

Saint Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church

24 BURKE ROAD

FREEHOLD, NJ 07728

Cheesefare Sunday

February 22, 2015

**Father Robert E. Lucas, Pastor;
Subdeacon Daniel J. Korba and Nikitas Tsokris,
Cantors**

Rectory 215-862-9227; Parish Center 732-780-3158

We Are A Stewardship Parish Of Time, Talent and Treasure

The mission of our parish faith community is to teach the Gospel message in the rich tradition of the Orthodox Church; to enable people to reflect the image of Jesus Christ in every day activities of life; to offer spiritual formation through changing times; and to celebrate community among Orthodox believers in our Freehold area.

We of St. Paul the Apostle Parish dedicate ourselves to maintaining the sanctity of worship and spiritual enlightenment in a family environment that reaches and involves all ages and unifies all people.

We believe in the spirit of ecumenism in which we share our faith by word and example and extend our spiritual insights to all people.

We accept the responsibility of Christian Stewardship that through generous giving we may all experience a faith communion with Christ as the Center of our lives.

We dedicate ourselves to insuring the well-being of all people so that we may truly experience the message of Christ's salutary gospel.

We are a beacon on a hill with the eyes of many upon us; that beacon is the inspired Light of Christ which must shine brightly in our lives.

It is not ourselves we preach but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts, that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ. This treasure we possess in earthen vessels to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way possible, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in us 2 Corinthians 4: 5 – 8.

GLAD TIDINGS

+++ The Great Fast begins tomorrow. We should impose on ourselves, first, fasting away from sin and then utilize food and practices as a way to discipline our physical bodies and empower the soul to lead us to paradise. Fast from all those foods and practices which lead to perdition by our over indulgence. Embrace those practices which strengthen the power of the soul over the body. Persist in this practice until it leads us to victory on the Resurrection. Fast from talking and pray more!

+++ The next Pirohi Sale will be Saturday, March 14.

+++ Today we have Forgiveness Vespers after our luncheon.

+++ Every Monday, we have prayerful devotions before the Myrrh bearing icon at 6:00 PM. Everyone is invited to be present in praise. The Birthgiver invites us to manifest our faith in response to her first shown love, to unite our prayers with hers for the salvation of our souls. Invite your friends and neighbors to join us.

+++ Please keep the intentions of these members of our parish intercession community in your daily prayers: Father George, Father Thomas, Barbara, Betty, James, Yevlogia, Nicholas, Maria, Cynthia, Pani Anna Marie and Andrea.

+++ The sign-up sheet for both the Web Site and Bulletin sponsors is on the bulletin board in the kitchen. Please sign up as soon as possible. Do NOT make payment until your sign-up month has arrived. This will make it easier for Father to keep track of payments. Thanks in advance to all who support the parish in this way.

+++ We offer thanks to the Blessed Trinity for inspiring generosity in the souls of our faithful and the blessing of abundant grace in our midst with the offering received last Sunday: Tithe Offering, \$00; Candles, \$.00; Parish Dues, \$00; Diocesan Dues, \$00; Holyday, \$00; for a total of \$.00. We express our profound gratitude to the parishioner communicants who offer their God-given treasure and labored for the sake of the Lord and the good of our parish. God bless and reward you good and faithful souls!

+++ As faithful believers, we intercede and associate ourselves in prayer with the following who have prayed and offered seven day lights for their intentions: Father Lucas, Maria Idronmenos, Anna Zacharyczuk, Bob Gorbich, Marilyn Korba and Pani Buletza.

+++ We make a **PENNIES FROM HEAVEN** Canister available for our faithful to bring in pennies for our altar and its appointments. We are already in receipt of **\$1819.00** from this apostolate. Even your pennies can help and are a blessing to our parish.

+++ Please be certain to see a member of the Parish Council if you would like to help our parish by using **Shop Rite Food Coupons** available in \$20.00 denominations. We invite **ALL** to be caring and supportive and use Grocery Coupons for food shopping as we have gratefully realized \$5750 on this project to date!

+++ The Clothing Drive is a permanent on-going project in our parish. Please bring any type of clothing and fabrics along with stuffed animals and shoes for the benefit of our parish. The bags can be left in the vestibule or on the front porch of the rectory. Please invite your friends and neighbors to assist us in disposing of unwanted clothing, shoes and fabrics.

