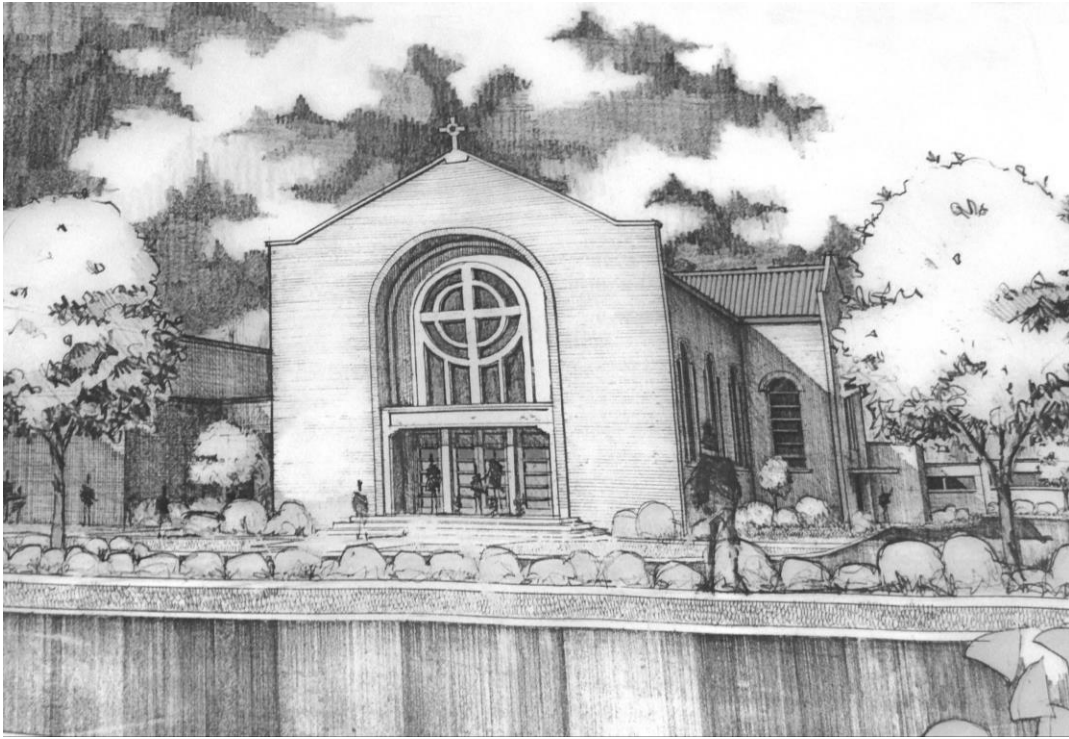


St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

Sunday School Curriculum



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St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church

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Preface

It seems that we have struggled in many ways to teach our youth about the Orthodox faith. There are lots of materials and methodologies out there for Sunday school teachers but unless you know exactly where to look, you may not find them. This “book” of Sunday School materials was born out of a seminar for our Sunday School teachers at St. John Greek Orthodox Church in Tampa, FL, in August of 2013. We got into a heavy discussion on good Sunday school materials. And finally, exasperated, we got out blank sheets of paper and wrote down the most important topics that our Sunday School students should know. Rather than a huge scope of information, we pared it down to 30 subjects that if our students (and adults) know these, they will have a basic working knowledge of the Orthodox faith.

Over the next year, I wrote out many of these lessons for our Sunday school teachers, who then took the materials and made them age appropriate for their respective grade levels, adding in crafts and other activities as appropriate. Some of these lessons, were outlines I wrote as we were going along through the year. Others were taken from things I had previously written. Other things, like “The Ten Commandments in Preparation for Confession,” is something I use in ministry, though truthfully I do not know which prayer book it comes from. So, as a disclaimer, some of the material in this book was taken from other sources and reprinted here. I am not claiming authorship of this book, nor will this book ever be used to make financial gain for anyone or any cause. If there is material in this book that came from other sources which I have failed to name, if anyone recognizes this, I hope they will feel honored that their work will inspire a new generation of students. I offer this because in our age of sharing things, I believe this material may be shared far beyond the St. John Greek Orthodox Church in Tampa and I wanted to be upfront about the lack of citations in this material.

Special thanks to Charlie Hambos, our pastoral assistant, for his valuable help in laying out the material, proofreading it, and also for adding a few lessons of his own.

This material is dedicated to the Sunday school teachers of St. John Greek Orthodox Church in Tampa, Florida. I thank you for your inspiration, and your dedication to teaching our children the beauty of the Orthodox Christian faith. And to anyone who may read these

materials who teaches children or adults, I hope and pray that this material will prove useful in your ministry of teaching your students about our Faith.

+Fr. Stavros N. Akrotirianakis
October 2014

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Prayer

- I. What is prayer?
- II. Why do we pray?
- III. How should we pray? - Prayer involves five things.
 - a. Praise of God - We praise You, we glorify You
 - b. Thankfulness - What am I thankful for?
 - c. Confession - Asking God for forgiveness for whatever we've done wrong and for help in making good decisions
 - d. Prayer for others - Make a list of people you want to pray for.
 - e. Prayer for ourselves - Ask God to help us with our particular needs.
 - f. Rule of 5 - Every morning, thank God for five things, pray for five people, pray for five things you need THAT day.
- IV. When do we pray?
 - a. When we wake up
 - b. When we go to bed
 - c. When we eat, thanking God that we have food
 - d. Before we do something—like take a test, do our homework, play a sport—ask God to keep us safe, to clear our mind, to help us to do our best
- V. Prayers we use - Trisagion Prayers (Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Imortal...), The Lord's Prayer, The prayer to the Holy Trinity (Heavenly King, Comforter...), The Jesus Prayer that we repeat over and over again (Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner).
- VI. What do we pray for?
 - a. Health
 - b. Our families
 - c. Make good choices—not to lie, or gossip
 - d. Have a clear mind and no distractions
 - e. Safe travels
 - f. Our church, our priest, our Sunday school teachers and fellow students. Things like that.
- VII. Take questions on prayer.

An Article on Prayer by Fr. Stavros (December 2008)

"What is 'fair game' to ask for in prayer?" I was asked recently. Can we pray that the Buccaneers win the Superbowl? Or that taxes are lowered? Can we pray to get into the right school? Or find someone to marry?

Prayer is one of the greatest expressions of one's faith in God. It is also probably the most challenging aspect to the Christian life. It is not difficult to drive to church on Sunday, and have your body in church for an hour. It is something entirely different to pray for an hour while in church. It is not difficult to pray the Lord's Prayer with a large group of people before having a meal. It is something entirely more challenging to kneel alone and offer up prayer to God.

What is prayer and why is it important? Prayer, simply put, is communication with God. Prayer is where we speak to God. When we speak to another person, especially when the conversation goes to a deep level, certainly more than a cursory "hello," an "intimacy" develops where one is comfortable sharing private thoughts, be they joys or sorrows, triumphs or setbacks. And by sharing, one is then open to receiving advice, empathy, encouragement, compassion. Prayer, when done regularly and correctly, brings one into an intimate union with God. And the by-products of this union are peace, comfort, discernment, and joy. I know from speaking with my Spiritual Father, when I say "Things aren't going well," or "I'm stressed out," he'll ask me, "How's your prayer life?" and inevitably I will answer, "Not going particularly strongly at this time." There is certainly a correlation between how much I pray and how much peace I have.

Prayer is when we communicate our thoughts, whatever they may be, and we offer them to God. How much more powerful of a conversation can there be than when one speaks to God! It is certainly more powerful than speaking with a friend or even a spouse. God communicates His thoughts to us through scripture and worship. That's why it is important that we combine prayer along with worship and scripture reading. It is not enough to go to church but never pray, just like it wouldn't be very beneficial if you sat with a friend and always listened and never spoke.

As for why is prayer important, the answer is the same reason why conversation is important in an interpersonal relationship. **BECAUSE IT MAKES THE RELATIONSHIP!** Every kind of interpersonal relationship we have is based on communication. You can't consider someone your friend if you **NEVER** speak to them. Certainly a good friend is someone we communicate with regularly, not just in times of crisis. So how can one have a relationship with God if he or she never speaks to God? Or speaks to Him only occasionally, or in times of crisis? Prayer is what creates and solidifies our relationship with God. His relationship with us is solidified when He creates us, and when He died on the cross for our salvation. Prayer is how we enter into the relationship with Him.

Prayer has many benefits—first, it enhances our relationship with God. That is the most important thing. The more one prays, the closer to God one gets. Secondly, it sets a tone for the day. If one spends some time in prayer before beginning a task, the task tends to be done more efficiently. If one spends time each day praying to make good decisions, one will tend to make better decisions. To use a sports analogy, offering a prayer might be analogous to a quarterback checking over a defense before he runs

the play he's called. That extra second is often the difference between success and failure. Same thing with prayer. Each day of our lives, we call hundreds of plays—thoughts, actions, decisions. Pausing for a few moments to pray about a decision might make us think twice about what we say or what we do, or it may confirm that indeed our proposed course of action is a good one. I know that I've reached many decisions "by praying about them."

Is there any cost to pray? No. The only thing one has to give is time and attention. I find that it is indeed hard to give both. Time is short for everyone these days. There just aren't enough hours in the day. And there is so much "noise" around us that we all have learned not only to like it, but we are almost addicted to it. When you get in the car, it's as if the radio "beckons" to be turned on. Same thing with the TV at home. Some of us are addicted to emailing, texting and using our cell phones. The irony is I find that whenever I am able to turn everything off to pray, I enjoy the silence. And I find that if I give up time to pray, I quickly gain the time back because prayer makes me more efficient in my tasks.

What then to pray for? There are so many things to pray for that do not involve our favorite sports team or material gain that are worth so much more than winning and money—how about the fruits of the Spirit? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self control. (Galatians 5:22-34) All the riches in the world won't make us feel good if we don't have these things. How about discernment in making good decisions? That might make one more wealthy, if one prays for discernment in making a financial decision. However, the prayer is not based on material gain, but on discernment in a financial decision, which might have as a by-product material gain. How about efficiency in completing tasks? Being efficient, not having our minds wandering, helps us to be more productive at work, which has as by-products, perhaps a job promotion (material gain), or more time at home with family. What are some things we hear prayed for in the Liturgy—peace from God, peace in the world, for our parish and our city, for our country and its leaders, for those who are sick or suffering, for favorable weather, for deliverance from all affliction, wrath, danger and need; for a guardian angel, for forgiveness of our sins, for things that are profitable unto our souls, to spend our lives at peace and in repentance, and for a good account at the awesome judgment seat of Christ. When we are praying about these things, and actively seeking them in our lives, Jesus tells us all the other things "shall be added unto you" as well. (Matthew 6:33) Of course, we should pray for the health and well-being of our families and friends.

How are we supposed to pray? In what posture? There are many postures one can use when praying. The most important thing is to be attentive in prayer. In church, most often we pray standing up. Many people connect prayer to being on their knees. For some, bowing their head at a desk or table works. And some people pray as they are laying down in bed at night, drifting off to sleep with prayerful thoughts in their minds and hearts. Certainly in order to pray, there are certain sensory helps that augment prayer and sensory hindrances which make prayer difficult or impossible. Ideally, prayer is done in silence. Using icons in prayer is helpful in that icons give us a visual image of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the Angels and the Saints. They also help us to focus. If

you focus on looking a figure in an icon in the eye, it will make it harder for your eyes to wander to other things. The soft glow of a candle brings a sense of peace into prayer. Burning incense makes us feel like we are in church and enhances the “mysticism” of the experience. Some people find it helpful to pray with church chants going on in the background. Certainly having the television on while praying is going to take away from the experience of prayer. Listening to loud music doesn’t really work either. You can’t pray while talking on the phone or texting a friend or surfing the Internet. Prayer involves silence and stillness. I often think of the shepherds on the first Christmas night, sitting in silence, in darkness, keeping vigilant watch over their flocks. This is the kind of atmosphere where one communes with God in prayer. That’s why it’s no surprise that the angels appeared to the shepherds with the “good news” of the Nativity of Christ, as opposed to announcing it to the multitudes gathered in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was so noisy with people rushing around for the census that a multitude of angels singing would probably have gone unnoticed.

How often should we pray? Saint Paul says that we are to “pray without ceasing.” Well, we all have jobs, children and responsibilities. No one can sit and pray all day. Even monks and nuns do not sit and pray all day. But they maintain a prayerful demeanor at all times. Everyone has had the experience of getting a song stuck in their head all day, so that unconsciously (with no effort at all), that song is going through them all day long. This is how the Jesus Prayer, “Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner” works. Say that prayer enough times and it stays with you all the time, whether you are consciously saying it or not. That’s how one can “pray without ceasing.” As a practical matter, one should pray before meals (and after them as well), before beginning tasks (such as a brief prayer before one gets in the car to travel or while the computer is booting up on your desk) and any other time one feels the need. Praying the “Jesus Prayer” as you wake up helps you to greet the day with joy. Praying it while you fall asleep at night will make your sleep more peaceful.

There is the concept of a “**prayer rule**” in Orthodox spirituality. The prayer rule is a commitment to pray a certain way each day—it could be to pray for a certain amount of time, or at a certain time, or a certain number of prayers. A rule of prayer is something one is committed to doing, hence, the term “rule.” Prayer rules are sometimes imposed by a Spiritual Father, meaning that in the sacrament of Confession, the Spiritual Father will tell the Spiritual child, in essence, “this is how and how often you should be praying, based on your spiritual maturity and perceived need.” In personal experience, I have helped people develop a prayer rule, rather than “imposing” one, so that by participating in the process of development, one is more likely to stick with the implementation.

Following my article, there is a suggested prayer rule. This prayer rule involves the use of a prayer rope (a rope with either 33 or 100 knots on it that is worn around the wrist, and you move your finger from knot to knot as you say the Jesus Prayer. We have this kind of ropes for sale in the bookstore, I have some in my office and we can always order more if need be). This prayer rule will take you no more than ten minutes to accomplish each day. I suggest that you set aside a certain time of the day consistently to do this prayer rule. It might be first thing in the morning, or before you leave for work, if you can

do it at work, or first thing when you get home. But this prayer rule should be done once in each 24 hour period. Try doing this prayer rule for a month, and see how your life improves, spiritually and over all. It really does work.

How much of a necessity is it to pray in church as opposed to praying on your own?

Personal prayer and corporate prayer are two different things. The two greatest commandments of Christ are "Love the Lord your God. . .and love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27) Thus, the two kinds of prayer are both important. It is important to have a personal relationship with God, but it is necessary to have a corporate relationship as well. So that when we are praying in church, we are praying as a community, with one another and for one another, as well as for things that concern one another—peace in the world, for our country, for temperate weather, etc. There is a saying, "One Christian is no Christian," so one cannot be a Christian existing outside of the community, praying at home but never praying in church. On the other hand, there are people who faithfully come to church but who never pray outside of church. And there is a problem with that as well. Because without personal prayer, there isn't a strong personal connection and conviction about our relationship with God. And because one is not around his church community except for on Sundays generally, how does one fight the battles to be a faithful Christian the other days of the week—with a personal relationship to God. Thus, both personal prayer and corporate prayer are important. In addition, the setting of corporate prayer is where we partake of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is always received in the context of corporate prayer, there is no such thing as private Communion. Since Holy Communion is part of the spiritual life and spiritual growth, it is necessary to worship in a corporate context in order to receive Communion.

There are challenges to praying. It takes time. You have to dedicate time each day to sitting still and being silent. You have to keep your mind focused while praying, and that can be a struggle, especially because in having such busy lives, our minds are often so busy it's hard to shut them off. It is also a challenge to pray when we don't see immediate results, or when life is difficult and we think that God is silent and absent from our lives. The message here is STAY WITH IT, especially when you are just starting out on a regular regimen of prayer. Stay with it, even when you "don't think it is working." Because over time, prayer transforms the heart and soul of a person. The key being, over time. It doesn't happen overnight and it doesn't usually happen in a profound way on a given day. It happens over time. Just like exercise gradually gets a person in better shape. It happens over time. And just because every workout isn't necessarily a good workout, we continue exercising and over time there is improvement. Same thing with prayer, keep doing it and over time there is spiritual growth and improvement.

The rewards of praying are many. Prayer gets us closer to God. It gives us confidence. It gives us peace. Prayer allows you inner peace, so that you can carry the weight of the world but do it in peace. A life of prayer is the contrast between the people in busy Bethlehem and the Shepherds in the countryside on the first Christmas. The people in Bethlehem were besieged with busyness. We see Bethlehem on the first Christmas as a scene of chaos. I think of the mall the day or two before Christmas—total chaos, a place I'd avoid at all costs. The shepherds had responsibilities but also had quiet time.

There lives may not have been flashy, but they weren't chaotic. Just like the people scurrying around Bethlehem may have had flashy lives but they had no peace. Again, from the Christmas story, the Magi were people of stature, rulers in the society of their day, but also were people of faith, who followed a star for two years trusting that it would lead somewhere special, and their faith was rewarded. So prayer and peace and faith figure in the Christmas story. And they don't come from busy and chaotic Bethlehem, but from the quiet countryside of the shepherds and the faithful journey of the Magi.

Let's be honest—our lives all resemble busy Bethlehem. The challenge is to incorporate the patience of the shepherds and the faith of the Magi into them. And this is done through daily prayer. As we approach the Holy Season of the Nativity, make prayer part of your preparation for Christmas and incorporate it into your life after Christmas. Perhaps a Prayer Rule can be a New Years resolution, just start it December 1.

Just like at Lent and Holy Week, the church affords us more opportunities for corporate worship as we approach the feast of the Nativity. The month of December calls for the church to celebrate the most Divine Liturgies in a single month. No coincidence. We will celebrate Divine Liturgy on December 4 (St. Barbara), December 6 (St. Nicholas), December 9 (St. Anna) and December 12 (St. Spyridon), so there are four more opportunities to receive Communion and to worship. As we approach Christmas, there is the service of the Royal Hours (December 23 at 9:30 a.m.) which is a service of prayer and meditation. There is no Communion at this service, and also there is very little "movement" in the service. Just a stillness and quietness that prepare us to celebrate Christmas by offering an opportunity for prayerful reflection. There will again be two Divine Liturgies celebrated for Christmas. On December 24 at 9:30 a.m., there will be the Vespereal Divine Liturgy of St. Basil. This service consists of Vespers, prophecy readings and the Liturgy of St. Basil. People who don't drive at night and people with young children will especially want to take advantage of this service. And on December 24 at 5:00 p.m., the church will be open for silent prayer. The Orthros of Christmas will follow at 5:30 p.m., followed by the Divine Liturgy of Christmas at 7:00 p.m. In years past, many people have kept a vigil on Christmas by coming at 5:00 p.m. to pray, then worshipping at the Orthros and Liturgy. Both the Royal Hours on December 23 and the Liturgy the morning of December 24 will be done in natural light and candlelight only—so it makes for a more "ethereal" feeling in the church. From 5:00-7:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve, the church will be illumined only by candles. So please keep Christ in Christmas by worshipping at as many of these services as you can.

Prayer is the missing ingredient of Christmas. It seems in modern practice, we try to "survive" Christmas more than celebrate it. Between shopping, cooking, wrapping and card writing, Christmas leaves us relieved when it is over rather than joyful when it has arrived. So put some prayer into Christmas, both in the weeks leading up to us and especially on December 23 and 24.

Prayer is the missing ingredient of life—most of our lives are like little Christmases—shopping, rushing, just trying to survive. Prayer allows us not just to survive, but to thrive in our environment, regardless of how busy and challenging it becomes. Because prayer brings peace, wisdom/discernment (so we don't make as many mistakes), helps

slow life down a little bit, and this ultimately brings hope, and as St. Paul writes, “hope does not disappoint us.” (Romans 5:5)

So, what is “fair game” to ask for in prayer? Whatever is of spiritual benefit to you, that is the answer. That’s why the Lord’s Prayer is the consummate prayer—because it asks God for our “daily bread,” the things we need today in order to get through today. Whether the Buccaneers win the Superbowl or my taxes are lowered, whether my son goes to college or finds the right person to marry ultimately have no bearing on my salvation. Peace, joy, clear conscience, repentance, discernment, efficiency, wisdom, patience and love—these things have a bearing on my eternal salvation. Hence, it is these things we should be bringing to God in the beautiful relationship with Him that we call PRAYER.

Daily Prayer Rule

Standing before your icons, make three prostrations, venerate your icons, and pray the following without haste and with attention:

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen
Glory to You, our God, glory to You!
Heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, everywhere present and filling all things, the treasury of good things and Giver of life. Come and abide in us, cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls, O Good One.

+Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us. (3 times.)

+Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

All holy Trinity, have mercy on us. Lord, pardon our sins. Master, forgive our transgressions. Holy One, visit and heal our infirmities for Your name’s sake. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy.

+Glory to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

+Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon us and save us. Amen.

Be seated in a quiet place, with feet flat on the floor, and say the following, using a prayer rope:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me a sinner. (100 times)

Before the concluding prayer, return to your icons, make three prostrations, kneel and Give glory to God for His exceeding greatness; Thank Him for the specific blessings which he has bestowed on you; Confess the sins which you have committed since the last time that you prayed; Make any specific supplications to Him that you may have. Include the names of those persons for whom you pray. Then remain on your knees and pray the following:

Lord, I know not what to ask of You. You alone know what my true needs are. You love me more than I myself know how to love. Help me to see my real needs which may be hidden from me. I dare not ask for either a cross or a consolation. I can only wait upon You; my heart is open to You. Visit and help me in Your steadfast love. Strike me and heal me; cast me down and raise me up. I worship in silence Your holy will. I offer myself to You as a living sacrifice. I put all my trust in You. I have no other desire than to fulfill Your will. Teach me to pray. Pray Yourself in me. Amen.

Stand up, make one prostration, venerate your icons and pray: +Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon us and save us. Amen.

Sign of the Cross

- I. Historically the cross was a symbol of shame - criminals were put to death on crosses, which was painful (often took days to die) and humiliating (done in public with people ridiculing the condemned).
- II. A beautiful irony - the cross is now a symbol of the triumph of Christ over death - we wear crosses as a sign of our identity as Christians.
- III. Another irony - the first sin was committed by eating from a forbidden TREE. Our salvation is made possible by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross—made from the wood of a TREE.
- IV. The vertical bar of the cross represents our relationship with God. The horizontal bar represents our relationship with one another. It also represents that message of the Gospel is for all people
- V. We make the sign of the cross with three fingers together (representing the Holy Trinity) and our two other fingers resting (the dual natures of Christ - human and divine). We cross our head, our chest and our right and left shoulders.
- VI. Better to make the cross fewer times and with reverence than many times sloppily.
- VII. We make our cross when we hear the name of the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary, before and after the Gospel, when the Holy Gifts pass by us, before and after Communion, and before and after prayer. We should make the sign of the cross first thing in the morning when we wake up and the last thing at night before bed.
- VIII. The Emperor Constantine had a vision when his soldiers were fighting an army much larger than his. He saw in the sky, a cross with the words "En touto Nika" on it—which means, "in this sign you will be victorious"—He told his soldiers to put crosses on their shields and they won. In 313 Constantine made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire. The sign of the cross replaced the sign of the fish as the sign of Christianity.
- IX. St. Helen, his mother, went to Jerusalem to find the true cross in 325. She went to Golgotha and there found a fragrant plant growing, called vasiliko (Basil), which means "of the King". Under the plant is where the cross was found. This is why on September 14, we commemorate the finding of the cross with a special procession where the cross is carried on a tray of vasiliko (Basiliko).
- X. You can cut vasiliko from its stem, thereby essentially killing it, but put it in water, and it will grow roots and "come back to life," just like the Lord.
- XI. At the end of class, make sure everyone can make their cross correctly, and watch over the next few Sundays to make sure. Thank you.

Holy Communion

- I. Holy Communion is THE Body and THE Blood of Jesus Christ. It is not a symbol or an imitation - We believe that the bread and wine we offer at the Divine Liturgy becomes THE Body and THE Blood of Jesus Christ.
- II. The foundation of Holy Communion is at the Last Supper. Jesus partook in a meal with His disciples. After supper, Jesus took bread and gave it to His disciples and said "Take, eat, this is my Body, which is broken for you." He also took a cup of wine and gave it to the disciples, saying "Drink of this all of you, this is My Blood."
- III. Bread and wine have other symbolism. The manna from heaven in the Old Testament was a type of bread. Jesus said "I am the vine and you are the branches." So, abiding in the vine, and partaking of the vine are parts of being a Christian and living in Christ. Jesus also said, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst."
- IV. In the early years of Christianity, Christians gathered in homes in the evening to pray, worship and have communion in the context of a meal, just like the Last Supper. By the end of the first century, the Eucharist had been shifted to the morning hours and was removed from the context of a meal to a service by itself.
- V. In the early years of the church, people received Holy Communion every day. We are supposed to abstain from eating before receiving Holy Communion. The origin of the word "breakfast" goes back to the early church when people would fast, receive Holy Communion, and then break the fast by eating breakfast.
- VI. Holy Communion is supposed to be a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. We receive Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. Through the Communion, HE comes into our bodies. That is why it is a joy to receive Holy Communion and we should joyfully approach for Holy Communion as often as we can.
- VII. The Divine Liturgy is the service where we receive Holy Communion. The service is a long series of prayers and hymns designed to prepare us for our encounter with Jesus, which takes place in Holy Communion.
- VIII. In order to receive Holy Communion, you have to prepare. This includes:
 - a. Faith in God - Expressed by saying the Creed, and believing in God.
 - b. A relationship with God through prayer.
 - c. Moral Living - Keeping the commandments. When we mess up in this area, we should go to confession so we can get back on the right path.
 - d. Reconciliation with your fellow man. It doesn't do much good to approach Holy Communion if you are angry with someone.
 - e. Worship at the service where you are receiving Holy Communion. If you don't get there for the Gospel reading, there is really not much point in receiving Holy Communion.
 - f. Fasting—abstinence from food the morning that you are receiving Holy Communion. Also following the fasts of the church: Great Lent, Advent, Dormition Dormition Fast, Apostles Fast; also fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays (On Wednesday because on this day the council of the Jews was gathered to betray our Lord; on Friday because on this day He suffered death for our salvation.)
 - i. Fasting in the strictest sense, involves abstaining from meat, fish and dairy products (all animal products) on Wednesdays and Fridays. However, for

- people who have not experienced fasting before, try keeping a fast from meat on Wednesdays and Fridays.
- ii. Fasting is a discipline designed to help us maintain control of our hunger, with the idea that if we can discipline our bodies to go without certain kinds of food, we can discipline our minds to go without certain thoughts, or discipline our lives to go without certain kinds of behaviors.
- IX. The Divine Liturgy - The service where we celebrate the Eucharist.
- a. Prayers by the priest with responses made by the people and hymns sung by the people. We are supposed to sing the responses not just be spectators.
 - b. There are prayers for everything: Prayers for peace in the world, our country, civil leaders, people who are sick, prayers for ourselves, for forgiveness and for repentance.
 - c. There is a reenactment of the life of Christ, His teaching (The Gospel); His Entrance into the world (Small Entrance), His journey to Golgotha (Great Entrance), the Last Supper (the consecration) and the Resurrection (Holy Communion).
- X. Receiving Holy Communion
- a. Pray the Holy Communion prayers silently along with the priest
 - b. While in line, pray "Lord remember me in Your kingdom."
 - c. When it is almost your turn, make the sign of the cross.
 - e. When it is your turn, hold the cloth under your chin, say your name loudly and clearly so the priest can hear you and open your mouth wide.
 - f. Close your mouth on the spoon.
 - g. Wipe your mouth with the red cloth.
 - h. Make the sign of the cross.
 - i. Take a piece of Antithoron.
 - j. Read the Thanksgiving Following Holy Communion Prayers found in the red Liturgy book.
 - k. After church, you shouldn't chew gum or spit until you've eaten a full meal, so that there is no Holy Communion left in your mouth.

The Lord's Prayer

For this week's lesson on the Lord's Prayer, I offer an article that I wrote several years ago on this subject.

The Lord's Prayer is the "par excellence" of prayers in the Bible. We are introduced to this prayer in the Gospel of Matthew (Chapter 6:9-13), during a lengthy discourse of Christ, which is known as "The Sermon on the Mount." This discourse includes the "Beatitudes" (Matthew 5), as well as teachings on fasting, prayer, almsgiving, trusting God and judging others. In Matthew 6, Jesus talks about how to pray, and tells His followers that they should not heap up empty phrases when they pray, nor flaunt their prayer rituals. Rather they should pray in secret, and use simple words. He then teaches them the Lord's Prayer:

*Our Father, who are in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.*

The Lord's Prayer is used in almost every Orthodox worship service. We are supposed to use this prayer before meals. Many of us will offer it especially on Thanksgiving, before we sit down for Thanksgiving Dinner. The prayer is short and simple. Most people in society know it, whether they are Christian or not, and yet this prayer is very powerful and packed with meaning. If we truly understand this prayer and can live by it's meaning, it can become very transformative for our lives. So let us examine this prayer in a little closer detail. (Note: the explanations of the Lord's Prayer which follow are adapted from "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom on the Gospel of Matthew, p. 134-140)

Our Father, who are in heaven - Jesus teaches us to pray on behalf of our brethren. Thus, each time this prayer is offered, regardless if one is alone or in a group, God the Father is addressed as "our" Father. And as we offer this prayer, we are offering up our supplications for the common body of human beings, for the good of our neighbor, as well as our own good. In praying constantly for our neighbor, this is supposed to help take away hatred, pride and envy, and instead foster charity and equality among people. Acknowledging God as being in heaven acknowledges that something greater than us, God, is watching over us from a place greater than our place, heaven. This constantly strengthens our belief in God, as well as acknowledging that we all have a common Father. God is not only our Father. He is everyone's Father.

Hallowed be Thy name - As God's children, we honor our Father, by reverencing His name as being "Hallowed" or "holy." The name of God is to be not only respected, the way that we respect our earthly father, but is to be glorified, a respect even greater than for our earthly fathers. The Father of all humanity is Holy, in the sense that He is set apart, because He is perfect, loving, giving and all the things that a father should be.

Thy kingdom come - The Kingdom of Heaven is the goal and destination of every human life, at least it should be. We should have a sense of longing for the things to come. Every child has daydreams and fantasies about growing older. Most fantasize about careers they may never have - like being an athlete or a dancer. But as children grow into young adults, the dreams become more concrete and more attainable. For instance, a teenager dreams about owning a car, or having a career, or owning a home or getting married. And as he or she reaches full

adulthood, they can't WAIT for these things to happen, they can't happen soon enough. We live in this world, there is nothing wrong with enjoying the things of this world, but we look forward to the world to come. Just like the child enjoys being a child and the things of childhood that are unique to childhood—playing after school, being on sports teams, etc.—but also looks forward to adult life and its privileges. We should enjoy the good things of life, but also be in constant preparation, and enthusiastic expectation of the things that are to come.

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven - It is God's will for us to love one another, and for us to love Him in all things. When we obey God's will for our lives, then earth becomes a small piece of heaven. So, the meaning of this line is that earth is also God's, and we are to act as if we are in God's kingdom, even while on God's earth. Our life on earth is a time to learn and to practice for being in His kingdom. Our earthly death is like the final exam in a class—after death, our record of life on earth will be examined by God and those whom He deems worthy, will pass the test and enter the Kingdom of heaven. And those who don't pass the examination to God's satisfaction (not ours), will not inherit the Kingdom of heaven, but will go to a place of eternal condemnation. Sometimes God's will is in conflict with our own will. We willfully do things that are against God's will, especially in our sins and transgressions. Also, at times we fail to trust God and rely on our own will rather than trusting that He has a plan for our lives.

Give us this day our daily bread - What does this phrase mean? It means simply, to give us this day, today, the things that we need, today. It doesn't ask for the future, nor does it ask for riches, it asks for the things that are required in order to pass this day. On a given day, we obviously need food and shelter, but there are other things also that we may need on a given day that are not material in nature, things like patience, efficiency, wisdom, discernment, strength, courage, etc. So, in praying for our daily needs, think specifically about the things you need on a specific day, and offer those things up to God.

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us - Everyone sins against both God and their fellow man. There is no one who lives and does not sin. So, all are in need of forgiveness, from their fellow man and also from God. So this line of the prayer tells us two things—we must forgive others their sins if we expect God to forgive our sins, and even more significant, is that God will forgive our sins, in the same way, just as we forgive others. If we can't forgive others, then we can expect God to not forgive us. When we go to God and ask for forgiveness, or we go to confession and in a formal and sacramental way ask God to loosen our sins, we must in like manner loose and forgive the sins of others. When God forgives our sins, we are asking more than just forgiveness, we are asking God to blot out our sins from our life record—"afeseos" in Greek means "remission," which is a complete blotting out of sins, rather than only forgiveness, which is "synhorese." "Ke AFES imin ta ofilimata imon," is the phrase in Greek, "Forgive us our trespasses," literally means "forget all about our trespasses just as we will forgive (and forget about the sins) of those who have trespassed against us. The Lord's Prayer reminds us not to hold grudges against others.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil - Here we are asking God to not allow us to fall prey to temptations, especially those of pride and greed. We are also to lessen conflict rather than escalate conflicts. We are to try to bring peace into our own lives and into the lives of others. In order to not fall into temptation, we must stay away from evil. Some translations of the Lord's Prayer use the phrase "Evil One," instead of just "evil," implying that we must be delivered specifically from the Devil, the Evil One. This is a debate that probably will never be resolved. The intention is for us to be delivered from all manifestations of evil. We know that the Devil is the author of all evil, just as God is the author of all that is good. So, if we are delivered from evil things, then we also will be delivered from the evil one.

