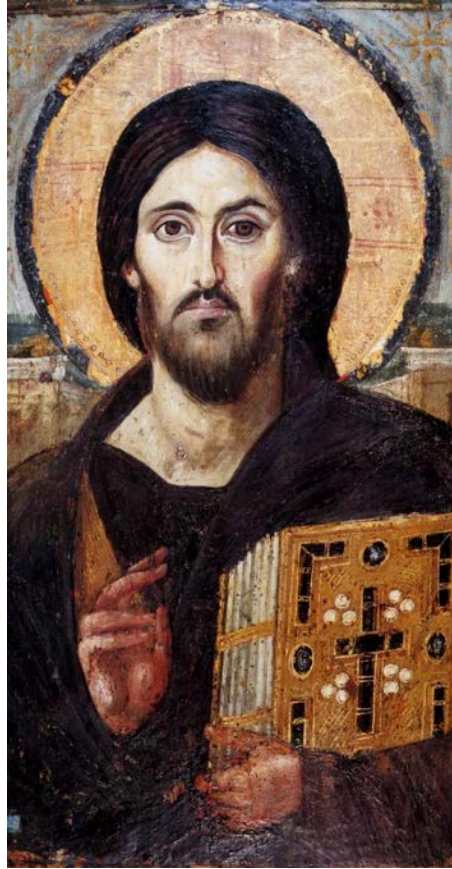




Sunday School of the American Dioceses  
of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church

## 7th Grade

# Reflecting Christ



7th Grade

**Reflecting Christ**

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

# Lesson 1: Made in His Image

## Lesson Goals

- *I can recognize that every person is uniquely made in God's Image and the importance of how that creation shall be kept holy.*
- *I can understand that our calling is to grow in His Likeness to be healthy.*
- *I can understand the true meaning of being called to subdue and have loving dominion over all the earth and I can care for as well as care about it.*

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## God's Image

The Book of Genesis and the Nicene Creed affirm God is the creator of all things, visible and invisible. The Church also believes as absolute truth that all people (men and women) are created in God's image and likeness (**Genesis 1:27**).



This means that God created each of us with unique bodies, minds, and spirits. Just as artists create different masterpieces, God crafted each person with specific features, thoughts, and behaviors, making every individual distinct and special. This diversity is what enriches the human race and reflects God's creativity. The modern world (including social media) often pressure us to conform to certain standards of appearance and behavior.

However, God teaches us that we were made exactly as we to fulfill a special purpose in the world. We are called to be like God (**Matthew 5:48; John 15:12; 1 Corinthians 11:1; Galatians 5:22-23**). God loves us unconditionally - even when we sin and fall away from Him, he still loves us and waits for us to return. We understand that being made in the likeness of God is a calling to be a living reflection of His love.

## Called to His Likeness

In the teachings of St. Paul, we learn that our bodies are not just physical entities; they are, in fact, temples of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul states in **1 Corinthians 6:19-20**, “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?

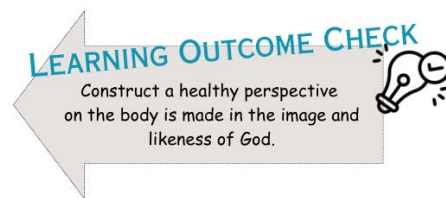
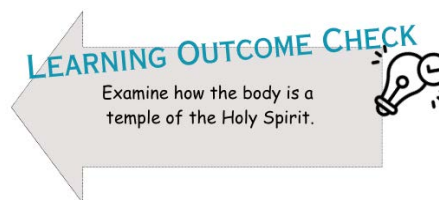
For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” This teaches us that, through Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit enters our lives and becomes a part of us, guiding us in our daily decisions and helping us to strive to be more like Christ.

Worshiping God is an important part of our lives as Orthodox Christians. It helps us grow closer to God and to become more like Him. We are reminded of our purpose especially when we gather for worship. For example, during the Second Service of Holy Pentecost, we pray, “Make us worthy by our worship today on which you perfected your holy Apostles by the gift of Your Holy Spirit, to be enriched with the same divine gifts and to conquer our spiritual, as well as our sensual enemies.” This prayer shows us that worship is a way for us to receive God’s help and strength.

In the book of Genesis, we learn that we are created in God’s Image. This means that we are special and made to reflect God’s goodness and love. All parts of us—our body, mind, and soul—are important and work together as one. The Holy Spirit is given to us as a helper and teacher. He guides us to understand what is right and wrong, and helps us to grow..



Theosis is becoming one with God, and our bodies are a vital part of this process. By understanding that we are made in the image and likeness of God, we appreciate the beauty and purpose of our bodies. Worship is an expression of our joy for this special opportunity!





## The Perfect Man

Christ is the ultimate example of how man was created in His image and likeness. God welcomes us to become more Christ-like.

Christ showed that life is more than praying and doing God's will to get blessings. We are to live a life with God in mind in everything we do. God Created us to be like Him and to take on His character traits. Jesus Christ is the perfect role model of God's intention for creating us. The saints are men and women who have become holy by living their life as Christ, and become role-models for us. In the words of St. Paul, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (**1 Corinthians 11:1**).

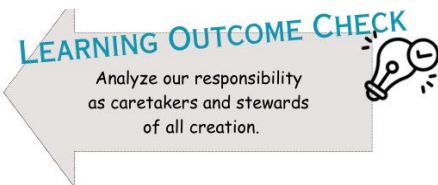


## Our Responsibility

Not only are we responsible for taking care of our bodies as part of God's creation, but we are responsible for taking care of the rest of God's creation too.

God created us to *"Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of heaven, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."* (**Genesis 1:28**).

This means we are to care for everything God created! We are to show the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**) in all of our actions. We are to care for our families, for our Church, and for our environment. We are called to serve the poor and needy, through community service, without any expectations.



*Think*

What does God mean by "dominion" in Genesis 1:28? Can you think of ways we can take care of His creation the way He desires?

We can even care for our room the way God desires! By practicing to keep clean and in order, and having icons, the Cross, and our Bible in the special place we transform where we spend a lot of our time to one that pleases God. God wants you to be a caretaker of everything around you. When we act with Christ always as our center, we please God and keep the Great Commandment (**St. Matthew 22:36-40**).

## Summary

We were formed to look like God imagined us to be, and to care for His creation. We are to use our God-given talents to care for our community and the world God lovingly created for us. Therefore, we will grow to be like Him.

The profound truth is that each person is uniquely created in the image and likeness of God, which teaches us the importance of viewing our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit. We must understand that our bodies are not merely physical vessels, but integral components of our entire being, designed by God for a distinct purpose. By acknowledging the divine nature within us, we can cultivate a healthy perspective on our bodies, and also recognize we have a responsibility to care for ourselves and the world around us. This is a way we can reflect God's love to the world. Let us embrace our special identity as living icons of God and to strive to be like Christ in all our thoughts, actions, and choices!

### Reflection Questions

1. Why should we care for our bodies?
2. If all men are created in God's image, why do some people still do terrible crimes?
3. What is our responsibility to the environment?
4. During Holy Qurbana, we sing:

*I will dwell in them  
Who receive as food  
My Holy Body  
And my Blood as drink*

How are we becoming more like Him by receiving His Body and Blood?

# Lesson 2: I Fear No Evil

## Lesson Goals

- *I can understand how my faith forms my behavior and the choices I make.*
- *I can understand that as I relate to people of varied backgrounds, views, and experiences, I must continue to reflect the light of Christ.*
- *I can understand the Christians response to bullying*

---

Have you ever heard the phrase “When the going gets tough, the tough get going”? Have you ever thought about what it means?

Some people might interpret it to mean that when things get difficult “smart” people figure out how to avoid the problem. Others may interpret it as when life gets difficult, “strong” people attack the problem head on and fight through for success.

However, there is a third way to consider it: Life becoming difficult means there lies an opportunity for God to start a new work in and through us. Situations that seem impossible for us alone, are meant to be a journey for us with God. If you let Him take charge over you, it becomes an opportunity for you to be under His light.

With God’s grace, you will be able to face life’s difficulties. Always remember St. Paul’s words:

*“I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13).*



We remember Joshua who had to lead the Jews to Canaan after Moses’ death. He was worried, had no idea what to do and was convinced he could never fill the shoes of the great prophet. Yet, the Lord reminded Joshua: *“The book of this law shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may have the understanding to do all the things written therein. Then you will both prosper, make your ways prosperous, and have understanding. Behold, I have commanded you. Be strong and courageous. Do not*

*be cowardly or fearful, for the Lord your God is with you in all things. wherever you go.”*  
**(Joshua 1:8-9)**

Joshua stayed strong in his faith and trusted in God. Then he was given the promise of God’s continued presence with him.

Whenever we place our trust in God, we too are given that same promise of God’s presence and support to face all of our problems. That does not mean that things will always be easy or comfortable, rather that God will be with us through it all.

The rod and the staff are a shepherd’s tools and sources of comfort. A shepherd uses his tools to guide his flock safely through pastures and back to rest. A staff guides the sheep in the right direction, while a rod is used to defend them against other animals or to tame wandering sheep. Left alone, the sheep will wander and may get caught in dangerous places or predators may eat them. The shepherd’s rod and staff are tools of control, protection and security for the beloved flock. Safety and comfort comes from the painful discomfort of those very tools. Remember **Psalm 22:4 (23:4)** -

*“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me”.*

This verse reminds us we do not need to fear no matter how difficult life gets because our Shepherd is always standing by us. We should not give into negative emotions (frustration, fear, pain, anger etc.), but rather hold firmly to Christ.

Understanding this, we must constantly ask ourselves:

*Where is the Lord’s rod? How am I trusting in Him now? How can I see both Christ’s presence and my life’s purpose, especially in difficult times?*





## The Holy Maccabean Martyrs



In the book of 2nd Maccabees, chapters 6 and 7, we learn about the powerful story of the Holy Maccabean Martyrs: Eleazar the Teacher, Shmouni, and her seven sons. These faithful individuals faced severe persecution from King Antiochus, who sought to destroy the Jewish people. They were commanded to eat sacrificial pork, which is forbidden in Jewish law (**Leviticus 11:7-8**). Rather than surrender to fear or anger, they chose to remain loyal to God, even when it led them to suffer.

### Eleazar the Teacher

Eleazar was an elderly scribe and teacher. When he was forced to eat pork, he refused and spat it out. The guards, who respected him, offered him a way out by suggesting he eat other meat at home instead of the pork, so he could appear to obey the king. However, Eleazar chose to reject this offer because he did not want to set a bad example for his students, including Shmouni and her sons. He preferred to face death rather than pretend to abandon his faith.

## Shmouni and Her Seven Sons

Shmouni and her seven sons were also captured and commanded to eat pork. One by one, the sons were given the chance to save themselves by renouncing their faith but they refused. As punishment for their commitment, they were subjected to horrific tortures, such as having their tongues, hands, and feet cut off, and being thrown into boiling oil.

When it was the youngest son's turn, the king urged Shmouni to convince him to save his life. However, she encouraged him to follow in the footsteps of his brothers and honor God. This son bravely accepted martyrdom, proclaiming that God would ultimately destroy the king. After witnessing the tragic loss of her sons, Shmouni also became a martyr.

## Trusting the Lord

Eleazar, Shmouni, and her seven sons are venerated for their courage and faithfulness. Their feast day is August 1st, and in our daily prayers (2nd watch of Tuesday Midnight Prayer and the 2nd Qolo of every Thursday Morning Prayer) we remember Shmouni's strength and her heartfelt pleas to God:

*In the morning Shamouni  
Offered up her prayr's to God:  
"O God give judgment for me  
before King Antiochus  
He slays my sons like sheep and  
Charges me like a lion*

*Shamouni said to the king  
"Of my seven noble sons,  
I will not give even one to you  
to serve as a slave  
I will give them to the Lord  
Because they are His servants*

The Maccabean martyrs showed us that, even in the face of serious challenges, it is possible to stand firm in our beliefs. They trusted that God was with them and would give them strength through the Holy Spirit. They supported each other in faith, saying, "The Lord God is taking notice of us and is encouraging us" (2nd Maccabees 7:6).

Their story teaches how we can face difficult ethical issues. We need to remember that everything we do is grounded in our faith in God. Even when faced with tough choices, we must trust God's plans for us.

Let us encourage each other in our faith, reminding one another that prayer and support are powerful tools for overcoming challenges. Like Eleazar, Shmouni, and her sons, we are called to be brave and steadfast, knowing that God is always with us.

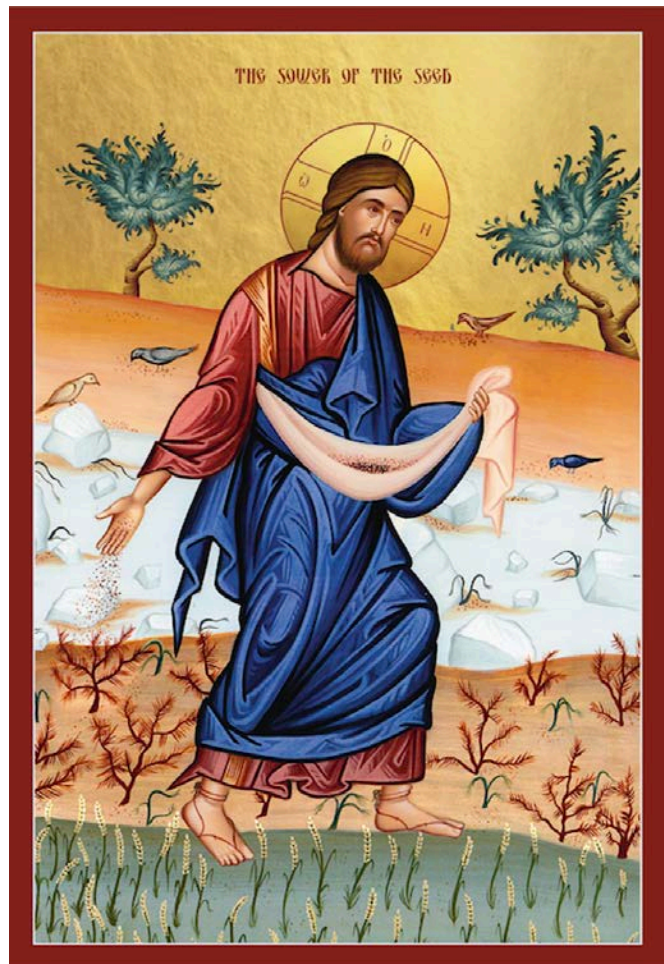


## The Good Soil

Whenever we see our car's low fuel warning light, we stop and refuel. Then the car will not stop mid-way through our journey. Similarly, worry is a warning light, a reminder that it is time to pray. It takes faith to obediently listen to His instruction and to pray with an attitude of thanksgiving, especially in difficult circumstances.

Prayer moves our problems and burdens onto Christ's shoulders. Prayer allows us to experience God's presence.

In our toughest times, when we feel too weak to even pray for anything, the Church has blessed us with the **Jesus prayer: Kurielaison. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.** Through this simple prayer we bring our troubles before God and humbly request His guidance. Through prayer we can hear the Words of God. How do you use His Words?



In **St. Matthew 13:1-23**, Jesus talks to His disciples about the Parable of the Sower. While the sower was sowing the seeds, some fell on the wayside, some on rocky ground, among thorns, and some on good soil. The seeds that fell on the good soil grew well and healthy. God wants us to be the Good Soil and to let the Seed (Word of God) grow and be fruitful within us, unlike the seeds that fell elsewhere.

*St. Shmouni, a Jewish scribe*, was like the good soil. She allowed the seeds to grow within her and planted little saplings around her (her seven sons). When we are well informed in our faith, we start to behave well in society too. We should not allow anyone to bully us, nor do we bully others. We should speak up for ourselves and stand up for others too.

We often wonder why God does not warn us in advance about the hard, difficult days in our future. But God has never claimed that there will not be difficult days either. St. Peter in his first letter says:

*"In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7).*

He does not want you to focus on what has not happened. He wants you to build your faith so that you are ready to face anything that might happen. Above all, we must learn that He is in control and will always be beside you to hold you and guide you, even through your life's difficult times. Remember: *God's grip on you is far stronger than your grip on Him.*

### **Should you Bully or Watch Someone Being Bullied?**

The Holy Spirit dwells in all of us and guides us to do God's will. Even though our minds may be set on what the Holy Spirit desires, it still may be difficult for us to always act right. So, pay attention to all that is around you.

You can learn to relate to people with different life experiences and opportunities than you. This includes different race, gender, social class, citizenship, ability/disability, sexual orientation, religion or other differences.

When we face challenges and setbacks, we must remember to lean on Christ and resist allowing our emotions to lead us to frustration or anger. If we are afraid, we must trust that God is always there to help us through. He has blessed us with a community of people that we can trust and rely on like our priest, parents, spiritual elders, teachers, and siblings.

#### *Remember*

Life becoming difficult means there lies an opportunity for God to start a new work in and through us. Situations that seem impossible for us being alone turn out to be a journey for us and God together. They become an occasion for us to be under His light, if we let Him to take charge over us. With God's grace, we are able to overcome all difficulties in life.

#### *LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK*

Relate with the love of Christ the ways in which individuals & groups have unequal experiences, access to opportunity, or life outcomes



#### *Research*

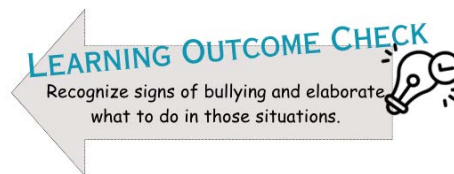
Read St. John 8. How did Jesus respond to the crowd that was bullying the woman?

If our anger or pain tempts us to act in a way that might hurt ourselves or others, we must remember that all creation is God's and that we are responsible to protect, not destroy.



There are many resources available through our Diocese, parish, school, and other organizations for counseling and therapy which can help us navigate our emotions, safely and effectively. Thus, we can uphold our faith and protect the well-being of ourselves and others. It is important to pay attention to our friends and families. Then we can be sources of help and support in their times of need. We need to be attentive.

This table below shows some common signs that may require you to take action by offering care, speaking up, and confiding with a trusted adult. Since everyone is God's beautiful creation, we cannot let any harm happen to anyone.



| Signs of 'The Bully'                          | Signs of 'The Bullied'                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aggressive to people                          | Unexplainable injuries                                     |
| Has bully friends                             | Lost or destroyed clothing, books, electronics, or jewelry |
| Tries to control others                       | Controlled by others                                       |
| Inflexible                                    | Too flexible                                               |
| Tries to be a powerful leader                 | Always being teased                                        |
| Always the teaser                             | Feels helpless                                             |
| Blames others for their problems              | Always accepts responsibility                              |
| Excludes others                               | Tries to fit in                                            |
| Confrontational                               | Always avoids confrontations                               |
| Selfish                                       | Selfless                                                   |
| Self-centered                                 | People pleaser                                             |
| Tries to be the center of attention           | Isolated/lonely inside                                     |
| Always concerned about their reputation/looks | Feels invisible to others                                  |



If you notice multiple signs over time or if you have a feeling of unhappiness toward yourself or others, you must seek help from a trustworthy adult or your priest.

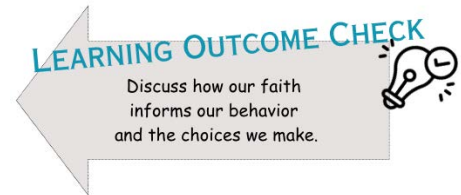
## Summary

Remember that our Christian faith is not just a label, but rather guides us in our behavior and the choices we make.

We must see, respect, and love the image of God in others and in ourselves.

We understand that we are to always practice the love of Christ. We are called to be the guardian and not the bully because we are the good soil not the rocky soil.

*“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” (St. James 1:2-3)*



## Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on the virtues of faith demonstrated by figures like Eleazar and St. Shmouni. How can you apply their examples to your own life when faced with challenges or trials? In what practical ways can you strengthen your faith to help you endure difficult situations?
2. Identify some signs that a person may be experiencing bullying. How can you uphold your Christian values in these situations without harming others? Why is it important for us to act with kindness and understanding, especially towards those who may be struggling?
3. Consider individuals or groups with different backgrounds or experiences than your own. How can you relate to their struggles with the love that Christ exemplifies? What steps can you take as an Orthodox Christian to support those facing inequality or hardship based on their race, gender, social class, or other differences?

# Lesson 3: Hurt People can Hurt People

## Lesson Goals

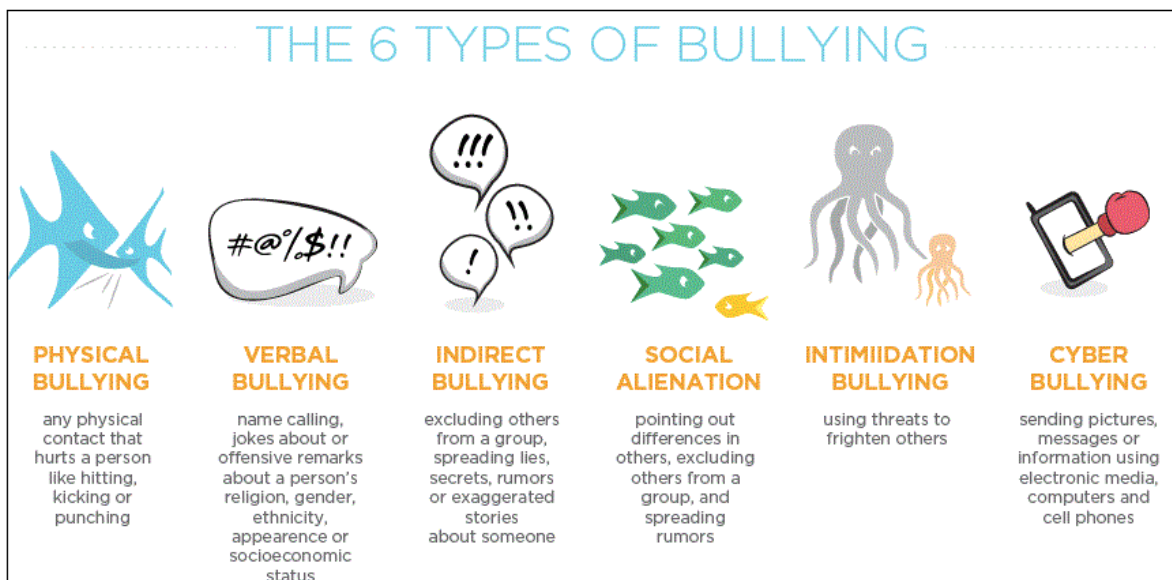
- *I can better understand what may result in bullying.*
- *I can remember there are resources that can help me through difficult situations.*
- *I can understand find safe ways to end bullying.*

## What is Bullying?

*“But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God; ....by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love” (2 Corinthians 6:4,6)*

Have you ever felt hurt by something others have said or done? Have you ever felt like you were continuously picked on?