+++ A vestment closet is being installed at the right rear of the chapel.

+++ We invite all pray the Lord our God grants us the grace of enrichment of our spiritual lives for his glory.

LORD



TEACH
US

God Is Our Redeemer

I have blotted out your sins; they are gone like morning mist at noon! Oh, return to me, for I have paid the price to set you free Isaiah 44: 22.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding Ephesians 1: 7, 8.

You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, for your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ 1 Peter 1: 18, 19.

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.

Looking for the glad hope, the revelation of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, so that he might make us free from all wrongdoing, and make for himself a people clean in heart and on fire with good works Titus 2: 13, 14.

And have you entirely forgotten the encouraging words God spoke to you, his children? He said 'My child, do not ignore it when the Lord disciplines you, and do not be discouraged when he corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those he loves and he punishes those he accepts as his children' Hebrews 12: 5, 6.

The Springtime of the Fast

*"O faithful, with peaceful hearts and in sincerity let us greet the holy season of the Fast: let us each ask for the remission of his sins, that we may be sharers in the joy that comes through forgiveness."**

During the week before Great Lent, the Church has given us for liturgical texts the Lenten Triodion. Morning and evening, each day the texts encourage us to embrace the Fast, to take it up with joy, looking forward to eating at the Master's table on Pascha. Every page offers inspiration: "Let us make haste to wash away through fasting the filth of our transgressions, and through acts of mercy and compassion to the needy let us enter into the bridal chamber of the Bridegroom Christ." For strength to complete the fast we look to Christ for help: "Grant in Thy compassion that we may spend the season of the joyful Fast in profound peace." "Rain down upon us, O Benefactor, the waters of compassion, drowning all our filth, and grant us opportunity for repentance." We are taught the reason why we fast: "So we may appear before the Creator in glory forever."

The Triodion is clear that we are not to expect that taking up the Fast is an easy task: "The beginning of the spiritual contest is at hand. Let us lay aside the comforts of the flesh;...let us suffer with Christ as His servants." The Church teaches that an acceptable fast is not merely abstaining from food, "If thou dost fast from food, my soul, yet dost not cleanse thyself from passions, thou dost rejoice in vain over thine abstinence. For if thy purpose is not turned towards amendment of life, as a liar thou art hateful in God's sight, and thou dost resemble the evil demons who never eat."

Throughout this week, the Triodion gives us as examples to follow those who lived in Old Testament times. Here are some of them with the reasons why they fasted:
- "Through abstinence, Moses was counted worthy to speak

with God face to face on Sinai. With faith let us follow his example....[he] was granted the vision of God."

—"Through abstinence Enoch the wonderful was translated from the earth....let us be translated from corruption and enter into life."

—"Let us now follow the example of Elijah who fasted and fled from wicked Jezebel, that like him we may be taken up from earth." "Elijah was borne up in a chariot of fire."

—"Because of his virtue and hospitality, Abraham received into his home the Trinity present in angelic form."

—"When he fasted, Isaiah the wise tasted the coal of fire when the angel, holding it in tongs, touched his lips with it."

—"Because they fasted Daniel and the three Children broke the teeth of lions and trampled underfoot the burning flames."

—"The holy Fast preserved Jonah in the whale....[and] the men of Nineveh turned God from His wrath."

—"Because he fasted, Joseph fled from intercourse with the sinful woman and was granted royal power....David gained the victory over the Philistine and obtained a kingdom."

We are given the example of other men who through fasting encountered God, including Gideon, Joshua the son of Nun, and Job. The Lord's apostles are also held up to us to emulate: "With the dew of fasting, O apostles, [you] taught all men to keep within themselves a citadel safe from attack, a dwelling place of holiness." Our Lord Himself shows the way: "Fasting as man, the Lord overcame the tempter; and so He gave us an example, showing us what lies within our power and setting limits for us." So, "Let us welcome the Fast with willing hearts....God has shown mercy to us. Let us in our turn show mercy: let us feed the poor, and with the divine water of fasting let us wash the defilement from our souls....The precious season of the Fast is here, clothing all of us with inward joy."

