

12th Grade

Our Life in the World to Come

Table of Contents

	LESSON	PAGE
1	THE MEDICINE OF LIFE	1
2	THE LIVING CHURCH	8
3	THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST	13
4	THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH	18
5	OPENING THE SCRIPTURES	25
6	THE SANCTITY OF LIFE	31
7	CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP	39
8	LOVE THE SINNER AND NOT THE SIN	46
9	ETHO D'MORAN	53
10	SALVATION THROUGH THE CROSS	60
11	THE JOURNEY TO SALVATION	66
12	FULFILLMENT IN CHRIST	71
13	OUR SYRIAC ROOTS	75
14	THE WORLD TO COME	91
15	ONE OF THE LEAST	97
16	WRESTLING WITH GOD	103

Supporting materials can be found at <https://talmido.org>

Lesson 1: The Medicine of Life

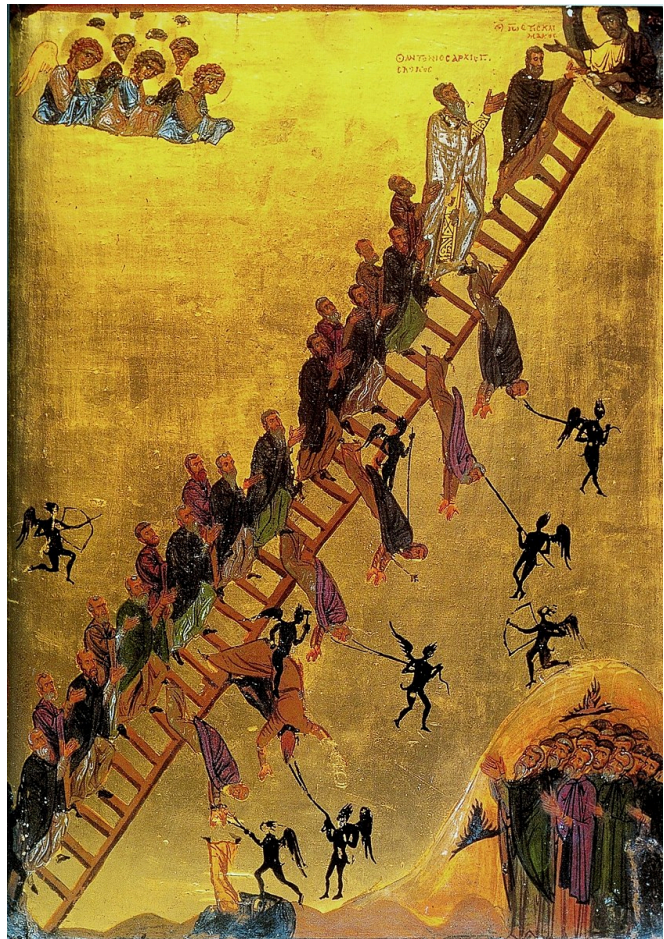
Lesson Goals

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

Have you encountered individuals who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious”? This is never an opportunity to judge but to reflect as that person may have had a bad experience with a religious organization or have a theological misunderstanding.

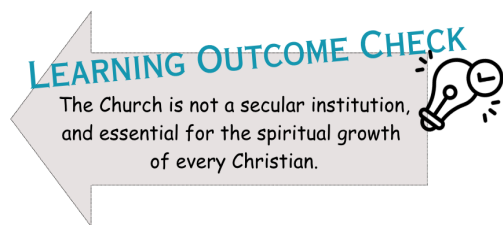
So, what is Orthodox spirituality?
In the Orthodox Church, everything begins with Christ and is fulfilled in Christ. Reflecting on the word ‘religion,’ Fr. Alexander Schmemmann observes: *“Christ did not bring religion; Christ brought the Kingdom of God. Christianity is not a religion to help secular man to cope with his problems.”*

Being a “good Orthodox Christian” does not mean someone who attends Church every Sunday. Rather, each day and each moment of our lives have Christ at the center with Holy Qurbana being the moment when we are in our closest and full communion with Him. Orthodoxy therefore becomes a way of life and not membership in an organization. Christ did not introduce a religion but rather He fulfills our purpose (**Revelation 21:5-6**).



Fr. George C. Papademetriou¹ teaches, "The spirituality of the Orthodox Christian is portrayed as a life in Christ, a life of commitment to the Lord, and complete submission to His will. One lives only to do everything for Christ's sake, as Christ wants it and as Christ would do it."

When we understand the Holy Church is the Body of Christ (**Colossians 1:24; Ephesians. 4:11-12; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23**), we see the necessity of the Church for our spiritual growth. As we live the sacramental life called for by the Church, we grow closer to God and become united in Him. This process is *deification* or *theosis*, and we understand this follows Christ's teaching - "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." (**St. Matthew 5:48**).



Orthodox spirituality is "a journey towards a mystical union with God through living the Gospel teachings in the context of the Church, and participating in her sacraments and Holy Traditions" (Dimitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*²). This journey begins at Holy Baptism and through the other Sacraments leads us toward communion with God. It is a life of repentance working with the Holy Spirit.

Healing in the Church

Spirituality is understood to be an everyday activity to grow in communion with God and applies to our whole being. As such, there is a direct connection between "salvation" and "healing".

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

¹ Papademetriou, Fr. George C. . "An Introduction to Orthodox Spirituality - Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America," n.d. <https://www.goarch.org/-/an-introduction-to-orthodox-spirituality>.

² Stăniloae, Fr. Dumitru. *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*. 1st ed. St. Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2013.

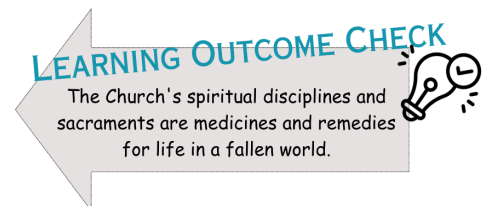
³ Harvey, Fr. Geoff. "Salvation Is Healing." The Good Shepherd Orthodox Church, n.d. <https://www.thegoodshepherd.org.au/salvation-healing>.

The Sacraments of the Church are essential to the Christian journey. They are spiritual and physical healing tools, connecting us to Christ and restoring our relationship with God through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion and indwelling of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14). Christ is our Great Physician.

Just as you go to a doctor for physical ailments, the Church is there to heal us spiritually. The Church is a spiritual hospital. Sin separates us from God leading to death, but the Church, through its sacraments and teachings acts as medicine. This healing isn't only our inner selves as it encompasses our whole being – body, soul, and spirit. By participating in these sacraments and living a life united with Christ and the Church, we experience full healing and restoration.

In the Orthodox Church, we embark on this journey of spiritual renewal with the sacrament of Baptism when we renounce Satan and his influence, dying to our old life and being reborn into a new life in Christ. With Chrismation we are anointed with Holy Chrism and the seal of the Holy Spirit making us temples of the Holy Spirit and empowering us to grow in holiness.

We rely on the Holy Sacraments to guide us. Confession, a Sacrament of repentance, allows us to confess our sins to a priest and receive absolution, the assurance of God's forgiveness. The priest also offers spiritual guidance and support, helping us heal from the wounds of sin and find strength to live a more holy life.



The Holy Eucharist, the center of our faith, brings us in communion with God. Each time we partake in Holy Communion we receive the grace of healing. As Saint Ignatius said, "The Holy Eucharist is the medicine of immortality and an antidote to death." The Sacrament of Holy Unction offers physical and spiritual healing.

Fullness of Healing: Spiritual, Physical, and Mental Health

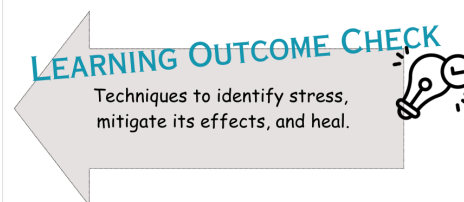
"No one can heal my disease except He who knows the depths of the heart." - St. Ephrem

St. Ephrem reminds us that full healing is only found in Christ. Sometimes God allows us to experience illness or challenges, even chronic ones. Although difficult, these

moments can help us grow in faith and become closer to God. Just like Christ endured suffering for us, we can learn to find peace and strength even in difficult times.

Just as we care for our physical health, we also need to care for our mental health. Orthodox Christians believe our body, mind, and spirit are all connected. If one part is struggling, it can affect the others.

Life can be stressful! We all face challenges, big and small. Our faith is a powerful tool to help us when we are stressed and gives us healthy ways to cope. Building spiritual habits including prayer, meditation, worship, and fasting helps manage stress and improves our overall well-being.

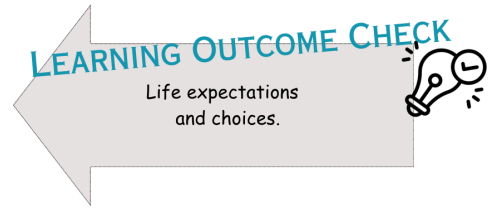


- **Prayer:** Prayer of any form brings peace and comfort. The Church provides many fixed prayers for all occasions, and impromptu prayers of any form helps us feel connected to something bigger than ourselves. The Jesus Prayer is simple and helps us “pray without ceasing” (**1 Thessalonians 5:17**).
- **Meditation:** Meditation can help us calm our minds and focus. As **Psalm 45:11 (46:10)** reminds us, “Be still, and know that I am God.” Remembering God helps us manage our emotions and reduce our stress.
- **Worship:** Attending Church regularly provides a sense of community and support. We are also reminded of God’s love and presence in our lives, and by partaking in the Holy Qurbana we receive the Real Body and Blood of Christ.
- **Fasting:** Fasting helps us focus on our spiritual life and develop self-discipline. It can also have positive effects on our physical health. In the Orthodox Church, we fast as a community which is another tool that brings us together in Christ.

We do need extra help at times to manage our mental health. Just like we see a doctor for physical problems, we can see a therapist for mental health challenges. It is also important to understand our priest is our spiritual father and is an important source of guidance and support in high school and beyond as we navigate personal, academic, and career-impacting choices. As Christians, above all our lives, our minds, thoughts, and hearts should always remember and remain with the Lord God.

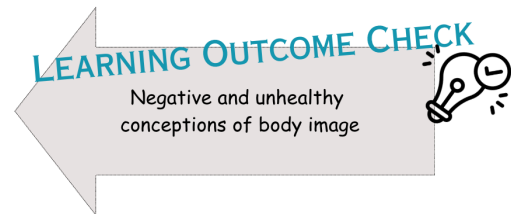
By practicing our Faith and taking care of our mental and physical health, we build resilience. This means we can better handle the ups and downs of life and bounce back

from challenges. As you prepare for life after high school, remember that taking care of your whole self is essential. Make healthy choices, build strong relationships, and rely on your faith to guide you. You can face the future with confidence and hope!



Our Faith is in Christ who is the “Way, the Truth, and the Life” (**St. John 14:6**). By following His teachings, as embodied in the Church, we are led to a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. We are all created in God’s image (**Genesis 1:27**). This means we are inherently good and worthy of love, just as God is.

When we look in the mirror, we are not just seeing a reflection of our physical appearance but also a reflection of God’s love and beauty within us. Always remembering God helps us combat negative and unhealthy conceptions of body image. Instead of listening to the material world and focusing on apparent flaws or feeling the need to compare ourselves to others, we must see ourselves as God sees us - perfectly loved and uniquely beautiful.



Navigating the Fallen World

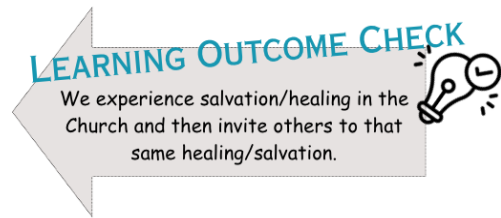
Our calling is to bring Christ to the world (**St. Matthew 5:15**). However, as we navigate through life in the fallen world there are often intentional and at other times unintentional when we bring down the health of ourselves or others. Although our journey is towards perfection, the reality is that we are far from being perfect.

Remember our life in the Church provides us with the medicine for healing! Our theology emphasizes the need for humility, and each cry of “Kurielaison! Lord have mercy!” is a reminder not only of God’s perfect Divinity but also that through His Love for us, there is forgiveness, redemption, and hope.

What if the Prodigal Son (**St. Luke 15:11-32**) felt so ashamed that he never returned to his Father? Stigma refers to a social perception of shame or disgrace associated with a person, characteristic, or circumstance.

When stigma persists around an action that we have done that is sinful or mental health concerns, individuals often worry that they will be rejected, judged, or discriminated against because of their psychological, relational, or emotional struggles.

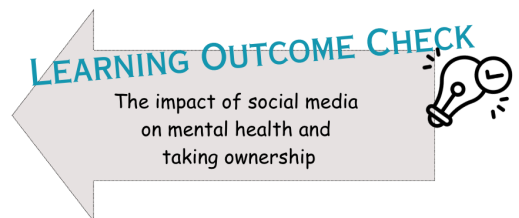
Many will choose to suffer silently instead of reaching out for support. Worse, many often feel they are not “good enough” to come to Church. We each have a responsibility to compassionately break this pattern when we see it in ourselves or others. Especially with mental health, the silence from those who are struggling is a sign that they do not feel safe to express their needs.



As Christians, we need to be open to listening and discussing with kindness, patience, and gentleness. We need to share the presence of Christ in ourselves with others.

We need to begin to *"bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ"* (**Galatians 6:2**). Being more intentional in perceiving signs of positive and negative behaviors and influences in ourselves and others is a way to bring the presence of Christ everywhere we go, and our actions more than words will bring us and others closer to the Church.

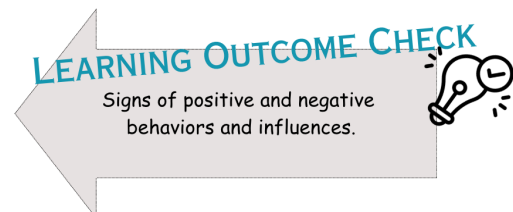
This becomes more difficult in the anonymity of social media and the Internet, but continuing to work with the Holy Spirit within us and striving to live the Sacramental life of the Church brings the balance discussed throughout this lesson of spiritual, physical, and mental well-being.



Summary

It is important to manage our overall health, particularly our mental well-being, as this is an act of stewardship for the body, mind, and spirit that God has entrusted to us. It is essential to understand that seeking help is not limited to times of tragedy, trauma, or crisis; support should be sought whenever needed, as we are never alone in our struggles.

Our parents, parish, and Diocese offer valuable resources for guidance and assistance. Moreover, being aware of others in need is fundamental to embodying Christ-like behavior, which centers on keeping the doors of our hearts and the Church open to those seeking solace. By placing Christ at the center of our lives (**St. Matthew 6:33, 1 Corinthians 11:1-2,**



Philippians 4:13), we can navigate the complexities of academic, personal, and professional decisions more healthily. In moments of anxiety and potential depression, reflecting on our eternal purpose can provide a comforting perspective amid life's challenges. As Elder Paisios of Mount Athos reminded, "Each person will account to God whether they sanctified the path of life they chose". The enduring beauty of our Faith lies in the assurance that the Church's doors are always open to welcome us back, even if we get lost in our daily struggles and lose sight of the eternal goal.

Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on the silent prayer the priest recites before reading the Gospel during Holy Qurbana. How does understanding the Church as a hospital help us obey God with "joy"?

Grant us, O Lord, the knowledge of your Divine Words and fill us with the understanding of Your Holy Gospel, the richness of Your Divine Gifts, and the grace of Your Holy Spirit.

Grant us the wisdom to obey Your commandments with joy and do Your will.

Make us worthy of Your blessings and mercies, now and always, and forever and ever. Amin.

2. Can anyone be ugly?

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

3. What are ways we can better identify stress with the lens of the Church? What are practical ways to mitigate and heal given the ancient wisdom given to us?

Lesson 2: The Living Church

Lesson Goals

- *I can describe why we need the Church.*
 - *I can relate to how the Church is where Sacraments are fulfilled in Christ.*
 - *I can defend why the Church is essential for the spiritual growth of every Christian.*
-

We need to understand the reason for the Church to understand the profound statement of Saint Irenaeus, “Wherever the Church is, there is also the Spirit of God, and wherever the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and the fullness of grace.” Christians today feel they love Christ but do not need the Church, but this sadly overlooks the criticality of the Church in our lives.

The Church

Fr. Thomas Hopko made the following bold statement while reflecting on the role of Orthodox parish⁴:

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

Whatever the original reasons and conditions for its founding, whatever other services and activities it may provide, whatever other desires and needs it may fulfill for its members, a community of Orthodox Christians must be Christ’s One Holy Church.”

Our parish is more than just a building. The parish functions as a holy place where we directly connect with God and grow in Faith. The parish is holy because the Church as the Body of Christ (Colossians 1:24; Ephesians. 4:11-12; 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23) is Holy. Everything we do in the parish, from our worship to our community outreach, is guided by God’s love and wisdom.

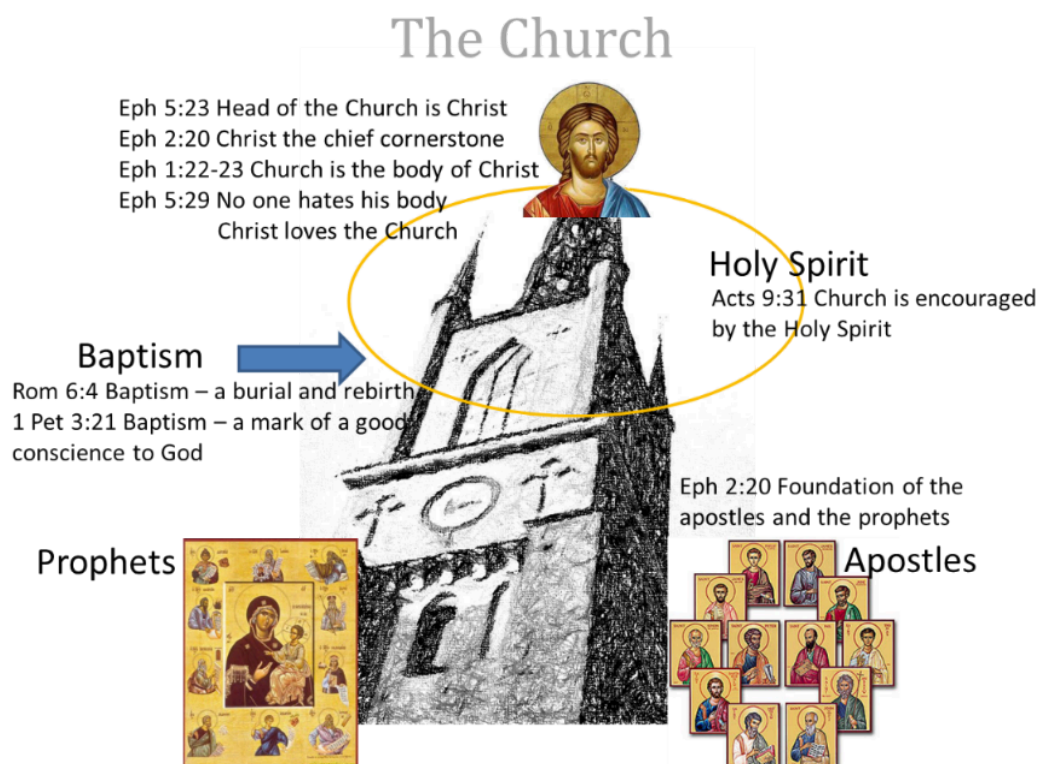
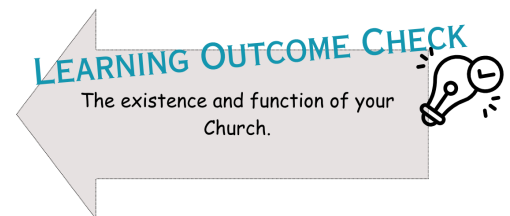
The Orthodox Church constantly evolves and adapts to the world around us, but always holds the core truths of our Faith given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. The Church is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic, and within everyone can find a sense of belonging and

⁴ Hopko, Fr. Thomas. The Parish Community: Our Life in Christ. Thirteenth All-American Council, 2002. <https://www.ocadwpa.org/files/Parish%20Development/Hopko-Orthodox-Parish-in-NA-Orlando.pdf>.

grow in their relationship with God. The Church exists because God wants us to be in communion with Him and with each other. It's not just a building or a set of rules, it's a living, breathing organism that helps us grow in our faith and fulfill our purpose as Christians. We need the Church to be strong, to be supported, and to be guided on our journey with God.

