



ORTHODOX SYRIAN
SUNDAY SCHOOL
ASSOCIATION

Diocese of UK, Europe and Africa

C A T E G O R Y | M A S T E R Y



Our Life in the World to Come
GRADE 12

ORTHODOX SYRIAN
SUNDAY SCHOOL ASSOCIATION
OF THE EAST



Our Life in the World to Come
Grade 12

Category
Mastery

2024

OSSAE : DIOCESE OF UK, EUROPE & AFRICA

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON SERIES - 12

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The Malankara (Indian) Orthodox Church

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First Edition : January 2024

Printed in the United Kingdom
For Private Circulation only

FOREWORD



**MALANKARA ORTHODOX
SYRIAN CHURCH**(INDIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH)

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No. E-015/AMS/2024

11 January 2024

FOREWORD

As we embrace the dawning of a new era in the Sunday School of our Diocese, it is with profound gratitude and joy that we introduce the newly launched textbooks. This milestone is not merely a culmination of efforts but a new beginning, charting a course for faith-filled learning.

Special recognition is due to the Director and the team of dedicated authors of the Diocese of Southwest America of our Church who have tirelessly woven this tapestry of knowledge and devotion. Their commitment to creating a curriculum that speaks to the heart of our tradition is truly commendable.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to His Grace Zachariah Mar Nicholovos and His Grace Thomas Mar Ivanios, our Metropolitans, whose blessings and guidance have been the bedrock of this endeavor. Their spiritual leadership has been a guiding light throughout this year-long journey of preparation and transition.

Our teachers, those steadfast beacons of knowledge, deserve a resounding acknowledgment for their adaptability and perseverance, ensuring a smooth transition to this new curriculum. Their dedication to the spiritual growth of our youth is a testament to their faith and love for the church.

In line with the Apostle Paul's exhortation in Titus 1:9 (NRSV), "He must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it," we recognize the pivotal role of sound teaching in nurturing faith. This verse echoes the mission of our Sunday School to steadfastly impart the truth of the Gospel, fostering a resilient and enlightened community of faith.

To the teachers and students embarking on this sacred educational journey, may you be filled with enthusiasm and wisdom. May your hearts and minds be fertile grounds for the seeds of divine knowledge to flourish.

The significance of the Sunday School in our community cannot be overstated. It is here that the foundations of faith are laid, where the stories and teachings of our church come to life, and where the future guardians of Orthodoxy begin their spiritual journey.

A special word of gratitude is extended to Fr. Anoop M. Abraham, Vice President of the Sunday School for the Diocese. His leadership, along with the director, curriculum coordinator, secretary & joint secretary, reviewers, trainers, and all team members, has been instrumental in bringing this vision to fruition.

As we conclude, let us move forward in the spirit of Orthodox tradition, with hope and prayer that these textbooks serve not only as vessels of knowledge but also as lanterns lighting the path towards spiritual maturity and devotion.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

+ Metropolitan Abraham Stephanos

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Glory to the Triune God!

I would like to express my deepest gratitude and sincere appreciation to all those who have contributed towards the development of this Orthodox Sunday school textbook for the new curriculum. It has been a long and challenging journey but with the help and support of many individuals and organizations, we have finally reached this milestone.

First and foremost, I would like to thank our Diocesan Metropolitan H G Abraham Mar Stephanos for His Grace's tireless effort to reform our Sunday School to meet the needs of our future generation by implementing the new curriculum and heartfelt gratitude to all the officials and key personalities of Northeast and Southwest American Diocesan Sunday Schools who are the backbone of this new curriculum and Talmido.

Great appreciation to all the curriculum development committee members of our diocese for their selfless efforts in editing a comprehensive and relevant textbook that caters to the spiritual needs of our Sunday School students. Your dedication, expertise, and commitment to the project were crucial in bringing this book to fruition. Special thanks to the clergy members of our diocese who generously shared their knowledge, wisdom, and experiences in shaping the lessons and activities in this book. Your input has helped to create a well-rounded curriculum that reflects the teachings and traditions of our Orthodox Faith.

I am also grateful to the head teachers and teachers who took the time to review and provide valuable feedback on the content and structure of the textbook. Your insights and suggestions have greatly enhanced the quality of the material and have made it more engaging and accessible to our young learners.

I would also like to acknowledge the role of Holy Episcopal Synod and OSSAE officials for their unwavering support and encouragement towards this new curriculum. It is with their guidance and vision that we were able to compile a textbook that aligns with the goals and objectives of our Holy Church and Diocesan Sunday School education.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the students who will be using this textbook. Your enthusiasm and eagerness to learn about our faith is what motivates us to continue improving and developing resources for your spiritual growth.

In conclusion, I would like to thank everyone who has been a part of this journey and has contributed in any way towards the creation of this Orthodox Sunday school textbook. May it serve as a valuable resource for many generations to come and may it inspire and nurture the faith of our young Orthodox students. Thank you all for your support and dedication.

Fr Anoop Abraham Malayil
Vice-President OSSAE – UK Europe and Africa

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The Medicine of Life

Lesson Goals :

- *I can explain how the Church is a spiritual hospital and how Christ is the ultimate Physician for all our needs (spiritual, mental, and physical).*
- *I can defend how the Church's spiritual disciplines and sacraments are medicines and remedies for life in a fallen world.*
- *I can identify signs of positive and negative behaviours and influences in our spiritual journey towards our salvation.*



Have you ever heard people describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious”? Our response needs to be one of humility, empathy, and prayer as very often there are individual circumstances that lead them to this point of view, and it is possible that there was a personal grievance often with a religious institution, one bad example by a leader representing that religion, or misunderstanding of the actual theology of the religion has turned them away from “religion”.

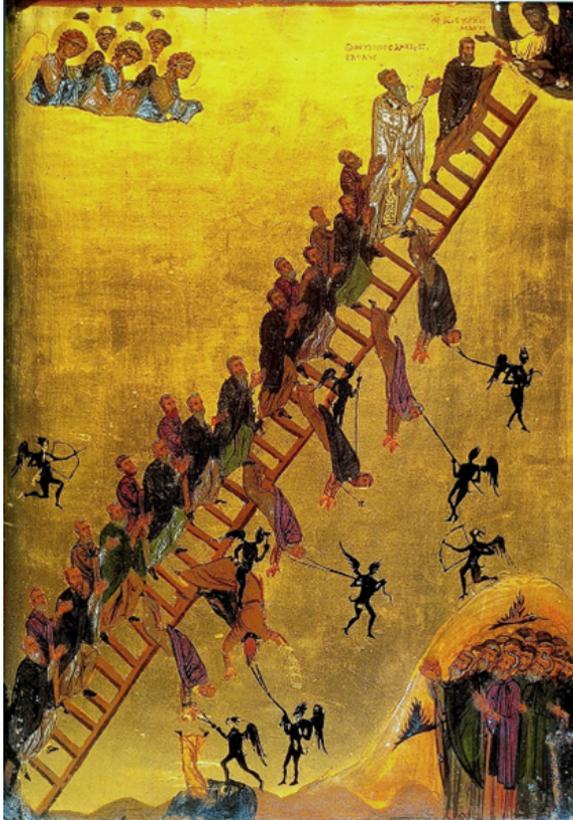
What is important for us is to reflect and learn, and understand that phrase which yields the question - what is Orthodox spirituality? How should we answer the questions on religion if asked?

Orthodox Spirituality

A secular definition of spirituality is “the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul”. According to Dr. Christina Puchalski (Director of George Washington Institute of Spirituality and Health), “Spirituality is the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to nature, and to the significant or sacred”.

This definition is actually incomplete for an Orthodox Christian. A better definition of “spirituality” comes from Rev. Dr. George C. Papademetriou¹: “The spirituality of the Orthodox Christian is

¹“An Introduction to Orthodox Spirituality” (<https://www.goarch.org/-/an-introduction-to-orthodox-spirituality>)



The Icon of the Ladder of Divine Ascent

portrayed as a life in Christ, a life of commitment to the Lord, and a complete submission to His will. One lives only to do everything for Christ's sake, as Christ wants it and as Christ would do it."

For the Orthodox Church, everything we do begins in Christ and is fulfilled in Christ. It is with this reason that Fr. Alexander Schmemmann made the observation that "*we must also say 'no' to reli-*

gion." *Christ did not bring religion; Christ brought the Kingdom of God. Christianity is not a religion to help secular man to cope with his problems.*"

This statement that Orthodoxy is not a religion is not to be misunderstood that we should be "Sunday only Christians". Rather, a true understanding of Orthodoxy is that through our life each and every day is Christ-centred. Orthodoxy

is not a “religion” in the sense of an organisation, but rather it is a way of life centred on Christ. As St. Paul says, **“for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”** (1 Corinthians 1:18).

The Church is the Body of Christ (Colossians 1:24; Ephesians. 4:11-12; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23) and is essential for the spiritual growth of every Christian. The goal of union with God is achieved through a long process called **deification or theosis**. In Orthodox spirituality, the culminating state of one’s spiritual life is the union of the soul with God, lived or experienced. Jesus said, **“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”** (St. Matthew 5:48).

Orthodox spirituality is a journey towards wholeness or fullness. This journey includes purification through repentance, prayer, and working with the Holy Spirit, who is within us. This journey begins at our baptism. However, when we understand that our life’s purpose is an invitation to be in communion with the Divine, then we start to pursue the journey with all our heart, soul, and mind.

Sacramental Theology for Healing in the Church

Spirituality therefore is an everyday activity to grow in communion with God. Spirituality not only refers to our spiritual life but also to our mind and body as well. It is more holistic and is a “a journey towards a mystical union with God through living the Gospel teachings in the context of the Church, and participating in her sacraments and Holy Traditions” (Dimitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*²).

Our Church’s teaching has a very direct connection of “salvation” and “healing”. As Fr. Geoff Harvey³ eloquently reminds us: *“Christ’s mission to earth wasn’t about securing our forgiveness from the Father, but in healing us from the corruption of sin and death. Jesus taught that our Heavenly Father is eager, ready and waiting to forgive sins. He always has been—and always will be—ready to abandon His dignity and sprint toward any of His children who want to return to Him (St. Luke 15:11-32) . Our Heavenly Father quickly and easily forgives anyone who desires His forgiveness. The key to understanding the Fall of mankind (and the plan of salvation) is that we humans need to be healed from the corruption of sin and death. Salvation is healing.”*

The Sacraments (mysteries) are for the spiritual and physical healing of its faith-

²“Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar”, by Dumitru Staniloae

³“Salvation is Healing”, by Fr. Geoff Harvey (<https://www.thegoodshepherd.org.au/salvation-healing>)

ful. There are many sacraments instituted for this purpose and the most important of them are Holy Baptism, Holy Chrismation, Holy Confession, Holy Eucharist, and the Holy Unction. Healing is achieved when we participate with Christ, our Great Physician. Just as one would visit a doctor for healing of physical ailments, the very purpose of the Church is to heal us, to restore the rift between God and humanity which is caused by our sin, which leads us to death. Healing is experienced when we are united to one another and to God in the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Just as one would take medicine prescribed by a doctor, everything that the Church does, all its sacramental and liturgical life, all its teaching, is medicine for our soul and body. These are directed at restoring the proper relationship between God and the creation, which is corrupted through sinfulness. This is the real meaning of Christian healing, and it involves the whole person, the body, the soul and the spirit.

In **Baptism** one enters into a new life after renouncing Satan and all his evil influences, sin, and death. **Chrismation** is the sacrament of anointing with Holy Chrism - the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit. By Chrismation one becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit and is privileged to have the potential to grow in holiness. **Holy Confession** is also called a sacrament of penance or repentance. Confession before a priest provides the believer an opportunity to confess sins and receive absolution or as-

urance that the Lord has forgiven his or her sins. Moreover, the priest may provide advice and spiritual support to heal the broken heart of the confessor, who would thereby acquire physical and mental strength to receive holistic healing – the primary purpose of Holy Confession. **Holy Eucharist** is the centre of Orthodox Spirituality through which we come into communion with God. Each time we participate in Holy Communion, we receive the grace of healing. In the words of Saint Ignatius, “*Holy Eucharist is the medicine of immortality, and an antidote to death.*” The **Sacrament of Holy Unction**, also called the **Sacrament of Healing**, is administered anytime and on any member of the Church regardless of age. This sacrament can be repeated as many times as required.

Partner Talk

How does the modern day standards of beauty and popularity often conflict with our theology?



To be perfect, just as our heavenly Father is perfect, it's important to note that perfection or deification is a life-long journey that we complete as part of our life in the Church, healing from life in the modern world, and especially through God's grace. Unlike other denominations, we do not believe this is an instantaneous benefit given at the Holy Baptism or when one is “born again”. We understand this process just as the

ancient Church understood, a life-long struggle with the goal to be like Christ in all that we do.

Fullness of Healing: Spiritual, Physical, and Mental Health

Spirituality is seeking closer communion with God and engaging in the reality beyond our material world. This can result in positive emotions such as peace, awe, contentment, gratitude, and acceptance. It is through the Holy Spirit within us that we are created and fulfilled, and the fruit of this work is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Our spiritual journey allows us to joyfully and willingly follow the Lord's commandment to love God and love our neighbour (St. Matthew 22:36-40).

"No one can heal my disease except He who knows the depths of the heart." This quote from St. Ephrem the Syrian, reminds us that the fullness of healing is only found in Christ. We affirm God's sovereignty over disease, yet many of us bear physical, mental, or spiritual illnesses that need to be managed for the rest of our earthly lives. In His wisdom that is beyond our comprehension, God may allow chronic illness for the cultivation of virtue and faith and the glory of His Kingdom. By actively struggling to remain faithful despite illnesses, we can acquire peace with our circumstances, deepen our love for Life, and depend on God more wholeheartedly—which is

what Christ demonstrated to us through His Passion.

Our **mental health** should not be viewed any less important than our physical or spiritual health, and as Christians everything comes together in Christ. Our spiritual practices include prayer, meditation, worship and fasting, which can lead to better mental and physical health and well-being.

Mental health awareness is critical in our life as an Orthodox Christian. All of us have body, mind, and spirit. Managing the health of all the three requires consistent and conscious effort. If your body needs care, we see a doctor, and in that same token, if our mind needs care, we must see a therapist. Throughout our spiritual journey, it is critical that we use our priest as our spiritual father and very often it is with the help of our priest that we can gain the discernment to seek help. Usually, when something affects the health of one part of who we are, it impacts the health of the other two as well. Maintaining healthy habits around diet, sleep, and exercise for physical health have equivalent counterparts in our spiritual and mental health. Regular spiritual and mental health practices as well as accountability to a priest and, when needed, a therapist can help us build resilience to the day-to-day stressors, worries, and ambiguities of life. Our spiritual practices can also help us find peace, faith, and hope in the face of illness and trauma.

Prayer may contribute to physical and mental relaxation along with feelings of

hope, comfort, gratitude and compassion – all of which have a positive effect on overall well-being.



Meditation can induce a feeling of calmness for the mind as well as improve concentration and attention. Recent research shows that meditation increases the brain's grey matter density which can reduce sensitivity to pain, enhance the immune system, control emotions, and relieve stress. Medical research has proved that clinically depressed adults who believed their prayers were heard by a concerned divine presence responded much better to treatment than those who did not believe this. **Spiritual community worship** such as attending church services can be a source of support which may provide a sense of belonging and caring from others. In addition, it was found that there has been a strong connection between the church attendance and improvement of health, mood and well-being of the person. **Personal spiritual strength** can help one overcome hardships. People who are spiritually strong find ways to meet challenges, continue with purposeful lives and bounce back to move on with more motivation. In other words, spiritual strength can

be a source of motivation to move on. It is ironic that modern science is rediscovering the numerous health benefits of ancient Christian practices of fasting, prayer (that include prostrations), and forgiveness. These include better immune function, longer life span, lower blood pressure, improved cardiovascular health, and fewer experiences of anger or hurt⁴.

We know that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (St. John 14:6). Therefore, it is only natural that following the path the Church prescribes not only brings healing but also a more positive view of ourselves as well. We are all created in God's Image and Likeness (Genesis 1:27). Whenever we look at ourselves in the mirror, we are looking at an icon of Christ!

Partner Talk

Why is the Church a hospital and not a courtroom?



Within the Church is the fullness of healing. To quote St. John Chrysostom: *“The Church is a hospital, and not a courtroom, for souls. She does not condemn on behalf of sins, but grants remission of sins. Nothing is so joyous in our life as the thanksgiving that we experience in the Church. In the Church, the joyful sustain their joy. In the Church, those worried acquire merriment, and those sad-*

⁴Earl K Balken, Why spirituality is important. Center for Spirituality and Healing. University of Minnesota

dened, joy. In the Church, the troubled find relief, and the heavy-laden, rest.



Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden (with trials and sins), and I will give you rest.

St. Matthew 11:28



What could be more desirable than to meet this voice? What is sweeter than this invitation? The Lord is calling you to the Church for a rich banquet. He transfers you from struggles to rest, and from tortures to relief. He relieves you from the burden of your sins. He heals worries with thanksgiving, and sadness with joy.

No one is truly free or joyful besides he who lives for Christ. Such a person overcomes all evil and does not fear anything!”

Navigating the Fallen World

Our calling is to bring Christ to the world (St. Matthew 5:15). However, as we navigate through life in the fallen world there are often impacts on our overall health and especially our mental/emotional health. We at times intentionally and at other times unintentionally bring down the health of others. Although our journey is towards perfection, the reality is that we are far from being perfect.

Our life in the Church provides us with the medicine for healing! Our theology emphasises the need for humility, and each cry of “Kurielaison! Lord

have mercy!” is a reminder not only of God’s perfect Divinity but also through His Love for us, there is forgiveness, redemption, and hope.

What if the Prodigal Son (St. Luke 15:11-32) felt so ashamed that he never returned to his Father? Stigma refers to a social perception of shame or disgrace associated with a person, characteristic, or circumstance. When stigma persists around an action that we have done which is sinful or mental health concerns, individuals often worry that they will be rejected, judged, or discriminated against because of their psychological, relational, or emotional struggles. Many will choose to suffer silently instead of reaching out for support. We each have a responsibility to compassionately break this pattern when we see it in ourselves or in others. Especially with mental health, the silence from those who are struggling is a sign that they do not feel safe to express their needs. As Christians, we need to be open to listen and discuss with kindness, patience, and gentleness.

Reflect

Identify signs of positive and negative behaviours and influences in your spiritual journey towards salvation.



We need to begin to “*bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ*” (Galatians 6:2). Being more

intentional to perceive signs of positive and negative behaviours and influences in ourselves and others is a way to bring the presence of Christ everywhere we go, and our actions more than words will bring us and others closer to the Church. This becomes more difficult in the anonymity of social media and the internet, but continuing to work with the Holy Spirit within us and striving to live the Sacramental life of the Church brings the balance discussed throughout this lesson of spiritual, physical, and mental well-being.

Summary

Managing our overall health, especially our mental health, is an act of stewardship for the body, mind, and spirit, and the life that God has given us. There are times when a tragedy, trauma, or crisis requires immediate intervention. However, these are not the only times to seek help or specialised care. Things don't have to be worse before you receive support. Our parents, our parish, and our Diocese have resources and avenues to seek help. Always remember that as a Christian we are never alone as we are

always and forever united in the Body of Christ!

Being aware of others who may be in need is also at the core of becoming more Christ-like. Orthodox evangelism is not one that counts the number of converts we can bring to the Church, but rather keeps the doors of the Church and our heart open to all who are in need. Keeping Christ at the centre of all we do not bring us to a healthier state in our hearts, mind, and soul but helps us discern actions that bring Christ to others. Keeping Christ at the centre of all (St. Matthew 6:33; 1 Corinthians 11:1-2; Philippians 4:13) helps us as we look beyond high-school and think about academic, personal, and professional choices ahead. What may bring feelings of anxiety and even depression gets new context when we think of the eternal. As Elder Paisios of Mount Athos reminded, *"each person will account to God whether they sanctified the path of life they chose."*

This eternal goal can often get lost in our daily struggles but the beauty of our Faith is that the doors of the Church are always open to us as well!

Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on the silent prayer the priest recites before reading the Gospel during Holy Qurbana. How does understanding God's will for us help us obey with "joy"?

*Grant us, O Lord, the knowledge of your Divine Words and fill us with the understanding of Your Holy Gospel, the richness of Your Divine Gifts, and the grace of Your Holy Spirit.
Grant us the wisdom to obey Your commandments with joy and do Your will.
Make us worthy of Your blessings and mercies, now and always, and forever and ever. Amin.*

2. Can any person be ugly?
Examine this question using our Orthodox theology that everyone is made in God's Image and Likeness (Genesis 1:27) and analyse how the modern day standards of beauty and popularity often conflict with our theology. How can we support even those outside the Church who are suffering from depression and feelings of inferiority?

The Living Church

Lesson Goals :

- *I can describe the existence and function of my Church.*
- *I can explain how the Church is the place where Sacraments are fulfilled.*
- *I can explain why the Church is not a secular institution.*
- *I can defend why the Church is essential for the spiritual growth of every Christian.*



“Wherever the Church is, there is also the Spirit of God, and wherever the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and the fullness of grace.” To understand this profound statement made by St. Irenaeus, it’s necessary for us to first understand what and who is the Church.

Partner Talk

Discuss St. Irenaeus’s quote, “Wherever the Church is, there is also the Spirit of God, and wherever the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and the fullness of grace.”



The Church

Fr. Thomas Hopko, former Dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, New York, made a bold statement in his reflections on “The Orthodox Parish in North America:”

“An Orthodox parish has only one God-given reason for being. It exists to be the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ.

Whatever the original reasons and conditions for its founding, whatever other services and activities it may provide, whatever other desires and needs it may fulfil for its members, a community of Orthodox Christians must be Christ’s One Holy Church. If it is not, then it is neither Christian nor Orthodox, whatever else it may be and do.

As you are entering youth-hood and

experiencing adulthood soon, remember that your parish is a place of worship, a place to deepen your relationship with God but most importantly with you. Our Church is the Body of Christ where you can pile your daily worldly burdens and temptations and leave your heart, mind and spirit filled with the divine Blood of Christ. Always remember our church is yours to come back to no matter how difficult life gets. Theologically speaking we are the unique one Orthodox church which continues to grow with the changes of today fostering growth for all those who are involved in our Church.

Each parish, therefore, is the one and only Church of Christ. Our parish is Holy because Christ's Body is holy. Everything in the parish, and everything about it, is Holy because God and Christ are Holy. Each part of the parish is sanctified by the Holiness of God and His Son Jesus Christ, "the Holy One of God." Remember you are a very important part of this parish and the Church, the Body of Christ. Thus, you are in communion and union with God every moment of your life. That union is sanctified, purified and cleaned every time you make the time to visit the Church and take part in the Holy Eucharist. Everything in and about a parish—its organization, structure, administration, finances and properties, as well as its theological and moral teachings and practices, and its liturgical and sacramental rites and services – is of God. They are

determined by God, inspired by God and submitted to God for His glory and the good of His people.”¹

Our Christian parish must also be catholic. The Orthodox parish shall be “catholic” so that it is full, complete and whole, lacking nothing in its mystical and sacramental being and life as Christ’s Holy Church. In an Orthodox Christian parish the whole fullness of God must dwell, as in Christ’s body, with all the fullness of life and grace and truth, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Only then the parish and her people can experience and enjoy the true catholicity disseminated by the fragrance of Holy Mooron from the wounds of the risen Christ.

And, according to the understanding of Christ’s Church in the Nicene Creed, the Orthodox parish that is truly Christian will not be just the same Church of Christ with every other parish. It will reflect four characteristics of the Holy Church, namely, One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. The Church will be one with God’s Unity, Holy with God’s Holiness, catholic with God’s fullness, and apostolic with fully reflecting the apostolic succession. God’s own apostolicity is found in the Church of Christ at all times and places. An Orthodox parish is apostolic in two ways. It will be apostolic because it is founded upon Christ’s apostles and secondly because it is firmly rooted in apostolic doctrine and tradition. It will keep and live

¹The Parish Community: Our Life in Christ by Fr. Thomas Hopko (<https://www.ocadwpa.org/files/-Parish%20Development/Hopko-Orthodox-Parish-in-NA-Orlando.pdf>)

The Role of the Church

John Moschus mentions the story of some thieves who try to rob an old hermit in 6th century AD Palestine. The old hermit tells them to take whatever they need. However, after they leave he finds a small bag of money they missed. He takes it and runs to give it to them. The love and earnestness of the hermit prompted them to return everything they had taken. In the above story, the old hermit did not preach, accuse or threaten them; instead he loved them just as Christ loved everyone who encountered Him. He lived Christ in His daily life and made the thieves see God through him. As members of the Church – the Body of Christ, each of us is confronted constantly to follow the example of Christ in our daily lives, but most of the time pass on these opportunities because of our worldly priorities. Nevertheless, this is a sacred responsibility we have been entrusted with when we were baptized and anointed with the Holy **Mooron**. The very purpose of our lives is to live Christ every day of our lives.

“the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 3) It will preserve and pass on the apostolic “deposit” (*paratheke*) which has been guarded and developed by Orthodox Christians, particularly through their bishops, in all times and places, from apostolic times to the present (cf. 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:12, 14). Thus, the Orthodox parish can witness the call to bear the name of Christ upon themselves and mutually enrich in Christ just like the Apostles did all around the world.

An Orthodox parish is apostolic also because it exists with God’s mission, which is the mission of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the apostles of all ages, beginning with Christ’s own. The words apostle and apostolic are derived

from the Greek word *apostolo*, meaning “to send.” So does the Latin word *mitto*, from which are derived the words mission and missionary. Each Orthodox Christian is thus “a sent one”, to be looked up on by everyone, who is inspired by God. An Orthodox Christian thus called to serve as a guide to attract others to the Kingdom of God.

An Orthodox Christian parish, however it was founded and for whatever purpose it was organised, must understand itself to be an apostolic community with a missionary purpose. Its members, especially its leaders, must be conscious of themselves as people sent by Christ from God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring God’s Unity, Holiness and Fullness to all human beings in this di-

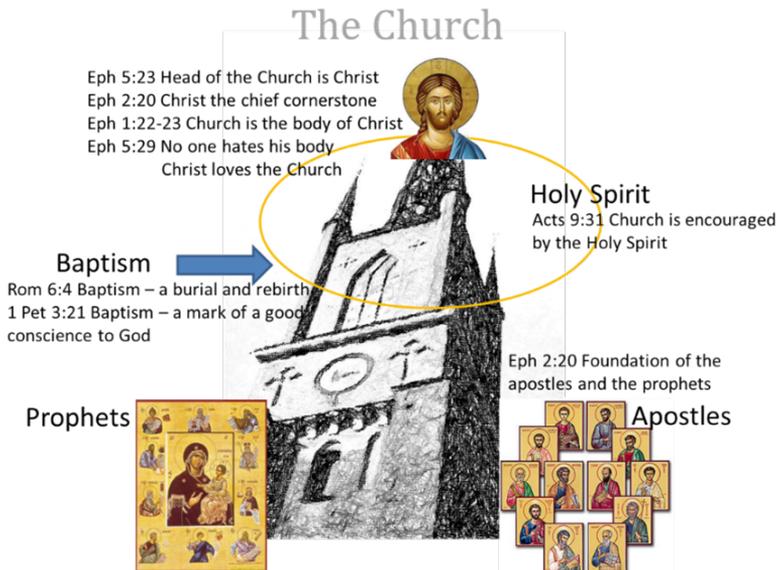
vided, sinful and fragmented world. If a parish has no awareness and consciousness of being “sent” by God to speak His words, to do His work, and to accomplish His will in this world, then it is not an Orthodox Christian parish. At best it is a bunch of decent people carrying on a bundle of benign activities for their own benefit. At worst, to use apocalyptic words, it is a “synagogue of Satan” perverting God’s gospel by its *“blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (which) will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come”* (Revelation 2:9, 3:9; St. Matthew 12:31-32; St. Mark 3:28).

An apostolic community has a pur-

pose to serve the world two fold: for one, it creates a healing environment for the world from the impacts of Satan and for the other, it radiates joy and happiness of a transformed community, where theosis is being nurtured. In other words, the purpose of each one of us as Orthodox Christians is to spread this healing apostolicity.

