



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

9th Grade

Our Identity and Purpose



Grade 9

Our Identity and Purpose

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Lesson 1: A Dead Son Returns

Lesson Goals

- *I can explain why we believe everyone is capable of being holy.*
- *I can describe how the father's forgiveness was preemptive and relate this to God.*
- *I can explain the connection of the prodigal son's repentance to our experience during the Sacrament of Holy Confession.*

As members of the Church, it is important for us to always rejoice and be thankful for what we have, and to celebrate even more when someone returns to the Faith. The Parable of the Prodigal Son (**St. Luke 15:11-32**) illustrates this idea beautifully. While it may seem like a simple story at first, it provides insights to the most profound teachings about the theology of the Orthodox Church. This familiar parable gives us powerful reminders of our journey to salvation.



Our Salvation: From Creation to Communion

The parable begins with an introduction to a father who has two sons. The youngest asks the father to give him his **inheritance**, with which he then leaves and journeys to a distant country (St. Luke 15:11-13). A closer analysis of these few verses brings attention to very important theological points.

“So he divided to them his livelihood ...” (v.12): This highlights a fundamental teaching of the Orthodox Church. What is the inheritance we receive as God’s chosen creation? It is our creation in God’s image and His likeness (**Genesis 1:26-27**). According to St. Basil, the image of God is the beginning and root of goodness, which man possesses immediately after being created, and which was placed in his nature. We are then meant to grow into His Perfect likeness (**St. Matthew 5:48**), which is the extent to which we are like God.

The Prodigal Son, however, squanders his inheritance and chooses to travel to a *“far country”* (v.13) and immerses himself in the pleasures of the world. From a theological perspective, the son was living outside of the person that God created man to be. The far country represents those who *choose* to live a life in exile from God (i.e. away from the Father’s House).

This choice demonstrates another essential teaching of the Church - God has created us with **free-will**. The gift of free-will grants us the ability to choose to love Him or not. This is important because of our fundamental belief in the Orthodox Church that God is Love (**1 John 4:8**). He created us to be sons and daughters, not slaves or robots who do not have the freedom of choice.

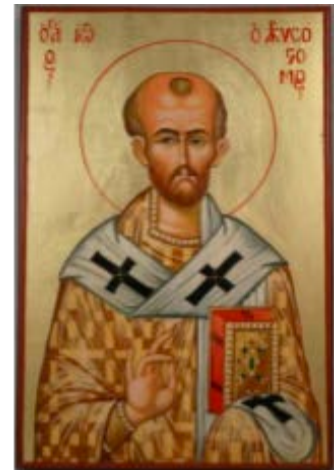
Without freedom, there can never be true love. A relationship of love requires freedom to choose to love the other person. For example, if an adult son or daughter is upset with their parents and decides to leave home before it is the appropriate time, the parents can't lock them up in their room and force the parent - child relationship. Another more extreme example to illustrate that love cannot be forced is if one uses the threat of violence to force one person to love another ... a tactic that did not work for the prince in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast!

For love to be real, everyone involved needs the freedom to choose to love. That's why we enter into a relationship with God and why He gave all of us free-will to choose to love Him. Adam and Eve chose to disobey in the Garden of Eden. Rather than punish or

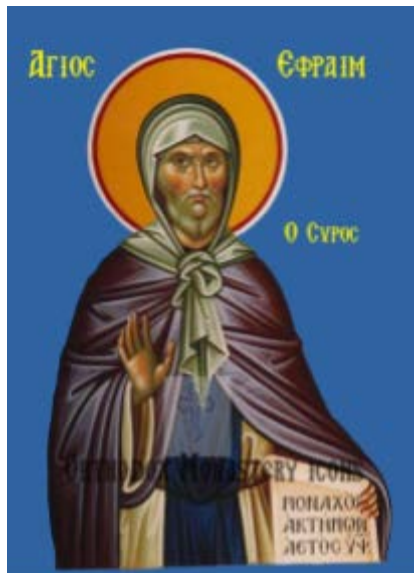
force love God chose to defeat death through His Incarnation and Resurrection (**St. John 3:16**). Love can never be forced or coerced.

The Orthodox understanding of free-will is in direct contradiction to the teaching of predestination taught by some other Christian denominations, in particular those that align with the Protestant teachings of John Calvin. Predestination states that God determines who will be saved and therefore people have no say in the matter. Our Church simply does not accept this understanding and we can defend our believe from this parable taught to us by Christ.

We see this integral teaching in the Scriptures that Christians willingly and freely choose Christ (**Revelation 3:20**) . This is seen in the writings of the Church Fathers as well. St. John Chrysostom teaches that “God never draws anyone to Himself by force and violence. He wishes all to be saved, but forces no-one.”



St. John Chrysostom



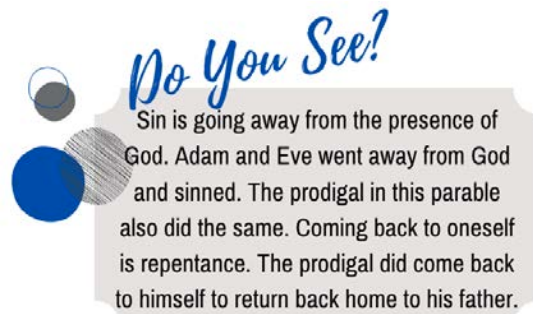
St. Ephrem

This was true from the very beginning when God gave Adam and Eve the choice to obey His commandment. St. Ephrem teaches that had Adam and Eve obeyed the commandment, they would have had access to not only the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil but also to the Tree of Life. Out of His love, God *wants* the salvation of all mankind (St. John 6:39-40) but does not force anyone to choose Him. How can there be love when there is no choice?

The Prodigal Son chooses of his own will to squander his inheritance and use it for selfish pleasures. At this point in the story, the son has lost everything, but then remembers that even the servants of his father had more than enough to eat whereas he had nothing. In St. Luke 15:17, the prodigal “*came to himself*” which is true repentance.

We often fall away from Christ due to the poor decisions we make, but even in this state we are still the children of God created in His Image. In other words, we remain an icon of Christ! Our thoughts, words, and actions though may not reflect His Likeness. This is what we see in the prodigal son at this moment - his past deeds did not negate the fact that

he was still the beloved son of his father, and he chooses (“came to himself”) to return to the path of holiness.



The son knows his sins are only a drop of mud compared to “the ocean of mercy and love of the Father” (Sh’hima Wednesday Compline). In St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, he reminds us that “it is no longer [I] who do it, but sin that dwells in [me]” (Romans 7:17). We must understand that sin is something distinct from who we are created to be, and a foreign force that dwells in us to turn us away from who we are supposed to

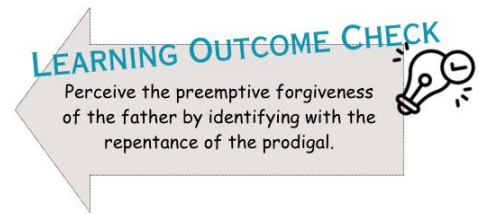
be. Late Lamented His Grace Dr. Paulose Mar Gregorios interpreting St. Gregory of Nyssa says that sin is going away from the presence of God. Adam and Eve went away from God and sinned. The prodigal in this parable also did the same. Coming back to oneself is repentance. This clearly demonstrates that there is potential for good in everyone, as they are created in God’s image and that image is never lost.

The Orthodox Church emphatically rejects teachings found in some other denominations that humanity is inherently evil, incapable of doing good, and despised by God. These are found in other doctrines such as “total depravity” that teach in multiple ways that human nature is thoroughly corrupt and sinful as a result of the Fall in Genesis 3. Orthodox theology on the contrary teaches that all men and women are created in God’s image and likeness (**Genesis 1:27**). The image and likeness of God remains in us, although Adam and Eve disobeyed and transgressed God’s commandment by sinning. The consequence of this disobedience was death (**Genesis 2:16**) and we inherit that consequence (death). In short, the image and likeness of God is the foundation for every bit of goodness in human beings representing a fallen humanity. Because of this we do not accept that human beings are deprived of goodness.

The prodigal repents and returns to his father who was clearly waiting for his beloved child to return as he saw him even though “*he was still a great way off*” (**St. Luke 15:20**). The father ran to his child in such a hurry that he “*fell on his neck*” and proceeded to kiss him even before the prodigal son uttered a single word of repentance!



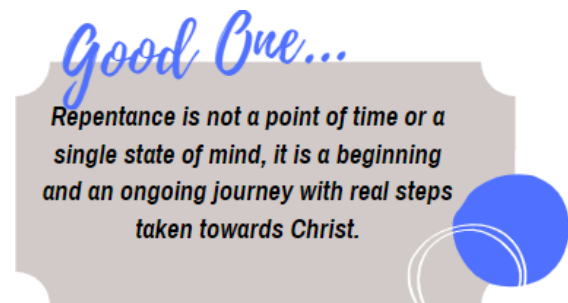
God loves a humble heart [Psalm 50(51):19], and we see in this parable how much God loves us even when we sin and are far away. Just like the father eagerly welcomed his lost son back home before he even confessed his mistakes, God is always ready to forgive us with love and compassion as soon as we choose to turn back to Him with a sincere heart.



The father proceeds to throw a great feast for his son (**St. Luke 15:21-24**) as the son is back in communion with his father in his father's home. This is the teaching given to us by Christ Himself on the story of Salvation! Though humanity has squandered its inheritance and fallen from the path of perfection, God receives us with open arms if we choose to repent and come back to Him again.

The Story of Salvation: Our Role

So what is our role in this story of Salvation? First and foremost, we repent. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, literally means a change (*meta*) of mind (*nous*). Repentance is not merely feeling remorse for our actions, but a full reorientation of ourselves towards Christ. We literally turn away from sin and turn towards Christ. The Prodigal Son exemplifies this as he turned away from the far country and journeyed back towards his father. His repentance, however, was not just the initial thought of returning to his father's house, but rather his journey back as a whole. Likewise, repentance is not a point of time or a single state of mind, it is a beginning and an ongoing journey with real steps taken towards Christ. As with the prodigal, we start by "coming to ourselves" and remembering our true identity as image-bearers of God. Then we must proceed to actually "image" God through our words, thoughts, and deeds and grow in His likeness.



Having embarked on this journey of repentance, we must then come before God and confess our sins. When the prodigal stands before his father, he immediately confesses, **"Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son"** (v.21).

In the Sacrament of Holy Confession, we also confess our sins before God in the presence of a priest. We do this primarily for healing. We, who are sick with sin, approach the hospital (the Church) and receive medicine (God's grace) through the sacrament. In this act, we also are reconciled and reintegrated into the body of Christ.

However, even before the prodigal confesses, we see that *"when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him"* (v.20). The father embraced and loved his son even before a single word was uttered!

By now, we can identify the father in the parable as God. In this act of running towards the son, we truly see how great the love of God is for His children and His preemptive forgiveness.

One way to understand the mortal sin, the sin unto death is the sin that is not repented. Christ says that there's only one unforgivable sin - the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Cf. **St. Matthew 12:31**). This blasphemy is nothing other than our refusal to repent, or in other words, our refusal to accept His forgiveness and His mercy. The true failing of Judas was not the betrayal of Christ, but rather that he did not repent. As Fr. Thomas Hopko once explained, "We think that our prodigality, our madness is greater than the mercy of God which is just blasphemy."

We must also think about where these acts take place. This all happens at the Father's house, which is the Church! An Orthodox Church is not a mere building but rather a gathering of the people called by God and where God Himself is present and presides. The parable teaches us the importance of the Church in our return to God and our growth as His children and in His likeness. There is deep symbolism in v. 22-23 that teaches the importance of the Church and the Sacraments.

Robe (<i>Isaiah 61:10</i>)	Righteousness granted by Baptism. After a person is baptized, he or she is often in a white cloth, signifying the robe of incorruptibility.
Ring (<i>Haggai 2:23</i>)	This is the family identity, signifying that the son is no longer a prodigal. In Baptism, we become children of God.
Sandal (<i>Ephesians 6:15</i>)	Our walking according to the Gospel
Fatted Calf	A wheat-fed calf used in religious sacrifice. This is a reference to the Holy Eucharist (or Holy Qurbana)

At the end of the parable (v.25-29), we are introduced to the resentful and unhappy older brother. Who does the older brother represent?

One interpretation is that the older brother represents the Pharisees, or the members of Israel (with the prodigal then being the Gentiles). While it can be looked at in that perspective, we can also understand the older brother is to represent those of us who are members of the Church too, who also fail to repent from lack of empathy.

The reality of our life is that at times we can relate more to the prodigal, and at other times we are more like the older son. The older brother was resentful because his younger brother who had taken his inheritance and wasted it away was now being given a feast. He had been faithful and yet had not gotten even a small feast to have with his friends. The father responds by returning the focus back to the son who was dead and is now alive again. The prodigal son's sin had caused him great pain and left him isolated and dining on the food of pigs. Meanwhile, the older brother always had access to the food of the household and enjoyed the love and presence of his family. So now when the younger son has returned home, it was a cause of rejoicing because what was lost from their family was now found.

Reflect

When have you felt like the Prodigal Son and when have you felt like the older son?

As St. John Chrysostom said, "Almost any noble person can weep with those who weep but very few of us can rejoice with those who rejoice." When we know Christ in fullness, we model pure joy for ourselves and those around us. Even when we feel envious, jealous and unhappy of other people's life and belonging, we will be able to quickly shift our mentality and focus on pure joy and gratitude for what others have been given.

In v.10, Christ says, **"There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."** Our responsibility as Christians is to always realize our identity as image-bearers and children of God and seek to grow in His likeness. This parable teaches us of the condition of one who chooses to sin, one who truly repents, and the greatness of God's compassion. For all who have fallen into great despair over their sins thinking that there is no forgiveness, this parable offers hope.

This parable can perhaps more appropriately be called the parable of the Loving Father for the love of the Father is unending and unconditional; he is always waiting for the lost son to return back home.

Reflection Questions

1. Placing yourselves “in the shoes” of each of the brothers, how would you have responded if you were the prodigal? The older son? Can you find examples in your own life when you may have acted as one or the other?
2. Compare and contrast “the Fall” in the Garden of Eden and the Parable of the Prodigal Son.
3. The Sacrament of Holy Confession gives us an opportunity “to return.” What are ways we can prepare ourselves for this sacrament in the future?
4. The older brother felt entitled, and was jealous of the praise and attention the younger brother received. How do we interpret jealousy, and how can that be damaging to our spiritual life? Devise a way to address jealousy in your own life.
5. Reflect on the words of the Prayer before Absolution and Confession with the understanding of the prodigal son who “came to himself” (repented) (**St. Luke 15:17-19**). How would you use this to explain to someone who argues that the words of the prayer are enough for forgiveness of sins?
6. Can you think of ways in which the forgiveness of God is pre-emptive?

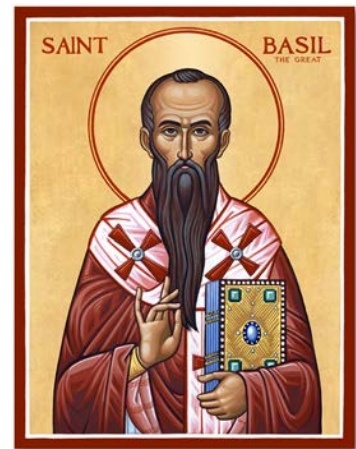
Lesson 2: In the Beginning

Lesson Goals

- *I can elaborate on the concept of salvation from the Orthodox perspective.*
- *I can defend the Orthodox understanding that all people are created in the image and likeness of God and have the potential to be holy.*
- *I can differentiate between "Ancestral Sin" vs "Original Sin" and do understand the Orthodox teaching regarding this*

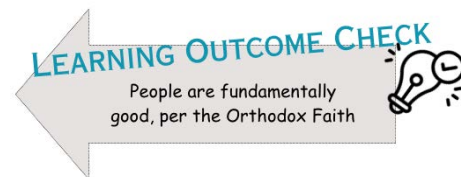
Creation

Let us revisit the story of creation with the intention of looking deeper into the meaning of the act of salvation. In **Genesis 1:26-27**, we read: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of heaven, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that moves on the earth.’ So God made man; in the image of God He made him; male and female He made them.” Let us take a moment to meditate why God chose to create us in His image? Does God like us? Is God giving us privileges or is God giving us responsibilities? Does this action of God foster growth? What does this mean exactly?



As we explored in the previous lesson, St. Basil expounds that the image of God is the beginning and root of goodness. Thus, we possess the image of God immediately after being created. We are then meant to grow into God’s perfect likeness (St. Matthew 5:48), which is the extent to which we are like God. We even see this reflected in the prayers of our Church. In the Sh’himo prayers from Saturday Matins, we sing, “*God created Adam and sat down contemplating him. He saw how fair and like the creature was to the Creator.*”

In **Genesis 1:31**, we read that “God saw everything He had made, and indeed, it was very good.” This includes men and women, which is why we assert that human nature is good and that people are fundamentally good. We are created in God’s image.

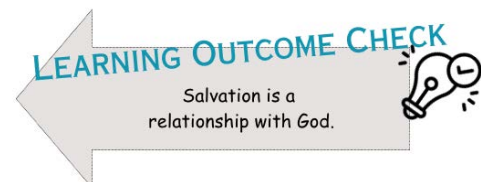


But, how can we acquire the likeness of God? Acquiring likeness of God is through acts of virtue such as virtue of patience, virtue of kindness, virtue of forgiveness, obedience, respect, and many more. Can you think of any more?

God placed man in the Garden of Eden (also known as Paradise) to tend and keep it (Genesis 2:15). During this time, Adam and Eve were living in a state of communion with God. To understand what Communion with God means, we can take a look at 1 John 4:8 which states, **“God is love”**. Before Adam and Eve made the mistake of following the word of Satan, they lived in complete acceptance of what was around them. They lived in peace, joy and love.

This is what St. John is talking about when he says being in communion with God is love. In the book *Thirty Steps to Heaven*, Archimandrite Vassilios explains: *“[“God is love”] means that He is Trinity -- three Persons in an eternal relationship of love, oneness, and unity. Love is relational and everlasting. Its fulfillment is perfect harmony and unity of persons. Thus the only one who truly is love by nature, who is love in His very essence, is God the Trinity.”* We see that the Persons of the Holy Trinity live in perfect harmony and unity with one another. This is Communion with God, and what it means to be saved.

The Orthodox Church teaching of Salvation is the perfect relationship with God, with no separation or disharmony of will or action. We know we are given free will in the creation of humanity, so we can also choose to love Him as He loves us.



Let's take a moment to remember that Adam and Eve were not created perfect or in a state of final completion; rather, they were created as “spiritual children” with the potential to continue to grow in this union with God and into His perfect likeness. St.

Irenaeus of Lyons (115-202 AD) writes, *"He [Adam] was a child not yet having his understanding perfected. It was necessary that he should grow and so come to his perfection."* St. Gregory of Nyssa further expounds on this as he claims that the Christian life is one of never-ending growth. It is a continual process of transformation from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). Thus, even Adam and Eve were meant to grow in their fulfillment of God's likeness. This is a crucial point in understanding the events to follow.

Partner Talk

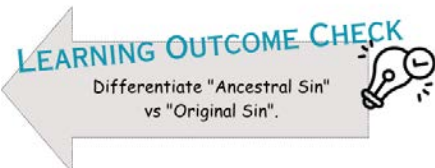
At a funeral, we sometimes hear from non-Orthodox Christians that it was "God's plan" for the person to die. In our theology, was this God's plan?

The Fall of Man

The Fall of Adam and Eve had profound repercussions for humanity, which the Orthodox Church understands through the concept of Ancestral Sin. This term refers to the disobedience of Adam and Eve when they chose to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (**Genesis 2:16-17**). The Orthodox Church teaches that this instruction from God was not a test or temptation to prove the loyalty of man towards God. One way to think about this is how a parent does not fully explain important things to a baby. Our belief is that God gave us this warning out of love for Adam, and just like a baby did not explain further as man was not ready to understand the reason. God's warning to Adam was that if he ate of the fruit before he was ready, he would die a spiritual death.

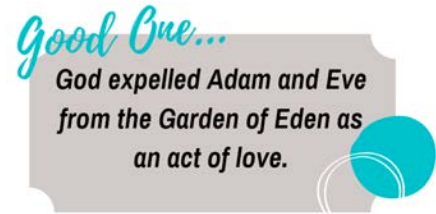
St. Ephrem the Syrian explains, *"...had the serpent been rejected, along with the sin, (Adam and Eve) would have eaten of the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowledge would not have been withheld from them any longer; from the one they would have acquired infallible knowledge, and from the other they would have received immortal life. They would have acquired divinity in humanity; and had they thus acquired infallible knowledge and immortal life, they would have done so in this body."*

Adam and Eve's decision to turn away from God resulted in a separation of all man from the source of life and perfection. However, it is important to note that in Orthodox teaching, we do not carry the guilt of Adam's sin; rather, we exist in a world that has fallen away from God's grace due to that disobedience. This fallen state has given rise to various struggles, including death, illness, conflict, and suffering, all of which humanity faces as a consequence of Ancestral Sin. While Original Sin emphasizes the punishment due to guilt, Ancestral Sin highlights the need for healing in the wake of sin's consequences.



As a result of the Fall, every person is inclined toward sin, and death became a universal reality for humankind. The trials and tribulations we experience in our lives stem from this fallen condition. God, in His boundless love for us, recognized that true communion with Him could not be achieved unless He intervened by becoming one of us. Through Jesus Christ, our Savior, we find hope for healing from the bondage of sin and the restoration of our relationship with God. While the legacy of Ancestral Sin affects our lives, the promise of salvation through Christ empowers us to seek reconciliation and healing in our journey of faith.

It is important for us to see the depths of God's love and mercy in every step, even sending Adam and Eve out of Paradise. As St. Gregory the Theologian proclaims, *"Yet here too He provides a benefit — namely death, which cuts off sin, so that evil may not be everlasting. Thus, His punishment is changed into mercy."* God did not want His beloved children to eternally be in a state of broken union with Him so He allowed death to cut off sin. But He had a plan to save us!



Ancestral Sin	Original Sin
Emphasis on inheriting death, divine compassion and separation from God due to sin of Adam and Eve	Emphasis on inheriting guilt and God's wrath due to sin of Adam & Eve
Derived from the Early Church, i.e., the Orthodox Church	Developed by St. Augustine in the 4th Century in the Western Church. View taken by Roman Catholicism and Protestantism
Responsible only for own sin	Responsible for all sin committed in Adam

God's Eternal Plan

The primary consequence of the Fall was a separation from God and a break in the communion Adam and Eve shared with God. They were no longer living in unity with their Creator. Furthermore, there was nothing that humankind could do to restore this communion, since we cannot remove the effects of our own sinfulness. Thus, if humankind could not ascend to heaven and unite itself with God, then it remained for God to come down to earth and unite Himself with humankind.

Reflection Questions

1. A friend tells you that he believes that the "first commandment" from God in Genesis 2:17 was given as a loyalty test and death was a punishment for the transgression." How would you respond to this?
2. At a funeral, we sometimes hear from non-Orthodox Christians that it was "God's plan" for the person to die. In our theological perspective, death of a faithful, is it God's plan?
3. We know as fact that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior .. but what is He saving us from? What is the full understanding of "salvation"?
4. Study the responses between the Priest and the faithful during the Blessing of the Censer in Holy Qurbana and evaluate our understanding of the measure of holiness. With this in mind, evaluate and justify our teaching that in the life of the Church we have a path to holiness.

Lesson 3: Our Salvation

Lesson Goals

- *I can compare and contrast the Orthodox view of salvation compared to the Protestant/Non-denominational view of salvation.*
- *I can justify that the Love of Christ compelled Him to come for our salvation.*
- *I can interpret how the Holy Trinity fulfills the work of salvation.*

In the grand story of humanity's relationship with God, we see a crucial theme of relationship and communion between God and mankind. Since humanity could not reach up to heaven to reunite with God, it was necessary for God to come down to earth to reunite with us. This is God's eternal plan, and in this lesson we explore how love motivated God to come to us in order to bring us salvation and restore our relationship with Him.