An Orthodox parish is where we come together as one to worship. Along with the heavenly choir and our departed, we are united to praise and adore the One True God. When we are baptized we joined to become God's Kingdom on earth, preparing us for the resurrection of the dead and the new life in the world to come. All of us become a vital part of the parish and the Church as a whole. You are connected to God in a very real way, and that connection is strengthened every time you come to Church and participate in the Holy Qurbana.

Every Orthodox parish reflects the four characteristics of the Holy Church, namely, One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. The Church will be One with God's unity, Holy with God's Holiness, Catholic with God's Fullness, and Apostolic because it is firmly rooted in doctrine and teachings given to the Apostles by Christ Himself.



The Church keeps and lives “the faith which was once and for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 1:3) which is the “one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith” that we acknowledge during the Fifth Thubden as well as in the hymn during Holy Qurbana,

*Through our off'rings and our pray'rs
We make good mem'ry of our fathers.
Who in their life taught us to -
Be children of God!*

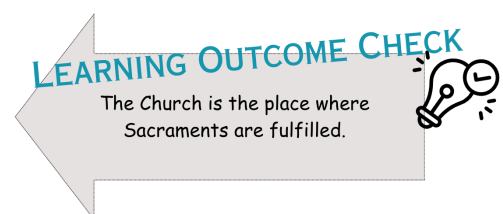
Our Church serves the world by creating a healing environment from the impacts of Satan. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the life of the Church, we become Christ-like (theosis) and radiate His Presence. In other words, the purpose of each one of us as Orthodox Christians is to spread this healing apostolicity.

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

The Spirit of God

The second part of St. Irenaeus’s statement refers to the Spirit of God. Our aim as Orthodox Christians is theosis, and for this we need the help of the Spirit within us.

In the Holy Church we are partake and are transformed through the Holy Sacraments. The word ‘sacrament’ originates from the Latin word sacramentum. However, the Greek word mysterion articulates the intent of the word better. When we become members of the Church through Baptism, we become born again (new life in Christ) which is through Chrismation is sealed through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Eucharist unites our body and blood with the Body and

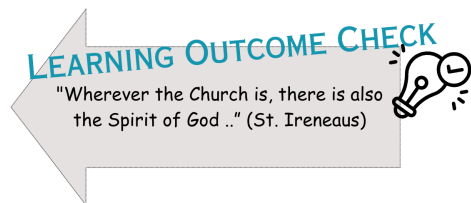


Blood of Christ. Marriage in Christ allows human love to become divine and eternal, and two bodies (male and female) become One in Christ. Through the Sacrament of Healing our body and soul is healed, leading us to some more time in this world, or an eternity in the Kingdom of God. The Sacrament of Confession removes the separation between us and God (Isaiah 59:2), and restores us to life in Christ. The Sacrament of Priesthood allows for the presence of Christ in the Church.

Each Sacrament of the Church transforms us, and as we remember during Holy Qurbana is it “the One Living Holy Spirit, who is the Perfector and the Fulfiller of all that has been and all that will be”. Through our cooperation with God, we grow in holiness towards the One Holy Father, the One Holy Son, and the one Holy Spirit who is the most Holy and Pure. HG Yuhanon Mar Severios reflects⁵, “The Holy Sacraments are visible actions commissioned by Jesus Christ, and invisibly fulfilled by the Holy Spirit, to receive the Grace of God and for the salvation of the human race. Further, it involves the special intervention of His God and is more than a prayer or a special worship service.”

Fullness of Grace

The last part of St. Irenaeus’s statement, “...wherever the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and the fullness of grace,” refers to our responsibility as members of an Orthodox parish to be motivated to keep God’s commandments as our essential and ultimately exclusive reason for our existence.



By doing so, we, the Church, can exacerbate the fullness of grace. The life and activity of an Orthodox parish should be perfectly described by Jesus’ answer to the question concerning the first and great commandment of the law of God.

And one of the scribes asked him, “Which commandment is first of all?” Jesus answered, “*The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.’* The second is this, *‘You shall love your Neighbor as yourself.’* There is no other commandment greater than these.” (**St. Mark 12:28-31**) Love requires more than one person and cannot exist in isolation.

In fact, when we think of love, we unconsciously assume a plurality of human beings – a community. Community and communion originate from Latin communis, and means the

⁵ HG Yuhanon Mar Severios. Shushrusha Samvidhaana Sahaayi. MOC Publications (Kottayam), 2018.

sharing or exchange of intimate thoughts and feelings especially when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level.

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

We strive with our whole heart and mind to love the Lord our God and love our neighbor (**St. Matthew 22:36-40**). We must create a community flourishing in love, care, and healing. When such communities exist, theosis happens and the Kingdom of God becomes visible. This is our apostolic goal and mission.

Our afflictions will be great, as Christ has promised, but our successes are assured by His victory. *"In the world you have tribulation,"* Jesus says to his apostles, *"but take courage, I have overcome the world."* (**St. John 16:33**). Let us remember, *"For what is impossible with men is possible with God."* (**St. Luke 18:27**)

Reflection Questions

1. Consider each Sacrament of the Church and the role it plays for spiritual growth and theosis. Is it possible to stay at home and truly worship by ourselves?
2. Fr. John Behr asks, "You have to be responsible for coming to Church and being a member of the Church. But, why are you coming to this Church? Is it just because your parents did and your parents before that did? Or do you believe that here you encounter the Lord of all Creation of this history, the one sitting at the right hand of the Father, and become His Body?"

Considering the term "fullness" from the quote by St. Irenaeus, how would you respond to Fr. John Behr?

3. How would you respond to someone who no longer wishes to attend Church because of an issue they had with the people in the Church?

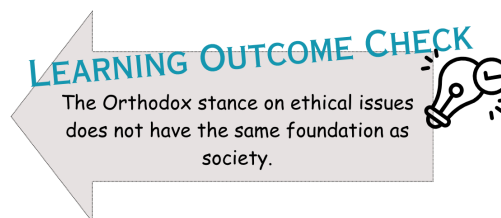
Lesson 3: The Presence of Christ

Lesson Goals

- *I can discern how my Faith impacts my values and perspectives.*
- *I can defend the Orthodox stance on ethical issues when society does not always have a true Christian foundation.*
- *I can defend that the goal of a Christian is not just to be good but to be the presence of Christ even to those who don't believe.*

Our Christian faith calls us to witness Christ through our actions, words, and thoughts (**Romans 8:29**, **2 Corinthians 3:18**, and **1 St. John 3:2**). Living a Christian life develops our virtue and ethics to shape a strong moral character, reflecting the teachings of Christ. In our increasingly pluralistic society—characterized by the coexistence of diverse beliefs and values—it is essential to recognize that while tolerance is a hallmark of such a society, it can lead some to mistakenly believe that all beliefs are equally valid. In contrast, Orthodoxy teaches that while we respect others, we must remain steadfast in our conviction that the essence of our faith is rooted in the truth of the One True God as expressed in the Nicene Creed.

The early Church, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, provides a historical foundation where Christian communities thrived despite persecution and internal conflicts. The growth of the Church was not through adaptation to societal norms; rather, it stood out as a beacon of Christ's love and truth. Guided by the Golden Commandment to love God and our neighbor, the Church maintained a focus that often diverged from societal views. This echoes the prayer of Christ (**St. John 17:14-19**), emphasizing that His followers are not of this world while still being sent into it to bear witness to the truth. The modern world, rich in religious philosophies and cultural diversity, poses challenges for Orthodox Christians who seek to engage with those whose foundational beliefs differ from our own.



While navigating this complex landscape, our Lord calls us to embody His presence always through love, compassion, and service to all. The fruit of the Holy Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**) further emphasizes that the outwardly attributes of a Christian is that of our Lord. St. John Chrysostom reminds us that love is our fundamental commandment⁶; we are to

⁶ St. John Chrysostom's homily on 1 Timothy 2:1-4 -

pray for, forgive, bless, and serve everyone, including those outside our faith community. This call to love serves as our ethical anchor in a society where differing values abound. By reflecting the principles of our faith in our interactions, we not only uphold our commitment to Christ but also invite others to witness the transformative power of His love, setting a profound example of what it means to live as His representatives in a pluralistic world. As an Orthodox Christian living in a pluralistic society, our only command is to love God and love our neighbor (**St. John 13:34-35**), and through love others will come to know Christ.

Living in a Pluralistic Society

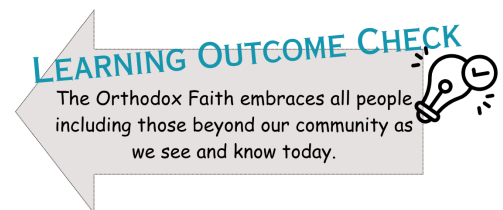
In **St. John 4:5-42**, we encounter a profound lesson on how to embody our Christian faith in today's pluralistic world through Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Even in ancient times, society was characterized by a diversity of beliefs and authorities. The notion that all tribes of Israel were uniformly united under one central authority is neither historically accurate nor Scripturally supported. After the death of King Solomon in 10 B.C., the northern tribes of Israel separated and settled in regions like Samaria, forming distinct kingdoms. Though these tribes professed loyalty to God, their actions were often contrary to His commandments, leading to their conquest by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C., as recorded in **4 Kingdoms (2 Kings) 18:9-12**. The Assyrians strategically relocated these Israelites with foreigners to alter cultural identities, resulting in the formation of a distinct Samaritan community by the time of Christ. Consequently, other Jewish people regarded them as Gentiles, disconnected from their heritage.

St. Cyril of Alexandria offers insightful commentary on this passage, illustrating how Christ calls us to engage with those outside our Church community. In spite of the enmity that existed between Jews and Samaritans, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman exemplifies divine love. His authenticity, empathy, and kindness inspired not only her but also her family and many fellow Samaritans to seek His message.

When Jesus first approached the Samaritan woman and asked for a drink, she was taken aback. St. Cyril reflects on her response: "How is it that YOU, being a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" This moment is critical as it shows Jesus confronting societal norms by communicating with someone considered "unclean" under Jewish law. His example teaches us that we are called to love our neighbors, even those who may not share our faith. By embodying Christ-like behavior in our everyday interactions, we can draw others closer to Him. Our mission is not to force conversion but to reflect the image of Christ in our lives. As St. Seraphim of Sarov famously said, "Acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved."

St. Cyril further notes the growth of the Samaritan woman's understanding as she converses with Jesus. Initially questioning Him, she progresses to recognizing Him as a Prophet. She offers thoughtful inquiry about worship, indicating a willingness to learn. This conversation highlights how Jesus provides her with deeper spiritual truths, ultimately revealing, "I that speak unto thee am He." The interaction serves as a reminder that through simple acts of kindness and love, we can create opportunities to share the Gospel, especially with those in need. St. Cyril warns that those responsible for teaching in the Church must diligently guide newcomers in the faith, progressing from basic instruction to a deeper understanding of God.

In our modern context, pluralism manifests through interactions with diverse religions, ideologies, and cultures, particularly affecting young people in schools and colleges. Our Faith embraces all individuals, recognizing the beauty in diversity and the shared humanity that connects us. When we engage with a strong understanding of our faith and a genuine relationship with Christ, we become witnesses to our beliefs, illuminating the path for those who seek truth (**St. Matthew 5:15**). However, we must remain vigilant; in our interactions, we can encounter secular ideologies that challenge our beliefs. Thus, it is our responsibility to maintain a firm grounding in our faith while reaching out with love to everyone in our pluralistic society.



Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Dr. Christian Smith made an observation that teenagers were describing their belief in a manner that they summarized as "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism"⁷:

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

⁷ Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

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

For many religions and even other Christian denominations, the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself. There is real danger in this line of thinking as it leads us away from Christ and towards apathy and sometimes even animosity against God. Any notion that one “loves Christ” but “hates the Church” is another signal that the teachings of the Church have been misunderstood.

The Orthodox theology is clear that Christ and His Church are One (**Ephesians 5:32; Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 12:13**), and we are to bring the Love of Christ to all as a witness. Our allegiance is not to any secular organization but rather to God. As St. Paul reminded us, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (**Philippians 3:20**).

What does it mean to be an Orthodox Witness?

In today’s world, marked by significant advancements in technology and communication, we also see a troubling trend of division among individuals based on various ideologies, such as political beliefs, racial and ethnic identities, gender identity, and socio-economic status. This raises an essential question: Is tolerance the best approach to accepting our differences? While tolerance can foster love for our neighbors, it risks compromising our Christian principles. As we navigate a polarized socio-political landscape, where extreme views often clash, it becomes crucial to ground our interactions in the teachings of Christ, who is the Eternal Truth. Our understanding of loving our neighbors must extend beyond mere acceptance; it should reflect our commitment to seeing Christ in everyone and treating all individuals with compassion, regardless of their beliefs.

The Orthodox Church’s mission is to live the Gospel through our actions and to share Christ’s love universally, without endorsing any specific ideological faction. The essence of

Orthodox witness lies in embodying Christian faith through sanctity, acknowledging that our faith centers around worship and the mystical experiences of prayer, fasting, and meditation. Living a holy life as aligned with Christ forms the foundation of our ethical values, which are derived from our cooperation with God. The Church recognizes that, devoid of divine grace, moral virtues can become compromised by personal desires. True virtue is birthed from a close relationship with God, leading us to a life that reflects His image and goodness.

Engaging with diverse perspectives through open dialogue is essential in addressing the conflicting ideologies that arise in society. His Eminence Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) emphasizes the importance of breaking free from self-centered perspectives to foster understanding and unity. In following the path of holiness, every member of the Malankara Orthodox Church is called to a saintly life, growing in goodness and virtue. As articulated by His Grace Paulos Mar Gregorios, the presence of goodness—wherever it is found—signals the presence of God. Thus, our commitment to recognizing and nurturing goodness not only transforms us but also reflects the Kingdom of God, where God’s presence reigns, regardless of acknowledgment.

Reflection Questions

1. How can we construct an argument, based on the belief that every individual is created in God’s Image and Likeness, that addresses the needs and concerns of marginalized groups outside our Church? Consider how this perspective aligns with the Christian theology that emphasizes love and action in demonstrating faith.
2. In what ways can Orthodox Christians respond with love to societal inequalities? Should our approaches differ based on factors such as gender, sexual orientation, or race, and how can we justify these responses within the framework of our faith?
3. What strategies can be implemented to create an inclusive and welcoming environment in our parish for individuals seeking the love of Christ, ensuring that our community reflects the Orthodox commitment to diversity and inclusion?

Lesson 4: The Mission of the Church

Lesson Goals

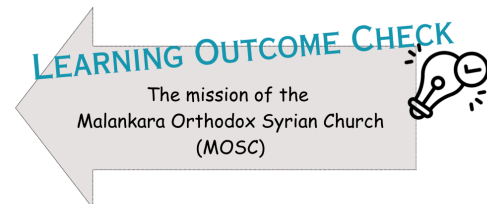
- *I can relate to how salvation is healing and understand how we share with others.*
- *I can discern various evangelism styles and their efficacy in modern-day society.*
- *I can relate to the mission of the Orthodox Church and defend common misunderstandings such as our practice of closed communion.*

Over fifty years ago, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann⁸ asked the National Conference of Orthodox College Students about the mission of Orthodox Christians in a Western country. This topic is important for the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church as we continue to grow outside of India.

When the first immigrants from India arrived in America and other countries, establishing a livelihood was paramount. The first Orthodox parishes served not only as places of worship but also as vital hubs for preserving cultural heritage. Other ethnic Orthodox groups including the Greeks, Russians, and Copts discovered the same sense of identity and unity at the Church after first arriving in a new land. Fellowship and food after Liturgy provided a familiar space for cultural expression and support as they navigated their new environment. This dual purpose of religious and cultural fellowship was essential for the well-being of this immigrant community and established a foundation for future generations in their newly adopted country.



The Orthodox Churches outside India now face a unique challenge: balancing a role as a haven for immigrants with the broader mission of the Church to spread the True Gospel. While providing spiritual support for newcomers is crucial, the Church must also move beyond its "immigrant-only" identity to actively engage with the local community. We must embrace our mission to be the Presence of Christ to our neighbors, and welcome all regardless of cultural background or origin. The Church's mission is personal, requiring each member to embody Christ's



⁸ Schmemmann, Fr. Alexander. "The Mission of Orthodox Youth." The Orthodox Church in America (OCA). National Conference of Orthodox College Students, 1968. <https://www.oca.org/wonder/the-mission-of-orthodox-youth>.

love and serve as His hands and feet. This is a shift from a focus on preserving cultural traditions towards a more inclusive approach, welcoming all who seek spiritual healing. The Church's claim to be truly Orthodox is undermined if it isolates itself and prioritizes cultural preservation over the universal mission of spreading the Gospel. Our command is to share the Gospel and be the loving Presence of Christ in this fallen world (**St. Matthew 28:18-20; St. Matthew 22:36-40; Acts 1:8**).

The Mission of Orthodoxy

Every Christian is called to be a missionary with a clear purpose. As an Apostolic Church, we continue the ministry of the Apostles and fulfill the command given to us by our Lord (**St. Luke 10:1-18**). Fr. Schmemmann⁹ breaks this down:

1. **Being an Apostle to ourselves:** We must constantly strive to overcome our sinful nature and become more like Christ. "I am sent to myself" means that the new Adam in me is always ready to challenge and fight the old Adam - the "I" who is still very much "of this world" and is subdued to it. *Metanoia* is a Greek word that means a "change of heart" and comes through repentance.

St. Seraphim of Sarov teaches we should "acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved." By following a path of holiness for ourselves, we become a beacon and example for others around us even though we are not directly engaging with them.

St. Gregorios of Parumala confessed regularly, and the saint's handkerchief became so wet during repentance that one could squeeze it to collect tears. The saint wept for the sins of himself and others. The Prophet Joel reminds us, "Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, and wailing and with mourning: rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord, your God, for He is merciful and compassionate. He is long-suffering and plenteous in mercy and repents of evils" (**Joel 2:12-13**).

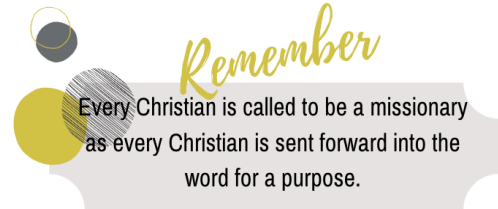
2. **Being an Apostle to others:** We are called to share our faith with others. "I am sent to others" is a calling for everyone and not limited to clergy and missionaries in the strict sense of the word.

⁹ Schmemmann, Fr. Alexander. "The Mission of Orthodoxy" Pravmir. National Conference of Orthodox College Students, 1968. <https://www.pravmir.com/the-mission-of-orthodoxy/>.

Every day we have opportunities to witness Christ to others and be His presence to those in need. A fundamental teaching of the Fathers is that we cannot share with others that which we do not possess ourselves; and thus, it is futile to believe we can share with the world the way to the Kingdom if we are not working with all our energy to receive it first in our hearts. The saints of the Church have endeavored to proclaim the Gospel through the sanctity of their lives and have taken great risks to preach the Gospel, sometimes being martyred while sharing their faith.

Our mission is to be visible so that others see the Church and the love of Christ through us. Bishop Irenei of the Russian Orthodox Church teaches this is sharing what we should have -

“We will have hearts that burn with God’s grace. We will have within us the Holy Spirit filling our lives and words and actions in the same way He filled the lives, words, and actions of the great missionary saints of all generations past.” According to him, to be genuine missionaries in the world, we must begin by whole-heartedly embracing repentance — repentance not as an obligation or as a requirement, but as a joyful and joy-creating foundation for truly spiritual life.



3. **Being an Apostle to the world:** We are called to spread the Gospel to everyone as Christ died for the salvation of the entire world. “I am sent as a missionary to the world” is understanding the scope of our vision and faith is always the salvation of all for whom Christ died, and He died “for the life of the world.”

The MGOCSM has been serving mission trips which is a blessing for all those who participate as they see the love and joy of our youth. If your calling is to serve on a mission trip, this is something that you have access to. However, mission work can be right where you live, where you work, or even at home. Too often we think of mission work as someplace far, but often the most we can witness to others about Christ is right where we are.

Orthodox Evangelism

Evangelism in the Orthodox Church is sharing the good news of the Gospel. It is not our calling and mission to force people to become Christian. God is the one who draws people to Himself, who opens their hearts, and who convinces them of the Truth.

