. ... This second church service, a liturgy of love and reconciliation, went on for nearly a full hour" (Blood Brothers, pp. 171-72).

In the church family, as in our natural families, our weaknesses and transgressions are always apparent. But the Christian community, if nowhere else, should be the place where mutual forgiveness in obedience to Christ should be the rule. The Church is expected to be a living communion of people who recognize that they are sinners and whose prayers for one another are reflected in the forgiveness they show for the sins they are bound to commit against one another. All commit sin, but all can also contribute to the task of undoing the effects of sin by mutual repentance and reconciliation. In the words of Father Dumitru Staniloae, "The Church is renewed through the Holy Spirit by mutual forgiveness and prayer. She is constantly renewing herself, repairing the inner
bonds of love between her members. In other words, she is recreating her inner unity, her harmony and catholicity" (Prayer and Holiness, p. 27).

This spirit is evident in our Church’s worship where the daily night service, Compline, is often followed by a mutual asking of forgiveness. It is, of course, at the heart of the Mystery of Confession, where the penitent asks forgiveness of the Church, represented by the priest, and thereby received assurance of God’s forgiveness as well.

5 — Making Up for the Wrong

The last aspect of repentance and reconciliation we shall discuss is restitution. In situations where others have suffered loss as a result of our actions, this is as much a sign of true repentance as asking forgiveness. We cannot imagine being sincere about repentance unless, like Zacchaeus, we are willing at least to restore what we have caused the other to lose.

This is most obvious in the case of material loss, but can also be imagined in other situations as well. If we become conscious that we have been neglecting a loved one, we can make up for it by increasing the attention we pay to them. By treating the person differently we manifest the sincerity of our repentance.

Besides agreeing to repay those he defrauded, Zacchaeus undertook to share his goods with the poor. The Tradition has seen almsgiving after the manner of Zacchaeus as another way of showing the authenticity of our repentance. Because it is our self-centeredness which underlies all our sins, the effort of reaching out to others in almsgiving helps us to become less focused on our own needs and desires. In today’s world it is often the giving of our time as well as our funds which can contribute to this side of our repentance.

6 — Seeking Healing

Sometimes we find that we are compulsively drawn to certain sinful habits or actions. We do not seem able to refrain from them or stay away from circumstances which lead us to sin. In these circumstances we may need to take advantage of the Church’s ministry of healing. We can ask at any time for prayer or request the Mystery of Holy Unction as well as seeking guidance on the matter. As usual it is best to deal with matters like this under the direction of a spiritual guide.

In conclusion we recognize that learning to practice these procedures for repentance will not keep us from sin in the future. It will enable to partake of that continual process of cleansing and restoration, that second baptism which renews our life in Christ through the power of forgiveness which the Spirit sets in motion.
Session Eight: Dealing with Wrongdoing

Content Questions

1. The text describes sin as a frustration of our nature. What does this mean and how is it connected with the idea that every sin is grave?

2. What is the difference between the “Sin of the world” and the “sins of the world”?

3. What is the difference between repentance and reconciliation? Why are both necessary to completely repair wrongdoing?

4. What do you understand by the “gift of tears”?

Reflection Questions

1. In the light of this chapter, what do you understand by our liturgy’s frequent prayer, “that the rest of our life may be spent in peace and repentance”?
2. What has been your experience with “finding excuses for sinful deeds” (page 76), such as “we didn’t mean any harm”, “he started it”, “that’s the way I am” or the like? How might such thinking inhibit our desire to repent?

3. How do you think a Christian should respond when another refuses his request for forgiveness?

4. How can a person make restitution for gossip or slander?

For Prayerful Reading

Choose one of the Scriptural or patristic quotes below or in the body of the chapter for reflection during the week. Record what it says to you in terms of your personal spiritual life.

Be reconciled with your brother – Matthew 5:23-24
Forgive and be forgiven – Matthew 18:15, 21-22, Luke 17:3-4
Repentance vs. remorse – 2 Corinthians 7:8-11
Conviction of sin as the work of the Holy Spirit – John 14:16

“Do not be surprised that you fall every day; do not give up, but stand your ground courageously. And assuredly the angel who guards you will honor your patience. When a wound is still fresh and warm, it is easy to heal; but old, neglected, and festering ones are hard to cure and require for their care much treatment, cutting, plastering, and cauterization. Many become incurable from long neglect. But with God all things are possible.”

St. John Climacus
IN CONCLUSION

Reflect on your experience in this group so far: the readings and reflections you have done on your own as well as the meetings, prayer and sharing you had together.

1. What aspect of this experience did you find most enriching or fulfilling and why?

2. What aspect of this experience did you find hardest to take and why?

3. If you were expected to repeat the experience, what would you change and why?

4. Are you interested in extending your commitment to the next mini-series?
5. Which of the following subjects in the spiritual life would you be interested in exploring at this time:

____ Eastern Spirituality in General

_____ Prayer

_____ Fasting

_____ Holy Mysteries

___ Relationships in Christian Perspective

___ Repentance and Spiritual Warfare

___ Personal Problems (Emotions, Habits, etc.)
Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of Divine Nature* (Light and Life Publishing) - An overview of the purpose of human existence according to the theology of the Eastern Churches, as they reflect on the Scriptural call to "...become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) A participant's study guide and a facilitator's guide are available.

*The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Educational Services) - Interactive commentary on the Scriptural text connecting St Paul's words with the living experience of the Byzantine Churches. Facilitator's Guide is also available.

The Theosis Program consists of an initial weekend of prayer, conferences and fellowship followed by an ongoing series of group meetings with discussions based on a specific text. Growing in the Christian life is the third text in this series.