God's Eternal Plan

"Incarnation" goes beyond its literal meaning of being "embodied in flesh" and encompasses not only the conception and birth of Jesus Christ but also the entirety of His life, teachings, sufferings, and glorification.



In his Nativity homily, St. John Chrysostom teaches that Jesus willingly took on our human nature to save us and highlighting that salvation involves restoring humanity to its original glory as the image of God, which was distorted by the Fall of Man. This restoration allows us to regain the ability to reflect God's likeness and to commune with Him. St. Gregory of Nazianzus further teaches that although our original communion with God was broken in Paradise, the new communion established through the Incarnation in Christ is unbreakable. In Christ, our humanity is united with His divinity without any change or confusion, creating a permanent bond that can never be undone.

The Father sent His own Son, "the very image of His person" (**Hebrews 1:3**), into the world to take human nature and restore man to his original glory in the image of God. This is remembered in all our prayers including the silent prayers of our priest such as this one said during the Fraction of Holy Qurbana:

"One is Emmanuel, and cannot be divided into two natures after the indivisible unity. Thus we believe and thus we confess and thus we confirm that this Flesh is of this Blood and that this Blood is of this Flesh." (Fraction Prayer of St. Dionysius Bar Salibi)

After the Resurrection, Christ ascended and is seated at the right hand of God the Father. So our human nature is also enthroned in the bosom of the Holy Trinity. Today even when we have sinned and turn away from God, through repentance we can be reunited again and never have to fear the "sting of death" (**1 Corinthians 15:55-57**).

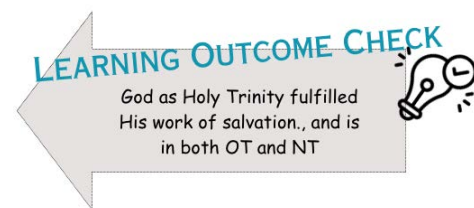
The Incarnation is always to be understood in light of the Passion of Christ. The Incarnation of the Word starts from the virgin birth, and continues to the Passion, Exaltation, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ. Fr. John Behr observes we learn more about who is Christ by contemplating on these events. The Orthodox Church has always understood and proclaimed that Christ became man to die and save man through His resurrection.



Christ is wrapped up in swaddling clothes in the Icon of the Nativity. On close observation, the wrapping is a traditional burial shroud, teaching us that Christ was born to die for us. We also see Christ lying in a manger that is shaped to resemble a tomb. Think about how much love God has for us, that He sent His only begotten Son to die for us!



The Old Testament foreshadows the our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Trinity is One True God, and is revealed both in the Old Testament (**Genesis 1, Isaiah 6:1-3, Psalm 2:7-8**, etc.) and the New Testament (**Matthew 3:16-17, John 1:1-3, Acts 2:17, Hebrews 1:8-10**, etc.). Anyone who does not read the Old Testament in this angle will see only stories and confusing narratives. It is the Cross and the Resurrection that gives meaning and reveals the deep meanings and how they proclaim Christ. Further, while the Old Testament offers a partial revelation of God, this has been completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ, signifying the Church's proclamation of salvation for the world. The parts of the Bible is never to be read as anything other than One Word.



Adam and Eve were called to be in communion with God, and which was why God created us in His Image and Likeness. The mystery of the Holy Trinity of Three Persons and One God is one we can never explain, but meditating on this gives us a better understanding of our purpose and calling. The Three Persons of the One True God existed in all eternity, and was fully revealed in Christ and we were taught how to grow to be like Him (theosis) in the One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. The Fall of Man brought sin and death to the world, and through the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, the salvation of man is fulfilled and complete.

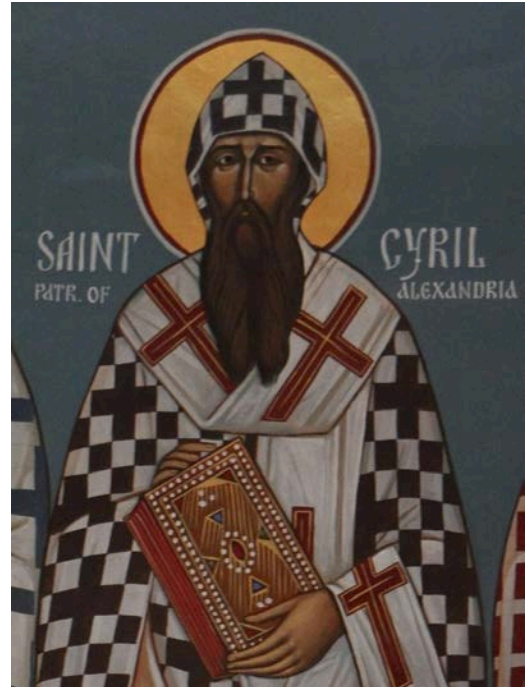
We remember and uphold this life giving message in the Church. For example, before the priest reads the Gospel, he proclaims this fact emphatically: "Now in the dispensation of our Lord, our God and our Savior Jesus Christ, who took flesh from St. Mary, the Mother of God, these things have come to pass in this manner..." and the congregation says: "We believe and confess."

According to the Fathers

We remember in the Thubdens of Holy Qurbana that St. Cyril of Alexandria as *“the exalted and true tower, who clearly expounded and declared the Incarnation of God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who took flesh.”*

St. Cyril was a leading figure in the early church who spoke about the Incarnation of Christ. In the fifth century AD, the heresy of Nestorianism taught that St. Mary gave birth only to a man, Jesus, who was later indwelt by God the Son as a temple to make Him Christ.

Nestorius referred to St. Mary as Christotokos or the mother of Christ. Nestorius overemphasized Christ’s humanity at the expense of His divinity. In response to this growing heresy, St. Cyril proclaimed that Christ was both *begotten of the Father in eternity* and *born of the Virgin at these end times*. Thus he properly emphasizes both His humanity and divinity in the acclamation “one incarnate nature of God the Word”.



This means that the nature of the Incarnate Word is one-united, i.e., the complete union of both divinity and humanity. This united/incarnate is whom Mary gave birth to. This is why the Church refers to Mary as Theotokos, or the ‘God-bearer,’ because it points to Christ as God and human, which is necessary for our salvation. If Christ was not fully human, then our humanity would not have been saved.

As St. Gregory of Naziansus states, “For that which He has not assumed, He has not healed”. Likewise, if Christ was not fully divine, then there was no one to save our humanity as our humanity would not be joined to His divinity. St. Gregory further states, “but that which is united to His Godhead is saved.” Thus Christ must be both fully human and fully divine for our salvation to have meaning. Furthermore, we must emphasize that the “one incarnate nature of God the Word” was without mingling, confusion, division, or alteration between His humanity and divinity.

We also remember St. Severus of Antioch as “the crown of the Syrians, the meadow abounding in blossom, who preached all the time that Mary was undoubtedly the God-Bearer.” St. Severus clearly and zealously declared the Christology of the Oriental Orthodox Church. Building on the foundation of St. Cyril, St. Severus further expounded that Christ is “from two natures”, divinity and humanity, that are united without mixing or confusion. He says “Those therefore who confess one incarnate nature of God the Word, do not confuse between the divinity and humanity of which He consists....they recognise the difference between them only in contemplation, not admitting a division: for the principle of union does not admit division.” We see the Christology of St. Severus expressed in his Ma'nitho (doctrinal hymn) which we sing at the start of every Divine Liturgy.



Scavenger Hunt!

Find the Ma'nitho of St. Severus using the Divine Liturgy book.

In this hymn, we proclaim that Christ is the “Only-Begotten Son, Word of the Father, Immortal in His nature”, showing clearly His divinity. We then go on to say, “Who did become incarnate of the pure Virgin, the holy and glorious Theotokos., He became man without change”, fully expressing His humanity. This prayer is foundational in its

meaning and its position at the start of the Liturgy is of no small significance. As the Service Book of the Holy Qurbana states, “the prayers of the Liturgy are a reflection of doctrinal uniformity, which is the basis of unity for worshippers and protects the Church from distortions of the Truth. A defective vision of God prevents us from properly worshiping and experiencing God.”

Thus, this hymn serves to bring the church together with a common proclamation and understanding of who it is we are worshiping: our Lord Jesus Christ, “worshiped and praised equally with His Father and Spirit. Have mercy upon us all!”

LEARNING OUTCOME CHECK

We can interpret and appreciate the Manitho of St. Severus.



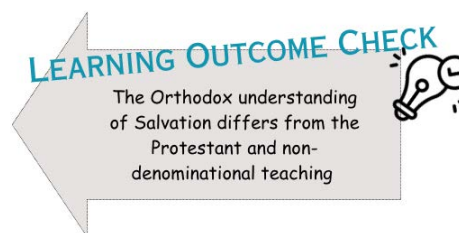
The Story of Salvation

In discussing the essence of our Faith, it is essential to recognize its profound connection to our salvation. The Incarnation of Christ is pivotal, as it restores our ability to commune with and unite ourselves with God, revealing salvation as inherently relational. Fr. Andrew Louth illustrates this distinction between the Orthodox understanding of salvation and that of Western Churches—such as Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions—through the metaphor of two arches. The Western perspective often frames sin as a contractual breach requiring a debt to be paid, thereby positioning salvation as merely the settlement of this debt.

In contrast, the Orthodox Church holds to a broader arch, extending from Creation to Deification, where humanity's creation in the image of God establishes our intrinsic purpose. As articulated by St. Basil the Great, "Man is a creature with orders to become god." This paradigm emphasizes that God's intention was not solely to save us from sin, but to elevate us to the status of His divinely adopted children. The journey of deification, or theosis, is thus our ultimate goal, representing a continuous process of becoming more God-like, with no endpoint even in eternity, as St. Athanasius affirms: "We become by grace, what God is by nature." In this light, the Gospel's message is epitomized in St. John 15:1-17, where Christ states, "I am the Vine, you are the branches," underscoring the necessity of our union with Him for true spiritual life, as salvation fundamentally encompasses our relationship and communion with God.

The Orthodox Church encompasses a more dynamic view of time regarding salvation. While it is true that one can affirmatively say, "I am saved," reflecting on Christ's completed work of redemption on the cross and the transformative act of baptism, the Orthodox understanding also emphasizes salvation as an ongoing process. This perspective entails that believers are continually being saved throughout their spiritual journey, as indicated by scripture references such as 1 Corinthians 1:18 and Philippians 2:12-13. Furthermore, there is an acknowledgment that salvation is not fully realized until the final fulfillment of God's promise, suggesting that believers must persevere in their faith, as illustrated in Matthew 10:22 and Romans 8:23-25.

In contrast, many Protestant and non-denominational views often emphasize salvation as a singular event based on faith and belief, focusing more on the moment of justification rather than the ongoing journey of sanctification, which is fundamental to the Orthodox faith.



The Church

We often think of the Incarnation as the start of the presence of Jesus on earth. However, when we reflect that Jesus is eternal and the reason for the Incarnation, we begin to understand how this also is the fulfilment of the Church as the Body of Christ (**Ephesians 1.22-23; 1 Corinthians 12.12-13; Romans 12.3-5; Colossians 1.24**). The Church serves after His Ascension and His enthronement at the right hand of God the Father. We receive the true Body and Blood of Christ during Holy Qurbana, and are called to be His Presence on earth. This is also how we participate in His work of salvation. In other words, the Church is the continuation of the Incarnation. By sharing in the life of the Church, we participate in the life of Christ (**Galatians 2:20**). Without participating in His life, we have no hope of eternal life/communion; for it is only through Him that we are united with God the Holy Trinity (**St. John 6:51, 53, 56-57**).

The Sacramental life of the Church brings us towards Christ. Through Baptism and Chrismation, we put off sin and Satan and put on Christ, being sealed and filled with the Holy Spirit as the *Paraclete*, our comforter and helper. Through partaking of the Divine nature in the Holy Qurbana, we become like Him and unite ourselves to Him. Though we sin and fall away from Christ, through a life of repentance and fasting and participation in Holy Confession, we renew our baptismal robe of incorruptibility and turn towards Christ again. This is our daily work in the process of communion with God. This is our work in ascending the Ladder of Divine Ascent. This is Theosis, attaining the likeness of God. And as we have seen, it is all made possible through the Incarnation of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. Describe how we should understand and view the Incarnation of Christ? Similarly, how are we to understand all of Scripture?
2. Explain the Christology of the Oriental Orthodox Church as understood by the teachings of St. Cyril and St. Severus.
3. Compare and contrast the understanding of Salvation in the Protestant and Orthodox Church.
4. Describe how the Life of the Church plays a role in the process of Theosis.
5. Go over the Ma'nitho of St. Severus and reflect on how it explains the foundational faith of the Church regarding Christ.

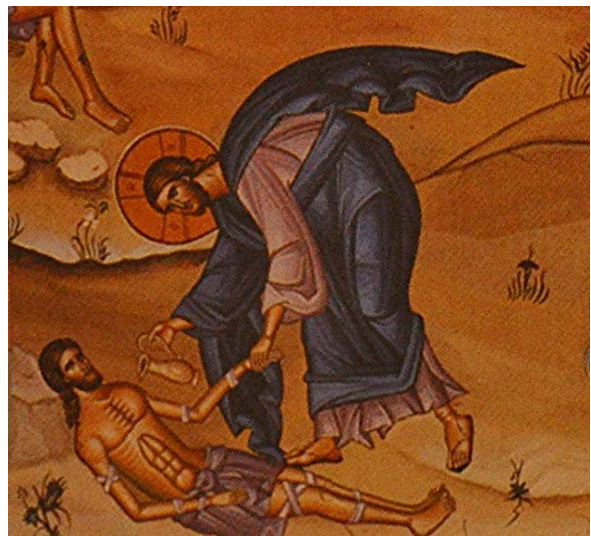
Lesson 4: A Traveler Saved

Lesson Goals

- *I can relate how the Church is like a hospital, and the Sacrament of Confession is like a “healing ointment”.*
 - *I can appraise the different ways the Church helps as well as guidance to make right choices for body and health.*
 - *I can understand that mental health is complex and that seeking professional counseling is encouraged for anyone struggling with their mental health wellbeing.*
-

The parable of “The Good Samaritan” is often understood with a focus on selflessness, encouraging us to adopt his admirable traits of compassion and care. This perspective is significant and has even inspired “Good Samaritan” laws that protect those who come to the aid of individuals in distress.

However, the teachings of the Church present a more profound understanding, beginning with the recognition that the Samaritan represents Christ, and we are the wounded traveler. The traveler, abandoned on the roadside, symbolizes the spiritual state of humanity, underscoring our need for the compassion and saving grace of Christ, the true Good Samaritan. The roadside also serves as a poignant reminder of the perilous paths we may traverse if we allow ourselves to be consumed by worldly desires. We make life choices that promote spiritual growth and strengthen our connection to God.



Furthermore, the Good Samaritan brought the wounded man to the Inn and entrusted him to the care of the innkeeper. The Inn symbolizes the Holy Church, emphasizing the ongoing nature of our spiritual journey. The Church is tasked with caring for and treating the wounds of all who are brought through her doors until Christ returns. Our souls require healing from the effects of sin, and this healing is facilitated through the sacraments and teachings provided by the Holy Church. By actively participating in these sacred practices, we allow God’s transformative work to occur within us, guiding us toward spiritual renewal and ultimate salvation. This ongoing process of healing and growth in our relationship with God is known as *theosis*.

The Church as a Hospital

Within the teachings of the Orthodox Christian faith, the Parable of the Good Samaritan serves as a profound illustration of compassion and neighborly love. In response to the inquiry of a lawyer seeking to understand, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus recounts the story of a Samaritan who, upon encountering a wounded traveler, demonstrates extraordinary kindness and care. The Samaritan embodies Christ Himself, showing love that not only affects the wounded man but also illustrates the depths of God’s mercy for humanity. As the parable unfolds, we see that the Samaritan places the wounded man upon his own colt, leading him to an inn where he can receive further care. This act signifies more than mere physical assistance; it symbolizes the boundless love Christ has for each of us, as He strives to deliver us from the spiritual and physical toll of sin. However, the journey to healing does not conclude with the man arriving at the inn. It is at this place of refuge where true restoration begins. The wounded traveler is anointed with ointment, treated with bandages, and nourished with sustenance vital for his recovery. This multifaceted approach to healing reminds us of the various gifts and sacraments found within the Holy Church. The Church stands as a divine hospital, where believers are called to partake in the healing of one another’s minds, souls, and bodies.

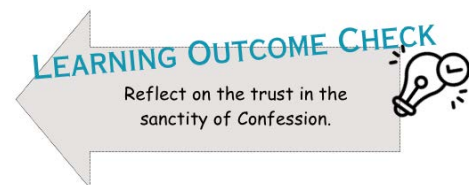
In this sacred ministry, we discover our roles as members of the Body of Christ. Each one of us contributes to this communal effort of spiritual restoration and empowerment. Thus, we affirm that the Church is not merely a place of worship but a sanctuary for healing—an institution dedicated to uplifting ourselves and our brothers and sisters in faith. Through prayer, the sacraments, and the community of believers, we all engage together in the transformative process of healing within the Holy Church.

The Teachings of our Holy Fathers on the Church as a Hospital	
St. John Chrysostom	Do not say to yourself: ‘I am no priest or monk; I have a wife and children. This is a work for the priests; this is work for the monks.’ The Samaritan did not say: ‘Where are the priests now? Where are the Pharisees now? Where are the teachers of the Jews?’ But the Samaritan is like a man who found some great store of booty and got the profit. “Therefore, when you see someone in need of treatment for some ailment of the body or soul, do not say to yourself: ‘Why did so-and-so or so-and-so not take care of him?’ You free him from his sickness <i>Eighth Homily against the Judaizers 4: 1-3</i>
St. Cyril of Alexandria	Very skillfully therefore does the Savior of all weave the parable of him who fell into the hands of thieves, saying, that when he was lying half dead, and in the last extremity of evil, a priest passed by, and in like manner a Levite, without feeling towards him any sentiment of humanity, or dropping upon him the oil of compassionate love; but rather, their mind was un-sympathizing and cruel towards him. But one of another race, a Samaritan, fulfilled the law of love. Justly therefore He asked, which of these three he thinks was the sufferer's neighbor. And he said, "He that wrought mercy with him." And to this Christ added, "Go you also, and act in like manner." <i>Sermon 68 of St. Cyril of Alexandria</i>

Holy Confession

The Sacrament of Confession serves as an important opportunity for self-reflection regarding our relationship with Christ and the Church, allowing the priest to assess how our sins—whether intentional or accidental—have affected our physical and spiritual well-being. While some individuals may believe they can confess directly to Christ, the Orthodox Church emphasizes the significance of verbal acknowledgment of our sins, particularly those committed against others and God’s creation, to a trustworthy person. This is crucial because feelings of guilt and shame are often difficult to confront alone. The example of St. Peter, who openly acknowledged his denial of Jesus and later received forgiveness, contrasts sharply with Judas, who did not seek proper confession and was ultimately overwhelmed by his guilt. Through Holy Confession, priests act as representatives of Christ, providing validation and comfort, and helping us unload the burdens of guilt and shame. It is important to remember that Confession is not a rare occasion but can be approached as often as needed, stemming from the genuine desire for healing and reconciliation, without being imposed upon anyone. In participating in this sacrament, we reaffirm our trust in its sanctity and the potential for spiritual renewal it offers.

Jesus Christ absolves, purifies, forgives and most importantly, **does not remember our wickedness**, which we have confessed to the priest, whose ears are that of Christ during the event of confession. If Christ is not to remember what you confessed, the priest shall not be remembering your sins. If he ever does, there are spiritual consequences and therefore, he will never break the trust you placed upon him while confessing and will always honor the sanctity of your confessions in front of the Holy Altar. That sanctity is the covenant he enters with you, and Christ is the witness for that covenant. The *hamnikho* (stole) which the priest wears during confession is the symbol of this sanctity.



Holy Qurbana

This Sacrament of “mercy, peace, sacrifice, and thanksgiving” is not only a way for us to give glory and thanks to Christ, the Good Samaritan and Great Physician, but to allow us to fully partake in the continual salvation we have been granted by Christ, who saved us through His precious Body and Blood. After confession, it is of paramount importance to receive Holy Qurbana. This is how Jesus completed the process of welcoming back St. Peter into the Church. We read in St. John 21:15–17 that Jesus' dialogue with Peter and the commission to feed, tend, and feed His sheep happened only after they ate together. This eating is the consumption of Holy Qurbana.

Fasting and Prayer

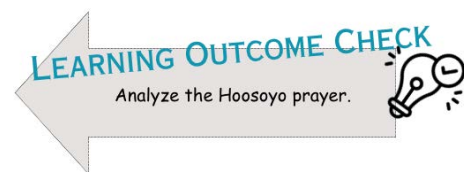
These two powerful spiritual tools provide Orthodox Christians the tools to refocus our journey to be Christ-like (Theosis). As medicine and bedrest allow our bodies the refocusing to fight off infection, so too are these two spiritual tools allowing our spiritual bodies in fighting off the natural temptation to fall into the desires of the flesh and focusing on repentance for that infection of sin that may have already taken hold in our body, through thought and deed. One gets ready for confession through fasting and prayer. Our church has a strong tradition of going for confession during the Holy Lent. Fasting and prayer can be prescribed after a confession too. These are all part of the process of spiritual healing.

Church Teachings

Church tradition becomes vitally important, similar to medication or immunizations, to provide us the resistance to the disease that is sin. Recall in the parable of the Good Samaritan that the Priest, in an effort to keep himself from ritual defilement, passed by on the other side. The Priest was following what he thought was law. According to Christ, he was not administering the love and compassion for his neighbor. The Orthodox Church has built a rich tradition around how we as Christians are to minister to one another and those in need.

The Hoosoyo Prayer

The Hoosoyo Prayer serves as a profound expression of the Orthodox Christian belief in seeking the healing and absolving Grace of God. Offered for all living and departed souls during the Holy Qurbana and other prayerful occasions, this prayer highlights the importance of divine mercy in cleansing us from our sins. It begins with the invocation, *"O' You Absolver, Purifier, Forgiver, wipe, blot out and remember not our wickedness!"*

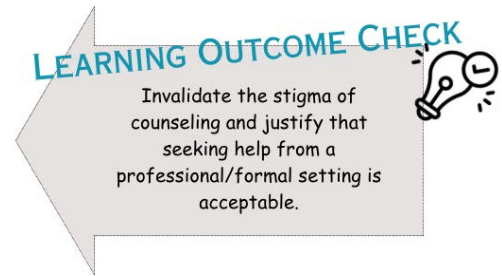


Students analyzing the Hoosoyo Prayer will appreciate its depth and theological implications within the context of Orthodox spirituality. The hallmarks of this prayer come as the priest asks God to give purity to himself and his people, to shed mercy upon the living and the dead, and to give all a good and holy end.

Mental Health

It's imperative to highlight that the healing ministry of the Church does not exclusively reside in our physical church walls. As Christians, we should be willing to seek counseling and advice through whatever forms improve us. The Church holds in prime importance the role of Holy Confession as a way to regularly cleanse our wounds and gashes from the detrimental impacts of sin.

However, there may be areas of your life where **professional counseling** (i.e., a professional relationship with a licensed professional to accomplish mental health, wellness and psychological developmental goals) may be the answer. If there are areas of your life where this type of help could benefit you greatly, the Church encourages and supports seeking out such help. One must overcome the stigma related to professional help in mental health requirements. A wounded and broken mind is equally important as a wounded and broken hand and both require professional help. Your church's vicar can serve as a valuable resource to guide you on the path to healing via professional counseling. One shall always be assured that your priest will be continuously praying for you during his personal prayers and Holy Qurbana when he has encouraged you for professional help.



By identifying as the wounded traveler we can seek different ways to grow closer to Christ and see that the Church provides various resources and prescriptions to help control the passions of the flesh so that we can make choices directed by the Spirit.

Reflection Questions

1. Describe and reflect what would have happened to the traveler had the Good Samaritan not arrived? How does this relate to our path towards Salvation, and away from secular focus?
2. How does Holy Confession provide a diagnosis and path of healing in relation to what sin does to us spiritually? Do you recognize the importance Confession and other Church traditions have on our lives?
3. The only thing in this world we own are our sins. What do you understand this statement to mean?

