

CHAPTER 1

Orthodox Daily Life

A. The Sign of the Cross

The sign of the Cross has been the most powerful weapon against great temptations from demons, from the early ascetics down to the present day.¹

The Sign of the Cross is a fundamental element of Orthodox life. It should be second nature to anyone who claims to be an Orthodox Christian. The Sign of the Cross is used in virtually every situation in life. Before we eat, before we sleep, or when we awaken in the morning, we should automatically make the Sign of the Cross. The great spiritual advantage of making a habit of this is that, when we are confronted with a dangerous or compromising situation, we will make the Sign of the Cross without hesitation. This might save our life or even our soul, depending on the circumstance. Saint Barsanuphios the Great has written:

[T]he Lord Jesus Christ, an angel or another person can be portrayed by demons, not only in sleep but when a person is awake—for satan can transform himself into an angel of light. But the Cross of the Lord, upon whose power, as the Church chants, the devil does not even dare to gaze—for he trembles and is convulsed being unable to behold its power—this he cannot represent.²

Because the Sign of the Cross has such a powerful effect on demonic powers, people often experience a sense of self-consciousness when attempting to make it. Our weak flesh also rebels against outward manifestations of faith. But this can be

¹ [St.] Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic, *The Prologue from Ochrid: Lives of the Saints and Homilies for Every Day in the Year*, trans. Mother Maria (Birmingham, England: Lazarica Press, 1986), Vol. 3, pp. 230–231.

² Father Clement Sederholm, *Elder Leonid of Optina* (Platina, ca: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1990), p. 195.

4 *Daily Life*

overcome quite easily, if we only strive to train ourselves and come to understand the tremendous power of the Cross, in which, Saint Paul tells us, we should glory.³

To make the Sign of the Cross, we place the thumb and the first and second fingers of our right hand together, representing the Three Persons or *Hypostases* of the Holy Trinity. Next, we fold the fourth and fifth fingers against our palm, representing the two Natures of Christ, Who came down from Heaven to the earth, in order to save mankind. Holding our right hand in this way, we touch the tips of the three fingers to our forehead, our abdomen, the right shoulder, and the left shoulder. We then put our hand down to the side of our body.

Properly executed—and one should be careful to make it slowly and with care—the Sign of the Cross has tremendous spiritual power. This is because we are not only affirming our faith in Christ’s Sacrifice on the Cross at Golgotha, but confirming our belief in the Holy Trinity and the Human and Divine Natures of Christ, that is, the basic dogmas of the Orthodox Faith.

The Sign of the Cross was such an integral part of Christian life in the Early Church, that few direct references can be found in the literature of the Early Church. It was an oral, living tradition which every Christian took for granted, much like Holy Baptism. Thus Saint Basil the Great says the following of this custom in his treatise “On The Holy Spirit”:

For were we to attempt to reject such customs as have no written authority, on the ground that the importance that they possess is small, we should unintentionally injure the Gospel at its very vitals; or, rather, should make our public definition a mere phrase and nothing more. For instance, to take the first and most general example, who is there who has taught us in writing to sign with the cross those who have trusted in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ?⁴

³ Galatians 6:14.

⁴ St. Basil the Great, “On the Spirit,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd ser., ed. Philip Schaff and

Here, Saint Basil refers to the Sign of the Cross as “the first and most general example” of an oral tradition. There are many references in the Lives of the Saints from Apostolic times down to the present day which testify to the power and security an Orthodox Christian can experience through the pious act of making the Sign of the Cross over himself. Saints and Martyrs of all ages have been delivered from fire, wild beasts, demonic attack, carnal temptations, and poison by fidelity to this ancient tradition:

The mysterious power of the Cross, however inexplicable, is true and indisputable. ...‘If ...[Saint John Chrysostomos] says, ‘we are striving to drive out demons, we use the Cross, and it is also of aid in healing sickness.’ St Benedict made the sign of the Cross over a glass containing poison and the glass shattered as if struck by a stone. St Julian made the sign of the Cross over a cup of poison brought to him, and drank the poison, suffering no bodily harm from it. The holy martyr Vasilissa of Nicomedia protected herself with the sign of the Cross and stood in the midst of the flames, remaining completely untouched. The holy martyrs Audon and Senis crossed themselves when ravening wild animals were let loose upon them, and the beasts became docile and meek as lambs. The sign of the Cross has been the most powerful weapon against great temptations from demons, from the early ascetics down to the present day. The most ferocious of the devil’s devisings are dispersed into nothing, like smoke, when a man signs himself with the Cross. Thus it was the good will of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself that the erstwhile sign of wickedness and shame, the Cross, should, after His crucifixion on the wood of the Cross, be the vehicle of all-conquering power and might.⁵

The Sign of the Cross should, as we have said, become an automatic response to every act we perform and every trial we experience. This is especially true when unclean or carnal thoughts suddenly come into our minds. Such thoughts are perhaps not sinful in and of themselves, but they can lead us to sin.

Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, mi: Wm. B. Erdmans, 1978), p. 41.

⁵ *The Prologue*, Vol. 3, pp. 230–231.

Therefore, it is essential that we immediately dispel them by making the Sign of the Cross in faith. We should also hasten to add that a pious retreat to the power of the Cross assumes that one is making a sincere effort to lead a Christian life or that he is in the midst of sincere repentance. The Sign of the Cross is not a talisman against those things that we do not want to put up with. It contains spiritual power, which always draws on the power of human intent. It is not something magical. If we neglect to say prayers or keep the fasts, or if we feel no true compunction for our carelessness, we should not be surprised if the Sign of the Cross does not magically heal, for example, a loved one in the hospital intensive care unit. By the Providence of God, such an unusual thing might happen. But within the domain of our own efforts, true spiritual results are always the result of a sincere devotion to God and submission to His Will, whatever the circumstances.

B. Icons

In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image [Icon] of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honoring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honor it, but not as God.⁶

Icons play a pivotal rôle in Orthodox living. As windows into the next world, they serve to teach us and to remind us of the importance of spiritual life. Without Icons, our Churches would very quickly become theaters full of spectators, rather than places where earth and Heaven meet, where the Angels and Saints join us in worshipping the Creator, God, the Holy Trinity. Without Icons to remind us of our Savior and the Blood which He voluntarily shed for us, or of His Holy Mother, the

⁶ St. John Damascene, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, ny: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), p. 23.

most exalted of created beings, sanctified by her ineffable contact with God within her womb, or of the Saints, whom we emulate in our path towards union with Christ, our daily lives would lose contact with the spiritual goal before us. We might quickly tire or even lose interest in running the long race and in fighting the good fight that Saint Paul describes for us.⁷

Orthodox Icons are painted according to very specific patterns and regulations, which must be followed strictly by the iconographer. Many iconographers are monastics, though a lay person may also paint an Icon under strict spiritual supervision. The patterns and rules for the execution of an Icon reflect the tradition of how specific Saints are to be depicted. The prototypes of various Icons derive from artistic ideals and Christological principles that were established by the Œcumenical Synods and fully developed in Byzantine times. Once one becomes aware of these conventions, recognizing the Icons of particular Saints becomes quite simple. This recognition is valuable, for it makes it possible for us to enter an Orthodox Church of any ethnic tradition and instantly recognize many of the Saints depicted, even when the lettering is in a language we cannot read.

As for the reverence we should hold for Icons:

The icon contains and professes the same truth as the Gospels and therefore, like the Gospels, is based on exact concrete data, and in no way on invention, for otherwise it could not explain the Gospels nor [*sic*] correspond to them.

Thus the icon is placed on a level with the Holy Scriptures and with the Cross, as one of the forms of revelation and knowledge of God, in which Divine and human will and action become blended.⁸

We should approach an Icon with the same reverence and awe that we reserve for the Holy Cross and Holy Scripture. We venerate an Icon in order to communicate the reverence, respect,

⁷ 1 Timothy 6:12; Hebrews 12:1.

⁸ Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, ny: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), p. 30.

and love which we hold for the subject of the Icon. Even as people visiting their loved ones in prison, separated by a glass window, might actually kiss the window to show their love and concern, so we, as pilgrims in this fallen world, reverently kiss the images of our Savior or His Mother or His Saints. Icons depict these holy persons in the heavenly realm, our own desired haven.

Because Icons are holy, there are particular ways they should be handled and displayed. Let us look at some of these.

Icons in the Home. The Orthodox Christian home is like a family Church. For this reason, we choose an eastern wall or corner of a prominent room to set up our “Icon Corner.” The Icon Corner is our “family Altar,” as it were. This is where we pray together as a family and where we share many of our joys and sorrows with the Lord. We should always include in the Icon Corner an Icon of Christ, the *Theotokos*, and any Saints whom we wish to venerate or pray to regularly. In the Icon Corner, we should have a small table or shelf to hold a bottle of Holy Water, Blessed Oil, palms from the Sunday of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), and other items used for worship. Married couples will often keep the candles which they held at their wedding here, as well. In front of the Icons, safely out of the reach of small children or pets, we should keep an oil lamp perpetually burning. Although some people use votive candles in their lamp, it is proper to burn olive oil. It is the fuel used in most monasteries and represents a very ancient tradition. Churches also traditionally use olive oil in their lamps. In the home, “Pious Orthodox faithful take oil frequently from the lamp and bless themselves, making the sign of the Cross on their foreheads.”⁹

There are two other major reasons—aside from fidelity to Church Tradition—for using olive oil, and both are related to the idea of sacrifice. The added cost of using olive oil over electricity, or even votive candles, renders the lighting of the lamp

⁹ Reverend Michael B. Henning, *Marriage and the Christian Home* (Seattle: St. Nectarios Press, 1987), pp. 23–24.

before an Icon a more genuine sacrifice and a more meaningful offering to God. Also, oil lamps require daily attention and periodic cleaning. This forces us to render some small service to God each day, even if that service involves something as simple as maintaining a lamp. Such pious, constant diligence will not go unrewarded. Church history is replete with accounts of families and monasteries which faithfully maintained their lamps, even when food literally ran out, and which God consequently delivered from their need. The care of oil lamps is described below:¹⁰

1. *The Glass.* A votive glass or any small glass with a wide mouth may be used for the lamp. (It is advisable, however, to use a glass large enough that it will hold enough oil to last at least ten or twelve hours.) Once used for this purpose the glass should not be reused for any other purpose. Traditionally, glasses used for oil lamps are red or blue, giving off a pleasant glow.