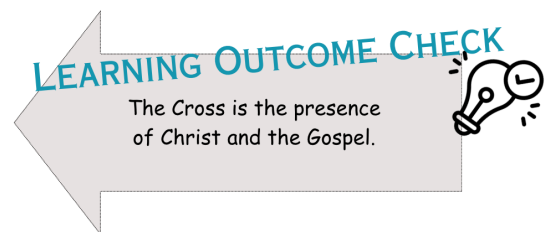
So, what is our role? Our primary task is to work out our salvation, repent of our sins, and strive always to be worthy to enter the Kingdom of God. This is the most important form of evangelism because it shows the world the power of Christ working in our lives.

But there are other ways we can share the Gospel and make the Church visible and welcoming. Our Church is a hospital, and God is the one who draws people to it. But we need to make sure that the door is open and inviting.

How do we do that?

- **The beauty of the Church:** The beautiful icons, the soaring crosses, the smell of incense, the hymns sung with devotion. These invite people in and point them towards God. Orthodox evangelism must center on the Church and her Sacraments.
- **Our own lives:** The way we dress, make the sign of the Cross in prayer, and generally live each day speak volumes about our faith. Others should see the joy we have in Christ and be comfortable with us asking questions.
- **Hospitality:** Welcoming visitors to the Church, sharing meals, and offering shelter and clothing are all ways of showing God's love in action.
- **Service:** Volunteering at soup kitchens, giving to the poor, helping those in need – these are all ways of putting our faith into practice.

The Cross is the ultimate symbol of God's love for us. It's where Christ sacrificed Himself for our sins and defeated death, and is the source of our salvation. This is the Gospel, or Evangelion (translated from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον meaning "Good News").

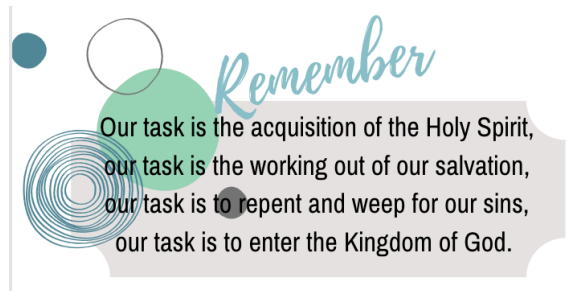


When we live our lives in a way that reflects the Cross – when we are willing to deny ourselves, bear our crosses, and love others as Christ loved us, we are proclaiming the Gospel in the most powerful way possible.

We keep the doors of our Church open and welcome all who come, and also invite others to join in the peace and love of Christ. God works through us and the Cross is the ultimate symbol of His love and our salvation. We are not tasked with forcing people to accept our faith. The Holy Spirit, not our efforts, is the One who works in people. God draws

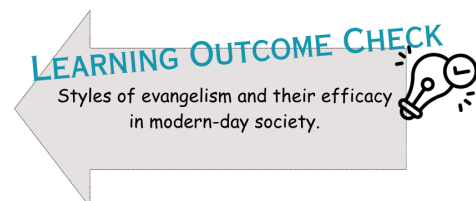
people to Himself, opens their hearts, and convicts them of their need for repentance. Through our actions, words, and prayers, we become channels through which God can work, bringing others to the light of His grace.

True mission is sharing the love of Christ. It is building bridges of understanding and compassion and allowing the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of those we encounter. Too often, the modern definition of evangelism focuses on the individual and their personality or charisma to do God's work. The risk in this approach is we often focus so much on ourselves that we forget our purpose.



Orthodox evangelism is the practical expression of God's love for mankind. Orthodox evangelism is greeting visitors as they come to the Church and helping them feel included. Orthodox evangelism is the hospitality offered to share meals and provide shelter and clothing as needed. Orthodox evangelism is to pray for our neighbor and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Orthodox evangelism is going to the soup kitchen and serving. Orthodox evangelism is giving to the poor without regard for "how the money will be used".

Orthodox evangelism is visiting the sick in hospitals and praying for them. Orthodox evangelism is going on mission trips to places you haven't been, and just serving and loving the people there as you would at home. Orthodox evangelism is going to the prisons (contact your local prison chaplain regarding how this might be done) and offering comfort and kindness to the imprisoned. Orthodox evangelism is loving your enemies.



Orthodox Evangelism is loving your neighbor as yourself. If we all did these things, then our Churches would be open and filled with light and glory drawing all who see her by the grace and action of the Holy Spirit in their hearts.

We don't have to preach on street corners, we don't have to have "events" or revivals or seminars as evangelistic tools - we simply have to be Orthodox Christians "to the max" without reservation or compromise.

Mission and Communion

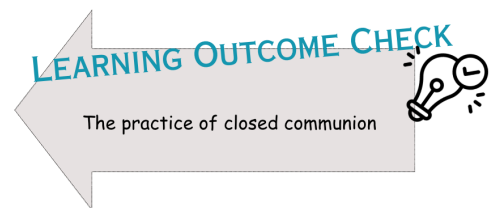
As members of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, we are blessed to be part of the Body of Christ. From the moment of our Baptism, we are fully incorporated into the Church, a journey sustained by our participation in the Sacraments, following God's commandments, and bearing the fruits of the Spirit.

But our faith is not just about personal growth; it also has a missionary aspect. We are called to share the love of Christ with all who are in need. This brings us to a question often asked: Why does the Orthodox Church practice closed communion?

The answer lies at the heart of our faith: God is Love. Every action of the Church, including closed communion, is rooted in this fundamental truth.

The Holy Qurbana, or Divine Liturgy, is the most sacred act of worship in the Orthodox Church. It is the very Body and Blood of Christ, offered as a sacrifice for our salvation.

Scripture warns us that partaking of the Holy Communion "unworthily" is a sin (**1 Corinthians 11:27**). This means that we must be prepared to receive this sacred gift.



Those who are not baptized as Orthodox Christians have not yet begun the journey of repentance and learning the Sacramental life that leads to holiness and communion with Christ.

Closed communion is a practice that goes back to the early Church, as documented in the 2nd-century writing, the Didache. It is a way to protect the sanctity of the Holy Qurbana and ensure that those who partake are prepared to receive it with reverence and understanding.

Our mission is to lovingly explain these practices to those who may not understand them. We speak the truth in love (**Ephesians 4:15**), always striving to share the fullness of the Christian faith with all.

Closed communion is not a rejection of others, but a way to safeguard the sacredness of the Holy Qurbana and to guide those who are seeking the truth. It is a testament to our love for God and our desire to protect the sanctity of His gift.

Summary

One of the biggest challenges facing the Orthodox Church today is the misunderstanding and misconceptions people have about Christianity. We must honestly acknowledge that this often starts with us.

Think about it: if we only experience our faith on Sundays or at special events, we're essentially hiding the light God has given us (**St. Matthew 5:14-15**). Imagine a beautiful candle kept locked away in a dark room – its light is wasted!

Instead, we should let the joy we find in Christ overflow into our everyday lives. This is what it means to live our faith beyond the church walls. This is our mission. We can share God's love with everyone we encounter, from our families and friends to strangers we meet on the street.

This isn't just about preaching or proselytizing. It's about living our faith with love, kindness, and compassion. It's about letting the fruits of the Holy Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**) – guide our actions and interactions.

By living our faith authentically, we can help dispel misconceptions and show the world the true beauty and power of Orthodox Christianity. We become living examples of God's love, radiating His light into the world, one person at a time.

Reflection Questions

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

Lesson 5: Opening the Scriptures

Lesson Goals

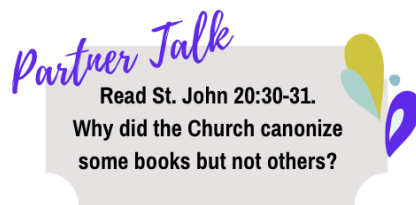
- *I can answer the question, 'Is the Orthodox Church a "Bible-based Church"?'*
- *I can explain how Christ opens the Scriptures to us.*
- *I can answer the question of whether Scripture alone is enough to fully know Christ.*

The Bible is more than just a book. It is a living, breathing source of truth, guidance, and inspiration. The Holy Scriptures teach us about God, His love for us, and the path to salvation. It is the Word of God, breathed into the hearts and minds of holy men and women throughout history.

There are some misconceptions of the Bible. For example, some Orthodox Christians mistakenly feel that knowing the Scriptures is optional. However, the Bible is an integral part of Orthodoxy, and a deeper understanding is crucial for spiritual growth. The Scriptures are deeply rooted in the Holy Tradition of the Church.

Many Christians on the other hand believe that Scripture alone is sufficient for faith and look down upon Tradition. However, the truth is that Scripture and Tradition are inseparable as Scripture is understood through the lens of Tradition, and it is Tradition that brings the Scriptures to life.

It was the Holy Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, that carefully chose the books that make up the Bible. This is the Canon (from the Greek word κανών "kanon," meaning "rule" or "standard"). These chosen books of the Bible give us clarity on our journey to salvation as well as a deeper understanding of God's love for us.



"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Road to Emmaus: Jesus Reveals Scripture

The Road to Emmaus (**St. Luke 24:13-32**) offers valuable lessons about the importance of knowing Scripture, studying it deeply, and living a life rooted in the Sacraments.

Saints Luke and Cleopas were walking away from Jerusalem towards Emmaus after Jesus' scandalous execution on the cross. Their friend's death saddened them, and they were confused on hearing about the empty tomb. They tried to make sense when a stranger walked up and joined them. Unbeknownst to them, this stranger was the Risen Lord Himself.

During their walk, Jesus provided them with a lesson on Scripture, effectively leading one of the earliest recorded Bible studies. But only later during the breaking of bread was their eyes opened in recognition of Him.



This story emphasizes the importance of being familiar with Scripture. Saints Luke and Cleopas had spent time with Jesus, who often taught them about the Scriptures. Jesus's teaching ignited a deeper understanding and warmth in their hearts. It prompts us to consider: Would their hearts have burned with such understanding if they had been unfamiliar with Scripture?

The Holy Spirit can touch our hearts in many ways—during Holy Qurbana, Bible study, Sunday School, daily prayers, or conversations. Familiarity with Scripture allows us to reflect and understand at a more deeper level. But although their hearts burned with emotion, they remained blind to the truth until Jesus took bread, blessed, and gave to them ... what happens today during Holy Qurbana! It was only through Christ that they were able to see and understand.

The transformation of Saints Luke and Cleopas from confusion to clarity illustrates true comprehension comes through engagement. Our journey mirrors that of Saints Luke and Cleopas; through the sacramental life of the Church, we fully know Christ.

Scripture is Tradition

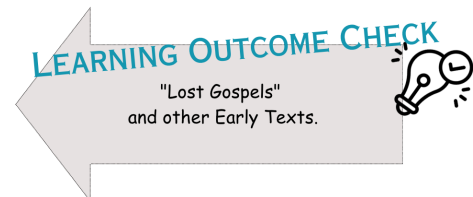
Holy Tradition is a vital and dynamic aspect of Christianity and not to be confused with local customs that vary by culture and region. It is a living experience handed down through generations, infused with the teachings of Christ as conveyed by the Apostles. Tradition is a gift of the Holy Spirit, a living experience that is relived and renewed through time¹⁰.

While many people misunderstand “tradition” as static rules that impose the past onto the present, in reality Holy Tradition is continually renewed and revealed through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures are an integral part of Holy Tradition, and a vital expression of the faith of the Orthodox Church. The Church’s canon, established through the ecumenical councils, reflects the consensus of the earliest Christian communities, who sought to ascribe authority to texts that rightly embodied the teachings and life of Christ.



This is the context to understand the “Lost Gospels”. The Church throughout its history has engaged in thorough discernment regarding which texts align with the authentic faith delivered to the prophets and the Apostles.

The Church’s recognition of specific writings as canonical is not arbitrary. As such, what many today label as “lost” texts such as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas were in fact rejected because their content contradicted the established Holy Tradition that safeguards the true nature of Christ.

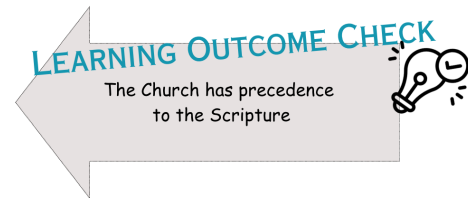


An Orthodox Christian recognizes that Holy Tradition encompasses the fullness of divine truth as lived out in the Church’s sacramental and liturgical life. The Eucharist, sacraments, creeds, and the lives of saints together reveal how this Tradition faithfully preserves the essence of Christian faith, ensuring that the teachings of the Church remain unaltered over time.

The Orthodox faithful understand that the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, serves as a custodian of Divine Truth, ensuring that only those writings consistent with the

¹⁰ Tradition in the Orthodox Church - Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. (n.d.). Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. <https://www.goarch.org/-/tradition-in-the-orthodox-church>

Apostolic faith are recognized as Holy Scripture. Tradition (*paradosis* in Greek) is better understand to hand down. Jesus revealed to the Prophets and Apostles the True Faith, and Apostles and Saints handed it down in written and verbal forms to the following generation. This deep-rooted understanding is essential in recognizing why the Orthodox Church has precedence over the Scriptures: it is the Church that canonized the Bible, defining its scope and significance within its overall Tradition.



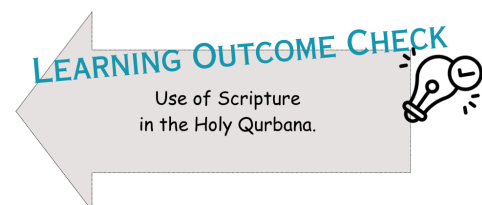
Although the Holy Bible has two parts, the Old and New Testaments, it has one message: Jesus Christ. Most people are able to easily relate the New Testament and Christ, but in fact all of Scripture points to Christ as we read in the Road to Emmaus - "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (**St. Luke 24:27**).

Scripture and Worship

The liturgical services of the Orthodox Church do not contradict Scripture. In fact, Orthodox worship follows the pattern of Old Testament worship and is the fulfillment of various Old Testament prophecies.¹¹

In Hebrews 8:5 we read, "For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." This reference to **Exodus 24:15-18** is the instructions given by God to Moses on how Israel should imitate heavenly worship. The Orthodox Church understands that the Church is the assembly of God (Greek 'ekklesia') which is the gathering of the people of Israel. In other words, the Church is Israel! For the Church, worship is a crucial part of our identity in the covenant with God. So, it stands to reason that proper worship is also critical to our identity as Christians.

Even the vestments worn by Orthodox priests are biblically based; they are patterned after the Old Testament and the heavenly prototype. Exodus 28 contains detailed instructions on the making of priestly vestments. Additionally, in heaven, Christ and the angels wear priestly vestments (**Revelation 1:13, 15:6**). The vestments are more than pretty decorations; instead, they are meant to manifest the dignity and the beauty of holiness that adorns God's house.



¹¹ Church, S. J. (2021, February 9). Is Orthodox worship biblical? Saint John the Evangelist Orthodox Church. <https://www.saintjohnchurch.org/is-orthodox-worship-biblical/>

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

After completing the Prayers of Veil (Shushhefo), the priest says, "May the love of God the Father, the Grace of the Only-begotten Son, and the fellowship and indwelling of the Holy Spirit be with you all my brethren, forever." This Trinitarian Blessing is from **2 Corinthians 13:12**. The four key words – took, blessed, broke, and gave – that the Priest utters during the Words of Institution of the Holy Qurbana are from **St. Luke 22:19**, **St. Mark 14:24**, and **1 Corinthians 11:24-25**.¹²

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

- The King's daughter stands in glory - **Psalms 44:10-12 (45:9-11)**
- The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree - **Psalms 91:13-15 (92:12-14)**
- Your priests shall be clothed in righteousness - **Psalms 131:9-11 (132:9-12)**
- As a father shows mercy to his children - **Psalms 102:13-15 (103:13-15)**¹³

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

Summary

St. Isaac the Syrian said that Scripture is like a gateway that leads our minds into the deep mysteries of God. It helps us find strength and light, especially when we pray. Scripture lifts our thoughts towards God and helps us focus on the spiritual, encouraging us to rise above the physical world.

¹² Holy Qurbana Notes, Very Rev. Ramban Lazarus Mathew Chor Episcopos

¹³ A Guide to the Orthodox Liturgy and Faith, Dr. Punnoose U Panoor, January 1994

As Orthodox Christians, we are blessed with the fullness of Divine Truth through the Church. Out of His great love, Christ established the Church which serves as “the pillar and the bulwark of Truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). It is within the life and Tradition of the Church that we are called to interpret and understand Scripture. When we try to interpret Scripture on our own, outside of this context, it can damage our community and the Body of Christ.

We see the consequences of individual interpretations in the many different non-Orthodox denominations that have emerged, each with its own understanding of Scripture. Unfortunately, in striving for personal interpretations, many of these groups have lost essential teachings that were preserved and taught by prophets and Apostles who received and learned from Christ.

Orthodox Christians are encouraged to turn to the writings and teachings of the early Church Fathers. These fathers of the Church attained a deep understanding of Christ’s message and lived according to His teachings. They don’t just show us what we should do; they provide examples of who we should strive to become. Their wisdom is found in the Church’s liturgical practices, sacramental life, and spiritual traditions, which are enriched by both written and unwritten teachings.

As students of the faith, let’s remember to approach Scripture through the lens of our Orthodox Tradition, learning from those who have gone before us and striving to grow closer to God together as a community.

Reflection Questions

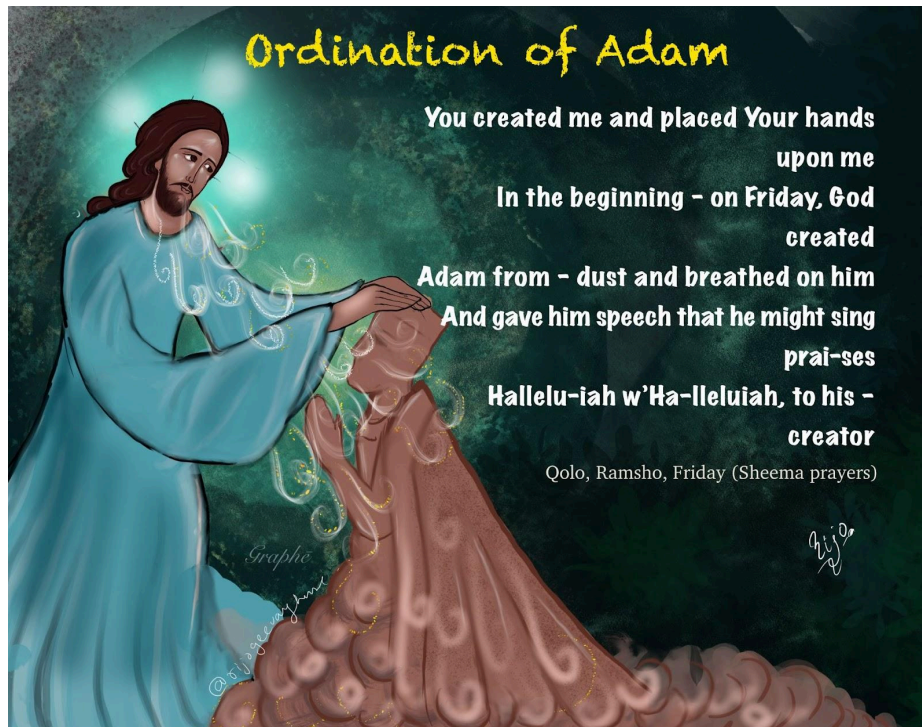
1. “*Sola Scriptura*” is the Protestant tradition that states Scripture alone is sufficient for Faith. How does the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32) challenge this doctrine? What elements of this biblical narrative support the Orthodox belief that Scripture alone is not sufficient for understanding Christian faith?
2. In the Road to Emmaus account, if St. Luke and St. Cleopas had never studied the Old Testament would their encounter with the risen Christ have had the same impact? Would their hearts have ‘burned’ (Luke 24:32) with recognition and understanding?”
3. How would you defend an attack that the Orthodox Church is not “Bible-based”?

Lesson 6: The Sanctity of Life

Lesson Goals

- I can connect our Church's teaching to how we should think about matters of life.
 - I can appreciate more deeply the meaning of being made in God's image.
 - I can identify guilt and shame that leads to repentance versus despair.
-

The true value of a painting goes beyond the materials used, like paint and canvas. It lies in the unique vision and creativity of the artist who created it. Every great piece of art reflects something about its creator—it carries their personal touch and style. Even without a signature, a skilled artist's work can often be recognized by its distinct brush strokes, techniques, and imaginative approach. By studying these elements, we can gain insights into the artist's character and creativity. This reminds us that, similarly, our own expressions and actions reflect our beliefs and values.