Lesson 5: Born of the Spirit

Lesson Goals

- *I can interpret the service of Holy Baptism as being born again.*
- *I can defend how the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is not merely a symbol but the physical presence of a spiritual reality.*
- *I can express why baptism is dying to an old way of life and being born again into a new way of life.*

Sacraments are the visible actions of the invisible grace. All sacraments are God given and they get accomplished by God through the prayers of the priest and the faithful. They disclose and reveal God to us, but also serve to make us receptive to God. All the Sacraments affect our personal relationship to God and to one another. The Holy Spirit works through the Sacraments. He leads us to Christ who unites us with the Father. By participating in the Sacraments, we grow closer to God and receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Although the Sacraments are addressed to each of us by name, they are experiences which involve the entire Church.

Baptism means “starting anew” of dying to an old way of life and being born again into a new way of life. Baptism was always connected with repentance which means a moral conversion. In the Gospel, we find John the Baptist baptizing people as a sign of repentance to prepare for the kingdom of God which was coming to men with the arrival of Christ the Messiah.

Baptism is our death, burial and resurrection in union with Jesus Christ. It is a rite of passage, given by Christ to the Church as an entrance into the kingdom of God and eternal life. The Sacrament of Baptism incorporates us into the Church, the Body of Christ, and is our introduction to the life of the Holy Trinity. Water is a natural symbol of cleansing and newness of life. Through the three-fold immersion in the waters of Baptism in the Name of the Holy Trinity, one dies to the old ways of sin and is born to a new life in Christ. Baptism is one's public identification with Christ's Death and victorious Resurrection. Following the custom of the early Church, Orthodoxy encourages the baptism of infants. The Church believes that the sacrament of baptism bears witness to the action of God who chooses a child to be an important member of His people. From the day of their baptism, children are expected to mature in the life of the Spirit, through their family and the Church.



The prayer said by the Priest encapsulates the purpose of the sacrament of Baptism.

Oh Thou giver of light who enlightens the bodies and souls, who said, "From darkness light shall shine forth. You gave purification by the water of salvation, and granted divine consecration through the holy oil; and unity with our Lord Jesus Christ by participation in His Holy Body and Blood. O merciful Lord, you have called this your servant, by divine invitation, from the darkness of deception to the way of life-giving teachings; we beseech You Lord, to inscribe his/her name in the Book of Life. Count him/her among the Congregation of your worshippers, and may the light of Your countenance be imprinted on him/her. May the victorious cross of Jesus Christ be sealed in his/her heart and mind that he/she flee from the vanities of this world and escape from all the wickedness of the adversary by keeping your divine commandments. (Baptism English Liturgy)

Wisdom of our Church Fathers



"You were led by the hand to the holy pool of divine Baptism.....and each of you was asked if he believed in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And you made that saving confession, you descended into the water and came up again three times. In the very same moment you died and were born."¹

- St. Cyril of Jerusalem

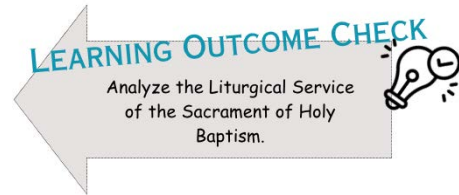
"Through baptism the Christian is sacramentally assimilated to Jesus, who in His own baptism anticipates His death and resurrection. The Christian must enter into this mystery of humble self-abasement and repentance, go down into the water with Jesus in order to rise with him, be re-born of water and Spirit so as to become the Father's beloved son in the Son and walk in the newness of life."

- St. Gregory of Nazianzus

¹ The Orthodox Study Bible. (2008), "Holy Baptism" study note, pg. 1532. Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Steps of the Holy Baptism

The Liturgical Service of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism has profound meaning. Each part is transformative teaching how Baptism is a means of entering into deeper communion with God. This Sacrament marks the beginning of our journey as children of God, and it is important to analyze to not only enhance our intellectual grasp but also encourage a more personal connection to our faith.



There are five general parts of the service:

1. The ministry of the Word followed by Exorcism

This is the initial preparatory part which is followed by introductory prayers and reading from the Epistles and the Gospel. During this rite, the Priest makes the sign of cross on the forehead of the child or adult and invokes God to remove any bondage of demonic or evil forces. This symbolizes the condemnation of the devil and the acceptance of Jesus Christ, which is the beginning of Christian life. Usually the Godfather/Godmother (the mediator) does that on behalf of the child. They also proclaim the symbol of Christian Faith the “Creed”.

The following prayer is from the Sacrament of Holy Baptism:

We call upon Thee, O Lord our God, creator of all things visible and invisible, while we lay our hand upon Thy creature whom we seal in Thy Name which is most holy and exalted, so that all demons, devils and unclean spirits may be driven away from Thy creature and image, who is Thy creation and handiwork.

2. Anointing with the Baptismal Oil and Blessing of Water

Next is the anointing with the Oil of Gladness (which is different from Holy Chrism). The Priest makes the sign of the cross three times on the forehead of the child. The child is prayed over, blessed and anointed with the oil, through which the candidate becomes a member of the church.

After the proclamation of Faith, the Baptismal water is prayed over and blessed as the sign of God's goodness of creation. The invocation of the Holy Spirit recalls the descent of the Holy Spirit in the river Jordan. A series of petitions and prayers for the consecration of the waters is conducted.

3. Washing with water

The child is then immersed in the water three times. Baptism includes three full submersions (or immersions) into a **baptismal font** filled with holy water – the first submersion is in the name of the Father; the second in the name of the Son, and the third in the name of the Holy Spirit. As the bathing of the child also symbolizes the baptism of Jesus Christ in the river Jordan, so both hot and cold water is used in the baptismal font. Threefold submersion also symbolizes participation of the candidate in the death and resurrection of Christ. When the candidate goes down into the baptismal water, he/she dies to the world and receives rebirth when comes out of the water (Romans 6:3,4 and Collosians 2:12).



Prayer during this part of the service

Have mercy on us, O God Father Almighty; and send Thy Holy Spirit upon us and upon this water which is being sanctified, from Thy prepared dwelling place and from Thy boundless bosom. He is personal (qnumoyo), and pre-eminent, the Lord and life-giver. He spoke through the Law and the Prophets and the Apostles. He is present in all places, fills all space, and perfects in holiness those who obey Thy perfect will, not as a servant but as Lord, pure in nature, working in myriad ways, and is the wellspring of spiritual gifts. He is consubstantial with Thee, proceeds from Thee and takes from Thy Son. He is equal on the throne of Thy Kingdom to Thee and to Thine only begotten Son, our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ.

4. Sacrament of Holy Chrismation

This is followed by the whole body being anointed with “Holy Chrism” which is the gift of the Holy Spirit to the child. At this point the mystery of the Holy Chrism (Myron) is administered. The candidate is anointed with the consecrated oil. Chrism is applied on the body in the pattern of the Cross, signifying the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

What does Chrism depict?

In his letter, Saint Severios said that the Myron signifies the Holy Spirit, the giver of gifts. Others also say that the Chrism depicts the Spirit, (basing themselves) on what David says: 'Like the oil that descends upon the head and upon the beard' of Aaron (Psalms 133:2), calling the Holy Spirit 'the oil that descends upon the head', that is upon Christ in (His) baptism.



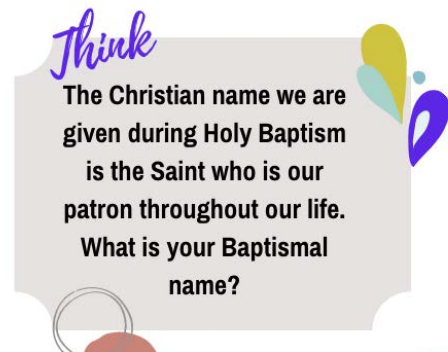
The liturgy says:

"O Lord God, crown this Your servant with splendor and glory. Grant that his/her life be pleasing to Your majesty and be for the glory of Your Holy Name, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit now and always forever and ever."

Like a king or queen is given responsibility, or a calling about their kingdom, like Adam was entrusted responsibility over creation, the newly baptized is entrusted with a purpose, a responsibility, and a calling to be stewards of the faith.

5. Participation in the Holy Eucharist

Immediately thereafter (or at the earliest possible opportunity), the candidate receives Holy Communion. The continuous presence of the Holy Spirit makes constant, progressive and personal growth of the Christian into the likeness of God possible.



Baptism: An Intimate and Continual Communion with God

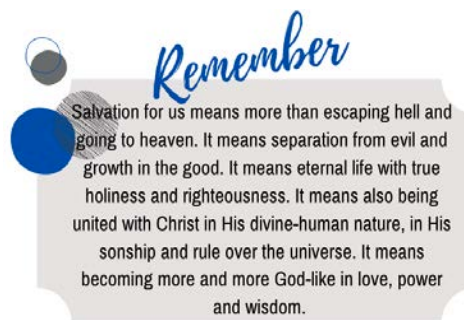
We are raised to a new life for a purpose, union, and communion with God as Baptism is the beginning of eternal life. Peter writes that Baptism now saves us. We can see this in **1 Peter 3:21** *"It is not the mere removal of dirt from our bodies, but provides us with a good conscience toward God."* Baptism is not the removal of filth from the flesh by washing with water, but for participation in the Resurrection of Christ through a cleanly washed conscience.

Why do we receive baptism? Because baptism is a new covenant by which we enter into the kingdom of God, and we are joined to Christ. We are given the sonship of the Father and brotherhood with Christ. We are granted the remission of our sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism opens the doors of the abundance of the Lord from which we receive the mysterious spiritual grace for eternal life. We become worthy to receive the Holy seal and sign of Our Lord. Through Chrismation, we are filled with the sweet fragrance which enables us to become free from the rule of the hostile powers and the rulers of darkness.

Gift of the Holy Spirit

In the Orthodox Christian tradition, the newly baptized person receives the Holy Spirit through the anointing with Holy Chrism, which is performed by either a bishop or a priest. The Holy Spirit is the Life-giver, Sanctifier, and Perfecter. While we certainly reflect on concepts of sin and grace, our core understanding of salvation centers around the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the one who grants life, helps us grow in holiness, and draws us closer to God's perfection. He actively works in the Church, using special gifts to build up the Body of Christ and make its members more holy. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is at work in all of Creation, guiding everything toward its fullest and most perfect state.

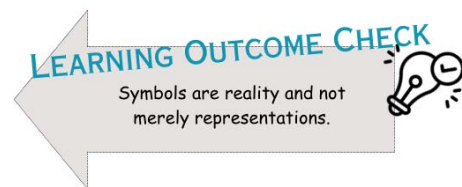


For Orthodox Christians, salvation means more than simply escaping hell and entering heaven. It involves separating ourselves from evil and actively growing in God. Salvation is about experiencing eternal life characterized by true holiness and righteousness. It also means being united with Christ in His divine-human nature, sharing in His Sonship, and even participating in His rule over the universe. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we have the opportunity to become more like God in love, power, and wisdom. We bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit - love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (**Galatians 5:22-23**). For Christians, this is what we understand to be human, and become the children God wants us to be!

To be perfect like Christ (**Matthew 5:48**) seems impossible, but is a reality through the grace and power of God. Participation in Christ's body, blood, essence, and nature is made possible by God's grace through the Holy Spirit and the "mysteries of the Church" (roze-d-idtho in Syriac), which are called Sacraments in the West. The Sacraments including Baptism, Chrismation, and Holy Qurbana allow us to experience the eternal reality of our oneness with Christ. This experience is not just abstract; it occurs in the here and now, through our faith within the Church. These are acts in the community of faith by which the eternal and eschatological (i.e. pertaining to the last times) reality of our oneness with Christ becomes experienced by faith in the Church, in time, in the here and now.

Symbols in our faith especially used in Sacraments are not merely representations; they embody a deeper reality that connects us to divine grace and the life of Christ. Through these sacred acts, we come to understand how the Holy Spirit works in our lives and in the world around us.



Reflection Questions

1. The baptismal font is also referred to as the mother's womb. How would you explain the correlation ?
2. Compare the Sacrament of Holy Baptism with the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites (Exodus 14:19-31), keeping in mind our understanding of salvation to be a journey.
3. In John 3:5, Jesus told Nicodemus, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God". How would you defend this is realized in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism?
4. During the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, what is the role of the godparent? Who is your godparent?

Lesson 6: Temple of the Spirit

Lesson Goals

- *I can conclude that Pentecost fully established the Mission of the Church.*
 - *I can argue how the Apostles embraced the mission of our Lord.*
 - *I can express we serve our mission through the life of the Church including the Sacraments, charity, fasting, and alms-giving.*
-

We believe in the one God – The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In Scripture there are three who are recognized as God and these three are described as distinct persons. This is not tritheism; for while there are three persons, there is but one essence. There is but one God. The energies of the Trinitarian God are always personal, “from the Father through the Son in the Spirit”. This trinitarian faith is to be found in the depth of the thoughts and actions of Orthodox Christians. In this chapter, we will learn more about the third person in the Trinity – The Holy Spirit.

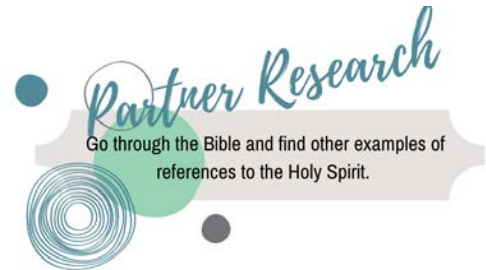
Who is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is introduced to us in the very first two verses in the Holy Bible. **Genesis 1:1-2** describes the “Spirit of God” hovering over the face of the waters when the earth was without form and void, when darkness was upon the face of the deep. In the Old Testament, there are several other references to the Holy Spirit (**Genesis 1:26, 18:1-16**). In **Joel**

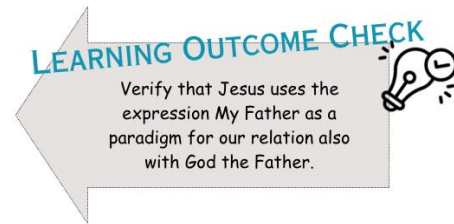
2:28, God promised prophet Joel that He would pour out His Spirit upon all flesh; and that sons and daughters shall prophesy, old men shall dream dreams, and young men shall see visions.

In the New Testament, St. John, the Baptist said that “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (**St. Matthew 3 :11**)

We then get to see the Holy Spirit during the baptism of Jesus Christ (**St. Matthew 3: 13 – 17**). In this incident we see the revelation of the Holy Trinity together when the voice of the Father says, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” and when the Holy Spirit descended like a dove coming to rest upon the Incarnate Son - Jesus Christ.



Jesus Christ at various places in the Bible speaks about the relationship between Him and the Father. Jesus says that He and Father are one (St. John 10:30). This statement of Christ is the paradigm and foundation for us to understand God the Father. When Christ teaches His disciples to pray (St. Matthew 6:9-13; St. Luke 11:2-4, He starts like “Our Father, who art in heaven...”. This strong relation is made known to us by the Holy Spirit. Unless the Holy Spirit teaches us the Father and the Son will always stay as strangers to us. That is why we are taught to have a strong relationship with the Holy Spirit.



Our Lord Jesus Christ repeatedly promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to His disciples. Early in His public Ministry He said, “If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of Living Water. But this he spoke concerning the spirit” (**St. John 7:37-39**).

Later He spoke to us about the Holy Spirit in St. John 14:16 and called the Holy Spirit our “helper”. In this verse, Jesus tells us that He will pray to the Father that He sends us another “helper” who will remain with us “forever”. Jesus Christ was sent by the Father, but He could not remain with us forever. He had to die on the cross for our sins and resurrect to defeat death and go back to heaven. But He made sure that we will not be left alone without support. The Holy Spirit, also sent by the Father, will remain with us forever as a helper giving us strength and guidance to take His mission forward.

The Nicene Creed further elaborates about the Holy Spirit. In the third paragraph of the Nicene creed, we get to know that the Holy Spirit is “*Living*” and is the “*life-giving Lord of all*”. The Holy Spirit “*proceeds from the Father*” and is “*worshiped*” and “*glorified*” together with the Father and the Son. We also come to know that the Holy Spirit “*spoke through*” the prophets and the apostles.

In the text of Holy Qurbana by St. Mathai Royo, the silent prayer at the time of epiclesis says that the Comforter Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father, and takes His essence from the Son. This prayer defines clearly the relationship between the three persons of the Holy Trinity. The Father begets, the Son is begotten, the Holy Spirit is worshiped and glorified along with the Father and the Son and He takes His essence from the Son.

Why do we need the Holy Spirit?

As the Gospel of John was written in Greek, the original word used to describe the Holy Spirit was “paráklētos” which means helper or counselor or advocate. A counselor is someone who will advise us. An advocate is someone who will represent us and intercede on behalf of us. In St. John 16, Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit will teach us and remind us of everything that Jesus has taught us. Why? Because the Holy Spirit is the teacher, whom Christ has promised to us continues the teachings of Christ through our own current language and context



St. Paul tells us in **Romans 8:26** that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. When we are weighed down by life’s heavy burdens and we don’t know how to pray, the Holy Spirit intercedes on behalf of us with sighs and groans that cannot be expressed with words. It is so comforting to us to know that the very Spirit of God prays on our behalf during times of crisis. When we run out of words, our God understands our wordless sighs because He loves us abundantly.

The coming of the Holy Spirit



Jesus came to us on a mission to spread the Gospel and to show us the way. He was the light through which we can reach God. But once Jesus was crucified, the apostles and other Christians were persecuted by the Jews. Left on their own, they lacked the courage to continue the mission of Christ to spread the Gospel to the four corners of the world. They

were confused, afraid, leaderless, and lost with no hope. After His resurrection, Jesus spent the next 40 days with His apostles, and He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there for what the Father had promised. Jesus said to them, *"I've told you what the Father promises: John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."* (**Acts 1: 4,5**).

On the day of Pentecost, which was the fiftieth day after Easter, the apostles and believers were assembled in a house, praying, and waiting for the fulfillment of the promise when the Holy Spirit came from the sky and filled the whole house with a sound like a violently blowing wind. Tongues that looked like fire appeared to them and arranged themselves so that one came to rest on each believer. All the believers were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. People from other countries were able to hear the apostles speak in their own language about the good news of the Gospel (**Acts 2**).

The Holy Spirit gave the apostles the newfound courage to fearlessly go, spread the word and continue the mission started by Jesus Christ. They were fearless even to the point of death. Soon St. Stephen who was a man "filled with God's favor and power" was arrested and stoned to death becoming the first Christian martyr. Before he was killed, St. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit and he said, *"Look, I see heaven opened and the Son of Man in the honored position—the one next to God the Father on the throne!"* (**Acts 7: 56**). This is how the Holy Spirit equipped the apostles to continue the mission of the Church for the life of the world.

Fulfilling Our Mission

After Pentecost, the apostles like St. Peter, St. Paul and St. Thomas set out to different parts of the world with courage and conviction to fulfill the mission and spread the Gospel both to the Jews and the Gentiles alike. God showed no partiality between Jews and Gentiles as the Gentiles also received the Holy Spirit. St. Peter's Jewish companions were amazed that the Holy Spirit would be poured out even on the Gentiles (**Acts 10**).

According to St. Paul, the Holy Spirit equips us with different gifts to fulfill His mission in the world(**1 Corinthians 12**). To some is given the gift of the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge, to others; faith, the gift of healing, working of miracles, ability to prophesy, discerning of spirits, ability to speak different languages or to understand different languages. The Spirit is the same, but the gift given is different as per the needs of the ministry for the benefit of all. St. Paul further says that by the Holy Spirit, we are all baptized into One Body. But just like a body has different organs fulfilling

different responsibilities, the Holy Spirit provides different gifts to each member of the One Body in Christ.

St. Paul further says that those who are led by the Holy Spirit of God are children of God. He calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of adoption through which we become joint heirs of God with Jesus Christ by whom we can cry out “Abba, Father” (Romans 8: 12 – 16). The Holy Spirit works in each believer making them more like Jesus which is called the process of deification or theosis.

The primary means by which The Holy Spirit works to give grace and deify the people are through (1) the Church’s sacraments and (2) human effort of good works.

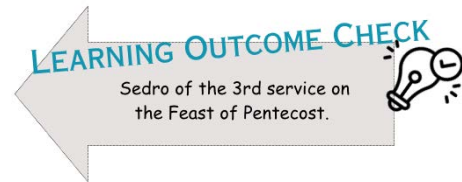
1. ***Through the Sacraments (mysteries):*** The sacrament of Baptism is the process by which God begins the process of theosis in a person. Through the mystery of Holy Chrismation, we receive the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist is the supreme means of theosis since it is the sacrament through which people become one with the body of Christ. During the Eucharist, there are two complementary movements – the movement of ascension and the movement of return. During ascension we move to the Kingdom of God which we can then witness to others and fulfill our mission. Now having once more become ‘His people and His inheritance’, we can do what Christ wants us to do: ‘you are witnesses of these things’ (St. Luke 24:8). During the return, we move back to the world, when the celebrant says ‘Let depart in peace’ as he leaves the altar and leads the congregation outside the church.



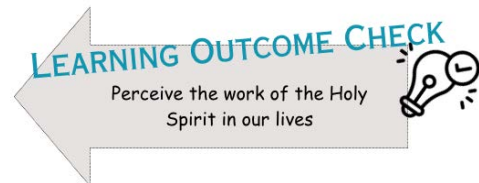
2. ***Through Works:*** Prayer, fasting, and other works are not the purpose of life, but they are necessary to achieve the purpose. Good works alone do not merit deification. As Christians, we rely on the grace of God. It is the Holy Spirit who deifies people by the means of works. The Holy Spirit enables us to participate with Jesus Christ in the search for the oppressed and marginalized to spread the love of God and the Gospel of peace.

Summary

During the Sedro of the third service of the Feast of Pentecost, the prayer defines the Holy Spirit as the comforter, the sanctifier of Churches, the perfecter of all divine ministries, the Spirit of grace, the fountain of goodness, the upright Spirit, the majestic Spirit, the Spirit who is the Lord, the Spirit of sonship, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of wisdom, the Spirit of understanding, the Spirit of knowledge, the Spirit of piety, the Spirit who prepares temples for Himself, the Spirit who guides, the Spirit who operates as He wills and wills as it is meet, the Spirit who distributes gifts to everyone, the Spirit of consolation, the Spirit of royalty, the Spirit of mighty deeds, and the Spirit of perfection.



The Spirit that fulfills the prophets, the Spirit who perfected the apostles, the Spirit who fortifies the martyrs and the Spirit that loves mankind. In the Emmaus experience, the disciples received the Body of Christ from Christ Himself and immediately their eyes were opened (St. Luke 24:31). It is the Spirit of God, who opens their eyes to see God and even today the same Spirit of God opens our eyes in the right and appropriate way, namely, the Orthodox way because He is the promised Spirit by Jesus Christ.



Reflection Questions

1. Describe the ways and means how we can carry forward the work of mission that the Church entrusts upon its members.
2. Analyze how the Holy Spirit is described in the Nicene Creed as the "One Living Holy Spirit, the life giving Lord of all". How can we relate this to the role of the Holy Spirit in preparing us for the "new life in the world to come"?
3. Analyze the Sedro of the third service of the Feast of Pentecost, and appraise how the the Holy Spirit fulfills those roles in our life. .

Lesson 7: The Sacrament of Sacraments

Lesson Goals

- I can understand that through the Holy Qurbana we glimpse life in Heaven in communion with Christ and the fulfillment of His commands and directions for us.
- I can understand the significance of the Liturgy in the life of the Church, faithful, and world at large.
- I can understand that there is a pattern to the Lectionary which draws us into a deeper understanding of Salvation and the Christian purpose.
- I can explain why the Church has optional/ supplemental fasts which people observe for piety or specific intercessions.