*(Quotes are from *The Lenten Triadion Supplementary Texts*, Cheese Week Services, Orthodox Monastery of the Veil of Our Lady, France, 1979.)

the meaning of communion

St. Maximus the Confessor calls Communion "the climax of everything...which transforms into itself and renders similar to the causal good by grace and participation those who worthily share in it" *The Mystagogy of the Church*. By this he means that Holy Communion as we popularly call it, is truly our goal and fulfillment in the Divine Liturgy. When we receive the Eucharist, we are deified, we are changed, we are transformed, we become more like God, whom St. Maximus, calls here the "causal good," that is, the good God who has created all that is. Despite this, for centuries, Eucharistic reception has become a neglected part of the Divine Liturgy.

We succumbed to the ignorance enforced on our souls by Moslem domination when even priests did not teach the richness of its truth because they too were deprived by the infidel of having any real spiritual formation. But now that we are freed from this tyranny, not only priests, but people should be eager to receive what rightfully belongs to them in heart and souls: regular and frequent reception of Eucharistic nourishment at every Divine Liturgy they participate in. Until recently, people received very infrequently, though the priest was obliged for the valid celebration of the oblation, to receive always so that the sacrifice could be properly completed. Why did people refrain from receiving Communion? The Church teachers put the accent on the awesomeness of the mystery, and our unworthiness before God, who is all-good. Because of this, the presence of Christ's Body and Blood became the most important aspect of the mystery, and the "climax" of the Divine Liturgy was the consecration of the offered gifts making Christ present. In the East, the Eucharist became a presence hidden in the Holy of Holies, inaccessible to all, but a few. In the West, the host became the object worshipped from afar, displayed, seen from afar, but never used as nourishment nor tasted in holy faith and excitement of soul.

St. Maximus wrote that Communion transforms those who "worthily share in it." Who, indeed, we must ask, is actually worthy? The priest prays before the Great Entrance, "No one who is bound by carnal desires and pleasures is worthy to come to you, to approach you, or to minister to you, the King of Glory." The fact is that we, as limited and mortal beings, imperfect in so many ways, cannot be worthy of the infinite, immortal, all good Creator of all. Despite this, the priest receives Communion at every Divine Liturgy. Likewise the Church teaches the importance of regular and frequent Communion. To attend the Divine

Liturgy, to be present in this august celebration and not to receive the gift of the Body and Blood of our Lord is like attending a banquet and not partaking of the food, the very purpose why the celebration takes place!

Unquestionably we are unworthy and cannot do anything to make ourselves worthy, but we partake "by grace," as St. Maximus points out. The reality is the action of our heavenly Father, as the deacon proclaims, "It is time for the Lord to act." When we have received, then, we pray, "We thank you Master, Benefactor of our souls, who loves us all, that this day you have made us worthy of your heavenly and awesome mysteries." We do not make ourselves worthy because that is impossible, but we do trust in the grace of our Creator who makes us worthy and provides spiritually for us.

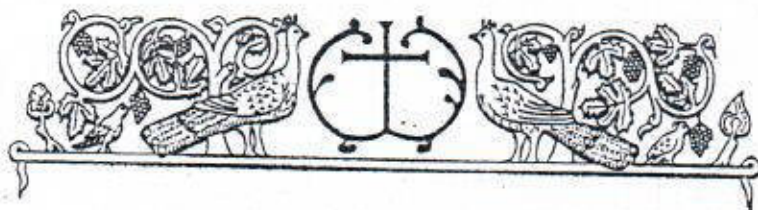
Much has been accomplished in the last several years and there has been an ongoing restoration and renewal of understanding the Divine Liturgy and its purpose in our lives. Primarily due to the efforts of Bishop John of Blessed Memory, frequent and regular Communion has been restored and spread to other jurisdictions and dioceses. Much more remains to be done and the most important area for renewal still is to be accomplished. Two practices have been restored from the continuum of the apostolic Church. First, the faithful hear the invitation of the Lord, "Take, eat, this is my Body...Drink of this, all of you, for this my blood of the new covenant" which is offered us through words of the Divine Liturgy and the teaching of the Church. Yet there are still some who hold back because of qualms about unworthiness. This can be overcome by regular Confession of offenses and sins against the goodness of our Creator in the sacramental Mystery of Reconciliation. Second, Communion has been restored to all baptized, even to small children and infants. Because there is never a time upon burial in the waters of baptism and resurrection from the death of alienation from God, when a person is not at complete communicant or member of the Body of Christ. The true and genuine meaning of the Eucharist is proclaimed because it is God who takes the initiative and offers himself to us. He seizes us and transforms us because He loves us, and the only real unworthiness is to refuse his invitation so explicitly offered. Communion does not depend on our powers or understanding, but all who are baptized are filled with good according to their potential.

