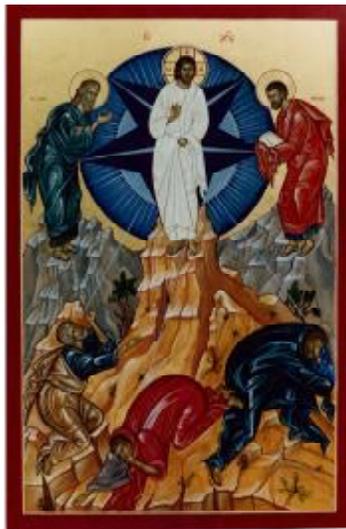


# Fulfilling Our Destiny

Theosis, Pope Francis, and the Jubilee of Mercy



St. Nicholas Byzantine Catholic Church

Pre-Lenten Retreat during the Tridion

January 22-23, 2016

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*"Somewhere deep in the heart of every man and woman there lives a dream saved from Paradise."  
(Fr. Boniface Luykx)*

## Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord

***The resplendence of the Transfiguration reveals the fullness of life destined to be ours.***

Christ's Tabor radiance is a kind of mirror in which we glimpse the glory that God wills to give His friends. The resplendence of the Transfiguration reveals the fullness of life destined to be ours. The Transfiguration invites us to configuration. As we peer into the glory that pours from every pore of the transfigured Christ, we cast off everything unworthy of our personal relationship with the Infinite, and we take on the luster of the Son of God. Jesus gazes back at us with a luminous look of love that makes us desire to live his transparent beauty—to be luminaries. Silently from Tabor's splendor, the Savior begs, "Become what you behold!"<sup>1</sup>

*"All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit."<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>Feast of the Transfiguration. *Magnificat*. 17/6. (August 2015). 84.

<sup>2</sup>2 Cor. 3:18.

## Table of Contents

<b>Comments from the Retreat Director</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Retreat Description</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Agenda</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Conference No. 1: <i>What is my destiny?</i></b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Conference No. 2: <i>Where am I?</i></b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Conference No. 3: <i>How can I know you, Lord?</i></b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Conference No. 4: <i>How can I see you, Lord?</i></b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Conference No. 5: <i>Who do you want me to be, Lord?</i></b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Conclusion: Becoming a Community of Missionary Disciples</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Other Resources Available</b>	<b>81</b>



## Comments from the Retreat Director

The Doctrine of *Theosis* (the divinization of the human person) is one of the great spiritual treasures of the Eastern Church which recent popes have described as worthy of rediscovery by the Universal Church. Many today seek self-help books on living a purposeful life and yet the answer to our purpose, the fulfillment to our inner longing, is contained within the ancient teachings of the Church, along with the wisdom of the Spiritual Fathers and Mothers who have gone before us.

I was fortunate to have been introduced to the concept of *theosis* by my Spiritual Father, Fr. Damon Geiger, who guided my journey for the first three years after my ordination to the diaconate. In addition, under his guidance we assisted in the delivery of three Theosis Retreats using the program developed by the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, Eparchy of Newton. This experience was further enhanced by several graduate research papers on this theme. Thus began my fascination with this great spiritual treasure.

The Master of Arts in Spirituality degree program at Loyola University Chicago requires a field service project, which for me brought to mind the connection between the Doctrine of *Theosis* and the teachings of Pope Francis, especially in *Evangelii Gaudium* and more recently, *Misericordiae Vultus*. While Pope Francis never specifically mentions the word *theosis*, he talks about interior transformation beginning with his opening statement: “The Joy of Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.” He validates the importance of the encounter with the Divine and discusses the importance of conversion and of a turning to God which in many respects mirrors the teachings of the Ancient Church Fathers and Mothers. In *Misericordiae Vultus* announcing the Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis takes this a step further by asking us to be “Merciful like the Father,”<sup>3</sup> with “like” being the operative word when we reflect on the doctrine of *Theosis*; “like the Father” or “God-like.”

In December 2014, I served at the funeral liturgy for my priest mentor, Fr. Edward Zavell, the man I credit most with the development and vision of my own vocation to ordained ministry. Prior to the liturgy, His Grace Bishop John (Kudrick), Eparchy of Parma, and I discussed the Theosis Retreat developed by the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, which validated the idea of developing a parish-based program. However, as we discussed, the Melkite Greek Catholic Theosis Retreat draws heavily in its materials on the experiences of its Arab Christian constituents and when I suggested to Bishop John that we needed a “Ruthenized” version of the program, he corrected me saying, “We need an ‘Americanized’ version. He is indeed correct.

The opportunity to create such a retreat finally came, and I was very honored, when Fr. Miron Kerul-Kmec, Pastor of St. Nicholas Byzantine Catholic Church in Barberton, Ohio, asked in May 2015, if I could lead a *theosis*-based retreat in January 2016 in preparation for the Great Fast (Lent). This was the genesis which led to the development of this retreat. I am deeply grateful for this opportunity because it truly was an area of personal interest and connects quite well with the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis.

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<sup>3</sup>See Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus*. Papal Bull (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Apr 11, 2015) No. 14.

Whom am I to write about *theosis*? At best, I am an unworthy pilgrim and sinner, just like all our fellow pilgrims on the spiritual journey. We are also learning more about this wonderful doctrine as we continue onward. We hope this material will help others to discover the purpose God has for each of us, a wonderful calling for life in communion with God.

To be clear, the purpose of this retreat is not to replace the Melkite Theosis Retreat, which is excellent. No student can ever be greater than his teacher. Our objective with this retreat is to create awareness of the Eastern Christian spiritual treasures that are our patrimony, allowing people to proactively engage their faith and ultimately to learn to love their faith. This is the faith and tradition entrusted to us, practiced and preserved since the earliest Christians, and to which we have been entrusted to pass onto future generations. We believe this is particularly important for our young people. Many are seeking in answers in life or questioning the relevance of their faith. Yet, it is their faith that provides the guidance and meaning they truly seek.

Each conference contained herein has been structured around a Gospel passage, a discussion (conference), a short individual reflection to break-open the conference further, and questions for individual discernment. With respect to the Jesus Prayer, there will be a practicum to experience the beauty of this ancient tradition first hand. Engagement is key to this retreat because the encounter with Jesus is key. We have seen lives changed in past programs, sometimes with that sudden “a-ha” moment, where the matters of faith become clearer. We have seen people including high school youth transformed through the consistent practice of the Jesus Prayer and understanding what a purposeful life truly is. Hearts have grown warmer, engagement in the faith and the Church has increased, and the process of *theosis*, the earthly pilgrimage, has been aided. We hope this retreat will have the same results as we have seen in other programs.

There are many people who have encouraged the development of this material along the way and I want to acknowledge and thank them for assisting me on this journey. It takes collective insights and perspectives to develop impactful resources. We are incredibly grateful. Below is just a partial list.

Molly F. Kleinguetl

Fr. Damon Geiger

Leslie Hrusch Bohannon, MATS

Cindy Mosby

Vicki Ruck

Donna Rueby

Most Rev. Bishop John M. Kudrick, DD

Fr. Miron Kerul-Kmec

Miron Kerul-Kmec, Jr.

Tom Deboise

Fr. Stephen Krupa, SJ

*Fr. Deacon Edward Kleinguetl*

(a fellow pilgrim on the spiritual journey)

# **Fulfilling Our Destiny**

## **Theosis, Pope Francis, and the Jubilee of Mercy**

***St. Nicholas Byzantine Catholic Church***  
***1051 Robinson Rd.***  
***Barberton, OH 44203-3852***  
***(330) 753-2031***  
***January 22-23 (Friday evening and Saturday)***

### ***Taking time to reflect, renew, and revitalize as we prepare for the Great Fast***

There is an inherent desire in every human heart of being drawn into the life of God, either consciously or unconsciously. This desire is manifested in the search for an all perfect love. As Fr. Boniface Luykx writes: *“Somewhere deep in the heart of every man and woman there lives a dream saved from Paradise – a dream of perfect love and fellowship.”* This search causes us to seek for our ultimate purpose, with eternal life as the ultimate destiny of creation. This is the life God intends for humanity, the life intended at the time of Creation. We as Christians might call this search our spiritual journey and, in the Eastern Christian tradition, this transformative journey of seeking our ultimate destiny as union with God (“Partakers of the Divine Nature” – 2 Pt. 1:4) is called *theosis*.

Our retreat will begin Friday evening, January 22, 2016, at 6:00pm and will continue through Saturday, January 23, 2016, concluding with the Holy Mystery of Repentance (Confessions) at 4:00pm and Divine Liturgy at 5:00m. The retreat will consist of five conferences which allows participants to reflect on their own progress on the spiritual journey. These include:

- ***What is my destiny?*** Discussing the life God intends for us (“Partakers of the Divine Nature”) in light of how we are created (“in the divine image”) and the significance of the Incarnation in our lives (regaining the “likeness” of God).
- ***Where am I?*** Acknowledging the deep-seeded longing in our lives, facing the sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness that exist – those things from which we desire to be free. Then, examining who Jesus is to us and what this means to us as we live our lives. We will also consider the tools for the journey of *theosis*.
- ***How can I know you, Lord?*** Deepening of our relationship with Jesus through an experience of contemplative prayer, coming to personally encounter Jesus who is the source of our joy and our strength. Those who encounter Jesus have the Joy of the Gospel fill their hearts and lives.

- **How can I see you, Lord?** Jesus tells us, “Blessed are the clean in heart, for they shall see God.”<sup>4</sup> How do we see God?
- **Who do you want me to be, Lord?** Considering who Jesus calls us to be in terms of discipleship (accepting the offer of salvation). What does it mean to regain the likeness of God?

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes, “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or least an openness to let him enter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly every day.”<sup>5</sup> He then encourages us to help others to come to know Jesus, accompanying them in humility in our common journey toward our Creator.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Visitors and guests are welcome to join us as we explore Spiritual Treasures of our Eastern Catholic Tradition***

#### **Our Retreat Director**



Fr. Deacon Edward Kleinguetl serves St. Martha Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston and, through special permission, serves the Archeparchy of Pittsburgh. An Ohio native, he has been extensively involved in retreats for all age groups including youth and young adults, both in the United States and China, and has written extensively on Eastern Christian spirituality including a work on the Jesus Prayer and another on *theosis*. He holds a BSBA from The Ohio State University (1982), a Diploma in Pastoral Studies from the University of St. Thomas (2006), and is completing a Master of Arts in Spirituality at Loyola University Chicago (est. 2017). He was ordained to the diaconate on February 3, 2007 by His Eminence Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, Archbishop of Galveston-Houston. He has been married to his wife, Molly, for over 32 years and they have two adult children.

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<sup>4</sup>Matt. 5:8.

<sup>5</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. Apostolic Exhortation (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Nov. 24, 2013) No. 1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. No. 169-170.

## Agenda

*The following is the agenda for the Retreat.*

Time	Activity
<b>Friday, January 22, 2016</b>	
06:00pm	Dinner
07:00pm	Retreat Introduction
07:15pm	<b>Conference No. 1: <i>What is my destiny?</i></b>
08:30pm	Personal Reflection in Silence
08:45pm	Instructions for Day 2
<b>Saturday, January 23, 2016</b>	
07:00am	Matins (TBD)
08:00am	Gathering and Coffee
<b>09:00am</b>	<b>Conference No. 2: <i>Where am I?</i></b>
09:40am	Personal Reflection in Silence
10:00am	Break
<b>10:10am</b>	<b>Conference No. 3: <i>How can I know you, Lord?</i></b>
11:00am	Jesus Prayer Practicum
11:25am	Group sharing of the Jesus Prayer experience
11:45pm	Video Segment: <i>Mysteries of the Jesus Prayer</i>
12:10pm	Lunch
<b>01:00pm</b>	<b>Conference No. 4: <i>How can I see you, Lord?</i></b>
01:40pm	Reflection in Silence
02:00pm	Break
<b>02:15pm</b>	<b>Conference No. 5: <i>Who do you want me to be, Lord?</i></b>
02:55pm	Reflection in Silence
03:15pm	Break

Time	Activity
03:20pm	<b>Conclusion: Becoming a Community of Missionary Disciples</b> <i>(What do Eastern Catholics have to share with the world?)</i>
04:00pm	Holy Mystery of Repentance (Confession)
05:00pm	Divine Liturgy

## Introduction

*Introductory comments and welcome to all participants. Introduce Retreat Director (very brief). Address any housekeeping issues.*

## Opening Prayer

Merciful God, we praise you: Father all powerful, Christ Lord and Savior, and Spirit of love. You reveal yourself in the depths of our being, drawing us to share in your life and your love. Heavenly King, be near to the people formed in your Divine Image, close to the world your love brings to life.