The Return of the Prodigal Son

The young man cringed...It was humiliating...of all animals...pigs...these dirty, filthy, noisy, unclean pigs were eating better than him. Growing up, he wasn't even allowed to touch a pig, and now here he was feeding them and wishing he was one of them. At least they have food. Oh, how he missed the food from his childhood. He regretted leaving crumbs on the plate, because he'd even settle for that now. Even the servants at his father's house ate well. And here he was... his stomach twisting. He had eaten well with his friends, but where were they now? They were there when he was buying, but now, they all had an excuse. All that money, it took his father a lifetime to earn it, but it was gone so fast. How was that even possible? He could still remember the look on his father's face when he asked for it. It was his inheritance after all, it didn't seem like an unreasonable request at the time. But, when he asked, he saw the look on his father's face, as he realized that his own son wished... that he was dead. How could he face his father again? There's nothing left. There's no way out, no way to fix this. He looked at the pigs. Even they had each other. No longer, he couldn't do this anymore.

He got up and walked. It was a long way home, and he rehearsed every word he would say to his father over and over. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' It was hard to get out. The word sinned was hard, but the words 'against heaven' were even harder, and 'against you' were the hardest. He got to a familiar street. He remembered walking it as a kid. In those days, he would hit this street and start running because home was almost in sight, but this time, his steps became shorter. His stomach tightened up, he began to sweat profusely. What if his father

didn't even want to see him? He looked up and in the distance he could see the light from the lamps in the house. He saw a man running. It was hard to see.

Suddenly he was in the air, twirling, held by arms that lifted him up as a boy. He felt the embrace, the kiss on his neck and cheek. He started to recite his line, but it was interrupted by his father's shout "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him." The robe was glistening, it was clean, it was as white as snow. His dirty rags seemed to dissolve underneath. They put the ring on his finger. It had the stamp of his family. With new sandals under his feet, he stepped over the threshold into his house again. They brought him to the table and gave him food. Nothing had ever smelled or tasted so good. How long he had longed for home. And here he was communing at the table with his family. His relief melted into unutterable joy. He mouthed the words thank you, but nothing could express what he was feeling inside. He was home.

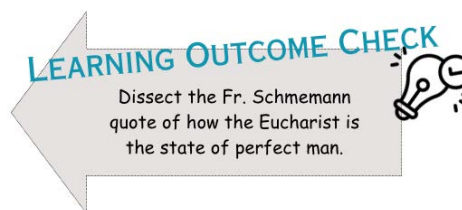


"The Eucharist is the state of perfect man. When man stands before the throne of God, when he has fulfilled all that God has given him to fulfill, when all sins are forgiven, all joy restored, then there is nothing else for him to do, but to give thanks."

-Fr. Alexander Schmemmann

None of us are truly worthy of the Kingdom of God, as we have received abundant blessings from the Lord but often squander these gifts on our own desires and vanity. It's easy to criticize the prodigal son for his actions until we recognize that we too have sinned against heaven and chosen darkness over the light, resulting in destruction and isolation.

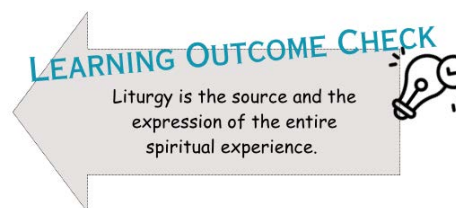
When we realize that we are better off in the light, the act of returning home signifies true repentance. The Lord is ready to welcome us back with open arms. His mercy removes our punishment, while His grace restores us, as exemplified by the father who clothed the prodigal son in a robe and ring, reclaiming him as a beloved child. This transformative grace is what we experience when we approach the sacraments. Although we do not deserve the gifts the Lord offers us, His love and compassion lead to our restoration. Through fasting, we acknowledge our sins and embark on the journey back to Him; through confession, we receive the renewal of our baptismal robe; and through absolution, we experience the reaffirmation of the seal of our chrismation. And when we receive the Real Body and Blood of Christ we fully are in communion with Him, leading us to fulfil our purpose of gratitude and worship.



Approaching the table, we enter into communion with the Lord and our family the Church, and partake of the Holy Qurbana. Standing before the throne of God, as we contemplate what we have received by grace, our hearts naturally overflow with thanksgiving. This sacramental experience is the taste of the heavenly reality that is the banquet of the Kingdom.

"Liturgy is the source and the expression of the entire spiritual experience. In prayers, the Church articulates its vision of God and the destiny of humanity and the entire creation"
-Fr. Dr. Baby Varghese

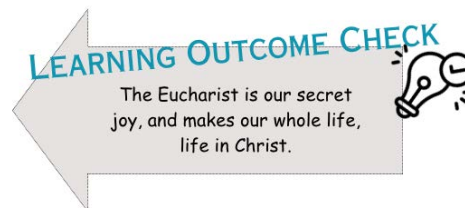
Our act of worship involves offering our heartfelt thanksgiving to God for sending His Only Begotten Son for our salvation. This act ascribes glory to the Lord, who selflessly took on death so that we might have eternal life. The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in this process by opening our hearts to worship in spirit and in truth, unveiling the profound mystery of God's love and sacrifice. As we participate in this divine liturgy, we recognize that it is both the source and expression of



our entire spiritual experience, allowing the Church to articulate its vision of God, humanity's purpose, and the well-being of all creation.

"The Eucharist is our secret joy and certitude, the source of inspiration and growth, the victory that overcomes evil, the presence that makes our whole life, life in Christ."
-Fr. Alexander Schmemmann

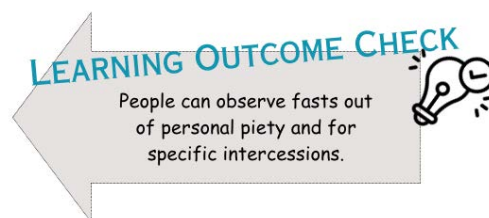
In the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, "The Eucharist is our secret joy and certitude, the source of inspiration and growth, the victory that overcomes evil, the presence that makes our whole life, life in Christ." This profound statement encapsulates the essence of the Holy Eucharist as central to the Orthodox Christian faith. The Eucharist is not merely a ritual; it represents the intimate communion between believers and Christ, providing spiritual nourishment that inspires and nurtures our growth in faith. Through the reception of the Eucharist, we experience a transformative victory over the hardships and evils of life, allowing us to partake in the divine love and grace of God. This sacred act reaffirms our identity as children of God and renews our commitment to live a life reflective of Christ's teachings, enhancing our understanding of salvation and restoration in our personal journey of faith. As we partake in this holy sacrament, we are reminded that our entire existence is enriched through our relationship with Christ, guiding us toward the fulfillment of our spiritual destiny.



Using the Calendar

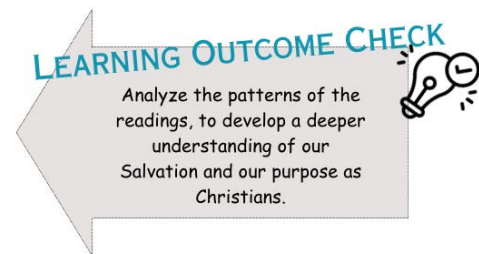
During the morning prayers we pray the psalm, "My soul thirsts for You and my flesh seeks for You like the thirsty earth, which is parched and begging for water." (**Psalm 62:1**) There is a thirst in our soul that cannot be quenched except by communing with the Lord. Our body and soul long to be in union with our Creator, the source of our life. When we partake of the canonical fasts of the Church, we become more attuned to the thirst and longing of our soul as well.

There are also times in life where we may fast for personal reasons. Before Esther went before the King, she called for a fast to prepare. In the same way, some may fast before major moments or decisions in their life or in the life of those they care about. A person preparing to be



ordained or a bishop, preparing to ordain, may fast. Sometimes, people seeking the intercession of St Mary may choose to fast for 8 days before the feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos. Though it's not a canonical fast of the Church, many have experienced revelation, guidance, and miracles during such fasting, including those who had children after years of barrenness in a similar manner to Saints Joachim and Anna, the parents of the Theotokos. Those who have entered monastic life live in a moderate state of fasting for the rest of their lives. They may take a more strict rule of fasting during the fasting periods of the year.

The Liturgical calendar also helps us with Scripture readings. Orthodox Christians engage in a profound journey of faith that allows for a deeper understanding of salvation and our purpose in Christ. The readings prescribed for each Sunday include selections from the Old Testament, encompassing the Pentateuch, historical narratives, wisdom literature, and minor prophets, alongside the New Testament epistles and Gospels. As we explore these readings, we recognize recurring themes that highlight God's covenant with His people, the prophetic anticipation of the Messiah, and the fulfillment of these promises through Jesus Christ. By analyzing the connections between the Old Testament prophecies and their New Testament realizations, students can appreciate the continuity of God's plan for humanity, grasp the significance of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and reflect on how this divine narrative shapes our identity as Christians. In this way, the liturgical cycles become not merely a series of events to be observed but an invitation to delve into the transformative aspects of our faith, ultimately guiding us toward a deeper relationship with God and a clearer understanding of our calling to live in accordance with His will.



What shall we reward to Your grace, our pleasant God, on account of this salvation that You have granted us? Who can offer glory that befits You? Yet, as little as it is and as much as possible, we worship You, thank You and glorify You and Your Only-begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit, now, always and forever.

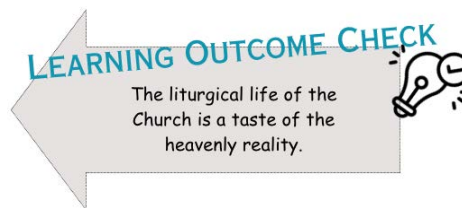
-Prayer of Thanksgiving in the Anaphora of St John the Evangelist²

² Barsom, A. M. (n.d.). Anaphora of St. John the Evangelist.
<https://syriacorthodoxresources.org/Liturgy/Anaphora/John.html>

Conclusion

In conclusion, our experience of the Holy Eucharist serves as a profound reminder of the grace and mercy bestowed upon us by God, who welcomes us despite our unworthiness and errors. Through the act of receiving the Bread of Life, we are drawn into a deeper understanding of our salvation and the expansive love that God has for each of us, akin to the joy felt by the prodigal son upon his return.

The prayers encapsulating our gratitude, such as the prayer of thanksgiving in the Anaphora of St. John, reflect our acknowledgment of this divine gift. Our liturgical worship, marked by symbol and ritual, is not merely a repetitive action but an ongoing journey that invites introspection and celebration throughout the seasons of the Church. Each fast and feast offers us new insights and spiritual growth, allowing us to partake in a taste of the Heavenly Kingdom. As we unite our voices with the angelic hosts, proclaiming the holiness of God, we are reminded that everything we do within the Church contributes to our understanding of this sacred reality, guiding us ever closer to the Kingdom of Heaven.



Reflection Questions

1. When Theologians like Fr. Schmemmann and Fr. Dr. Baby Varghese describe Holy Eucharist as the perfection of man when standing before God, what does this mean? Particularly relate the term “perfection of man” when it comes to our relationship with God?
2. What does the Liturgy, especially as it relates to bible readings, festivals, and seasons of the Church, provide for us as Christians?
3. Why do we fast prior to Eucharist? What does it allow us to do as Christians? How does fasting shape our participation in the Eucharist?

Lesson 8: The Body of Christ

Lesson Goals

- *I can relate that the choices I make draw me closer or further away from God.*
- *I can conclude that the Church provides prescriptions and guidance on how I can have better discernment to follow God in Spirit and Truth.*
- *I individualize the term "Anamnesis" and can appreciate why Liturgy and the time we spend at Church is important for spiritual growth.*

Receiving the Literal Body of Christ

When you are a member of the Malankara Orthodox Church, one of the first acts of your membership is to receive the Holy Mysteries, the actual, living, and life-giving Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. This is a sacred mystery, or sacrament of the Church, something that we understand differently than reformed churches who understand it as con-substantiation - the elements are body and blood of Christ if one wants to see it that way, or the Roman Catholic church who understand it as transubstantiation - a physical conversion of bread and wine to Jesus' Body and Blood, but a mystery in which the true, divine presence of Jesus Christ envelops the elements upon the altar where they become His Body and His Blood, for our salvation, for our sake, through the invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Through God's divine Grace, He descends upon the bread and wine, and they are becoming into His Body and Blood.

... And Becoming the Body of Christ

Remember that when we are in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, we don't just witness the becoming of the elements of bread and wine into the Holy Body and Life-giving Blood of Jesus Christ, we accept Him into our whole selves: body, spirit, mind. The Church teaches us that we are an inheritor of Christ from the time of our baptism: We are with Christ, in Christ, and He is with and in us. When we commune with Him during the Holy Eucharist, we remain in Him; His Body and Blood, which are His gifts to us, remain with us and in us.³

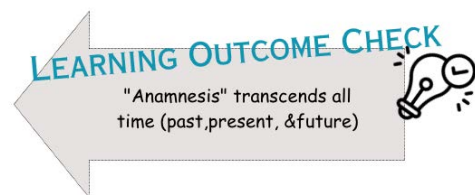
³ Breck, Fr. J. (2007, July 1). Eucharistic offering. Orthodox Church in America. <https://www.oca.org/reflections/fr-john-breck/eucharistic-offering>

Metanoia - *A path of repentance.* Metanoia in its literal sense means making a U-turn, namely, one is making a U-turn from sin to holiness. Repentance doesn't just include remorse, but a self-dedication to recalibrate ourselves to becoming Christ-like. As is done in baptism, we rebuke sin and the evil one, and embrace the victorious sign of Christ. We rekindle the efficacious anointing of the Holy Myron on our body and soul to escape the grasp of sin through metanoia. Repentance is not an overnight event, but a journey to which we must commit ourselves, and continually recommit ourselves to, when we are led astray by the sin of a frail and impermanent world that fails to fill our cup, but rather drains it and leaves us as empty vessels. Repentance is the process of refilling our cup to the brim with Christ, as we return our lives to the path of Christ.

Preparation/Rites - the Holy Qurbana is where we receive the Holy Mysteries- Christ's Body and Blood. From the period of our repentant self-examination of sin, confession of sin, and receiving absolution for sin, we prepare ourselves in the prayers and hours that lead up to the celebration of Holy Qurbana. One important part of the Qurbana is the Anamnesis. All preparation is important to reorient ourselves to God - although we are imperfect beings susceptible to sin, we are made clean through our humility and repentance, allowing the Mercy and Grace of God to cleanse us and prepare us for receiving Him. Anamnesis is not retelling an event, but actually partaking of that event

If we are to truly experience and immerse ourselves in the gift of being Christ's Body, His Holy Church, we must also partake of the reception of His Body and Blood. In many ways, the Church teaches us how we can place ourselves in an active participant role with relation to the Holy Eucharist.

Anamnesis is a Greek word that means "remembrance" but means a lot more than the English word to which it translates. The full meaning of anamnesis is partaking in the original enactment as if it were happening at that moment even though it is being "remembered" at a later time. By living through the moment even though it happened in the past as if it was happening now, we experience it in a manner that is special and even has impacts on us afterwards.



This is the full understanding of when Moses told the Israelites to remember the Passover (**Exodus 13:3-10**). The Passover was a way for the Jews to remember, or make again present, the Exodus and deliverance from Egypt. By reliving this every year, the people of Israel remembered how God saved them with their body, mind, and soul (and not just intellect).

THE ANAMNESIS: Not Just Commemorating, but Immersing Ones' Self in Eucharist	
Why do we Place Emphasis on the Anamnesis?	As the heart of Orthodox Liturgy, along with the Institution [Blessing of the Bread and Wine], and Epiclesis [Invoking the Holy Spirit to Transform Holy Mysteries, Christ's Body and Blood], the Anamnesis is the memorial of Christ's words that carry on beyond the Mystical Supper, that we do this and remember Christ when we do it → the ultimate realization that Christ is the Celebrant of the Divine Eucharist, and we should unite ourselves with Him, through a <u>Life in Christ</u>
How do we actively Remember Christ?	Already, by placing the offering of bread and wine upon the altar, we as Children of God collectively offer something physically (bread made from wheat, wine made from grapes), a sacrifice of the bountiful gifts God provides us, to God upon the altar. <u>But is that what God is looking for?</u> We should offer ourselves upon that same altar, our hearts, minds, and bodies, to execute the will of Christ in our Lives, and live in Christ
Why does this get done in the Church? And when we leave?	<i>Remember</i> , the command of our Lord is to Love Him, and Love one another unconditionally. By placing ourselves in the midst of the church, we show our love by offering ourselves not just to Christ, but to the service of those around us. By praying for others, we live a Life in Christ; by ministering and encouraging others, we live a Life in Christ. A Christ-like Life means we should go out of the walls of the Church and share the Love of God with others in all that we do

This is the full understanding for Orthodox Christians of the teaching Christ gave to remember him (**Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:18-20, 1 Corinthians 11:23-25**). We believe that the bread and wine become the real Body and Blood of Christ, and that during Holy Qurbana we are participating in the Eucharist in remembrance of Him. The time spent in Liturgy is not "ordinary time", but rather a blend of past, present and future. Anamnesis ensures that we are in a perpetual presence with the incarnation of Christ through participating in the Holy Liturgy.

Holy Baptism Opens the Door to Christ's Holy Body and Blood

As we develop from our birth and infancy, we are nourished as children with the best possible nutrients. Doing so is vital to our physical growth and development as human beings. The same must be said for our spiritual bodies. Without holy nourishment and nutrients, we cannot expect to achieve our purpose of uniting in oneness with Christ (Theosis).

Holy Baptism grants us, as Orthodox Christians, an inheritance as children of God's Kingdom, with all the joy and blessings it provides us. Foremost, it grants us the ability to participate in full body, mind and spirit in the Eucharistic Liturgy, partaking in the Body and Blood of Christ, and participating in all other mysteries and inheriting His promise of Eternal Life in the Heavenly Kingdom.

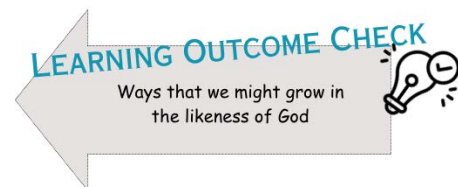
- We can always *fall out of favor with that elder family member* who wrote us into their Will and Testament, and be written out of the Will, losing out on the earthly and generational inheritance we once thought we had.

- Remember, our God is a loving God, we should not think of Him in the same manner as an unforgiving and unyielding elderly family member who would write an heir out of their Will. Recall in *Lesson 1, A Dead Son Returns*, how the parable of the Prodigal Son teaches us of our loving heavenly Father who is always waiting for us. *HOWEVER*, are we as Orthodox Christians doing what we can to live a life akin to being inheritors of God's Kingdom, and the promise of Eternal Life? Are we on a journey of **theosis**, becoming like our Heavenly Father, and immersing ourselves in repentant **metanoia** when we fall short, as a way to rejoin Him who awaits for us with open arms?
- We should build our spiritual life around the Holy Church and what it offers us to stay in **communion** with Christ, such that we do not lose out or risk squandering this ever-precious inheritance we receive as Children of God via Holy Baptism. As emphasized in *Lesson 1*, we could just as quickly divert ourselves from the Divine Inheritance through a path focused solely on worldly desires, alienating ourselves from God and his Gift to us. Even in the Church, our jealousy or pride could keep us from true Christ-like humility. He will always be awaiting us, arms open. A life in the Holy Church will always orient us to run towards those arms at all times, seasons and hours, never away from God, as the distracting worldly desires would want of us.

Communion in the context of this lesson reference may have multiple meanings

- the Holy Communion, receiving of the Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ
- the communion and intercession of the saints and the living faithful, both members of the Holy Church, where we experience a Life in Christ
- Communion as a spiritual joining between us and the Holy Trinity, through prayer, fasting and Life in the Church

The path of sin and destruction can be battled with the spiritual gifts and tools we obtain from the Holy Church. As we are called to not only partake in Christ's Body and Blood, but in doing so, *BECOME LIKE HIM*, we should also be grateful and in awe of the transformative mystery of the Holy Eucharist, and how it firmly takes us on a path to **theosis** - our journey to the oneness with Christ. The Body of Christ is not something we merely consume, but a calling and journey for us to be joined in Christ, as one Body.



Reflection Questions

1. How do you view the mystery of the Holy Eucharist? Is it something that the Priest does? Is it something more? Where do we as congregants come into this mystery?
2. How does what takes place on the Holy Altar - the mystery of transforming the elements into Christ's Body and Blood, mirror the journey we have in the Church? Are we allowing a transformation of ourselves through this journey?
3. Evaluate the following statement "When we sin, we will always remain in the love of God, but it is to us to turn back to him with full repentance and humility" Is it true, or are there things we do that would forever shun us from God's love?
4. Contemplate on the following phrase - "Everything we do in the Life of the Church brings us back to the Eucharist." How does this correlate with the process of metanoia, and what we've learned from the Parable of the Prodigal Son? How do we "come back" to the Eucharist?

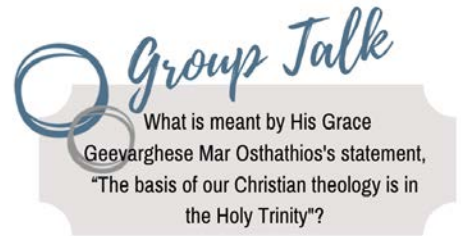
Lesson 9: The Holy Trinity

Lesson Goals

- *I can relate to the importance of the true understanding of the Holy Trinity to our salvation and relationship with God.*
- *I can defend why the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be altered or changed by being able to articulate consequences of incomplete or incorrect understandings.*
- *I can perceive how the Orthodox teaching that God is Love permeates through all our Sacraments, prayers, and our purpose in life.*

"The basis of our Christian theology is in the Holy Trinity". This bold statement by His Grace Geevarghese Mar Osthathios is foundational to understand the fullness of the Christian Faith given to us from the ancient days of Moses and illumined by God Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ to the Apostles.

Although we can never fully explain the Mystery of how the One True God is also Three Distinct Persons, it is important for us to appreciate this truth and apply the teaching as it opens our eyes to our life and our purpose.



In the Holy Trinity we see God as Love and how our very being or existence is towards this perfect and complete relationship and communion between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

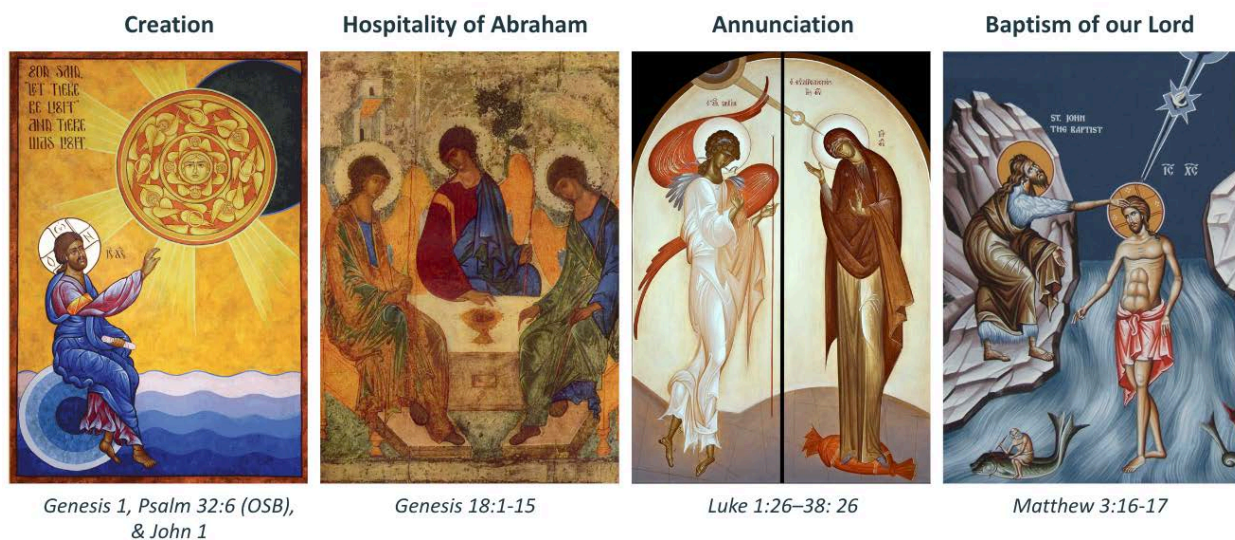
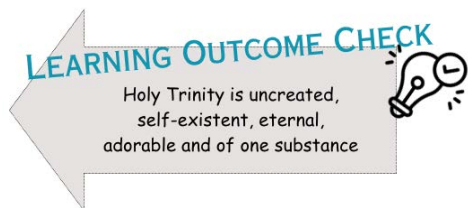
The Holy Trinity in Scripture and Worship

The teaching of the Trinity is not a theological development. His Grace Dr. Paulose Mar Gregorios reflects that "unfortunately too many Christians look for the concept of the Holy Trinity in the New Testament, and not finding it directly expounded there, relegate it to a "later addition" by the Christian Church."