Partner Talk

Discuss the following statement:
 “My friends don’t come to Church any more, so I don’t feel like going either.”



The Spirit of God

Now that we have an understanding of what the Church is and understand that we are the Church, let's take a look at the second part of St. Irenaeus's statement, which refers to the Spirit of God. Our aim as Orthodox Christians is theosis, which is a transformative process where our aim is to grow in the likeness of God and to be in union with God. In order to work toward theosis, the Spirit of God needs to reside in us. Through Holy Sacraments, we also receive the Spirit of God, through the form of the Holy Spirit.

The word 'sacrament' originates from the Latin word *sacramentum*. However, the Greek word *mysterion* probably articulates the intent of the word better.

We become members of the Church when baptised, and enter a new life in Christ. Chrismation seals this new life through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Eucharist unites our body and blood with the Body and Blood of Christ. Marriage in Christ allows human love to become divine and eternal. Through the Sacrament of Healing our body and soul is healed, leading us to some more time in this world, or an eternity in the Kingdom of God. The sacrament of Confession removes the separation between us and God (Isaiah 59:2), and restores us to life in Christ. The Sacrament of Priesthood allows for the presence of Christ in the Church. We receive the Spirit of God through these Sacraments, thus through

the Holy Church.

Though we generally say about seven mysteries (Sacraments), for us as Orthodox Christians, our life itself becomes a sacramental journey. So, everything that we do in the process of theosis becomes a Sacrament. Theosis creates an environment for us to fulfil the intended purpose, when God created human beings: 'To be with Him, to worship Him, and to grow in holiness'. This sacramental life saves us and the world and therefore, we lead a life of holiness.

The Church - the Fullness of Grace

The last part of St. Irenaeus's statement, "...wherever the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and the fullness of grace," refers to our responsibility as members of an Orthodox parish to be motivated to keep God's commandments as our essential and ultimately exclusive reason for our existence. By doing so, we, the Church, can exacerbate the fullness of grace. The life and activity of an Orthodox parish should be perfectly described by Jesus' answer to the question concerning the first and great commandment of the law of God.

And one of the scribes asked him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first command-



The Holy Sacraments are visible actions commissioned by Jesus Christ, and invisibly fulfilled by the Holy Spirit, to receive the Grace of God and for the salvation of the human race. Further, it involves the special intervention of His God and is more than a prayer or a special worship service. The following are required for valid fulfilment of sacraments -

- *A celebrant (priest or bishop) with rightful apostolic succession.*
- *All elements used in the sacraments must be instituted by Jesus Christ.*
- *The core elements of sacraments shall remain the same though local variances are permitted.*
- *The celebrant and recipient(s) must be convinced about the efficacy of the sacrament.*

The Church has seven principal sacraments, of which five are mandatory and two are optional. The five mandatory ones are Holy Baptism, Holy Myron, Holy Qurbana, Holy Confession, and Anointing of the Sick, while the two optional ones are Holy Matrimony and Holy Priesthood. Holy Matrimony is for the sustenance of the human race and Holy Priesthood is for the sustenance of the Holy Church.

LL HG Yuhanon Mar Severios

Metropolitan of Kochi

Shushrusha Samvidhaana Sahaayi, p 105, 1983,

reprinted 2018, MOC Publications, Kottayam



ment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

In fact, when we think of love, we unconsciously assume a plurality of human beings – a community. Community and communion originate from Latin *communis*, and means the sharing or exchange of intimate thoughts and feelings especially when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level.

At the Garden of Eden, man walked with God and was in communion with

Him. During the Fall, man fell out of communion with God. Through the incarnation and the sacraments of the Church, we reconnect with God. The Church, the Body of Christ, thus becomes the avenue that leads us back to God’s Love and Communion. Jesus spells this out in St. John 13:34-35 when He says “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”

In the Gospel according to St.



The Icon of the Mystical Supper

Matthew, Jesus teaches a lawyer, who asks about the greatest commandment. Jesus said: “You shall love the LORD your GOD with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. *On these two commandments* (Deut. 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18) *hang all the law and the prophets.*” (St. Matthew 22: 38-40) For our present purposes we can also say that these two commandments depend on the whole being and life of an Orthodox Christian parish. Whatever confusions and difficulties confront Indian Orthodox Christianity, whatever their origins and causes, and whatever temptations and trials they bring to believers, there is no good reason why our Orthodox Chris-

tian parishes cannot be Christ’s holy Church. We shall strive with our whole heart and mind to love the LORD our God; love ourselves to know the yardstick to love our neighbour. Thus we create a community flourishing in love, care, and healing. When such communities exist, theosis happens and the Kingdom of God becomes visible. This is our goal, apostolicity and mission.

Think

Why is the Church not a secular institution?



Our afflictions will be great, as Christ has promised, but our successes are assured by His victory. *”In the world you*

have tribulation,” Jesus says to His Apostles, *“In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* (St. John 16:33)

Let us remember,

“

The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.

St. Luke 18:27

”

Reflection Questions

1. Why can't we stay at home and do Church service by ourselves? If the Spirit of God is with me, then why do I need to go to church?
2. Fr. John Behr once remarked - “You have to be responsible for coming to Church and being a member of the Church. But, why are you coming to this Church?”
3. Is it just because your parents did, and your grandparents did before that? Or do you believe that here you encounter the Lord of all Creation of this history, the one sitting at the right hand of the Father, tangibly...perceptibly...and become His Body?” How can you relate this to the question - why are you a member of the Orthodox Church?
4. What does it mean to be a member of the Orthodox Church?
5. Role Play or Discussion: How would you engage someone who no longer wishes to attend Church because of an issue they have with the people or practices in the Church? Is this a justification to no longer be an Orthodox Christian?

Orthodox Witness in Today's Society

Lesson Goals :

- *I can discern how my Faith impacts my values and perspectives.*
- *I can defend the Orthodox stance on ethical issues when society does not always have a true Christian foundation.*
- *I can defend that the goal of Christianity is not only to be good but rather to strive to become like Christ in everything that we do.*



Introduction

Christian faith impacts values and perspectives. We are called to witness Christ with our actions, words, and thoughts using guidance and inspiration from faith, prayer, liturgy, discipline, scripture, and tradition. Christian faith forms and builds the virtue and ethics which focus on developing a strong moral character.

Pluralism is defined as a condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles, sources of authority, beliefs, etc., coexist. The most important characteristic of a pluralistic society is the tolerance of all people and religions, regardless of their differences. In a secular society there is cultural, political

and philosophical pluralism, where different communities and groups co-exist. As our society has become more pluralistic, it has been easy for some to fall into the error of believing that it ultimately does not matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere.

Partner Talk

Discuss examples of pluralism in today's modern society.



The opposite of pluralism is totalitarianism where only a single ideology, religion, philosophy or system is allowed. In this system, the concept of equality is diminished and only an "elect"

is in control while others not aligned are marginalised, scrutinised, and penalised.

Where does Orthodoxy fit within this spectrum of pluralism and totalitarianism? What is the ideal social structure for a Christian?

The early Church described in the Acts of Apostles (Acts 2:41-47) numbered more than 3000 and was growing. However, this was not because Christianity was accepted by the ruling authorities. The early Church was not only persecuted for their belief in Christ, but there were also internal conflicts and disagreements that led to the rise of many heresies prompting the need of Ecumenical Councils to confirm and uphold the faith that the Apostles entrusted to those who followed.

Throughout history, we see the growth of the Church not due to adaptation or reformation to fit society, but rather that the Church stood out from the world as a shining testimony to the love of Christ. The Church always and forever maintained focus on the Golden Commandment to love God and to love our neighbour (St. Matthew 22:37-40) and because of that singular focus was often not aligned to the views of any society. This was the direct prayer of Christ (St. John 17:14-19) for us: *“I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am*

not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.”

The modern world is one where there are many religious philosophies, diverse cultural ethos, different languages, traditions and practices. On the surface, several religions share a number of similarities and especially in the ancient religions we do see commonality especially around morality and ethical issues. The golden rule “treat your neighbour as you would treat yourself” appears in belief systems that existed even before Christianity. St. Justin Martyr emphasised that this was because of *logos spermatikos* or ‘Seeds of the Word [Christ].’ “In every man there is a divine particle, his reason, which at least before Christ’s coming was man’s best guide in life.”

But we need to be careful not to remain at this superficial level and be aware that there are differences in core foundational beliefs. For Orthodox Christians, our core belief begins with God, just as we profess in the Nicene Creed, “We believe in One True God”. All religions are not equal, and even within Christianity we cannot say that everyone who follows Christ shares the same theology as the Orthodox Church.

So, with this baseline that as Christians we do not conform to this world (Romans 12:2) and that our focus in life is to prepare for the Kingdom to come (1 Peter 2:9; Colossians 3:1-2; 1 John 3:2-

3), how do we engage with a society that does not share these values? How do we interact with those outside our Church?

In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it is very clear – we must love! We are commanded to pray, forgive, bless, feed everyone including those outside of our Church. This is without exception!

From St. John's homily on 1 Timothy 2:1-4:

"I exhort therefore that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth."

"Let every prayer of ours, then, be accompanied with thanksgiving. And if we are commanded to pray for our neighbours, not only for the faithful, but for the unbelieving also, consider how wrong it is to pray against your brethren. What? Has He commanded you to pray for your enemies, and do you pray against your brother? But your prayer is not against him, but against yourself. For you provoke God by uttering those impious words, "Show him the same!" "So do to him!" "Smite him!" "Recompense him!" Far be such words from the disciple of Christ, who should be meek and mild. From the mouth that has been vouchsafed such holy Mysteries, let nothing bitter proceed. Let not the tongue that has

touched the Lord's Body utter anything offensive, let it be kept pure, let not curses be borne upon it.

Let us learn at last to be Christians! If we know not how to pray, which is a very simple and easy thing, what else shall we know? Let us learn to pray like Christians. Those are the prayers of Gentiles, the supplications of Jews (i.e., who pray only for their own). The Christians' are the reverse, for the forgiveness and forgetting of offences against us. "Being reviled," it is said, "we bless; being persecuted, we suffer; being defamed, we entreat." Hear Stephen saying, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Instead of praying against them, he prayed for them."

To summarise in the words of Fr. Thomas Hopko, "We will answer for what we are given, and that's the teaching of Jesus. Everyone will give an account, according to what they have received. Those who have received much are going to have to answer for much. God will know what to do with us, and God will know what to do with every human being in the whole of creation. That's His business. Our business is to remain faithful to the truth."

As an Orthodox Christian living in a pluralistic society, it is of the utmost importance to understand what we believe and why we believe it.

Living in a Pluralistic Society

A reflection on how Jesus spoke with a Samaritan woman in St. John 4:5-42

at Jacob's well teaches us a lot on how to live our life as a Christian in today's world. We can immediately see that society even in ancient days was also pluralistic with different beliefs and sources of authority. Any idea that all the tribes of Israel were united under a central authority and governed with a set of beliefs is not historically and Scripturally accurate. The northern tribes of Israel separated and moved to areas that included Samaria after the death of King Solomon in 10 B.C. and established separate kingdoms. They claimed faithfulness to God but lived to the contrary, and were defeated by Assyria in 722 BC as written in 4 Kingdoms 18:9-12 (2 Kings 18:9-12). The Assyrian empire intentionally forced the Israelites to other regions they had conquered and likewise moved foreigners to the land of Samaria as part of their plan to change the culture and any sentiment that may cause future rebellion. In a few generations, the people of the conquered land would no longer be like that which the Assyrians had defeated. This is what happened to the Samaritans at the time of Christ. Other Jewish people no longer recognized them as one of their own but rather as part of the Gentile population.

St. Cyril of Alexandria's reflection on this passage provides us insights on how Christ wants us to respond in these situations where we engage with those outside of our Church. In spite of the animosity prevalent between Jews and the Samaritans, Jesus' conversation embodies divine love. His authenticity, em-

pathy, and kindness leads not just the woman (who the Church recognizes as St. Photini) to ask for "this water so that I won't get thirsty" (v15) but her family and many other Samaritans as well to follow Christ.

On how Christ first engaged with the Samaritan woman, St. Cyril writes:

"For first, on Christ asking for drink, she does not readily give it: but beholding Him breaking (as far as one can speak humanly) the national customs of the Jews, she begins to seek first the reason of this, all but, by her mentioning it, inviting the Lord to an explanation: How is it (says she) that THOU being a Jew askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria?"

What's important here is that Christ was fully aware of the laws and customs of the Jewish people to not engage with those who were "unclean". This is a model example that we are not to do anything other than what Christ commands which is love our neighbour who very often in a diverse community will not be a follower of Christ. By simply being Christ-like in our actions, we draw others closer to Him. Our mission is not to actively "convert" or "save" others but rather reflect the image and likeness of Christ in ourselves to all we engage. This is the core lesson of the saying attributed to Seraphim of Sarov, in which he instructs us to "Acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved."

St. Cyril further comments,

“But when during the progress of questioning, she at length begun to confess that He was a Prophet, having received His reproof a medicine unto salvation, she added another inquiry saying with zeal for learning: Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and YE say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. But He was teaching this again, that the time shall come, yea, is already present, when the true worshippers, rejecting worship on the mountains of earth, shall offer the higher and spiritual worship to God the Father. She attributes the best of all as the due of Christ alone, and keeping the more perfect knowledge for those times, says, We know that Messias cometh Which is called Christ; when He is come, He will tell us all things. Seest thou how ready to believe the woman was already getting, and as though ascending a staircase, springs up from little questions to a higher condition? It was right then to lay open to her with now clearer voice what she longed for, telling her that that which was preserved in good hope is at length set before her in sight, I that speak unto thee am He.”

St. Cyril is highlighting that with the simple act of asking for water, the Samaritan woman was able to come forward and see God. By not engaging with love in these simple everyday actions, we close the door to any possibility of sharing the Gospel to those who are in need. St. Cyril emphasises this as well:

“Let them therefore who have the care

of teaching in the Churches commit to the new-born disciples, the word of teaching to be digested, and so at length let them show them Jesus, bringing them up from slight instruction to the more perfect knowledge of the faith. But let them who, taking hold of the alien and so proselyte, and bringing him within the inner veil, suffer him to offer the Lamb with hands yet unwashen, and crown with the dignity of the Priesthood him who is not yet instructed, prepare for a mighty account in the day of judgement. It is sufficient for me only to say this.”

Pluralism involves many religions, ideologies and cultures; it also results in diverse cultural interactions in society, especially affecting young people in schools and colleges. If we engage with a strong understanding of our Orthodox Faith and a real relationship with Christ, we are able to be a witness to our Faith and share the light with all who are in need (St. Matthew 5:15). But, there is also a risk for us that in these interactions we may get influenced by secular ideologies and atheistic philosophy that is strongly emphasised in a modernist society.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

In a study of religious beliefs held by American teenagers, Dr. Christian Smith and other fellow researchers came to an observation that teenagers were describing their belief in a manner that they summarised as “Moralistic Thera-

peutic Deism”¹:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Does this framework convey our understanding of God? Is our goal simply to be good and be happy in life, or is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ inviting us for a deeper purpose? As we analyse and critique ourselves and learn how to better participate in political, social, and cultural changes around us, it is important to understand that the theology of the Orthodox Church is not that God is a distant and disconnected spiritual being who is not actively engaged in our day-to-day life. Rather, we know that God is one who created us in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:27-28) to be His Hands and Feet on this world and the world to come. God did not create humanity so that we be happy or ‘good’ people, but rather to become one with Him, to be in communion with Him, and not just be “Sunday only Christians”.

For many religions and even other Christian denominations, the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself. There is real danger in this line of thinking as it leads us away from Christ and towards apathy and sometimes even animosity against God. Any notion that one “loves Christ” but “hates Church” is another signal that the teachings of the Church have been misunderstood. Our theology is clear that Christ and His Church are One (Ephesians 5:32; Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 12:13), and we are to bring the Love of Christ to all as a witness. Our allegiance is not to any secular organisation but rather to God alone. As St. Paul reminded, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20).

What does it mean to be an Orthodox Witness?

The world today has experienced much progress in the realms of technology, communication and scientific research. However, there has been a countercurrent also apparent as people in society at large have separated one another into groups based on ideologies – especially political, racial/ethnic, gender identity, socio-economic status, etc.

Is tolerance the only answer in accepting differences? This question requires delving deeper because tolerance can be

¹Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

a double-edged sword where love for neighbours can be engendered but that love could come at the expense of compromising on Christian principles.

The socio-political climate has undoubtedly become polarised on the extreme ideological ends. In one sense opinions have been weaponised to attack one group of people versus another that takes a different stance. One could say that with the increasing secularisation of society there brings a need for a moral code that potentially can be enveloped in subjectivity. How is this so? Since Christ is the Creator of us all, He is the Eternal Truth and the source of all that is true. All of our well-intended actions are centred on Christ and all our actions should be steps towards our path to holiness.

If we are to love the Lord with all of our heart, mind, and strength, what directly follows is the unconditional love for our neighbour. The golden question then is, "Who is my neighbour?" We can easily spot our physical neighbours but in reality, our neighbour is everyone, because the objective is to find Christ in all people. This transforms our interaction and relationship with the other person from the mundane and apparent to what is more fundamental which is love for our fellow human being. Though we do not condone what a person says against the Gospel, we must first start to look at the person with compassion.

The Orthodox Church does not espouse any particular affiliation or preference for a particular ideological group. The government cannot legislate the the-

ology of the Church - the mind of the Church follows Christ. The focus of the Orthodox Church is living the Gospel in action, in sharing the love of Christ with all. At the same time, as Christians, we are stewards of Christ and therefore when being involved in public engagements or civic responsibilities, our actions should be in line with upholding the Gospel.

In the Western world, there has been a divorce of the soul and mind since the latter became more understood through rational concepts and reasoning. The soul makes up the whole of the person, therefore in the Orthodox Church, the healing of the wounded soul brings a holistic change to the person. Originally, the term for "psychotherapy" in Greek referred to therapy of the soul, which is "psyche." But in modern methodology, the realms of psychology and psychiatry have developed based on the understanding of the mind and intellect separated or superseding the existence of the soul. From the maladies of the soul comes the sickness of the whole person which can have spiritually or physical side-effects. The fracture of the inner person can lead outwardly into the fracturing of interpersonal relationships. This division results in going against the commandments of Christ.

Due to the wounded soul, this is where there is conflict of ideologies and ensuing rifts between people or groups come about. His Eminence Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos and Agios Vlasios advice to this is to

have open discussions with people having different opinions rather than treating everyone around as a stranger: “*We are hermetically sealed inside ourselves; jailed in the dreadful prison of senses and passions, especially in the passion of self-love, which is the root of all other passions.*”² Having a dialogue and seeing each other’s perspective outside of one’s own is the start of bringing more understanding and drawing people closer.

Orthodox witness is to uphold the Christian faith, lead a life of sanctity, and follow the path of holiness and personal devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. Orthodox witness is to not live a life of pleasure, but of chastity and abstinence. Orthodox faith is centred on worship, and the personal mystical experience of prayer, fasting, and meditation. Our faith based on leading a holy life in Christ impacts our values and perspectives. Our ethical values and virtues are determined by how much we cooperate with God. In the Orthodox Church’s perspective, God is the source of all virtues. Without God’s grace, virtue has no meaning and again by God’s grace, virtues prevail with each one’s participation. Without divine grace, virtues could be overpowered by desires, and behind all ambition and corruption, there is always hidden desire.

We grow in Communion with God starting with our Baptism. Our witness to the world is manifesting the image of God achieved. St. Gregory of Nyssa reflects, “through Jesus Christ, i.e. in the

new man created in the image of God, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily, who through his own purity rendered the human nature again akin to God, he has drawn us all together into the same grace - the whole human nature that now shares in his body and has been made akin to Him”

Divine virtues and *praxis* (applying these virtues in our lives) are unconditional and there is no room for self-interest - this is the Orthodox witness in its true sense. Every member of the Malankara Orthodox Church is called to lead a saintly life and grow in the path of goodness and holiness.

In summary, His Grace Paulos Mar Gregorios teaches us that “from Him comes all good. All that is good not only comes from Him, but is also His presence; where the good is, there, God is present. I bow before the good, wherever it shows up-in people of different faiths and religions, in people who claim to believe in no God, in birds and animals, in trees and flowers, in mountains and rivers, in air and sky, in sun and moon, in sculpture and painting, in music and art, in the smile of the infant and in the wisdom of the sage, in the blush of dawn and in the gorgeous sunset. Where the good is, there is the Kingdom of God. There, God is present and reigns even when that presence is not acknowledged or recognised, though the Kingdom belongs in a special sense to those who have known Him and worship Him, dedicating their lives to total obedience.”

²Hierotheos. “The Illness and Cure of the Soul in the Orthodox Tradition”. 1993. p. 28

Reflection Questions

1. Beginning with our core belief that everyone is made in God's Image and Likeness (Genesis 1:27-28), develop and support an argument that accounts for needs and concerns of marginalised groups outside of our Church that builds on the foundation of our Christian theology that God is love and that others are to know Christ not just by our words but through our actions.
2. Discuss some ideas on how we can respond with love as Orthodox Christians to inequality in the world. Does our response change based on gender, sexual orientation, or race?
3. What are ways we can welcome others who are in need of the love of Christ to our parish?
4. During the Final Benediction during Holy Qurbana, the priest blesses us with a prayer to leave the Church in peace and love and obey our Lord. What are some ways we can carry this peace and love received during Liturgy through our whole week so that we can not fall into the category of "Sunday Only Christians"?

The Mission of the Church

Lesson Goals :

- *I understand that salvation in the Church is healing and I can invite others with this hope and promise.*
- *I am aware of various styles of evangelism and their efficacy in modern-day society.*
- *I can relate to the mission of our Church in America and defend common misunderstandings such as our practice of closed communion.*



In a lecture in 1968 to the National Conference of Orthodox College Students, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann asked a simple question, “What is the role and task of Orthodox Christians in America?”

This question was not at the top of the mind for most Orthodox immigrants in America, given the daunting goal of finding a living in a new country. This is the same situation we face now. The first Orthodox parish communities no doubt began as a place of worship for the faithful but also fulfilled the need for these first immigrants to experience the culture and language of their mother country. This built a strong form of identity and unity in a new country and formed what is known as a “subculture” in sociology. After the Divine Liturgy, the faith-

ful would meet in the hall not only as Orthodox Christians but also as Malayalees, and Indians . This fellowship is essential to the life of a Christian and also serves a dual purpose as it allows immigrants to breathe their native culture and establish a foothold for growth in a new country.

As our parishes grow and new generations are born and raised in our region, we must always remember our Church will always be a home for immigrants who may not be comfortable with this and have spiritual and pastoral needs as they begin their new life. This is without question the mission of our Church. But as seen in other Orthodox jurisdictions that had been established hundreds of years before the first immigrants from India arrived, our next chapter is indeed

to grow beyond being just an immigrant community. It is not only important to interact and be a part of the communities we live in but also to fully obey the direct command of our Lord Jesus Christ to be His presence wherever we find ourselves (St. Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).

Think

What is the role and task of Orthodox Christians in America?



As we move forward from an “immigrant” mentality, it becomes even more critical to understand our mission and our calling as Orthodox Christians. More importantly, we need to understand that the mission of the Church is a personal mission as we become the hands and feet of our Lord Jesus Christ in a world that desperately needs to know God’s love. As we think of ourselves and our future generations, it is not enough to be Orthodox simply because it is the faith of our parents. Scripture and the Church fathers are clear that a parish is to be a spiritual hospital welcoming all who are in need of healing regardless of race, culture, or upbringing. With this in mind and heart, our claim to be the true Orthodox Church is hypocritical, if we insist we must keep to ourselves and our primary mission be for the perpetuation of the cultural values of a particular geographic region.

Remember

More importantly, we need to understand that the mission of the Church is a personal mission as we become the hands and feet of our Lord Jesus Christ in a world that desperately needs to know God’s love.



We welcome others to Christ by reflecting Him in our everyday actions. Our life is our message and we need to practice more than what we preach. This mission does not change regardless of where we are; geographically, the environment, age, or any other context – the message of Christ transcends all of these variables. All of us can experience holistic healing within the Church, the Body of Christ.

The Mission of Orthodoxy

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann reminds us that every Christian is called to be a missionary as every Christian is sent forward into the world for a purpose. As members of the “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”, the term “apostolic” means not only the continuity of ministry of the Apostles but also what the Apostles were commanded to do, i.e., the missionary nature of the Church and each of her members (St. Luke 10:1-18). Fr. Schmemmann breaks down to understand how we are missionaries in the following way:

Remember

Every Christian is called to be a missionary as every Christian is sent forward into the world for a purpose.

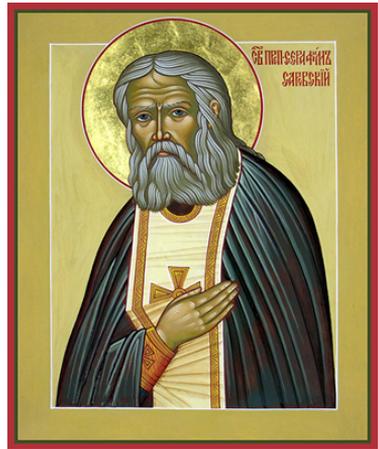


1. **Being an Apostle to ourselves:** “I am sent to myself” means that the new Adam in me is always ready to challenge and to fight the old Adam - the “I” who is still very much “of this world” and is subdued to it.
2. **Being an Apostle to others:** “I am sent to others” is a calling for everyone and not limited to bishops, priests, and missionaries in the strict sense of the word.
3. **Being an Apostle to the world:** “I am sent as a missionary to the world” is understanding the scope of our vision and faith is always the salvation of all for whom Christ died, and He died “for the life of the world.” Thus, one cannot be saved without giving oneself to this mission. Everyone is a missionary.

Being an Apostle to Ourselves

Our mission to us includes weeping and repenting for our sins and constantly striving for our salvation. St. Seraphim of Sarov is said to have taught that we should “acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved.” By this, St. Seraphim is teaching us that following a path of holiness for

ourselves also is a beacon and example for others around us even though we are not directly engaging with them. With the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are led towards the Kingdom of God. “For the heart of a man is capable of containing the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God are one.” St. Gregorios of Parumala used to go for confessions on a regular interval. Every time, the saint’s handkerchief was so wet that one could squeeze it to collect tears. The saint wept for the sins of himself, as well as for those of his faithful people, who were entrusted upon him by Christ. When each one of us can reach this level of holiness, the Church becomes the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic place for everyone to taste and experience happiness in the Kingdom of God.



St. Seraphim of Sarov

The words of the Prophet Joel remind us of this as well - “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, and wailing and with mourning: rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for He is merciful and compassionate. He is long-suffering and plenteous in mercy and repents of evils” (Joel 2:12-13). *Metanoia* is a Greek word that means a “change of heart” and is a change in ourselves through repentance. or, more literally, “after perception,” tying it closely to the idea of repentance.

St. Seraphim compares the foolish virgins in the parable of the virgins from St. Matthew 25:1-13 to people lacking good deeds. Jesus’ conscious choice to use virgins in the parable was probably intended to communicate that these were good people but just did not care enough to bring their “oil” which was the grace of God’s Spirit. St. Anthony said that sometimes the devil inspires us to do good deeds out of vanity or for the sake of virtue rather than for Christ (vain-glory). Again, sometimes we do good to flatter our passions or for ourselves, and not care for God’s grace. This reminder is given to us in Sneebe morning prayers - *“Like those five wise virgins, who were ready with their lamps, make us worthy to sing praise to you O Lord God”*.

Being an Apostle to Others

Each day we have opportunities in our lives to witness Christ to others and be His presence to those in need. A fundamental teaching of the Fathers is that

we cannot share with others that which we do not possess ourselves; and thus, it is futile to believe we can share with the world the way to the Kingdom if we are not working with all our energy to receive it first in our own hearts. The saints of the Church have endeavoured to proclaim the Gospel through the sanctity of their lives and have taken great risks to preach the Gospel, sometimes being martyred while sharing their faith.

Remember

When each one of us can reach this level of holiness, the Church becomes the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic place for everyone to taste and experience happiness in the Kingdom of God.