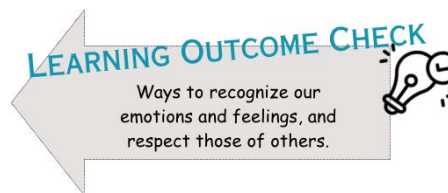
Bullying is a serious issue that involves aggressive behavior and a power imbalance, often leading to someone feeling hurt and humiliated. It can take many forms, such as making threats, spreading rumors, or physically and verbally attacking someone. In some cases, those who are bullied may later become bullies themselves to regain a sense of control. Bullying may also involve sharing negative or harmful content online or revealing personal information about others to embarrass them. As members of God’s beautiful creation, it is essential that we treat others with kindness and respect, understanding that our actions and words can significantly impact those around us. We need to reflect on our behavior, be aware of how we make others feel, and remember that we are called not to bully but to support and uplift one another, adhering to the teachings of Christ.



## The Effects of Bullying

Bullying can happen anywhere: schools, churches, homes or within various communities.

Repetitive actions, power imbalance, and intentional acts are the three main things that cause verbal, physical and relational types of harmful behavior among children. Some people dismiss bullying among children as normal and part of the growing up process. However, bullying is harmful and can lead to long lasting tension and fear in individuals. It may cause someone to avoid school. In severe cases, those who are bullied may take drastic measures, react violently, or even consider causing harm to themselves or to others. If not effectively managed right away, the effects of bullying may last a lifetime. Children who are bullied may experience negative physical, social, emotional, academic, and mental health issues.



If you feel hurt or affected by bullying, please talk to a trusted adult. Mental health professionals can help you to talk openly about what you are going through. The professional will make sure that this unfortunate situation does not continue to harm your physical and mental well-being. Remember you can always talk to a your priest or spiritual elders as well who can guide your spiritual health through this struggle.

## Standing up to Bullying

In our journey through life, we will often come across situations that are not right or appropriate. It is important for us to recognize how these situations make us feel and how we might want to react. We must also be mindful of our own actions, ensuring that we do not encourage bad behavior in others.

The parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us a valuable lesson about love and compassion. St. Gregory the Dialogist reminds us that true love, or “godly love,” cannot be complete unless we also care for our neighbor - *“Godly love cannot be perfect unless a man loves his neighbor also. Under which name must be included not only those who are connected with us by friendship or neighborhood, but absolutely all men with whom we have a common nature, whether they be foes or allies, slaves or free.”*

This means that we should not only be kind to friends or people who live nearby, but we must show love and kindness to everyone, including those we may not know well or those who seem different from us.





When we see someone being bullied or treated unfairly, this is an inappropriate situation. Just like the Good Samaritan, who helped a stranger in need, we are called to take action. This means being like the Good Samaritan by showing compassion, stepping up to help, and treating everyone with respect, regardless of who they are.

#### LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Recognize inappropriate situations and identify what to do if encountering them.



We should also remember that both the bullies and the bullied are children of God. All children must be taught to act as Good Samaritans. This means encouraging one another to be kind, to stand up against bullying, and to reach out to those who are hurting. In every situation, we have the choice to respond in a Christ-like manner, showing love and kindness to all, just as Jesus taught us.

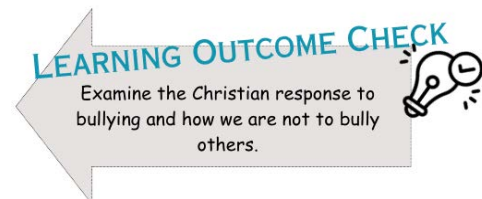
By following the example of the Good Samaritan, we can create a more loving and supportive community where everyone feels valued and respected. Let's always strive to be Good Samaritans in our lives!

## Understanding and Responding to Bullying Through a Christian Lens

Bullying can be a frightening issue, but it is essential for us to confront it from the very beginning. As Orthodox Christians, we must evaluate our response to bullying through the teachings of our faith. When you witness bullying, it is crucial to inform a trusted adult right away. Adults play a vital role in addressing bullying effectively. When they respond quickly and consistently, they convey a strong message: bullying is unacceptable. Research shows that when adults intervene promptly, they can significantly reduce bullying behavior over time. Here are some reasons why involving an adult is important to keep everyone safe:

- **Immediate Intervention:** Adults can step in right away and, when necessary, bring in another adult for support.
- **Separation of Those Involved:** Adults are able to separate the individuals involved to prevent further harm.
- **Ensuring Safety:** Adults will take action to ensure everyone involved is safe and secure.
- **Addressing Needs:** They can also address any immediate medical or mental health needs of those affected.
- **Reassurance:** Adults can provide comfort to the children involved, including bystanders, helping maintain a sense of safety.
- **Modeling Respectful Behavior:** Children can learn positive behaviors through the respectful actions of the adults who intervene.

Standing up to bullying is crucial, and this can be done through assertiveness. Assertiveness means expressing your feelings or opinions firmly but respectfully, without being passive or aggressive. For us as Christians, assertiveness should be rooted in the love of Christ, which is described in **Galatians 5:22-23** as including traits such as patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.



Our Lord Jesus Christ exemplified assertiveness with His disciples. He guided them to take thoughtful steps when dealing with wrongdoings. In **St. Matthew 18:15-17**, He teaches us how to address conflicts directly and constructively, encouraging reconciliation. When we see bullying, clear and strong words may help.

If we assert ourselves to a bully, it is important to be attentive to your feelings. Continue to be yourself and not allow a bully to change who you are. But remember that you may need help, and never hesitate to get help<sup>1</sup>.



Walking away when necessary also demonstrates the power of meekness, similar to how Christ handled situations. If we respond in this manner consistently, we can help reduce bullying in the future. It is always essential to prioritize safety for yourself and others.

Here are some practical steps to keep in mind:

- **Stay Calm:** If you face bullying, try to remain calm and composed. Take a deep breath and think before you act.
- **Seek Help:** Always talk to a trusted adult about what you've witnessed or experienced. They can provide guidance and support.
- **Be a Supportive Friend:** If someone you know is being bullied, show them kindness and let them know they are not alone.
- **Know When to Walk Away:** If a situation escalates, remove yourself from it and seek help.

By practicing these responses, we are not only protecting ourselves and others but also reflecting the love and teachings of Christ in our actions. Together, we can create a community that stands against bullying and promotes kindness, respect, and the true spirit of the Holy Gospel.

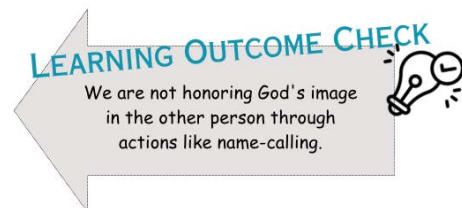
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<sup>1</sup> "Get Help Now" Resources: <https://www.stopbullying.gov/resources/get-help-now>

## The Cycle of Bullying

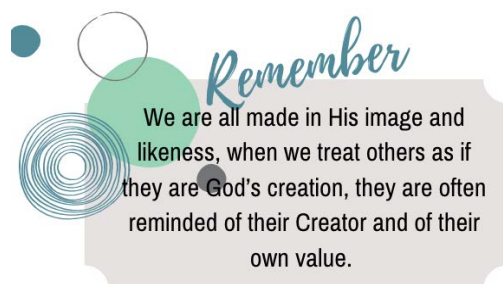
In our lives, we may encounter situations where people are unkind or hurtful to one another. Often, those who bully have experienced hurt themselves. They might feel a lack of control in their lives and, in response, they attempt to gain that control by hurting others. This cycle of bullying where “hurt people hurt other people” is damaging.

As Orthodox Christians, we should always strive to act in a way that honors God’s creation. Every person is made in God’s image and likeness, and this means we must treat each other with love and respect. When we engage in name-calling or other hurtful behaviors, we fail to recognize God’s image in others. Instead of bringing light into the world, we contribute to darkness when we allow our emotions to lead us into harmful actions.



Recognizing and expressing our emotions is important, but we must do so in healthy and constructive ways. We can look to the book of Psalms for guidance. In Psalms, King David expresses a range of emotions: joy, anger, and sadness. For example in **Psalm 94 (95) (96)**, we see David expressing joy. We also see him expressing anger in both **Psalm 9:33-36 (10:12-15) and 21:1 (22:1)**, and we see his sadness in **Psalm 21:12-16 (22:11-15)**. This illustrates the importance of being honest about our feelings while also reminding us that we have the responsibility to respond thoughtfully. Each of us should be aware of how our words and actions affect others.

Even when we feel bullied or targeted, our response should not mirror the unkind behavior we experience. Instead, we are called to embody Christ’s love in all situations, including on the Internet and social media. God calls us to be peacemakers and to reach out for help when needed. If we confront bullying, we can talk to a trusted adult about the situation rather than responding with anger or hurtfulness ourselves.



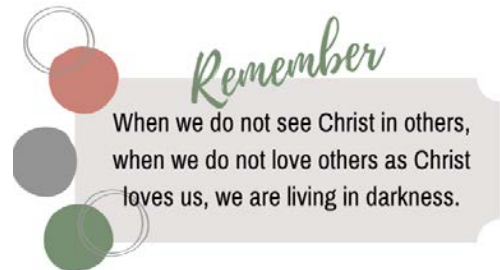
In the Bible, we find guidance on how we should treat others. In **1 John 2:9**, it is written, “He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now.” This reminds us that harboring hatred is contrary to our faith. Additionally, **1 John 3:15** teaches, “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer” underscoring the seriousness of our actions and attitudes toward others.



When we find ourselves feeling hurt, we should seek healing through prayer, reflection, and, if necessary, confession. True healing comes from opening our hearts to Christ's love, allowing us to express compassion instead of retaliation. We must remember that fasting from food or engaging in other spiritual practices means little if we do not strive to love those around us, including those who hurt us. The term "brother" encompasses all people, reminding us that our call to love and respect extends to every individual.

## Summary

As we navigate the challenges of bullying and online interactions, let us keep Christ in our hearts and minds. We can choose to break the cycle of bullying by responding with love and seeking to uplift, rather than tear down. Together, let us be examples of kindness, honoring God's image in every person we encounter.



We are supposed to always treat others with the love of God. Even though it may be difficult, we are expected to grow to become like Christ, and that includes growing in the way we treat others. This means treating others with kindness, no matter how we are treated. Christ still loved all His enemies, even the ones who mocked, and brutally crucified Him on the Cross. We follow His shining example!

## Reflection Questions

1. After reading this lesson, can you identify any times when you saw or experienced behavior that was bullying? Why do you think it was hard for you to recognize it as bullying at the time?
2. Why do you think it can be difficult to stand up to bullies, and how can asking an adult for help make a difference in these situations?
3. How do you think your friends or classmates would feel if they found out that you were being bullied, and why is it important to show respect for everyone's feelings?

# Lesson 4: The Belief of St. Thomas

## Lesson Goals

- *I can understand how to overcome doubts especially when it comes to my Faith.*
  - *I can relate to St. Thomas and be inspired by his discernment of God's plan.*
  - *I can appreciate that questions about our Faith can strengthen my love for Christ.*
  - *I can explain the Great Commission and how it should be an expression of our joy to share the Gospel to those within and those outside the Church.*
- 

We often hear the phrase “doubting Thomas” which sadly is an incorrect and incomplete understanding of the Bible narrative. Historical data and Scripture records do not mention much about the early life of St. Thomas but it is widely accepted that St. Thomas was a teenager just like you! And yet, Christ chose him to be an Apostle.



Traditional paintings and icons of St. Thomas from India such as on the right reflect this as well. We see an older, bearded Apostle in comparison to the younger, beardless youth in Byzantine icons and western paintings like on the left.

Remember that travelling in ancient days was difficult and took a long time. Traveling from the Middle East to India would have taken years which explains why an older, bearded man would be how St. Thomas likely preached in India and was known.

## Courage Amidst Challenges

We often refer to him as “doubting Thomas,” because of one Bible verse (**St. John 20:25**) which unfairly ignores the other good qualities of the young Apostle. From Scripture, we can see that St. Thomas was **courageous** and stood by Jesus in dangerous times. He, also, always sought the Truth, by constantly asking questions like an inquisitive child would. St. Thomas’ memorable confession , “My Lord and my God,” is the Bible’s first and clearest declaration of Jesus’ divinity!

When returning to Judea after Lazarus’ death, Jesus’ life was at risk because the Jewish leaders now wanted to stone Him. St. Thomas bravely insisted that the Apostles should accompany Jesus and protect Him. This disciple was not bothered by the dangers that he would likely face (**St. John 11:16**). This illustrates his courage and loyalty to Christ. Let us remember that God always grants us courage to face struggles and to support our friends in their times of need.

## Questioning, not Suspecting

Oftentimes, when we think of questioning, we think of a court case (like a scene from the television show- *Law and Order*), where the guilty party is questioned until they slip and the truth comes out. This type of questioning suspects that the one being questioned is guilty or foolish and that the question is a trap to get them to reveal their dishonesty. If we wrongly think about St. Thomas’ questions like this, it limits our understanding of his faith and the purpose of his questioning.

Whenever faced with doubts, St. Thomas brought them to Christ immediately. His questions were not traps to trip up or disprove Christ. Instead, St. Thomas’ love for Christ was very strong, but that still did not make everything easy for him to understand. When things were unclear, St. Thomas always had the courage to ask questions. For instance, in the Gospel of St. John, Christ foretold His departure from earth to prepare the way to heaven for the disciples and all people. In **St. John 14:1-4** Christ says,

*“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father’s house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you. 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. And where I go you know, and the way you know.”*

St. Thomas was not embarrassed to say to the Lord that he did not know where Jesus was going and so, how can we know the way? Meanwhile all the other Apostles silently listened to Jesus. Remember: His open doubts and public courage to find answers

were always relatable and are still good role models for us today. So, Christ answers Thomas' question in **St. John 14:6&7**:

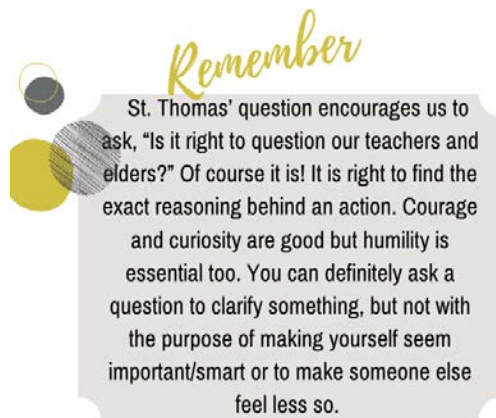
*"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him."*

St. Thomas' courageous question gave us Christ's clear promise, guidance and answer on how to know God. Had he never asked his question out loud, we might still have unanswered questions and doubts. Like St. Thomas we wonder...Is it right to question our teachers and elders? Of course it is! It is always right to find the exact reasoning. Courage and curiosity are good but humility is essential too. You can definitely ask a question to clarify something, but not with the purpose of making yourself seem important/smart or to make someone else feel less so.

### Uncertainty Leads to Deeper Faith

In **Revelation 3:15-16**, we read what at first glance may be confusing and even startling:

*"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth."*



Deep faith makes us question and challenge ourselves to truly understand and believe what is being shared. A "lukewarm" faith is one where the person says they believe, but their words, actions, and thoughts show that their faith has not changed their life at all. A "cold" response means rejection, whereas a "hot" response is one that shows passion. To better understand why rejecting a truth is better than a lukewarm response, we must remember that God is Love and what He deeply desires in us is love. Well,... is the opposite of love, indifference or hatred? Hatred means the person cared enough to

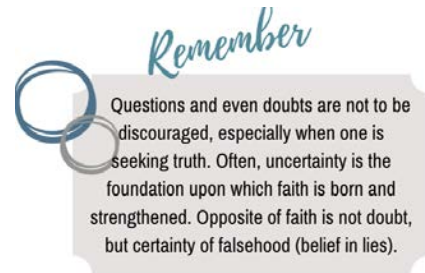
take a position, whereas indifference (or an I-don't-care-attitude) means to them the truth was not even worthy of any kind of response or change in behavior.

Now we can see that St. Thomas was not being indifferent when he responded to being told that the risen Jesus had appeared to the disciples when he was not present. His response actually shows that he was full of love and passion for God (**St. John 20:19-29**).



When the other disciples said, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas replied that he would not believe it unless he could actually touch Jesus' wounds. Jesus later presented Himself to the Apostles and invited Thomas to touch his wounds.

Crucified and risen? St. Thomas could not understand how such an impossible thing could be true. Yet, he certainly did not take his doubts to the Jews or the Romans, who would have been happy to witness the doubts of any of Christ's disciples. Instead, St. Thomas realized that he needed to share his doubts with those who knew Christ intimately, like he did. He confided in others who had faith and love for Christ. In presenting his doubts and working through his confusion, St. Thomas did not separate himself from his brothers nor did he seek guidance from those who were enemies of Christ. Rather, he took his doubts to the other Apostles, lovers of Christ. This shows great faith, even in the midst of his doubts. Thomas was seeking proof, not validation for his doubts. Christ realized Thomas' faithfulness, even in the midst of his doubt. So, the Lord mercifully clarified Thomas' concerns.



Jesus was not upset that St. Thomas questioned the resurrection, but instead Jesus showed compassion and understood St. Thomas' desire for more explanation. Questions and even doubts are not to be discouraged, especially when one is seeking truth. Often, uncertainty is the foundation upon which faith is born and strengthened. Opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty of falsehood (belief in lies).

Jesus understood St. Thomas' questions. The other Apostles and disciples were not upset with him for asking questions either. They responded to St. Thomas' initial questions with a witness of what they saw. This led to the opportunity where Christ Himself was able to personally interact with St. Thomas. As explained in the *Orthodox Study Bible*, the conversion of Thomas' doubt into faith led him to the clearest confession of Christ's Divinity, addressing Jesus as "*my Lord and my God.*" (**St. John 20:28**)

The closer we study St. Thomas in the Scripture, we see that he is just like us in so many ways!

1. **Loyal disciple & a compassionate leader**, as seen when he told the others, "*Let us also go, that we may die with Him*" (**St. John 11:16**).
2. **Smart & courageous** to encourage Christ to avoid the dangerous return to Jerusalem. Thomas' courage and bravery are also given as the reason why he was not with the other disciples and Apostles when Christ first appeared in the closed

room (**St. John 20:19**). When the other disciples “were assembled, for fear of the Jews” in the locked room, we know from Scripture that St. Thomas was not there.

3. **Curious & attentive**, as seen in **St. John 14:1-5** when he responded to Christ’s reassurance that He was to “*go to prepare a place*” for them. This must have been very confusing to all who were there. However, it was only St. Thomas who spoke to his Teacher and Lord so that he could understand more.

Through all these Scripture stories and Church traditions, the faith of St. Thomas grew to such a strong conviction that he would travel farther away than any of the Apostles (including St. Paul)! He spread the Word and made disciples of all (**St. Matthew 28:16-20**), thereby dedicating his whole life to telling others about Christ. As we remember in our hymns,

### **Concluding hymn on the Feast of St Thomas**

*The Church honors your mem’ry  
For you proclaimed before Christ  
In faith “My Lord and my God!”  
Thomas, how great was your faith  
Which the tempests could not shake!  
Bless’ed is your memory;  
May your pray’r be our refuge*

### **Summary**

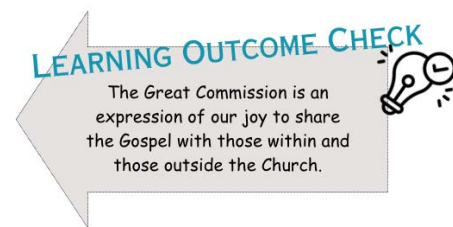
We remember St. Thomas as the Apostle to India in our prayers and hymns. It is a powerful testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit that the Gospel was brought directly to our ancestors in 52 AD, by one of the twelve Apostles. The Church continued to grow despite centuries of conflict and hardships.

As we study the work of St. Thomas -from his time as a disciple of Christ to spreading the Gospel in the modern day state of Kerala and beyond- we can learn to become better Christians. The transformation of St. Thomas from a zealous youth to an evangelist and martyr was so remarkable that St. John Chrysostom observed: “*Thomas, being once weaker in faith than the other apostles, toiled through the grace of God more bravely, more zealously and tirelessly than them all, so that he went preaching over nearly all the earth, not fearing to proclaim the Word of God to nations.*”

We are always wrestling within ourselves for clear answers. We are not always sure if what we are doing is right or wrong. We often carry the baggage of overthinking and the stress it causes.