Rather, we can see the Trinity in action literally in the first verses of Genesis! God the Father and God the Spirit are easily distinguished to the novice reader, but it is through the mind of the Church that we can distinguish that God the Word (Greek λόγος or logos, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, our Lord Jesus Christ) is He Who "spoke" all things into being. This was more clearly stated by St. John the Evangelist in the opening verses of his Gospel (**St. John 1:1-3**) - "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and*

the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made."

This is not the only time we see the Holy Trinity working together and possessing a single will and energy. These include the Hospitality of Abraham (Genesis 18:1-15), the Annunciation (St. Luke 1:26-38), and the Baptism of our Lord (St. Matthew 3:16-17). The Three Persons of the Trinity are co-equal and co-eternal. None of the three ever act separately, apart from the other two. The Holy Trinity has only one will. They are not three gods but one God. As the priest says in the benediction during Holy Qurbana, "May the grace and mercies of the Holy and Glorious Trinity, uncreated, self-existent, eternal, adorable, and of one essence be with you all, my brethren, forever."



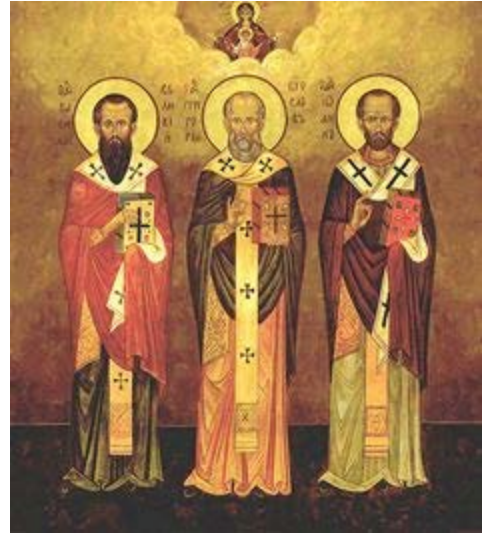
We see Scripture come alive in the Liturgical Feasts of the Church as well. The Feast of Pentecost is a literal textbook of the Holy Trinity, whereas other Feasts at first glance may seem to focus more on a single Person (e.g., Nativity of our Lord, Good Friday) but when we listen carefully, we understand that the Feasts are a glorification of the doctrine of the Trinity and shines on God. All worship is Trinitarian and it is in the worship of our Church that the Trinity is most fully revealed.

All the Sacraments are a manifestation of the Holy Trinity. There are many direct references to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit during the Holy Qurbana - the "Holy, Holy, Holy" (**Isaiah 6:1-3**), the Epiclesis, etc. We are reminded constantly that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit are real and present. Each distinct, but all one God.

Trinitarian Theology

The Cappadocian Fathers are St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus. These three great Church fathers greatly clarified the misunderstandings of the Holy Trinity and were critical to the final formation of the Nicene Creed.

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three divine persons (or in more formal language three hypostases). At the same time, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one God. They are One God because They are one in essence and nature (or in more formal language homoousios).

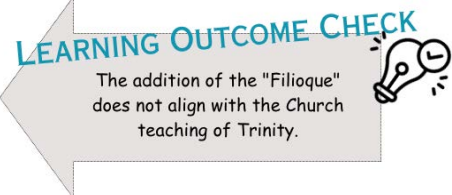


As summarized in the Orthodox Study Bible study article on the Holy Trinity - “These Persons are distinct, but not separate, and are not three gods. They are One God because They are one in essence and nature. The Father is the unbegotten Fountainhead of Deity. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the Helper and the Spirit of Truth who proceeds from the Father.”

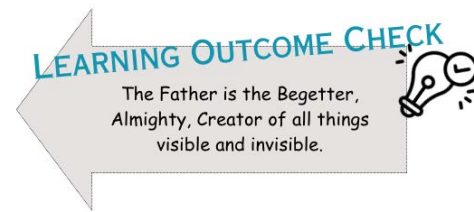
The Nicene Faith is our confession of Faith, and it captures the core belief of all Christians. The Church confirmed this during the First and Second Ecumenical Councils. This Symbol of Faith is the foundation of all teaching, and used regularly from the moment of our Baptism. We begin the Creed by proclaiming our belief in the “One True God”, and thereafter we proclaim the Mystery of the Holy Trinity.

There are other ancient creeds such as the Athanasius Creed, and Apostles Creed that we agree to be true but are incomplete proclamations of faith. Because of the heresies and misunderstandings, the ancient Church needed to clarify this at the Great Ecumenical Councils of Nicea and Constantinople in order to protect the faithful of the One True Church and therefore we should understand the Nicene Creed to build on these other creeds. They are not contradictory, but rather the Nicene Creed is more complete.

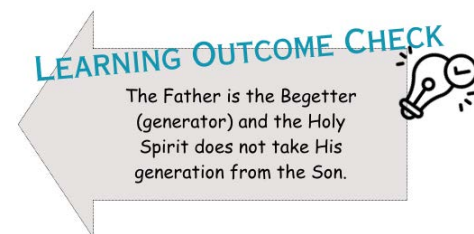
The Roman Catholic Church later added the Filioque (Latin term for “and from the Son”) to the Nicene Creed which incorrectly states that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son.



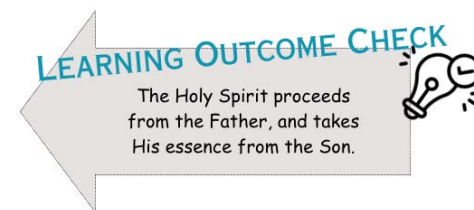
Only God the Father is the Begetter (Generator), Almighty, and the “maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible” as we say in the the Nicene Creed. Specifically the Councils of Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 undoubtedly established the divine natures of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit while still proclaiming “One True God”.



The Council of Nicea affirmed the Son as “light from light, true God from true God, of one essence (Greek homoousios) with the Father,” underscoring the belief in the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son. Subsequently, the Council of Constantinople articulated that the Holy Spirit is “the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father,” indicating that the Holy Spirit, unlike created beings such as angels, emanates from the very essence of the Father, thereby sharing in the same divine nature. This is the Faith of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church that we uphold to this day. They were not invented or made-up during those Councils, but affirmed to be the Truth revealed by Christ to the Apostles and remained unchanged by the living Holy Spirit.



The Holy Spirit does not take His generation from the Son but rather only from the Father and it is clearly spoken in **St. John 15:26** 'the Spirit of truth proceeds from the Father'. Therefore, we reject the Catholic addition and hold fast to the ancient Truth as true and faithful to the Apostolic teaching given to us.

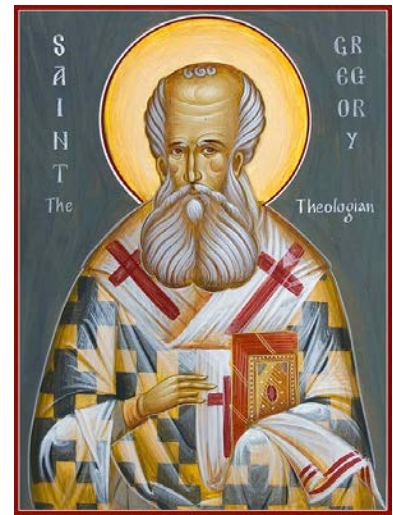


For Orthodox Christians, we neither take away or add to the ancient understanding of the Trinity given to us by God. To rationalize and modify based on human thoughts and ideas not only changes the Persons of God but changes the perfect relationship that they have with each other.

The Nicene Creed begins with the phrase, “We believe in One True God” and thereafter illuminates our faith about each Person of God, and finally closes with the confession of the Church. Our life and worship is centered on God as Trinity, and throughout our most intimate Communion with God at the Holy Qurbana we offer praise and thanksgiving to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

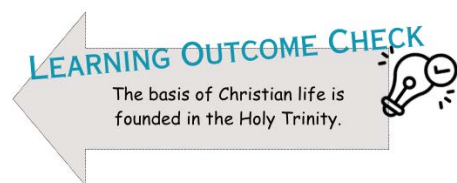
Importance of the Trinity

St. Gregory of Nazianzus (St Gregory the Theologian) emphasized the importance of the Trinity as such - "This I give you to share, and to defend all your life, the one Godhead and power, found in the three in unity, and comprising the three separately; not unequal, in substances or natures, neither increased nor diminished by superiorities nor inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite conjunction of three infinite ones, each God when considered in Himself; as the Father, so the Son; as the Son, so the Holy Spirit; the three one God when contemplated together; each God because consubstantial; one God because of the monarchia. No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one. When I think of anyone of the three I think of him as the whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of that one so as to attribute a greater greatness to the rest. When I contemplate the three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light."



What our great Church father is encouraging in this and in several other orations is for all Christians and is to think and meditate on the revelation of the Mystery of the Trinity. He also educates us on how God communicates to us (Greek: *oikonomia*) so that we can better understand ourselves and joyfully follow the sacramental transformation in our path towards salvation.

There is only one teaching of the Church when it comes to the doctrine and theology of the Holy Trinity and this needs to be fully understood or accepted. Any misunderstanding of the Trinity skews our understanding of all other Church teachings given the entire Christian Faith is rooted and grounded on the communion and relationship that exists between the Father Almighty, the One Lord Jesus Christ, and the One Living Holy Spirit. For our Church, theology is our faith and our faith is our theology. Thus, our faith is expressed in our prayers. In short, our prayers repeatedly confess the Holy Trinity and we believe so.



Theosis: Partaking of the Divine Nature

God is with us always and is everywhere. God the Father is above us and all things as the ever flowing source of love. God the Son gave us His promise that He is with us always (**St. Matthew 28:18-20**), and God the Holy Spirit is in us as we were baptized as Christians and sealed. God is in all places and fills all things.

We also know that we are created in God's image and likeness (**Genesis 1:27**) and gave us a unique position in His creation (**Genesis 1:28**). Jesus taught us as well how to "to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (**St. Matthew 5:48**) with a profound command: "love one another as I have loved you" (**St. John 15:12**).

To carry out this love means to be like the relationship that exists in the Holy Trinity which may seem impossible. However, through the Resurrection we have been restored and given a path to a new life in union with God. Theosis is the teaching of transformation to become like Christ, doing the things that He did and becoming sons of God in Him by the power of the Holy Spirit. The essence of Orthodox Christianity is the "acquisition of the Holy Spirit" and the "deification" of man by the grace of God, or theosis. The Fathers of the Church unanimously claim that Christian life is the participation in the life of the blessed Trinity in the most genuine and realistic way. The Orthodox Christian life is about becoming divine in union with God.

Heaven and Hell

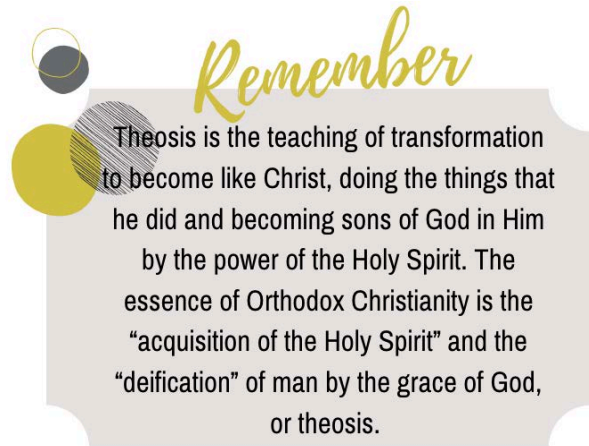
This relationship and union with God underscores the Orthodox understanding of heaven and hell. In the Nicene Creed, we confirm that God is the "maker of heaven and earth" but there is no mention of a place called hell. The Creed summarizes all that we need to understand for our salvation, so why this omission? Although there is no question that hell is real, there is no place called hell. Hell becomes real when our relationship with God becomes non-existent. In other words, our closeness with God is the cause of our own eternal joy or suffering based on our actions and decisions in our life.

Hell is commonly taught to be a place created by God for the express purpose of banishing the wicked for everlasting punishment. The damned are spatially cut off from God, His Kingdom, His people, and His love. But in the Orthodox Christian understanding, both heaven and hell are not spatial, but relational.

The goal of the Christian is not to "get to heaven" as to a locale, but rather to grow into deepening communion with God by receiving sonship through the Holy Spirit, beginning in this life and continuing forever. Similarly, the Church does not see herself as

sending people to heaven or hell, any more than God sends people there. Rather, the Church is the hospital for sinners, preparing people for the experience that all will have in the presence of God. The only real question is what effect seeing God will have on us.

The Orthodox understanding is that heaven and hell are primarily states of the human soul. What makes them what they are is our individual response to God's love, whereby God is either included or excluded from our being. In this present life, we can experience a foretaste of heaven as we live in communion with God, regardless of our physical circumstances. Jesus says, "For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you" (**St. Luke 17:21**).



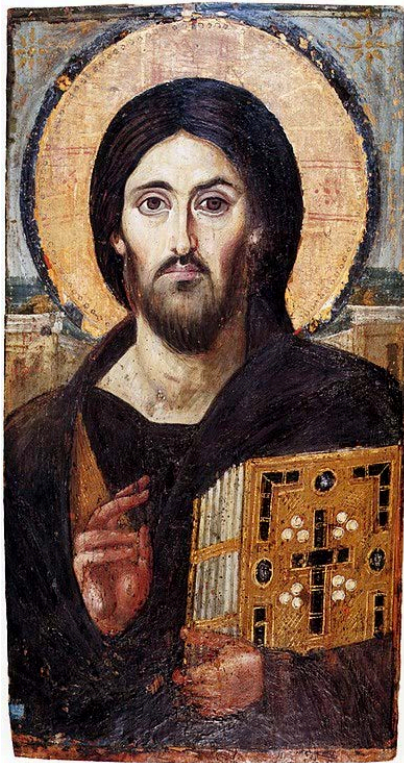
We can also experience a foretaste of hell by excluding Him from our lives: "but he who does not believe is condemned already" (**St. John 3:18**). In either case, it is neither a change in our physical location nor a change in God's attitude that determines our soul's state; it is our own choice (free-will).

Theosis is the process that brings a deepening communion with God, and the perfect model of unity and love is seen in the Holy Trinity. As we can see, the entire basis of our life in this world and in the world to come is founded in the Holy Trinity.

Summary

Everything in the Orthodox Faith is centered on Christ, who is fully man and fully God. And it is through Christ that we also center our Faith and our life on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity.

As Late Lamented His Grace Yuhanon Mar Severios of Kochi Diocese in his article titled Reksha states: "Salvation is the life in Christ. Salvation has to be experienced in the life in this world... Even if a sinner is placed in heaven, he can't stay there and he will run away. A sinner has no room in front of the holiness and luminance of God. The one without a wedding dress will be cast out from the banquet." (Sancharikkunna Choondupalaka, Compiled by His Grace Dr. Yakob Mar Ireaneos, page 395). When one is fully aligned with the Holy Trinity, salvation becomes real and the Holy Trinity feels the happiness over him.



With this understanding of the Trinity, even the basic questions such as “what does it mean that God is love?” takes on a Trinitarian meaning. We say that God is love because God is three Persons in an eternal relationship of love, oneness, and unity. Love is relational and everlasting. Its fulfillment is perfect harmony and unity of persons. Thus the only One who truly is love by nature, who is love in His very essence, is God the Trinity.

For us as Christians, we must be like God the Father as this was the new commandment of Christian life “to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” or theosis (**St. Matthew 5:48**). We need to be like God and to love God and our neighbor as Christ Himself has loved (**St. Mark 12:28-34**) and to bear the Cross (**St. Matthew 16:24-26**). And we need to be like God the Holy Spirit and bring forth the fruit (**Galatians 5:22-23**).

Reflection Questions

1. Arian theology holds that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, begotten by God the Father with the difference that the Son of God did not always exist but was begotten made before "time" by God the Father. Explain how this heresy incorrectly teaches that Jesus was not coeternal with God the Father and therefore would not be “fully God. In your explanation, defend that the Holy Trinity is uncreated, self-existent, eternal, adorable and of one substance.
2. Reflect on how St. Gregory of Nazianzus expressed that he “No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one.” How does this help us in our daily life think about the love of God? How important is making the Sign of the Cross with this in mind?
3. How can we model our life on the Trinity? Reflect on the following verses for the Father (**St. Matthew 5.48**), the Son (**St. John 15.12, St. Matthew 16:24**), and the Holy Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**)

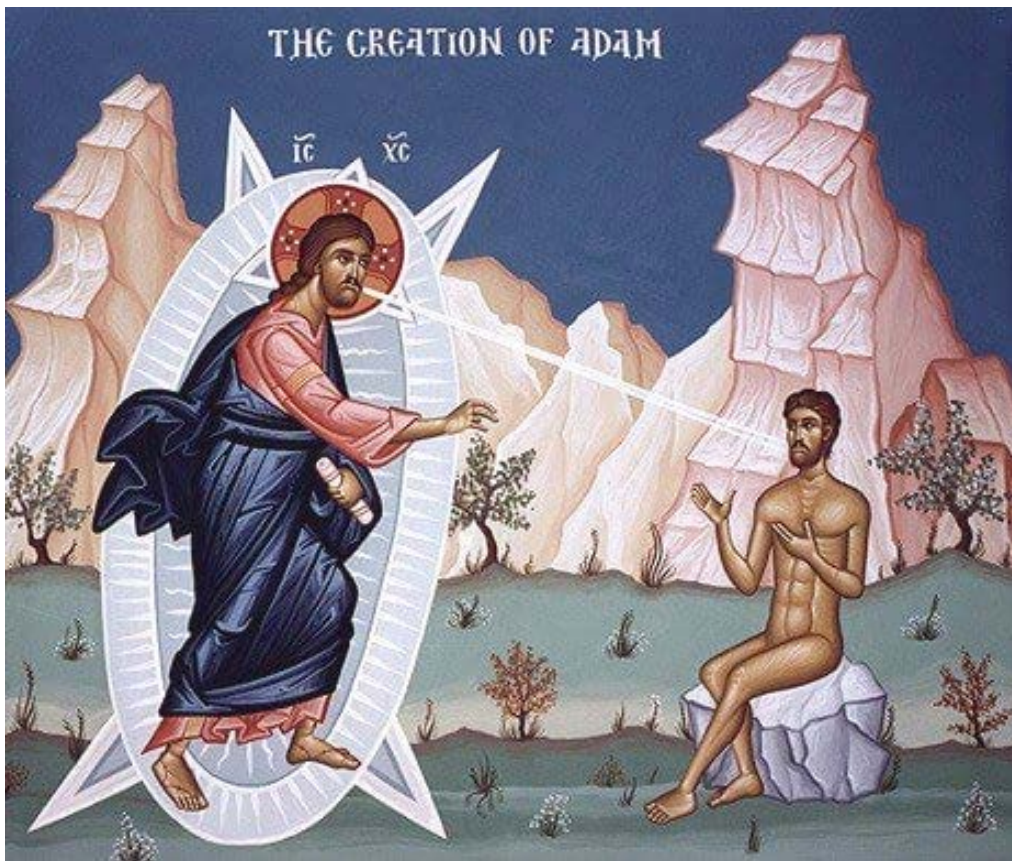
Lesson 10: Our Sacramental Life

Lesson Goals

- I can relate to how the Church practices of fasting and prayer help us grow in God's image and likeness.
- I can defend against the negative influences of the world with a clearer understanding of the role of the Church in our salvation.
- I can appreciate the Liturgical calendar and how the Church provides these tools to help us in our spiritual growth.

A Priestly Vocation

The Syriac tradition teaches us about the beautiful connection between God's love for His creation and our true calling as His children. Renowned scholar on Holy Liturgy Fr. Dr. Baby Varghese⁴ elaborates by stating that liturgical worship is our vocation, "the very purpose for which he was created. He was created to live in communion with God as a liturgical being".

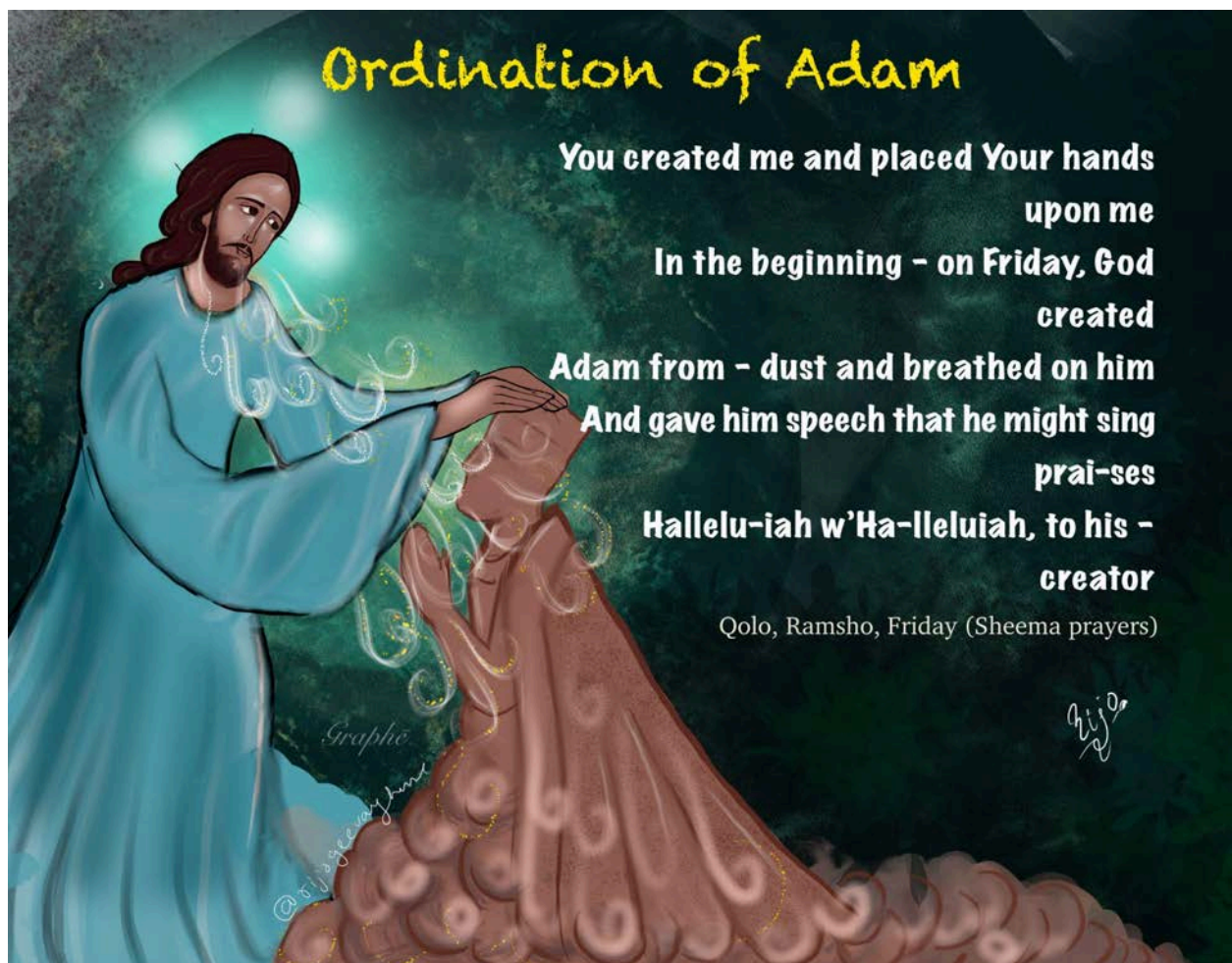


⁴ Varghese, Fr. B. (2004). West Syrian Liturgical Theology (1st ed.). Routledge.