For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen. - The Kingdom which we hope to enter for eternity is God's Kingdom. It is not our Kingdom. Therefore, to receive entrance into the Kingdom of God is a gift from God, not an entitlement or an achievement. We can only enter the Kingdom through God's mercies, which we hope to receive through our faithfulness to God. The Lord's Prayer outlines the things needed in order to be granted God's mercies:

1. Be a brother to your fellow man - Our Father
2. There is a destination for our lives, they are not ends to themselves - Who art in heaven
3. Glorify the name of God in your words and actions - Hallowed be Thy name
4. Look forward with joy, and thus prepare for the kingdom of God - Thy Kingdom come.
5. Follow the commandments - Thy will be done
6. Make your life on earth a practice for life in heaven - on earth as it is in heaven
7. Make the most out of each day, appreciate the things God gives you - Give us this day our daily bread
8. Forgive others when they wrong you, repent of the things that take you away from God - Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
9. Avoid temptations and tempting situations - lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

The greatest ***power*** at work in our world is the power of God. We fancy ourselves to be intelligent and thus powerful people. But look at the greatest things in the world—our natural resources—we cannot create more of these—these were created by God for our use, so we should use them carefully. Look up at the moon and the stars, or the sun that gives life to all of the world—we cannot possibly create these things—they are from God. So the greatest power at work in the world is the power of God.

We use the word ***"glory"*** and equate it with fame and accomplishment. All human glory and fame is fleeting. Sure, a person may be remembered long after he dies. But what glory is there in being remembered. When someone is saying nice things about you, you want to be present for that. The permanent glory is the glory of God—to share in God's glory is the greatest thing that the human being can do.

Forever - God has no beginning and no ending. His Kingdom, power and glory are without beginning and without end. The greatest gift we can receive in our lives is the entrance into God's heavenly kingdom, because once one has gone to heaven, and has experienced the glory and majesty of heaven, this will never end, it will be forever. Nothing in this life is forever—even suffering ends at death. Riches and power also end at death. The only thing that leaves this world with us is our souls, the God-like part of us that was given to us at conception and goes back to God for judgment at death. God will judge each soul, and then will assign each soul a place of repose, peace and refreshment; or will assign the soul to a place of pain and suffering. This judgment will be permanent. So, in this prayer, we pray that our souls will be prepared for and receive a good judgment before the awesome judgment seat of Christ, and will be assigned a place in God's heavenly kingdom.

Amen - the end of every prayer, which means simply, "May it be so," may this prayer be granted.

The Creed

- I. A statement of what we believe as Orthodox Christians. When someone asks you "What do you believe?" the answer is The CREED.
- II. The Creed was authored at the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 325, that is why it is called the Nicene Creed.
- III. It was edited into its final and present form in 381 at the second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople, which is why the The Creed is sometimes referred to as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.
- IV. The Creed hasn't changed since 381, making it the oldest Creed in the Christian world. The Roman Catholic Church added the words "And the Son" (And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Creator of life, who proceeds from the Father—and the Catholics added "and the son", which is called in Latin the Filioque). The Protestant church shortened the Creed to what is called "The Apostles Creed."
- V. The Creed is said at every celebration of the Divine Liturgy, every baptism, ever Chrismation, at the Compline Service, at the Akathist Hymn and at the 9th Hour. The Creed is something that if we worshipped correctly would be recited every day. At a very minimum, we are to recite the Creed before we receive Holy Communion. It is the confession our faith. It is what we believe.
- VI. The Creed is in 4 sections—I believe. . .
 - a. **In ONE God, the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible** - This establishes God as the creator of all things.
 - b. **And in One Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages** - This establishes Jesus Christ as the Son of God, but co-eternal with the Father, existing from before all time, also participating in the creation of the world.
 - i. **Light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not created, of one essence with the Father through whom all things were made** - Again, establishes that Jesus Christ is God and that there never was a time when He was not.
 - ii. **Who for us and for our salvation, came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man** - Though Jesus Christ existed forever in heaven, there was a time when He became incarnate, became man, through the Holy Spirit conceiving Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Jesus is fully God and fully man. As God, He existed from before all time. As a man, He experienced the same things we experience - hunger, thirst, sadness, sickness, etc.
 - iii. **Crucified for us under Pontius Pilate** - This puts a historical date on when Jesus walked the earth. Pontius Pilate is a historical figure whose dates are fixed by history.
 - iv. **He suffered** - He experienced human suffering.
 - v. **And was buried** - Just like everyone else.
 - vi. **And He rose on the third day according to the Scriptures** - He fulfilled the Scriptures, being raised from the dead.
 - vii. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 - viii. **He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead** - There will be a judgment for everyone who has ever lived or died.
 - ix. **His kingdom will have no end.**
 - c. **And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, (also co-eternal with the Father and the Son), the creator of Life** (the Holy Spirit creates human life and also invites us through baptism into the journey to everlasting life), **who proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified who spoke through the prophets.**
 - d. The last statements of the Creed are about the church

- i. **In one** (unified), **holy** (set apart and blessed by God), **catholic** (not Roman Catholic, but catholic meaning universal) **and apostolic** (dating from the time of the apostles) **church.**
- ii. **I confess one baptism for the remission of sins.** I believe that baptism is the entrance to my Christian journey and sets me on the path to everlasting life.
- iii. **I look to the Resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.** I have hope in the future, that those who die in Christ will be resurrected, as HE was, and attain to eternal life.
- iv. **Amen** - May what I believe come to pass. Let it be so.

Reading the Bible

- I. The "Bible" really means "The Book," as in THE Book of Scripture we should all be reading.
- II. In Greek, the word for Bible is "Evangelion" which means "The Good News." It is called The Good News because the Bible reveals to us the Word of God, which is good news indeed.
- III. There are two parts of the Bible - the Old Testament and the New Testament.
 - a. The Old Testament talks about the Creation of the world, the fall of humanity, the flood of Noah, the foundation of the Jewish faith (Abraham and God's covenant with Abraham - He is their God, and they are His people); Jacob and his 12 sons, which later became the 12 tribes of Israel; the story of Joseph being sold into slavery and how he is a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. All of this is told in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.
 - b. Exodus is about how God's people were enslaved in Egypt and how Moses was able to finally lead the people of Israel out of Egypt with God's help. Also included in Exodus are the 10 commandments.
 - c. Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy include all 613 provisions of the Jewish law.
 - d. The first five books of the Old Testament are about the Jewish Law, called the Pentateuch (the five books) - these books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
 - e. The next 12 of books in the Old Testament - Joshua, Judges, Ruth, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings and I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ester are basically the history of the Jewish people from the time they entered the land of Canaan almost until the time of Jesus.
 - f. The Poetical Books – Writings – are the next 6 books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations.
 - g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi—Prophets that told the word of God to the people and prophesied (foretold) of the coming of Christ.
 - h. There are a total of 39 books in the Old Testament.
 - i. Most of the New Testament is foretold in the Old Testament, in individual verses (as opposed to a group) that appear throughout the Old Testament.
 - j. In Exodus 26-31, the description of the first temple very closely resembles today's Orthodox Church, so we get a lot of our traditions right out of the Old Testament.
 - k. The Old Testament is read in church as follows:
 - i. Books of Genesis and Proverbs are read throughout Lent.
 - ii. Books Exodus and Job are read throughout Holy Week.
 - iii. Six Psalms are read at each Orthros service. The 50th Psalm is recited during Orthros and by the priest at liturgy. Psalm 104 is also read at Vespers. Many Psalms are read each day during the Hours.
 - iv. Old Testament Prophecy readings are a part of every Great Vespers service prior to a feastday.
- IV. The New Testament

- a. While the Old Testament was an old covenant with God and His people, the New Testament is the new covenant, founded in the blood of Christ in Golgotha at His crucifixion. The Old Testament was a foretelling of what would happen in the New Testament. The New Testament is a fulfilling of what was promised in the Old Testament.
- b. There are four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels—the content of each is very similar. There are some differences. For instance, the Christmas story in Matthew tells of the Magi while in Luke we read about the Shepherds. The Annunciation is only told in Luke. The genealogy of Christ is found only in Matthew and Luke.
- c. The Gospel of John is called the theological Gospel - the content of John is very different from the other three. For instance, John's explanation of the Nativity is only one verse, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory."
- d. All of the Gospels include accounts of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. However, each account varies slightly - this testifies to the truth of the Gospels - if four people witness the same event, they will write similar but not exactly the same accounts of what they witness.
- e. The Gospels focus on the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ—His teachings, miracles, Passion and Resurrection.
- f. The Gospels are read at every celebration of the Divine Liturgy, at baptisms, weddings, funerals, Paraklesis, Orthros, house blessings etc.
- g. If you've never read the Bible, the best place to start is by reading the Gospels.
- h. There is a selection from the Gospel for every day of the year, but not all of the text of the Gospels are covered in the daily readings.
- i. The Book of Acts is a book which chronicles the establishment of the Christian Church. It begins with Ascension, then Pentecost then the first work of the Apostles.
- j. The Epistles are letters written by St. Paul, St. James, St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude.
- k. St. Paul's Epistles include Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Phillipians, Colossians, I and II Thessalonians, Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews.
- l. Other than the Epistles of Titus and Philemon, both of whom were people, the Epistles were written to the churches of various cities, like Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae and Thessaloniki. These churches experienced issues similar to what we face today such as politics, lack of love, how to minister to others, etc., which is why we still read them today.
- m. There are letters written by St. James, St. Peter (2 of them), St. John (3 of them) and St. Jude which are "universal letters", meaning written to the whole of the church, not one specific community.
- n. We read from an Epistle reading or Acts at every celebration of the Divine Liturgy, at baptisms, weddings, and funerals.
- o. Just as with the Gospels, there is a lectionary (guide) for which readings are to be read on which days. Whatever Gospel is read on each Sunday, for instance, is read in every Orthodox Church around the world on that particular Sunday.
- p. The book of Revelation almost didn't make the "Canon" of Scripture (see below). It was placed in the Bible with the provision that it not be read in Church. No

church doctrine can be taken from it. This is why during the course of the church year, you will hear from every book of the Bible at some point in church except for the book of Revelation. This is because Revelation talks about the end times, and signs of the end times. And the church does not want us to obsess about the end times. Nor does it want us to be complacent. If we think we are not in the end times, then we won't be vigilant. And the fact is, time could end for any of us at any time. There are some non-Orthodox churches where all they read is Revelation, looking for signs. Christ said Himself that no one knows the day or time when He will come back.

- q. If you've never read the Bible before, start with the Gospels, then Acts, then the Epistles, then the Psalms, the prophets and finally the first half of the Old Testament. A practical matter - if you start with Genesis and read from there, you are probably going to get discouraged when you reach Leviticus as it reads like a law text, because that's what it is. Start from the New Testament and work backwards.
- r. Most of our traditions in the Orthodox Church are scripture-based, so it is important to know the Scriptures. Also, God's word is the Scriptures and God speaks to us through the scriptures.
- s. Thus it is important to read from scripture every day. The Archdiocese makes this easy, by giving us the opportunity to sign up for daily readings that can be sent directly to your phone, mobile device or email. Just go to www.goarch.org, and in the search window, type in "get daily readings" and follow the prompts.
- t. The "canon" of scripture, the official list of books that comprises the Bible, was codified (universally decreed and accepted by the church) in the 4th century by St. Athanasius. Prior to that time, there were fragments of writings in various places. These writings were gathered together at the First Ecumenical Council in 325 and were collected and arranged into what is today called the Bible. There are some writings that did not make the Bible like the Gospels by Mary Magdalene and by Thomas the Apostle.
- u. Prayer is one of the ways we talk to God. Scripture is one of the ways God speaks to us. That's why it is important to read scripture on a daily basis.
- v. The Holy Gospel on the Altar Table is not the whole Bible, the New Testament or even the Gospels. The Gospel is arranged according to the days of the year, with the daily readings listed how they occur during the year.
- w. It's very important to read the Bible. Biblical notes and commentaries help us to understand what we are reading.

The Ten Commandments

Why Commandments? There is a need for order and structure. If there is no order, there is chaos. So we have order for everything, like owning a house, driving a car, being a student, having a job, belonging to a country club. All of these things have some kind of rules and guidelines. There also needs to be a moral code. If morality is not legislated, people will not know where lines of inappropriate behavior are. Laws are also needed to motivate a shape in behavior. Firstly, a sense of duty that compels people to comply. Secondly, a sense of fear motivates people to comply.

The Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20):

1. You shall have no other gods before you.
2. You shall not make any graven images.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and mother.
6. You shall not commit murder
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not bear false witness
10. You shall not covet.

These are not the only commandments found in the Old Testament. There are another 603 commandments. The problem here was that the rules were so comprehensive that people couldn't follow them. Then there was contest and competition about who was the best at following the rules.

Finally, Christ came and consolidated the Ten Commandments into two commandments: Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

The Ten Commandments continue to this day to be the backbone of Society and the Church. Most laws in Western Society are based on the Ten Commandments

What is the difference between morality and righteousness?

Morality is what is right in the eyes of society. Morality changes with each generation. What was considered moral a century ago is fairly acceptable in society today on many levels.

Righteousness is what is right in the eyes of God and that doesn't change. Though Western law is based on the Ten Commandments, morality is shifting away from the Ten Commandments, it is shifting away from God's moral code. While it is still wrong to kill and steal, the moral code provided by the Ten Commandments is generally being broken.

The Ten Commandments Broken Down and explained.

1. You shall have no other gods before you.

What are your Priorities? If your house is on fire, you have only enough time to grab two things that you can carry in your hands—what would they be? Assuming that all people and pets are

already safe. You arrive home to find your house on fire. Is there anything you are going to run in and grab? Again, assuming that all people and pets are already safe.

In Matthew 13:44-46, it says "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it."

Kinds of things that violate the first Commandment: Failure to pray, Doubting God and not addressing those doubts.

2. You shall not make any graven images.

Why are the icons not graven images? We don't worship them. They are tools to help us in our worship. They are not the substance of our faith but part of its structure.

Kinds of things that violate the Second Commandment include honoring things above God, like playing golf every Sunday, not making time to pray, read the scriptures and not having a plan that includes God.

3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

The mouth is like a two-edged sword. Out of the mouth springs forth wisdom and praise of God, but also contempt and injury for our fellow man. So this commandment really has to do with how we use our mouths. Do we use our mouths as tools to praise and spread the word of God or as a weapon to either speak against God or against someone else?

Kinds of things that violate the Third Commandment include speaking against God, speaking against the clergy or the church, and using foul language.

For consideration: What is the allure of foul language?

4. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

On the 7th Day God rested from all of His Creation that He created. And He blessed the 7th Day for on that day God rested (Genesis 2).

Jesus finished His work on the 6th day of the Week, and on the 7th day (A Sabbath) He rested in the tomb. And when the Sabbath had passed, He inaugurated a "New Sabbath," which is the first day of the week—The Day of Lord, Kyriaki. So, the "first fruits" we give to God—the first day of the week is dedicated to Him.

Under this Commandment come things like regular worship, support of the church, participating in the sacraments, and keeping the fasts of the church. Not using our time wisely or having too much idle time falls under this commandment as well.

What does it mean to give God the "first fruits"?

Is it against God's law to work on Sundays?

Work can be done after church, since we have already honored God. Some people are required to work on Sundays, like medical people, policemen and fireman. Make a plan to worship on days that are not Sundays, because regular worship is a part of the Orthodox Christian life.

5. Honor your Father and Mother.

Children are to respect parents. Parents are to nurture children. Young children have to just trust their parents.

Spiritual children have to trust their Spiritual Father. The Spiritual Father in Orthodox theology and history is also called the "Geronta" or "elder". This is someone from whom you take spiritual advice and guidance. How can a child grow up without a parent? How can a Christian grow up without a spiritual parent, a spiritual Father? What this type of relationship is supposed to be about—the Spiritual Father directs/guides/loves the spiritual child; the spiritual child loves and obeys the direction of the Spiritual Father.

This commandment also covers those who are in authority over us, like a boss at work. This commandment is also against any kind of disrespect for our fellow human being and especially the clergy.

6. You shall not murder.

Is killing ever justifiable?

What is the difference between murder and killing? Murder is senseless killing. Killing in self-defense is allowed as a last resort. Nowhere does the Bible say not to have an army. A justified killing is like a police officer shooting the bank robber so he can't kill everyone in the bank. Even justifiable killing leaves behind pain.

The problem of gossip.

~"What is slander?" Someone asked St. Anthony, and he replied, "It is every sort of wicked word we dare not speak in front of the person about whom we are complaining." -St. Anthony

~Do not tell me, "I would be a slanderer only if I lied. I am committing no slander if I tell the truth." This is a grievous error. Speaking evil of others, even if the evil be true, is always a crime. Surely the publican was really a publican and a sinner, but he left the temple cleansed of all his defilements because he was scorned by the Pharisee. You want to correct your brother? Weep, pray to God, warn him by speaking to his heart, advise and exhort him. That is how St. Paul acted. But backbiting and slander is so sweet, you say. Yes, but NOT backbiting is sweeter still. The slanderer created deadly anxiety for himself, he is constantly besieged by suspicion and fear. He repents, but too late; he bites his tongue, but in vain; he trembles, for as his words spread, they may cause him great danger and expose those who repeat them to enmities which easily could have been avoided."
St. John Chrysostom

James 1:26 "If any one thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man's religion is in vain."

James 3:4-12 "Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire? And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh."

We must take care of our bodies. Excessive eating, drinking, smoking, drugs are not good for our body. Thoughts and attempts of suicide are also a form of murder. Just as doing too much can be bad for our bodies, doing too little can be bad too. We shouldn't be lazy in any of our tasks. We should also exercise to take of our body and our mind.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

We must be faithful to our spouse. No sexual activity outside of the context marriage, which means not only after one is married but also before one is married (fornication). Sex is a holy thing, created by God to not only continue the human race but as an expression of love between two people.

Lustful thoughts, inappropriate dress and unmodest behavior are also forms of adultery. Today we are surrounded by inappropriate material on the computer, the internet, TV, movies, magazines and even the mall. We must learn to keep our eyes on good things.

8. You shall not steal.

Taking things that are not yours. Most people think of stealing from a store. But here are other examples: Cheating on your taxes, not paying your bills, overbilling for a job, not working while at work (surfing Internet, talking on the phone). Talking when someone else is talking—stealing attention. What do you do when your job/employer forces you to overbill and overcharge?

9. You shall not bear false witness.

- Harming the reputation of someone else
- Making false statements
- Lying
- Culture of lying
- Exaggerating the truth—comes from lack of self-esteem
- What about "white lies"?

10. You shall not covet.

- Jealousy, envy, hatred of what others have.
- Trying to cause the downfall of others
- Anger at God for one's state in life.

Most frequently committed sins are murder (gossip) and coveting (jealousy).

Consolidation of the Commandments. Christ consolidated Ten Commandments into two—Love the Lord your God with all your soul, with all your heart, with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. Which becomes one Commandment--Love

Difference between goodness and Godliness. When goodness is an end unto itself, the beneficiary of the goodness is the good person. It benefits me when I do good. So the end goal is not goodness but Godliness. And the beneficiary of Godliness is our fellow man. We don't obey the law to avoid punishment, nor do we obey the law so that our life is better and safe. We obey the law to create a society where all are safe and the interests of all are honored.

Faith is what we believe. Without some kind of framework or structure, what we believe cannot be practiced or disseminated in an orderly or coherent form—it would be chaotic. Faith without works is dead faith. However, works without faith ultimately is self-beneficial and thus it is not Godly.

Grace heals what is infirm and completes what is lacking in each person. It is an intangible and Godlike quality. The sacraments are the best way that the church helps impart God's grace on people. But there is a danger in the sacraments that form takes precedence over substance, even in the way we speak of things:

Grace through the Sacraments

- Holy Unction is not simply "getting the oil." It's being anointed for healing of soul and body.
- Confession is not a listing of sins. It is a cry from the heart to be led back to God in repentance, to change and to be restored to God.
- Liturgy is a temporary entrance into God's Kingdom in preparation for hopefully a permanent residence in His Kingdom.
- Marriage is not a ceremony, but a miraculous uniting of two people into a family. And when we've committed all kinds of immoral/unrighteous acts prior to marriage, some of that beauty is compromised.

Concluding Thoughts

- We all violate all Ten of the commandments with great frequency
- Examination with humility will hopefully lead to realization, repentance, confession, absolution
- The Commandments provide a structure which will help us live out our faith.
- The Goal is to get to heaven, attain salvation, theosis.
- The plan is the appropriate action involved in attaining the goal.
- Following the Ten Commandments is central to that plan, because they help us not only to be good people, but to be Godly people, and to do what is righteous in the eyes of God.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN PREPARATION FOR CONFESSION

I am the Lord your God, and you shall have no other gods before me.

Has God been the source, center and hope of my life? Have I put myself, others or things before God? Have I failed to trust in God's existence, love and mercy? Have I failed to pray to God, to worship Him and to thank Him for His blessings? Have I tried to serve God and keep His commandments faithfully? Have I murmured or complained against God in adversity? Have I praised and glorified God through my words and deeds?

You shall not make for yourself a graven image in order to worship it.

Have I valued anyone or anything above God? Have I given to anyone or anything the love, honor and worship that belongs to God alone? Have I made an idol of any person, idea, occupation, or thing?

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Have I blasphemed God's holy name in any way? Have I sworn a false oath? Have I broken any solemn vow or promise? Have I entered into an agreement, promise or contract against God's law? Have I cursed or used foul language? Do I speak of God to other people? Have I spoken negatively about the church or the clergy with others?

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Have I worshiped regularly on Sundays and major feast days and have I helped others to do the same? Do I come regularly late to the holy services? Does my attention wander during church? Have I worked unnecessarily on Sundays or major feast days or caused others to do so? Have I spent the Lord's Day in a wholesome and edifying way? Do I use my time wisely or do I waste a lot of it? Have I contributed a sacrificial share of my time, talent and treasure to the church? Have I discouraged others from attending church or participating in the sacraments? Have I kept the prescribed fasts of the church?

Honor your father and mother

Have I loved and respected my parents as I should? Have I neglected them or failed to help them? Have I disobeyed them, deceived them or caused them pain by my words or deeds? Have I treated all my family members with patience and love? Have I neglected my children? Have I disrespected any member of the clergy?

Thou shall not commit murder.

Have I caused the harm, injury or death of anyone? Have I wished my own or anyone's harm or death? Have I been cruel to animals or destroyed any life unnecessarily? Have I spoke badly about other people or harmed the self-esteem of others? Have I done things that are harmful to my own body such as excessive eating, drinking, smoking, drug abuse? Have I tried to prematurely end my life? Have I had an abortion?

You shall not commit adultery.

Have I committed any immoral acts alone or with others? Have I caused others to commit immoral acts? Have I committed immoral acts in my heart? Have I honored my spouse? Have I been faithful to my spouse? Have I read or viewed inappropriate materials?

You shall not steal.

Have I taken anything that was not mine from anyone or from anywhere? Have I cheated anyone? Have I caused others to steal or cheat? Have I tried to find the owners of lost things I have found? Have I damaged or destroyed anything that belonged to another? Have I defrauded anyone of rightful wages? Have I paid my debts? Have I given to the poor and to philanthropic causes in proportion to my means?

You shall not bear false witness.

Have I given false testimony against anyone? Have I spoken evil, told lies or spread rumors about anyone? Have I disclosed to anyone the sins and faults of another? Have I made careless statements or done anything else to harm the name and reputation of another? Have I engaged in idle gossip?

You shall not covet.

Have I looked with envy jealousy or hatred toward the possession talents or achievements of others?

Have I desired the downfall or loss of others out of evil intent that I might benefit? Have I grieved that God has bestowed greater blessings on others than on me?

Making Moral Choices

1. Name some things you have no choices about (i.e. I didn't choose my parents).

2. Name some choices that you make every day and what determines that choice (example—I choose what to wear based on what is clean, what my mom has ironed).

3. When you have a difficult decision to make, who do you use to help make that decision- (i.e. parents, friends, church, TV, teachers, your own opinion, what you read in magazines.)

Activity: Ask each person to give their top three influences--Rank these from 1-8 (the thing that influences you the most would be 1, the thing that influences you the least would be 8).

4. When you have a problem, who is the person you are most likely to talk to—have each person give their top two or three choices.

5. Name some choices you have to make in the next few years.

6. What is the hardest thing you deal with right now?

7. If you could change one thing about your life right now, what would it be?

8. When you are faced with a temptation to do something you don't want to do or something you know is wrong, what are some ways you can say no?

9. What are some things you can do as a Christian to help your decision-making process?

Several moral dilemmas are listed below—for those with young students, you can think up some other age-appropriate moral dilemmas for the situations they face.

Moral Dilemma: Act your age

Amber tells Mr. Hartford that she is sixteen years old. It isn't quite true, but it's close enough. She will be sixteen in seven months. Amber lied because she needs the job if she is to get a car. She wished her parents could help her buy a car, the way all her friends' parents did. Mr. Hartford's company is the only one in town that is hiring teenagers, and she meets all of the qualifications for the job except for her age.

1. What would you do if you were Amber?

2. What if Amber would be sixteen in just one month?

3. What if Amber's father had just lost his job and the family needed Amber's money to help them survive?

Moral dilemma: NO ONE WILL EVER KNOW

Karla walks out of the store counting her change. She discovers that the cashier gave her an extra five-dollar bill by mistake. Karla can't decide whether to return the five dollars or keep it.

1. What would you do in Karla's situation?
2. What if the store had shortchanged her in the past?
3. What is the store was known for its high prices and practice of ripping customers off?
4. What if she had been given a twenty-dollar bill instead?
5. What if just as Karla was getting in the car to leave, she saw the grocery checker standing outside, frantically looking around as though he had discovered his mistake?

Moral Dilemma: It is your job

You've been working part-time at a high end clothing store for a year and are having a hard time making ends meet—the rent is going up on your apartment, car insurance rates went up and you didn't get a raise. You have tried to get another job but in the tough job market, you've had no luck. One day, the boss asks you to mark down the prices on some of the older inventory for an upcoming sale. A friend of yours, who also works at the store, says you should mark down some of the newer inventory while working on the inventory being marked for sale. That way, the two of you could afford to buy some new outfits. She reasons that since your boss didn't give either of you a raise, at least you deserve the opportunity to buy some nice clothes at a discount.

1. What would you do? Why?
2. What should you do? Why?

Moral Dilemma: It is your job

You are excited about your new job as a secretary in a prestigious law firm. You are making a great salary and have your desk overlooks the waterfront in downtown Tampa. Work moves at a breakneck pace in the office and many nights, you go home with a headache from all the hard work. As you get to know the other secretaries, you see a pattern that some of them take longer lunches than they are supposed to, spend a lot of time on personal phone calls, and spend part of the day surfing the Internet for the latest Hollywood scandals. Soon, you fall into the trap of extending your lunch hour, taking personal calls and surfing the Internet, though not really to the extent that others are doing. With your great job performance, when the office manager has to take a month off because of a medical problem, you get promoted to interim office manager with a little boost in pay and a chance to take the position permanently if the office manager is not able to come back to work. On your first day in this "new position" you hear one of the secretaries on the phone for an hour on a personal phone call. When you tell her to get off of the phone and concentrate on her work, she says, "you do it. Why can't I?"

What would you do and why?

What should you do and why?

Additional Moral Dilemma

You and four friends are visiting a Greek store in Tarpon Springs and discussing your tastes in music. You find 5 CDs of good Greek dance music and each agree to purchase one and makes copies for the other four people. The copyright on each CD case says, "Not to be re-produced without permission of the artist." Is this stealing?

Additional Moral Dilemma

As a side job, you mow your neighbor's lawn each week and he pays you \$30 each week in cash. At year's end, you've made \$1,500 from mowing his lawn. Do you claim it on your taxes? Should your neighbor claim you as an employee and withhold taxes and pay social security? The law says after a certain amount of money paid, you must claim someone as an employee? And over a certain amount of money received must be claimed on income taxes?

The Church Building and Sacred Vessels

- I. The Orthodox Church building is traditionally built in the shape of a cross.
- II. The church is meant to be a representation of heaven on earth, a place of relief and refreshment from the world.
- III. Our churches are only used for worship services—there are no other activities that occur in a church.
- IV. Churches traditionally have a dome over the center of the church. The dome is called the Pantocrator—the ruler of all things. And the Pantocrator always depicts Christ holding the Bible.
- V. There is a smaller dome that is usually behind the altar, it is a half-dome called the “Platitera”. The Platitera literally means “the apse of the heavens” but for better understanding, it is said that the Platitera means the bridge from earth to heaven. The Platitera depicts the icon of the Virgin Mary and the Christ-child.
- VI. There are four parts to a church
 - a. The narthex—where we enter the church, light a candle and venerate the icons.
 - b. The nave—where we sit, where the pews are. In many Orthodox countries, there are no pews in the nave and it is a large open space.
 - c. The Solea—the “stage” between the pews (nave) and the altar. This is where most of the sacraments take place.
 - i. Communion is distributed on the Solea.
 - ii. A baptism is conducted on the Solea.
 - iii. Chrismations are done on the solea
 - iv. So is Holy Unction
 - v. So also is marriage.
 - vi. Confessions are heard on the solea
 - vii. Though not a sacrament, funerals also take place on the solea.
 - viii. You might say that the most important moments of your life are on the solea.
 - ix. On the solea you will also find the baptismal font (sometimes it is movable and can be moved to the center of the Solea). At St. John, the baptismal font is built in to the church and cannot be moved.
 - x. You will also find the pulpit, where the deacon will read the Gospel and from where the sermon can be preached.
 - xi. On the right side of the solea is the Bishop’s throne—when a Bishop, Metropolitan or Archbishop comes to visit the church, they sit on the throne. The throne is a sign of authority—thus the throne has an icon of Jesus Christ on it.
 - xii. The solea is a raised platform—it is usually two or three steps above the nave.
- VII. The Iconostasion or icon screen
 - a. In the ancient Jewish Temple, there was a wall of separation between the Holy of Holies and the rest of the church, that is where we get this tradition.
 - b. Our wall has icons on it.
 - c. There is a minimum of six icons on any icon screen.
 - d. To the right of the royal doors, the doorway to the altar, are three icons—Jesus, John the Baptist and the Archangel Gabriel.
 - e. To the left of the royal doors are three icons—the Virgin Mary, the icon for the name of your church (in Tampa, we have a second icon of St. John the Baptist) and the Archangel Michael.
 - f. The angel icons are usually doors which open allowing access into the altar.
 - g. If the icon screen is wider than the three required icons on each side, the additional icons are optional and can be whatever the church wants.

- h. Additional comment on iconography—The “required icons” are the Pantocrator, the Platytera, and the six icons on the icon screen. In our church, we have murals of the life of Christ—Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost; we also have the twelve disciples down the side aisles, various saints in our stained glass windows and the four evangelists around the dome.

VIII. The Altar

- a. The altar table—center feature in the altar—this is the table where we celebrate the Divine Liturgy. It represents the throne of God, also the table of the Last Supper, and also the tomb of Christ.
- b. Entombed in the altar are relics of three saints—in our church we have St. Haralambos (2nd century), St. George (4th century) and St. Anysia (6th century). These relics are put into the altar in a special service called the consecration service. Our church was consecrated in 1986.
- c. On the altar are the following furnishings
 - i. The Gospel book
 - ii. The Blessing Cross
 - iii. The tabernacle—inside the tabernacle, Holy Communion is kept at all times, to be taken to those who are sick
 - iv. The sleepless lamp—there is a light that burns in front of the tabernacle at all times.
 - v. Candlesticks
- d. Behind the altar are the following
 - i. Fans or exapteryga (six winged) angel discs. These are carried in processions by the altar boys. In the book of Isaiah, the throne of God is described as having angels standing around it. That is where this tradition comes from.
 - ii. Procession cross—carried by altar boys in procession
 - iii. Large Crucifix—called the Estavromenos—this is carried by the priest on Holy Thursday and has a large figure of Christ on it.
 - iv. Also behind the altar are kept the censer, and the processional candles used by the altar boys.
- e. To the left of the altar table is a table called the Prothesis. On this table is where we prepare the Holy Gifts. On the table is found:
 - i. The chalice
 - ii. The paten
 - iii. The lance
 - iv. The spoon
 - v. An icon of the Nativity
 - vi. Water and wine for the service
- f. To the right of the altar is another table, called the Diakonikon
 - i. It is basically a storage area where we store the second Gospel book, the Chrismation set, the Communion kit and the priest’s liturgical books.

Church Vessels

The Chalice—The Chalice is the gold or silver vessel from which we receive Holy Communion. The Chalice has a cup, a stem and a base, and looks like a smaller version of the baptismal font. The Baptismal Font is where we are initiated or introduced into the faith. The Chalice is what sustains our faith—because we receive again and again, the Body and Blood of Christ from the Holy Chalice. In the service, the Chalice initially holds wine, which is consecrated into the Blood of Christ. The Body of Christ is eventually placed into the Chalice and using a spoon, the priest gives us both Body and Blood of Christ while holding the chalice.

The Diskos (or Paten)—This vessel is a plate with a stem and represents the creation, the whole world. Years ago, people thought that the world was round and flat. So the Paten represents the world. When we hear the words, “We offer to you these Gifts from Your own gifts in all and for all”, “all” are represented on the Paten. On the Paten, the priest cuts a piece of bread called the “Amnos” or the Lamb of God—This is Christ. There are pieces for the Virgin Mary, the Saints, and then for people who are living and people who have passed away—including all the people, the saints and the Lord, everyone is represented. The paten also represents the cave in Bethlehem, which is why is often has an etching of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child or an etching of the Nativity itself.