There is still much work to be done toward understanding completely our giftedness in being nourished from heaven. The great liturgical theologian of the thirteenth century, St. Nicholas Cabasilas, constantly underlined the reality of the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ.

If it is not so, then it would only be a symbol without the ability to transform us as Protestantism in its limitation and exclusion from the fullness of God's grace teaches. Instead, he writes, "...but when He has led the initiate to the table and has given them his body to eat, He entirely changes them and transforms them into his own state" as we read from his writing, *Life in Christ*. Most of the faithful do appreciate the awesomeness of the mystery that we receive. However, living in a materialistic world and culture, where "what we see is what we get," is always tempting to see a little square of bread dipped in wine as a token prize merited by our participation in the holy Liturgy. It is to be received as the most important act of faith that we can make.

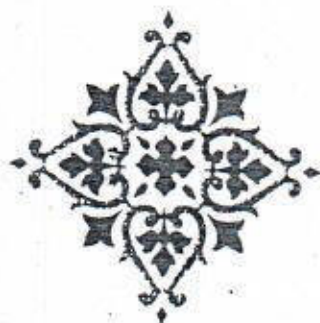
St. Paul does warn us, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the Body and Blood of the Lord. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" 1 Corinthians 11: 27, 29. If it was mere symbol as some fools contend, why would such serious judgment be made of their activity? When he speaks here of discernment" he is not talking about intellectual knowledge, but of introducing divisions between members of Christ's Body, which is the Church, the mystery itself of salvation in our world. When we receive Holy Communion, we are united not only with our Creator God, from isolated individuals to a community of salvation, but with all the people, who are slowly but inevitably becoming more and more like Christ. We may not all be the same, not agree in all matters, but we must be joined in Christian love, within hoping and praying for the best for each other, particularly their salvation, for "God is love" 1 John 4: 8 and we are mirrors and echoes of his love.

Hatred of others destroys the grace of Communion. We can sing, "Taste and see how good is the Lord," because He brings peace and good will among all people. This is the condition for any faith in Holy Communion. If we feel we cannot meet this condition, the solution is not to refrain from receiving communion, but to set aside our hatred, to set into motion a serious attempt to grow and respond to the love of Christ first shown. We must with concerted action and effort "love one another" as the deacon commands at the time of the Creed, just before being called forward to receive.





THE MAN WHO FEEDS *
ON THIS BREAD SHALL
LIVE FOR EVER · JN 6:58



YOUR ANCESTORS *
ATE MANNA IN THE
DESERT · JN 6:49 *

The Great Fast Is For The Soul

Each encounter with the Great Fast should become for us a further striving after holiness, for purification, a wrestling and struggling for the soul's improvement. The various spiritual exercises are only means and prerequisites for a richer forgiveness: "Who by fasting of the body curbs vices, lifts the mind, receives strength and heavenly reward."

First of all, we must, through our efforts united with the working of grace, remove the obstacles from our soul; we must renew our incorporation with Christ and with the communion of the saints; only then can Christ work in us, sanctify us and transform us to our rightful selves as created in His image.

Above all, the Great Fast is for the soul a period of intense baptismal recollection and renewal; it implies gratitude for the grace of baptism and a better, deeper understanding of the sublime call received in the sacramental Mysteries of initiation, of the ineffable gifts which encounter with God has brought us. Likewise it is a time for a newer and deeper consciousness of the obligations which we took upon ourselves with joy and gladness when making the baptismal promises to serve Him alone. We ought in this sacred season ask ourselves questions like these:

Have I really kept my often-repeated promises faithfully? Has God and His service always occupied first place in my life? Or have I served other gods, as so many lax and mediocre Orthodox believers do? What about the idols of the world, money, pleasure, the bodily comforts, even legitimate ones? Have I not first and foremost striven after greatness and the esteem of men, hoping to be recognized by them for my money and earthly wealth, honors, and praise, after worldly vanity and success?