This is summarized wonderfully during the evening prayers (Ramsho) on Friday:

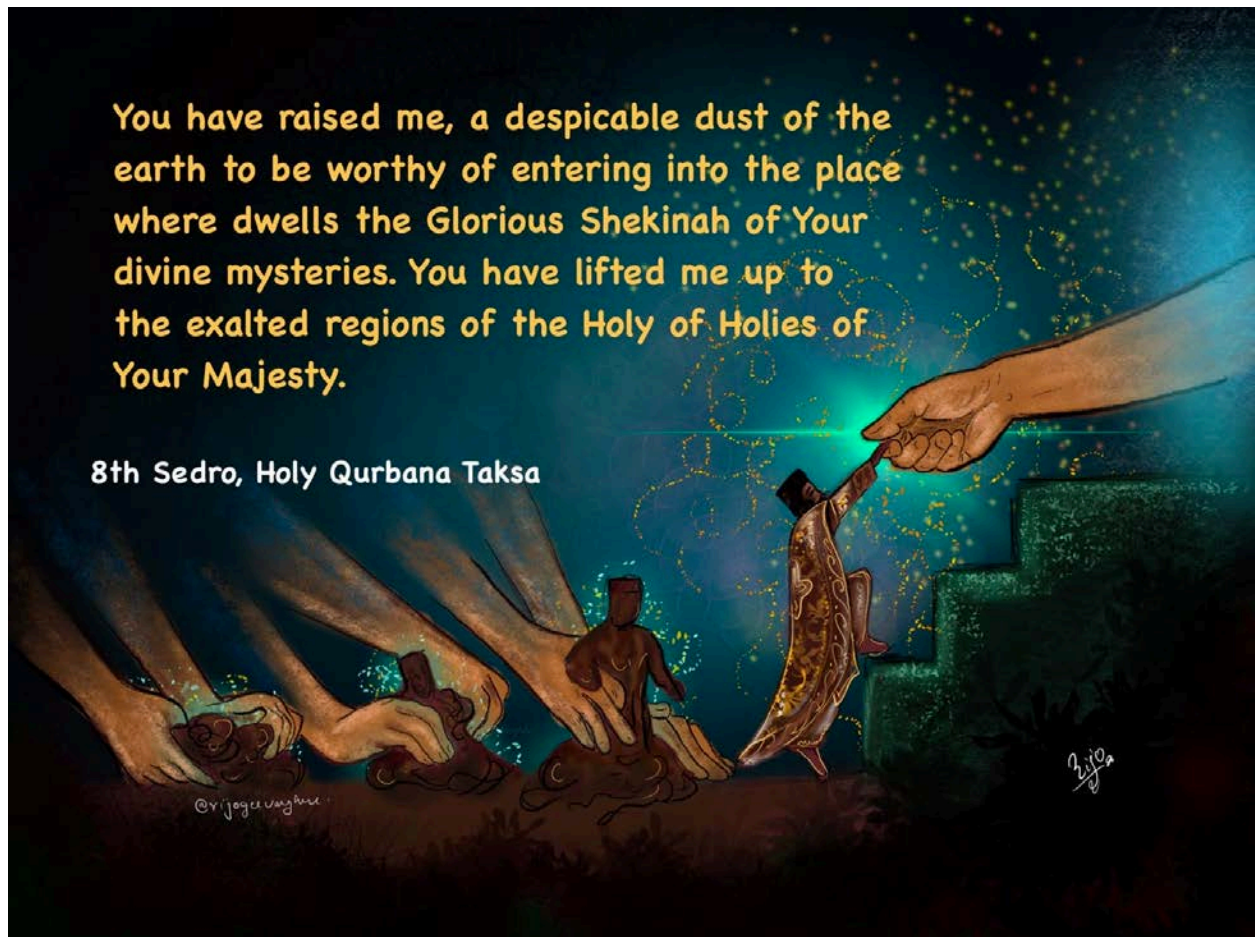
*You created me and placed Your hands upon me
In the beginning - on Friday, God created
Adam from - dust and breathed on him
And gave him speech that he might sing prais-es
Hallelu-iah w'Ha-lleluiah, to his - creator .. Barekmor*

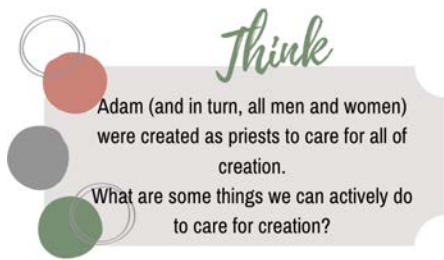
Fr. Dr. Baby Varghese explains further that the Syriac tradition has a beautiful interpretation of “You created me and placed Your hands upon me” as meaning ordination. This is also reflected in Scripture - **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”** (1 Peter 2:9)



Adam (and in turn, all men and women) were created as priests to care for all of creation. A careful reading of Genesis clearly shows that we were created in God's image and likeness (**Genesis 1:26-27**) by taking dust and breathing life (**Genesis 2:7**). God created a special paradise called Eden and placed man there for a purpose (**Genesis 2:8**) which was summarized in Genesis **1:28-30**. The Syriac tradition illuminates that this purpose extends beyond just caring for the world. He created us to stand before God, representing the creation and be in communion with Him.

From Fr. Baby Varghese, "Adam was created as a priest, with a vocation to stand before God on behalf of the whole creation. Adam's vocation was to offer praise to the creator as a representative, as a 'priest' of the creation. Thus, Adam's life in Paradise was a liturgical life, which consisted of 'watching, fasting, prayer, and sacrifices of righteousness.' Paradise was a 'sanctuary' where God was present, and Adam was led to the 'sanctuary' as a priestly guardian."



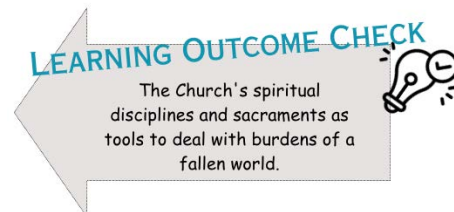


The Fall of Man brought sin and death into the world (**Genesis 3**), but one thing that never faltered was God's Love. God's plan for us also did not change, and our vocation remains. Our vocation is to be with God and worship Him so that God can grant us salvation, which is healing. Thus, we grow in holiness and progress towards theosis.

The other reason for God to call us is that we can extend healing to the broken world. Jesus called the twelve also for the same reason. **St. Mark 3: 14-15** reads:

"Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons."

Worshiping God includes prayers and other spiritual disciplines. The Church continues to teach us these spiritual disciplines and leads us through the Sacraments as tools to help us grow in Christ, even in this fallen world. He heals us and uses the ministry of the Church to heal the broken world.



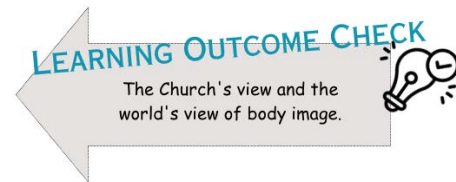
This is our commission and vocation. The Church constantly reminds us that we are created in God's image, and by following her teachings, we will grow in God's likeness (theosis). This understanding brings a positive and negative way of traversing the world.

Positive Mental Influence: All spiritual disciplines have a positive mental influence. Spiritual disciplines are twofold. The physical disciplines and mental disciplines. The Church teaches that mental disciplines are difficult to master. Therefore, one has to start with physical disciplines, which is mastering our body. This is the way for us to grow and master our mind. If we consider eating healthy and engaging in physical fitness activities to keep our bodies and minds sharp, and to fight against the negative impacts of gluttony, then it is a positive worldly influence that is supported through Holy Scripture:

"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19)

A healthy body encompasses a healthy mind, and such a mind will carry the fruit of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:22-23**) and gifts of the Holy Spirit (**1 Corinthians 7-11**).

Negative Mental Influence: An obsession for body image focuses on the external and on what others may think or presume about oneself. These lead to unhealthy outcomes, including envy or jealousy of those depicted to have the desirable physiques. On the contrary, chasing the goals rooted in the Church and scripture could save us from a spiraling quest that may have harmful effects on our mental state and well-being.



The Meaning of the Ordo

The more we connect our purpose with a liturgical understanding, we see God's plan in everything. Understanding the term 'ordo' or an order is helpful in this context. In Liturgy, the ordo is how we celebrate. While those outside the Church may see this as rigid or meaningless rules and repetition, what the Church teaches us is Divine patterns and purpose.

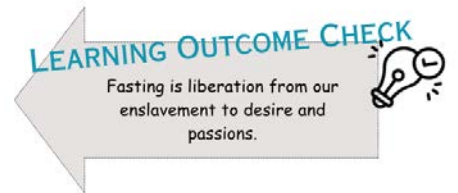
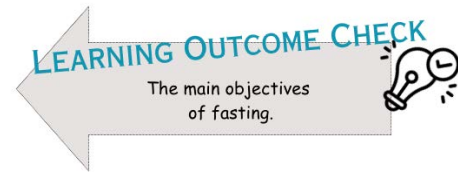
Fr. Baby Varghese explains, "Ordo is an ordering of a vision; it expresses the mind of the community. It orders and orients the community, by assigning each member his/her role and function in the celebration. In the Syrian Orthodox liturgy, there is no place for passive participation. Each member 'con-celebrates' with a prayer, hymn, gesture, or movement. Ordo implies the presence and participation of the people. Thus the meaning of the ordo is inseparable from that of the Church. The ordo enacts the vocation of the Church as 'a royal priesthood' which offers "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:9).

The goal of the ordo is to make worship the expression of the faith of the Church or to actualize the Church as the people of God, the worshiping community. Different elements have been arranged as a consistent whole precisely for the self-realization of the Church. Ordo is a theologically inspired 'language' by which the Church expresses itself. It actualizes as the fulfillment of the 'mystery of God,' which was hidden and is finally revealed in Christ. Each element, whether it is time, texts, gestures, or symbols, is rooted in and reflects the mystery of God."

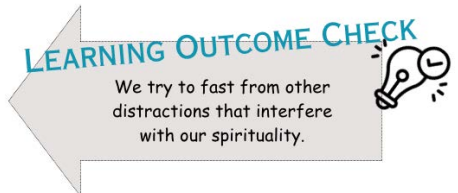


These are the Divine patterns in all that we do in the Church. This includes the Liturgical calendar that we use in Holy Qurbana, which is chosen to help us in our worship and bring us closer to God and His Purpose for us.

Fasting is another tool that is given to us by the Church. During the liturgical year, there are several periods of feasting. Fasting also provides us with periods of respite and mental/spiritual preparation for our ultimate purpose, salvation. The Church uses fasting as both a sharp spiritual weapon and armor to protect against what could spiritually weaken us. St. Paul exhorts us to put on the armor of God (**Ephesians 6:10-18**). Fasting is the armor of God and it helps us prepare ourselves for self-examination for a cure from all sinful infections. Confession and reconciliation with God through Holy Qurbana is the ultimate means and medicine for this healing. In short, fasting is liberation from our enslavement to all damaging desires and passions.



There are multiple avenues of fasting: For example, fasting from social media, fasting from all kinds of talking for a period of time, which is the fasting of silence; fasting from sleep for a period of time, which is the vigil; fasting to read more from the Holy Bible, to pray from the silent personal prayers from Pampakuda Namaskaaram, fasting to do more charity, which is the kindness of servanthood towards the creation etc. Once we fast from spiritual distractions and fast for more virtues, we come closer to God and God comes closer to us (**James 4:7-10**)



The following fasting guidelines are prescribed for Orthodox Christians, especially during lenten periods:

- Abstaining from food altogether for periods of the day, typically mornings
- Abstaining from luxurious foods, such as meats and dairy, throughout a fasting season
- Abstaining from conjugal behavior for married couples, alcohol, not going to the movies or certain avoidable celebrations. This is why the Church does not permit weddings during Holy Lent.

Our Return to Paradise

God's love for us never faltered even with the disobedience of Adam and the Fall of Man. We sing in the Friday Ramsho prayers as well:

*On Friday, the Lord - of creation stretched His hands
On the Cross - and of His own will
Tasted death and not the fruit Adam - ate
Halleleu-iah w'Ha-lleluiah, He re-stored Adam*



To quote Fr. Baby Varghese, “The Fall consisted in his failure to fulfill his ‘priestly’ vocation. Instead of ‘ministering’ to God, that is, to stand before God in an attitude of trust and thanksgiving - the content of communion - he did not believe in God’s promise. Thus the Fall was also a failure to fulfill his liturgical vocation. According to the West Syrians, the purpose of the Incarnation was to ‘teach man true worship’ and thus to restore the broken relationship.”

As mentioned earlier, our life in Paradise was a Sacramental life where we would grow and transform through close communion with God and true worship, i.e., the “watching, fasting, prayer, and sacrifices of righteousness”.



The Tuesday Sapro of the Sh'himo also illustrates this with a reflection on the Good Thief (**St. Luke 23: 39-43**), who was promised by Christ, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” (v43).

*O thief, speak of the beauty
Of paradise for our sakes -
And show us the tree of life
That we may pluck its first-fruits
Of watching, fasting, and pray'r -
And righteous sacrifices*

As Fr. Baby Varghese reflects further, “Liturgy gives us ‘the first fruits’ of Paradise, a foretaste of the joyful life in the presence of God. Paradise was a ‘sanctuary’ where God was present, and Adam was led to the ‘sanctuary’ as a priestly guardian. When he failed to fulfill his vocation, he was expelled from Paradise. Worship is the expression of our longing (‘nostalgia’) to live in communion with God and to regain our former inheritance and dwelling place.”

Conclusion

We often think of Sacraments as events in our life - our Baptism, when we partake in the Holy Qurbana, when we go to our Achen for Confession, etc. In this context, it is very often heard that there are only seven Sacraments in the Orthodox Church.

However, this is different from the ancient understanding of the Orthodox Faith as a sacrament being a mystery where a transformation happens because of God. As Fr. Thomas Hopko explains, “The more ancient and traditional practice of the Orthodox Church is to consider everything which is in and of the Church as sacramental or mystical. The Church as the gift of life eternal is by its very nature, in its fullness and entirety, a mystical and sacramental reality. It is the life of the Kingdom of God given already to those who believe. And thus, within the Church, everything we do—our prayers, blessings, good works, thoughts, actions—everything participates in the life which has no end. In this sense everything which is in the Church and of the Church is a sacrament of the Kingdom of God.”

Liturgy or Holy Qurbana is the basis of our life as it is the reflection of our eternal life. The Sacraments provide us the means through which we can transform and grow to be like God (theosis), and the tools of the Church that include fasting, prayer, Scripture reading (including the Liturgical readings), and stewardship all point towards this intimate Communion with God. Once we see these patterns, we understand our life is indeed Sacramental, and our goal is to be One in Christ.

Reflection Questions

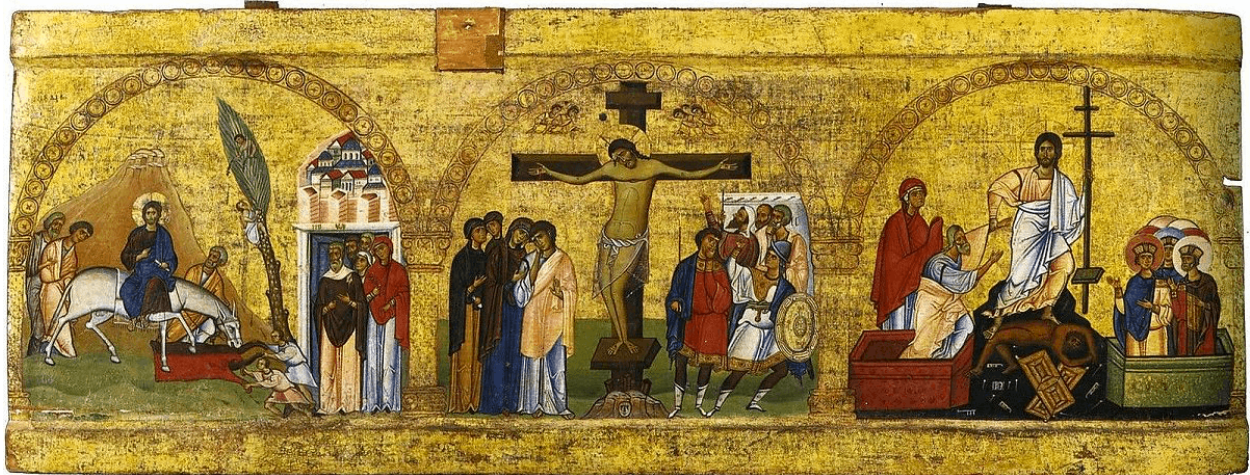
1. Examine how fasts of Wednesday, Friday, Nineveh and Great Lent are penitential fasts while the others are intercessory, commemorative of those events, and in spiritual preparation. What are some ways each fast changes our bodies and minds in ways beyond the physical?
2. Defend how obeying the teachings and instructions of the Church should not be thought in legalistic terms where punishment occurs if we do not follow, but rather in an eternal manner with Communion with God as our goal.
3. How can the world entangle us? Are there things we deem innocent, but upon further inspection, could ensnare or trap us from our true purpose and vocation?

Lesson 11: The Liturgical Calendar

Lesson Goals

- I can develop a deeper Understanding of our Salvation and Purpose as Christians through the Scripture Readings of the Festal/Sunday Liturgies.
- I can understand the Relevance of Scripture in the Festal and Sunday Liturgies.
- I can see the Liturgical Calendar allows for better understanding of the Tones, and their Deeper Relationship to the Liturgical Life of the Church.
- I can illustrate the purpose and goal of the fasting seasons of the Church.

The Liturgical Calendar of the Malankara Orthodox Church serves as a sacred framework, guiding the faithful through a rich spiritual journey that encompasses every season of the Christian year. The calendar not only emphasizes the life of our Lord Jesus Christ but also highlights the importance of fasting and feasting as essential components of our spiritual development. A community following a calendar is an ancient practice, and forms a common bond. Today in Christianity, the calendar achieves this through common feasts and fasts which bring focus to the life of Christ.



The Structure of the Calendar

At the core of the Liturgical Calendar are six major feasts that encapsulate significant events in the life of Christ. These feasts—Nativity (Yeldo), Baptism (Denaha), Resurrection (Qyamtha), Transfiguration (Mtale), Dormition of the Theotokos (Shoonoyo), and the Feast of the Holy Cross (Sleebe)—structure the year in cycles, helping us to reflect on key moments of salvation history. Importantly, the calendar does not start on January 1, unlike secular traditions, but rather at the end of October or early November.



This beginning is marked by the Feast of the Consecration (**Koodosh 'Edtho**), and the Feast of the Dedication of the Church (**Hudoth 'Idtho**). The Fathers of the Church were particular in starting the calendar with these Feasts. As Saint Paul writes to the Corinthians, “the Church is the Body of Christ or the Temple of God.” Saint Paul makes it clear that we, as followers of Christ, are members of Christ’s Body. We give high reverence to places of prayer and worship; to do this, the place must be clean. Likewise, we must also be clean as well as dedicated. The Sanctification of the Church reminds us to look within ourselves and be clean, not only physically, but spiritually as well.

The Church gives us the opportunity to re-examine ourselves and see if we are still on the Christian path. Are there aspects of our lives that need to be cleaned up? Are we continually working toward salvation? Are we truly reflecting the image of God in our lives? The Life of the Church gives us that opportunity every year. These two Sundays can be considered as preparation for the entry into the liturgical year.

The Importance of Fasting and Feasting

Fasting and feasting are not purely ritualistic practices but transformative experiences that invite believers to reflect deeply on their spiritual lives. The cycles of feasting, such as those surrounding the Nativity, and fasting, such as the Great Lent and the Nineveh Fast, serve to balance our approach to worship and growth in holiness. By engaging in periods of fasting, the faithful are encouraged to cleanse their spirits and deepen their prayer lives, allowing them to appreciate the joyful feasts that celebrate God's saving actions.

The period of Advent invites us to prepare for the Nativity, where we reflect on the Incarnation, underlining that Jesus, born in humility, is central to our faith. Such preparations evoke Old Testament prophecies and historical narratives, culminating in profound appreciation of the mystery of Christ's birth. The rhythm of this cycle then invites us to live in anticipation and gratitude for the ways God enters human history.

Progression and Tone of the Liturgical Year

As the Liturgical Calendar unfolds, it reflects a deep progression of spiritual themes aligned with Christ's life. For instance, after the festivities of the Nativity, we enter into reflections on Christ's early life and mission, highlighted by feasts such as the Circumcision and the Theophany. Each feast is imbued with meaning that encourages us to examine our understanding of salvation and transformation in Christ.

During the Great Lent, the church emphasizes the theme of mercy and healing through the miracles of Christ. This Lent serves not merely as a season of deprivation but as a time for intense spiritual renewal and a heartfelt call to repentance. The accompanying scriptures encourage us to consider the depths of Christ's compassion—a reminder that our journey toward resurrection is both communal and personal. Thus, participation in this Lenten journey prepares us to experience the joy of the Resurrection fully.

Following the Resurrection, the liturgical tone shifts from mourning and penance to joy and celebration during the feasts of Ascension and Pentecost. Jesus' ascension and the

coming of the Holy Spirit signify not just events in Church history but the ongoing presence and work of God among us, empowering us as witnesses of His love.

The celebrations of Pentecost, in particular, highlight the establishment of the Church and the call for believers to carry forward the Good News of Jesus Christ. Consequently, this period encourages believers to reflect on their roles within the body of the Church and in the larger community as agents of God's kingdom.

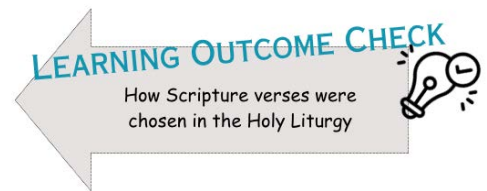
Embracing the Liturgical Cycle

The Malankara Orthodox Church's Liturgical Calendar is more than a schedule of religious observances; it is a comprehensive guide for believers to immerse themselves in the life of Christ through the practices of fasting and feasting. The careful balance between these two components reflects a profound understanding of the Christian journey, where moments of solemn reflection and joyful celebration coexist to enrich our spiritual lives.

As we engage with this sacred calendar, our challenge is not simply to know its structure but to embody its wisdom in our daily lives. Just as each feast and fast serves as a marker in our spiritual journey, we are called to reflect on our relationship with God, seeking to grow in faith and love, ultimately working toward our salvation. In this way, the Liturgical Calendar becomes a transformative tool that continually invites us to renew our commitment to Christ and His mission in the world.

Holy Scripture in Liturgy

A common criticism of the Orthodox Church is that we are not a "Bible based" Church, but the reality is the Holy Bible is used extensively in the Liturgy of our Church. The early Christians adopted the practice of Scripture reading from the Jewish custom of reading extracts from the Old Testament on the Sabbath. The early Christians soon added extracts from the writings of the Apostles and Evangelists to the Liturgy. The readings for the entire liturgical calendar is found in the lectionary - which is a cycle of biblical readings for the church year. Our Holy Fathers of the Church were very meticulous about the verses selected and the placement of the verses in the services.

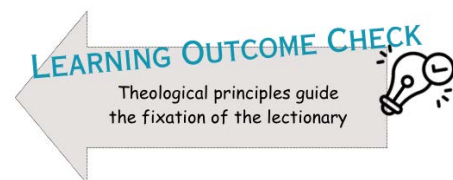


For example, Psalm 51, the Psalm of repentance, is recited at the beginning of every evening prayer (Ramsho) and morning prayer (Sapro). Every service in the Malankara Orthodox Church usually begins with Psalm 51, where we begin by acknowledging that we

have sinned and ask God for mercy. There are also Old Testament readings, which we can see referenced in hymns and specific Promeon/Sedre of the Church. Just before the start of the Holy Qurbana, the Old Testament passages are read. The first passage read is from the books of Moses (Torah); the second book is taken from either a historical book or one of the books of wisdom. The third and final reading is taken from the prophets. Once the Holy Qurbana commences, after the procession and Trisagion, the acolyte stands one step above from where the faithful stand and reads. Standing one step above from the faithful is to denote the ministry of teaching from the writings of the Church. There are two readings - one reading taken from the Acts of the Holy Apostles or the General Epistles (gospel to the Jews) that is read from the left side of the altar (northwest corner), followed by the reading from the Pauline epistles (gospel to the gentiles) from the right side of the altar (southwest corner). Then, the celebrant reads the Gospel from the middle of the altar (universal reach of Christ's teaching).