The Asterisk—this item covers the bread on the Paten and has the practical application of now having the cover of the paten touch the Body of Christ. It also represents the Star of Bethlehem. The star is placed over the Paten towards the end of the service of Proskomide (preparation of the Holy Gifts) and is removed from the Paten when the priest says “Singing the Victory hymn, proclaiming, crying out and saying,” shortly before the Consecration.

The Spoon—this “utensil” is used by the priest to distribute Communion to the people. It is dipped in the Chalice and on the spoon, the priest captures some of the Body and Blood of Christ to give to those who are receiving Communion.

The Lance—this “utensil” is used by the priest to cut the bread (prosphora) that is used at the liturgy. It represents the spear that was thrust into the side of Christ.

The Covers of the Chalice and the Aer—There are covers placed over the Chalice and the Paten at the end of the Proskomide. These covers serve the practical purpose of keeping the bread on the paten and the wine in the chalice as the vessels are carried through the church at the Great Entrance. After the Great entrance, the covers are removed from the vessels. The Aer is a large cloth worn over the back shoulders of the priest as he carries the gifts in procession. The aer represents the robe that Jesus wore to Golgotha. The aer is placed over the Gifts once they are placed on the altar after the Great entrance. And at the time of the Creed, the Aer is removed from the gifts, shaken over them (representing the earthquake at the time of the Resurrection) and folded and laid aside.

The Zeon—a small vessel that holds hot water that is placed in the chalice shortly before Communion. The water represents the warmth of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel—Called Evangelion in Greek, the Gospel literally means the Good News, the good news of Jesus Christ. Inside the Gospel is a text of the passages that are read in church. These passages are not in any order—like Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but rather short passages that are read each day of the year. So there is a lectionary, a schedule of what is read, for each Sunday and each day of the year and this is universal for all Orthodox churches. The Gospel lectionary starts with Easter Sunday, goes through the Paschal season, then includes readings from Matthew, the Luke, Mark is read during Lent and John is read during the Paschal season primarily, though all four Gospels have passages for Holy Week, and for various feast days. The cover of the Gospel always has the crucifixion on one side and the Resurrection on the other—the Crucifixion side is carried in front on weekdays, and the Resurrection side is carried in front on Sundays. On the resurrection side are icons of the four evangelists. On the crucifixion side are icons of four prophets of the Old Testament.

The Censer—or Thimiato in Greek, is used to burn incense. From the Old Testament, our prayers are directed towards heaven along with the incense. The censer traditionally has four chains (representing the four evangelists) and 12 bells (representing the 12 Apostles) and makes noise, reminding us to make noise in a positive way about our faith. During Lent, often a censer with no bells used at the Lenten services. Incense is made from pressed flowers that are pressed with clay and become rocks which when placed on a hot charcoal, emit a fragrant smoke. The priest censers the altar, the icons and the people. Why the people? If the icons are holy images of holy people, we the people, made in God's image, are also holy, and so incense is offered over us and the icons.

The Church Hierarchy

- I. In John 20, Jesus establishes the Apostles as the first bishops of the church. It says “He breathed on them and said ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any they are retained.’”
- II. Following Pentecost, the Apostles went to all parts of the world and there set up churches—James stayed in Jerusalem, Thomas went to India, Andrew to Constantinople (wasn’t called that back then, but that part of the world), Peter went to Rome, etc.
- III. As the churches began to grow, one Apostles was not enough to do all the things in the church, so the office of Deacon was created in Acts 6 with seven men being selected to assist the Apostles in the daily distribution of food to the poor.
- IV. As the churches began to grow in cities, more church communities in each city, the office of priest was created.
- V. So there are three priestly offices—the deacon (who assists the priest), the priest (who oversees a community) and a Bishop (who oversees a group of communities, called a Diocese, Metropolis or Archdiocese).
- VI. There are several titles given to Bishops—Bishop, Metropolitan, Archbishop and Patriarch.
- VII. Here is how our church Hierarchy works—
 - a. Father Stavros is the priest of Tampa.
 - b. Tampa is one of 73 churches under the Metropolis of Atlanta. Our Metropolitan is Metropolitan Alexios.
 - c. In the United States, there are 9 Metropolises (including the Archdiocesan district in New York)—So there are the Archdiocesan District (administered by the Archbishop himself), the Metropolis of Boston, the Metropolis of Chicago, the Metropolis of Atlanta, the Metropolis of Denver, the Metropolis of Detroit, the Metropolis of Pittsburgh, the Metropolis of San Francisco, and the Metropolis of New Jersey. Each Metropolis is headed by a Metropolitan.
 - d. The Archbishop of America, is Archbishop Demetrios.
 - e. The Archdiocese of America is under the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Our Ecumenical Patriarch is Patriarch Bartholomew. He oversees Orthodoxy in many countries around the world.
 - f. The Patriarch does not oversee all the churches—there are Patriarchates in other places like Jerusalem, Moscow, Alexandria (Africa), Romania and they have their own Patriarchate. The Church of Greece has it’s own leadership as well.
 - g. The United States, Western Europe, Australia and Asia are under the jurisdiction (authority) of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Patriarch is also our spokesman on an international level for the Orthodox Church. We do not call our Patriarch the pope, because he is not infallible—he is the first among equals, but governs in a collegial way with the other bishops of the church.
- VIII. In order to be a priest, one has to be a deacon first. Usually a person is a deacon for a relatively short period of time. They become a deacon in a ceremony called an ordination. One goes from lay person (not a clergyman) to being a deacon. After a period of time, which could be a day, or it could be months or years, most deacons are ordained to become priests, again another special ceremony also

- called an ordination. The bishops are selected from the unmarried, or celibate, clergy. They are then ordained to be bishops also in a special ordination ceremony.
- IX. If a priest wishes to be married, he must get married before he is ordained a deacon.
 - X. For people who wish to become priests, they have to go to a special school called the Seminary. Holy Cross Seminary is in Boston, so Fr. Stavros, Charlie, and everyone else who wants to be a priest, went to Holy Cross.
 - XI. When someone gets out of seminary and isn't married but wishes to be married before ordination, they can work in a church as a pastoral assistant. That means that they assist the priest but they are not ordained and do not serve as a priest yet.
 - XII. Orthodoxy is about belonging to a community. There are no churches that are not connected to other churches. There are no bishops (Hierarchs) that are not connected to other bishops. We exist as an Orthodox church in Tampa because we are connected to the Metropolis of Atlanta. If we created our own church, unconnected to anyone, then we wouldn't be an Orthodox Church.
 - XIII. Father Stavros couldn't serve as a priest unless he is connected to a Bishop. Even something as simple as going on vacation requires a release from one bishop and an acceptance by another bishop. i.e. when Father goes to California to visit family, he is "released" from the Metropolis of Atlanta and granted permission to "enter" the Metropolis of San Francisco for a week or two. The priests are always connected to a Bishop or Metropolitan, even on vacation.
 - XIV. The Bishops (Archbishops, Metropolitans, Patriarch) are also connected to each other. It requires several Bishops to ordain another Bishop. Bishops have Apostolic succession, meaning they can trace their line all the way back to the Apostles. This is something special about the Orthodox Church.
 - XV. A deacon cannot serve a service alone—he assists the priest. The deacon can take communion to the sick and distribute Communion during the liturgy.
 - XVI. A priest can celebrate all the sacraments of the church except for Ordination. A priest can consecrate the oil of Holy Unction but only the Patriarch can consecrate Holy Chrism (used at baptisms, which is made at the Patriarchate and distributed to all the churches).
 - XVII. Only the Bishops are allowed to ordain priests. And in the case of ordination of a bishop, it requires three Bishops for the ordination.
 - XVIII. Ordinations always take place during a celebration of the Liturgy.
 - XIX. Each order of the clergy has separate vestments. The bishop, for instance, wears a crown and carries a staff.
 - XX. Hopefully one day soon, we will have one at St. John.
 - XXI. When our Metropolitan comes, he stands on the Bishop's throne. Only a bishop can stand there, not a priest.
 - XXII. A Bishop is addressed as "Your Grace". A Metropolitan is addressed as "Your Eminence". An Archbishop is addressed as "Your Eminence."
 - XXIII. A priest or deacon is addressed as "Father."

Charity/Thankfulness

- I. In Greek, the word for thankful is Eucharisto
- II. In Greek, the word for thanksgiving is Eucharistia
- III. That is also the word for Eucharist (or Holy Communion). The Eucharist is the Holy Thanksgiving, or the Theia Eucharistia
- IV. Inside the word Eucharistia are two other Greek words
 - a. Haris—meaning Grace
 - b. Hara—meaning Joy
- V. So, thanksgiving, grace and joy are intertwined.
- VI. And in the Eucharist, we receive the grace of God which brings us joy.
- VII. A good thing to do in any grade level is to ask the students about things for which they are thankful.
- VIII. Remind them that every day in prayer, they should remember five things for which they are thankful.
- IX. In many of Christ's miracles, the first thing He did was give thanks, i.e. before multiplying the five loaves. So, we are supposed to give thanks for all things.
- X. The two great commandments of the Lord for us are for us to love the Lord with all our strength, heart, body and mind. The second commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. How do we love our neighbor? We extend charity to our neighbor.
- XI. Charitable giving is supposed to be a regular part of our lives. Whether that is supporting the church through stewardship, or supporting a local charity or helping your neighbor, this is one of the commandments—to be kind to others. Can you think of other ways that you can be a good neighbor.
- XII. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) tells us that our neighbor is everyone, and the one in the parable who acted like a neighbor was the one who had mercy and compassion on his neighbor. Acts of charity also show our mercy and compassion for other people.
- XIII. It is easier to be kind to others when we are thankful for what we have. Charity and thankfulness go hand in hand. When we feel a sense of entitlement and are not thankful for what we have, we are less likely to be charitable towards others.
- XIV. Partaking of the Eucharist, Holy Communion, is also an act of Thanksgiving to God for His gifts to us. So we receive communion as an act of thanksgiving, as well as obedience to His commandment, as well as our humility.
- XV. The Lord tells us that we are to share with those who are in need, that the one with two coats is to share with the one who has none. In Matthew 25: 31-46, we are told that our eternal judgment will be based in how well we have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger and visited the sick.
- XVI. We've got to do better, as individuals and as a parish, in showing charity to our neighbor.
- XVII. Ask for constructive ideas on how to show charity/love for our neighbor. Talk about the boxes of hope, about community outreach, and about things you can do at school and in other parts of your life.
- XVIII. When we offer the Holy Gifts at the Consecration at the liturgy, we sing "We praise You, we bless You, we give thanks to You and we pray to You Lord our God." Before we ask God for anything, we are supposed to praise Him, bless His

Holy Name and Thank Him. This is in line with the prayer rule I offered several lessons ago—that we should thank God for five things, then pray for others and then pray for ourselves. But we begin our prayers with thanksgiving.

Stewardship

- I. A steward is a temporary caretaker.
- II. A caretaker is one who takes care of something.
- III. What are things we take care of—our toys, our rooms, our teeth. Think of how we take care of them—we don't break our toys or we won't have them. We clean our rooms so that we have room to move around safely in them. We brush our teeth to insure that we will be able to each. What happens when we don't take care of things? Our things don't work as we need them to.
- IV. What are some things that we are stewards of? (basically everything we have)
 - a. Our mouths—what comes out of them—does what come out of our mouths help or hurt others
 - b. Our bodies—do we eat properly? Exercise?
 - c. Time—how do we spend our time? Do we study enough? Do we waste time? On the flip side, do we allow ourselves time off to rest, or engage in wholesome activities?
 - d. Talent—how do we use our talents? Everyone has talents. What are some talents that you have? How do you use these talents to help others or better our world?
 - e. The Environment—do we seek to clean the environment? Or do we pollute the environment? Do we litter? Play music too loud? Use bad language?
 - f. We are stewards of property—do we drive our cars recklessly or obey the law; do we keep our homes in good repair.
 - g. We are even stewards on our sports teams—do we practice, play fair
 - h. We are stewards in friendships, marriages and with co-workers
 - i. We are stewards of the Commandments of God—the Ten Commandments and the two great ones—to love God and love our neighbors.
 - j. We are stewards of knowledge—do we help and encourage others to learn and grow
 - k. We are stewards of our Christian faith—are we praying? Learning? Being a good example? Encouraging others? Being faithful to what it means to be a Christian? Do we take time to worship each week, and get involved in the ministries of the church?
 - l. We are stewards of St. John (or whatever church we attend)—we have to support the church with
 - i. OUR TIME—worshipping in church each Sunday; giving time to participate in the ministries of the church; giving time to doing community service.
 - ii. OUR TALENT—everyone has a talent. The church needs lots of talents—people are needed to sing, to serve in the altar, to read, to make Prophora, to serve on the Parish Council, to be greeters, to teach Sunday school, to be in Philoptochos, etc.
 - iii. OUR TREASURE—The Bible says we are supposed to give 10% of our material goods back to God. This is called a tithe. This is the ideal that

we should strive for. We should be giving treasure on a regular basis to the church.

iv. How to give

1. In JOY—there is no point in giving out of guilt—we should give out of a sense of joy and thankfulness
 2. As an expression of LOVE and THANKFULNESS—Love should be the motive to give. We shouldn't hope for credit. God loves us and we love God and our gift of Stewardship is an expression of love. In order to love, you have to give, because love is an attribute where we take something that is ours and we offer it to someone else, in this case, God and the Church.
 3. SACRIFICIALLY—Christ sacrificed Himself for our sons. We are called to sacrifice for Christ's Church. There is no faith when you know the outcome. We are called to sacrifice with faith that our sacrifice will be rewarded (though not necessarily in monetary terms)
- v. Our church grows when we are faithful stewards—when we take time, offer and talent and treasure and do this with enthusiasm, this is what draws others to the church. When we are not faithful stewards, it becomes difficult to maintain what we have, let alone grow it.
 - vi. Stewardship is a way of life—it's something we should be thinking about every day.

What kind of stewards we are will affect what kind of church we have and how well we are able to express and spread our faith.

Epiphany? Theophany? Baptism? What exactly is the Feast we Celebrate on January 6?

January 6 is one of the 12 major Feasts of the Orthodox Church year. It is known by many names—The Baptism of Christ, Epiphany, Theophany, and in Greek “Ton Foton.” Why? Is one more correct?

Actually, all the names can be used to describe the feast we celebrate January 6. Each name depicts a certain aspect of the feast and when all are taken together, they paint a complete picture of the event we celebrate January 6, as well as its meaning for Christianity.

The Baptism of Christ- Calling January 6 the Baptism of Christ calls significance to an historical event which is told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. The concept of baptism is something that pre-dates Christ. Obviously, St. John was in the wilderness baptizing people the day Jesus came to be baptized. The baptism that John was doing was a baptism for the forgiveness of sins, basically a ritual washing to be clean from sin. John testifies to those whom he is baptizing, in response to those who wondered whether John was the Christ, “I indeed baptize with water, but One mightier than I is coming whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” (Luke 3:16) This pre-figures the gift of the Holy Spirit that we receive through Chrismation, as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed on the Apostles at Pentecost—tongues of fire enabling simple fishermen, and in turn all of us, the ability to participate in and spread the Good News of Christ. Because ritual washing became part of the Judaic Tradition or Law, Jesus, a Jew, submitted to be baptized, even though He had no sin, so that He could fulfill and then supersede the Law.

Epiphany-The word “epiphany” if you look it up in the dictionary, means “revelation.” It means that something previously hidden or unknown is revealed. For example, through some intense life experience, a person might have an epiphany about what they are supposed to do with their life, or what life is all about. Afterwards, the path of life becomes more clear for them to follow. In the case of the Orthodox feast of the Epiphany. Jesus comes down to be baptized, recognizing John's ministry. Jesus does not need baptism for forgiveness of sins, for He is sinless. Rather He is baptized to be revealed to Israel. (John 1:31) In this baptism. He identifies Himself with His church that is to be, prefiguring our going down to death in baptism (Romans 6:1-6). By thus entering the waters of the Jordan Rivers. He sanctifies forever the waters of baptism (and indeed, all of creation) by mystically restoring it to its original condition through union with Him. (some of the notes in this paragraph were taken from the Orthodox Study Bible footnotes, p. 145)

Theophany-The Word “Theophany” takes the concept of revelation that is part of “epiphany” and makes it more specific. Theophany is the revelation of God. At the Baptism of Christ, the Holy Trinity was revealed to the whole world for the first time. All three members of the Holy Trinity were present, revealing the Triune Godhead of the Father. Son and Holy Spirit. The Son was being baptized. The voice of the Father gave His endorsement of the Son. as well as setting the relationship of Father and Son, when the voice of God the Father spoke: “This is my beloved Son. in whom I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11) The Holy Spirit descended upon Christ coming out of the water in the form of a dove. While this does not mean that the Holy Spirit was incarnated as a dove, it means rather that the dove symbolizes purity, peace and wisdom and appeared in this special sign at the Baptism. We call God the Father also the Creator. Jesus Christ is called the Son. the Word, and the Light. The Holy Spirit is also called the Wisdom of God.

Ton Foton-This is a Greek phrase used in describing the Feast of Epiphany. It means literally "Of the Light," or might also be translated "The Feast of Lights." Most correctly, however, it should be translated, "Illumination" or even "Enlightenment." And perhaps it most accurately captures the significance of this feast. By descending into the waters of the Jordan River, Christ re-consecrated the creation that was created perfect but fell through sin. If the first thing in the created world was light, then the first act in the re-consecration of the world was the Light descending into the waters, and the descent of the Holy Spirit and the endorsement of the Father of the Light, Jesus Christ, as His only-begotten Son. Indeed, this event is very enlightening for all of humanity. And very illuminating for a sinful world. For with the Light of Christ, we can be freed from sin. As we read in the Gospel of Matthew, after the Baptism of Christ, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned." (Matthew 4:16-17)

The hymn of Epiphany, which is chanted as we bless the waters in the church, captures not just the event of the Baptism, but it's meaning in the history of mankind:

"When You o Christ were baptized in the Jordan, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest. For the voice of the Father bore witness unto you, calling You, calling You 'The Beloved Son.'" And the Spirit in the form of a dove, confirmed His word as true and steadfast. O Christ our God, who did appear and enlighten the world, Glory to You."

Traditions associated with Epiphany—blessing of the waters

- i. Water is the basic building block of the human body. Most of our bodies are water.
- ii. Water is the basic building block of our planet. Most of our planet is covered with water.
- iii. We bless water on Epiphany as a way of "reconsecrating" our environment and ourselves.
- iv. We bless water in churches—in a basin of water, reading passages from the old testament about cleansing ourselves, and about how water quenches thirst, as well as fire. We read the Gospel account of the baptism of Christ, we invoke the blessing of the Holy Spirit upon water and then we sprinkle water throughout the church and on ourselves to reconsecrate ourselves. We also drink of the water.
- v. We bless water outside, like in Tarpon Springs, by throwing a cross into the water, along with some of the holy water that has been blessed in the church. Boys dive in a retrieve the cross. The point is not actually the retrieving of the cross but that the cross consecrates the water of lakes and rivers and by extension all the waters throughout the world. It is a blessing, not an athletic contest, to dive for the cross and to retrieve it as well.

Some notes on John the Baptist

- i. He was the cousin of Jesus. The Virgin Mary was related to Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. Zacharias and Elizabeth were not able to have children but through a miracle were able to have a son named John. John was living in the wilderness and baptizing people, hence the name John the Baptist. Baptism at the time of Christ was similar to our sacrament of confession—it was a ritual washing that people received periodically. It was part of the Jewish law that they had to be "baptized" frequently. John was preaching to his followers that "one is coming after me who is greater than me," he was telling them about Jesus. Hence he has the title Prophet—one who foretells the future—as well as the title

- "Forerunner" because he was the one who was telling about Christ right before came into the world at the Nativity.
- ii. Jesus approached John to be baptized. John would have prevented it but did baptize Jesus in the river Jordan. Jesus was following the Jewish law regarding baptism.
 - iii. History says that the flow of the Jordan River changed from north to south and started flowing south to north after the Baptism
 - iv. After the baptism, the heavens opened and a voice was heard saying-this is my beloved Son in whom I well pleased. And a dove also came over the head of Jesus. This is the first time we see the Trinity (see above note)
 - v. John testified to everyone that this person was Christ, the Son of God.
 - vi. John was later imprisoned and beheaded, making him the first martyr for Christ (first person killed for Christ).
 - vii. John is the only person to have the title "Prophet" (he is the last of the prophets, what we call the holy people who came before Christ) AND "Saint" (Saints are what we call the holy people after Christ.)

In our church, there are 12 major feast days—the day after most major feastday is the feastday of the "second most important figure" in the story. So at Epiphany, January 6, the most important figure is Christ. The next most important figure is St. John the Baptist, thus his feastday (and the feastday of our church) is January 7.

Vasilopita Sunday – St. Basil

Saint Basil the Great was born about the end of the year 329 in Caesarea of Cappadocia, to a family renowned for their learning and holiness. His parents' names were Basil and Emily. His mother Emily (commemorated July 19) and his grandmother Macrina (Jan. 14) are Saints of the Church, together with all his brothers and sisters: Macrina, his elder sister (July 19), Gregory of Nyssa (Jan. 10), Peter of Sebastia (Jan. 9), and Naucratus. Basil studied in Constantinople under the sophist Libanius, then in Athens, where also he formed a friendship with the young Gregory, a fellow Cappadocian, later called "the Theologian." Through the good influence of his sister Macrina (see July 19), he chose to embrace the ascetical life, abandoning his worldly career. He visited the monks in Egypt, in Palestine, in Syria, and in Mesopotamia, and upon returning to Caesarea, he departed to a hermitage on the Iris River in Pontus, not far from Annesi, where his mother and his sister Macrina were already treading the path of the ascetical life; here he also wrote his ascetical homilies.

About the year 370, when the bishop of his country reposed, he was elected to succeed to his throne and was entrusted with the Church of Christ, which he tended for eight years, living in voluntary poverty and strict asceticism, having no other care than to defend holy Orthodoxy as a worthy successor of the Apostles. The Emperor Valens, and Modestus, the Eparch of the East, who were of one mind with the Arians, tried with threats of exile and of torments to bend the Saint to their own confession, because he was the bastion of Orthodoxy in all Cappadocia, and preserved it from heresy when Arianism was at its strongest. But he set all their malice to naught, and in his willingness to give himself up to every suffering for the sake of the Faith, showed himself to be a martyr by volition. Modestus, amazed at Basil's fearlessness in his presence, said that no one had ever so spoken to him. "Perhaps," answered the Saint, "you have never met a bishop before." The Emperor Valens himself was almost won over by Basil's dignity and wisdom. When Valens' son fell gravely sick, he asked Saint Basil to pray for him. The Saint promised that his son would be restored if Valens agreed to have him baptized by the Orthodox; Valens agreed, Basil prayed, and the son was restored. But afterwards the Emperor had him baptized by Arians, and the child died soon after. Later, Valens, persuaded by his counsellors, decided to send the Saint into exile because he would not accept the Arians into communion; but his pen broke when he was signing the edict of banishment. He tried a second time and a third, but the same thing happened, so that the Emperor was filled with dread, and tore up the document, and Basil was not banished. The truly great Basil, spent with extreme ascetical practices and continual labours, at the helm of the church, departed to the Lord on the 1st of January, in 379. at the age of forty-nine.

His writings are replete with wisdom and erudition, and rich are these gifts he set forth the doctrines concerning the mysteries both of the creation (see his Hexaemeron) and of the Holy Trinity (see On the Holy Spirit). Because of the majesty and keenness of his eloquence, he is honoured as "the revealer of heavenly things" and "the Great."

Saint Basil is also celebrated on January 30th with Saint Gregory the Theologian and Saint John Chrysostom. Together, they are called the Three Hierarchs.

St. Basil authored one of the Divine Liturgies, the Liturgy of St. Basil which we celebrate on the Sundays of Great Lent, Holy Thursday and Holy Saturday, Eve of Christmas and Eve of Epiphany and January 1.

The Tradition of the Vasilopita

St. Basil during his life was a great friend to the poor. He founded hospitals and orphanages. That is why he is the patron saint of orphans. He founded what today is the Philoptochos society of our churches, meaning, the friend to the poor. St. Basil was baking bread and was baking coins into the bread and then throwing the bread through the windows of homes where there were widows, orphans and poor people. The bread became known as "Vasilopita" or "Basil's bread" We still cut it in his honor each year near his feastday of January 1. The bread is baked with a coin in it and whoever gets the coin is said to have good luck for the year.

Confession

Sample questions—vary them based on age level

- I. What is the difference between right and wrong?
- II. Why do we have rules? (Without rules, there is chaos, no order)
- III. What are “Commandments”? (God’s rules for how to live our lives)
- IV. Why are the Commandments important? (We get along better with everyone; following them will help us get to heaven)
- V. What are some good things Christians are supposed to do? (Love God, love your neighbor, give some examples)
- VI. What are the Ten Commandments?
- VII. What are some bad things that people do? (disobey parents, cheat at school, gossip, make fun of other people, lie, exaggerate, mean to siblings, push people, fight, steal things, use bad words, get them to give you other examples)
- VIII. What do you think God thinks of us when we sin?
- IX. What happens to us when we sin? (we turn our back on God—you can take an icon, hold it in front of the class, and every time you use an example of a sin, turn the icon over—people think that God can’t see them, he doesn’t know what they are doing wrong. Except the mistake in this thinking is that God can see them—when we sin, we are turning our back to God, not the other way around.)
- X. Why is sin bad? (Because it separates us from God)
- XI. Consequence of sin? (eternal separation from God)
- XII. Use story of Prodigal Son **you may want to save any information on the prodigal son for when we get to that lesson which will be February 16**—Son gets inheritance, wastes it in poor living, is in want, no one helps him. This is us when we sin—inheritance is our faith, we waste our faith when we sin, then we are in want and sad, and we feel alone.
- XIII. The key moment in the story of the Prodigal Son is when the son “comes to himself.” He realizes that he is not living well. He decides to go back to his father and ask his forgiveness. The father not only forgives him, he restores him, has a feast in his honor.
- XIV. What is confession? (When we make the journey of the Prodigal Son back to God)
- XV. How does confession work?
 - a. First, one needs a sense of sadness over state of sin
 - b. Second, one needs to confess openly, honestly, what they have done wrong that has caused their separation from God.
 - c. Third, one needs a repentant and humble heart that desires to make a genuine change and start over again.
 - d. Fourth, one sits down with a priest and confesses their sins in front of an icon of God. The sins are confessed to God, the priest is there as a witness. (Why a priest, and not alone—because God endows the priests in John 20, with the ability to “bind and lose sins.” God speaks to His people through the mediation of the priest. So the priest listens and God acts through Him to loose a person of sin.)

XVI. Write down a list of sins that you do. Bring that to confession. Make sure your kids do this on the day they go to confession—when I hear many of them, this makes it go quicker and makes it manageable, also causes people to make preparation, rather than just winging it.

Make your confession.

The priest may offer some advice.

The priest will offer the prayer of absolution, restoring you to a state of being reunited perfectly with God.

It is your job, after leaving confession, to keep it that way by working at it (that is repentance-changing bad habits and bad behaviors so that over time you become a better Christian)

When should someone go to confession (at least once a year, usually during Lent, and at times when one is feeling particularly sorry/sad because of a sin/sins. Kind of like going to the doctor—go once a year for a check-up and when you are seriously sick.)

Do priests remember confessions—not usually—there are so many, how can a priest remember all of them?

Can priests repeat what they hear in confession—NO, it is absolutely confidential

Do priests think less of people when they hear their confessions—NO, to the contrary, they think more of them.

Note to Sunday School Teachers: You need to lead by example. The best way to teach about confession is start going yourself and explain to your students the challenges and rewards that you personally experience through confession. I cannot stress this enough

An Article on confession by Fr. Aris Metrakos (who happens to be Spiritual Father for Fr. Stavros)

Confession Is Not...

...merely a way to "get things off our chests."

...counseling or therapy.

...merely asking Christ to forgive us.

...a legalistic entitlement to receive the Eucharist.

Confession Is...

...a radical, public recommitment to Jesus Christ.

...the act of metanoia par excellence rooted in the act of renewal of memory par excellence.

...an act of thanksgiving.

...a means of discovering not only who Christ is, but who we are.

To Understand Repentance Is to Understand Confession

Repentance (metanoia) means to change the nous (often translated "mind," but literally "the eyes of our soul"). It is a continuous process that begins at baptism and extends into eternity. Our entire life should reflect an attitude of prayer. What does this mean? When we pray, we descend with our nous into our heart, the seat of our spirit and the Holy Spirit to encounter God. When our lifestyle is prayerful, we are continually working to make this descent with our nous into our heart. The more perfect our nous becomes, the more readily we can find our way to our hearts. In a fallen world, our nous is corrupted. In confession, our spiritual eyesight becomes clearer, as the eyes of our soul become more perfect.

Repentance Brings Renewal of Memory and Renewal of Memory Brings Repentance

Integral to the act of metanoia is the concept of renewal of memory. If we were able to be consciously aware of God's presence in our lives 100% of the time, we would never sin. In a fallen world this is not possible. When the non-believer recalls his sins there is only despair, remorse, and depression. When the believing Christian recalls his sins, he is reminded that every time he ignores God, he sins; therefore, recalling his sins transforms despair to joy as he is motivated to be more and more aware of God's presence in his life and to grow closer to Him - to learn to love God in the present as much as he has loved sin in the past. Such renewal of memory is a fruit of confession.

In preparing for confession, please remember the following:

1. There is no need to confess again those sins which were previously confessed and for which you received absolution unless you have repeated them; otherwise it is a lack of faith in the power of the mystery of confession.
2. There is no need to mention other people associated with your sins. You should only judge yourself.
3. The holy Fathers recommend that we confess our sins in general only, because relating things in detail could be a source of temptation both for oneself and for the confessor.

4. Do not make your repentance cold and careless.
5. Do not enumerate the trivial while ignoring the grievous.

Come to confession...

...with the frequency that has been prescribed by your father confessor. Those who come to Father Aris for confession are asked to do so at least once during Christmas Lent and once during Great Lent. He would like you to call or see him at least once every four to six weeks, so that you can let him know what is going on in your life, but not necessarily for confession.

Those who have fallen into the state of spiritual deception which leads them to believe that they have nothing to confess, may find inspiration and guidance by reading prayerfully the following when preparing for confession:

Turning my gaze at myself and attentively observing the course of my interior life I am convinced, through experience, that I love neither God nor my neighbor, that I have no faith, and that I am full of pride and sensuality. This realization is the result of careful examination of my feelings and actions.

1. I do not love God. For if I loved Him, then I would be constantly thinking of Him with heartfelt satisfaction; every thought of God would fill me with joy and delight. On the contrary, I think more and with greater eagerness about worldly things, while thoughts of God present difficulty and aridity. If I loved Him, then my prayerful communion with Him would nourish, delight, and lead me to uninterrupted union with Him. But on the contrary, not only do I not find my delight in prayer but I find it difficult to pray; I struggle unwillingly, I am weakened by slothfulness and am most willing to do anything insignificant only to shorten or end my prayer. In useless occupations I pay no attention to time; but when I am thinking about God, when I place myself in His presence, every hour seems like a year. When a person loves another, he spends the entire day unceasingly thinking about his beloved, imagining being with him, and worrying about him; no matter what he is occupied with, the beloved does not leave his thoughts. And I in the course of the day barely take one hour to immerse myself deeply in meditation about God and enkindle within myself love for Him, but for twenty-three hours with eagerness I bring fervent sacrifices to the idols of my passions! I greatly enjoy conversations about vain subjects which degrade the spirit, but in conversations about God I am dry, bored, and lazy. And if unwillingly I am drawn into a conversation about spiritual matters, I quickly change the subject to something which flatters my passions. I have avid curiosity about secular news and political events; I seek satisfaction for my love of knowledge in worldly studies, in science, art, and methods of acquiring possessions. But the study of the law of the Lord, knowledge of God, and religion does not impress me, does not nourish my soul. I judge this to be an unessential activity of a Christian, a rather supplementary subject with which I should occupy myself in my leisure time. In short, if love of God can be recognized by the keeping of His commandments - "If anyone loves me he will keep my word," says the Lord Jesus Christ (John 14:23), and I not only do not keep His commandments but I make no attempt to do so - then in very truth I should conclude that I do not love God. St. Basil the Great

confirms this when he says, "The evidence that man does not love God and His Christ is that he does not keep His commandments."

2. I do not love my neighbor. Not only because I am not ready to lay down my life for the good of my neighbor, according to the Gospel, but I will not even sacrifice my peace and my happiness for his good. If I loved my neighbor as myself, as the Gospel commands, then his misfortune would grieve me also and his prosperity would bring me great joy. But, on the contrary, I listen with curiosity to accounts of my neighbor's misfortune and I am not grieved but indifferent to them and, what is more, I seem to find satisfaction in them. I do not sympathize with the failings of my brother but I judge them and publicize them. My neighbor's welfare, honor, and happiness do not delight me as my own; I am either completely indifferent to them or I am jealous or envious.