Our role as Christians is union with God. Everyone has life struggles and these struggles often test our faith. Just as St. Thomas pressed forward, so too must we with the understanding that as Christians, we are never alone. Talking with your friends at church, your family, priests, deacons, bishops, or seeking professional help through the resources from our Church are all ways we can not only find answers but also grow in that same zeal, passion, and joy that helped St. Thomas share the Gospel to our ancestors. When your faith is tested: reflect on how God has helped you in the past, confess His power over the situation, and trust Him for the resources you need.

In the Orthodox Church, we understand the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:16-20**) not as something we have to do or else we'll get punished. Instead, it's a chance for us to share the Gospel with others because we understand how amazing is God's love!



Just like St. Thomas shared the Gospel in India and other places, we can also reflect Christ to others through our actions and our lives. When things get tough, remember to praise God and ask your priest, teachers, and elders to pray for you. You can also talk to God often and ask Him to help your faith grow stronger. And don't forget to ask St. Thomas to pray for you too, as he can help you in your journey of sharing God's love!

### Reflection Questions

1. What does the Great Commission mean, and how does it describe our joy to share the message of Jesus with others inside and outside the Church?
2. Why might some people think that the Great Commission is just a responsibility, and how can we explain that it is actually an exciting opportunity for us to spread the Gospel?
3. Can you think of a story from the Bible about Jesus teaching His followers how to share the Gospel? How does that story show us that sharing the Gospel is something we do out of joy and love?

# Lesson 5: In Three Days

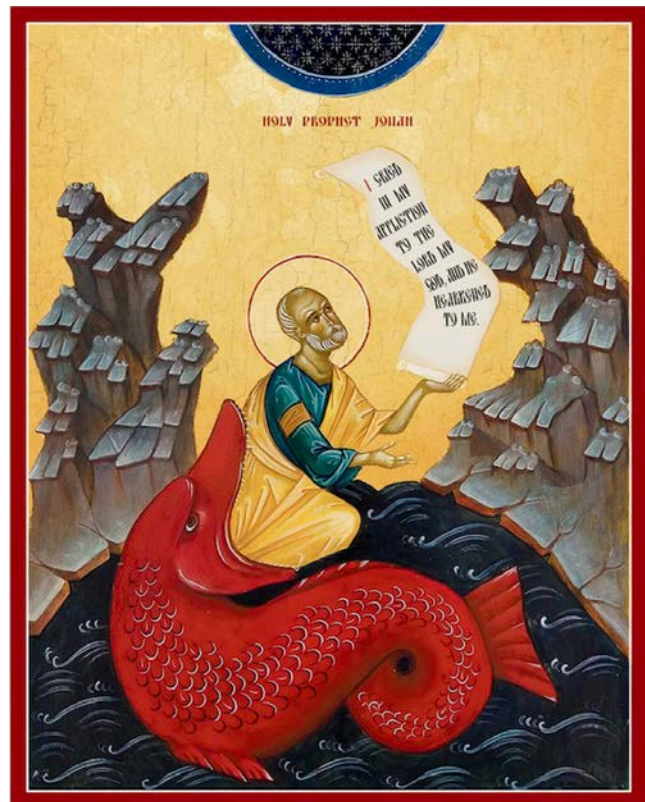
## Lesson Objectives

- *I can identify what separates mankind from God and what reunites us.*
- *I can explain my Christian identity, and whom we are called to support.*
- *I can state how my faith guides me to utilize my talents to support God's will.*

## Jonah: A Type of Christ

Jesus mentions Jonah's story as a sign of His own Death and resurrection (**St. Matthew 12: 38-42**). In the story of Jonah, God asked him to go to Nineveh to preach for the people's repentance. However, in his disobedience Jonah, instead, decided to go to Tarshish via ship but a dangerous storm arose. To save their own lives, the men in the boat threw the disobedient Jonah into the ocean. A whale swallowed Jonah, where he remained for 3 days in prayer until God saved him. Once on the shore, Jonah traveled to Nineveh where he preached to them for repentance, just as God had first instructed him to do.

Do you see some similarities between Jonah and Jesus? This foreshadowing is known as typology.



A "type" in Scripture is not an exact duplicate of a person or event, but rather it is a similarity from the Old Testament that resembles a fulfillment in the New Testament. Jonah and the whale prefigures Christ's burial, the stomach of the fish being Christ's tomb: as Jonah was freed from the whale after three days, so did Christ rise from His tomb after three days. Jonah is not Christ, but parts of the story helps us understand what is to come.

Typology helps us understand God's plan never changed. God remains constant and unchanging, and the teachings of the Old Testament guide us towards the New Testament.



In **Malachi 3:6**, it states, “I am the Lord, I change not,” and **Hebrews 13:8** further emphasizes that Jesus is the same “yesterday, today, and forever”.

### Three Long Days



Jonah remained in the belly of a great fish for three days and three nights. Could this be a miracle? Indeed! God prepared the “great fish” to swallow up Jonah from the moment he was thrown overboard. God always has a plan.



The terrified Jonah prayed for three days and three nights, **Jonah 2:3** - *"I cried out in my affliction to the Lord, my God. And he heard my voice"*. Jonah was certain that God would save him.

If Jonah was not swallowed by the fish, would he have still believed in God and prayed? The three days and nights might have been the longest in Jonah's life, but that is when he actually found his renewed faith.

Whenever we face life challenges or stress, that is when we need to realize that God is giving us a gentle warning to actually pay more attention to our behavior and our spiritual life. This is when we are to give everything unto God and believe completely in Him, just like Jonah eventually did.

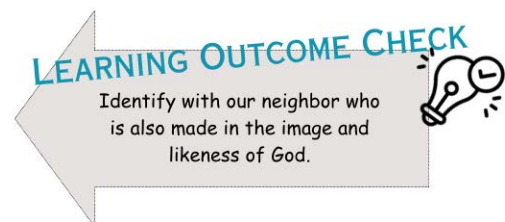
When we have faith in God, He will mold our behavior and guide us to our next steps, just as He did for Jonah. God guided and gave courage to Jonah on how to reach Nineveh, and briefed exactly what to tell the cruel and wicked people of Nineveh. The Ninevites put on sackcloth, fasted and repented. The people listened to Jonah who was a stranger in Nineveh because they heard God's warning and completely believed in Him.

### **Christian Identity formed by Christ and the Holy Spirit**

At first, Jonah could not identify with God's mercy and compassion. He repeatedly questioned and only half-heartedly carried out God's commandments. His intellectual pride, feelings of narrow-nationalism, and supposed moral superiority over the people of Nineveh prevented him from practicing the fruit of the Spirit that God put before him.

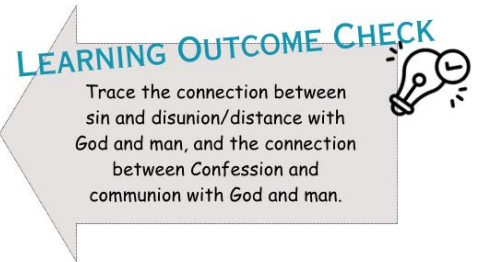
We often have a Jonah hidden within ourselves, where we let our intellect and false superiority rule over the fruit of the Spirit that God has for us. We forget to see our **neighbor** as someone who, like us, was created in God's own image and likeness. We need to connect with and care for others, rather than find their faults and ridicule them.

When God showed mercy to the people of Nineveh, Jonah assumed that God was wrong and that the Ninevites should have been punished, as they had been warned. However in His infinite love, God completely forgave the Ninevites when they repented. If God, Himself, can forgive, then who are we to judge our neighbors? We must open the doors of our heart and love others, just as God loves us. We shall not forget that the image and likeness of God is found in our neighbors too.



## Sinful Separation Reconciled by the Holy Spirit

Jonah's calling is unique because he is not called to preach to his own people, but to a group of cruel and wicked pagans. The people of Nineveh had sinned, and God wanted them to turn back from their sin. Turning back from sin means being reconciled by the Holy Spirit. Sin separates us from God.<sup>2</sup>

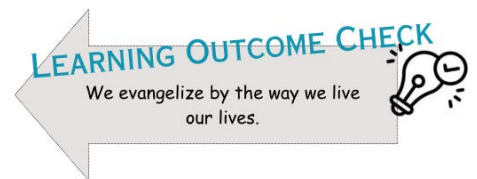


In **2 Thessalonian 1: 9**: "These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power."

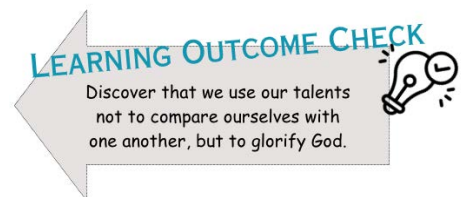
Does this mean that God will never give you a second chance? God always takes care of you and does not do anything that will intentionally make you sad. God is loving and is always ready to give you a second chance. Just like the Ninevites were forgiven, our sins are also forgiven through the sacrament of Holy Confession. We need to seek forgiveness and be reconciled with the Holy Spirit through complete humility and faith.

## Living out Our Faith: Mission, Evangelism, and Stewardship

We understand that we are here because of God. Our lives and actions show who we are in the communities around us. Orthodox evangelism is not forcing others to be like us and believe what we believe, but to be the presence of Christ in their life. To fulfill God's will, we must be like Him. When we do this, we can experience the fruit of the Holy Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**) and by doing so help others around us. This is what St. Seraphim of Sarov meant when he said, "*Acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved.*"



Just like Jesus fulfilled God's plan during His time on Earth, each of us has our own special purpose and calling. We have talents and abilities that He has given us, and we are called to develop as we grow in Christ. We are created in God's image, and through our actions, we can strive to become more like Him.



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<sup>2</sup> The Orthodox Study Bible. (2008). Pg. 1021, Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Jesus tells us in John 10:10, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” He sacrificed His life to show us how to live according to God’s will. By adjusting how we think and act, we can lead abundant lives—not focused on earthly pleasures but centered on our relationship with God and one another. God offers us eternal life through His Son, and we can accept this wonderful gift through our efforts in sharing our faith, known as evangelism.

In the story of Jonah from the Bible, we see how God chose not to punish the people of Nineveh when they repented and sought His forgiveness. When they realized they had done wrong, they showed their sincerity by fasting, wearing sackcloth, and coming together as one to ask for mercy from God. This story teaches us the importance of obedience and unity in faith.

Every one of us has unique talents that we can use to honor God in our everyday lives. For instance, if you are a writer, you can write stories that celebrate God’s glory; if you enjoy drawing, you can create beautiful art that reflects the amazing world He has made; if you are a teacher, you can share God’s teachings with others. Instead of comparing ourselves to one another, let us celebrate our individual gifts as ways to glorify God. Together, we can support those in need and sing praises to His name.

By living our lives as examples of God’s love and sharing our talents, we become true stewards of our Christian identity and commitment. Through our actions, we evangelize and inspire others to discover the joy and peace that comes from living in fellowship with God.



## The Nineveh Fast

The Nineveh ( or Three Day) Fast gives us an opportunity to reflect on Christ’s mission just before the Great Lent on our liturgical calendar. This short fast calls us remember the transformation of the Ninevites when Jonah preached and informed them of God’s plan for them. It is a time for penance and prayer. Just as Jonah spent his time repenting and praying in the belly of the fish, this strict fast calls us to repent, pray, and prepare ourselves for the 40-days of Great Lent.



to

## Comparison Between Jonah and Jesus

| Jonah (Old Testament)                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Jesus (New Testament)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Jonah was called to preach repentance Nineveh                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Jesus delivered repentance to all all of us                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Jonah came down from Joppa                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Jesus came down from heaven                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Jonah stayed in the belly of the fish for 3 days until the fish spat him to the shore                                                                                                                                                          | Jesus stayed in the belly of the earth for 3 days until He resurrected                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Jonah half-heartedly obeyed God                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Jesus wholeheartedly obeyed God                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Jonah was willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of the shipmates                                                                                                                                                                          | Jesus sacrificed His life for everyone's salvation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Jonah calmed the storm by throwing himself into the sea                                                                                                                                                                                        | Jesus calms the storm through His words                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Jonah ran away from God's will                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Jesus obeyed God's will                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Jonah despised God for showing mercy on the repentant sinners                                                                                                                                                                                  | Jesus is always happy to receive repentant sinners                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Jonah went astray from his commission, God's commandment to go to Nineveh, by going to Tarshish                                                                                                                                                | Jesus did not go astray from His commission                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Jonah's repentance within the belly of the big fish was his own as well as of a representative nature for the entire humanity. The ship represents the world and people on the ship confessing different gods represent the whole of humanity. | Jesus while He was laid to rest inside the tomb preached the Gospel to the dead, so that they would repent from their sins. Jesus as a human represented Jonah also in His repentance, and as God, gave pardon to Jonah, accepting his repentance. Thus Jesus extended pardon to the entire humanity too. |



## Summary

A lot can happen in three days. We read that Jonah repented, prayed, made up his mind to go and preach to Ninevites, praised God, and saw the wonders of God.

In your life, there will often be a ship near the harbor that wants to take you in a different direction than where God wants you to sail. It will be up to you to decide if you want to become a Jonah and climb the wrong ship or become like Jesus and sail the ship that God has in place for you.

### Reflection Questions

1. How can understanding sin and its effects help us grow closer to God and others, and why is Confession important for building those relationships?
2. What can we learn from the people of Nineveh about recognizing our mistakes and helping each other, since everyone is made in God's image?
3. How can we use the Nineveh Lent to think about our true identity as Christians, our responsibility to help others, and our commitment to using our talents to honor God?

# Lesson 6: We Call Upon You

## Lesson Goals

- I can understand the importance of prayer.
- I can learn how to pray on a daily basis and implement daily prayer in my life.
- I can understand the meaning of making the Sign of the Cross.

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*"Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."*

**- St. Matthew 7:7-8**

## What is Prayer?

Prayer is our direct line of communication with God! Just like we have conversations with our friends and family, we need to think of prayer as our conversation with God. St. John reminds us, *"Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us."* (1 John 5:14)

God is always listening to our prayers but never forces us to pray. The image we should keep is from the Prodigal Son (**Luke 15:11-32**), and how the father ran to the prodigal and "fell on his neck" (v.20) and kissed him before he could even say a word! This is how we need to remember God when we pray and open ourselves to Him



Prayer should not be used to just ask, but to reflect on His wonderful Glory, in everything that He has done for us. It is very important to remember that prayer is not a one-way conversation where we talk to God. During prayer we can hear God talk to us if our hearts are humble and open as the prodigal was when he returned back home.

We need to be open to listening to God. God speaks to us through the words of the Holy Bible. We can also listen to His instruction through the words of the Divine Liturgy and our Sh'hima prayers, which are inspired by God's Holy Spirit. The Church also encourages us to have a spiritual Father (a priest or bishop) whom we can confess to and receive teachings from on how to rightly interpret what we hear. We can also go to elders or parents who can help us. This reduces the risk of misinterpreting the Word of God and being misguided in thinking as if "God is speaking". With true spiritual judgment, you will blessedly come to know the right path or choice that God wants you to follow.

### How do we Pray?

Once a disciple asked Jesus how to pray. His answer was to teach the Lord's Prayer (**St. Luke 11:1-4**). He clearly showed us that prayer is not just asking God to fulfill our needs. The Lord's Prayer is actually about praising and thanking God for everything He has already done for us. We remind ourselves that God's plan for us is always a loving blessing. While we ask for our **sins** to be forgiven, we also ask God to give us the strength to resist temptations that take us away from Him. The Lord's Prayer reminds us to pray for ourselves and for others and to forgive too.



Our prayers should be a true conversation with God, not a scene for everyone to see. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (**St. Luke 18:9-14**) is a reminder that God hears and responds to prayers that are pure and humble. When it comes to prayer, the biggest challenge for many of us is "*how to pray*". The Lord's Prayer teaches us how to pray.

Jesus Christ not only taught us how to pray verbally but He also showed us many examples of how to pray through the actions in His own life. In the garden of Gethsemane, He showed us how to submit to God's Authority. He not only asked His Father to take this cup of suffering from Him but also confessed God's will and asked for His all-knowing will to be done. It shows His ultimate submission to God's authority. Even while suffering on the Cross, Christ forgave His oppressors and prayed for them. He asked God to forgive everyone who caused Him suffering.

## Why do we Pray?

People often resist praying due to lack of time and lack of understanding on "why" we pray and how it helps us in our lives. We pray for many reasons:

- To reflect upon God's love for us and our love for Him.
- To praise and thank God for everything He has done for us.
- To ask God for His help and guidance in all our troubles.
- To receive strength to face life's challenges.

St. Paul said: *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."* (**1 Thessalonians 5:16-18**).

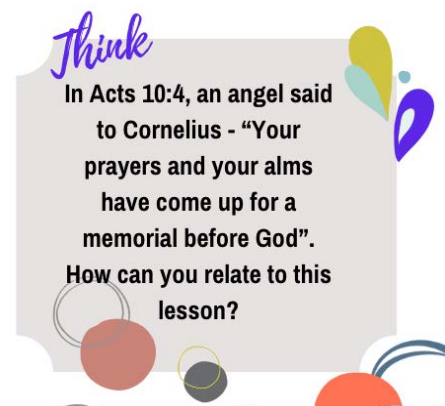
Prayer is very powerful, as it brings about healing which is the power to resist all types of temptations, for inner strength to fight evil, and for comfort in our individual troubles. Everyone, and especially all Christians, will face temptations! Often like quicksand, for the more you fight it, the more you may get drawn towards the danger. Praying to God will give you the power and strength to defeat these temptations.

*"Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation"* (**St. Matthew 26:41**). Through prayer we repent, receive forgiveness for our sins and are strengthened in Him.

## True Fasting

Fasting is not 'giving up' something for God as He has no use for the food that we do not eat. As we are reminded in **Psalms 50 (51)**:

*You will not be pleased with whole burnt offerings. A sacrifice to God is a broken spirit, A broken and humbled heart God will not despise".*



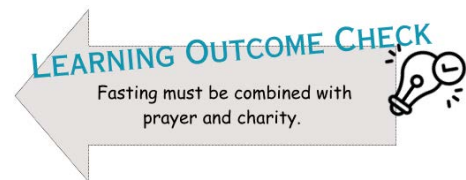
True fasting is a reminder that God gives us everything. By sacrifice, we strengthen ourselves spiritually and physically to overcome all temptations. We are, also, reminded how great an event and sacrifice it was that God took flesh and became man. He not only suffered the same hunger we do, but He also offered his life as the greatest sacrifice ever. Any sacrifice of ours is small in comparison.

But fasting without prayer is just a diet! Prayer is the most important part of fasting. Together, fasting and prayer are spiritual weapons against temptation, and helps us in our spiritual growth to become like Christ.

Queen Esther fasted and prayed for three days and nights (**Esther 4**) for the strength and confidence to speak to the king. She even asked her people to fast for her too. God answered her prayers by softening the king's heart, as he helped save her people. Through fasting and prayer, the Holy Spirit transforms and strengthens us. It cleanses us spiritually and brings us closer to God.

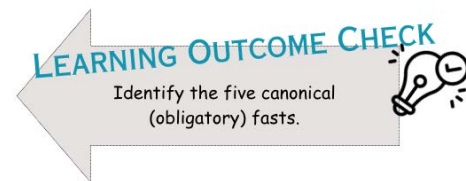
Personal fasting is prayerfully giving up our favorites, such as chocolate or television. We, also, fast together as a Church especially during special feast days.

When we fast together, we help each other not only through common prayers and acts of charity, but also by uplifting each other and helping through whatever temptations may come our way. Our priest and spiritual elders teach us all about proper fasting.



St. John Chrysostom compared fasting to medicine. Both must be properly and regularly taken, just as prescribed. For fasting, God is our all-knowing Physician and Healer.

So, fasting is a medicine for our soul which works wondrously, if carefully followed, just as God intended it. There are five canonical fasts that the Holy Church observes with highest importance:



1. **Nativity Fast:** December 1-25, the 25 days in preparation for the festival of the birth of Christ.
2. **The Three-Day or Nineveh Fast:** A three-day fast (Monday through Wednesday) beginning three weeks before the start of the Great Fast. In this fast, we remember Prophet Jonah, who fasted in the belly of the big fish for three days and three nights.



This reminds us of the three days Jesus spent inside the tomb. Jonah's preaching to the Ninevites also made them repent of their sins and fast.

3. **The Great & Holy Fast:** Forty days of fasting plus the days of Holy Week, which lead us to the festival of the Resurrection of our Lord.
4. **The Apostles Fast:** Thirteen days from June 16-29 to remember and meditate upon the life and witness of the Holy Apostles.
5. **The Dormition or Assumption Fast:** Fifteen days from August 1-15 in remembrance of the death of St. Mary and the direct assumption by God of her soul and body into the heavenly kingdom.

Throughout these canonical fasts, as Orthodox Christians we relate with these important figures of remembrance. We try to imitate them and achieve their holiness. During these fasts, Orthodox Christians do not eat any animal products. . We choose to spend more time in prayer, and acts of charity. We read the Holy Bible and about the Holy Saints to be inspired to become more like the divine men and women.

### **The Shortest Prayer**

*"Let us not then be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Be the Cross our seal made with boldness by our fingers on our brow, and on everything; over the bread we eat, and the cups we drink; in our comings in, and goings out; before our sleep, when we lie down and when we rise up; when we are in the way, and when we are still." (St. Cyril of Jerusalem)*

The sign of the Cross is the shortest form of prayer and symbolizes the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This simple sign reminds us of God's presence and protection over us. With the simple sign of the Cross, He gives us strength in our battle against evil. It is important that we at least make a sign of the Cross before everything: before we eat, go out, take a test etc. A sign of the Cross should always be made purposefully and never casually. St John Chrysostom said "When you sign yourself, think of all the mysteries contained in the Cross. It is not enough to form it with the finger. You must first make it with faith and good will".