Have I not comfortably lived in sin according to my own perverse will? Baptism initiates a life which demands further development. This new, holy, spiritual love, this association with the sufferings of Christ and His Church as baptism implies, demands that it be lived and carried out faithfully and fully, with seriousness and sincerity. Otherwise, I am guilty of breaking my word, of perjury and disloyalty.

The Great Fast for the soul means exercising greater faithfulness towards God and His expectations. We must do the "the will of the Father who is in heaven." With Jesus our Saviour and Mary and all the intercessory saints, we boldly and bravely pronounce: "Your will be done..not as I will, but according to Your will."

We should live for God according to His manifest will, His honor and His interests for the salvation of our soul. We should work, suffer, struggle, deny ourselves; labor for Him and with Him. Our hands should be used for Him; we should speak with our tongue only what is pleasing to His ears; we should walk only where He can accompany us. Our mind should busy itself only with Him and whatever comes from Him; our heart should love Him alone and everything else in Him on account of Him; our heart, our talents, faculties, and skills, our time, everything belongs to Him and should be subject to His all-holy will.


How have we corresponded to all this until now? Assuredly we want to act more zealously, generously, and joyfully! With greater fervor of spirit we shall endeavor to pray during this sacred and holy season, "Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!" We ought make our constant prayer, "All for the glory of God!" With more attention and devotion we shall make the simple sign of the Cross, a brief, but powerful form of baptismal renewal; and we shall pray our Creed with more intense faith and love coupled with dogged determination.

Lastly, we must make every effort to attend all the specially prepared services of the Great Fast in our parish church and thus bring ourselves in conformity to the Passion of Christ!

Recollection

A man who visited to interview Thomas Alva Edison was most impressed with what was painted and hung on a wall in his room. In effect, the sentence was "It is remarkable to what lengths people will go to avoid thought." That is tragically true. Some of us think, more of us think we think, and most of us don't even think of thinking. The result is a somewhat cockeyed world."

✠✠✠ CREATION ✠✠✠

 "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible." These opening words of the Nicene Creed, the central doctrinal statement of Christianity, affirm that the One True God is the source of everything that exists—both physical and spiritual, both animate and inanimate. The Holy Scriptures begin with a similarly striking assertion: "In the beginning God made heaven and earth," St. Basil the Great declares:

In the fear that human reasonings may make you wander from the truth, Moses has anticipated inquiry by engraving in our hearts, as a seal and a safeguard, the awesome name of God: 'In the beginning God created.' It is He—beneficent Nature, Goodness without measure, a worthy object of love for all beings endowed with reason, the beauty the most to be desired, the origin of all that exists . . . —it is He who 'in the beginning created heaven and earth.'


The ever-existent Almighty God was not forced to create the universe. Rather, in His goodness and lovingkindness, He freely chose to do so. And the fact that the Lord created the universe *out of nothing* stands in clear contrast to the creation myths of the surrounding cultures in the ancient world.

The central role of Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father, in the creation of all things is plainly stated in the first chapter of the apostle John's gospel, where it is written, "In the beginning was the Word, . . . All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made." And the specific role of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Undivided Trinity, in the creation of the world is seen in Genesis 1:2 (see also Ps 103:30; 32:6).

Regarding questions about the scientific accuracy of the Genesis account of creation, and about various viewpoints concerning evolution, the Orthodox Church has not dogmatized any particular view. What is dogmatically proclaimed is that the One Triune God created everything that exists, and that man was created in a unique way and is alone made *in the image and likeness of God* (Gn 1:26, 27). The Church Fathers also consistently affirm that each species of the animate creation came into existence instantaneously, at the command of God, with its seed within itself.

The development of life was not by accident. Rather, Supreme Intelligence and Impenetrable Wisdom were at work in the creation and sustenance of all that exists. In discussing various scientific theories of his day, St. Basil the Great declared, "If there is anything in this [or any other] system which seems probable to you, keep your admiration for the source of such perfect order—the wisdom of God." He also wrote, "We must still remain faithful to the principle of true religion and recognize that all that exists is sustained by the Creator's power."

