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METROPOLITAN SABA

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THE WORD

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HIS EMINENCE
METROPOLITAN SABA

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Letters to the editor are welcome and should include the author's full name and parish. Submissions for "Communities in Action" must be approved by the local pastor. Both may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All submissions e-mailed and provided as a Microsoft Word text or editable PDF. Please do not embed artwork into the word documents. All art work must be high resolution: at least 300dpi.

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OUR MEETING WITH HIS EMINENCE, METROPOLITAN SABA

Bishop JOHN

During Bright Week, our bishops met with our Metropolitan SABA. The meeting was as festive and beautiful as the holy season of Bright Week itself. Sayidna SABA exemplified our Antiochian theology and tradition, as he led a discussion about how our Orthodox praxis, or practice, needs to reflect the theology of the Church as preserved by the Gospel, the Fathers, and our worship. He proclaimed that our actions as bishops and as church leaders needs to reflect heaven, and not the fallen world. Our theology leads our practice, and cannot be divorced from it. He went on to eloquently describe the art of the priesthood, whose goal is to bring man to God. To do this we need to incarnate God's love. We cannot be reduced to rules and laws. Our God is active in His movement toward us, and we must reflect this action in our lives; we are the Church. We Orthodox are strangers in the modern world, as our Lord told us we would be. We need to support God's people and each other as we journey through this modern, or "post-modern," world.

His Eminence spoke to us about our need to establish our Church more deeply and widely in this land, through building ministries, hospitals, schools, homes for the aged, programs for people with special needs, colleges, university dorms, and retreat centers. Similarly, he wants to see the parishes develop teams to minister to the people of the parishes, as well as those who are our neighbors. We cannot keep our Orthodox inheritance a secret, but we need to turn it into actions that will save people.

We need to find creative ways to fund and endow these programs, so that they can continue regardless of economic or social uncertainties.

The bishops had frank and open discussions about the challenges that we face. Metropolitan SABA then reviewed with us upcoming clergy assignments and ordinations. We also discussed our needs for the future, and particularly educational programs. We discussed the way the bishops will interact with the Metropolitan. Sayidna shared that the Holy Synod and our Archdiocese will form a joint committee to delineate roles and responsibilities of bishops and the Metropolitan. The bishops and Metropolitan are of one mind concerning these needs.

Metropolitan SABA listened to the bishops with great respect and love. We were all honest about our concerns, and we are all dedicated to bringing about necessary healing and direction for the future. Sayidna SABA landed on American soil immediately before Holy Week and led the Archdiocese liturgically through this holiest season. Now that he has met with the bishops, he will visit the dioceses or regions of the Archdiocese. The ministry of Metropolitan SABA is established on a solid foundation, and God is blessing us. I consider myself blessed to witness God's work in America through the ministries of this man.

When we say many years to a metropolitan or bishop, we call to mind our salvific relationship with him, and we reaffirm our election of him as our Bishop or Metropolitan.

Many years, Metropolitan SABA!

The Right Reverend
Bishop THOMAS

The Right Reverend
Bishop ALEXANDER

The Right Reverend
Bishop JOHN

The Right Reverend
Bishop ANTHONY

The Right Reverend
Bishop NICHOLAS

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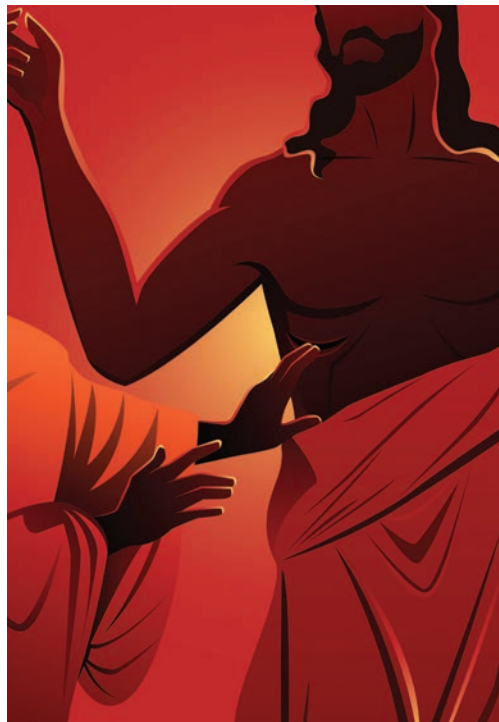
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HOLY NOSTALGIA

Fr. Peter Kavanaugh

NURTURE IN YOUR HEART A HOLY NOSTALGIA. PASCHA IS THE SEASON FOR NOSTALGIA, FOR LOVE-SICKNESS AND RESOLUTE LONGING FOR HOME. OF COURSE, OUR HOME IS NOT OF THIS WORLD, NOR IN OUR PAST, NOR IN ANOTHER COUNTRY. HOME IS IN PARADISE, WITH OUR RESURRECTED LORD.



“Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’” What weighed on St. Thomas’s heart that morning in which the disciples told him that they had seen Christ?

You can imagine the jubilation in the air. When Thomas had last seen them, the apostles were cowering in fear. All of them despaired. All of them doubted. Today, they were different men, exuberant and courageous. Not Thomas, however. Their joy was like salt on an open wound. He had not seen the Lord. He had not even seen the angels. They shouted, “Christ is risen!” All he knew and felt was a bleak and meaningless world.

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). St. Thomas is a hero for us today. We live, it seems, in a disenchanted world. For most of history, men and women saw spirits in nearly every movement in the

forest, and every breeze in the air. The thunder in the sky, the flights of birds, and the buzz of the bumblebee: men and women took for granted that behind it all were mysterious spiritual forces. (Perhaps they were closer to the truth of things than we are, despite our microscopes and encyclopedias.) It was as easy to believe in God as to believe

in water, but not so for us. We live in the same state of mind as St. Thomas that day long ago – a spiritual fog.

Where is God? Where is the resurrected Jesus? The Church sings “Alleluia,” but the noisy traffic looks the same, the politics are the same, the humdrum is the same. The Church calls it Bright Week, but the clouds seem rather gray. Unsure and disappointed, you can imagine the tension in Thomas’ heart. We can identify all too well, when the promises of the gospel do not align with the palpable struggles in our lives.

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands,

and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25). St. Thomas is a hero not because he doubted. He is a hero because, within his doubting, he longed for truth. No one lacks faith in God because he cannot find God. More often, lack of faith stems from lack of interest. The road to hell is not paved with good intentions, it is paved with no intentions, with indifference, apathy, distraction.

St. Thomas missed out on Christ's appearance. So did we. How should we respond? Do we shrug our shoulders and just move along. Do we say, "Not enough evidence," and busy ourselves with career, health, games and distractions?

St. Thomas did not merely doubt God, he desired God. "Unless I see . . ." "Unless I touch . . ." His words are saturated in nostalgia – a nostalgia for meaning, for intimacy. He longed for home.

The test is in the doing. Christ did appear. Thomas's longing was strong enough. His desire for communion overpowered the doubt. Christ appeared, and told Thomas to look at the mark of the nails. He encouraged Thomas to touch the scar in his side.

St. Thomas did. Would we? Do we yearn for God as earnestly? If we were to see God, and touch him, would we even then follow God? The noble St. Thomas challenges all of us in our doubts and struggles – what do we seek?

Christ calls us to live in a perpetual state of nostalgia — longing for God. The word, *nostalgia* has a long and fascinating history. It was first used in Homer's *Odyssey*. The famous king was estranged from his wife and home, and persevered through all number of adventures. Why did he forego every temptation? Why did he always press on with so little reason for hope? Nostalgia drove him forward, a longing for his *nostimon emar* – the "Day of Return." Eventually, the word *nostalgia* developed from two Greek words: *nostos*, meaning "homecoming," and *algos*, meaning pain, grief, and distress.

At times, nostalgia has been classified as a mental disorder. It was once considered the disease that crippled sailors, convicts, and slaves. The 1833 *Cyclopaedia of Practical Medicine*, labelled nostalgia as "the concurrence of depressing symptoms which sometimes arise in persons who are absent from their native country, when they are seized with a longing desire of returning to their home and friends and the scenes of their youth."

But nostalgia has a positive side. C. S. Lewis had this to say: "Apparently . . . our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honour beyond all our merits and also the healing of that old ache."

All our life, we have ached inside because we long for home. All our sadness is sadness because we know we are exiled. All our pain is pain from being absent from God.

There is only one path home. It is the same path that drove Odysseus back to his wife. It is the same path that led St. Thomas eventually to find Jesus Christ and touch His side. It is holy nostalgia, a blessed discontent, an insistence never to settle for less until we can see and touch God. Nostalgia will kill a soul when put in the wrong place. It will save a soul when put in the right place. Nostalgia is another word for listening to your heart ache, and knowing the real reason it aches.

"O GOD, thou art my God; early will I seek thee. My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth after thee, in a barren and dry land where no water is. Thus have I looked for thee" (Psalm 63:1).

Question God. Question the world. Question your heart. Cherish a beautiful song, and notice the sadness in your heart when the song ends. Savor a delicious meal, and notice the disappointment when you know you cannot eat any more. Appreciate your relationships, and be bold enough to feel the pain that comes at separation, through distance or death. Everything beautiful is a glimpse into paradise. Everything sad, is sad, because it reveals our distance from paradise. All life pierces our heart with nostalgia for one purpose, to urge us on to God.

Reach out and touch Him.

Fr. Peter Kavanaugh
Wichita Falls, Texas

THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH: THE CRUCIFIXION, OR PENTECOST?

Christopher Holwey

The Feast of Pentecost, which occurs fifty days after Pascha, is one of the great Feasts of our Orthodox Church. It is the Feast in which we celebrate the Spirit of God coming down upon the Apostles, as promised them by Jesus Himself, when

He said to them: “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me” (John 15:26). And again, after His Resurrection, before His ascension into heaven, after the Apostles asked Him if He would now “restore the kingdom to Israel,” He said, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:7–8).

Quite often, though, on this Feast Day, we will say that it is “the birthday of the Church,” since it is on this day that the disciples received the Holy Spirit and began their ministry of preaching the Word of God, of spreading the Faith, and establishing churches and communities in many of the towns and cities throughout the Roman Empire. Because of this, it may seem quite natural and proper to call this day and feast “the birthday of the Church.” I propose, however, that this is somewhat misleading. The “birthday of the Church” is not the Feast of Pentecost when the Spirit of God came down upon the Apostles; rather, it is when Jesus hung upon the Cross, and after He died and gave up His spirit, “one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out” (John 19:34). This is the day on which the Church was technically

born and brought forth from the side of Christ. This is what is testified and manifest to us in the Old and New Testaments, and from our Church Fathers as well.