### **Praying is an Essential Part of Leading Spiritual Orthodox Christian Life**

Every day we have to find time to pray and reflect on our day. The ancient Church prayed seven times a day which is still followed in monasteries. Prayer should not be considered as a rule or command but rather an expression of love for God. It is important to

try and pray to God as often as we can, as prayer brings us closer to Him. As the world grows busier, one suggestion is to pray in the morning to gladden our hearts to get us through the day and in the evening to give thanks and praise God for all the blessings received throughout the day. The Church also provides fixed prayers that bring us together in body, spirit, and mind.

### **Types of prayers**

- **Personal Prayers** – It is important to find time daily to openly talk to God about our problems and to personally thank Him for everything He has done for us. This helps us improve our relationship with God.
- **Family Prayers** – Families should always try to find time to pray and praise God together. God should be the center of every family. A family that prays together stays together. Helping each other in their spiritual growth helps bring families together and strengthen their spiritual lives.
- **Intercessory Prayers** – Intercessory prayers are an important part of our worship. The Bible gives us many examples of intercession, such as Moses, Elijah and other prophets praying for their people and seeking God's mercy. Jesus Christ was the ultimate example of intercession. He intercedes for us and offers His own life as the true sacrifice. We, as Christians, should always pray for others, as it is part of our Christian identity.
- **Liturgical Prayers** – Liturgical prayers are prayers that are set by our Church for use during our Liturgy. These are the prayers that we pray with our Church family, as we are all part of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

### **Summary**

Prayer needs to become a natural part of our daily life. In order to achieve the full likeness of God (**theosis**) we have to be in constant communion with Him and always, seeking His guidance in every action, thought and activity that we do. If daily prayer is not part of your life, take some time to reflect on how you can make some time in your schedule to spend with our Creator.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Considering the lesson on fasting and prayer, why do you believe some individuals feel hesitant to pray aloud in public settings? Reflect on the importance of sharing one's faith with others.
2. In light of our discussion on incorporating prayer into our lives, what challenges do you think people face when trying to make prayer a regular part of their daily routines? Consider how fasting and charity can complement prayer in this context.
3. Throughout our learning, we have explored the various purposes of prayer. Why do you think some people misunderstand prayer as only a means of asking God for help or gifts? Discuss the different ways we can engage with prayer beyond just making requests.

# Lesson 7: Fasting as Medicine

## Lesson Goals

- I can identify in the Bible where people fasted.
- I can explain that fasting is more than not eating food.
- I can explain how the Church is like a hospital for sinners.

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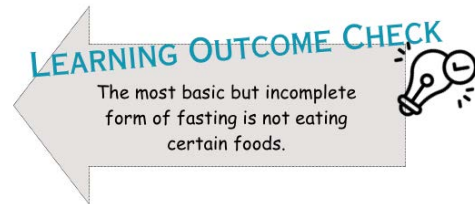
## True Fasting

Fasting is often thought of as simply giving up certain foods for a while. However, St. John Chrysostom<sup>3</sup> beautifully describes fasting as a medicine. Just like medicine works best when taken at the right time and in the correct dosage, fasting must also be done properly. If we focus only on not eating certain foods and forget its true purpose, we might actually be missing the point.

Fasting is not only about food; it touches every part of our lives. It is a way to distance ourselves from sin. If we are only avoiding certain meals, we are not truly fasting in the way that God wants us to. St. John Chrysostom emphasizes that if our fasting is limited to only eating certain foods and nothing more, we are in fact ridiculing the fast! Fasting needs to be shown through our works as well. For example,

- If we see someone who is poor, show them mercy and help them.
- If we have a disagreement with someone, try to make peace with them.
- If a friend is successful, be happy for them instead of feeling jealous.

In other words, while we may fast with our mouths by not eating certain foods, we should also let our other body parts participate in fasting. True fasting is about bringing ourselves closer to God through our thoughts, words, actions, and habits. It is not a commandment meant to weaken our bodies; instead, it is a way to help us control our bodies and refresh our souls. Fasting helps us grow in grace and learn more about God. Fasting is about more than just food—it's a way for us to grow to more like Christ (theosis) and strengthen our relationship with Him!



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<sup>3</sup> St. John Chrysostom. (n.d.). Homily 3 On the Statues. New Advent.  
<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/190103.htm>

# St. John Chrysostom on “True Fasting”



Let the hands fast,  
by being free of avarice and greed



Let the feet fast,  
by ceasing to run after sin



Let the eyes fast,  
by disciplining them not to glare at  
that which is sinful



Let the ear fast,  
by not listening to evil talk and gossip



Let the mouth fast,  
from foul words and unjust criticism

Fasting goes beyond merely abstaining from food; it involves a holistic approach that includes prayer, almsgiving, and charitable works. True fasting is about distancing ourselves from sin, humbling our desires, and fostering spiritual growth through our actions, thoughts, and interactions with others.

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Basic fasting principles.





## The Role of Fasting in the Spiritual Life

Fasting is an important part of spiritual life. There are many examples in the Old Testament of the men of God who fasted and did great works. Moses fasted for forty days before he spoke to God. Daniel was fasting when the Angel Gabriel appeared to him. Nehemiah fasted when he heard of the sad news about Jerusalem. David was a man of fasting. He said, "I afflicted myself with fasting". Isaiah spoke about fasting (**Isaiah 58:3-12**) and King Jehoshaphat called all the people to fast (**2 Chronicles 20:3**). People of Nineveh fasted with great commitment (**Jonah 3:7-9**). In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Himself fasted till He felt hungry. The Lord spoke about fasting in His Sermon on the Mount (**St. Matthew 6:16-18**). He also spoke about the importance of fasting when He spoke about the Devil "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting" (**St. Mark 9:29**). We read about fasting in the Church of the Apostles (**Acts of the Apostles 13:3, 4** and **1 Corinthians 7:5**). The Church fathers also spoke about about fasting in their writings and speeches. The history of the Orthodox Church shows us that the faithful observed public fasting (Lent), and fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays.



During the Monday Southara Prayers for the the Fast of Nineveh, we remember some of those who fasted in the B'outho of St. Ephrem. We sing:

*Observe the forty-days' fast  
And give bread to the hungry  
As as you learned from David  
Pray seven time every day*

*Both Moses and Elijah  
Fasted forty days and nights  
As our Lord also fasted  
And conquered the evil one*

## Summary

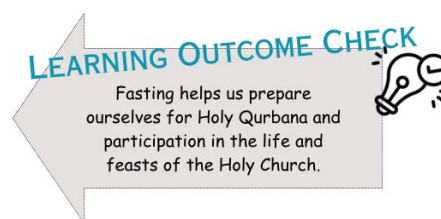
Fasting is an important spiritual practice that aids in personal growth and prepares us for participation in the Holy Qurbana and the life and feasts of the Holy Church. When we fast, we do not simply abstain from food; instead, we engage in a holistic approach that

includes prayer and meditation. This combination strengthens our inner selves and allows us to combat sinful desires.

The Bible teaches us about the struggle between our physical needs and spiritual aspirations. As stated in **Galatians 5:17**, “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another.” This indicates that our journey toward spiritual purity requires effort, and one way to achieve this is through fasting.

St. Isaac the Syrian reflects, “*Every struggle against sin and its lusts must begin with fasting especially when the struggle is because of an internal sin.*” True fasting leads to spiritual growth, a purer heart, and heightened godliness. However, fasting must not be limited to merely skipping meals. Without prayer and a genuine effort to cleanse our hearts from negativity—such as grudges and hatred—our fasting may lack true significance.

In essence, fasting and prayer together form a powerful combination that can help us build a strong relationship with God. The saints regarded fasting as a fortress, while prayer was seen as a weapon. By using both during our fasting period, we prepare ourselves to participate more fully in the Holy Qurbana, allowing us to engage meaningfully in the life of the Holy Church.



The Lord desires only for us to freely return to Him, as expressed in **Joel 2:12**: “Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Let us remember that true fasting involves our whole person—body, mind, and spirit—and leads us closer to holiness and a deeper connection with our faith.

### Reflection Questions

1. What do you think fasting really means, and why is it different from just being on a diet?
2. Why do you think fasting is important to do before receiving Holy Qurbana? How does it help us get ready for this special moment?
3. In what ways do you think fasting can help us grow spiritually, and how do you see it connected to prayer and helping others?

# Lesson 8: Fullness of the Faith

## Lesson Goals

- I can speak in love to defend how Orthodoxy is different from other Christian denominations.
- I can understand how Orthodoxy has the fullness of the Faith.
- I can better understand how our Church understands sin as a sickness in need of healing which is not the emphasis found in non-Orthodox denominations.

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## Understanding Orthodoxy

Have you ever been at a dinner where two people were arguing? It could be kids fighting, adults disagreeing, or both. It makes everyone at the table feel uncomfortable, like time has slowed down. When they argue out loud, everyone else just wants to escape, and even simple things like saying, "Please pass the water," feel strange and awkward.

This uncomfortable feeling can also happen at God's table. God invites us to Holy Communion, where we connect with Him with "our minds, our thoughts, and our hearts". When we receive the Holy Body and Blood of Christ, we truly become united with Him.

But here's the catch: when we are in conflict with others, it's hard to commune with God. Just like at a real dinner, arguments around God's table spoil the meal for everyone. We all yearn for a peaceful and loving gathering.

Jesus teaches us about the importance of coming together: "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (**Matthew 18:19-20**) This shows us that when we unite in His name, we create a beautiful community. But before we can truly enjoy our communion with God and with each other, we need to make peace. If we have a disagreement with someone, we should take the time to apologize and reconcile. This is why, at the beginning of the Anaphora (the Eucharistic prayer), we share the Kiss of Peace. We first make peace with each other before we approach God's altar with our gifts. Jesus reminds us in **Matthew 5:23-24** that if we have wronged someone, we need to say we're sorry and try to make things right.

This teaching connects with the Mystery of the Holy Trinity - God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, who exist as One True God in perfect harmony.

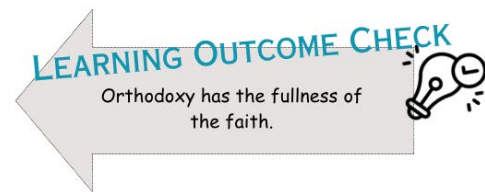
But what happens when we disagree or get hurt by someone else? The Apostle Peter asked Jesus, “How often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven.” (Matthew 18:21-22) This means we should be ready to forgive others as many times as it takes, just like God forgives us over and over.

## In Communion

This idea of forgiveness and community applies not only to our families but also to our churches. Throughout history, some groups have separated from the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, and today the pre-denominational Church is the Orthodox Church. We must understand that these splits happened because groups of people within that denomination began to teach ideas that were different from what the Apostles were taught about the Truth of the Person of Jesus Christ.

All Orthodox churches have the “one, genuine, and uncorrupted Faith.” This means that we follow the teachings and traditions handed down through generations since the time of the Apostles. Nothing was added and nothing was removed. We stay true to the original message of Christ, ensuring that the faith we practice is pure and complete.

Being part of the Orthodox Church helps us understand the fullness of Faith. It reminds us that we are called to live in community, to forgive one another, and to keep the teachings of Christ alive. Through Holy Communion, we truly experience this fullness together, and God is always there with us.



Different denominations occurred because of a change in the teachings given to us. An example is during the Reformation of the 16th century led by Martin Luther and others who argued against the tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe at that time, but in the process significantly changed their beliefs so that we can no longer agree their theology is the same as the one given by the Apostles. We can see much of this was not bad intentions but lack of understanding - for example, a raging debate occurred on “Faith vs. works”. Many took the Ephesians 2:8-9 as justification that faith alone was enough, i.e.,

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”*

But this is immediately followed by **verse 10**:

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

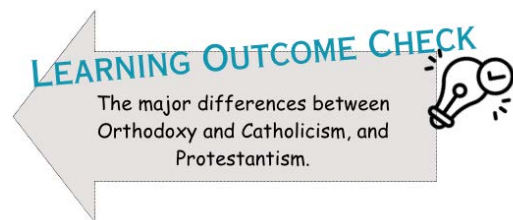
This whole debate should be confusing to an Orthodox Christian as there was never any contention until the middle century in Europe that faith and works were two separate outcomes, e.g.,

*"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?" (St. James 2:14)*

*But someone will 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. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!" (St. James 2:18-19)*

We certainly believe that we are saved by grace through faith. But faith and works are not separable. When we look carefully at what St Paul was teaching in his letter to the Church in Ephesus, we see it clearly has to do with the Law and how it relates to the accepting the Gentiles into the Church. He is saying that since it is not the observance of the Law that saves, therefore the Gentiles do not need to follow the Jewish laws like circumcision and eating only kosher foods. The Reformation also took away emphasis on the Sacraments including our most important teaching that we receive during Holy Qurbana the Real Body and Blood of Christ.

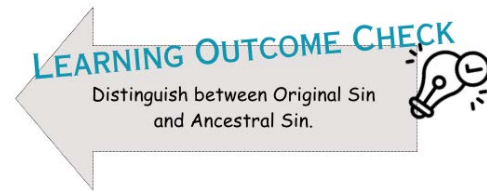
On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church added to the Nicene Creed what is today known as the "Filioque" which is a Latin phrase that means "and from the Son". This was done without the consensus of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Other teachings such as Original Sin, Immaculate Conception, and Papal Infallibility were also additions and enhancements added later by the Church of Rome.



Another difference in teaching between the Orthodox Church and the Western Churches that include the Catholic and Protestant denominations is the teaching of Original Sin. The Western Church teaches that all people inherit the guilt of Adam and Eve's original



sin, and this guilt of humanity needed a sacrifice which was the death of Christ on the Cross. For the Orthodox Church, we have are living in a fallen world due to the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin. We are not "guilty" of their sins but rather through them sin and death entered the world. We use the term the "sin of Adam" or refer to it as Ancestral Sin.



The doctrine of Original Sin caused further problems in the Catholic Church regarding St Mary who in their teaching is also "guilty" of sin, so they developed another doctrine called the "Immaculate Conception" that said St. Mary was born innocent of original sin and therefore not like you and me. The Protestant denominations just reduced St. Mary to merely a "vessel" and resolved this issue. For the Orthodox Church, this was not only unnecessary developments but undermined the important teaching that St. Mary was just like us, and what happened to St. Mary is our future as well. Her humanity is a great hope that we also can become pure and holy to have Christ in us as well!

After the Reformation, Christianity further splintered into many different groups. What could be considered a small crack in a piece of glass after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. suddenly spread out into a web of fractures. Today, we find that there are nearly 40,000 different denominations all who identify as Christians. This vast division among believers is known as denominationalism, and it is important to understand that this is not how the Apostle Paul instructed us to behave.

Within the Orthodox Church, there is unfortunately a schism that we pray one day will be resolved. The Byzantine or Eastern Orthodox, which includes the Greek, Russian, Romanian, Antiochene, Serbian Orthodox Churches, and the Orthodox Church of America (OCA) did uphold the Council of Chalcedon and subsequent others as there was a misunderstanding on the Nature of Christ and Will of Christ that has yet to be resolved at the Synodal level. Once that occurs, these two Orthodox Traditions can once again enjoy Holy Communion between themselves.

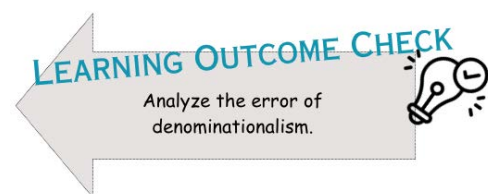
St. Paul urges us to "walk worthy of the calling with which you were called" (**Ephesians 4:1**). He emphasizes humility, gentleness, and patience, advising us to "bear with one another in love" and to maintain unity in the Spirit. He reminds us that there is one body of believers, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, and one God who is present in all of us. This teaching highlights the need for unity among Christians rather than division.

Similarly, in **Philippians 2:1-3**, St. Paul encourages believers to have the same love and to work together in harmony. He advises that we should not act out of selfishness or pride but should instead value one another. When Christians focus on their differences rather than their shared beliefs in Christ, they move away from the true teachings of the Bible.

In the early days of Christianity, as seen in the Acts of the Apostles, when disagreements arose, the leaders of the Church would gather together. In this gathering, they would seek guidance from the Holy Spirit to find the best way forward. This model of unity and cooperation is how the Orthodox Church continues to operate today. Bishops, who are the leaders of different regions, come together to discuss important issues within the Church. Their discussions are not just based on their own opinions but are guided by the Holy Spirit and are consistent with the teachings of the Church that have been followed for centuries. It is important to note that the councils of the early Church did not create new teachings but instead clarified the authentic teachings that were already present. They ensured that nothing was added or taken away from the original message given by God through the prophets and revealed by Jesus Christ.

The Bible even reminds us of the importance of leadership and counsel: “Those for whom there is no leadership fall like leaves, But there is salvation in much counsel” (**Proverbs 11:12**). This verse illustrates that guidance from wise leaders is essential for maintaining faith and unity among believers.

In conclusion, the issue of denominationalism presents a challenge to the unity that Christians are called to uphold. To truly follow the teachings of Jesus and His Apostles, we must strive for unity in faith, drawing on the wisdom of past councils and remaining open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.



## Unity in Diversity

*“Behold now, what is so good or so pleasant as for brothers to dwell together in unity?”*

**- Psalm 133:1**

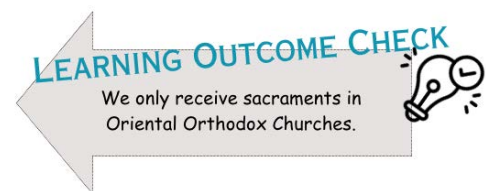
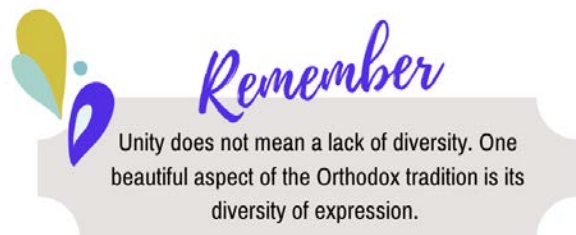
Unity does not mean a lack of diversity. One beautiful aspect of the Orthodox tradition is its variety of expression. The One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic faith is fully expressed in different cultures and at different times. This is reflected in the Incarnation itself. Though our Lord was incarnate at a specific time and amongst a particular culture,

He remained Divine In all His fullness. Our Lord remains incarnate at any time, every place and amongst all people. Therefore, the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Sacraments must be translated into the language of the worshiping congregation. The Church buildings, iconography, and traditions should take the shape of the culture it exists in.

And so, whether one goes to an Orthodox Church in Addis Abba, Ethiopia, Etchmiadzin, Armenia, or Devalokam, India, we will find the same Orthodox and Apostolic faith expressed but in different cultures. The most beautiful expression of this unity of faith is in the mutual communion of these Churches.

The Malankara Orthodox Church is a part of the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches, all of whom “proclaim those three sacred, holy, and ecumenical

councils of Nicea,



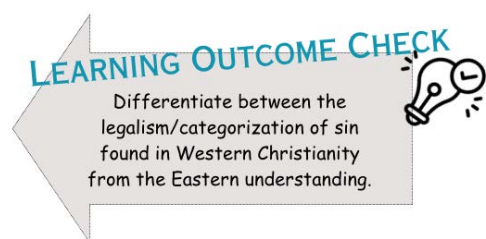
Constantinople, and Ephesus”. We can receive communion from any of the these churches as we are in full unity and communion. However before visiting another parish, we should respectfully contact the Vicar to inform him

that we are members of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church which may be more commonly known as the Indian Orthodox Church.

### Speaking the Truth in Love

We believe that God is love, and this love is the foundation of our Orthodox faith. St. Paul teaches us that speaking the truth in love is vital to our growth as Christians (**Ephesians 4:14-16**). It is not enough to simply know the doctrines; we must express them with love and humility.

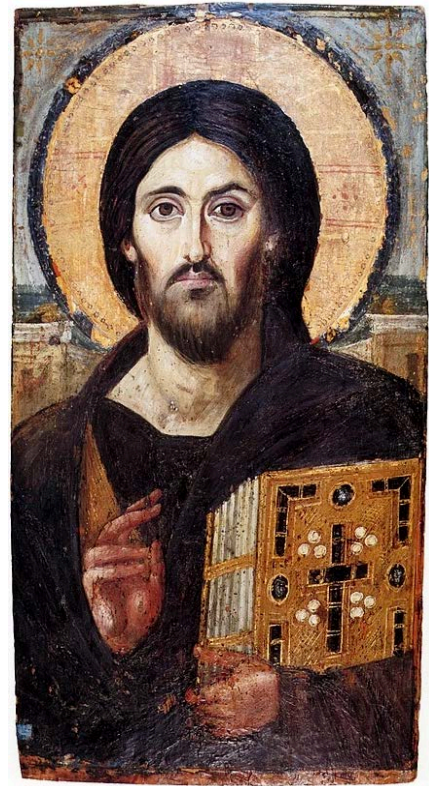
The fullness of our Christian faith comes from what God has revealed to us throughout history: first through Moses and the prophets, then through Jesus Christ, who is God in human form, and finally through the teachings of the Apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit. This passing down of teaching is known as Apostolic Succession, and it assures us that we hold onto the true and unaltered faith as entrusted by the early Church leaders.



Unlike some Western Christian traditions that may emphasize strict rules and categorize sins, the Orthodox understanding stresses that God's essence is love. This means that our faith is not about legalism but about a loving relationship with God and one another.