Our mission to the people around us is therefore to be visible as Orthodox Christians so that others see the Church and Christ through us. If we start our mission to others by first changing ourselves, Bishop Irenei of the Russian Orthodox Church says that we will have something far greater than a plan for spreading the word or offering just the right counsel. “We will have hearts that burn with God’s grace. We will have within us the Holy Spirit filling our lives and words and actions in the same way He filled the lives, words, and actions of the great missionary saints of all generations past.” According to him, to be genuine missionaries in the world, we must

begin by whole-heartedly embracing repentance — repentance not as an obligation, not as a requirement, but as a joyful and joy-creating foundation for truly spiritual life.

Being an Apostle to the world

Christ has commanded us to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (St. Matthew 28:19-20).

There are over 4 billion people who do not know the hope, love, and joy of life in Christ, and it is important to reach out to them where they are. The MGOCSM of North America has been serving on mission trips in America and abroad very consistently, and it is a blessing for all those who participate as well as those who are touched by the love and joy of our youth. If your calling is to serve on a mission trip, this is something that you have access to. However, mission work can be right where you live, where you work, or even at home. Too often we think of mission work as some place far, but very often the most we can witness to others about Christ is right where we are. This is the most simple mission work, which Christ has commissioned us at the very end of St. Matthew’s Gospel.

Orthodox Evangelism

Remember

Our task is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, our task is the working out of our salvation, our task is to repent and weep for our sins, our task is to enter the Kingdom of God.



It is very important to remember that the purpose of mission work is not to coerce or count the number of people we bring into the Church. We do not convince people of the Truth but it is God Who attracts people, Who brings them in the door, Who convicts their hearts, Who brings them to repentance, and Who convinces them of the Truth. It is through us that God works!

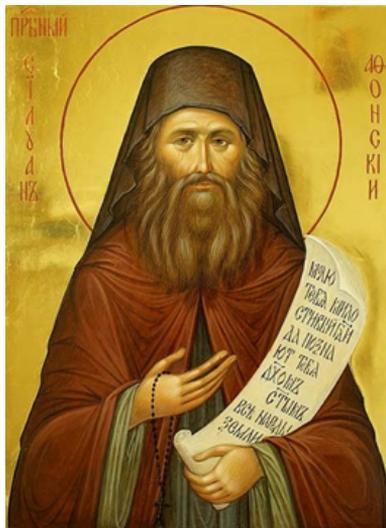
Too often, the modern definition of evangelism focuses on the individual and their personality or charisma to do God’s work. The risk in this approach is we often focus so much on ourselves that we forget our purpose.

What is our task? Our task is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, our task is the working out of our salvation, our task is to repent and weep for our sins, our task is to enter the Kingdom of God. This, more than anything else, is what we must do. This is an evangelistic task - indeed the primary evangelistic task.

There are other “tasks”, however, which derive from this one which are a bit more specific to “evangelism”. It is God who brings people to the door of the

Church and who convinces them that they should enter - however, we must keep the door to the Church open and visible. Said in other words, the door of the Church is visible alone through the faithful. Hence, Orthodox evangelism must centre on the Church - the beauty of the building, the beauty of the services, the frequency and availability of the services. Orthodox evangelism is served by beautiful icons, crosses rising against the sky, the smell of incense, and the pious and holy singing of the services.

Orthodox evangelism is served by our visibility as Orthodox Christians in the world - the clothing of the clergy (and in these days the modest and humble clothing of the faithful as well) - the sign of the cross as we pray at each juncture of our lives - beginning and ending a task, eating and finishing a meal, starting and ending a trip, etc. Orthodox evangelism is the keeping of icons in our homes, in our offices, and in our cars. Orthodox evangelism is keeping the fast without excuses or compromises. Orthodox evangelism is setting our priorities to forgo the allures of the world in order to be at divine services whenever they are held. Orthodox evangelism is denying ourselves and bearing our cross. Orthodox evangelism is keeping the door of the Church open and visible. While the Holy Spirit is the one who draws the world to Himself, it is you and I who keep the doors of the Church open and who welcome all who come. This is our calling.



Elder Silouan of Mt. Athos

The second specific task that we as Orthodox Christians have in evangelism is the practical expression of God's love for mankind. Orthodox evangelism is greeting visitors as they come to the Church and then modelling (neither instructing nor condemning the visitor) for them, proper behaviour and demeanour in the Church. Orthodox evangelism is the hospitality offered to share meals and provide shelter and clothing as needed. Orthodox evangelism is to pray for our neighbour and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Orthodox evangelism is going to the soup kitchen and serving. Orthodox evangelism is giving to the poor without regard for "how the money will be used".

Orthodox evangelism is visiting the sick in hospitals and praying for them.

Orthodox evangelism is going on mission trips to places you haven't been, and just serving and loving the people there as you would at home. Orthodox evangelism is going to the prisons (contact your local prison chaplain regarding how this might be done) and offering comfort and kindness to the imprisoned. Orthodox evangelism is loving your enemies (Elder Silouan of Mt. Athos says that this is the true mark of a Christian - the love of one's enemies).

Orthodox Evangelism is loving your neighbour as yourself. If we all did these things, then our Churches would be open and filled with light and glory drawing all who see her by the grace and action of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. We don't have to preach on street corners, we don't have to have "events" or revivals or seminars as evangelistic tools - we simply have to be Orthodox Christians "to the max" without reservation or compromise.

Mission and Communion

We have an important mission as full members of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. We begin our journey with Baptism and even as infants we are full members of the Church which is the Body of Christ (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 4:12; Hebrews 13:3; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:24). Our membership in the Church is sustained by our participation in the Sacraments, following the

commandments of God and exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

But as discussed in this lesson, our participation in the life of the Church also has a missionary aspect where we share the love of Christ to all who are in need. With this in mind, why does the Orthodox Church not give Holy Qurbana to everyone?

The foundation of the Orthodox Faith centres on the fundamental Truth that God is Love. Everything He does and every Word that has been taught is based on His Love for us beginning with the very act of our creation in His Image and Likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). By extension, every action of the Church is based on love including closed communion.

Think

Why is the foundation of the Orthodox Faith centred on the fundamental Truth that God is Love?



We read in Scripture that anyone who partakes of the real Body and Blood of Christ in an "unworthy" manner is guilty of Sin (1 Corinthians 11:27). All who are not Baptized as Orthodox Christians have not begun the path of repentance and been taught to live the Sacramental life that we believe leads to holiness and communion with Christ. Participation in the Body and Blood of Christ is closed to everyone except to members who not only are Baptized but have prepared to partake of this Holy Communion. This

practice goes back to the early Church and is recorded in the 2nd century writing, the Didache.

Part of our mission work is to lovingly explain some of the misunderstood practices of our Church, and always speak the Truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). In the example of closed Communion, our practice is very much to protect those who we welcome into the doors of our Church and pray that the Holy Spirit continues to work in them and through us as they open their eyes and hearts to the love of Christ and the fullness of the Christian faith.

Summary

Arguably the biggest challenge in today's world which desperately needs to know of God's love is the misunderstanding and misconceptions that come when they hear of Christianity.

We must acknowledge with humility that this begins with us. Using the framework provided in this lesson where we begin with ourselves, we can extend our Liturgical experience to our everyday life. From there, we can help people and witness God's love to others we interact with and from there to the world.

If we keep our Orthodox Faith only on Sundays or at conferences and retreats, we take the light that God has given us and keep it hidden (St. Matthew 5:14-15). The joy that we feel in the

presence and communion with Christ should overflow in our hearts and extend to all who we interact with. This is the deeper meaning of the fruit of the Holy Spirit that works within us, when we cooperate with God out of love and joy (Galatians 5:22-23).

As members of the Church, we are God's chosen people. In the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, "we must think in terms of a remnant, of a movement, of service. We must begin with ourselves, if we are to be of service to the Church. When God gives something, a talent, He wants us to invest it. He wants us to serve. There is no other way of following Christ".

Final Thoughts

“

We must think in terms of a remnant, of a movement, of service. We must begin with ourselves, if we are to be of service to the Church. When God gives something, a talent, He wants us to invest it. He wants us to serve. There is no other way of following Christ

· Alexander Schmemmann

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Reflection Questions

1. Think of examples of “Godly grief or contrition” as described in 2 Corinthians 7:10 with grief that is self-centred and earthly goals. How does one produce repentance that leads to metanoia?
2. How can we be the Presence of Christ at our homes and in our school? Is this limited only when we are working with other Christians?
3. As you think ahead to college, what can we do to better prepare ourselves to witness Christ to others? How can you leverage Church ministries such as MGOCSM, campus ministry, and counselling to become missionaries in our everyday life?

Opening the Scriptures

Lesson Goals :

- *I can answer the question, 'Is the Orthodox Church a "Bible-based Church"?'*
- *I can explain how Christ opens the Scriptures to us.*
- *I can answer the question, 'Can a Christian fully know Christ through the Scriptures alone?'*



Holy Scripture is vital to an Orthodox Christian because it teaches the Truth, rebukes errors, corrects faults, gives instruction for living rightly, and is inspired by God. To benefit from it, we must approach it with reverence, meditate on it rather than flipping through its pages, and pray with it. There is a misconception among us Orthodox Christians that it is optional to know Holy Scripture. We could not be more wrong.

The Holy Scripture is part of the Church's Holy Tradition (note the upper-case T). We may encounter questions about the role of Traditions in our spiritual life and the sufficiency of Scripture alone. For some Christians, especially non-denominational ones, only the Scripture has a role in their life; Tradition has none: they look down upon it. On the other hand, we believe that the Scripture is rooted in Tradition; Scrip-

ture is understood correctly through Tradition; And that the Scripture comes alive in Tradition.

Remember

Holy Scripture is vital to an Orthodox Christian because it teaches the Truth, rebukes errors, corrects faults, gives instruction for living rightly, and is inspired by God. To benefit from it, we must approach it with reverence, meditate on it rather than flipping through its pages, and pray it.



The Holy Church canonised (Greek κανών, meaning rule, measuring stick, or standard) a set of books for a purpose that the few verses below highlight.

“

³⁰Jesus worked many other miracles for his disciples, and not all of them are written in this book. But these are written so that you will put your faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. If you have faith in him, you will have a true life.

St. John 20:30-31

”

“

Everything in the Scriptures is God's Word. All of it is useful for teaching and helping people and for correcting them and showing them how to live. The Scriptures train God's servants to do all kinds of good deeds.

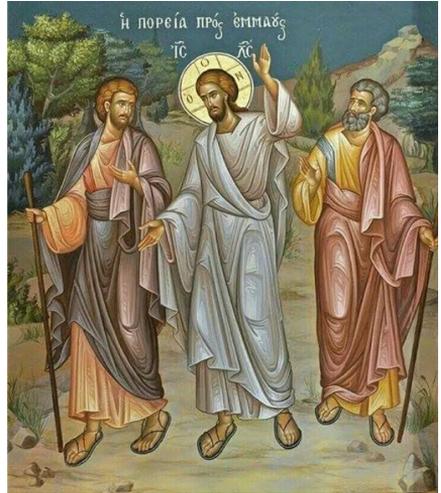
2 Timothy 3:16-17

”

Road to Emmaus: Jesus Reveals Scripture

The Road to Emmaus story (St. Luke 24:13-32) illustrates three points: the need to be familiar with Scripture, study it, and live a sacramental (Traditional) life. In this event, we read about Jesus' friends, Saints Luke and Cleopas, walking away from Jerusalem towards Emmaus after Jesus' scandalous execution on the cross. Their friend's death saddened them, and they were confused on

hearing about the empty tomb. They tried to make sense of those and other recent events when a stranger walked up and joined them.



Road to Emmaus Icon

Unfortunately, they did not recognize the stranger: the Risen Lord. As they walked along, our Lord gave them a scripture lesson, one of the earliest documented Bible studies. After He broke bread and gave it to them at dinner, their eyes opened; they recognized Him.

The saints were familiar with Scripture; Jesus often talked about it to them. As Christ expounded it to them on the road to Emmaus, they felt warmth in their hearts; in other words, they began to know the Scripture. Until then, they were only familiar with Scripture; they did not know it. Would Christ's exposition have stirred them if they were un-

familiar with Scripture?

We must also be familiar with the Scripture like those saints because the Holy Spirit will knock on our hearts anytime and make them burn. It could happen to us during Holy Qurbana, Sunday School, Bible study, daily prayer, or when conversing with our spiritual guide.

Being familiar with the Scripture is essential but not enough; we must know it. In the story, Christ chides those saints for being inattentive - slow at heart - and even calls them fools. By doing so, He underscores the need for us to know the Scripture. Further, we read that even though those saints' hearts were burning, they were blind; they could not comprehend the Word. They were blind until Jesus sat down to eat, took bread, blessed, broke, and gave it to them.

Those four simple Traditional actions; take, bless, break, and give, which are the same four verbs employed at the **words of institution** during Holy Qurbana, opened the saints' eyes; Christ was revealed to them, and they knew Him. Those actions are all it took for Christ to be revealed. Such is the power of Holy Tradition: simple yet revealing.

Did Saints Luke and Cleopas fully comprehend Christ, the Truth, by being familiar with the Scripture? No. They were still "fools." They progressed to knowing the Truth and its revelation by participating in Bible Study and the sacrament of Holy Qurbana. Like them, our eyes will also be opened if we partic-

ipate in the sacramental life of the Holy Church, a life that Tradition leads us to.

Holy Tradition

We have used the word Tradition many times so far. What is it?

People view traditions with suspicion because their proponents usually strive to restore the past or use it to measure the present against the past. Holy Tradition is far from that; it is not a tool for stirring nostalgia or a yardstick for judgement. Instead, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, a living experience that is relived and renewed through time¹. The Holy Tradition is dynamic in application yet unchanging in dogma; although it grows in expression, it is always the same. The Orthodox believe that the Holy Tradition is that faith once delivered as understood within the context of lived history.

Remember

People view traditions with suspicion because their proponents usually strive to restore the past or use it to measure the present against the past. Holy Tradition is far from that; it is not a tool for stirring nostalgia or a yardstick for judgment. Instead, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, a living experience that is relived and renewed through time



¹<https://www.goarch.org/-/tradition-in-the-orthodox-church>

Tradition, *paradosis* in Greek, means to hand down. Jesus handed the apostles a deposit of faith; the apostles and saints handed it down in written and verbal forms to the following generation. They handed it down to the next, who gave it to the next, and so on; today, it is with us without addition, alteration, or subtraction. An Orthodox Christian understands Holy Tradition as the fullness of the divine Truth proclaimed in scriptures, preserved by apostolic bishops, and expressed in the life of the Church. Examples of expressions of the Holy Tradition are the Divine Liturgy; Holy Mysteries such as Eucharist, baptism, and marriage; the Creed, canonical Christian iconography, and the sanctified lives of godly men and women.²

It is essential to distinguish between Tradition and tradition: note the capitalization. Unlike Tradition, which is Holy, tradition refers to common practices rooted in culture, locale, or time. Consequently, Tradition is immutable; tradition is not: it can change. Examples of tradition are men and women seated separately in Church, calling the priest Achen etc.

In the Road to Emmaus we see Jesus breaking bread and the disciples' eyes opening. How did breaking the bread cause the disciples' eyes to open? Holy Tradition provides the answer.

In his narrative of the Last Supper, St. Luke says this in Chapter 22:19, "Je-

sus took some bread in his hands and gave thanks for it. He broke the bread and handed it to His apostles. Then He said, "This is my body, which is given to you. Eat this as a way of remembering me!" The word remembering means recalling, reminiscing, or recollecting a past event; per Holy Tradition, that word means rejoining an event and living it in the present, or anamnesis.

Thus, when Saints Luke and Cleopas witnessed Jesus breaking the bread, they relived the Last-Supper experience: a mystery and an eye opener. Similarly, every time an Orthodox Christian celebrates the Eucharist, they are living the Last Supper anew, rather than merely remembering a past event.³ From where does an Orthodox Christian access the richer connotation of the word 'remembering'? Holy Tradition – the hand-me-down that they inherited at their baptism.

Scripture Rooted in Tradition

The Holy Bible is part of the *Written Tradition* of the Holy Church. The Holy Bible serves to provide an Orthodox Christian essential details and context to participate fully in the Church's sacraments and understand its theology. For that purpose, the Holy Fathers canonised (approved for reading at Holy Liturgy) the books of the Bible.

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_tradition

³Accessible Orthodoxy: Anamnesis

Remember

Unlike Tradition, which is Holy, tradition refers to common practices rooted in culture, locale, or time. Consequently, Tradition is immutable; tradition is not: it can change.



In everyday language, 'Word of God', Holy Scripture and Holy Bible are used interchangeably. However, to an Orthodox Christian, the 'Word of God' is a ti-

tle reserved for Christ and not a theological term for Holy Scripture. The Bible clearly states who the 'Word of God' is in several verses. One such, St. John 1:1, says, "In the beginning was the one **who is called the Word**. The Word was with God and **was truly God**.² From the very beginning, the Word was with God.³ And with this Word, God created all things. Nothing was made without the Word."

So, if the Holy Bible is not the Word of God, what is it? To help with the answer, below are quotes from two fathers of blessed memory⁴.

“

We must always explain Scriptural truth in the context of sacred Traditions of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and not establish any dogma on the basis of Holy Traditions alone.

. **H. G. Dr. Geevarghese Mar Osthathios (Former Metropolitan of the Diocese of Niranam, Kerala)**

”

“

The Bible is the book of the Church. It is the main written authority within the Church — not over or apart from it. Everything in the Church must be biblical: for the Church, to be the Church, must be wholly expressive of the Bible. The Bible lives in the Church! Without the Church, there would be no Bible. The Church gives the Bible its life as a book. It makes the book come alive!

. **Father Thomas Hopko (Dean of Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary)**

”

⁴The Scriptures – Saint Paul's Greek Orthodox Church (stpaulsirvine.org)

Although the Holy Bible has two parts, the Old and New Testaments, it has one message: Jesus Christ. Approximately three-quarters of the Bible is in the Old Testament, a record of God's speaking and working in history from when He created the universe and our first parents, Adam and Eve, up until about 450 BC. In the period between the two testaments, the people waited for the coming of the Messiah into human history. The books of the New Testament begin with the four Gospels, which record the life, death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven of Jesus, and then proceed to instruct various Christians and Christian churches about how to think and live in light of who Jesus is and what He did. Thus, the Bible is a library of books that are one Book, showing divine unity and continuity.

The Bible is the record of the revelation of God to man through the prophets and Christ. This point is illustrated by the fact that the New Testament has roughly three hundred explicit Old Testament quotations and upwards of four thousand allusions to the Old Testament. In many ways, the Old Testament is a series of promises that God makes; the New Testament is the record of the fulfillment of those promises and the anticipation of the completion of the remaining ones at Jesus' second coming. The four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - are the centre of the Bible, just as Christ is the centre of the Church.

For this reason, the Evangelion reading during Holy Qurbana is only from those Four Gospels.

The authorship of the Bible's books is unclear; they were written by several holy people inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit. God did not dictate the Bible word for word to those people; instead, by His divine self-revelation, God inspired His People to produce Scripture. They cooperated freely with His will, unlike a robot or a zombie.⁵

In ancient times, authorship was usually given to the first speaker, i.e., if one person spoke and a second person wrote what the first person said, that book's author would be the first person. The Holy Church considers Moses the author of the Pentateuch, the first five Old Testament books, and St. Paul to be the author of several New Testament letters and epistles. On close examination of those books, letters, and epistles, it becomes clear that neither Moses nor St. Paul wrote them entirely. For example, Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch, has a narrative of Moses' death. Could Moses have written about his own death? Quite unlikely.

Similarly, the Holy Church considers St. Paul as the author of the general epistle to the Hebrews despite doubts based on the writing style and language used. For example, the usual opening—"Paul, an apostle"—is absent. Nevertheless, we should be comforted that the Holy Church blessed St. Paul to be the original

⁵<https://www.orthodoxroad.com/where-did-the-christian-bible-come-from/>

speaker, even if he may not have written that epistle.

With time, the Church discerned which writings were truly apostolic and which captured the essence of both oral and written Traditions. It was a prolonged struggle that took place over several centuries. As part of the discernment process, the Church met several times in council to deliberate on various issues, among which were also the questions about the canon of Scripture. It is important to note that the purpose of these councils was to discern and confirm what was already generally accepted within the Church at large. The councils' intention was not to legislate the canon but hand over to future generations what had become self-evident Truth and practice within the churches of God, i.e., Traditions.

The councils sought to proclaim the common mind of the Church and to reflect the unanimity of faith, practice, and tradition as it already existed in the local churches represented. The councils provide us with specific records in which the Church spoke clearly and in unison about what constitutes Scripture. Among the many councils that met during the first four centuries, two are particularly important in this context:

1. The Council of Laodicea met in Asia Minor about A.D. 363. This council listed the canonical books of the present Old and New Testaments, ex-

- cept for the Apocalypse of Saint John.
2. The third Council of Carthage met in North Africa about A.D. 397. This council, attended by Augustine, provided a complete list of the canonical books of both the Old and New Testaments. The council accepted the twenty-seven books of the present-day New Testament and held that these books should be read in the Church as Divine Scripture to the exclusion of all others.⁶

Those councils, after considerable deliberation, decided to include a set of books in the Holy Bible and rejected others. One such book is *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, a gnostic book portraying Christ as a supernatural being who killed a childhood acquaintance and resurrected him. The Church rejected that book because its writings contradict Tradition, which teaches Christ is a sinless lamb. As 1 Peter 1:19 says, "You were rescued by the precious blood of Christ, that spotless and innocent lamb." Now and then, a news article appears about the discovery of a 'lost book,' e.g., *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* or *Dead Sea Scrolls*. Those articles often claim that the discoveries would shed new light on Christianity. Those claims may sound true to people ignorant of the Bible's history and the Church and its Traditions. On the other hand, the faithful, who are aware of the Church and the Bible's relationship, know that there are no 'lost

⁶<https://www.orthodoxroad.com/where-did-the-christian-bible-come-from/>

books' because the Church read all the writings that were available before the Bible's canonization. The faithful view these books as 'rejected' rather than 'lost' ones.

Scripture and the Holy Church

An Orthodox Christian can boldly claim that the Orthodox Church has the fullness of the Faith. Below are some reasons that are the basis of its wholeness:

- Christ dwells in the Church in the fullness of His body, the Holy Eucharist
- The Holy Trinity is worshipped
- The Theotokos and saints are venerated
- The Holy Mysteries (sacraments) are central to the Church's faithful
- The Gospel is proclaimed
- The Scripture's authority within the life of the Church is accepted and understood as it reveals Christ
- The corporate nature - all of creation, animate and inanimate - of salvation is practised.

In its fullness, the Holy Church produced the New Testament, preserved Scripture (1 Corinthians 15:1-8), and told us what Scripture is. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance, the Church identified the books which comprise the Holy Bible. And, She did it for a reason: to raise Her children in the fullness of the Faith. Therefore, separating the Holy

Bible from the Holy Church is anathema to an Orthodox Christian.

An Orthodox Christian does not view the Holy Bible as an isolated manuscript nor as the fruit of scientific or historical research. Instead, they consider the Holy Bible a faith document to be read and interpreted within a "Canon of Truth" and the Church's Traditions. For other Christians, the Bible is complete, authoritative, and sufficient. That idea, *Sola Scriptura*, is anchored in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." In that belief system, there is no role for the Church or its Traditions. Whereas, an Orthodox Christian views today's Church as a direct and clear continuation of the Church of the Apostles, whose children rely on Tradition to interpret Scripture correctly and appropriately.

Though Martin Luther may have coined the slogan *Sola Scriptura*, the fact is that he did not practise it. If he had, he would have tossed out the Creeds and spent less time writing commentaries. The phrase came about due to the reformers' struggles against the added human traditions of Roman Catholicism. Understandably, they wanted to be sure that their faith was accurate according to New Testament standards. But to isolate the Scriptures from the Church, to deny 1500 years of history, is something the slogan *sola scriptura*

⁷<https://www.orthodoxroad.com/where-did-the-christian-bible-come-from/>

and the Protestant Reformers-Luther, Calvin, and later Wesley-never intended to do.⁷

Orthodox Christianity considers the Canon of the Holy Bible closed; it does not add new teachings or remove or water down the ones handed down. On the one hand, Roman Catholicism expounded teachings and made additions, such as the Immaculate Conception about the birth of St. Mary and Papal infallibility. On the other hand, Evangelical/Protestantism removed teachings, such as the belief that the Holy Eucharist is the real Body and Blood of Christ, the belief in intercession to Saints, and the prayers for the departed.

Scripture and Worship

The previous sections explained how the Church produced, preserves, and interprets Scripture and how Scripture is a part of the Church's Tradition as well as the vessel that carries that Tradition faithfully to future generations. Consequently, every aspect of an Orthodox Christian's life is infused with Tradition and Scripture, like fish and water. Is it any surprise then that Orthodox Christian worship does not contradict Scripture? Yes, it would be a surprise to people unfamiliar with the Orthodox Church; however, to Her children, the Church's worship is always congruent with Scripture's teachings and fulfils biblical worship.

Orthodox worship can overwhelm those who are unfamiliar with it. Its pattern, sights, sounds, smells, songs, prayers, etc., are unlike contemporary worship. That form incorporates praise and worship sessions, hour-long sermons, audio-video elements, and buildings that resemble auditoriums. Whereas, Orthodox worship is patterned after the one set in the Bible! Hence the sights, sounds, smells, etc.⁸

Examining a few Orthodox-worship elements, the pattern of worship, priest's vestments, and Divine Liturgy, will underscore the fact that Orthodox worship is infused with Scripture. Orthodox worship follows a pattern that God prescribed in the Bible. Hebrews 8:5 says, "Before Moses made the tent, he was told, "Be sure to make it exactly like the pattern you were shown on the mountain!" This a reference to Exodus 24:15-18, where God instructs Moses that the life of the new Jewish nation should imitate heavenly worship. Proper worship meant adhering to those instructions; there was no room to improvise or adapt to contemporary culture. And proper worship was a crucial part of their identity in their covenant with God. So, it stands to reason that proper worship is also critical to our identity as Christians.

Even the vestments worn by Orthodox priests are biblically based; they are patterned after the Old Testament and the heavenly prototype. Exodus 28 contains detailed instructions on the

⁸<https://www.saintjohnchurch.org/is-orthodox-worship-biblical/>

making of priestly vestments. Additionally, in heaven, Christ and the angels wear priestly vestments (Revelation 1:13, 15:6). The vestments are more than pretty decorations; instead, they are meant to manifest the dignity and the beauty of holiness that adorns God's house.

From its start to its end, the Divine Liturgy - the Queen of Sacraments - is soaked in Scripture. To start with, before the public celebration of the Liturgy, five Old Testament passages are read to prepare the faithful for the birth and life of Christ. In the first part of the Liturgy, two New Testament passages are read, followed by a reading from the Gospels.

After completing the Prayers of Veil (Shushfo), the priest says, "May the love of God the Father, the Grace of the Only-begotten Son, and the fellowship and indwelling of the Holy Spirit be with you all my brethren, forever." This Trinitarian Blessing is from 2 Corinthians 13:12. The four key words – took, blessed, broke, and gave – that the Priest utters during the Words of Institution of the Holy Qurbana are from St. Luke 22:19, St. Mark 14:24, and 1 Corinthians 11:24 and 25.⁹

In the second part of the Holy Qurbana, when the Mother of God, saints, and the departed are remembered and incensed, the hymns chanted are taken from the Psalms. Those hymns are:

- The King's daughter stands in glory -

Psalms 45:9-11

- The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree - Psalms 92:12-14
- Your priests shall be clothed in righteousness - Psalm 132:9-12
- As a father shows mercy to his children - Psalm 103:13-15¹⁰

Orthodox worship may seem strange, but this is how Christians have worshipped historically since the birth of the Church. It is, indeed, the worship that follows the pattern prescribed by God in the Old Testament worship and is the fulfilment of various Old Testament prophecies. God wants this form of worship even today.

Examine

Examine the Psalm portions these hymns are taken from. Then examine the hymns. What do the hymns mean?