To begin with, St. Paul tells us in Romans 5:12–21 that Adam is a type of Him who was to come, meaning Jesus Christ. He says that “if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. ... For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.” St. Paul says forthrightly in Romans 5:14 that Adam “is a type of Him who was to come,” and in 1 Corinthians 15:45, “And so it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’ [Genesis 2:7]. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.”

These are important references, because they help us to make this connection between Adam before his disobedience and fall from Paradise, and Jesus of Nazareth, the new Adam, the Christ and eternal Son of the living God. God created Adam and stated that it was not good for man to be alone on the earth; as there was not found a helper comparable to him, or fit for him, “God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the LORD God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said:

“This is now bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh;



Icon of the Pentecost, hand written by Khourieh Randa Azar.
Email: Randa.Azar@gmail.com

She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man” (Genesis
2:21–23).

This woman who is created from the side of Adam, taken out of man while he was in a deep sleep, and who we would later come to know as Eve (3:20), his wife, is brought forth and “born” from Adam’s side, from his rib. Here, then, is another type and foreshadowing in the Old Testament that points to what is fulfilled in the New Testament. Adam’s “deep sleep” is like Jesus’ dying on the Cross. As God took one of his ribs from Adam’s side while he slept and made woman, so one of the soldiers pierced the side of the dead Jesus, the Second Adam, with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out (John 19:34). So, if Eve is created and born from the side of Adam while he was in a deep sleep, as the bone of his bones, and flesh of his flesh, being taken out of *Man*, which in Hebrew is the word *Adam*, meaning mankind, then it is the Church that is born from the side of Christ, the new Adam, after He died on the Cross, when the soldier pierced His side. The blood and water came forth, showing us the beginning and birth of the Church, the Body of Christ.

St. Ambrose has some beautiful words in his commentary on this passage, John 19:32–34, found in the *Patrologia Latina*, Volume 100, Book 6:

Then the soldiers came, and indeed broke the legs of the first, and of another who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus, when they saw him already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance, and immediately blood and water came out. The evangelist used an elegant and watchful word, so as not to say: struck him in his side, or wounded him, or something else; but he opened it, so that the door of life might be opened there in a certain way, whence the sacraments of the Church flowed, without which one cannot enter into life, which is true life. That blood was shed for the remission of sins; That water tempered the cup of salvation This foreshadowed that Noah was commanded to make a door in the side of the ark, through which the animals that were not perishing in the flood, of which the Church was prefigured, could enter (Genesis 6:16). Because of this the first woman was made from the side of man sleeping, and she was called life and mother of the living

(Genesis 2, 22, seq.). For he [Adam] signified great good, before the great evil of transgression, in the habit of lying down and sleeping. And this second Adam slept on the cross with his head bowed, so that there might be formed for him a spouse which escaped from the side of the sleeping man. O death, whence the dead come to life!

St. Ambrose beautifully presents to us that the soldier did not pierce Jesus’ side to wound or strike him, but rather, to *open* the side of Christ from where the sacraments of the Church flowed (Latin: *Sed unus militum lancea latus ejus aperuit, et continuo exivit sanguis et aqua*), since it is while He slept on the Cross, “there might be formed for Him a spouse which escaped (came forth) from the side of the sleeping man.”

St. John Chrysostom also offers us this same understanding in his commentary on this passage:

With this too an ineffable mystery was accomplished. For “there came forth water and blood.” Not without a purpose, or by chance, did those founts come forth, but because by means of these two together the Church consisteth. And the initiated know it, being by water indeed regenerate, and nourished by the Blood and the Flesh. Hence the Mysteries take their beginning; that when thou approachest to that awful cup, thou mayest so approach, as drinking from the very side.

He says that by means of the blood and water coming forth from the side of Christ, the Church consists. In Greek, it is ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων τούτων ἡ Εκκλησία συνέστηκε. This last word, συνέστηκε, *synestike*, is also found in St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians 1:17, “And He is before all things, and in Him all things *consist*” (Greek: καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν). At the end of the previous verse, v. 16, St. Paul says, “All things were created through Him and for Him,” and then in the following verse, v. 18, he says, “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.”

What is quite interesting here, and probably not by accident, is that after St. Paul says that all things are created by Him, through Him, and for Him, and that in Him all things consist, he then explains that this so because Christ is the head of the Church. In

saying that Christ is the “head” of the Church, he uses the word κεφαλή, *kephali*, for head (which is also found in Ephesians 5), which means the *head* in the sense of the source, or the beginning. Christ is the beginning and source of the Church because she comes from His side, as did the blood and water (which of course are also references to His Blood of which we partake in communion, and the water by which we are baptized in His name, in the Church). We also see this headship mentioned in 1 Corinthians 11:3, “the head (*kephali*) of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God,” showing that God the Father is the head or source of Christ (because Christ is the only-begotten Son of the Father before eternity), Christ is the source of man, and man is the source of woman (as with Adam and Eve).

From all of this – the bringing forth of Eve from the side of Adam, the blood and water coming forth from the side of Christ, the headship in the sense of being the source and beginning – it is evident to us that Christ is the head and source of the Church. It is clear, too, that she is born from His side when He is on the Cross and the soldier pierced, or opened, His side, to allow the Church to be born, to come forth. We see, too, that the sacraments of the Church flow from the side of Christ, who sacrificed Himself for the salvation of us all.

So, what then is Pentecost? How are we to understand its true nature if it is not technically the birthday of the Church? On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God came down upon the Apostles and disciples of Christ to empower them to be all that God had created them to be. Pentecost, then, is the consecration and anointing of the Church by the Holy Spirit with the power from on high. Jesus brought forth and gave birth to the Church from His side on the day of His crucifixion. But 50 days after His Resurrection from the dead, on the day of Pentecost, He sent upon them the Holy Spirit to give them the power from on high to minister, to teach, to proclaim the Word of God to all the nations. This Word was that His Death and Resurrection were to save us from eternal death and the tyranny of the devil, and to bring us home to the Kingdom of God, which we lost through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. In St. Luke’s Gospel, 24:49 (as we see also in Acts 1, above), Jesus says, “Behold, I send the Promise of my Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued

with power from on high.” Pentecost is the day on which they all received this power and anointing by the tongues of fire from above, the power, grace, and blessings from God to go forth and proclaim the Word of God with conviction and authority, to fulfill the prophecy of Joel (2:28ff.), to prophesy, to see visions, to dream dreams, to “show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth below ... that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” What happened after the coming of the Holy Spirit? They followed St. Peter’s direction: they repented and were baptized. They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:38–42).

We now participate in all of this when we are baptized into Christ. In our baptism and immersion into and out of the water, we die with Christ and are born anew, born from above (John 3). “We were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6). Then, in our chrismation, we receive the gift and seal of the Holy Spirit. We are anointed and consecrated by God to be all that God has called us to be, empowered to proclaim and bear witness to His Death and His Resurrection for the salvation of all, knowing that “He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Corinthians 1:21). God sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, so that now we are even able to call God *Abba*, Father (Galatians 4:6).

Pentecost may not technically be the birthday of the Church, but it is the day on which we were all empowered, consecrated, anointed, strengthened, equipped, and given the authority to be His anointed ones, His sons and daughters by adoption. By Pentecost we were blessed and sanctified by the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit, to proclaim God’s Word, to manifest His presence in this world, to glorify and praise His Holy Name by all that we do and are. Because of Pentecost, we can give heartfelt thanks to Him who through His love for mankind has sacrificed Himself, His own life, so that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

Christopher Holwey

Christopher Holwey attended St. Vladimir’s Seminary from 1981–1984, received his Master of Divinity degree, and served as a priest of this Archdiocese for 18 years. He now lives in Farmington Hills, Michigan, and serves at the Basilica of St. Mary in Livonia, Michigan, as chanter, choir director, and lecturer on the Faith.

EASTERN DIOCESES' SPRING RETREAT AND MEETINGS

On March 17–19, more than 125 people gathered for the combined Eastern Dioceses Spring Retreat and the Antiochian Women of the East (AWE) Lenten Retreat. At the Antiochian Village Heritage and Learning Center, Fr. Andrew Stephen Damick and Chaplain Sarah Byrne-Martelli provided informative and enriching presentations titled “Angels and Demons” (Damick) and “Joy Comes in the Mourning: Caring for Our Own Grief, Caring for Others” (Byrne-Martelli). His Grace Bishop THOMAS (Joseph) led both retreats in the divine services, including a Hierarchical Divine Liturgy on the Sunday of the Holy Cross. The last included a memorial for our Father of Thrice-Blessed Memory, His Eminence Metropolitan PHILIP. Pilgrims visited the gravesite of St. Raphael (Hawaweeny), Bishop

of Brooklyn, and the Shrine of St. Thekla, Equal-to-the-Apostles, and an Akathist service was prayed to both saints. Special programming was provided for the Teen SOYO students by Fr. Christopher Shadid, Director of the Antiochian Village Camp. Reports were submitted by the Eastern Dioceses Ministries for the Antiochian Women of the East (AWE), Teen SOYO, Young Adults Ministry (YAM), Financial, Parish Life Conference planning, and Scholarships. All are looking forward to the upcoming 2023 Parish Life Conference which is being hosted by St. Moses the Black Church (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) at the Antiochian Village, June 28–July 2, 2023.



GAMBLING WITH OUR CHILDREN IN THE INTERNET AGE

Keidi Lewis

I was recently in an intake conference for a new student, with a coworker, Marcy. She led the meeting and I took notes, opting to type right into my computer to save time. After the meeting, Marcy suggested that in the future I take notes on paper. She gently pointed out where I had missed key moments as I typed, focused on formatting and what was happening on my screen and not what was being communicated in the meeting. Marcy said words that have haunted me since: “It was like you left the room.” I see it happen all the time now. It’s much easier to see when others get absorbed in *their* screens: checking a text or looking up something online for “just a sec” has the same effect as leaving the room, or at least paying no attention. Now, when I’m done sending a text and my phone is away, I’ll announce to the world: “I’m back!” acknowledging the shift in my awareness and attention.

Marcy’s observation was a good reminder that we should curb the overuse of our super-convenient, supercomputer cell phones. Even more, it raises the question: when we as parents are so careful about where our children go, and with whom, and under what supervision, why would we allow them to “leave the room” (leave the house, leave Christian morality, and so forth) through the Internet? Much of the time we have no idea where they’re going, who they’re with, or what damage is being done to their self-image and identities, their mental health, and their values.

