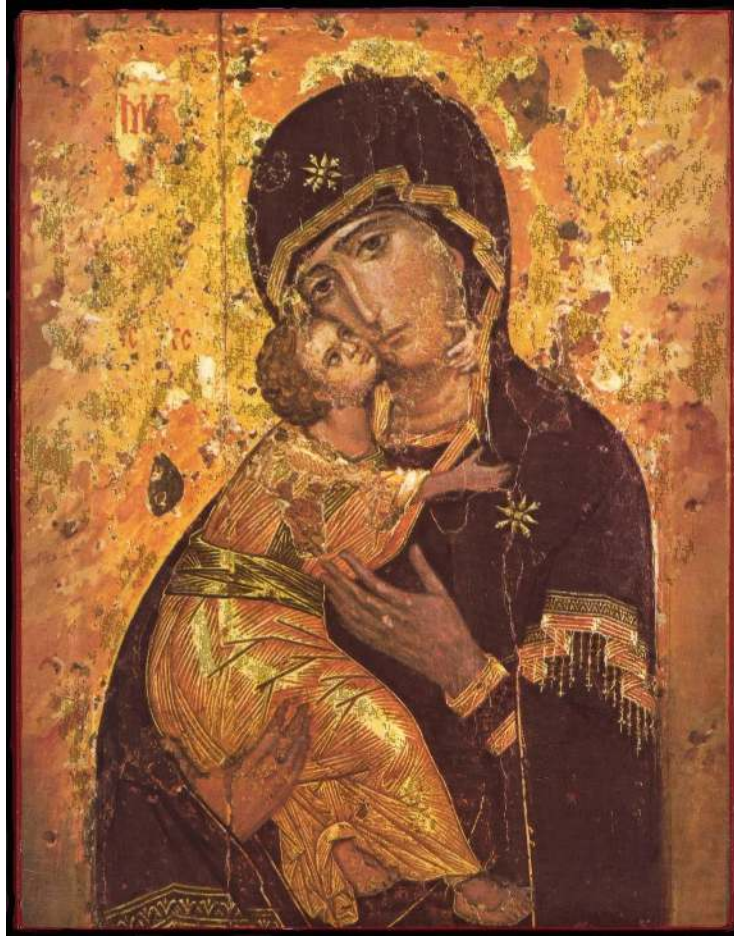




Diocese of South-West America
Sunday School

7th Grade

I Am Yours, O Lord



Table of Contents

Midterm Exam (December/January): Lessons 1-8

Final Exam (May/June): Lessons 9-16

	LESSON	PAGE
1	WHO AM I?	2
2	CHRIST: FULLY GOD	5
3	CHRIST: FULLY MAN	9
4	THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE	12
5	GROWTH OF THE CHURCH	15
6	THE COUNCILS AND THE PERSON OF CHRIST	19
7	SAINT SEVERUS AND THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON	26
8	SAINT ATHANASIUS: "WHAT WAS GOD TO DO?"	28
9	CAN I BE LIKE GOD?	30
10	TRUST IN GOD	32
11	TRUE WORSHIP	34
12	FASTING AND PRAYER	38
13	SACRAMENTAL LIFE	44
14	SAINT PAUL	49
15	SAINT GEEVARGHESE MAR DIONYSIUS	53
16	OUR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	56

LESSON 1 - WHO AM I ?

Objective: Students will understand that a person's identity is rooted in knowing God because man is created in the image of God, making the connection that to know themselves is to know God.

Have you ever thought to yourself - 'Who am I?' Many people raise this question to themselves. As Christians, we are called to see the truth of our identity: first and foremost as **God's Creation**.

We are created by God

To understand "Who am I?" we need to look at the first two chapters of Genesis, which narrates both the creation of the universe and the creation of man. There's a remarkable difference between the creation of the universe and the creation of man. Look at Genesis 1:3: "Then God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light."

In a similar way, God created everything in the universe: the Sun, the Moon, the Stars and the living creatures- God created all by His word. God said, "Let there be light" and it came into being instantly. However, we read how God created man very differently from the rest of creation in **Genesis 1:26-30** and **Genesis 2:8-25**. We read : "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him" (**Genesis 1:27**). This passage teaches us how we are made, in the *image of God*. However, we only truly understand what this means through Christ's incarnation because He is the perfect image of God and our model.

'Image of God': God's love, goodness, and wisdom

Who is God? God is love. God is Lord and God is goodness. Therefore, if we are made in the image of God, then our image consists of love and goodness. (To see the definition of love read **1 Corinthians 13**). Man is created out of God's love. He patiently guides us, protects us from all dangers, saves us from sin, and leads us into all goodness: all these show His ineffable love towards us. When we say that man is created in the image of God, it means that man is created to be of love, wisdom and goodness.

Humankind has the calling to be completely selfless in love. Man is created so that he can move towards perfect goodness, as the heavenly Father is perfectly good. From the very beginning, however, we see how man needs to make the choice to love and obey

God and how man is tempted to disobey. The temptation towards evil and disobedience exists throughout life. We are taught that by focusing on God, depending on Him, and becoming selfless as Christ demonstrated, we can resist and conquer these temptations. When man grows in love, wisdom, true lordship and goodness, he grows into the stature of God. He bears the character of God and becomes a visible image of God in Christ. Christ showed Himself to all people through his love, lordship and goodness. The Psalmist says: “I say, “You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you,”(**Psalm 82:6 OSB**).

We also learn in **Genesis 2:7**, “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living being.”



Here, we find **three important ideas** concerning man:

- (1) God formed man uniquely.
- (2) He formed man of dust from the ground,
- (3) He breathed into him the breath of life.

God is the creator of man. Even the body of man has God's very touch. Man is part of the earth-the material universe, but he is more than that, he has God's breath of life. Man owes his life to God. He is born of God and is the Child of God.

Conclusion

Let each of us now answer the question: 'Who am I?' The answer should be, 'I am a child of God created in His image. I am created to be a visible image of God, by growing into the perfection of the heavenly Father in all love, wisdom, lordship and goodness.'

LESSON 2 - CHRIST: FULLY GOD

Objective: Students will understand the nature of Christ as God and the meaning of transfiguration, along with its importance in regards to the Church's understanding of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ.

As we previously learned that we are made in the Image of God, God revealed what that truly means through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Word of God or the Son of God, became man and took flesh from the blessed Theotokos. Who Jesus Christ is has been challenged, intentionally mistaught, and attacked throughout the centuries by various philosophers, heretics, and sometimes well-meaning but ultimately false teachers. The Church has had the responsibility in the world to teach and affirm that Christ has two natures: both divine and human. He became man but He is also God. The Church has always held that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man. In this chapter we will look on Christ who is fully God.

The Transfiguration

Jesus took His beloved disciples Peter, James, and John and went to Mount Tabor to pray. While praying, His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became dazzling white (this is what it means when the Scriptures say He “transfigured”). Suddenly the disciples saw that Moses and Elijah appeared and were talking to Jesus. As Peter spoke to Jesus, a cloud, a symbol of God's presence, overshadowed them. A voice said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (**Luke 9:35**). We witness Christ's divinity and Godly nature in this event. The Church celebrates the Feast of Transfiguration each year on August 6 because of its importance in revealing the nature of Jesus while on Earth.



The Transfiguration is prefigured in the Old Testament when God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai in the cloud. Peter, James, and John witnessed the glory of the Son of God as He was revealed to the world.

Liturgy Connection: Nicene Creed - A Testament of Our Faith

During the time of the early Church, heresies (false teachings) sprung up, especially about the natures of Christ. The church maintained the true teaching that Christ became human and is God. The Nicene Creed is the testament of our faith, and in the Nicene Creed, we proclaim that Jesus Christ is God when we say *“And in the one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, begotten of the Father, before all world, light of light, very God of very God, begotten not made being of the same substance with the Father, and by whom all things were made”*.

What do we learn from the Transfiguration of Christ?

- 1) The aim of prayer is to become godly by attaining holiness and goodness as demonstrated by the condition of prayer within which Christ was transfigured.
- 2) The departed, namely Moses and Elijah experienced the glory and presence of God and spoke with Christ. The departed saints were active in their life even after their departure from this world.
- 3) Christ is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, represented by Moses, the Law-giver, and Elijah the glorious prophet. The Law and Prophets witness to the coming of Christ. They are meant to prepare Israel for the incarnation of Christ as Jesus Christ, Himself, explains in **Matthew 5:17**, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” and **Luke 24:27** “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He [Jesus] expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself”.
- 4) The Transfiguration is a manifestation of God and displays the uncreated and divine light or energy of God.

Example of Christ in the Prophets: Feast of the Triumphal Entry

The Jews hoped that the Messiah would be born in the family of David, liberate them from the Roman Empire, and establish the Kingdom of God. Some Jews believed the Messiah would appear during Passover and rule as king. Jesus' arrival to Jerusalem on a donkey was the event Zechariah prophesied regarding the coming of the Messiah to Jerusalem: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey" (**Zechariah 9:9**).

In the Old Testament times, as a sign of peace and humility, kings used to travel by donkey, but rode on a horse when going to war. Solomon had gone to Gihon on a donkey to be enthroned as King. Jesus came to establish His Kingdom through love, humility,

and peace rather than war and force, which is why Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey. In accordance with that, Jesus began His journey to Jerusalem from Bethphage, at the eastern slope of Mount Olive. At Bethphage, Jesus sent two of His disciples, saying, "Go into the village opposite, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat; untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why you are untying it?' you shall say this, The Lord has need of it" (**Luke 19:30,31**). The disciples brought the colt and placed their clothes upon the colt. Jesus sat on it and moved towards Jerusalem in a great procession, thus fulfilling the prophecy of prophet Zechariah (**Zechariah 9:9**).

The Jews believed that the Messiah would appear at Mount Olive (**Zechariah 14:3-4**). People joined the disciples and some spread their clothes on the road in an act similar to spreading carpets. After the enthronement of a Jewish king during the Old Testament times, people used to welcome him by spreading their clothes on the road (**2 Kings 9:13**). Some people cut small branches of trees and spread them on the road, to make the way smooth and to honor the King, Messiah. People took tender leaves of date palms and welcomed Him, singing, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (**Matthew 21:9**) The Aramaic word "Hosanna" means "Save now".

During the feast of Passover, the pilgrims going to Jerusalem used to sing the portion of the Psalm, which says, "Save us, we beseech thee, O Lord! Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord" (**Psalm 118:25,26 OSB**). Singing the same song, people welcomed Jesus. They sang in the hope that the Messiah, the anointed of the Lord, would come to save Israel. Jewish leaders disliked the enthusiasm and gladness with which people welcomed Jesus. Some said to Jesus, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." Jesus replied, "I tell you if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

We celebrate the Triumphal Entry of Christ into Jerusalem, also called Palm Sunday, to commemorate the triumphal entry of Jesus' enthronement. With palm leaves, we receive Jesus and join the procession. That day, Jesus was a King, but with expectations different from those of the Jews. His throne was the cross, and His crown was a crown of thorns. His majestic apparel was the red gown put on Him. Jesus was not a king who established His dominion by taking arms and causing bloodshed. Rather, He came to establish the Kingdom of God through love and sacrifice and to make all people the children of God.

Conclusion

By learning about the Transfiguration of our Lord, we gain a deeper understanding of what it means for Christ to be fully God and fully man. Just as Christ was transfigured and the glory of the Father was revealed, may we also radiate the Divine Light of God.