The repeated affirmation "and God saw that it was good" in Genesis 1 underscores the intrinsic, fundamental *goodness* of matter and the whole created order, even after the Fall. This understanding is the basis for a sacramental world-view—that the created order not only is good, but also can be a means for communion with God, by virtue of being created by the All-Good God. Moreover, the astounding beauty, intricate order, and sublime harmony of all aspects of Creation, as well as the tremendously vast expanse of the universe, are intended to draw mankind to an awareness of and appreciation for the Creator, and to the worship of Him—and Him alone (see Ps 18:1-4; Rom 1:20).



Wisdom Of
The



Byzantine
Fathers

But Adam and did not wish to say, "I sinned," but said rather the contrary of this and placed the blame for the transgression upon God who created everything "very good," saying to him, "the woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I ate of it." And after him she also placed the blame on the serpent, and they did not wish at all to repent and falling down before the Lord God, beg forgiveness of him. For this God banished them from Paradise, as from a royal palace, to live in this world as exiles. At that time also He decreed that a flaming sword should be turned and guard the entrance into Paradise. And God did not curse Paradise, since it was the image of the future unending life of the eternal kingdom of heaven. If it were not for this reason, it would have been fitting to curse it most of all, since within it was performed the transgression of Adam. But God did not do this, but cursed only the whole rest of the earth, which also was corrupt and brought forth everything by itself; and this was in order that Adam might not have any longer a life free from exhausting labors and sweat St. Simeon the New Theologian.

Did You Know That ...

- ...the hope of the harvest lies in the planting?
- ...proximity to the Son protects us from eternal burning?
- ...simply believing the purity of Orthodoxy will not save us if we do not live it?
- ...there must be a connection between faith in theory and faith in practice?
- ...we are what we think?
- ...being exposed to the values of Christ is one of the purposes of the Church?
- ...something vital is missing in the life of the parish where Christ is not recognized easily?
- ...the mother who thinks she is doing her son a favor by dissuading him from a vocation to the priesthood, has already damned His soul?
- ...blessings from heaven come to us by simply doing His will?
- ...the suffering of Christ on the Cross was not just for others, but certainly includes us?
- ...God's glory is revealed in the quality of our upright lives?
- ...disinterested love means we shall not benefit from the concern we show for other souls?
- ...to be devoted to a worthwhile cause means we are faithful to the Lord?
- ...kindness and courtesy are lived not for acknowledgement, but simply because they are the Christ-like things to do?
- ...regardless our chronological age, Christ in us, keeps us thinking young?
- ...our life should be a seriously lived justification of Christ's enduring love for us?
- ...in changing our thinking process to that of Christ, we change the destiny of our soul?

STARTING OUT AS
AN APOLOGIST

People often ask, "How should I begin to educate myself to defend and define my faith? How do I prepare for the inevitable knock on the door? I do not want to have to stand there open mouthed." The best place to start your homework, if you are serious, is the Bible, God's revelation to us in word. Almost every American home has one. It is either a well-worn, well-used book or it is the book with the thickest layer of dust, as is often the typical case in Orthodox homes.

Step 1: Blow off the dust.

Step 2. Open the Bible to the gospels. Here is where you should start. St. Jerome, that wise, old Doctor of the Church, noted that a Christian believer who is not immersed in the gospels does not know Christ (cf. Com. in Is., prol.). Knowing proposition about Christ is one thing, and it is needed, but reading his words and understanding the setting is crucial. It does not matter in what order you take the gospels. The easiest way is to follow the order in the text: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The first three, known as the synoptics, are much alike; they follow the same general order in the way they present the material about Christ's life and teaching. The fourth gospel, that of John, is distinct. Beginning with Matthew, set aside a fixed amount of time each day until you get all four gospels read. Plan to read slowly, but not too slowly. Some people take only a verse at a sitting. That is fine if you have already gone through the gospels a dozen times. If you are on your first reading or your fifth, you will either want to read straight through or at least read in long stretches. That way you will get more of an overview. Later on you can do the detail work. The gospels are not long. The New Testament is in itself not long. The gospels comprise close to a third of the New Testament and in most printings they run about thirty pages which, is just about right for leisurely reading. So make that your goal: one gospel a night. In four nights you will have them done. Then read them again before doing anything else.