The Internet, screen use and over-use, and social media have been weighing on my mind, lately. My personal, out-of-control consumption of the Internet, has been giving me the nagging feeling that maybe I was put on earth for more than mindless scrolling. I have three daughters who use and play on the computer frequently. I worry as I know less and less about what reaches of the Internet they are “visiting.” Most significantly, I teach numerous



anxious, depressed, and searching high school students at an alternative charter high school. Because of our school’s format and small size, we are a haven for students whose anxiety and social distress have made them refugees from the traditional high school (whose students have large amounts of anxiety, as well). My students have caring and involved parents, stable home lives, and they sometimes have such high anxiety that they are unable to get out of the car when being dropped off for school. Some of my students still wear a medical mask, not because of COVID, but because they don’t want peers to see their faces. A disproportionate number of them identify as transgender. Many of my students have spent time at in-patient programs to help them survive their suicidal ideation, their self-harm, their bothersome thoughts, their disordered eating. In trying to figure out what is going on for these high schoolers, I’ve come up with all manner of theories about what has gone on in their lives (or on their screens) that could lead to such mental distress.

Here is what we do know: We all are spending too much time on screens. Screen escapism is addictive, and the software algorithms are designed to keep us online, to keep us scrolling and consuming. We know that Internet scrolling, on social media or otherwise, is generally not going to help us on our path to salvation. The foundational concept of a website or social media platform trying to keep our attention and engagement is at odds with our being fully present, spiritual, still and quiet with God.

We were created to find meaning in our lives – and our purpose – in God, in the framework of our faith. Without this deep understanding of who God is and who we are in Him, there is understandable anxiety and depression. We also need space for contemplation. God’s still, small voice is hard to hear above the compelling siren’s call of the Internet. We



Screen escapism is addictive, and the software algorithms are designed to keep us online, to keep us scrolling and consuming

need depth, the time to go deep into quiet, into nature, into serving our neighbor, into the vastness of God and His love for us. Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at NYU, noticed that phones and the Internet cause us to spend more and more of our lives in a shallow state, moving quickly from task to task and screen to screen, dangerous for adults who are more fully formed, but perilous to the development of our children. Haidt said in an interview with *Christianity Today*’s Russell Moore:

When kids got on what we what might call “experience blockers” – when they got phones that engage them all the time – they have no room for any other experiences, and I fear that

their spiritual development is warped too, because it’s all shallows all the time. TikTok is really funny, there’s lots of stupid shallow stuff that makes you laugh. If there’s no room for even parental input – let alone spiritual experience or communication with God – if all the input channels are jammed, then you have a kid growing up in the shallows.¹

We know that besides blocking real-life experiences, allowing unlimited access to the Internet can erode the values we are trying to instill in our children in subtle, seemingly innocuous ways. Many messages that are in opposition with the Orthodox faith are overtly and covertly spread to our kids, on sites that they visit and on social media: that sex is a casual, non-sacred thing; that adults are foolish, cringey, the enemy, and not to be trusted; that objectifying women is a harmless pastime without consequences for future relationships; that it’s no big deal to be LGBT, or that you have to decide your sexual orientation *this instant*. There are cautionary tales of Orthodox kids “leaving the room” down the rabbit holes and dark alleys of the Internet and being won over to other value systems by apparently kind, friendly, available, well-meaning people of whom parents are completely unaware.

Allowing our children unaccompanied into the Internet is taking a gamble. They might be fine. They may be able to negotiate the allure of other beliefs about the world and our place in it. They may stand strong, able to articulate how Orthodox beliefs don’t align with what is presented online. They may be able to maintain their sense of self and identity in Christ. On the other hand, however, they might not. The younger the child is, the larger the gamble. If the Web as a whole is a metaphysical gamble, social media has even worse odds, especially for our young girls. Social media can be negative for adults – an ideological echo chamber, a distraction and time-drain, and a perpetuator of vices like pride, self-promotion, social comparison, and judgment – but the harm of social media goes further.

Social media as it is structured today turns us into consumers. Since social media platforms changed from sharing news and connecting far-flung friends and family to a place where people present themselves as a curated product driven by computer calculations: all content is there for us, created for our consumption, with the hope that we’ll click again. Everyone is objectified. Everything

is for our evaluation. Is it funny? Is the person attractive? For our children, this is skewing the way that they look at (or consume) the world. I see it in my classroom: for years I've shown the same pictures of people as vocabulary words when teaching Spanish. This year, a student commented on how the little blonde girl in my picture for *chica* was so ugly and repulsive. "Trolling" is creeping into real life, not just from the anonymity of the Internet. If everything is weighed and judged by social media users, then there's an unconscious – or conscious – expectation that one will be weighed and judged by everyone else, sometimes with a comment or lack of "likes" as evidence. Here is a perfect recipe for anxiety and depression.

My theories about students' mental health being related to something going on online are confirmed by people like Jonathan Haidt. What has been suggested for years has finally been confirmed with data: levels of anxiety and depression and the self-harming behaviors that accompany them go up with use of social media. Monitoring a child's social media accounts does nothing to allay the potential damage, as the "dopamine loop" reward of posting-liking-commenting *is* the destructive part. When we allow participation in social media, it is a gamble with our children's happiness, with their anxiety levels, with the wiring of their brains and with their ability to regulate their own moods. This is especially dangerous for young girls.

Much more than for boys, adolescence typically heightens girls' self-consciousness about their changing body and amplifies insecurities about where they fit in their social network. Social media – particularly Instagram, which displaces other forms of interaction among teens, puts the size of their friend group on public display, and subjects their physical appearance to the hard metrics of likes and comment counts – takes the worst parts of middle school and glossy women's magazines and intensifies them.²

Multiple studies of young people's mental health show that there was a significant increase in anxiety, depression, and the accompanying dangers to physical well-being starting around 2012, when teens got cell phones and onto social media. These numbers were up years before COVID, although the pandemic (and subsequent increase in electronic

dependence) didn't help.

So what can we do, as Orthodox parents and communities? Haidt acknowledges the intense pressure for kids to be on social media, as so much of their social life is potentially based there, and suggests that groups of parents (youth groups? church communities?) band together with agreements to delay social media participation for all their kids, making it less attractive. *This is possible!* It's working so far at our church, where my daughters borrow my phone to text their friends to make plans and that's the extent of their phone use. Social media is just not going to happen, a fact they know and have accepted. They don't miss what they never had, and the people they want to hang out with aren't on social media, anyway. For my daughters (and for me!), I am trying to help them think critically about where they go and what they allow "in" online, and how to recognize the never-ending shallows for what they are: empty.

When is the right time to allow our children on social media or unrestrained Internet access? The most extreme answer is, when you're done raising them. When you think they are fully formed, when you don't want to have any more direct influence in their life, or when you think they're ready to take on the world by themselves: *then* launch them onto the open Internet and social media. Delay the influence as long as possible. Jonathan Haidt recommends social media after age 16. Dr. Mikhail Varshavski ("Doctor Mike") thinks we should "treat it just as we do any mind-altering substance: cigarettes, nicotine, alcohol."³

All our screens take us away from the present and from the precious people around us. We can say: "I'm back!" more often, or not leave in the first place. We can remain "in the room" with loved ones, practicing the skills of connecting and engaging. We can stop the potential harms by not allowing our children to be part of the Internet and the social-media gamble. We can refocus our attention on deep, eternal things; we can become still and present in God's Kingdom.

1. "The Russell Moore Show – Jonathan Haidt Says Social Media Is Making America Stupid," YouTube video uploaded by *Christianity Today*, 19 May 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zOzjw-997nU.
2. Jonathan Haidt, "The Dangerous Experiment on Teen Girls," *The Atlantic*, 21 November 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/facebook-dangerous-experiment-teen-girls/620767/>
3. "Doctor Mike on Anxiety & Social Media | Conversation W/ Jonathan Haidt," YouTube, uploaded by Doctor Mike, 25 August 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUSMbMzm1Ko (at 35:22:00 minutes).



Ora et Labora: **FINDING GOD IN THE SOIL**

Fr. Peter Kavanaugh

*“The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all.
It is the healer and restorer.” – Wendell Berry*



The day began with Mass in the biting cold, the moon above us, and the cattle lowing outside the chapel. It was peaceful ... and wild. After a warming cup of coffee, we gathered by the barn to feed the pigs, tend to the sheep, and gather eggs. The day carried on as adults and children worked the dirt together, pausing only to pray the Angelus, heads bowed, and hearts focused on Our Blessed Lady. After work was done, it was time for Compline, and at last a refreshing meal by the flickering campfire. Time changes when you spend consecutive days under the open sky. Eternity penetrates the mundane. The earth is charged with wonder.

This March, we gathered for our first Lenten Retreat at the Ave Maria Farm. It was a life-changing experience. We were tired, chilled, hungry, and aching at times, but it was all worth it.

Ora et Labora. St. Benedict taught us this long ago, and his words ring true today. "Prayer and work," in the garden, within the community, joined to Christ and the sacraments: life is enchanted.

The Ave Maria Farm is a small community in Northern Texas dedicated to a vision. It began when we started asking questions. What would it look like to live a life centered around sacramental worship, traditional values, fellowship, and a healthy relationship with nature and dirt? We felt it was time to step back and reprioritize, and, along the road, to join up with others who share the same vision. Now, you will find here on our homestead the main farmhouse and three tiny homes, a small chapel, a pole barn and community garden, and a small herd of cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens, and Bonita, the family donkey.

We built the tiny homes to provide a place for young adults enjoying a gap year, studying at college, or just along for the adventure, who want to start their adult life on a solid foundation, experience community, and learn basic farming skills. We are also a fifteen-minute drive from Midwestern State University and our parish, St. Benedict Orthodox Church, in Wichita Falls. The Church offers daily Mass and Rosary services, catechism, spiritual life classes, and a classical co-operative school for homeschooling families. We are building a life grounded on work, prayer, dialogue, and beauty, and we welcome you to get involved.

What is our work about? The Venerable Cardinal

Newman sums it up here as well as any could. May it be true in our lives today.

When the bodily frame receives an injury, or is seized with some sudden malady, nature may be expected to set right the evil, if left to itself, but she requires time; science comes in to shorten the process and is violent that it may be certain. This may be taken to illustrate St. Benedict's mode of counteracting the miseries of life. He found the world, physical and social, in ruins, and his mission was to restore it in the way, not of science, but of nature, not as if setting about to do it, not professing to do it by any set time or by any rare specific or by a series of strokes, but so quietly, patiently, gradually, that often, till the work was done, it was not known to be doing. It was a restoration, rather than a visitation, correction, or conversation. The new world which he helped to create was a growth rather than a structure. Silent men were observed about the country, or discovered in the forest, digging, clearing, and building; and other silent men, not seen, were sitting in the cold cloister, tiring their eyes, and keeping their attention on the stretch, while they painfully deciphered and copied and re-copied the manuscripts which they had saved. There was no one that 'contended, or cried out,' or drew attention to what was going on; but by degrees the woody swamp became a hermitage, a religious house, a farm, an abbey, a village, a seminary, a school of learning, and a city. Roads and bridges connected it with other abbeys and cities, which had similarly grown up; and what the haughty Alaric or fierce Attila had broken to pieces, these patient men had brought together and made to live again."¹

Unplug from the Machine. Tune in to God's Reality.