For you are holy, Our God, and we give glory to you: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and always and forever. Amen.

## Conference No. 1: *What is my destiny?*

*“Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” (Jn. 14:5)*

*“Man seeks joy and happiness in heaven. He seeks what is eternal from everyone and everything. He seeks to find joy in God. God is a mystery. He is silence. He is infinite. He is everything. Everyone possesses this inclination of the soul to heaven. All people seek something heavenly. All beings turn toward Him, albeit unconsciously.”<sup>7</sup>*

*(Elder Porphyrios)*

## Opening Gospel Reading

*John 14:1-11 (“I am the way and truth and the life.”)*

## Conference Discussion

### A. What is the purpose of my life?

Probably every person has at one point asked the question, *“What is the purpose of my life?”* Every human heart is filled with longing. Since the time of Aristotle and the ancient Greek philosophers, people have asked the question: *What is the purpose or meaning of my life?*

We all thirst for meaning. Some recognize it is God whom they seek (“My soul thirsts for God, the Living God. When can I enter and see the face of God?”<sup>8</sup>). Unfortunately, many do not. Often we seek meaning in our life by the choices we make, only to be left feeling empty inside. (“It looked good at the time, but it did not turn out the way I thought or hoped.”) CS Lewis went so far to

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<sup>7</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wound by Love: The Life and Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios*. Edited by Sisters of the Holy Convent of Chrysopigi. Translated by John Raffan (Limni, Evia, Greece: Denise Harvey, 2013) 113.

<sup>8</sup>Ps. 42:3. All biblical quotes are from the NABRE, 1991, unless otherwise specified.

write: “All that we call human history ... [is] the long, terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.”<sup>9</sup>

***How often in our own lives do we look for something other than God?***

Here is an important reality: Only God can truly satisfy our innermost longing. Only God is truly inexhaustible. One author writes: “We seek for something or someone else to (quench) our inner thirst, to fill the void God created as a sacred place for himself, a void large enough that only He can fill.”<sup>10</sup> God created us for one purpose and one purpose alone, to share His overwhelming love. Until we surrender ourselves and allow Him to fill our hearts completely, we will never experience true human fulfillment – there will always be something missing. There also seems to be a correlation: the farther we are away from God, the deeper the longing within.

Early Greek Father St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) actually wrote about this, calling it the experience of our own dissatisfaction. He tells us that we can have all the food, honors, personal recognition, power, praise, sexual intimacy, or other pleasures that we seek and somehow we will still find ourselves empty. The feeling of fulfillment is only temporary and, in the end, we remain dissatisfied. So Gregory concludes that either we are the most pitiable of creatures, seeking for something that does not exist, or there is in fact something that transcends time and space that can truly fill our deepest longing. That something, he concludes, is God.

Only God is inexhaustible; His goodness, love, mercy, compassion, and patience are without measure. Everything else falls short. Money runs out, the thrills no longer have the same effect, relationships run dry, we have accomplished our goals, and our family and friends have come and gone. Yet, God remains ever the same, ever present and ever faithful. As St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) writes: “Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing away. God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing. God alone is enough.”<sup>11</sup>

***So, what do I think is the purpose of my life?***

## **B. Our Purpose is to Become Partakers of the Divine Nature**

A simple answer is this: “We live on earth in order to live in heaven, in order to be ‘divinized,’ in order to become one with God.”<sup>12</sup> In essence, our pilgrim journey on earth is to prepare us to live with God in heaven, to live the life He intended for each of us since the time of creation. Becoming one with God, or as described in the Second Letter of Peter, “Partakers of the Divine Nature,”<sup>13</sup> is

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<sup>9</sup>CS Lewis. *Mere Christianity* (1952). Taken from [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/C.\\_S.\\_Lewis](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/C._S._Lewis).

<sup>10</sup>Joseph Langford, MC. *Mother Teresa’s Secret Fire: The Encounter that Changed Her Life and How It Can Transform Your Own* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2008) 191.

<sup>11</sup>Prayer of St. Teresa of Avila. See [www.ewtn.com/Devotionals/prayers/StTeresaofAvila.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/Devotionals/prayers/StTeresaofAvila.htm).

<sup>12</sup>Archimandrite Christoforos Stavropoulos. *Partakers of Divine Nature*. Translated by Rev. Dr. Stanley Harakas (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1976) 11.

<sup>13</sup>See 2 Pet. 1:4. *Orthodox Study Bible*.

a process of transformation which the Early Greek Fathers referred to as *theosis*. This is an essential doctrine in Eastern Christian spirituality which describes the slow, incremental, step-by-step transformation we undergo beginning here on earth, taking us from where we are today to our life in communion with God in heaven, there to be one with Him. We are invited to life in the Holy Trinity through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the “Giver of Life.”

*Theosis* (Θέωσις) in Greek means the “divinization” or “deification” of the human person, which describes our destiny as “Partakers of the Divine Nature.” We achieve this by living lives of virtue, striving to mirror the attributes of God such as love, mercy, and compassion. We strive in life to be more and more *like* God, following the example given to us by His Son, Jesus Christ, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. To undergo this transformation, “we must desire, struggle, and prepare ourselves so that we are worthy, capable, and receptive enough to accept and guard this great gift from God.”<sup>14</sup> Bottom line: We must freely choose this life in Christ.

During this retreat, we will reflect on this concept of *theosis* and our destiny to live in communion with God, to be one with Him.

### ***If our destiny is to live in union with God, how do we achieve this?***

This is the question we will be addressing over the course of the weekend. It is also the perfect question for us to consider as we prepare ourselves for the Great Fast (Lent), which in turn prepares us to celebrate the central event of our Christian Faith: The Resurrection of Christ at Easter. As Christians, we stake our hope on the Risen Christ and the life he won for us. More on that as we go along.

In the meantime, how do we know that union with God is our destiny? Fr. Boniface Luykx, a Ukrainian Greek Catholic Monk and founder of Holy Transfiguration Monastery in Redwood, California, writes:

Somewhere deep in the heart of every man and woman there lives a dream saved from Paradise – a dream of perfect love and fellowship. It is at the origin of every marriage and friendship.... It makes them beautiful and lifts up every human heart. If we are honest, we know this dream is not from this world. All generations have sung and dreamed about this perfect, all healing, all uniting in love, but none have ever reached it. Why? Precisely because it stems from Paradise and must bring man back to Paradise. We never really reach perfection on earth, but we keep reaching out for it.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the deep-seeded yearning we each experience – the desire to love and be loved – is a reminder of our creation and our original purpose. Essentially, we are drawn back to Paradise.

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<sup>14</sup>Archimandrite George. *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life* (Mount Athos: Holy Monastery of St. Gregorios, 2006) 47.

<sup>15</sup>From “A Monk’s Odyssey,” Detroit, March 17, 1973. Cited at <http://www.holytransfigurationmonksfmounttabor.com/father-boniface-luykx.html>.

We are called to become what we were originally created to be. *Anything less, and we fall short of our potential.* Anything less and we will be unfilled and unhappy.

Before moving forward, it is important to prepare a foundation for our discussion.

### C. Anthropological Overview: Becoming who were created to be

How were we created? In the Book of Genesis, we read:

*Then God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.*

*God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*<sup>16</sup>

Thus, human beings were made in the image of God, that image impressed within each person and giving us our fundamental dignity. The Early Greek Fathers would say that we are patterned after the Image Absolute,<sup>17</sup> which is Christ Jesus himself. No other creature was made in the image of God. Further, God also gave humanity dominion over the rest of His creation. We were entrusted with God's creation.

For purposes of our discussion, let us differentiate between image and likeness:

**Image:** The sum total of our *possibilities*.<sup>18</sup> It is imprinted upon us and can never be taken away.

**Likeness:** This is the Image's *fulfillment*,<sup>19</sup> our ability to become who God wants us to be, achieving our possibilities, which as discussed above, means to ultimately live in union or communion with Him – *nothing less*.

After the Creation, Adam was deceived by the temptation to be "like God," rejecting God's divine command. Thus, the Fall of Adam creates a condition of separation from the living God. We lose the divine gift of living in communion with God, our human nature becomes distorted, the divine image within us is weakened,<sup>20</sup> and the likeness is lost. The choice Adam and Eve made did not bring them happiness. Likely many of the choices we have made in our lives did not bring us happiness either.

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<sup>16</sup>Gen. 1:26-27.

<sup>17</sup>St. Athanasius of Alexandria. *On the Incarnation*. Based on public domain text from [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org) (Lexington, KY: Paradox Media, 2009) Chapter 3.11.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Anthony M. Coniaris. *Tools for Theosis: Becoming God-like in Christ* (Minneapolis: Light & Life Publishing Company, 2014) 8.

<sup>19</sup>ibid.

<sup>20</sup>See Stavropoulos. *Partakers of Divine Nature*. 27.

Adam and Eve lost the “delightful paradise”<sup>21</sup> in which they were placed, exchanging it by their free choice for a life of toil and struggle. In fact, the early Genesis chapters are essentially what happens to humanity left to its own (i.e., separated from God). We read about murder, revenge, and domination by the first dictator – clearly falling short of being who we were created to be. Pope St. John Paul II (1920-2005) described these rifts as “the seeds of disunity”<sup>22</sup> – a far cry from the communion the Creator had intended for us.

Yet, despite the repeated failure of humanity to live up to its fullest potential, God never gave up on us. “No power and no sin are able to overcome the love of God for humanity.”<sup>23</sup> God who is “ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-existing, yet ever the same”<sup>24</sup> decided to send us a very personal message through His Son, choosing to demonstrate his love for humanity visibly and not invisibly. Jesus is a visible manifestation for us of the Father’s love, mercy, and compassion – He sent that message to us in person.

***Why is the Incarnation so important?***

### **D. The Importance of the Incarnation**

In terms of the Incarnation, let us begin with the troparion for the Pre-Nativity Period leading up to Christmas. As an aside, the beauty of the Eastern Church is that the Early Church Fathers tried to pack theological teachings into short, one-stanza hymns that have been handed onto us within our Troparion and Kontakion. Before the Nativity, we hear:

Bethlehem, make ready, for Eden has been opened for all; Ephrathah, prepare yourself, for the Tree of Life has blossomed from the Virgin in the cave. Her womb has become a spiritual paradise wherein the divine Fruit was planted. If we eat of it, we shall live and not die like Adam. Christ is born to raise up the likeness that had fallen.<sup>25</sup>

“Christ is born to raise up the likeness that had fallen.” He came to undo the sin of Adam. Both St. Athanasius of Alexandria (c.295-373) and St. Irenaeus of Lyon (130-202) are quoted as saying,

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<sup>21</sup>See Anaphora. *The Divine Liturgy of Our Holy Father Basil the Great* (Pittsburgh: Byzantine Seminary Press, 2006) 72.

<sup>22</sup>John Paul II. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Papal Encyclical (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, April 17, 2003) No. 24.

<sup>23</sup>Stavropoulos. *Partakers of Divine Nature*. 28.

<sup>24</sup>From the Anaphora (consecration prayer) of the Divine of Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. Taken from *The Divine Liturgies of our Holy Father John Chrysostom* (Pittsburgh: Byzantine Seminary Press, 2006) 72.

<sup>25</sup>Troparion. Pre-Festive Day of the Nativity. Taken from *The Divine Liturgies of our Holy Fathers John Chrysostom and Basil the Great* (Pittsburgh: The Byzantine Catholic Metropolitan Church *Sui Juris*, 2006) 283.

Note: all references to the Divine Liturgy are taken from this Ruthenian Byzantine translation, unless otherwise noted.

“The Son of God became man so that man could become god.” Or, using the term used in the ECED catechetical materials, Christ came so that we could become “God-like.”<sup>26</sup>

Essentially by becoming man, Jesus does not restore us to instant perfection. However, he does place us back on the right trajectory.<sup>27</sup> What was restored in the Incarnation was our receptivity to the divine,<sup>28</sup> which once again allows us to grow in relationship with God. He came to draw us together and bring us back to God. Think of the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd seeking out the lost sheep.<sup>29</sup> However, this is only half of the Incarnation story.

Christ is came as the “second Adam,” modeling for us a life of obedience, a full life from birth to death. His example shows us how to regain the likeness of God. In our Gospel passage for this conference, Philip says, “Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Jesus tells him, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Let us unpack this further.