AFTER THE GOSPELS

Next? Try Acts, which is about the same length as each of the gospels. Then go to the epistles: Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians. Work in the other epistles gradually and be in no rush to get to Revelation. Take it last. You can get through everything within two weeks, reading no more than thirty pages an evening. Each evening's work is about equal to a thorough reading of the daily paper, which you may be in the habit of doing anyway.\

So now you are ready to do battle, right? Wrong. You have only just begun. But you have begun and that is the important thing. You have situated yourself and obtained an overview, but there is much homework to do.

Read the Catechism

Next you should read a systematic presentation of the Orthodox faith. Virtually all of the Church's teachings are present, either explicitly or implicitly in the pages of God's revelation to us in the Old and New Testament., but they are not organized in an easy to remember manner. Now that you have read the New Testament and begun to absorb its material, you need to know how to organize and interpret that material. This is something we cannot do on our own. Many sects start precisely because someone reads the Bible and interprets a particular passage in an unusual way, then makes this normative for how they read everything else in Scripture. Rather than reading the passage in context of the whole of Scripture teaching, they lock on to a particular passage and give it a strange interpretation. They may be unaware of the rest of what Scripture has to say on the same subject, or if they are aware of it, they twist the rest of what Scripture says to fit their interpretation of this passage.

The apostle Peter was very concerned about this problem and addressed it in his letter. In 2 Peter 1: 20, 21, we find our first rule of Bible interpretation: "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" By prophecy he simply means anything that Scripture teaches because prophecy does not always mean predicting the future as so many erroneously believe. For this reason, we must avoid the temptation to evaluate passages by simply asking, "What do I think this verse means?" Christ endowed the Church with teachers and He did so for a very specific reason: to assist people in how to understand Scripture and his teachings. Therefore, rather than simply looking to private and personal interpretations, we must look to the public interpretation of Scripture which is what the Church of Jesus Christ has. We must read Scripture in the context of what the Church has historically understood it to mean, for it is the Church that Christ established as "...the pillar and foundation of truth" 1 Timothy 3: 15.

There are significant dangers if we do not do this. The letter of Peter spoke highly of what his fellow apostle Paul had written, but he cautioned that Paul's letters can be difficult. "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do in the other scriptures" 2 Peter 3: 16. So ignorant people, those who

do not adhere to the true interpretation they have been taught, can twist the scripture to their own destruction. Strong words indeed! Yet Scripture includes them so we would know that we must not approach Scripture as an ignorant or unstable person would do, ignoring the content of how the Church has always understood it.

This makes it important to have a thorough grasp of the faith of Christ as you read Scripture. The best way to get an overview of what the Church teaches is to read a catechetical work. You may already have read one while growing up, but even if you have, it never hurts to review what the Church teaches. There are a whole number of worthwhile catechisms available. Reading and studying them requires some commitment, since they can be pages and pages long, but it is well worth the effort. For those who are not able to invest that much time at once, there are many excellent assorted catechisms available too. Speak to your parish priest or consult your parish library if you are fortunate enough to have one.

LEARN THE OBJECTIONS

Next you need to learn what kinds of objections are made against the faith of Jesus Christ. Sit down and read the right stuff. Get samples of anti-Orthodox literature by ordering it from anti-Orthodox groups if necessary.

After you learn what the charges are you need to learn the proper responses. Do not presume that mastering the Bible will be sufficient. It is trickier than that.

True, you will have to make use of the Bible in your talks with non-Orthodox. Do not swallow the argument that discussing interpretations is worthless: it can be immensely worthwhile for everyone concerned. But as a rule, you will find it difficult to know just where to look for the most appropriate verse unless you have studied arguments by other believers, which means turning to books other than Scripture itself.

There are volumes in which all the major issues are discussed and the positions of "professional anti-Orthodox" are given in their own words, so you know exactly what they say to their own people. The position of the Church of Jesus Christ on each issue is proven from Scripture, early Christian writings and plain old common sense.

AFTER YOUR HOMEWORK IS DONE

Let's flip a few pages on the calendar. You have read the New Testament any number of times. You have dipped into the Old Testament. You have read a catechism and learned its teachings thoroughly. You sent away for anti-Orthodox material. You have gone through Orthodox books that are now so readily available. This is a good start to your preparation as an apologist. More study will certainly be necessary.