1. Cardinal Newman, *A Benedictine Education: The Mission of Saint Benedict and The Benedictine Schools*, pp. 37-38.



JOINT STATEMENT

TEN YEARS AFTER THE KIDNAPPING OF THE ARCHBISHOPS OF ALEPPO



Beloved brothers, sisters, and spiritual children,
Christ Is Risen! Truly, He Is Risen!

We greet you today in this festive and exalted Paschal period, having our eyes fixed on the cross of suffering, and knowing that the Lord of glory transformed this cross of suffering into a cross of glory. Today, we remember the cross carried by the Christians living in this Middle East, suffering from murder, displacement, and terror. Today, we remember the spear which has marked for us Christians, in the last two thousand years, the Passion of our Lord at Calvary, and the other spear which has wounded us for the last ten years ago, and this wound has not been healed. Today, we remember the kidnapping of our brothers, the Archbishops of Aleppo, Youhanna Ibrahim and Boulos Yazigi, which occurred on April 22, 2013.

Ten years have passed. As Christians, we continue to affirm that we rely only on our Lord for our presence here in this land of the East. Ten years have passed. As Christians, we continue to affirm that we are abiding here against all odds. We are here as living witnesses of Jesus of Nazareth, Who loved us and Whom we love. Ten years have passed, and we affirm that we have been tirelessly following up on this case. We have knocked on the doors of

local and foreign governments, embassies, and religious and civil authorities, in the hope of receiving just a glimmer of hope about this issue. We would like to share all this information with you, dear brothers and sisters, and all that we have done in this case and many other cases. We continue our efforts in this regard. Even now, we are determined with all our strength to discern what is factual in all the darkness enveloping this case, a case which involves the agonies of abduction and the humiliation of human dignity. This case calls for more than just saying sweet words about human rights. Human rights are politicized according to interests. The international community and governments, however, ought to work seriously to implement these rights, instead of taking the position of blindness, incapacitation, and satisfaction with uttering words of condemnation and denunciation.

In this bright week of glorious Pascha, we recall that, first and foremost, we are the children of the Resurrection, despite all hardships. We also recall that the tears shed by the myrrh-bearing women who mourned Christ turned, after the Resurrection, into tears of gladness and joy, beholding the Master Who has overcome death and destroyed the power of the evil one. As Christians, the kidnapping of both



bishops invites us to reflect on the fact that everyone is targeted in this East. The bishops' kidnappers did not ask about denomination, affiliation, or religion. The two bishops were kidnapped because they were a fragrant scent emanating from the sweet-smelling witness of the Church of Antioch, the Church of this land. Here is where the Apostles first walked, the cradle from which the sparks of Christianity spread to all the world. No earthquake or calamity shall overcome the Church. These circumstances invite us to conduct a profound existential review of the history of our existence here, and to the need for strengthening our cohesion in this wounded East. The call for us to continue to bear witness to our Lord, not only by maintaining stone structures, but also by the authenticity of the faith of our children and their presence in the land of their ancestors, and by shunning any ethnic or factional extremism that weakens their witness for Christ Jesus, Who wished that all be *one*.

In the midst of this Bright Pascha, we are set to behold the countenance of Jesus, from Whom we draw power and mercy despite all that surround us. We cry out to Him from the bottom of the heart, bowing the knee of the soul, and saying: You have brought us forth, making us from the clay of

this land. You willed for us to be witnesses to your Holy Name. Strengthen us, O Lord, to live up to the testimony entrusted to us. Wipe away our burdens with the light of Your Resurrection. Calm the impulses of war and instill in us the spirit of Your peace. O God, be with the abductees, and with all those who are in distress and affliction. O Savior, the world yearns for the sweetness of Your peace. We implore You in this glorious Paschal season, and we heartily bow before You, prostrating and chanting from the depth of our soul:

“Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and to those in the tombs bestowing life.”

Damascus, 22 April 2023.

JOHN X
Greek Orthodox Patriarch
of Antioch and All the East

IGNATIUS APHREM II
Syriac Patriarch of Antioch and All the
East and Supreme Head of Universal
Syriac Orthodox Church

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION

FATHER ANDREW DAMICK SPEAKS AT LIBERTY UNIVERSITY OCF EVENT

On April 1st, 2023, Liberty University Orthodox Christian Fellowship hosted Fr. Andrew Stephen Damick as a lecturer on Liberty’s campus. Fr. Andrew is the Chief Content Officer of Ancient Faith Ministries, the author of several books, and the host of several popular Orthodox Christian podcasts.

This event has been the Liberty OCF’s largest event to date since its official recognition by Liberty University in August, 2022, and marks the first time the OCF has hosted a guest speaker.

With over a hundred guests in attendance, Orthodox Christians and inquirers alike were able to hear Fr. Andrew’s presentation, titled “Salvation and the Unseen World.” Fr. Andrew’s presentation, which was divided into two parts, covered questions such as, “What do demons have to do with the Gospel?” and “What do Angels have to do with Salvation?” Much of Fr. Andrew’s presentation mate-

rial comes from his latest book: “Arise, O God: The Gospel of Christ’s Defeat of Demons, Sin, and Death.”

During his visit, Fr. Andrew gave Fr. Alban Waggener of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church a copy of the Axion Estin of Emmaus. This icon, enshrined at St. Paul Antiochian Orthodox Church of Emmaus, Pennsylvania, is modeled on the original Axion Estin (“It Is Truly Meet”) icon of Mount Athos.

Holy Trinity Orthodox Church is a Western Rite Orthodox Parish serving the central Virginia area. Holy Trinity had its origins in the Anglican parish of Christ Church in Lynchburg. By 2006, Bishop Robert Waggener and most of the members had made the decision to seek entry into

the Orthodox Church. Under the guidance of Fr. Michael Keiser, of blessed memory, and the catechesis of Fr. Nicholas Alford, some 27 were baptized or chrismated on Pentecost 2006. Bishop Waggener was ordained to the Orthodox priesthood in September of 2006, with his baptismal name of Alban. Since then, the parish has met at six different locations in Lynchburg. With the help of some generous benefactors, and diligent saving, Holy Trinity was able to purchase a suitable building for cash in June 2018, and eventually moved into the church building in October 2020. Since then, the parish has grown at a consistent pace, with most of its parishioners being converts to the faith.



THE TRUE IDENTITY AND MISSION OF A HEALTHY PARISH COMMUNITY

Fr. Joshua Makoul



It is often said that the Church is a hospital.

I have always had mixed feelings about this saying. Is the Church made up entirely of sick people? Overall, the answer is no.

This may be because sickness is not the most accurate way to describe our state. Perhaps it is better to say that there are aspects of ourselves that are fallen, distorted from the way God that intended them, and in need of restoration. This is true of all of us. So there are those of us in the Church presently who are not so much sick, but in the continuous process of restoring the fallen or distorted aspects of ourselves.

It is important to note that we exist as a hospital not just for those *within*, but also for those on the outside, and those who will yet join our community. A healthy parish has the power to heal and restore one's humanity. The present world has a way of marring and distorting our humanity making it far from how God intended it to be. As a parish community, we are called to have the opposite effect on the souls who wander into our community. Indeed, every parishioner has the opportunity, ability, and calling to become a physician of souls.

I have observed individuals come into our community in a very troubled state, a state that made it difficult for others to approach or embrace them. I have had the blessing of seeing those same individuals be transformed over time. Gradually, over the months or years, they became more balanced, healthy, and whole. In essence, their humanity was being restored. They experienced love from others in the parish, and in turn learned that they are worthy of love, and that they ought not to loathe themselves anymore. They experienced the way God meant for us to be and to live. They experienced a healthy family, and got a second chance at having a nurturing family, often quite different

from the one in which they were raised.

A warm, healthy, and loving community will not expel such souls upon encountering them, but will surround them with acceptance, love, affirmation, and occasionally, of course, boundaries. Even boundaries teach and challenge those on the receiving end to mature and grow. The parish family gives the gift of belonging, love, and safety. This is a healing gift. It is a gift we are all qualified to give. The most recent research on healing from adverse life-experiences indicates that healing can occur most effectively when we have deep experiences that override what the fear part of the brain tells us. A healthy parish community has the power to give those deep experiences.

It is a beautiful thing to observe the restoration of a wounded and damaged person. It is much like the healing of the demoniac in the gospel. What Christ did in an instant, we as a parish community do over time, through radiating the mercy and love of Christ. Indeed, this world is much like the tombs among which the infamous Gadarene demoniac dwelled. It has become a lonely place that can drive people to madness, and to become like the demoniac of the gospel. Today, the actual habitation of a demon is not needed: the present world is able to do it on its own.

Christ instructed us to spread the gospel, but He also healed every person he encountered who sought healing. We are to do both. Nearly everyone healed by Christ became a believer. We are to spread the gospel not only through the power of the word or through teaching, but through our presence, love, mercy, and affirmation. For the parish setting, healing is not only an individual act, but a communal one. Also, healing is not merely a restorative act: it is also evangelistic.

Therefore, we should be encouraged, knowing that we are not powerless nor helpless. It is the calling of every parish community to engage in this restorative and healing work. A community's ability to do this is the true criteria of its health and success. It is not the number of projects accomplished, nor its membership numbers. Each of us has the power to contribute to this wonderful and beautiful healing ministry. The opportunity exists at every coffee hour, every church service, and every communal meal and gathering. So, truly we are all called to become a physician of souls. We need only dispense the medicine of love, safety, and affirmation.

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|---|--|---|--|---|

THE BENEFIT OF FRIENDS

Fr. John Fenton

WHEN ST. PAUL URGES US TO WORK OUT OUR SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING, HE EXPECTS THAT WE WILL NOT STRUGGLE PRIVATELY OR INDIVIDUALLY, BUT COMMUNALLY. WE WILL STRIVE WITHIN A COMMUNITY OF THE FAITHFUL. THIS IS IMPORTANT, BECAUSE GOD CREATED US TO BE LIKE HIM – A COMMUNITY DRAWN INTO THE COMMUNITY THAT HE IS. SO WE ARE NOT DRAWN IN MERELY AS INDIVIDUALS INTO THE INDIVIDUAL GOD. RATHER, WE PARTICIPATE TOGETHER IN THE HOLY TRINITY, WHICH MEANS THAT TOGETHER WE AID EACH OTHER'S REPENTANCE, HEALING, AND REDEMPTION. THAT IS HOW THE LORD GOD DESIGNED US – WITH FRIENDS WHO AID OUR SALVATION.

I can think of no better example of this than the episode in the Gospels in which Jesus heals the paralytic who is brought to him by friends (Matthew 9:2; Mark 2:3; Luke 5:18). St. Mark and St. Luke relate the great effort made by these friends to seek the Lord's help: breaking up the tiling and roof, and then lowering their friend down into the midst of the crowd around Christ (Mark 2:4; Luke 5:19). As dramatic as this scene is, the key moment that gets the scribes and Pharisees tittering is when Christ turns to the paralytic and announces these saving words: "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee" (Matthew 9:2; Mark 2:5–7; Luke 5:20–21).