Conclusion

St. Isaac the Syrian summarised the purpose of Scripture thus, "For [Scripture] serves as the gate by which the intellect enters into the divine mysteries and takes strength for attaining luminosity in prayer...Scripture draws the mind up and sets it at every moment in the direction of God; it baptises it from this cor-

⁹Holy Qurbana Notes, Very Rev. Ramban Lazarus Mathew Chor Episcopos

¹⁰A Guide to the Orthodox Liturgy and Faith, Dr. Punnoose U Panoor, January 1994

poreal world with its insights and causes it to be above the body continually....”

An Orthodox Christian must realise that the Church offers the Divine Truth in its fullness. Out of His philanthropia (love towards humankind), Christ gave the Church that is the pillar and the bulwark of Truth (1 Timothy 3:15). It is within the context of this Church and its Traditions the faithful must attempt to interpret Scripture and understand it. Doing otherwise harms the community of the faithful, the Body of Christ. The splintering of non-Orthodox churches into a plethora of denominations, each holding to its interpretation of Scripture, is a testament to the dangers of interpreting Scripture unrestrained by Tra-

dition. In doing so, those denominations also sacrificed fundamental teachings preserved and taught by the disciples in the early Church.¹¹

Rather than relying on 'inspired' self-interpretation of Scripture, Orthodox Christians should seek commentaries of the early fathers of the Church. The latter acquired the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) through the Church's life and understood our Lord's words. More than teaching us 'what we should do,' those Fathers set examples of 'who we should strive to become.' Such pearls are preserved within the Church's liturgical, sacramental, and ascetic life that are infused with its written and unwritten Traditions.

Reflection Questions

1. Contrast the experience of St. Luke and St. Cleopas on the Road to Emmaus (St. Luke 24:13-32) needing Christ to open their eyes to the Protestant doctrine of Sola Scriptura. What points are present in this Biblical narrative that can be used to defend the Orthodox understanding that Scripture alone cannot be the only source of authority?
2. In the Road to Emmaus passage, how would the narrative change if St. Luke and St. Cleopas did not know the Scripture? Would their hearts “burn” (v32) if they were not familiar with what was taught?
3. How would you respond to a claim that the Orthodox Church is not a “Bible based Church”?

¹¹<https://www.neamericandiocese.org/orthodoxy/scripture-and-tradition.aspx>

The Sanctity of Life

Lesson Goals :

- *I can connect our Church's teaching to how we should think about matters of life.*
- *I have a deeper appreciation on what it means to be made in God's image and likeness.*
- *I can identify guilt and shame that leads to repentance versus despair.*



Icon of Creation

The value of a painting is not in the paint and the canvas, but in the vision of the artist who puts them together. A great work of art, no matter what the subject, is in some way a reflection of its author. It bears the imprint of its creator. A painting by the most exceptional artists can be identified even though it has not been signed. By examining the brush strokes, techniques employed, and the creativity, one can identify and learn more about the one who has created the artwork.

“

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

- Ephesians 2:10

”

“

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:27

”

Since we too are His workmanship, we bear the imprint, the image of our Creator. Each and every human being has value therefore, not because of the substance we are created out of or even the particular form we have taken, but because we bear the image of the One who has created us. We are sacred and holy,

because the Lord who made us is sacred and Holy.

Sanctity of Life

As Orthodox Christians, we believe that each and every person has intrinsic value. Much of modern secular society values people based on what they produce. According to that outlook, some lives would be more valuable than others. While very few would admit it, this philosophy underpins much of modern society. If one takes an honest look, it's not hard to see that this is one of the causes of the narcissism epidemic we find ourselves in. As Orthodox Christians we believe that each individual is unique and each person is equally valuable. In other words, it is like diverse and equally valuable gemstones. Because we are made in the image and likeness of God, every life has intrinsic value. Human life is not valuable because we have assigned value to it, but because God created it with value. That value can neither be degraded nor upgraded by any person. Pride and arrogance cause us to puff ourselves up to say that I am more important than you. This is false dignity. This iniquity is the fuel for most heated arguments. On the other hand, a person cannot be devalued either.

Human dignity is God-given. One of the most dignified moments in Holy Scripture is when our Lord Jesus Christ washed the feet of his disciples. The One through whom all things were cre-

ated was bowing before the creation and washing their feet. One cannot even begin to imagine the astonishment the angels must have felt in that moment. Each one of us has to realise that the Lord gives us our dignity and therefore we cannot be devalued by ourselves or by another person.

Sometimes we may feel shame or guilt because of actions we have done. Both shame and guilt coupled with their social impact have a capacity to destroy us. This destruction is the goal of the devil. When Adam and Eve sinned (Genesis 3), they thought that their God-given dignity and worthiness to be able to present themselves in front of God were gone. They felt shame and guilt and therefore, they hid themselves from God. This is what shame and guilt usually do: compel oneself to hide from God and everyone. This is very unhealthy. The Holy Church encourages us to go otherwise. The feeling of shame and guilt over our sins should lead to our repentance and not to hiding ourselves from God and the Holy Church. We should take ownership of our own behaviour and actions. We should never be ashamed of who we are. Shame over who we are leads to despair and hopelessness. That is not coming from the Holy Spirit but from the deception of the fallen ones who are at war against us. We do not have the ability to degrade our intrinsic value as a creation of God, nor do we have the ability to degrade the intrinsic value that God has given to another person. Every life is sacred and holy. To describe it simply,

as Orthodox Christians we believe in the sanctity of life.

Each life is precious and holy because it is a gift from God. As a result, to take the life of another person or of oneself is inherently sinful. Life is not ours to take. This is why murder, euthanasia, and capital punishment are wrong. Euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, was once called “mercy killing,” but has in recent times been rebranded “Death with Dignity.” There is no dignity in taking the life of another human being. Suffering is not to be entirely avoided in life. When a person passes away because of a disease, they have died a natural death. Even in situations where a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order is given, the person has passed away from their illness. When a person passes away because of Physician-Assisted Suicide or Capital Punishment administered by the State, it is a homicide. They have passed away because of the intervention of another person. This is not a natural death. At the same time, our approach towards death needs to be balanced so that we don’t unreasonably prolong death beyond natural means as well. If someone has been given a terminal diagnosis, they do have the choice to not receive treatment that would prolong their life by a few weeks or a few months. To receive treatment or to not receive treatment both constitute good decisions in that circumstance. Similarly, when brain function has ceased, and a person is completely dependent upon artificial means to keep their organs functioning, the Church

would call for them to be taken off of life-support and be allowed to naturally pass away.

There are times when suicide can be the result of reckless behaviour. There are other times when it can be the result of pride that refuses repentance like we see in the story of Judas Iscariot. They have clearly missed the mark and are far away from God. Funeral services offered to such individuals are singularly out of respect to the human being created in the image of God as well as showing mercy and compassion to the grieving loved ones. There are other times however when suicide is the result of a long battle of mental health. The brain is an organ that can suffer from diseases like any other organ can. In that situation, the Church would view that the person has passed as a result of the disease of their mind in the same way that people can die of heart failure. In those circumstances, a normal funeral would be offered. This is also why the Church would call anyone suffering from mental illness to get the medical help their body needs in order to find wellness. If someone is having suicidal thoughts, it is important to seek professional help (Teacher, please provide the appropriate helplines/websites for your country). They are highly encouraged to immediately reach out to their priests to pray for them and help them find the resources they need. They also should start regularly visiting a counsellor. Sometimes it can be hard to talk to others about what we are going through for fear of

judgement or disappointment, but our spiritual fathers are there to walk with us through difficult times helping us to find paths forward when we are feeling trapped. No priest will look at such people judgmentally, but will only assure their prayers and encourage seeking medical help.

The Value of Life

How we value the sanctity of life of every person underpins much of our beliefs. Our values should determine our actions. At times, in haste, we may decide our actions first and then work back to determine our values. Doing so will not produce virtue and integrity. Instead, we need to take time to discover and form our values and then opt for our actions as an extension of those values.

Because of the value of Sanctity of Life and the belief that life starts from the moment of conception, any action after conception that would interrupt or end the natural progression of life is considered immoral.

“

For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvellous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well.

Psalm 139:13-14

”

The practice of controlling the number of children in a family and the interval between them is generally called Family Planning. Some forms of family planning are considered acceptable and some are not. Among the acceptable forms, there are preferable ones as well. One preferable form is called Natural Family Planning, a practice which today is most often used in relation to trying to have children. It is a process of paying attention to the natural cycles and the optimum times for fertility. The same can be done to prevent pregnancy as well. This form of family planning is what was practised in the many centuries preceding the invention of contraceptives in the modern era. In the past century, there has been a rapid increase in the development of contraceptives and in the safety of their use. As a result, it is permissible¹ to use contraceptives as a form of family planning, provided that the couple are not altogether against having children. One should not have an unhealthy obsession with not having children or having children. Human beings are the crown of creation. The Holy Spirit always guides the crown of creation, the human beings, and this divine knowledge shall guide everyone when questions of Family Planning come up.

In-Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) may not be an ideal form of family planning, but it sometimes becomes necessary because

couples are having difficulty conceiving a child. IVF involves the fertilisation of the wife's ovum/egg with the husband's sperm in an environmentally controlled external lab setting (i.e. a test tube) and the resulting embryos being implanted back into the uterus. IVF is currently a very costly procedure which, depending on age and other factors, is successful only about half of the time. The conditions that the Church places on the proper use of IVF are that the husband must be the sperm source and the wife must provide the egg and carry the pregnancy herself. There should not be any third person providing what is necessary for conception or carrying forward of the pregnancy. In addition, all embryos that are produced by the initial artificial insemination should be attempted to be used for implantation at some point in the future. There ought not to be unused embryos left frozen indefinitely. Nor should those embryos be used for any other purpose such as research. Embryonic Stem Cell research is not permissible because the ends cannot justify the means. Stem Cell research using stem cells retrieved from the umbilical cord or other means is permissible.

A type of Family Planning that is not acceptable given the value of Sanctity of Life is abortion. The Church understands that abortions are events with significant emotional distress, great

¹While this is currently the consensus view in Orthodoxy, there are some faithful Orthodox who hold the view similar to the Roman Catholic view that the use of contraceptives is not permissible because of its interference.

suffering, and pain. Almost no one who chooses to receive an abortion does so because they truly want to. Fredricka Mathews-Greene Kochamma writes: “No one wants an abortion as she wants an ice cream cone or a Porsche. She wants an abortion as an animal, caught in a trap, wants to gnaw off its own leg.”² We must understand that a woman in that situation may be feeling great societal and familial pressure one way or the other. A woman may not feel that she would have the financial, emotional, or relational support to be able to raise the child in her womb in a manner that she would want. It becomes the Church’s responsibility in those situations to alleviate those external pressures as much as possible. If a woman truly wishes to have and raise her child or even to entrust the child to another to raise, the Church must do everything it can to be able to make those wishes an attainable reality. In situations where the mother’s life is in critical danger, or the pregnancy will not be able to safely come to term, it may be medically necessary to terminate the pregnancy, tragically ending the life of the child. In the situation where a child may possibly have a physical or mental challenge of some sort after birth, an abortion is not permitted because every life is precious, intrinsically valuable, and has something beautiful to offer the world.

The Orthodox Church believes that

human life begins in the womb. The unborn child is a person and therefore abortion is a loss of life. Our hymns and even iconography of the Church reflects this teaching, and we also read in Scripture (St. Luke 1:36, St Luke 1:41, etc.).

There are extreme cases that may require more discernment because of the degree of their tragedy, for example if the pregnancy is caused by sexual abuse or rape. Rape is of course an atrocity against the dignity of a woman. The violation of the woman by the offender is continued in the pregnancy and can compound the emotional and physical distress to cause trauma to the attacked woman. In such situations, one needs to seek medical help immediately. Be assured that the Church does not condemn or judge a woman at all, but looks after them compassionately and non-judgmentally. The priests are there to help such women and are ready to continue praying for them. As difficult as it is to comprehend, the path to healing is not found in another painful act of ending the life of the child. Exploring ways not to follow the path of abortion is what one is encouraged to do. It is possible in these circumstances that the “morning after pill” that would prevent any possible embryo from implantation would be considered permissible. However, if the pregnancy has already commenced, then the child should be brought to term because the child is innocent and de-

²<https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/01/abortion-roe-v-wade-unborn-children-women-feminism-march-life/>



The Icon of the Annunciation

serves to live. The brokenness of the situation is not beyond God's redemptive ability to create a beautiful mosaic out of the broken pieces. When no possibilities exist to carry out pregnancy and the agonies of the suffering woman are enormous leading towards mental illnesses, a medical decision may take this into account. However, one shall know that the woman going through all these phases is experiencing severe mental trauma before, during and after an abortion. They deserve kindness and compassion, which the Holy Church offers readily. On the other hand, men and women are to respect the God-given dig-

nity of each other's body and not to violate any physical and moral boundaries in the context of sexual abuse or rape. It is morally reprehensible to commit such an act of violation to another human being. That is the fundamental expectation of the Church from everyone of her children.

Our faith teaches that God always provides a reason to hope no matter how hopeless we may feel in that situation. Saint Paul writes, "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5).

Conclusion

Sometimes a work of art that has weathered many storms and trials may find itself broken or damaged. And yet, even a broken statue would still have great intrinsic value if it was made by a master sculptor. Even more so, if that sculptor were to take the broken pieces and put that statue back together again, it would be restored to its former glory or transformed into an even greater glory. We are a work of art, sanctified and holy, not because of our own doing but be-

cause of our Creator who has given us His image and likeness. We have value because the Lord has given it to us. We have dignity because the Lord has elevated us. And we are not a finished product yet. The Lord is still working on us, smoothing out the edges and by the Holy Spirit growing us to the potential that He has placed in us. As we understand that value in ourselves and in the lives of every other human being, we learn to love and respect ourselves and others around us as the children of God that we all are.

Reflection Questions

1. Discuss and analyse the following observation by Fr. Thomas Hopko - “A Christian should never be lonely! If we feel lonely it means we forget that we are members of the people of God ... that we are fellow citizens with the Saints ... that we have access to God through the Son of God Jesus, raised and glorified, by the power of the Holy Spirit that is in all of the saints of all times and of all places. And we are a member, each one of us, of that community, we are all members of Christ’s body so we gather as Church”
2. If an Orthodox Christian friend approaches you with feelings of being overwhelmed or sad, what are some ways to help him or her stay connected to Christ and His Church and walk in the truth? How could you help if your friend was not a Christian?
3. Reflect on the words of the Prophet Isaiah, “Even to your old age and grey hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.”. How could you share this message of hope and love to a friend who approaches you with a difficult life decision?

Christian Stewardship

Lesson Goals :

- *I can relate the teachings of Christian stewardship in my daily life.*
- *I can express how Christian stewardship is an expression of our love for God and our neighbour.*
- *I understand the social and spiritual responsibility we have as Christians in this fallen world.*



Icon of Creation

God's Creation

God created all things (visible and invisible) out of His Love. As explained

in the Orthodox Study Bible, “The ever-existent Almighty God was not forced to create the universe. Rather, in His

goodness and loving kindness, He freely chose to do so. And the fact that the Lord created the universe out of nothing stands in clear contrast to the creation myths of the surrounding cultures in the ancient world.”

All things are created by God, and repeatedly after each action of love we read, “and God saw that it was good”.

The Orthodox Study Bible explains that this repeated affirmation “underscores the intrinsic, fundamental goodness of matter and the whole created order, even after the Fall. This understanding is the basis for a sacramental worldview - that the created order not only is good, but also can be a means for communion with God, by virtue of being created by the All-Good God. Moreover, the astounding beauty, intricate order, and sublime harmony of all aspects of Creation, as well as the tremendously vast expanse of the universe, are intended to draw mankind to an awareness of and appreciation for the Creator, and to the worship of Him - and Him alone.”

When God created us, He proclaimed that we have “dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of heaven, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28). This is an important concept to understand Christian stewardship and the sacramental relationship we have with God’s creation. “Dominion” in this Christian understanding is not that we can rule over and do what we please, but rather we care for His creation and be in communion with Him so that we can do His

will throughout the world. As we read in Scripture, God’s blessing is for us to “be fruitful and multiply”.

Remember

“Dominion” in this Christian understanding is not that we can rule over and do what we please, but rather we care for His creation and be in Communion with Him so that we can do His will throughout the world.



Stewardship is a Christ-centred lifestyle that acknowledges accountability, reverence and responsibility before God. We are created in the image and likeness of God, and are called to live a life of stewardship like Adam. Christian Stewardship is managing resources that God has given to everyone. Jesus compared the faithful as well as the Church in a bigger sense with those, whom the Master has placed in charge to distribute food at the proper time (St. Matthew 24:45-46). The Church is here the servant and the whole creation is the household of God. God has kept us in charge of His household to manage it earnestly and faithfully. ‘Steward’ from the Greek word ‘Oikonomia’ means stewardship, or house manager. Jesus frequently used the term steward or servant in the gospels. Every Christian is charged to be a good steward of God’s grace (1 Peter 4:10). Jesus said, “For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...” (St. Matthew

20:28). The Church, being the embodiment of Christ in this world, is called to fulfil Lord's stewardship as her duty and responsibility. Stewardship needs to be understood in a broader sense that the Church is called to serve Christ Who fills everything in the universe (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Saint Paul explains stewardship of the Church in five different terminologies:

1. The assembly of the "Called out" by God ("Ekklesia") or God's Own People (Romans 1:1-2)
2. Brethren in Christ (Philip 1:1, Col 1:2), where everyone is treated equally regardless of their background, which is based on two fundamental principles - Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of all members
3. Community of Saints (Romans 1:7); being persecuted, tortured, and martyred for their Christian faith
4. Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5: 22); to lead a life in chastity and purity, accountable for her day-to-day life, longing for the heavenly bridegroom
5. Body of Christ (Ephesians 1:23, 1 Cor 12:3-8) with Christ being its Head and thereby explaining the intrinsic unity and organic oneness of Church and Christ to affirm the importance of stewardship. If the Church is the body of Christ, she has the responsibility to demonstrate stewardship to the creation of her head, Christ.

Those terminologies are different expressions of stewardship and accountability for the Church towards God and

the World. Stewardship is a part of our being in Christ, as responsible children; obedient and honest towards their father as well as being respectful and fair to one another. Caring for our fellow beings is an integral part of Christian life, and does not end with alms giving but also sharing our resources, spiritual and intellectual. Stewardship includes our time and talent as well as financial resources.

We are called to care for all of God's creation (Genesis 1:26). This caring includes recycling to protect nature including air, water, and vegetation. Locally, we need to practice good stewardship by manifesting the fruit of the Holy Spirit including love, joy, peace, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). God's grace enables us to forgive others, which is an act of purification when one gets rid of ill-feelings about another person. Jesus taught us to forgive our enemies. Forgiving helps the one who forgives more than the one who is forgiven. Good stewardship requires respect for nature and compassion to our fellow-beings. Obedience, faith, and humility brings us closer to God.

The ultimate goal of our stewardship is becoming Christ-like for which worship is the most defining means to experience God's presence. Holy Qurbana is the centre of Orthodox worship and is thanksgiving to God, as we enjoy His blessings in our everyday life. It is offering ourselves to His will, while remembering the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God,

on the Cross, his burial and resurrection on the third day defeating death, and thereby giving us the privilege of incorruptibility of life. Stewardship is enshrined in our Divine Liturgy as it says, “We have nothing of our own. All that we have is from You O God. We offer unto Yours of Your own, on behalf of all and for all.” Stewardship requires each Christian to participate in the Holy Qurbana on a regular basis, along with offering prayers, observing fasting and reading the Bible including daily devotions. Offering first fruits is another way of stewardship, like giving the tithe, as a thanksgiving to what God had provided for us. “Bring an offering when you come to the sanctuary of the Lord” (Psalms 98:8).

Stewardship and Consumerism

Stewardship is clearly a part of the Christian world view that is based on unity with all creation and the desire for harmony with it. However, we live in a culture that is secular and materialistic and often views religious and spiritual aspects as optional or non-existent. This approach to the created world ignores the unseen and without the concept of a Creator relegates the seen as objects for use and even exploitation. Rather than care for creation on behalf of the Almighty, the view here is to use creation for one’s benefit.

Christians have a responsibility toward the world and nature. St. Paul explains the scope of redemption not

only for mankind but also for nature which would be achieved through the redeemed mankind. “The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:20-21). Humanity’s role in protecting our earth and nature from over-exploitation and misuse is part of good stewardship. Good stewardship towards using our economic resources would also eliminate poverty from the earth as it is caused by uneven distribution of food and lack of buying power of the depressed class due to less availability of economic resources for them. It is important to view life as sacred, as a sacrament of which we are a part and which we may offer back to God in thanksgiving.

Remember

The ultimate goal of our stewardship is being Christ-like for which worship is the most defining means to experience God’s presence. Holy Qurbana is the centre of Orthodox worship and is thanksgiving to God, as we enjoy His blessings in our everyday life.



Often times stewardship is considered only from a financial perspective, but as presented above, this is a very limited understanding of the word. The Orthodox Church sees giving as stewardship and as a sacred offering. This offering



The Widow's two mites icon

can be time, effort, or money. Christian stewardship can be best understood as an offering to God from the abundance He has provided to us.

A good example of stewardship and consumerism is to consider a person who hands you a \$20 bill and then asks you to give it to someone else. In this case, you would probably hand it over without a problem, and that person would have no problem handing it back to me. However, if I were to ask you to reach into your own pocket and give me or someone else \$20, there would probably be some hesitation. Why do you act differently in these two situations? In the first instance, you were given something to take care of that was not yours, you were a steward. In the second instance, you felt ownership of the money in your pocket. Consumerism is best thought of in terms of personal ownership and re-

jection or ignorance that everything is from the one true Creator.

Bad stewardship leads to adverse impacts including pollution, greed, selfishness, exploitation of the weak and the poor, inhumane attitude, lack of kindness and concern towards fellow-beings, discrimination, and so on. Irresponsible parenting and abortion may also be examples of bad stewardship as children are a gift and blessing from God.

In the New Testament, Paul describes how we should view our giving in 2nd Corinthians 9:6-11. "Give as he has decided in his heart" We must decide in advance how much to give and make a commitment. "Not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" Do you see your giving as a burden or obligatory? Finally, God has given us generously so that we, in turn, may also give generously.

Remember

Humanity's role in protecting our earth and nature from over-exploitation and misuse is part of good stewardship.



God for the air we breathe? When we remember God in all that we do, then giving becomes easier as we remember how God gives us. Thanksgiving and offering are key to the understanding of Christian Stewardship. All we have comes from God, and we give thanks to Him for all the blessings He bestows on us.

Stewardship is Love

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote in “For the Life of the World”, that “our human role is to offer back to God in thanksgiving, all that He has given to us”. Everything we have comes from God, and this gift is because God is love. How many times do we remember to thank

God's desire for us to cooperate with Him and spread His love throughout creation is best illustrated in the story of the Feeding of the 5000 (St. Matthew 14:14-23). As shown in the icon, Christ performed a miracle taking five loaves of bread and two fish and multiplying them to feed 5,000 men (and even more women and children!).



Feeding of the 5000 icon

However, it is the disciples who have been asked to distribute the food to the people. Could not the One who performed this miracle and who can create out of nothing be able to give the food to

those who were hungry? Of course! But, by involving the disciples Christ was also teaching them. This also is a prefiguration of the Eucharist, where the clergy have been entrusted with the distribu-

tion of the Eucharist.

Stewardship is a sacred connection between us, the believers, and the Church, which is His Body. Some reminders on how to give an offering of money, time, or physical assistance when called upon by the Church:

- Offer your first and finest – Set aside money for God first before other obligations
- Offer with thanksgiving in mind – Think of all you have been blessed with
- 10% is the starting line, not the finish – Train to get to 10% but don't let that be the end. Continue on beyond that.
- Plan your giving – Set a commitment and stick to it.
- Offer Generously and Cheerfully – Do you see your giving as a burden or obligatory?

Reflection Questions

1. In the story of King David and the building of the Temple (2 Samuel 7), the people gave generously for the building of the temple because they understood everything they had belonged to the Lord. Reflect on your own life and any similar examples you gave with an open heart because you remembered everything you had was from God?
2. As a class, brainstorm some ideas on service projects that can be completed together. Decide on a project and bring it to fruition.
3. Discuss: What are some steps that can be taken to eliminate poverty in this world? Think about actions that can be taken on a global, national and individual level.

Love the Sinner and Not the Sin

Lesson Goals :

- *I can discuss the Christian response on LGBTQ, racial and gender equality, standing with the victims of abuse, and prison ministry.*
- *I can develop and support an argument that accounts for the needs and concerns of marginalised groups that build on the foundation of our Christian theology that God is love and that others are to know Christ not just by our words but through our actions.*
- *I can acknowledge and affirm that our Orthodox Faith embraces all people including those beyond our community as we see and know today.*
- *I can analyse and critique how our methods, goals, and actions are always focused on Christ even as we participate within political, social, and legal change movements.*
- *deduct that, at the core, one experiences salvation/healing in the Church and then invites others to that same healing/salvation*

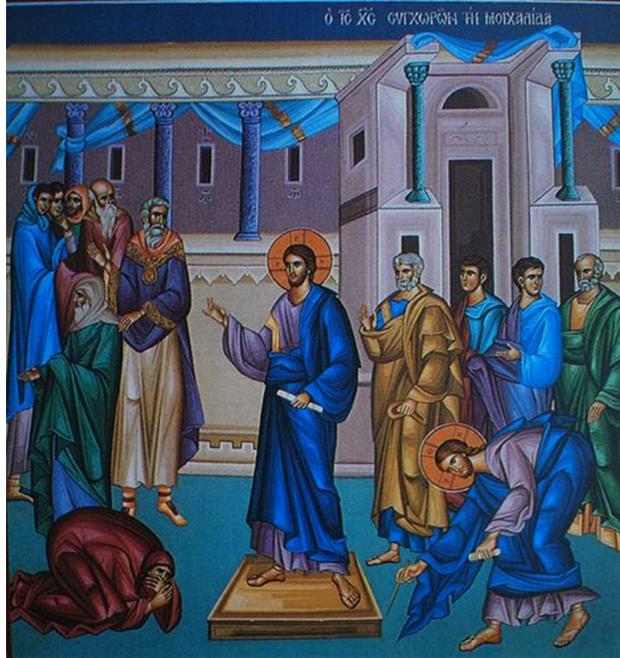


Introduction

How do we treat those who are not members of our Church? Can we be more inclusive and keep the doors of our Church open to all those in need of Christ?

Acts 10 begins with the story of Cornelius, a devout man who lived according to the ways of God and followed Jesus' commandments – he worshipped God and gave alms generously. However, not being a Jew, he was considered

unclean and therefore could not become a Christian in the context of those times. God, though, had accepted him and sent St. Peter to him. Through a vision, God educates Peter that no one who is faithful and obedient to God is unclean. Peter is sent by God to Cornelius and introduces Christ to Cornelius, his household, his relatives, and his close friends. As he preached to them, the group is filled with the Holy Spirit – a sign of ac-



Icon of Jesus forgiving the sinful woman

ceptance from above. Peter declares that he has to baptise them and make them part of the Church, as they have already been accepted by God through the Holy Spirit.

Later in Acts 11, we see that many of the Apostles and brethren who were in Judea criticise Peter for keeping company with and baptising Gentiles. Peter explains to them his visions and that God sent him to Cornelius to preach the Gospel and that the Holy Spirit descended upon all who were gathered there – including the Gentiles. He ex-

plained to them that if God had already accepted them, who was he to withhold baptism from them? When they heard Peter's words, they glorified God saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." This account illustrates to us that God shows no partiality and loves all equally. Over the ages, however, there have been instances when members of the Church have built artificial barriers of entry for people on the basis of the prejudices of the times rather than on the basis of faithfulness and obedience to God. It is

important that the Church be a welcoming place for all those who are truly seeking God and desire a relationship with Him, and it is we, the members of the Church who need to ensure this happens.

In St. John 8, Jesus is presented with a woman caught in the act of adultery that came with the punishment of stoning according to the Jewish Law. Jesus suggests that those among the people who are without sin should stone her first. Hearing this, the group recognizes their sins and gradually dissolves. After the crowd has dispersed, Jesus tells the woman to go her way and not sin again. Jesus' response balances the punishment for sins that the Law dictates with His mercy described in Psalms 116(117):2 and 117(118):4. Though Jesus did not give detailed instructions for every single life situation concerning how we need to treat others irrespective of their sins, faith, social position, sexual orientation or any other criteria for that matter, this interaction provides us general guidance when we ask the question, "What would Jesus do?"