The Orthodox Church is recognized as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. It has maintained the original teachings of Christ and the Apostles without alteration.

We should approach discussions about our faith with respect and humility, avoiding arguments that may harm our relationships with others. When differences arise, we must engage in thoughtful conversations that help us grow together in love and faith. But we never compromise or alter the Truth that was given to us by Christ Himself.



### Reflection Questions

1. What is the difference between the way Original Sin is understood in Western Christianity and Ancestral Sin in Eastern Orthodoxy? How can understanding these differences help us appreciate diverse perspectives on sin?
2. In what ways do the teachings of the Orthodox Church reflect the beliefs of early Christians, and how might this understanding help unite rather than divide different Christian denominations?
3. How do the sacraments in the Orthodox Church differ from the practices in many Protestant churches? Why do you think sacraments play such an important role in Orthodox faith and practice?

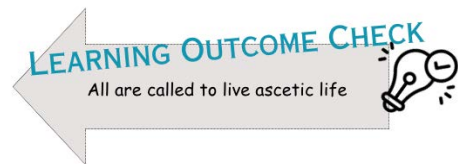
# Lesson 9: Monastic Life

## Learning Goals

- *I can understand asceticism and how we are all called to live an ascetic life.*
- *I can understand the three pillars of spiritual life - fasting, prayer and charity.*
- *I can learn from the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, Mothers and monastic life.*

## Asceticism

Asceticism is a lifestyle that is focused on spiritual goals and ignores all worldly pleasures. In the Orthodox Church, both married and unmarried individuals are called to the ascetic lifestyle.



Asceticism is not unique to Christianity. It has been observed in many religious traditions like Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism.

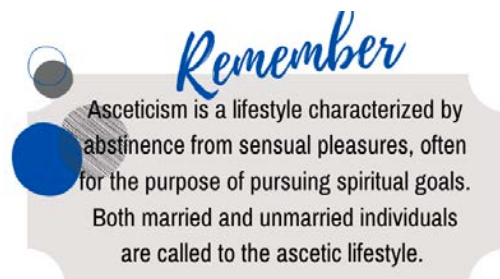
In Orthodoxy, asceticism is a lifestyle that prepares people for the Kingdom of God. The goal is to lead a godly life by exercising good spiritual characteristics. This is achieved through the training and conditioning of the whole human person, body and soul.. Good spiritual characteristics are practiced to battle against Satan, bad habits and immoral desires with lots of discipline, preparation and self-sacrifice.

## Monasticism

*Monasticism* is a form of communal living separated from the world (as in a monastery for men or for women) for the purpose of ascetic dedication to prayer, spiritual discipline, and living by the Gospel. Monasticism is at the very heart of early Eastern Christian life. Monks choose to follow the call of Christ, with complete obedience and devotion. As a community of souls, wholly living their life in Christ, they become radiant models for the entire Church.



The Syriac word for a monastery is ***dhayara: (definition)*** a special place where monks live, practicing asceticism, and withdrawn from the world for their spiritual practices. They typically adopt a simple lifestyle, giving up all material





possessions and worldly pleasures. They spend their time in prayer, fasting, and work devotedly for the monastic community. Through a life of spiritual discipline, they seek a closeness to God free from all worldly distractions and temptations.

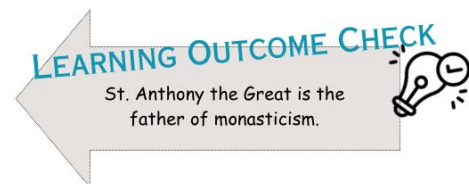
Asceticism is a characteristic of all Christians who follow the Gospel, including monks who also live separately in their own community. The word monk comes from the Greek word **monos** which means “solitary” or “isolated.” Early monastic life required three vows of complete obedience, poverty, celibacy, and all with a life of manual labor.

In early times there were two classic forms of monasticism:

- The Anchorite: hermit in the wilderness or Church solitary monk (ex. The Desert Fathers).
- The Cenobite is a life within a structured and often secluded Church community.

### **Anchorites – St. Anthony, Father of Monks (AD. 251 – 356)**

St. Anthony came from a wealthy Christian family in Egypt. At age 19, both of his parents died. Anthony and his only sister inherited large wealth, and continued to live at home.



At age 20, Anthony heard (at Church) the Gospel passage of Jesus talking to a rich man:

*“If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven; and come, follow Me,” (Matthew. 19:21).*

Anthony felt that Christ was directly talking to him and decided to obey His words. After first securing a stable existence for his sister, Anthony then distributed all his wealth to the poor and oppressed. He entrusted his sister to a Christian community of virgins. This was evidence that a community of Christian women existed in Alexandria in his day.



Anthony followed Christ’s calling into the desert life. His withdrawal was gradual but he kept moving further and further away from human society. In 285 AD, Anthony reached the deep desert by the Red Sea. At this outer mountain, he struggled day and night to free his true self from his evil thoughts, passions and demons. While living as a monk, he renounced all worldly interests

and led a life of prayer and meditation. He recited Psalms, sang hymns, and prayed all while planting and working for the community.



*The Cave of St. Anthony*

In about 305 AD, Anthony came out of the desert to counsel his many followers in their struggles, who were inspired by his discipline and holiness. St. Anthony visited his parents' town only twice. Once was to encourage martyrs and to argue their cases in the courts of justice. The second was at the age of 90, to fight against the heresy of Arius and to strongly affirm the Nicene Creed. Towards the end of his life, he came to be known all over the world and earned great praise.

His desert followers increased in number. Thus in the Christian Church, St. Anthony came to be known as the 'Father of Monks'. He is often wrongly considered the first Christian monk. However, there were many ascetics before him. Anthony was among the first known monk to go into the wilderness (about AD 270), which seems to have contributed to his popularity.

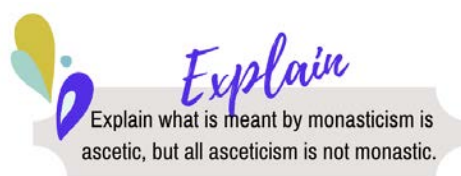
The biography of Anthony's life was recorded by St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in the classic text, "Life of St. Anthony of Egypt." The book helped to spread the concept of Christian monasticism, as did Western writings and art about Anthony's survival against supernatural temptations in the Eastern Desert of Egypt.

St. Anthony promoted a solitary (eremitic) life, while St. Pachomius advanced the communal (Cenobitic) monastic life. They were two symbolic founders of a lifestyle that soon spread throughout the Christian world. Within their lifetimes many followers began fleeing the cities for the peace of the desert. Hence, Christian monastic life was born.

### **Cenobitic – Pachomius of Egypt (286-346)**

Cenobitism is another type of monasticism where communal life is under the guidance of an elder or chief monastic leader known as **hegumen** or abbot (*abba* – father). Here a group of monks lives together, under common rule, sharing a common house, table and Church, and mutually supporting and encouraging one another.

There are two great founding fathers of this form of monastic life in the Orthodox world: St. Pachomius of Egypt (AD 292-346) and St Basil the Great (AD 330-379). Pachomius was born to idol-worshipping parents. During his youth, he was a soldier in the Roman Army who was sent to Ethiopia along with others. During this journey, they met many Christians in the rural areas who invited the soldiers to their houses, washed their feet and fed them. Pachomius was attracted to the hospitality of these Christians and was excited about their good deeds. After the war, Pachomius was baptized and became a Christian. He met a well-known hermit of that time, Palaemon, and followed him.



In AD 320, he set up a monastery on the banks of the River Nile. He instituted certain common rules and regulations for monastic life. Pachomius examined the sincerity, purpose and commitment of the new followers. He lovingly tested his disciples' ability to stand strong against worldly desires and temptations. Pachomius taught that true monks possess obedience, love of God, celibacy, and piety. He emphasized the importance of studying Scripture and memorizing Psalms and other Bible verses. He also taught the monks to read and write the Christian Creed of faith. Therefore, the monasteries grew into spiritual power houses of the Church. We observe May 17th as the day of St. Pachomius' remembrance.

Some Sayings of the Desert Fathers:

- An old man was asked, "How can I find God?" He said, "In fasting, in watching (i.e. vigils) in labors, in devotion, and above all in discernment. I tell you; many have injured their bodies without discernment and have gone away from us having achieved nothing. Our mouths smell bad through fasting; we know the Scriptures by

heart, we recite all the Psalms of David, but we have not that which God seeks: charity and humility."

- An old man said, "In all trials do not blame others but only yourself, saying, 'It is because of my sins that this has happened!'"
- An old man was asked, "What is the straight and narrow way?" He replied, "The straight way is this, to do violence to one's thoughts and to cut off one's own will. This relates to the the early word's of the disciples, *'See we have left all and followed You.'*" **(Mark 10:28)**

### St. Macrina

St. Macrina was the sister of St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa. Her mother, St. Emilia, taught her how to pray, read Scriptures, and attend Church services. She was brought up to lead a life that was well-pleasing to God.

When she grew up she was betrothed to a pious man; however, soon after their engagement, her fiance passed away. Afterwards, many people sought her hand in marriage, but not wanting to be unfaithful to her deceased fiance, she chose a life of a virgin. She chose to stay at home to help her parents with household tasks.

After the death of her father, she became the chief support for her family. Once her siblings grew up and left, St. Macrina convinced her mother to set the servants free, and together went to settle in a woman's monastery. Several of their servants followed her example, took monastic vows, living together as a family, in prayer and work. St. Macrina was deeply respected for her self-discipline and temperance. She slept on boards and had no worldly possessions.





Some of the sisters in her monastery reflected on stories of her ability to heal a girl of an eye illness and to ensure there was no shortage of wheat at her monastery, even in times of famine. We remember St. Macrina on July 19th.

## **Summary**

In Lesson 9, we explore the themes of asceticism and monasticism, key components of a spiritually disciplined life. Asceticism is a lifestyle dedicated to spiritual goals while renouncing worldly pleasures, and it is a calling for all Christians, whether married or unmarried. The lesson emphasizes the importance of the three pillars of spiritual life: fasting, prayer, and charity. Monasticism, a communal form of living that fosters this ascetic dedication, encourages individuals to live together in prayer and discipline, embracing the Gospel. Through the lives of early monastic figures, we learn how asceticism and monasticism serve as guides for spiritual growth and devotion in the Orthodox Church.

A significant focus of the lesson is on St. Anthony the Great, recognized as the Father of Monasticism. His commitment to living a solitary life in the desert laid the foundation for the monastic tradition, inspiring others to pursue a similar path. Alongside him, St. Pachomius contributed to the development of communal monastic life, introducing structure and rules for monastic communities. The lessons from these early Christian figures, along with insights from the Desert Fathers and Mothers, offer valuable reflections on living a life of prayer, humility, and discipline. By understanding these historical examples, students can appreciate the significance of monasticism and asceticism in developing a spiritually enriching life.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. How can we practice asceticism in our daily lives, even in small ways, to better connect with our spiritual journey?
2. What challenges do we face in trying to live according to the three pillars of spiritual life, and what can we do to overcome these distractions?
3. In what ways do the lives of St. Anthony, St. Pachomius, and St. Macrina inspire us to understand the true meaning of monastic life and spirituality?



# Lesson 10: The Apostle to India

## Lesson Goals

- *I can relate to the importance of the arrival of St. Thomas in India.*
- *I can explain the significance of the Synod of Diamper and the Coonan Cross Oath.*
- *I can understand the establishment of the Catholicate.*
- *I can provide a brief history of the Malankara Orthodox Church in America.*

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*“And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved” **St. Mark 16:15-16***

In about 52 AD, St. Thomas the Apostle of Christ landed just north of the modern-day city of Kochi (Kerala). He preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the already existing Jewish colonies there and established eight Christian communities at Maliankara (Kodungallore), Palayur, Paravur (Kottakavu), Gokamangalam (Kokamangalam), Niranam, Chayal (Nilackal), Kollam (Quilon), and Thiruthancode.

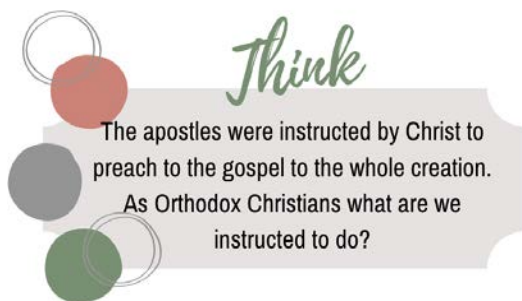
Today, almost all of these original locations still have a strong St. Thomas Christian community with ancient traditions in place.

From Kerala, St. Thomas proceeded to the eastern parts of south India where many other people heard him and accepted Christianity too. He then preached as far away as China. Returning to India in AD 72, St. Thomas was martyred at Mylapore (near Chennai).

There is also historical evidence of St. Thomas in India and of the representation of the Churches in India at the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea. A Bishop named John, representing Persia and India, attended the Council. Similarly, St. Ephrem, also, spoke of the missionary work of St. Thomas to India. He even composed hymns about St. Thomas, namely his mission to India, martyrdom and the fourth century removal of St. Thomas' bones to Edessa, etc., . When the Portuguese reached India in 1498 A.D, they found



Christians who strongly believed that the Apostle St. Thomas had suffered martyrdom and was buried at Mylapore. Many non-Christian residents in that area, also, testified to the Portuguese that St. Thomas had, indeed, been buried there and that Christian settlements existed in the vicinity. St. Eusebius of Caesaria wrote about St. Thomas in India, too.

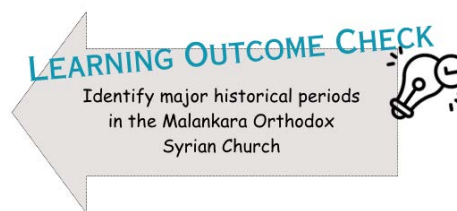


Although St. Thomas was the first to bring Christianity to India, there were Jewish settlements already existed in South India long before St. Thomas' arrived. South India had strong trade connections (spices etc.) with the Mediterranean and West Asian world since ancient times. There are records of an active trade relationship between Jews in both Israel and South India. Cranganore, Palur, Paravoor, etc., were growing Jewish

settlements and great trading centers. Thus, the Jewish locals eagerly invited St. Thomas, a Jew himself, and so began his calling to establish Christianity in India.

The existence of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, itself, is the most conclusive proof that St. Thomas came to India and brought us Christianity.. Fr. Dr. Jacob Vellian (Catholic Scholar) best summarized it: "In the end, we are the evidence... We have a very ancient, unbroken tradition that St. Thomas was the founder of the Church in India. Our traditions are unanimous that he came here, and that is something we have held onto, despite persecution, for 1,700 years. Our spirituality is very close to that of the early Church and we believe our Church is as old as any Apostolic Church in the world. Our songs and traditions are quite clear about this. In the end, it is these traditions that we base our belief on: not something on paper or stone which is secondary. It is our fidelity to St Thomas that is most important to us."<sup>4</sup>

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church has a rich history that can be divided into several major periods. The Persian Connection began around 410 AD when the Persian Church affirmed the faith of Nicea and recognized the Metropolitan of Selucia-Ctesiphon as the Catholicos of the East. This period set the stage for early interactions between Indian Christians and Nestorian missionaries. The Colonial Era commenced with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498, who sought to bring the Indian Christian community under the authority of the Pope, leading to significant tensions and

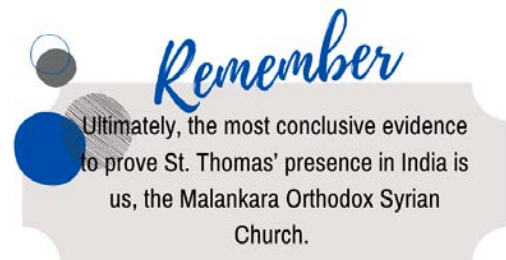


<sup>4</sup> Lanterns on the Lanes: Lit for Life... by George Abraham, Notion Press, 2020.

the establishment of Catholic control over some congregations. The Establishment of the Catholicate in 1912 marked a turning point for independence, as the Indian Church sought self-governance under the leadership of His Holiness Baselios Paulos I, distancing itself from the Patriarch of Antioch. In recent decades, the Church has seen tremendous growth across the globe, particularly in North America, Europe, and Africa, as Indian Christians migrated for better opportunities, establishing communities that continue to uphold their rich liturgical traditions and faith.

### **The Persian Connection**

It was because of the well-established spice trade route that the early Church (especially in Persia) already knew of the Christian communities established by St. Thomas. Whenever persecuted in the Persian Empire, many Christians fled to the Southwestern coast of India and found a welcoming ancient Christian community.



There is no specific documentation about the way the Indian Church was governed during the early centuries. According to tradition, after St. Thomas the Church was likely shepherded by the leaders of the Christian Churches in the Middle East.

A Synod of the Persian Church (410 AD) affirmed the faith of Nicea and acknowledged the Metropolitan of Selucia-Ctesiphon as the Catholicos of the East. However, soon controversies and Empire disputes arose. The Persian Church declared itself Nestorian and its head the Patriarch of the East (Babylon). Nestorian missionaries began moving to India, Central Asia, China, and Ethiopia to teach their doctrines to the Churches St. Thomas had established.

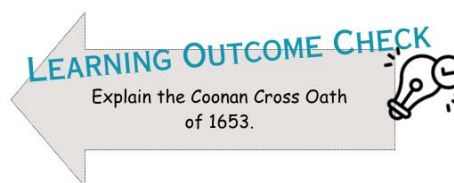
### **The Colonial Era**

The Church in India has always maintained its local character, despite the arrival of many Europeans. In 1498, Vasco da Gama (Portuguese General) arrived in Calicut, Kerala. By the 16th Century, the Portuguese had established themselves as the colonial rulers. Although they had found a Christian community on arrival, the Portuguese brought missionaries to carry on evangelistic work to establish Churches in communion with Rome under Portuguese patronage. These missionaries were also eager to bring the already existing Indian Church under the Pope of Rome, as a separate wing. The new converts in the coastal areas were completely latinized. In AD 1599, with the 'Synod of Diamper' the

representatives of various Indian parishes who attended the assembly were forced by Portuguese Authorities to accept the authority of the Pope of Rome.



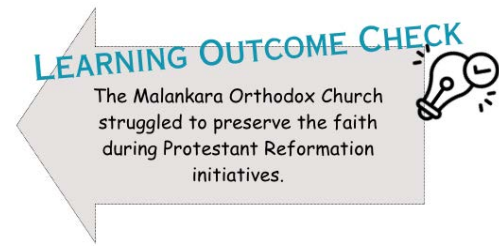
Following the Synod, the Indian Church was governed by Portuguese Bishops who were mostly unwilling to respect the integrity of the Indian Church. The majority of people were very unhappy. This led to a historical revolt on January 3rd 1653, known as the Koonan Kurishu Satyam, or Coonen Cross Pledge. As pictured above, this was a powerful public vow, by members of the Saint Thomas Christian community of Kerala, that they would not submit to Portuguese/Roman Church leadership or lifestyle. The swearing of the oath was a major event in the history of the Saint Thomas Christian community and a major turning point in its relations with the Portuguese colonial forces. The Christians totally rejected 54 years of Roman dominance. The sovereignty of the Malankara Church was established in 1665 AD. However, with no bishop to guide them spiritually, the faithful had to face many serious difficulties but were still determined to keep the independence of the Indian Church. Soon Archdeacon Thomas was consecrated to become the first bishop with the title of Mar Thoma, the first in the long lineup to Mar Thoma IX.



At the request of the St. Thomas Christians, a bishop from the "Syrian Orthodox" Church, Abdul Jaleel Mar Gregorios came to India in 1664 and confirmed the episcopal consecration of Mar Thoma I as the head of the Orthodox Church in India. This began the formal but autonomous relationship with the Syrian Orthodox Church, which is also called "the Jacobite Church".



By 1836, now the British were attempting reformation within the Orthodox Church, partly through their Anglican leadership takeover at the Kottayam theological seminary. Some members were drawn into the Anglican faith. Eventually, the reformist group broke away to form the Mar Thoma Church. The Patriarch Peter III of Antioch visited India in 1875-77. The unique identity of the Orthodox Church under its own Metropolitan was a well known fact. However, this Antiochan Patriarch continued to interfere in the Indian Church leadership. He suppressed the authority of the Malankara Metropolitan, resulting in legal fights. In 1889, the final judgment of the Travancore Royal court declared that the Patriarch had spiritual supervisory powers over the Malankara Church but no administrative leadership in the Church. The Patriarch was not satisfied with this decision.



During the Malankara Association Meeting held in March, 1908, Vattasseril Thirumeni was chosen as the Metropolitan and was sent to the Patriarch of Antioch for consecration. On May 31 1908, he was consecrated by the Patriarch of Antioch with the name, Vattasseril Geevarghese Mar Dionysius. Unlike other new bishops, His Grace was not given an official “kalpana” to establish his authority as the newly consecrated spiritual leader. His Highness Mar Abdulla, the reigning Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, wrongly stated that the office of the Metropolitan of Malankara was not necessary for the Indian Church. To further his plan of Syrian colonization, a Syrian Bishop named Sleeba Mar Osthathios was sent to India, even though the Patriarch had previously agreed to confirm the appointment of Vattasseril Geevarghese Mar Dionysius as the next leader. . During his meeting with leaders of the Malankara Association, the Patriarch carefully suggested that they should write a statement agreeing to administrative and spiritual authority of the Patriarch over the Church in India. It was because the Patriarch felt he had full and divine authority over the Indian Church, whether they admitted it or not. The Royal Court’s decision gave only spiritual authority to the Patriarch of Antioch, which Vattasseril Mar Dionysius and his supporters were in agreement with. Spiritual authority referred to faith interpretations, sacramental life, and ecclesiastical discipline. However, the Patriarch wrongly claimed he, also, had temporal authority over the Indian Church's internal





administration, management of its finances, schools, parishes and other institutions. All the Bishops consecrated by the Patriarch after 1875 (except Mar Dionysius V) had admitted this illegitimate claim and given the Patriarch of Antioch the legally registered deeds that he had demanded.