**The Life** – Union with God, that which the Father intended for us from the beginning.

**The Truth** – We are all sons and daughters, created in the Divine Image. We all have value without exception to Our Heavenly Father.

**The Way** – the example Jesus modeled for us.

As a monk from Mount Athos teaches us, we become who God wants us to be by following the examples and teachings of Jesus, who modeled the divine attributes or “likeness” of God. These are goodness, love, mercy, compassion, longsuffering,<sup>30</sup> patience, purity, and having pure love for neighbor.<sup>31</sup> We regain the likeness of God by following the example of Jesus, who modeled for us extreme humility and self-surrender to Our Heavenly Father. As St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) writes, “We unite ourselves to God, in so far as this is possible, by participating in the godlike virtues and by entering into communion with Him through prayer and praise. Because the virtues are similitudes<sup>32</sup> of God, to participate in them puts us in a fit state to receive the Divine.”<sup>33</sup> In

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<sup>26</sup>See Eastern Catholic Eparchial Directors of Religious Education (ECED). *We Become God-Like*. Book 7 (Woodland Park, NJ: God With Us Publications, 2011).

<sup>27</sup>See Jeff Vogel. “The Haste of Sin, the Slowness of Salvation: An Interpretation of Irenaeus on the Fall and Redemption.” *Anglican Theological Review*. 89/3 (Summer 2007) 444.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Vogel. 447.

<sup>29</sup>See Luke 15:1-7, Parable of the Lost Sheep. See also John 10:1-18, Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

<sup>30</sup>Longsuffering is more than simply perseverance. By definition, longsuffering means “long and patient endurance of injury, trouble, or provocation.” We consider the example of Jesus, his extreme humility and self-surrender especially during His Passion.

<sup>31</sup>The divine attributes or what God wants us to become can be seen through Jesus’ life in the Gospels. Taken from a Monk of Mount Athos. *The Watchful Mind: Teachings on the Prayer of the Heart*. Translated by George Dokos (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2014) 160.

<sup>32</sup>Similitudes being defined as “likeness; resemblance.”

<sup>33</sup>Cf. St. Gregory Palamas. “Three Texts on Prayer and Purity of Heart.” Taken from *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth. Vol. IV. Translated and edited by GEH Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 343.

other words, this is how we undertake the transformation process of *theosis*, of becoming God-like.

Thus the Incarnation is important to our salvation for two critical reasons:

- (1) It restores our relationship to the Father, allowing us to again receive and collaborate with the Divine. The Incarnation does not guarantee our salvation; however, it affects our redemption because it is now our free choice whether we desire to live in union with God or not, whether we desire to follow the way of Jesus or not.
- (2) Jesus is the Image of the Father after whom we are patterned, coming to us in our own humanity and giving us the example of supreme obedience and self-giving for us to follow in order to obtain the abundant life promised to us by God.<sup>34</sup>

Through the Incarnation, God comes to us in a very personal and visible way. He has shown us the depth of His love by sending what was most dear to Him – His Son. As St. Paul writes, Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the first born of creation.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the offer of salvation is always there. God knocks at the door of our hearts.<sup>36</sup> “He will not rest until He has invaded our heart and made it His throne. He will not rest until He has moved us from the gutter to the Palace.”<sup>37</sup> The choice is ours as to whether we will open the door and let Him in.

***Are we willing to open our hearts to Jesus?***

## **E. Discipleship: Following the Example of Jesus**

Jesus has shown us the way to the Father and he spells out for us the terms and conditions of discipleship: “Whoever wishes to come after must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”<sup>38</sup> In Luke’s Gospel, it is written that we must do this daily.<sup>39</sup> The “way” to the Father Jesus modeled for us is the Way of the Cross. To be disciples of Jesus, we too must take up our crosses. We are called to do so whole-heartedly and without hesitation, reassured that the Risen Christ has our backs.

There seems to be a dichotomy in this. The destiny to which we are called, union with God, sounds extremely positive. Yet, when we hear about the way to that destiny, to follow the example of Jesus and his Way of the Cross, this seems quite negative. In today’s world, there is sometimes a distortion to this Gospel message – that suffering is somehow not part of the package. So, it is important to clarify at the outset that Jesus did not ascend the cross so we would be spared a

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<sup>34</sup>See John 10:10: “I came so that they may have life and have it more abundantly.”

<sup>35</sup>Col. 1:15.

<sup>36</sup>See Rev. 3:20. See also John 15:23.

<sup>37</sup>Coniaris. *Tools for Theosis*. 80.

<sup>38</sup>Mark 8:34.

<sup>39</sup>See Luke 9:23.

similar fate. “Christ suffered so that we could handle suffering with Him.”<sup>40</sup> Discipleship has a cost – it’s not free.<sup>41</sup>

As Desert Father Dorotheos of Gaza (c.505 – c.565) would tell us: “In God’s providence everything is absolutely right and whatever happens is for the assistance of the soul. For whatever God does with us, he does out of love and consideration for us because it is adapted to our needs.”<sup>42</sup> This means every blessing and challenge is a gift from God, all tailored to our needs. We ask each time we pray the Our Father, “Give us this day our daily bread,” and He will give us exactly what we need – no more or no less. He gives us what we truly need, not what we *think* we need.

We have probably all already realized that our faith will be tested. The trials we experience help us gauge if our house of faith is really built upon rock, or whether we witness ourselves slowly crumble when we realize, much to our chagrin, that our foundation is built on sand.<sup>43</sup> God knows what we need in order to strengthen our relationship with Him and, yes, that sometimes includes trials and challenges. The question is whether in times of trial we cry out in fear, or do we trust that God has our back?

We are fortunate that we have a most excellent guide (Jesus), who not only showed us the way, but who also experienced temptations and trials, and who remains with us through His Spirit to guide us on our journey. We are not left orphaned or required to face our challenges alone.

***Are we willing to turn to Jesus and stake all our hope in Him? Are we still willing when we know that His way is the way of the cross?***

## F. Theosis: Fulfilling Our Potential and Regaining the Likeness

We have described *theosis* as the step-by-step, transformative process which we undertake, whereby following the example of Jesus we once again begin to regain the “likeness” of God, preparing ourselves to live in union with Him in the life to come. It is how we become who we were created to be. Think about this: Every one of us has the potential to be another Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta. This statement generally receives very skeptical responses. Yet, this statement is true and we can say this with confidence because we are all created in the Divine Image. We have the blueprint of the divine attributes engrained within us. The difference is ultimately how well we collaborate with the Divine Presence dwelling within us. However, the potential is there.

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<sup>40</sup>Gabe Martini. “Carrying the Cross and Suffering in Hope.” Taken online newsletter, *On Behalf of All*. <http://onbehalfforall.org/carrying-the-cross-and-suffering-in-hope>.

<sup>41</sup>Consider Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s discussion on cheap grace versus costly grace. See, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

<sup>42</sup>Dorotheos of Gaza. *Discourses and Sayings*. Translated by Eric P. Wheeler. Taken from Cistercian Studies Series, No. 33 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977) 192. Discourse XIII, “On Enduring Temptation Calmly and Thankfully.”

<sup>43</sup>See Matt. 7:24-27.

Jesus tells us, “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”<sup>44</sup> On the surface, this seems daunting or seemingly impossible. However, in the original New Testament Greek, the word for “perfect” is *telios*, which derives from the word *telos* (τέλος), meaning purpose or goal. Thus, “perfect” – *telios* – means living up to the purpose for which we have been created and to which we have been called.<sup>45</sup> It is not about being perfect. Nor is it simply living a good life. We are called to be much more, to be Christ-centered and God-like, in order to fulfill the purpose for which we were created.

The transformation associated with *theosis* is our daily decision to follow the example of Jesus, to desire God above all else. It takes time, patience, and perseverance. We will be tested along the way. However, Jesus has told us what lies in store for those who hold out until the end.

***Do I accept who God is calling me to be? How well am I living up to my purpose?***

## **G. The Struggle of *Theosis* in Today’s World**

At the beginning of this conference, we acknowledged the fact that every human person is filled with deep yearning and desire. We want to know our purpose in life. We desire happiness, to love, and be loved. The challenge is that we live in a secular world which boldly promises happiness without pain and suffering. It promises this happiness instantly and we grow impatient with struggle and perseverance. We are constantly surrounded by brilliant and well-produced advertisements that try to convince us we want what the world has to offer. The packaging looks enticing, the ribbons and the bows are elegant, and the offer is almost too good to turn down. The fruit looks luscious and pleasing to the eye.<sup>46</sup> The voices of secular society compete with the gospel message, trying to drown them out.

Like Adam and Eve, we sometimes succumb to these lures, these temptations, seeking fulfillment and love in the wrong places. Yet once we bite into the beautiful fruit, we find it is actually rotten. We realize that we have been deceived and are ultimately left empty, despairing, and lonely. If we are honest with ourselves, we have probably all been there, disappointed by the path we have chosen.

Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in our own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger

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<sup>44</sup>Matt. 5:48.

<sup>45</sup>See Anthony M. Coniaris. *Achieving Your Potential in Christ: Theosis*. (Minneapolis: Light & Life Publishing Company, 2004) 118.

<sup>46</sup>See Gen. 3:6.

for believers too. Many fall prey to it, and end up resentful, angry, and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life; it is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the Risen Christ."<sup>47</sup>

Only God can fill the "God-size" holes in our lives. Our only hope is in the Risen Christ.

***Have we found ourselves caught up in the way of the world? Have we ever taken our faith for granted?***

### H. Qualifications for *Theosis*: Link to *Evangelii Gaudium*

To summarize, we were created for a purpose: to live in union with God. We realize that purpose and prepare for it by our life on earth. *Theosis* is the incremental, step-by-step transformational process we undertake to become more God-like, to be divinized, preparing ourselves to fulfill this destiny.

Let us consider how we will further explore the concept of *theosis* during our retreat and its meaning for our lives. In doing so, let us reflect upon the words of Pope Francis:

- (1) *"The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus."*<sup>48</sup>

Realization of the joy is rooted in encountering Jesus. It is all about the encounter. How did we encounter Him? We encounter Jesus in the Church through the liturgy and its Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) and in Prayer, through a personal, contemplative prayer relationship. Both of these are qualifications to attain *theosis* in our lives.<sup>49</sup> In turn, when we have a deeper relationship with Jesus, we have a greater capacity to recognize the Divine Image in others, even when we encounter Jesus in his most distressing disguises.<sup>50</sup> This is *theosis* in action.

- (2) *"Those who accept His offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness."*<sup>51</sup>

Now let's be honest, who wouldn't want to be set free from these things? Yet to do so means to "accept His offer of salvation," which means agreeing to the terms and conditions of discipleship. Jesus tells us these are self-denial and patient endurance, picking up our crosses daily, and following His example. To this end,

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<sup>47</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. ("The Joy of the Gospel: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World"). Apostolic Exhortation. Nov. 24, 2013. No. 66.

<sup>48</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 1.

<sup>49</sup>See Archimandrite George. *Theosis*. 53-56.

<sup>50</sup>A favorite image of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta and Dorothy Day. See Matt. 25:31-46. "'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you to drink?' 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

<sup>51</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 1.

humility and asceticism<sup>52</sup> are two additional qualifications to attain *theosis* in our lives.<sup>53</sup> These help to cultivate the soil of our hearts, preparing ourselves to encounter Jesus, and part of the step-by-step, incremental transformation in our lives.

(3) *“With Christ, joy is constantly born anew.”*<sup>54</sup>

It is only through Christ that we realize purpose and fulfillment in our lives. Our destiny rests in having Christ-centered lives.

As we explore the meaning of *theosis* for us personally, we will consider the encounter with Jesus as well as the other qualifications/practices which provide the foundation by which we become more and more God-like.

### Personal Reflection: Freely Taking Up the Cross

*Personal Reflection in Silence. Read the following and then consider the reflection questions.*

Where hides this joy of the Lord, this God who fills the earth with good things, and how do I fully live when life is full of hurt? How do I wake up to joy and grace and beauty and all that is the fullest life when I must stay numb to losses and crushed dreams and all that empties me out?

Is this toxic air of the world, this atmosphere we inhale, burning into our lungs, this *No God? No, God, we won't take what you give. No, God, your plans are a gutted, bleeding mess and I didn't sign up for this and you really thought I would go for this? No, God, this is ugly and this is a mess and can't you get anything right and just haul all this pain out of here and I'll take it from here, thanks. And God? Thanks for nothing.* Isn't this the human inheritance, the legacy of the Garden (Paradise)?....