What is often overlooked, however (and most certainly was in my Protestant upbringing), is that the Lord's saving words are spoken because He sees the faith of the man's friends. Each of the synoptic evangelists highlights this truth: Jesus acts and speaks when he sees *their* faith, the faith of the four friends, not the faith of the paralyzed man (Matthew 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20). Among other things, these few words ("Jesus, seeing their faith, said . . ." [Matthew 9.2]) indicate that the man's paralysis is not simply physical. His condition, most likely his despair and hopelessness, and perhaps even his weak or even non-existent faith in God's healing hand, has paralyzed this man's soul and nearly extinguished his desire and ability to pray, "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save

me, and I shall be saved: for thou art my praise" (Jeremiah 17:14).

In his homily on this Gospel, St. Peter Chrysologus underlines this point:

[The paralytic] makes no response to grace, because he was more interested in a cure for his body than for his soul, and he was lamenting the temporal afflictions enfeebling his body so much that he failed to lament the eternal punishments of his soul that was even more enfeebled, and so considered his present life dearer to him than the future one. Rightly then does Christ regard the faith of those who brought him and overlook the folly of the man lying there in such a state, that by virtue of the others' faith the soul of the paralytic would be cured before his body.

So, rather than seeing the man on the mat, the Lord Jesus sees the friends. Instead of hunting for the faith of the one, He beholds the faith of the many who aid this poor man. "Notice . . . God does not seek the will of the foolish, he does not wait for the faith of the ignorant, and he does not examine all the senseless desires of the infirm, but *he comes to help thanks to someone else's faith, so that he may grant through grace alone*, and not deny, whatever is of the divine will" (St. Peter Chrysologus).

This episode is an excellent instruction on the benefit and necessity of intercessory prayer. By their actions, with their faith, the friends present

their petition to the Lord. But this episode also teaches us about more than prayer. Our Lord acknowledges not just the friends' hope that Christ will help him. He sees their faith made visible through their deeds, and uses it to fashion His miracle. Their merit, then, of hauling their friend through the streets, encouraging him along the way, going to extreme lengths to place him in front of Christ, ignoring ridicule and fear – their merit for their friend benefits his salvation.

St. Ambrose, in his commentary on this episode, lauds the merits of these friends: "Great is the Lord, who through the merits of some (*qui aliorum merito ignoscit aliis*) forgives others, and while He proves some, excuses the faults of others. Why, O man, has your companion no power with you, when with the Lord a slave has the merit of intervention (*interueniendi meritum*) and the right of obtainment?" (*Commentary on Luke*, Book 5.11).

This episode, recorded in three different gospels, is not the only instance of Christ extending healing, wholeness, and salvation to someone based directly on the deeds of another. The nobleman's son is healed due to the father's faith and merits pleading before Christ (John 4:46ff.) The centurion's servant is healed due to the commander's confidence and efforts (Matthew 8:5ff.; Luke 7:1ff.). The Canaanite woman's daughter, too, is exorcised, also at a distance, because the mother persists and offers a faith-based counterargument to Christ (Matthew 15:21ff; Mark 7.24ff.). What is striking about these last two incidents is that both the centurion and the mother are pointedly described as Gentiles, and therefore persons whose faith is unexpected, if not also nascent. In either case, each of these instances, and many more, indicate the value and benefit of friends who aid our salvation, not merely by supporting us or praying for us, but with their faith-filled actions.

Like St. Paul, St. James understands that friends aid our salvation. He directs the sick, whether physically or spiritually unwell, to call upon the Church through her priests. These friends, by their ministrations and prayers, "shall save the sick [person]." Forgiveness and healing result from these efforts. Especially when we are caught up in our fears and anxieties, "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous [person] availeth much." This apostolic encouragement is then sealed with the example of Elias, whose merits and prayers brought health and

material salvation to many (James 5:13–18).

Merits, that is the deeds and efforts of others, can be distinguished but not uncoupled from their prayers. As we see from the men who bring the paralytic, righteous merits are a prayer of faith in action. As St. James indicates, prayers of faith are effectual because of the righteous deeds or merits of the men or women who offer them. Based on these Gospel stories and comments by the Holy Apostles, from the outset and through the centuries the Church has extolled the benefits of friends for our salvation, not just in their prayers, but also in their saintly conduct. These saints, as friends of ours, benefit us by their prayers precisely because of their merits.

For this reason, in one of his Ember Fast sermons, St. Leo the Great encourages his faithful Roman Christians to pray based on the merits of the Holy Apostle Peter: "Let us fast therefore, on Wednesday and Friday; now on the sabbath let us keep vigil together at the tomb of S. Peter the Apostle, by whose merits may we be able to obtain that which we ask (*cujus suffragantibus meritis*), through our Lord Jesus Christ, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, world without end. Amen" (Sermon 13.2 on the Fast of the Tenth Month).

Yet our saintly friends benefit us by more than prayers rooted in their righteousness. The Church teaches that, like the paralytic, we benefit directly from the sacrifices, the death, and the deeds which the Saints have made for righteousness' sake, as if these sacrifices were our own. Consider the merit of St. Xenia of Petersburg. For many years, with many sacrifices, she asked that her suffering might be applied to her deceased husband, that he might benefit from her merits, and that what she did would be imputed not to her but to him. Consider also the merit of St. Agatha who, after various tortures, was burned to death on hot coals, yet her veil did not burn thereby becoming a precious relic. Some years after her martyrdom, Mount Etna erupted, and a fire broke out. "The multitude of the heathen, fleeing to the tomb of the virgin, took thence her veil to defend them from the fire: that the Lord might show himself a deliverer from the burning, for the merits of Agatha (*quod a periculis incendii meritis beate Agathæ*) his blessed Martyr" (Benedictine Breviary).

These are not the only examples. We can also



consider the sufferings of Ss. Pelagia of Divievo, or Zosima of Paris. From earliest times until our own day, our holy fathers like St. Nikolai Velimirovic have openly stated that we can and even should take upon ourselves penances performed on behalf of others, and that God will credit these things to others, even if they know nothing about it.

Because of the salvific benefits from our departed friends, the liturgy, both East and West, draws attention to those saints whose efforts, as well as their prayers, aid our salvation. In these prayers, we literally ask that we might receive and be credited with the reward earned by a particular saint because of his (her) sacrifice. For we are taught and so believe that we benefit directly from the sacrifices which the saints have made for righteousness' sake, as if these sacrifices were our own.

As with the friends who bring the paralytic to Jesus, the efforts, works, and merits of our friends in this life or the saints in heaven build upon and magnify (rather than detract from) the grace of Our Lord. For these deeds show that Our Lord is most willing to overlook our weakened faith and our faltering prayers so that, "seeing *their* faith," He may deal with *us* in His mercy. In my youth, I was taught that only the work of Christ was salvific; that His sufferings alone can aid my salvation. The Scriptures and the Church's tradition, however, are clear that the glorification of Our Lord in His saints also means that someone else, like St. Xenia, or the Canaanite woman, or even an earthly friend, can perform some pious act which the Lord will see and credit to me; and that I may benefit and thereby claim the merits of my friends on my behalf for my saving health.

MORE THAN WORDS ON A PAGE: THE ANTIOCHIAN HOUSE OF STUDIES

Elissa Bjeletich Davis

“A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian” — Evagrius

I have quoted this beautiful statement more times than I can count; yet somehow when I arrived at the Antiochian House of Studies to begin work on a Master’s degree in theological studies, I was surprised. I came to study theology, so I expected complex readings, fascinating lectures, intense vocabulary, and intricate distinctions. I didn’t anticipate, however, the joyful and grace-filled way in which these professors would “write the theology of the Church on their [students’] hearts and change them,” as His Grace, Bishop THOMAS so aptly put it.

A theologian is one who prays! How can one possibly study theology as if it were merely a collection of texts? Our faith is incarnational; the Truth is a Person, who took flesh and walked among us. So it is natural and right that our theological work should take flesh as well. How often do we remind one another that Orthodoxy is a lived faith, that its *praxis* is key to developing our knowledge and love of God? Then, of course, this program must offer us a theology that lives not on a bookshelf, but which takes root in our hearts.

This all seems obvious to me now, but when I set out at the end of August to fly from Texas to Pennsylvania, I wasn’t sure what to expect. What sort of people would I meet? Would they be cold and distant, academic and elitist? Would I be lonely? Could I keep up? Would the program’s expectations be too much for a busy mother?

You may know this program as the “St. Stephens Certificate” course, which has been offered for 42 years, allowing Orthodox Christians with busy lives

— careers, families — to undertake theological studies without moving to a full-time seminary. In addition to that certificate course, the Antiochian House of Studies offers various Masters and Doctoral programs, and as of this June, the school has received full accreditation through the Association of Theological Schools.

The Master’s program requires two one-week residencies, during which we gather at Antiochian Village in Pennsylvania. Throughout the rest of the year, we’ll undertake rigorous coursework at home, and in the final year, we’ll produce a Master’s thesis. In addition, each of us must create and implement an annual Praxis Project, a program or resource designed to assist and enhance our home parishes (and perhaps others). It is an ambitious and beautiful program, and God willing, we’ll accomplish much in these three years!

First, however, there is the week-long residency. I had set aside this week, looked forward to it, purchased textbooks and notebooks and airplane tickets, and now finally the moment had come. I had arrived, and as I climbed aboard our shuttle to the Village, I looked at the crowd around me.

The students are a mixture of people from different walks of life. Many are like me: middle-aged people with established careers, hoping that we have enough time, now that the kids are out of the house, to finally dive into our Orthodox faith — and praying that we still have it in us to study and to write papers! While most of us have long been Orthodox, a few are new converts (or even catechumens!) falling in love with this faith, and yearning to know more. We have young professionals and young





parents, just getting started in ministry, and hoping to gain the necessary understanding to serve Christ and His Church well. There are men whose priests have suggested that they pursue the diaconate, and priests who have come for further education in the Church they love. One thing unites us: every one of us shares a profound love of Christ and of His Holy Church, and each of us has come to move ever more deeply into this Orthodox faith.

At breakfast on the first morning, a group of us discussed the curious and delightful energy we were seeing among the clergy who run the Antiochian House of Studies. They have a childlike joy about them, and a camaraderie that you cannot miss. They laugh together, glowing with excitement. Mark, the father of five young kids, commented that in other, non-Orthodox circles, one often hears people say that seminaries can easily become “the place where faith goes to die.” We’ve heard pastors and writers say that they were aflame with excitement about Christ, but found that their academic experiences at seminary trampled that spark, exhausting them spiritually. Mark marveled that this just didn’t seem possible in this Orthodox environment. These professors are aflame, and they were already igniting sparks all around them. We knew we had entered into something very special.

