

A Tranquil Heart Amid Turbulent Seas

By Bishop THOMAS (Joseph), with Fr. Noah Bushelli and Subdeacon David Hyatt

Editor's Note: The St. Emmelia Orthodox Homeschool Conferences are an outreach of the Department of Homeschooling. Regional conferences are held annually to promote, support, and unite homeschooling families throughout Orthodox North America. On January 12, 2019, Bishop THOMAS gave the Final Address at the St. Emmelia SOUTH Conference held at The Saint Constantine School in Houston, Texas.

Christ is Born! Glorify Him! Christ is Baptized! Let us shine with Him!

This weekend we have been encouraged and inspired by the presentations from our keynote speaker, Fr. John Whiteford, and our wonderful workshop leaders including Dr. John Mark Reynolds who also served as our host here at The Saint Constantine School.

Among the many practical workshops this weekend, we have been instructed in how to begin charting a course as first-time homeschoolers, to more advanced topics like choosing the best literature for our educational voyage. One of the strengths of these St. Emmelia Conferences is that they bring together seasoned sailors alongside new and inquiring deckhands. Together we have learned how to navigate the liturgical calendar in our homeschools, as well as being guided in working with special needs and uncooperative students. We are grateful for all of our workshop leaders who invested so much into each one of our homeschooling families.

Our theme for this year's conference has taken on the nautical focus of "Charting & Staying the Course" which seems particularly relevant in these times of instability in

the world and our own country. Now more than ever, we need to be bold in charting the course for our family and educational lives as Orthodox Christians so that we might navigate our ships safely into the harbor of the Kingdom of Heaven. The waves of change in our society threaten to make our sea legs wobble as we are buffeted from all sides with moral chaos, antisocial social media, a frantic pace of life, and of course the influence of the Evil One who seeks to lead us off course to be lost in the storms of life. “The world, the flesh, and the devil” have been stirring up seas of life from the beginning of time, yet the rate of change in our cultural moment is truly unprecedented.

In Hebrews 6:19, St. Paul describes the hope that we have while we sail the sea of life “as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast...” Doesn’t that sound like the remedy for the sea sickness that we sometimes feel as we strive to educate our children in the Orthodox faith and equip them with the knowledge and skills that they will need to live faithful lives surrounded by the waves of our culture? St. Paul goes on to tell us “this *hope* we have as an anchor of the soul” is found in none other than Jesus our eternal High Priest! Having seen the storm of the world, the flesh, and the devil in distinction to the peace that Christ won for us by his advent, death, and resurrection, let us attend to the task at hand of having a “tranquil heart amid turbulent seas”.

The most important thing I’d like to get across to you is this: It *is* possible to be calm amidst the storms of life. Do not believe the lie from the evil one that “things are hopeless!” He slyly suggests your sighing and sacrifice, your labor and love, your prayers and ministry are in vain. “Flip through the TV channels”, he prompts. “Check email”, he tempts. “Have another snack.” “Have another drink” because “it doesn’t matter”. NO!!! God is with us, even in the pain, the confusion, and the hopelessness. God has given us of the gift of restored humanity in Jesus Christ who has opened

heaven to us. We have received the “free gift that costs us everything”. Jesus Christ abides in us and we abide in Him through our conscientious participation in the sacraments, careful reading and application of the Divine Scriptures, keeping the Commandments through repentance, service, and sacrifice, and through our prayer life, liturgical, daily, and deep in the heart! Let me echo the Apostle Paul’s powerful words, that he shares with us from his great vision of the resurrection: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.” (I Corinthians 15:58)

I’d like to offer a few examples that will encourage you in remaining faithful. First, our Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man, the Lord of Heaven and Prince of Peace, calmed the stormy seas as he calmed the heaving hearts of his disciples. As we read this passage please allow the light of this inspired teaching to shine brightly and illumine your hearts and refresh the habits of your home:

“Immediately Jesus made His disciples get into the boat and go before Him to the other side, while He sent the multitudes away. And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. But the boat was now in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves, for the wind was contrary. Now in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid.” And Peter answered Him and said, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” So He said, “Come.” And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But

when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!" And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Then those who were in the boat came and worshiped Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