But from that Garden beginning, God has had a different purpose for us. His intent, since he bent low and breathed life into the dust of our lungs, since he kissed us into being, has never been slyly to orchestrate our ruin. And yet, I have found it: he does have surprising, secret purposes....

He means to heal our soul holes...

Grace, it means “favor,” from the Latin *gratia*. It connotes a free readiness. A free and ready favor. That's grace. It is one thing to choose to take the grace offered at the cross. But to choose to live as one *filling*

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<sup>52</sup>Asceticism: from the Greek *áskēsis* (ἀσκησις) meaning "exercise" or "training," similar to an athlete. Asceticism as practice of spiritual discipline has three basic goals: (1) bringing order and self-control to human appetites, (2) centering a person, and (3) opening a person to God's presence. Such practices include fasting, abstinence, almsgiving, prayer vigils, and other disciplines meant as voluntary self-denial as prescribed by Jesus in his terms and conditions of discipleship (denial of self).

<sup>53</sup>See Archimandrite George. *Theosis*. 49-53.

<sup>54</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 1.

with his grace? Choosing to *fill* with *all* that He freely gives and fully live—with glory and grace and in communion with God?

I know it but I don't always want to: it is a choice. It is a choice for me to freely collaborate with your grace. I choose to accept your offer of salvation.

Living with losses and the realities of this life, I may choose to still say yes. Choose to say yes to what He freely gives. Choose to say yes, knowing my life on earth prepares me for the life that is to come.

***Am I willing to accept the graces and challenges God gives me? Do I realize all is for my benefit, to prepare me to live the life to which He calls me, to live in communion with Him?***

Source: Ann Voscamp. *One Thousand Gifts*. A *New York Times* bestseller. Taken from *Magnificat*. July 2015, Vol. 17, No. 5. 179-180. (Modifications made.)

## Reflection Questions

*Consider the following questions. Note these are for personal reflection and will not be shared. So, be honest in answering. Everyone is at a different place in the spiritual journey, which is okay.*

1. **Have I ever wondered what my purpose in life is?** If so, what do I think my purpose is? Who do I think I am called to be?
2. **Have the choices I made brought me lasting joy? Or have I been left with inner emptiness?**
3. **God calls us to live in union with Him. What are my personal thoughts about this?** Does this “destiny” impact how I live my life?
4. **We are reminded that we have been created in the Divine Image. What does this mean to me?** Do I recognize the Divine Image in myself? Within others?
5. **Have I ever found myself separated from God?** What was the experience like? Recall what it was like. How happened to me? How did I act? Did I truly feel as if something was missing? (I might feel a sense of separation right now. It is okay. Be honest about it.)

6. **Do I truly desire the life that God desires for me (communion with Him)?** Am I willing to work on my relationship with God (to accept His offer of salvation) in order to gain this life?



## Conference No. 2: *Where am I?*

*“Whom are you looking for?” (Jn. 20:15)*

*“God is love; He is not a simple spectator in our life. He provides and cares for us as our Father, but He also respects our freedom. He does not pressure us. We should have our hope in God’s providence and, since we believe that God is watching over us, we should take courage and throw ourselves into His Love and then we will see Him constantly beside us. We will not be afraid that we will make a false step.”<sup>55</sup>*

*(Elder Porphyrios)*

### Opening Gospel Reading

*John 15: 1-9 (The Vine and the Branches)*

### Conference Discussion

#### A. *Where am I?*

*Where am I?* This is the first question we need to ask ourselves when we reflect upon our spiritual journey. *Where am I?* As with any map in order to determine where we are, we need a point of reference. In this case, we need to ask: Where is God? Where am I in relation to God?

Since *theosis* is about a gradual transformation, drawing ever closer to God, each of us needs to periodically assess our relationship with Him. In most cases, the spiritual journey is not on a constant upward trajectory. Rather, we go through cycles in our lives.

Yesterday, we said that Jesus is the “way” to the Father, in that He modeled the life to which we are to live in order to achieve our destiny. So the question we need to consider is:

***Where is Jesus in my life?***

#### B. *Where is He?*

Recall our discussion yesterday evening. We are set free from our inner longing only if we accept Jesus’ offer of salvation.<sup>56</sup> So where am I in relationship to Him?

Blessed Mother Teresa would tell us: “Don’t search for Jesus in far lands; He is not there. He is close to you; He is in you.” *Where am I? Where is God in relationship to me?* As we spend time this day reflecting on our spiritual journey, it is worth taking time to reflect upon our own personal relationship with Jesus.

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<sup>55</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wounded by Love*. 192.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 1.

Dominican author Albert Nolan would ask us the hard question: *Is Jesus first in your life?* Essentially the Christological challenge of today is not whether Jesus is consubstantial with the Father, or whether he is human or divine. These issues were resolved by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and most people *confess* these doctrines with their lips. The challenge of today is whether we are willing to confess these doctrines with our hearts.<sup>57</sup> Do we make the *choices* in our daily lives that reflect these beliefs in Jesus? Do we accept Jesus' conditions of discipleship ("the offer of salvation"<sup>58</sup>) over the secular voices and way of the world? Nolan writes:

Everyone has a god—in the sense that everyone puts something first in one's life: money, power, prestige, self, career, love and so forth. There must be something in our lives which operates as our source of meaning and strength, something which we regard, as the supreme power in our lives. If we think that priority in life is to be a transcendent person, we will have God with a capital letter. If we think of our highest value as a cause, an ideal or ideology, we will have god with a small letter. Either way, we will each have something that is divine to us personally.<sup>59</sup>

***Where does Jesus fit in our lives? Do we make His values our priority? Or, is something else first in my life? (Consider CS Lewis – "something other than God" which will make us happy?)***

### C. Turning to God: A Deliberate Effort

*Theosis* is all about collaborating with the Divine Presence within. The key is that we must freely make this choice. God's grace is always available, His love never fails. However, as discussed yesterday, we need to open the doors of our hearts to Him. It is about *collaborating* with the Divine – it is never forced upon us. Certainly, God occasionally sends us reminders of His desire for us. Consider St. Paul and his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.<sup>60</sup> Our encounters with Jesus may not be as quite as dramatic and, yet, sometimes we are knocked to the ground literally and figuratively. These encounters with Jesus can often be moments of conversion.

In the Eastern Christian tradition, there is a term for this collaboration: *Synergy*. We work with divine grace to bring about wholeness and the ability to achieve our potential. "Synergy means the mingling of divine love with our capacities to love, guiding them and grounding them in the grace of God. Synergy means the release of a quality of creativity and energy that manifests our likeness to the restored image of God in us."<sup>61</sup> In a word, it means our ability to be fully alive.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Jesus expressed the same issue with the Pharisees and scribes of his day. See for example Matt. 15:8 where Jesus quotes the Prophet Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

<sup>58</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 1.

<sup>59</sup>Albert Nolan. *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001) 165-166.

<sup>60</sup>See Acts 9:1-9.

<sup>61</sup>James W. Fowler. *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000) 115-116.

<sup>62</sup>Consider St. Irenaeus of Lyon's statement: The glory of God is man fully alive."

Our turning to God must be real and not simply superficial. He must be accepted and the way of the world rejected. We cannot straddle the issue. Consider the example of Zacchaeus, the Gospel we heard on the First Sunday of the Triodion, two weeks ago. He was not just any tax collector, he was the chief tax collector of Jericho. Likely he had been consumed by a desire for ever-increasing riches. As St. Cyril of Alexandria (378-444) writes: He was short of stature physically and spiritually.<sup>63</sup> Zacchaeus seeks to see Jesus, not knowing that he is also sought and that his salvation is desired by Jesus<sup>64</sup> who, as he says to the murmuring crowd,<sup>65</sup> came to seek the lost.<sup>66</sup>

What happens? Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus causes a true change of heart, a spirit of repentance or *metanoia* (μετάνοια). It is not a superficial change. Zacchaeus demonstrates what it really means to welcome Jesus, welcoming him into our hearts.<sup>67</sup> The Lord knocks and Zacchaeus opens the door. Without being asked or prompted, he declares with a repentant heart: "I give half to the poor"<sup>68</sup> and keeps the other half to make restitution four-fold to those whom he defrauded.

For Zacchaeus, the encounter with Jesus resulted in true repentance, a change of heart described in Greek as *metanoia*. It is not a superficial change, which Jesus confirms when he says, "Today salvation has come to this house...."<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, our turning to God must be real. Sometimes we have an encounter with Jesus through a spiritual experience, which fills us with tremendous zeal. How do we keep that zeal alive? We need to make the conscious and deliberate decision to turn to God each day, to desire Him above all else. We must remain in a constant state of vigilance. "The road to our *theosis*, our union with God, can be formulated in the following short statement: divine grace and human freedom; theory and action; enthusiastic zeal and (deliberate) decision; abandonment of the 'world' and return to God; good works as means toward *theosis*; a warm heart and a vigilant eye."<sup>70</sup>

***For theosis to occur, we must make a deliberate choice to deny ourselves and turn toward God daily.***

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<sup>63</sup>Cf. St. Cyril of Alexandria. *Commentary on Luke*. Homily 127. Taken from "Luke," edited by Arthur J. Just, Jr. From *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (ACCS). Vol. III. General editor Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 284.

<sup>64</sup>See Luke Timothy Johnson. *The Gospel of Luke*. Taken from *Sacra Pagina*. Vol. III. General editor Daniel J. Harrington, SJ (Collegeville, MN: A Michael Glazier Book/The Liturgical Press, 1991) 285.

<sup>65</sup>See Luke 19:7.

<sup>66</sup>Cf. Luke 19:10.

<sup>67</sup>St. Augustine of Hippo. Sermon 174.3. ACCS. 291.

<sup>68</sup>See Luke 19:8. *Orthodox Study Bible*.

<sup>69</sup>Luke 19:9.

<sup>70</sup>Stavropoulos. *Partakers of Divine Nature*. 37.

***“If you do not strive, you will not find; and if you do not knock eagerly at the door and keep long vigil before it, you will not receive an answer.”<sup>71</sup>***

***(St. Isaac the Syrian, d. 700)***

## D. *Theosis* is a Gift freely given and freely chosen

*Theosis* is a gift freely given by God. God acts in *theosis*. However, attaining *theosis* requires action on our part as well. We must desire it, struggle for it, and prepare ourselves to receive this gift.<sup>72</sup> God shows His love for us, and we are called to reciprocate our love for Him. As modern day monk and spiritual father, Elder Porphyrios (1907-1991), writes: “Christ stands outside the door of our soul and knocks for us to open to Him, but He does not enter. He does not want to violate the freedom which He Himself gave us.”<sup>73</sup> The gift is freely given. We must freely choose whether to accept.

Christ is life, the source of life, the source of joy, the source of the true light, everything. Whoever loves Christ and other people truly loves life. Life without Christ is death; it is hell, not life. That is what hell is—the absence of love. Life is Christ. Love is the life of Christ. Either you will be in life or in death. ***It’s up to you to decide.***<sup>74</sup>

## E. Tools to Cultivate *Theosis*

*Theosis* in our lives can only be achieved through our collaboration with the Divine Presence (Synergy). We cannot do this alone. As we discussed last night, we need to *encounter* Jesus (“The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus”) and two of the ways we encounter Him is through (1) the Church and its Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) and (2) Personal Prayer. Combined, these represent the interior spiritual life (cultivating a love for God). In turn, this love for God is ultimately manifested in love of neighbor,<sup>75</sup> which is explored further in Conferences No. 4 and No. 5.

### 1. The Church

Have you ever noticed that human beings often adapt to the crowd or environment in which they find themselves? For example, if a person continuously hangs around with a certain group, he or she tends to become more like them. Often when we find ourselves in a dark place, it is because we have simply followed the crowd, consciously or unconsciously desiring to be like the others.

<sup>71</sup><http://glory2godforallthings.com/2008/01/30/st-isaac-the-syrian-and-the-door-of-heaven/>.

<sup>72</sup>See Archimandrite George. *Theosis*. 47.

<sup>73</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wound by Love*. 109.

<sup>74</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wound by Love*. 97.

<sup>75</sup>See Matt. 22:36-40. See also 1 John 4:20-21: “If anyone says, “I love God,” but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God\* whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

Similarly, if we surround ourselves with likeminded individuals with a common faith, we find greater strength to sustain the spiritual journey. We need the Church to create the environment in which to cultivate our faith. Pope Francis often refers to the Church as a field hospital for sinners, not a museum of saints. Spiritual Father Damien Geiger often called the Church the “Twelve-Step Program for Repentant Sinners.” Any journey is easier when we know that we are not alone.