LESSON 3 - CHRIST: FULLY MAN

Objective: Students will be able to explain the reason why the Church maintains that Christ has two natures and get a better understanding of what it means to be fully man.

For centuries, the Church has faced many tribulations in maintaining the Faith that was passed down from Jesus and the Apostles. The nature of the Trinity has been long challenged, which made it necessary for the Church to come together to correct any false teaching and reaffirm the faith going back to what Jesus said and taught.

In lesson 2, we learned that Christ is God. In this lesson we will learn about Christ's human nature. We will also explore evidence as to why the Church maintains that Christ has two natures in order for us to keep and defend the truths of the Faith.

Church Doctrine on the Nature of Christ

During the start of Holy Qurbana when the congregation sings the Maneesa of St. Severus (the hymn that starts with the line *"By the prayers of Your mother"*), one line pronounces the Church's doctrinal belief in the nature of Christ when they sing *"Man becoming nor with change"*. This line pronounces the belief that though Christ was human, His divine nature did not change. Both His human and divine nature are often referenced throughout the Scriptures.

Christ's Godly & Human nature - referenced in scripture

A. Jesus' Birth and Childhood

Luke 2 informs us about Jesus' birth and His growth as a human being. Again, Scripture highlights both the natures of Christ. Though He went through the experiences of being a human being, He remained perfect. After reading **Luke 2**, the following can be highlighted:

- **Luke 2: 11-14** (Birth of Christ): The Angels confirm the coming of Christ during his birth by appearing to the shepherds and saying, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."
- **Luke 2: 39-40** (In reference to Jesus' Childhood in Nazareth): "So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to

Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon him” (NKJV)

According to the Orthodox Study Bible, the reference that Jesus “grew and became strong in spirit” does not mean that He was lacking divine perfection at any time. Instead this verse means that in emptying Himself and assuming human nature (**Philippians 2:7**), he freely subjected Himself to human development and expression.

B. The Baptism of Jesus

The Church celebrates the baptism of Jesus on January 6th. It is known as the Feast of Epiphany. This shows us not only the nature of Christ but of the Trinity itself.

In **Luke 3:21-22** and **Matthew 3:15**, the Orthodox Study Bible writes that Jesus Himself does not need baptism: In being baptized, our Lord accomplished several things: (1) He affirmed John’s ministry; (2) He was revealed by the Father and the Holy Spirit as Christ, God’s beloved Son (3) He identified with his people by descending into the water with them (4) He opened heaven to a world separated from God through sin.

The verses above show how Jesus was anointed by the permanent presence (indwelling) of the Holy Spirit. It also clearly shows the perfect harmony of the Holy Spirit (3 in 1 and 1 in 3) - The Father, The Son, and Holy Spirit witnessed by the people present at the Baptism of Christ.



Why did Christ have to become Human?

Adam and Eve’s disobedience invoked a spiritual death for all mankind that separated all mankind from God. So how does Adam and Eve’s sin relate to each of us? The Orthodox Study Bible teaches us that we who are of Adam’s race are not guilty because of Adam’s sin, but because of our own sin. However, because all of mankind fell away from the grace of God through Adam’s disobedience, man now has a natural tendency, an inclination towards sin, because just as death entered the world through sin, now sin enters through fear of death.

The Orthodox Study Bible also states that though the image of mankind is fallen, the image of man is not completely corrupted or obliterated. “Human nature remains inherently good after the Fall; mankind is not totally depraved. People are still capable

of doing good, although bondage to death and the influences of the devil can dull their perception of what is good and lead them into all kinds of evil.”

God willingly, out of love for us, came down as a man and was subject to temptation. He was also subjected to the hardships we faced, but unlike us, he did not sin. “Christ, by His Death and Resurrection, conquered the devil and death, freeing mankind from the fear of death (**Hebrews 2:14-15**) and making possible a more complete communion between God and man than was ever possible before. This communion allows people to become “partakers of the divine nature” (**2 Peter 1:4**), to transcend death and, ultimately, all the consequences of the Fall”.

Liturgy Connection 1: Nicene Creed

In the Nicene Creed, we refer to Jesus’ human & godly nature by reciting the portion that starts with “*Who for us men and for our salvation, came down from Heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit, and of the Holy Virgin Mary, Mother of God, and became man*”. This portion affirms our belief that He was both man and God. It also reaffirms that He became human to save us. The Nicene Creed was originally established when false teaching arose about the nature of Jesus Christ. Now, we say the Nicene Creed with the full knowledge of who God is and by holding onto the Faith that came from God to the Apostles, and from the Apostles down to us, through the Church fathers. When we say the Nicene Creed, especially the portion about Jesus Christ, we should meditate on these words and evaluate how well we know God, how well we know the Scriptures that reveal the nature of God, and how much faith we have in the truth that is offered to us by the Church.

Liturgy Connection 2: Blessing of the Censor

In the Holy Qurbana, during the blessing of the censor, the focus is on the nature of the Trinity. The priest first prays to the Father by holding one chain of the censor. Then he prays to the Son by holding two more chains, showing the admitted declaration of the human as well as the Godly nature of the Lord. He then prays to the Holy Spirit by holding the fourth chain.

LESSON 4 - THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

Objective: Students will understand what it means for Christ to be the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Jesus says “I am The Way, the Truth, and the Life”. Which “way” is He referring to? What “truth” is He talking about? What “life” is He referring to?

Christ is ‘the Way’

When we think about the word ‘way’, we often visualize roads or pathways to a destination. When we drive to a place or travel we are going to a destination and the “way” involves the path or road we take to get there. When Christ tells the Apostles that He is “the Way”, the destination He is referring to is Eternal Life and Salvation in the eternal Kingdom with the Father. Our final destination in life is to seek the eternal Kingdom of God. Our journey to that destination is just as important. In an attempt to make the most of that journey, we ought to be faithful to the practices of the Church by partaking of the Sacraments, immersing ourselves in the study of the Word and praying ceaselessly.

Christ is ‘the Truth’

(A) Truth

- Christ is the absolute truth meaning that He is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. Life and Salvation is in Christ.
- Faith is the level of belief and trust we have in the words and promises of God
- Look at Hebrew 11 to see more of a definition that’s explained by St.Paul.
- Jesus also says that it is not enough to know or have faith in the Father but we need to know and have faith in Christ equally

Discuss & Share: What is the meaning of faith? Read Hebrews 11 & 1 John 5:1-13 and discuss your understanding on the meaning of faith.

(B) What can faith do?

- It can lead us into the eternal kingdom (1 John 5:9-13)
- It will grant us peace in the present world and help us to overcome the world (1 John 5 1-5)

(C) How faithful should we be to God's words?

- Christ says we should have faith like a child.
- **Example:** A child who trust his or her parents would not question how to cross the street. The parent simply takes the child's hand and crosses the street with the child
- Christ calls us to have the trust and simplicity like children have of their parents.

III. Christ is 'the Life'

When Jesus refers to "the Life", He speaks of spiritual life, which ultimately leads to Eternal Life. Though we may be physically living, we may be spiritually dead. In order to attain Eternal Life in the Kingdom and keep growing in our spirituality, we must constantly challenge ourselves to grow and be perfect like Him (**Matthew 5:48**). Furthermore, as we read in **1 John 5:11**, we have been given Eternal Life, Christ. This is a great responsibility that has been entrusted to us and once we truly believe this, we are moved to live this out in our daily lives.

Jesus Raises Jairus' Daughter

While Jesus was preaching and healing the sick at Galilee, a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, approached Him. His 12 year old daughter was bedridden due to severe illness. Jairus pleaded with Jesus to come to his house and heal his daughter. Accepting his plea, Jesus started towards his house. A large multitude accompanied Him. On the way, someone from Jairus' house came with the news of the girl's death. Jesus consoled Jairus: "Do not fear. Only believe, and she shall be well"(**Luke 8:50**). As Jesus approached the house, all those who had gathered were mourning. Though Jesus told them that she is only sleeping, they laughed at Him and did not believe. Jesus took her by hand and said "Child, arise." Immediately, she rose up, just as from sleep. As Jesus is the Son of God, He has authority even over death. Physical death is only a sleep; the Bible refers to the dead as those who are asleep. When the Lord comes again, they will rise up like those who are from sleep (**Matthew 9:24-26; Mark 5:23; Luke 8:41**). Just like He raised Jairus' daughter, in the Second Coming Jesus will raise all the dead.

Conclusion

Christ's resurrection is the rock on which Christianity is built. Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven at the Mount of Olives. The Church recognizes this as the Feast of the Ascension of our Lord and is celebrated 40 days after Easter.

Just as the angels assured the disciples that they will “see Him the same way He went up” (**Acts of the Apostles 1:11**), we too live with this hope and must lead our lives in preparation to see Him (Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life) again.



LESSON 5 - THE GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

Objective: Students will learn about the early Church and the persecution and the death of the martyrs who strengthened the church, namely. Saints Ignatius, Clement and Polycarp.

The Church

We read in **Ephesians 1:22-23** that Christ Himself is the head of the Church. This idea is also seen in **Colossians 1:18**. Furthermore, we - the Church - are the Body of Christ. As the body of believers grow, so does the Church.

The day of Pentecost was a shining day in the history of humanity. A stormy wind shook Jerusalem and tongues came down on the disciples and the Holy Spirit outpoured over them and filled them with all knowledge and kept fear away from them and they went out of their upper room to the world carrying the message of Christ... a message of love and redemption. As the years passed, the Church continued to grow due to the disciples' mission of evangelization. As the first century came to its end, all the apostles departed from this life and the Church faced a new world. The world was completely filled with paganism. But delightful lights began to shine as the lights of the church of Christ, reducing the darkness.

Growth of the Church

The spread of Christianity was not easy. Many enemies tried to hinder its progress and growth and fought the Church, but could not defeat her. In spite of persecutions, the Christians were an example of loyalty and sincerity even to their persecutors and their lives were a good model for all people to follow. Many non-Christians believed in Christ when they saw the Christians' deeds and they glorified their Father who is in heaven. Through love, sacrifice and martyrdom, Christianity became victorious and the more persecution and torment increased, the more they kept close to Christ. They did not fear death but they sought it and desired it everywhere. They were martyred in Egypt, in Syria, in Rome and their martyrdom astonished the people around them and made them ask themselves "Why do they hold fast to their God?" Many believed because the Christians held fast to their Christ in spite of the cruelty and tormenting they suffered.

Martyrdom of Saint Stephen

The Church faced persecution first from the Jews. Stephen, one of the seven deacons of the early Church became the first martyr. As someone who was killed for his beliefs and for witnessing his faith, we remember St. Stephen in the fourth diptych during the Holy Qurbana. He was accused of speaking against the Jewish temple and their Law. He faced death courageously with his strong faith in God. Though St. Stephen was the first martyr, he was not the last. Almost all of the Apostles became martyrs along with others.

Saul Journey to Becoming Paul

Saint Paul was born in Tarsus, and was a Hebrew from Diaspora. He also had two names. He was named Saul, but also called Paul (Acts 9) and he was a Roman citizen. He used to persecute Christians but one day God literally called him and asked him why he was persecuting him. He was temporarily blinded and he was instructed to go to a Christian in order for him to regain his vision.