2. *The Oil.* The use of olive oil for the lamps is, as we have said, an ancient tradition, dating back as far as our Father Moses. The olive oil will burn better if the container in which it is stored is left open and allowed to age. Be sure to protect open oil from insects and other possible sources of contamination with cheesecloth or another form of screen. Before pouring the oil into the glass, it is a good idea first to add a small amount of water and a pinch of salt. The oil will float on the water, and, in the event that the lamp is left unattended for too long, will extinguish the flame, thus preventing the glass from cracking; the salt will inhibit the growth of microorganisms.

3. *The Wick.* To make a wick, use cotton string about a foot in length. Do not use coated or waxed string. Six-ply cotton string will be thick enough. If the wick is soaked in vinegar, it will burn more brightly and more cleanly. The wick should be allowed to dry thoroughly before being used.

4. *The Flame.* The Fathers of the Holy Mountain (Mount Athos) have taught us to use a very low flame, which they call “passionless.” The flame should burn steadily and not flicker,

¹⁰ These tips have been adapted from Henning, *Marriage*.

since it is otherwise distracting during prayer. A lamp will burn six to twelve hours, depending mainly on the oil, but also on the size of the flame, the weather, *etc.* Before relighting a lamp, remove the excess carbon from the wick and twist the string slightly, in order to shape the wick into a point. Candle wax may be used to make a firm point, for ease in threading the wick. It should be trimmed off before lighting.

5. *Cleaning.* Napkins or tissue used to wipe off the carbon and oil from the fingers should be burned in a special place (in the home censer, for example) and not thrown in the trash. Be careful not to drip or spill the oil when lighting the lamp. (Saint Theodore of Studion imposes a “penance” of thirty prostrations on an Ecclesiarch who spills oil from the Icon lamps.) The glass in the lamp should be washed periodically and the oil replaced. The water in which the glass is washed, as well as the old oil from the lamp, should not be poured down the drain. It is best, rather, to pour them under plants or trees or in an area that is not walked on.

We should show the same care and reverence that we display towards the oil which we burn in front of an Icon for the Icon itself. Of late, there has been a trend towards using Icons in rather mundane ways. They have been used as labels on bottles of wine, as seals on envelopes and postage stamps, and even on wrapping paper. In all of these cases, the Icons are treated as mere decorations, without any respect or veneration. After having served their decorative function, they are placed in the trash. Since everything which we do as Orthodox Christians should be logical and consistent, it makes no sense to prostrate ourselves and kiss one Icon in the Church and then throw another in the garbage. All Icons are equally deserving of our respect. Thus we should be careful to avoid any mundane or blasphemous uses of Holy Icons.

Icons Used When Traveling. Whenever we travel, we should take a small diptych or triptych Icon with us. These are small Icons, usually of the Savior and the *Theotokos*, which are hinged

together and folded up to protect the Icons when packed in a suitcase or purse. Whenever we stop for the night or to take a rest in our travels, we should take out the Icons, determine the direction of east, and set them up with their backs to the east. We should then recite our prayers in front of them. Praying before Icons is, of course, an important part of Orthodox piety. So is the habit of facing east during such prayers. This ancient custom is mentioned by Saint Basil the Great:

Thus we all look to the East at our prayers, but few of us know that we are seeking our own old country, Paradise, which God planted in Eden in the East.¹¹

The custom of carrying Icons on a journey for use in prayer is an old one. Recently, the remains of a Russian warship, the *Slava Rossii*, which went down off the south coast of France in 1780, were discovered. Over eighty small metal Icons, apparently used by those traveling on the ship for their daily devotions, were recovered from the wreckage. Significantly, one authority writes of this find:

Why were such metal icons so numerous aboard the *Slava Rossii*? Ever since the early Christian period, icons had functioned as *pal-ladia*—that is, as protectors. The sailors of Catherine the Great's fleet were probably no more pious than other members of Russian society, and in carrying such icons were probably expressing their native devoutness and the seaman's natural desire to be kept safe from harm.¹²

It would serve all of us well to follow the example of these Russian sailors and to seek the protection of our Lord or the *Theotokos* by taking with us Icons of our own during travel and vacations.

C. Prayer

Pray without ceasing.¹³

¹¹ St. Basil the Great, "On the Spirit," p. 41.

¹² Diane le Berrurier, "Icons From the Deep," *Archaeology*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (1988), p. 27.

Saint Paul offered this advice in his First Epistle to the new believers in Thessalonica. He did so precisely because he understood how very essential prayer is to the life in Christ. Most sincere believers understand this concept in their minds, but few know how to bring it to fruition. To do so is not nearly as difficult or lofty a task as one might think. All that is required is determination.

The mechanics of establishing a personal and family prayer life are very similar to those of establishing a routine of fasting. In fact, the two literally go hand in hand. To establish a prayer life without keeping the fasts opens one to spiritual delusion, particularly if any significant time is spent in quiet prayer. Likewise, fasting without prayer leads one to pride and vainglory, which puff up the individual in his own eyes. Unless prayer is undertaken in conjunction with fasting, and unless we pray when we fast, our efforts will be in vain. Remember what our Lord said of a powerful demon: "This kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting."¹⁴ All Christians are constantly engaged in spiritual warfare, whether they know it or not, and this war cannot be waged effectively without a regular cycle of prayer and fasting that goes on seven days a week.

Family Prayer in the Home. Traditionally, it is the husband who is responsible for establishing the family prayer life. If he takes the lead and consults with his wife in an atmosphere of mutual respect and Christian love, she will usually respond very positively in helping him to maintain a Christian household. If the husband truly loves his wife, "as Christ loves the Church,"¹⁵ she will sense this love and support him in his efforts to guide the family down an Orthodox path. But if the husband assumes the rôle of a dictator or judge, handing down decisions from a position of superiority, such pride and arrogance will engender animosity and anger. And this is not the

¹³ 1 Thessalonians 5:17.

¹⁴ St. Matthew 17:21.

¹⁵ Ephesians 5:25.

kind of atmosphere which will encourage sincere family prayer. We must always remember that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance.”¹⁶ If the prayer life we initiate does not at some point begin to bear such fruit, we should realize that something is wrong.

Orthodox prayer is by nature repetitive and cyclical. This means that specific times should be established for prayer and a specific order of prayer be decided upon. The Church has established a set of Morning and Evening Prayers. These can be found in any Orthodox prayer book. Each member of the family should have his own copy to read along.

“Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray and cry aloud: and He shall hear my voice.”¹⁷ The Orthodox prayer cycle actually moves from evening to evening, as the Psalmist prescribes. In the evening, there should be more time available, and so a little more can possibly be done than in the morning. A daily prayer life would best benefit from saying an Evening Prayer Service, reading the daily Scriptural readings, and reading from the Lives of the Saints for that day. To maintain the liturgical cycle that is followed by the Church, we should have a Church calendar which has Scriptural readings listed for each day of the week. The calendar will also inform us of the particular Saints commemorated on a particular day. Calendars are available from various sources.

In the morning, again, we should set a specific time before family members leave for work or school and stick to that time. It is wise to begin with a short set of prayers and then add to the list as the family adjusts to the new schedule. The most difficult obstacle to be overcome is the illusion of time. When our family first began to establish a prayer life at home, we were convinced that there was absolutely no time for it. Though at the time we were only saying a short set of opening prayers, we were all sure that we would all be late getting to our respective destinations.

¹⁶ Galatians 5:22-23.

¹⁷ Psalm 54 [55]:17.

Then one day we decided to time how long these prayers were taking. We were finished in less than two minutes! Time, then, is relative to the importance we place on what we are doing. When we seriously consider the importance of getting to our Ultimate Destination, the amount of time we spend at prayer will seem almost insignificant.

Prayers should be said standing, facing the Icon Corner, with the lamp lit. Men should stand to the right, women to the left. Women and girls should have their heads covered during prayer, and all should be modestly dressed. The Orthodox Christian home is supposed to be a “family Church.” We should also approach our prayers with awe and reverence, having first settled any quarrels or differences amongst ourselves. We should cross ourselves, making bows and prostrations, just as we would in Church. Keep in mind that many distractions will occur just as the prayers begin. The phone will ring, salesmen and neighbors will come to the door, dogs will bark, *etc.* Anything that can be disruptive always seems to come along at prayer time. At such times, persevere! Do not be discouraged or dismayed. “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”¹⁸ These distractions will become less frequent with the passage of time.

After prayers, the whole family should sit quietly while someone reads from the Lives of the Saints. If the daily Scriptural readings are read, all should stand while the husband reads the Gospel. After an initial period of awkwardness, these readings will begin to spark conversation between children and adults. This is, therefore, an excellent way for children to learn about their Faith. A child learns far more about any subject when he is allowed to frame his own questions. If the child asks a question you cannot answer immediately, do some research and find out the answer. Ask your Priest. If he does not know the answer, he probably knows where the answer can be found. These periods of interaction can form the basis of a very healthy communication between parent and child. For one thing, if the

¹⁸ St. James 4:7.

adults are leading the prayers and readings, the child will understand that God is very important to the parents and that He is deserving of our time and effort. And this attitude can only be communicated in the home.

Often there is some resistance to the idea of starting a prayer life from one person or another in the family. Children may resist and drag their feet. Nonetheless, they should be compelled to participate, just as they are compelled to attend school. If, for some reason, the husband and wife cannot agree on a scheduled prayer life, then the spouse desiring a prayer life should quietly go about the business of establishing his or her own. This must be done in a spirit of absolute humility and subservience to God. When prayers are framed in humility and reverence, they will be pleasing to God. They will also slowly change the life of the person who is praying and impress the person who is not. This impression will gradually lead that person to pray as well. Ultimately, there will spring forth in these two individuals a desire for communal or familial prayer. But this will only happen when sincere evidence of the fruit of the Spirit is manifested. What husband or wife could not help but be attracted to anything that caused his spouse to become a more patient, joyful, loving individual? On the other hand, if prayer is accompanied by snide comments, angry or superior looks, or stony silence, who on earth would wish to emulate that?