The Church facilitates our encounters with Jesus, both through the Divine Liturgy and as repository of our spiritual traditions. In addition, it is through the Church where we have access to the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). As Elder Porphyrios (1907-1991) writes: “Outside the Church there is no salvation, there is no life.”<sup>76</sup>

### *a. Tradition*

The Church is entrusted with our spiritual traditions. It is through the Church that we can receive guidance from the collective wisdom of the Church Fathers and Mothers who have gone before us. We have access to the writings of those who have undergone the spiritual journey before us, which provides guideposts for our own experiences.<sup>77</sup> Many others have walked the same spiritual path and have left markers for us to follow.<sup>78</sup>

### *b. Divine Liturgy*

The encounter with Jesus in the liturgy is two-fold.

- (1) Liturgy of the Word - In the first part of the liturgy, Christ nourishes us through the words of Sacred Scripture. Jesus is called the Word of God (*Logos* in Greek). As John the Evangelist writes, “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.”<sup>79</sup> We hear His teachings and the whole of Scripture tells the story of God’s great love for humanity, which culminates in sending us His Son, and whose Spirit continues the work through the Church.
- (2) In the Liturgy of Eucharist, Christ comes to us as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.<sup>80</sup> The sin (singular) is the Fall of Adam, and Jesus restores our

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<sup>76</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wound by Love*. 87.

<sup>77</sup>A corollary is the relationship between spirituality and theology. Spirituality drives theology, not the other way around. Consider the analogy: Spirituality is the following river. Theology and the Tradition of the Church are like the embankment, helping guide us and interpret our spiritual encounters with the Divine (the author’s own analogy).

<sup>78</sup>See Richard J. Fowler. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper One, 1998) 72.

<sup>79</sup>John 1:14.

<sup>80</sup>See John 1:29. This is John the Baptist’s testimony regarding Jesus: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

relationship with the Father. Jesus is physically present to us and He nourishes us in the Holy Eucharist. More on this below.

Jesus comes to us in every liturgy both as the Word (*Logos*) and the Lamb of God, speaking to us and uniting Himself to us.<sup>81</sup>

The Divine Liturgy itself provides a sense of beauty, of heaven and earth coming together in worship and giving us a sense of the sacred. It was said that when St. Vladimir the Great (958-1015), Grand Prince of the Kievan Rus,' initially sent his emissaries to Constantinople to investigate the Christian faith, they attended a Divine Liturgy at Hagia Sophia and in their report back to the prince, they said, "We did not know if we were on earth or in heaven. We only know that of a truth, God is with them."<sup>82</sup> This profound proclamation confirms the beauty and sacredness of the liturgy. In addition, the Church represents our public prayer which is a complement to our personal prayer. These two are not meant to be separated.

**Bottom line: We need the Church to strength us on our journey of theosis.**

## 2. The Holy Mysteries (Sacraments)

Each of the Holy Mysteries represent encounters with the Divine. In each, Jesus shows the depth of His overflowing love for us. Let us consider these in the context of our journey of *theosis*.

### a. The Holy Mystery of Baptism

The Holy Mystery of Baptism is our personal participation in Easter, the death and resurrection of Christ. In Baptism, we are clothed with Christ and initiated into the Church – we are claimed for Christ and this dignity can never be revoked. We are reminded of this during the Easter season and other selected times in the Church calendar when we sing instead of "Holy God" for the Thrice-Holy Hymn, we sing, "All you have been baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. Alleluia!"<sup>83</sup> In the Resurrection Matins, we sing:

It is the day of Resurrection, O People, let us be enlightened by it. The Passover is the Lord's Passover, since Christ our God, has brought us from death to life and from earth to heaven. Therefore, we sing the hymn of victory.<sup>84</sup>

Most of us were baptized as infants, so how does Baptism assist us in our journey of *theosis* when likely we do not even remember the event? The answer is that we need to acquire (or re-acquire) the grace of our Baptism in our lives, to claim it and make it our

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<sup>81</sup>Coniaris. *Tools for Theosis*. 74.

<sup>82</sup><https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/2010/05/25/the-beautiful-god/>.

<sup>83</sup> Thrice-Holy Hymn used on Pascha (Easter), Bright Week, Pentecost, Nativity, Theophany, and Lazarus Saturday. Taken from *The Divine Liturgies*. 31.

<sup>84</sup>Resurrection Matins. Resurrection Canon. Ode 1. Hirmos. 7.

own. St. John Climacus writes: “Repentance is the renewal of baptism and is a contract with God for a fresh start in life. Repentance is critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself. Repentance is the daughter of hope and the refusal of despair. (The penitent stands guilty—but undisgraced.)”<sup>85</sup> After all, in Baptism we were washed clean and set free from sin (having been clothed in Christ). Repentance restores us to this state of cleanliness.

The Holy Mystery of Repentance (Confession) is the concrete expression, beginning, and completion of repentance. It gives us the chance to express our sins to our confessor and be forgiven. In Eastern Christian theology, unlike in the Roman Church, there is no delineation between mortal and venial sin. All sin is considered separation from God. The small sins can easily become habit and can ultimately cause a contraction of our hearts. There is a strong belief that these smaller encroachments need to be kept in check, not allowing poisonous seeds to take root in our hearts. Thus, the Eastern Spiritual Fathers place greater emphasis on seeking the Holy Mystery of Repentance on a more regular basis. As St. John Climacus writes: “In fact nothing gives demons and evil thoughts such power over us as to nourish them and hide them in our hearts unconfessed.”<sup>86</sup>

Further, as Pope Francis writes: “The confessional must not be a torture chamber, but an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best.”<sup>87</sup>

However, Repentance is not simply the Holy Mystery of Repentance (Confession). Repentance first and foremost is a state of mind, a constant acknowledgment that we are sinners and the mourning of our sins,<sup>88</sup> both of which are important in our upward movement to God. Through this ongoing state of repentance, “each day the soul is strengthened and becomes a fertile field, providing the fruits of the Holy Spirit to harvest.”<sup>89</sup> “If a person has not repented, if one has not changed his or her way of life, thinking, attitudes, opinions and if that person does not stand forever tearfully before God, then it is not true repentance.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>St. John Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Translated by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell. The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) 121. Step 5: “On Penitence.”

<sup>86</sup>St. John Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. 211. Step 23: “On Pride.”

<sup>87</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 44.

<sup>88</sup>*Penthos* (πένθος), also called compunction, is mourning for our sinfulness (e.g., “Spare your people, O Lord”) and an important part of repentance as a state of mind. Some Greek Fathers also describe the gift of tears associated with such mourning, a reflection of unworthiness and a desire for the mercy of God. This also helps to cultivate the virtue of humility, which will be discussed in Conference No. 4.

<sup>89</sup>Stavropoulos. *Partakers of Divine Nature*. 53.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.* 55.

In addition, as we will discuss in our next conference, the Jesus Prayer is a reflection on this ongoing state of Repentance. This prayer “leads in the last analysis to the embracing of our souls by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>91</sup>

**b. *The Holy Mystery of Chrismation (Confirmation)***

Chrismation (Confirmation) is our personal participation in Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon us. We receive the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>92</sup> The significance of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is worth considering. At the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit descends upon the Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos* (“God-bearer”). At the Theophany (the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan), the Spirit descends upon Jesus in preparation for his earthly ministry. However, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends upon all of humanity. We see the effects of the Holy Spirit as described in the Acts of the Apostles, transforming individuals who were behind locked doors because of fear to boldly proclaiming the gospel message. The Troparion for Pentecost Sunday is the following:

Blessed are you, O Christ our God. You have shown the fishermen to be all-wise, sending down upon them the Holy Spirit. Through them you have the whole world in your net. O Lover of us all, glory to you!<sup>93</sup>

At the time of Jesus, to consider fishermen to be all-wise was unthinkable. Yet something powerful clearly happened. We today are proof of this “something,” gathered here in this Church. Someone handed the Gospel message onto us and that transmission began with those fishermen on that first Pentecost.

In the Holy Mystery (Sacrament), the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us, bringing to life the graces we received in Baptism.<sup>94</sup> Jesus assured us at the Last Supper that He would not leave us orphans.<sup>95</sup> He says that He will send us another Advocate, “the Spirit of truth” which will remain with us and be within us.<sup>96</sup> Like Baptism, we need to claim the graces of Chrismation (Confirmation) through Repentance and other actions which prepare our hearts as a suitable dwelling for the Spirit (e.g., cultivating the virtue of humility and ascetical practices).

In our effort to achieve *theosis* in our lives, it is predicated on collaborating with the Divine Presence, which means collaborating with the Spirit of God dwelling within us. The graces granted through the Spirit are many-fold: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude,

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid. 77.

<sup>92</sup>See Rom. 8, 1 Cor. 6, and 2 Cor. 21-22.

<sup>93</sup>Troparion for Pentecost Sunday. *The Divine Liturgies*. 205.

<sup>94</sup>See Coniaris. *Theosis*. 81.

<sup>95</sup>Cf. John 14:18.

<sup>96</sup>See John 14:16-17.

knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.<sup>97</sup> In summary, the Spirit gives us the strength and guidance to live our lives in a manner pleasing to God, drawing us closer to Him (becoming more God-like) and preparing us for our final destiny: union with Him

The Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of Christ's promise, teaching us what we need to know and reminding us of all that Jesus taught.<sup>98</sup> In other words, the Holy Spirit becomes our guide during our journey of transformation and *theosis* can only be realized in the Holy Spirit,<sup>99</sup> drawing us to life in the Holy Trinity. Consider that in the Eucharistic celebration, bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ *through the invocation of the Holy Spirit* (in the *Epiclesis*). It is the same Holy Spirit which has the power to transform our lives, from fear and doubt to faith and constancy. As discussed in our first conference, cultivating a spirit of humility and self-denial (asceticism) create the fertile ground within our hearts, opening them for collaboration with the Spirit.

Certain Spiritual Fathers such as St. Seraphim of Sarov (c.1754-1833) describe the aim of the spiritual life to be acquisition of the Holy Spirit. This can also be defined in terms of *theosis*, becoming God-like, sharing in His divine nature, since the purpose of the Holy Spirit in us is to divinize (deify) us and make us Temples of God's presence,<sup>100</sup> guiding our actions in our journey towards our ultimate destiny. St. Paul validates this when he writes, "Do you not know your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?"<sup>101</sup> He also writes:

We even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.<sup>102</sup>

Essentially, St. Paul is describing the transformation one undergoes in *theosis*, because afflictions represent our crosses and the terms and conditions of discipleship ("the offer of salvation") involve following the Way of the Cross.

Our collaboration with the Spirit, who has been poured into our hearts, gives us the strength to turn toward God on a daily basis and assists us in the journey of *theosis*.

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<sup>97</sup>See also Isaiah 11:2.

<sup>98</sup>See John 14:26.

<sup>99</sup>Stavropoulos. *Partakers of Divine Nature*. 29.

<sup>100</sup>Coniaris. *Theosis*. 139.

<sup>101</sup>1 Cor. 6:19.

<sup>102</sup>Rom. 5:3-5.

c. *Mystery of Holy Eucharist (Communion)*

In the Eucharist, we receive the divinizing Presence of Christ within us.<sup>103</sup> *Theosis* involves our constant movement in the direction of God, our desire to be in union with Him, and what gives us the abundant life Jesus promised. “It is not possible, however, for us to live in God without tasting God, without God living in us, without receiving God within us.”<sup>104</sup>

As Jesus says, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.”<sup>105</sup>

Consequently after Baptism, Chrismation, and Repentance, it is the Eucharist

...which unites us, in a mystical and spiritual manner with God and which produces our divinization. The Mystery of the Body and Blood is a concrete realization of the unity of our human nature with Christ, and concurrently, of our unity with members of the Church.

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is closely related to Holy Baptism. The work of the renewal and *theosis* of human beings, which was performed once through Holy Baptism, is confirmed by the Eucharist, which is constantly repeated. The Eucharist feeds the believer with the Body and Blood of Christ. It strengthens us and moves us forward. It unites us closely with the Savior and leads us firmly toward *theosis*.

With Holy Communion, we relive the miracle of (Christ’s) Divine Incarnation. It is this Holy Mystery that human beings are interpenetrated by the Divine, just as a rod of iron, thrust into a searing flame soon becomes itself a fire engulfed in flame.<sup>106</sup>

Thus, Eucharist is an encounter with the Risen Christ.