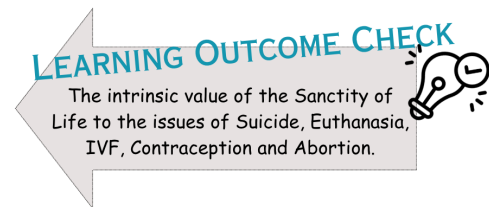


Every human being is a unique creation, reflecting the image of our Creator (Genesis 1:27, Ephesians 2:10). Our inherent value does not stem from the materials that make us or the specific forms we take, but from the Divine Image we embody. This means that we are sacred and holy, just as the Lord who fashioned us is sacred and holy. Each of us bears a unique imprint of the One who created us, making us all deserving of respect and dignity.

Sanctity of Life

As Orthodox Christians, we hold that every individual possesses intrinsic value, a belief that stands in stark contrast to much of modern secular society, which often assesses a person's worth based on their productivity. This mindset implies that some lives are more valuable than others, contributing to the rising epidemic of narcissism in our culture.

In truth, each person is unique and equally valuable, much like a collection of diverse and precious gemstones, because we are all made in the image and likeness of God. Our value is inherent, derived from our divine creation, and cannot be diminished or enhanced by human judgment. The arrogance and pride that lead us to elevate ourselves above others is a distortion of true dignity, often fueling conflict. Conversely, it is equally important to recognize that no individual's worth can be degraded; we are all created with purpose and value, firmly rooted in our relationship with God. Because our Creator loves us, every life has intrinsic value.

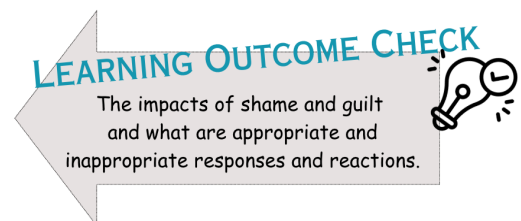


Human dignity is a gift from God. A powerful example is when Jesus Christ washed the feet of His disciples. Here, the Creator of the universe humbled Himself to serve His creation. This profound act demonstrates that our worth comes from God and cannot be diminished by ourselves or others.

Even as we navigate our lives, we may encounter feelings of shame and guilt due to our actions. While these emotions are a natural part of being human, they can lead to harmful consequences if we respond inappropriately. The enemy seeks to use shame and guilt as tools to alienate us from God and our community.

After Adam and Eve had sinned (Genesis 3), they felt unworthy and ashamed leading them to hide from God. This behavior reflects how shame and guilt can isolate us. Instead of hiding, the Church teaches us that the appropriate response to shame and guilt is repentance. Acknowledging our mistakes and taking responsibility for our actions are essential steps toward healing.

It's crucial to distinguish between feeling shame for actions and feeling shame for who we are. Shame about our identity can lead to despair and hopelessness, which is not from God but rather from the enemy's deception. We must



remember that our intrinsic value as God's creation cannot be diminished by our actions or by the opinions of others.

As Orthodox Christians, we hold the belief in the sanctity of life. Every person has sacred worth, and it is vital to honor that dignity in ourselves and others. Our journey involves embracing our true identity in Christ and responding to our mistakes with humility and a desire to grow.

Every life is precious and sacred, as it is a gift from God. Because of this belief, taking the life of another person or even one's own life is seen as inherently wrong. Life isn't something we're entitled to end; therefore, actions like murder, euthanasia, and capital punishment are considered sinful.

Euthanasia, also known as physician-assisted suicide, was once referred to as "mercy killing," but it is now often called "Death with Dignity." However, the Church teaches that there is no dignity in ending another person's life. While suffering is a part of human existence, it should not be entirely avoided. When someone dies from a disease, it's viewed as a natural death. Even if there is a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order in place, the death results from the individual's illness. On the contrary, when death is brought about by physician-assisted suicide or capital punishment, it is classified as homicide because it involves the deliberate intervention of another person. This distinction is essential; a natural death should be allowed to occur without interference.

At the same time, the Church recognizes that decisions about end-of-life care must be balanced. For individuals who receive a terminal diagnosis, choosing not to undergo treatment that would only extend life for a few weeks or months can be a valid decision. Similarly, when a person has lost all brain function and depends on machines to survive, the Church supports removing life-support to allow them to pass away naturally.

Suicide can arise from different circumstances. Sometimes it may be the result of reckless behavior; other times, it can happen due to pride and a refusal to seek forgiveness, as illustrated in the story of Judas Iscariot. In these cases, funeral services are held in respect for the individual, acknowledging that they are made in the image of God, and to provide comfort to grieving loved ones.

However, there are instances when suicide is linked to mental health struggles. Just like any other organ, the brain can experience diseases that affect a person's thoughts and feelings. In such situations, the Church views the individual as having succumbed to a mental illness, much like someone might die from heart disease. Under these

circumstances, a normal funeral is appropriate, recognizing the struggle the individual faced.

The Church encourages anyone dealing with mental health issues to seek professional help. If someone is having suicidal thoughts, it is important to seek professional help (e.g., the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline which in America can be reached by dialing 988) . They are highly encouraged to immediately reach out to their priests to pray for them and help them find the resources they need. They also should start regularly visiting a counselor.

Sometimes it can be hard to talk to others about what we are going through for fear of judgment or disappointment, but our spiritual fathers are there to walk with us through difficult times helping us to find paths forward when we are feeling trapped. No priest will look at such people judgmentally, but will only assure their prayers and encourage seeking medical help.

The Value of Life

The belief in the sanctity of life is fundamental to our values and shapes the choices we make. It's important to let our values guide our actions rather than making decisions quickly and then trying to justify them afterward. When we take the time to thoughtfully consider our beliefs and allow them to influence our actions, we can act in ways that reflect virtue and integrity.

One of our core values is the sanctity of life and that life begins at the moment of conception. Any action taken after conception that interrupts or ends the natural development of life is viewed as morally wrong.

*For You formed my inward parts;
You covered me in my mother's womb.
I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Marvelous are Your works,
And that my soul knows very well. - Psalm 138:13-14 (139:13-14)*

Family planning refers to the practices that help control the number of children a family has and the timing between their births. Within this context, some methods are considered acceptable in the Orthodox Christian faith, while others are not. One noteworthy and preferable practice is called Natural Family Planning (NFP). This method involves tracking natural cycles of fertility to either achieve or avoid pregnancy. Historically,

NFP was the primary form of family planning used for many centuries before modern contraceptives were developed.

In recent times, there has been significant advancement in the development and safety of contraceptives. According to Orthodox teachings, it is acceptable¹⁴ to use contraceptives for family planning as long as the couple is not categorically opposed to having children. It is crucial to maintain a healthy balance and not develop an obsession regarding having or not having children. The Church teaches that human beings are the pinnacle of creation, guided by the Holy Spirit, and this guidance should inform decisions about family planning.

Another method, In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF), may not be the ideal choice for family planning but is sometimes necessary when couples experience infertility. IVF involves fertilizing the wife's egg with the husband's sperm in a controlled laboratory setting, with the resulting embryos being implanted back into the wife's uterus. However, this expensive procedure has a success rate of about fifty percent, depending on various factors such as the couple's age. The Church stipulates specific conditions for the proper use of IVF: the husband must provide the sperm, the wife must provide the egg, and she must carry the pregnancy herself. Additionally, all embryos created should ideally be used for implantation; there should not be any frozen indefinitely or used for research purposes. While embryonic stem cell research is not permissible, research using stem cells from umbilical cords or other non-embryonic sources is acceptable.

A practice that is not accepted in the Orthodox faith in terms of family planning is abortion. The Church recognizes the profound emotional turmoil and suffering that accompanies the decision to terminate a pregnancy. Many women do not choose abortion lightly; it is often a result of feeling trapped under societal or familial pressures. As noted by Fredricka Mathews-Greene Kochamma, "No one wants an abortion as she wants an ice cream cone or a Porsche. She wants an abortion as an animal, caught in a trap, wants to gnaw off its own leg."¹⁵ The Church believes it is our duty to support women facing these pressures so that they can make informed and compassionate decisions about their pregnancies.

¹⁴ While this is currently the consensus view in Orthodoxy, there are some faithful Orthodox who hold the view similar to the Roman Catholic view that the use of contraceptives is not permissible because of its interference.

¹⁵ Mathews-Green, F. (2019, May 30). When abortion suddenly stopped making sense. National Review. <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/01/abortion-roe-v-wade-unborn-children-women-feminism-march-life/>

If a woman wishes to keep and care for her child or to place the child for adoption, the Church should help her achieve those goals. However, there are extreme cases where the mother's life is in serious jeopardy, or if the pregnancy is not viable. In such instances, though tragic, the Church acknowledges that it may be necessary to end the pregnancy. Nevertheless, the Church does not permit abortion in cases where there may be potential challenges with the child's health because all lives are precious and meaningful.

For the Orthodox Church, human life begins at conception, and the unborn child is considered a person. This belief is reflected in the Church's hymns, iconography, and scriptural references (such as **St. Luke 1:36** and **St. Luke 1:41**). As adherents of the faith, we are called to embrace the sanctity of life in all its forms, guiding our choices with wisdom and compassion in family planning.



In extreme situations, such as pregnancies resulting from sexual abuse or rape, we are faced with particularly challenging circumstances. Rape is a grave violation of a woman's dignity, and the trauma can extend further when it leads to pregnancy. In these heartbreaking cases, it is crucial to seek medical help as soon as possible.

The Church does not condemn or judge a woman in such distressing situations but rather offers compassion and support. Priests and members of the Church community are

there to help these women and pray for their healing. While it is incredibly difficult to navigate these challenges, it is important to understand that healing does not come from ending the life of an unborn child. We are encouraged to explore alternatives to abortion.

In cases where emergency contraception, like the “morning after pill,” can prevent pregnancy shortly after an assault, it may be considered permissible. However, if a pregnancy has already begun, the Church teaches that the child, being innocent, should be allowed to live. God has the power to create beauty from our brokenness, turning tragic circumstances into something meaningful.

If a woman is experiencing extreme suffering that may lead to mental health issues, medical professionals may take her significant distress into account in their decision-making. Yet, it is essential to recognize that women who face the decision to have an abortion may experience profound emotional trauma before, during, and after the procedure. They deserve our kindness and compassion, which the Church is always ready to provide.

Moreover, it is imperative for both men and women to respect each other’s God-given dignity and to uphold moral boundaries. Acts of violence against another person are morally unacceptable and go against the fundamental teachings of the Church.

Our faith reassures us that there is always a reason for hope, even in the most difficult circumstances. As Saint Paul reminds us, “Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (**Romans 5:5**). Let us cling to this hope, supporting one another in love and compassion as we navigate life’s challenges together.

Summary

Sometimes a work of art that has weathered many storms and trials may become broken or damaged. And yet, even then it has great intrinsic value as it was made by a master. We are a work of art, sanctified and holy, not because of our own doing but because of our Creator who has given us His image and likeness. We have value because the Lord has given it to us. We have dignity because the Lord has elevated us. God is still working on us, smoothing out the edges and with the Holy Spirit growing us to our potential. The more we understand that value in ourselves and in the lives of every other human being, we learn to love and respect ourselves and others around us as the children of God that we all are.

Reflection Questions

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

Lesson 7: Christian Stewardship

Lesson Goals

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

God's creation of the universe beautifully reflects His love and goodness. The Almighty chose to create everything—both what we can see and what is invisible—not out of necessity, but to share His love with all that exists. This stands in stark contrast to the creation myths of ancient cultures, which often explains creation as a product of chaos or conflict. Instead, Christianity teaches our God created freely and lovingly. After each act of creation, we hear the affirmation, “and God saw that it was good,” highlighting the intrinsic value and purpose that God bestows upon all He has made.



This goodness continues to be true even after the Fall, reinforcing that the physical world can lead us to a deeper connection with God. Everything in creation reflects God's beauty and harmony, encouraging us to recognize and praise the Creator.

God granted us “dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of heaven, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (**Genesis 1:28**). Rather than seeing dominion as a license to exploit or harm creation, we are taught it is a responsibility to care for and

nurture the world as God's faithful representatives. Our stewardship is thus rooted in a desire to fulfill God's will, reflecting His love and care for creation.

Christian stewardship involves a lifestyle characterized by accountability, reverence, and a sense of responsibility before God. Since we are created in His image, we are called to live out our stewardship in ways that honor both God and His creation. The idea of stewardship can be understood through the framework of "oikonomia," a Greek term meaning management of a household. This concept emphasizes the importance of managing all that God has created with diligence and faithfulness.

In the Gospels, Jesus illustrates the role of a steward by comparing the Church and its members to servants entrusted by a master to provide for the needs of others (**St. Matthew 24:45-46**). As stewards of God's grace (**1 Peter 4:10**), Christians are called to serve others selflessly, just as Christ served humanity (**St. Matthew 20:28**). This service should encompass a broader sense: that the Church is to serve Christ in every aspect of the universe (**Ephesians 1:22-23**).

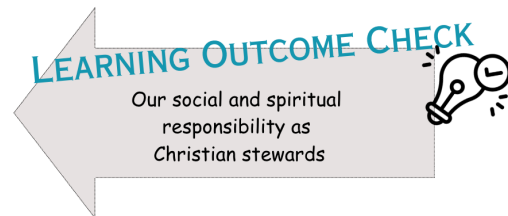
Saint Paul teaches us how to understand the stewardship of the Church:

1. **God's chosen:** In **Romans 1:1-2**, Paul describes the Church as the "Ekklesia," which means the assembly of those called out by God. This signifies that we are God's chosen people, gathered together to serve Him.
2. **Brethren in Christ:** In **Philippians 1:1** and **Colossians 1:2**, Paul refers to the Church as a family of believers where everyone is treated equally no matter their background. This unity is built on two key ideas: the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all members. We are all valued in this community.
3. **Community of Saints:** In **Romans 1:7**, Paul speaks of the Church as the "Community of Saints." This term reflects the collective identity of those who follow Christ, including those who have faced persecution, torture, and martyrdom for their faith. Their courage inspires us to live out our beliefs boldly.
4. **Bride of Christ:** Paul uses the imagery of the "Bride of Christ" in **Ephesians 5:22**. This term highlights the Church's commitment to lead a life of purity and chastity, while being accountable for our actions. We look forward eagerly to a perfect relationship with our heavenly Bridegroom, Jesus Christ.
5. **Body of Christ:** In **Ephesians 1:23** and **1 Corinthians 12:3-8**, Paul teaches that the Church is the "Body of Christ" with Christ as its Head. This metaphor emphasizes our unity and connection with Jesus. As His body, the Church has the responsibility

to demonstrate good stewardship of all creation and to live in a way that honors Christ.

Stewardship is how the Church demonstrates its responsibility both to God and to the world. As followers of Christ, we are called to be responsible and obedient children to our Heavenly Father, treating one another with respect and fairness. Caring for others is essential to our Christian lives; it goes beyond just giving money to those in need. It involves sharing our time, talents, and skills, as well as our financial resources. In essence, stewardship is about embracing our role in caring for each other and the world around us.

As believers, we are called to take care of all of God's creation, as stated in **Genesis 1:26**. This responsibility involves not only protecting the environment through practices like recycling but also caring for the air, water, and vegetation that sustain life. In our local communities, good stewardship means showing love, joy, peace, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**).



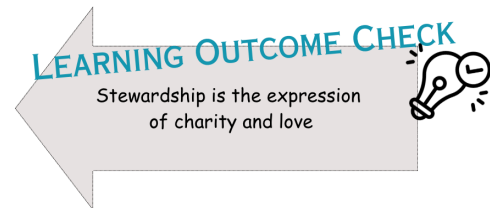
Valuing God's grace enables us to extend forgiveness to others, transforming our hearts and freeing us from negative feelings. Jesus taught us the importance of forgiving even our enemies, highlighting that forgiveness benefits the one who forgives even more than the one who is forgiven. By demonstrating respect for nature and compassion toward others, we actively practice good stewardship.

The ultimate goal of our stewardship is to become Christ-like, and worship is a fundamental way to experience God's presence. Holy Qurbana is central to our life and is our thanksgiving to God for His blessings in our daily lives. Participating in the Holy Qurbana means offering ourselves to God's will while remembering the sacrifice of Jesus Christ - His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection that conquered death and grants us the hope of eternal life.

Stewardship is deeply rooted in our Divine Liturgy, which reminds us that "We have nothing of our own. All that we have is from You, O God. We offer unto You of Your own, on behalf of all and for all." This understanding compels every Christian to regularly participate in worship as well as engage in prayer, fasting, Bible reading, and daily devotions.

Another key aspect of stewardship is the practice of offering our “first fruits,” which includes giving a tithe as an expression of gratitude for what God has provided. As **Psalm 95:8 (96:8)** encourages, “Bring to the Lord the glory of His name; Take up sacrifices and enter into His courts.”

Stewardship is not just a duty; it is a heartfelt expression of charity and love. As we care for creation and each other, we reflect God’s generosity and grace in our lives. We grow closer to God and deepen our commitment to loving our neighbors and the world around us.



Stewardship and Consumerism

We live in a secular and often materialistic society that often overlooks the spiritual significance of our relationship with the world around us. As Christians, we are called to protect and preserve the earth. St. Paul reminds us in **Romans 8:20-21** that redemption is not only for humanity but also for creation itself. He expresses the hope that “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” This means that our role as stewards extends beyond just managing resources; it involves promoting the wellbeing of all creation and ensuring that we use our resources wisely to eliminate poverty and support those in need.

Many people think of stewardship solely in financial terms, but this understanding is limited. The Orthodox Church teaches that stewardship encompasses all aspects of our lives—time, effort, and money are all sacred offerings to God. When we give, we are sharing from the abundance that He has given us.

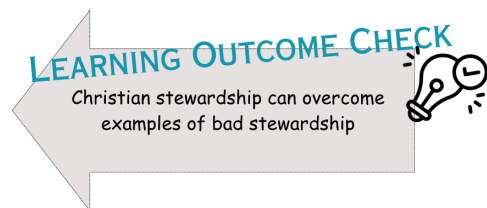
To illustrate the difference between stewardship and consumerism, consider this scenario: Imagine someone gives you a \$20 bill and asks you to pass it along to someone else. You likely would do so without hesitation because you understand that you are simply entrusted with that money. However, if you were asked to give away \$20 of your own money, you might feel reluctant.



This difference is rooted in the feeling of ownership that consumerism instills in us. When we see ourselves as owners, we forget that everything ultimately belongs to God, our Creator.



Bad stewardship can lead to harmful consequences such as pollution, exploitation, and a lack of compassion toward others. Neglecting our responsibilities can also lead to actions that reflect poor values, like irresponsible parenting or treating life as disposable. Each child is a gift from God, and we must view our responsibilities towards them as an essential part of our stewardship.



In **2 Corinthians 9:6-11**, Paul advises us on how to approach giving: “Give as he has decided in his heart.” It’s important to think carefully about how much we give and to commit to that decision. He also emphasizes that we should never give reluctantly or under pressure, for “God loves a cheerful giver.”

Do you view your giving as a burden or an opportunity for joy? God entrusts us with His resources not just to keep for ourselves but to share generously with others.

As Orthodox Christians, we must evaluate our attitudes towards stewardship and consumerism. Are we caretakers of God’s creation, seeking to use our resources wisely and generously? Or have we become caught up in a mindset that prioritizes personal ownership over responsibility?

By understanding and practicing Christian stewardship, we align with God's will. We are responsible for His creation, and support our communities with love and compassion.

Stewardship is Love

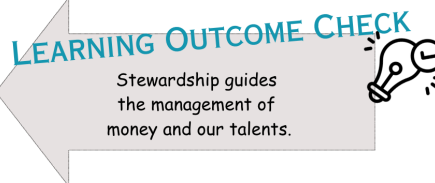
Fr. Alexander Schmemmann reflected that “our human role is to offer back to God in thanksgiving, all that He has given to us”. Recognizing that everything we have comes from God—a gift rooted in His boundless love—encourages a spirit of gratitude in our daily lives. How often do we pause to give thanks for the simple blessings, such as the air we breathe? When we consciously remember God in all that we do, the act of giving becomes a joyful expression of our gratitude, reinforcing that stewardship is not merely a duty but a heartfelt response to God's generosity.



The story of the Feeding of the 5000 (**St. Matthew 14:14-23**) serves as a powerful illustration of this stewardship. In this miracle, Christ demonstrates His incredible ability to provide for our needs. However, He chooses to involve the disciples in the distribution of the food, teaching them about cooperation and service. This partnership is significant: it reflects our calling as members of the Church (the Body of Christ) to spread His love to all.