3. I do not have faith in spiritual realities. I believe neither in immortality nor in the Gospel. If I were firmly convinced and believed without a doubt in eternal life and in retribution for our earthly actions, then I would be constantly thinking about this; the very thought of immortality would inspire me with wonder and awe and I would live my life as an alien who is getting ready to enter his native land. On the contrary, I don't even think of eternity and I consider the end of this life as the limit of my existence. I nurture a secret thought within and wonder, "Who knows what will happen after death?" Even when I say that I believe in immortality, it is only from natural reasoning, for down deep in my heart I am not convinced of it and my actions and preoccupations with earthly cares prove this. If I accepted the Holy Gospel with faith into my heart as the word of God, then I would be constantly occupied with it; I would study it, would delight in it, and with deep reverence would immerse myself in it. Wisdom, mercy, and love hidden within it would lead me to ecstasy and day and night I would delight in the lessons contained in the law of God. They would be my daily spiritual bread and I would earnestly strive to fulfill them; nothing on earth would be strong enough to keep me from this. But on the contrary, even if I sometimes read or listen to the word of God, it is either out of necessity or curiosity; I do not delve deeply into it but feel dryness and indifference to it and I receive no greater benefit from it than I do from secular reading. Further, I am eager to give it up promptly and go to worldly reading, in which I have greater interest and from which I get more satisfaction.

4. I am full of pride and self-love. All my actions confirm this. When I see something good in myself, then I wish to display it or brag about it to others, or interiorly I am full of self-love even when outwardly I feign humility. I ascribe everything to my own ability and I consider myself more perfect than others, or at least not worse. If I notice a vice in myself, then I try to excuse it or justify it; I pretend to be innocent or I claim that I couldn't help it. I am impatient with those who do not show me respect and I consider them incapable of judging character. I am vain about my talents and cannot accept any failure in my actions. I grumble and I am glad to see the misfortune of my enemies, and my intention in doing anything good is either praise, self-interest, or earthly comfort. In a word, I continuously make an idol out of myself, to whom I give unceasing service as I seek sensual delights and try to nourish my carnal desires. Studying the guide to confession leads me to conclude that I am proud, adulterous, without faith; I do not love God and hate my neighbor. What state could be more sinful?

The state of the spirits of darkness is better than my condition, for though they do not love God and hate man and are nourished by pride, at least they believe and tremble. But I? Can there be a worse fate than I am faced with? What is more strictly forbidden that man will be judged on than the careless and slothful life which I recognize in myself!

After prayerfully reading the above, further prepare for confession by reflecting on the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN PREPARATION FOR CONFESSION—THIS IS THE LIST THAT ALL ADULTS SHOULD CONSULT AND PREPARE OFF OF WHEN COMING TO CONFESSION. FOR YOUNG CHILDREN, IT IS SUFFICIENT TO WRITE A LIST OF TWO OR THREE THINGS. FOR ADULTS, YOU SHOULD MAKE NOTES OFF OF THIS COMPREHENSIVE LIST.

I am the Lord your God, and you shall have no other gods before me.

Has God been the source, center and hope off my life? Have I put myself, others or things before God? Have I failed to trust in God's existence, love and mercy? Have I failed to pray to God, to worship Him and to thank Him for His blessings? Have I tried to serve God and keep His commandments faithfully? Have I murmured or complained against God in adversity? Have I praised and glorified God through my words and deeds?

You shall not make for yourself a graven image in order to worship it.

Have I valued anyone or anything above God? Have I given to anyone or anything the love, honor and worship that belongs to God alone? Have I made an idol of any person, idea, occupation, or thing?

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Have I blasphemed God's holy name in any way? Have I sworn a false oath? Have I broken any solemn vow or promise? Have I entered into an agreement, promise or contract against God's law? Have I cursed or used foul language?

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

Have I worshipped regularly on Sundays and major feastsdays and have I helped others to do the same? Have I worked unnecessarily on Sundays or major feastsdays or caused others to do so? Have I spent the Lord's Day in wholesome and edifying ways?

Honor your father and mother.

Have I loved and respected my parents as I should? Have I neglected them or failed to help them? Have I disobeyed them, deceived them or caused them pain by my words or deeds? Have I treated all my family members with patience and love?

You shall not commit murder.

Have I caused the harm, injury or death of anyone? Have I wished my own or anyone's harm or death? Have I been cruel to animals or destroyed any life unnecessarily?

You shall not commit adultery.

Have I committed any immoral acts alone or with others? Have I caused others to commit immoral acts? Have I committed immoral acts in my heart?

You shall not steal.

Have I taken anything that was not mine from anyone or from anywhere? Have I cheated anyone? Have I caused others to steal or cheat? Have I tried to find the owners of lost things I have found? Have I damaged or destroyed anything that belonged to another? Have I defrauded anyone of rightful wages? Have I paid my debts? Have I given to the poor and to philanthropic causes in proportion to my means?

You shall not bear false witness.

Have I given false testimony against anyone? Have I spoken evil, told lies or spread rumors about anyone? Have I disclosed to anyone the sins and faults of another? Have I made careless statements or done anything else to harm the name and reputation of another? Have I engaged in idle gossip?

You shall not covet.

Have I looked with envy, jealousy or hatred toward the possessions, talents or achievements of others? Have I desired the downfall or loss of others out of evil intent that I might benefit? Have I grieved that God has bestowed greater blessings on others than on me?

THE BEATITUDES

Blessed are the Poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Have I truly recognized my complete dependence on God? Have I been proud, arrogant and self-righteous in my ways? Have I been selfish, possessive and self-seeking? Have I sought after status, power and wealth?

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Have I endured difficulties and afflictions with faith and patience? Have I felt sadness for the sufferings of the poor, the hungry, and addicted; the sick, the lonely and the sinful of the world? Have I truly been sorrowful for my sins and faults?

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Have I tried to serve or rather to dominate others at home, school, work, office, Church and elsewhere? Have I nursed hatred in my heart or desired revenge against anyone? Have I been resentful, bitter, unforgiving or insulting and abusive to others? Have I loved my enemies?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Have I truly yearned for God's will to be done in all things? Have I worked for justice in my family, society and the world in ways within my reach? Have I tried to cultivate a righteous life through prayer, fasting, worship, receiving Holy Communion and deeds of love toward others?

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Have I shown compassion and help toward the poor, hungry, lonely and needy around me? Have I tried to understand and forgive others? Have I been indifferent, judgmental or legalistic?

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Have I loved goodness, purity and holiness? Have I succumbed to evil motives and intentions? Have I given way to impure thoughts, words or deeds? Have I been guilty of bias and prejudice? Have I been hypocritical, pretentious or self-indulgent to sinful passions?

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Do I have God's peace in my heart? Have I been unfairly angry, aggressive or impatient? Have I worked for peace at home, work, Church and in society? Have I been irritable, polemical, or divisive?

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Have I complained when persecuted for God's sake? Have I prayed for my persecutors? Have I failed to defend anyone in the truth for fear of humiliation or persecution? Have I had the courage to stand up for what is right despite criticism, ridicule or persecution?

Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you on my account; rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

Is the joy of Christ in my heart even in trying moments? Have I been pessimistic, despondent or despairing? Have I truly delighted in the promise of God's treasures in heaven?

Salvation and the Story of Zacchaeus

What does the word Salvation mean? Answer: Salvation is a theological concept, a process, and a destination.

Salvation means to be saved. Saved from what? Answer: Separation from God

God created the world perfect

God created the human being perfect

The human being fell through sin, though his choice to go away from and disobey God. Sin is what separates us from God—we cannot be with God in the moment that we are sinning. St. Paul writes, The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:23).

Death is the ultimate indignity—because in death we can be separated from God permanently. This is why we work towards salvation, so that in our physical death, we attain to everlasting life in the Kingdom of God.

So, salvation means to be saved from spiritual death (we will all undergo physical death) so that we can live eternally with God.

In many churches, salvation is looked at as a one time event—you “get saved” at a certain moment in time. The Orthodox church does not hold this view. Salvation, in our understanding, is a process. It begins the day we are baptized, and begin our journey to salvation. Salvation is something we work on every day—we seek to grow closer and closer to God. And salvation is ultimately a destination, which we attain through our faith, our works and ultimately God’s grace.

So, when someone asks you, “are you saved”? The answer is “I have the potential to be saved because I am baptized, I am working on my salvation in my every day life and I hope I will be saved by God’s grace.”

If this is hard to understand, use the concept of marriage, another concept that is a continuous action. For the person who is married, you can say “I was married on a certain day, I am working on my marriage today, I hope to be married forever.” Again, marriage, like salvation, is not a one-time act, but rather a continuous action.

Who can be saved? Anyone who chooses to accept Christ, who believe in Christ, and whose life/actions reflect that belief.

In the Gospel lesson today, we meet a man named Zacchaeus. HE was a tax collector, the town pariah, a thief.

He sought to see who Jesus was—he was interested in knowing about Jesus.

Jesus saw him in a sycamore tree and called out to him, that Jesus desired to go to his home.

Zacchaeus accepted the request of Jesus to come into his home. So, he had faith. He examined himself and repented of all of his stealing by restoring fourfold whatever he had stolen—so he did works of repentance.

And Jesus said “Today salvation has come to this house.” Ultimately, God makes the decision, by His Grace, of who received salvation.

The story of Zacchaeus illustrates how salvation works. God offers the opportunity. We accept the opportunity through faith. We repent of our sins and change our life to a life of joyful obedience to the commandments of God—loving God and loving our neighbor—and ultimately God’s grace determines who is saved.

Have students read the Gospel account of Zacchaeus. Luke 19:1-10

Have students discuss who is Zacchaeus in our modern world. Zacchaeus was a man who wanted to know who God is. Modern day Zacchaeus includes:

- People who are new to our church
- College students
- People you go to school with
- People you play sports with
- Anyone who wants to know God

How do we reach Zacchaeus?

- We talk about God
- We set a good example of what it is to be a godly person, what it means to follow the commandments of God.

February 2 - The Presentation of Christ

Re-read with your classes the Gospel Lesson from Luke 2:22-40



In this icon you can see from left to right:
Joseph, Protector of Mary, earthly father of Jesus—

He is depicted as an older man---church tradition holds that he was a widower, had been previously married and his first wife died. He had children from that marriage, which is why the Bible refers to the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus—these are actually half-brothers and half-sisters. He is holding in his hands the pigeons that were required by the law to be brought as a sacrifice when your child was presented in the Temple.

In between Joseph and Mary is the Prophetess Anna, who we read about in the scripture passage—she was in the temple praying constantly.

Next we have the Virgin Mary, who is always depicted in a blue robe with a red robe over that. She has the initials for “Mother of God,” or “Mitir Theou” next to her—those letters appear traditionally in icons of the Virgin Mary.

The baby Jesus has the letter IC XC near His head—these letters stand for Iisous Christos, Jesus Christ, and are always in the icons of Jesus.

The next figure is the priest Simeon, who was an older man, whom God promised would not die until he saw the Christ. Of course no one knew when Christ was coming.

The tradition of the 40 days comes from the Old Testament and was part of the Jewish Law. All male children were brought to the Temple when they were forty days old. Female children were brought at 80 days. A gift had to be given at the temple—pigeons or turtle doves. Mary and Joseph were following the Jewish Law in bringing Jesus to the temple for His 40 days.

Simeon was on duty at the temple that day, and when he saw Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus, he knew that this was the Christ. So he took the child in his arms and offered a beautiful prayer:

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to Your Word, for my eyes have seen Your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all people, a Light to enlighten the Gentiles and glory to Your people Israel.

Simeon offered this prayer in thanksgiving, that now he could die in peace because the Lord's promise to him had been fulfilled.

In the Orthodox Church, there is now a tradition that when a baby is 40 days old, whether it is male or female, it is brought to the church and is blessed by the priest, who says the same prayer as the prayer of Simeon. The boys have this prayer offered over them in the altar in front of the Holy Cross. The girls have this prayer offered over them in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary.

Now a note on Tradition—the traditions in our church are based on things in the Bible. Sometimes the Bible is vague on details. For instance, regarding the 40 day blessing of babies, the Bible says that Jesus was received by the priest Simeon, who offered the beautiful prayer over Him. It doesn't say if He was received in back of the church or in front of it.

It has become our Tradition (meaning taking this Biblical account, adding to it, but then making the Tradition the same the whole world over) that a 40 day old baby is received at the BACK of the church. The priest offers four prayers over the mother—first, a prayer of thanksgiving that she survived childbirth (which was a bigger deal centuries ago but still a pretty big deal today); second a prayer for the mother to rejoin the church community (in our Canon Law—the book of rules about the Orthodox Church—it says that if we miss three Sundays of church, we are not to receive Communion until we are properly restored to the church. Because it was a "requirement" that the new mother not come to church for forty days, the second prayer was a prayer of restoration to the congregation of the new mother after her 6 week absence); the third prayer is for the child; and the fourth prayer is for the child, its parents, Godparents to be. Then the priest takes the child in his arms and walked into the church saying three times "The servant of God (name of child) is churching in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Then the prayer of Simeon is offered as described above, then the child is given back to its mother.

So this is where our beautiful tradition of the 40 day blessing of a baby comes—And every Sunday school student who was born in an Orthodox home had this done over them.

There are many more examples of Traditions in our church that are based on scripture, this is one of them.

Why is this celebrated on February 2? Because it's 40 days after Christmas!

The Publican and the Pharisee and Fasting

The journey to Pascha (Easter) begins well before Easter, exactly 10 weeks before actually.

- I. The beginning of this journey is called the Triodion—four Sundays prior to Great Lent.
 - a. Sunday 1 The Publican and the Pharisee
 - b. Sunday 2 The Prodigal Son
 - c. Sunday 3 The last Judgment
 - d. Sunday 4 Forgiveness Sunday
- II. Great Lent follows:
 - a. Sunday 1 of Lent Sunday of Orthodoxy
 - b. Sunday 2 St. Gregory Palamas
 - c. Sunday 3 Veneration of the Holy Cross
 - d. Sunday 4 St. John of the Ladder
 - e. Sunday 5 St. Mary of Egypt
- III. Which is followed by
 - a. Palm Sunday
 - b. Pascha
- IV. The beginning of Triodion—The Publican and the Pharisee
 - a. Begin by reading the Gospel Passage Luke 18:10-14

Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

¹³“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

¹⁴“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

- b. There are two men in the Parable
 - i. A Pharisee—a respected Jewish leader
 - ii. A tax collector (also called a publican) The tax collector was not well liked, he was basically a thief, stealing more than what he was supposed to take in taxes from people. In other words, the town low-life.
 - iii. The Pharisee was doing ostensibly good things—he kept the commandments, fasted, gave generously, was not stealing.

- iv. The publican went to pray and said "God have mercy on me a sinner."
- v. Why did God hear the prayer of the evil tax collector and not the prayer of the righteous Pharisee?
 - 1. The Pharisee prayed "with himself"—he had no relationship with God.
 - 2. The Pharisee had great pride, no humility
 - 3. The publican/tax collector realized that his only chance for salvation was to obtain God's mercies.
 - 4. Even the most righteous person still sins—even the most righteous person is in need of God's mercy.
 - 5. The Pharisee was proud of who he was.
 - 6. The publican was ashamed of who he was, but hopeful at what he could be.
 - 7. The lesson of the parable is that we must be humble, and we must seek the mercies of God no matter how righteous we think we are.

V. In three weeks we will begin Lent

VI. One of the big things in Lent is that we fast. What is fasting?

- a. Fasting, strictly speaking, is total abstinence from food. We are supposed to do this when we receive Communion—we are supposed to not eat or drink anything the morning we receive Communion.
- b. We are called to abstain from certain kinds of foods on Wednesday and Friday of each week and during Lenten periods. The correct way to fast is not to have meat, fish, or dairy products.
- c. As this is hard for almost everyone, most people who choose to fast, fast only from meat.
- d. If you've never tried fasting, you should ask your parents if you can try not eating meat on Wednesdays and Fridays.
- e. During the 40 days before Easter and before Christmas, we are supposed to fast from meat (at a minimum, more if you can)

VII. Why fasting?

- a. Fasting, abstaining from food, requires us to control our appetite.
- b. It's about learning to control our impulse to do something we want to do, like eat a certain kind of food. If we can control impulses to eat, then we can learn to control impulses to do other things, like be angry, jealous, and mean.

VIII. History of fasting

- a. Before important period of spiritual growth, or important spiritual events, there was a fast.
- b. Before Moses got the ten Commandments and the Jewish Law, he fasted for forty days.
- c. After Jesus was baptized and before He began His ministry, He fasted for forty days. This is where the 40 day fasting interval comes from.

- IX. The Orthodox Tradition is to fast every Wednesday (in honor of the betrayal of the Lord) and Friday (In honor of the Lord's Crucifixion) as well at Holy Week, forty days of Lent, forty days before Christmas, as well as the first 14 days in August (feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary).
- X. There are also four weeks that are fast free—no fasting required for Communion except the total abstinence from food the morning you are receiving. Those four weeks are:
 - a. The week after Christmas, until January 5
 - b. The week after Pascha
 - c. The week after Pentecost
 - d. The week after the Sunday of Publican the Pharisee. This week you do not need to fast. Because for the Pharisee, He made fasting His God, his competition etc.

The Prodigal Son

Begin by reading the story again from the Bible—Luke 15:11-32

The meaning of the story:

- The "Inheritance" is our faith.
- When we sin, we are squandering the faith, we waste it.
- When we sin, we are leaving our father and going into a foreign land.
- Eventually, our sin will get us in trouble, as it did with the Prodigal Son, who found himself eating pig slop with no friends.

The key moment in the story is when the son "comes to himself." The Father doesn't chase him down or send a search party after him or force him to come home.

God our Father doesn't force us to be good or to love Him. He certainly hopes we do but He doesn't force us.

The moment the son "comes to himself"—we call that "repentance"—repentance is a desire to change. Repentance, in Greek the word is Metanoia, means a change in direction. To repent means to stop going away from God and start going towards Him.

And how does repentance happen?

- We recognize we are wrong
- We desire to make things right
- We put a plan in action to make things right

The son realized he was wrong.

He made a plan to make things right—to go tell his father he had sinned and wanted to be as one of his father's hired servants.

He put the plan in action by going home.

Now, the Father—

The father was overjoyed to see his son.

He was quick to forgive him, even before the son gets his apology out, the father is forgiving him.

He doesn't punish or chastise him or ground him or put him on probation—he throws a party in his honor.

When we return to God, He is overjoyed.

Angels in heaven rejoice. There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who never went astray.

God takes us back when we repent

He doesn't punish us or chastise us. He quickly restores us.

Now to the Older Son:

He doesn't share his father's joy

He is angry that his father has forgiven the younger son, the son who squandered half of the inheritance.

He refuses to forgive the younger son

He refuses to go into the party

He claims that he has always obeyed the father and that the father has never honored him

Now the older son gets a bad rap, so to speak. Why?

First of all, NO ONE always obeys our Father, God. We ALL sin. We are ALL like the Prodigal Son. To suggest otherwise is not only not true, it is not humble. If there is joy in heaven over a sinner who repents, there has to be joy on earth as well. We should rejoice when someone makes it right with God, even if they have sinned against us.

Lent is like the journey of the prodigal son—it is a time of the year set aside to “make our way back” to God.

Confession is also like this parable. We “come to ourselves”, recognize what we are doing wrong, and then make our way back to God through the sacrament of confession. And God, through the person of the priest, helps restore us to the GLORY that God wants us to have. The priest embraces us like the father embraces the prodigal son, forgiving and restoring us.

Repentance is not a one-time event in our life though. We are continually sinning, and must continually repent of our sins.

Below are some questions to keep in mind as you do this lesson

1. Why do you think the Prodigal Son decided to leave home?
 - a. To grow up
 - b. To get away from his father's values
 - c. He wasn't appreciated at home
 - d. To try to make it on his own
2. What was it that caused the Prodigal Son to “come to himself”
 - a. Homesickness
 - b. Guilt for what he had done
 - c. Feeling sorry for himself
 - d. Hunger pangs
 - e. Realization that he was stupid
3. When the older brother (who had been good) heard “music and dancing”, what was his attitude?
 - a. It's unfair
 - b. Don't expect me to forgive him.
 - c. No use being good
 - d. He blew his inheritance and now he's blowing mine.

4. If you were the younger son returning home, how would you feel when you first saw your father again?
 - a. Scared
 - b. Unworthy
 - c. Relieved
 - d. Guilty
 - e. Grateful
 - f. Loved
5. If you were the father, what would have been your response when your son returned?
 - a. Good to see you—but you are grounded
 - b. Where's the money?
 - c. I don't approve of what you've done but you're still my son
 - d. Welcome home, son—I love you!
 - e. Do you realize how worried I was?
 - f. Other_____
6. By temperament and experience, who can you relate to most in this story right now?
 - a. The younger son
 - b. The older son
 - c. The father
7. Which of the father's qualities do you most need?
 - a. His willingness to let his son make mistakes
 - b. His patience in waiting for change
 - c. His capacity to forgive
 - d. His understanding in dealing with his children
 - e. His ability to celebrate life
 - f. Other_____
8. In what ways can you relate to the experiences of the younger son?
 - a. I've spent some time in a distant country
 - b. I've experienced my share of "wild living"
 - c. I've been flat broke
 - d. I've been hungry
 - e. I've been in a job I didn't like
 - f. I've realized my unworthiness
 - g. I've grappled with deciding whether to return home
 - h. I've been received with open arms
 - i. I've experienced the grace of the Father
 - j. Other_____
9. Spiritually, where are you in your relationship with God right now?
 - a. Never left home
 - b. Still at home, but feeling tempted to check out the "distant country"

- c. In the distant country, trying to have a good time
 - d. Starting to realize I'm in a pigpen
 - e. Nervously headed back to God, but not really knowing what to expect
 - f. Just beginning to feel God's forgiveness
 - g. Gradually feeling God's acceptance
 - h. Celebrating with the family of God, enjoying "the fatted calf"
 - i. Other _____
10. What is the lesson in this parable for you?
- a. God loves me and accepts me.
 - b. I need to see others as God does
 - c. God is waiting for me to come home
 - d. I need to reconcile with a family member
 - e. Other _____
11. What is the next step for you in your spiritual journey?

The Last Judgment

Read the Gospel Lesson—Matthew 25:31-46

The Important points of the Gospel Lesson

Not everyone will go to heaven. The Bible is very clear on this. There will be a judgment of all people, and people will be divided, classified as sheep and goats.

The judgment will be based on people's actions—seeing people who are in need and helping them.

The judgment will also be based on people's beliefs—seeing Christ in people and ministering to them as if we were ministering to Christ Himself.

Both groups of people in the parable—the sheep and the goats—were surprised at their judgment. The sheep were doing good things, not expecting reward, it was just intrinsic to them. The goats were not doing good things. Of course, they were not expecting punishment, but they didn't see Christ in the opportunities to help others. As they lament, "if we knew it was you, we certainly would have helped you"

The lesson here is that we need to help our neighbor, which of course is one of the two great commandments—love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

There are specific ways we are to help out neighbor—

- Feed the hungry
- Give drink to the thirsty
- Welcome the stranger
- Clothe the naked
- Visit the sick
- Go to the one in prison

So, there are some obvious practical ways we do these things—

- I. We give food to the hungry, through serving at community outreach, or giving food to the food pantry, or at our collections in September and December, or giving food anytime
- II. Giving away clothing we are not using to a clothing drive. Or buying clothing to give away.
- III. Welcoming a new student at school or a new co-worker at work. Sitting with someone who doesn't have someone to sit with.
- IV. Visiting someone who is sick either at home or in a hospital
- V. Visiting someone who is in prison, or offering encouragement to someone who has done something wrong.

But there is also a broader base of things we are supposed to do:

- I. I was hungry—there are people who are hungry for attention, or hungry for a sympathetic ear to listen to their problems. We need to find them and "feed"

- them by listening, or giving a quiet or shy person a chance to shine, or a person who doesn't have much confidence and chance to succeed.
- II. I was thirsty—There are people who are thirsting for knowledge, people who need help with their studies. There are people on sports teams who are not as good as everyone else and who need an opportunity to play to, and who need encouragement and help to get better. They need people who can be patient.
 - III. I was a stranger—everyone is aware of who new people are—at school, at work, on a sports team. Everyone sees people who have no one to sit with at lunch. And we have the ability to minister to them, and help change this situation.
 - IV. I was naked—Obviously, there is the clothing drive to help people who don't have clothes to wear. But we are naked in other ways—when we don't have self-confidence, we feel naked. So, we can help build the self-esteem of others rather than tearing it down through gossip. We can also work to stop gossiping and bullying so that we discourage others from injuring people.
 - V. I was sick—again, the obvious, visit those who are sick, or send a get well card to someone who is sick. There are others who are sick—maybe they have a physical disability and need help and encouragement and INCLUSION. There are people who have learning disabilities—they learn differently, but they have value—we can learn to see the value in anyone.
 - VI. I was in prison—people who go to prison are there because they made mistakes—prison gives them time to think about what they've done, so that they return to society ready to be rule followers instead of rule breakers. We know, however that the prison system punishes people more than it rehabilitates them, so that they don't have skills or emotional composition necessary to be successful in their re-entry into society. So, we have to set up prison ministries to help those who have paid their debt to society reenter society, and also so that those who have committed egregious sins, while having lost their freedom, do not also lose their salvation.
 - VII. HOWEVER, there is another kind of prison that people end up in—and this is a prison they enter because of circumstance. And these people are STUCK in prison—some will never get out of the prison. Examples
 - a. People are in prison over how they look
 - b. Over a learning disability they cannot fix
 - c. Over a physical handicap they cannot overcome
 - d. Some of us are just not good at sports
 - e. Some will never be good at math
 - f. Some don't have good social skills
 - g. A new kid will move into a new school in the middle of the year and know no one
 - h. Some have an illness they cannot overcome
 - i. Some are born into poverty
 - j. There are people "in prisons of circumstance" all around us

So, we are to find the people who are in prison and help them to cope with or escape their prisons when possible.

These ministries—feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, ministering to those in prison—these are not guidelines or suggestions. They are REQUIREMENTS!
OUR SALVATION WILL BE BASED ON THEM!

Here are some questions you can ask your students in relation to this parable

The Sheep and the Goats—the Last Judgment—Matthew 25:31-46

1. From this parable, on what basis are people divided into sheep and goats?
 - a. Their beliefs
 - b. Their actions
 - c. Their character
 - d. Their treatment of others
2. Thinking about this parable Jesus told, how would you feel if you were placed in the group of sheep?
 - a. Surprised
 - b. Grateful
 - c. Overjoyed
 - d. Relieved
 - e. Unworthy
3. What person has always been there for you when you needed them?
 - a. My mother
 - b. My father
 - c. A grandparent
 - d. Another family member
 - e. Close friend
 - f. Other_____
4. What kind of people do you have the most compassion for?
 - a. Homeless
 - b. Sick or disabled
 - c. Lonely
 - d. Refugees
 - e. Elderly
 - f. Starving
 - g. Prisoners
 - h. Other_____
5. If Jesus were to come today and evaluate your life, what would he say about how you have “looked after” Him by caring for others?
 - a. You’re doing great!
 - b. You’re doing a lot better than you used to.
 - c. You used to do much better

- d. You're doing the best you can
 - e. You're in big trouble
6. Who are the "hungry", "thirsty", "strangers", "naked", "sick" and "imprisoned" that you encounter in your daily life? How can you help them.

Forgiveness Sunday - Lenten Goals

- I. We are about to start Great Lent. Great Lent starts on a Monday that we call Clean Monday. It is a day we are supposed to clean our minds, our mouths, our hearts, from bad things and try to live a life that is more pure, more close to how God wants us to live our life. It is a day we are supposed to clean our relationships with God with one another and this is done through forgiveness.
- II. Clean Monday this year is Monday, March 3.
- III. For forty days, we'll experience what the church calls "Great Lent."
- IV. In forty days, we'll spend an additional week we call Holy Week, reliving the events leading up to and including the crucifixion of Christ.
- V. Only after Lent and Holy Week are over will we celebrate Pascha, the feast of the Resurrection.
- VI. Lent is marked by
 - a. Additional services in church—there are extra services on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays of Lent
 - b. Fasting—abstaining from meat (and dairy products) from now until Pascha
 - c. Joyful sadness—the sadness is over our sins—we should spend time thinking about the things that we do that take us away from God. And these

things should make us sad. This is why in church during Lent (on the weekdays), you see the church in purple and black—it's not sadness for the crucifixion, but sadness for our own sins. The fact that God will accept us back if we ask His forgiveness, this is a cause of joy.

- d. Confession—many people go to confession during Lent, so that they can be forgiven of their sins and start over again in their spiritual journeys
- VII. It is a good time to make a plan for Lent today. There are lots of goals you can set.
 - a. Coming to more services
 - b. Reading the bible
 - c. Praying more
 - d. Going to confession
 - e. Following the Sunday school Lenten calendar
 - f. Fasting
 - g. Changing certain behaviors—i.e. being nicer to others, not putting people down, listening to your parents, helping without being asked
- VIII. Now to the topic of forgiveness
 - a. When we do wrong, God expects us to repent—repentance means to not only say we're sorry for what we've done wrong but to make plans to assure we won't make the same mistake again.
 - b. When we have done wrong and we come to God and ask for forgiveness, God is quick to forgive us. Like that Father was quick to forgive the Prodigal Son. God is quick to forgive us and restore us.
 - c. So, how are we to forgive others?
 - i. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. (The Lord's Prayer) This means that we are to forgive others in the same way that we wish for God to forgive us. (Matthew 6:9-13)
 - ii. How many times should I forgive my neighbor? Jesus tells us 70 times 7 times (Matthew 18:22)—if you do the math for that, that is 490 times. That's a lot of forgiveness.
 - iii. Why should we forgive others?
 - 1. Judge not and you will not be judged (Luke 6:37)
 - 2. We forgive because God first forgave us by dying on the cross for us.
 - 3. If God is easy to entreat and easy for forgive, we should be do the same.
 - 4. Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone. (John 8:7)
 - 5. Take out the log in our own eye before we take the speck from the eye of another.
- IX. How we forgive in America—we say we are sorry but we make excuses. Like "I'm sorry but I had a reason." We don't "own it". And the response is "I forgive, but I don't forget." This doesn't work either. God forgives and forgets. You can't keep a record of iniquities on others. The Psalms say "If You Lord were to mark iniquities, who could stand, but with you there is forgiveness." (Psalm 130:3) If we do not want God to mark our iniquities, let us not mark the iniquities of others.
- X. The Gospel of forgiveness Sunday speaks of investing our treasure. It says to not put our treasure in earthly things that will ultimately rust and wear out. But put our

treasure in heaven, there is not rust, no thieves. Where our treasure is, there our hearts will be. (Matthew 6:21—read over the Gospel lesson, which is Matthew 6:14-21) If we put all of our emphasis into baseball or power or possessions, then our hearts will be with those things and not with the things of God.

- XI. Lent is a time for us to put some treasure in heaven by asking forgiveness, forgiving others and making some new habits that will help get us closer to God.
- XII. On forgiveness Sunday, it is a day we ask forgiveness from others, we forgive others and then we are ready to begin Great Lent.

Sunday of Orthodoxy—Icons

- I. Icons are an important part of Orthodox tradition—they cover the walls of our churches, we are supposed to have them in our homes, even put them in our cars, wallets, etc.
- II. Icons are images of holiness. They depict holy people, the Lord, and events in the life of the Lord and of the church.
- III. We venerate icons—meaning we show them respect and reverence, not the wood they are painted on the but images depicted on the wood. We don't say "we kiss icons" but we "venerate images of holiness."
- IV. Icons tell stories—years ago when people couldn't read, they learned through pictures, the same way that babies read picture books. Icons tell stories of saints and important events—for instance the icon of the Resurrection shows Jesus going to Hades to raise from the dead all those who had died before Him—John the Baptist, Adam and Eve, etc. In the icon, Jesus is raising them by the wrist, not by the hand, an indication that He is willing to meet us more than halfway, as shaking a hand denotes equality. The icon of the Crucifixion show the city wall of Jerusalem (outside the city wall), the place of the skull (Golgotha), the sun and moon hidden in the corners; the Virgin Mary and the myrrh-bearing women, the disciple John who stayed at the cross and the centurion has a halo because he later became a saint.
- V. Icons give us an idea what holy people looked like—Jesus is depicted as a middle eastern man (dark skin, long hair, beard) in his early 30s. This is what middle-eastern men still look like. Jesus is never depicted with blond hair or without a beard.
- VI. There is a color scheme in icons of the Lord and the Virgin Mary. Christ is always depicted in an under robe of red (symbolizing heaven) and an outer robe of blue (symbolizing earth), since HE came from heaven to earth. The Virgin Mary is the opposite—her under robe is blue with the outer robe being red, since she came from earth to heaven.
- VII. We use icons as a focal point—they help us focus our prayers, so that we are staring at an image of holiness as we are praying, not staring into space.