The Church, Society and Homosexuality

The increased social and political acceptance of gay marriage and its association with civil rights have once again raised questions regarding the Church's position. At the time of this publication the Respect for Marriage Act of 2022, which formally grants federal recognition for all marriages between any two

individuals, was signed into law. It is important at the outset to distinguish between homosexual desire/thoughts and homosexual behaviour/actions. Like all other passions of this fallen world, the Church does not condemn a person for having thoughts or desires or for being tempted. At the same time, the Church also does not condone those behaviours. Any sexual activity apart from the relations between a husband and wife in a blessed marriage is a departure from God's intended purpose for gifting humans with sexuality. We are more than our thoughts, desires, and attractions; they do not define us. Rather, our identity is rooted in Christ.

The earliest reference to homosexuality in the Bible is in Genesis 19 describing the interaction between the men of Sodom, Lot, and his heavenly visitors. Leviticus 18:22 declares that homosexuality was an abomination and Leviticus 20:13 prescribes the punishment for this as death. St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 says that those who indulge in homosexuality will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, we see in Genesis that God made humans as male and female and blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it," and, "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh." This affirms that the purpose of sexuality is the uniting of two as one flesh within marriage and the production of new life, and not for the gratification of fleshly desires.

Consider

Therein lies the conflict because, for the Church, marriage is a path to salvation, and for the State, marriage is a legal union with rights and benefits. This perceived dichotomy has caused a lot of tension between Church and State and has raised numerous questions.

For the Orthodox, marriage is a pathway to holiness based on what God intends for us. The courts, at least in the United States, ruled on the equality of same-sex unions to traditional marriage from the perspective of taxation and benefits, and in the process, they ended up defining or rather redefining marriage in the legal context. Therein lies the conflict because, for the Church, marriage is a sacrament, a path to salvation, and a means for theosis. For the State, marriage is a legal union with rights and benefits. This perceived dichotomy has caused a lot of tension between the Church and the State and has raised numerous questions.

LGBTQ Questions for the Orthodox Church

❓ Can LGBTQ individuals be members of the Church?

Yes, they can. Membership in the Church is not membership in an institution or social organisation; rather, it is

being part of the Body of Christ and the household of God. We become members of the Church through Holy Baptism and continue to strive to become worthy members, working towards our salvation and becoming one with God, through our faithfulness and obedience to Christ's commandments. Christ's love is unconditional and is given freely to everyone. This membership is a gift of God to us, and it is up to us to accept it or not. The Church welcomes all who seek Jesus Christ and desire a relationship with Him, regardless of what their individual struggles are. This also means that the members of the Church need to have the willingness to discuss questions and concerns with sensitivity and compassion while recognizing boundaries and respectfully accepting points of disagreement.

❓ Can LGBTQ individuals receive Holy Communion?

Any member of the Orthodox Church who has prepared themselves through repentance, prayer, and fasting may receive Holy Communion under the care and guidance of his/her Achen. Rev. Dr. Stephen Muse, in a discussion on LGBTQ issues (Muse, An Orthodox Response to LGBTQ, YouTube), mentions that an elder from Mt. Athos raised the question on whether the Church is also consistent in denying communion to heterosexual members who have sexual relations outside of marriage. To begin with, we must understand that any

sexual activity that is not between a husband and wife within blessed marriage is a sin. Sins of a sexual nature can have very deep impacts on a person. In some instances, a priest may allow someone to commune after they come to confession. In other instances, a priest may require someone to refrain from communing for a period of healing before allowing them to commune. Irrespective of the process and the time, the goal is to lead the person closer to Christ and is meant to happen under the safe care of the spiritual father, the priest.



Rev. Dr. Stephen Muse

In 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, St. Paul warns of the dangers of receiving Holy Communion without preparation and self-examination. Fr. Muse warns that we can be burned by the misappropriation of our relationship with Christ and presuming that it is our right to receive Communion or that we are a member of the Church because we give money. He compares this to a marriage where one assumes he or she has a right to the other

person's possessions which tends to objectify and eclipse the true person. True love respects boundaries, just as God respects our free will to love or reject Him. It is easy to attach shame and fear to various things in our lives, feeling like any mistake condemns us to hell. This is not the way God looks at this. In these situations of self-doubt and turmoil, talking to a priest or pastoral counsellor helps.

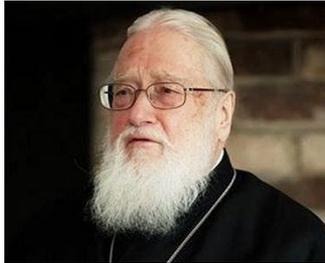
❓ Will the Church bless same-sex unions?

The Orthodox Church will not conduct same-sex weddings as she cannot bless them because biblically, marriage is a sacrament between a man and a woman. In Scripture, marriage is always understood to be between a man and a woman. When looked at from the perspective of civil rights, Fr. Muse says that it is possible to grant civil/political rights without an ecclesiastical blessing as Church's theology cannot be dictated by the Government. A state or county may grant a marriage licence to two individuals based on local civil law. However, the Church is not bound or compelled by that to conduct a wedding.

❓ Isn't homosexuality a sin?

It is important to reiterate that having homosexual feelings, urges, and desires in and of themselves is not any more sinful than any other part of being a human who struggles with passions and temptations. However, acting on those feel-

ings, indulging those urges, or pursuing those desires does constitute sin, and the Scriptures and the testimony of the Church Fathers urge great caution because sexual sins affect us in a deep way and can cause harm to our souls.



Bishop Kalistos Ware

The Bible unequivocally says that homosexuality is a sin. In Scripture, the uniting of husband and wife in marriage (i.e., “the two shall become one flesh”) is a gift from God to unite the man and woman who were seen as separated when Eve was formed from the separation of Adam’s side. Therefore, all forms of sexual gratification outside of the bond of a blessed marriage to a single spouse and all forms of sexual gratification which do not have the possibility of producing life – including but not limited to homosexual practice – are sin. Bishop Kalistos Ware calls homosexuality a constitutional sin, i.e., a sin not necessarily chosen by the person but more because of his constitution or orientation – as compared to a sin of volition, which is a sin by conscious choice.

❓ Will God love me if I am gay?

Yes, God loves all of us and that will never change. Fr Muse suggests that if a parent loves their child, how much more would God love us? God is love and the source of love, and when we show love to one another, we are employing a faculty we possess because we are made in God’s image. A parent can love their child without agreeing with or supporting all of their actions. As Christ says in St. Matthew 7:9-11, “Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” God loves us and accepts who we are in a much fuller and deeper way than our own families can. But showing love and acceptance does not mean agreement. We can certainly love someone and not agree with them, just as God loves us unconditionally though He does not accept everything that we do. Acceptance without agreement is a more nuanced, honest, and healthier response compared to those that are swayed by political or societal pressures.

❓ Will I go to hell if I am gay?

God does not “send people to hell,” and being gay – as in having homosexual thoughts, feelings, or desires – does not automatically condemn someone to hell.

In St. Matthew 25, Christ explains how He will sit in judgement of all peoples and that the basis of this judgement is on what we do in the life we are given. God's grace is given to all of us. The Holy Spirit received at the time of Holy Baptism needs to be nurtured. This nurturing leads to synergize with God and cannot happen without our consent. God's grace works in us in cooperation with our own will through the work of the Holy Spirit. All forms of sin separate us from God. When we sin, we separate ourselves from God. The uncreated divine grace sanctifies all who repent and seek Christ. However this same grace could be experienced as a burning pain by those who reject Christ.

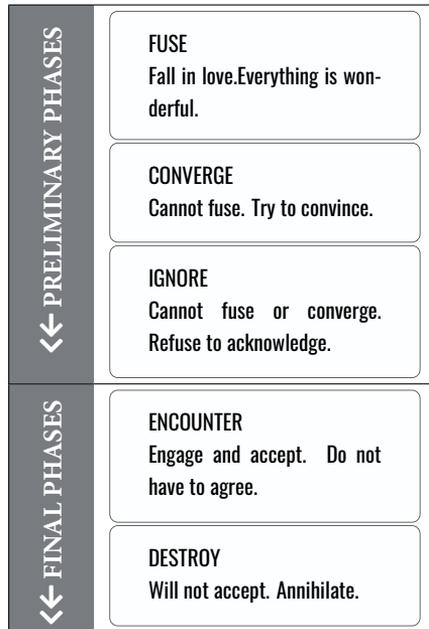
The more we indulge in sin, the more impurity will be present in us that will face the fire of being in God's presence at the final judgement. Turning away from God is turning toward sin. Hell is the refusal to receive God's love. This is articulated in Matthew 23:37-39 in Jesus' final public sermon, where He describes God's desire to embrace His people who push him away. Verse 39 provides the hope of salvation through the acceptance of His grace, just as the grace granted to the thief crucified on the right (Luke 23:40-43).

❓ Why do we ostracise LGBTQ?

For Fr. Muse, this question bears an implicit presumption of judgement – using God to hate someone. Ironically, this is

the state of hell, where love is not given and Christ is refused.

When encountering something new or different, humans and for that matter all living things, feel threatened or anxious. Fr. Muse sees an evolution in the response:



If we can see Christ Himself in everyone we meet – especially those who are not like us – we will be able to encounter and engage anyone. It is important to look beyond the surface to see an individual with genuine love and empathy, without being judgmental, jumping to conclusions or at the other extreme, pandering. If God can accept each one

of us as we are, why should the Church that we are part of have any trouble accepting LGBTQ people? The Church is a place of refuge for all those who earnestly seek Christ. It should be a safe space where everyone feels loved and accepted and these topics can be discussed with respect and sensitivity. Recall, however, that loving and accepting do not constitute agreeing with or endorsing a way of living or pursuing desires that are at odds with the teachings of Holy Scripture – in essence, love the sinner, not the sin.

❓ What would Jesus do?

Though Jesus did not directly mention homosexuality, just as He did not specifically mention several other topics, it is worthwhile to recall Christ's interaction with the adulterous woman as an indicator. Jesus shows mercy to everyone who approached Him. Even when the Law condemns a person to stoning as in this instance, Jesus offers mercy to ensure that she has a chance to live a life being loved rather than being condemned. After the crowd disperses, He asks the woman, "Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." St. Justin Popovich of the Serbian Orthodox Church declares, "I will sacrifice myself in order to save the Canons of the Church, but in the case of saving one person, I will sacrifice all the Canons." The Church does not exclude anyone from worship. On inclusivity, Fr. Muse says, "I

want to be exclusively Christ's, to be inclusive of all whom Christ loves and no one is left out." This is being absolutely inclusive in line with the unconditional love of Christ.

Fr. Muse says that humans do not respond well when the response to our pain and suffering is just condemnation. What we do respond to, is a love that seeks to understand and welcome us. "Love of the other does not mean fusing with the other and becoming what they are," Fr. Muse continues, "It means being who you are, holding on to yourself, and having open conversations that are not threatened by whatever it is about the other person that makes you anxious or nervous. If you truly trust in Christ, you will see what Christ is giving the world through this other person."

Salvation and living the Orthodox Way

In St. Matthew 5:48, Jesus says "Be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." Rev. Dr. George C. Papademetriou says, "The ultimate purpose of man, therefore, is to become perfect in God, through love. That is, to attain perfect, selfless love of God and one's fellow human beings."

H.G. Dr. Yuhanon Mar Diascoros of the Kottayam Diocese describes this journey to perfection (Diascoros, Spirituality, MOSC) as unending, as God is unending. This is a dynamic living condition, moving from one degree of bliss to a deeper degree of bliss. Thirumeni

identifies two major steps for this journey –

1. Moving ahead toward perfection through purification from passions and the acquiring of virtues.
2. A life progressively moving ahead in the union with God. At this point, man's work is replaced by God's. Man contributes by opening himself up receptively to an ever-greater filling with the life of God.



H.G. Dr. Yuhanon Mar Diascoros

Diascoros Thirumeni says: “The road to Christian perfection does not exclude this world and the works in it, but it does require that it contributes to the winning of virtues.” He says that the person who has reached the peak of perfection exerts an influence and attraction on his or her neighbours, which in turn encourages them to strive to reach the same goal. The greatest of the virtues according to Thirumeni is love. “In love there is also knowledge and the love of God

cannot be separated from the love of the people.”

The Church is described as a hospital for sinners. Jesus provided total healing which included both physical and spiritual for all who approached Him. As members of the Church, we have the same mission – provide “total healing” by being “Christ” to the people around us. This is accomplished by showing love and acceptance to everyone – to see all those whom we come across as people directed by the Holy Spirit to seek Christ, in essence, not just preach Christ but to live Christ.

Faiths and beliefs outside the Church

As members of the Orthodox Church, it is important to know what we believe (and why), but also what we do not believe. The Orthodox perspective is that, though not all religions are the same and worship the same God, there can be elements of truth in other religions and philosophies. We can describe other faiths as incomplete or not containing the fullness of the truth, but not false or condemned. Justin Martyr called this *Spermatikos logos* – logos in the seed form (innate wisdom) – seeds of truth. Justin Martyr believed that God prepared humanity to receive Him by revealing small bits of Himself throughout history. In other words, all belief systems have the seeds of His revelation within them and to some extent, some elements of truth. If all human beings are created in the image of God, they are capable of

discovering the Truth of God to some extent. Since all Truth and goodness comes from God, any goodness found in other religions is from God. This is not to say that all faiths are equally true and will lead to the fullness of the knowledge of God. The fullness of Truth is Jesus Christ – God’s complete revelation to man – which is preserved most completely in the Orthodox Christian faith. Because of this, an Orthodox person is called by God to share his or her faith with others and invite them to experience that same fullness which he/she has experienced and be transformed by it.

Definition

Spermatikos logos - literally means "seeds of truth" and is a belief other beliefs and philosophies have certain elements of truth

Conclusion

Fr. Evangelos talks (Orthodox Teaching of the Elders, Youtube) about the experience of a gay man who went to meet Father Paisios and told him his inability to control his passions. Father Paisios asked him, "Can you fast on Wednesdays and Fridays?" He responded, "I can."

"You make a lot of money from the German college. You will keep a tenth for you and the rest, you will give to the poor. Can you do that?" asked the Father. "Yes," he responds.

"Can you read the Akathist Hymn to Theotokos every day?" asked the Father. "I can," responds the man.

"Can you go to the hospital once a week and take care of a sick man who has nobody?" asks Father Paisios again. "I can," he responds.

"Can you find a priest and confess?" asks the Father. Again the man responds, "I can."

"Can you follow the canon prescribed by me?" asks Father Paisios. The man responds, "I can."

"Can you attend the liturgy every Sunday?" asks the Father. He responds, "I can."

At this, the Father says, "Go and do what you can. And God will do for you what you cannot do." After this, the man, Statmatis, worked among homosexuals and AIDS victims, bringing them to Christ.

St. James in his epistle (James 2:14-17) emphasises the need for faith supported by works – "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by works, is dead." Jesus emphasises this in St. Matthew 22:37-40, when He says the two greatest commandments are "love God" (faith) and "love others" (works) and again when He says, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments," (St. John 14:15). Our actions of unbiased and unconditional love to all the people around us is a great testament of our faithfulness and obedience to God. Christ and, by extension, the Church (the Body of Christ) does not distinguish or choose favourites between people, whether they are Jew or

Gentile, married or celibate, politician or businessman, and for that matter, gay or straight. Everyone is created in the image and likeness of God and is equally

precious to Him – as Christ says in St. John 6:37, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”

Reflection Questions

1. Discuss the Christian response on LGBTQ, racial and gender equality, standing with the victims of abuse, and prison ministry.
2. Think of a group within the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church that is currently marginalised or misunderstood. How can you better relate to their needs and concerns using the teaching of the Orthodox Church that God is love? Think about our calling that others are to know Christ not just by our words but through our actions.
3. What can we do to remind ourselves that our methods, goals, and actions are always focused on Christ even as we participate within political, social, and legal change movements?

Etho d'Moran

Lesson Goals :

- *I can summarise how Pentecost relates to the confirmation of the Church.*
- *I can defend the gifts of the Spirit, including the gift of the tongues in the biblical and historical context.*
- *I can discuss the significance and the meaning of the service of Pentecost.*



Descent of the Holy Spirit

Christians are often taught that the Church was “born” on the day of Pentecost. This major feast of our Church (*Siom Boorke* in Syriac) celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit after the Ascension of Christ, and is described in Scripture in **Acts Chapter 2**. “Siom Burke” means “kneeling” because on this

festival everyone kneels for the first time after the celebration of the Resurrection. Kneeling here is a token of humbling oneself at the arrival of the Holy Spirit, which was the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ.

With the descent of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles and faithful who had gathered were anointed with “tongue, as of fire” (**Acts 2:3**) and filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit. They went out to Jerusalem and preached the Gospel in numerous languages (**Acts 2:4**). As mentioned in the Orthodox Study Bible footnotes of **Acts 2:1**, “On the first Christian Pentecost, the unity of assembling with one accord (or purpose) in one place provides the environment in which the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us.” This is the establishment of the visible Church, where salvation is being preached and Christian life is being practised as instructed by Lord Jesus Christ.

However, is Pentecost truly the birth of the Holy Church?

In “Tuyobo” or the preparatory service of the Holy Qurbana, the priest prays silently for the children of the Holy Church, and the list begins with Adam and continues through Eve and all the prophets and saints of the Old Testament. Strictly speaking these holy men and women were not baptised on earth. However, when Christ went into the Hades after His death, He preached the Gospel to them and they were made worthy to be part of the eternal Church, which has started with God.

We see these similar teachings in the sedros of Koodosh Eatho and Hudosh Eatho as well. In fact, we hear more directly that the Holy Church also includes the choirs of Holy Angels. In short, the Holy Church began eternally with the Holy Trinity and the visible Church began with the arrival of the Holy Spirit as the promised paraclete (**St. John 14:15-31**).

Etho d'Moran is Syriac for “Church of our Lord”, and a reminder that the Church and God are always and forever One. St. Paul often emphasises this relationship with Christ and Church. For example, in **Colossians 1:18**, he writes that “*Christ is the head of the body, the Church*”. In **Ephesians 1:22-23**, St. Paul teaches that “*God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*”

Our prayers begin and end with the

phrase “Glory be to the Father, Son, and Living Holy Spirit, One God for ever and ever”. The Church exists because of God the Father, the Church is the Body of Christ and the Church is being perfected by the Holy Spirit.



Holy Trinity

The Greek word *ekklesia* and the Hebrew word *qahal* are translated as the Church because they mean a gathering or assembly of people for a purpose. It's important to understand that this purpose was born out of God's Love and was restored on the day of Pentecost. Therefore Pentecost is not the birthday of the Holy Church, but rather the day the visible Church on earth was renewed to bear witness to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus says to St. Peter that He would build the Church upon the faith he confessed, which was that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God (**St. Matthew 16:18**). The real rock is Christ (**I Cor 10:4**) and St. Peter was confessing the faith in this rock, which made him a rock for Christ. The whole assembly confessed this faith on the day of Pentecost and that made them renew

themselves to be called the Church.

The Roots of Pentecost

Our purpose began on the day of creation when man and women were created in God's image and likeness (**Genesis 1:27**) for a purpose to fill the Earth and be stewards for Him (**Genesis 1:28-31**). God created us out of His Love and as love needs freedom, we were also created with free-will and the ability to choose to obey or disobey.

God's love for man is emphasised in the qolo of the quqlion for the departed clergy:

Qolo : Quqlion for departed clergy

*God created Adam and
Sat down, contemplating him
He saw how fair and like the
Creature was to Creator
The earthly one came and went
Through the trees of Paradise
The angels marvelled
At how he was exalted*

(Daivam srushtichaadathe..)

We know Adam and Eve disobeyed the Word of God and fell to temptation, and their decision brought sin to this world. This was not God's plan or purpose, and most importantly His Love for mankind is unceasing. We were His Chosen One (**Deuteronomy 10:15**) and although man's decision separated us, He still had a plan to redeem and restore us.



Creation of Adam

The story of man after the Fall (**Genesis 3**) continues through Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel, and in Cain we see how sin overcame the world. Noah remained faithful through the flood (**Genesis 6 to 9**) but man continued to choose unfaithfulness. This leads to the Tower of Babel (**Genesis 11**).



Tower of Babel

The Scriptural account begins by say-

ing “the whole earth was one language and one speech” (**Genesis 11:1**). As we read in the Orthodox Study Bible, “mankind was united as one race and one language. But this unity existed without the Holy Trinity, for man’s true unity is union and communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Trinity”. Babylon would be considered at the time as the greatest city in the world, but without God the only future would be death and destruction. Man was attempting to have God come down and serve them, so God obliged - “Come, let Us go down there and confuse their language, so they may not understand one another’s speech” (**Genesis 11:7**). For more clarity on this, the Orthodox Study Bible explains, “The Lord divided this false unity for the sake of man’s salvation, that man might seek and find Him (**Acts 17:26-28**). For they sought to build their unity by making a name for themselves (**Genesis 11:4**). They cared nothing for the name of the Lord God, by which man is saved.”

Through Abraham and the Covenant (**Genesis 17**), we see the origins of Israel and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob being called together. The act of circumcision was an external act of the Old Covenant that marked them as the People of God. This was the beginning of God’s actions to save all of mankind.

Israel’s bondage followed, and we read how God never abandoned His people. Through the Passover (**Exodus 12**), Israel was saved from bondage and in Moses we see the formation of Liturgical

worship in the Temple (**Exodus 25-31**).

What is important to understand is that God’s Love for us connects all these events in the Old Testament and leads us to Christ and our salvation. As Fr. Thomas Hopko reflects, “The story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses is that God is the one who is choosing, God is the one who is acting, God is the one who is sharing His righteousness, His truth, His knowledge, His power with the people that He has chosen as a pure grace. We even come to believe that He has chosen these people for the sake of [the] salvation of the whole creation, for the salvation of the world in their messianic king who is to come, who will fulfil all the Law perfectly and thereby redeem the whole world, in whom, as it was promised to Abraham, that he was the seed in which all the families of the earth ultimately would be blessed.”

Remember

Etho d’Moran is Syriac for “Church of our Lord”, and a reminder that the Church and God are always and forever One.



Confirmation of the Church

As we reflect on God’s actions after the Fall, we see more clearly that God’s Love for us never abated. With His Death and Resurrection, God was able to undo the consequence of the Fall, and death no

longer is the end. As we sing in the Ma-neesa of Mar Severus (the opening hymn of the Holy Qurbana),

*And who by His grace
Descended for all mankind
To bring life and salvation
For our fallen human race;
Who did become incarnate
Of the pure Virgin,
The holy and glorious Theotokos
He became man without change
And was crucified for us,
Chris, who is our Lord and God;
He trampled death by His death
And destroyed our death*

(Sahajamathaay mruthirahitha..)

Jesus promised to His followers that after He goes, the Holy Spirit would come. As we read in **St. John 14:15-17**, “If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray to the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever - the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.”

This day came 50 days after the Resurrection of our Lord, which is where we get the name *Pentecost* which means fifty. This day was prophesied by the prophet Joel, which we read during the 2nd Service of Pentecost: “Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed. And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all

people.” (**Joel 2:25-32**).

We also see on this day of Pentecost many details that contrast to the Tower of Babel. For example in **Acts 2:2-3**, “And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them.” And later, in **Acts 2:4**, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”



The Pentecost Icon

It's important to understand that this gift of the tongues is not gibberish or an external sign. Rather, this is the next

phase of our Church's growth and the invitation for all to be joined as Israel and be His people. Even in the command from Christ, we see the Trinitarian Love: *"Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (St. **Matthew 28:19-20**). One shall at the same time know that each one was not speaking someone else's language. Everyone spoke their own language, but all understood everyone's speech in their own language. Isn't this a miracle?

This is the unification of tongues, which was broken in Babel. *And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language. Then they were all amazed and marvelled, saying to one another, "Look, are not all those who speak Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God."* So they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, *"Whatever*

could this mean?" (Acts 2:5-12)

The Sedro from the 2nd Service of Pentecost further illuminates this beautiful teaching - "Today, by the descent of the Comforter, the Upper Room has become the second Babylon, not as a punishment as it was in the confusion of the tongues, as in the first one, but rather, by the power of the Holy Spirit, it has been enlightened by the light of grace so that the apostles might become wise for preaching of the Truth."

Baptism becomes a sign of the New Covenant and should not be seen as abolishing Circumcision or the Old Covenant from the days of Moses but rather a fulfilment and renewal towards our purpose that had been disrupted by the Fall. The word Baptism is a transliteration of the Greek word *Baptizo* (which means to dip or immerse). Baptism unites us not only with Christ but also with His people, the Church. One is baptised into the community of faith to share in its life, values, and vision. Baptism, by bringing us into the glorified life of Christ and making us part of His deified humanity, integrates us into the Church, His body. St. John the Forerunner came baptised with water, but Christ baptised with Living Water and with the Fire of the Holy Spirit (St. **Matthew 3:11**).

The work of the Holy Spirit is to exalt Christ in our hearts. He forms the image of Christ in us. We owe all to God in salvation. The Father gave us the Son, the Son gave His life for us, and the Spirit gives us life and faith in Christ. The

continuous presence of the Holy Spirit makes possible the constant, progressive, personal growth of the Christian into the image and likeness of God.

Remember

Our prayers as well begin and end with the phrase "Glory be to the Father, Son, and Living Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever". The Church exists because of God the Father, the Church is the Body of Christ and the Church is perfected by the Holy Spirit.



The Services of Pentecost

Forty days after the resurrection, we observe the Ascension of our Lord. This is followed by ten days of vigil before the Pentecost during which no celebrations, including marriages, are permitted. The Church celebrates the Feast of Pentecost

in three phases to express three distinct expressions of the Holy Trinity.

The first service is addressed to the Father, second to the Son, and third to the Holy Spirit. At the beginning of the service, three bowls with water are placed on the "Derga" or the step in front of the Holy Altar. The first service starts. At the end of the first service the priest takes the middle bowl, goes around the church and sprinkles it on the faithful. The same happens at the end of the second service, but the bowl will be the one at the left of the three. After the third service the bowl on the right side will be taken. At the end of each service, the congregation kneels down (therefore, the Syriac name Siom Burke) and cries out "Kurielaison" (Lord have mercy on me) while the priest who is also kneeling, prays silently.

The Service of Pentecost is one of our lengthier celebrations but an important one that reminds us of the love of the Trinity and our commitment as Christians.

Reflection Questions

1. How would you respond to your friend who asks, “Are you an Orthodox Christian? Don’t you know that Christians are under a new covenant? The old one is finished because Jesus died on the Cross, and we now praise and worship Him as we want because we are saved.”
2. As we read in the Orthodox Study Bible, “mankind was united as one race and one language. But this unity existed without the Holy Trinity, for man’s true unity is union and communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Trinity”. Reflect on what interferes between your union and communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Trinity.
3. Explain how Baptism has replaced circumcision.

Salvation through the Cross

Lesson Goals :

- *I can relate how humility of the Cross is a power which evil in its pride cannot bear.*
- *I can identify how the Cross is the presence of Christ as well as that of the Gospel.*
- *I can narrate the legend of King Abgar from the Syriac tradition.*
- *I can develop an understanding of the exaltation of the Cross.*
- *I can analyse and understand the Quqlion of the Holy Cross.*



Introduction

The Holy Cross is the most recognisable symbol of Christianity. Images of the Holy Cross are found everywhere in the church, and a Table Cross is present at multiple places. The Holy Cross represents everything about Jesus Christ: His birth, death, and resurrection. In other words, the Holy Cross reminds us about the presence of Christ and the Holy Gospel. It also represents everything we gain through Christ: peace, salvation, discipleship, glory, humility, and victory. The Cross is present in all our worship, including the Qauma, the Trisagion, the Nicene Creed, etc. There are also special commemorations of the Holy Cross every Friday, Mid-Lent, Good Friday, Exaltation of Cross on major feast days, and the Feast of Holy Cross (September 14).