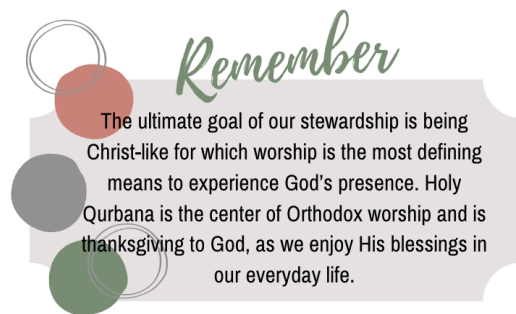
As you contemplate your role as a steward, consider these key principles that will guide your management of money, talents, and time:

- **Offer Your First and Finest:** Set aside money for God first before other obligations.



- **Remember Thanksgiving:** Approach your offerings with an awareness of all the blessings you've received. This mindset fosters a deeper appreciation and encourages joyful giving.
- **10% as a Starting Point:** 10% is the starting line, not the finish. Build habits to give 10% but don't let that be the end.
- **Plan Your Giving:** Set a commitment and consistently stick to it, ensuring that giving becomes a regular part of your life.
- **Give Generously and Cheerfully:** View giving not as a burden but as an opportunity to participate in God's work through your generosity.

As you integrate these principles, remember that stewardship is about cultivating a heart that reflects God's love in the way we manage our resources and talents. It invites us into a deeper relationship with Him and allows us to be instruments of His grace in the world.



By actively engaging in stewardship, we can make a meaningful impact, not only in our own lives but also in the lives of those around us. Embrace this calling with enthusiasm and gratitude, and let your stewardship be a testament to God's love working through you.

Reflection Questions

1. At the dismissal of Holy Qurbana, our priest turns to the congregation and starts the blessing by saying, "Depart in peace". Evaluate how this blessing connects to the principles of Christian stewardship, and how it can guide us as we go back to our daily lives.
2. Think of a moment when you were able to give with an open heart because you felt what you had was a gift from God. How did you feel afterwards?
3. As a class, brainstorm ideas for a service project that could be completed without the help of an adult. Remember that even a simple act such as helping an elder in the Church is giving your time and brings joy to our Lord!

Lesson 8: Love the Sinner and Not the Sin

Lesson Goals

- I can recognize and affirm that our Orthodox Faith embraces all individuals, extending acceptance beyond our immediate community.
- I can critically analyze how our methods, objectives, and actions are aligned with Christ, even as we participate in movements for political, social, and legal change.
- I can conclude that true salvation and healing are experienced within the Church, and that we are called to invite others to share in that same journey of healing and salvation.

We believe every person is created in the image and likeness of God (**Genesis 1:27**) underscoring the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals. Our Lord Jesus Christ taught us that the essence of our Faith is love both for God and for our neighbors (**St. Matthew 22:36-40**). This is the foundation to our response as Christians to today's most pressing social issues, including LGBTQ+ inclusion, racial and gender equality, support for victims of abuse, and prison ministry. The values of love, acceptance, and understanding should transform our Church into a welcoming community for everyone, regardless of their background or circumstances. Our compassionate approach honors the dignity of all individuals while remaining faithful to our Orthodox Christian teachings.



Imagine standing in a crowd, where the tension is palpable as a woman, caught in a moment of vulnerability, is brought forth to face harsh judgment, her fate hanging by a thread.

In **St. John 8:3-11**, Jesus disrupts this narrative; He doesn't cast stones but instead invites reflection on personal faults, ultimately offering this woman mercy instead of condemnation.

This profound moment is a powerful lesson for us today as we navigate complex issues like LGBTQ rights, racial and gender equality, and

support for victims of abuse and those in prison. Just as Christ did not define the woman by her sin but saw her as a beloved child of God, we too are called to respond with love to marginalized groups. We can be a voice of compassion, ensuring that all individuals are welcomed and supported in their journey, just as Christ welcomed the woman into a new life.

By embodying this spirit of inclusion and empathy, our actions can reflect the core Christian belief that God is love, encouraging everyone to find healing and acceptance within our communities.

Embracing Love and Compassion in Response to Society

As society evolves, the Church faces questions about its stance on issues like homosexuality especially in the context of legal changes such as the Respect for Marriage Act of 2022 that recognizes civil marriages between any two individuals. Regardless of how society changes, the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony remains between a man and a woman who are both baptized in the Orthodox Church.

The explanation is simple - our identity even in marriage is rooted in Christ! While the Church acknowledges temptations and urges, sexual activity should only within the sanctity of a blessed marriage between a man and woman. Unmarried individuals may struggle with homosexual or heterosexual passions, and just as other passions of this fallen world the Church does not condemn a person for having thoughts or desires or for being tempted. Rather, the Church calls for repentance whenever we stray from His Path, and we are absolved and healed during Holy Confession with a promise to try and not sin again.

However, sexual activity apart from the relations between a husband and wife in a blessed and holy marriage is a departure from God's intended purpose for his beloved children. For the Church, marriage is another pathway to holiness.

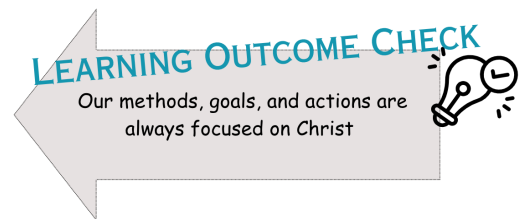
The courts in the United States and other countries have ruled the equality of same-sex unions to traditional marriage from the perspective of taxation and civil benefits, and in this process redefined "marriage" in a legal context. This creates a dichotomy as both are labeled as "marriage", but within the Church the definition has not changed.

Consider

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

Within the Church, our identity is more than our thoughts, desires, and attractions. It is also more than a political, social, or legal movement. As St. Justin Popovich teaches, “To be Orthodox means to have the God-man Christ constantly in your soul, to live in Him, think in Him, feel in Him, act in Him. In other words, to be Orthodox means to be a Christ-bearer and a Spirit-bearer.”

This is our identity in Christ. As we engage with on LGBTQ+ and broader societal issues, it is crucial that our methods, goals, and actions reflect the love of Christ.



Jesus exemplified mercy and compassion toward those marginalized by society, such as the adulterous woman He encountered, demonstrating that true love involves both acceptance and guiding others towards a faithful life. This balances the Church’s teachings on sin with its calling to love unconditionally, as seen in **St. Matthew 22:37-40**, where loving God and loving others are intertwined.

Ultimately, our approach to these complex issues align with our beliefs summarized in the Nicene Creed. As we engage in social and legal movements, it is vital that we uphold the principles of faith supported by actions—serving those in need, upholding Christ’s message of love, and inviting all individuals into a relationship with God that promotes healing and wholeness, regardless of their backgrounds. In doing so, we reflect the truth that everyone, including those in the LGBTQ+ community, is created in the image of God and deserving of compassion without compromising our core beliefs.

Our Church position on LGBTQ+

Our membership in the Church transcends just being part of an institution or social organization. After our Holy Baptism, we are joined with the Body of Christ and the household of God. We work diligently for our salvation through faithfulness and obedience to Christ’s commandments. Christ’s love is unconditional and offered freely to all, making our membership a divine gift. The Church welcomes everyone who seeks a relationship with Jesus Christ, regardless of their struggles, and as members, we are encouraged to engage in open dialogue with sensitivity and compassion, recognizing boundaries and respecting differing perspectives.

A member of the Orthodox Church who has LGBTQ+ thoughts and temptations must speak with a priest and follow the Sacraments of the Church. The ultimate goal is to draw closer to Christ under the care of their spiritual father. Sins of a sexual nature (whether

homosexual or heterosexual) can have deep impacts on a person that require spiritual healing.

Only Baptized Orthodox Christians who have prepared themselves through repentance, prayer, and fasting may receive Holy Communion under the guidance of a priest. A member involved in sexual activity outside of marriage is committing a sin that requires repentance and forgiveness in the Sacrament of Holy Confession. The priest may allow the person to commune after confession, but may also discern that the person needs to refrain from Holy Communion for some more time in order to heal. As St. Paul cautions in **1 Corinthians 11:27-32**, this is not to punish but rather to protect as there is danger in receiving Holy Communion in an unworthy manner.

It is crucial to understand that having homosexual feelings, urges, and desires does not mean we should act on them. Acting on these feelings or indulging in these urges is considered a sin, as emphasized by Scripture and the teachings of the Church Fathers. Homosexuality contradicts the divine intention for marriage, where a husband and wife unite in a blessed bond capable of producing life. The uniting of husband and wife in marriage (i.e., “the two shall become one flesh”) is a gift from God to unite the man and woman who were seen as separated when Eve was formed from the separation of Adam’s side. All forms of sexual gratification (including homosexual) outside this sacred union is seen as sinful and needs repentance.

The Orthodox Church teaches that God loves us unconditionally, and does not “send people to hell” even for “being gay” (i.e., having homosexual thoughts, feelings, or desires). Christ will sit in judgment (**St. Matthew 25**), but He also desires everlasting life and for us to be like Him. Within the Church we have the strength of the Holy Spirit to guide and transform us (theosis). Hell is therefore a choice. As we sing in the Sh’himo Vespers on Tuesday:

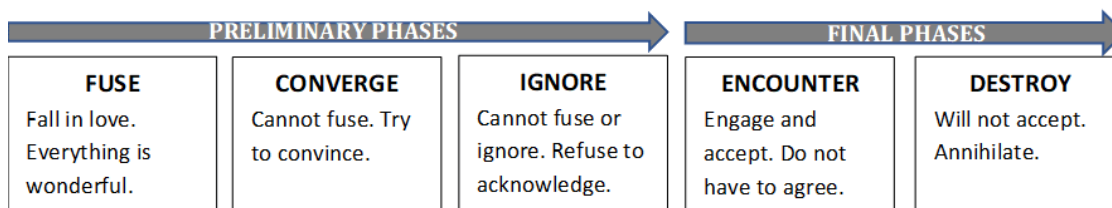
I knock at the door of Your Mercy, Lord! Forgive me!
The cunning ways of the evil one have kept me from
The path of life and have kept my mouth from praise
And my feet from the Holy Church!

“O how this world has deceived me!” cried out the rich man.
“Its pleasures have passed like a dream, now hell torments me.
I am denied water in this sea of fire.
Woe to me! I do not repent!”

Although God's love and mercy for each of us is constant and unchanging, it does not mean God approves of all our actions and choices just as a loving parent may not agree with or support all of their child's choices. This distinction helps us grasp the depth of God's love and the need for moral discernment in our lives.

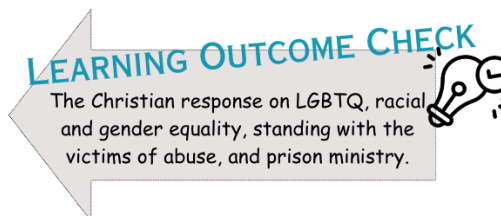
Turning away from God's Love leads us toward sin. Hell is therefore the consequence of rejecting God's love. God's deep desire is to gather His people (**St. Matthew 23:37-39**) but yet we resist and fall to temptation. Grace is available for all as we saw with the Good Thief (**St. Luke 23:40-43**). We believe in the incredible mercy of God and the transformative power of accepting His love including for those who have LGBTQ+ temptations.

For those outside of the Church, we are simply called to love our neighbor. When we ostracize or judge those who identify as LGBTQ+, we are mistakenly using God to hate! When encountering something new or different, we have a reaction. Fr. Stephen Muse presents an evolution in our natural response:



When we are able to see the Image of God in everyone we meet including those who are not like us, we begin to be like Christ. It is important to look beyond the surface to see an individual with genuine love and empathy, without being judgmental, jumping to conclusions or at the other extreme, pandering. Fr Muse reminds that nobody responds well to condemnation especially when they are in pain or suffering. However, everyone responds to a genuine love that seeks to understand and welcome.

Fr. Muse continues, "Love of the other does not mean fusing with the other and becoming what they are. It means being who you are, holding on to yourself, and having open conversations that are not threatened by whatever it is about the other person that makes you anxious or nervous. If you truly trust in Christ, you will see what Christ is giving the world through this other person."



The Church: A Spiritual Hospital

H.G. Dr. Yuhanon Mar Diascoros describes our journey to perfection¹⁶ as unending just as God is unending. This is a dynamic living condition, moving from one degree of bliss to a deeper degree of bliss. Thirumeni identifies two major steps for this journey –

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

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

The Church is a hospital for sinners, and Christ provides complete healing for all who approach Him. When we are faithful to the teachings of the Church, we are healed and also provide to others. This is our mission as Christians and members of the Church in this fallen world.

Summary

If God can accept each one of us as we are, why should our Church be any different? Regardless of LGBTQ, race, or gender, or whether they are victims of abuse or in prison for being an abuser or otherwise, the Church is to be a place of refuge for all those who earnestly seek Christ. It should be a safe space where everyone feels loved and accepted and these topics can be discussed with respect and sensitivity.

However, loving and accepting do not constitute agreeing with or endorsing a way of living or pursuing desires that are at odds with the teachings of Holy Scripture – in essence, love the sinner, not the sin.

¹⁶ H.G. Dr. Yuhanon Mar Diascoros. (n.d.). Spirituality. Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. https://mosc.in/the_church/spirituality/

The Orthodox Christian response to the fallen world is grounded in our belief that God is Love. This teaching naturally emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and compassion both within the Church as well as outside, encouraging us to embrace all members of society as reflections of Christ, regardless of their backgrounds or struggles. Our example is always Christ and we also have the Holy Saints (men and women) who modeled Christ in their lives. We must always engage in respectful dialogue and action that align with our Faith. We must advocate for marginalized groups while remaining faithful to our Sacraments and our Church teaching which emphasizes that genuine love is expressed through our words and actions, even as we constantly work on our salvation which is in Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the key distinctions the Church makes regarding thoughts and actions related to homosexuality, and how does this inform our identity in Christ?
2. Think of a group within our Church that may be marginalized or misunderstood. How can you better relate to their needs and concerns?
3. What can we do to remind ourselves that our methods, goals, and actions are always focused on Christ even as we participate within political, social, and legal change movements?

Lesson 9: Etho d'Moran

Lesson Goals

- *I can relate the Old Testament events to Pentecost.*
- *I can defend that our purpose as Christians was known from the beginning of creation.*
- *I can connect how Baptism and our membership in the Church is tied to our salvation.*

Many Christians believe the Feast of Pentecost is the day the Christian Church began. This major feast (known as *Siom Boorke* in Syriac) commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles following the Ascension of Christ (**Acts Chapter 2**). “Siom Boorke” translates to “kneeling” and reflects the practice of kneeling during this festival for the first time after Easter. Kneeling symbolizes our humility and reverence in response to the arrival of the Holy Spirit, which was promised by Jesus.

The Apostles and the other faithful gathered were filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered with “tongues, as of fire” (**Acts 2:3**). They preached the message of the Gospel in various languages (**Acts 2:4**) marking a significant moment in the establishment of the visible Church. The believers were all “in one accord”, creating a space for the Holy Spirit to dwell among them. This gathering heralded the start of the Church as a community dedicated to preaching salvation and living out the teachings of Jesus Christ.



However, should Pentecost be considered the actual beginning of the Holy Church?

During the Holy Qurbana, the priest prays for the Holy Church beginning with Adam and Eve and including all the prophets and saints of the Old Testament. Although these figures were not baptized during their earthly lives, they received the grace of salvation when Christ descended into Hades after His death and preached the Gospel to them. The Holy Church also includes the angels alongside the faithful.

In essence, the Holy Church has existed eternally with the Holy Trinity, while the visible Church on earth was initiated by the arrival of the Holy Spirit, referred to as the promised Paraclete (**St. John 14:15-31**).

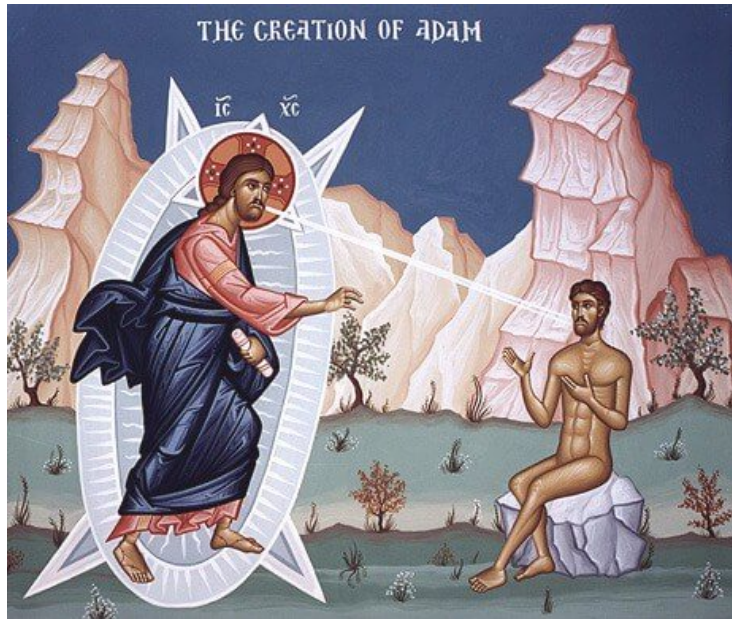
Etho d'Moran means “Church of our Lord” in Syriac, and underscores the unity between God and the Church. St. Paul often emphasizes this relationship, noting in Colossians 1:18 that Christ “is the head of the body, the Church.” In **Ephesians 1:22-23**, he elaborates that God placed all things under Christ’s feet and made Him the head over all things for the Church, which is His body and the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Our prayers echo the profound truth of the Trinity: “Glory be to the Father, Son, and Living Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.” The Church exists because of God the Father, is the Body of Christ, and is continually shaped and perfected by the Holy Spirit.



The Greek word “ekklesia” and the Hebrew word “qahal” both translate to “the Church,” meaning an assembly of people brought together for a purpose. This purpose, rooted in God’s love, was restored on the Day of Pentecost. Therefore, while Pentecost is not the birthday of the Holy Church, it represents the renewal of the visible Church on earth, reminding us of our mission to bear witness to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus affirmed this connection when He told St. Peter that it was upon the faith he proclaimed—that Jesus is the Son of the living God—on which He would build His Church. This collective confession of faith on Pentecost rejuvenated the disciples and established them as the Church of Christ.

Pentecost is a pivotal event that connects deeply with the origins of the Church and the purpose of humanity as outlined in Scripture. The roots of Pentecost can be traced back to the very beginning of creation when humanity was created in God's image (**Genesis 1:27**) to steward the earth (**Genesis 1:28-31**).



From the Qolo of the Quqlion for the Departed Clergy:

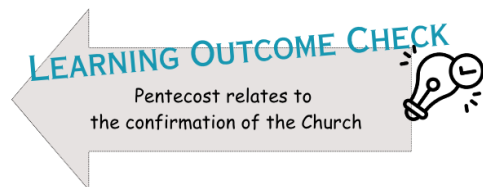
*God created Adam and
Sat down, contemplating him
He saw how fair and like the
Creature was to Crator*

*The earthly one came and went
Through the trees of Paradise
The angels marveled
At how he was exalted*

God created us out of His Love and as the hymn reminds for the exalted position to be His Presence and steward all of His creation. As we were created in His image, we also were called to act out of love and this requires free-will and the ability to choose our actions including whether to obey. Sadly, despite the noble purpose of our creation, our free will led to the disruption of this divine relationship through sin.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles, filling them with the power to proclaim the Gospel in various languages (**Acts 2:4**). This event marks not only the unveiling of the Church's mission but also a renewal of humanity's original vocation of unity and communion with God.

The significance of Pentecost in confirming the Church lies in its embodiment of divine love and purpose. The visible Church is not a new institution but a renewal of God's eternal plan established since creation. On this day, believers gathered in one accord, reflecting the unity that God desires for His people (**Acts 2:1**). The Holy Spirit's arrival signified the Church's birth from a community of faith that acknowledges Jesus Christ as the Son of God (**St. Matthew 16:18**). The Apostles,



now empowered by the Spirit, began to fulfill the Great Commission of Christ— to go forth and make disciples of all nations (**St. Matthew 28:19-20**).

The confirmation of the Church through the Holy Spirit is also linked to the fulfillment of the Old Covenant. While circumcision marks the physical identity of God's chosen people in the Old Testament, Baptism symbolizes spiritual regeneration and our incorporation into the community of believers in the New Covenant. This transition reflects that the true unification of humanity comes not through external rituals but through a deep, interior relationship with the Holy Trinity— the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism invites individuals to share in the life, values, and mission of the Church, effectively linking them to the divine purpose intended from the start.