- VIII. When we enter the church, the proper thing to do is venerate the icons in the narthex. We venerate the icons by venerating the foot or the hand of the person depicted. We do not venerate saints on the cheek.
- IX. Icons in the Orthodox church are always two dimensional, not three dimensional. They are not meant to be life-like. The physical features of the icons are often distorted on purpose. The mouths are too small, reminding us to speak less. The ears are big reminding us to listen more, etc.
- X. There was a controversy in the church about whether icons were graven images. In about 730, icons were banned from the churches by the emperor. In 787, the seventh ecumenical council decreed that icons were not graven images. However, they were not returned to the churches until the year 843, on the first Sunday of Great Lent. The empress Theodora ordered the icons returned.
- XI. There is a synodical statement, authored by the Patriarch and the Holy Synod in the year 843, that is read each year on the first Sunday of Lent, commemorating the restoration of the icons to the churches.
- XII. On the first Sunday of Lent, there is always a procession of icons around the church, with petitions and prayers offered over the community, the people of the community, people who have passed away from the community and for the protection of the community. In most churches, the Sunday school children carry icons in the procession. The procession stops four times, and prayers and petitions are offered.
- XIII. After the procession, the priests the synodikon, the statement of 843, affirming the use of icons. Then the congregation confesses the Creed, the confession of our faith, together. Finally, new icons are blessed and incense is offered over the entire church and anyone in it.
- XIV. You should put up an icon corner in your house, perhaps in your room, so you can offer your daily prayers near the icons. Why? Because when we pray, the saints and angels pray with us. So we should stand surrounded by their images. Also, since we are praying to the Lord, we should stand in front of his images as well. Many people put small icons in their cars or backpacks, so that they have an image of holiness with them at all times.
- XV. The reason why the priest censes the people in the church along with the icons is because WE are living icons. Icon (in Greek "Eikona") means image. We are all created in the image and likeness of God so we are holy (or have the potential to be holy) images of God.

Being a Good Friend—Second Sunday of Lent-The Paralytic

- I. A good way to start off is asking students “what is the meaning of the word ‘friend’?”
- II. Next ask for characteristics of a good friend
 - a. Possible answers (let them come up with this first) are
 - i. Consistent/reliable—they are always your friend, not just depending on the situation
 - ii. Fun
 - iii. Honest
 - iv. Can keep a confidence/secret
 - v. Forgiving
 - vi. They have your best interests in mind
 - vii. A good listener
 - viii. Someone who gives good advice
 - ix. Someone who has good morals and values and will encourage you to stay out of trouble
- III. Importance of having good Christian friends
 - a. They pray for you
 - b. They encourage you to worship
 - c. When your faith is shaken (as happens to all of us at least occasionally), they help to build up your faith again.
 - d. Everyone has questions about the faith or the Bible—a good friend can either provide or help us find these answers
 - e. A Christian friend holds you accountable, discourages non-Christian behaviors, encourages Christian behaviors.
- IV. Friendships in your youth—things to keep in mind
 - a. Friends are friends for a reason, a season or a lifetime
 - b. Some of your childhood friends will fit all categories. Some will be friends for a short while, some for a longer while and hopefully some for a lifetime.
 - c. Friendships change—they grow and sometimes they fade, and that’s ok. But you should always be a good friend—don’t gossip about people be they friends or not friends.
 - d. Learn how to be a good friend
 - i. Learn how to be a good listener
 - ii. Learn how to keep a confidence
 - iii. Learn how to encourage without being overly critical
 - iv. Learn when to give advice and when you should just listen.
 - v. Seek to befriend those who don’t have many friends.
 - vi. For older classes, you might read over the story of Kyle (below), but only to the older classes
 - e. Having friends is something we all need—no one is an island, everyone needs friends, everyone needs to learn how to be a good friend.
- V. Read over the Gospel lesson—Mark 2:1-11
 - a. Jesus heals a Paralytic after the four friends of the Paralytic lowered him through the roof of a house.

- b. While Jesus did the miracle, the friends were an important and necessary part of the equation.
 - c. The friends carried the Paralytic to where Jesus was—their friend was paralyzed, he couldn't get there himself
 - d. When they saw they couldn't get into the house, they worked together to raise their friend up to the roof.
 - e. They thought outside the box, they cut a hole in the roof and lowered their friend down to Jesus.
 - f. The friends played an important role in the miracle given to their friend by Jesus.
- VI. Think of ways that you can be a good Christian friend.
- VII. What are ways in which YOU need a friend who is Christian?
- VIII. Jesus speaks about friendship in John 15:3, when He says "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." This is the ultimate example of friendship, to lay down your life for a friend. You most like are not going to be called to do this, but a good friend is willing to make sacrifices for a friend, a good friend is willing to GIVE to a friend in need—whether that need is time, or patience, or a sensitive ear.

The Value of a Good Friend (even though this is a fictional story, it plays out in life more often than we think)

One day, when I was a freshman in high school,
I saw a kid from my class was walking home from school.
His name was Kyle.
It looked like he was carrying all of his books.
I thought to myself, "Why would anyone bring home all his books on a Friday?
He must really be a nerd."
I had quite a weekend planned (parties and a football game with my friends tomorrow afternoon), so I shrugged my shoulders and went on.
As I was walking, I saw a bunch of kids running toward him.
They ran at him, knocking all his books out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt.
His glasses went flying, and I saw them land in the grass about ten feet from him.
He looked up and I saw this terrible sadness in his eyes
My heart went out to him. So, I jogged over to him as he crawled around looking for his glasses, and I saw a tear in his eye.
As I handed him his glasses, I said, "Those guys are jerks. "
They really should get lives.
" He looked at me and said, "Hey thanks!"
There was a big smile on his face.
It was one of those smiles that showed real gratitude.
I helped him pick up his books, and asked him where he lived.
As it turned out, he lived near me, so I asked him why I had never seen him before.
He said he had gone to private school before now.
I would have never hung out with a private school kid before.
We talked all the way home, and I carried some of his books.
He turned out to be a pretty cool kid.
I asked him if he wanted to play a little football with my friends
He said yes.
We hung out all weekend and the more I got to know Kyle, the more I liked him, and my friends thought the same of him.
Monday morning came, and there was Kyle with the huge stack of books again.
I stopped him and said, "Boy, you are gonna really build some serious muscles with this pile of books everyday!
" He just laughed and handed me half the books.
Over the next four years, Kyle and I became best friends.
When we were seniors we began to think about college.
Kyle decided on Georgetown and I was going to Duke.
I knew that we would always be friends, that the miles would never be a problem.
He was going to be a doctor and I was going for business on a football scholarship.
Kyle was valedictorian of our class.
I teased him all the time about being a nerd.
He had to prepare a speech for graduation.

I was so glad it wasn't me having to get up there and speak
Graduation day, I saw Kyle.
He looked great.
He was one of those guys that really found himself during high school.
He filled out and actually looked good in glasses.
He had more dates than I had and all the girls loved him.
Boy, sometimes I was jealous!
Today was one of those days.
I could see that he was nervous about his speech.
So, I smacked him on the back and said, "Hey, big guy, you'll be great!"
He looked at me with one of those looks (the really grateful one) and smiled.
"Thanks," he said.
As he started his speech, he cleared his throat, and began
"Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years.
Your parents, your teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach...but mostly your friends...
I am here to tell all of you that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give
them.
I am going to tell you a story."
I just looked at my friend with disbelief as he told the story of the first day we met.
He had planned to kill himself over the weekend.
He talked of how he had cleaned out his locker so his Mom wouldn't have to do it later
and was carrying his stuff home.
He looked hard at me and gave me a little smile.
"Thankfully, I was saved.
My friend saved me from doing the unspeakable."
I heard the gasp go through the crowd as this handsome, popular boy told us all about
his weakest moment.
I saw his Mom and dad looking at me and smiling that same grateful smile.
Not until that moment did I realize it's depth.
Never underestimate the power of your actions.
With one small gesture you can change a person's life.

Veneration of the Holy Cross

- I. Start off by making sure everyone does the sign of the cross correctly. Many people still are not doing that, so this is a nice review day.
- II. The three fingers together represent the Holy Trinity. The two fingers that are left represent the dual natures of Christ—Human/Divine
- III. Ask the students, why do you think that the church put this particular Sunday as the Sunday of the Holy Cross (answers: it is halfway through Lent and it focuses us on the journey that we are taking and where it is leading)
 - a. The end of the journey obviously is the Resurrection, but as one of our prayers says “Through the CROSS joy has come to all the world.” If Jesus had not died on the cross there would be no resurrection. He had to die like us, He had to pay the penalty of our sins for us.
 - b. Let’s put this a different way. Let’s say that “Maria” wants a candy bar. And let’s say that the candy bar costs \$1. But Maria doesn’t have \$1. So let’s say that “George” is also in the store and he has \$2. And he says that he will pay for Maria’s candy bar and get one for himself. Does the store care if George pays for Maria’s candy bar? No, so long as they get the dollar for the candy bar, it doesn’t matter who pays it. So George pays in place of Maria,
 - c. St. Paul tells us “The wages of sin is death.” That means that because we sin, (and sin is going away from God), that the penalty for our sins is death—and going away from God permanently. So Jesus “pays the penalty” for us by dying on the cross. And because of this, we never have to be permanently separated from God. When we die believing in Jesus, we can go and live with Him in heaven.
 - d. So the Lenten journey isn’t about “deprivation” (fasting), nor is it just rituals. The Lenten journey is about re-education—relearning about Jesus, His death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead. And it is about recharging us, about getting us excited to be Christians.
- IV. The Gospel lesson (re-read March 8:34-9:1) talks about value, specifically the value of a person’s soul. There is nothing that can be valued as high as the soul, and nothing can be given in return for a soul. One can trade a dollar for a candy bar. It didn’t take forever to earn the dollar, and the candy bar won’t last forever, so it is a fair trade. But the soul lasts forever, so you can’t trade anything for it. And if you gain the whole world but lose your soul, then you’ve really failed, because you can’t take the world with you with you die—only your soul goes with you, and it goes to meet the Lord for it’s final judgment—whether it will go to heaven or not.
 - a. The Gospel lesson also tells us that we should not be ashamed of God’s words. We shouldn’t hide our Christianity under a bushel, so no one know that we are Christian. Rather, as one song says “they will know we are Christians by our love.” Part of being a Christian is that people know we are Christians.
- V. Historically, it was about three weeks before Palm Sunday that Jesus started telling His disciples that they were on the way to Jerusalem where He would be crucified and rise from the dead. (This is actually about the time the Transfiguration took place, but because that important feast would have been lost

with all the other stuff going on during Lent, the church moved transfiguration 40 days before Holy Cross Day on September 14). Thus the Veneration of the Holy Cross is half-way through Lent, and about three weeks before Holy Week.

- VI. The holiday is called the “Veneration” of the Holy Cross, meaning that the cross and what it means are very dear to Orthodox Christians. We venerate, meaning we show great respect for the cross—we wear crosses, we put them up with our icons. And on this particular Sunday, we have a procession with the cross, holding it over the heads of everyone in church and kneeling down to let us pass over us. During this procession, we are supposed to pray to God for help in carrying our crosses. (more on this below)
- VII. Whoever wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up His cross and follow me.
 - a. If we want to follow Christ, it requires some kind of commitment. One has to follow, one can’t be a couch-potato Christian. One has to deny himself certain things—things that are attractive but are not Christian, those things have to be denied. For instance, we have to deny ourselves of a desire to hurt people when we are angry, or to steal something we feel we have a right to.
 - b. What does it mean to take up the cross? The cross was a symbol of shame and pain. The cross was heavy—even Jesus needed help carrying His. So, we have to carry the weight of our crosses, confident in our faith that our Lord will help us carry them, to our desired destination (heaven). And we have to help one another to carry the crosses that we each carry. Sometimes people say “I don’t have the strength to carry my cross, can I have a lighter one?”
 - c. Here is a story: In a certain village, there lived a man who was always bemoaning his lot. He was a Christian, and found the weight of his cross too heavy to bear. One night, before going to sleep, he begged God to let him change his burden. That night he had a dream; the Lord led him to a warehouse. The warehouse was filled with crosses—large ones, small ones. The Lord told him to set down his cross and look around the warehouse and choose the cross he wanted to carry. So the man set down his cross and tried out other crosses. One was covered with diamonds and he decided to try that one because it looked regal and expensive. But then it cut into his shoulders. Another one was too big, another too heavy. Finally he looked at a very simple, wooden cross, and said to God “I’ll take this one.” And God said “are you sure? You can have any cross you want in here.” The man said he was sure, he picked up the cross and it felt just right. Then God said, “that is the cross you came in here with.”
 - d. The moral of the story is not that we need to trade in our “crosses” for other crosses, to trade in our challenges for other challenges, but to ask for God’s help in dealing with our challenges, and to help one another deal with the challenges we all face.
 - e. Another thing you can do—ask what are “crosses” that people carry—some are sick, or slow learners, or not good athletes or not popular. How do you help someone carry that cross? How do you deal with your life if that is your cross?

Faith - Fourth Sunday of Lent and St. John of the “Ladder”

What does the word “faith” mean to you? (ask for some answers)

Faith means believing or trusting without fully seeing or comprehending.

Name some things that require faith:

1. Having surgery as an example, you won’t see what they are doing, they put you to sleep, you trust they will operate successfully.
2. You have to trust your teachers that over the course of the year, they are going to teach you something.
3. You have to trust your parents, that they are wiser than you and can help guide you to a good life when you grow up.
4. You have to trust builders of roads, buildings, elevators, etc., that you can pass safely in travel or in a building without getting hurt.
5. Name some other examples or see what the group can come up with.

It doesn’t require faith to sit in a chair that you know is going to hold your weight. Many things in life do not require faith—they require skill. Passing a math test is an example. If you’ve mastered the math skill, you will do well on the test, faith doesn’t figure into that.

When you have faith, you transfer your trust into something or someone else. You let go of control and you trust in someone else. In order to have faith in God, you must let go somewhat of your will for your life and give your will over to God. For instance, you must give over your will to be angry and try to follow after God by being kind. We follow after God and give up some of the control of our lives because we BELIEVE that we are going to inherit the Kingdom of God, everlasting life. Now, we don’t KNOW what that kingdom will be like. None of us have been there, so it might be easy to say that it is hard to believe in the kingdom of God.

Yet God rewards those who believe in Him, even in this life, with little pieces of heaven that He reveals to us. God reveals heavenly things in prayer, in worship, in joy, in love, to those whose hearts are pure and seek after God.

We have to be people of faith in order to enter into the Kingdom of God. We have to believe in the message of Christ, that He came to the world to die for our sins so that we can inherit eternal life.

But we also have to live a life of faith—we have to love God but we also have to love our neighbor. We have to set a good example for our neighbor, help our neighbor, forgive our neighbor.

We have to have ears that are open to God’s call for our lives. God may call us to do things that are difficult—we have to have trust in God’s plan for our lives. Our lives may become difficult—we may face hardship or sickness—people of faith stick with it even when life gets hard.

We may be doubt created in our minds, either through temptation or life circumstances—we have to have faith in order to erase doubt.

And so faith is a struggle—we struggle to live in faith, we struggle to attain perfect faith. This is where a church community comes in, a community helps us when our faith is tested.

This is also where individual prayer comes in. Because prayer strengthens faith. Confession strengthens faith, because it enjoins someone in our faith journey so that we are not making that journey alone.

---Switching gears to a totally different angle on the fourth Sunday of Lent.

We celebrate a saint called St. John of the Ladder. St. John wrote a book, called the Ladder of Divine Ascent, which outline thirty steps to get to heaven.

The 7 include:

Note: these are monastic virtues, and suggestion of them would be dismissed quickly because it is virtually impossible to attain these in a non-monastic life. Yet there are elements to them that are attainable by regular people living in the world.

1. Renunciation of the world
2. Detachment
3. Exile or pilgrimage
4. Obedience
5. Repentance
6. Remembrance of death
7. Joyful mourning
8. Freedom from anger and meekness
9. Remembering wrongs
10. Putting aside slander
11. Silence
12. Putting away lying
13. Putting away sadness
14. Control of the stomach
15. Purity and chastity
16. Putting away material desire
17. Giving away possessions
18. Putting away desires of the mind
19. Constant prayer
20. Keeping vigilant at all times
21. Putting away cowardice
22. Putting away all vanity
23. Putting away any unclean and blasphemous thoughts
24. Simplicity
25. Destroying all passions
26. Discernment of thoughts
27. Stillness of body and soul
28. Attitude of mind and body in prayer
29. Meditation on heaven and perfection

30. Love, faith and hope

There are some things to be learned from the concept of the ladder. You could encourage your students to make their own “ladders” so to speak by mentioning virtues that bring them closer to God.

You could put things like:

1. Knowledge of the things of God
2. Study of the scriptures
3. Consistent prayer
4. Time spent on the things of God
5. Worship
6. Desire to know God
7. Acts of charity
8. Control of our tongue
9. Kindness towards others
10. Love of enemies
11. Obedience to the Commandments

See what your students can come up with—and then maybe make a ladder putting what should come first. For instance, perhaps the first rung of the ladder is “Desire to know God” and the second it “Time spent on the things of God.”

Holy Week-Fifth Sunday of Lent

Two topics to cover today:

I. The fifth Sunday of Lent is dedicated to St. Mary of Egypt. Here is her story:

St. Mary of Egypt was anything *but a Saint* throughout the first part of her life. From a very young age, she was a prostitute. Being from Egypt, she decided that she wanted to see the Holy Land and the Tomb of Christ (also known as the *Church of the Holy Sepulchre*). As she went to enter the Church, a force kept her from entering. She was unable to enter, while so many others did. She realized that God had done this to have her stop her sinning. She promised to God that day she would stop. She repented with a pure heart, and she was allowed to enter. She went for Confession, received Holy Communion, and then went to the desert to live for years in repentance. Years later, she was visited by a Priest-monk, Zosimos (later a Saint in our Church). He gave her Holy Communion, and they discussed her trials and tribulations. Although she suffered much, she was so happy to be with Christ. Later that same day, she fell asleep in the Lord. Her example of repentance is SO great, we commemorate her life many centuries later. St. Mary of Egypt lived from 344-421 A.D.

Lessons of St. Mary of Egypt

~Even if you've really screwed things up, you can still repent (change) and God will still love you and accept you.

~Some of our greatest saints started out as great sinners.

~Our life should be a continual repentance from our sins.

~Confessing sins is not enough—we need repent, change how we live so we can strive to avoid the same sins in the future.

II. We are about to embark on the journey of Holy Week.

- a. This is the most important week in the life of the Orthodox Church
- b. You might ask the students what is their favorite Holy Week service and why?
- c. You might ask the younger ones what do they remember about Holy Week. (My son might mention me throwing leaves on Holy Saturday morning, which then give you an occasion to discuss the meaning of that action, which is that in the ancient Olympics, the champions wore crowns of laurel leaves, the leaves were a sign of victory. The leaves scattered throughout the church are signs of Christ's victory over death.
- d. Next week's lesson will highlight Palm Sunday and Easter. Today I discuss the services of Holy Week, particularly ones that will be attended by our children
- e. Saturday of Lazarus—Father Stavros will show us at 9:30 a.m. how he prepares Holy Communion in a special service that he'll do on the solea called the "Proskomide"
- f. Palm Sunday—Sunday school students will walk in procession commemorating entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on a donkey, when the children went before Him waving Palm Branches.

- g. Palm Sunday night, Holy Monday Night and Holy Tuesday Night—there are three services called the Services of the Bridegroom. Read the Parable of the Ten Maidens—Matthew 25:1-13. The lesson of this parable is that the oil is the faith. We have to be wise with our faith and make sure we have enough of it. In the Bridegroom services, there is an icon of the Nymphios, or Christ as the Bridegroom. It is carried in procession and placed in front of the church.
- h. Holy Wednesday—either in the afternoon or the evening there is a service called Holy Unction—this is where we are anointed for the healing of soul and body—prayers for our health and for forgiveness of our sins are offered by the priest. He then anoints our foreheads (our brains, that they may know God), our chin (our mouth to speak nice things), our cheeks (our eyes that they may see the beautiful things of this life) and our hands (to do good works)
- i. Holy Thursday—The Crucifixion of Christ—We read 12 Gospels about the Arrest, Trial and Crucifixion of Christ. After the fifth Gospel, there is a procession of Christ on the Cross. We then go up and venerate the cross.
- j. Good Friday morning—Reading of the Hours—we read Prophecies foretelling of the Crucifixion of Christ and Gospels of the Crucifixion. We kneel and pray before the Cross.
- k. Good Friday afternoon—The taking down of Christ from the cross. The body of Christ is removed from the cross and placed in a tomb, called the Kouvouklion. The embroidery that depicts Christ going into the tomb is called the Epitaphios.
- l. Good Friday evening—The Lamentations—The funeral service for Christ. We carry the Epitaphios in the Kouvouklion around the outside of the church
- m. Holy Saturday morning—The first announcement of the Resurrection—Leaves are scattered throughout the church as a sign of Christ's victory over death.
- n. Holy Saturday Night—The Resurrection of Christ—At midnight, the lights in church are turned out—the priest has one candle and from that all the candles are lit. We go outside, read the Gospel of the Resurrection, see the empty tomb and sing Christ is Risen—Christ is Risen from the dead by death trampling down death and to those in the tombs He has granted life.
- o. Easter morning—The Gospel is proclaimed in many languages, showing the universal character of the Gospel, and that we are to spread it to all people.

The Scenes of Holy Week

Scene One—The Triumphal Entry

Days: Saturday of Lazarus-Palm Sunday Morning

These two days provide a respite from the austerity and sadness of Great Lent. The Saturday of Lazarus commemorates the miracle of Jesus raising His friend Lazarus from the dead. And it is a foreshadowing of the general resurrection of the dead that is possible for all through Christ's Resurrection. Palm Sunday commemorates the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Jesus enters the city on a donkey and is met by thousands of people who wave palm branches and sing praises to him.

Observations: The colors for these two days are lighter, generally white on Saturday of Lazarus because of this is a Resurrectional liturgy and green on Palm Sunday. The

Divine Liturgy both days is that of St. John Chrysostom. Both days are joyful in tone and nature.

Scene Two—Beginning of Holy Week-the Final Teachings/Plotting the Betrayal

Days: Palm Sunday evening through Holy Wednesday morning

As day changes to night on Palm Sunday, the joy of the morning fades to reflective sadness on what lies ahead. The journey of the next three days is a mixture of Christ telling His followers of the end times and to remain vigilant and narrative of the Chief Priests and the plot against Christ.

The Bridegroom services are actually Orthros (Matins) or morning services, celebrated the evening before by anticipation, i.e. the Orthros of Holy Monday is celebrated Palm Sunday evening by anticipation. The name of this service comes from the central figure in the well-known parable of the ten maidens (Mt. 25:1-13). The Kingdom of God is compared to the bridal feast and the Christ of the Passion is the Divine Bridegroom of the Church. The title Bridegroom also suggests the Parousia or Second Coming. The central hymn of these services is "Behold the Bridegroom comes in the middle of the night. . ." and is a reminder to all of us that we must be vigilant in our faith. On Palm Sunday evening, we have the procession of the icon of the Nymphios. The Nymphios service is also celebrated on Holy Monday in the evening and Holy Tuesday in the evening, and the choir will also sing the Hymn of Kassiane during the service Holy Tuesday evening.

Observations: The Icon of the Nymphios/Bridegroom, is carried in procession on Sunday evening and remains in the middle of the church sanctuary until after the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy on Wednesday morning. The Bridegroom service is held on Palm Sunday, Holy Monday and Holy Tuesday evenings with the Pre-Sanctified Liturgy being held on Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday and Holy Wednesday mornings. The colors worn at these services are traditionally purple and black. The lights are kept dim for these services. Last year, for the first time, we instituted the tradition of the "maidens" (taken from the aforementioned scripture) who keep vigil around the icon of Christ the Bridegroom.

Scene Three—The Upper Room

Days: Holy Wednesday Evening-Holy Thursday morning

The theme now changes to one of healing, as we commemorate the washing of the feet and the institution of the Holy Eucharist. On Holy Wednesday evening, we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Unction and on Holy Thursday morning, the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great. The Mystery of Holy Unction is established upon the words and actions of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a sacrament of healing and transformation from a bruised and hurt world to the deliverance from sin and corruption.

Observations: The Icon of the Last Supper is displayed at both services. Traditionally crimson or deep red is worn on Holy Thursday, symbolizing the blood of Christ instituted in the New Covenant of Holy Communion and shed for the life and salvation of the world on the Cross. The Divine Liturgy of Holy Thursday morning has a joyful tone to it.

Scene Four—The Passion and Death of Christ

Days: Holy Thursday evening, Good Friday morning and Good Friday afternoon

The journey of Holy Week now goes into high gear. We move from the upper room, to the Garden of Gethsemane, to the Betrayal, the Torture, the Trial, the road to Golgotha, the Crucifixion, Death and Burial of the Lord. Between these three services, 17 Gospel passages are read, almost half of the Holy Week total. The first Gospel on Holy Thursday evening is the long discourse and High Priestly Prayer of Christ and is a beautiful passage on love and friendship. The Procession of the Crucified Christ occurs after the fifth Gospel. The faithful have an opportunity to kneel and pray before the Cross. The service of the Hours on Good Friday morning is traditionally not well attended, which almost seems appropriate. Very few followers hung on to witness the Crucifixion of the Lord. Most fled to their homes. The service of the Hours has little fanfare or pageantry, but is a quiet vigil watching over the Lord on the Cross. The Vespers of the Descent of the Cross is a good service to attend particularly if you cannot attend the other two. It summarizes the events of the previous two services adding the burial of Christ in the tomb. The body of Christ is removed from the cross and wrapped in a white linen sheet. It is entombed on the altar table for the remainder of the service and is not put back up on the cross until the Ascension forty days after Pascha.

Observations: The vestments worn at these services are purple and black. Good Friday is the only day of the year when no Divine Liturgy can be held. Also no funeral services can be done on Good Friday—the only funeral is that of the Lord. The Icon displayed is the Icon of the Crucifixion.

Scene Five—The Lamentations

Day: Good Friday Evening

This is a service of transition between the sadness of Holy Thursday and the joy of the Resurrection. The color worn at this service is traditionally gold or red. The lights are turned up again for the first time since Palm Sunday. This service is highlighted by the singing of the Lamentations and the procession around the outside of the church with the tomb of the Lord. In terms of the Holy Week narrative, however, very little is covered. The Gospel is only 4 verses long and is a repeat of the 12th Gospel of Holy Thursday night. The Prophecy of Ezekiel and the Epistle reading from the book of Corinthians are important scriptural references. The icon displayed for this service is the icon of the Extreme Humility. It shows Christ going into the tomb with the cross in the background. *Many people flock to the Good Friday service for the “pageantry”—the Lamentations, the Procession, etc. In my opinion, while this is one of my favorite services in Holy Week to celebrate, it is not one of the most important. Certainly Holy Thursday evening, the Gospel narratives of the Passion and the Procession of the Crucified Christ rank of higher importance. So, while I encourage you to attend as many services of the week as possible, I would actually consider this service not as important as many others.*

Scene Six—The Empty Tomb

Days: Holy Saturday Morning-Holy Saturday Evening-Easter Sunday

There are two Paschal Liturgies, that is two liturgies that commemorate the Resurrection of Christ. In the ancient church, there was an all-night vigil commemorating the Resurrection with the Vespers and Liturgy of St. Basil being held in the evening hours of Holy Saturday, the Resurrection Service at midnight, and the Orthros and Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom being held on Sunday morning. In recent centuries, this has been changed. The Resurrection service is still held at midnight. The Orthros and Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom follow immediately, from 12:30-2:00 a.m. And the Vespers and Liturgy of St. Basil have been transposed to Holy Saturday morning. Thus, we proclaim the Resurrection with "Arise o God," "Anasta o Theos," from the morning of Holy Saturday. The Holy Saturday morning Liturgy commemorates the first announcement of the Resurrection to those who were in Hades. Jesus Christ descended into Hades and bestowed eternal life to those who had been held captive there. The Resurrection Service and the Liturgy which follows commemorate the Resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Observations: The color for Pascha traditionally is White. On Holy Saturday morning, bay leaves are scattered throughout the church as a sign of Christ's victory over Hades and death. Prophecies foretelling the Resurrection are read, including the Prophecy of Jonah and the whale (the three days Jonah spends in the belly of the whale foreshadow the three days of Christ in the tomb) and the Prophecy of Daniel (The three youths saved from the fiery furnace). The Liturgy of St. Basil follows. This is a longer liturgy than that of St. John Chrysostom. The Resurrection service begins with the chanting of the Canon of Good Friday at 11:00 p.m. This is a summary, if you will, of the events of Holy Week. There is an actual closing to the period of the Great Lent, where petitions are said for the well-being of the community as we close the Lenten season and anticipate the Resurrection. The Great and Holy Lent concludes with "Through the Prayers of our Holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy on us and save us." This is traditionally how we end all the services in our church, except for those services between Easter and Ascension. "Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers. . ." will not be said again in the church until Ascension. The lights in the church are completely extinguished, except for the Vigil Candle on the Altar Table.

The priest lights his candle from a solitary light in the altar, the vigil candle that is in front of the tabernacle. He comes through the Royal Doors and chants "Come receive the Light, from the everlasting Light and glorify Christ, who is risen from the dead." The light is then "passed" to all in the church. A procession is made outside to the empty tomb, where the Gospel of the Resurrection is read and we sing "Christos Anesti-Christ is Risen" proclaiming the Resurrection of Christ. We then return to the church and turn all the lights on, and celebrate the Divine Liturgy for the "feast of feasts" the Resurrection of our Lord.

Having celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the early hours of the morning, there is no Liturgy at 10:00 a.m. on Easter Sunday, ironically the only Sunday of the year where that is the case. On Easter Sunday morning, we celebrate the Agape Vespers from 11:00 a.m.-noon. This is a brief service where we chant "Christos Anesti" many times and read the Gospel in many languages. This is a reminder to us that we are to share the good news of the Resurrection of Christ to all peoples in all languages.

Palm Sunday

Read the Scripture Readings:

Philippians 4:4-13—READ over this passage, giving emphasis to the highlighted words—what does each of these words or phrases mean?

⁴ **Rejoice** (*be full of joy, do not despair*) in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!

⁵ Let your **gentleness** (*be kind to others, as the Lord is kind to us*) be known to all men. The Lord *is* at hand.

⁶ Be **anxious for nothing**, (*when we put our trust in the Lord, there is no need to be anxious*) but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; ⁷ and the **peace of God, which surpasses all understanding**, (*the only thing in the world that is not fleeting is the peace of God, because being at peace with God is THE thing we can carry into eternal life*) will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brethren, whatever things are **true**, whatever things *are noble*, whatever things *are just*, whatever things *are pure*, whatever things *are lovely*, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any **virtue** and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.⁹ (*the things we need to be concerned with in life are things that are good, pure, lovely, and virtuous. We should not be concerned with popularity, riches, good looks, vanity or material gain*) The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰ But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, **to be content**: (*we should learn to be content and grateful for what we have, not always striving for what is beyond us, not being greedy*) ¹² I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. ¹³ **I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.** (*with God all things are possible, and only with God are certain things possible, and when we have God, we are strengthened to survive every circumstance that life throws at us.*)

The Gospel lesson speaks of Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

While many followers thought that Jesus would enter the holy city on a chariot with an army behind Him, he came in humility on a donkey.

Explain what is humility and ask, is humility a sign of strength or weakness.

Humility doesn't mean to roll over and not have an opinion or fight for yourself. It means to think of serving others before serving yourself.

One of the hymns of the service today is "God is the Lord and has revealed Himself to us. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

Christ revealed Himself not with glory, but with humility. Christ wants us to live our lives with humility, with service to others.

When Christ entered Jerusalem, the children went before Him carrying palm branches and laying their clothes on the ground so he could pass over them.

So, in our service today, the children walk in procession in front of the priest who is carrying the Gospel, the Word of God, representing Christ and His entry into Jerusalem.

During this Holy Week, we will re-enact the scenes of the first Holy Week, the first of which is the entry into Jerusalem which we commemorate today.

Review with the children the highlights of the week, based on the services the children in your class will most likely go to.

Holy Wednesday—receiving Holy Unction, being anointed with Holy oil for healing of soul and body.

Good Friday morning—the crucifixion of Christ, keeping vigil at His Cross

Good Friday afternoon—The un-nailing from the Cross and placing of Christ into the tomb.

Holy Saturday—the announcement of the resurrection, the scattering of the leaves of victory in the church

Pascha (tell students we call it Pascha, not Easter)—AGAPE vespers—the reading of the Gospel in many languages, reminding us that we are to spread the Gospel, the good news, to everyone.

Sunday of St. Thomas

Ask students for their thoughts on our recent Holy Week experience

What was your favorite service and why? What do you remember from Holy Week? Did you learn anything? For students who went to the Good Friday retreat, did they learn anything?

Discuss the reaction of different people to the resurrection of Christ

~The soldiers guarding the tomb Matthew 28—they were worried they'd lost their jobs

~The Pharisees—Matthew 28 Paid the soldiers money to cover up the empty tomb story, tell people that disciples came and stole the body

~Two disciples in the country—Luke 24—still don't understand the significance of what had happened in Jerusalem.

~Mary Magdalene and the other mary—

 In Matthew 28:9, they worship with joy when they encounter Christ

 In Mark 16, they are afraid and say nothing to anyone

 In Luke, they are perplexed but tell the disciples about the Resurrection

 In John, Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus and she tells the other disciples

In Mark 16, Disciples are skeptical of account of Mary Magdalene

And In John 20, we encounter Thomas, who doubts about the resurrection. He says that unless he sees the imprint of the nails in the hands of Jesus, he won't believe in the Resurrection. Despite the fact that 11 disciples are telling Thomas that they have seen the Lord, he still will not believe them.

What things make us doubt God?

 That there is a God

 Or that God has a plan for our lives

Possible answers are when bad things happen to people, or when our life is not going well and we wonder why, or when we pray for something and it doesn't happen for us.

What things help us know that there is a God, and that He has a plan for our lives?

Possible answers include things like the beauty of God's creation all around us, the gifts and talents that each person has, things that happen that are so co-incidental that it has to be God who has arranged a certain thing to happen.