The leaders of the Antiochian House of Studies often remind us that this is a house: it is intended to become a home, from which we don’t merely study about God, but in which we get to know Him. After all, the Truth is a Person, and we want to know Christ, to be filled with Him, not just to read some books about Him. Indeed, by the end of the first day, it already felt like home, and we felt like an enormous, joyful, chattering family.

We have come here to seek God, and we seek Him everywhere. The day begins and ends in the chapel; we will seek Him as we worship together, the Body of Christ gathered. We find Him around the table as we break bread together. We explore

Him in the Scriptures, in the theology texts, in the liturgical prayers and in the chanting. Even in Church History, we will seek to discern His hand in the unfolding of great events.

My roommate, Jessica, an elementary-school music teacher, is pursuing her Master’s on the Church Music track, studying Byzantine Chant in addition to theology. She related with wide-eyed excitement how, in her first class, the instructor asked how one prepares to chant. Students offered various clever vocal exercises, only to be told that one must begin by dropping to one’s knees. We must empty ourselves, that we may be filled with the Holy Spirit, so that the Holy Spirit can sing through us. Of course.

This program is truly Orthodox, not just because the impressive crowd of professors is made up of Orthodox bishops and priests, and not just because its teachings are in line with the Creeds and the Fathers. This program is Orthodox because those teaching it know that theology is so much more than words on a page. We are carrying the grace we’ve received home with us, to our families and our parishes, ready to begin the next chapter. Back in the rhythm of our daily lives, where we’re learning to integrate good study habits into already busy schedules, we’re reading *Hymn of Entry* by Archimandrite Vasileios. He tells us, “Theology is born from the Church and returns to it. It flows from spiritual life and guides us to the fulness of the Kingdom. By its nature theology, as a mystery, remains outside any ‘specialization.’ It concerns the whole people.” (page 23).

Indeed, it does, and may our experiences here in the Antiochian House of Studies turn us into whole people, as our instructors “take theology and make it take flesh” (as Bishop Thomas says). Please pray for all of us students, as we labor to know God better and to dive ever deeper into Holy Tradition.

Elissa Bjeletich Davis is a student in the Masters of Theological Studies Program at the Antiochian House of Studies, as well as an author and podcaster working with Ancient Faith Ministries. She is active in Orthodox youth and family ministries, directing and teaching Sunday school, volunteering at summer and family camps, and contributing to various curriculum projects. She serves as President of the Advisory Board of Youth Equipped to Serve (YES), a ministry of FOCUS North America.

ARCHDIOCESAN OFFICE

ORDINATIONS

GIANNAKAKOS, Mykel, to the holy diaconate by Bishop ANTHONY at the Presanctified Liturgy, April 5, 2023, at St. Nicholas Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

GIANNAKAKOS, Deacon Mykel, to the holy priesthood by Bishop ANTHONY at the Vespers Liturgy of Basil the Great, Holy Thursday, April 13, 2023, at St. Nicholas Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Fr. Mykel is attached to the parish.

McCLANAHAN, Deacon Philip, to the holy priesthood by Bishop JOHN on April 23, 2023, at St. Andrew Church, Riverside, California.

SALVIA, Deacon Andrew, to the holy priesthood by Metropolitan SABA on Holy Saturday, April 15, 2023, at St. Ignatius Church, Florida, New York.

THORNBURG, Deacon Joseph, to the holy priesthood by Metropolitan SABA on Holy Thursday, April 13, 2023, at St. Anthony Church, Bergenfield, New Jersey.

TRANSFERS

BALLARD, Fr. John, attached to St. Anthony Church, Spring, Texas, effective June 15, 2023.

DALY, Fr. Raphael, assigned as Pastor of St. Luke Church, Erie, Colorado, effective September 1, 2023.

FINE, Fr. Nicholas, assigned as Pastor of St. Anthony Church, Bergenfield, New Jersey, effective June 1, 2023.

GILBERT, Fr. Anthony, assigned as Pastor of St. George Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, effective July 1, 2023.

HERNANDEZ, Fr. Thomas, attached to St. Andrew Church in Riverside, California, effective June 1, 2023.

HONORE, Fr. Andrew, assigned to full-time Navy chaplaincy, effective July 1, 2023.

HYATT, Fr. David, assigned as Pastor of St. Michael Church, Greensburg, Pennsylvania, effective July 9, 2023.

IBRAHIM, Fr. Michael, assigned as Pastor of St. Elias Church, Syracuse, New York, effective January 15, 2023.

KEES, Fr. Symeon, assigned as Pastor of St. Raphael of Brooklyn Church, Iowa City, Indiana, effective August 1, 2023.

KFOUF, Fr. Ayman, assigned as Dean of St. George Cathedral, Coral Gables, Florida, effective July 1, 2023.

McCLANAHAN, Fr. Philip, assigned as Pastor of St. Athanasius Church, Sacramento, California, effective May 27, 2023.

SALVIA, Fr. Andrew, assigned as Second Priest of St. Elias Church, Austin, Texas, effective August 1, 2023.

THORNBURG, Fr. Joseph, assigned as Pastor of St. Silouan the Athonite Church, College Station, Texas, effective June 15, 2023.

VALENTINE, Fr. Ignatius, assigned as Pastor of St. Nicholas Church, Cedarburg, Wisconsin, effective August 1, 2023.

VAZQUEZ, Fr. John, assigned as Pastor of St. George Church, Albany, New York, effective June 1, 2023.

VEST, Fr. Ephraim, assigned as Pastor of St. Elias Church, Sylvania, Ohio, effective July 1, 2023.

RETIREMENTS

HOWELL, Fr. Stephen, effective April 7, 2023.

MOGA, Fr. David, effective February 7, 2023.

MUSTIAN, Fr. David, effective September 1, 2023.

NOSAL, Fr. John, effective July 9, 2023.

REPOSED

EL-FAR, V. Rev. Alexandros, reposed in Christ on March 20, 2023, predeceased by his wife of nearly 70 years, Khouria Yasmine. Fr. Alexandros is survived by sisters Alice and Katherine; children Henry (Fawzeyya), Nicholas, Nola (Najib), and Subdeacon Karim (Jasmin); and grandchildren Jessy, Nancy, Nesrine, Julian, Elias, Matthias, Simon, Gabi, Fayez, Alexandros and Antonios.

Fr. Alexandros (Fr. Iskandar) was a remarkable figure, whose life was characterized by service, devotion, and love for his community. He was born in Palestine and served in Lebanon, Jordan, and the United States. Fr. Alexandros' journey was filled with challenges, through which he maintained his faith and an unwavering commitment to his spiritual

calling. His spiritual journey took him from Beirut, Lebanon, to Brooklyn, New York, back to Jordan, and to California, during which he served in various capacities. Finally, he established All Saints Mission Church in Rohnert Park, California.

Fr. Alexandros was ordained a deacon on February 26, 1961, at St. Nicholas Church in Beirut, and a priest on March 5, 1961, at St. George Orthodox Church of Burmana. On March 25, 1961, he received the *epigonation* (shield) to hear confessions and he celebrated his first liturgy on April 1, 1961, at Ein Jdeidah. Fr. Alexandros served as a parish rector at St. John the Baptist and Forerunner Church in Wadi Chahrour Al Oulia. He was elevated to Archpriest (*protopapas*) on December 31, 1972, by His Eminence Metropolitan EPIPHANIOS (Zayed) of Akkar, Lebanon.

Throughout his time in the Middle East and during periods of war there, Fr. Alexandros provided spiritual guidance and served others, even beyond his own community. He assisted as a substitute clergyman from 1967 to 1972, filling in for missing clergy. Despite the challenges and persecution in his surroundings, Fr. Alexandros fearlessly continued to serve and bring hope to those around him.

In 1972, Fr. Alexandros served at St. Nicholas Cathedral, Brooklyn, New York – established by St. Raphael of Brooklyn – for four months, as well as St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in Manhattan. Upon returning to Lebanon from 1972 to 1985, he served the Archdiocese of Tyre and Sidon, at St. Nicholas Cathedral in Sidon and St. Thomas Church in Tyre. During the Lebanese war, Fr. Alexandros was given permission by His Eminence Metropolitan BOULOS (Khoury) to transfer and serve Salt, Jordan's Orthodox community, from 1985 to 1993.

HARB, Archdeacon Joseph, 83, fell asleep in the Lord on March 9, 2023. Born December 15, 1939, in Palestine, Archdeacon Joe was proud of his rich Arabic-speaking heritage and his Orthodox faith, which together guided him throughout his life. As an immigrant to the United States, Archdeacon Joe became a proud American. He served in the U.S. Navy in a civilian role, making this his career. He was a proud, too, to be a veteran.

Through his twenty-plus years of service as a clergyman, Archdeacon Joe truly fulfilled God's calling for him. He served at St. George Church,

Akron, Ohio, first with Fr. Lou Mahshie, and more recently with Fr. John Alassaf.

Archdeacon Joe will be missed by his wife, children, grandchildren, family, and all of our parishioners. He was a loving husband, father, grandfather, and friend. He was the beloved husband of Gloria (née Ronan); loving father of Joseph Jr. (Shay) and Debra Harb; cherished grandfather of Arianna, Jaden, Conner, Jessica, DJ, and Alex; dear brother of Sy and Terry, and those who predeceased him: Sami, Issa, Albert, George, and Harb; and an uncle and friend to many. All funeral services will be held at St. Matthew the Evangelist Church, North Royalton, Ohio, celebrated by Bishop ANTHONY.

SHAHDA, V. Rev. Fr. Joseph, fell asleep in the Lord on April 1, 2023. In his 30 years of ministry, he pastored St. Mary Church, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and St. George Church, Houston, Texas. Both churches remember him as a great shepherd and a loving family man, devoted to the betterment of all those whose lives he touched.

His Grace Bishop THOMAS of Oakland, Charleston and the Mid-Atlantic served alongside Fr. Joseph in Houston in a number of capacities from 1983 to 1996, including as his assistant pastor. In his letter to Fr. Joseph's family, His Grace lauded his mentor, but also lamented that "the lessons I learned from him came by looking in the rearview mirror, as opposed to learning them as I stood at his right side."

V. Rev. Fr. James Shadid, current pastor at St. George Church, Houston, also praised his predecessor. "His guidance and love for others will always be remembered as a cornerstone of his actions. His work as an Orthodox priest will never be forgotten by his parishes, and his devotion as a family man will always be remembered as an example to his children and grandchildren."

Fr. Joseph is survived by his wife, Khouria Anita; his sons, Joseph and James; his daughters-in-law, Amy and Norma; and his grandchildren Samuel, Joseph, Julia and James.