Because the Holy Eucharist can enflame and divinize us, many of the Spiritual Fathers over the ages have encouraged more frequent reception of Communion. These include, as examples, St. Basil of Caesarea (330-379), St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain (1749-1809), and St. John of Kronstadt (1829-1908), the latter of whom encouraged even lay faithful to participate in Eucharist daily. Of course, Communion should be received worthily and well, which places increased emphasis on Repentance, thus creating a cycle of upward turning to God.

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<sup>103</sup>Coniaris. *Theosis*. 81.

<sup>104</sup>Stavropoulos. *Partakers of Divine Nature*. 56.

<sup>105</sup>John 6:53-54.

<sup>106</sup>Stavropoulos. *Partakers of Divine Nature*. 56-57, 59.

As discussed in our first conference, encountering Jesus is an important element in *theosis*. Each of the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) provides opportunities for this encounter.

***Do I recognize Christ in each encounter, particularly in the Holy Mysteries of Repentance and Eucharist?***

### 3. Personal Prayer

Prayer completes our union with God, makes us one in spirit, and enhances our collaboration with the Divine Presence, thus enabling our transformation in *theosis*. More about the encounter with Jesus in personal prayer will be discussed in our next conference.

## F. The Journey of *Theosis*: Preparing Ourselves for Unseen Warfare

In this conference, we have taken time to consider where we are in our relationship with God, as we consider our individual journeys of *theosis*, preparing ourselves to live a life in union with Him. We have talked about the terms and conditions of discipleship (“the offer of salvation”), namely the Way of the Cross. We talked about the daily turning to God, desiring Him above all else.

Finally, we considered some of the tools available to us for our journey of *theosis*, namely the importance of the Church, its liturgy, and the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). These will assist us in drawing inward to God dwelling within us and encountering Christ, strengthening us for the journey of transformation.

Now, we need to consider another reality. We will face struggles, trials, and temptations along the spiritual journey. The lure of the secular world will always remain around us because even if we strive to renounce the “world,” the reality is we still live in the world. The demons will try to use every device, temptation, and deception possible to derail our relationship with God. The great irony of this unseen spiritual warfare within ourselves is the discovery that “the demons fight hardest when God is near; the darkness of the shadow is in direct proportion to the brilliance of the light.”<sup>107</sup>

Let us consider for a moment what we are individually willing to do to properly arm ourselves for the assaults that will inevitably come. St. Antony of Egypt (251-356) advises: “The proper daily labor for a man is to cast his wretchedness before God and reckon on temptation until his last breath.”<sup>108</sup> Thus, we need to leverage the tools we described above, incorporating them into our spiritual disciplines in order to sustain us during the times of temptation or spiritual dryness. To summarize, these would include:

- (1) Frequent participation in the Divine Liturgy and reception of the Holy Eucharist.

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<sup>107</sup>John Chrysostom. *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2003) xii.

<sup>108</sup>Quoted by Dorotheos of Gaza. *Discourses and Sayings*. 146. Discourse VII: “On Self-accusation.”

- (2) Establishing a daily Rule of Prayer.
- (3) Spiritual reading, both Sacred Scripture and other spiritual writings from the Great Fathers and Mothers. “Everything proceeds from Holy Scripture. You must read it continually in order to learn the secrets of spiritual struggle.”<sup>109</sup>
- (4) Frequent participant in the Holy Mystery of Repentance.
- (5) Other practices such as regular fasting, following the fast cycles of the Eastern Church, spiritual direction, and other ascetical practices.

The sole objective of these practices is to deepen our relationship with Jesus, sustaining us for the journey of *theosis* and preparing us for the spiritual warfare we will encounter along the way.

Why are these spiritual practices important? Desert Father Abba Poemen (d.450) would tell us: “As long as a pot is on the fire, no fly nor any other animal can get near it. But as soon as it is cold, these creatures get inside. So it is for us; as long as we live lives in spiritual activities, the enemy cannot find a means of controlling us.”<sup>110</sup> Our objective is keep all the unsavory creatures, the demons and poisonous weeds from entering our hearts. St. Paul writes, “Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil.”<sup>111</sup>

In terms of the journey of *theosis*, St. John of Kronstadt (1829-1908) writes:

Your spiritual life is clearly divided into two states, differing acutely one from the other: into a state of peace, joy, expansion of heart, and into a state of suffering, fear, and contraction of heart. The causes of the first are the actions of your soul when in conformity with the Creator’s laws; and the cause of the second state, the transgression of His holy laws.<sup>112</sup>

He adds, “The purer the heart is, the larger it is, and the more able it is to find room within it for a greater number of beloved ones.”<sup>113</sup> Loving our neighbor is an important similitude or attribute of God, thus one of the objectives to *theosis*. In addition to opening ourselves to Christ who stands before the door of our hearts and knocks, it is important to have an enlarged heart with a capacity for others. Elder Porphyrios says: “No one should wish to be saved alone without all the others being saved.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wound by Love*. 110.

<sup>110</sup>*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Translated by Benedicta Ward, SLG (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975) 183.

<sup>111</sup>Eph. 6:11.

<sup>112</sup>John Ilytch Sergieff (St. John of Kronstadt). *My Life in Christ*. Translated by EE Goulaeff (Jordanville, New York: Printshop of St. Job of Pochaev, Holy Trinity Monastery, 2000).

<sup>113</sup>Sergieff. 36.

<sup>114</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wounded by Love*. 89.

## G. Concluding Thoughts

In our first conference we discussed the value proposition of the Gospel as described in Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*: "The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus."<sup>115</sup> To this end we discussed that an important part of the journey of *theosis* is the encounter with Jesus. We said with regard to the encounter, there were two qualifications for *theosis*: (1) The Church with its liturgy and the Holy Mysteries, and (2) Personal Prayer. In this conference we discussed the first of these qualifications. We also considered how these encounters and spiritual practices associated with the Church can prepare us for waging spiritual warfare when we are inevitably assaulted by the demons who will try to thwart are upward journey toward God.

### Personal Reflection: Where am I?

*Personal Reflection in Silence. Read the following and then consider the reflection questions.*

For all the wondering, this is the first question of the Old Testament—God coming to ask after you: "Where are you?"

Where are you in your life? Where are you—from me? To get where you want to go, the first question you always have to answer is *Where am I?*

Our fall was, has always been, and always will be, that we aren't satisfied in God and what He gives. We hunger for the One who comes after us and offers Himself as Bread for our starved souls.

And after all the wondering, this is the first question of the New Testament, when the wise men come asking *Where is he?* (Mt. 2:2).

We only find out where we are when we find where He is. We only find ourselves....*when we find Him.* We lost ourselves at one tree. And only find ourselves at another.

Wise men are only wise because they make their priority the seeking of Christ.

All our moments, all our waking—all the globe is a looking glass to God, and the wise keep seeking the presence of Christ in a thousand places, because you only come to yourself when you come to Him.

And your God, he's coming now, everywhere for you.

In all humanity's religions, man reaches for God. But in all His relationships, God reaches for man. Reaches for you who have fallen and scraped your heart raw, for you who feel the shame of words that have snaked off your tongue and poisoned corners of your life, for you who keep trying to cover up pain with perfectionism.

Three words come through the dense thicket of failure: *Where are you?*

Your God refuses to give up on you.

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<sup>115</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 1.

Your God looks for you when you're feeling lost, and your God seeks you out when you're down, and your God calls for you when you feel cast aside. He doesn't run down the rebel. He doesn't strike the sinner. He doesn't flog failure.

***God calls for you: "Where are you?" So, where am I? How will I respond to His call?***

Ann Voscamp. *One Thousand Gifts*. A *New York Times* bestseller. Taken from *Magnificat*. Dec. 2014, Vol. 16, No. 10. 64-65.

## Reflection Questions

*Consider the following questions.*

1. **Where am I?** Where am I right now, today? Am I near God? Am I far from God? Do I feel like God has abandoned me? Have I wandered away from God? Are Jesus and His values the top priority in my life?
2. **Inside, am I filled with sorrow, emptiness, and loneliness?** Am I consumed with guilt because of sin? (Be honest with yourself. No else will see this answer.)
3. **Do I truly feel that God is seeking me?**
4. **How do I feel when I hear that God refuses to give up on me;** that He reaches for me no matter my failures?
5. **How will I seek a return to the Lord? Or, how do I remain with the Lord?**
6. **What am I willing to do to deepen my relationship with Jesus and support my journey of theosis?**
  - a. Commitment to some type of daily prayer regimen?
  - b. More frequent reception of Eucharist?
  - c. More frequent participation in the Holy Mystery of Repentance (Confession)?
  - d. Participation in groups with like-minded individuals to nurture and strengthen my faith?
  - e. Other ways?

## Supplemental Information: God's Essence and His Energy

Within Orthodox spirituality, there is a distinction made between the Essence of God and the Uncreated Energies of God. For simplicity, this distinction was not discussed within the conference. However, should a participant raise questions on this specific matter, the following provides a brief explanation and an analogy to a complex theological concept.

The Eastern Spiritual tradition understands that the ultimate destiny of humanity, “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4) implies union with the Divine. However, in order to create a dogmatic basis for union with God, the Eastern Church was impelled to formulate a teaching on the distinction between God’s essence and His Energy.<sup>116</sup> God’s essence is “awesome and unapproachable” for humanity,<sup>117</sup> as stated in the Old Testament: “But you cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live.”<sup>118</sup> However, the way God communicates Himself, i.e., through grace, is an Uncreated Energy with which we can know God and unite ourselves to Him.

Archimandrite George illustrates the difference between Essence and Uncreated Energy using the analogy of electricity. He writes: “If we grasp a bare electric wire, we will die. However, if we connect a lamp to the same wire, we are illuminated. We see, enjoy, and are assisted by, the energy of the electric current, but we are unable to grasp its essence.”<sup>119</sup>

He goes on to write, “If we were able to unite with the essence of God, we would become gods by essence. Then everything would become a god...”<sup>120</sup> Thus, God would be diffused to an indistinct power dispersed throughout the world in men, in animals, and in objects.<sup>121</sup> Essentially this is what Hinduism espouses. At the same time, if God only had His essence – of which we could not partake – and did not have His Energy, He would remain a self-sufficient God, closed within Himself and unable to communicate with his Creation.<sup>122</sup> Thus, the Eastern Christian theological position is that God communicates Himself through His Energies. If these energies were not divine and uncreated, we could not be deified nor united with God, because nothing created could deify. It is through these Energies that we can commune with God and the distance between God and humanity can be effectively bridged.<sup>123</sup>

In summary, Essence and Uncreated Energy are dogmatic theological constructs to explain deification and union with God, while still maintaining separation between humanity and the Essence of God, who is ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, and incomprehensible.

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<sup>116</sup>Cf. Vladimir Lossky. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998) 71.

<sup>117</sup>See Archimandrite George. *Theosis*. 39.

<sup>118</sup>Exod. 33:20.

<sup>119</sup>Archimandrite George. *Theosis*. 39.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup>Cf. *Ibid.* 39-40.

<sup>122</sup>Cf. *Ibid.* 40.

<sup>123</sup>Cf. *Ibid.* 41.



## Conference No. 3: *How can I know you, Lord?*

*“Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk. 11:1).*

*“Learn to love prayer. In order not to live in darkness, turn on the switch of prayer so that divine light may flood your soul. Christ will appear in the depths of your being. There, in the deepest and most inward part, is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is within you.”<sup>124</sup>*

(Elder Porphyrios)

### Opening Comments

In our first conference we discussed our purpose in life, who God created us to be (Partakers of the Divine Nature) and we spoke about the importance of encountering Jesus relative to our journey of *theosis*. In our second conference, we discussed where we are in relationship to God and the ways we encounter Jesus in the Church, its liturgy, and in the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). In this third conference, we will consider how we encounter Jesus through the practice of personal prayer, being open to his presence and receptive to the graces He wishes to bestow on us.