Fathers of The Early Church

Heresies are beliefs opposing what is recorded about Christ in the Gospel. The influence of other religions and philosophies had created heresies. The Church fathers taught the members of the Church the real apostolic faith and also wrote letters and books explaining why the heresies were wrong and backed it up with scriptures and teachings by the Apostles. In the diptych during the Holy Qurbana, we recognize the church fathers who stood with the one Apostolic and true faith.

St. Clement of Rome

St. Clement was the third Bishop of Rome who lived at the end of the first century. He was the disciple of St. Paul and St. Peter. In the epistle to the Philippians (**Philippians 4:3**) St. Paul qualifies him as his co-worker. Some Orthodox Churches have included two letters in the Bible, written by St. Clement to the Church in Corinth.

“He was ordained Bishop of the city and because of his activity to spread Christianity, the Emperor sent him into exile in a far away country. There he met two thousand Christians in exile like him because of their Christian faith and they were tormented with hard work. He encouraged them and helped them in their work and reminded them of the heavenly joy that awaits them. Those banished people endured hardships joyfully and their life changed. Many non-Christian people believed in Christ because of Bishop Clement’s works.” In AD. 100, under the order of the emperor Trajan, Clement was tied to the anchor of the ship and was killed by drowning in the Black Sea.

St. Ignatius of Antioch

Saint Ignatius, the third bishop of Antioch was the disciple of the Apostles Peter, Paul and John. He cared for his people with power and courage so the people gave him the name of “Theo-phoros” i.e. “that who carries the Lord”, “one who bears God” or “one who was borne by God”.

Emperor Trajan urged him to worship the idols. He tempted him with money and glory and threatened that he would torment him and put him to death but all his attempts were in vain and at last St Ignatius was sent to Rome to be thrown to the fierce animals to eat him.

Ignatius was not frightened. All his people wept for him but he encouraged them all. In his epistle to the Romans he says: “At last my brothers I attained what I desired... to die for Christ to declare myself a Christian and deserve the glorious name given to me but my fear is that you, through your love for me might try to save me from death and deprive me of the martyrdom for Christ”. Tradition teaches us that the child whom Jesus took in His arms was Ignatius. In AD 107, Ignatius was thrown before lions, in the stadium called "Flavian Circus" of Rome.

It was a practice to throw criminals and prisoners condemned to death, before wild beasts in big stadiums called "Circuses" of Rome. The people of Rome used to sit on galleries to view this and enjoy it. Thousands of Christians were executed like this during the time of persecution.

St. Polycarp of Smyrna

Saint Polycarp (AD 69-135) was born in a Christian family in Asia Minor. He had learned about Jesus from the apostles. When the apostle St. John was staying in Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey), Polycarp was his disciple. Later on, Polycarp became the Bishop of Smyrna. The Roman soldiers reached his home during the night to tie him up. He welcomed the soldiers like guests and he offered them food and drinks. He sought permissions to pray for an hour. Prostrating to the ground he prayed for about two hours. The soldiers felt sorry for being sent to capture this very old and gentle person.

The soldiers brought Polycarp to the police chief. He took him in a horse and carriage and went. On the journey, the police chief advised him to confess the emperor as God so that he could escape from death. When Polycarp refused to do so, the chief became wild

and threw him out of the carriage.

Afterwards, he was led to a stadium, where criminals were publicly executed. A voice was heard from heaven, saying, "Polycarp, be courageous". Some believers who were with him also heard this. He was brought before the governor. The governor continued to tell Polycarp that if he denied Christ, he would be set free. Polycarp replied "Eighty-six years, I have served Christ, till now; he has done nothing wrong to me. How will I deny my King and Savior?" Polycarp was unwavering when the Governor threatened him to be thrown before wild beasts, "Call them, there is no question of leaving the way of goodness", he replied. The next threat was to burn him alive, if he did not curse Christ.

That also failed to frighten him. Binding his hand and legs he was laid on a heap of firewood and set on fire. The fire burnt around him like a covering, but did not touch his body. Finally, some soldiers struck him with a spear and killed him. In the abundant flow of blood, the fire was put off.

Conclusion

The Roman rulers thought the Church could be utterly destroyed by persecuting and killing Christian leaders. But the steadfast faith of the martyrs and their firm hope in life after death encouraged the members of the Church. These fathers instilled enthusiasm and inspiration in many to witness Christ. During the first century, the Church thrived because of the unwavering faith and dedication of the followers of Christ.

LESSON 6 - THE COUNCILS AND THE PERSON OF CHRIST

Objective: Students will learn about the three ecumenical councils, how they related to the person of Christ and how they contributed to the foundation of the Church.

What is a Council?

During the first centuries, the early church spread all over the world. Converts were inspired by the faith and blood of the martyrs, as well as the prayers and lives of the followers of Christ. The Holy Spirit led the Apostles and the Church leaders in understanding and interpreting the Christian faith. They always prayed for guidance from the Holy Spirit to guide their thinking and preserve their unity. As the Church grew, different teachings about Christ also began to spread and threaten the understanding of our Lord Jesus Christ that was taught by the Apostles. The Church had settled difficulties and made decisions by council, in order to get a consensus of opinion among all the believers inspired by God who were led by their appointed leaders, first the Apostles and then the bishops. A council is when the leaders of the Church gathered to deliberate and ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to administer the Church and decide various doctrinal, moral, and liturgical questions. The Orthodox Church is conciliar - operating by councils - on all levels, from a parish council to a worldwide council.

The first church council in history was held in the Apostolic church to decide the conditions under which the Gentiles (non-Jews) should enter the Christian Church (**Acts of the Apostles 15**). From that time on and all through history, councils were held on every level of the Church life to make important decisions. Bishops met regularly with their priests, also called presbyters or elders, and their people. It became the practice, and even the law, very early in the Church's history that bishops in given regions should meet in councils held on a regular basis.

When a false teaching spread to the point where it threatened to change the teaching of the true faith, a council of all of the bishops in the church were called. All the bishops were not able to attend these councils and not all such councils were automatically approved and accepted by the Church in its Holy Tradition. But, for Orthodox Christians, three councils received the universal approval of the entire Church and addressed very important heresy that would have changed the teaching of who Jesus

was, i.e., the person of Christ. These Councils of Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus are known as the Ecumenical Councils.

The First Council of Jerusalem

We read about the first council in **Acts:15**, which took place in Jerusalem during the time of the apostles of our Lord. After the ascension of our Lord to heaven, His disciples and the apostles received the Holy Spirit, and started preaching salvation of Christ to the world. Paul and Barnabas, preached to the gentiles in different parts of the world. When they finished their mission, they traveled to Antioch, met with disciples and the church and told them what God had done to them, and how the Lord opened the door of faith to the gentiles.

The Controversy

While Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch, some of the Jews who became Christians insisted that the Gentiles could not be saved unless they first follow the Law of Moses before becoming Christians. They had long arguments and debates on this subject. The church of Antioch appointed the Apostles, Paul and Barnabas and some other church members of Antioch and asked them to go to Jerusalem and seek the guidance of the disciples.

In order to resolve the above issue, the apostles and the bishops of the church assembled in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas explained how some of the converted Jewish people insisted that the Gentiles must be circumcised before becoming Christians. Since the members of the council knew that they could not decide on this matter with their own wisdom, they prayed to the Holy Spirit for guidance. After long discussion, St. Paul rose and said that God has given the Holy Spirit to all those in the whole world who believed in Him and purified their heart by faith. He also stated that all men, Gentiles, and Jews shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

St. James, the first bishop of Jerusalem reminded the assembly about how St. Peter converted a group of Gentiles. He also said that the prophecy of the Old Testament agrees to this matter and insisted on not giving any additional burdens to those who turn to God. St. James also proposed to write to Gentiles to abstain from the pollution of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood (Acts 15: 19-20) All the members of that council agreed on the proposal of St. James and wrote a message to the churches informing them of the council's decision. The church, guided by the Holy Spirit, continued to build up a clear understanding of the Christian faith.

The Three Great Ecumenical Councils

During the first three centuries, the Christians were persecuted and thousands were martyred for their faith. In AD 313, the Roman Emperor Constantine accepted Christianity and ended the persecutions of all Christians and in a few years, Christianity became the state religion and the Roman Empire became a Christian country. For the next two centuries, the Christian church faced many pagan challenges and heretical philosophies, which continued to influence the believers.

The Council of Nicaea

At the beginning of 4th century A.D., Arius a priest in the city of Alexandria, started teaching that Jesus Christ was not God in the same sense as God the father. He also taught that Christ was not of the same essence and not eternal and God was the supreme divine being completely separated from mankind. Since Arius was a scholar, he was able to convince many simple-minded people and some well educated people who were still attached to paganism. This teaching was more dangerous than the worst persecution. If Christ was not God, who had become man, suffered and died for man, and had conquered death through His death, and then the Christianity would be almost like another pagan idea.

The Church of Alexandria felt the danger of Arius heresy and the patriarch of Coptic Church Alexandrus condemned this teaching and tried to guide Arius to Christian faith. Arius complained to the Emperor Constantine who finally decided to call a general ecumenical council meeting to resolve the crisis. Three hundred eighteen bishops and priests from the churches all over the world were assembled in Nicaea in Asia Minor in the spring of 325 A.D. Among them, there was Bishop Paul from Syria with his burned hands carrying the signs of the persecution he has suffered, St. Paphnotius and St. Potamon, both blinded in one eye and lamed from tortures inflicted on them, Patriarch Alexandrus, and his deacon, St. Athanasius the Great from Egypt. 318 bishops who participated in the council, are called 'holy fathers of Nicea' or just 'holy 318'. The number 318 has a biblical significance as the bishops are seen like 318 servants of Abraham (**Genesis 14:14**). The council studied the teachings of Arius and examined them very carefully. St. Athanasius explained the orthodox faith showing how the Son is of one essence with the Father. The council finally confirmed that Arius had distorted the Christian faith and the fathers of the council proclaimed the faith of the church in earth, and all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, born of the father before all worlds; light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father". The council of Nicaea was one

of the greatest events in the history of Christianity and saved the Church from the heresy of Arius.

The Council of Constantinople

The Christian faith was again threatened by a new heresy by the patriarch of Constantinople, Mecedonius. He taught that the Holy Spirit was created. The Emperor Theodosius the great assembled a second council in Constantinople in May 381 A.D. consisting of one hundred fifty bishops. After careful studies and lengthy discussions, the council refuted the heresy of Patriarch Mecedonius and completed the creed of the church. "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father..... who spoke by the prophets..... We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen." Since it was in the second Ecumenical Council in 381 A.D. that the creed was completed, it is also known as "Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed".

The Council of Ephesus

During the year 431 A.D. Nestorius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, preached that God was not born from the Virgin Mary, but she had given birth to a human being and God dwelt in him later on. He forced his teachings on the Church. St. Cyril the great, the Patriarch of Alexandria wrote a letter to Nestorius advising him to give up this wrong teaching. He also wrote to many bishops around the world warning them the danger of this heresy. Finally a third ecumenical council consisting of two hundred bishops from around the world assembled in Ephesus in A.D. 431 to put an end to this matter. The council refuted the teaching of Nestorius and declared the introduction of the Creed.

"We magnify thee, O Mother of the True Light; and we glorify thee, O Saint, Mother of God. For you had borne to us the savior of the entire world. He came and saved our souls. Glory be to You, Christ, our master and our King, the honor of the apostles, the crown of the martyrs, the joy of the righteous, the stability of the Churches, and the forgiveness of sins. We evangelize and preach the Holy Trinity, one God-head. Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord send your blessings ... Amen".