Next, with the support of some locals, the Patriarch HH Abdulla sent a letter of excommunication to Metropolitan Vattasseril Mar Dionysius. Then Mar Dionysius convened a Managing Committee meeting of the Church at the M.D. Seminary Chapel where they agreed to ignore His Grace's excommunication and instead, called upon the Malankara Association to handle the situation. Meanwhile, the Senior Patriarch of Antioch (HH Mar Abded Messiah) rightly declared (Aug. 17, 1911) that the excommunication of Vattasseril Mar Dionysius by the Patriarch HH Abdulla was not legally true, and that the Church of Malankara should ignore it. At the request of Vattasseril Mar Dionysius' supporters, the Senior Patriarch HH Mar Abded Messaiah visited India (June 1912) to repair the damage done by Patriarch HH Abdulla. The Patriarch HH Mar Abded Messiah elevated and consecrated His Grace Paulose Mar Ivanios as the first Catholicos of the East in 1912. By the reestablishment of the Catholicate of the East in India, the Malankara Orthodox Church became autocephalous (completely self-governing). The Catholicos supervises the Malankara Church and the Patriarch leads the Syriac Orthodox Church. Two other Bishops were consecrated: Geevarghese Mar Philoxenos (who became the second Catholicos in 1925), and Euachim Mar Ivanios.

Before his death in 1915 (Antioch), HH Mar Abded Messaiah issued two Kalpanas dated 17th September 1912 and 24th February 1913 stating that the Catholicos had been installed, and that the Bishops of Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church have the right to raise a successor to the Catholicos. Now, the Malankara Church, in coordination with the Malankara Association, was given the authority over the Church, as led by the Holy Spirit. The Catholicos' authority included ordaining Metropolitans-Bishops, consecrating Holy Mooron, and performing other necessary Church functions.

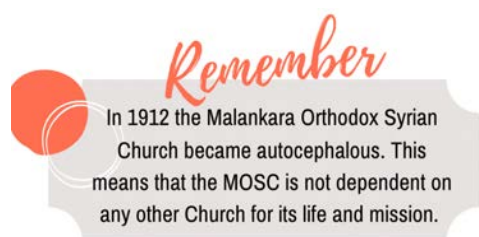
About a year before his death, Vattasseril Thirumeni, Mar Dionysius prepared his 'will' which would hand over to the Holy Episcopal Synod of the Church, and all the properties of the Church that were administered by him. Soon after his glorious death (Feb. 23, 1934) the Patriarchal side raised a court objection to this adoption but the case was dismissed. The 'will' was then registered and formally executed.

For twenty-five years, HG Vattasseril Mar Dionysius served as the honorable Metropolitan of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.. HG was a saint full of prayer, determination and action. With his unwavering faith, sincere devotion and strong

encouragement, he would never stoop for falsehood. Vattasseril Geevarghese Mar Dionysius is popularly known as Malankara Sabha Bhasuran (The Great Luminary of Malankara Orthodox Church) because of his rich contribution to the Malankara Orthodox Church. Mar Dionysius was canonized as a saint of the Church in 2003.

## Establishment of the Catholicate - 1912

1912 was a significant year in the history of our Church's independence and self-governance. The Indian Church wanted to preserve its independence and be self-governing. So, they decided to separate from the Syriac Orthodox Church and establish a Catholicate in India. In September 1912, with the assistance of His Holiness Patriarch Abdul Messiah, His Holiness Baselios Paulos I was installed on the Apostolic Throne of St Thomas as the First **Catholicos** of the East.

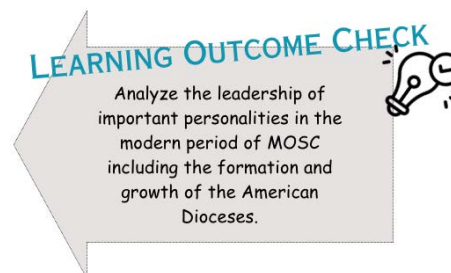


Even though there have been other smaller splits in the Church, the year 1912 marked a major division in our Church. Everyone was not in agreement with the Church's need for independence and self-governance, namely the establishment of the Catholicate in India. His Holiness Patriarch Abdul Messiah of Antioch installed His Holiness Baselios Paulos I on the

Apostolic Throne of St Thomas as the First **Catholicos** of the East. Some people chose to stay under the authority of the Patriarch of Antioch resulting in two major Church divisions. One became the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church under the leadership of HH the Catholicos. The other section became the Jacobite Syrian Church that remained under the leadership of HH the Patriarch of Antioch. Even though the two Churches briefly united during the reign of Catholicos and Malankara Metropolitan HH Baselios Geevarghese II from 1958 to 1975, they have been separate ever since. However, most importantly because of the Supreme Court ruling of July 3 2017, there is a small hope that these two Churches will one day reunite again. Lord have mercy!

## Malankara Orthodox Church in North America

After the establishment of the Catholicate our Church grew rapidly. Eventually, many Indians started immigrating to different parts of the world in search of a better life. In doing so, they also spread our Church and the Gospel! Churches were established in



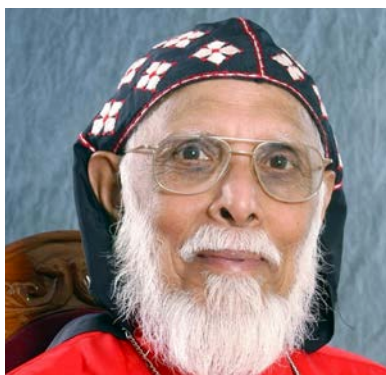
the Middle East, Europe, North America, Oceania, and Africa.

*"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."*  
**St. Matthew 18:20**

In the 1960's, many skilled persons migrated to the United States and Canada. Soon many more Indian Christians and their families started moving to North America for higher education and employment opportunities. Therefore, churches were established in these new areas of settlement to continue the liturgical and spiritual traditions of the homeland.



*H.H. Baselius Mar Thoma Mathews I*



*H.G. Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios*



*H.G. Mathews Mar Barnabas*

The Malankara Church decided to create more Dioceses around the world to better serve its members. Initially, most of the parishes were under the Metropolitan of the Diocese of Bombay, H.G. Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios. Then, the Holy Synod decided to grant the parishes in America their own Diocese, named the American Diocese.

In 1979, H.H. Baselius Mar Thoma Mathews I, the Catholicos of the East led the ceremony in New York that enthroned H.G. Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios as the Metropolitan of the American Diocese. Under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Mar Makarios Thirumeni the Church in the United States and Canada saw tremendous growth.

In 1991, Metropolitan H.G. Mathews Mar Barnabas became the Assistant Metropolitan and in 1993, assumed the role of the new Metropolitan of the American Diocese. Under HG's leadership the Churches grew both physically and spiritually.

Many spiritual organizations, including MGOCSM and Sunday School, also grew strong. In 2002, Metropolitan H.G. Zachariah Mar Nicholovos became the Assistant Metropolitan.

The American Diocese continued to grow and became too large to be managed by one Metropolitan. In 2009, the Malankara Managing Committee recommended to the Catholicose HH Marthoma Didymos I that the American Diocese should be divided into two Dioceses.

Thus, the Northeast American Diocese and the Diocese of Southwest America were created. H.G. Mathews Mar Barnabas and H.G. Zachariah Mar Nicholovos continued as Metropolitan and Assistant Metropolitan, respectively for the Northeast American Diocese. Metropolitan H.G. Mathews Mar Barnabas retired in 2011 and Metropolitan HG Zachariah Mar Nicholovos succeeded him.



*HH Marthoma Didymos I*



*H.G. Zachariah Mar Nicholovos*



*H.G. Dr. Thomas Mar Ivanios*

H.G. Alexios Mar Eusebius was appointed as the first Metropolitan of the Diocese of South West America. In 2017, the Malankara Metropolitan assumed the leadership of the Diocese of South-West America and appointed H.G. Dr. Zacharias Mar Aprem as Assistant Metropolitan, who served until November 2022. On Nov. 3rd, 2022, H.G. Dr. Thomas Mar Ivanios became the Metropolitan of the Diocese of South-West America.

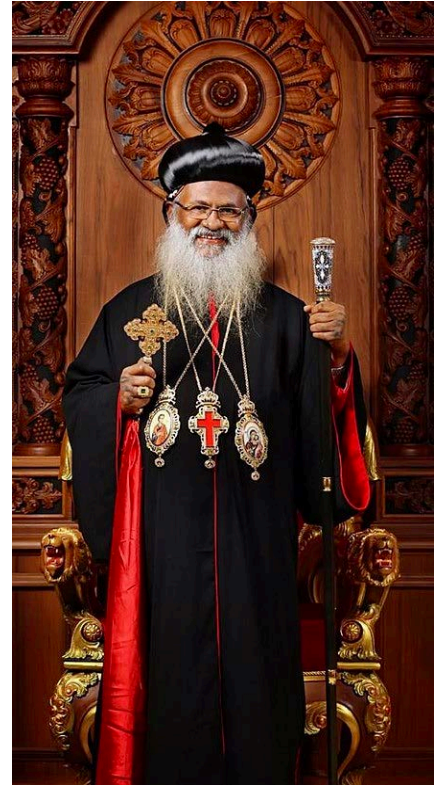
Today the two American Dioceses combined have more than 110 parishes (across both USA & Canada) consisting of over 6,000 families and are growing steadily.

In October 2021, H.H. Baselios Marthoma Mathews III, was sworn in as the Ninth Catholicos of the East in Malankara and the 92nd primate on the Apostolic Throne of St. Thomas Let us continue to keep the Orthodox Church and leadership in our prayers.

## Summary

As we carefully study our Church's rich divine history, we remember the many sacrifices of our faith-filled ancestors and spiritual fathers. According to God's all-knowing plans, it was because of the brave Apostle Thomas that Christianity first arrived in our motherland of Kerala. We are humbled to know that Christianity landed in India, centuries before it ever reached this land of North America. Similarly, our Malankara Orthodox faith first reached North America because of our loving immigrant parents and holy clergy.

Now, we are the lucky ones to receive the combined benefits of all their centuries of deep faith, loving efforts and courageous sacrifices. May our true faith grow. May the Orthodox Church and her divine liturgical traditions, also, continue to eternally bloom in our Dioceses and beyond. All Glory to God!



## Reflection Questions

1. How did the arrival of St. Thomas in India influence the establishment of Christianity in the region, and what significance does this have in understanding the historical development of the Malankara Orthodox Church?
2. In what ways did the Coonan Cross Oath of 1653 serve as a pivotal moment for the Saint Thomas Christian community, and how did it reflect their desire for independence from Portuguese influence?
3. What challenges did the Malankara Orthodox Church face during the Protestant Reformation, and how did key leaders contribute to preserving the Church's traditions and autonomy during this period?



# Lesson 11: Secularism And Spirituality

## Lesson Goals

- I can explain that Jesus Christ is the Truth, through whom we come to know the true identity of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- I can apply the understanding of sanctity of life to Genetic Engineering (Cloning), Blood and Organ Donation
- I can understand the impact of social media on Mental health
- I can analyze our responsibility as caretakers and stewards of all creation. Also examine the interrelationship between stewardship and climate change

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*“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” (2 Timothy 4:3-4)*

As seen in St. Paul’s letter to Timothy, Christians have constantly faced challenges in this secular (mostly non-religious) world with society’s ever-changing expectations. In schools today, students may be taught things that seem different or even the opposite of what the Church teaches. Movies, television shows and social media may appear to stand up for equality but often are just encouraging questionable morality and the pursuit of one’s own desires.

Today, most of what takes up our time, effort, and resources in the world stands against our faith. Our lives are supposed to be centered on growing in our relationship and communion with God. However, worldly interests and activities seem to take up much of our day and often block our spiritual growth. This tension between the world vs. our Christian faith is not new as seen by the cover of Time Magazine<sup>5</sup> which boldly asked, “Is God Dead?”

In this lesson, we examine what the Orthodox Church teaches about some important matters and will explore how we relate to science, which is the effort to find answers about the world and how things work in it.



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<sup>5</sup> “Is God Dead?” (Time Magazine Cover, April 8, 1966).

## What is Truth?

To begin, let us ask what is truth. In this world, “truth” is what can be measured, proven or recognized as real by our senses. However, in the Nicene Creed, we state that we believe in “One True God...the Maker of heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible.”

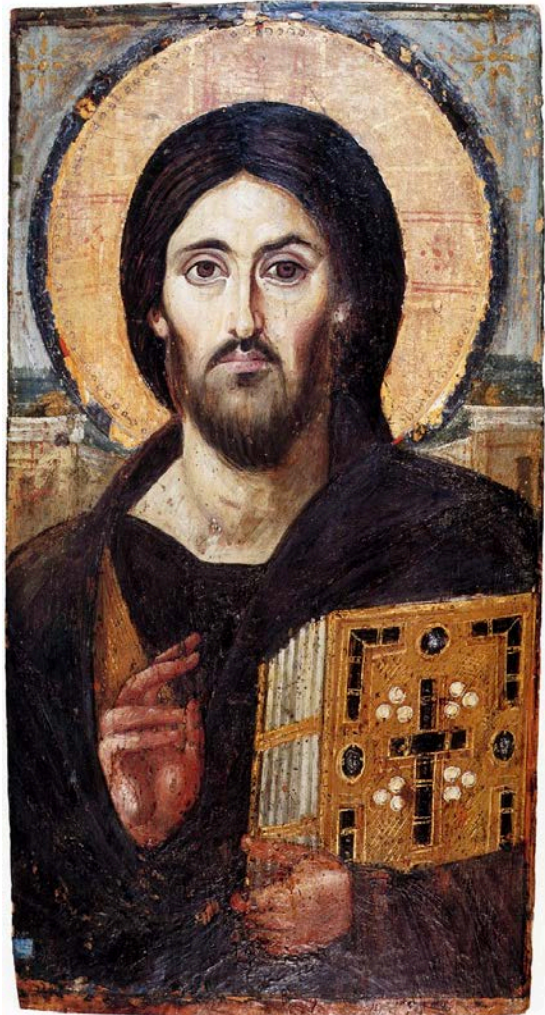
This opening statement of faith shows our belief in an unseen reality that exists beyond our senses. Truth is more than what exists in this physical world. As an Orthodox Christian, your body and your soul are one. So, seen and unseen realities are often blurred/overlapping. We participate in the unseen reality, especially through our participation in the life of the Church.

In **St. John 18:37**, the Lord says to Pontius Pilate when questioned by him:

*“For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the Truth hears My voice.”* To this Pilate asks that very important question, *“What is Truth?”*

In **Chapter 14**, Christ already said this about Himself, *“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”* In the beginning of John’s gospel, he says, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* In this translation, the “Word” comes from the Greek word *logos*, which also means truth or reason.

Once we understand that Christ is Truth (the reason for all things!), then we know that looking for truth, reason or purpose in this world equals seeking Christ. How we connect with the rest of His creation is an important part of our growing relationship with God.



### LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

Point out that Truth is not relative, it is found in the Holy Trinity and we are rooted in it.



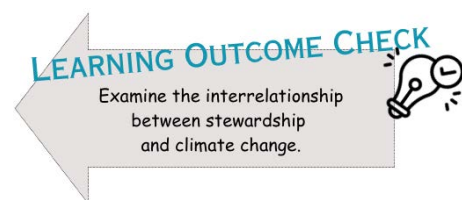
## Caretakers of Creation

We see in the book of **Genesis** that God, “*saw everything He had made, and indeed, it was very good.*” All of the elements of the natural world are good, including mankind.

We see that the Holy Trinity is actively involved in the creation of Adam. In **Genesis 1:26**, God says, “*Let Us make man in Our image*” indicating the existence of the persons of the Godhead. God created mankind and placed them in the garden for a specific purpose. He instructed them to “fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion” over all living creatures. God created mankind to care for the rest of creation. Let us take a closer look at these specific phrases above:

- To “fill the earth” means to take the goodness of God’s garden and expand it to the rest of the world. Just as a healthy garden blooms and increases, through our work and participation in God’s grace, we help to expand Eden and spread life to all creation.
- To “subdue it” means to make sense out of chaos. Through mankind’s participation in the world, the wild, disorganized, and confusing parts will be completely transformed. People were supposed to do the work of expanding Paradise to the rest of creation.
- To “have dominion over” is to participate in God’s rule. God created mankind to be a part of His heavenly kingdom. Dominion is not having authority that conquers or hurts others, but rather encourages and cares for all Creation.

Since we have been created in God’s image, and then entrusted to care and look after all creation, we must be genuine world caretakers. We are to care for all creation just as God Himself would care for it. We have a responsibility to conserve natural resources, protect sensitive ecosystems, and continue God’s work of filling the earth with life rooted in Him. Humans are meant to live in harmony with nature and to bring God’s love to the rest of creation. One of the most important aspects of the stewardship that God entrusted to humans is to protect and care for life, most especially other human life.



Understanding that our life’s purpose is to be His earthly caretakers, brings us even closer to God as we work towards becoming like God in what we do (theosis). This truth is found in the Holy Trinity, our foundation.

## The Sanctity of Life

God is the source of life and gives all life.

**Genesis 2:7** says: *“Then God formed man out of dust from the ground, and breathed in his face the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”* The Church teaches that life begins at conception in the womb and that “full personhood” exists at the time of conception. **Psalm 138:13-14** says:

*“For you possess my heart, O Lord;  
You took hold of me from my mother’s womb. I will give thanks to You,  
For I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”*

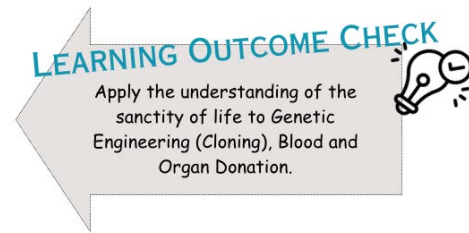
Even the single-celled zygote is an individual. This life is precious and holy because even while in the womb, it is in God’s image and has every right to exist and live. What makes life holy is that it is given by God for a purpose to grow in communion with Him and to become like Him.

Although many amazing breakthroughs in medical science have been made in recent decades, some procedures do not have the respect for the unborn human life as they are due. Genetic engineering is when an organism’s DNA is changed to bring about different/more desirable characteristics. This means that many naturally occurring traits or processes are changed or removed by turning “off” or “on” certain genes or introducing genes of other species through a laboratory process. This can happen in plants, animals, and even in humans, as in disease prevention. However, without proper safety rules and serious ethical considerations, this can lead to manipulation of human traits for selfish, pride-filled reasons. We must always remember that the body is holy, as is, because this is how God has created us.

Cloning is recreating an identical copy and is unethically manipulating the life God has gifted to human beings. It wrongly attempts to challenge the divine design of human reproduction. Lastly, the Orthodox Church approves organ or blood donation as it is for protecting and sustaining human life.

## Social Evolution of Mankind

Social Media has given us the ability to connect with friends and family and easily keep in touch. Another benefit of this technological advance is that we can now cooperate and work together in ways that were unimaginable just a few decades ago.





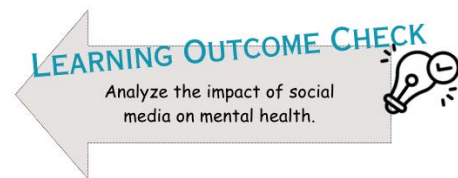
Sadly, this has also made us glued to our devices, in and in danger of distancing ourselves from our real lives, family and friends. Social media allows us to anonymously paint an online image of ourselves which could encourage jealousy, misbehavior and bullying. All this behavior feeds the craving for 'likes' and acceptance which act as addictive psychological rewards. This leads to unnecessary stress between our real life and a fake virtual life. It, also, shows us how vulnerable life has become.

Often the secular world considers those who are rich and powerful to be “blessed”; whereas the Christian focus is always on God and the eternal. As we read in **Psalms 1:1-3**:

*“Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the way of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the troublesome; But his will is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree Planted by streams of waters, That produces its fruit in its season;”*

This message is repeated by Christ during the Sermon on the Mount (**St. Matthew 5:3–12**). St. Paul, also, clearly teaches that the blessed will live in the light of Christ and bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit (**Galatians 5: 22-23**).

Our online image should always reflect our life in the real world, and how we behave with others. Our salvation lies in being perfect like our heavenly Father (**St. Matthew 5:48**) which is through the power of the Holy Spirit within us. We are to imitate Christ in all that we do.



Regardless of how the world is in reality or virtually (e.g., the metaverse), our focus is always on God and living our fullest life in the light of the Holy Trinity. This will bring us good health, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

## Science and Religion

Science is often seen as being at odds with Christianity, or that somehow to believe in Science automatically makes one not believe in Christ.

For Christians, God is the Creator of everything. As we profess in the Nicene Creed, He is the “maker of Heaven and Earth, and all that is seen and unseen”. God created everything out of nothing, and no one is an equal to God. We believe this because of our



Faith, and because God Himself taught us these truths. As St. Paul teaches, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (**Hebrews 11:1**).

Science has made advancements over the years that have helped all mankind. The Orthodox Church supports Science whenever it is for good purposes. As Christianity grew in the Western world, other Churches took more of a legalistic view of worldly issues. One example being the persecution of Galileo by the Roman Catholic Church to oppose his theory that the planets revolved around the sun.

The Orthodox Church, in comparison, did not take issue with the scientific order of the Universe. Our Church firmly believes that no scientific theory can ever change the True God. As stated in the Nicene Creed, we firmly believe in One True God, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things seen and unseen.