PALMER, Protodeacon George (Robert), 81, of Benbrook, Texas, reposed in the Lord on Palm Sunday, April 9, 2023, with Shamassy Linda, his wife of 56 years, and family by his side.

Ordained a deacon in the Antiochian Archdiocese in 1999, Protodeacon George served in two Texas parishes: St. Peter Church, Fort

Worth, and Ss. Constantine and Helen Church, Carrollton. He was preceded in death by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. William Fred Palmer, and his brothers, Douglas Palmer of Washington, and Francis Clarke Palmer of South Carolina. He is survived by his wife, Linda; sons, Robert C. Palmer II (Jackie) of Mt. Vernon, and William Fred Palmer (Dawn) of Katy. Protodeacon George was blessed with eight grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren; he is also survived by a number of brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law in numerous states.

Born in Rock Hill, South Carolina, on April 29, 1941, Protodeacon George graduated from Rock Hill High School in 1959, and soon after joined the United States Marine Corps. He completed basic training at Parris Island, South Carolina, after which he was stationed at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. After serving a deployment as a fleet Marine to Japan, he completed his service in 1963. Protodeacon George returned to Rock Hill after his discharge, where he assisted his parents at the family jewelry store until after his father's passing. During this time he met Winthrop student Linda Lane. His courtship began a love that lasted for the next 56 years.

Protodeacon George worked for various construction firms. In 1966, his first son, Robert Calvin Palmer II, was born. Shortly after "little" Robert's birth, "big" Robert would go to work for Duke Energy in the construction of various nuclear power plants. In 1971, a second son, William Fred Palmer, was born. Protodeacon and Sh. Linda made their home wherever the work was, which eventually meant a move to Denver, North Carolina. They made a bigger move in 1981 to Granbury, Texas to continue his career in construction for Piping Design Services and then Bechtel Engineering. He eventually left the construction industry as a Quality Control/Quality Assurance Specialist and moved to Katy, Texas, to continue working for Bechtel. In 1995, he accepted his final job with Alcon Labs, which brought him back to North Texas and Benbrook. After retirement, Protodeacon George and Sh. Linda traveled throughout the U.S.

Protodeacon George led a long life of service to his fellow man. In addition to his many years in the holy diaconate, he served as a Scout leader and youth sports coach and volunteered with the Benbrook Police Department's Citizens on Patrol Program.

OLDENBURG, Rita Susan, was born on March 17, 1948, in Rochester, Minnesota. After high school, and graduation with a nursing degree, Rita made the trek to Anchorage, Alaska, in the early 1970s with two girlfriends. There she met Michael Molloy, and they were married in October of 1973. They became an integral cornerstone of the St. John the Evangelist community in Eagle River, Alaska, as it made the journey into the Orthodox Church. Mike became Fr. Michael, and Rita became a priest's wife, known as Khouria Rita. They became godparents to many children in the community, and eventually were blessed to adopt Stephen and Regina to complete their family.

Like Martha, the gifted servant to Christ (Luke 10:38–42), Khouria Rita was a servant to all, so unsurprisingly she took the name of Martha as her saint's name. She was always a pillar of strength and most dependable.

After many, many years in Alaska, they followed Regina and moved to Henderson, Nevada. There, Khouria Rita had the joy of spending time with her three granddaughters. The girls loved going to "grandma school," where they enjoyed all types of crafts and projects. She passed away peacefully in the loving arms of Regina.

Khouria Rita will be missed most especially by her husband, Fr. Michael, children Regina (husband Mario), son Stephen, and her precious granddaughters, Charisma, Avonlea and Theory.



ORATORICAL FESTIVAL JUDGES' CHOICE

CATHERINE ESPER, DIOCESE OF TOLEDO AND THE MIDWEST



The world often encourages teens to act in a “grownup” manner, to forget the pleasures and characteristics of childhood, and put on a grown-up facade. In the Church, however, we are taught that childlike qualities are a very

important part of our salvation. Now, this isn't the first or last time you'll hear that worldly views clash with the Church. If we dig deeper into the theme of childlike behavior and its correlation to the Kingdom of Heaven, however, we can learn a lot. First, I will tell you what our verse from Matthew means to me and describe some of the individual qualities of childlikeness. Then I will explain how the verse is relevant to our parishes and the Antiochian Archdiocese. Lastly, I will deal with the theme of being “converted” and relate it to our verse.

It is difficult to be a young person in the Church. It is a transitional period between having parents make important decisions for us, in terms of daily living as well as our spiritual lives, and having to assimilate the faith and live it on our own. This transition isn't an easy task, especially when it comes to situations and obstacles that present themselves in high school and college. To understand our verse, I

ask you to picture a young child who has complete and utter trust in her parents. She does not understand the world or know its dangers, and thus her parents care for her, guiding her through new challenges and experiences. A

child accepts the wisdom and love her parents show her as part of their care, and submit her will to theirs. We should be no different than this child in regard to God, no matter our age, and submit our will to His. To me, this verse means trusting God in all circumstances, accepting His decisions without becoming angry or questioning Him, and acting like Christ to truly show His light to the world. Let us look at this more closely for a better understanding of the verse.

To trust God in all possible circumstances is a challenge. It is even more difficult to do in the course of our daily lives, especially when it seems as if we have ultimate power (and responsibility) in every area of our lives. “Just study a little harder!” or “build a better resume!” or (my least favorite) “try harder next time, and it'll all work out,” they say! Well, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it just won't. If your trust in God is incomplete, you will accomplish nothing of value to Christ. In a world that

prioritizes self-aggrandizement in its basest form, we are called by Christ to be the opposite. As was the case for Peter walking on the water, when his faith faltered, so did his balance, and he began to sink. We must not be like Peter, and doubt the Lord. Even if we are bewildered or anxious about our future, we must understand and continue, steadfast in the confidence that the Lord is with us, and will not let us drown. He says, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on” (Matthew 6:25–34). He also says, “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

This year, I admit I had difficulty accepting God’s decisions concerning my future. I had “a plan” for my college destination and the way my life would unfold after my senior year of high school. I envisioned myself at this school, followed all their social media accounts, and watched “Day-in-My-Life” YouTube videos throughout the application season. Jesus Christ, however, had a different plan. My preferred school waitlisted me, which initially caused me a great deal of anguish and confusion. “Why! I

was perfect for that school!” I thought. I was quick to question Him, but my parents reassured me that a plan was already made for me, had been so since before I was born, and was unfolding at this very moment. This experience tested my trust in God and brought me closer to Him. I had now to accept His plan for my life. All of us must be like little children and trust that God’s decisions in our life are for our best interest, even if we cannot see that immediately.

It is more important than ever to emulate Christ. Our world is hungering terribly for Him, although it is unaware of it. Our youth face problems that our parents and grandparents never thought possible. The pandemic was one thing, but social pressures, mental health issues, gender identity, and many more, are serious issues that teens encounter daily. The world is hurting more than ever, and is lost. We must be a light for others. People will notice something different about us when we emulate Christ in our behavior. They will be attracted to *our* light and want to know more about our religion.

This verse can have an enormous impact on our churches and the Antiochian Archdiocese as a whole. To be childlike is to show purity, trust, innocence, and pure love. Our churches can show this in many ways, and have been doing so. Many people want to learn about our faith, and bringing catechumens in is a great way to show others love and God. There are also people who are still struggling from the effects of COVID. Parishes can be support systems in many ways for these people through financial support, mental aid, clothing/food drives, or simply just providing a place to go. The Church is Christ’s home, and offers aid to anyone who needs it.

We have seen the Archdiocese exemplify this verse as well. The best example I can think of is our very own Antiochian Village. With its humble roots, and the giving nature, openness, and opportunities of its staff, it provides our people with a place to go, to feel included, loved, and hopeful. It is far away from the everyday world, and every time people visit, it truly does show the light of Christ.

Lastly, as Orthodox Christians we should strive to be converted with this verse. To be converted means to accept the will of God in your life and the meaning of this verse. I have talked about the ways this verse can be interpreted. Now it is time to take those lessons and work on our own childlike behaviors, so we can ultimately become closer to God.

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ORATORICAL FESTIVAL JUDGES' CHOICE

CHRISTINA SALEM, DIOCESE OF WICHITA AND MID-AMERICA



As I prepare for college, I look back on my own experiences as a youth in the church. One of the things that I hear in my head over and over is the all-too-familiar words of Khouria Gigi Shadid: “When you make the sign of the cross, you remember that God is the boss.” Back then, my biggest concern was learning the proper hand motions to Khouria Gigi’s songs at Vacation Bible School. VBS had a great impact on my life. Those weeks made a lasting impression, and I now realize that it makes a biblical impression on young children who still look at the church in simplicity. I truly admire children during their early adolescence, because no sexually immoral thoughts have occupied their imaginations yet. The Kingdom of Heaven renews children, because they possess an innocence that strengthens their faith.

Saint Artemius of Verkola is known as “the

Righteous Child Wonderworker.” His parents raised him to devote himself to Christ. Sadly, a lightning bolt struck Artemius at the young age of twelve and tragically killed him. He did not have a traditional funeral or burial because of the superstition surrounding the circumstance of his death, but many years later, his body remained uncorrupted. Something so simple, yet seemingly so hard, like a life of dedication to Christ, leads to a blessed outcome. Artemius knew only of Christ during his short life, so God received him into His Kingdom. Christ makes a clear point in Matthew 18:5–6, “Whosoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. Whosoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” God cherishes the faith of the youth, so that

ultimately they may be counted among the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ wants us to know that nothing should be done to alter the faith of the little ones, or corrupt their innocence. Otherwise, there may be terrible consequences.

My whole life, I have heard that “children should be seen and not heard.” This was usually in the context of having respect for my elders. Oftentimes, however, sayings like this let people think that children do not have anything valuable to say. In 1 Timothy 4:12, we read, “Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.” There are always boundaries that children should not cross in relation to adults, but kids should be taught that what they say *does* matter. Children can have a unique insight into the world that is easily forgotten as we grow up, but it is important to remember that child-like wisdom. Increasing knowledge can be uplifting, but it can have a downside as well. As adults, we begin to question why God allows bad things to happen in the world. It is easy for doubt to fill our minds when evil happens.

Children, however, can find Christ in anything. Recently during Divine Liturgy, my mom and I sat right behind a family present for a forty-day memorial. One of the families in front of us was familiar with the church, but attended a Protestant church nearby. During the service, the little boy pointed up to the dome with an icon of Jesus and said “Heaven is at Sitty’s church.” Children are known for not having a filter, and the fact that the little boy was able to recognize the beauty and importance of something in the church unintentionally showed the true value of the faith. Of course, children are by no means perfect. There will be the daily fights about who gets to play with the basketball first, or a refusal to eat anything that isn’t shaped like a dinosaur or a Disney character. This past school year, I participated in a class involving “peer mentoring.” The teacher assigned a pal who was recommended by his teacher from one of the elementary schools in the district. Every few months, we set goals with our pals and gave them an incentive to reach their goals. My pal was certain that he wanted Pokémon cards. Every time after we set his goal each week, he

asked where the cards were. It started to annoy me. At long last, the day came that I brought him the cards, and I have never seen someone so happy. He gave me a hug and thanked me at least twenty times during our forty-minute period together.