Cross as a symbol in Orthodox Worship

1. **Gesture of Cross:** The Malankara Orthodox faithful make a sign of the Cross using the fingers of the right hand. This practice can be traced back to the second century. Tertullian (c. 155 AD – c. 220 AD) says, “*In all our actions, when we come in or go out, when we dress, when we wash, at our meals, before resting to sleep, we make on our forehead the Sign of the Cross*” (The Chaplet, Chapter 3). The gesture of the Holy Cross is a prayer with our body so that we sanctify our actions and ourselves. Through this noble gesture, we proclaim that the Son of God has come down to save us, which is the proclamation of the Holy Gospel. Therefore, this gesture is exceptionally vital for us as Christians.

2. **Quilion of the Holy Cross and Friday:** The **Quilion** of Cross (**Psalm 43:6-8 OSB**) is sung every Friday and on other special occasions. The Cross is remembered every Friday because Our Lord was crucified on Friday. Adoration of the Holy Cross and sealing the sign of the Holy Cross on the forehead at the time of baptism and all other occasions by a priest ensures that the Holy Cross is the strong protection by night and by day from the powers of all evil. Therefore, we sing as follows:



Think

Calculate how many days in a year the Mnortho is in the church.



Friday, Third Hour, Qolo
*At the Third Hour and at all times,
 we will adore
 The life-giving Cross,
 And we sign ourselves with it for it
 is our hope
 And strong protection
 By night and day – from the evil
 one and his powers -
 It delivers us.*

3. **Mnortho:** At the half of Great Lent (Mid Lent), a special object called **Mnortho** (or Golgotha) is placed in the middle of the church nave. A Cross is placed on top of Mnortho. The Mnortho recalls the words of Jesus that “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up*” (**St. John 3:14**).

4. Jesus is referring back to the elevation of the bronze serpent in the wilderness (**Numbers 21:8-9**). Anyone bitten by a poisonous snake was healed when they looked at the bronze serpent. In the same way, we are healed from the deadly venom of sin if we look to Our Lord elevated on the Cross (see **Psalm 34:5**). The Mnortho journeys with us from the middle of the church to the front of the church at Holy Week, and then into the Holy Altar room (madbaha) from Easter to Ascension. The Cross on the Mnortho is used for the burial, Resurrection, and Ascension of our Lord. The Mnortho is inside the nave of the Church during the second half of the Holy Lent, and that is why we kiss its

wings without fail whenever we enter and leave the Church.

- Veneration of the Holy Cross:** Great Friday service includes a special service of the veneration of the Cross. The service of the Veneration of Cross follows the ninth-hour prayers. The opening prayer reminds us of our responsibility to carry the Cross (see **St. Luke 9:23**). *“May we, in compliance with Your supreme command, carry Your Cross on our shoulders in a Christian-like manner, always ready to mortify our members which are on earth and live You in fear of God”* (Great Friday, Veneration of Cross, Sluzo; see **Galatians 5:24**). This service concludes with **adoration of the Holy Cross** by all the faithful. The hymn sung at the time of the adoration reminds us that Christ gave us salvation through the Cross and the reason for us to adore the Holy Cross:

Great Friday : Adoration of the Holy Cross

*“We bow before Your Cross,
Which brought salvation for our souls,
And we – cry out with the thief, O
Christ,
‘Remember us when – You – Come!’”*

- Exaltation of the Holy Cross:** Several of the major feasts of the Lord include a unique service called **Exaltation of the Cross**. To exalt means to raise to a higher rank. The physical exaltation of the Cross signifies

the supreme importance the Cross should have in our lives. In the Malankara Orthodox tradition, the feasts with the exaltation service include the feast of Nativity, Baptism of our Lord, Mid-Lent, Palm Sunday, Great Friday, Resurrection (Easter), and Ascension. The consecration of the church also includes the service of the exaltation of the Holy Cross. At the exaltation of the Holy Cross, the celebrant takes the festive Cross and blesses the four sides of the earth. It symbolises the blessing of the entire universe by the Cross, the sign of victory of God over all evil. All faithful, therefore, also make the sign of the Cross, which symbolises receiving blessings.

Keep in mind

The gesture of the cross is a prayer with our body that sanctifies our actions. It also is our proclamation that the Son of God has come down to save us, which is the proclamation of the Holy Gospel. Therefore, this gesture is exceptionally vital for us as Christians.

- Feast of the Holy Cross:** We celebrate the finding of the true Cross of the Lord in the fourth century by Saint Helena on September 14th. The day's prayer reminds us that the Cross

is the armour we wear. We venerate Your Holy Cross saying: “The Cross is an armour which never fails, the Cross is a wall which never fails” (Feast of Holy Cross, Sedro).

King Abgar and Mid-Lent

At Mid-Lent, we also remember the healing of King Abgar of Edessa by Christ. Edessa was an important city on the border between the Roman Empire and Persian Empire. The Persian Empire was located East of the Roman Empire and was governed initially by the Parthian dynasty (and later by the Sasanid dynasty). At various times, another small kingdom known as the Kingdom of Edessa existed between the Roman and Persian empires. King Abgar was the king of Edessa at the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry. According to early Christian historians, including Eusebius of Caesarea, King Abgar was afflicted with leprosy. Though he was isolated and far away from Jesus Christ, he sought a way to find healing from Jesus. The legend says there was an exchange of letters between our Lord Jesus Christ and King Abgar. Our Lord took a cloth, used it to wash His face, and sent it with a letter to King Abgar. Christ stated in the letter that He would send one of His disciples after He ascended to bring complete healing to Abgar. When King Abgar received the letter and cloth, he placed that cloth on his face and had partial healing.

The tradition goes like the King had sent a letter back to Jesus, saying that he

was aware of the impending danger of death at the hands of the Jews for Jesus, and he was offering a haven for Jesus in his kingdom. After the Ascension of the Lord, St. Thaddeus (Mar Addai), one of the seventy-two evangelists, visited King Abgar to complete his healing from leprosy as prophesied by Christ. Edessa (also known as Urha) thus became an important centre for Syriac Christianity. The letter of Christ, which was the cloth that saved King Abgar from leprosy, reminds the Holy Cross, which is why we remember this event during the Mid Lent. This tradition stands at the bottom of the high importance of the Holy Cross, wherever the Syriac tradition flourished and we sing this story as Katholiki at the feast of the Mid-Lent.

Cross and Jesus Christ

1. **Cross and Salvation** - St. Paul states, “*For the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*” (1 **Corinthians. 1:18**). The Cross was used as a tool for punishment in the Roman Empire and was an abomination for the Jews. Using such a tool for veneration was considered foolishness across society during those days. The message of the Cross is the power of God for us who are being saved. Notice that salvation is a continuous process, and we are all being saved even now. The Holy Cross symbolises the entire saving work of Jesus Christ. As we sing on Friday,

Friday, Matins, Qolo of Quqlion

*By it we – confess and worship
We have life – by Your saving work*

Therefore, we envision the Cross as a ladder that joins heaven and earth. Here we see that **the Cross is a cosmic symbol** because of its power over the entire cosmos (universe). This power of the Holy Cross is achieved through the humble submission of Christ through His death. A cosmic victory can only come through a humble expression which evil in its pride cannot bear.

2. **Power and Wisdom of God** - The message of the Cross is foolish to some because it defies worldly expectations. St Paul states that “preaching a crucified Messiah is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (**1 Corinthians 1:23**). The Jews expected the messiah to establish a worldly kingdom and could not fathom that, the Messiah would be crucified by worldly powers. Similarly, Greeks also expect divine beings to be powerful over others. According to St Paul, the Cross is a sign of power, but different from what the world expects. God chose the humble instrument of the Cross to be the means of our salvation, and that is the wisdom of God (**1 Corinthians 1:29**). As we sing in the prayers for Friday Morning Prayer (Matins),

Friday, Matins, Qolo of Quqlion

*By Your Cross You cut off the head
of the ev-il tyrant
By your valour you loosed the hold
of greedy – Death on us
So we cry to You
Glory to the Pow’r of Your be’ing
Lord – of – all*

3. **Victory of God** - Through the power of the Cross Christ defeated all evil powers and defeated death. Through the Cross, Christ has given us victory as well. We can find strength in our daily life by relying on this victory. As a sign of victory, the Cross is also a sign of joy:

Friday 3rd hour Bovooso

*Son of God in whose Cross the crea-
tion rejoiced,
Let my mind rejoice in the precious
Cross of light*

4. **Eternal Fountain** - The Cross is a wine press that the Holy Church received and “Her children drink of it and rejoice in it forever” (Friday, Matins, Qolo). Jesus was pierced on the side by a lance when he was on the Cross (**St. John 19:34**). Blood and water flowed from Jesus’ side. Just as Eve was created from the side of Adam, the Church, which is the Holy Bride of Christ the Bridegroom, is created from the side of Christ the New Adam. The Church stands at

the foot of the Cross, always baptising with that water and drinking that blood in the Eucharist.

The Cross is, therefore, a symbol of Jesus Christ, his life and work, and the entire gospel message.

Our participation in the Cross

As the symbol of the gospel, the Cross also represents Christian discipleship and living.

1. **Christian Discipleship** - Jesus calls all of us to take up our Cross and follow him daily. *“Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his Cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it’”* (St. **Luke 9:23-24**). Here we see that to save our life we must lose it. This is the paradox of Christian living. This is what it means to imitate Christ (**1 Corinthians 11:1**). We are to die daily to our old man and to be renewed as a new being (**Romans 6:6**).
2. **Cross is our armour** – In our life of discipleship, the Cross is an armour that protects us.

Quqilion for Cross, Qolo

*We fear not the evil one
Because the Lord is with us
We are clothed in His armour
And in it we all glory*

(Naathan koottaay ..)

The armour of the Cross is a powerful weapon in a spiritual war against all that is evil.

Quqilion for Cross, Eqbo

*The Cross conquered and conquers
The Cross has conquered Satan
May the Cross be a stronghold
To all who confess the Cross*

(Sleeba vennu ..)

3. **Dying to self** – As a symbol of Christian living, the Cross represents the daily dying to the self. St Paul says, *“But God forbids that I should boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”* (**Galatians 6:14**). Since the Cross is the reason for our boasting, our prayers repeatedly say that “we glory in the Cross.” The Cross is also a reminder of our need to become humble, die to sin, and live righteously (**1 Peter 2:24**). When we see the sign of the Cross in Church and when we make the sign of the Cross in prayer, let us remember the need to die to sin and to live righteously.

Remember

For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it” (St. Luke 9:23-24). Here we see that to save our life we must lose it. This is the paradox of Christian living. This is what it means to imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). We are to die daily to our old man and to be renewed as a new being (Romans 6:6).



Reflection Questions

1. Consider the examples of the use of the Holy Cross as a symbol in Orthodox worship. How do these examples show that the Cross is a symbol of the person of Jesus Christ and the gospel?
2. Review why the Cross was seen as foolish in the time of St Paul. How is the Cross seen as foolishness in today’s world? Can the power of God still be revealed as a reply to those who consider the Cross foolish today?
3. It is said that the Christian life is a Cross-shaped (or cruciform) life. How is this true in your life or in the life of a Christian you admire?

The Journey to Salvation

Lesson Goals :

- *I can discuss how the Final Judgement and Salvation is about both faith and works, and that the debate of "Faith vs. Works" is not one that the Orthodox Church partakes in.*
- *I can validate that Christ is the only Judge, and that we as Orthodox Christians do not judge others.*
- *I can reframe how we understand Final Judgment, that it is not legalistic and a form of punishment, but rather a consequence of our choices.*



In the history of Christianity, the role of faith vs works in our salvation has been a hotly debated topic and the cause of many divisions. Is Salvation achieved by faith alone? What is the role of good deeds or "works" in our salvation? Can we "earn" salvation by doing good deeds? On the other hand, if works have no role in salvation and "faith alone" is what will save us, then why bother doing good works in a world that will pass away? These questions have confounded Christians through centuries.

“

Yea, a man may say, you have faith, and I have works: show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works

James 2:18

”

The Proof of Love: Our Faith without Good Works is Dead

Our journey towards salvation can only progress through a continual state of repentance and the constant remembrance that we cannot live without God. Psalm 51 (50 in Greek translations) is used frequently during daily prayers and in preparation for Holy Qurbana as a reminder of the importance of having a pure relationship with God, echoed in the opening of the prayer, "Have mercy on me, O God, in Your loving kindness; in the abundance of Your mercy blot out my sin."

The continual state of repentance allows for God's grace to abound in our lives. By emulating the lives of the saints who never ceased to call upon the Lord in repentance, we come to see the truth

that we are not worthy of anything but must beseech the Lord for His loving mercy.

The saints show us that works of love and mercy grow out of humility and God's love in their hearts. Their works demonstrated that their love and good works were a result of that deep and constant state of repentance. Saint Gregory the Great said, *"The proof of love is in the works. Where love exists, it works great things. But when it ceases to act, it ceases to exist."*

The Liturgy reminds us that only those with faith and love may draw near to receive the Holy Mysteries. Our participation in the Body and Blood of the Lord provides each of us with the opportunity to be Christ-bearers in the world in which we live, and others will know we belong to Christ, "by our love" (John 13:35).

However, our deeds do not supersede the place of grace and faith with God, but are part of the whole experience in our relationship with God. We do not view salvation in the legalistic terms of acquittal and justification, for salvation is much more than simply being forgiven and getting into heaven. Salvation is not about being "saved" by our works for this is impossible. Works do not save us, but when placed in the context of a relationship, we see that works are an expression of our faith—*"By their deeds you will know them"* (Matthew 7:16).

Our works cannot *earn* us salvation, but neither are works unimportant. Indeed, the way we live our life is of utmost

importance. In Holy Scripture we read that God will judge each person according to their deeds (See Matthew 25:31-46, Romans 2:6, 1 Peter 1:17, and Revelation 20:12, among other passages). So as was once reportedly stated by an Orthodox theologian, "You cannot be saved by works, but you cannot be saved without them." According to the Fathers, our communion with God is made fuller and more complete through our works. Good works help grow our hearts in love toward God and our neighbour, thus helping us attain God's "likeness" in this life, bringing us into a joyful communion with Christ.

Christ -- The Eternal Judge

“

Judge not, that ye be not judged

St. Matthew 7:1

”

True repentance reminds us that we are not called to judge anyone, but to forgive as our Heavenly Father forgives us. As we become more aware of our own sins and realise how much forgiveness and mercy we need, we are less likely to see the sins of others.

Every Orthodox Christian should strive to truly forgive others, and to turn our gaze away from our neighbour's sin and focus only on our own need for change. The only way one can overcome the sin of judging others is to see one's

own sins. True repentance only bears fruit when we work on our own fallen nature.

Judgement belongs to God alone. It is not for us to decide who is saved, who is not, who is evil, who is hopeless, and so forth. We might certainly deem an action to be sinful or inappropriate, but we do not judge the person, and we do not consider ourselves as being superior to anyone else. It is best for us to acknowledge each of ourselves as the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). If God is patient and merciful with us, then we should also be so to everyone, regardless of their struggles and sins and regardless of their beliefs. While we believe the fullness of the truth was revealed to the world in Jesus Christ and is found in Holy Orthodox Christianity, we rejoice whenever goodness and truth are expressed and practised by anyone, regardless of their own beliefs or religion. We do not dismiss or condemn any person or religion outside the Church, for only God knows what is in each person's heart, and not everyone is exposed to the fullness of the truth in this life, through no fault of their own. We must remember that each will be judged according to the measure they have been given. Other faiths may not have the fullness of the Apostolic Truth, but if they are believers in God and are trying to live a holy life—or if they are even non-believers or agnostics but are demonstrating kindness and service to others—we must give thanks to Christ for what they do have. (But of course, as we are called to do,

we strive in love to share the truth and beauty of Christ to all peoples and nations [Matthew 28:18–20]).

Finally, we must not presume to understand God's justice as a legalistic framework since God's justice transcends our understanding. St. Isaac the Syrian reminds us that God has only one law: the law of Love—*“Do not presume to call God just, for what sort of justice is this: we sinned, yet He gave up His only-begotten Son on the Cross?”*

Therefore, let us live our lives heeding the words of St. Paul: *“Speaking the truth in love, let us grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head [of the Church], even Christ (Ephesians 4:15),”* that we may echo the words of St. Anthony the Great: *“I no longer fear God, but I love Him.”*

The Second Coming and Final Judgement

“

This Child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many

St. Luke 2:34

”

The Orthodox understanding of life after death and the Second Coming of Christ is rooted in the Holy Scriptures and Patristic teachings (teachings of the Fathers of the Church) on the subject. The Fathers are unanimous in their understanding of eschatology which is the study of religious ideas or beliefs



The Icon of The Last Judgement

about death, judgement, and the after-life. While most Christians believe that there is some form of life after death, there are various Christian interpretations of this belief. (study of the last days) as a mystery, and while their teachings abound in metaphors and parables, we must realise that we can only understand this mystery fully in the age to come.

The volumes of Patristic writings on this subject show an important distinction between the Orthodox view and the so-called “Western” view of the Second Coming and the experience of Hell. Under this supposed understanding of heaven and hell, God’s retributive justice condemns the ungodly to suffer in hell. It is almost as if human suffering satisfies the legalistic framework of God’s justice.

The Orthodox Church, however, does not hold this view of the afterlife. As

mentioned previously, the law of Love means mercy triumphs over justice. Does this mean that Orthodox Christians do not believe in a hell-like experience in the afterlife?

Upon Christ’s Second Coming, everyone who has ever lived will see Christ in His uncreated light, forever. For *“those who worked good deeds in their lifetime will go towards the resurrection of life, while those who worked evil in their lifetime will go towards the resurrection of condemnation (St. John 5: 29).”* All will be separated at the moment of the final judgement, with the good experiencing paradise as exceedingly good and radiant, while those who have rejected Christ’s love, and whose lives ended without repentance, will look upon Christ as hell, the *“all-consuming fire”* spoken of in Hebrews 12:29.

For those who want to be with Christ

and experience the golden light, they will experience this as encompassing, eternal joy. But, for those that reject Christ it will be a painful experience. We believe that heaven and hell are not about loca-

tion or places, but about our relationship with God. Heaven and Hell are within the same realm, which is in the presence of God.

Reflection Questions

1. Defend why the Orthodox Church does not describe our final judgment as one according to only faith or only works.
2. What does it mean to judge?
3. Do we have the authority to place judgment on acts such as (homosexuality, adultery, murder, rape, etc.)?
4. What does it mean when St. Paul says, "I am the foremost of sinners" in 1 Timothy 1:15?

Fulfilment in Christ

Lesson Goals :

- *I can elaborate on how the Old Testament covenant was fulfilled in Christ.*
- *I can interpret the connection between Old Testament typology and Christ.*
- *I can uncover how circumcision was a symbol of the covenant between God and Abraham.*
- *I can explain how the Sacrament of Baptism continues the promise which God gave to His people.*



Psalm 1 could be seen as introducing key concerns of the whole Bible, since it describes the two fundamental classes of mankind—sinners and righteous. It also addresses concepts ultimately revealed in the perfectly blessed man, Jesus Christ, who stands at the crossroads of two ways (Psalm 1:1; St. Matthew 7:13). From the time of creation, the Old Testament traces characters whose “will is in the law of the Lord” and who “meditate in His law day and night.” These righteous people started from the beginning through creation from Noah, Abraham, David and ended in Christ. All these righteous men, detailed in the genealogy of Christ (**St. Matthew 1** and **St. Luke 3**), trace God’s chosen lineage culminating in His incarnation. Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit exults on this in the Mag-

nificat – “As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.”

The Old Testament Fathers and God's Covenants

Noah’s expression of thanksgiving through the sacrifice at the end of the flood (**Genesis 8:20-22**) is described as a sweet aroma to the **Lord** God. God in turn establishes a covenant with Noah to never again destroy creation through a flood. Following Abram’s victory in battle as described in Genesis 14, he is met by Melchizedek the priest-king of Salem and the king of Sodom. Melchizedek, another personification of Christ, brings out bread and wine to him. Abram’s humility and righteousness in his dealings, especially with the two kings, are fol-

lowed by the **Word** of God (God the Son is described in the Bible as the Lord God and the Word of God) blessing him with descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky (**Genesis 12:2; 15:5**). It is interesting to note that stars were chosen as a measure of comparison here. It implies not only large numbers, but exaltedness also. Also to note is God mentioning (**Genesis 12:3**) "...and in you all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed." This is probably one of the earliest mentions of salvation and the incarnation to occur around 2000 years later through his descendants. In Genesis 17, Abram (exalted father) becomes Abraham (father of a multitude) and is asked by the **Lord** God to be circumcised along with all of the male members of his family and servants. This would be an enduring sign and reminder to each of Abraham's covenant with God.

Later the **Lord** God provides detailed instructions to Moses (**Exodus 19-31**) on the laws the children of Israel (Jacob) needed to follow. The covenant is affirmed with the sacrifices of calves (**Exodus 24:5-8**) and blood is sprinkled on the people. This is a sacred agreement and God spells out the consequences of following and not following the instructions in Deuteronomy 28 – blessings and divine protection versus an unprotected, vulnerable and tragic existence. Joshua renews the covenant (Joshua 24) before he departs from his earthly life.

The **Lord** God tells King David through the prophet Nathan (2 Kingdoms 7) that his throne would be estab-

lished forever (Psalms 88:36-38) through his son who would also have the honour of building a temple for Him.

The New Testament and the New Covenant

All this time, the covenant appears to almost have a sovereign, legal and militaristic context – God protects and the people agree to worship and serve only Him. If they do, He blesses them and if they do not, calamities befall the people.

However the tenor of this relationship changes with the prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah. Ezekiel prophesies a **Covenant of Peace (Ezekiel 34:25)** with His people, the descendants of David – peace and prosperity (**Ezekiel 37:15-28**) under one Shepherd (**Ezekiel 34:23**). Jeremiah and Ezekiel describe this as a **New Covenant (Jeremiah 38:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:22-28)**. Ezekiel 38:34 probably captures this transformation best – "... *For I will be merciful to their wrongdoings and I will no longer remember their sins.*" Again Ezekiel 36:27, "*I shall put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my requirements, and you shall keep My judgements and do them.*"

These prophets herald the incarnation when God the Son becomes Man to live among human beings and shows them that they can live without sinning, and defeats the greatest human fear, the fear of death through His death and resurrection. Following this as promised, He sends the Holy Spirit to abide with humankind and perpetually

guide them during their earthly journey. The new covenant through God the Son, Jesus Christ, is a covenant of unconditional love, sacrifice and union with God through the Holy Eucharist.

Circumcision in the Old Covenant and Baptism in the New Covenant

God's covenant in the Old Testament was reinforced through different sacrifices that involved the shedding of blood. As a mark of the covenant with Abraham, blood is shed by each individual through circumcision. It is interesting to note the sequence of events in Genesis – God's promise to Abram/Abraham – the covenant (**Genesis 17:1-8**), circumcision – the mark of the covenant (**Genesis 17:9-14**) and followed by the promise of the birth of son in his old age (**Genesis 18:9-10**).

Circumcision was a symbol of the death of the body, so that we might obtain life. A part of the body is cut off to die, followed by a renewal in God. With the new covenant, circumcision is replaced by baptism as the mark of the covenant, where we die with Christ so that we may live with Him. Just as the old covenant stated that he who was not circumcised would be cut off from His people, the new covenant does the same with baptism. The old covenant included a blessing and a punishment. However the new covenant mentions the promise of salvation for those who are baptised and

become part of the Church. The people who do not are just excluded from this blessing.

Father Daniel Griffith compares the blade used in circumcision to the Holy Spirit in Baptism that removes sin completely from us. St. Paul elaborates on this in **Colossians 2:11-15**. The Spirit-blade emblazons the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit. St. Cyril of Alexandria says that we must cut away the tumultuous risings of carnal pleasures and passions with the sharp surgery of faith and ascetic labours.

Sacrifices in the Old and New Covenants

It is also fascinating to note another drastic change with the new covenant. The numerous sacrificial offerings including the grain offerings, the drink offerings, first fruits and livestock in the Old Testament part of the old covenant are replaced by Christ offering himself in the new covenant. Father Stephen De Young, in his essay, *The Sacrifice to End All Sacrifices*, points out Christ's sacrifice cannot be compared to a sin offering where a scapegoat is released "alive" in the Old Testament as it cannot be sacrificed as it is now unclean. Rather Christ's sacrifice is comparable to the other offerings made to God where all of these have a common characteristic – they are all food offered to God which is later consumed by the priests and the worshippers. Father Young is quick to point out that the sacrifices of the New Testament initiated by Jesus Christ are not just a

communal meal, because for an animal to become part of a meal, it must first be butchered. By God's own sacrifice, the sacrificial system has been fulfilled per Father Young. His sacrifice gives our liturgy and Eucharist its meaning and reality.

Conclusion

Creation was an expression of God's free will, goodness, wisdom, love and omnipotence. God created man in His own

image and gave him free will. Man, however, used his free will to sin and separate himself from God. In the Old Testament, God uses prophets, laws, promises, and punishments to wean the man away from sin. In the New Testament, He comes and lives with the man to show him how to live without sin. He sacrifices Himself to fulfil all future sacrifices. He institutes the Eucharist to unify man with Him and sends the Holy Spirit to abide with man and guide him constantly if he is only willing to listen.

Reflection Questions

1. How is Christ the fulfilment of the Old Testament? (focus on Christ)
2. Why do we say that Baptism fulfils the Old Testament practice of Circumcision?
3. Explain how God's love for His people was the reason for Circumcision in the OT and how this is now replaced with the Sacrament of Baptism.

Syriac Liturgical Traditions

Lesson Goals :

- *I can appreciate how the Syriac roots uniquely illuminates the ancient wisdom of Christianity in a unique way*
- *I can relate to how the canonization of Scripture relates to our Syrian tradition*
- *I can discern how the structure of the Holy Qurbana and the special feasts helps us come closer to Christ*



“

For the West Syrians, worship is the vocation of man, the very purpose for which he was created. He was created to live in communion with God as a liturgical being

Fr. Baby Varghese

”

Unlike the Western Church, the Orthodox Church, and in particular the Syrian Orthodox Church, never insisted on liturgical uniformity, and the different monasteries and regions of the world followed their own liturgical practices. This diversity is not to be considered a deficiency but rather evidence of the power and active involvement of the Holy Spirit in the Orthodox Church. St. Dionysius Bar Salibi reflects, “The fact that people of every country pray differently and have something that singles them out from the rest goes to their credit, first because it indicates the wealth of their devotions and spiritual vigour, and secondly because it is a sign of the incomprehensibility of God, who wishes to be glorified in different ways in different countries and towns.”

Introduction

In his book “West Syrian Liturgical Theology,” Fr. Baby Varghese defines Christian theology as the search for meaning and the articulation of that meaning. This definition is important when we speak of liturgy. For Orthodox Christians, the liturgy is an attempt to align ourselves with the Almighty.



Despite this diversity in language, prayers, and practises, there is commonality in the key parts of the Liturgy and the prayers of the different Feast days. This reflects that all Orthodox Churches worship the One True God who was revealed in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Just as different people who witness an event may retell it based on their own perspectives and experiences, so too are there different Liturgical expressions of the Divine Revelation. But, through the active guidance of the Holy Spirit, all expressions are of the common Truth. We see this in the work of the Liturgical Resource Development, who translate the Syriac and Malayalam hymns and prayers to English, and in the irrefutable evidence that, throughout the centuries and through various translations, the original meaning was never altered.

Orthodox liturgy employs early Chris-

tian thought patterns, language, symbols, and cultural and physical elements, and it brings together all senses of perception through the assimilation and enculturation¹ of Christ's teachings. Each liturgical tradition results from an enculturation encounter between the Gospel and the culture in which the message of salvation is preached.

Thus, Orthodox liturgy ensures that it preserves the essence of the Gospel and establishes the experience of the Kingdom of God. The liturgical tradition of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is no different, and she is proud of her liturgy, which our fathers have handed down to us over the past generations.

What we believe is what we pray, and what we pray is what we believe. In the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, our current prayers and songs reflect the West Syriac tradition.