8 days after the Resurrection, Jesus appears to the 11 disciples and Thomas is there with them. (as an aside, why are there 11 disciples and not 12—because Judas betrayed Jesus; and who replaced Judas among the 12—a man named Matthias was named as the 12th disciple to replace Judas.) Jesus appears to all the disciples including Thomas. Now Thomas believes and confesses Jesus as "My Lord and my God." Jesus says to him "Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet believe." The challenge to Christianity is not seeing but still believing.

We believe in Christ and in the Resurrection though we have not witnessed it ourselves. We believe through the testimony of others and through our own experience of God (in nature, in our lives). That means we KNOW up to a certain point and we take the rest of faith.

The goal of the Christian life is not to be faithless, and Not to require proof of everything, but to take things on faith.

We believe that heaven is a place where those who believe in Christ will go. But even those who have died can't tell us about heaven. We have to make our own choice to work and to believe that God is going to take care of us, rewarding us for our faith in Him.

Faith is believing without seeing or completely knowing. We have to show faith everyday—in others, in ourselves—give some examples of faith

If you feel comfortable to share, share moments about your faith and your moment of doubt

Roles in the Church and the Great Commission

Read Matthew 28: 16-20 The Great Commission

Read Luke 19:1-10 The story of Zaccheus

These two passages tell us a lot about the role of the church and why we have a church.

The church exists to

Spread the Gospel to all Nations Matthew 28:16-20

Seek and to save the lost Luke 19:1-10

What does that mean?

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is called the Evangelion, the Good News. Good news is meant to be shared.

What is the good news? That Jesus came to live among us and show us the way to salvation.

Read John 3:16 For God so loved the world. . .

Read John 1:1-17 We beheld His glory. . .

Christ wants us to share this news with all nations, not just Greeks, or Americans, not just with the people who come to our church, or our friends. He wants us to share it every nation, every person.

To baptize everyone in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity, this means that we are to encourage everyone to believe like us—in God the Father, in Jesus His Son and in the Holy Spirit.

Seeking and saving the lost—the story of Zacchaeus. In every city, in every school, in every neighborhood and every church, there are people who are lost

Because they are sad

Confused

Trapped

Unsure

Have no self-confidence

Other examples

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and the lost person that day was Zacchaeus, and Jesus went to him and ministered to him.

The church is supposed to be like a hospital—there are two kinds of people in hospitals: those who are sick and those who are trying to heal them. There are two kinds of people in the spiritual hospital as well—those who are ill and those who are trying to heal them. If you are spiritually ill, the church has ways to treat spiritual illness—worship, Communion, confession, prayer, counseling, etc. When you are spiritually ill, come to the church for spiritual healing. Each of us needs the spiritually healing that only comes from the church and from Christ.

Now, there are many roles for healing in a hospital—it's not just the doctor or the surgeon. There are specialists, nurses, administrators, food services, people who keep the hospital clean, researchers, etc. Lots of roles.

And there are lots of roles in the church to help the church function in its mission, to baptize all nations, and to seek and to save the lost.

The priest—the most obvious one—the priest is the spiritual leader, directs the life of the church, leads the worship, etc. And we certainly need priests in our church. People who end up as priests feel a calling from God to this ministry. If a young man feels he has this calling, this is something to pray about and to discuss with your priest.

But there are many other roles in the church

Altar boys—serve in the altar and assist the priest at services

Music ministry—people sing in the choir or serve as the chanter, singing the responses at the services

Teachers—we need people to teach Sunday school, offer Bible studies (we currently have small group Bible studies in our church led not by the priest but by people of the community)

We need people to visit the sick, offer rides to those who can't get to church

Charitable giving—doing volunteer work with Community Outreach or Philoptcohos, or donating to the food pantry

Volunteering to help at the festival

Volunteering to help with social media, or streaming the services

Being a youth advisor

Serving on the Parish Council

Being on the welcoming committee

Volunteering at events or in the office

Being a faithful Christian, worshipping regularly and setting an example for others.

Donating time, talent or money to various ministries and causes

There are lots of roles in the church, and there is certainly a role for everyone.

Spreading the Gospel—the GREAT COMMISSION—is not a suggestion, it is a requirement. We are required to be servants of the Lord and the church, and we are required to become recruiters for the faith as well.

Talents/Gifts

Read Matthew 25: 14-30, the Parable of the Talents

Discuss the lessons of this parable

In the parable, a “talent” is a sum of money, with each talent equaling about 10 years with of work, so a lot of money.

The master is the Lord.

The servants are us.

For our purposes, a “talent” can mean just that “a talent” or a skill

In our life everyone gets talents. We have them temporarily, for as long as we live. At the end of our lives, the master will return to see how we did with his investments in us—we will all stand before God and answer to Him how we did with the Gifts He gave to us.

- I. Everyone has a gift
 - a. Ask the students what they think some of their gifts are
- II. Everyone got a different gift—as in the parable, some got five, some got two, some got one. Likewise every person has something that is unique and special about them
 - a. Ask each student to name something unique about them.
- III. There is no one who got no gifts.
 - a. Ask the students why not everyone gets the same talents, what would happen if everyone had the same talents
 - b. Ask students who is more important, the doctor or the farmer (answer-they are both important—with no farmers we have no food, however most parents would rather see their child as a doctor rather than a farmer.
 - c. Life lesson—whatever talent you have, it is needed, but do your talent well.
- IV. Not everyone is a good steward of their talents. As in the parable, some go out and make something of what they have, others bury it in the ground
 - a. Can you think of an example of someone burying a talent in the ground (someone who could be a talented doctor or lawyer but who breaks the law and ends up in jail, now their talent goes to waste.) Some people can be good students but they don’t try hard.
- V. We’re supposed to be good stewards of our talents—do the best we can with what we have been given.
- VI. We shouldn’t be jealous if we got certain talents but not others—God expects us to do the best we can with what WE have, not with what someone else has.
- VII. In the parable, the man with the 5 talents and the man with the 2 talents were rewarded equally, because both made the most with what they had. The man with the 5 wasn’t rewarded MORE than the man with the 2 just because his outcome was more.
- VIII. In our society, we tend to think that more is better. If a man starts with 5 and ends up with 6, and another man starts off with 2 and ends up with 4, in the eyes of society, the one with 6 is better than the one with 4 because 6 is more than 4. However, in the eyes of God, the one with the 6 would be a failure because he started out with more and should have ended with more.
- IX. God makes an investment in each of us—He invests some of Himself, in each of us. He expects a return on His investment.
 - a. If someone gave you \$1,000, what would you do with it? If you spend it all on candy or video games, did you really do something with this gift or just

- waste it. Our gifts are supposed to be used for God's glory and the benefit of those around us.
- X. The man with the one talent was afraid to use his talent and buried it in the ground.
 - a. How do we bury our talents?
 - b. Why do we bury our talents? (usually fear)
 - XI. The man told the master that he was afraid. And so he hid the talent he had been given.
 - XII. The master told the man that fear was not an excuse. So, if you have a talent or a calling and you run from that calling out of fear, God will not be pleased. Many times answering a call is a hard thing to do. Not all calls are easy to answer—going to college, or graduate school, or serving in the military, or surviving medical residency, or following the call to the priesthood, and other examples—these things are hard.
 - XIII. Those who do not use their talents will be punished.
 - XIV. Those who use their talents, to the glory of God and to help their fellow man, these will be rewarded.
 - XV. In your youth, you are supposed to discover what your talents are and prepare to use them throughout your life.
 - XVI. Think about things you are good at and enjoy doing. Think of things that are unique about you. Pray and listen for the call of God in your heart—doing these things will help you figure out what your calling in life is. Prayer and faith will help you fulfill that call.

The Sacramental Life of the Orthodox Church

What does the word Sacrament Mean? The word "sacrament" is actually a "Catholic" word—the Greek word "Mysteria", the Holy Mysteries.

The Holy Mysteries—how God unites with man and how man unites with God

The Holy Spirit effects all the sacraments—meaning we call down the Holy Spirit to make each Sacrament take effect—i.e. the Holy Spirit consecrates bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

All of our sacraments are founded in scripture, but there are rituals associated with each sacrament and these are "fleshed out" in Apostolic writings, Ecumenical Councils, a Liturgical books on Tradition, called the "Typikon" which is a book that explains how the different rituals are carried out and it is a book that is accepted by all Orthodox Churches around the world. (There are slight differences between the Slavic Churches and Byzantine Churches, and also slight differences between Patriarchates and Autocephalous Churches).

Some debate over the number “seven” in regards to the sacraments. Some people write that prayer is a sacrament. Others write that the funeral service should be considered a sacrament.

But the seven sacraments in the Orthodox Church are—Baptism, Chrismation, Communion/Eucharist, Holy Unction, Confession, Marriage, Ordination

Two are sacraments of initiation—Baptism and Chrismation—done one time—these are done in order for one to join the church. If one has not been baptized, both baptism and chrismation as well as first Communion are done in one service. In the event one joins the church having been baptized in another church, they are not re-baptized, but are Chrismated and then receive communion.

Two are optional sacraments—Marriage and Ordination—meaning that you don’t need to have either sacrament to have a full life and attain salvation.

Three are sacraments to be done on a regular basis—comprise what is called the “sacramental life”. In the sacramental life, we participate regularly in Communion (pre-supposing that we are praying, fasting, living in accordance with the Commandments, etc.), Confession (at least 1-2 times per year) and Holy Unction (at least once per year but can be done at any time)

Sacraments of initiation

BAPTISM

Great Commission—Matthew 28:19-20—Baptize all nations

Pre-Jesus—baptism was a ritual washing, done repeatedly. That’s what John the Baptist was doing in the wilderness. That’s why he was called John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer. Baptism pre-Christ was similar to our current concept of confession, it was done repeatedly, once or twice per year.

Concept of unity with God—a “mark” of unity—The First Covenant (in Genesis 15)—

Circumcision—the mark with a sign that one is a child of God.

In words of St. Paul, there is neither circumcision or uncircumcision, but a new creation—“circumcision of the heart”—our mark is baptism

Baptize by immersion, in the name of the Trinity

Symbolically, this re-enacts death and Resurrection of Christ—we die to sin, to live in Christ. Sin is drowned in the waters of baptism.

Why infants?—Because you can’t limit God’s power to age or intelligence

Order of service—

Catechism—a desire to join, reciting of the Creed. Exorcisms are offered over the person being baptized, asking for all evil to depart from them and never again enter into them.

The person being baptized, or their sponsor, recites the Creed, indicating a desire to join the church by pledging their belief in God.

The priest blesses the water in the baptismal font and the person who is getting baptized is immersed in the font three times

Chrismation is done immediately after the baptism (see below). The then person is tonsured—has their hair cut as a sign of thanksgiving to God. Then they receive Communion for the first time.

CHRISMATION

One must be born of water, “and the Spirit.” (John 3:5-unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God)

Pentecost—the Disciples Receive the Holy Spirit

Baptism makes one a Christian, that’s why we recognize baptisms in name of Holy Trinity from other denominations

Chrismation makes one Orthodox, as the Holy Spirit enters into them. Chrismation is also a “mark” on us as God’s people. Chrism received one time, it is different from oil of Holy Unction.

How Chrism is made—it is distributed by clergy but consecrated by Patriarch in Constantinople and given to all the churches in the world. Chrism is a special oil made from 40 types of oil and flowers from all seven continents.

Chrismation is done immediately after baptism of infants, or to adults who have already been baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity.

Optional Sacraments

MARRIAGE-Founded in Genesis 2—when God creates woman from man, because man finds nothing in creation that is his equal. The first miracle of Christ was at the wedding at Cana, water becoming wine, lesser becoming greater, with the blessings of God.

John 2: 1-11

Sacrament of Marriage used to be done in context of Liturgy—couple received Communion. After 1054, service moved to an independent service, no Communion

There are two services—service of Betrothal and service of Crowning. Service of Betrothal was done at time of engagement—no longer the case—because that is when the promise to be married was given. After period of engagement, then the relationship was crowned in marriage. Now the two services are done together.

Three marriages in church are allowed.

One party to the marriage must be Orthodox, the other baptized in the name of the Trinity

Marriage is done out of “need.” Those who are self-sufficient “need” not be married. One need not be married in order to reach the kingdom of God. In heaven, there is neither married or given in marriage.

Marriage is also NOT to have children—they are a bi-product of a marital union. A marriage can be successful without having children. Goal of marriage is mutual salvation.

Parts of the Marriage Service

Blessing of rings—a ring is a pledge or promise so the couple pledges their lives to each other

Holding Candles—representing the Light of Christ

Joining of Hands—God consecrating the union of two people in a physical and spiritual way

Putting on the crowns—symbolize the crowns of Martyrdom, the couple is supposed to “die” to each one’s individual needs to the benefit of the couple.

The Common Cup of wine—everything in the married life is shared in common

The Dance of Isaiah—a procession around the marriage table three times in the name of the Trinity, with the priest leading the way with the book of the Gospels.

The removal of the crowns—the earthly marriage should be broken only in death.

ORDINATION, also called Holy Orders—also an optional sacrament. Only for men who are “called” by God to be clergy.

This is found in the Old Testament in Exodus and Leviticus with instructions for the priesthood from the tribe of the Levites.

In the New Testament, found in John 20:21—As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Service of Ordination—Acts 6—seek out men of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. They prayed and laid their hands on them.

Orders of the Clergy-

DEACON-Assists

PRIEST—Celebrates

BISHOP-Teaches

The Deacon does not serve alone.

The Bishop is the Typos Christou, who stands in the place of Christ, that’s why icon of Christ on the Bishop’s throne.

The priest serves in place of the Bishop, since not every community has a Bishop. When the Bishop is present though, he becomes the head celebrant and offers the sermon.

Role of the priest is teaching, preaching and healing (services). The priest is the bishop’s representative in a parish—the priest is the head of that parish where he serves. The Bishop makes the decision on where priests serve and for how long they serve a particular parish.

One must be a deacon before becoming a priest, and a priest before becoming a Bishop.

Bishops taken from the ranks of the unmarried clergy.

At each rank, there is an ordination—Three times around the altar table, same hymns as at a wedding, a laying on of hands (three Bishops ordain a Bishop, one Bishop ordains priest and Deacon), a prayer of the Holy Spirit, vesting with vestments of each rank, and the people confirm the ordination with the AXIOS (Worthy)

At each Ordination—the person getting ordained offers an address to his ordaining bishop, he goes around the altar table three times, he kneels and the Bishop lays his stole and his hands over the priest and prays for him to be ordained to either be a deacon, priest or bishop. Then the newly ordained is given the vestments of his position and the people say AXIOS (worthy) for that person to be deacon, priest or bishop.

The Deacon is ordained after the consecration and before the Lord's prayer—because he assists with Communion but does not consecrate the Gifts.

The Priest is ordained after the Great Entrance but before the Consecration, because the primary job of the priest is to be the celebrant of the services and consecrate the gifts.

The Bishop is ordained right before the Epistle Reading because his primary job is to teach on the scriptures.

At each rank, there are titles—Bishop (Metropolitan, Archbishop, Patriarch)

Priest (Confessor, Ekonomos, Protopresbyter, Archimandrite)

Deacon (Archdeacon)

SACRAMENTS IN WHICH WE REGULARLY PARTICIPATE

HOLY COMMUNION (Eucharist)

"Take, eat, this is my Body." "Drink of this all of you, this is My Blood." "Do this in Remembrance of Me." (Last Supper)

"For as often as You eat this bread and drink this cup, you confess the Lord's Death and Resurrection until He comes. (I Corinthians 13)

The operative word is "often." We are supposed to receive the Eucharist often.

In early church, Eucharist part of an Agape meal, in the evening, like the last supper.

By end of first century, it is moved to morning hours, between 3rd and 6th hour of the morning. Meaning between 9-12 in the morning. A separate service develops

Outline of liturgy

Service of Preparation—of Gifts—this is called the Proskomide and is done before the Liturgy begins. Father Stavros does this service on Saturday of Lazarus for people to see—on all other occasions it is done privately in the altar.

Liturgy of the Word

Prayers/Petitions/Hymns/Readings

Liturgy of the Faithful

Great Entrance

Creed

Anaphora (offering/Consecration of the Gifts)

Communion

Dismissal

This is first developed by St. James, later edited by St. Basil, and later edited by St. John Chrysostom.

Communion initially done every day, tradition of "Breakfast"—you are not supposed to eat before Liturgy, so people would come to liturgy every day, first thing in the morning, receive Communion and then break the fast by having breakfast.

Later, Liturgy was done on Sundays and major feastdays (still done every day in monasteries)

We have Liturgy about 100 times a year in parish use.
How often should one receive—as often as he is prepared—through fasting, prayer, worship, confession, charity.

HOLY UNCTION

Whoever among you is sick, let the elders of the church come and anoint him with oil (James 5:14)

Parable of the Good Samaritan—bound up the wounds using wine and oil (Eucharist and Unction) (Luke 10)

The Seven-Time washing of Namaan the Syrian in the book of Kings is the reason why the service contains 7 Epistles, 7 Gospels and 7 Prayers

Service of Holy Unction—sanctifying of oil by the priest

7 Epistles, 7 Gospels, 7 Prayers

Then the faithful are anointed with the Holy Unction, for healing of soul and body. Holy Unction does not take the place of medical science, will not cure a broken leg, but Holy Unction helps to heal a wounded soul that is often caused by a wounded body.

Done each year on Holy Wednesday. Should be done more frequently, like once a month, or during fast periods. Used in time of illness

Because there was no set interval for Holy Unction, it was put at once a year on Holy Wednesday, in the middle ages, to make sure it got done at least once a year.

CONFESSION

John 20:21-22—whatever sins you forgive are forgiven; whatever sins you retain are retained—Christ gives the Apostles the authority to bind and loose sins.

(Apostolic Succession—Bishops, translated to priests to this day)

Purpose of confession

We all sin—repentance is how we atone for sins, through the discernment of the priest, who listens to the repentant heart and grants absolution

A Recommitment to Christ—when we repent of our sins, we are recommitting ourselves to Christ.

An opportunity to be unburdened of guilt

An opportunity to repent—make a plan for repentance

Mechanics of confession

Tradition of a Spiritual Father—you choose someone as your spiritual father and ask him to join you in your spiritual journey. The spiritual father is akin to a spiritual doctor.

Why confession is done face to face—because you receive tangible permission to not feel any guilt for your sins, and you get needed guidance as well as the prayer of absolution. The priest also represents the church—in ancient church confession was done publicly, now it is done privately with the priest representing the church.

You should prepare a list for confession—things you've done wrong, things you want to do better at.

Sacrament is actually absolution—the putting away of all of your sins.

How often should confession be done—at least once a year and then “as needed”, in times of spiritual sadness or struggle.

Who should be your spiritual father? It could be your parish priest, another priest in our area, you could go at summer camp or at a retreat or to a monastery, but you should go with someone you know and trust.

The Light of Christ Illumines All people

Darkness is the absence of Light—if you make your Sunday school room as dark as possible, by shutting off the lights in the room, it might be too dark to read, but not too dark to see.

If you close your eyes but look at a light with your eyes closed, you can still perceive light, that it is light in the room.

If you put your hands over your eyes, then it is totally dark, there is no light.

If you are in a totally dark room but light one candle, you will not see well, but you will see. Because darkness is the total absence of light.

Christ is the Light of the World—Jesus said “I am the Light of the World; He who follow me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

John 1—Christ is the true light who enlightens every person who comes into the world, and the darkness cannot overtake the light.

Light not only gives us the ability to see, but the light of the sun promotes growth of plants and warmth. Without light, we would most certainly die.

The first thing God created was Light. Those who walk in the light know where they are going.

John 11:9-10 If any one walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰ But if any one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.

So when we come to church to worship, the FIRST thing we do is light a candle. Why?

1. Because the candle represents the Light of Christ
2. Because we want that Light in us.
3. If we've had a bad week, we can re-light the fire in our souls.
4. If the week has been a good one, we can strengthen our light.
5. Wherever we are going to go in the week that is to come, we want the light of Christ to light the way for us.
6. Lighting a candle is a very personal thing—it is asking for the Light of Christ to come into US.

Making Faith Personal

Faith is a possession—it's something we can have. But it is not a material possession—you can't put a value on it or hold it in your hand. Faith is also something that once you have it, no one can take it away from you.

Faith is not an accomplishment—it is not an end. Faith is a journey, and we are on that journey for our whole lives. The journey will never end as long as we are alive. So you can't master the faith, but you can continually grow in faith and deepen your faith.

Faith is not a destination—the destination is heaven/eternal life. Faith is what aids us on our journey.

Faith is something that has to be personal to you—you can't have the faith of your parents. Your parents can teach you about the faith or encourage your faith, but you ultimately have to claim faith for yourself. Because faith isn't material or tangible, a person can't take their faith, cut it in half and share it with someone else, the way you can cut a sandwich in half and share it with someone.

Faith is also a choice—it can't be imposed on someone. I can't force someone to have faith. I can teach about the faith but the choice to believe is left up to each person.

We put our faith in the person of Jesus Christ—faith is personal, it relates to our relationship with Jesus Christ as God, as Lord, as Savior, as guide, as hope.

Any relationship requires time, communication and trust.

You can't have much of a relationship with someone if you don't spend time. A parent can be a parent in name only—but if a parent spends no time with a child, then they are not much of a parent. Being a parent requires a lot more than just giving birth to a child, it requires time and dedication to that child. And so, as Christians, we have to spend time on our relationship with Christ. And that time is spent in prayer, in worship, in loving one another, obeying the commandments, etc.

A relationship requires communication—

In Christian terms, the relationship includes PRAYER—where we speak to God, and WORSHIP—where God speaks to us. Communication also includes listening and watching the words and examples of other Christian people. It also includes speaking about the faith and being a good example to others, being a good communicator of the faith.

Faith requires trust—and trust means not always knowing the outcome of something but doing it anyway. Faith is not a blind faith though, faith is often based on the experiences of other people—if someone went to college and enjoyed the experience and it made them who they are today, you can take the word of a parent or a friend that college is a good thing and you can pack up and go to college, even though you've never been to college before. At some point in life, our experience of college is based solely on the experience of others. If we are in high school, we listen to what people are telling us about college, that it is necessary, that we will like it, and at some point we make up our mind and we go to college. And then at some point, we decide we like

college for ourselves, not because of what others have said but because of what WE know and have experienced for ourselves. And at some point, when we have children or when we have younger friends, we become ambassadors for the college experience, encouraging others who have not been to go.

It's kind of the same thing with our Christian faith--

The bottom line is that our relationship with Jesus Christ, our guiding Light, has to be personal. Until it is personal, we have to keep relying on the experiences of others. But at some point, we have to make the decision for ourselves. And once we make the relationship personal, and not what we have heard from others, we become more convinced that our faith and our relationship with Christ is a great thing. And the more convinced we become of this, the more easily we are able to encourage others to grow in their faith as well.

Traditions

A Tradition in the Orthodox Church is something that is done the same way all over the Orthodox world. For instance, there is a Tradition for how we celebrate the Divine Liturgy—it is done the same way around the world. There is a Tradition for how a church is set up—icons, altar, etc.

A Tradition becomes a Tradition when the Church (as a whole) decides something needs to be changed, and “codifies” it through either a decree from the Patriarchate, or in years past through an Ecumenical Council.

There are many Traditions in our church. Most of them are based in Scripture and then “fleshed out” in traditions that are universally accepted. Here are some examples:

Memorial Service—In John 12, Jesus says “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” So, we pray for those who have died and we do so by offering boiled wheat. There are Saturdays of the Souls set aside for honoring the dead. Why Saturday? Because that was the day that Christ laid in the tomb. Why 40 days after someone dies are we doing a memorial service? Because 40 is an important interval in the Bible. 40 days after the Resurrection was the Ascension of Christ. This is why we offer the memorial service at 40 days.

40 Days for a Baby—There was a tradition from the Old Testament that babies were brought to the temple when they were 40 days old (girls 80 days). So when Jesus was born to Mary, on the 40th day after the Nativity, Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the Temple to do for him what the law required. A priest in the temple named Symeon, had been promised by God that he would not die until he saw the Christ. So, when he saw the baby Jesus, he knew it was the Christ. He took the child in his arms and said “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to Your word, for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light to enlighten the Gentiles and glory to Your people Israel.” This is all told in the Gospel of Luke chapter two. This is why babies, boys and girls, are brought to church for the first time when they are 40 days old. This Tradition has its roots in scripture. Now there is a universal service that has been written for this occasion, which is done the same way everywhere. There are four prayers that are read, two for the mother, one for the new child and one for the family. The baby is then carried into the church by the priest, who offers the prayer of St. Symeon—over the boys this is done in the altar, over the girls, outside the altar.

Artoklasia—blessing of the loaves—In the Gospel accounts, we read about how Christ blessed five loaves of bread and two fish and with them fed five thousand people. There is a service called the Artoklasia, the blessing of the artos (bread) which asks God to multiply His blessings on a church, a family, or a feastday. Different people offer this service at different times of the year. This service can be offered on a major feast day, like August 15 (Dormition of the Virgin Mary), asking for God to multiply His blessings on a major feast for everyone in attendance. A family can ask for an Artoklasia for

someone's nameday. Sometimes we offer an Artoklasia for an organization, like AHEPA or Philoptochos, and we offer one each year on the feast day of our parish.

Fasting—In the Old Testament, Moses fasted before going up Mount Sinai to get the Ten Commandments from God. In the New Testament, Christ fasted in the desert for forty days before beginning his ministry. The tradition of fasting has to do with heightened spiritual awareness. We fast for forty days at a time before Pascha and before Christmas. We also fast on Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year. On Wednesdays we commemorate the betrayal of Christ and on Fridays His Crucifixion. We also fast, meaning eat nothing, the morning we receive Communion.

The Saints of the Orthodox Church

The title "saint" comes from the Greek word Agios or Agia, which means "holy" and "set apart from." Saints are holy people of God. People who have set themselves apart from the world and fully dedicated their life to Christ. They have been given this gift of "sainthood" through the Holy Spirit. They are not necessarily people from long ago. In fact the most recent canonized saint was St. Porphyrios. He died in 1991. Another very famous and recent saint of the 20th century is St. Nectarios of Pentapolis. His body lies uncorrupt on the Greek Island of Aegina. He is one of the few "walking saints." This means the nuns must replace the dead saint's slippers because they mysteriously

become worn down. There are many miracles attributed to the saints and their relics to this very day. (Find some stories of saints online to read to the class).

We, as Christians, in fact, are called to be saints. God tells us, "Be Holy, for I am Holy (Leviticus 11:44). St. Paul addresses many of his letters to the people of the cities he is writing as, "those called to be saints." For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:2, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of the Jesus Christ our Lord."

The Orthodox Church in its wisdom has made several categories of saints based on what they did in their life or how they died. There are six main categories of saints. Many of them are commemorated (Angels, Prophets, Apostles, Great Teachers, Martyrs, Just/Venerable/Righteous Father, Unmercenaries) during every Divine Liturgy in the Service of Proskomide (Preparation of the Gifts). The six main categories are:

1. The Apostles, who were the first ones to spread the message of the Incarnation of the Word of God and of salvation through Christ. Examples include Sts. Peter and Paul and the twelve disciples.

2. The Prophets, because they predicted and prophesied the coming of the Messiah. Examples include St. John the Baptist, St. Moses, St. Elias, St. Daniel and St. Isaiah.

3. The Martyrs, for sacrificing their lives and fearlessly confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. Examples include the Protomartyr St. Stephen, St. George the Victorious, St. Demetrios the Myrrh-streamer, St. Theodore of Tyron and St. Theodore the Commander.

4. The Fathers and Hierarchs of the Church, who excelled in explaining and in defending, by word and deed, the Christian faith. Examples include St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Nicholas of Myra.

5. The Monastics, who lived in the desert and dedicated themselves to spiritual exercise (askesis), reaching, as far as possible, perfection in Christ. Examples include St. Anthony the Great, St. Ephraim the Syrian, St. Kyriakos, St. Evagorios, St. Gerasimos and St. Maximos the Confessor.

6. The Just/Venerable/Righteous, those who lived in the world, leading exemplary lives as clergy or laity with their families, becoming examples for imitation in society. Examples include the Venerable Elizabeth the Wonderworker, Venerable Symeon, Venerable Euthymios and the Venerable Makrina.

Those are the main six but there are other designations as well, which help us understand their life. These include:

Confessor: one who has suffered for the faith but not martyred outright.

Enlightener: the saint who first brought the faith to a people or region.

Equal-to-the-Apostles: one whose work greatly built up the Church.

Fool-for-Christ: a saint known for his apparent, yet holy insanity.
 God-bearing: title given to one of the Holy Fathers.
 Great-martyr: one who was martyred for the faith and suffered torture.
 Healer: a saint who used the power of God to heal maladies and injuries.
 Hieroconfessor: a confessor who is also a clergyman.
 Hieromartyr: a martyr who is also a clergyman.
 Martyr: one who has died for the faith.
 Merciful: one known for charitable work, especially toward the poor.
 Myrrhbearers: the first witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus.
 Myrrh-streaming: the relics of the saint exude holy and sweet-smelling oil
 New-martyr: a recent martyr often bearing the same name as a previous martyr
 Passion-bearer: one who faced his death in a Christ-like manner
 Prophet: an Old Testament saint who anticipated Christ
 Protomartyr: the first martyr in a given region
 Right-believing: an epithet used for sainted secular rulers
 Unmercenary Healer: a saint who used the power of God to heal maladies
 Venerable-martyr: a martyred monastic
 Virgin-martyr: an unmarried, non-monastic, chaste female martyr
 Wonder-worker: a saint renowned for performing miracles

The Intercession of the Saints

St. Paul asked people to pray for him. We should also ask people to pray for us. In every Liturgy, we ask God the Father to accept, on our behalf, "the prayers and the intercession" of all the Saints who now live in heaven.

St. John Chrysostom says that we should seek the intercession and the fervent prayers of the saints, because they have special "boldness" (parresia), before God.

Let's put it this way. Can one player win a soccer game against a whole team of players? The answer is no. That is why we need many players (saints) on our side to help beat the enemy, which is sin, death and Satan. The saints can help us. They are our friends.

We can pray to many saints for a particular reason because they are known to heal, or find or help in a certain way. Here are some examples:

St. Eleftherios – Childbirth
 St. Paraskevi – Eye disease, headaches
 Sts. Cosmas, Damian, Nektarios, Panteleimon, Spyridon – Illness of any kind
 Sts. Basil, Nicholas, Stelianos – Children in general
 St. Demetrios – Crops

Sts. Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom – Education
St. John the Baptist – Godparents
St. Phanourios – Lost Property
St. Basil the Great – Orphans
St. Irene – Peace
Sts. Basil the Great and George – Poor
St. Elias the Prophet – Rain, thunder and lightning
St. Barbara – Roads
St. Nicholas – Sailors
St. Nectarios – Cancer patients
Sts. George, Prokopios, Theodore of Tyron, Theodore Stratilates - Warriors

THE VENERATION OF THE SAINTS

The Orthodox honor the saints to express their love and gratitude to God, who has "perfected" the saints. As St. Symeon the New Theologian writes, "God is the teacher of the Prophets, the co-traveller with the Apostles, the power of the Martyrs, the inspiration of the Fathers and Teachers, the perfection of all Saints ... " (Catechesis, I).

Relics of Saints

The Fathers, and all early Christians in general, paid especially great respect to the relics of the martyrs. In addition to the sources already mentioned, Eusebius of Caesarea, the Church historian, says that "those who suffered for the glory of Christ always have fellowship with the living God" (Church History, 5:1). In the Apostolic Constitutions (5:1) the martyrs are called "brothers of the Lord" and "vessels of the Holy Spirit." This helps to explain the special honor and respect which the Church paid to the relics of the martyrs. St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, and St. John Chrysostom remind us that the relics of the martyrs "are filled with spiritual grace," that even their tombs are filled with a special "blessing." This Patristic practice still continues today, and people from all over the world visit churches that possess the relics of martyrs and saints. Also, according to the ancient tradition, the consecration of new churches takes place with the deposition of holy relics in the Holy Table of the sanctuary. At St. John's we have the relics of St. Anysia, St. Haralambos and St. George.

The Feast Days of the Saints

The early Christians used to meet on the name-day of a saint, which in practice usually was the day of his death. These gatherings took place either around the tomb of the saint or in the church, which kept and preserved his holy relics, or in churches with great historical and theological significance. We do this to remember the saints and what they did for us.

Ask the students if they know which saint they are named after? Perhaps the teacher could provide some information on their patron saint.

Here is a prayer to a patron saint:

"Saint (Name), Holy Mother of God and all the saints, who have pleased God in Your lives; pray to Christ my Lord that I might live this day in peace love and humility. Pray unto God for me, O Holy Saint (Name), well-pleasing to God: for I turn to you, who are a speedy helper and intercessor for my soul."

CANONIZATION OF SAINTS

How do saints become saints? Basically, the Ecumenical Patriarch and many other Bishops from around the world come together to decide as a group. In the Orthodox Church, it isn't one person who makes the decisions. It is done by a group of Bishops but ultimately, the entire church must agree with the group of Bishops in making an decision a reality.

Activity: It can be difficult today for young people to develop their personhood and understand their self-worth in a world where the rich and famous are given the most attention. This is why for Orthodox Christians, the Saints are our best role models! One creative exercise to boost their confidence or healthy Christian self esteem is to pair them up, and ask them to draw each other's icon.

Each of us is a living icon of Christ, since we bear His image within us. We are becoming saints with a small "s" and strive each day to resemble Christ more and more in our thoughts, words, and actions.