In summarizing how Pentecost relates to the confirmation of the Church, students should recognize that Pentecost represents the divine empowerment of the apostles to engage in their mission, rooted in God's everlasting promise of love. This event not only signifies the Church's inception but also its calling to grow and flourish as a community of faith, united in the Spirit, continuing the redemptive work begun by Christ. In essence, Pentecost serves as a reminder of the Church's purpose to affirm believers in their faith and to witness collectively to the truth of God's ongoing work in the world.

The Gift of the Spirit

In the Book of Genesis, the Tower of Babel serves as a profound lesson about human pride and the consequences of trying to usurp divine authority. At Babel, people sought to make a name for themselves by building a magnificent tower that reached the heavens.

After the Fall (**Genesis 3**), the story of humanity unfolds through figures like Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel, illustrating how sin began to dominate the world, seen in Cain's actions. Despite Noah's faithfulness during the flood (**Genesis 6-9**), humanity persisted in choosing unfaithfulness,



culminating in the Tower of Babel (**Genesis 11**). Although “the whole earth was one language and one speech” (**Genesis 11:1**), this initial unity existed devoid of the Holy Trinity, as true unity requires communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As great as Babylon was, it was distant from God to the point that humanity attempted to compel God to serve them.

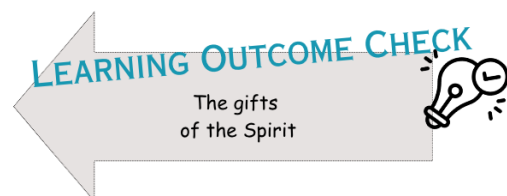
This ambition led to God confusing their language, resulting in their scattering across the Earth. This event symbolizes the fracture of humanity’s unity, as they sought to achieve greatness without God. The Orthodox Study Bible clarifies that this division was necessary for humanity’s salvation, encouraging mankind to seek and find God (**Acts 17:26-28**), as their desire to unite was based on self-interest, disregarding the name of the Lord God, the true source of salvation.

However, the languages became a barrier to understanding and cooperation, contrasting sharply with God’s original intention for humanity to dwell in unity and harmony under His guidance.

Fast forward to the day of Pentecost, as recorded in the Book of Acts, we witness a striking reversal of Babel. Here, the Holy Spirit descends upon the Apostles, empowering them to speak in tongues. Rather than confusion, this gift results in unity as people from diverse nations gather in Jerusalem and hear the Apostles preaching the Gospel in their native languages. This moment marks the birth of the visible Church and the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to send the Holy Spirit to guide and empower His followers. The gift of tongues thus becomes a sign of God’s restoration of unity—a divine response to humanity’s earlier division at Babel.

The gift of tongues must be framed within biblical and historical context of the Church. The Apostle Paul emphasizes that spiritual gifts, including tongues, are given to benefit the whole body of Christ (**1 Corinthians 12:4-11**). The gift of tongues was not merely an isolated phenomenon but a crucial component in the early Church’s mission to spread the Gospel to all nations. This gift signifies the Holy Spirit’s active presence in the Church, enabling believers to overcome language and cultural barriers, thereby uniting them in their shared faith. As believers practice these gifts today, they herald the same spirit of outreach and inclusiveness that characterized the Day of Pentecost.

Ultimately, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including tongues, remind us of God’s continuous desire to engage with humanity. They demonstrate His intention to unite His people, not only as



individuals but as a cohesive body that transcends cultural, linguistic, and social distinctions. By incorporating the lessons from Babel and the transformative moment of Pentecost, students can grasp the theological significance of these events and appreciate the ongoing relevance of the Holy Spirit's gifts in their own spiritual lives. The Church, rooted in the love of the Trinity, is called to continue sharing the Gospel, equipped by the divine gifts that renew and empower her mission throughout the ages.

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

The New Covenant

The New Covenant, established through Jesus Christ, signifies a profound transformation in the relationship between God and humanity. Unlike the Old Covenant, which was centered on the law given to the Israelites—including practices such as circumcision as a sign of their identity as God's chosen people—the New Covenant expands this promise to all of humanity through faith in Christ. Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection fulfilled the requirements of the law, paving the way for a new understanding of grace and salvation.

Under this covenant, faith and Baptism become the means through which individuals enter into a covenant relationship with God, emphasizing belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior rather than adherence to the old laws as a basis for righteousness.

Baptism serves as the New Covenant's equivalent to circumcision, marking a significant shift in the way believers identify as part of God's people. While circumcision was an external symbol of belonging to the Old Covenant, Baptism represents an internal transformation and a commitment to the community of faith—the Church. As St. Paul explains, believers are "buried with Him through baptism into death" and are raised to new life (Romans 6:4), indicating a spiritual rebirth and incorporation into the Body of Christ. This act of immersion not only signifies the individual's personal commitment to follow Christ but also symbolizes their unity with His body—the Church. Thus, baptism, as commanded by Jesus in the Great Commission (**St. Matthew 28:19**), symbolizes the beginning of a new life in the

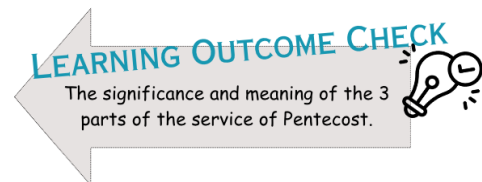


Holy Spirit, illustrating the fulfillment of God's promise for all people to be His chosen ones through faith.

The Services of Pentecost

Forty days after the resurrection, we observe the Ascension of our Lord. This is followed by ten days of vigil before the Pentecost during which no celebrations, including marriages, are permitted. The Church celebrates the Feast of Pentecost in three phases to express three distinct expressions of the Holy Trinity.

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



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

Reflection Questions

1. Defend that Pentecost signifies the confirmation of the Church and not the "birth" (or start) of the Church.
2. What insights do the three parts of the Pentecost service provide about the work of the Holy Spirit and the nature of the Trinity in our worship and lives?
3. Explain how Baptism has replaced circumcision in the context of the New Covenant. What are the theological connections between these two practices, and how does Baptism serve as a means of joining the believer into the body of Christ and the community of faith as outlined in the lesson?

Lesson 10: Salvation through the Cross

Lesson Goals:

- I can relate how humility of the Cross is a power which evil in its pride cannot bear.
- I can identify how the Cross is the presence of Christ as well as that of the Gospel.
- I can analyze and understand the Quqlion of the Holy Cross.

The Holy Cross stands as the most recognizable symbol of Christianity, adorned throughout Churches and homes. It encapsulates the entirety of Jesus Christ's life—His birth, death, and resurrection—serving as a profound reminder of the Gospel. The Holy Cross embodies the gifts we receive through Christ, including peace, salvation, discipleship, glory, humility, and victory. This sacred symbol is integral to our worship practices, appearing in the Kauma, the Trisagion, and the Nicene Creed. Additionally, we hold special commemorations of the Holy Cross every Friday, during Mid-Lent, on Good Friday, during the Exaltation of the Cross on major feast days, and specifically on the Feast of the Holy Cross, celebrated on September 14.



Cross as a symbol in Orthodox Worship

1. **Gesture of Cross:** The Malankara Orthodox faithful make a sign of the Cross using the fingers of the right hand. This practice can be traced back to the second century. Tertullian says, *"In all our actions, when we come in or go out, when we dress, when we wash, at our meals, before resting to sleep, we make on our forehead the Sign of the Cross"*. The Sign of the Cross is a prayer with our body, and we proclaim that the Son of God has come down to save us, which is the proclamation of the Holy Gospel. Therefore, this gesture is exceptionally vital for us as Christians.
2. **Quqlion of the Holy Cross:** The Quqlion is from **Psalm 43:6-8 (44:5-7)** and sung every Friday as our Lord was crucified that day, and also for special occasions. Adoration of the Holy Cross and sealing the sign of the Holy Cross on the forehead at the time of baptism and all other occasions by a priest ensures that the Holy Cross is the strong protection by night and by day from the powers of all evil.

Therefore, we sing as follows:

*“At the Third Hour and at all times, we will adore
The life-giving Cross,
And we sign ourselves with it for it is our hope
And strong protection*

*By night and day – from the evil one and his pow’ers -
It delivers us.” (Friday, Third Hour, Qolo)*

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

Jesus is referring back to the elevation of the bronze serpent in the wilderness (**Numbers 21:8-9**). Anyone bitten by a poisonous snake was healed when they looked at the bronze serpent. In the same way, we are healed from the deadly venom of sin if we look to Our Lord elevated on the Cross (see **Psalms 34:5**).



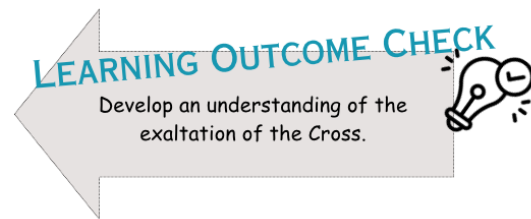
The Mnortho journeys with us from the middle of the church to the front of the church at Holy Week, and then into the Holy Altar room (madbaha) from Easter to Ascension. The Cross on the Mnortho is used for the burial, Resurrection, and Ascension of our Lord. The Mnortho is inside the nave of the Church during the second half of the Holy Lent, and that is why we kiss its wings without fail whenever we enter and leave the Church.

4. **Veneration of the Cross:** Great Friday service includes a special service of the veneration of the Cross. The service of the Veneration of Cross follows the ninth-hour prayers. The opening prayer reminds us of our responsibility to carry the Cross (see **St. Luke 9:23**). “May we, in compliance with Your supreme command, carry Your Cross on our shoulders in a Christian-like manner, always ready to mortify our

*members which are on earth and live You in fear of God” (Great Friday, Veneration of Cross, Sluzo; see **Galatians 5:24**). This service concludes with **adoration of the Holy Cross** by all the faithful. The hymn sung at the time of the adoration reminds us that Christ gave us salvation through the Cross and the reason for us to adore the Holy Cross:*

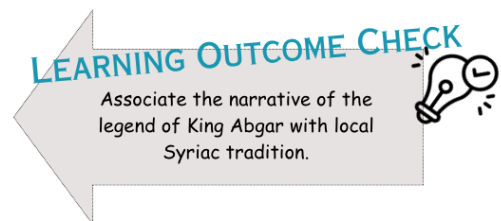
*“We bow before Your Cross,
Which brought salvation for our souls,
And we – cry out with the thief, O Christ,
‘Remember us when – You – Come!’” (St. Luke 23:42)*

5. **Exaltation of the Holy Cross:** Several of the major feasts of the Lord include a unique service called **Exaltation of the Cross**. To exalt means to raise to a higher rank. The physical exaltation of the Cross signifies the supreme importance the Cross should have in our lives. In the Malankara Orthodox tradition, the feasts with the exaltation service include the feast of Nativity, Baptism of our Lord, Mid-Lent, Palm Sunday, Great Friday, Resurrection (Easter), and Ascension. The consecration of the church also includes the service of the exaltation of the Holy Cross. At the exaltation of the Holy Cross, the celebrant takes the festive Cross and blesses the four sides of the earth. It symbolizes the blessing of the entire universe by the Cross, the sign of victory of God over all evil. All the faithful also make the sign of the Cross, which symbolizes receiving blessings.
6. **Feast of Holy Cross** We celebrate the finding of the true Cross of the Lord in the fourth century by Saint Helena on September 14th. The day's prayer reminds us that the Cross is the armor we wear. “We venerate Your Holy Cross saying: “The Cross is an armor which never fails, the Cross is a wall which never fails” (Feast of Holy Cross, Sedro).



King Abgar and Mid-Lent

At Mid-Lent, we also remember the healing of King Abgar of Edessa by Christ. Edessa was an important city on the border between the Roman Empire and Persian Empire. The Persian Empire was located East of the Roman Empire and was governed initially by the Parthian dynasty (and later by the Sasanid dynasty). At various



Keep in Mind

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

times, another small kingdom known as the Kingdom of Edessa existed between the Roman and Persian empires. King Abgar was the king of Edessa at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. According to early Christian historians, including Eusebius of Caesarea, King Abgar was afflicted with leprosy. Though he was isolated and far away from Jesus Christ, he sought a way to find healing from Jesus.

The legend says there was an exchange of letters between our Lord Jesus Christ and King Abgar. Our Lord took a cloth, used it to wash His face, and sent it with a letter to King Abgar. Christ stated in the letter that He would send one of His disciples after He ascended to bring complete healing to Abgar. When King Abgar received the letter and cloth, he placed that cloth on his face and had partial healing.

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

Cross and Jesus Christ

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

"By it we – confess and worship

We have life – by Your saving work" (Friday, Matins, Qolo of Quqlion)

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

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

*By Your Cross You cut off the head of the ev-il tyrant
By your valor you loosed the hold of greedy – Death on us
So we cry to You
Glory to the **Pow’r** of Your be`ing Lord – of – all” (Friday, Matins, Eqbo)*

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

*Son of God in whose Cross the creation rejoiced,
Let my mind rejoice in the precious Cross of light;” (Friday 3rd hour Bovooso)*

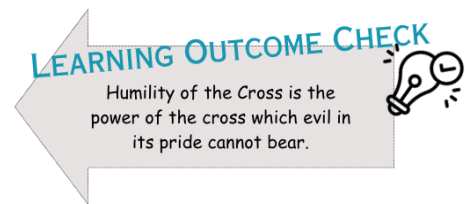
4. **Eternal Fountain** - The Cross is a wine press that Holy Church received and “Her children drink of it and rejoice in it forever” (Friday, Matins, Qolo). Jesus was pierced on the side by a lance when he was on the Cross (**St. John 19:34**). Blood and water flowed from Jesus’ side. Just as Eve was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

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

Our participation in the Cross

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

1. **Christian discipleship** - Jesus calls us to take up our Cross and follow him (**St. Luke 9:23-24**). To save our life we must lose it. This is the paradox of Christian living. This is what it means to imitate Christ (**1 Corinthians 11:1**). We are to die daily to our old man and to be renewed as a new being (**Romans 6:6**).
2. **Cross is our armor** – In our life of discipleship, the Cross is an armor that protects us. *“We fear not the evil one; Because the Lord is with us; We are clothed in His armor; And in it we all glory” (Quqilion for Cross, Qolo).*
The armor of the Cross is a powerful weapon in a spiritual war: *“The Cross conquered and conquers; The Cross has conquered Satan; May the Cross be a stronghold; To all who confess the Cross” (Quqilion for Cross, Ekbo).*
3. **Dying to self** – The Cross represents the daily dying to the self. St Paul says, “But God forbids that I should boast except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (**Galatians 6:14**). Our prayers repeatedly say that “we glory in the Cross.” The Cross is also a reminder of our need to become humble, die to sin, and live righteously (**1 Peter 2:24**).



Reflection Questions

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

Lesson 11: The Journey to Salvation

Lesson Goals

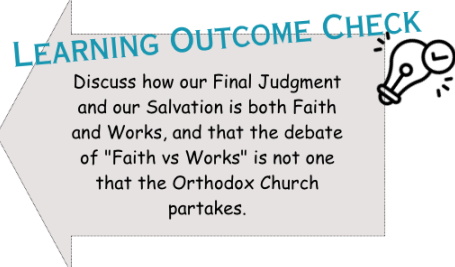
- I can discuss how the Final Judgment and salvation is about both faith and works, and that the debate of "Faith vs. Works" is not one that the Orthodox Church partakes in.
- I can validate that Christ is the only Judge, and that we as Orthodox Christians do not judge others.
- I can reframe how we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

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

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

"Yea, a man may say, you have faith, and I have works: show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." (St. James 2:18)

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



The continual state of repentance allows for God's grace to abound in our lives. By emulating the lives of the saints who never ceased to call upon the Lord in repentance, we come to see the truth that we are not worthy of anything but must beseech the Lord for His loving mercy.

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

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

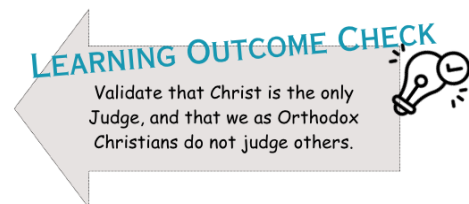
However, our deeds do not supersede the place of grace and faith with God, but are part of the whole experience in our relationship with God. We do not view salvation in the legalistic terms of acquittal and justification, for salvation is much more than simply being forgiven and getting into heaven.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

Our works cannot *earn* us salvation, but neither are works unimportant. Indeed, the way we live our life is of utmost importance. In Holy Scripture we read that God will judge each person according to their deeds (See Matthew 25:31-46, Romans 2:6, 1 Peter 1:17, and Revelation 20:12, among other passages). So as was once reportedly stated by an Orthodox theologian, "You cannot be saved by works, but you cannot be saved without them." According to the Fathers, our communion with God is made fuller and more complete through our works. Good works help grow our hearts in love toward God and our neighbor, thus helping us attain God's "likeness" in this life, bringing us into communion with Christ.

Christ – The Eternal Judge

"Judge not, that ye be not judged" – **St. Mathew 7:1**

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



Every Orthodox Christian should strive to truly forgive others, and to turn our gaze away from our neighbor's sin and focus only on our own need for change. The only way one can overcome the sin of judging others is to see one's own sins. True repentance only bears fruit when we work on our own fallen nature.

Judgment belongs to God alone. It is not for us to decide who is saved, who is not, who is evil, who is hopeless, and so forth. We might certainly deem an action to be sinful or inappropriate, but we do not judge the person, and we do not consider ourselves as being superior to anyone else. It is best for us to acknowledge each of ourselves as the chief of sinners (**1 Timothy 1:15**). If God is patient and merciful with us, then we should also be so to everyone, regardless of their struggles and sins and regardless of their beliefs. While we believe the fullness of the truth was revealed to the world in Jesus Christ and is found in Holy Orthodox Christianity, we rejoice whenever goodness and truth is expressed and practiced by anyone, regardless of their own beliefs or religion. We do not dismiss or condemn any person or religion outside the Church, for only God knows what is in each person's heart, and not everyone is exposed to the fullness of the truth in this life, through no fault of their own. We must remember that each will be judged according to the measure they have been given. Other faiths may not have the fullness of the Apostolic Truth, but if they are believers in God and are trying to live a holy life—or if they are even nonbelievers or agnostics but are demonstrating kindness and service to others—we must give thanks to Christ for what they do have. (But of course, as we are called to do, we strive in love to share the truth and beauty of Christ to all peoples and nations [Matthew 28:18–20]).

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Reframe how Final Judgment is not legalistic and a form of punishment, but rather a consequence of our choices.



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

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Deduce that if God is merciful and does not judge legalistically, then neither should we.



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

The Second Coming and Final Judgment

“This Child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many” – St. Luke 2:34

The Orthodox understanding of life after death and the Second Coming of Christ is rooted in the Holy Scriptures and Patristic teachings (teachings of the Fathers of the Church) on the subject. The Fathers are unanimous in their understanding of eschatology which is the study of religious ideas or beliefs about death, judgment, and the afterlife. While most Christians believe that there is some form of life after death, there are various Christian interpretations of this belief. (study of the last days) as a mystery, and while their teachings abound in metaphors and parables, we must realize that we can only understand this mystery fully in the age to come.

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

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



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

For those who want to be with Christ and experience the golden light, they will experience this as encompassing, eternal joy. But, for those that reject Christ it will be a painful experience. We believe that heaven and hell are not about location or places, but about our relationship with God. Heaven and Hell are within the same realm, which is in the presence of God.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways does the Orthodox Church's understanding of Final Judgment integrate both faith and works, and why is this perspective crucial in distinguishing its beliefs from the "Faith vs Works" debate?
2. How does St. Paul's declaration of being "the foremost of sinners" in 1 Timothy 1:15 reflect the Orthodox view on humility and the recognition of one's own shortcomings, and how does this relate to our understanding of judgment in a Christian context?
3. How can we articulate the idea that Final Judgment is a natural consequence of our choices rather than a punitive measure, and how does this align with the Orthodox belief in God's mercy?

Lesson 12: Fulfillment in Christ

Lesson Goals

- I can understand how the Old Testament covenant was fulfilled in Christ.
- I can interpret how events in the Old Testament foreshadowed Christ.
- I can connect the Sacrament of Baptism continues the promise given to Israel.