### Opening Gospel Reading

*Matt. 6:5-6 (When you pray, go to your inner room)*

## Conference

### A. Introduction: The Story of Fr. Walter Ciszek, SJ (1904-1984)

Fr. Walter Ciszek was an American-born Jesuit who accepted Pope Pius XI's invitation to serve as a missionary in Russia. He went to study in Rome at the newly-formed Russian Pontifical College (the Russicum) and was ordained a priest for the Byzantine-rite. With no immediate opportunity to go to Russia, he was serving a parish in Eastern Poland in 1941 when Russian forces overran the town. Fr. Ciszek spent the next 23 years in the Russian gulag in conditions many could simply not endure. First, he was shipped to a labor camp in Siberia. When it was discovered he was a Catholic priest, he was sent to the KGB's infamous Lubyanka prison in Moscow, where he spent the next five years primarily in solitary confinement. During the first year at Lubyanka, he was subjected to intense interrogations and torture, accused of being a "Vatican spy." Coerced into signing a confession, he was exhausted, humiliated, brought to the depths of disillusionment and despair, hitting absolute rock bottom. His faith was tested. Where was God in all this? Where were the eloquent words he was supposed to have received – you know, the part in Scripture that says we do not need to prepare for our trial beforehand because God will give us what we need?<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wound by Love*. 113.

<sup>125</sup>Cf. Matt. 10:19.

What Fr. Cizek finally realized was that he was still relying on his own merits. He realized he had lost sight of God – had tried to wage the struggle on his own. He writes:

When I recognized that, I turned immediately to prayer in fear and trembling. I knew I had to seek immediately the God that I had forgotten. I had to ask that that moment of despair had not made me unworthy of His help. I had to pray that He would never again let me fail to remember Him and trust Him. I pleaded my helplessness to face a future without Him. I told Him that my own abilities were now bankrupt and He was my only hope.<sup>126</sup>

As Cizek notes, at that moment of complete self-surrender, he was consoled by thoughts of Jesus and His agony in the garden – that Jesus too knew the feeling of fear and weakness in His human nature. Yet Jesus consented with an act of total abandonment and submission to the Father's Will:<sup>127</sup> *"Not my will, but yours."*<sup>128</sup> This is faith built upon rock.

Convicted of espionage, Fr. Cizek was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor in Siberia, mainly shoveling coal in the cold with inadequate food, clothing or shelter. After finishing his sentence, he still was not allowed to leave Russia and so he worked for another three years as an auto mechanic. Despite times of disappointment and challenge, he learned to recognize God's presence in all that happened to him; he trusted God and his witness encouraged others.

***If we were placed circumstances similar to Fr. Walter Cizek, how would we fair? How firm is the foundation of our spiritual house? Is it built upon rock?***

### **B. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta's Simple Philosophy: Pray and Trust**

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta had a very simple philosophy in life: pray and trust. It is that easy and that hard. It is hard to trust someone when we do not know him or her. Thus, the order is important. First, we pray and come to know Jesus in a personal way. Second, we will be able to trust that he has our backs, no matter how difficult the circumstances. Think for a moment of Fr. Walter Cizek and his realization that his own efforts were bankrupt; he had to trust in Jesus or he would never have endured his ordeal.

### **C. Encountering the Living Jesus: The Importance of Prayer**

We live in a world where people are seeking meaning in their lives. Some know that it is Jesus whom they seek. Unfortunately, many do not. When people encounter crises in their lives, how do they react? How many people collapse because there is no spiritual foundation or because that foundation is grounded upon sand? In the midst of despair and inner longing, there is a realization that something is missing and, thus, people are seeking that which is missing.

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75-76.

<sup>126</sup>Fr. Walter J. Cizek, SJ. With Fr. Daniel Flaherty, SJ. *He Leadeth Me* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1973)

<sup>127</sup>Cizek. 76.

<sup>128</sup>Cf. Luke 22:42.

In our first conference yesterday, we heard the observation of the monk, Fr. Boniface, who said that yearning for the all perfect love is what draws us to Paradise (whether we realize that this is our destiny or not). And, there is only one way to that destiny: Jesus.

Some people want spirituality, but they want it outside of structured religious institutions. Others believe that they cannot find Jesus inside the Catholic Church and thus are looking to other churches, often Evangelical Protestant Churches. Yet, the Crisis of Faith we are experiencing today is not because structured religion has lost meaning; the crisis exists because many have lost or have not been exposed to one of the most fundamental components of faith: the ability to encounter Jesus through prayer. Simply put, we as a Church and a society do not know how to pray as we should.<sup>129</sup> The reality is this, the interior spiritual life was always meant to consist of two components: (1) an intensely personal relationship with Jesus through prayer and (2) the sacramental life of the Church. Both of these were always meant to go hand-in-hand. That was the way it was in Early Church; they were not separated. Ultimately, this love of God should manifest itself in love of neighbor (the Greatest Commandment and the second).

Blessed Mother Teresa would ask us: “Do you really know the Living Jesus – not from a book but from being with him in your heart?” She is referring to contemplative prayer which has two common elements: (1) praying from the heart and (2) interior silence. That is why this type of prayer is often called the Prayer of the Heart.

Interestingly enough, in a survey completed at our own parish of St. Martha by the Catholic Leadership Institute, one of the top two areas of improvement that was identified was placing more emphasis on teaching people to pray. (The other area was better homilies.)

Since 2011, on the various retreats we have delivered, we have focused on the **Jesus Prayer**, which is one of the great treasures of the Eastern Churches. We believe it remains relevant for our world today for four reasons.

- (1) It is the oldest contemplative prayer tradition in the Church, going back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers in the Third to Fifth Centuries in Egypt, being faithfully persevered and practiced since that time.
- (2) It is the most used form of contemplative prayer in the world today.
- (3) It is the only form of contemplative prayer which approaches God with a profound sense of humility.

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<sup>129</sup>See for example Gabriel Bunge, OSB. *Earthen Vessels: The Practice of Personal Prayer According to the Patristic Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002). Beginning with the opening discussion on page 9. This Swiss Benedictine monk describes the “evaporation of faith” and how, despite best efforts, Christianity seems to be growing cold. His premise is that somehow we have lost touch with the importance of a personal prayer life which was always an essential part of the mystical tradition of the Early Church.

(4) Its elegance and simplicity.

## **D. The Jesus Prayer: An Ancient Prayer Focusing on Interior Stillness**

How should we pray? In Blessed Mother Teresa's Simple Path, the first step she describes is this: "The fruit of silence is prayer."<sup>130</sup>

### **1. Jesus Himself Provides the Example**

We need silence more than we realize. With the busyness of our lives, it is hard to slow down and take time for Jesus. Yet, whether we realize it or not, we need Jesus more than we need food, water, light, or life itself.

Jesus himself reinforces the importance of prayer and often withdrew to spend time with His Father. Prior to beginning His earthly ministry, He spent 40 days in the desert to pray. Before Jesus taught, preached, or healed, we often hear how He went off to a secluded place to pray. Why did Jesus originally go up to Mount Tabor where He was transfigured? Luke tells us that He went up the mountain to pray.<sup>131</sup> Also in Luke, Jesus tells His disciples the Parable of the Persistent Widow<sup>132</sup> and the passage begins with this statement: "And he told them a parable about the necessity to pray always without becoming weary."<sup>133</sup> Jesus prayed and He encouraged His disciples to pray.

### **2. How Should We Pray?**

When Jesus taught His disciples, He specifically told them: "When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you."<sup>134</sup> (Mt. 6:6). In ancient times, the Desert Fathers and Mothers interpreted the "inner room" as being the silent recesses of the heart where the human and Divine met. St. Paul adds, "The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows the intention of the Spirit, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will."<sup>135</sup>

Prayer can be simply described as the workings of the Holy Spirit within us. Our desire is to get in touch with these workings of the Spirit; our intention is direct contact with the Divine. To do this requires us to listen for the Spirit working within us and to do this requires stillness and silence in our hearts. Yet, when we take time to sit in silence to be with the Lord, one likely experience we have is the constant "Twitter-feed" of thoughts bombarding us. Our challenge in developing a personal relationship with Jesus, to listen for His voice in the silent

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<sup>130</sup>Mother Teresa. *A Simple Path*. Compiled by Linda (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

<sup>131</sup>Luke 9:28.

<sup>132</sup>See Luke 18:1-8.

<sup>133</sup>Luke 18:1.

<sup>134</sup>Matt. 6:6.

<sup>135</sup>Rom. 8:26-27.

recesses of our hearts, requires us to find interior stillness. The **Jesus Prayer** is a powerful tool to help us achieve this objective.

The primary purpose of the **Jesus Prayer** is to assist us to grow into deeper relationship with Jesus Christ by encountering him in the stillness of the human heart. It is like listening at the feet at the feet of Jesus like Mary did, the better portion as Jesus told Martha, who was overwhelmed with the chores of hospitality.<sup>136</sup>

## E. The Jesus Prayer: Placing Jesus at the Center of Our Lives

### 1. The Jesus Prayer

The **Jesus Prayer** is a simple, yet powerful tool to come to know the Lord Jesus in a very personal way in the silent recesses of our hearts. In effect, it places Jesus at the center of our lives as Our Lord. The following is an overview of the prayer itself:

Breathing	Prayer	Observation
Inhale	<i>Lord, Jesus Christ</i> <sup>137</sup>	<b>A profession of faith:</b> Acknowledging Jesus as Lord, the center of our lives, and as the Son of God.
Exhale	<i>Son of God</i>	
Inhale	<i>Have mercy on me</i>	<b>A desire for repentance and reconciliation:</b> Acknowledging who we are (“a sinner”) and our request of Jesus (“have mercy on me”). In addition, the prayer is grounded in humility – which is considered the foundation for attaining all the other virtues. Humility is part of the movement away from self.
Exhale	<i>A sinner</i>	

This prayer acknowledges a complete surrender to God, allowing Jesus to lead us on the spiritual journey to the Father. The **Jesus Prayer** is the only contemplative prayer tradition that approaches God with such a profound sense of humility, which is important to the journey of *theosis*. In today’s world there seems to be a loss of respect for God. This prayer focuses on the relationship between Creator and creature, acknowledging the great difference between, and asking for the one thing most needed by us, mercy. We need not ask for anything more since Jesus tells us: “Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.”<sup>138</sup> Thus, all we truly need is God’s mercy. Think, too, of the Jubilee of Mercy and Pope

<sup>136</sup>See Luke 10:38-42

<sup>137</sup>Acts 4:12: “There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved.”

<sup>138</sup>Matt. 6:8.

Francis' opening words in *Misericordiae Vultus*: "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's Mercy."<sup>139</sup>

It is important to note **Jesus Prayer** is performed without mental forms or focusing on images such as icon. It is solely intended to experience the presence of God. The breathing is meant to be natural, such that the prayer takes root in the heart even when the practitioner is not conscious of it ("praying without ceasing"<sup>140</sup>).

## 2. Practicing the *Jesus Prayer*

The following is a practical discussion on how to pray the **Jesus Prayer**<sup>141</sup>:

### a. Posture

Position your body comfortably, spine erect, using either a chair or cushions.

### b. Grounding

Be aware of your physical senses. Close your eyes and gradually become aware of the physical senses of your body. Feel them as they flow through you.

### c. Opening Your Awareness to God's Presence

Open your awareness to feel the presence of God all around. Feel that presence within. Breathe in the Divine with every breath. Breathe God out and let yourself rest in His presence. Begin slow, steady breathing with deep, natural breaths. Release outside thoughts and distractions.

### d. Moving from the Head to the Heart

We are very experienced in having thoughts in our heads. Slowly move thoughts to the heart. With every breath, allow the sphere of energy within to slowly sink from the head to the heart. This may be very difficult at first; slowly allow the energy within to become heavier and heavier, sinking to the heart one inch at a time. Center yourself in your heart. (This is the reason the **Jesus Prayer** is also sometimes called "Prayer of the Heart.")

### e. Beginning the Words of the Prayer

When a basic rhythm of breathing, inhalation and exhalation, has been established, seek to synchronize your breathing with the reverent repetition of the prayer. Slowly say the words of the prayer from the heart: "*Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*" Let your heart repeat these words slowly, over and over again, feeling God's presence within. Desert Father St. John Climacus writes: "The beginning of prayer is the expulsion of

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<sup>139</sup>Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus*. Papal Bull (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Apr 11, 2015) No. 1.

<sup>140</sup>Cf. 1 Thess. 5:17

<sup>141</sup>The framework below leverages material from the following source: Ken Kaisch, *Finding God: A Handbook of Christian Meditation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) 199-200.

distractions from the very start by a single thought.”<sup>142</sup> In this case, that single thought is the use of the *Jesus Prayer*.