Prayer When Traveling. When traveling, either alone or as a family, we should always take along a prayer book, prayer rope, and an Icon. Most hotels in the United States have a Bible in each room. This can be used for daily Scriptural readings and also for profitable reading if you have a few spare hours.

Prayer at Meals. We should always give thanks to God for the fact that we even have food to eat. Before each meal, we should all stand quietly behind our seats as the blessing is said by the senior person present, unless he or she defers it to someone else. The husband or, in his absence, the wife is normally responsible for saying the blessing. It should be said properly and reverently. This is indispensable for the children. They learn

good manners by waiting quietly to be seated, and they learn to understand that food is not a right, but a true blessing and gift of God.

It is not the same thing to eat your meal with a blessing and to eat it without one. Every meal is eaten at God's table which He Himself has laid for us, and we must thank God, our Host, and ask His blessing. Food which is blessed is both sweeter and more satisfying, but unblessed food is both bitter and unsatisfying—and unhealthy. The Emperor Theodosius the Younger was once walking in the outskirts of Constantinople and, seeing the little house of a monk, called in on him. The elder asked the Emperor if he would like something to eat. The Emperor accepted, and the elder brought him bread, oil, salt and water. The Emperor ate and drank, and then asked the monk: 'Do you know who I am?' 'God knows who you are,' answered the monk. 'I am the Emperor Theodosius.' The monk silently prostrated before him. The Emperor then said to him: 'I am an Emperor and the son of an Emperor, but believe me, I have never before in my life eaten such sweet-tasting food as here today with you.' 'And do you know the reason?' asked the elder, and went on: 'It is because we monks always prepare our food with prayer and a blessing, and therefore even bad food will turn into sweet for us. They certainly take a lot of trouble over the preparation of your food, but they do not ask a blessing from God, and so the most delicious food is tasteless.'¹⁹

The Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer is at the heart of all monastic endeavor. But this Prayer is not reserved solely for monastics and should be used by all pious Orthodox Christians. The Jesus Prayer is the simple prayer of the publican: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Much has been written of it and of its use, often on a very lofty level. We will not discuss these lofty dimensions of the Jesus Prayer, but, rather, strongly recommend that anybody living in twentieth-century Western society generally avoid such goals as "prayer of the heart" and seek a more practical benefit from this "prayer of prayers." A superficial view of Christian life, such as that which

¹⁹ *The Prologue*, Vol. 2, pp. 295-296.

seeks instant enlightenment through this or that formula, can lead one down the thorny path of delusion and spiritual death.

Having put forth a warning about its misuse, we must stress that there are very positive uses for the Jesus Prayer for any person at any moment. If circumstances occur which keep you from saying your regular Morning or Evening Prayers, then you can recite the Jesus Prayer on a prayer rope. A prayer rope is a cord of intricate knots made from yarn in the form of numerous Crosses, usually braided by monastics, which can be obtained from an Orthodox supply company. Though they resemble the Western rosary, prayer ropes should not be confused with this Latin devotional device and are not used in the same way as the rosary. To say a prayer rope, according to the simplest method, you merely recite the Jesus Prayer once for each knot on the rope, until you have used all of the knots on the rope. As the Jesus Prayer is recited, one settles into a regular rhythm. This rhythm will vary with each individual. To say a prayer rope takes a minimal amount of time and allows us a way to worship God even when our time is constrained.

The Jesus Prayer can be used at any time of the day. When we find ourselves in an idle moment, we can recite it quietly to ourselves or even in our head. If we are faced with a temptation of any kind, we should recite the Jesus Prayer quietly, until the temptation recedes. When we have a close call driving in traffic, we should recite the Prayer in thanksgiving. When we awaken from a bad dream, we should cross ourselves and recite the Jesus Prayer, until we slip back into sleep. This Prayer should be our constant companion and solace. Our ultimate goal should be to have this Prayer on our lips instantly, in any situation.

There was once a terrible collision of two jumbo jets on the runway in Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands, in the mid-'70s. About twenty-five people survived out of almost six hundred. One of these survivors described the hellish scene of a plane full of hundreds of people who were burning to death, and his most vivid memory was that of hearing almost all of these people cursing God in their agony. What would come to our minds if

we were thrust into such a situation? Are those the sentiments that we would like to present to the Eternal Judge? A constant practice of the Jesus Prayer can teach us to glorify and thank God in all circumstances—even in times of tremendous agony and pain. And it can prepare us to go before the Eternal Judge, not condemned by our curses, but justified by our praises. It is, in effect, a training tool for prayer.

Prayer is also an attitude, as much as it is words. If the Jesus Prayer leads us to true prayer, it leads us to something which is profoundly bound up with the very goal and purpose of human existence. Metropolitan Cyprian gives a wonderful description of what this ultimate goal in our prayer life should be. He depicts for us the fruit of the Jesus Prayer:

The Faithful commonly offer this convenient excuse when we give them the brotherly counsel that they should cultivate ceaseless prayer: ‘How is it possible to pray unceasingly amidst the world and its distractions?’

Indeed, could it be that the injunction of St. Paul to ‘pray without ceasing,’ an instruction certainly not addressed only to monks and ascetics, but to newly-enlightened Christians living in idolatrous surroundings, is unattainable? Most assuredly not. Let us, then, delve into this vital matter.

A basic error on the part of the Faithful, with regard to prayer, is that they think of prayer as being restricted to words alone. Our prayer, in fact, is an expression of our spiritual disposition, and it becomes constant and more ardent when accompanied by good works. The entire life of a renewed Christian is a prayer. His existence *is an offering of glorification to our Lord and God. It is a material manifestation of yet another Apostolic command: ‘Whether ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.’*²⁰

Thus it is that St. Basil the Great tells us to pray whenever we sit at a table. When you eat bread, thank Him Who gave it to you. When you drink wine, remember Him Who provided you with this gift, that your heart might be gladdened. Is your hunger satis-

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 10:31.

fied? Do not forget the Benefactor. When you dress, thank Him Who gave you clothes, increasing your love for God, Who bestows upon us garments for both winter and summer. Is the day finished? Thank our Lord, Who gave us the sun, that we might do the works of the day, and Who gave us fire to serve the needs of the night. And again in the evening, raise up your eyes to the Heavens and the beauty of the stars, glorifying the Master Fashioner, Who made all with wisdom.

In this manner, without our perceiving it, our hearts are drawn close to God: we live in an atmosphere of Grace, we breathe God, we pray unceasingly. And certainly it is to this that prayer aspires—not only, then, to the formal repetition of designated prayers at an appointed hour. Prayer and glorification on the road, at work, at meetings, on outings, everywhere and always: this is unceasing prayer.

The beginning of ceaseless prayer is, without doubt, difficult. But we have divine allies. These are the Holy Angels. As the Holy Fathers say, ‘the Holy Angels urge us on to prayer, accompanying us and delighting in their prayers for us.’ Let us not be negligent, contriving ‘excuses for sins,’ but let us press ourselves, that we might become *living Christians*, people of prayer, and dwelling places of the Holy Spirit.²¹

D. Fasting

Then came to Him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but Thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast.²²

Most people have heard of this passage from Scripture, but they generally do not have the slightest idea how to interpret it practically. The Orthodox Church is the only Christian Tradition which has preserved and maintains a specific and rigorous

²¹ Metropolitan Cyprian, “Words on Prayer,” *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. 1, Nos. 4 & 5 (1984), p. 12.

²² St. Matthew 9:14–15.

schedule for implementing the very healthy and spiritually profitable discipline of fasting. Before going into the details of how to fast in the Orthodox Church, we should consider first the reasons why we fast. For once we understand why we fast, we often find fasting much easier to implement.

First of all, we do *not* fast in order to punish ourselves. This very negative approach is actually an attitude which was held by Roman Catholics when they still practiced fasting. There is a delicate but significant distinction between a contrition that is founded on self-examination and a generic guilt that has little relationship to reality and which can often psychologically cripple a person. The former is essential to the formation of an Orthodox concept of sin and repentance. The latter is an aberration that is exemplified by Western notions of original sin and the corresponding juridical model of salvation that seeks to appease an “angry” and “offended” God. Let us emphasize that we Orthodox fast principally in order to recall and to emulate Adam and Eve in their original state before the Fall. At that time, according to Scripture, they consumed no animal products of any kind and certainly did not kill animals for meat. The Orthodox fast thus restricts the kind of food which we eat more than the actual quantity, in an attempt to return to the food eaten in the Garden of Eden. While there are certain days during Great Lent and Great Week when we do not eat any food at all, the usual pattern of fasting involves abstinence from animal products, fish, wine, and olive oil. Thus, it is quite possible to keep the Orthodox fast without feeling at all punished or deprived.

This emulation of our first parents, Adam and Eve, also accomplishes a second goal of fasting, bodily health. The Fathers of the Church have long maintained that the consumption of meat excites the passions and is unhealthy. Medical science has also come to question the safety of animal foods and to praise the vegetarian diet:

With regard to the avoidance of foods of animal origin, as dictated by the Church on certain days and during various periods, we

have seen here too, that today's medical science supports the correctness of these ordinances. It does so in two ways. First, by its proof that cholesterol leads to arteriosclerosis, hypertension, and various kinds of cardiac disorders, and by its discovery that cholesterol is found in all foods of animal origin (meat, fish, eggs, dairy products), which the Orthodox Church prohibits Christians from eating on fast days and during lenten periods. Second, by its proof that fats lead to the diseases just mentioned and to others.²³

By limiting our intake of animal products, we also allow our bodies the opportunity to throw off toxins which have accumulated in our systems.

The third reason for fasting is perhaps, at least for us in the West, one of the most important ones: self-control. Every day we are inundated with thousands of messages, either visual or audible or both, which beckon, cajole, or beguile us to indulge ourselves in one form of excess or another. Statistical research has shown that we listen to these messages and act upon them. The average twentieth-century American enjoys a standard of living which was once reserved to high-placed aristocracy. In the heat of August, even a hundred servants with hand-held fans could not do for Louis xiv what a simple room air conditioner does for a retired widow in a small apartment in our time. What would Julius Cæsar have given for a chariot capable of traveling over sixty miles per hour, which could cover hundreds of miles in a single day? The luxury and comfort we enjoy tends to smother spiritual life even as the thorns choked out the seed in our Lord's parable.²⁴ Thus, to train ourselves in denial and self-control, to learn the art of gracefully declining a simple piece of cheese on an inappropriate day, is one of the more valuable lessons the Church can offer us.