TODAY'S CATCHWORD: "DIVISIVE"

If you engage in apologetics, which is that brand of theology that deals with how to defend the truth of faith, sooner or later you will be brought up short by someone who says disagreeing with others about religion or faith is "divisive." Divisive seems to be the "in" word nowadays in our politically correct society. If you acquiesce, that is, if you give up ever mentioning differences of opinion and speak only platitudes, the result is that no mental progress is made, either from you or for others.

C. S. Lewis wrote about what he called "mere Christianity," more or less those positions on which nearly all Christians could agree. But "mere Christianity" is also incomplete Christianity, and it can be at best a way station to a final destination, as Lewis has pointed out in his books on the subject. He compared staying with "mere Christianity" with only those doctrines all Christians accept as living perpetually in the hallway of the house rather than entering into one of its rooms, where living is meant to be done. Even though we may have to go through a hallway to get to a room, it is the room that is our destination, not simply the corridor. Thus Lewis rightly declared that we have the responsibility to accept and embrace that set of particular doctrines or teachings which we find to be true upon investigation. We cannot stay in the incomplete, if ecumenically comfortable, no man's land of "mere Christianity."

And if that is true of "mere Christianity," it is also true of religion upon which all people, Christians, agnostics, what have you, can agree, which if it ever existed, would be a religion no one would be willing to die for.

THE WAY TO HANDLE DIFFERENCES

Some have proposed the analogy of the world's religions being different roads winding up a tall mountain, with God in a cloud at the top awaiting our arrival. The paths are supposedly all

man-made conventions reaching to heaven, so no one religion is really any better than the others. However, this misconception overlooks one enormous truth. One religion's path was

not paved by man's effort from the bottom of the mountain to the top, but was paved by the Creator God down the mountain to man. That road is Christianity and it is arrogant to prefer a man's path to the one blazed for our sake by God himself.

The fact is, not all religions lead to God. Christianity teaches there is but one God, that we have one life, and that human destiny lies either in an eternal heaven or an eternal hell. Buddhism, by contrast, teaches that there is no God, and that human destiny lies in reincarnating to suffer until we use the Eightfold Path to kill our individual identity. Two more different religions can scarcely be imagined.

The first step in true ecumenism is to understand others as they really are, their beliefs as they actually are. There are differences between Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant faiths. To pretend here are not is not ecumenical, it is just plain ignorant. What is true on a grand scale in the interreligious dialogues is also true in ecumenical dialogues between Christians. There are real differences that divide people, and it is vitally important that those differences are clearly understood. After all, solutions cannot be found unless the problem is clear and recognized. What is truly ecumenical is to get around the squabbles and finger-pointing, that so often obscured discussions in the past, to see what commonality there is and to cooperate, based on that commonality, to the extent one's own principles are not compromised. Let us admit it:

There is much room for cooperation, not infinite room, since the differences preclude that, but still much room, nonetheless. This cooperation can be all the more fruitful if we have a real appreciation of one another's position. Cooperation becomes almost impossible if we ignore differences. Fear of differences result in paralysis not increased cooperation. This means, in the long run, that abject avoidance of "divisiveness" actually promotes present divisions, while honest and good natured discussion of differences, and yes, similarities, makes for fewer, not greater divisions.

The road to unity is paved with good sense, not merely good intentions.

RESPECTING WHAT IS SACRED

People today have busy lives. Work, doctor appointments and after school activities fill up our daily calendar. Our spare time is filled with writing and answering e-mail and checking out social media. As important as all these things are, we must make time to stop and reflect on our spiritual life. Church is a great place to start!

The church is not merely a "building" - it is a place where the Living God dwells, and is constantly present. When we walk into a church, we are entering into another "world" - a sacred "world." Established by Christ, the Church is a place where we each may become what we are created to be. Our time spent in church carries us beyond our petty earthly concerns. It stretches our vision to heaven, so we may worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We need a place dedicated to God, where we can gather for the sole purpose of praising Him. For us, the architecture, icons, vestments, music, candles and incense help to FOCUS our thoughts. It is a place where God is always "on call."

In Church, as we sing in one of the hymns of the Divine Liturgy, we are expected to "lay aside all earthly cares." We are also expected to lay aside cell phones, video games, food and beverages, inappropriate conversations and anything else that may distract us from our purpose for coming to church in the first place: offering prayers and entering into spiritual communion with the Lord!

The Orthodox Weekly Bulletin Vestal, Cliffwood, New Jersey Litho in U.S.A.