History of the Syriac Liturgy

Syriac has been the liturgical language of the St. Thomas Christians from a very early date, even though their identity and culture have always remained truly of Indian origin. Syriac belongs to the Semitic language family. Since the beginning of the Christian Church in Malankara, people have used Syriac as their language to worship for two reasons: 1. As a comrade of Jesus Christ, St. Thomas might have spoken that lan-

¹Enculturation - the process by which individuals learn and acquire the cultural norms, values, beliefs, and behaviours of their own society or group

guage. 2. Syriac and the Jewish community in Malankara might also have used this language. Later, bishops from Syriac-speaking areas started coming to Malankara, and this tradition flourished.

Therefore, we can see many Syriac words in Malayalam vocabulary: For instance, Sleenba (Cross), Madbaha (Altar), Kasheesha (Priest), and Qurbana (Eucharist).

The liturgy used in the Malankara Church when the Portuguese landed in Malabar at the end of the 15th century was the East Syriac liturgy of Mar Adai and Mar Mari - the same as that of the Persian Church. Latinization under the Portuguese caused a break with the East Syriac tradition. Other liturgical practises would also have been in line with those of the East Syriac tradition. Later, when the church faced the threat of Latinization under the Portuguese Archbishop Menezes, the Archdeacon of India and other leaders of the Church were constantly trying to establish contacts with churches in the Middle East that were following Syriac liturgy and traditions. Following this, the West Syriac form of worship, language, and music was introduced to the Church in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and we continue to practise this tradition in our Church today.

Books of prayer such as Sh'himo (Common Prayer) prayers for the Holy Week, prayers for Lent, and the Penkiso (prayers for feasts and special days) followed suit. At present, the Church is using West Syriac Liturgy. The Church fol-

lows the faith established by the three Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (AD 325), Constantinople (AD 381), and Ephesus (AD 431).

The establishment of Syriac printing presses, first in Cochin (St. Thomas Press), which was later shifted to Kottayam, and then in Pampakuda (Mar Julius Press in 1879), helped adopt West Syriac texts. During the second half of the 19th century, most of the liturgical texts were translated into Malayalam. Eminent linguists like St. Dionysius Vattasseril, Konat Mathen Malpan, and Mattackal Alexandros Malpan paved the path for this trend. At the same time, HH Mar Baselios Augen I, HH Mar Baselios Mathews I, HG Youhanon Mar Severios (of Cochin diocese), and Konat Abraham Malpan followed their lead in the next generation. Now all liturgical texts are available in Malayalam and English. Some of the texts are also available in languages like Hindi, German, French, etc.

Canonization of Scripture

How should we respond when someone asks, "Who wrote the Bible?" Or if asked the question, "Do you go to a Bible-based Church?"

The Holy Bible (or Holy Scriptures, as the Bible is a collection of books) is not only the book of the Orthodox Church but was written by the Church and intended to be read by those who believe in God and constitute His people within the Church. There has always been an

implicit assumption that those who read the Holy Bible were Christians or catechumens (a Christian convert under instruction before Holy Baptism). Every word in Scripture presupposes faith in God. The Holy Bible was never intended to be an isolated manuscript or the fruit of scientific or historical research. Rather, the Holy Bible is a faith document for the children of God and was intended to be read and interpreted within a "Canon of Truth," i.e., the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

The Bible is the record of the revelation of God to man through the prophets and Christ. The four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are the centre of the Bible, just as Christ is the centre of the Church. For this reason, the Four Gospels are always enthroned on the altar in an Orthodox Church.

The Orthodox faith interprets the Bible in terms of Christ. The Old Testament prepares for the time of Christ, the Messiah, who fulfils its message and history. The New Testament writings are also centred around Christ and tell of His action in the world and in the Church through the Holy Spirit.

The Bible is central to the life of the Orthodox Church and gives both form and content to the Church's liturgical and sacramental worship, as well as to its theology and spiritual life. Nothing in the Orthodox Church is opposed to what is revealed in the Bible. His Grace Dr. Geevarghese Mar Osthathios emphasised that the sacred traditions of the Church will never contradict Scrip-

ture, and in fact, "We must always explain the Scriptural truth in the context of the sacred traditions of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church and not establish any dogma on the basis of the traditions alone." In other words, our written tradition is the Holy Bible!

Although the Bible is the written Word of God, this neither means the Bible fell from heaven ready-made nor that God dictated the Bible word for word to men who were merely His passive instruments. The **canon** (from the Greek word "kanōn," which means "rule" or "measuring stick") of the Bible is the process of centralising the Church texts into one collection of books.

So, if God did not write the Bible, what did He do? He established the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church! In Scripture itself, we clearly read that the Church is the Body of Christ (Colossians 1:18–29, Ephesians 5:23, 1 Corinthians 12:12, etc.). It is within the understanding of the Church that the Holy Bible is to be read and understood.

For the Orthodox Church, the Holy Scripture is our written tradition. It was the Church that wrote down the words of Scripture (from Moses to the Apostles and St. Paul). It was the Church that preserved the words of Scripture (1 Corinthians 15:1–8). It was the Church that told us what Scripture is and chose from among several texts (Luke 1:1–4) and selected those that upheld the Canon of Truth.

It is the Church alone that correctly interprets the Scripture because She alone

upheld the fullness of Christ's teachings. For all Christians, the Canon (Greek κανών, meaning "rule" or "measuring stick"—it is the list of books considered to be authoritative scripture) of the Holy Bible is closed, and no books are added. In Roman Catholicism, teachings have been expounded to the point of new additions (e.g., the Immaculate Conception, papal infallibility), and in Evangelical/Protestantism, teachings were taken away (belief that the Holy Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ, belief in the departed and Saints, changed views on Sacraments including Holy Baptism, Priesthood, and Confession, etc.). For the Orthodox Church, we do not add any new teachings, unlike other denominations.

The Holy Bible is the Divinely inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16), and although it has two parts (the Old Testament and the New Testament), the entire book is one message, one Word—Jesus Christ.

As a final note, it must be understood that despite some modern theories or popular media outlets claiming that "lost books" are being discovered that shed new light on Christianity, there are no "lost books" as all the writings that had been written in those times were read and included by the Church. Rather than thinking of these books as "lost," it is more proper to view these books as "rejected," as the Church determined these writings did not uphold the full revelation of Christ. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is a good example of a re-

jected Gnostic book that portrays Christ as a supernatural being who killed and then resurrected a childhood acquaintance, which the Church rejects as we know Christ lived as a man who did no sin.

New Testament

The New Testament contains 27 books, beginning with the Gospel of Matthew and ending with the Book of Revelation. All Christian denominations accept this without dispute.

How were these books selected? By the Church! It is important to understand that in the days of Christ and the Apostles, there was no "New Testament"; For example, when St. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16 that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, he was referring to what we call the Old Testament today, as many books of the New Testament had not been written yet.

In 367 A.D., St. Athanasius wrote a Paschal Letter where the books of what we call the New Testament are listed in the order as it is seen in today's Holy Gospel. However, we never claim that St. Athanasius decided on these books individually, but rather that these were the teachings of Christ that were being read in Churches at that time and written down by St. Athanasius. Writings from a local council held earlier at Carthage in 318 AD also made note of these books. This is a reflection of the authority and sacredness of oral teachings, which upheld the teachings of Christ to His Apos-

ties in the Christian community of the early Church.

Old Testament

As mentioned earlier, the Apostles refer to what we call the “Old Testament” as Scripture. These sacred books are not intended to be ignored by Christians, as there is much we can learn about Christ in the pages of the Old Testament. For the Church, the Old and New Testaments together are referred to as Holy Scripture and understood as One Word.

The number of Books is disputed between the different Christian denominations. For Orthodox Christians, there are about 46 to 50 books depending upon whether the original source is the Septuagint (Greek) or another (e.g., the Syriac text is called the Peshitta). Our Church considers the Syriac Peshitta as its Bible, with 47 Old Testament books.

The Ordo

Liturgy is celebrated according to an *ordo* or order. From Fr. Baby Varghese, by the word *ordo* (a Greek word that is also known as *tekso* in Syriac), we mean ‘the shape of worship’. The *ordo* consists of liturgical texts, lectionary, gestures, time, music, architecture, and symbols. Even the different ministerial roles of the clergy are in order.

Fr. Baby Varghese further teaches that all of this is done as an ordering of a vision and an expression of the mind of the community.

“Ordo is an ordering of a vision; it expresses the mind of the community. It orders and orients the community by assigning each member his or her role and function in the celebration. In the Syrian Orthodox liturgy, there is no place for passive participation. Each member ‘con-celebrates’ with a prayer, hymn, gesture, or movement. Ordo implies the presence and participation of the people. This meaning of the *ordo* is inseparable from that of the Church. The *ordo* enacts the vocation of the Church as ‘a royal priesthood’, which offers ‘spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1 Peter 1:5, 9).

The goal of the *ordo* is to make worship the expression of the faith of the Church, or to actualize the Church as the people of God, the worshipping community. Different elements have been arranged as a consistent whole precisely for the self-realisation of the Church. Ordo is a theologically inspired ‘language’ by which the Church expresses itself. It actualizes itself as the fulfilment of the mystery of God, which was hidden and is finally revealed in Christ. Each element, whether it is time, texts, gestures, or symbols, is rooted in and reflects the mystery of God. The West Syrian commentators have pointed out this fundamental principle.”

Everything that is done in Church and per our West Syrian tradition is centred on Christ, and through our words, actions, and thoughts, we become one with Christ. This understanding truly brings deep meaning to the special moment in

Holy Qurbana where we respond, “Our minds, our thoughts, and our hearts are with the Lord God!”

The Divine Liturgy

In the West Syrian tradition, the ordo of the Holy Qurbana is a revelation of the successive phases in Christ’s earthly life. Through the celebration of the Holy Qurbana, we deepen our understanding of God as revealed in Christ. With each celebration of the Holy Qurbana, we have a clearer understanding of the paradox of our relationship with God. As Bishop Kallistos Ware explains, on the one hand, God is nearer to us than anything else, but on the other hand, God is further from us than anything else. Despite His intensely personal presence of love within our lives and during Holy Qurbana, He is ultimately beyond our comprehension and understanding. However, through Christ and the Church, we are drawn nearer to God’s revelation and plan for our salvation and eternal life.

With this understanding, let’s re look at the basic structure of the Holy Qurbana:

1. **Preparation rites (tuyobo):** The important elements of the preparation rites are the vesting of the celebrant and the setting up of the bread and wine on the altar. During the time of the “tuyobo,” the Morning Prayer progresses in the main sanctuary. The Old Testament is read at the end of Morning Prayer. The Old Testament readings reveal the messianic prophecies from the Old Testament.
2. **Pre-Anaphora:** With the opening of the curtain, the pre-anaphora begins with a solemn procession around the altar. During the procession, the congregation sings the anthem (Manitho), composed by Patriarch Mar Severus of Antioch.
3. **Reading of the Scriptures:** Then the Epistles and the Gospel are read.
4. **Promion-Sedra and the Blessing of the Censer:** The Syriac word Sedro means “series of long prayers.” Sedra is a series of prayers and petitions. Promion (In Greek, promotion means introduction) is the introductory prayer preceding the Husoyo. Husoyo is the invariable prayer of penitence. Sedra follows the Husoyo. Then the celebrant offers incense and blesses the censer before censuring the entire sanctuary. The blessing of the censer in the Name of the Holy Trinity implies that we offer our prayers to the One Triune God.
5. **The Nicene Creed:** The Creed is a proclamation of the faith of the Church.
6. **Offering of the Holy Qurbana (Anaphora):** The part of the celebration that follows the Creed is called “Anaphora” (Greek, offering). As the first step, the priest washes his hands, symbolising the purification of the heart. Then he kneels down before

- the altar, says an inaudible prayer, and remembers the names of the living, the sick, and the departed, as the faithful have requested.
7. **Kiss of peace and the lifting up of the veil:** The kiss of peace is exchanged in accordance with our Lord's words to reconcile with each other before offering a sacrifice (Matt. 5:23–24). The lifting up symbolises that the life-giving and heavenly mysteries are revealed through the Holy Qurbana.
 8. **Prayer of the Veil (Sosaffa):** With a prayer (Lift up your hearts, Let us give thanks to the Lord.), the central part of the celebration begins. The priest says the prayer of thanksgiving, which evokes God's mercy towards us. The entire Holy Qurbana is a Thanksgiving (Eucharist) to God for sending His only begotten Son for our salvation.
 9. **First Benediction:** The priest blesses the congregation, invoking the Holy Trinity (the love of God the Father...).
 10. **Words of Institution:** The celebrant blesses the bread and wine, invoking the words of the institution of the Eucharist by Christ during the Last Supper.
 11. **Anamnesis, or the Commemoration of the Salvific Works:** During the Last Supper, Our Lord instructed His disciples: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luk. 22:16; 1 Cor. 14:24–25).
 12. **Invocation of the Holy Spirit (Epiclesis):** Invocation of the Holy Spirit is one of the characteristic traits of the Orthodox liturgy. During this time, the bread and wine are mystically transformed to become the body and blood of Christ (Russo).
 13. **Intercessions (Thubden):** The intercessions contain six canons (sets of prayers), each consisting of three prayers. Each set contains one loud prayer by the priest and the acolyte, as well as one silent prayer by the priest. The first three canons commemorate the living, and the remaining are for the departed. The intercessions are prayers for the well-being of all the members of the Church, including both living and departed.
 14. **Second Benediction:** The celebrant blesses the congregation for a second time.
 15. **Fraction:** The prayer during the fraction evokes the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, the living bread who was "broken" on the cross for our salvation.
 16. **The Lord's Prayer:** Here, the Lord's Prayer serves as the preparatory prayer for receiving the Holy Eucharist.
 17. **Third Benediction:** The celebrant blesses the congregation for the third time.
 18. **Elevation of the Holy Mysteries:** This is an invitation to receive the

Holy Qurbana, as well as a warning about the sanctity of the elements. The entire congregation responds to the blessedness of the occasion, saying, “The One Holy Father, the One Holy Son, and the One Holy Spirit” This means that through the Holy Qurbana, we are granted communion with the Holy Trinity by His grace.

19. **Intercessory Qukilions:** Quikilions are excerpts from Psalms, followed by the cycle of eqbos, qolos, and bovoothos, which are sung here. Usually, the Qukilions are to commemorate the Holy Cross, St. Mary, the Holy Saints, the departed clergy, and the departed faithful.
20. **Holy Communion and Thanksgiving:** The celebrant first partakes of the Holy Communion, followed by the acolytes serving in the Madbaha.

Then the Holy Mysteries are brought to the faithful of the congregation.

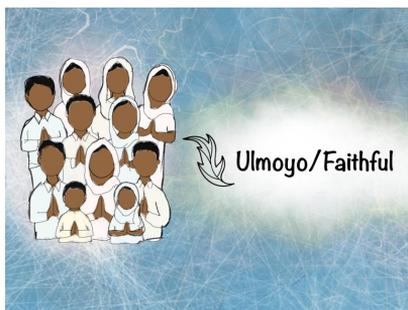
21. **Procession of the Holy Mysteries:** The priest faces the west and presents the elements to the congregation.
22. **Thanksgiving Prayer:** Here, the priest offers a Thanksgiving prayer followed by the final benediction.
23. **Dismissal:** With the dismissal, the celebration is concluded.

The Orders of Priesthood

In the Syriac tradition, Adam is understood to be the first priest. It was entrusted upon Adam to care for the world and bring order to chaos. This teaching is seen in the orders of priesthood in the Syriac Church. We are all of the royal priesthood! The orders also should bring to mind the ranks of the angels, for the ordo extends to both heaven and earth.

First Order: Ulmoyo (or the Faithful)

All members of the Church, both men and women, are ordained to the first order or priesthood. Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, we are born again into a new life with Christ. As the prayer of the priest reminds us, “By the grace of baptism, you are now seen in this world in the form of light.”



Second Order: Momyono (Confessor of Faith)

This order consists of those who teach the faith in the church, such as Sunday School teachers, etc. In today's practise, this is the same as an Acolyte ordained to serve on the Holy Altar to assist the priest.



Third Order: Mzamrono (Singers)

This is the order who can officially sing liturgical songs for any of the holy services and guides the choir in the church.



Fourth Order: Qoruyo (Readers)

They are given the duty of officially reciting the Psalms and reading the Holy Scriptures during the Holy Qurbana.



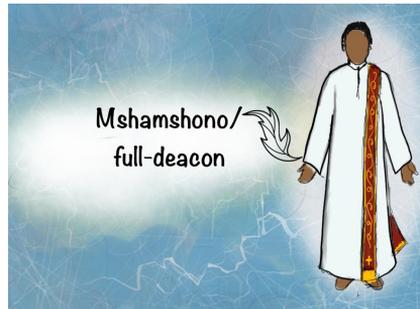
Fifth Order: Yawpadiaqno (Sub-deacons)

Their role is to oversee and guide those in the lesser ranks (up to Qoruyo), holding the candle during the various parts of the liturgy, and generally making sure that everything in the sanctuary runs smoothly during liturgy.



Sixth Order: Mshamshono (Full-deacons)

They are permitted to officially serve in liturgical ceremonies. They assist with the needs of the priest at the altar and have the privilege of having the power of the Holy Spirit to read the Holy Gospel, Promeion, and Sedro, give Qurbana to the faithful, and lead in the Quqliions.



Seventh Order: Kasheesho (Priest)



Eighth Order: Bishops

They have all the rights of a Priest, along with the right to ordain Deacons and Priests, and consecrate Churches. Although all bishops are equal, there are three different and special roles:

1. Cor-Episcopos:
2. Episcopos (Metropolitan):
3. Catholicos (Primate of the East): Catholicos of the East, and Malankara Metropolitan, the Supreme Head, is an elevation from the Bishop. His Holiness is also the head of The Holy Synod. The Catholicos is the spiritual head, and Malankara Metropolitan is the administrative head of the Holy Church in India.

- Period of Great Lent: Begins with the Sunday of Kothine and goes through the Holy Week, extending up to the feast of Resurrection.
- Period of Resurrection: Begins with the Feast of Resurrection and extends to the Feast of Pentecost.
- Period of Pentecost: This season begins with the Feast of Pentecost up to the Feast of the Transfiguration (Aug. 6th).
- Period of Transfiguration: This begins with the Feast of the Transfiguration and extends up to the Feast of the Holy Cross.
- Period of the Holy Cross: This begins on September 14 with the Feast of the Holy Cross and extends to the next Koodosh Etho.

Liturgical Year and Seasons

The liturgical calendar, seasons, and hours are arranged by our Church fathers, guided by the Holy Spirit. This enables us to lead a Christ-centred spiritual life. The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church starts the Liturgical Calendar with the Feast of Sanctification (Koodosh Etho), which falls on the first Sunday between October 30 and November 5 (about 8 Sundays before Christmas).

- Period of Annunciation: This begins with Koodosh Etho and ends with the feast of Nativity (Yeldho).
- Period of Epiphany: Begins with the feast of Yeldho and extends to the beginning of the Great Lent.

The Canonical Hours

In the Orthodox church, the liturgical day begins in the evening with the setting of the Sun. According to the Orthodox tradition, prayers are offered seven times during the day, as mentioned by King David (Psalm 119:164). The Common prayer in Syriac, known as the Sh'hima prayer, starts with the evening and ends with the Ninth-hour prayer

- 6 pm:** Evening prayer /Ramsho/Vespers/Sandhya
- 9 pm:** Compline /Sutoro / shayana / retirement to sleep
- 12 am:** Midnight /Lilyo/ vigil/ Pathirathri

6 am. Morning/Safro/Matins/Prabhatham

9 am: Third Hour /Terece/ Thloth Sho'in/ Moonam Mani

12 pm: Sixth Hour / Thseth Sho'in/ Madhyahnam

3 pm: Ninth Hour / Tsha'Sho'in /Onpatham Mani.

Canonical fasting

In the Malankara Orthodox Church, there are five canonical fasts and two weekly fast days (Wednesdays and Fridays). In addition, we can observe our own personal fasts. The canonical fasts are:

1. The Nativity Fast: This is from December 1 to 25.
2. The Three-Day Fast, or Nineveh Fast: This Fast commemorates the penance, repentance, and conversion of the people of Nineveh.
3. The Fifty-Day or the Great Lent: This starts with Shubqono (Reconciliation) and ends with Qyamtha (Resurrection).
The ten days from the Ascension of our Lord (40 days after the Resurrection) to the day of Pentecost are considered vigil days. Weddings are not permitted during this period.
4. The Thirteen-Day Fast, or Apostles Lent: This celebrates the 12 disciples and St. Paul and starts on June 16 and ends on June 29.
5. The Fifteen-Day Fast or the Feast of the Assumption (Dormition) of the

Theotokos: This is from August 1 to 15.

Liturgical Music Tradition of Malankara Orthodox Church

The soul of Syriac Liturgy is in its melodious music. The liturgical music that was passed down through the generations was not through musical notations but through oral traditions. Syriac' is the official language of Syriac Christians. We continue to preserve this tradition because of the solemnity of the music, the nobility of its contents, and the vitality of its elements (Piety or Bhakti) in worship. The 4th century is considered to be the golden period of the Christian Church, both in faith and theology, liturgy, and music. In the 4th century, fathers like St. Ephrem, St. Jacob of Serug, St. Mar Baalai of Aleppo, St. Shemvooon Kookkoyo (Saimon the Potter), St. Severios of Antioch, St. Aphrahat, and St. Narzai, etc., were considered to be the pioneers of Syriac literature and poetry. Many Malpans (Teachers) introduced their own singing style through their teachings, further increasing the number of variations.

In addition to this, the influence of local music and the mode of singing have transformed Syriac music into a different form. West Syriac music is one of the most ancient ecclesiastical music traditions, which is unique in richness both in literature and music. Through its relationship with the Orthodox Church in Syria, the Malankara Orthodox Church

has incorporated this music system into its common worship and liturgy. Syriac literature was written mainly as poetry. This was a need of the time for propagating the orthodox faith against major heresies. Thus, deep theological ideas are expressed through simple rhyming words and melodies.

The names of the Syriac melody. Syriac poetry is entirely different from the other poetic traditions. But it bears a similarity to Hebrew poetry. The syllabic structure is the soul of Syriac poetry. It contains Theology, Doctrines, Spiritual discourses, Praise, and Petitions.

1. Madrosho. St.Ephrem was the first among the Syrian writers to compose madrosho, which is very common in the West Syriac liturgy.
2. Memro: This includes the discourses or homilies in verse.
3. Sugitho: It means additional. It gives a different mood in worship. This is not a prayer or discourse of devotion. During continuous prayers, Sugitho plays an important role in bringing the mind of a devotee to a different stage of mind.
4. Eniyono: It means response. The congregation responds or gives answers to the Priests or Deacons

5. Manito, Mabartho, and Takshepto. These are all hymns of praise.

Facing the East

We pray facing the East. This is a strong tradition that dates back to Apostolic times and is biblically based (Genesis 2:8; St. Matthew 24:27, 30; Baruch 4:36) The Temple of Jerusalem was built facing eastward. All the churches were built in the same model because all the Apostles followed their Jewish heritage in many things, such as priesthood, worship, and the structure of church buildings. The other main reason was their hope in the second coming of Christ, as written in the Bible: “For as the light comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (St. Matthew 24:27). This tradition still continues, as our churches are built in an East-West orientation. The bodies of our beloved faithful departed are laid to rest facing the east with the hope of resurrection and meeting our Lord Jesus Christ face-to-face. Turning to the East represents our final preparation to receive Christ when He comes for the Final Judgment. Thus, the East symbolises our spiritual watchfulness and our readiness to meet Him to give an account of our lives.

Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on liturgical worship in the Old Testament and how we worship today. Can you defend how both served as a means of communion with God, but through Christ, our relationship is now more intimate?
2. How would you respond to those who say our traditions are made by man? Think of prophet Isaiah's vision of heaven (Isaiah 6) and what our tradition is based upon.
3. Defend how this hymn sung before the Quqlions is a reminder to us of the Syriac tradition that we are united in Christ?

Through our off'rings and our pray'rs
We make good mem'ry of our fathers
Who in their life taught us to -
Be children of God
O Son of God, raise them up
In the heavenly kingdom with the -
Righteous and the just in the -
World which has no end

The World to Come

Lesson Goals :

- *I can interpret the feast of Ascension through Holy Scriptures, icons, liturgical prayers, and hymns*
- *I can discuss the significance of the number 40*



The promise of salvation is the beginning of the eschaton. Eschaton is a Greek word meaning the end of the world. From a Christian perspective, eschaton has already started with Pentecost. In other words, we are in eschaton times as we are awaiting the second coming of Christ, which can happen at an unexpected time. The end of the eschaton will come with the second coming of Christ. The events that lead to the eschaton and the second coming of Christ are the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. This is where the ministry of the Church is becoming relevant. The Church has to facilitate the fulfilment and salvation of humanity at the end of the eschaton. Why does the Church believe that she has a sure role to play on a daily basis to assure salvation to her children? It is because she has the assurance from her bridegroom that He will come and take her with Him

and she doesn't know when that second coming of Christ will be. It is also an assurance because the resurrected and ascended Christ is seated at the right hand of God the Father, and therefore, humanity is already placed at the right hand of God the Father. This is the promise and guarantee of eternal life being fulfilled in the case of every member of the Church after the final judgement.

The Ascension of Jesus is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (**Acts 1:9**) – “He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.” Even as the disciples continue to look upwards, verse 10 describes two angels appearing and immediately drawing their attention. In verse 11, “Men of Galilee,” they say, “Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” This

summarises the message of Ascension –

- Christ's physical departure from the world.
- Christ being received into heaven in glory.
- The promise of the second coming of the Lord (Parousia).



Ascension Icon from Michurin, Bulgaria

Introduction

Before Christ ascended into heaven, he declared the descent of the Holy Spirit on His disciples soon after. Holy Scripture stresses Christ's physical departure and his glorification with God the Fa-

ther, together with great joy that His disciples had as they received the promise of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was to come to assure the Lord's presence with the disciples, enabling them to be His witnesses to the end of the earth (**St. Matthew 28:20, St. Mark 16:16, St. Luke 24:48–53**).

The Lord leaves in order to be glorified with God the Father and to glorify us with Himself. Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (**St. John 14:3**). Jesus said this to assure us of His second coming and our participation in His glory.

The Significance of Ascension for the Church

Ascension is an essential part of the incarnation of the Son of God. The primary goal of God becoming man is the restoration of the distorted image and likeness of God in Adam. St. Paul writes, "If by the one man's (Adam) offence death reigned through the one, much more those who receive God's abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one man (the 2nd Adam), Jesus Christ (**Romans 5:17**). This explains the ultimate benefit of each and every individual who believes in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, which is to reach the stage of immortality, as death is abolished once and

for all. Ascension points to the promise of eternal life.

The incarnation of the Son of God in history incorporates multiple stages for its completion, which is called eschaton (the end age), and it includes Virgin birth, Baptism by John the Baptist, Public Ministry, the Transfiguration, Suffering, Death, Resurrection on the third day, Ascension on the 40th day, and the promise of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity. We recite this whole event in the Holy Creed: “For us men came down from heaven, And was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Virgin Mary Mother of God and became man, And was crucified for us in the days of Pontius Pilate and suffered, and died, and was buried, And on the third day, He rose again according to His will, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of His Father, and shall come again in His great glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end [MJ1].” The Son of God, as the second person of the Holy Trinity, came down to the world, which is the incarnation. His going back to the bosom of His Father is the Ascension. Since He went back or ascended, His next arrival is the Second Coming, which will be in great glory and will be to judge everyone who will be resurrected. Some will join the eternal life, and some will endure eternal punishment after the judgement. The ascension of Christ makes it all possible.

Ascension is the necessary consequence of the incarnation. It is also im-

perative that Jesus Christ ascend before the Holy Spirit can descend upon the disciples to complete His Messianic mission in this world. As the resurrection expresses the triumph of Jesus Christ over sin and death, the ascension led the way for the establishment of the Church in this world at Pentecost.