The generally accepted rules of fasting in the Orthodox Church are as follows:

²³ Constantine Cavarinos, *Fasting and Science* (Etna, ca: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1988), pp. 19-20.

²⁴ St. Matthew 13:7.

1. Unless otherwise noted, on a fast day we do not eat animal products of any kind. This includes any part of any mammal (beef, lamb, pork, *etc.*), bird (chicken, turkey, duck, *etc.*), or fish (tuna, cod, sardine, *etc.*). This also includes any by-products of these animals (milk, cheese, or eggs). Olive oil is also restricted on fast days. This is for a very special reason. It hearkens back to the time when a dove brought an olive sprig back to the Ark to signify God's mercy on the world after the Flood.²⁵ So, during a fast we set aside olive oil in anticipation of God's sign of mercy. (We might note the similarity between the Greek words for "olive oil"—*elaion*—and "mercy"—*eleos*)

2. Alcoholic beverages are allowed as follows:

a. Hard liquor of any kind (that is, a drink stronger than wine) may be consumed only when meat or dairy products are permitted.

b. Wine is allowed on specific fast days when the Saint of the day is commemorated with a sung Doxology or a *Polyeleos* is appointed. These days are always specified in the Church Calendar. Olive oil is also allowed on these days. These days are commonly referred to as "wine and oil days."

c. Beer is usually consumed any time and is not considered an alcoholic beverage.

3. There are also fast days when fish is allowed, in addition to wine and oil. These days are also specified in the Church Calendar. They generally denote Feast Days, such as the Transfiguration or the Annunciation, which fall during fasting periods. Fish is sometimes eaten on the Patronal Feast of a parish or monastery when it falls on a fast day, but this custom is in violation of strict fasting rules.

4. Shellfish (shrimp, clam, lobster, *etc.*), reptiles (alligator, turtle, rattlesnake, *etc.*), and amphibians (*e.g.*, frog legs) are all allowed on any fast day.

5. Non-dairy substitutes and mock meats which are vegetarian in content are often used during fasts. These do not normally violate the spirit of the fast, since avoiding animal prod-

²⁵ Genesis 8:11.

ucts is very much a matter of avoiding the hormones and fats which are unhealthy and excite the passions. Moreover, when we are put in the position of having to locate substitutes, this very action instills the discipline which fasting is meant to bring to our lives. If, however, we fast by constantly replacing meat and dairy products with unhealthy or rich-tasting, rather than natural, substitutes, we violate the meaning and purpose of the fast. One must exercise honest control in this area.

6. Many Orthodox substitute vegetable oils for olive oil on a fast day. Strictly speaking, this practice is acceptable. However, the use of these oils, too, should be restricted as much as possible, since they are unhealthy and are often used to enhance the natural flavor of food—things inconsistent with the spirit of fasting. A strict fast, where no oil is permitted, is called “xerophagy” and is observed in stricter monasteries on fasting days and during the various lenten periods. When followed for short periods of time, this is also a good practice for lay people.

7. Orthodox monastics do not eat meat or poultry at *any* time, including non-fast periods. They may, however, eat fish, dairy products, and eggs on non-fast days.

8. Married couples should also abstain from sexual relations on fast days. This also includes non-fast days during which they are preparing for Holy Communion. This is referred to as “fasting from the flesh” and can help strengthen a marriage when practiced with mutual consent of the husband and wife.

These are the times when we fast in the Orthodox Church:

1. Every Wednesday and Friday during the year, except during certain fast-free weeks. (These exceptions are the weeks following Nativity [Christmas], the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, Pascha, and Pentecost.) The Wednesday fast recalls the betrayal of Christ by Judas Iscariot and the Friday fast commemorates His Crucifixion. In monasteries, incidentally, Mondays are also generally observed as fast days, in honor of the Holy Angels.

2. The Orthodox Church has four fasting periods in the liturgical year. These are:

a. Great Lent. The fasting rules for Great Lent are outlined in most Orthodox calendars and cookbooks.

b. Apostles' Fast. This fasting period starts the Monday after the Sunday of All Saints. It is generally less severe, allowing fish on weekends and on several Feast Days during the Fast. Tuesdays and Thursdays are wine and oil days. The Apostles' Fast ends on June 29, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. If this day falls on a Wednesday or Friday, fish, wine, and oil are permitted.

c. Dormition Fast. Held in honor of the Dormition (Falling Asleep) of the *Theotokos*, this is the shortest fasting period, lasting only two weeks. It begins on August 1 and ends on August 15. Fish is only allowed on the Feast of the Transfiguration (August 6). Weekends in this Fast are wine and oil days. If the Dormition falls on a Wednesday or Friday, that day becomes a fish, wine, and oil day.

d. Nativity Fast. This fast begins forty days before the Feast of the Nativity (Christmas) on November 15. It is a more relaxed Fast until December 20. Until that date, we are allowed fish on weekends. After that date, wine and oil are appointed for the weekends. Tuesdays and Thursdays are wine and oil days throughout this Fast.

These fasting periods were established many centuries ago in order to allow Orthodox Christians properly to prepare themselves for the various Feasts in the Church's liturgical cycle. This cycle is Divinely inspired, as is all of Holy Tradition. If we are to participate fully as Orthodox Christians in the Festal Calendar, we must orient ourselves to God's schedule, rather than our own. This means that social and familial events which center around the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, or Western Christmas must be rearranged or adjusted according to the lenten periods in which they fall. We must also be careful to schedule weddings outside of any fasting period. It makes no sense for a couple to marry during a time when the marriage cannot be consummated with the blessing of the Church.

No Bishop or Priest, we should add here, has the authority

to grant “dispensations” from any fast day, except for reasons of health on a case-by-case basis. This practice among Orthodox in the West is a violation of Holy Tradition and introduces a spirit of legalism into the Church that compromises the Orthodox way of life and places it under submission to Western ideas and practices.

Fasting is one of the primary ways that we train ourselves to be in the world, but not of it, and constitutes one of the more challenging tasks facing an Orthodox Christian in America and the West. We are surrounded by people who accept those messages which extol the “virtues” and pleasures of self-indulgence. Few of our contemporary countrymen are going to support us in our Orthodox Faith, even though all will watch our struggles with interest, waiting to see if we are truly serious about what we claim to believe. This is especially true of our heterodox families and friends. Therefore, there is no greater witness for Orthodoxy in America than that humble soul who quietly goes about the business of keeping the fast.

With regard to the everyday problems of fasting, let us emphasize the fact that recent trends towards health and fitness have been a boon for Orthodox fasting in America. Foods which were once full of lard or other animal fats are now prepared with vegetable oils or shortening. The emphasis on consumer awareness has resulted in excellent labeling standards on all food, making it possible to know exactly what is in the food we are buying. Many excellent meat substitutes, such as tofu and “soya bean meat” products, as well as vegetarian dishes, are commercially available in most supermarkets. All of this, unheard of thirty years ago, makes fasting easier for Orthodox Christians in the West.

The first step in fasting, then, is to familiarize yourself with the resources that are available to you in your area. Excellent vegetarian cookbooks are available in any bookstore. Locate one or two and study them. Determine the basic ingredients that you will need to make a vegetarian meal and go about the business of finding them in your supermarket. Once you have tried a

few recipes, you will discover that about ninety percent of the flavor in any recipe comes from spices, onions, and garlic. Meat is more a matter of texture than anything else. There are ways to mimic this texture. They can be as simple as throwing artificial bacon bits into soups or salads. Tofu mimics hamburger very well, with none of the fat. There are also many excellent milk substitutes on the market, which can even be poured over cereal, though you should choose one made with soya or light oils and low in sugar. There are many other things available; it is simply a matter of taking the time to find out what they are.

A few guidelines will serve to make fasting easier:

When Shopping. Read labels! Some people feel that by reading labels closely they might develop a pharisaical attitude. But that is simply not true. We are only being pharisees when we read the labels on *other* people's food (and this does happen). It is a perfectly reasonable thing to want to know exactly what we are eating, whether we are fasting or not. Do not assume that something has no dairy products or meat. Read the label. Some cookies are still made with lard. Again, read the labels. Gelatin (including Jell-O) is made from animal by-products. It should be avoided. Croutons often have cheese mixed in them. One should be wary of such products. There are several mock crab and lobster products on the market which are actually made from fish and eggs; these, too, present a problem on a regular fast day. One must be careful to watch for them. The best rule of thumb is, in the end, never to assume anything.

At Home. The key to keeping a good fast, particularly during the longer fasting periods, is to develop a good repertoire of dishes. Great Lent can be a truly difficult experience if we eat lentils every day. Lentils are fine, but what about vegetarian tacos, vegetable curry, a nice pasta salad, shrimp casserole, or five-bean soup? The list can go on forever. The point is that there is potentially a great variety in the foods which we can eat during a fast. Also, home-baked bread always makes a meal seem like a feast, and is far more nutritious than the bread avail-

able in a market. There are bread-making machines on the market that make it possible for even the busiest household to enjoy this simple pleasure.

Fasting in a family situation requires commitment, particularly on the part of the husband and wife. The children, especially small children, will follow whatever agenda the parents establish. If the parents approach a fast day with a negative attitude, the children will learn that fast days are something to be dreaded. If the parents look forward to a fast, so will the children. The best attitude to develop is one of humble acceptance: "If today is a Wednesday, we will simply not discuss ice cream or pizza. We will leave that for the time when we can have these things." Such words of encouragement teach children to accept fast days without any negative feelings. And at a time when people feed their children health-destroying junk foods, parents who teach their children to fast are more responsible parents.