Summary on Councils:

Council	Defender	Heretic	Heresy	Conclusions
Nicaea, A.D.325	St. Athanasius	Arius, the priest	Christ was not God	Son is of one essence with the Father. Condemned the Arian heresy , proclaimed the first part of the Creed
Constantinople, A.D. 381	St. Gregory of Nazianzen and St. Gregory of Nyssa	Macedonius, Patriarch of Constantinople	Holy Spirit was created	Defended the teachings of the Church on Holy Trinity and in particular on the Holy Spirit. Completed the Creed of the Church
Ephesus, A.D. 431	St. Cyril of Alexandria	Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople	God was not born from the Virgin Mary, but she had given birth to a human being and God dwelt in him later on.	Defended the Church's teachings on the Holy Virgin Mary (Theotokos) Mary, Mother of our Lord. Added to the creed "the virgin Mary, mother of God". Declared the introduction to the Creed and forbade any change to it in future.

All Oriental Orthodox Churches recognize only the first 3 ecumenical councils (the first one held at Nicea in 325 AD, second one at Constantinople in 381 AD and the third one at Ephesus in 431 AD).

The Nicene Creed summarizes the Faith of our Church, and preserves the Christian faith according to the scripture and teachings of the apostles and Fathers of the Church.

Conclusion: The Nicene Creed

We believe in one true God, (*Hebrews 11:6, 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, Romans 3:29-31, Ephesians 4:6*)

The Father Almighty (*1 Corinthians. 8:6, Revelation 1:8*)

Maker of heaven and earth (*Exodus 20:11, Genesis 1 & 2*)

and of all things visible and invisible. (*Jeremiah 32:17. Colossians 1:16*)

And in One Lord (*Acts of the Apostles 10:36*)

Jesus Christ (*Matthew 1:21, John 4:25-26*)

the Only-Begotten Son of God (*John 1:14*)

begotten of the Father before all worlds (*1 John 4:9*)

Light of Light / True God of True God (*John 1:4, 1 John 1:5-7, John 12:35-37, John 5:18*)

begotten, not made (*John 8:58*)

being of one essence with the Father (*John 10:30*)

and by Whom all things were made; (*John 1:3*)

Who for us men and for our salvation (*Matthew 1:21*)

came down from heaven (*John 3:31*)

+And was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Virgin Mary (*Luke 2:6, Luke 1:35*) Mother of God (*Luke 1:43*)

and became man, (*John 1:14*)

+ And was crucified for us (*Mark 15:25*)

in the days of Pontius Pilate (*Matthew 27:22-26*)

and suffered, and died, and was buried, (*Matthew 27:50-60*)

+And on the third day He rose again (*Matthew 28:6*)

according to His Will (*1 Corinthians 15:4*)

and ascended into heaven (*Luke 24:51*)

and sits at the right hand of His Father (*Mark 16:19*)

and shall come again in His great glory (*Matthew 25:31*)

to judge both the living and the dead (*2 Timothy 4:1*)

whose kingdom shall have no end. (*Luke 1:33*)

And in the one Living Holy Spirit (*John 14:26*)

the life-giving Lord of all (*2 Corinthians 3:17-18, Isaiah 6:8, Acts 28:25 Romans 8:2, 2 Cor. 3:6*)

Who proceeds from the Father (*John 15:26*)

and Who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified (*Rev. 4:8*)

who spoke through the prophets and the apostles. (*2 Peter 1:21*)

And in the One (*John 10:16*), Holy (*Ephesians 5:26-27, 2 Peter 2:5&9*), Catholic (*Romans 10:18*) and Apostolic (*Ephesians 2:20*) Church.

And we confess one baptism (*Ephesians 4:5*) for the remission of sins, (*Acts of the Apostles 2:38*) and we look for the resurrection of the dead (*Romans 6:5*) and the new life in the world to come. (*Matthew 25:34, Revelation 21:1-7*)

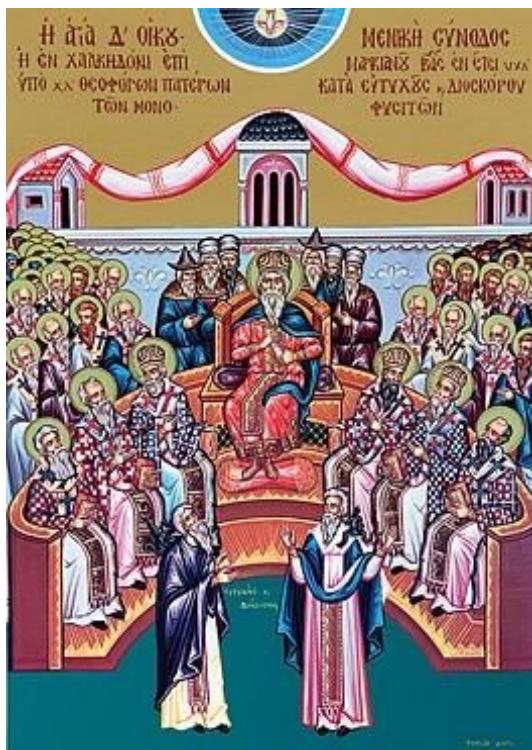
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LESSON 7 - SAINT SEVERUS OF ANTIOCH

Objective: Students will learn about St. Severus and how his teaching helped form the Church.

Saint Severus of Antioch was born in Sozopolis in Pisidia about A.D. 465. As a young man, not yet baptized, he was sent to Alexandria to study grammar and rhetoric, and then to Beirut to study Roman law. It was there Severus learned about Christianity and studied the works of St. Basil and St. Gregory of Nazianzus. He was baptized, became increasingly ascetic, and spent much of his time in Church.

St. Severus is remembered in the 5th diptych of the Holy Qurbana as *“the Crown of the Syrians, the eloquent mouth, the pillar and doctor of the Holy Church of God as a whole, the meadow abounding in blossom, who preached all the time that Mary was undoubtedly the God bearer”*. But what does this mean and why did our Church not accept the Council of Chalcedon?



St. Severus was an uncompromising critic of the 4th Great Council that had been held in Chalcedon in 451 A.D., and in particular the Tome (or letter) of Pope Leo of Rome. The Council adopted the formula of faith affirming that Jesus Christ was ‘one Person’ made known ‘in two natures’ and this along with the Tome of Leo was rejected by a large number of delegates of the Christian East, which has maintained since that time an organized existence in communities in Egypt, Syria, Ethiopia, Armenia and India, which are commonly referred to as the Oriental Orthodox Churches. St. Dioscorus had argued at Chalcedon that the main disagreement was the wording of "two natures after the union" i.e., Christ is fully God and fully man i.e., human and Divine in one. In other words, the Oriental Church fathers argued at Chalcedon that the wording ‘in two natures’ of Chalcedon was not the tradition of the pre-Chalcedonian Church, which proclaimed ‘from two natures’ and ‘one incarnate nature’.

It is important for us to understand that the Oriental Orthodox Church is not 'monophysite' (which teaches Christ is one (mono) nature), but rather 'miaphysite' i.e., we believe that in the one person of Jesus Christ, Divinity and Humanity are united in one or single nature ("physis"), the two being united without separation, without confusion, and without alteration.



As we learned earlier, we believe Christ is fully God and fully man, and by imitating Christ we are acting God-like in all we do. The Person of Jesus Christ is central to the Christian faith, and this is why our Church fathers disagreed with the Council of Chalcedon. Today, many of our Church leaders continue to discuss and pray together to find a solution to this disagreement that divided the Church. All along, it is the belief of many that all members of the Orthodox Church has been holding to that one Faith of the Church through the centuries.

Conclusion

As we learn about the life of St. Severus, we see that his contributions to the Church were crucial. Because of his ability to speak out, we have a great understanding of the two natures of Christ.

LESSON 8 - SAINT ATHANASIUS

Objective: Students will learn about St. Athanasius and his contribution to Church teaching.

Saint Athanasius of Alexandria attended the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in AD 325 by the Emperor Constantine. A young deacon at the time, St. Athanasius would go on to succeed his bishop, the famous Alexander of Alexandria, noted for confronting the followers of Arius. St. Athanasius is one of the most beloved figures in the entire history of the Church.



His writings are many, and are oftentimes complex and dense, bearing the marks of the intricate controversies with which he was involved. And yet, in the midst of such density are moments of remarkable beauty, and some of his texts dwell, in a unique way, on the person of Christ, incarnate in the world, the savior of humanity.

St. Athanasius reflects, not just on what it meant and means for the Son to have become man, but on the reasons why this took place. What motivated God to act in so marvelous a way? The answer comes in the very fact of creation. For St. Athanasius, God acts because His beloved creation that He created in His own image is suffering.

In his famous writing “On the Incarnation of the Word”, St. Athanasius wrote that God could have chosen to ignore His children and allow the devil to have tricked Adam and Eve into losing the knowledge of God. But He loved us and did not want to see us die i.e., “He, who fashioned humanity in His own image, saw humanity perishing”. Again, and again, in this small treatise, St. Athanasius asks, “What was God to do?” Could He simply stand by and watch? Could He witness the destruction of that which His own hands had fashioned?

And of course, every time such a question is asked, its rhetorical nature resonates clearly. Of course, God could not act in this way! We know how God would act – not because He had to, but because there is no way for divine love to see such a destruction of what love had produced, no way for the loving, creative God to simply abandon the object of His creative love. He loved us too much!

Because of His love for us, He became a man, the coming of our savior, Jesus Christ, the very image of God. Simply forgiving humanity was not the goal of God's work as we had to learn from within that we were special and loved. So, God acts uniquely. Humanity is restored, not from without, but from within. God enters into His very creature, and by that entering in, restores and builds up, offering grace from within the person, rather than without.

This is the very notion of what is so often called deification, or theosis. God binds humanity to Himself. The restored creature is not one on whom God shines, but in whom God transfigures and transforms.

Conclusion

God becomes man that man might become god. This is the insight of St. Athanasius, one of the great voices from the early Church, the Father of Nicaea.

LESSON 9 - CAN I BE LIKE GOD?

Objective: *Students will see how as humans, though we sin and are not perfect, can in fact be like God.*

What does it mean when St. Athanasius says, “God becomes man that man might become god”? How can we be like God?



This was the meaning of salvation in the early Christian Church. Salvation was the transformation so that we not only look like Christ (image), but also think, talk, act, and be just like Christ (likeness). For Orthodox Christians, this doesn't just happen instantaneously, but rather is a process that takes us our whole life! This process is known in the Church as theosis or deification.

According to Protopresbyter George Metallinos, Dean of the Athens University School of Theology, “For we Orthodox the unique and absolute goal of life in Christ is theosis, our union with God, so that man – through his participation in God's uncreated energy –

may become “by the Grace of God” that which God is by nature (without beginning and without end). This is what “salvation” means, in Christianity.”

As Christians we know that salvation is an ongoing process that, as believers, we are called to cooperate in. We are instructed to “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). The Apostle Paul made clear the necessity of human cooperation when he told us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Philippians 2:1–13)”.

Our salvation is a process by which we become more and more like Christ. Our faith is a free gift from God, not dependent upon anything we can do, but this lifelong process of salvation requires that we cooperate with God’s grace, that we might be transformed by the Holy Spirit, and made holy. If we are to spend eternity with God, transformation must take place.