Psalm 1 reminds us that a person who follows God's will is blessed and points us toward Christ. As Fr. Patrick Henry Reardon observes, "Christ is the one who fulfills the Law, and He is the key to its understanding." This introduction highlights key themes of the entire Bible, as it describes the two fundamental categories of mankind: the sinners and the righteous. It also addresses concepts ultimately revealed in the perfectly blessed man, Jesus Christ, who stands at the crossroads of two ways (**Psalm 1:1; St. Matthew 7:13**). From the time of creation, the Old Testament traces characters whose "will is in the law of the Lord" and who "meditate in His law day and night." These righteous people started from the beginning through creation from Noah, Abraham, David and ended in Christ. All these righteous men, detailed in the genealogy of Christ (**St. Matthew 1 and St. Luke 3**), trace God's chosen lineage culminating in His incarnation. Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit exults on this in the Magnificat – "As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever."

The Old Testament Fathers and God's Covenants

Noah's expression of thanksgiving through the sacrifice at the end of the flood (**Genesis 8:20-22**) is described as a sweet aroma to the **Lord** God. God in turn establishes a covenant with Noah to never again destroy creation through a flood. Following Abram's victory in battle as described in Genesis 14, he is met by Melchizedek the priest-king of Salem and the king of Sodom. Melchizedek, another personification of Christ, brings out bread and wine to him. Abram's humility and righteousness in his dealings especially with the two kings is followed by the **Word** of God (God the Son is described in the Bible as the Lord God and the Word of God) blessing him with descendants as numerous as the stars in the night sky (**Genesis 12:2; 15:5**). It is interesting to note that stars were chosen as a measure of comparison here. It implies not only large numbers, but exaltedness also. Also to note is God mentioning (**Genesis 12:3**) "...and in you all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed." This is probably one of the earliest mention of salvation and the incarnation to occur around 2000 years later through his descendants. In Genesis 17, Abram (exalted father) becomes Abraham (father of a multitude) and is asked by the **Lord** God to be circumcised along with all of the male members of his family and servants. This would be an enduring sign and reminder to each of Abraham's covenant with God.

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

The **Lord** God tells King David through the prophet Nathan (2 Kingdoms 7) that his throne would be established forever (Psalms 88:36-38) through his son who would also have the honor of building a temple for Him.

The New Testament and the New Covenant

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

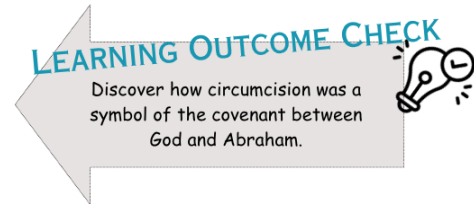
However the tenor of this relationship changes with the prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah. Ezekiel prophesies a **Covenant of Peace (Ezekiel 34:25)** with His people, the descendants of David – peace and prosperity (**Ezekiel 37:15-28**) under one Shepherd (**Ezekiel 34:23**). Jeremiah and Ezekiel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

These prophets herald the incarnation when God the Son becomes Man to live among human beings and shows them that they can live without sinning, and defeats the greatest human fear, the fear of death through His death and resurrection. Following this as promised, He sends the Holy Spirit to abide with humankind and perpetually guide them during their earthly journey. The new covenant through God the Son, Jesus Christ, is a covenant of unconditional love, sacrifice and union with God through the Holy Eucharist.

Circumcision in the Old Covenant and Baptism in the New Covenant

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

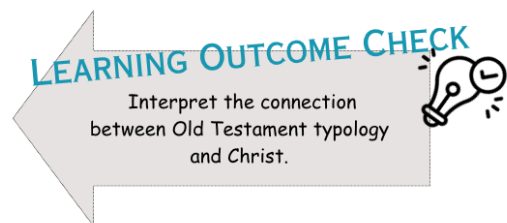
Circumcision was a symbol of the death of the body, so that we might obtain life. A part of the body is cut off to die, followed by a renewal in God. With the new covenant, circumcision is replaced by baptism as the mark of the covenant, where we die with Christ so that we may live with Him. Just as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



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

Sacrifices in the Old and New Covenants

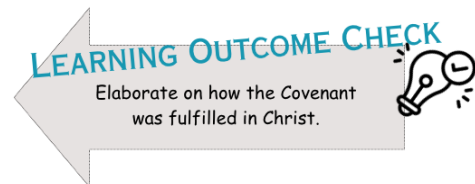
It is also fascinating to note another drastic change with the new covenant. The numerous sacrificial offerings including the grain offerings, the drink offerings, first fruits and livestock in the Old Testament part of the old covenant are replaced by Christ offering himself in the new covenant. Father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



characteristic – they are all food offered to God which is later consumed by the priests and the worshippers. Father Young is quick to point out that the sacrifices of the New Testament initiated by Jesus Christ are not just a communal meal, because for an animal to become part of a meal, it must first be butchered. By God's own sacrifice, the sacrificial system has been fulfilled per Father Young. His sacrifice gives our liturgy and Eucharist its meaning and reality.

Conclusion

Creation was an expression of God's free will, goodness, wisdom, love and omnipotence. God created man in His own image and gave him free will. Man however used his free will to sin and separate himself from God. In the Old Testament God uses prophets, laws, promises, and punishments to wean the man away from sin. In the New Testament, He comes and lives with the man to show him how to live without sin. He sacrifices Himself to fulfill all future sacrifices. He institutes the Eucharist to unify man with Him and sends the Holy Spirit to abide with man and guide him constantly if he is only willing to listen.



Reflection Questions

1. In what ways does Christ represent the culmination of Old Testament typology, and how do these types provide insight into His nature and mission as revealed in the New Testament?
2. Discuss the significance of circumcision as a symbol of the covenant between God and Abraham. In what manner did this practice reflect God's commitment to His chosen people?
3. Analyze how the covenant established in the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ. How does this fulfillment transform the meaning and purpose of rituals such as circumcision, particularly in relation to the Sacrament of Baptism?

Lesson 13: Our Syriac Roots

Lesson Goals

- I can appreciate how our Syriac Liturgical tradition roots illuminates the ancient wisdom of Christianity in a unique and special way.
- I can relate the canonization of Scripture to our Syriac tradition.
- I can discern how the structure of liturgy brings us closer to Christ.

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

- Fr. Baby Varghese

Introduction

Fr. Baby Varghese¹⁷ defines Christian theology as the search for meaning and articulation of that meaning. This definition is important when we speak of liturgy. For Orthodox Christians, the liturgy is the attempt to align ourselves with the Almighty.

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

Despite this diversity in language, prayers, and practices there is commonality in the key parts of the Liturgy and the prayers of the different Feast days. This reflects that all Orthodox Churches worship the One True God who was revealed in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Just as different people who witness an event may retell based on their own perspectives and experiences, so too there are different Liturgical expressions of the Divine Revelation. But, through the active guidance of the Holy Spirit, all expressions are of the common Truth. We see this in the work of the Liturgical Resource Development who translate the Syriac and Malayalam Hymns and Prayers to English, and the irrefutable

¹⁷ Varghese, Fr. B. (2004). West Syrian Liturgical Theology (1st ed.). Routledge.

evidence that throughout the centuries and through various translations the original meaning was never altered.

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

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



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

History of the Syriac Liturgy

Syriac has been the liturgical language of the St. Thomas Christians from a very early date, even though their identity and culture remained always truly of Indian origin. Syriac belongs to the Semitic language family. Since the beginning of the Christian Church in Malankara, people have used Syriac as their language to worship for two reasons: That was the language that St. Thomas might have spoken Syriac as a comrade of Jesus Christ, and the Jewish community in Malankara might also have used this language. Later bishops from Syriac-speaking areas started coming to Malankara, and this tradition flourished.

Therefore, we can see many Syriac words in Malayalam vocabulary: For instance, sleeba (cross), madbaha (altar), kasheesha (priest), and Qurbana (Eucharist).

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

Books of prayer such as Sh'himo (Common) Prayer, prayers for the Holy Week, prayers for Lent, and the Penkiso (prayers for feasts and special days) followed suit. At present, the Church is using the West Syriac Liturgy. The Church follows the faith established by the three Ecumenical Councils of Nicea (AD 325), Constantinople (AD 381), and Ephesus (AD 431).

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

Canonization of Scripture

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

The Holy Bible (or Holy Scriptures as the Bible is a collection of books) is not only the book of the Orthodox Church, but was written by the Church and intended to be read by those who believe in God and constitute His People within the Church. There has always been an implicit assumption that those who read the Holy Bible were Christians or catechumens (a Christian convert under instruction before Holy Baptism). Every word in Scripture presupposes faith in God. The Holy Bible was never intended to be an isolated manuscript, nor the fruit of scientific or historical research. Rather, the Holy Bible is a faith

document for the children of God and was intended to be read and interpreted within a "Canon of Truth" i.e., the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

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

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

The Bible is central in the life of the Orthodox Church and gives both form and content to the Church's liturgical and sacramental worship, just as to its theology and spiritual life. Nothing in the Orthodox Church is opposed to what is revealed in the Bible. His Grace Dr. Geevarghese Mar Osthathios emphasized that the sacred traditions of the Church will never contradict Scripture, and in fact "We must always explain the Scriptural truth in the context of the sacred traditions of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and not establish any dogma on the basis of the traditions alone." In other words, our written tradition is the Holy Bible!

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

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

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

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

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

As a final note, it must be understood that despite some modern theories or popular media outlets claiming that "lost books" are being discovered that shed new light on Christianity, there are no "lost books" as all the writings that had been written in those times were read by the Church. Rather than thinking of these books as "lost", it is more proper to view these books as "rejected" as the Church determined these writings did not uphold the full revelation of Christ. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas is a good example of a rejected, Gnostic book that portrays Christ as a supernatural being who killed and then resurrected a childhood acquaintance which the Church rejects as we know Christ lived as man who did no sin.

New Testament

The New Testament contains 27 books, beginning with the Gospel of Matthew and ending with the Book of the Revelation. All Christian denominations accept this with no dispute.

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

In 367 A.D., St. Athanasius wrote a Paschal Letter where the books of what we call the New Testament is listed in the order it is seen in today's Holy Gospel. However, we

never claim that St. Athanasius decided these books individually, but rather these were the teachings of Christ that were being read in Churches at that time and written down by St. Athanasius. Writings from a local council held earlier at Carthage in 318 AD also made note of these books. This is a reflection of the authority and sacredness of oral teachings, which upheld the teachings of Christ to His Apostles in the Christian community of the early Church.

Old Testament

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

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

The Ordo

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

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

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

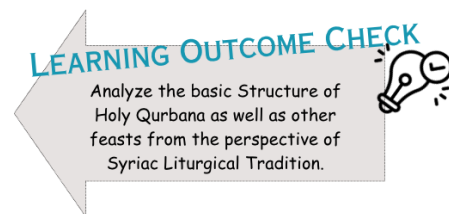
The goal of the *ordo* is to make the worship the expression of the faith of the Church, or to actualize the Church as the people of God, the worshipping community. Different

elements have been arranged as a consistent whole precisely for the self-realization of the Church. Ordo is a theologically inspired 'language' by which the Church expresses itself. It actualizes itself as the fulfillment of the mystery of God which was hidden and is finally revealed in Christ. Each element, whether it is time, texts, gestures, or symbols, is rooted in and reflects the mystery of God. The West Syrian commentators have pointed out this fundamental principle."

Everything that is done in Church and per our West Syrian tradition is centered on Christ, and through our words, actions and thoughts we become one with Christ. This understanding truly brings deep meaning to the special moment in Holy Qurbana where we respond, "our minds, our thoughts, and our hearts are with the Lord God!"

The Divine Liturgy

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



With this understanding, let's relook at the basic structure of the Holy Qurbana:

1. **Preparation rites (tuyobo):** The important elements of the preparation rites are the vesting of the celebrant and the setting up of the bread and wine on the altar. During the time of the "tuyobo," the Morning Prayer progresses in the main sanctuary. The Old Testament is read at the end of Morning Prayer. The Old Testament readings reveal the messianic prophecies from the Old Testament.
2. **Pre-Anaphora:** With the opening of the curtain, the pre-anaphora begins with a solemn procession around the altar. During the procession, the congregation sings the anthem (Manitho) composed by Patriarch Mar Severus of Antioch.
3. **Reading of the Scriptures:** Then the Epistles and the Gospel are read.

4. **Promion-Sedra and the Blessing of the Censor:** The Syriac word Sedro means “series of long prayer.” Sedra is a series of prayers and petitions. Promion (In Greek, promotion means introduction) is the introductory prayer preceding the Husoyo. Husoyo is the invariable prayer of penitence. Sedra follows the Husoyo. Then the celebrant offers incense and blesses the censer before censuring the entire sanctuary. The blessing of the censer in the Name of the Holy Trinity implies that we offer our prayers to the One Triune God.
5. **The Nicene Creed:** The Creed is a proclamation of the faith of the Church.
6. **Offering of the Holy Qurbana (Anaphora):** The part of the celebration that follows the Creed is called “Anaphora” (Greek, offering). As the first step, the priest washes his hands, symbolizing the purification of the heart. Then he kneels down before the altar and says an inaudible prayer, and remembers the names of the living, the sick, and the departed as the faithful have requested.
7. **Kiss of peace and the lifting up of the veil:** The kiss of peace is exchanged in accordance with our Lord’s words to reconcile with each other before offering a sacrifice (Matt.5:23-24). The lifting up symbolizes that the life-giving and heavenly mysteries are revealed through the Holy Qurbana.
8. **Prayer of the Veil (Sosaffa):** With a prayer (Lift up your hearts..., Let us give thanks to the Lord.), the central part of the celebration begins. The priest says the prayer of thanksgiving, which evokes God’s mercy toward us. The entire Holy Qurbana is a Thanksgiving (Eucharist) to God for sending His only begotten Son for our salvation.
9. **First Benediction:** The priest blesses the congregation invoking the Holy Trinity (... the love of God the Father...).
10. **Words of Institution:** The celebrant blesses the bread and wine invoking the words of institution of the Eucharist by Christ during the Last Supper.
11. **Anamnesis or the Commemoration of the Salvific works:** During the Last Supper, Our Lord instructed His disciples: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luk.22:16; 1 Cor.14:24-25).
12. **Invocation of the Holy Spirit (Epiclesis):** Invocation of the Holy Spirit is one of the characteristic traits of the Orthodox liturgy. During this time, the bread and wine are mystically transformed to become the body and blood of Christ (Russo).

13. **Intercessions (Thubden):** The intercessions contain six canons (sets of prayers), each consisting of three prayers. Each set contains one loud prayer by the priest and the acolyte, as well as one silent prayer by the priest. The first three canons commemorate the living, and the remaining are for the departed. The intercessions are the prayers for the well-being of all the members of the Church, including both living and departed.
14. **Second Benediction:** The celebrant blesses the congregation for a second time.
15. **Fraction:** The prayer during the fraction evokes the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, the living bread who was “broken” on the cross for our salvation.
16. **The Lord’s Prayer:** Here, the Lord’s Prayer serves as the preparatory prayer for receiving the Holy Eucharist.
17. **Third Benediction:** The celebrant blesses the congregation for the third time.
18. **Elevation of the Holy Mysteries:** This is an invitation to receive the Holy Qurbana, as well as a warning about the sanctity of the elements. The entire congregation responds to the blessedness of the occasion, saying, “The One Holy Father...the One Holy Son, and the One Holy Spirit”. This means that through the Holy Qurbana, we have been granted communion with the Holy Trinity by His grace.
19. **Intercessory Qukilions:** Quikilions are excerpts from Psalms, followed by the cycle of ekbos, kolos, and bovoothos are sung here. Usually, the Qukilions are to commemorate the Holy Cross, St. Mary, the Holy Saints, the departed clergy, and the departed faithful.
20. **Holy Communion and Thanksgiving:** The celebrant first partakes of the Holy Communion, followed by the acolytes serving in the Madbaha. Then the Holy Mysteries are brought to the faithful of the congregation.
21. **Procession of the Holy Mysteries:** The priest faces the west and presents the elements to the congregation.
22. **Thanksgiving Prayer:** Here, the priest offers a Thanksgiving prayer followed by the final benediction.
23. **Dismissal:** With the dismissal, the celebration is concluded.

Orders of Priesthood



 Kasheesho/Priest



Mshamshono/
full-deacon 



 Yawpadiqno/
Sub-deacon



Qoroyo/Readers 



 Mzamrono/Singers



Momoyono/
Confessor of Faith 



 Ulmoyo/Faithful

The Orders of Priesthood

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

First Order: Ulmoyo (or the Faithful)

All members of the Church, both men and women, are ordained to the first order or priesthood through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. As the prayer of the priest reminds us, "by the grace of baptism, you are now seen in this world in the form of light."

Second Order: Momyono (Confessor of Faith)

This order includes who teach the faith in the church including Sunday School! In today's practice, this is when an Acolyte is ordained to serve on the Holy Altar to assist the priest.

Third Order: Mzamrono (Singers)

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

Fourth Order: Qoruyo (Readers)

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

Fifth Order: Yawpadiaqno (Sub-deacons)

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

Sixth Order: Mshamshono (Full-deacons)

They are permitted to officially serve in liturgical ceremonies. They assist the priest with the needs of the priest and have the privilege of reading the Holy Gospel, Promeion and Sedro, as well as distribute Holy Qurbana to the faithful and lead in the Kuklions.

Seventh Order: Kasheesho (Priest)

This is the role of a person who has been ordained as a priest.

Eighth Order: Bishops

Those in this order have all the rights of a Priest and can ordain all the ranks up to priest as well as consecrate deacons and priests. They also consecrate Churches. Although all bishops are equal, there are three different and special roles:

1. Chor-Episcopos



2. Episcopos (Metropolitan):



3. Catholicos (Primate of the East):

Catholicos of the East, and Malankara Metropolitan, the Supreme Head is an elevation from the Bishop. His Holiness is also the head of The Holy Synod. The Catholicos is the spiritual head and Malankara Metropolitan is the administrative head of the Holy Church in India.

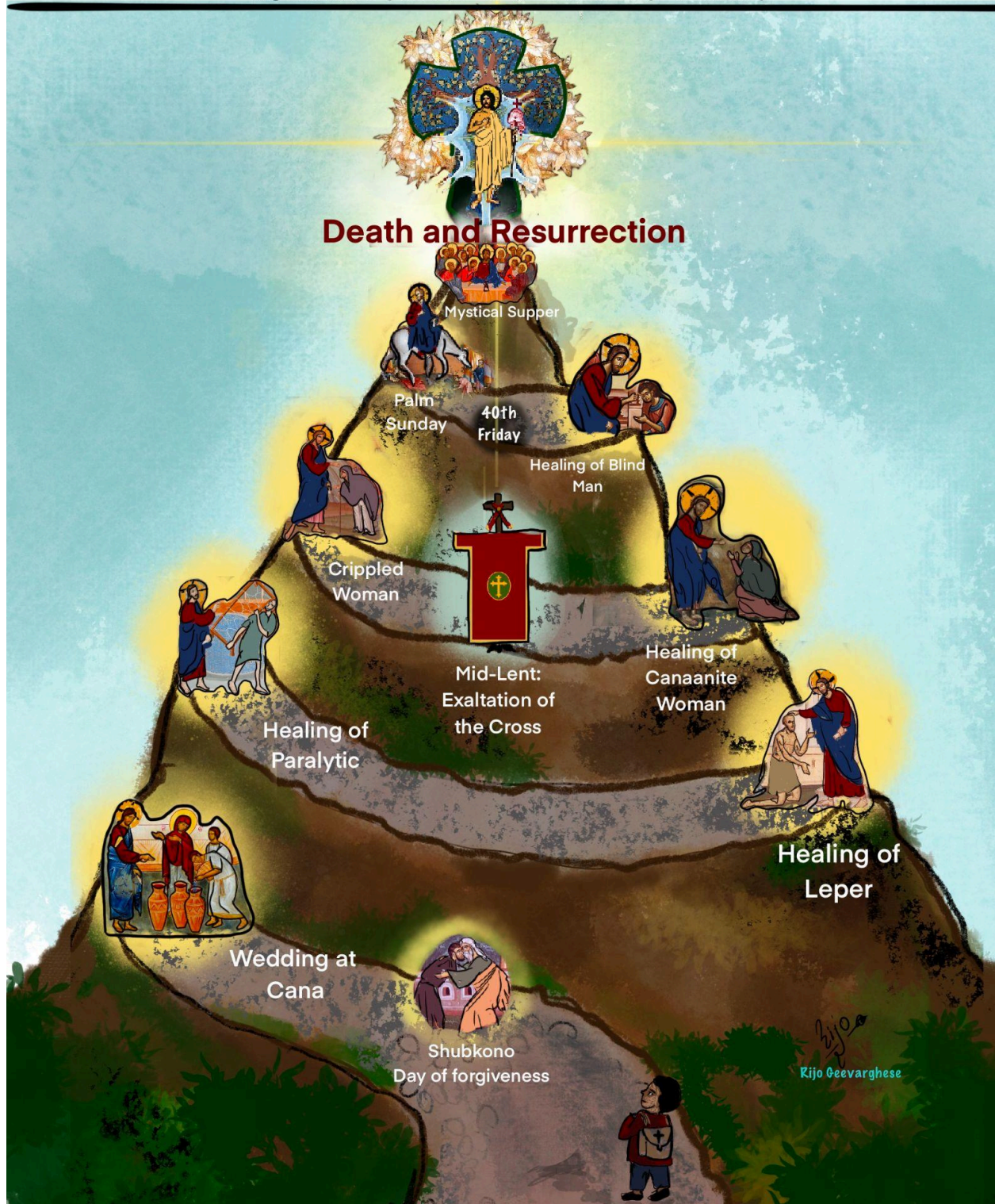


Liturgical Year & Seasons

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



Mountain of Great Lent



Liturgical Music Tradition of Malankara Orthodox Church

The essence of Syriac Liturgy lies in its rich and melodious music, which has been preserved through oral traditions rather than formal notation. Syriac plays a vital role in maintaining the solemnity and nobility of this liturgical music, which enhances worship through its deep piety. The 4th century is recognized as the golden age of the Christian Church, marked by significant contributions from figures such as St. Ephrem and St. Jacob of Serug, who pioneered Syriac literature and poetry. This period saw the introduction of various singing styles by Malpans, enriching the musical tradition further. The intermingling of local music styles has led to the evolution of Syriac Music, particularly within the West Syriac tradition, which is one of the oldest ecclesiastical music systems and is profoundly influential in both literature and worship. The Malankara Orthodox Church has embraced this music within its liturgy, highlighting its importance in expressing deep theological concepts through simple melodies and rhyming poetry, a necessity during the time of combating significant heresies.