Fasting with Relatives or Friends. If you happen to have guests to dinner or if relatives stay with you during a fast, simply feed them what your family would eat. They should be aware of the fact that you are Orthodox Christians and should be as gracious about accepting your hospitality during a fast as they would be at any other time. We are under no obligation to feed people anything that we would not eat ourselves. This creates an artificial situation which inevitably causes more problems than it solves. Converts often find that their families pass through a phase of challenging them about their fasting. This is a spiritual trial which will pass. If we assume a very humble attitude and treat our fasting in a matter-of-fact way, without any fanfare, eventually people will accept it as something that is important to us. On the other hand, if we assume an attitude of superiority or become judgmental and condemnatory of those who do not fast, then people will learn to avoid us and come to believe that Orthodox Christians are very haughty and unpleasant people.

If a traditionalist (Old Calendarist) Orthodox Christian invites a modernist Orthodox (most of whom fast "in spirit," but not in fact) to dinner at a time which coincides with a New Cal-

endar Fast, then fasting food should be quietly served, whether the modernist is accustomed to this or not. We should always encourage our Orthodox brothers to observe the fast. It goes without saying that modernist Orthodox should be served only fasting fare if they visit traditionalists during one of the Old Calendar Fasts.

Fasting in a Restaurant. We may at times find ourselves in situations, particularly at work, where a group of people will ask us to eat lunch with them during a fast. This is not an impossible situation. Most restaurants now have some form of salad bar, and all restaurants have a side salad on the menu. Many have cooked vegetables as well. When ordering a salad, it is wise to ask if the salad has any cheese or eggs. If so, simply ask the waitress or waiter to have a salad without cheese or eggs. This is perfectly acceptable, since many people are allergic to these things. Cooked beans or spinach sometimes come with bacon. It is wise to ask about this, too, before ordering. Some restaurants have dishes made with shrimp or scallops. As long they have no cream sauce, this is an excellent food during fasts. No one will be in the least offended if you follow the Church's fasting rules in this way. There is, then, no excuse for setting aside fasting in the face of the proverbial "business lunch" or any other circumstance where you may be dining out.

When dining out with the family, Oriental restaurants are usually a good choice. Most Oriental restaurants have seafood dishes with shrimp or scallops. They also usually have a stir-fried vegetable plate. Fried rice is a problem, since it is usually made with egg. But many restaurants will leave the egg out on request. Some shrimp dishes also have meat. For instance, shrimp with lobster sauce always seems to come with pork in the sauce. These dishes should obviously be avoided. Mexican restaurants are usually not a good choice. Most of them cook the beans and rice that are the staples of this food in lard or meat drippings and many foods are smothered in cheese. Seafood restaurants, on the other hand, are an excellent choice. In addition

to various types of fish, these restaurants usually have several items on the menu which can be eaten on any fast day.

No matter which restaurant you choose, here are some basic guidelines to follow;

1. When in doubt, *ask*. There are many people who are on various diets or who have food allergies. Most restaurants are happy to accommodate such customers. Thus, do not hesitate to ask for substitutes. Dieters can ask to have food broiled in margarine instead of butter. You can do the same. Also ask for margarine to put on your bread and ask for a non-dairy creamer for your coffee.

2. If the food ordered has something unexpected, such as meat, or if a salad is smothered in cheese, politely explain that you can not eat the dish in question and ask for a substitute. Under no circumstances should you knowingly eat anything which would break the fast.

3. In a social drinking situation, we should choose beer, soft drinks, or juices (unless it is a wine day). These things are also healthier than hard spirits, anyway.

4. Concentrate on the main item being ordered and do not get bogged down with details. If the avocado sandwich has a very little bit of mayonnaise, do not make a scene by scraping it off. Such a display does more spiritual harm than good. There is a difference between eating a small amount of condiment on a sandwich and deciding to consume a salad covered with bleu cheese dressing. For one thing, there usually is a choice of dressings for a salad, but very few restaurants have a vegetarian substitute for mayonnaise on a sandwich. In any event, we should always follow the dictates of our conscience, but not make silly displays of our fasting.

5. Always say a quiet blessing before beginning to eat, whether the people around you are religious or not. You can always cross yourself, which shows your Christian commitment, and say a prayer silently, if need be. If anyone is offended by the Cross, you probably should not be sitting at the table with him.

One challenge often posed to an Orthodox Christian during

a fast is the experience of answering people's questions about our fasting customs. This is especially true on the job. Inevitably, people will notice that there are times when you appear to avoid meat. Most Americans find this very strange and are naturally curious. Some are downright rude in their curiosity. When confronted about your choice of meal, merely reply that there are certain times when you do not eat meat. If someone pursues the topic, point out that this is a discipline you have accepted as healthy and beneficial, much like jogging or losing weight. You might also explain your fasting customs as a spiritual exercise in self-denial. Be careful always to make such statements from an attitude of humility. We should never allow ourselves to sound prideful or superior. A humble reply coupled with a quiet blessing before eating is a very strong witness for Orthodoxy. If people do choose to ridicule or mock you for this, accept this humbly as a trial from God. Such acceptance builds spiritual strength. If certain people "get on your nerves" repeatedly, simply avoid eating out with them.

Fasting While Traveling. Some people choose to cite (or misquote) ancient Canons which relax the fast for a person who is traveling, and thus excuse themselves from fasting while on a journey. But is this really necessary? These Canons were written at a time when travel was a very dangerous and risky adventure, and they do not, at any rate, allow for a total abandonment of fasting. These situations simply do not exist in modern America or Europe. There are restaurants everywhere and, as we have said, they all serve food which can be eaten even during the strictest fasting period. Air travel also presents no problems. All airlines that serve meals will provide vegetarian or seafood meals upon request, though you must be diligent about ordering special meals before boarding the plane. Do not feel that this is any trouble for the airline. It is very common, especially with international carriers. Truly devout Jews, Moslems, and Hindus all require special meals. Besides religious considerations, many people require special meals for reasons of health. The airlines are all competing for your business and are more than happy to

accommodate the needs of their passengers. Here are some basic rules to follow regarding air travel:

1. It is wise to request special meals at the time you arrange your flight. This means that you should consult the Church Calendar and verify whether any of the days when you will be traveling are fast days, and whether you are allowed oil or wine or fish. Request either a vegetarian meal, which will be all vegetables, or a shellfish meal, such as shrimp, crab, or scallops. Be sure to verify that any crab served is real crab and not mock crab made from fish.

2. Check back with the airline the day before your departure to make sure that your special meals are listed with your reservation; if not, order them again.

3. At check-in, before boarding the plane, verify that the special meals appear on your reservation. The airline should have a few vegetarian meals set aside, even if they did not appear on the reservation. These efforts in checking and double-checking are perhaps a bit frustrating, but we can tell you from experience that this is the only way to be sure that you are not presented with a choice of chicken or lasagne on a Wednesday flight.

If traveling by train or bus, the options are more limited. However, we have found that bringing our own food along, particularly on a shorter trip, is a viable alternative. A little planning ahead can make the trip so much more enjoyable.

Fasting at School. Once a routine of fasting is established at home, children are far better prepared to pursue fasting seriously at school. Young children in the first four years of elementary school are usually very zealous about following fasting rules at school. Children that age thrive on structure, and once they have a routine set, they follow that routine to the letter. Usually, the school itself will not have any appropriate fasting foods available for lunch, so the meal must be brought from home. But this is not a bad thing, since school lunches are notorious for their unhealthy ingredients and poor preparation.

When parties are scheduled at school on a fast day, check with the teacher and make her aware of the child's situation. Offer to bring something to the party that the child can eat. Be sure to have enough for the other children to share. This accentuates the positive for the child, rather than allowing him to feel left out. At the same time, it allows the child to feel different in a positive sense and to develop a healthy notion of what it means to be one of those "peculiar people"²⁶ of Christ's Church.

In America today, it is not be unusual for a child to attend school with Moslems, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Each of these faiths has particular dietary and social restrictions. If we, as Orthodox Christians, out of a false concern that our children not appear different from the other children, excuse them from fasting at the school Christmas party, we will have no witness before the Moslem child who maintains a strict Ramadan fast, or the Buddhist child who remains vegetarian at all times. Our children will quickly perceive this as hypocrisy on our part and we will be unable to teach them anything further about living our Faith.

Any sincere Orthodox Christian is going to appear different to those around him. This was true in Saint Paul's time, when he spoke of the peculiarity of Christians, and it holds true today. Children can handle these differences as long as they have firm support from their parents. But if the parents falter in their resolve or are indifferent to fasting, the children will definitely follow suit. This is one of the grave responsibilities of parenthood. Children always learn from their parents. The question is this: Will they learn that which is pious, noble, and healthy, or that which is destructive to the soul and body? The answer is entirely up to the parents.

When Invited to Visit Friends During a Fast. We should generally avoid social engagements during a fast; however, when this is impossible, there are some helpful guidelines that we can follow:

1. If the occasion involves dinner, we should ask what is be-

²⁶ Titus 2:14.

ing served. If we explain our situation to the hostess, she will most likely arrange something for us. If she is unable or unwilling to do so, then it is probably best to put off the invitation until a more appropriate time. This can be done politely in such a way as to cause no offense.

2. At a buffet-style dinner, it may be possible to bring a covered dish. If so, arrange this with the hostess. You can then provide your own fasting food for the dinner.

Fasting During American and Non-Orthodox Holidays. The American holiday season poses particular challenges for Orthodox Christians. Thanksgiving sometimes falls during the Nativity Fast (according to the Church, or Julian, Calendar which traditionalist Orthodox Christians follow). Western Christmas (December 25 New Style, or December 12 on the Church Calendar) always falls during the Nativity Fast, which means that we are in a period of preparation for the Birth of Christ, while the society around us is beginning its round of “Xmas” parties. While family closeness and a spirit of generosity are admirable qualities in and of themselves, commercial interests in America have moved in to take advantage of the “Christmas spirit” by introducing relatively new “traditions” of expensive gift-giving and lavish entertaining. These not only compromise the Nativity Fast for Orthodox Christians, but violate even the meaning of the Western celebration of Christmas. In order to deal sensitively with our family and friends, while still maintaining an attitude of prayerful preparation for the Nativity of Christ, we should plan our activities during this season carefully.