The sole purpose of the Church is the salvation of every human person, whereby we are united to Christ, and transformed by Him in all holiness, and prepared for eternal life. Through the Church we hear the Good News, that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and that He rose from the dead, and because of this we have eternal life. This work of salvation is a gradual, lifelong process by which Christians become more and more like Christ. Our salvation begins the moment we commit ourselves to Christ, and within the abounding grace of the Holy Spirit, we are even drawn closer in communion with God. Theosis goes far beyond the simple restoration of people to their state before the Fall. Because Christ united the human and divine natures in His person, it is now possible for us to experience closer fellowship with God than Adam and Eve initially experienced in the Garden of Eden. Some Orthodox theologians go so far as to say that Jesus would have become incarnate for this reason alone, even if Adam and Eve had never sinned.

Conclusion

As human beings, we are nowhere near perfect and must work hard towards perfection. Through prayer and proper participation in all that is offered by the Holy Church, we have the opportunity to attain salvation, to be more and more like Christ.

LESSON 10 - TRUST IN GOD

Objective: Students will gain insight on how by trusting in God, we learn to allow Him to guide us, which eventually will reveal His purpose for our lives.

For what are you living your life? As a Christian, do you understand right vision of the purpose of your life? Often that vision is not quite clear before us. Too many people think of gathering possessions, of wealth or power as the main purpose of our life.

In the **Luke 12:13-40**, we hear Christ teaching us through the parable of the rich man. Jesus begins with the warning, "take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

Before this, a request is put to Jesus. This request came after a discourse by the Lord about matters important to one's spiritual health and discipleship. Thus it shows that despite what we hear, we remain fixated on things of this world. See also **Matthew 20:20-21**, "Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him. And He said to her, 'What do you wish?' She said to Him, 'Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.'"

Jesus' response to the request is heard in **Matthew 20 : 25 & 26**. His response shows Jesus' desire to avoid being caught up in the mundane. His concern is for our eternal souls.

Another related text to the Rich Fool is **Matthew 16:26**, "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

The main problem presented in this parable is that the man does not see his wealth as a gift from God. This compares to the young man who asked what was needed to inherit eternal life, and his answer was presented in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Another problem to note is in **Luke 16: 19**; it is that this man laid up the riches for himself. On wealth and being a Christian, **Mark 10:23** says, "Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!'" **James 5:1-6** says: "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that

are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you."

Mark 10:27, however, offers hope to all of this: "But Jesus looked at them and said, 'with men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.'"

It is not wrong to be wealthy and a Christian. There is a way to avoid the peril found in **James 5:1-6**. The way out includes using our riches to serve the poor and making sure that we have a healthy attitude towards money. 1 Timothy 6:10 tells us that it is the love of money that is the root of all evil.

Does this apply only to the rich? It does not. We all must be careful and aware of greed and covetousness. And all of us must be good stewards.

- **Ecclesiastes 5:10-11**: "In the abundance of good things they who eat them also increase, but what virtue does the owner have from them, except to see them with his eyes? The sleep of a servant is sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep."
- **Proverbs 11:28**: "He who does not deal graciously with his own house will inherit the wind, And a man without discernment will be servant to one with discernment."

The root problem is seeing one's possessions for oneself and the mistake of evaluating one's life in terms related to what one possesses.

LESSON 11 - TRUE WORSHIP

Objective: Exploring God's nearness in worship and understanding that God who is above us (Father) is also God who is with us (Son), and God who is in us (Holy Spirit).

*“Behold this time of prayer - And this time of forgiveness;
This time of supplication - This is the time of mercy”*

This is the Church inviting us to worship our Almighty God, during Church services, and our behavior in the presence of such a King should match the invitation.

Our God is a totally Awesome God! Overwhelming in His Mighty Power! Breathtakingly Glorious in His Splendor! Unsurpassed in the passionate depth of His Mercy and Love! Majestic in Holiness, Awesome in Glory! If we try to describe the Infinite, Eternal, Transcendent, Sovereign, Omnipotent God as He Truly Is, we soon run out of superlatives for He is the Indescribable One, Magnificent beyond the farthest stretches of our imagination. Let us ask ourselves one single question: If we would hear about such a King on earth how would we prepare to meet him and how would we behave in His presence?

And again the Church is inviting us: "With the fear of God, love and faith draw near."

Let us take a quick look at the three spiritual states to which the Church invites us:

- Fear: the only fear we should have in our hearts is the fear of proving unworthy of such a Majestic, Awesome, Loving Lord and King.
- Love: It is in our nature to return love to the ones who loves us. How much more then, should we give our entire hearts to the One who IS Love? (**1 John 4:8**)
- Faith: "I believe O Lord and Confess that You are truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the first."
- Draw near: "He who in obedience and humility draws near to the Lord Jesus Christ will never desire to be separated from Him. (St. Nikolai Velimirovich)

If our hearts are set right, then our worship, attitudes and behaviors will also be set right. Orthodoxy ("The True Worship") is truly a way of life and not just the name of a Church or a set of teachings.

Exploring God's Nearness in Worship

It is appropriate to speak about God in terms that evoke our sense of awe, respect, and wonder. Yet, it is also necessary and spiritually healthy to understand God in terms that relate to God's nearness and the intimacy we should feel in worshiping Him. Although we say that God is our King, Almighty Lord, Creator of the Universe, we must also affirm that He is our loving Father, the Good Shepherd, and the One who dwells within the heart of every believer. We also affirm that God dwells in the heavens, that He alone is truly Holy, and we can never hope to understand the depths of Him nor the true nature of His being. God is also inside of us, He lives inside our hearts, runs through our veins, animates our thoughts, and His life-giving Spirit gives us life and breath each day!

Our faith teaches and reminds us of God's closeness and deep love for us. Our faith reminds us of God's desire to be in relationship with us and dwell inside of us. In fact, in Church we take part in and observe many things that witness to God as the loving Father (Abba), and the God who is the Good Shepherd who knows and calls each of His sheep by name.

From the moment we enter Church we begin to participate in the worship of the Church. After lighting a candle, we venerate the icon the patron saint or feast of our church, as a sign of our love for the Saints and for God. During the Holy Qurbana, we are asked to love one another so that with one mind we may confess, that, "Christ is in our midst." And as we respond to this command we embrace those around us with a holy kiss. We are also reminded that God is with us and that all of His loved ones surround us when we look around our Church and see the beautiful icons that show God's saints who stand with us in Christ. We also see our heavenly King standing among us, we see Christ our God standing next to St. John the Baptist on the icon screen. Our God lives among His people and stands next to them because He loves them and invites them to stand with Him.

There is one more powerful way that confirms our God's deep desire and love for us: Holy Qurbana. In the chalice brought out by our priests there is the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. During each Holy Qurbana we have the great opportunity to receive God inside of us! Can you imagine what a special thing this truly is? The God and Creator of the Universe comes to live inside His creation, you and me. This is truly a wonderful thing, but more importantly it is the ultimate sign of God's desire to be close to us and to be near to us. When we receive Holy Qurbana, God comes to live in us, His Body enters ours, and His Blood flows through our veins! Truly our God is inside each of us, and His

ultimate desire is to live a close relationship of love with every one of His beloved children.

God Who is Above Us, is also God Who is with Us

As we have established, Orthodoxy literally means "True Worship." Our true worship, or true approach to God, is one whereby we approach Him in humility. Remember the Parable of the Publican (Tax Collector) and the Pharisee. Even though the Publican was a sinner, God heard his prayer because he approached in honesty and humility, recognizing his sin with the heartfelt words, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." When one recognizes God's greatness compared to us, we approach God in awe. God, on the other hand loves us so much that He responds to our approach with tender love and compassion, like a loving parent.

We are to give our best to God. Even more than this, God always is there for us as a loving, compassionate parent. In fact, that is why Jesus came to live with us and save us. He did not wait until we were worthy of Him, but came while we were still sinners. "We love God because He first loved us." (**1 John 4:19**). So really it is through the love of God FIRST, which we experience through Jesus, that our desire to approach God with awe, deep love and respect grows.

The context of how we worship and act within the Church, the temple, is a balance between God who is completely above us, unapproachable yet at the same time God who is with us, "Emmanuel." We then enter His House like we might enter the house of a King or Queen, or the President of the United States. We would enter their house with awe, dressed in our best, with our best manners. The splendor of such a visit would be something that we would talk about for years. Now imagine if the King, Queen or President came and sat down with us and treated us like we were the most special of people, with a unique familiarity, kindness, and love. Wouldn't we feel so special? At that moment, this awesome experience would become deeply personal. And so it is with our entrance into our Lord's House. We could add that this same awe, balanced with familiar love, is the essence of our personal approach to God in private and corporate prayer.

When we approach God in worship, we give our very best. When we do this, we not only honor God, but we honor His image within us as we are created to be Godly. Let's always keep this in mind, not only in Church, but also in our personal prayer life. With this in mind, let's give God our very best: our best love, our best manners, our best respect. Let

us approach Holy Communion just as we would the greatest King that ever lived, because that is exactly what is happening. Let us prepare in humility. When we receive our piece of bread after Holy Qurbana or at the end of church, let's eat carefully trying not to drop any crumbs. As we cross ourselves, do it slowly with love and respect, thereby offering our best to God.

Conclusion

As Orthodox Christians, we come from a rich tradition of experiencing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in worship. The more we open our eyes to the sacramental life of the Church and allow ourselves to partake of all the Church has to offer us, the more we will be able to experience true worship.



LESSON 12 - FASTING AND CONFESSION

Objective: Students will gain a better understanding of what it means to fast and pray and why it is essential to our spiritual lives.

What does fasting mean? Is it only about abstaining from certain foods for a certain amount of time? True fasting is about bringing ourselves closer to God through our thoughts, our actions, and our habits. Fasting must be together with more praying and more charity. It is not a commandment for weakening the body but exercising and controlling the body to refresh the soul and test it to grow in grace and in the knowledge of God.

The Position of Fasting in the Spiritual Life

Fasting has an important position in the spiritual life and there are many examples in the Old Testament of the men of God who fasted and did great works. Moses fasted forty days before he spoke to God. Daniel was fasting when the Angel Gabriel appeared to him. Nehemiah fasted when he heard of the sad news about Jerusalem. David was a man of fasting. He said, "I afflicted myself with fasting". Isaiah spoke about fasting (**Isaiah 58:3-12**) and king Jehoshaphat called all the people to fast (**2 Chronicles 20:3**). In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Himself fasted till He felt hungry. The Lord spoke about fasting in His Sermon on the Mountain (**Matthew 6:16-18**). He also spoke about the importance of fasting when He said about the Devil "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting" (**Mark 9:29**). In the Book of Acts we read about fasting in the church of the apostles (**Acts of the Apostles 13:3, 4**) and (**1 Corinthians 7:5**). The church fathers also wrote about fasting in their writings and the rules, which have been given to us. The history of the Orthodox Church bears witness to the fact that the believers respected public fasting that have been established since the times of the early church such as Lent, and fasting on Wednesday and Friday.

How Did the Lord Christ Fast and Pray?

After Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan, He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights and afterwards He was hungry and the devil came and tempted Him three times but the Lord quoted verses from the Scriptures to answer him with. He gave us a practical example of how man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (**Matthew 4:2-11**). The Lord's fasting was accompanied by prayer

and spiritual struggle. In the same way we fast and pray with Him and through Him. May our fasting and prayer be acceptable before the Lord.