Lectionary

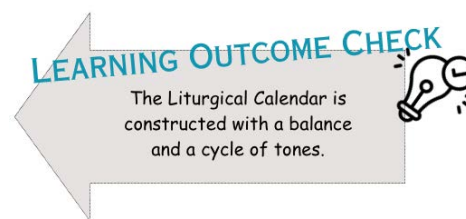
Now with the calendar established, the Church Fathers also put together a **lectionary**. The lectionary guides the faithful through the rhythm of seasons providing relevant readings from the scripture that provide spiritual nourishment for the soul. Lectionary has specific Bible passages that correspond to the theme of the day and tell the historical event that occurred, through the epistle readings and the Gospel read on the day. The Old Testament readings of each feast have some connection to the New Testament readings. The link between the Old Testament and New Testament readings usually represent a **typology**. Typology in biblical exegesis is a doctrine concerning the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament. Events, persons, or statements in the Old Testament are seen as types prefiguring or superseded by antitypes, events or aspects of Christ or His revelation described in the New Testament. These Scripture passages are selected based on the feast day.



The lectionary is another tool that the Church has for us to grow spiritually and grow towards perfection. Every Church has an official lectionary containing Scripture readings that are read in the services according to the cycles of the liturgical year. The beauty of being part of the Church is the organization of the calendar, especially through the lectionary. The Church follows this strict order and bases the entire set of services around this order. The Scripture verses for the day starting with the Old Testament, the General and Pauline Epistles, and the Gospel reading is based on the lectionary. Every parish follows the same calendar, which has been handed down to us through the Church Fathers who were

inspired by the Holy Spirit. This allows for unity amongst the members even though they do not attend the same parish but belong to the Orthodox Church.

Along with the Liturgical Calendar, there are tones that are set for every day. The Orthodox Church is unique, having a completely sung liturgy. Everything is sung from the very beginning to the end. The Octoechos (The Hymns of the Cycle of the Eight Tones for Sundays and Weekdays) covers each of the eight tones, or melodic patterns, together with its accompanying hymns, sung throughout all the services for the seven days of the week and Feasts, beginning on Saturday evening. Two complementary melodies are used for chanting of hymns in a week, then another, rotating through the set of four according to an established system through the liturgical calendar. Music for a feast is set to a fixed melody appropriate to the occasion. Traditionally, the use of musical instruments is avoided in liturgical services. Variation helps reduce the repetitive nature in the hymns but are still organized in a way that is deliberate and calculated. Themes can even be seen in the hymns due to the varying musical key structures of each specific tone. Some tones bring feelings of happiness and joy during feasts while others help to bring somber feelings, especially during times of fasting. By utilizing a structured system, the entire worshiping congregation can participate in the hymns of the Festal services and Holy Qurbana. This safeguards the sanctity and purpose of liturgical music - teaching the theology of the church to the faithful.

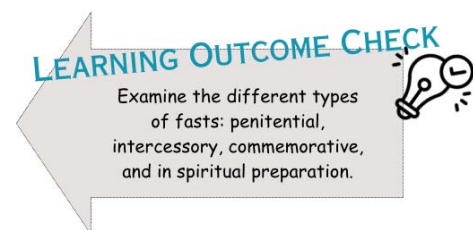


In the Malankara Church, we have eight tones. Every Sunday, the tone of the day changes to the next in sequential order until there is a reset when a new season in the liturgical calendar begins. Typically Tone One is used for feasts such as the Nativity and Resurrection. This reset of our tonal structure according to these great feasts also allows us to see the importance of these feasts. Following the reset, the tones follow in sequential order as normal. Other patterns can be seen with the tonal structure as well. One major pattern is seen at the beginning of the liturgical calendar, from *Qoodosh 'Idtho*, the first day of the liturgical calendar. Being the first day, the Church starts with Tone One and continues this pattern for Eight Sundays, which leads to the week of Nativity. Every Sunday is assigned a different tone leading to a tone reset at the feast of the Nativity. Great Lent also follows a similar pattern leading to the Resurrection, the First Sunday of Lent is assigned Tone One and every Sunday from there changes in a sequential pattern to a tone reset at Resurrection Sunday. Church music and tones require in us a longing to know God and to possess a desire to behold Him portrayed in our song. It requires that we be true to Christ, for in singing and chanting we become witnesses to the Truth.

What is the aim of the Calendar, the lectionary, and the tonal structure in the Church? We cannot understand the mystery of Christ through just intellect. A person must experience Christ through prayers, liturgy, tradition that have been handed down, and experiences, to be truly united with God. The church shows us various ways to encounter God. The calendar takes a year to complete a full cycle and then is repeated. The repeated experiences help us to gradually improve our growth toward salvation. As we continue on the path of salvation, we must always keep in mind that we are continually walking towards God, experiencing the life of His Son in our life, and that through His Spirit we will finally return to paradise.

Fasting

The Church observes multiple fasts for the faithful as fasting redirects our lives toward God and reminds us of our dependence on Him. Fasting also aids us in attaining salvation. One of the Lenten hymns illustrates this beautifully when it tells us to begin the fast with joy. It tells us that if we only fast from food and not from our passions, we fast in vain. The true fast, it says, rejects evil, silences the tongue, lays aside anger, and cuts off all malice. Traditionally, the Orthodox Church fasts on Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year, except the eighteen days prior to the Great Lent and during the seven week period from Resurrection to Pentecost. We also fast daily during the five Fasting Seasons, and from midnight whenever planning to receive Holy Communion. We fast on Wednesdays because it is the day Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve apostles, betrayed Jesus Christ. We fast on Fridays, because it is the day when our Lord Jesus Jesus was crucified.. The only occasion when the Fast is not observed is when a Feast of the Lord falls on a Wednesday or a Friday.



There are five Canonical fasts observed in the Church - the Nineveh Fast, the Great Lent, the Apostles' Fast, the Dormition Fast, and the Nativity Fast.

Summary

The Church developed the Liturgical Calendar to help us remember the Life of Christ every hour, day and week of the year. This helps us to grow to be more and more like Christ every moment of our lives. The calendar serves as a framework connecting the life of Christ to specific events throughout the year. We foster a closer relationship with God and a commitment to the path of salvation as we live the life of Christ through the calendar. The rhythms of the liturgical year not only educate but also serve to engage in continuous reflection and growth to become more like Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. Why does the liturgical calendar start with the Feast of Qoodosh Idtho?
2. How are the Bible Readings for each Sunday or Feast Day selected?
3. What are the Canonical Fasts of the Malankara Orthodox Church? What is the purpose of these Fasting Seasons?
4. What are the tones in the Orthodox Church? Why do we use tones? What purpose does the tones serve in liturgical music?
5. Why is Psalm 51 used at the beginning of most services in the Church?

Lesson 12: Christian Symbolism

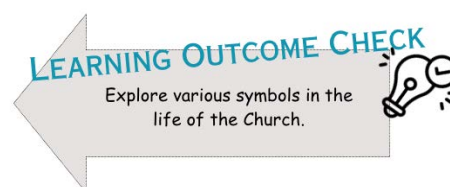
Lesson Goals

- I can appreciate liturgical life as a taste of heavenly reality.
- I can analyze various symbols in the Church.
- I can defend how the Holy Cross symbolizes Christ.
- I can relate how symbols are not merely representations but tie to our life.

Symbols are objects that convey a message that transcend the limits of language. Symbols also help to point us to a reality or message that is greater than the symbol itself. Symbols have come from different cultures, regions, and times. As Christianity grew, symbols became understood to represent significant teachings of the Faith. Symbols are ways in which we can perceive God's redemptive acts through His Creation. Through this perception, understanding, and participation we enter into communion with God.

The reason why symbols have such a significant place in our worship is explained by St. John of Damascus. He states, "Since not everybody is literate or has the leisure for reading, the fathers acknowledged that these should be depicted in images as memorials to serve as a concise reminder" (St. John of Damascus, *On Images*). We utilize both the written word and symbolism in sacraments, iconography and Church architecture. This is done to convey the faith to people so that we will always have God in our hearts and minds.

Our Church is full of symbols that improve the quality of our experience in prayer and liturgy. Symbols enhance our participation in the life of Christ and His Church. Some symbols or images we see in the church are the Holy Cross, the dove, a lamb, etc.. By entering into a church, one can observe symbols in the architecture, colors, icons, and vestments. These symbols and images are not about that object itself, but points to a larger, spiritual reality. For example, when we see an image of a dove in the church on the wall or on the priest's vestments, it should point us to the truth of the descent of the Holy Spirit who dwells in all of us.

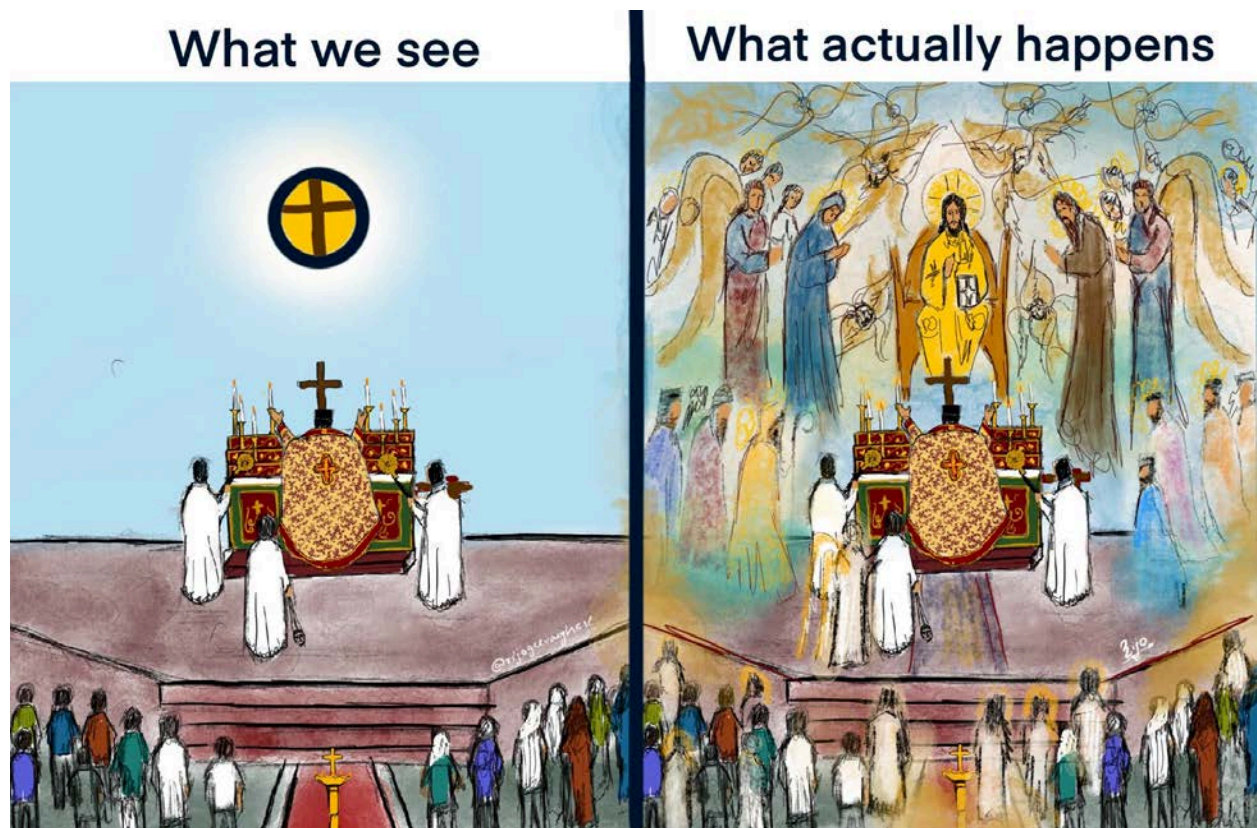


The Holy Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. It is not just a symbol. During the Holy Qurbana, the bread and wine are mystically transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. To outsiders this is seen as a mere symbol, but to the faithful, this is the actual body and blood of the Lord. The act of receiving Holy Communion commemorates the Mystical Supper, when our Lord commanded His disciples, "...do this in remembrance of

me” (St. Luke 22:19). In addition, the Holy Eucharist is the participation for the faithful to enter into heavenly worship. Throughout all of Scripture, prophets and Apostles have shared visions they have seen of the worship that takes place before God. One prominent example can be seen in the book of Isaiah which states,

“...I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. The house was full of His glory. Around Him stood seraphim each one had six wings with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.’ The lintel was lifted up by the voice of those who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said, ‘Woe is me, because I am pierced to the heart, for being a man and having unclean lips, I dwell in the midst of people with unclean lips; for I saw the King, the Lord of hosts, with my eyes!’ Then one of the seraphim was sent to me. He had a live coal in his hand, which he took with tongs from the altar. He touched my mouth, and said, ‘Behold, this has touched your lips. Your lawlessness is taken away, and your sin is cleansed’”
(Isaiah 6:1-7).

The vision shows a clear connection that the heavenly worship that the prophet witnessed and partook in is the same worship that is witnessed during the Holy Eucharist.

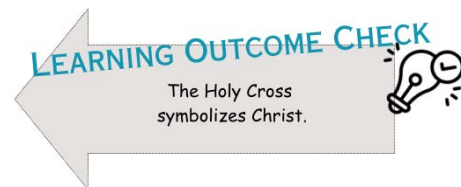


A prominent symbol of Christianity is the Holy Cross. The imagery of the cross had been foreshadowed since the time of Moses. In the Book of Numbers, the Israelites spoke against God and Moses as they were traveling through the desert. God punished them by having venomous snakes bite them. Moses was commanded by God to make a copper serpent and put it on a pole. The people admitted their wrongdoing and once they looked at the copper serpent they were healed (**Numbers 21:4-9**). In the Gospel of St. John, Christ explains to Nicodemus the imagery of the copper serpent, “...as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (**St. John 3:14-16**). The cross during the rule of the Roman Empire was a symbol of death. The purpose of this public display was to dissuade others from committing crimes. The condemned would be stripped naked and left to hang on the cross. The design of the cross was to bind people with their arms spread out. This method of execution was meant to be slow, grueling, embarrassing, humiliating, and excruciating. The crucifixion of Christ was meant to deter his followers, but after His Resurrection, it stopped being a symbol of death and despair. Once seen as a symbol of crime, humiliation, and fear, the symbol of the Cross was changed through Christ to be a sign of victory. Now when we look at the Cross of Jesus Christ in the Church, we are reminded of his Passion and the salvation the Cross offers us through our Lord who hung on it.

As seen in a hymn from the *She’himo* prayers for Friday morning,

“The Cross is the sign of peace
And the sign of victory
By the Cross we have been saved
And in it we all glory.”

The Cross became a symbol that represents Christ. As stated by St. Ephrem the Syrian, “The thief possessed faith - that faith which possessed him - and it raised him up and placed him in paradise. He saw in the cross the Tree of Life”⁵. Again, “His Son sowed and planted. In the one Tree of Life, the planter depicted his likeness”



⁵ St. Ephrem. (n.d.). The Pearl - Seven Hymns on the Faith. New Advent.
<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3705.htm>

In both hymns, St. Ephrem shows the close relationship between the Cross and the Lord Jesus Christ. The planter that the Syrian saint refers to is Christ Himself, and the Tree of Life is a symbol of the Cross of Christ.



St. Geevarghese Mar Dionysius of Vattasseril reflected, “When we adore before the cross, it amounts to adoring the Lord who was crucified, and His death on the cross”⁶

⁶ St. Geevarghese Mar Dionysius Vattasseril. (2006). Basic Doctrines of the Church (Matopadesha Sarangal). MOC Publications.

We adore the Cross because it is the Cross of our Lord, and by adoring it, we adore Him.

The experience of Christianity is enhanced by symbols. These symbols can be seen not only physically in the Church but also in our prayers and worship as shown above. Through symbols, we are able to experience Christ on a deeper level. This allows us to have a glimpse of the heavenly reality, while we are on Earth. Symbols help us enter into heavenly worship helping our spiritual eyes to be opened to the realities of Christ's salvation and His Holy Church.

Reflection Questions

1. What are some other symbols in the Church that were not specifically mentioned in this lesson?
2. How have symbols brought you closer to God? How have symbols deepened your faith in God?
3. What are some symbols you can use to help people who do not know about the Orthodox Church understand our faith?

Lesson 13: The Sanctity of Life

Lesson Goals

- I can appreciate the complexities involved in dealing with ethical issues
- I can empathize with those who have to make decisions in these difficult situations like death penalty, suicide, stem cell research, embryonic stem cell research, cloning etc, while applying the intrinsic value of sanctity of life.

“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 wondrously made; Marvelous are Your works, and my soul knows this very well. My bone You made in secret was not hidden from You. And my substance was in the lowest parts of the earth; Your eyes saw me when I was unformed” Psalm **138:13-16**). We can paraphrase these verses like; ‘The Lord is Lord of everything and I am His handiwork. I can’t be hidden from Him anywhere.’ Anyone, who owns the conviction of King David that God is the Lord of human life knows the depth of sanctity of life.

The society we live in has advanced in ways that may have not been imagined by King David and the early Christians. It is as if we hear about new scientific advancements and related ethical dilemmas every day. Today we may ask questions like “what does the Church teach about this subject and why?” While the Church does not have explicitly new teachings, there are different expressions of age-old teachings and specific questions related thereto with new characteristics.

The Church has always maintained a consistent life ethic. Fr. John Breck writes in his book ‘God with us’, “Orthodoxy holds that every human being, without exception, is created in the image of God and bears the Divine image from conception to the grave.”⁷

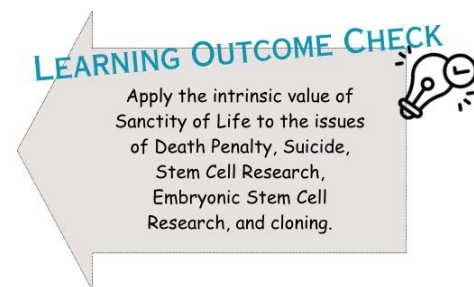
Secular systems also try to involve in sanctity of human life. Therefore, questions like the following gain importance in the context of the life of a faithful: “Does the secular society I live in help me become a better Orthodox Christian in the context of sanctity of life or is there a secular society that allows the flourishing of Orthodox Christian life and morality?” With these questions in mind, we look into the three different modes of ethical thinking: teleological, where the ends justify the means; deontological, where there is a lack of trust in human beings so we need rules and commands, and lastly, virtue, where we trust human beings to find the right way. The Church is a combination of these three modes of

⁷ Breck, John. “A Consistent Life Ethic.” Essay. In *God with Us: Critical Issues in Christian Life and Faith*, 27. Crestwood, N.Y, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003.

ethical thinking. The Church has commandments and canons but ultimately it is virtue-teleological. St. Paul tells us, “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children” (**Ephesians 5:1**). Along with this exhortation, the Church has a set of commandments and canons which can be applied at different levels and in different situations.

Our goal as Orthodox Christians is to inaugurate the Kingdom of God to the present world. To do this, we start with ethos that affirms life. It is shown throughout the entirety of the Scriptures that living a Godly life is life itself while living an ungodly life is death. Christ says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (**St. John 14:6**) and, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (**St. John 14:15**). We cannot simply just say we choose life; rather, we have to choose to follow the way of Christ and in that, we are given life. God’s commandments and way of life come from a time when the Israelites only had the ten commandments, but we are given the divine commandments by Christ during His Sermon on the Mount (**St. Matthew 5-7**). Though Christ gives us the divine commandments, the root commandment comes from the Old Testament times. “...I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life...” (**Deuteronomy 30:19**). This is the way of life in which we are called to walk. We are called to adopt a Christocentric lifestyle which allows us to have a consistent life ethic in which we affirm the sanctity of life in all things.

The Church upholds that human life is a sacred gift from God which we are to care for in every manner. St. Paul clearly states “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (**1 Corinthians 6:15**) and “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” (**1 Corinthians 6:19-20**). Implications of knowing about the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit ranges from the effects of lust or anger in our life to specific issues such as the death penalty. When it comes to some ethical issues, there are a lot of gray areas in which one consults with their spiritual father. In other ethical issues such as the death penalty, the Church has certain understandings that are black-and-white. The ending of one’s life is an absolute no but given the complex fallen world we live in, we try to comprehend all available angles.



These are extremely complex issues that the modern man is confronted with. The Church does not pretend to have ready made solutions, but the Church relies on Christ and on the living Holy Spirit, who broods over the Church to lead her into new dimensions of

Truth as we are able to in our age. In the trust in God and humility we attempt to look for answers for these extremely important and difficult issues before us.

Capital Punishment

The death penalty or capital punishment is “the process of sentencing one to death for the most serious crimes (capital crimes) and carrying out that sentence.”⁸ Someone committing a capital crime is the reflection of a broken world. The root of capital punishment is founded on justice and revenge. Thus, through capital punishment a person or society wants to establish justice through revenge against the perpetrator of a capital crime. We can see from the Gospels that this is not what Christ teaches us. Christ says to us, “But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (**St. Matthew 5:39**) and “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (**St. Matthew 5:43-44**). We are called to echo the words of Christ when He was sent for capital punishment, “Father, forgive them...” (**St. Luke 23:34**).

At the same time, the law and order system in the fallen world is a necessity in a civil society. “*Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God*” (**Romans 13:1**). Capital punishment is part of the system in a broken and fallen world. May Christ heal us all from the brokenness in this world.

Suicide

This is an important topic and one that should be discussed along with a mental health professional. The Church has a very definitive teaching on suicide, but one that preaches emphatically that God is Love and that empathy and compassion is needed above all.

Suicide refers to the act of ending one's life in an attempt to escape the prolonged, intense, and persistent experiences of hopelessness and psychological pain. Prior to an attempt, a person in this situation often struggles with frequent thoughts of death, unbearable pain, despair, and hopelessness. Our faith is one of hope. The God we worship is a God who has given us hope in the midst of suffering. In the Quqilion for the departed we sing, “The Life-Giving King” because God is the source of life and hope and it is only in Him that we have life and hope. The topic of suicide is a heavy topic in which there are many factors to consider when trying to understand a person's reason to act on suicidal ideation.

⁸ Capital punishment | Bureau of Justice Statistics. (n.d.). Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://bjs.ojp.gov/topics/corrections/capital-punishment>

The person may not necessarily want to die but because the pain is so prolonged and intense, the idea of acting on the suicidal thoughts provides an apparent escape from the pain. What appears like a solution at that moment, is separate from Christ who is the source of all life and hope. The Church has compassion for anyone who struggles with thoughts of suicide and supports them in seeking clinical mental health care services. It is important to know that anyone struggling with these thoughts is **not alone**. There are many resources for anyone struggling with these thoughts, namely the clergy or the 24/7 Suicide Prevention Lifeline that can be reached by calling **1-800-273-8255** or by texting **HELLO** to **741741**. The Church fully supports clinical mental health care for anyone seeking it. Our Lord is a merciful Lord who loves each person without exception. The Church prays for God's compassion on anyone who is struggling with suicidal thoughts so that their despair may not lead them to act on these thoughts. If the tragedy of suicide occurs, the Church will continue to intercede for God's mercy on them. As the Psalmist said, "Because he has cried to me", says the Lord, "I will deliver him and strengthen him. Because he has known my name, He shall call upon me and I will answer him, I will be with him in distress (**Psalm 91:14-15**).

The person acting on suicide loses hope in the mercy of Christ. However the Church teaches that whatever great our sin is or however grave our situation is, the mercy of Christ is able to overcome and help us is the teaching of the Church. LL His Grace Metropolitan Dr. Paulose Mar Gregorios, one of the greatest Church Fathers of our times, towards the end of his earthly life was unable to do many things on his own as he was paralyzed and physically handicapped. It was a great source of frustration and anger to the man who was fiercely independent all his life. However his words even in those days provide us with a great source of encouragement - "Even in this situation of mine, in my utter helplessness, my God is able to bring good out of me and so I praise my God".