Thanksgiving. There are two basic situations which we face at Thanksgiving. Either we are expected to have family and friends over, or we are expected to visit family and friends. If we are serving the meal, the best thing to do is to arrange to have the usual turkey dinner on the previous Sunday, before the Nativity Fast. If we invite those with whom we would normally share this day to the Sunday dinner, then there will be less contention about Thursday. Sincere people who truly care about us

will be glad to adjust. Those who stubbornly insist on our participation in the Thursday holiday do not really have our feelings at heart. In such situations, it is best to avoid confrontation altogether. Many family situations are less than healthy. This sort of contention is a clear sign of problems which go much deeper than a turkey dinner. It is thus much better for all concerned to work at overcoming those difficulties, rather than simply playing out a charade each year on the last Thursday of November. This might require a few years to sort out. But with patience, humility, and a loving attitude, the situation will eventually improve.

If we are invited to dinner on Thanksgiving, we should be very frank about the fact that this is a fast day for Orthodox and that we would be happy to arrange to visit after dinner. Sitting at table and not eating the meal would probably cause more tension and problems than it would solve. Arranging to bring a fasting dessert or some drinks after dinner is a far better alternative. If we bring something, we should be very low-key about the content and emphasize that it is to be shared by all. This sort of quiet witness will speak volumes to people over the years.

Western Christmas. This day has taken on a dimension over the past fifty years which, unfortunately, causes people to dread its approach and breathe a sigh of relief at its departure. Police statistics show that suicides and family abuse increase dramatically during this time. How sad it is that the Birth of Christ is so often forgotten in the midst of what has become an emotional Saturnalia, with the family elevated to a status above God and emotions transformed into a substitute for spiritual feelings. The depression associated with this holiday is the result of parties without pleasure, frivolity without joy, and a subconscious yearning for the spiritual meaning of Christmas. We should not dwell on these negatives, but as Orthodox Christians we must understand that Tradition holds out a much better way for us. And in this understanding we should separate ourselves from the cash register holiday that has become Western Christmas.

The parties and social whirl which surround this season

need not cause undo concern. We should avoid attending many parties, as this is inconsistent with our own preparation for Nativity. But attending several engagements with non-Orthodox family or friends causes no problem. We should, however, assiduously avoid lavish affairs which involve large numbers of people we do not know, since these parties too often degenerate into occasions for drunkenness and immorality. When declining such invitations, we should maintain a quiet, humble spirit and merely say that we have other plans.

On Western Christmas day we should visit those heterodox family members and friends whom we would normally visit and exchange gifts with those whom we normally exchange gifts. We should keep gifts simple, preferably made by ourselves, and we should be very loving and gracious. Once again, we can always bring a fasting dessert to share, if a meal is involved. We can console ourselves, if we feel left out of the holiday festivities, by realizing that this day is for most people the climax of a season of endless parties and shopping. We can call to mind the fact that we will be breaking the Fast in two weeks, followed by a fast-free period of spiritual celebration, while our non-Orthodox family and friends will be in the middle of the post-holiday blues.

New Year's Day. New Year celebrations are something that we should restrict to family and a few friends. For one thing, traditionalist Orthodox Christians follow the Julian Calendar, as we have said. For us, the New Year coincides with a Church Feast Day—the Circumcision of Christ (and the Feast of Saint Basil the Great)—and is thus celebrated in a sober way. As well, the Orthodox Church Year, around which we arrange our worship, begins on September 1, not January 1. We should avoid the large gatherings which mark the celebration of the secular New Year on the New Calendar, as these are usually occasions for drunkenness and immorality. Our Fast ends a week later, after the Nativity Feast, and we will then have an opportunity to celebrate in an upright, joyful way. If we properly prepare and

wholeheartedly rejoice in our Faith, our celebrations of Christ's Birth will gradually become occasions of joy for our family and friends as well. We will come to avoid, rather than dread, the secular holidays of the Western Christmas season.

E. Money

For the love of money is the root of all evil.²⁷

Nothing is closer to the heart of the modern materialist than his money. Money determines our status in society, our level of self-worth, and our entire identity as persons. In Western societies and in those countries which have embraced Western materialism, such as Japan and the Pacific Rim, the acquisition and spending of money are perceived as the single most important activities in a person's life. For the average person, from the ages of twenty-five to sixty-five more time and effort are poured into this activity than any other. This sad state of affairs is very evident among Orthodox Christians as well, especially in the West. Most people emigrate to North America for the purpose of acquiring money, and many succeed in their desire. But what is the proper Orthodox Christian attitude towards money? What are the proper uses of money? When does one cross the line from good stewardship to avarice? What was the difference between the rich man who left poor Lazarus to die at his gate and the Righteous Joseph of Arimethea? Both men possessed great wealth. These are important questions that Orthodox Christians in the materialistic world must address, for it is impossible for us to progress spiritually until we have placed our acquisition and use of money in proper perspective.

First of all, we must always keep in mind that money in and of itself is neutral. Money is merely a tool, a means to an end. As noted above, it is the *love* of money that constitutes a problem, not money itself. The Greek word *philargyria*, or "love of silver," is the term used by Saint Paul. This term is related to the word *philargyros*, the Greek adjective for "covetous," which was used in the Gospel of Saint Luke to describe the Pharisees who re-

²⁷ i Timothy 6:10.

jected our Lord's admonition that man cannot serve both God and mammon.²⁸ This same word is used by Saint Paul to describe the attitude of men in the last days: "For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous [*philargyros*], boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy."²⁹ As we can see by the various sinful attitudes included in this list, covetousness is very dangerous to the soul. But what do we mean by "covetous"?

As soon as Adam fell, God made it clear that man was to work for his bread in this fallen world. Therefore, honest, hard work is a virtue which has been extolled by all of the Fathers of the Church. The Desert Fathers supported themselves with handicrafts, weaving baskets and mats. Saint Leo of Optina, in nineteenth-century Russia, was constantly weaving belts as he counseled his spiritual children. Even today, all of us must perform some sort of work in order to acquire necessary food, clothing, shelter, and transportation. Those who seek to receive these things without working for them become slothful parasites who gradually lose all self-respect and motivation. In the words of King Solomon, "A slothful man hideth his hand in his bosom, and will not so much as bring it to his mouth again."³⁰ Rather, one should, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest."³¹

So it is plain that all Christians are expected to work and to support themselves and their families by this work. The real question is: "How much work and money are enough?"

In His parable of the talents, Christ showed us that different people are given varying degrees and amounts of talents or resources. The master in this parable gave one man five talents,

²⁸ St. Matthew 6:24; St. Luke 16:13.

²⁹ ii Timothy 3:2.

³⁰ Proverbs 19:24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6:6-8.

another two, and another only one.³² Therefore, we should not be surprised if a few of us become very wealthy, some of us live comfortably, and many of us have very little in this life. In God's eyes, there is no particular honor for any of these people, rich or poor; rather, each has varying degrees of responsibility. The man who doubled his two talents was accorded the same honor by the master as the man who ended up with ten. Each doubled what he was given, and that was the basis for his reward. The same holds true in our lives today. If one is born into an upper middle-class American family, with the advantages of a comfortable life and superior education, God will expect much more from him than He ever would from a child born in the slums of Mexico City or Calcutta. God loves both equally, yet allows their situations in life to be completely different.

As Orthodox Christians, we understand that God created the heavens and the earth. That means that He created everything that money buys—even the gold and silver from which money is made or on which it is based. We must come to understand clearly that God owns everything and that we have ultimate possession of nothing. We are only given permission to act as stewards of His property, like the servants in the parable of the talents. So long as we maintain this attitude of stewardship or service, which relates directly to Christian humility, we are in a position to use those things which God has entrusted to us for His glory. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to believe that those riches we possess are actually *ours*, then we will begin to cultivate in ourselves an attitude of pride and superiority, which is diametrically opposed to the Will of God. The Psalmist describes such poor souls in this way:

They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches;

None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him:

(For the redemption of their soul is precious, and it ceaseth

³² St. Matthew 25:15.

for ever:)

That he should still live for ever, and not see corruption.

For he seeth that wise men die, likewise the fool and the brutish person perish, and leave their wealth to others.

Their inward thought is, that their houses shall continue for ever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they call their lands by their own names....

This their way is their folly; yet their posterity approve their sayings.

Like sheep are they laid in the grave; death shall feed on them; and the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; and their beauty shall consume in the grave from their dwelling....

Be not thou afraid when one is made rich, when the glory of his house is increased;

For when he dieth he shall carry nothing away: his glory shall not descend after him.³³

Here we see portrayed the arrogance and utter folly of those who allow themselves to believe that what they possess is actually *their* property and not that of God. This attitude is what caused the rich young man to turn away from Christ when he was asked to give up his possessions and follow Him.³⁴ This was also what led our Lord to say: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."³⁵ The rich man is not loved any less by God than the poor man, but his riches themselves entangle him in a web of self-deceit which ultimately leads either to a rejection of God or to the creation of a god in a form acceptable to the rich (the so-called "social religion" of those who think that their wealth is a personal "blessing" from God). In either case, spiritual death is almost always the result.

As long as we remember that our earthly possessions are not really ours, but God's, all things will naturally fall into place for

³³ Psalm 48 [49]:6-11, 13-14, 16-17.

³⁴ St. Matthew 19:21-22; St. Mark 10:21-22; St. Luke 18:22-23.

³⁵ St. Matthew 19:24.

us. After all, it is always easy to be generous with someone else's money; and in this case, God means for it to be that way. But as soon as we begin to cling to money or those things that it buys, or come to believe that God blesses us through material things, we fall to the sin of avarice. We must recognize this in ourselves and within our families if we ever hope to embark upon any serious form of spiritual life; for the materialism of twentieth-century America has been a veritable black hole of avarice, from which many millions of people have never been able to extricate themselves. Never in history has six percent of the world's population consumed seventy-five percent of the world's resources; yet that is precisely what we Americans, as a nation, are doing. In such circumstances, we must set aside the idea that "everything" is ours and begin to recognize that all things belong to God. That to which we can rightfully lay claim is that which God gives us for our needs, not that which we want.

As Orthodox Christians in America, then, we have a particular responsibility to seek a simpler, more spiritual existence—and seek this life we must. We must reverse the pattern established by most Americans and seek to minimize our interaction with the materialistic world, in order to embark on the path of Orthodox maximalism. This concept has been forcefully put forward by Bishop Auxentios of Photiki:

If we have a profession, then this profession should always be understood as service to God. If it provides us with food and shelter, so that we have greater time for the Church, then it is God-pleasing.... And if our earthly work brings us fame, fortune, or prestige, then we must surrender these things to the Church also, using what has come to us to help others come to the Church.