Although he impatiently waited for the Pokémon cards, my pal graciously and innocently appreciated receiving the cards. Though our biological age means that many of us are no longer children, we are all still children of God. God first united us to Himself and each other through baptism. Father Gregorios writes in his Commentary on the Divine Liturgy, “Through Baptism, we have become children of God. We have not simply been freed from sin . . . Now we are ‘freemen and citizens of the Church.’” The whole Orthodox Church is united through many things, but the sacrament of Baptism is what connects everyone together. It is a gift to be a child of God in the Orthodox Church because the bond of faith cannot be broken.

Last summer, I was blessed with the opportunity to go to the Antiochian Village for my last year as a camper. Apart from the dread of having to match boys’ swim trunks with all of my outfits, I loved each and every day that I spent at camp. Most importantly, however, the Antiochian Village blessed me with a spiritual experience I had not been accustomed to. The Village assigned a particular saint to each cabin, and the counselors were responsible to teach us about the saint’s life of faith and the reason for their sainthood. Also, instead of having Matins and Vespers every day, many Supplication services took place for specific saints throughout the week. I was exposed to so many beautiful hymns that I had never heard before. I loved to hear everyone who was familiar with the words singing in harmony. Summer camps throughout the Archdiocese help instill a sense of unity through faith at such a young age.

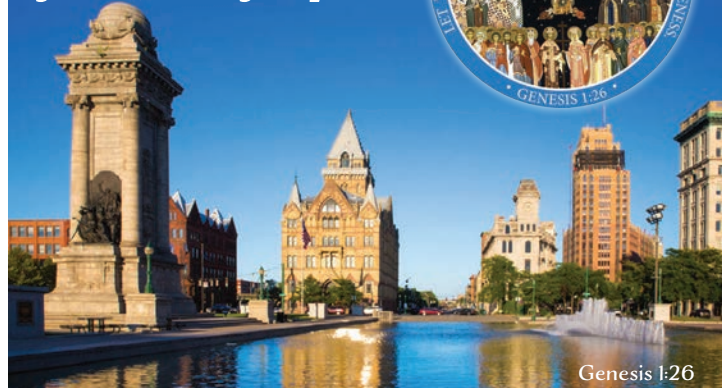
Like Matthew 18:3, Luke 18:15–17 presents Christ’s bond with children and those who can be like them. Saint Theoplect comments on this passage, “So it is that he who lives humbly and innocently will be accepted by God, as well as he who receives the kingdom of God the way a little child does, without guile or skepticism.” God has high expectations of us. He looks for the child-like

qualities of innocence and faith, exemplified in the way we live our lives. So we see how important it is to guard our children's innocence. I often babysit my two-year-old cousin. Every time I babysit him, we end up watching the same two movies, *Encanto* or *Up*. I have seen these so many times now that I can quote them blindfolded while playing on my phone. Of course, I usually try to hide that I am on my phone to give the impression that I am paying attention to the movie. However, recently he came from the other side of the couch to sit with me. Unthinkingly, he held me accountable for my actions and brought me into the present moment, getting me off my phone to pay attention to my surroundings.

The Greek word *stréfon* means "to be converted." One definition in the Greek-English Lexicon is "to turn back." Being "converted" does not simply mean altering yourself, but refers to turning one's back on worldly temptations and looking towards Christ. So we read in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is good and acceptable and perfect will of God." The purpose of life is to be intentional with godly faith and to uphold God's standards. People already baptized in the Orthodox Christian Church continue to be converted by entering into the sacraments. Participating in acts, such as communion and confession, allow us to turn away from the struggles of the real world and engage in a closer relationship with Christ. By no means will the struggles go away, but immersing oneself in the sacraments allows for our faith to be strengthened for the future.

I guess I am an adult now. I just turned 18, and the older one gets, the more sad things one sees in a fallen world. People are so quick to blame others, rather than looking inside. However, we should put ourselves back into the mindset of a child. I babysit, and see so many kids learning to walk. When they fall, they pick themselves right back up. They do not have anyone to blame, and they keep pushing themselves forward. A child's innocence allows him or her still to see the remnants of God's beauty in the fallen world, rather than searching for the bad things within. Perhaps there is wisdom in the old saying, "Children should be seen and not heard," for they should be seen for the pure, Christ-like qualities they demonstrate.

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ORATORICAL FESTIVAL JUDGES' CHOICE

ERIKA KJENDAL, DIOCESE OF NEW ENGLAND

On Holy Saturday 2021, four children, ranging in age from three to seven, stood expectantly before a large horse trough in the front of our church. The day they had been waiting for all year had finally arrived. Their excitement was evident, but their stillness and wide eyes revealed that they stood in fear and reverence as well. Each had carefully chosen his or her saint name — Elijah, Lucia, Marina, and Mary, the Mother of God — and all knew the importance of entering into the Church to which their saints belong. After the long prayers for the exorcisms, the blessing of the water, and the anointing with oil, it was time. Bravely, the little boy stepped in the water first, squeezed his eyes shut, and plugged his nose as the priest baptized him in the name of the Father! And the Son! And the Holy Spirit! When his dripping head emerged the third time, the little girls began to cheer. Clapping their hands and smiling, they whispered to their friend: Good job, Eli! In turn, the three girls were baptized as well, each encouraged by the words of her friends, and each greeted with a cheer when she rose from the water.

The littlest girl was the last to go, and when she had been baptized, all four hugged each other, excited not just for themselves, but also for their friends who stood by them, ready to embark on their new life together.

This scene beautifully illustrates the natural virtues of a child, especially the virtues of joy, love, simplicity, and purity. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus lifts up children, setting them as the example for all who want to follow Him. In Chap-



ter 18, the disciples approach Jesus and ask a very worldly question: “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus answers, “Assuredly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Imagine the disciples’ reaction to this answer. Not kings or princes or other men of great importance will be the greatest, not even the man who keeps all the commandments of the Law, but a little child. A child? Why

does Jesus call us to be like children?

What first caught my attention at the baptism of those little kids was their joy. They were so excited for the day to come. Finally, when it came, yes, they were a little nervous, but more, they were brimming with happiness. They smiled widely, and could scarcely refrain from bouncing up and down. This is universally true: children are naturally happy — because they have no reason not to be. Their life is free from worries, time is an unknown concept, and they lean on their parents for everything. If this is not the case for a child, it means that he or she has had to grow up too fast. As a result, their natural joy and light has been tarnished by the cares and sorrows of this world. My heart breaks to see this. We must protect our children as best we can from those worldly burdens, because joy is a precious gift of a child.

Growing out of their natural joy, children’s prayers are instinctively ones of praise and thanksgiving: thank you, God, for this day; thank you for Mom; thank you for Dad. They lift up their hands to God not usually in supplication, but in love and adoration. We see this displayed on Palm Sunday, when

the children cry out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" When the chief priests and scribes become indignant at this, Jesus quotes from Psalm 8: "Out of the mouths of babes and nursing infants/ You have perfected praise." After the baptism, someone asked the four children what was different about our church, compared to their old one. One of the little girls answered, "Taking communion, because it feels like I am part of the Church even though I am a kid." There you have it, ladies and gentlemen! From the mouths of babes you have perfected praise! Let us strive to cultivate this childlike joy within us, so that we may perfect our praise.

Another beautiful characteristic of children is their loving hearts. They so willingly love and are loved, that they set an example for us of the unconditional love that Saint Paul calls us to. One of the most special things about the baptism that day was the love the children had for each other. You could see this in their constant encouragement, especially when it came time for the littlest girl to be baptized. She was very scared, and did not want to go under the water. She even tried bargaining with the priest to "only dunk me twice!" But the other three stood right next to the font and reassured her, until she bowed her head and let the priest guide her under. When she got out, they all hugged and congratulated her. Their hearts were full with love for one another and love for God. If we could share in that outpouring of love, we would be one step closer to our conversion, one step closer to becoming like little children.

The simplicity of children also strikes me. After the first little boy was baptized, spontaneously the girls began clapping. The cheer came straight from their heart, and they gave no thought to how it would look, or what people would think. They were just genuinely expressing the excitement in their hearts. Saint Paisios commends this childlike simplicity when he says, "When purity comes to man and simplicity with its fervent faith and devotion arrives as well, then the Holy Trinity takes up His abode within us." Simplicity is closely tied to purity of heart and both are sacred characteristics of little children. A word often used to describe a child's simplicity and purity is *innocence*. Indeed, Christ tells His disciples to be "as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves." Children are naturally innocent, because they have not been exposed to the world long enough to have collected dirt and darkness in their

heart. Neither have they lived long enough for their heart to be hard and calloused. Instead, it is clear and bright, simple and pure, allowing Christ to enter and Christ to shine forth.

As adults, though, we must cry out to God, "Create in me a pure heart and renew a right spirit within me!" For this purity of heart that comes so naturally to children fades so quickly as we move into adulthood, because the world is constantly bombarding us with tragedy and violence, lifting up carnal passions and frivolous pursuits. I am right on the cusp of the transition from a child to an adult, and I must fight hard to retain this purity of heart. It is hard to find places of stillness and beauty in which to settle our hearts, but this is one of the reasons I am so thankful for my years at Antiochian Village. Camp has given me a place away from the noise of the world and immersed me in the life of the Church. There I have the opportunity to see the mud caked in my heart, and to have the time to clean it out. Coming home each year, I can feel Christ's presence so much more strongly, and hopefully I shine His light a little brighter. We are all striving to regain the purity of a child, for as the Beatitudes say, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Joy, love, simplicity, and purity are all virtues we should strive for as we work on our conversion and become like children. I could list many more childlike virtues as well: obedience, dependence, lowliness, but they all require something. Jesus continues his answer to the question, "Who is the greatest?" by saying, "Therefore, whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." To grow in these virtues, to return to a pure and simple childlike state, we need humility. Then "those who humble themselves will be exalted, and those who exalt themselves will be humbled." It is indeed necessary to enter the kingdom of heaven as children, for we are children. We are children of God, and we will be entering our Father's house. To prepare ourselves for that, we must bow our necks and be converted. We don't need another baptism of water, as the four little children had on Holy Saturday, but we need a conversion of our hearts. May we humble ourselves and become like little children, so we may enter the heavenly kingdom and live with our Father forever, through the prayers of the Theotokos and all the saints. Amen.

Erika Kjendal of St. Michael Church, Cotuit, Massachusetts

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