How to Fast Correctly

Fasting and spiritual growth go hand in hand. Fasting is an exercise to humiliate the desires of the flesh and not an exercise to weaken the body itself. In our physical nature there is a bad tendency which we inherited from Adam and Eve and St. Paul expressed it by saying; “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary to one another; so that you do not do the things that you wish” (**Galatians 5: 17**). In another place he says: “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death” (**Romans 7:24**).

St. Isaac the Syrian says: “Every struggle against sin and its lusts must begin with fasting especially when the struggle is because of an internal sin. Resisting the desires of the flesh does not mean that we should weaken the body and moderation in fasting is necessary so that physical and spiritual health may not be affected.

Abstaining from food should go side by side with internal spiritual growth. This means that physical fasting is connected with the godliness of the heart, the soul’s fasting and the purity of the flesh. In this, one of the saints said, “If we are fasting only in the sense of abstaining from food while we are still bound to sin and iniquities, submission of the body will not benefit us so long as the most precious part of us is defiled.

So as the outer man fasts, the inner man must also be controlled and be kept away from harmful food as acceptable fasting should be genuine; without evil, insincerity, grudge, hatred or defilement of body and soul”.

Fasting and prayer are inseparable. The saints likened fasting to a stronghold and prayer to a weapon with which man fights inside the stronghold... St. Augustine said, “In the Temple built by Solomon, there were two altars, on the outer altar, burnt offerings are offered and on the inside altar the incense offerings were offered. The same is true with the temple of Spirit which is man where there must be two altars; the inside one which is the heart where he offers the incense of prayers and their aroma and an outer altar where the body is offered as an offering through fasting and types of abstemiousness and devoutness”.

As we fast, we must continually be in contemplation. It is necessary for spiritual life to feed on contemplations during fasting. The Church sets fasting on important occasions so we must connect fasting with contemplation and remember the occasions of fasting. During the holy Lent we remember our Lord, the Holy righteous Lord when he fasted. On Wednesday, we remember the plans of the chief priests to kill Him. Ask yourself then “Do I betray Him and how much shall I receive to betray Him?” Remember that you betray Him when you sin... So during each fasting raise your heart to God in the spirit of contemplation to attain spiritual power during fasting. You can get benefit also through reading the Holy Bible and the spiritual books with the spirit of discipleship, prayer and obedience of the commandments.

Part of our fast encompasses almsgiving. Fasting is usually accompanied by works of love and mercy, so in his hunger, the fasting man shares with the poor and the needy and spends what he has saved of the expenses of his food and other things on his needy brethren... Isaiah emphasizes this fact by saying: “Is not this the fast that I choose... Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?” (**Isaiah 58:6, 7**).

IV. Discussion

A young man may face a problem, i.e. the family sometimes does not allow him to fast as they believe this would keep him healthy and the suggested cure is the following: 1. He must test himself as his life may not be straight and his behavior may be a stumbling block in the eyes of the family. 2. He must discuss the matter with his father of confession and follow his advice concerning the period he appoints for fasting and if there are any health reasons a doctor should be consulted. 3. He should discuss the matter with his family and explain the importance of fasting and the importance of obeying the commandments of Christ and the church order. 4. He should seek the priest’s advice when necessary and the priest will help him to convince the family to allow him to fast. He could also pray so that the Lord may soften their hearts and allow him to fast.

V. Repentance

While fasting is just one aspect of the process, repentance is the other. Outward fasting is nothing without us changing on the inside. This means we have to see where we have fallen to sin, come into repentance and then seek to confess our sins

A. How do we repent?

1. The First step in the way of repentance is to **test yourself**. Sit with yourself and think of the things you did in the same way the Prodigal son did so that you may know your sins and the points of weakness. In this regard, St. John Chrysostom says, “Test yourself. If you remember your sin God will not remember it and if you forget it, God will not forget it”.

2. The Second Step is to **repent what you have done**. The prodigal son repented leaving his father’s house and his heart was broken. We cannot repent unless our hearts become sorry for what we did. We should be confident of God’s love and be sure that He will accept us. We should never fall into despair.

3. The Third Step is to **adopt an attitude against sin**. Repentance does not mean that I should repent what I did only but it indicates a positive movement towards the Father. What would have been the benefit if the Prodigal son had sat in his place without doing anything? He rose, walked and went to his father’s house. In the same way, we have to rise and pray and seek God’s help to grant us the power so that we may not sin again. We should give signs of repentance to the Lord as when we say “sorry” to those whom we offend or as we get rid of a bad picture in our library... and so on.

4. The Fourth Step is **going to confession**. This is a necessary step as he who sins, sins against the Lord and against the church, which is His Body. We should bear in mind that each believer is a member of that Body. That is why our teacher St. James tells us to “Confess your sins to one another” (James 5:16). In the past, believers used to confess their sins in public in the church but the church saw that it was better for the believers to confess in secret to the priest.

VI. Is it Necessary to Confess to the Priest?

Yes, we must confess our sins to our Priest. This Priest should be our spiritual guide because he receives his authority from God who forgives our sins. He receives this authority through the Sacrament of the Holy Orders. The Lord said to His disciples, “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (**Matthew 18:18**). After His resurrection, He confirmed that sacrament when He breathed in their faces saying: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22,23). The priest makes me ashamed of myself when I repeat my confession of the same sin in my confession and it is of benefit for the soul to be ashamed and fear the guide, so that the soul in this case tends to fear God only. Pride may lead man to refuse to confess his sins to the Priest.

III. What are the sins that we should confess?

“Sin is lawlessness. Sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4) and it is written that the wages of sin is death. Sin may be in the form of action, saying or thinking. The more man proceeds spiritually, the more he discovers his wrongdoings. At the beginning of the road he discovers the apparent sins such as insulting people, calling them names, swearing, stealing and telling lies. However when he makes progress, he discovers selfishness, stinginess, self-love, grudge, hatred, etc. (John 3:14-20). We must examine ourselves well before confession to discover our sins, as this is one of the signs of our spiritual progress. (Adapted from <http://www.suscopts.org/ssc/Grade07.pdf>)

2) Accountability

The following is an excerpt from the Orthodox Study Bible regarding Confession:

People ask, “Can’t I confess to God privately?” Certainly, though there is no clear biblical basis for it. Even general confession occurs in the Church. God provides us the sacrament of confession to give us deliverance from sin and what psychologists call denial. It is easy to pray in isolation yet never come clean. It is far more effective to confess aloud to God before a priest and benefit from his guidance and help.

IV. The Prayer of Repentance

O righteous Lord... I know my weakness and the silliness of my mind but I give myself to your grace to save me. With complete trust and confidence I leave myself between your hands to keep me safe till the Day of Judgment. Bless me and grant me Your grace till Your Son comes. Glory and Honor be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit forever and ever, Amen.

V. A Test to Examine Yourself

Ask yourself the following questions and answer them honestly:

Pride: Are you proud of yourself or of your deeds? Do you despise others? Do you condemn others and judge them?

Selfishness: Do you harden your heart and show no mercy to your brothers? Do you prefer yourself to your brothers in choosing the best things? Do you refuse to help others and serve them with pleasure?

Grudge: Do you feel sorry when others succeed? Do you feel happy when evil befalls one of your relatives? Do you think of taking revenge when anyone offends you?

Hatred: Do you refuse to forgive others and reconcile with them? Do you say bad words about others? Do you put the seeds of hatred between friends?

Laziness: Do you do your homework and studies honestly? Do you neglect prayers or spiritual exercises? Do you eat much or sleep for a long time?

VI. Preparing for Confession

Before Confession, we must sit quiet for some time in the presence of God and examine ourselves. The Holy Spirit shall guide us to find out our sins, and how far we have departed from the love of God and the love of man. Through Confession, we renew our life in the Kingdom of God and regain the grace of Baptism.

VII. Liturgy Connection: ‘Shubukono’- Service of Reconciliation

On Monday, when the Great Lent begins, we conduct the service of Shubukono, the service of reconciliation. At the end of the service, all worshippers give peace to one another. Beginning the Great Lent with the Shubukono service is meant for this process of reconciliation.

During the Great Lent, those who are physically able, should fast till the evening. Those who are unable or weak, they should try to fast at least till noon. Church has arranged special prayers for the Great Lent. These prayers exhort us to repent and to turn towards God. As a sign of repentance, we kneel down and touch our forehead to the ground, during the Lenten prayers. There is a practice of kneeling and bending down to the floor, forty times after the noon prayer.

LESSON 13 - SACRAMENTAL LIFE

A common definition of the sacrament is: 'The visible means of invisible grace'. Here, 'the visible' represents the act - being baptized, partaking in Holy Qurbana, etc. Grace is the very energy of God. We view sacraments as a "means of grace"- God working through them.

A true sacramental life means 'we are transformed'. Remember Christ's Transfiguration, where His earthly body was transformed.

A true Christian life is centered in Jesus Christ, who is God and became man because He loved us (**John 3:16, John 1:14**). This union of the Divine and human nature in one person, the Incarnation of our Lord, has once and for all bridged the gap between God and Creation. By the Incarnation, the material world is redeemed.

Creation is brought back to the possibility of harmony with its Creator. Our redemption, however, is no one-time event, over and done with at the moment of the Passion or Ascension. God did not become man simply to provide for the inspiration of future generations; His saving acts have brought about in the world in which we live a permanent alteration. Prior to the Incarnation, man could only know God as if at a distance, even as a shadow. But now God Himself lives among us, as Jesus promised: "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (**Matthew 28:20**).

This enduring presence of Christ in Creation is not the vague and dilute divine presence that a muddled pantheism preaches. God is certainly present in all of His Creation. But He is more specifically and intensively present in particular and reliable ways that He Himself has established.

The Fathers most frequently call these particular forms of the Lord's enduring presence a "Mystery." The most familiar term in English is "Sacrament." For our purposes here, the two terms will be used interchangeably — for "mystery" conveys a truth about God's Grace which is lacking in the word "sacrament."

The Holy Mysteries are no mere signs or symbols; they are not just external indications of the presence of some invisible reality. A Sacrament is the Divine presence, just as the man Jesus Who walked among men 2,000 years ago was God Himself incarnate. When some portion of this created world (a cup of wine, a piece of bread, a vial of oil, a touch

upon the head, etc.) becomes a Mystery, it becomes thereby "of God"; it is divinized; it becomes the real and present location of that continuing presence — of Christ, and in some sense it is Him.

Sacraments are indefinite in number, not restricted to an easily-identified, categorizable few. However, there are seven major Sacraments that we see often as members of the Body of Christ:

1. Baptism and Chrismation

"As many as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ forevermore, Alleluia" Orthodox hymns based on **Galatians 3:27**.