...Every relationship in life, every responsibility in the world, and even life itself are secondary to our service to the Church. A layman is bound by this rule, since the Royal Priesthood of believers exists in its exaltation of the new life that God has given us, one which demands that we put aside the life of sin and of the world and give ourselves over wholly to the needs of the soul and God's Church.

...If one's job or one's earthly pursuits impede, rather than

accommodate and serve, the priorities of the spiritual life, it is the former pursuits which must be put aside, not the latter priorities. One should ideally hold employment which allows attendance at Church not only on weekends, but on major Holy Days. And certainly one should arrange to have vacation days from work correspond at least to the activities of Great Week and Pascha. Vacations from work should not be seen as occasions for leisure or travel pleasures, but as a time in which one's service to the Church can be increased or when pilgrimages to monasteries and holy places can be arranged. If one's employment precludes this, then he should seek another livelihood. And if this means a decrease in one's standard of living—well, better a life lived in poverty than an eternity spent in spiritual deprivation.³⁶

All of the priorities set forth by Bishop Auxentios are directly affected by our attitude towards money: by how much we love money. In this Western materialistic society, our salaries, the size of our homes, the kind of cars we drive, and the kinds of entertainment we can pay for all have an impact on our self-image. How we spend and utilize money is often, therefore, an outward indicator of our inner spiritual condition. The blind pursuit of money and the various distractions from the spiritual life that it will buy ultimately indicate a sickness of soul that will lead us to a disastrous end, both in this world and in the next:

Abba Isidore said that the passion of greed is frightful and dares to do anything; it is never satisfied with what it might acquire and leads the soul of which it has possession to the greatest of all evils. Let us, then, from the very beginning drive it away with all our might; for if it prevails in our soul, it becomes incapable of being subjugated.³⁷

F. Creating an Orthodox Atmosphere in the Home

³⁶ Bishop Auxentios, "The Church First, All Else After," *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1991), pp. 1–2.

³⁷ *The Evergetinos: A Complete Text*, Vol. 2 of the 1st Book, trans. Bishop [Archbishop] Chrysostomos, Bishop Auxentios, Constantine Kokenes, John V. Petropoulos, and the Rev. Gregory Telepneff (Etna, ca: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1991), p. 92.

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience Godliness; and to Godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fail.³⁸

The atmosphere experienced at home sets the tone for our entire outlook on life. This is especially true for children. Every home has some kind of atmosphere or “feeling” which is instantly apparent to any stranger who walks into it. We can control and shape the feeling and mood of our surroundings. In fact, our ultimate goal as Orthodox Christians should be to strive to foster in our homes an atmosphere in which there prevail the virtues enumerated above by Saint Peter. This is not easy, particularly in these times. But neither is such a goal impossible to achieve. If we honestly seek the good in this world, through a sincere striving to seek God in our everyday lives, we will naturally seek to be selective in what we see and hear and what we bring into our homes.

Above all other worldly things that we encounter, television, videos, music, magazines, and books have the greatest influence on us. It is essentially through these entertainment media that we confront the society around us and that society influences us. And it is thus primarily through these things that the “world” enters into our home. Since we cannot prevent the influences of the world from entering into our homes, and since these influences are frequently designed for entertainment, we must be highly selective in choosing what is heard and seen in the home through television, videos, and music and what is read in books and magazines. If we are to form and maintain an Orthodox at-

³⁸ ii Peter 1:5-10.

mosphere in the home, we must choose programs and reading material which have instructive value and which are not sources of mere distraction and witless pleasure. This also demands that we reflect on the nature of the entertainment media around us. Thus, we would like to make a few comments about television, videos, music, and books and magazines, so as to help readers to determine what helps and what hinders, among these things, in the establishment of a home atmosphere conducive to Orthodox living.

Television. It is a sad fact that many people simply surrender their entire home life to the whims of media executives. The general assumption in America seems to be that everybody must own a television and that everybody must watch that television a minimum of four to eight hours every day. No matter how violent, inane, or sexually provocative the content is, we are expected to find this material entertaining. This is a perfect example of how the world insinuates itself into the life of a Christian. Millions of people who claim the Name of Christ in this country passively conform themselves to the world's standards simply by regularly watching network TV fare. They become like the frog placed in a pot of cool water which is slowly heated until the frog is boiled to death. Because of the gradual change in temperature, the frog never becomes alarmed enough to jump out of the pot. So it is with people who have watched TV from childhood. They become so desensitized to violence and sexual immorality that they cease to have any reaction to material which would have been immediately banned from the movie house, not to mention the home, even several decades ago.

TV and Children. The real tragedy in all of this is the effect that regular television viewing has on children. Here we shall list just five of the many very serious effects that television has on children:

1. *Potentially questioning, curious, family-centered, book-and-art-loving five-year-olds become television zombies and lose the ability to question their environment.* Interaction with other hu-

man beings is an essential life skill. Television deprives children of the tools for acquiring that skill. Television first hypnotizes and then numbs the imaginative capabilities of the child. If a child listens to a story as it is read from a book by a loving family member, he has the opportunity to formulate his own vision of that story in his mind. He can ask questions as the story progresses and make comments about various characters and situations as they occur. If he sees that same story on the television, he must sit passively and allow the TV to dictate every element of the story to him. Ultimately, many children grow to prefer this passivity to thinking about a story. The young student, therefore, loses interest in books, which approach life with more complexity than that offered by TV and which require him to think. Creative writing, diaries, letter writing, and the ability to discuss any topic for more than a few minutes—all of these diminish as the electronic device takes over.

2. *By the age of ten, schoolchildren usually exhibit changes in speech patterns as a result of watching TV.* Television viewing causes children to become so passive that their verbal expressions are reduced to a minimum. Ask your child about his school day. If the response you get is muddled and incoherent, this is usually evidence that he has been watching too much television. This deficiency is in major part the result of absorbing rapid-fire television images, which never allow the child to formulate a response. By age eleven, having watched more than four thousand hours of television, the average American child has taken the majority of his English lessons from the TV screen, not from schoolteachers or books. There are few full paragraphs spoken on TV, almost no poetry, and no descriptive materials. Is it any wonder, then, that children cannot communicate intelligently and that the average eighteen-year-old American can hardly read or write?

3. *Television inhibits meaningful family communication.* A typical fourteen-year-old girl in this country talks with her mother—in terms of actually discussing a subject in an intelligible way and in a sensible context—for only about four minutes a

week. We have allowed television viewing, it seems, to take the place of normal dinner conversation and the exchanges between parents and children that are essential to child rearing. As television watching increases, family communication decreases. The TV comes to devour more and more hours in a young child's life, and almost nothing can compete with it for attention.

4. *Creative silence, which allows us to contemplate our relationship with God in a deeply personal way, is discouraged by dependence on the ever babbling television.* Children and adults who are from a home environment which has a constant background of TV noise become increasingly discomfited in the face of extended silence. They tend to develop the impression that silence is somehow wrong or unnatural. Prayer, then, can easily seem discomfiting and Church Services long and unbearable. Thus, the value of quiet contemplation is never learned. A desire for silence, prayer, and contemplation, the foundations of deep spiritual growth, can only be developed in a peaceful atmosphere—ideally in a home where time is invested in personal and familial prayer, without the blare of TV or music.

5. *The major issues of life are twisted and distorted by the media, which are primarily interested in creating spiritless consumers.* Love, war, death, prejudice, history, the future, and, most importantly, God and the fate of the human soul—all of these issues are either twisted, distorted, or ignored by TV “culture.” Children and adults do not view television in a comprehensive context, since TV never presents enough in-depth information for the viewer to *have* a context. News is presented in short “sound bites” which have been edited to portray a particular point of view. Documentaries concentrate on subjects which seek to titillate rather than inform and educate the audience. TV talk shows blatantly go about the business of portraying the abnormal—sex change operations, homosexuality, children who have murdered their parents, and every form of immorality imaginable—without providing the viewer with a context into which he can place these things. Children especially, then, come

to think of the abnormal as normal and as something to be accepted. Having no historical, cultural, or spiritual frame of reference, the good and the bad are jumbled together in a child's mind, with the good more than likely forgotten three days later. Such an empty creature, TV "experts" know, is quick to buy anything put before him. A spiritless, unthinking viewer, he becomes an indiscriminate consumer.

In view of its devastating effects on them, what sort of TV should we encourage our children to watch? The best thing, particularly for preschoolers, is no television at all. The sad fact, however, is that most parents, even in Orthodox homes, choose to use the television as a baby-sitter, rather than facing the responsibility of interacting with their own children. Children need to have stories read to them. They need time to play in ways which will exercise their imaginations and allow them to manipulate toys, which also develops hand-eye coordination. These things are best accomplished where there is no television. Older children need to see moral purity as a way of life. The excessive or gratuitous violence and sex portrayed on TV, with its glorification of materialistic attitudes, will not create such a vision. Thus, while it is perhaps not possible to remove the influence of television from their lives entirely, we must make clear rules for watching TV. Lewd programs must be forbidden in the home. The child should also be trained to leave a friend's house, if such programs are being viewed there, making it clear that he should quietly remove himself from the situation without a display of self-righteousness. Only if we are careful to limit TV viewing will we produce the kinds of sensitive, morally responsive children who have the character to avoid independently the very TV poison that destroys character.

Adults and TV. For adults, indiscriminate TV viewing poses dangers almost as serious as those posed for children. Repetitive exposure to immoral and violent situations and to secular, humanistic attitudes, which deny or ignore the spiritual side of man's nature, leads to a subtle shift in our attitudes and beliefs. The people who write and produce network television live in a

world which is far removed from that of a pious Orthodox Christian. Their worldview is generally devoid of any valid concept of spiritual life. Network television tends to express open disdain for moral purity in any form. For example, virginity is usually portrayed in a sarcastic and negative light. The American dream is portrayed as a quest for mediocrity in which the smart person is one who seeks to obtain the greatest return for the least effort. Situational ethics are the order of the day. These influences are far more insidious than we think, and they sometimes do more damage than the open violence and crude sex displayed on TV. The latter an adult can immediately identify as immoral and wrong; but subtle attacks on moral and spiritual values are not easy to see. They can, again, influence our attitudes and ideas without our even knowing it.