Encourage the students to learn more about their saints and to look around our church to see all of the icons of the saints.

The Ascension of Our Lord

Begin with a prayer:

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit+

O Christ our God, You ascended in Glory and gladdened Your disciples by the promise of the Holy Spirit. Your blessing assured them that You are the Son of God, the Redeemer of the world. (Apolytikion of the Ascension)

O Christ our God, upon fulfilling Your dispensation for our sake, You ascended in Glory, uniting the earthly with the heavenly. You were never separate but remained inseparable, and cried out to those who love You, "I am with you and no one is against you." (The Kontakion of Ascension)

+Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ Our God, Have mercy on us and save us. Amen. +

Introduction to the Ascension of Our Lord

The Feast of the Ascension of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ is celebrated each year on the fortieth day after the Great and Holy Feast of Pascha (Easter). Since the date of Pascha changes each year, the date of the Feast of the Ascension changes. The Feast is always celebrated on a Thursday.

The Feast itself commemorates when, on the fortieth day after His Resurrection, Jesus led His disciples to the Mount of Olives, and after blessing them and asking them to wait for the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit, He ascended into heaven.

******Have a student or the teacher read the following from the Bible: Acts 1:9-11, Mark 16:14-20 and Luke 24:36-52.

1. How are the stories similar?
2. How are the stories different?

Have a student hold up the icon of the Ascension of Our Lord found at the end of this lesson or make copies for all of the students. Have the students answer the questions about the story and point out various details they see in the icon. Below are things they may point out and a description of the meaning. Please go over all of these:

1. Who is pictured on the icon? *Christ, Virgin Mary, Disciples, Angels (See icon description below)*
2. Jesus ascended from the Mount of ? *Olives*
3. How many apostles are pictured? *12, St. Paul is the bald one to the left of Mary*
4. What instruction did Jesus give to those left behind? *Go teach and baptize the world.*
5. How long after the resurrection does the Ascension occur? *40 days*

Christ – He is the central person of the icon. Christ is blessing everyone with His right hand. He is blessing the world and promises to send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. In His left hand is a **scroll**. The scroll is a symbol of teaching. Therefore, Christ is the source of blessing and knowledge. The icon reminds us that Christ continues to be the source of the teaching and message of the Church, blessing and guiding those to whom He has entrusted his work. Christ is clothed in white to signify the brilliant Light of His Divinity. Christ is the Light of the world.

Mandorla (big blue sphere surrounding Christ) - Christ is shown ascending in His glory in a mandorla. A mandorla is a design which is almond-shaped or round. Inside the mandorla is the figure of a holy person.

Theotokos - The Theotokos occupies a very special place in this icon. She is in the center of the icon, immediately below the ascending Christ. The gesture of her hands is gesture of prayer. She is clearly outlined by the whiteness of the garments of the angels. The Theotokos is depicted in a very calm pose.

The Apostles – Surrounding the Theotokos, they are moving about, talking to one another and looking and pointing towards heaven. They are totally confused about what is happening. The entire group, the Theotokos and the disciples represent the Church.

St. Paul – He is the balding guy facing the opposite direction of the others. Paul was not present at the Ascension. He wasn't even a Christian at that time. But he became a Christian and one of the greatest Apostles and missionaries of Church.

Angels carrying Christ – They are escorting Him back to His heavenly home.

Angels on either side of the Theotokos – Once Christ had ascended, two angels said to the disciples, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven." Then the disciples returned to Jerusalem (Acts 1:11).

Olive trees – The figures are set against the hilly landscape of the Mount of Olives, scattered with Olive trees. The place where the Ascension of Our Lord took place.

For Teacher Review or Optional Class Discussion: Biblical Story of the Ascension

The story of the Ascension of our Lord, celebrated as one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Church, is found in the book of the Acts of the Apostles 1:3-11. It is also mentioned in the Gospels of Mark (16:19) and Luke (24:50-53). The moment of the Ascension is told in one sentence: "He was lifted up before their eyes in a cloud which took Him from their sight" (Acts 1:9).

Christ made His last appearance on earth, forty days after His Resurrection from the dead. The Acts of the Apostles states that the disciples were in Jerusalem. Jesus appeared before them and commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the "Promise of the Father". He stated, "You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5).

After Jesus gave these instructions, He led the disciples to the Mount of Olives. Here, He commissioned them to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). It is also at this time that the disciples were directed by Christ to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Jesus also told them that He would be with them always, "even to the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20).

As the disciples watched, Jesus lifted up His hands, blessed them, and then was taken up out of their sight (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9). Two angels appeared to them and asked them why they were gazing into heaven. Then one of the angels said, "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen Him going into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

A summary of the Ascension of Our Lord *The teacher may choose to read it to the class or read before in preparation:*

The feast of the Ascension is the feast of salvation consummated. The whole process of salvation: birth, passion, death and resurrection are completed in the Ascension. "When Thou hadst fulfilled for us Thy dispensation, and united the things in

earth with the things in Heaven, Thou, O Christ our God, didst ascend in glory, in no wise being parted from those that love Thee, but Thou didst remain with them inseparably and proclaim to them: I am with you, no one is against you.” [The kontakion of the Feast] As an expression of the meaning of this festival, the theme of the Ascension used to be placed in the dome of ancient churches, thus completing the scheme of paintings they contained.

The first glance at Orthodox icons of this feast creates the impression that they do not quite correspond to their name. The principal place in them is given to a group consisting of the Mother of God, angels and apostles, whereas the principal figure, the ascending Saviour Himself, is almost always much smaller than the other persons depicted and is as it were secondary in relation to them. Yet in this very disparity Orthodox icons of the Ascension conform to the Holy Scriptures. Indeed, in reading accounts of our Lord’s Ascension in the Gospels and the Acts one is left with the same impression of lack of correspondence between this even and its descriptions. The fact of the Ascension itself is given there only a few words. The accounts of the Evangelists concentrate all their attention on something else—on the last precepts of the Saviour, establishing and defining the role and significance of the Church in the world and its connection and relationship with God. The Acts of the Apostles give a more detailed description of the Ascension. This description, together with the account in the Gospel of St. Luke, constitute the factual data (though not all of them) which lie at the basis of Orthodox iconography of Christ’s Ascension. The centre of gravity in the accounts of the Holy Scriptures and consequently of the iconography, lies not in the fact of the Ascension itself, but in the significance and consequences it has for the Church and the world.

The ascending Saviour Himself, leaving the earthly world in the flesh, does not abandon it in His Divinity, does not desert the inheritance gained by His blood—the Church, “in no wise being parted . . . but remaining with them inseparably.” “And, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28.20). These words of the Saviour refer both to the whole history of the Church in its totality and to each separate moment of its existence and to the life of each member of it until the Second Coming. This is why the gesture of the Saviour is directed towards the group in the foreground whom He is leaving behind and towards the external world. The icon conveys this connection of His with the Church, by always depicting Him as blessing with His right hand (He very seldom blesses with both hands) and usually holding in His left hand the Gospels or a scroll—the symbol of the teacher, of preaching. He ascended blessing, not having blessed (“While He blessed them, he was parted from them . . .” Luke 24.51), and His blessing does not cease with His Ascension. Depicting Him in the act of blessing, the icon shows graphically that even after the Ascension He remains the source of blessing for the apostles, and through them for their successors and for all those whom they

bles. As we have said, in the left hand the Saviour holds the Gospels or a scroll, the symbol of the teacher, or preaching. By this the icon shows that the Lord, while dwelling in heaven, remains not only the source of blessing but also the source of knowledge, communicated to the Church by the Holy Spirit. The inner link between Christ and the Church is expressed in the icon by the whole structure of the composition linking together into one whole the group on earth with its consummation in heaven. Both the upper and the lower parts of the icon, the earthly and the heavenly, are inalienable from one another and one without the other loses its meaning. (Lives of the Saints and Major Feast Days by Fr. George Poulos)



Feast of Holy Pentecost

Begin with the prayer of the Holy Spirit and Hymns of the feast:

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit+

Heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, everywhere present and filling all things, Treasury of blessings and Giver of life: come and abide in us, cleanse us from every impurity and save our souls, O Good One.

Blessed are You, O Christ our God, who made fisherman all-wise, by sending down upon them the Holy Spirit, and through them, drawing all the world into Your net. O Loving One, glory be to You. (Apolytikion of Pentecost)

When the Most High came down and confounded tongues of men at Babel, He divided the nations. When He dispensed the tongues of fire, He called all to unity, and with one voice we glorify the Most Holy Spirit. (Kontakion of Pentecost)

+Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy and save us. Amen+

Introduction to the Feast of Pentecost

The Feast of Holy Pentecost is celebrated each year on the fiftieth day after the Great and Holy Feast of Pascha (Easter) and ten days after the Feast of the Ascension of Christ. The Feast is always celebrated on a Sunday.

The Feast commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, a feast of the Jewish tradition. It also celebrates the establishment of the Church through the preaching of the Apostles and the baptism of the thousands who on that day believed in the Gospel message of salvation through Jesus Christ. The Feast is also seen as the culmination of the revelation of the Holy Trinity.

******Have a student or the teacher read the account of Pentecost from Acts 2. Ask a student to summarize the story. Also, have them answer these questions:

1. Where are the apostles gathered together? Why? *In the upper room of a home. They were gathered together devoting themselves to prayer. (Matthias was chosen to replace Judas before the Pentecost)*
2. What were the events of the day of Pentecost? *Sound of wind. Tongues of fire. Preaching.*
3. Why were the Jews from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem? *Feast of Weeks – They were celebrating a holiday at the Temple.*
4. Why did this aid in spreading the Gospel? *The visitors took the Gospel back to their own countries.*
5. In what form did the Holy Spirit appear? *Tongues of fire.*
6. What power did it give the apostles? *Ability to speak in many languages.*
7. Who promised to send a guide for the apostles on the day of His Ascension? *Christ*

Have a student hold up the icon of Pentecost found at the end of this lesson (also called The Descent of the Holy Spirit) or make copies for all the students. Have the students point out various details they see in the icon. Below are the things they may point out and a description of the meaning. Please go over all of these:

The icon of the Feast of Pentecost is known as "The Descent of the Holy Spirit". It is an icon of bold colors of red and gold signifying that this is a great event. The movement of the icon is from the top to the bottom. In the icon of Pentecost we see the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy Spirit, sent down upon the Apostles who will teach the nations and baptize them in the name of the Holy Trinity. Here we see that the Church is brought together and sustained in unity through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit guides the Church in the missionary endeavor throughout the world, and that the Spirit nurtures the Body of Christ, the Church, in truth and love.

Semicircle on top with rays coming from it - The rays are pointing toward the Apostles. One ray for each of the Apostles present.

Tongues of Fire – The tongues of fire are seen descending upon each one of the Apostles, signifying the descent of the Holy Spirit.

Building in the background - represents the upper room where the Disciples of Christ gathered after the Ascension.

The Apostles - shown seated in a semicircle which shows the unity of the Church. The group of twelve represent the Church, not just those mentioned in the book of Acts as being with the others on the day of Pentecost.

St. Paul – The balding man on the top right holding a book. He wasn't actually present on the day of Pentecost but is included in the icon. He became an Apostle of the Church and its greatest missionary.

St. Peter – Top left. As read in Acts 2, Peter was present and defended the behavior of the men by using the prophecies of the day from Joel and Isaiah.

Four Evangelists - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—holding books of the Gospel, while the other Apostles are holding scrolls that represent the teaching authority given to them by Christ.

Cosmos - In the center of the icon below the Apostles, a royal figure is seen against a dark background. This is a symbolic figure, Cosmos, representing the people of the world living in darkness and sin, and involved in pagan worship. This one person represents the whole world that had formerly been without the light of faith. In his hands is a cloth containing scrolls, which represent the teaching of the Apostles. The tradition of the Church holds that the Apostles carried the message of the Gospel to all parts of the world. Through the power of the Holy Spirit the Church brings light to the whole world by her teaching.

Open seat on top – Also known as "Teacher's Seat." At the center of the group of Apostles, there is a place, which is unoccupied. It is reserved for Christ, the invisible head of the Church. Some icons of Pentecost show Mary the Mother of God in the centre, occupying the "Teacher's Seat". Mary was present at Pentecost Theotokos' presence in the centre is not problematic though, as she is the ultimate exemplar of a Christian.

For Teacher Review or Optional Class Discussion: Biblical Story of Pentecost

The story of Pentecost is found in the book of The Acts of the Apostles. In Chapter two we are told that the Apostles of our Lord were gathered together in one place. Suddenly, a sound came from heaven like a rushing wind, filling the entire house where they were sitting. Then, tongues of fire appeared, and one sat upon each one of Apostles. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as directed by the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4).

This miraculous event occurred on the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, celebrated by the Jews on the fiftieth day after the Passover as the culmination of the Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:10). The Feast of Weeks began on the third day after the Passover with the presentation of the first harvest sheaves to God, and it concluded on Pentecost with the offering of two loaves of unleavened bread, representing the first products of the harvest (Leviticus 23:17-20; Deuteronomy 16:9-10).

Since the Jewish Feast of Pentecost was a great pilgrimage feast, many people from throughout the Roman Empire were gathered in Jerusalem on this day. When the people in Jerusalem heard the sound, they came together and heard their own languages being spoken by the Apostles (Acts 2:5-6). The people were amazed, knowing that some of those speaking were Galileans, and not men who would normally speak many different languages. They wondered what this meant, and some even thought the Apostles were drunk (Acts 2:7-13).

Peter, hearing these remarks, stood up and addressed the crowd. He preached to the people regarding the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He spoke about Jesus Christ and His death and glorious Resurrection. Great conviction fell upon the people, and they asked the Apostles, "What shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38-39).

The Bible records that on that day about three thousand were baptized. Following, the book of Acts states that the newly baptized continued daily to hear the teaching of the Apostles, as the early Christians met together for fellowship, the breaking of bread, and for prayer. Many wonderful signs and miracles were done through the Apostles, and the Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).
(GOARCH.ORG)

A summary of the Feast of Pentecost The teacher may choose to read it to the class or read before in preperation:

Today we celebrate on of the most important feast days of the Christian Church – the birthday of the Church. All Christian denominations, Orthodox, Protestant and Roman Catholic observe this magnificent feast day of Pentecost. The word Pentecost is a Greek word meaning fiftieth.

Just before Jesus Christ was ascended into heaven on the fortieth day after His Resurrection, he promised his faithful disciples and followers that very soon the power of the Holy Spirit would be with them to give them spiritual strength to carry the message of Christ throughout the world. The followers of Christ, however, were simple fishermen, and they had very little education. They gathered together in the "upper room" waiting for a sign from heaven. Suddenly on the fiftieth day after Easter, there came a great sound from heaven which was like a rushing mighty wind. It filled the house where the disciples were waiting. Then a miracle happened. Great tongues of fire were seen over each of the heads of the disciples. It was the power of the Holy Spirit which brought divine inspiration to all in the house. They began to speak many different languages, and they were "filled with the Holy Spirit." This was the fulfillment of the promise which the Lord had given to them.

St. Peter delivered the first sermon in Jerusalem on this first Pentecost. Over 3,000 people became Christians. The disciples traveled to the far corners of the earth to bring the message of Jesus Christ to all men. All this was made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit on that eventful and historic day of Pentecost in the city of Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago.

During the Divine Liturgy today, all Orthodox Christians take part in the beautiful service known as "the service of kneeling." The priest reads three beautiful prayers about the miracle of Pentecost. During each prayer the entire congregation kneels and prays also. It is during this time that we pray very hard that the power of the Holy Spirit will enter our hearts also and give us spiritual strength to live out our lives according to the will of God. Let the Holy Spirit enter your heart today. This is the true meaning of Pentecost. (Lives of the Saints and Major Feast Days by Fr. George Poulos)



The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ – December 25

Begin with a prayer:

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit+

Your Nativity, O Christ our God, has caused the light of knowledge to rise upon the world. For there in the worshippers of the stars were, by a star, instructed to worship You, the very Sun of Righteousness, and to know You as Orient from on high. Glory to You, O Lord. (Apolytikion of the Nativity of Christ)

The Virgin gives birth today to Him Who is above all-being and the earth offers a cave to Him whom no man can approach. Angels, with the shepherds, glorify Him. Magi, with a star make their journey. For unto us is born today as a newborn child, the Pre-Eternal God. (Kontakion of the Nativity of Christ)

+Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy us and save us. Amen+

Address the class: "Christ is Born!" Then they should respond: "Glorify Him." It is similar to the Pascha greeting and response: "Christ is Risen!" and "Truly He is Risen!" Explain to the students this is the response of the Three Magi and the shepherds at the birth of Christ and so it is our response to the birth of Christ.

Have a student or the teacher read the Birth of Christ Gospel Narratives from Matthew 1:18-2:23 and Luke 1:1-2:22. Ask a student to summarize the story in each account.

1. How are the stories similar?
2. How are the stories different?

Have a student hold up the icon of the Nativity found at the end of this lesson or make copies for all of the students. Have the students point out various details they see in the icon. Below are things they may point out and a description of the meaning. Please go over all of these:

The Theotokos – She and Christ are the main figures in the icon. She is depicted reclining upon a blanket. She is looking towards Joseph. She is praying to the Lord so his struggles of disbelief and temptation will pass. She relies on the Lord, her Son, through prayer that Joseph will overcome his doubt and the temptations of Satan.

Baby Jesus Christ – Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is seen wrapped in swaddling clothes. This not only represents His total submission to the human flesh, but also foreshadows His death and resurrection. The manger represents His crib, His church and His tomb, all in one.

Saint Joseph – the Guardian of Christ and His Mother; tradition relates that Joseph was an elderly widower, thus having white hair and a beard; he is depicted being tempted by Satan to doubt the virgin-birth.

Satan – the figure in the lower center; he is depicted as an elderly hunchback tempting Saint Joseph; whereas all else in the icon should be done in bright colors, Satan, the Prince of Darkness, is portrayed in dark, drab garments.

Shepherds – the figures on the right; they are depicted facing the angels as they announce the glad tidings of the birth of the Messiah. They look scared but the Angel tells them not to be afraid.

The Magi – the figures on the left they are depicted following the star, which is in the top center and carrying their gifts; tradition speaks of their being representative of all mankind...one being young (beardless), one being middle-aged (short beard) and one being elderly (longer grey or white beard).

The Angels – The group on the left offers worship to Christ; the group of the right announces the glad tidings to the shepherds. The angels brought the “good news of great joy” to Shepards tending their flocks. They sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

The Cow and Donkey in the cave – illustrate that all creation rejoices at the birth of the Messiah, the lowly and the great, the earthly and the heavenly.

The Star – The Star of Bethlehem in this icon is found right above the infant Jesus Christ. In some other icons there will be three rays coming down from the half-circle on the top of the icon, representing the Holy Trinity.

Darkness in the Cave – Due to sin, many of us struggle with doubt or disbelief. This cave represents our struggle. The Cave represents the world, dark with sin through man’s fault. It is now illuminated by the Light of the Incarnation. Within this cave, Christ, “the Sun of Truth,” enters into the world he created for us, clothed in the flesh of Mary’s body through natural birth, the same way all of His children are born. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.” St. John the Evangelist.

The midwives – They are depicted washing Christ after his birth. It was a custom at that time to have women help in childbirth because there were no hospitals.

Optional Discussion: Pagan Roots of Christmas

The noonday sun is at different heights in the sky during the different seasons of the year. This occurs because the earth’s axis is tipped by 23 degrees to the plane of the Earth’s revolution about the sun. From December to June, the noonday sun climbs steadily higher in the sky and falls steadily lower from June to December. The rise is associated with longer and warmer days while the decline is associated with shorter days, colder temperatures and death.

In Pagan times, this solar cycle was not understood, men and women had no certainty that the sinking sun would turn and rise again. It fell upon Pagan priests to evoke the favor of the Gods to restore the sun.

It had become a source of great gladness for ancient people to observe the sinking of the sun come to a halt and rise again. The point at which the sinking of the sun comes to a halt is the winter "solstice" (In Latin, it means "Sun Halt")

The time of the Solstice (December 21) became an occasion, for a great feast. In Rome, a three day period, later a seven day period, was devoted to the God, Saturn. The holiday was known as Saturnalia. At the Saturnalia, public business was suspended for parties, singing and gift giving. It was a season of for joy, peace and goodwill.

During the first centuries of the Roman Empire, Christianity was in competition with many religions from the East including Mithraism, a form of Sun-worship in Persia. In 274 AD, the Roman Emperor Aurelian, set December 25, the Mithraist Holiday as the day of the birth of the Sun.

The celebration of the Winter Solstice was a great problem to Christian conversion. Christianity required the abandonment of joy and merriment of these popular holidays. Christianity while adapting itself to these popular pagan customs did not compromise the essential doctrines of the Church. The Church also changed the day of the birth of the sun to the Birth of the Son of God. The Day of Christ's Birth was not set forth in the Bible. It may as well have been December 25.

Once this date was settled, converts joined Christianity without giving up the merriment of Saturnalia. December 25 was adopted through most of the Empire between 300 and 350 AD. (From, Celebration: Feasts and Holy Days by the Orthodox Education Commission, 1995.)

Optional Discussion: The 12 Days of Christmas in the Orthodox Christian Tradition

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, The Great Feast of the Nativity of our Lord begins on the Eve of 25 December (for those Orthodox churches which follow the Julian calendar, 25 December falls on 7 January of the modern Gregorian Calendar).

The Twelve Days of Christmas are a festive period linking together two Great Feasts of the Lord: Nativity and Theophany. During this period one celebration leads into another. The Nativity of Christ is a three-day celebration: the formal title of the first day is "The Nativity According to the Flesh of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ", and celebrates not only the Nativity of Jesus, but also the Adoration of the Shepherds of Bethlehem and the arrival of the Maji.

The second day is referred to as the "Synaxis of the Theotokos", and commemorates the role of the Virgin Mary in the Incarnation.

The third day is known as the "Third Day of the Nativity", and is also the feast day of the Protodeacon and Protomartyr Saint Stephen.

29 December is the Orthodox Feast of the Holy Innocents.

The Afterfeast of the Nativity continues until 31 December (that day is known as the Apodosia or "leave-taking" of the Nativity).

The Saturday following the Nativity is commemorated by special readings from the Epistle (1 Tim 6:11-16) and Gospel (Matt 12:15-21) during the Divine Liturgy. The Sunday after Nativity has its own liturgical commemoration in honour of "The Righteous Ones: Joseph the Betrothed, David the King and James the Brother of the Lord".

1 January, at the center of the festal period, is known in the Western Church as the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God and as another feast of the Lord (though not ranked as a Great Feast): the Feast of the Circumcision of the Lord. On this same day is the feast day of Saint Basil the Great, and so the service celebrated on that day is the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil.

2 January begins the Forefeast of the Theophany.

The Eve of the Theophany (5 January) is a day of strict fasting, on which the devout will not eat anything until the first star is seen at night. This day is known as Paramony ("preparation"), and follows the same general outline as Christmas Eve. That morning is the celebration of the Royal Hours and then the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil combined with Vespers, at the conclusion of which is celebrated the Great Blessing of Waters, in commemoration of the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. There are certain parallels between the hymns chanted on Paramony and those of Good Friday, to show that, according to Orthodox theology, the steps that Jesus took into the Jordan River were the first steps on the way to the Cross. That night the All-Night Vigil is served for the Feast of the Theophany. (By John Sandinopoulos, mystagogy.com)

A summary of the Feast of the Nativity *The teacher may choose to read it to the class or read before class in preparation.*

The greatest holiday for the Christian Church is truly the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, Easter Sunday. After this important day, comes the Feast Day of the Birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

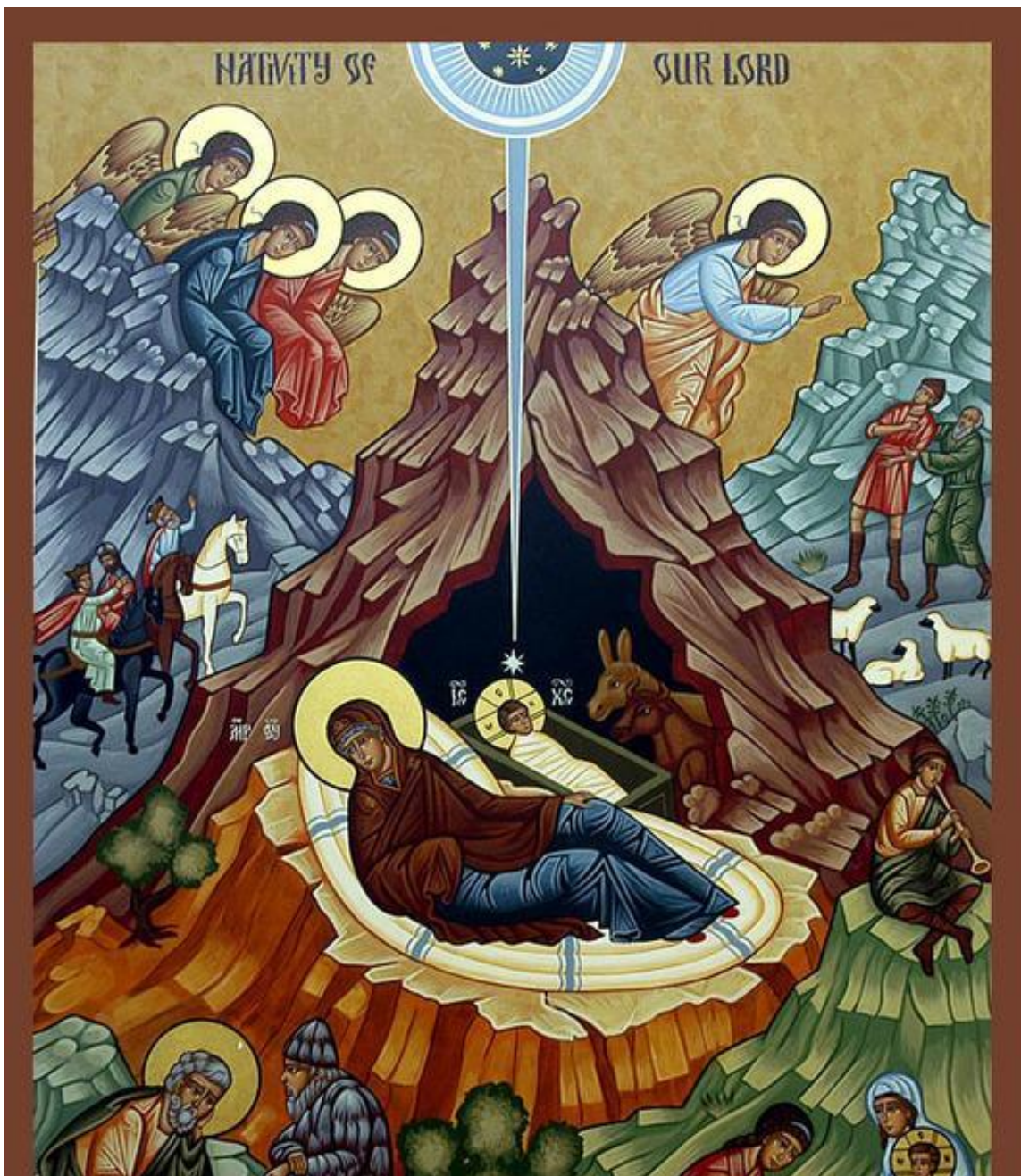
This Feast day is also called the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, which means Jesus took on a body like us. What it means is that our blessed Lord came into the world to save us all. The beautiful story is told in two books of the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew and St. Luke.

We all know the story because we have heard it over and over since we were small children. And yet, no matter how many times the Birth of Jesus is told, we still marvel at how much God loved us. God loved us so much, He sent His Son to teach us a new way of life. Our forefathers realized the importance of Christ's Incarnation, and set aside December 25th each year to celebrate His miraculous birth as the dawn of a new era, the Christian era.

But Christmas means more than the day we celebrate the Birth of the Christ Child. We exchange fine gifts to remind us of Jesus' love and His Gift to us. We sing special hymns of praise and love. We prepare ourselves to receive Holy Communion with fasting and confession. We go to church with our family.

Christmas each year gives us another chance to become even better Christians. We may have been pretty good Christians last year, and even better Christians the year before. But this is a new year, and we must do everything possible to be even better Christians this year.

We celebrate Christmas each year to remind ourselves that Jesus came for us – you and me. (Lives of the Saints and Major Feast Days – Fr. George Poulos)



The Theotokos

Begin with a prayer:

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.+

Truly it is right to call Thee blessed, and we bless Thee O Theotokos, Maiden who is ever blessed and Who has known no blame, Thou art truly mother of our God. Higher still in honor than the Cherubim, and Thou art beyond compare far more glorious than the Seraphim, Thou without corruption has given birth to God the Word. Truly Theotokos, we do magnify Thee.

A protection of Christians unshamable, intercessor to our Holy Maker, unwavering. Please reject not the prayerful cries of those who are in sin. Instead, come to us, for you are good; your loving help bring unto us, Who are crying in faith to you: Hasten to intercede and speed now to supplicate, as a protection for all time. Theotokos, for those who honor you.

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.+

The Virgin Mary has many names. She is the Mother of Christ and Mother of all of us. Most popular in the divine services, she is called the Theotokos which means "Birth-giver of God." She is the Theotokos because she willingly accepted the Holy Spirit to conceive the Son of God, Jesus Christ in her womb. The church has developed most of what we know of the Theotokos from Gospels and from other 1st-century documents such as the Protoevangelion of James.

Why is the Theotokos so important to us as Orthodox Christians? She is important because from a young age, she was chosen to be the way that the Son of God would

enter the world. The only thing left to happen was for her to accept this responsibility by her own free will. When the Archangel Gabriel came to announce that she would be the mother of God saying, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Power of the Highest will overshadow you." (Luke 1:35) At this point Mary still had a choice. Thankfully and we will be forever thankful that Mary responded, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." From that point until now, we continue to fulfill the words of the Holy Spirit spoken through her, "behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" (Lk. 1:45).

Here are some other names of the Theotokos, which are used in the hymnology and iconography of the church:

Angeloktiste (Angel-Built)
Bebaia Elpis (the Certain Hope)
Boetheia (the Helper)
Brephokratousa (the Infant-Holder)
Chrysopege (the Fountain of Gold)
Deomene (the Supplicant)
Eleousa (the Merciful)
Eleutherotria (the Liberator)
Evangelistria (the Bearer of Good News)
Galatiane or Galatousa (the Nurse)
Giatrissa (the Healer)
Glykophilousa (of the Sweet Kiss)
Gorgoepekoos (the Quick-To-Listen)
Gregoroussa (the Vigilant)
Hagia Skepe (the Sacred Protection)
Hagia Zone (the Sacred Girdle)
Hodegetria (the Leader)
Hypermachos Strategos (the Defending General)
Kataphyge (the Safe Haven)
Megalochare (Of Great Grace)
Myrobletissa (the Spring of Myrrh)
Myrtiotissa (of the Myrtles)
Nerantziotissa (in the Bitter Oranges)
Pantanassa (the Queen of All)
Paraportiane or Portaitissa (by the Gate)
Paregorettria (the Giver of Solace)
Phaneromene (the Revealed)
Pharmakolytria (the Deliverer from poison)
Platytera ton Ouranon (the Wider than the Heavens)
Ponolytria (the Deliverer from pain)
Thalassine (of the Sea)

The title **Our All-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorified Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary** is often used in Orthodox services when Mary is mentioned.

1. **All-holy** This is because she is the supreme example of cooperation between God and the free will of man. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Sometimes Mary is called the New Eve because her obedient submission to the will of God offset Eve's disobedience in Paradise.

2. **Immaculate** The Orthodox Church calls Mary "immaculate," "pure," or "spotless" (achrantos in Greek).

3. **Most blessed and glorified Lady** The Orthodox Church honors the Mother of God on account of the Son. St. Cyril of Alexandria, along with the Fathers of the Council of Ephesus, insisted on calling Mary "Theotokos" not just to glorify her, but to safeguard a right doctrine of Christ's person, the Incarnation. Orthodox Christians feel that one cannot really believe in the Incarnation and not honor Mary.

4. **The Theotokos*** – meaning the birthgiver of God. This is often translated as "the Mother of God."

5. **ever Virgin Mary** The Orthodox Church honors Mary as "ever Virgin." In iconography, her virginity before, during, and after the birth of Christ is represented by three stars on her shoulders and forehead.

*Concerning the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God, suffice it to say that the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus (431 A.D.) officially adopted the term Theotokos in her honor. There is a period of fasting (the first 14 days of August) and numerous feasts and hymns dedicated to her. Her image is traditionally painted above the Sanctuary and called "more spacious than the heavens" (Platytera). The Virgin Mary, being the mother of God, earnestly intercedes for us, for she gave her flesh to Christ in all humility and obedience, so that the Word of God could become man.

FEASTDAYS AND SERVICES TO THE THEOTOKOS

Ever since the Archangel Gabriel first said, “you are blessed among women,” to the Virgin Mary, these words of praise have inspired the faithful of the Christian Church. Their love for Christ, and desire to honor all that He honored has led them to also praise His glorious Mother. Thus they continue to fulfill the words of the Holy Spirit spoken through her, “behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed” (Lk. 1:45). The Church has honored the Most Holy Lady in many ways. Theologians have defended her doctrinally and theologically. Authors have composed hymns dedicated to her. The faithful have sought her intercession in their prayers. Finally, the entire Church has celebrated feast days commemorating certain events in her life or miracles performed through her mediation. After the Council of Ephesus (431 AD), however, the number of hymns and services to the Theotokos increased and flourished. All feast days seem to have their historical foundations during or after this great Council, which defended the doctrine of the Person of Christ and the dignity of the Mother of God.