"For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit" **Acts of the Apostles 1:5**

Although He didn't need it, Jesus was baptized by St. John the Baptist because we need to be washed clean through the Sacrament of Baptism. We are commanded by Jesus to be baptized. He said to the apostles, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (**Matthew 28:19**)

Through Baptism, we become part of the Body of Christ and are united to God. In the Orthodox Church, people are baptized with total immersion in the baptismal water as they were in the early days of Christianity, and as St. John baptized in the River Jordan. We are immersed three times representing the Trinity and also the three days that Jesus was in the tomb. We are immersed in the water so that we die to sin. As Jesus rises from death in the Resurrection, we then rise up out of the water to a new life in Christ. For this reason, baptism is sometimes referred to as a "personal Pascha (Easter)." The two most important parts of Baptism are the triple immersion in water and calling on the Trinity, "In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." In some Christian churches, people are not baptized until they reach an "age of reason." The Orthodox Church doesn't require intellectual ability to become baptized and, thus, a member of the Body of Christ. Instead, the Church sees Baptism as a gift of love from God. Therefore, babies are baptized even though they are too young to understand. Baptism bestows the grace of the Holy Spirit to the baby in the hope that the baby will choose Christ later in life. During the Sacrament of Baptism, the person goes from darkness to light which is represented by the baptismal candles. Because of this, baptism is also called "Illumination."

Chrismation is the anointment of the body with Holy Chrism Oil in the Name of the Holy Spirit in order to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is intended to strengthen a person in his or her spiritual life. As Baptism is thought of as a "personal Pascha," Chrismation is often referred to as a "personal Pentecost." Just as the apostles and followers of Christ received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the person being Chrismated is imbued with the Holy Spirit. The word Chrismation come from the Greek word "Chrism" which means "anointing." Chrismation immediately follows Baptism in the Orthodox Church just as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove immediately after he was baptized. Baptism is done with water and Chrismation is a "Baptism" of the Holy Spirit. "...Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (**John 3:5**)

2. The Eucharist and Confession

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body: for we all partake of that one bread." **1 Corinthians 10:16-17**

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." **1 John 1:5**

The Eucharist, or Communion, is considered the most important of all the Sacraments. At the Last Supper, Jesus offered thanks to God for the bread and the wine. This is why Communion is called the "Eucharist" from the Greek word, "efharistia" meaning "thanks." We receive our first Eucharist immediately following Baptism and Chrismation. The Eucharist is the partaking of the actual Body and Blood of the Risen Christ. It is a gift of God's grace in which we take Christ into our bodies and souls. As in the first days of Christianity, the Orthodox Church believes the bread and wine of the Eucharist become the Body and Blood of Christ during the Consecration portion of the Divine Liturgy. We become part of the family of God when we take Communion. It unites us with other Orthodox Christians because we share in the same Christ, reminding us that the same Christ lives in us all. As with all of the Sacraments, the Eucharist is holy and requires us to prepare for it through "self-examination, fasting, prayer, repentance, and forgiveness". "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My

flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." (**John 6:53-54**)

"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (**John 1:29**) Sin is turning away from God. The Sacrament of Confession, or Repentance, is one of the means by which our sins are forgiven. We are cleansed from sin; hence Confession is called a "new Baptism." In the early church, Confession was made publicly, but it became private after the 4th century. Now, we confess to God and are forgiven by God in the presence of a priest who acts as a witness and represents Christ and the congregation. The priest is not the one who forgives us of our sins; only Christ forgives us through the priest. We are to confess to God everyday because we sin everyday. "A young monk complained to the great ascetic, Abba Sisoës: 'Abba, what should I do? I fell.' The Elder answered: 'Get up.' The monk said: 'I got up and fell again!' The Elder replied: 'Get up again!' But the young monk asked: 'for how long should I get up when I fall?' 'Until your death,' answered Abba Sisoës." (Aleksiev, p. 33-34). We confess every time we say the Lord's Prayer, but we are to make Confession with our priest a regular part of our spiritual journey and practice, also. "... though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (**Isaiah 1:18**)

3. Holy Unction, Matrimony, and Ordination

"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the Lord. And the prayers of the faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. " (**James 5:14-15**)

"Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." (**Genesis 2:24**) "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint..." (**Acts of the Apostles 6:3**)

Holy Unction is the Sacrament of anointing with Holy Oil when one is sick, spiritually, physically, or emotionally. It helps to remind us that Christ is with us through our pain and illness. Holy Unction is offered to all Orthodox Christians on Holy Wednesday and, as needed, at any time of the year. The Church is a hospital, and Christ is the Great Physician. The anointing with oil in the name of the Lord combined with having faith are the key ingredients for healing according to James (see key verse above). Olive oil

was considered to have healing powers in ancient times. The Good Samaritan used oil along with wine on the victim's wounds (**Luke 10:25-37**). Holy Unction is not magic in that everyone will return to good physical health after receiving it, though it can happen. Bishop Ware quotes Sergius Bulgakov: "This sacrament has two faces: one turns towards healing, the other towards the liberation from illness by death." As the passage above from James indicates, the anointing can also be a means for the forgiveness of sins.

Matrimony is the Sacrament in which a man and a woman are joined together before God and the world to become husband and wife. In Matrimony, a new relationship is formed between the couple, God, and the Church. The couple is to encourage one another in the Christian life and to grow closer to God. During the ceremony, they wear crowns signifying the grace received from the Holy Spirit. They are also crowns of martyrdom as self-sacrifice on both sides is a part of true marriage. Coniaris writes, "...we have invited the Lord Jesus to enter this all-important relationship to redeem it, to give us the grace and the power to be patient... to be loving...to be forgiving... to be kind... to be understanding. For all this we need his grace, His presence, His love and his power."

The Sacrament of Ordination is when a man becomes a deacon, priest, or bishop with the consent of the people. They are pastors, teachers, and representatives of the parish. The first bishops were ordained by the apostles. There has been a continuous line of bishops originating from the apostles called "Apostolic Succession." This is one of the reasons that we know that the Orthodox Church has been the true Church of Christ throughout history. Lay people are "ordained" into the Church through Chrismation and can perform Baptisms in cases of emergency. There were female deacons ('deaconesses') in the early centuries of the Church. They performed pastoral duties, particularly for women.

LESSON 14 - SAINT PAUL

Objective: Learning the pleasant meeting with the Lord in our life and the possibility of change.

Saint Paul was converted from a persecutor of the Church to a preacher and a great teacher. Through a meeting with the Lord, he was changed completely. It was Paul who labored the most for the growth of the early Church. Paul was also the first apostle who reached out to the non-Jewish (Gentiles) people and as such, is known as the Apostle of the Gentiles.

Saul the Persecutor of the Church (Acts 9:1-31)

Saul was born at a place called Tarsus in Cilicia, a province in Asia minor (modern-day Turkey). His parents were Jews, and Saul grew as a zealous Pharisee. Cilicia, at the time, was a Roman province. His father was a Roman citizen, and so Saul was also a Roman citizen with all rights and privileges. He was educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, a famous scholar and Jewish Rabbi at the School of Studies founded by Cicero. Thus his education equipped him to serve as a scholarly Rabbi in the Jewish religion.

He was a great fanatic of Judaism. He heard the Story of Jesus of Nazareth and the appearance of Christianity from the Jews. He was greatly annoyed and began to persecute the believers severely as he believed that in doing so he served God and his religion. He used to destroy and loot the Christian churches. When the Jews planned to stone St. Stephen the pious deacon, Saul attended the process of stoning and heard him when he said: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit". He also saw his angelic face when he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice "Lord, do not remember this sin against them" and Saul approved of his murder (**Acts 7:4-60**).

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles says that this fierce lion used to break into the churches and houses and draw men and women and take them to prison. The Church endured Saul's persecutions patiently and the Book of Acts says that those who were scattered because of persecution went about preaching the Word of God and in every house where a murder took place because of this fanatic man's persecutions, many prayers were raised for him. Nobody thought of hurting him because the Lord says to the believers; "Look, I am sending you forth as lambs among wolves". The lamb is devoured by the wolf but a lamb cannot devour, otherwise it will turn into a wolf.

God never fails the prayers of His children. This moaning and those cries, which rose continually from the catacombs “O Lord, remember Saul” found in the heart of the Lord of the Church a wonderful response.

A Meeting and a Change

Saul caused Jerusalem’s flock to scatter. His fanaticism led him to take letters from the chief priest to Damascus and to the synagogue of Damascus so that if he should find any of these followers of Christ, he would be able to arrest them, both men and women and bring them back to Jerusalem. He was armed with all the weapons of power, he had the power of the High Priest and strong men and soldiers, he had his zeal and fanaticism which were beyond description, all this was against a humble meek flock that cannot resist because their Lord prevented them from carrying a sword and demanded that they should learn lowliness from Him and leave vengeance to the Lord “Vengeance is Mine”.

On his way to Damascus, jealousy and fanaticism filled his heart. As Saul was coming near the city of Damascus, suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you Lord,” he asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (The goads is a piece of iron used for pricking a beast to urge it to run). Saul was frightened and confused. He said, “What shall I do, Lord?” The Lord said to him: “Arise, go your way into Damascus, and there you will be told about everything it is appointed for you to do”. The men who were traveling with Saul had stopped, not saying a word; they heard the voice but could not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground and opened his eyes, but could not see a thing. So they took him by the hand and led him into Damascus. For three days, he was not able to see and during that time he did not eat or drink anything.

In the House Of Ananias

There was in Damascus a certain disciple named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision; “Ananias”. He said, “Here I am, Lord”. The Lord said to him; “Arise, go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look up a man called Saul, from Tarsus. For, look, he is praying, and in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands upon him that he might recover sight”. But Ananias answered; “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how many injurious things he did to your holy ones in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to put in bonds all

those calling upon Your name”. The Lord said to him: “Be on your way, because this man is a chosen vessel to Me to bear My name in the nations as well as to kings and the sons of Israel. For I shall show him plainly how many things he must suffer for My name”. So, Ananias went off and entered into the house, and he laid his hands upon him and said, “Saul, brother, the Lord Jesus that appeared to you on the road over which you were coming, has sent me forth in order that you may recover sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit”.

The Persecutor becomes a Preacher

And immediately there fell from his eyes what looked like scales, and he recovered sight and he rose and was baptized and he took nourishment and gained strength. He got to be for some days with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately in the synagogues he began to preach Jesus, that this One is the Son of God. But all those hearing him gave way to astonishment and would say: “Is this not the man that ravaged those in Jerusalem who call upon this name, and that had come here for that very purpose, that he might lead them bound to the chief priests?” But Saul became Paul and he kept on acquiring strength and was confounding the Jews that dwelt in Damascus as he proved logically that this is the Christ.

The Persecutions that the Apostle of the Nations Suffered

As the Lord Jesus Christ suffered in bearing witness to the Heavenly Father, each member bearing witness to the Lord Jesus has to suffer also. Every witness should be persecuted... persecuted by the world, the devil, and men and by the corrupt ancient man that lies in his nature. Thus the life of every faithful witness is composed of persecution forming a sad symphony outside him but inside him it is pleasant and enjoyable as St. Paul said: “For though tribulation is momentary and light, it works out for us a glory which is of more and more surpassing weight and is everlasting” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Sources of Paul’s Troubles

The Jews: They were shocked when they saw Saul change into Paul the preaching apostle so they resisted him severely in every synagogue and in every city. They flogged him five times, struck him many times and they stoned him once and at this time he was about to die.

The false brothers: Those are the Jews who became Christians but kept the Spirit of Judaism in their heart and tried to introduce Jewish beliefs in the Christian faith to dye

it with the Jewish life. Those, Paul called “the false brothers”. They used to go to every church he established and arouse tribulations and spread rumors so Paul suffered a lot because of their behavior.