When we watch any TV program or any commercial, we must constantly evaluate what we are watching and compare its message or substance with the eternal standard of Orthodox Christian Truth: What would Saint John Chrysostomos have thought of this? How would Saint Peter have reacted to it? If we do this constantly, we can learn to discriminate a beneficial program from a questionable one. However, this requires that we remain vividly sensitive to what we watch. To do this, we must limit television viewing, make it secondary to the pursuit of silence and spiritual exercises (prayer, contemplation, spiritual reading, *etc.*), and constantly search for the source of the philosophies which underlie TV "culture." Otherwise, TV will take from us our ability to judge and to tell what is right from what is wrong. It is obvious that this will eventually negatively affect the Orthodox home itself.

Videos and Movies. What we have said of TV applies to videos and movies, since most videos and movies are now seen on TV in the home. With regard to movie theaters, as a general rule it is not good for children to go to them. In the first place, the parents have no control over what is presented in such places. Thus, children bring back into the home influences which the

parents know nothing about. Also, movie theaters often serve as inexpensive “baby-sitters” and lead parents to abandon their parental responsibilities. This, too, has a deleterious effect on the Orthodox home.

Music. Music is an extremely powerful medium of communication. Certain forms of music are even physically addictive. The powerful bass line of contemporary rock and rap has a sensual beat which, as a number of psychologists have determined from empirical studies, is capable of arousing passions. This bass line, coupled with lyrics which range from the merely suggestive to the openly pornographic, is pumped into the heads of many young people at a rate of four to six hours a day. Studies have shown, in fact, that most adolescents spend even more time listening to music than watching TV or videos. Therefore, it is important to carefully evaluate a young person’s music.

Music and Adolescents. Adolescence is a time of personal discovery. Most young people, at this stage of growth, are trying to figure out where they fit into the world. The need for belonging, along with a terrible fear of being rejected by their peers, leads young people to move in herds. This reflects itself in the world of music, where adolescents conform to the crowd by listening to the same music, which is usually promoted by local radio pop music programs. Most of this popular music involves lyrics which encourage the young to conform and to follow the crowd and which advocate an immoral and frivolous way of life. The constant stimulation that adolescents receive from such music renders it impossible for them to spend any serious time in quiet prayer or introspective contemplation, or even to value these things. Rather than embarking on a journey of personal discovery, they are most often completely absorbed in the cynical message of nihilism which comes pounding through the speakers and into their unformed minds.

Popular music obviously cuts children off from the rest of the family. Meaningful communication with children is impossible, if they are constantly listening to music, especially if they are wearing headsets that cut out the rest of the world. The best

solution to this problem is to prevent it from starting in the first place. Children should be exposed to classical and traditional music from their earliest years. If they develop an ear for good music, they will be naturally repulsed by the crude, primitive beat of pop music. Listening to radio stations that feature rap, rock, and other popular music should be banned in the home. All tapes and compact discs brought into the home should be examined and approved by the parents. Stereo headphones should not be allowed, but, rather, music should be as much as possible shared with others.

Music and Adults. It is quite easy for an adult to point to popular bands like Metallica or Megadeth and condemn those young people who choose to listen to such demonic and violent music. But they should remember that the airwaves are full of country music stations that play songs with lyrics extolling the “pleasures” of adultery, murder, drunkenness, and irresponsibility. Millions of adults listen to this music. Adults should also reflect on the moral content of lyrics from the music normally played on light rock and oldies stations, many of which are obscene, suggestive, and even anti-Christian. We adults cannot listen to lyrics laden with negative and immoral imagery and expect our children to heed us when we warn them against the inappropriate messages found in the music to which they listen. Only if the adults in a family also listen to good and wholesome music will the children form proper attitudes towards this form of entertainment.

Magazines and Books. We should evaluate the magazines and books we have in our homes, both for the sake of our children as well as our own. Look at each magazine that you buy carefully and analyze the editorial slant. So-called “soft porn” magazines like *Playboy* and *Penthouse* obviously have no place in a Christian home. Not only is the glorification of immoral pleasures in these kinds of magazines un-Christian, but the worldview portrayed in them focuses on materialistic self-gratification. Such a worldview destroys family life, since in a healthy family, each member is constantly called upon to subordinate his immediate desires

for the good of the entire family. Without such an attitude, spiritual life dies; for, to be sure, self-discovery in a spiritual sense is built on our concern for others. This is a basic principle of Christianity—a principle to which self-gratification is wholly antithetical.

Other magazines tend to concentrate on fashion, hobbies, cars, or sports. Most of these are not openly immoral or wrong. But the philosophy behind them must be examined. What one must consider in evaluating such publications is the matter of priorities. All of these magazines have articles and advertisements which focus on a materialistic approach to life. This is a very seductive thing. Many a mid-life crisis has been fueled by the desire for sports cars, stereos, clothes, and the “things of the world,” a desire subtly implanted by exposure to a worldly philosophy that places greater focus on this life than on the next. The hapless victim of such a philosophy comes to think that he can fill the spiritual void in the human soul—something which we feel acutely as we see old age and death approaching—, and he thus turns to the world and makes the stuff of fashion, sports, and hobby magazines the main priority in his life. As a consequence, he often loses not only his soul, but his family. Worldly priorities must be avoided, if we are to build a proper Orthodox attitude in our homes.

There are other magazines which should be scrutinized. Many women’s magazines, for example, tend to elevate romantic love as an end in itself. All immoral behavior becomes permissible, as long as it is done for “love.” This message is obviously a threat to the Christian home. Many women’s magazines also tend to denigrate the rôle of mothers and motherhood, elevating career and self-fulfillment to a place of primary importance. Once again, the emphasis here is on self, rather than the family, and the values presented are destructive to the home. The advertisers in these magazines also concentrate on weight loss, make-up, clothes, and hairstyling, urging the reader to seek things that lead to vanity. Very subtly, such advertisements turn a woman

away from a life of commitment to the home and children and instill in her a desire for worldly adornment. This is abundantly clear when we contrast the adornments of the “fashionable” woman presented in modern magazines with the adornments which Saint Peter assigns to the Christian woman:

Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.³⁹

Sadly enough, many of the books which are sold in America and in Western Europe today are simply trash. Since fewer and fewer people read, booksellers have turned to themes that they think might attract a public which has turned to the witless entertainment of television and videos. Thus, much of the fiction written over the past twenty years is either blatantly immoral or at best morally ambivalent. Take, for example, the books of Stephen King, admittedly an excellent writer and clever storyteller—a rare thing in today’s world of books. Though his works are not immoral, his tales of psychic horror are almost demonic in content. Very few of Stephen King’s characters possess any deeply held beliefs that directly affect their lives. Instead, they are usually brutalized and murdered in bizarre ways, often with a hideously demonic element at play in the background. There is no reference to God and His ultimate power. Almost always, evil is presented as an ultimate or superior power and King’s characters are but helpless victims of something beyond their control. Such material—among the most popular in America—is spiritually dangerous for any Christian. It portrays a completely false image of the spirit world, often in very compelling terms, and destroys any image of the God-protected individual and family that underlies a Christian view of the home.

Pop psychology and “self-help” books deserve special attention. Next to books of fiction and immoral romance novels, they

³⁹ i Peter 3:3-4.

are probably the best-selling volumes in America. These books should be generally avoided. Not only do many of them view human beings from a humanistic or amoral perspective, but the authors contradict one another. One self-proclaimed “expert” will pontificate about his or her theory of child rearing or male-female relationships, only to have all of those ideas refuted by a different “expert” several years later. Thus the reader is exposed to a moral relativism that is constantly changing, making values seem capricious and ultimately unstable. Since none of these “experts” has a rational frame of reference for what he theorizes, the reader never develops a logical view of human interaction, the human being, or life. And without some standard by which to measure human behavior and thinking, he is left without a philosophy of life. Books that thwart the development of a philosophy of life obviously have no place in an Orthodox home.

Adult Responsibility. The key to maintaining an Orthodox Christian atmosphere in the home lies entirely in the hands of the adults living in that home. If they are united in their desire to seek to manifest the fruits of the Spirit—“joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, against such there is no law”⁴⁰—then it very quickly becomes quite easy to separate diversions which are positive and helpful from those which are destructive. It is really quite simple to evaluate the merits of the films, books, songs, or programs under consideration. Read reviews of films or programs before renting or watching them. Is the overall message positive or constructive in its intent? Is the story line so weak that the director has to resort to vulgar language, gratuitous violence, or illicit sexual images to hold the audience’s interest? Does the story line itself denigrate God or present demonic phenomena in a positive or ambiguous light? The same problems that render a film unsuitable also apply to books and music. Reviews for all of these can be found in newspapers and newsmagazines.

Our most important goal as Orthodox parents is the creation of an Orthodox atmosphere in the home. Ideally this

⁴⁰ Galatians 5:22-23.

should begin early on. But in the case of many converts to the Faith, or of parents who have only of late seen the negative effects of the world on their children and homes, the ideal time has often passed. Children who have already reached adolescence and have been allowed to watch and listen to all kinds of entertainment garbage since early childhood present a difficult challenge. Nonetheless, we must correct them with uncompromising fidelity to Christian virtue, though always in a calm spirit and with patience. Objectionable and inappropriate entertainment materials should be immediately removed from the home. This is the responsibility and right of the parent, and this should be made absolutely clear to children. We should be guided in these things by the words of Saint Paul: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil."⁴¹ If our children see us constantly testing and weighing the merits of each movie or program we watch, each book or magazine we read, and each piece of music we listen to, they will come to understand that an Orthodox Christian is responsible for what he chooses to do. And if this vigilance results in a corresponding increase of peace, joy, and temperance in the home as the more negative elements are eliminated, will come to emulate our example. They will put away old and bad habits and learn to live the same Orthodox life that is lived by children reared from a young age in the Faith. This is how an Orthodox Christian home, even among those who convert to the Faith when their children are older, can truly become a small plot of Heaven on earth.

⁴¹ i Thessalonians 5:21-22.