Many scientific theories, such as evolution, have unfortunately become very controversial for some faiths. For Orthodox Christians, we are to remain focused on our Faith. As long as Science does not replace God as the Creator or change the Person of Christ, it is acceptable to have opinions about whatever theory has been put forward.

Many great scientists in history are indeed Christian. It is important that as we grow and work in today’s world, we sanctify our activities by always staying Christ-centered.

## **Living our Faith**

As Orthodox Christians, it is sometimes difficult to know how to participate in the modern world and still live our Faith. It is true that often the secular world emphasizes knowledge without God as illustrated by the cover of the Time magazine in 1966. This is not new, as we saw people literally walk away from Christ Incarnate (**St. John 6:66**) when their secular minds could not accept the teaching that the Eucharist is the Real Body and Blood of Christ.

When we take our focus away from God and prioritize other things, what are we truly worshiping? These temptations and distractions have always been with mankind beginning with the Garden of Eden.



## Summary

It is important to be a disciple of Christ at any age! The God we worship can never be fully explained and; no scientific theory or advancement can come close to explaining everything. Many highly controversial scientific theories (e.g., evolution, Big Bang, etc.) will likely change over time. For example, scientists once “theorized” that the atom was the smallest, indivisible unit. This is the natural advancement of science . The Orthodox Church supports science. Church members can continue to work in these fields to further advance theories because at no time does this invalidate the Nicene Creed or the doctrines of our Faith.

As discussed in this lesson, there are areas where caution is necessary which includes cloning and the sanctity of life. These are very complex situations and even adults are encouraged to talk with their priest for more guidance.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Is donating blood allowed by the Orthodox Church? Apply the Orthodox Church teaching on the Sanctity of Life when answering the question and focus on the benefits of blood donation.
2. How can we help friends or family that are being bullied online? What if the person that is the bully is our friend or family? How can we approach either the victim or the aggressor using the teachings of our Faith?
3. What are some signs that our mental health is being impacted by social media? How can we rely on the support of the Church and the Sacraments to get better?

# Lesson 12: The Conciliar Church

## Lesson Goals

- *Recognise how the Church adopted a conciliar approach instead of an autocratic one for decision-making*
  - *Understand how the Church Fathers used the Holy Bible and Tradition to identify and refute heresies and develop the Nicene Creed.*
  - *Study how the Councils came to the decisions that determined the faith of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church*
- 

## What is a Council?

A council is a group of people who come together to think, discuss, and make decisions. A Church council is when church leaders gather to pray and seek guidance from the Holy Spirit. Together, they make important choices about beliefs, morals, traditions, and worship practices.

The Orthodox Church believes in a way of making decisions called “conciliar” which means it is done through councils. This process takes place at different levels: within individual parishes, at the diocese level (which is a group of parishes), and worldwide.

From the very beginning, the Holy Church has served her members by working together through councils. God guided the Apostles and later the bishops and other church leaders to make decisions that included input from everyone. Sometimes, not all decisions made by councils were understood or accepted by everyone. When a decision was found to be incorrect, like at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451, the Church did not accept it.

In the Roman Catholic Church, they have a different approach called Petrine Primacy. This means that the Pope of Rome, who is seen as the successor of St. Peter (the head of the Apostles and Christ’s representative on earth), makes important decisions himself. They also believe that the Pope is infallible, meaning he cannot make mistakes.

However, the Orthodox Church does not agree with the ideas of Petrine Primacy or the Pope’s infallibility. Instead, we believe that the Church is guided by councils made up of bishops and other leaders, similar to how the twelve disciples were guided by Jesus Christ. Our focus as Orthodox Christians is to ensure that the decisions made by councils align with the truth found in the Holy Scriptures and follow the teachings of the Church Fathers.

## The First Council of Jerusalem

In the early days of Christianity, an important meeting called the First Council of Jerusalem took place around AD 50. This gathering was called because there was a disagreement among the early Christians regarding the acceptance of Gentiles (non-Jews) into the Church and described in Scripture.

Some men from Judea, which is modern-day Israel, traveled to Antioch, located in present-day Turkey, where many Gentiles had begun to believe in Jesus Christ. These Judeans were teaching that in order to be saved, the Gentiles had to follow the Law of Moses, which included being circumcised, a painful procedure, before they could become Christians. This was a repeat of a discussion that had already been resolved in **Acts 11:1-18**.

In response to this disagreement, two of the Apostles, Paul and Barnabas, engaged in a lively debate with the Judeans. They believed it was important to seek clarity on this matter, so they decided to travel to Jerusalem to meet with the Apostles and elders there.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, the Apostles and elders came together to discuss the issue at hand. St. James, the first Bishop of Jerusalem and a cousin of Jesus, led this important meeting. Recognizing their need for divine wisdom, the Council members prayed to the Holy Spirit for guidance (**Acts 15:28**).

St. Peter spoke passionately, reminding everyone that God knows the hearts of all people. He expressed that God accepts Gentiles who believe in Jesus and grants them the Holy Spirit in the same way He did for the Jewish believers. Peter emphasized that it is by grace that everyone is saved (Acts 15:7-11).

Following Peter's testimony, Paul and Barnabas shared their own experiences of how God had performed miracles among the Gentiles, demonstrating that they too were touched by the Holy Spirit and cleansed by their faith.

After much discussion and prayer, St. James interpreted the testimonies of Peter and Paul. He proposed that the Gentiles who were turning to God should not be burdened with the requirement of circumcision. The members of the Council agreed with St. James, believing that this decision was guided by the Holy Spirit.

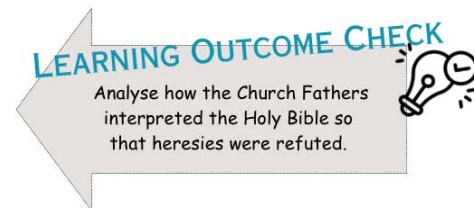


They then wrote a letter to the Churches to inform them of their decision. St. James advised the Gentiles to only avoid certain practices: things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, consuming blood, and eating animals that had been strangled (**Acts 15:19-20**).

The First Council of Jerusalem serves as a significant example of how the early Church dealt with important matters through prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The decisions made by the Apostles and Elders helped to maintain unity and clarity within the Church.

### **The Uncorrupted Faith**

The Church Fathers, like St. Peter and St. James during this Council, interpreted the Holy Scriptures with great care to ensure that the truth of God's love and grace was upheld. They used the Scriptures as their guide when addressing challenges and potential heresies—false teachings that could lead believers away from the true faith. By closely examining the Scriptures and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church Fathers demonstrated how to refute heresies and confirm the importance of salvation through Jesus Christ alone. This approach not only preserved the faith of the early Christians but also laid down a foundation for future councils and teachings within the Church. Through their example, we learn the importance of seeking God's wisdom in our understanding of the Scriptures and in our faith journey. This became the model in all subsequent Councils as well, as these were not meetings where the teaching was changed when heresies became widespread but rather teachings were clarified.



In the early Church, as described in Acts 2:42-47, Christians formed a close-knit community that worshiped God together, shared their resources, and prayed, all while feeling a deep sense of belonging to the body of Christ. However, as the Church spread due to persecution, false teachings and heresies began to emerge alongside its growth. To address serious threats to the true faith, councils were convened, with local councils handling specific issues. Nevertheless, when a matter affected the entire Church, representatives from all churches gathered for a larger council. Among these, three councils received universal recognition from the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church for their important decisions: the Council of Nicea in AD 325, the Council of Constantinople in AD 381, and the Council of Ephesus in AD 431. These Ecumenical Councils played a crucial role in defining the Christian faith and are acknowledged as sufficient to uphold the teachings of the ancient Church, while other local councils were not recognized.

## **The Council of Nicea**

In the year 325 AD, the Council of Nicea took place to address a serious issue within the Christian faith. A priest named Arius from Alexandria was teaching that Jesus, the Son of God, was not of the same substance as God the Father. This idea, known as Arianism, raised many important questions for Christians: If Jesus was not truly divine, how could He save humanity? The Church recognized that these teachings posed a significant threat, and Pope Alexander condemned Arius' beliefs. Despite his exile, Arius gained many followers, which led Emperor Constantine to convene the Council of Nicea, where 318 bishops gathered to discuss these crucial matters.

During the council, the bishops debated the nature of Christ and the relationship between the Father and the Son. The majority of bishops, including notable figures like Athanasius, supported the belief that Jesus was "of the same substance" with the Father, known as Homoousian. They clarified that Jesus was eternally begotten, not created, emphasizing His divinity. In response to Arianism, the council produced the Nicene Creed, which affirmed that Jesus Christ is "Light from Light" and "true God from true God." This council laid the foundation for understanding the Holy Trinity and stood firm against the dangerous teachings of Arius.

## **The Council of Constantinople**

The Second Ecumenical Council convened in Constantinople in 381 AD and focused on another vital aspect of the Christian faith: the Holy Spirit. During this council, the bishops addressed the heresy known as Macedonianism, which denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit, claiming it was not eternal and should not be worshiped alongside the Father and the Son. St. Basil the Great emerged as a leader in defending the Holy Spirit's role, emphasizing the Scriptures that describe the Holy Spirit as both divine and integral to the Holy Trinity.

As a result of the discussions and decisions made at this council, an important phrase was added to the Nicene Creed: "And in the One Living Holy Spirit, the life-giving Lord of all." This declaration affirmed the Holy Spirit's divinity and role in the Church. The council also clarified the belief that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, establishing this theology as a cornerstone of Orthodox Christianity. These decisions further strengthened the faith against various heresies and the misunderstandings surrounding the Holy Spirit's nature.

## The Council of Ephesus

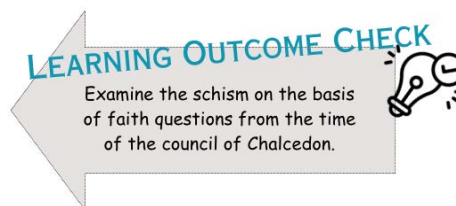
In 431 AD, the Third Ecumenical Council was held in Ephesus to address the teachings of Nestorius, who asserted that Jesus was merely a human born to St. Mary, with the divine Word of God entering Him later. This idea contradicted the belief that Jesus was both fully God and fully human from the very moment of His conception. The council vehemently opposed Nestorius's views, emphasizing that St. Mary should be called "Theotokos," meaning "Bearer of God," affirming that Jesus Christ is God incarnate from the beginning.

Led by St. Cyril of Alexandria, the council members successfully denounced Nestorianism and upheld the truth that Jesus Christ is one with both divine and human natures, unified as the Incarnate Word of God. After much deliberation, Nestorius was expelled from the Church, reinforcing the belief in the fundamental nature of Christ. The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was finalized during this gathering, establishing the foundational beliefs of the Orthodox Christian faith that continue to guide the Church today.

## Rejection of Council of Chalcedon

In AD 451, another council met in the small city Chalcedon near Constantinople. This council led to the separation of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Church.

St. Dioscorus was an important church leader in Alexandria. He became the patriarch, which is a high-ranking bishop, in the year 444 after St. Cyril. St. Cyril is remembered in our church prayers, called the Thubden, as "the exalted and true tower." He taught the truth about the Incarnation, which means how God, the Word, became human through Jesus Christ. St. Dioscorus also believed that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. This belief is called **miaphysitism**. It means that in Jesus, both His human and divine natures are always present as one single nature. This mystery of the Incarnation is very important in understanding who Jesus is. This is very different from **monophysitism** that teaches that Jesus Christ has only a single element to His nature i.e., His divinity.



At the Council of Chalcedon, due to numerous reasons that were also political in nature, the many in the council began to coalesce that Jesus Christ is to be "recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."

St. Dioscoros was a devoted defender of the Orthodox faith and a disciple of St. Cyril. He led a group of fellow believers in opposition to the statement that Jesus Christ exists “in two natures.” St. Dioscoros and his followers stood firmly against this interpretation during the discussions of the Council of Chalcedon. Unfortunately, they were defeated, and the council proceeded with its decision.

The Council of Chalcedon was not accepted by many in the Christian East, which includes communities in Egypt, Syria, Ethiopia, Armenia, and India. These groups of believers are now commonly known as the Oriental Orthodox Churches. They hold that the declaration of “in two natures” made at Chalcedon is not in line with the teachings of the Church before that council. Instead, they proclaim the belief in “from two natures” and “one incarnate nature.”

St. Severus was one of the key figures who defended the decisions made at the Council of Chalcedon. However, those who opposed him labeled him as a Monophysite. Fr. V.C. Samuel defends St. Severus stating that he “never objected to the dynamic continuance of the two natures in the one Christ, and the ascription of the term ‘monophysite’ to his theological position is nothing but the legacy of the polemics of a bygone age.” Fr. Samuel suggests that St. Severus’s beliefs are deeply rooted in the theology of St. Cyril, further emphasizing the complexity of these theological discussions.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. How did the decisions made at the Councils of Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus shape the beliefs and practices of the Church? Can you think of one specific teaching or doctrine from these councils and explain why it is important to our faith today?
2. Why did the Council of Chalcedon lead to a schism in the church? Reflect on the key faith questions that arose during this council and discuss how different interpretations of these questions have affected the relationship between the Oriental Orthodox Church and other Christian communities.
3. The Church Fathers played a significant role in interpreting the Holy Bible. Can you identify a specific heresy that was addressed by one of the Church Fathers? Describe how their interpretation helped clarify the teachings of the Church and why this is still relevant to our understanding of faith and scripture today.

# Lesson 13: The Creed

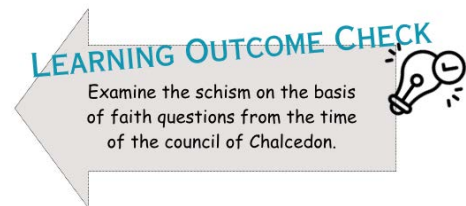
## Lesson Goals

- *I can understand how the Creed confirms our faith in the Holy Trinity*
- *I can appreciate how the Nicene Creed was expanded by our Church Fathers to clarify for the faithful against serious heresies*
- *I can recognise how the church adopted a conciliar approach in decision making*

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## Background to the Council of Constantinople

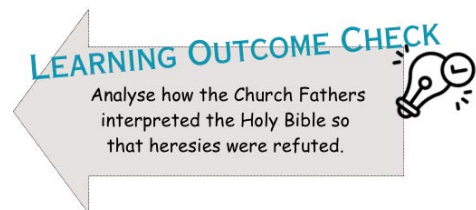
The faith of the first Council (AD 325, Nicea) was agreed upon by the second Council (AD 381, Constantinople). The following simple language changes/additions were made by the Council of Constantinople, to make the statement of faith clearly understood and to finally publicly end false beliefs (heresy arguments).



The statement that 'He became Man' was added to the Creed to show that Jesus had a fully human form too.

'The Holy Spirit is the Lord and the Giver of Life to everything', means He is the creator, the True God and equal to Father and Son. Hence, he is worthy of being adored along with Father and Son. So, this part was added: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father..... who spoke by the prophets..... We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen" The doctrine of the Trinity was now complete.

Since the Council of Constantinople completed the Creed in its present form, the Creed was first known as the "Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed". It is a declaration of the Orthodox faith of the Christian Church. It opposed many heresies. Now, it is known simply as the Nicene Creed. It is to be recited in full faith and acceptance of the truths, as it blessedly summarizes our divine faith.





## **Filioque – the great schism**

Initially, both the Greek (Eastern) and the Latin (Western) Churches together believed the Nicene Creed which states that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and is worshiped and glorified along with the Father and the Son”. However, in the 6th Century, the Roman Catholic (Latin) Church added “proceeds from Father and the Son.” In the Latin language, the word for “from the Son” translates to ‘Filioque.’ The Creed was accepted in its present form in AD 381 , but the "filioque" phrase was not added until AD 589.

No one has the right to remove or add anything to the finalized version of the Nicene Creed, for it is the Church’s complete statement of Faith. According to Orthodox Church teachings, even the ecumenical councils do not have the authority to change the Creed.

The statement that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Son, is wrong because in the gospels Jesus Christ describes the Holy Spirit as the “Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father” (**St. John 15:26**). Hence, the ‘Filioque’ is completely opposite to what is written in the gospels and to the teachings of the Church Fathers.

The Orthodox Church opposed the inclusion of the ‘Filioque’ in the Creed. This controversy caused the Great Schism of 1054 or the East-West Schism. The Church became divided into two separate Churches: Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.

## **The Council of Ephesus**

At the 3rd council (Ephesus AD 431), St Cyril was so concerned about keeping the truth in theology that he wrote letters to the Council which were accepted as the true Orthodox Doctrine. When it was declared that Nestorius was excommunicated for his heresy beliefs (that Jesus was not of a Virgin birth because Jesus' humanity and divinity were separate), the people cheered loudly. It was seen as victory for the Mother of God. There was no greater joy in the city than this verdict by the Council. Victorious and having solved the biggest crisis of the Christian world at that time, Saint Cyril returned home to Alexandria.

## **The Council of Chalcedon**

St. Severus is remembered in the 5th Diptych of the Holy Qurbana as “the Crown of the Syrians, the eloquent mouth, the pillar and doctor of the Holy Church of God as a whole, the meadow abounding in blossom, who preached all the time that Mary was undoubtedly the God bearer”. But what does this mean and why did our Church not accept the Council of Chalcedon?

St. Severus was a strong critic of the 4th Great Council (Chalcedon, 451 A.D.) and their unacceptable view of 'in two natures' which was very close to the heresy of Nestorius. St. Severus was supported by a large number of delegates of the Christians from the East, representing communities in Egypt, Syria, Ethiopia, Armenia and India. These communities are now referred to as the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

St. Dioscorus of the Oriental Orthodox Churches taught that Christ is a single personality formed by the union of perfect Godhead and perfect manhood. This simply means that Christ is fully God and fully man; human and Divine in One. In the words of St. Cyril of Alexandria, Jesus is 'one incarnate nature of God the Word.'

As we learned earlier, we believe Christ is fully God and fully man, and by imitating Christ we are acting God-like in all we do. The Person of Jesus Christ is central to the Christian faith, and this is why our Church fathers disagreed with the Council of Chalcedon.

### **Our Symbol of Faith**

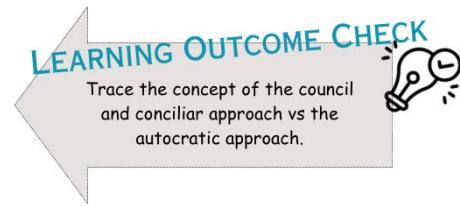
The Nicene Creed is important for our Christian beliefs and we recite for the first time during the Sacrament of Baptism. The Creed is recited in all our Sacraments and our daily prayers. We also say the Creed before the priest offers the Anaphora, an important moment of the Holy Qurbana. Mar Bar Kepha shared three important reasons for this:

- To Declare Our Beliefs: When we recite the Creed, it allows everyone to know and affirm the beliefs we hold as a community.
- To Unite Faith and Confession: The Creed helps us understand that what we believe in our hearts is the same as what we express with our words.
- To Sanctify Our Minds, Hearts, and Mouths: Speaking the Creed prepares us spiritually for the sacred moments of worship that follow.

The priest begins the recitation of the Creed because he represents all members of the Church community. This shows the idea of being together in faith, rather than just following one person's authority.

As we say the Creed, we also make the sign of the Cross three times to remember key moments in Jesus' life: His Incarnation (becoming human), Crucifixion (His sacrifice for us), and Resurrection (His victory over death).

In our Church, this practice reflects a conciliar approach, where the beliefs of the whole community are expressed together, contrasting with an autocratic approach where one person dictates everything. By participating in the Creed, we are part of a unified group that honors Christ's teachings together, showing the strength and beauty of our shared faith.



### **Reflection Questions**

1. How did the Church Fathers contribute to defining the dogmas of the Nicene Creed, and why do you think it is important for us to understand these foundational beliefs in our faith today?
2. Reflect on the differences between a conciliar approach and an autocratic approach to decision-making. How could these different styles impact a local church community, and why might the conciliar approach be more beneficial in resolving disagreements?
3. Choose one of the councils (Nicea, Constantinople, or Ephesus) and discuss what issue it addressed. Why do you think the outcome of that council was significant for the future of the Church, and how does understanding this issue help us in our own faith journey?

# Lesson 14: Workers in the Vineyard

## Lesson Goals

- *I can briefly summarize the different Oriental Orthodox Churches and their history*
  - *I can explain that we are in communion with the Oriental Orthodox Churches*
- 

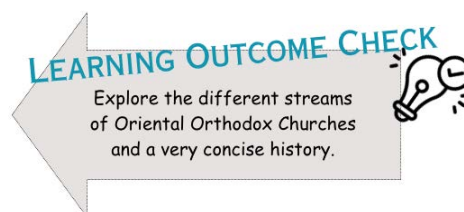
## The Oriental Orthodox Churches

The Oriental Orthodox Churches uphold three important councils: the Council of Nicaea, the Council of Constantinople, and the Council of Ephesus. These councils are considered sacred, holy, and ecumenical, establishing crucial beliefs for the church.

The Oriental Orthodox communion is composed of six autocephalous churches - the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch which includes the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

In 1963, at the World Council of Churches Conference held in Montreal, Canada, the Oriental Orthodox Churches were officially named and organized as a subgroup within the worldwide church community. This was a significant step towards better understanding and cooperation among different Christian traditions.

In 1965, representatives from all of these Churches gathered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Our Malankara Church was represented by the late H.H. Moran Mor Baselios Augen I of the East, highlighting our important connection with the other Oriental Orthodox Churches. This lesson will delve deeper into the unique histories and practices of these Churches, as well as their shared faith and traditions.