Stem Cell Research

Stem cell research involves the use of "cells from which all other cells with specialized functions are generated."⁹ There are two types of stem cells that are used, embryonic and adult. The embryonic stem cells come from embryos that are a few days old and adult stem cells come from most adult tissues. The Scriptures clearly tell us that human life begins in the womb. The best example of this is when St. Mary visits St. Elizabeth. "And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (**St. Luke 1:44**). It is also seen in Isaiah, "Thus

⁹"Frequently Asked Questions about Stem Cell Research." Mayo Clinic. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, June 8, 2019.
<https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/bone-marrow-transplant/in-depth/stem-cells/art-20048117>.

says the Lord God who made you, and formed you from the womb” (**Isaiah 44:2**). From the time of conception, one bears the image of God and this person created is one that is unique and personal to God. Fr. John Breck writes, “Genetic uniqueness is merely the physical or physiological counterpart to a deeper and more significant reality, which is the creation of a spiritual being in which soul and body are thoroughly integrated, one with the other... That created being qualifies as “personal”...because at every stage of human existence it bears and manifests the very image of the *personal* God.”¹⁰ Because the Church emphasizes and fully believes that human life begins at conception, it does not condone the use of embryonic stem cells for research. The Synod of the Orthodox Church of America has reiterated St. Paul’s writing which says, “And why not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”?” (**Romans 3:8**). The act of destroying embryos is evil and we should not try to profit from that evil act. The Church however does not condemn the use of adult stem cells particularly for therapeutic developments because it is not at the cost of human life.

Cloning

Cloning is the “deliberate production of genetically identical individuals.”¹¹ As mentioned throughout the entirety of this lesson, human life is a sacred gift given by God that begins at the moment of conception. Fr. John Breck poses a question for all of us to consider, “What is God’s role in the process of human procreation?”¹² Everything we do in our lives is known by God, from the beginning of conception to the end of our lives. God is involved in the process of procreation and when we try to take procreation into our own hands, we begin to assume the role of God. Every single one of us is a unique and personal creation by God. As Christ says, “I am the good shepherd, and I know my sheep” (**St. John 10:14**) and “But the very hairs of your head are all numbered: (**St. Luke 12:7**). Since we are all a unique and personal creation to God, God wants us as we are. When we look at the lives of the holy Apostles, Christ did not select the same “cookie-cutter” personality rather each Apostle was unique in his own way. Similarly, when humans try to make a more perfect person through the use of cloning embryos, that clone would lose the unique personality that God intended us to have. As mentioned above, just because the embryos were already harvested, does not mean we should profit from them.

¹⁰ Breck, John. “A Consistent Life Ethic.” Essay. In *God with Us: Critical Issues in Christian Life and Faith*, 24. Crestwood, N.Y, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003.

¹¹(US), National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering (US), Institute of Medicine (US) and National Research Council (US) Committee on Science, Engineering, and and Public Policy. “Cloning: Definitions and Applications.” Scientific and Medical Aspects of Human Reproductive Cloning. U.S. National Library of Medicine, January 1, 1970. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK223960/>.

¹² Breck, John. “A Consistent Life Ethic.” Essay. In *God with Us: Critical Issues in Christian Life and Faith*, 48. Crestwood, N.Y, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003.

Conclusion

In the journey of life, we often encounter ethical issues that can be complex and difficult to navigate. As Orthodox Christians, we have a valuable resource in our spiritual leaders—our bishops and priests—who guide us through these gray areas. Our commitment to living a life rooted in Christ is essential for understanding and applying ethical values in all areas of our lives, not just in the more controversial situations.

Living a committed life in Christ means that we strive to follow His teachings and example. When we embrace this commitment, we find that our actions and decisions reflect a strong set of ethics that honor God and uplift those around us. In contrast, living apart from Christ leads to a life that lacks true purpose, as the Apostle Paul reminds us: “For to me, to live is Christ...” (**Philippians 1:21**).

Moreover, as Orthodox Christians, we firmly believe in the sanctity of human life. This belief is deeply rooted in the understanding that every person is created in the Image and Likeness of God. Therefore, every life is precious, unique, and special. Recognizing this truth encourages us to treat others with respect and dignity, promoting a culture of love and compassion. By living according to the teachings of Christ, we are called to protect and honor the gift of life in all its forms.

Reflection Questions

1. Justify why the Church prays for God’s compassion on anyone who is struggling with suicidal thoughts and always intercedes for God’s mercy, but also does not condone suicide. Incorporate the Orthodox teaching that God is the source of life and we are created in His Image and Likeness.
2. Analyze the dilemmas in capital punishment.
3. Support the Church teaching that cloning is not in line with our Faith.
4. What is the issue with embryonic stem cell research for Christians?

Lesson 14: Thy Will Be Done

Lesson Goals

- I can learn to grow in the image and likeness of God, walk along His path, and forsake the world and its empty promises.
- I can build a trustworthy relationship within the Orthodox Church, and use it to help us to make good life choices.
- I can understand that Holy Confession frees us from the mental anguish of the world and helps us on the journey toward divine joy and grace.

Being Human

If we look to this world alone for answers to our life's purpose, we may find ourselves without direction in understanding what it truly means to be human. Fr. John Behr¹³ emphasizes that the transformative journey of becoming fully human can only be in the light of Christ. He argues that true humanity is realized not through individual self-assertion or secular influences, but through participation in the life of Christ who reveals the image of God. Fr. Behr highlights that becoming human is a dynamic, ongoing process that is deeply rooted in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, inviting believers to embody this divine life in their own existence. This is also known as theosis.

In his Letter to the Romans¹⁴, St. Ignatius of Antioch expresses a deep desire to embrace martyrdom as a means of fully uniting with Christ and attaining true life. When he says, "Do not hinder me from living; do not desire my death," he is paradoxically referring to his physical death as the gateway to eternal life. For St. Ignatius, "living" in the fullest sense is not merely continuing his earthly existence but rather achieving spiritual life in communion with God.

He asks the Roman Christians not to prevent him from this destiny, as he believes that his martyrdom will bring him into "the pure light" of God's presence, where he will finally become "a man" in the truest sense—fully realizing his



¹³ Behr, Fr. J. (2013). *Becoming human: Meditations on Christian Anthropology in Word and Image*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

¹⁴ St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Romans (Lightfoot translation). (n.d.).
<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-romans-lightfoot.html>

identity in Christ. Ignatius sees martyrdom as the culmination of his faith and the ultimate fulfillment of his humanity.

A “HUMAN BEING” MEANS LIVING IN THE WORLD

You aren’t born able to walk and talk. But you learn, and you’ll misspeak and misstep in the process. Ultimately what does that get you:

You have tools to just prolong your earthly life, that has an expiration date

A “HUMAN BEING” MEANS LIVING THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST

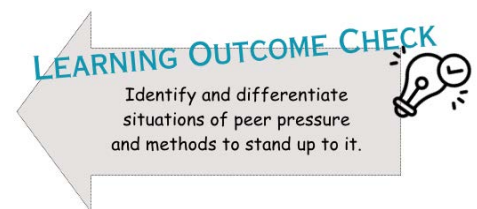
You start living the example Christ showed us: laying down our life (**being selfless**), living for others (**love**), grow our virtuousness which gets us the following:

We start to build an eternal life in Christ, which cannot be touched by death

Understanding Life Choices and the Path to Theosis

In our journey of becoming one with God, it is essential to recognize that we are always in control of our decisions. As illustrated in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the choices we make can lead us down varied paths, and poor decisions often result in negative consequences. This parable teaches us about the importance of choosing wisely and discerning the path we should follow, guided by the teachings of Christ, our parents, and our Church.

One common challenge faced by many youth is peer pressure, which might lead to decisions that are not aligned with Christian values. For example, when you are older you might be in a situation where you feel compelled to speed while driving due to the encouragement of some friends in the car. This choice may provide a fleeting thrill, but it is essential to consider its implications. Choosing to disregard safety and put oneself and others at risk brings selfishness into play. Such decisions often arise from a desire for acceptance among peers but ultimately detract from the values instilled by your family and Church, and may often endanger yourself or others around you. This danger could be physical, mental, or spiritual.



The Orthodox Church teaches against pride and self-centeredness, emphasizing that these traits can lead to emotional emptiness. To navigate decisions effectively, you should engage in a thoughtful process of discernment. This involves pausing to reflect on the

potential consequences of your actions: Will they harm others? Do they honor God and those who care for you? When you make decisions from a place of careful consideration, you embody the Christian values of love and responsibility.

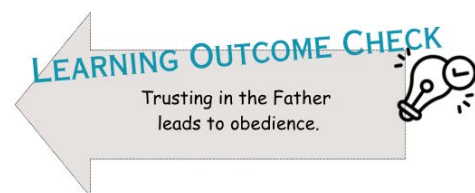
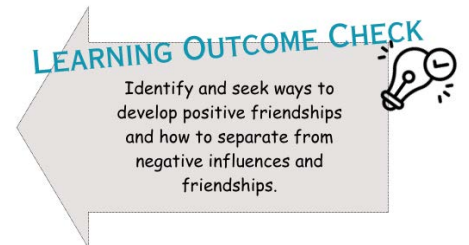
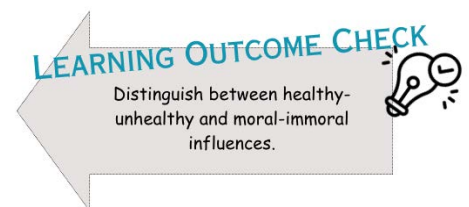
Building a strong relationship with your Parish Priest, who acts as a spiritual guide, can further support you in discerning the right path. The Parish Priest has a profound understanding of the challenges faced by youth and their families, having spent years learning about God's Word and the teachings of the Church. Through a covenantal relationship based on mutual respect, your priest can offer invaluable insights on living in accordance with Christian teachings.

Furthermore, your parents play a critical role in nurturing your faith; however, when questions or challenges arise that they may not fully address, your Priest can bridge that gap. By participating in Holy Confession, you can seek forgiveness for past missteps and recommit to a life guided by Christ's example.

As you navigate your journey, reflect on what influences your decisions. Are they driven by a desire for temporary gratification and acceptance, or are they aligned with the goal of seeking Theosis and a deeper connection with God? The teachings of the Church, the sacramental grace offered through Holy Confession, and the guidance from your Parish Priest and community can aid you in cultivating a path toward a heavenly life. Ultimately, it is essential to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy influences, as well as moral and immoral pressures. Striving to deepen positive friendships while separating from negative influences will help illuminate your journey toward a Christ-like existence. By doing so, you keep your eyes fixed on the ultimate goal: a life in harmony with God's will, leading you toward eternal life in His Kingdom.

Summary

The choices we make are very important, and keeping God in our hearts and minds guides our decisions. Through the Church, we also have help from trusted elders and our priest, and have access to healing Sacraments such as Holy Confession.





It is encouraged to discern the path ahead by evaluating the consequences of our decisions and consider the guidance of our parents, parish priests, and the Church.

Trusting in God as a loving Father fosters obedience, enabling individuals to align our actions with Christ's example. This transformative journey (theosis) calls us to recognize that true fulfillment lies not in worldly pursuits but in cultivating a relationship with God and living within the teachings of the Church. Through discernment and adherence to divine guidance, we can navigate life's challenges and with every decision become closer to Christ. And through it all, through humility and strive towards Christ and our spiritual growth.

We should strive to be like the good soil in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1–23), and be open to God's word and committed to spiritual growth. Just as the good soil bears fruit through nurturing and care, so too can Christians cultivate a life of theosis by aligning their decisions with the teachings of Christ and the support of their community, ultimately fostering spiritual maturity and fulfillment in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Reflection Questions

1. Propose ways that you can think of God's will as we discern and choose the path that leads to the Kingdom?
2. Interpret how the Parable of the Sower illustrates the importance of spiritual growth and decision-making in our lives?
3. Think about how your friends, even if they are not Christian, can affect the choices you make. Why is it important to consider their influence when trying to make decisions that help you become more like Christ?

Lesson 15: Trust in the Lord

Lesson Goals:

- I can reach out to someone who is more mature than us rather than just a friend of our age.
- I can differentiate between society's definition of success vs. Christ's definition of success.
- I can reach out to my parents, my bishop, priests, family members, and friends when it is important to seek help with mental health matters.

"Life is hard." This is a phrase many of us may have already, or will eventually at some point, say. No matter how much we think that life will get easier as we grow older, we all have had, or will have, a point in life where we say "life is difficult" or "I thought life was supposed to get easier as I got older." We all live in a society that says success is the most important thing in the world. A simple dictionary search tells us that success is "the status of having achieved and accomplished an aim or objective." Now the question is, "what is our aim or objective?"

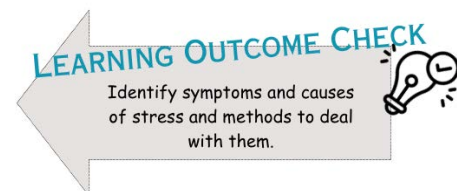
In the Gospel of St. Luke, Jesus Christ tells us the parable of the Rich Fool (**St. Luke 12:13-21**). Prefacing this parable, Christ says, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist of the abundance of the things he possesses" (**St. Luke 12:15**). He tells about a rich man who decided to tear down his barns so he could build even bigger barns that held even more crops. He told himself, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry" (**St. Luke 12:19**). This rich man thought he had nothing to worry about. Then the man died and all of his wealth went to others. Christ says "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (**St. Luke 12:21**). From this parable it is clear that we must be rich towards God instead of rich towards ourselves. Man is made in God's image. Jesus said if we give a little one, a cup of water it is like giving it to Christ. So to be rich towards God is to be generous and sharing with each other, like Abraham's hospitality to the three visitors (**Genesis 18:1-15**) or like Jesus to the people who were either hungry, thirsty, sick, scared or lonely (**St. Matthew 15:32**). So to be rich towards God is to grow in holiness. The more we read about God, talk to God, spend time with God, the more we can be like Him, and the more peaceful we will be. On the other hand, if we try to get away from God, we will have spiritual and mental problems. This leads to stress. Christ teaches us how to cope with stress.

St. Irenaeus said, “man is body, soul, and Holy Spirit.” The term for soul that is used in the original Greek quote of Irenaeus is *psyche*. This is a secular understanding too and therefore, the mental health studies are called psychology. In Christian understanding, human is a union between pneuma (soul), nous (mind), and body. When one has an illness with their physical body they go to the physician. When one has a spiritual illness of pneuma, they go to their spiritual fathers. So then what do we do if we have an illness with our nous? It can be much more difficult to understand the health of our mind, also known as our *mental health*. Just as a physician studies and understands the health of the body, there are various mental health professionals such as psychiatrists, counselors, therapists, and social workers, who specialize on the mental challenges that humans face.

As defined by the World Health Organization, “Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” In other words, mental health is a state where one can live their life and love others. Our whole being (body, mind, and soul) works together like gears on a bicycle, just as St. Paul says, “And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it (**1 Corinthians 12:16**). This is why it is just as important to take care of our mental health in addition to our physical body and our spiritual life. As mentioned before, the worldly definition of success can make life stressful. We are told to be the best in everything we do, but what is not said so much is how important it is to take care of our mental well-being.

There are periods in life where we can feel our mental health being tested such as finals week, the loss of a friendship/relationship, the funeral of a loved one, and even times when we or ones we love are sick.

These are all stressors in our life that can cause us to feel overwhelmed, anxious, and even depressed. When we struggle through these, our state of well-being is affected negatively. The symptoms of stress may appear when one is looking for instant gratification or becomes impatient to be successful and not willing to wait for the results. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI¹⁵) talks about some signs to see if we are stressed such as: headaches, lack of sleep, feeling overwhelmed, change of appetite, and difficulty concentrating. While all of these, on their own, may not be symptoms of stress, many experience a number of these symptoms at the same time. When we are going through stress, we may not get enough sleep and or nutrition. This can lead to low energy which can make it difficult to concentrate resulting in more mistakes increasing the stress more. This can become a vicious cycle.



¹⁵ <https://www.nami.org/Home>

A simple example is that some people try to work 24/7. This leaves no time for rest which creates stress. How do we break the cycle of stress? Thankfully, there are many things we can do. The Church teaches us to set aside time every day and every week to rest, and thank God for everything we do. This helps us rest and recharge and refocus on what's important. Another example is reading **Psalms 51, 91, 121**, which gives us great comfort. Even better, memorize them and then you can recite them in your mind whenever you are stressed. Reciting the Creed is another option. Once you have settled a little bit, take a step back from everything and acknowledge that we are stressed and need a break. NAMI gives us different methods to deal with stress such as: time management, eating, sleeping, setting aside time for ourselves, exercise and meditation. After trying all this, we may still come to realize that it is not enough, so what? The simple answer is to **reach out**. Reach out to your spiritual fathers like bishops or priests, parents, mentors, family members, or even a friend. It is important to recognize that when reaching out to someone, it should be someone more mature than we are. There are times when we may need to reach out to a mental health professional as well. Someone who can hear us, help us, and most importantly, be objective to what we tell them. When we have someone who is objective with us, then we can pinpoint more directly the things that are causing us to stress out or are causing other mental illnesses we may struggle with.

Just like there is no shame in seeking out help from a physician when our bodies are sick, there is **no shame** in seeking help from a mental health professional. The most important thing is that no matter what the struggle is, we are not alone. There is always help. While it is important to go to our parents, spiritual fathers like our bishops, and priests, family, or friends during times of struggle, let us remember that some may not be equipped fully to help us and may recommend seeking help from a trained mental health professional.

As Orthodox Christians, we are called to seek total dependence on God, “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding*” (**Proverbs 3:5**) and “*casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you*” (**1 Peter 5:7**). While this is true, just because we trust in the Lord and cast our cares upon Him does not mean the mental illness will go away. In the same manner, just because we are Malankara Orthodox Christians does not mean we are immune from mental illnesses. One in five adults and one in six adolescents experience some kind of mental illness. It is very prevalent and sometimes we will struggle with it too but that is okay.

Struggling with mental illness is not a stigma and we should not be ashamed of seeking help from the right people. They are there to help those who are struggling. Even if one is not struggling with a mental illness, one may seek out a counselor or therapist to

simply have someone who is there for us to help with an objective outlook. There are many resources in society for all of us to find the right professional to help us. Do we want an Orthodox therapist? We have those resources. Want someone who is South Asian? We have those resources too. The key is to just start looking when you want, need, and can.

Unlike the rich fool, wealth does not define our success. Our sole dependence on God is our measure of success. Our Lord cares for us, sees us, and hears us. He loves us. We can still understand this and have love for God although we do see a mental health professional. The Lord tells us, “Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand” (**Isaiah 41:10**). Many times the Lord works through other people to help us. When we are struggling with mental illness, our Lord will work through the mental health professionals to help us and uphold us. No matter what one is going through, know that **we are not alone.**

Reflection Questions

1. What was your understanding of mental health before this lesson, and how has it changed (if so)?
2. How can we talk with our parents and friends about the importance of seeing a mental health professional when the need arises?
3. Discuss: What are the different types of mental health professionals, do you know the differences between them? What are they?

Lesson 16: Becoming Human

Lesson Goals

- I can understand that all people are fundamentally good.
- I can teach that humans are a work of art by God.
- I can illustrate that becoming god is by becoming a human.
- I can demonstrate that the creation of God started in the Garden of Eden and is transforming in the resurrection of Christ.

The Purpose of Creating the Human Being

The uniqueness of the human being is the purpose of its creation. We were created by God different from all the rest of Creation with the intent to become like Him, in order to be in communion with Him. In the Book of Genesis, it is observed that God brought all of creation into existence by speaking (**Genesis 1:1-25**). However, when the moment came to make the human being, the process was more elaborate. As stated,

Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of heaven, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that moves on the earth. So God made man; in the image of God He made him; male and female He made them” (**Genesis 1:26-27**).

Furthermore, God took great care in creating the human being. As stated in Genesis, “*Then God formed man out of the dust from the ground, and breathed in his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul*” (**Genesis 2:7**). The reason for our creation is elaborated by a Syrian saint named St. Jacob of Serugh. He says, “God wished to create Adam as a fitting image, a beloved icon, a likeness of his Lord, the head spring, the source of species, the father of races, the ruler of the world, a god of flesh, the anointed of the Father, the image of His Son, the bond of the worlds, a haven for rest from His task of making [everything], the new Lord who was set there to inherit the entire world.”

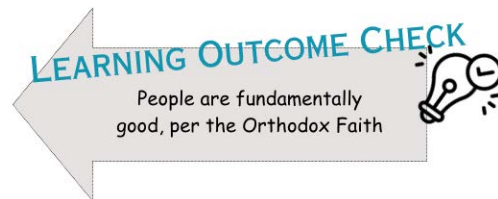
The creation of human beings was special when compared to the rest of creation. A human being’s existence is to be with God in a unique communion that no other created being can partake in.

The Uniqueness of the Human Being

God placed human beings in a special rank in creation. As stated, “By his Creator, he was a god of flesh to creation, but by his free will he aligned himself with a beast and became like it. The Good One who formed him placed and set him in the heights of Eden, but the evil one who hated him cast him down into the depths of a grave”.

God created us in His image and likeness. By being created in His image and likeness, we are fundamentally created to be good. However, we are called to be more than just good. As seen in Scripture, when God instructed His people, “*You shall be to Me a royal priesthood and a holy nation,*”

(**Exodus 19:6**) and “*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy*” (**Leviticus 19:2**). The Apostle, St. Peter, echoes this command by reminding us that, “...as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy’” (**1 Peter 1:15-16**). Holiness is the characteristic that human beings are commanded to strive for. It is through the pursuit of holiness that we can become like God. In his work, *Against Heresies*, St. Irenaeus of Lyons elaborates on the need for us to align ourselves with God’s will, in order to become like Him.



Fr. John Behr reflects¹⁶ that man is called to become godlike and achieve perfection. It begins by questioning how one can be a god when they are not yet fully human or perfect. It emphasizes the need to first attain the status of being human before one can hope to participate in the glory of God. Humans do not create a god, but rather let God create them. To reach perfection, one must await the timing of God and offer a flexible heart to retain the shape given by the Creator. By doing so, the mud within oneself can be concealed by God's art, and the individual will be adorned with gold and silver, appealing to God, the King. However, rejecting God's art or being ungrateful towards Him results in the loss of both His art and life. The document emphasizes that belief in God and submission to His Hands is necessary to receive His art and become a perfect work of God. Conversely, not believing in Him and fleeing from His Hands leads to imperfection and deprivation. In short, faith, obedience, and gratitude in the pursuit of godliness and perfection will lead us to theosis.

¹⁶ Behr, Fr. J. (2000). *Asceticism and anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement*. Oxford Early Christian Studies.

Becoming a Human Being

The way to become like God is to first become a human being. In order to achieve this we are to follow the example of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He is both God and man. It is by following Christ can we fully realize our potential as a human being. To follow Christ means to follow Him to the Cross. To follow Him through pain, suffering, death, and ultimately, resurrection.

According to St. Irenaeus, “The work of God is the fashioning of the human being” (Behr, 2013, p.31). When God began the creation of human beings, and finished it with His death on the Cross, He said, “It is finished” (**St. John 19:30**). Through Christ’s resurrection, death was transformed as the way to enter eternal life. To become a human being requires us to become the children of God. In order to become a child of God a person is required to be baptized. Through baptism we participate in Christ’s death and resurrection. As explained by St. Paul, *Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection...* (**Romans 6:3-5**).

We continue to die each day through the act of martyrdom when we dedicate ourselves to Christ. Although we are no longer being killed or persecuted for our faith, we face many challenges and obstacles that can prevent us from seeking God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. It is by overcoming these obstacles that we face our martyrdom, and transform ourselves daily into becoming a fully realized human being: the image and likeness of God.

Reflection Questions

1. How does one become a human being?
2. What makes you think everyone is fundamentally good?
3. Why do you think the human being is unique among all creation?
4. During the Holy Qurbana we stand before God and pray for the entire Creation. Reflect on this and try to think of reasons why we do this?