(Matthew 14:22-33)

Our Lord's power is truly awesome and we can take courage in it. However, the true miracle is that He shares this power with us. We see this as St. Peter overcomes nature by walking on the waters -- only when his focus and his faith overshadowed his fear. This Lordly power was given to many of our beloved saints, the great cloud of witnesses of God's abiding love who instruct, inspire, and intercede for us. St. Nicholas is of course the patron of ships throughout the western world, because God worked through him in his life and much more after his death. St. Mary of Egypt walked on the water deified by her faithful repentance fulfilled by Holy Communion. St. Emmelia's prayers for her son, St. Basil the Great, saved his ship from disaster. In our own land, St. Innocent narrowly escaped a tempestuous sea by the prayers of St. Herman. God's power and providence are real and nature-overturning. This is why we chant the beautiful Psalm, "Who is so great a god as our God?" (Psalm 77:14) over and over again during our most solemn and joyous times of the year.

Second, God's help is physical, as in the examples I have already shared, but it is also metaphorical, as in keeping calm in the spiritual, emotional, vocational, and even educational parts of our lives. St. Paul reminds the church of Philippi of this daily choice we have in Christ's miracle: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13) The examples of God's help in the Scriptures and Church History are

too much to even start to mention. However, today our Living God shows his continued care for us, a love in which we can rest and rejoice.

One quick example is from a beloved saint of the last generation, Elder Paisios, whose practical, witty wisdom has spread far from Mount Athos. He said, “What I see around me would drive me insane if I did not know that no matter what happens, God will have the last word.” We too, along with this new saint and all the saints, do not live by fear; we do not live by anxiety; we live by faith! God does have the last word, therefore we can stay calm in the midst of the storms of life.

Another example is from my first pilgrimage to Mount Athos. I needed assistance getting from Philotheou to a small monastery, Kelli Marouda. I was directed to find Fr. Mark, “Pater Markos”. I was told that “Pater Markos” would be at vespers and I could talk with him then. Then, “Oh... he should be at Liturgy and you can catch him after.” “Oh well...maybe tomorrow,” I thought. Finally, I followed a wild-goose-chase up and down through the castle walls until finally I made it to an office. Pater Markos, buried in piles and piles of paper, peered with his beaming smile over to my anxious and exhausted face. In a moment he made the necessary arrangements for my travel. But before leaving him to his work, I asked him how he was so peaceful amid the deluge of paperwork. His calm smile betrayed a little wear and tear, but joyously and zealously he said that when he sacrificed his peaceful life working in the garden to be the secretary of the monastery, God accepted his sacrifice and gave him a deep sense of peace. And he reminded me to bring this same spirit back with me in my priestly ministry.

I share this sweet story and all of these things with you to encourage you in the voyage of your home-education programs. You have chosen, with God’s prompting and

the support of many, a difficult path. The challenges of marriage are multiplied in parenting and compounded with home-education. But take comfort in our Lord's receiving the pouring out of your own life for the lives of those around you! Your Labor is not in vain in the Lord!!! Our Lord, our Saints, and our Beloved Holy Ones remind us that God truly is sufficient amidst our troubles, and abundant in our needs.

With this in mind, let's talk about a couple practical things we can do to ensure that our homes remain 'in Christ.' But first, a secret our Lord shared with his disciples just before his passion: "Watch and pray lest you enter into temptations." (Matthew 26:41) We need to be focused, just as a pilot on a ship in a storm needs to be not just confident and competent, but at the helm, in control of the vessel, following the captain's orders. Here are three things you need to do:

First, let me introduce an adaption of a new concept: FOMO is the "Fear Of Missing Out" and is popular amid the tech-savvy younger generation as an explanation for the psychological underpinning of the "24/7" culture -- to always be available, to not miss any event, to comment on every social media post, etc... JOMO, on the other hand, is the "Joy Of Missing Out". It is knowing that there is so much more to life than the breaking news, the twists and turns of opinion and friendships, the daily development of technology. JOMO is the purposeful aligning of ourselves with Jesus Christ who withdrew to the hills to pray, balanced his public ministry with his inner circle, and undergirded it all with his personal prayer time alone with His Father. St. Herman of Alaska, the first Orthodox monastic and missionary saint in America, was once asked about being lonely on Spruce Island. He replied with a question, "Who is it better to converse with, angels or men?"