Here are seven important feasts, which will be discussed in greater detail, these being:

1. The Nativity of the Theotokos
2. Placing of the Veil at Blachernae
3. The Synaxis of the Theotokos
4. The Annunciation
5. Hypapante – Presentation/Meeting of Christ in the Temple
6. The Entrance into the Temple
7. The Dormition—Assumption

The Nativity of the Virgin (Sept. 8) is one of the oldest of the Marian feasts. It’s celebration stems from the Protevangelion of St. James a 2nd century apocryphal book supposedly written by James the Brother of the Lord, which describes the birth of Mary to her elderly parents, Joachim and Anna. The story runs much like the biblical account of Abraham and Sarah or that of Zachariah and Elizabeth; two elderly people considered cursed by God because of the woman’s barrenness were suddenly promised a child by God. This feast reminds us that Mary is one of us, a human being, born like us in original sin. It refutes those who, like the Collyridians, who attempted to deify her and desecrate her dignity by calling her something she is not. The feast reminds those, such as the Docetists, who believed that Christ was only a phantom, having no real human body, that His Mother was a real human being, born of the generation of David; therefore, the one born of her must in the same way partake of her nature.

The second feast we will discuss is the **Placing of the Veil at Blachernae (Oct. 28)**, instituted in the year 469 AD to celebrate the recovery of the sole relic of the Virgin. An early legend relates that Mary entrusted her veil upon which some drops of milk had fallen as she fed the infant Jesus to two women in her company. Finally a Jewish woman obtained it, kept it in a casket and performed miracles with it.

The next important feast day of the Virgin is called the **Synaxis (Dec. 26)**, because it commemorates her distinct role in the Incarnation. Sometime between 500 and 530 AD Justinian introduced this feast, occurring on the 26th of December (Essey, 46). The term Synaxis is a Greek compound meaning "also worthy" and is meant to commemorate that person or persons who played the most important secondary role in any feast of Our Lord. Just as Epiphany has its Synaxis of the Forerunner, The Feast of the Nativity of Christ has its Synaxis of the Theotokos. This feast was celebrated in the West (Rome) eight days after Christmas in commemoration of the reality of Mary's Motherhood of Jesus. Later the Feast of the Circumcision replaced it. (Dix 377)

The fourth feast, the **Annunciation (March 25)** is among the oldest Christian feasts. It originally began as the Feast of the Conception of Christ, However, with the ever-growing devotion to His Mother, and the increasing consciousness of her role in the Divine Economy, the feast soon took on a distinctly Marian character. Even at that early date, the feast was celebrated on March 25, exactly nine months before Christmas. The sermons and hymns about the Annunciation vary in their content and style, sometimes being beautiful, and at other time's monotonous elaboration on the conversation between the Virgin and the Archangel Gabriel. The hymns of the Annunciation show Mary's role as the New Eve, defined by the Ancient Fathers. Eve's disobedience brought death to man. Mary's obedience brought man life and salvation.

The **Presentation of Christ in the Temple (Feb. 2)**, known in the West as The Purification and among the Greeks as Hypapante is another originally Christ-centered feast. Although the Latin Church has retained much of the Christ-centered elements, it therefore, appears to be a feast "shared" by Christ and the Virgin. After 40-days, the Theotokos presented Christ in the temple to be dedicated to God which was a practice of the Jews. This is where the Orthodox Christians derive the 40-day blessing. When Christ was presented to Symeon, the Priest of the Temple, he says, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all peoples. A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."

The sixth important feast of the Theotokos to be discussed is the **Entrance into the Temple of the Virgin (Nov. 21)**. The feast is an old one, having its sources in the apocryphal gospels. It was celebrated, along with the Feast of the Conception of St. Anna in the 4th century, although the Byzantine Church did not "officially" recognize it until 1166. Most sermons dealing with this feast come from the period of the Iconoclastic Controversy, or directly after it. St. Germanos of Constantinople (733 AD) treats the subject of the Virgin's Entrance into the Temple as Mary, the true and eternal Temple of God, sanctifying the Temple of the Old Covenant. She makes the Temple holy, although she had come to receive a blessing there. In the hymns of this feast, the Church reflects upon the Ecclesia-Maria parallel, i.e., the concept of Mary as the Prototype and symbol of the Christian Church as first displayed in the Apocalypse. The presence of this feast also leads us to believe that the Virgin Mary, while in the Temple, had conversed with the angels, among them Gabriel. This would explain why she, when confronted by Gabriel in Luke 1, was not so much taken aback by the fact that he was an angel as she was by what he told her.

The last feast to be discussed is also the last major feast day of the Christian calendar, the **Dormition (Aug. 15)**. The celebration of the Dormition presupposes belief in the Assumption of the Virgin. Although the "title" of the feast means "falling asleep" and seems to deal only with her death, many of the hymns speak about her "translation" to heaven. St. Gregory Palamas proved her bodily assumption theologically sound and necessary. For both Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics this feast is one of the most popular of the Church calendar because it underlines the promise of our Lord to raise up to life again those who believe in Him. It inspires our hope for future glorification. The feast also strengthens love for the Blessed Virgin as the Mother of all believers and makes dynamic hope in her intercession.

Icon of the Virgin Mary



Our present icon of Mary the Theotokos (or Mother of God) is the common and best-loved. In Orthodox iconography it is extremely rare to find an icon of Mary without Christ. This is done to illustrate that Mary's greatness lies in her unique relationship with her Son. She is highly venerated and respected because she freely consented to give birth to the Saviour. She was and continues to be a human being like us, but her greatness rests in that she gave herself and her will over to the Almighty. With her right hand she is pointing to her Son, as if saying to the viewer, "Here is your Savior, the long awaited Messiah." Because Jesus is the Saviour He is shown bestowing a blessing with His right hand. In His left hand He holds an unrolled scroll. The reason the scroll is not unrolled is to emphasize that as a child Jesus had only begun His mission, and had not completed His role as Saviour. The stars or diadems on the veil of the Theotokos are symbolic representations of her perpetual virginity (before, during and after birth). In Orthodoxy we are more prone to refer to Mary as the "Theotokos," a Greek word meaning "The Birth-giver of God." This title refers to the special role that Mary assumed in the salvation of creation. The letters MP ΘY appear on all icons of the Theotokos. They are abbreviations for the Greek words, "Mother of God." In this and all other icons of Mary the Theotokos, unless otherwise noted, her outer garments and veil are red and the inner garment is blue. The veil is red, the colour of divinity, whilst the clothes under the veil are green or blue, the colours of humanity. This is the exact opposite of the usual depiction of Christ: Who has humanity worn upon His eternal, divine, nature. As the evangelist Luke records, the angel Gabriel said to Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Power of the Highest will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35) And so this is shown in Mary's veil.

THE AKATHIST HYMN

Having discussed the particular feasts dedicated to the Mother of God; we shall now concentrate on two special liturgical services devoted to her.

Preeminent among any service or feast dedicated to the Theotokos is the Akathist Hymn. This service is served in its entirety on the fifth week of Great Lent. Sections of it are also performed on the four proceeding weeks. The smaller, sections of this service are called The Salutations, taking their name from "hail", the greeting of the archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation.

The Akathist Hymn is a many faceted service. It is a hymn praising the Incarnation of Our Lord, directing its force to Him through His Mother. The praises refer to her as the salvation of mortals, the ladder and bridge to heaven, the Bearer of the Universe. These salutations would be blasphemous if directed toward Mary for her own sake. However, it is taken for granted that the listener believes that she is really these things because she bore God in the Flesh. As such, the Akathist Hymn is also a vast poetic-dogmatic exposition of the Dogma of the Person and work of Christ and a melodic Anathema against those who confess the Nestorian heresy.

The Hymn is also a prayer of thanksgiving to Mary personally. Because she said, "behold the handmaid of the Lord", and "let it be according to your word": the Theotokos brought about the salvation of the human race. Her role as the New Eve is portrayed to its logical zenith in the Akathist Hymn. Through her accomplishment, "creation was renewed", "the devil crushed", and "Mankind was uplifted". The population of the saved therefore, offers her this hymn of praise.

The Akathist is also one of the epics of Christian hymnography. It deals mainly with the happenings in the first chapters of the Gospel of St. Luke, i.e., the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Visit of the Shepherds and Magi. It is the way they are related to the listener, however, that makes this hymn one of the most imaginative and beautiful in Church hymnody. There is detail unparalleled here. There is introspection on the part of the actors of this drama. Each verse gives us insight we did not have previously, as to the inner doubts of Joseph, the madness of Herod, the devotion of the Magi, and the confusion of the archangel.

Today the Hymn is celebrated within the context of the Small Compline service. This skeleton contains the Kontakion, which is the Akathist Hymn proper, and a canon to the Theotokos. This canon precedes the Salutations but is interspersed within the Kontakion when the Akathist is performed in its entirety. The Kontakion is considered the most beautiful part of the service of the Akathist, and, actually is the Akathist Hymn.

Later the Faithful used the Akathist as a "song of victory, " a hymn of thanksgiving to the Theotokos for military victories. It was used for this particular purpose on at least four occasions: for a victory of Heraclios over the Persians in 628, for a victory of Constantine IV in 673, for a victory of Leo III in 719 and for Manuel II in 1421. The Akathist received another Procemion after the siege in 626.

There are four staseis relate the following themes to the listener:

The first stasis deals with the Annunciation, the Virgin's purity, the visitation to Elizabeth, and the doubts of Joseph.

The second stasis deals with the Adoration of the shepherds, the worship of the Magi, the flight to Egypt, and the Presentation of Christ in the Temple.

The third stasis talks of the new creation through the birth of Christ from the Theotokos, calls the worshippers to lift their minds to heaven, and the divine Condescension — God omnipotent willing to take a manger as His bed, and the inexplicableness of the Incarnation.

The final stasis reveals the Theotokos as Protectress, Theosis, and the inadequacy on the part of man to praise God, destruction from Adam's curse, and petitions of intercession to Mary.

THE PARACLESIS SERVICE

The Paraclesis is another important service.

The word Paraclesis is a Greek word having a number of meanings and uses. Generally, the word means "supplication", but it also carries the meaning of "comfort" as the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Paraclete or Comforter. The Paraclesis is that service of the Church in which the Faithful make an appeal to the Theotokos to intercede before God, especially in a period of tribulation, calamity, or temptation. In the Paraclesis, the Faithful supplicate Mary as the Mother of Mercy and receive relief, healing and grace we receive through her intercession.

The Paraclesis Service may not rightly be called a Byzantine invention; because, it's public celebration was not common until the period just before the fall of Constantinople. Before then there are no traces of a Byzantine service or a prototype thereof designed to publicly supplicate the Virgin (or Christ or any Saint) for the special, personal needs of those present. The Akathist Hymn here does not apply because it is a hymn praising the incarnation. It is a hymn of thanksgiving, whereas the Paraclesis is the opposite, a song of complaint to be performed in times of danger and tribulation. It roughly corresponds to the Latin Novena, which began to develop at about the same period. In the Horologia and Euchologia up to the 15th century, there is no trace of such a service. The very wording of The Paraclesis canons in these books indicates that their primary purpose is personal devotion because all the references to the person singing are singular (I, me, my). Significantly most personal references in the canon of the Akathist are in the plural. In the 15th century, the service first appears and has little distinction from the modern service.

One can easily make a deduction as to the development of this service through an examination of its contents. The order and the content follow a skeletal framework already extant in the service of Matins. The presence of the 142nd Psalm, the hymn

"God is the Lord" with its opening troparia, Psalm 50, the canon, the Antiphons, Prokeimenon, Gospel, Exapostelaria, and Megalynaria are all borrowed from the Matins Service.

Another service, which is structurally similar to the Paraclesis, is the Euchelaion or Unction Service. This service has been the subject of much research by the late Dr. Panagiotis Trembelas, and has been shown to stem also from the Matins Service and the Liturgy of the Word. The similarity of the Paraclesis to the Unction Service would seem merely causal were it not for the fact that Trembelas also mentions that the Paraclesis canon was sometimes read along with the specifically prescribed canon of the Euchelaion (written by Arsenios).

From the foregoing, it is possible to make a valid hypothesis as to what occurred in the formation of the Paraclesis as a special service. People hearing the canon being sung in the Euchelaion service began to feel the need and desire of having a special service of healing in which the Theotokos was implored to intercede for the healing of her servants. Such services might have begun to take place first in those churches having miracle-working icons, relics, or special shrines. It was an easy matter to reduce the Unction service to a service of supplication by eliminating the original canon, exchanging the solemn Alleluia for the every-day "God is the Lord", and substituting troparia for the originals. Early versions of the Paraclesis Service more often than not include the reading of the Unction prayer "The troparia of Unction, "Have mercy on us, Lord have mercy on us," are still found in the modern form of the service. It would be an excellent idea to reintroduce such a practice in modern parishes, especially in those liturgically active parishes, which have a Paraclesis service once a week on Friday evenings.

The institution of such a service in the practice of the Church led to the introduction of many other Paraclesis services. Athonite manuscripts from the 15th through the 18th centuries are full of Paraclesis services dedicated not only to the Theotokos, but also to special icons of her, to Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Forerunner, the Cross, the angels and most of the popular saints of the Church. These services, however, are mainly unimaginative and poorly produced copies of the Great and Small Paraclesis Services and never gained the vast popularity of their prototypes. They are used at present only in monasteries and in parish churches in Greece by request on the feast of a particular saint, as well as before a saint's miracle-working icon. A collection in modern edition of such Paraclesis Services in Greek may be obtained by ordering the book "A Treasury of Saints" from any Greek bookseller.

The Great and Small Paraclesis Services are sung in Byzantine Churches in Greece, the Middle-East and in America during the 14-day Fast in preparation for the Dormition of the Theotokos on August 15th. It is not yet certain when this practice was initiated; although, it must have predated the Fall in 1453 due to the fact that St. Mark of Ephesus had prepared his aforementioned seven canons to be sung during that fast period. However, it is not known in what context these were to be sung. Also, this being a local celebration of the City of Ephesus, it is uncertain how or when such a practice extended to the entire Church.

Saints Cosmas and Damian – Serving with Love

Life of Saints Cosmas and Damian

The Holy Wonderworkers and Unmercenary Physicians Cosmas and Damian and their mother St Theodota were natives of Asia Minor (some sources say Mesopotamia). Their pagan father died while they were still quite small children. Their mother raised them in Christian piety. Through her own example, and by reading holy books to them, St Theodota preserved her children in purity of life according to the command of the Lord, and Cosmas and Damian grew up into righteous and virtuous men.

Trained and skilled as physicians, they received from the Holy Spirit the gift of healing people's illnesses of body and soul by the power of prayer. They even treated animals. With fervent love for both God and neighbor, they never took payment for their services. They strictly observed the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Freely have you received, freely give." (Mt. 10:8). The fame of Sts Cosmas and Damian spread throughout all the surrounding region, and people called them unmercenary physicians.

Once, the saints were summoned to a grievously ill woman named Palladia, whom all the doctors had refused to treat because of her seemingly hopeless condition. Through faith and through the fervent prayer of the holy brothers, the Lord healed the deadly disease and Palladia got up from her bed perfectly healthy and giving praise to God. In gratitude for being healed and wishing to give them a small gift, Palladia went quietly to Damian. She presented him with three eggs and said, "Take this small gift in the Name of the Holy Life-Creating Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Hearing the Name of the Holy Trinity, the unmercenary one did not dare to refuse.

When St Cosmas learned what had happened, became very sad, for he thought that his brother had broken their strict vow. On his deathbed he gave instructions that his brother should not be buried beside him. St Damian also died shortly afterward, and everyone wondered where St Damian's grave should be. But through the will of God a miracle occurred. A camel, which the saints had treated for its wildness, spoke with a human voice saying that they should have no doubts about whether to place Damian beside Cosmas, because Damian did not accept the eggs from the woman as payment, but out of respect for the Name of God. The venerable relics of the holy brothers were buried together at Thereman (Mesopotamia).

Many miracles were worked after the death of the holy unmercenaries. There lived at Thereman, near the church of Cosmas and Damian, a certain man by the name of Malchus. One day he went on a journey, leaving his wife all alone for what would be a long time. He prayerfully entrusted her to the heavenly protection of the holy brothers. But the Enemy of the race of mankind took on the appearance of one of Malchus' friends, and planned to kill the woman. A certain time went by, and this man went to her at home and said that Malchus had sent him to bring her to him. The woman believed him and went along. He led her to a solitary place intending to kill her. The woman, seeing that disaster threatened her, called upon God with deep faith.

Two fiercesome men then appeared, and the devil let go of the woman and fled, falling off a cliff. The two men led the woman home. At her own home, bowing to them deeply she asked, "My rescuers, to whom I shall be grateful to the end of my days, what are your names?"

They replied, "We are the servants of Christ, Cosmas and Damian," and became invisible. The woman with trembling and with joy told everyone about what had happened to her. Glorifying God, she went up to the icon of the holy brothers and tearfully offered prayers of thanksgiving for her deliverance. And from that time the holy brothers were venerated as protectors of the holiness and inviolability of Christian marriage, and as givers of harmony to conjugal life. From ancient times, their veneration spread also to Russia.

The Unmercenary Saints Cosmas and Damian of Asia Minor should not be confused with the Unmercenary Saints Cosmas and Damian of Rome (July 1), or the Unmercenary Saints Cosmas and Damian of Arabia (October 17). (Source: OCA.org)

Serving with Love

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Four types of love

STORGE (storgē): "A natural, instinctive love or a parental love." Storge is natural affection, like that felt by parents for offspring.

AGAPE (agápē): "A pure, sacrificial love. God's love for us"

The term s'agapo means I love you in Greek. It generally refers to a "pure", ideal type of love rather than the physical attraction suggested by eros. Sometimes described as a "sacrificial" love. It has also been translated as "love of the soul". Used to describe God's love for us.

EROS (érōs): "A passionate, romantic love"

The term describes a passionate love, with sensual desire and longing. The Greek word erota means in love. Although eros is initially felt for a person, with contemplation it becomes an appreciation of the beauty within that person, or even becomes appreciation of beauty itself. Eros helps the soul recall knowledge of beauty, and contributes to an understanding of spiritual truth. Some translations list it as "love of the body".

PHILIA (philía): "A friendly love. A love felt between friends and for family"

A dispassionate virtuous love. It includes loyalty to friends, family, and community, and requires virtue, equality and familiarity. Philia is motivated by practical reasons; one or both of the parties benefit from the relationship. Can also mean "love of the mind".

NOMOS (nomōs): "A devotion to God"

XENIA (xenía): "Ritualised love, often seen in hospitality"

Hospitality, was an extremely important practice in Ancient Greece. It was an almost ritualized friendship formed between a host and their guest, who could previously be strangers. The host fed and provided quarters for the guest, who was only expected to repay with gratitude.

The Greatest is Love: I Corinthians 13

¹If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

³If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful;

⁵it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;

⁶ it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

1 Corinthians 13 – Broken down

Paul is writing this letter to the Church at Corinth. Paul talks about love and it is a good reminder for us as every day. Paul begins by saying that if you do not have love; you are like a clanging cymbal!

You know that a banging cymbal is Loud and annoying! And Paul says that isn't love. He said that it doesn't matter how wise you are... if you don't have love, then you don't have anything.

1. Patient & Kind [verses 3 & 4] Paul said even if he gave everything he has to feed the poor, there would not be a profit (an advantage or reward) without love. Paul is saying to share and give with the right heart and with love. He wants you to give freely and not resent what you are giving.

2. Jealous Love does not envy, does not parade itself and is not puffed up. Love isn't jealous of what others have, and if you have things that others want, you shouldn't make your friends jealous because you have it.

3. Boast Love is not proud or big headed. That also means boasting or bragging. Accept what you have, what God has given you. Be happy, not "I want this and that".

4. Not Rude or Mean [verse 5] Love does not behave rudely. Love is not impolite or mean. Love doesn't do things that we'll regret or be ashamed of later. Discuss being mean.

5. Care About Others Love does not seek its own. Love doesn't look out for their own interests or just themselves. That also includes grabbing things from people. Or interrupting when someone is talking. Love cares about other people's needs.

6. Controls Temper Love is not provoked. That means that Love doesn't become angry easily. Love is forgiving. Take time to let your temper cool down. Don't hold grudges. Love thinks no evil. Discuss anger and what angers the students and what they can do to control it.

7. Good Thoughts (verse 6) Does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth. Iniquity is sin, or doing sinful things that God doesn't like. And, just the opposite is to be happy to do what is right.

8. Same As Scripture [verses 7-8]

Love bears all things. (Love accepts and protects.)
Love believes all things. (Love trusts)
Love hopes all things. (Love always has hope.)
Love never fails. (Love puts up with things and never gives up.) If you love someone or something, you never stop trying. Love is patient, willing to listen and take the time to pay attention.

9. Three Look at today's Bible verse 13. There's faith, hope and love;
Faith is believing in Jesus and knowing that He will do what's best for us.
Hope is the Resurrection of Christ. God is love! Love never ends.
We have faith in what Jesus taught us, and we know that if we do everything He commands, we will go to Heaven with Him.

10. Greatest is Love BUT the greatest of these is love. Why? Finally, the Bible tells us that love keeps no record of wrongs. **ACTIVITY:** You have a piece of paper in front of you. Pretend that this is a list you've been making of things that bother you about other people. Let's tear it up. Rip it to little pieces! Now there's nothing standing in the way of you loving others.

Love Everywhere

We all need love - All people need love in order to live. God loves us and gives us gifts in our life, such as our talents. He wants us to take care of all these gifts from Him. God gave us His son, Jesus, to save us from sin. In Jerusalem, Jesus taught people, healed people, and was baptized in the Jordan River. He died on the cross and rose from the dead. Jesus taught that the most important rule is to love God with your whole self. Jesus wants us to love others. People will know you are a Christian when you treat others with love.

Love at home - God wants parents to love their children, and children should obey their loving parents. There are many ways to show love for your parents. The Church has seven sacraments, which help us to be close to God. Marriage is the sacrament of love. Icons show Jesus and the saints. They may tell stories about the Church. They remind us of God and the saints. When we burn incense, the smoke rises like our prayers rise to God. The Jesus Prayer is, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." We should forgive each other and ask for forgiveness from others.

Love in Church - Our church is a family and we show each other love in many ways. At Divine Liturgy, we receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, a sacrament of love. To prepare, we pray, forgive each other, and fast from certain foods. Our church has many symbols, such as the Cross, the altar table, the chalice, the baptismal font, icons, and the incense censer. When we hurt ourselves or others, we sin. We should ask God for forgiveness of our sins in the sacrament of Confession. When we decide to confess our sins to God, we sit with a priest and he helps us and blesses us. Even when it is not easy to be loving, the Holy Spirit helps us to love.

Love means serving others - To serve means to do something good for someone, out of our love for them and for God. When we care for others, we are caring for Jesus. We should remember this whenever we see a person in need. God made people the same in many ways, and different in many ways. We should love and serve people, even if we don't know them. People in the church can join together to help others who are in need.

Love means being respectful - Respecting other people is a way of telling them that they are important. All people deserve respect. We should respect leaders such as our teachers, coaches, priests, and our president. Our church's leaders are bishops and priests. A bishop takes care of priests and the people in parishes. Our priests celebrate sacraments, teach us, and visit people in the hospital. Deacons are helpers to the priests and bishops. We also respect the saints, who were people who lived God's way. We remember the day the saint died. This is a feast day, because on that day the saint went to heaven. The night before a saint's feast day, we have Great Vespers to honor the saint and ask for him or her to pray for us. The next morning, we celebrate Divine Liturgy. We celebrate a person's name day on the feast day of a saint. We must treat our world with respect so that all people can enjoy it.

Love means obeying the rules - Rules help us to live together. When we obey them, it shows that we care about ourselves and about each other. We follow rules in our church because we love and respect God and others there. God gave us rules in the form of the Ten Commandments. Jesus taught us to follow these commandments, and that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love others. The Holy Cross is a symbol of love, because Jesus died on the cross to save us. We celebrate this feast day on September 14. We show our respect for the cross by making the sign of the cross, putting it up on our walls, or wearing it on a chain around our necks. Seeing a cross should remind us of Jesus' love for us. We love and respect Mary, the Theotokos, which means the Mother of God. When Mary was three years old, her parents brought her to the Temple in Jerusalem, where the Jewish people prayed. She lived there her whole life, praying and following God's way. On November 21, the Church celebrates the day that Mary entered the Temple. When the baby Jesus was forty days old, Mary and Joseph brought him to the Temple to be blessed by God. A very old man named Simeon held Jesus in his arms, and knew that it was the Savior. After he did, he told God that his life was complete. This feast day is called the Presentation of Jesus, and we celebrate it on February 2. Just like Jesus, your parents brought you to be blessed when you were forty days old. We believe that after Jesus died, He rose from the dead after three days. This is the greatest miracle of our faith. We proclaim, "Christ is risen!"

Explain: Give a definition of what serving means. Explain the key verse: Jesus didn't come for others to serve Him, but to serve and help others. Our motivation for serving must come from a love for God and others and our desire to be more like Jesus. We can see examples of serving in Scripture.

Look at John 13:2-5 and see that Jesus washed the disciples feet. This is an act of serving. Serving isn't something that we should dread doing. It should be something that brings us joy! We don't have to wash feet as Jesus did to be serving. As children,

we can serve by helping our parents with chores around the house. We can help out at church by opening a door for an elderly person. Serving is possibly one of the easiest of the disciplines to practice – IF we have the right attitude about it. There are always ways to serve and help others.

Another way to serve is to pray for others. Instead of only praying for our own needs, we can be servants by praying for those around us. Serving is basically about others and not ourselves! When we serve, we should strive to be more like Jesus, caring for those around us more than we do our own needs and wants.

Craft: Make cards for shut-ins or someone you know is sick and deliver them personally (or mail them if delivering them isn't possible). For younger children, use our free coloring pages to create artwork to give away.

Hymns of the Orthodox Church

"What then is more blessed than to...hasten to prayer at daybreak and to worship the Creator with hymns and song?" ~St. John of Damascus

"Whoever attunes himself and studies the meaning of sacred songs from the beginning to end, will find himself approaching God." ~St. Gregory Palamas

What is a hymn?

A hymn is a way we respond to God when He touches our heart. It is a prayer or meditation set to music. It is a conversation with God. Hymns allow us to connect with God in a very special way, one that involves our body, our senses, and our mind. When we sing a hymn, it is as though we are praying twice, once with the words that we say and once with the song that we sing!

What are we saying when we sing hymns?

- We are giving glory to God.
- We are giving thanks to God.
- We are asking Him for blessings.
- We are learning about our faith and what we believe about God.

- We express the full range of our emotions from joy to sorrow by calling out to our God.

When were hymns first invented?

We know from reading the Holy Bible that hymns were sung in the Old Testament. We read in the Book of Exodus that after God parted the Red Sea, Moses and the Israelites crossed over to safety and immediately sang a song to God to praise Him and thank Him for saving them (Ex. 15:1-21).

King David is said to have written at least half of the Psalms in the Old Testament. These beautiful poems became the hymnal (songbook) of the Jewish people. When they went to the temple to pray, there were cantors who chanted the Psalms and all of the people would sing with them.

The tradition of people singing in the Temple carried over to New Testament worship as well. It is recorded in the Gospel of Mark that after the Passover meal, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn before they went out (Mk. 14:26).

Singing with the Angels

"And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.'" Isaiah 6:3

We Sing with the Angels- Holy God! Holy Mighty! Holy Immortal!
Among the many blessings that Jesus wants to share with us is a special place in Heaven, close to Him. By His sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus has given us the privilege of being with Him and with all the saints and angels. To celebrate this joyous event, we join our voices with the chorus of angels in heaven who continually sing praises of God (see Isaiah 6:1-4). We sing Holy God! Holy Mighty! Holy Immortal! three times, indicating our belief in the Trinity. Let us see what the words of this beautiful hymn mean.

When we sing Holy God!, we mean that God is different from us and our world in a very special way. He is pure and spotless. He is awesome and majestic. When Moses approached the burning bush, he was told to remove his shoes because the ground that he was walking on was holy; God was present there (Exodus 3:5). Singing the words Holy God! helps us to remember that during the Divine Liturgy we are in God's presence.

God is Mighty! There is nothing that is as strong as our God. The parting of the waters of the Red Sea was one such instance when God proved His might. Our God is the chief source of our strength when we need help. When we sing Holy Mighty!, we remember that we cannot do anything by ourselves, but with and through God, all things are possible.

God is Immortal! This means that God cannot die. Everything in the world is created, and sooner or later everything dies. Only God, who is the source of all life, has no beginning and has no end. As the Creator, He alone is eternal and immortal. When we sing Holy Immortal! we are reminded that if we believe in Him, follow Him, and unite our lives with His, we, too, can live forever with Him.

It is interesting to note that the word for holy in Greek is *ayios*. The prefix *a-* means not, and the root word *-yi* means earth. So the Greek word for holy, literally means not of this earth. The Thrice Holy Hymn is a beautiful reminder that during the Divine Liturgy, we are experiencing a taste of "heaven", something not of this earth.

Byzantine Music – The tones and tunes

What is Byzantine chant? We call it Byzantine because it originated in the era of the Byzantine Empire. Its development has continued to this day. The Church knows about music's power to influence us, and that's why it uses hymns, music with words, to help us lift our hearts and souls to God, while also teaching us about God and God's way.

Byzantine music has a few purposes.

Byzantine music lifts our minds to God, helping us pray. When you wrote in your journal, how did you say this song made you feel? It was probably a very soothing sound compared to some of the other things we listened to. It was designed to be that way. It wasn't meant to have a fast beat or a loud bass line. It was designed to help lift our minds to heavenly things, almost like we're in heaven. Our focus is pulled away from everyday things, such as which boy likes me, what grade I'm going to get in math, or why I'm angry with my parents.

Byzantine music reflects our intrinsic need to worship God. Each and every one of us has a built-in desire to worship, because God created us with the need to be connected to Him. There are certain things about every person that are true. For instance, we all need food and water to stay alive, we all have emotions, thoughts and feelings, and we all are worshipful creatures. That's what worship is: giving God the glory and thanks that is due to Him.

The Tones

The hymns of the church are based on 8 tones or modes. Each tone has its own distinctive scale, melodic line, and phraseology, and all hymns of the church fall into 1 of the 8 tones. Many hymns are also based on a "model" hymn. A model hymn, while being set within 1 of the 8 tones, has its own distinctive melody. A good chanter will memorize the scales and melodic lines of the 8 tones as well as many of the "model" hymns. This allows them to sing any hymn without music. In order to sing a hymn, all they need to know are the words to the hymn and what tone or model hymn to sing.

Apolytikion: (from the Great "dismissal")

This is the hymn of the day. Each Sunday during the Orthros and at the Small Entrance of the Divine Liturgy, one of the eight Resurrection Apolytikia is sung in its proper tone. Beginning with Pentecost, we start with the first Apolytikion and cycle through all eight, singing one each Sunday, and then repeating the cycle. Below is a list of the 8 Resurrection Apolytikia:

Name of Hymn	Tone
The Stone Was Sealed	First Tone
When You Descended	Second Tone
Let All Things Rejoice	Third Tone
The Tidings	Fourth Tone
The Eternal Word	First Plagal Tone
The Angelic Powers	Second Plagal Tone
O Lord By Your Sacred Cross	Grave Tone
From On High Did You Descend	Fourth Plagal Tone

In addition, an apolytikion in honor of a feast day (ex. Christmas or Pascha), or in honor of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or a saint on the occasion of their feast day may also be sung.

Who wrote the hymns of the Orthodox Church?

When people first started to worship the God of Abraham, they believed that their worship service was prescribed from heaven. As descendents of those early Jews, it is our belief even today that when we worship our Lord, we are being inspired by the angels who praise Him continuously in heaven. With this in mind, many of our hymns were written by people who did not wish to have their names made known. They preferred that all of the glory go to God. Even though there are hymnographers who remain anonymous to us, today we will study three who contributed greatly to the way that we worship our Lord through song.

Saint Ephraim was the first Christian to use poems and songs as a vehicle for teaching Orthodox theology. He lived in the 300's during a time when people were spreading untruths about the Christian faith. St. Ephraim composed beautiful hymns so that people could learn and remember the correct teaching of the Church. It is for this reason that he is called the "Harp of the Holy Spirit." He is rightly known as the first and greatest hymnographer of the Church, since he set the pattern for those who followed him. He especially inspired Saint Romanos the Melodist.

St. Romanos the Melodist (491-518) was from Emesa of Syria, and apparently was born of Jewish parents, for a hymn written in his honor in Greek says he was "of Hebrew stock." He was baptized an Orthodox Christian, and at some time became a deacon in the Church of Beirut. He was the first to compose a type of hymn called a kontakion. The most famous kontakion he wrote was for the feast of Christ's Nativity which we continue to sing during every Christmas season.

St. John of Damascus lived in the late 600's and early 700's and is considered to be one of the greatest Orthodox hymnographers and theologians. He is especially known for his eloquent writings in defense of the veneration of icons. St. John adorned the Church of Christ with his hymns. There are eight tones or modes in Byzantine music. We sing one tone each week, cycling through all eight, then we begin with tone one again. These tones are attributed to St. John of Damascus. He also composed many of the sacred hymns for the feasts of the Lord and the Theotokos. It is interesting to note that St. John was considered a great theologian and hymnographer, and to some extent the two go hand-in-hand.