*The Addis Ababa Conference -1965*

### ***Armenian Apostolic Church***

The Armenian Apostolic Church traces its roots back to the apostle Thaddaeus, who was the first to preach the Gospel in Armenia. King Abgar of Armenia, who became gravely ill, heard about Jesus' miraculous healing powers and sent for Him. However, after Jesus' Ascension, He sent Thaddaeus to Armenia in AD 36. Thaddaeus healed the king and shared the teachings of Christ with him, his household, and the people of Edessa, leading to the establishment of the Armenian Church. King Abgar is recognized as the first Christian monarch, and he supported St. Thaddaeus in spreading the faith throughout Armenia.

In AD 49, the apostle Bartholomew joined Thaddaeus to further the mission of Christianity in Armenia. Sadly, both apostles faced persecution from those who opposed their teachings, and they were martyred for their faith. Over the centuries, many Armenian Christians sacrificed their lives for their beliefs, enduring torture and persecution. One particularly tragic event occurred in the 3rd century when King Khosrovo II ordered the execution of Christians. In response, a nobleman named Anak killed the tyrannical king, but



only his infant son survived. By divine grace, this child grew up to become St. Gregory the Illuminator, who played a crucial role in establishing the Armenian Church in his homeland.

### ***Coptic Orthodox Church***

The Coptic Orthodox Church, which originated in Egypt, has a rich history tied closely to the early years of Christianity. The Holy Family's travel to Egypt to escape King Herod's persecution is considered a significant moment in Coptic Church history, showing Egypt's important role in the story of salvation. Many Coptic traditions celebrate this event, suggesting that the Egyptians revered the young Jesus even before His public ministry. St. Mark the Evangelist is credited with founding the Coptic Church in Alexandria and became its first patriarch, starting a line of 177 patriarchs.

St. Mark played a significant role in introducing the Gospel to the Egyptians. The first Egyptian to convert was a cobbler named Anianus, who had a miraculous encounter with St. Mark while he was repairing the Evangelist's shoe. After this transformative moment, St. Mark baptized Anianus and his family, and Anianus later became a bishop. St. Mark's ministry faced challenges, as he was captured and martyred by pagans who opposed the spread of Christianity in AD 68. Despite his death, St. Mark's legacy continues in the Coptic Church, where his teachings and leadership remain influential.

### ***Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church***

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church highlights Ethiopia's historical connections to Israel and its early acceptance of Christianity. The church's namesake means "united" with Christ, emphasizing the belief in the union of humanity with the divine. Ethiopia's link to God is well-documented in the Bible, including the story of the Queen of Sheba visiting King Solomon. Through the centuries, many Ethiopians journeyed to Jerusalem, inspiring them to worship the One True God. The Book of Acts recounts how St. Philip encountered an Ethiopian traveler, leading him to spread the Gospel upon his return to Ethiopia.

For much of its early existence, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was overseen by the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria. However, due to geographic challenges, there were periods when communication between the Ethiopian faithful and the Coptic leadership was limited. By the 19th century, efforts to strengthen this connection led to the consecration of four bishops for the Ethiopian Church. In 1959, the first Ethiopian Patriarch, Archbishop Basilios, was appointed. This pivotal event marked a significant step towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Church becoming independent and self-governing, allowing it to develop its unique traditions while remaining rooted in Christian faith.

## ***Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church***

The Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church formed after Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1991. Following this historic event, the churches in Eritrea organized themselves and sought the support of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate to help establish a self-governing church. In response to their request, several Eritrean bishops were ordained in Cairo within three years. This empowered the Eritrean Orthodox faithful to practice their faith under their own leadership while maintaining close ties to the Coptic Church.

In May 1998, the Eritrean Patriarchate was officially appointed in Asmara with the consecration of Patriarch Filipos. The beliefs and liturgical practices of the Eritrean Orthodox Church closely mirror those of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Both churches share a rich spiritual heritage and are known for their unique traditions, emphasizing the importance of communion with God and vibrant community life. As they continue to flourish, both churches play vital roles in the spiritual lives of their congregations and contribute to the broader Orthodox Christian community.

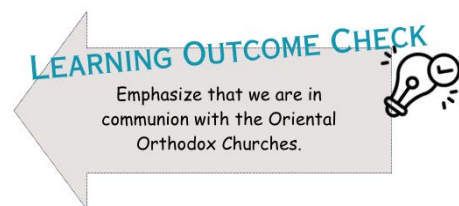
## ***Syriac Orthodox Church***

The Syriac Orthodox Church has its origins in the city of Antioch, where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. Even before the arrival of St. Peter and St. Paul, other believers traveled to Antioch to preach the Gospel. The church became an essential center for early Christianity, especially following the destruction of Jerusalem. Antioch later became the home of the Patriarch, who held authority over regions such as Syria, Phoenicia, and Mesopotamia, reflecting the church's growing influence.

A significant split occurred in the church after the Council of Chalcedon, leading to the development of what is known as the modern Syriac Orthodox Church. Prominent early figures such as St. Severus of Antioch, St. Philoxenos of Mabbug, and St. Jacob of Serugh were instrumental in shaping the teachings and structure of the church. This church values its direct lineage back to the apostles, particularly St. Peter, underscoring its historical significance in the Christian faith and the rich theological heritage it offers to its followers.

## **Our Church**

The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (MOSC) is an important part of the family of churches known as the Oriental Orthodox Churches. This means that we are in full communion with them, sharing the same core beliefs and teachings.



As members of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, we follow the same faith that was expressed in the important meetings of the early Church, called ecumenical councils. These councils took place at Nicaea in AD 325, Constantinople in AD 381, and Ephesus in AD 431. Although the ways we celebrate our faith in worship may differ, each tradition within the Oriental Orthodox Churches reflects the same fundamental beliefs.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons taught us that the small differences in how we practice our faith actually help to show our unity. In other words, even though we might do things a little differently in our services, we all believe in the same essential truths about our faith. This unity is a great blessing, reminding us that we are all part of one big family of believers.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. What are some important events in the history of the Oriental Orthodox Churches that have shaped their beliefs and practices, and how do these events connect us as a community?
2. In what ways can we show our connection and support to other Oriental Orthodox Churches, and why is it important for our faith as Malankara Orthodox Christians to maintain these relationships?
3. After learning about the various Oriental Orthodox Churches, how do you think our traditions and practices in the Malankara Orthodox Church reflect our shared history and communion with other churches?

# Lesson 15: The Monasteries of God

## Lesson Goals

- *I can understand monasticism.*
  - *I can relate how monasticism and marriage are two different paths towards salvation.*
  - *I can briefly explain asceticism and how all are called to live ascetic life.*
- 

## Monasteries

Monasteries are places where monks live together, pray and are transformed into true children of Christ. A monk (Sanyasi) lives a life of obedience, poverty and chastity. Monasteries are also called Aashramam or Dayara. There are separate dayaras for men and women. Not every one who stays in a Dayara is formally a member of an Aashramam. Once they become members of the Aashramam, they have to wear Masanampsa (special head cloth) which indicates that they chose to be an Aashramasthan. They wear a wooden cross around their neck and also stop eating meat.

## Monasteries of the Malankara Orthodox Church

Monasticism refers to a lifestyle involving separation from the world for the purpose of complete dedication to prayer, to achieve perfect obedience to the gospel life. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, monasticism is considered full dedicated discipleship of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist is considered the first monastic follower. Our Church has also been blessed to have many Dayaras and all have been growing in divinity based on prayers, fasting and observance of Lents.

The following is a list of most of our Orthodox Dayaras:

### 1. Bethany Aashramam : Ranni - Perunad

\*Order of Imitation of Christ

\*Founded in 1918 by Fr. P.T. Geevarghese ( Later Archbishop Mar Ivanios )and Dn. Alexios (Later Alexios Mar Theodosios).

\*to teach faith, conduct worship in its fullest form, to encourage people to live a life that's filled with God and to live a life which is an offering for the Church ,and society.

\*An old age home is found in Kuzhimattom. & Priests and Nuns in this order wear a cloth that is **Kaavi** or orangish in color.

## **2. Bethany Madtam**

\*Sisterhood of Imitation of Christ

\*Started in 1921 by Fr. Alexios Mar Thevodosios and Fr. P.T. Geevarghese. Sr. Hannah and Sr. Sarah were Superiors.

\*Patients who are in need are helped.

## **3. Mount Thabor Dayara: Pathanapuram**

\*Society of the order of the Sacred Transfiguration

\*Started in 1930 by Fr. C. M. Thomas ( Later Thoma Mar Divanasios )

\* Focus is helping in parish ministries, other church spiritual organizations but mostly to help the needy in providing funds for making homes, conducting weddings etc.

## **4. Mount Thabor Convent : Pathanapuram**

\*1930, Fr. C.M. Thomas, Sr. Sushana (first Superior Mother)

\*Focus areas are Education, assisting with Sthree Samajam functioning etc. )

## **5. Bethlehem Ashramam : Chengammanaad**

\*1960, Mathews Mar Coorilos Thirumeni (Later H.H. Baselios Marthoma Mathew II, Metropolitan)

## **6. St. Paul's Aashramam : Puthuppaadi**

\*1958, Fr. M.V. George (Later Geevarghese Mar Osthathios) \*Children's home and Evangelisation are the main missions.

## **7. St. Paul's Convent : Puthuppaadi**

\*1978, Children's Home [Shishubhavanam], Girl's Home [Baalika Bhavanam], Old age home [Vridha Bhavanam], Hospital services

## **8. Holy Trinity Aashramam : Ranni**

\*1970, Fr. T. E. George (Later Geevarghese Mar Dioscoros)



\*Parish mission is the focus.

### **9. Holy Cross Convent : Thiruvananthapuram**

\*1985, Dioscros Thirumeni

\*Focus is a home for special needs children.

### **10. Kristhushishya Aashramam, Thadakkam, Coimbatore**

\*1936, The first Aashramam founded outside of Kerala and was started by Bishop Peckanham Walsh.

\*Evangelization, conduct conferences and dhyanams, and providing medical care are the focus.

### **11. St. Mary's Convent: Othara**

\*1934, Founded by K.M. Annamma

### **12. Bethlehem St. Mary's Convent: Kizhakkambalam ( 1937)**

### **13. Nazareth Convent: Kadambanaad, Adoor (1966)**

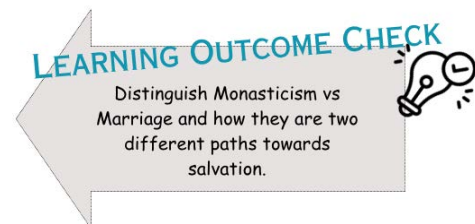
### **14. Basalel Convent : Shooranaad ( 1968, Founded by Barskeppa Ramban )**

### **15. Mar Coorilos Dayara: Mylapra**

### **16. St. Mary's Convent : Aduppootti**

## **How is Monasticism different from marriage?**

Monasticism and marriage are two different routes towards the same destination. Just like in a monastery, where every monk or nun should forgive their fellow members, inside a family the husband and wife should, also, forgive each other. Just as a member of the monastery prays for the unity of all the members of the Aashramam, the husband and wife should pray for the unity of the family. In both these routes, the challenges are very different, but at the same time they have many similarities too. In the first days of marriage, life is easy and love is fresh. However, as life goes on and the responsibilities increase, one should remember the love which they first shared. This should help them to continue to love and support each other. This same message of remaining devoted in love and in faith with God applies to monks too.



## Asceticism

*“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” (St. Matthew 16:24; St. Luke 9:23)*

Asceticism comes from the Greek word for exercise or training which is done as preparation. In spiritual life, this means exercising the concepts of self-sacrifice, struggle, and being in constant battle against our human will, habits and worldly passions. Asceticism is the way of life which prepares one for the Kingdom of God through the training and conditioning of the whole person (body and soul) towards a Godly life.

## Summary

Asceticism is an exercise in goodness/morals. It is the work that we have to do to correct, reform and purify ourselves. It may involve fasting, prayer, prostrations, participation in divine services, prayer rope (Jesus prayer) or not eating certain foods. These are all acts of self-sacrifice, as you try to be closer to God.

### Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on a monastery you would like to visit and explain how the monastic life there exemplifies a different path to salvation compared to married life. What insights can you gain about the unique spiritual practices of monks that differ from those of individuals in marriage?
2. Consider the role of monks in the Church. How do the commitments and lifestyle of a monk illustrate the concept of monasticism? In what ways do you think these commitments differ from the responsibilities and experiences of married individuals?
3. The historical context of the Malankara monastery raises interesting questions. Why do you think it took many centuries for our Church to establish a monastery, and how does this relate to the understanding of monasticism as a distinct path toward salvation in contrast to marriage? In what ways do you think these two paths can coexist within our faith community?

# Lesson 16: Tending the Heart and Mind

## Lesson Objectives

- *I can explain how to seek support from my spiritual community.*
- *I can understand when to seek help from a professional for my mental health*
- *I can identify how public expectations are often different from expectations for Orthodox Christians.*
- *I can state how managing my time, talents and resources will help me become more like Christ and guide others towards Christ too.*

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*“Therefore humble yourselves under the Mighty Hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:6).*

In this lesson, we will read about how we Christians can work towards a healthy body, mind and soul.

Let us discuss the terms physical health and mental health.

1. *Physical health* - the condition of your physical body and how well it is working.
2. *Mental health*- your emotional, psychological, and social well-being, and their impact on how you think, feel, and act.
3. *Spiritual health*- is expressed through prayer, daily Christian living, worship, and leads to our union with God.

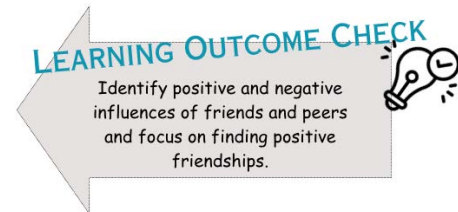
It is important that we see our well-being in each of these areas and not just our physical health, as getting physically sick is often the easiest to recognize. However, if we do not practice good habits, express our emotions in healthy ways, and keep our focus on Christ, our health can quickly decline in all areas without us even realizing it.

## Emotions and Experiences

Emotions are reactions that human beings experience in response to events or situations. The type of emotion a person expresses is dependent upon the situation and how that person responds to that situation. For instance, a person experiences joy when they receive good news. A person experiences fear when they are threatened. We have to

understand that even if two individuals experience the same situation, both of them might express very different emotions.

It is important to avoid thinking of feelings as good vs bad or positive vs negative. This creates unnecessary judgment on the emotion. It discourages others from expressing themselves openly and in a healthy way. We should think of our emotions as information that we can pay attention to and learn from. This helps us understand our baseline, our normal daily routines. Each of us have regular routines and emotions that we recognize because they happen on a daily basis. That is why it is important to recognize our natural responses to situations. Then we can tell when something feels off or different from our natural responses.

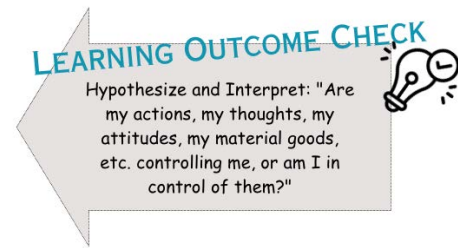


This is a good indicator whether we need to talk about it with someone or to seek out more help. Sometimes we may not understand why we feel a certain way. Sometimes we feel so joyous about something that we should talk to someone to better help understand and remember those happy memories. Talking about our feelings and emotions is a good way to process our reactions, understand ourselves and why we may feel the way we do.

We all go through struggles in our lives; some may be very difficult and some not as difficult. We all have our own individual strengths and weaknesses. It is important to recognize the things we like and dislike and to build up on our God-given talents and strengths. One way, to figure out how to express and work through our emotions in a healthy manner mentally and spiritually, is to read the **Psalms**. Here, we read that David learned how to speak with God and how to express his emotions to God in a healthy way. There is both joy and praise in the Psalms and throughout the Scriptures.

There is, also, sadness. Interestingly, when Christ was suffering on the Cross, He said: *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* (**Matthew 27:46**). In His most painful moment, Christ was actually quoting Scripture (**Psalms 22:1**). We, also, see David expressing anger. Even St. Paul told the Ephesians: *"Be angry, and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil"* (**Ephesians 4:26-27**).

St. Paul was not saying to never get angry, but rather to express anger in a healthy way. We have to understand the cause of why we are frustrated or getting angry. We have to make sure that we are not taking out our anger on our family and friends. As we process our anger, we have to direct the anger towards the devil as this is the appropriate way to express anger and to not sin!



### **Building Relationships and seeking support from our community**

As Orthodox Christians, our goal is **Theosis**, to become like God which means to become like Christ. One of the best ways to grow to become like Christ is to engage in Sunday School, Church services, to read the Bible and other spiritual books, and to learn more about Christ. Building relationships and friendships with people who are also growing spiritually is another great way to keep ourselves growing in fellowship.

Christ taught us to love God and to love others (**John 13:34-35**). Some examples of this are building a good relationship with your parish priest, spiritual father, your Sunday School teacher, and other students about your age. It is like having a Church family. Then we can share our experiences and our struggles with this community. We are able to ask them to pray for us, just like we will pray for others in our community and around the world. So, whenever we are really struggling, we will easily reach out to that parish priest or trusted adult with whom we already have a strong relationship. They will talk with, guide and pray for us, as necessary. Sometimes they might recognize that we may need to talk to a professional therapist. These are all good things to make sure that we have the proper support through our difficult times.

### **Need to seek professional support**

If you feel you are having stress and anxiety beyond your normal daily and school stress, it is important that you speak to a trusted adult. Open up to them and express what you are going through.

There is good stress and bad stress. Good stress helps us meet deadlines and makes sure that we turn our homework in on time or that we study well for an upcoming examination. Stress, that shuts us down or interferes with our duties, means that we are stressing out so much that we are not able to handle or complete any task. It is because



fear or anxiety prevents us from being productive or moving forward. Getting extra support help is a good reminder of Jesus' message to us:

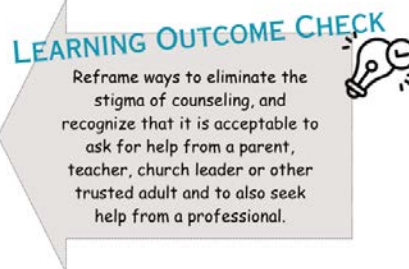
*"casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."* **(1 Peter 5:7)**

God wants you to give all of your worries, cares, and concerns to Him. One of the ways He takes care of us is by putting helpful people in our lives, for us to go to when we need the extra support.

Sometimes we experience situations in our school (bullying, bad grades, etc.) or families (death, excessive fighting, etc.) that cause us a lot of sadness or anger. It is important to talk with a trusted adult about how these situations affect us. This will help us mentally process and will give us extra support for what we are going through.

During trauma, we do not realize how it can affect us. The sooner we are able to process and talk about the trauma, and get help, the sooner we will heal. Then we will be better able to handle difficult situations, as they come up.

It is important to recognize our emotions during difficult times and to observe how it affects our daily functioning. If it is affecting us negatively and we are unable to do our daily tasks (examples: not wanting to go to school etc.). Then it is important to seek professional support and guidance. You will learn how to process the struggles and eventually go back to your normal daily routine to the best of your ability.

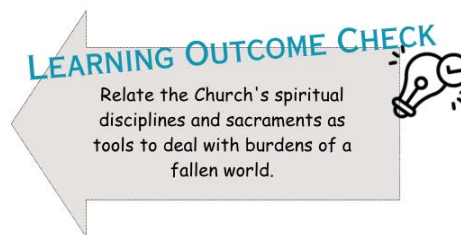


### Stay Focused on God

No matter all the joys and struggles which we go through in life, it is important to always keep our focus on God and always walk towards His Kingdom. The gospel of St. Mark reminds us:

*"And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength"* **(Mark 12:30).**

When we build up our love for God and His Church, we become the best version of ourselves and live up to our full potential. The way we live our lives as Orthodox Christians, and the way we treat others (with love and patience) shows in our daily lives; especially in how we approach school, friendships,

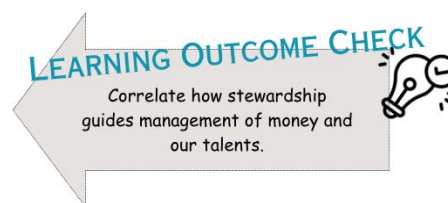


Church, and learning how to serve God and others with our time and talents.

The advice a spiritual mentor gave to an overwhelmed mentee once was *“find opportunities to help others and it will help you”*. This might seem odd and the opposite of what the stressed out mentee should be doing. However, as the mentee started obeying this advice, it increased her serotonin levels (a hormone in your body that puts you in a better mood), reduced her constant worries, her focus on her problems, and reminded her to refocus on God and the Church. This actually helped her to complete her duties and to seek out the support she needed to process the struggles she was going through.

## Summary

Our lives have to be centered around God and the Church. We have to get into habits of loving others in a godly way, serving others, and giving of our time and wealth to the needy. These are all ways that reenergize us and refocus our priorities to live a life pleasing to God. We are not to live for worldly treasures that may deceive and harm us.



Being positive physically, mentally and spiritually is the goal. Healthy daily habits can help decrease your stress, lower your risk of disease, and increase your energy to be the best Christ-like version of you!

## Reflection Questions

1. How can I recognize whether my thoughts and actions are being influenced by negative pressures from my friends and peers, and what steps can I take to regain control over them?
2. In what ways can I create a supportive environment where my classmates feel comfortable sharing their struggles and asking for help, while also challenging the stigma around seeking support?
3. How can I apply the Church's spiritual disciplines, like prayer and community service, to actively support my friends who may be facing mental health challenges?