So, what does JOMO look like in your family? A quick search of possibilities: You and your children do not have to be involved in every activity, every sport, every opportunity. You can find joy in togetherness. This is something that has to be pursued more purposefully as children grow. It also means that we don't have to fear what we miss teaching our children; we must choose the most important things and joyfully, not with regret or fear, abandon the things that don't go deep preparing the soul for the journey to heaven. We don't have to keep up with the Jonesopoulis Family, and we certainly don't have to drive our children crazy with our feverish ambition for their perfect lives. We do have to prepare our children for the eternity which they are already participating in. JOMO means we don't live by fear, we live by a joyful faith. It means we make decisions out of confidence, not out of anxiety. JOMO means "less is more" and stillness is productive. JOMO is the modern paraphrase of St. Paul's admonition to "rejoice always. Pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks." (I Thessalonians 5:16-18a)

We all can become hesychasts, to one degree or another, and also teach our children the sweetness of saying "no" to worldly things so we can say "yes" to God. JOMO is exercising your "Holy No" and your "Holy Yes". Indeed, we all have to become hesychasts through the steady practice of stillness -- digital, verbal, and physical stillness will foster mental stillness which gives birth to internal stillness. I am not talking about a pagan mantra, an empty nirvana, but a restfulness in God's presence. JOMO means there is more to life than "this" life; likewise there is more to homeschooling than "home" and "school".

Second, we need to know our enemy's tactics. Another holy man of our generation has a strong witness to us as to how to stay calm amidst temptations. Elder

Cleopa, a much loved and much suffering abbot in communist Romania, teaches us about the “eight directions of temptations”. He says that temptations come from the front (anxiety about the future) and the back (anxiety about the past), the left (vice) and the right (false virtue), above (thinking too highly of yourself) and below (thinking too lowly of yourself), without (your circumstances) and within (your characteristics). Please take some time to reflect on this in terms of your emotional, mental, spiritual, familial, educational, and relational make up.

St. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that we are not ignorant of Satan’s devices. (2 Corinthians 2:11) Let’s use this knowledge to practically guide us in not reacting to attacks from these eight directions. We can be aware of these *logismoi* (thought darts) and quench them with watchfulness and prayer, and then respond in a God-pleasing and family-edifying way. Apply this schematic for spiritual vigilance and teach it to your children.

Finally, I want you to stay close to each other. Our homes are miniature churches, micro-ecclesias. But they can only remain Christ-centered if we all choose to stay close to each other. As Orthodox Christians we have chosen “Totus Christus: Caput et Corpus” which is translated “The Total Christ: Head and Body”. We avoid isolation because we know that it is dangerous praxis as well as damnable theology. So, I beg you to deepen the friendships you’ve made in this conference. Labor for future St. Emmelia South Conferences. Stay in touch with each other. Relationships are hard work. They tend to get messy from time to time, but they keep God’s love real and with God’s grace and our repentance they can save us!

I beg you, for all of the hard work that Christi and her team have put into this conference with the guidance of Fr. Noah and assistance of Subdeacon David, I beg

you to change your homes, your habits, and your hearts. Repentance is what is needed. This conference is a call to repent. Repentance is full of difficulty, headache, heartache, blood, sweat, and tears. However, it is all worth it because “God can’t be outgiven”.

Hopefully, you have been asking yourselves the most important question: “Is my homeschool ‘seaworthy’?” I tell you it is because you have demonstrated humility and expended precious resources to attend this weekend. It is seaworthy because you have acted upon your desire to grow. You are a good captain because you are not a pirate or a privateer, but you sail obediently, zealously under the flag of the Emperor of Eternity!

Please pray with me this beautiful verse from the sixth ode of the canon of the funeral service as a closing to our conference:

As I behold the sea of life

 surging high with the tempest of temptations,

I set my course toward thy tranquil haven

 and cry aloud to Thee:

Lead my life forth from corruption, O most-merciful One.