The Pagan Priests: Those caused the people to rebel against Paul because they felt that Paul’s preaching caused the loss of their resources and income. This happened in the city of Ephesus as an example. Besides, he faced many other troubles in his travels especially the thorn in the flesh and in this he entreated the Lord that it might depart from him but the Lord said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (**2 Corinthians 12:7-9**).

Trials and Tribulations

Throughout his ministry, St. Paul faced troubles and was persecuted for the sake of the Gospel. When we read 2 Corinthians, we learn not only about different experiences he went through but get a glimpse of how he overcame those obstacles, remaining steadfast in his faith in Christ.

Conclusion

How can I be one of the Lord Jesus’ disciples? Christ who directed His call to Saul is still directing it to each one of us. And the Lord who met him is on the way ready to meet with us on the way of our life and call us all to be His disciples. He expects us to respond to Him and answer His call.

LESSON 15 - SAINT GEEVARGHESE MAR DIONYSIUS

Objective: Students will learn about the life of St. Geevarghese Mar Dionysius and of his contribution to the Church.

Saint Geevarghese Mar Dionysius, the Malankara Metropolitan, was a bright Luminary of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. He illumined during the tumultuous times of the Church, bringing the Church triumphant from the bonds of foreign domination. Thirumeni dedicated his entire life to secure the freedom and welfare of the holy Church. He faced constant physical and verbal abuse as he courageously led the Church to her independence. He confronted obstacles and dangers through fasting and prayer. God protected Thirumeni throughout his life. He was gifted in many fields. He was a multifarious genius. He was a spiritual leader, and a theological educator. He was a noble personality with a remarkable commanding power.



Early Life

St. Dionysius was born to Joseph Vattasseril of Mallappally and Eliamma Kolathu Kalathil of Kurichy on 31st October 1858. Following his elementary education at C. M. S. Middle School in Mallappally, he completed his high school education from C. M. S.

High School, Kottayam. In 1876, while still a high school student, he was ordained as a sub deacon by H. H. Moran Mar Pathrose Patriarch.

Life in the Church

Dn. Geevarghese studied at the Orthodox Theological Seminary (Old Seminary), Kottayam for four years thereby undergoing his theological training. He soon became a great Syriac scholar under the careful tutelage of St. Gregorios of Parumala, who taught him at Parumala Seminary. In 1879 Dn. Geevarghese was ordained as a full deacon and in 1880 he was ordained as a priest by St. Gregorios of Parumala. By this time, Fr. Geevarghese had become an authority in Syriac, Church history, faith and doctrine, the Church fathers, and theology. In recognition of his incredible expertise in Syriac and theology, he was designated as Malankara Malpan. He spent his spare time

reading, studying, and thinking. He was the author of the book, "Doctrines of the Church". He also used his scholarship to edit and publish the order of Church worship to be used by the ordinary faithful for meaningful participation in worship. He was appointed as Principal of M.D. Seminary, Kottayam as he was both a great scholar and administrator. In 1903, he was blessed as a Ramban (monk). He also served as the Manager of Parumala Seminary. In 1908 he was consecrated as Geevarghese Mar Dionysius Metropolitan and served as the Assistant Malankara Metropolitan.

The next year he became the Malankara Metropolitan and served and led the Church in that capacity until his departure from this life in 1934 when he and the Church triumphed in establishing the official constitution of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. He bade farewell to his earthly life on 23rd February 1934.

Legacy

H. H. Moran Mar Baselios Geevarghese II, Catholicos of blessed memory, remarked in the speech at the burial of Vattasseril Thirumeni as follows: "When we look at the highest solemn position held by Vattasseril Thirumeni and his deep and firm faith in God, he seemed similar to Moses who led the sons of Abraham from the captive land of Egypt to the promised land of freedom and happiness. There is no doubt about it. Moses had spent his entire life for the freedom of his people but he could not enter the Promised Land. He was only able to see the Promised Land from a distance. Likewise the Moses of the Malankara Church has also watched the freedom of his Church from a distance".

Vattasseril Thirumeni was a good orator who was well aware of the importance of the vitality and moral persuasiveness of words when delivering the speeches to the faithful. Spiritually, he was transformed by Christ and bore no scars from sin. His humility and withdrawal from the praise of this world, kept many from seeing the incredibly pious and faithful life that Thirumeni lived. He avoided spiritual hypocrisy and arrogance throughout his life. Prayers and fasting were the pillars of his spiritual foundation. He faced all the challenges with the power he had gained through his valued spiritual life. In addition to the liturgical hours of prayer, Thirumeni spent much time in private prayers and silent meditations behind closed doors and away from the attention of people. In spite of his busy schedule, he was also able to read a good portion of the Holy Bible everyday.

Conclusion

Vattasseril Thirumeni was a beam of light, radiating the love of Christ not only during his lifetime but even today. May his life of prayer, fasting and humility be an example to us and may his intercession on our behalf allow us to grow closer to Him.

LESSON 16 - OUR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Objective: Discovery of our gifts and making use of them for the glory of God.

God created Adam and gave him freedom. One of the prominent signs of freedom is responsibility, which God gave to him in keeping the commandment and working in Paradise. The more freedom man gets the more responsibility he has. The more talents he has the more commitments he has. In the parable of the five talents (**Matthew 25:14-30**) “The Lord shows how each one of us is responsible for what he does and what he does not do.

This parable shows that man is in a state of work. It explains the necessity of hard work in our service and responsibility. It urges us to give ourselves for the glory of God and the good of others. The Lord shows us that all that the people received have been received from the Lord. Of themselves they are nothing, they cannot pretend that they own anything. The purpose of our talents is that they are tools of service and sacrifice and for the glory of God “As good stewards of God’s varied grace” (**1 Peter 4:10**). The Lord gave some people more talents and to the others less talents. This does not mean partiality. If He gave the owners little or more talents, they would be a heavy burden for them and the Lord does not demand us to do more than we can do. Work is the Law of Life. The Lord created Adam and ordered him to work, and he who does not work must not eat. Work involves happiness because he who works with joy, satisfaction and hard work gets the fruit of his labor.

Work is the Law of Life

The Lord created Adam and ordered him to work. Work involves happiness because he who works with joy, satisfaction and hard work gets the fruit of his work. In this life on earth “what man sows, is that he reaps”. The same is true in spiritual matters; what we sow of asceticism, struggle, godliness, love and sacrifice we get it in the form of heavenly eternal rejoicing.

The Behavior of the Three Servants (Matthew 25 : 14- 30)

Two of the servants did well. They worked hard, were honest and made use of their talents while enjoying their potentials. When we apply this attitude in our practical life, we understand the importance of hard work and honesty in studying, worship, sports,

making use of our leisure in practicing hobbies and making use of our health serving our families and the Church.

The Reward

A great compliment “well done, good and faithful servant”, more authority, more responsibility and perpetual joy “Enter into the joy of your master”. How happy is the man who lives in perpetual happiness? Their characters were accepted, their services were accepted, and they received the eternal joy.

The Lazy Man

What annoyed you in his behavior? His laziness and negligence, his scorn of his talent, or his fear of work and the risk of trade... If we benefit from this subject in our spiritual life, why is laziness dangerous in worship, in studying, or in the Service? Despising our little talents is dangerous. Why? What is our duty toward what the Lord is given us of time, health, intelligence, knowledge... however little this is?

Settle accounts with the lazy

Follow up how the accounts were settled with the lazy servant. We notice the following:

- He gives excuses...
- His great confidence in his argument “Here you have what is yours”.
- Indifference to his sin “I hid your talent in the ground”.
- He judged his master “I knew you to be a hard man”.
- The Spirit of slavery and fear: “I was afraid”. Nothing hinders performing our duty towards God more than the Spirit of fear among servants. Fear is against perfect love.

When the master wanted to settle accounts with the lazy servant he accused him of two charges:

- “You wicked and lazy servant”: He who does not do good deserves severe blame. That person who lives for himself does not deserve to live. Refraining from doing good is sin that leads to judgment, and laziness paves the way to evil and when man sleeps, the enemy sows thorns.
- Contradicting himself (**Matthew 25: 26,27**): “You knew that I reap where I have not sowed... Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers”.

On the Day of Judgment the evil lazy people will find no excuse...all false weak excuses will fade away and every mouth will be shut.

Judging the Lazy Servant

- The lazy servant was pronounced guilty.
- He was deprived of his talent (**Matthew 26: 28,29**): “So take the talent from him, and give it to him who ... For everyone who has more will be given, and he will have abundance... but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away”.
- He was cast into the outer darkness, there men will weep and gnash their teeth. This verdict shows us the dangerous results of laziness in life.

II. Using our Talents in Serving Others

Jesus and the poor

Jesus was born in a poor family at Nazareth, and thus He could relate with the poor people of the world. When He lived with His parents, He worked and supported the family. He was able to come in contact with many people in the community and could learn about their problems. When He started His ministry, He chose His disciples who were from the working members of the society. This does not mean that He hated the rich. There were rich people too who followed Him. He loved them all, the poor and the rich, the literate and the illiterate. But He remained poor as any poor man in the world. It was the poor who could easily understand Him and follow Him.

Final Judgment

Jesus Christ used many parables to teach the disciples about the final judgment of the Kingdom of God. The parables of the king who gave a marriage feast (**Matthew 22:1-10**), the wise and foolish maidens (**Matthew 25:1-13**) and the man who entrusted talents to the servants (**Matthew 25:14-30**) illustrate the various aspects which prepare us for the final judgment. Jesus concluded His exhortation by giving a picture of the Last Judgment (**Matthew 25:31-46**). Christ the King shall come in His glory with all the angels and shall sit on His glorious throne. People of all nations shall be gathered before Him. He shall separate the good from the bad. He shall invite the good people, saying, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (**Matthew 25:34**)

What should our attitudes be towards others?

Jesus then tells us of the main criterion for separating the good and bad people. We are judged according to our attitude towards the hungry and the thirsty, the stranger and the prisoner, and the naked and the sick. He shall say to the blessed ones who are given

entrance into the Kingdom:

I was hungry and you gave me food,

I was thirsty and you gave me drink,

I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

I was naked and you clothed me,

I was sick and you visited me,

I was in prison and you came to me." (**Matthew 25:35-36**)

Jesus Christ makes Himself manifest as the poor and the destitute. We confront many a Christ in our everyday life in the form of the hungry and the thirsty, the stranger and the prisoner and the naked and the sick. He who ministers to any of these "little ones" he ministers to the Lord. Jesus made Himself one among the least and the lowliest of the world and called them His own brethren. He says, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me." (**Matthew 25:40**)

He who denied these least of His brethren denied Christ Himself. At the last judgment He shall go away into eternal punishment, Jesus here makes it clear to me that I cannot love Christ if I cannot love the poor. I cannot grow spiritually and inherit the Kingdom of God simply by some spiritual exercises. I can be sure that I grow in the love of Christ when I can see Christ in the poor and the needy, and love them. If I love Christ, I love the poor, I Love Christ in the poor.

Our Christian Responsibility: Help the poor

We have learned that it is our Christian responsibility to care for the poor; who really is the poor? It is evident that the question of poverty is a relative one. The standard of life of the poor people of underdeveloped nation can be much lower than that of the poor of an affluent nation. There is no general standard for poverty applicable to all countries alike. Yet we may say with a measure of justification, that the poor are those who cannot afford their food, clothing, and housing, the basic necessities of life. Leaving apart the general considerations, we must look into our own neighborhood, find the needy, and help them. God's poor, for us to help, is our own poor and needy neighbor.