Syriac poetry is entirely different from the other poetic traditions. But it bears a similarity to Hebrew poetry. The syllabic structure is the soul of the Syriac poetry. It contains, Theology, doctrines, spiritual discourses, praise, and petitions.

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

Facing the East

We pray facing the East. This is a strong tradition that dates back to Apostolic times and is biblically based (**Genesis 2:8; St. Matthew 24:27, 30; Baruch 4:36**) The Temple of Jerusalem was built facing eastward. All the churches were built in the same model because all the Apostles followed their Jewish heritage in many things, such as priesthood, worship,

and the structure of church buildings. The other main reason was their hope in the second coming of Christ, as written in the Bible; “For as the light comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (St. Matthew 24:27). This tradition still continues; as our churches are built in an East-West orientation. The bodies of our beloved faithful departed are laid to rest facing the east with the hope of resurrection and meeting our Lord Jesus Christ face to face. Turning to the East represents our final preparation to receive Christ when He comes for the Final Judgment. Thus, the East symbolizes our spiritual watchfulness and our readiness to meet Him to give an account of our life.

Reflection Questions

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

Lesson 14: The World to Come

Lesson Goals

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

The promise of salvation marks the beginning of the *eschaton*, a term derived from Greek that signifies the end of the world. From a Christian perspective, the eschaton commenced with Pentecost, indicating that we are currently living in these eschatological times whilst awaiting the second coming of Christ, which may occur unexpectedly. The culmination of the eschaton coincides with Christ's return, following critical events such as His incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The Church plays a vital role in this process, tasked with facilitating the fulfillment of humanity's salvation as we approach the end of the eschaton. The Church believes it has a significant daily responsibility to ensure the salvation of its members because it has the assurance from Christ, its bridegroom, that He will come to gather His faithful, despite the uncertainty of when this will happen. Additionally, the resurrected and ascended Christ is depicted as seated at the right hand of God the Father, symbolizing the promise of eternal life for every Church member after the final judgment. The Ascension of Jesus is illustrated in the **Acts of the Apostles 1:9**, where it states, "He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." As the disciples gazed upward, two angels appeared, reminding them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." This message encapsulates Christ's physical departure, His glorious reception in heaven, and the promise of His second coming (Parousia).

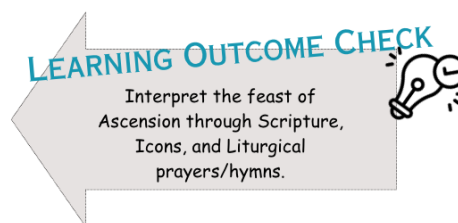


Before Christ ascended into heaven, he declared the descent of the Holy Spirit on His disciples soon after. Holy Scripture stresses Christ's physical departure and his glorification with God the Father together with great joy which His disciples had as they received the promise of the Holy Spirit who was to come to assure the Lord's presence with them, enabling them to be His witnesses to the end of the earth (**St. Matthew 28:20, St. Mark 16:16, St. Luke 24:48-53**).

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

The Significance of Ascension for the Church

Ascension is an essential part of the incarnation of the Son of God. The primary goal of God becoming man is the restoration of the distorted image and likeness of God in Adam. St. Paul writes, "If by the one man's (Adam) offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive God's abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one man (the 2nd Adam), Jesus Christ (**Romans 5:17**). This explains the ultimate benefit of each and every individual who believes in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, which is to reach the stage of immortality, as death is abolished once and for all. Ascension points to the promise of eternal life. The incarnation of the Son of God in history incorporates multiple stages for its completion, which is called eschaton (the end age) and it includes – the virgin birth, baptism by John the Baptist, public ministry, the Transfiguration, suffering, death, resurrection on the third day, ascension on the 40th day, and the promise of the descent of the Holy Spirit the third person of the Holy Trinity. We recite this whole event in the Holy Creed: "For us men came down from heaven, And was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of the Holy Virgin Mary Mother of God and became man, And was crucified for us in the days of Pontius Pilate and suffered, and died, and was buried, And on the third day He rose again according to His Will and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of His Father and shall come again in His great glory to judge both the living and the dead whose kingdom shall have no end^[MJ1]." The Son of God as the second person of the Holy Trinity came down to the world, which is the incarnation. His going back to the bosom of His Father is the Ascension. Since He went back or ascended, His next arrival is the Second Coming, which will be in great glory and will be



to judge everyone, who will be resurrected. Some will join the eternal life and some endure eternal punishment after the judgment. Ascension of Christ makes it all possible.

Ascension is the necessary consequence of the incarnation. It is also imperative that Jesus Christ must ascend before the Holy Spirit can descend upon the disciples to complete His Messianic mission in this world. As resurrection expresses the triumph of Jesus Christ over sin and death, ascension led the way for the establishment of the Church in this world at Pentecost.

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

Ascension is not merely a magnificent sight for the disciples, but an event they became part of. In fact, the reason for the Apostles and first believers to become convinced Christians is that they either witnessed the ascension or they were told about the ascension by those who witnessed the event and they had no problem trusting them. Ascension is therefore the event that every baptized in Christ is called in. During the Holy Qurbana, the priest says “the Holy Mysteries are given only for the pure and the holy”, before raising the cup and the chalice (*sursum corda* meaning lifting up). He then lifts the elements and says, “God the Father who created the world is with us”, “God the Son who redeemed the world is with us” and, “God the Holy Spirit who sanctifies and fulfills everything is with us”. This is a public proclamation that all faithful individuals have the potential to be lifted up from unholiness and sin by the grace and mercy of God to the holiness of God. In the words of St. Athanasius of Alexandria, “The Son of God became the son of man so that sons of men may become sons of God”. In short, the ascension brought humans closer to the holiness of God.

Ascension is the one of the important events in the redemptive work of the Son of God along with the Birth, the Death and the Resurrection of Christ. This means, redemption of each and every individual baptized into Christ is assured in the ascension, which means they get a share in His heavenly Kingdom as the Church is the manifestation of the Kingdom

of God in this world. Individual redemption has a holistic dimension that includes, both our bodies and souls. Jesus ascended into heaven after He had risen from the dead on the third day. He physically appeared to His disciples and many others, before ascending with His resurrected body as witnessed by His disciples. Saint Paul says he has appeared to more than five hundred people. This implies that the ascension enables the resurrection of our own physical bodies. Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ are the basis of hope for every faithful believer in the Church (**1 Corinthians 15**).

Ascension also confirms the second coming (Parousia) of Christ. At the time of the ascension, two angels declared the second coming of Christ as mentioned at the beginning of this lesson. The Nicene Creed reiterates this message, “He will come again with great glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose Kingdom shall have no end”. Each believer needs to lead a life in preparation to stand before God’s throne at the time of the final judgment, when we will be accountable for every action of ours during our lifetime. In effect, the second coming of Christ does affect our present Christian life. In the words of Saint Paul, “denying ungodliness, and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (**Titus 2:12-14**).

Ascension and the Second Coming in our Daily Prayers and Liturgy

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

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

The *Bo’utho of Mor Balai* goes thus –

“O Thou full of mercy, renew thy creation at thy resurrection. O Lord, comfort and absolve our departed ones who died with hope in Thee, and await Thy coming. Lord make them dwell in

the bosom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. May the living and the departed together cry out and say blessed is He who has come and is to come and give life to the dead. Amen.

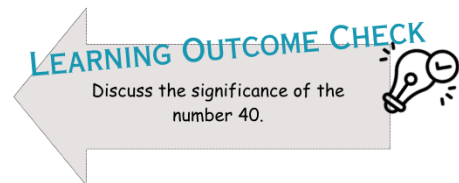
Every Holy Qurbana starts with the preparatory hymn:

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

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

Importance of 40

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



The Church observes the Great Lent (50 days) that includes the 40-days fast of our Lord and Savior followed by a week identifying with His passion, crucifixion and resurrection. This is a time for abstinence from certain foods for physical cleansing along with prayer and self- discipline for spiritual purification.

We observe forty days of lamentation following the passing away of our loved ones. On the fortieth day, we celebrate Holy Qurbana and pray at the graves of the departed ones. This ritual is a spiritual intercession by the family and the congregation for the departed

souls who collectively wait for the day of judgment. This intercessory service exhibits the belief in the continuation of life after life on the earth. This forty-day lamentation period represents the forty days Jesus spent with his disciples after His resurrection and before His ascension. The Church believes that departed souls too spend forty days after death visiting loved ones before departing to the chamber of light, where they will be prayerfully living the eschaton and the second coming of Christ or the Parousia.

Conclusion

The ascension of Jesus Christ marked the reunion of man with God. The first man Adam created in the image of God had lost his closeness to God when sin came in the way and separated him from his Creator. The consequences of sin were suffering and death. Subsequently, God became man, suffered, died, was resurrected and ascended back to reunite humanity with God. In St. Paul's words: "Christ became the second Adam" (**Romans 5: 12 f, 1 Cor 15:45**), becoming the perfect man with perfect God to fulfill the mission of redeeming the Adamic generations. Living as a man, He showed us to live a life without sin and overcome our fears – fears of pain, suffering, and death. Through His resurrection and ascension, He gives us hope for our own resurrection and ascension.

Reflection Questions

1. In light of Acts 1:11, how does the promise of Christ's return inform our understanding of His Ascension and shape our anticipation for the events of Pentecost, as reflected in our liturgical prayers and hymns?
2. Considering the connection between the Ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, in what ways can we draw parallels between the two events to enhance our understanding of their theological significance and their impact on the early Church?
3. What is the significance of the number 40 in the context of Christ's time on earth post-resurrection and its correlation with the liturgical journey leading up to Pentecost, as portrayed through Scripture and iconography? How does this duration help us comprehend the transformative process occurring within the disciples?

Lesson 15: One of the Least

Lesson Goals

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

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

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

- **St. Matthew 25:37-40**

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

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

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

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

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

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

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Be able to develop and support an argument that accounts for needs and concerns of marginalized groups that builds on the foundation of our Christian theology that God is love and that others are to know Christ not just by our words but through our actions.

The Good Samaritan Revisited

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

To have a deeper understanding of the significance of the person who helped being a Samaritan, one needs to have a general understanding of "Second Temple Judaism".

Second Temple Judaism is a common designation for the Jewish traditions that flourished between the return of exiles from Babylon and the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple under Persian patronage from 538 to 515 BCE, until the destruction of the Temple by Roman forces in 70 CE.

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



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

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

Moreover, we see the Samaritan bring the wounded man to the Inn. Through our Church fathers, we know that the Inn symbolizes the Church and it is Christ who brings those in need of healing to us! From the reflection of St. Severus:

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

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

Unity in Diversity

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

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

not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” (Revelation 2:9, 3:9; Matt. 12:31-32; Mark 3:28)

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

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

St. Gregorios of Parumala was known to minister to all who were in need and brought many converts to our Church. HG Pathrose Mar Osthathios founded the “Sleebadasa Samootham” (meaning ‘Order of the Servants of the Holy Cross’) who’s ministry focus was the upliftment of the Dalit Christians. HG Alvares Mar Julius worked tirelessly in Goa for the poor and often would beg with a bowl in one hand and his Bishop’s staff in the other hand to raise awareness and collect alms for the needy.



St. Geevargese Mar Gregorios



HG Pathrose Mar Osthathios



HG Alvares Mar Julius

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

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

Reflection Questions

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

Lesson 16: Wrestling with God

Lesson Goals

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

The Father's House

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



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

We know how the parable ends with the prodigal returning to the Father and being received as royalty. We also know that Christ taught this parable so that everyone could understand God’s wisdom through these simple stories. In this parable, the Father clearly represented God, and the Father’s house in turn is the Church. In the thought of Fr. Thomas Hopko, the experience of the ‘house of the father’ is the experience of the Church. The Church is the gathering of worshipping people, where God is present. Very particularly for Christians the Son of God, Christ, is the teacher, the priest, the pastor, the bishop, and the prophet. Christ is the head of the Church (**Ephesians 5:23**). Through His sufferings, He has

become not only the head of the Church, but like the Apostle Paul continues in the letter to the Ephesians, the head over all things for the sake of the Church.

We know from the very first page of Scripture that God is Love, and that He created us out of Love. We are all made in the Image of God and in His Likeness (**Genesis 1:27**) and for a Divine Purpose (**Genesis 1:28**). The purpose God envisaged for humans is to be His hands and feet throughout all of creation. But, as we know love needs freedom and man has free-will. The free-will was a blessing, but the same blessing caused the man to unfortunately fall through the temptation of the devil (**Genesis 3**). However, God's love for us never abated, and through the holiness of St. Mary we know Christ became man, was crucified and died, and rose again on the third day to defeat death. The Feast of Pentecost is the fulfillment of the Church and the reinstatement of our mission and purpose.

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

Living in the Far Country

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

We can imagine the son feeling despondent and alone, rationalizing to himself that the father would never take him back home. In his despair, it is very understandable that he would be emotional and whether out of fear, guilt, or anger chose to never return back home. In his brokenness he would continue to survive in the far country. In this hypothetical scenario, there are a number of ways for the prodigal to survive.

From Fr. Hopko: *"But if we could just imagine, just for a little exercise here, that the boy doesn't go back. And he stays in the pigpen and he actually copulates with some of the harlots and the prostitutes there and reproduces—reproduces—that children are born in the pigpen. His own children are born there in the pigpen with the other people who are in the pigpen also copulating, procreating and reproducing. Then let's imagine that this fellow grows old and he dies in the pigpen—biologically, physically dies. He's already been spiritually dead, but now he is physically dead. And then let's imagine that his children grow up and they*

heard from time to time from their father that he had a life before the pigpen. Maybe he spoke about it once in a while. Maybe he reminisced. Maybe when he got drunk he babbled about it, or whatever. But they had an inkling that there was some other place that he had come from, that he hadn't always been in the pigpen.

But then let's imagine that they grow up and they reproduce in the pigpen and they get old and they die and they have children. And now these children are a couple of generations removed from the man who knew the house of the father. Then let's imagine that they grow up and they reproduce and they die. And then let's imagine that all of a sudden—well, really not all of the sudden, but after this process—it does happen that there are those there who have no knowledge, even by hearsay, of any house, of any father. Suppose that all they know is the pigpen. And they think that the pigpen is it. That's their total experience, the pigpen.”

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

Wrestling with God

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

With this comes a great responsibility as well. Fr. John Behr asks us to think about this: *“You have to be responsible for coming to Church and being a member of the Church. But, why are you coming to this Church? Is it just because your parents did and your parents before that did? Or do you believe that here you encounter the Lord of all Creation of this history, the one sitting at the right hand of the Father, tangibly... perceptibly .. and become His Body”*

The key to our spiritual growth is to always seek God and grow in Him. Our God is a powerful and almighty Lord, who created all that is seen and unseen. And yet, God is the

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

Our God is one who is Love and never changes. In **Revelation 3:15-18**, we hear the words of St. John telling us to be “cold or hot” and not “lukewarm”. This may sound confusing at first, but if we keep in mind how Christ encourages us to learn more about Him, what He tells us is to push ourselves to choose God... or not! Arguably, the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference or apathy. If one hates, a decision was made to choose whether to love or not. Apathy and indifference reflects one who doesn’t even care to choose love or hate.

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

Christian Gonzalez of the Youth and Young Adult Ministry (Y2AM) of the Greek Orthodox Church wrote a small document, where he is highlighting the wrestling match of Jacob with God. Gonzales emphasizes the importance of establishing welcoming environments within the Church where young adults can openly grapple with their questions and uncertainties about their faith. It draws a parallel between this struggle and the biblical account of Jacob wrestling with God, highlighting that God actively participates in this process, akin to a loving father engaging in a playful wrestling match with his children. The Church needs to acknowledge and embrace the personal and challenging nature of this wrestle, and to create a comforting and secure atmosphere for young adults to discuss their inquiries, worries, anxieties, and uncertainties honestly. By fostering this engagement with God and providing dedicated spaces for it, the Church can facilitate a profound encounter with the divine and a deeper comprehension of God's ways. Ultimately, Gonzales says that this wrestling experience leads to a profound reverence for liturgy and a sense of spiritual transcendence within the Church. The document concludes by drawing a parallel to Jacob, who emerged from his struggle with God carrying a physical reminder, suggesting that wrestling with God can bring about lasting transformation in individuals.

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

Conclusion

St. Gregory of Nyssa in reflection on the life of Moses¹⁸ says the following: *"What then are we taught through what has been said? To have but one purpose in life: to be called servants of God by virtue of the lives we live. For when you conquer all enemies (the Egyptian, the Amalekite, the Damien, the Midianite), cross the water, are enlightened by the cloud, are sweetened by the wood, drink from the rock, taste of the food from above, make your ascent up the mountain through purity and sanctity; and when you arrive there, you are instructed in the divine mystery by the sound of trumpets, in the impenetrable darkness near to God by your faith, and there are taught the mysteries of the tabernacle and the dignity of the priesthood."*

As full members of the Holy Church, we are the royal priesthood (**1 Peter 2:9**). We are God's chosen people and to us comes both a promise of new life and a wonderful gift of purpose. This is made possible through Christ and the Resurrection. As George Cronk writes¹⁹, "In Christ, then, the covenant with Israel was fulfilled, transformed, and transcended. After the coming of the Messiah—the Incarnation of God the Son—only those who are 'built into Christ' are counted among the people of God. In Christ, the old Israel is superseded by the Christian Church, the new Israel, the body of Christ; the old covenant is completed in the new covenant and through Jesus Christ".

The Church is the Body of Christ (**Romans 12:5,1; Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 3:6, 4:15-16, 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 1:24**) and in Christ we know there is hope in the Resurrection and a promise of everlasting life. Just as the prodigal was embraced by the loving Father without a single word



¹⁸ St. Gregory of Nyssa: The Life of Moses.

¹⁹ George Cronk, The Message of the Bible; St. Vladimir Seminary Press; 1982, p. 80

uttered, so too we must always keep in mind that our Church is there whenever we need the most.

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

Reflection Questions

1. Explain to a friend 3 reasons why you are an Orthodox Christian?
2. Defend the Church teaching that all are equal referencing the Body of Christ as given in 1 Corinthians 12:20-27.
3. Analyze the following quote by Fr. Thomas Hopko: "A Christian should never be lonely! If we feel lonely it means we forget that we are members of the people of God ... that we are fellow citizens with the Saints ... that we have access to God through the Son of God Jesus, raised and glorified, by the power of the Holy Spirit that is in all of the saints of all times and of all places. And we are a member, each one of us, of that community, we are all members of Christ's body so we gather as Church"

Thinking of the years ahead, how could you seek help from the Church for yourself or a loved one when encountering difficult times?