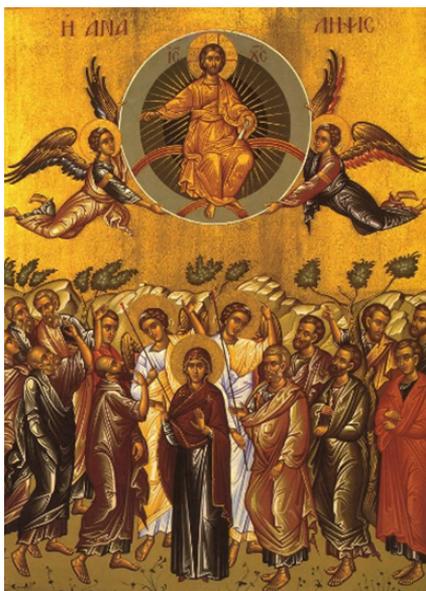
Ascension and Pentecost are interconnected, as the latter was the aftermath of the former. This is also significant in terms of the full revelation of the Holy Trinity to the Church. As incarnation is the objective revelation of the Son of God, His ascension made possible the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. This explicitly revealed the unity, co-eternity, and co-existence of the One Triune God. Father is the One who sent the Son and also the Holy Spirit into the world. At Pentecost, the Apostolic community has experienced the arrival of the Holy Spirit and is abiding upon them as they are filled with His power (**Acts 2:2-4**). He is the Perfecter, the fulfiller, the Helper, and the Spirit of Truth who proceeds from the Father (**St. John 15:26**). The Church is the Body of Christ (**Ephesians 1:22**), “the fullness of Him who fills all in all”. The Church intrinsically manifests the fullness of Christ into the world through its sacramental synergic existence.

Ascension is not merely a magnificent sight for the disciples, but an event they became part of. In fact, the reason for the Apostles and first believers to become convinced Christians is that they either witnessed the ascension or

were told about the ascension by those who witnessed the event, and they had no problem trusting them. Ascension is therefore the event that every baptised Christian is called in. During the Holy Qurbana, the priest says, “The Holy Mysteries are given only to the pure and the holy,” before raising the cup and the chalice (*sursum corda*, meaning lifting up). He then lifts the elements and says, “God the Father who created the world is with us,” “God the Son who redeemed the world is with us,” and, “God the Holy Spirit who sanctifies and fulfils everything is with us”. This is a public proclamation that all faithful individuals have the potential to be lifted up from unholiness and sin by the grace and mercy of God to the holiness of God. In the words of St. Athanasius of Alexandria, “The Son of God became the son of man so that sons of men may become sons of God”. In short, the ascension brought humans closer to the holiness of God.

Ascension is one of the important events in the redemptive work of the Son of God, along with the Birth, the Death and the Resurrection of Christ. This means the redemption of each and every individual baptised into Christ is assured in the ascension, which means they get a share in His heavenly Kingdom as the Church is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in this world. Individual redemption has a holistic dimension that includes both our bodies and souls. Jesus ascended into heaven after He had risen from the dead on the third day. He physically appeared to His disciples and

many others before ascending with His resurrected body, which was witnessed by His disciples. Saint Paul says he has appeared to more than five hundred people. This implies that the ascension enables the resurrection of our own physical bodies. Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ are the basis of hope for every faithful believer in the Church (**1 Corinthians 15**).



Ascension of Jesus Icon

Ascension also confirms the second coming (Parousia) of Christ. At the time of the ascension, two angels declared the second coming of Christ, as mentioned at the beginning of this lesson. The Nicene Creed reiterates this message: “He will come again with great

glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose Kingdom shall have no end.” Each believer needs to lead a life in preparation to stand before God’s throne at the time of the final judgement, when we will be accountable for every action of ours during our lifetime. In effect, the second coming of Christ does affect our present Christian life. In the words of Saint Paul, “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from

every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:12-14).

Ascension and the Second Coming in our Daily Prayers and Liturgy

The foundation of our Christian Faith is our faith in the Resurrection, Ascension, and Second Coming of Christ. The Orthodox Church upholds these teachings throughout its canonical prayers, and this is fully expressed in the liturgy to serve as a continuous reminder for the faithful. In the daily evening prayer (9th hour), we pray thus:

*“Renew Your creatures by the resurrection,
Your worshippers who have slept in Your hope.
Give rest and pardon to the dead, O Lord,
Who slept in hope and await Your second coming.”*

The *Bo’utho of Mor Balai* goes thus:

“O Thou full of mercy, renew thy creation at thy resurrection. O Lord, comfort and absolve our departed ones who died with hope in Thee, and await Thy coming. Lord, make them dwell in the bosom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. May the living and the departed together cry out and say, Blessed is He who has come and is to come and give life to the dead. Amen”

Every Holy Qurbana starts with the preparatory hymn (karthave nin rakthasa-reerangal..):

*“Lord, make good memory of the faithful departed
Who consumed Your Holy Body and Living Blood
Make them stand at Your right hand
On that day Your glory dawns.”*

This same hymn is repeated at the time of the procession of the Holy Mysteries (*Hymn by Mar Ephrem, Service Book of the Holy Qurbana, p. 216*).

Importance of 40

There are several remarkable events and practises related to the number 40. The book of Genesis mentions the forty days (**Genesis 7:17**) of rain that caused the deluge as the punishment of God against the sins of mankind. Following the death of Jacob in Egypt, it took the Egyptians forty days (**Genesis 50:3**) to embalm his body. After Moses led the Israelites to freedom from slavery in Egypt, they wandered for forty years in the wilderness of Sinai due to their disobedience of God's commandments. During this entire time, God provided them with manna to eat (**Exodus 16:35**) in the wilderness. Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai before he received the Ten Commandments (**Exodus 24:18**). God gave Nineveh forty days to repent to avert the punishment of His wrath, delivered through Jonah (**Jonah 3:4**). Elijah also fasted forty days and forty nights to win over the evil King Ahab and his false prophets (**1 Kings 19:8**) and to restore the true worship of Yahweh. Before His temptation, Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights in the desert (St. Matthew 4:2) and defeated the temptations of the devil.

The Church observes the Great Lent (50 days), which includes the 40-day fast of our Lord and Saviour, followed by

a week of identifying with His passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. This is a time for abstinence from certain foods for physical cleansing, along with prayer and self-discipline for spiritual purification.

We observe forty days of lamentation following the passing of our loved ones. On the fortieth day, we celebrate Holy Qurbana and pray at the graves of the departed loved ones. This ritual is a spiritual intercession by the family and the congregation for the departed souls who collectively wait for the day of judgement. This intercessory service exhibits belief in the continuation of life after life on earth. This forty-day lamentation period represents the forty days Jesus spent with his disciples after His resurrection and before His ascension. The Church believes that departed souls too spend forty days after death visiting loved ones before departing to the chamber of light, where they will be prayerfully living the eschaton and the second coming of Christ, or the Parousia.

Conclusion

The ascension of Jesus Christ marked the reunion of man with God. The first man Adam created in the image of God had lost his closeness to God when sin came in the way and separated him from his Creator. The consequences of sin were suffering and death. Subsequently, God became man, suffered, died, was resurrected, and ascended back to reunite humanity with

God. In St. Paul's words, "Christ became the second Adam" (**Romans 5:12–15, 1 Cor 15:45**), becoming the perfect man with perfect God to fulfil the mission of redeeming the Adamic generations. Living as a man, He showed us to live

a life without sin and overcome our fears—fear of pain, suffering, and death. Through His resurrection and ascension, He gives us hope for our own resurrection and ascension.

Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on Acts 1:11. "This same Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will **so come in like manner** as you saw Him go into heaven."
2. Explore the connection between Ascension and Pentecost.
3. Reflect on the significance of the number 40.

One of the Least

Lesson Goals :

- *I can explain how my words and actions as a Christian teach others our understanding that God is Love*
- *I can defend the teachings of our Church that may appear to others as un-supportive of the needs and concerns of marginalised groups*
- *I can help others who are seeking a relationship with Christ find the Truth within our Church*



Bible Verse

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

St. Matthew 25:37-40



Central to our Christian faith is that God is Love. When tested by the Pharisees, Christ confirmed that “all the Law and the Prophets” have as a foundation that we should love God and love our neighbour (**St. Matthew 22:34-40**).

Who is our neighbour? In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it is very clear that it could be anyone! We are literally instructed by our Lord to pray, forgive, bless, feed everyone including those outside of our Church. This is without exception! The following excerpt is from St. John's homily on **1 Timothy 2:1-4**.

"I exhort therefore that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth."

'Let every prayer of ours, then, be accompanied with thanksgiving. And if we are commanded to pray for our neighbours, not only for the faithful, but for the unbelieving also, consider how wrong it is to pray against your brethren. What? Has He commanded you to pray for your enemies, and do you pray against your brother? But your prayer is not against him, but against yourself. For you provoke God by uttering those impious words, "Show him the same!" "So do to him!" "Smite him!" "Recompense him!" Far be such words from the disciple of Christ, who should be meek and mild. From the mouth that has been vouchsafed such holy Mysteries, let nothing bitter proceed. Let not the tongue that has touched the Lord's Body utter anything offensive, let it be kept pure, let not curses be borne upon it.

Let us learn at last to be Christians! If we do not know how to pray, which is a very simple and easy thing, what else shall we know? Let us learn to pray like Christians. Those are the prayers of Gentiles, the supplications of Jews (i.e., who pray only for their own). The Christian's are the reverse, for the forgiveness and forgetting of offences against us. "Being reviled," it is said, "we bless; being persecuted, we suffer; being defamed, we entreat.") Hear Stephen saying, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Instead of praying against them, he prayed for them."

St. John Chrysostom is reminding us that our thoughts, actions, and prayers for those should not be different for those who are not like us. Whether they are not our friends, or not in our Church, or do not look like us .. we love others as Christ loved us. St. Stephen gives us the best example of loving others in martyrdom (**Acts 7:54-60**), It was the blood of these martyrs that was one of the elements that fuelled the spread of Christianity as those outside the Church were amazed at how people could be so full of love for their enemies. As St. John Chrysostom exhorted, "Let us learn at last to be Christians!"

The Good Samaritan Revisited

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (**St. Luke 10:25-37**) is a well known parable that teaches us many important lessons including understanding how God wants us to work with marginalised groups.

To have a deeper understanding of the significance of the person who helped being a Samaritan, one needs to have a general understanding of "Second Temple Judaism". Second Temple Judaism is a common designation for the Jewish traditions that flourished between the return of exiles from Babylon and the re-



Icon of the Good Samaritan

building of the Jerusalem Temple under Persian patronage from 538 to 515 BCE, until the destruction of the Temple by Roman forces in 70 CE.

Samaria was a different region that was larger, richer, and more populous than Judea. The Samaritans had their own temple on Mount Gerizim. The Second Temple Judeans regarded them as foreign converts and the offspring of mixed marriages, and therefore of impure blood and the relations between the two communities were strained.

As such, for Christ to identify the “hero” of the parable to be a Samaritan was scandalous! Moreover, through the storytelling of the parable we see that Christ was identifying Himself with the Samaritan. St. Severus of Antioch reflects on this as follows:

Finally a Samaritan came by ... Christ gives himself on purpose the name Samaritan. For speaking to the doctor of Law, who made lovely discourse on the Law, he shows by his words that neither the priest nor the Levite nor, in short, any of those expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the Law of Moses, did so, but that he himself came accomplishing the Law and showing by his acts themselves “who is our neighbour” and how to “love him as we do ourselves”, him whom the Jews, to outrage him, had said: “You are a Samaritan and you are a demon”.

Moreover, we see the Samaritan bring the wounded man to the Inn. Through our Church fathers, we know that the Inn symbolises the Church and it is Christ who brings those in need of heal-

ing to us! From the reflection of St. Severus:

Then he brought the man to an inn. – He calls inn the Church, which has become the dwelling-place and the receptacle for all people. Indeed, we do not hear him say, in a restricted sense with a legal connotation and of the liturgy in a figurative way: “The Ammonite and the Moabite shall enter into the Church of God”, but rather: “Go and teach all the nations”. And once they had arrived at the inn, the Samaritan asked that even greater kindness be shown to the one he had saved: indeed, when the Church had been formed by the reunion of the peoples who had died to polytheism (or: who were dying in polytheism), Christ was present in her giving every grace.

There should be no question that we are responsible for whomever we see marginalised in society or in need of help. This is the teaching from Christ in **Matthew 25:37-40**, where the “one of the least of these My brethren” could be anyone we see! Our teaching is clear that all men and women are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), and no matter how much the person chooses their action to be Christ-like or not the image (or icon) of Christ is still in them! St. Justin Martyr is among the Church fathers who teaches how the seed of Christ is in everyone, and that is one way to help us better understand the command from

our Lord to love our neighbour no matter who they are or how they may appear!

Unity in Diversity

Fr. Thomas Hopko has a very strong reminder of the purpose of the Church. In a reflection on the “The Orthodox Parish in North America”, Fr. Hopko reflects:

An Orthodox Christian parish, however it was founded and for whatever purpose it was organised, must understand itself to be an apostolic community with a missionary purpose. Its members, especially its leaders, must be conscious of themselves as people sent by Christ from God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring God’s unity, holiness and fullness to all human beings in this divided, sinful and fragmented world. If a parish has no awareness and consciousness of being “sent” by God to speak His words, to do His work, and to accomplish His will in this world, then it is not an Orthodox Christian parish. At best it is a bunch of decent people carrying on a bundle of benign activities for their own benefit. At worst, to use apocalyptic words, it is a “synagogue of Satan” perverting God’s gospel by its “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (which) will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” (Revelation 2:9, 3:9; Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:28)

As active members of our Church, we must always remember this mission to bring Christ to all who are in need. The divisions in society are many, and we see many who are in need of God's Love but are ignored and mistreated.

We have many inspiring examples of how our Bishops and clergy minister to the marginalised members of society. One of the evils of ancient India is the caste system that still pervades into modern society, biases and attitudes. The "untouchables" were the people who were relegated by birth, profession, or other characteristics to be beneath those of others and as the name implies not to be interacted with.

St. Gregorios of Parumala was known to minister to all who were in need and brought many converts to our Church. HG Pathrose Mar Osthathios founded the "Sleebadasa Samoocham" (meaning 'Order of the Servants of the Holy Cross')

who's ministry focus was the upliftment of the Dalit Christians. HG Alvares Mar Julius worked tirelessly in Goa for the poor and often would beg with a bowl in one hand and his Bishop's staff in the other hand to raise awareness and collect alms for the needy.

Every society has similar biases and prejudices, including slavery and segregation in America. The Gospel is clear that such practices are not the teachings of Christianity, and throughout Scripture, or in our hymns, and prayers, we are never to discriminate or treat anyone other than as equals and with love.

Everything we do centres on Christ and that all are created in His Image is the foundation upon which we understand unity. We also see this in the Holy Trinity where 3 Persons are One God. This mystery is what illuminates all that we do both inside as well as outside the Church.



St. Geevargese Mar Gregorios



HG Pathrose Mar Osthathios



HG Alvares Mar Julius

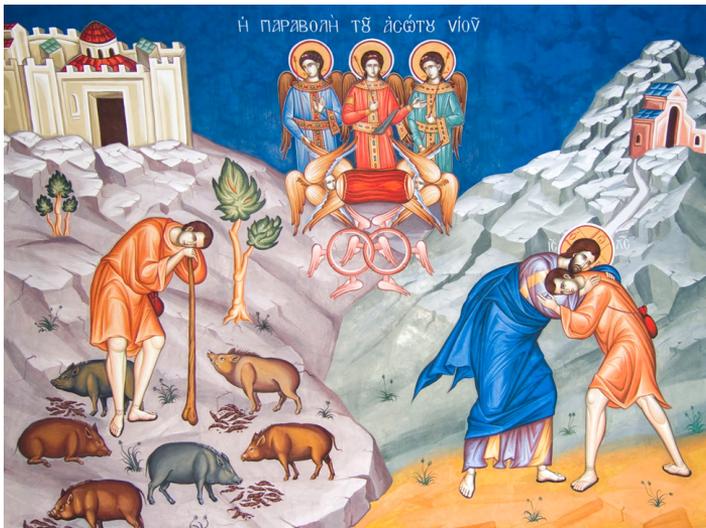
Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on the Parable of the Good Samaritan and identify the implicit biases and inherited assumptions that led the priest and Levite to pass the wounded man on the street. What can we learn about how to treat others with different backgrounds and perspectives from the actions of the Good Samaritan?
2. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann teaches that “Orthodox Evangelism is loving your neighbour as yourself.” Analyse how we can approach others who are not Christian and through our kindness and genuine love towards their well being bring them closer to Christ.
3. What can you do in your classroom or after-school organisations that would help others see through your actions the true Christian teaching of equity and inclusion? Defend how we can be strong advocates without preaching or debating theology.

Wrestling with God

Lesson Goals :

- *I can summarize how the Nicene Creed and the teachings of the Orthodox Church apply to my daily life.*
- *I can distinguish between the true teachings of the Church and misinterpretations, and know where to seek help when the answer may not be clear.*
- *I can prepare myself for uncertainty and struggles knowing our purpose.*



Prodigal Son Icon

The Father's House

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (**St. Luke 15:11-32**) there is a moment when the prodigal feels at his lowest. He had spent all his inheritance with those he thought were friends, but when famine and hardships hit in the land that was “far away” from the Father’s house he had nothing. He had no food, no friends, and not even a place to stay! Many people remember the story that the son ate the pig’s food but a careful reading of Scripture (v16) tells us that it is written that he was longing to eat the food the pigs were eating! And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.”



This setting is even more alarming when considering the context of the Jewish community at the time that Christ

was teaching as the Jewish people did not eat pork as it was forbidden in the Scripture at the time which was what we call today the Old Testament. There was no use for pigs and they were animals that were raised by the Gentiles which emphasized that this country the prodigal son found himself was truly a foreign land. The prodigal son was alone.

We know how the parable ends with the prodigal returning to the Father and being received as royalty. We also know that Christ taught this parable so that everyone could understand God’s wisdom through these simple stories. In this parable, the Father clearly represented God, and the Father’s house in turn is the Church. In the thought of Fr. Thomas Hopko, the experience of the ‘house of the father’ is the experience of the Church. The Church is the gathering of worshipping people, where God is present. Very particularly for Christians the Son of God, Christ, is the teacher, the priest, the pastor, the bishop, and the prophet. Christ is the head of the Church (**Ephesians 5:23**). Through His sufferings, He has become not only the head of the Church, but like the Apostle Paul continues in the letter to the Ephesians, the head over all things for the sake of the Church.

We know from the very first page of Scripture that God is Love, and that He created us out of Love. We are all made in the Image of God and in His Likeness (**Genesis 1:27**) and for a Divine Purpose (**Genesis 1:28**). The purpose God envisaged for humans is to be His hands and

feet throughout all of creation. But, as we know love needs freedom and man has free-will. The free-will was a blessing, but the same blessing caused the man to unfortunately fall through the temptation of the devil (**Genesis 3**). However, God's love for us never abated, and through the holiness of St. Mary we know Christ became man, was crucified and died, and rose again on the third day to defeat death. The Feast of Pentecost is the fulfilment of the Church and the reinstatement of our mission and purpose.

The Church, as imperfect and often times failing at the commands given to us, still represents God's House in this world preparing us for the new life in the world to come. Just as the Father in the Parable teaches, God is always there without change, loving us and waiting for us to be with Him. Sometimes we are the elder brother and sometimes we are the prodigal, but at all times the Father is patiently there for us and He embodies all that is good and holy.

Living in the Far Country

Fr. Thomas Hopko asks a challenging question that opens our mind to an even deeper meditation on this "simple" parable by Christ - what if the prodigal decided not to return home?

We can imagine the son feeling despondent and alone, rationalizing to himself that the father would never take him back home. In his despair, it is very understandable that he would be emotional and whether out of fear, guilt, or

anger chose to never return back home. In his brokenness he would continue to survive in the far country. In this hypothetical scenario, there are a number of ways for the prodigal to survive.

From Fr. Hopko: *"But if we could just imagine, just for a little exercise here, that the boy doesn't go back. And he stays in the pigpen and he actually copulates with some of the harlots and the prostitutes there and reproduces—reproduces—that children are born in the pigpen. His own children are born there in the pigpen with the other people who are in the pigpen also copulating, procreating and reproducing. Then let's imagine that this fellow grows old and he dies in the pigpen—biologically, physically dies. He's already been spiritually dead, but now he is physically dead. And then let's imagine that his children grow up and they heard from time to time from their father that he had a life before the pigpen. Maybe he spoke about it once in a while. Maybe he reminisced. Maybe when he got drunk he babbled about it, or whatever. But they had an inkling that there was some other place that he had come from, that he hadn't always been in the pigpen.*

But then let's imagine that they grow up and they reproduce in the pigpen and they get old and they die and they have children. And now these children are a couple of generations removed from the man who knew the house of the father. Then let's imagine that they grow up and they reproduce and they die. And then let's imagine that all of a sudden—well, really not all of the sudden, but after this process—it

does happen that there are those there who have no knowledge, even by hearsay, of any house, of any father. Suppose that all they know is the pigpen. And they think that the pigpen is it. That's their total experience, the pigpen."

Fr. Hopko is describing the world that we live in today. The fallen world is one that is desperately in need of God's Love but what we see in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is one that many have no memory or understanding of the authentic Christ. There are many who preach a different Gospel than what was given by Christ to the Apostles (**Galatians 1:8-9**) There are thousands of Christian denominations, but as there is only One Christ, there can only be One Church and it is that knowledge of the Father's House that we need to hold true.

Wrestling with God

We become full members of the Body of Christ when we are baptized into the Orthodox Church. Even if we are baptized as infants, through the Sacrament we become full members of the Body of Christ. This blessing is also the beginning of a spiritual journey towards perfection (theosis), and the Sacramental life through the Church is one that helps us towards the goal of becoming like the authentic Christ. The Church provides the fullness of the Christian Faith, and only through the Church can we be in full Communion with God.

With this comes a great responsibility as well. Fr. John Behr asks us to think

about this: *"You have to be responsible for coming to Church and being a member of the Church. But, why are you coming to this Church? Is it just because your parents did and your parents before that did? Or do you believe that here you encounter the Lord of all Creation of this history, the one sitting at the right hand of the Father, tangibly... perceptibly .. and become His Body"*

The key to our spiritual growth is to always seek God and grow in Him. Our God is a powerful and almighty Lord, who created all that is seen and unseen. And yet, God is the Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the One who created us in His Image and Likeness. God waits patiently for us to return to Him, and the judgment to come is based on our choices to become like Him. Christ reassures us that all who seek Him will find Truth (**St. Matthew 7:7-8, St. John 14:6**) but we must be careful as there are many who will deceive (**St. Matthew 7:22-24**). The importance of asking questions within the Church can not be emphasized enough especially when things seem most confusing. A Christian should never feel lonely as we have the communion of the living (our parents, family, friends, and clergy) and the faithful departed (the Saints and our loved ones). When we are in trouble, we must turn to the Church.

Our God is one who is Love and never changes. In **Revelation 3:15-18**, we hear the words of St. John telling us to be "cold or hot" and not "lukewarm". This may sound confusing at first, but if we

keep in mind how Christ encourages us to learn more about Him, what He tells us is to push ourselves to choose God... or not! Arguably, the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference or apathy. If one hates, a decision was made to choose whether to love or not. Apathy and indifference reflects one who doesn't even care to choose love or hate.

With this in mind, we understand more the story of Jacob in **Genesis 32:22-32**. When we first read this event of the Patriarch Jacob, we may be confused. Why is wrestling with God a good thing? What was the point?

Christian Gonzalez of the Youth and Young Adult Ministry (Y2AM) of the Greek Orthodox Church wrote a small document, where he is highlighting the wrestling match of Jacob with God. Gonzales emphasizes the importance of establishing welcoming environments within the Church where young adults can openly grapple with their questions and uncertainties about their faith. It draws a parallel between this struggle and the biblical account of Jacob wrestling with God, highlighting that God actively participates in this process, akin to a loving father engaging in a playful wrestling match with his children. The Church needs to acknowledge and embrace the personal and challenging nature of this struggle, and to create a comforting and secure atmosphere for young adults to discuss their inquiries, worries, anxieties, and uncertainties honestly. By fostering this engagement with God and providing ded-

icated spaces for it, the Church can facilitate a profound encounter with the divine and a deeper comprehension of God's ways. Ultimately, Gonzales says that this wrestling experience leads to a profound reverence for liturgy and a sense of spiritual transcendence within the Church. The document concludes by drawing a parallel to Jacob, who emerged from his struggle with God carrying a physical reminder, suggesting that wrestling with God can bring about lasting transformation in individuals.

Our God is Love, and He is Real. Through the Sacramental Life of the Church, which includes Holy Confession and other healing Sacraments, we are transformed. And through the Holy Qurbana, we become One physically with the Real Body and Blood of Christ. This is an invitation that can be received through Holy Baptism alone. We must realize it as the gift given to us by the Holy Church. Whether we feel like the prodigal or the elder brother, we must know that God is waiting for us and ready to embrace us with love. Our Father's Home is our home, and our identity is in Christ (**St. John 15:9-25**).

Conclusion

St. Gregory of Nyssa in reflection on the life of Moses says the following: *“What then are we taught through what has been said? To have but one purpose in life: to be called servants of God by virtue of the lives we live. For when you conquer all enemies (the Egyptian, the Amalekite, the*

Damien, the Midianite), cross the water, are enlightened by the cloud, are sweetened by the wood, drink from the rock, taste of the food from above, make your ascent up the mountain through purity and sanctity; and when you arrive there, you are instructed in the divine mystery by the sound of trumpets, in the impenetrable darkness near to God by your faith, and there are taught the mysteries of the tabernacle and the dignity of the priesthood.”



As full members of the Holy Church, we are the royal priesthood (**1 Peter 2:9**). We are God’s chosen people and to us comes both a promise of new life and a wonderful gift of purpose. This is made possible through Christ and

the Resurrection. As George Cronk writes¹, “In Christ, then, the covenant with Israel was fulfilled, transformed, and transcended. After the coming of the Messiah—the Incarnation of God the Son—only those who are ‘built into Christ’ are counted among the people of God. In Christ, the old Israel is superseded by the Christian Church, the new Israel, the body of Christ; the old covenant is completed in the new covenant and through Jesus Christ”.

The Church is the Body of Christ (**Romans 12:5,1; Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 3:6, 4:15–16, 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 1:24**) and in Christ we know there is hope in the Resurrection and a promise of everlasting life. Just as the prodigal was embraced by the loving Father without a single word uttered, so too we must always keep in mind that our Church is there whenever we need the most.

Your Sunday School journey ends here. Be assured that your teachers will always be praying for you. Do remember to come back and give what you received to the next generation. May the love of God the Father, grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the communion and indwelling of the Holy Spirit be with you for the remainder of your faith sojourn. Amen!

¹George Cronk, *The Message of the Bible*; St. Vladimir Seminary Press; 1982, p. 80

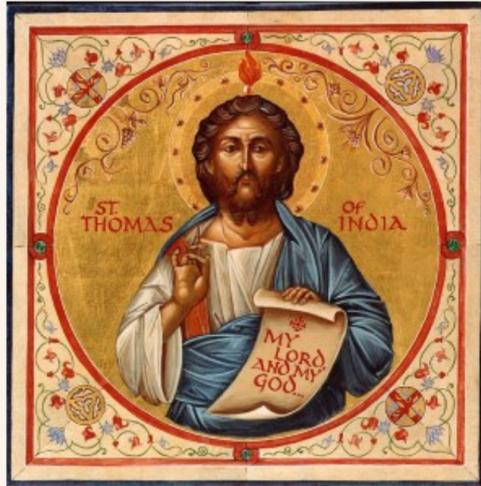
Reflection Questions

1. Explain to a friend 3 reasons why you are an Orthodox Christian?
2. Defend the Church teaching that all are equal referencing the Body of Christ as given in 1 Corinthians 12:20-27.
3. Analyse the following quote by Fr. Thomas Hopko: “A Christian should never be lonely! If we feel lonely it means we forget that we are members of the people of God ... that we are fellow citizens with the Saints ... that we have access to God through the Son of God Jesus, raised and glorified, by the power of the Holy Spirit that is in all of the saints of all times and of all places. And we are a member, each one of us, of that community, we are all members of Christ’s body so we gather as Church” Thinking of the years ahead, how could you seek help from the Church for yourself or a loved one when encountering difficult times?

Gratitude

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**FIRST EDITION
2024**