#### f. **Attentiveness**

When your attention wanders, be patient. Thoughts and distractions are likely to emerge in one’s consciousness during the *Jesus Prayer* (“Twitter-feed”). Slowly refocus on the prayer, releasing the thoughts. “The goal is not to suppress the thoughts during prayer, but only to ignore them, to let them be and to let them go – and to *prefer* Jesus, to choose Him anew whenever we wander.”<sup>143</sup>

Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO provides the best analogy for thoughts. He describes human consciousness as a river and our thoughts as boats going down the river.<sup>144</sup> Suddenly in prayer, we realize that we are on one of these boats. Keating writes: “If you find yourself on a boat, just get off. There should be no self-recriminations, no sighs, no annoyance that you had a thought. Any such reflection is another thought, another boat.”<sup>145</sup>

We should not judge ourselves for having a thought. Just gently let it go and return to the prayer. Remember the intention: to enter into prayer, to cultivate the relationship with God. God is more interested in our intention than whether we do the prayer perfectly (which we cannot). Gently we bring ourselves back to attentiveness (head in the heart, rhythmically breathing, and the slow repetition of the prayer: *Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*).

Consider the Four “R’s” related to interior stillness:

- Do not **Resist** the thought; we are human beings and rational thought is part of who we are. It was a gift from our Creator.
- Do not **Retain** the thought. Once you realize your mind has wandered, gently let go of the thought. If you find yourself on a boat, simply get off.
- Gently **Return** to the prayer.
- Do not **Regret** the thought. The purpose of the prayer is intention; to build a relationship with the unseen God and God knows this intention. Regret is another thought, another boat going down the river. Regret is also a demon that can result in despair and discouragement, anything to prevent us from continuing our prayer.

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<sup>142</sup>St. John Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* 276. Step 28: “On Prayer.” The Greek term used for thought, *monologistōs*, can also mean “by a repeated short prayer.”

<sup>143</sup>Langford. 196.

<sup>144</sup>See Thomas Keating. *Intimacy with God* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002) 61-63.

<sup>145</sup>*Ibid.* 63.

The repetition of the prayer should not be a monotonous attempt to gain God's attention,<sup>146</sup> essentially trying to wear down God, but an attempt to change oneself by clearing one's mind of everything except Jesus. The goal is to make this prayer so connected with one's breathing that it becomes, as the experienced fathers say, truly rooted in our hearts and continues as unconscious or self-activating prayer.

Also with regard to distractions, the “enemy” who despises prayer will do *anything* to disrupt our efforts. Assaults come from the left (“vain thoughts and sinful imaginings”<sup>147</sup>) and from the right (“edifying memories” or “beautiful thoughts”<sup>148</sup>) are all meant to disrupt us from our prayer. Keep in mind what is important to God. He is pleased when we persevere in our prayer, that we stay the course no matter how intense the distractions may become.

### **g. Concluding the *Jesus Prayer***

When you are ready, allow yourself to come back to this place. Let the feeling return to your hands, feet, and face. Take a deep breath and slowly open your eyes again. This prayer was intended for a monastic to perform in his or her cell. Accordingly, each person chooses when to conclude his or her prayer. The prayer is not completing a specified number of repetitions. Its importance is simply spending time in silence with Jesus.

### **h. Using a Prayer Rope**

Eastern Catholic monastics often use a prayer rope to count the number of recitations of the *Jesus Prayer*. Tradition has it that St. Pachomius (292-348), an Egyptian and early Desert Father, invented the prayer rope as an aid for illiterate monks to accomplish a consistent number of prayers and prostrations in their cells. Prayer ropes come in varying lengths; however, ropes with 100 beads (usually with a knotted cross on the end) and 33 beads are the most common. A discussion of prayer ropes is included in Appendix B.

The *Jesus Prayer* is meant to be very personal, done in private reflecting the instructions of Jesus in Mt. 6:6 (“Enter the inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret”). In Eastern Christianity, this is also referred to as Prayer of the Heart, which is a way of describing the ongoing process of a human being returning to his or her true state, to a consciousness of being in Christ. It is not a prayer that uses images or meant to focus on an object such as an icon. Rather, it is done with eyes closed, often in the dark, focusing inward, and being conscious of the Divine Presence within.

## **F. Jesus Prayer Practicum**

***Ask if there are any questions about the *Jesus Prayer*.***

***Complete a practicum of the prayer with approximately 20 minutes of silence. Lead the participants as they enter into the *Jesus Prayer*.***

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<sup>146</sup>Cf. Matt. 6:7.

<sup>147</sup> *The Pilgrim's Tale*. 108.

<sup>148</sup>*Ibid.*

*Discussion of what the Jesus Prayer experience was like for the participants at the conclusion of the period of silence.*

## G. Movie

*Show a segment of the movie, The Mysteries of the Jesus Prayer (~13 minutes).*

## H. Concluding Thoughts

In our first conference we discussed the value proposition of the Gospel as described in Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*: "The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus."<sup>149</sup> To this end, we discussed that an important of the journey of *theosis* is the encounter with Jesus. In the last conference, we discussed the encounter of Jesus within and through His Holy Church, its liturgy and the Holy Mysteries. This conference we discussed the encounter through personal prayer. It should be noted that these two elements of prayer should not be disconnected, but rather together represent the fullness of the spiritual life.

Encountering Jesus provides us the openness to receive the graces He wishes to give us, which assist us on our journey of *theosis*. It is analogous to Mary listening at the feet of Jesus. It is what we should do *first* in order to know how to act (Martha).

## Personal Reflection: In Silence, we leave the many to be with the One

*Personal Reflection in Silence. Read the following and then consider the reflection questions.*

Maggie Gobran is a lay Coptic Christian woman who works with the forgotten children of the garbage slums of Cairo. She is a Nobel Peace Prize-nominee and is often called the "Mother Teresa of Egypt." In addition to regular time for prayer, she often goes on retreat to the Coptic Monastery of St. Antony.

Mama Maggie, as she is called, tells us that purity of heart is the key to our relationship with God. While it is the most difficult, silence is the key to recognizing the Kingdom of God within.<sup>150</sup> She advises us:

- Silence your body to listen to your words.
- Silence your tongue to listen to your thoughts.
- Silence your thoughts to listen to your heart beating.
- Silence your heart to listen to your spirit.
- Silence your spirit to listen to His Spirit.

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<sup>149</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 1.

<sup>150</sup>See Luke 17:21. *Orthodox Study Bible*.

In silence, you leave the many to be with the One.<sup>151</sup>

It is in silence and stillness that we begin to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit, the light, whispering wind that is always there. How many times in our lives do we miss the light, whispering wind because we want to be in control, or are afraid, or despairing, or caught up in the world?

*“Let us, who mystically represent the Cherubim, now set aside all earthly cares.”<sup>152</sup>*

### Reflection Questions

*Consider the following questions.*

1. **What was my experience with the Jesus Prayer like?**
2. **How would I describe my prayer life?** Non-existent, occasional, bland, in tune with the divine?
3. **How important do you think prayer was to people like Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Fr. Walter Ciszek, and others?** Why? Cite specific examples.
4. **Do I make time for prayer and for silence?** Or, do I always find myself too busy or putting it off until tomorrow?
5. **What struggles have I had with prayer?**
6. **What would I like out of my prayer life?** Do I desire a personal encounter Jesus?

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<sup>151</sup>See Marty Makary and Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Mama Maggie: The Untold Story of One Woman’s Mission to Love the Forgotten Children of Egypt’s Garbage Slums* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2015) 159.

<sup>152</sup>See Cherubic Hymn. *The Divine Liturgies*. 42.

## Conference No. 4: *How can I see you, Lord?*

*“Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8)*

*“The Christian religion transforms people and heals them. The most important precondition, however, for someone to recognize and discern the truth is humility.”<sup>153</sup>*

(Elder Porphyrios)

### Opening Comments

In our first conference we discussed our purpose in life, which is to live in communion with God. This purpose is achieved through a transformational process called *theosis*, which begins in this life here in our earth in order to prepare ourselves for our life in heaven. We described the importance of the encounter with Jesus to the process of *theosis*. In Conference No. 2, we discussed how we encounter Jesus in His Church, its liturgy, and in the Holy Mysteries. In Conference No. 3, we discussed how we encounter Jesus in personal prayer, namely contemplative prayer. In this fourth conference, we will discuss more about the transformational process itself.

### Opening Gospel Reading

*Matt. 5:3-12 (The Beatitudes)*

## Conference

### A. Introduction

In the Beatitudes we are told the clean of heart will see God. This is an incredible statement when we also say that God is “ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever-existing, yet ever the same”<sup>154</sup> – in other words, incapable of being comprehended by the human mind. What does this particular Beatitude truly mean? Can we in fact see God if, of course, we possess a clean heart (a byproduct of our *theosis* journey)?

This Beatitude provides an excellent insight into the type of transformation that occurs when we speak about *theosis*, and which is how we prepare ourselves for our ultimate destiny which is being in union with God (“Partakers of the Divine Nature”<sup>155</sup>), sharing in the abundant life promised by Jesus to His followers.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wounded by Love*. 94.

<sup>154</sup>Anaphora (consecration prayer). *The Divine Liturgies of our Holy Father John Chrysostom* (Pittsburgh: Byzantine Seminary Press, 2006) 72.

<sup>155</sup>2 Petr. 1:4. *Orthodox Study Bible*.

<sup>156</sup>See John 10:10(b).

## B. Recap from Previous Conferences

To prepare for this discussion, let us summarize some of the concepts we discussed in our first conference. First, every human person is created in the Divine Image. This means we possess attributes of our Creator imprinted within us, which in turn means we have the capacity for goodness, love, mercy, compassion, longsuffering, patience, purity, and pure love of neighbor – attributes of the Divine. However, like any copy of the original, we have our flaws. Jesus is the Image Absolute, the perfect image of the Father and, thus, our model.

We also discussed the importance of the Divine Incarnation with its two-fold purpose: (1) to restore our relationship with God and restore our receptivity to collaborate with the Divine Presence, and (2) to provide us with a model of how to live in right relationship with Our Heavenly Father. Namely, this relationship is Jesus' supreme obedience and self-surrender compared to Adam's inordinate desire to be like God, thereby ignoring the great divide between Creator and His creation. As St. Paul reminds us of this difference between Jesus and Adam:

Who, though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God, something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness, and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, being obedient to death, even death on a cross.<sup>157</sup>

## C. What of God can we see?

Can we truly see God? Early Greek Father St. Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-395) developed significant groundwork for the Doctrine of *Theosis*. He says that this Beatitude implies more than simply knowing something *about* God. God is meant to be experienced. He is ever present and making His presence known. Yet how can we see or experience this?

St. Gregory wrote a series of homilies, *On the Beatitudes*, a total of eight homilies, one for each. These were actually some of his earliest writings, dating back to the mid-370s, and his Sermon No. 6 includes the following which we will use for our reflection:

The Lord does not say it is blessed to know something about God, but to have God present within oneself. *Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.* I do not think that if the eye of one's soul has been purified, he is promised a direct vision of God; but perhaps this marvelous saying may suggest what the Word (Jesus) expresses more clearly when He says to others, *The Kingdom of God is within you.*<sup>158</sup> By this we should learn that if a man's heart has been purified from every creature and unruly affections, he will see the Image of the Divine Nature in his own beauty. I think that in this short saying the Word<sup>159</sup> expresses some such counsel as this: There is in you, human beings, a desire to

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<sup>157</sup>Phil. 2:6-8.

<sup>158</sup>Luke 17:21. *Orthodox Study Bible*. The actual reference is to the "kingdom of Heaven." However, this term is often used interchangeably with "kingdom of God."

<sup>159</sup>Refers to Jesus as the *Logos*, or Word of God.

contemplate the true good. But when you hear that the Divine Majesty is exalted about the heavens, that Its glory is inexpressible, its beauty ineffable, and Its Nature inaccessible, do not despair of ever beholding what you desire. It is indeed within your reach; you have within yourselves the standard by which to apprehend the Divine. For He who made you did at the same time endow your nature with this wonderful quality. For God imprinted on it the likeness of the glories of His own Nature, as if molding the form of a carving in wax. But the evil that has been poured all around through nature bearing the Divine Image has rendered useless to you this wonderful thing that lies hidden under vile coverings. If therefore, you wash off by a good life the filth that has been stuck on your heart like plaster, the Divine Beauty will again shine forth in you.<sup>160</sup>

This reflection is extremely rich, but provides us with a few points to consider.

#### **D. Considering St. Gregory of Nyssa's Concept of *Theosis***

St. Gregory of Nyssa maintains that a great divide exists between the Creator and His creation, and that we are not given a direct vision of God. However, what we can see is the beauty of God in the Divine Image, His pattern, impressed within each of us. He describes the fundamental beauty of this image, while explaining that this is what Jesus meant when he said, “*The Kingdom of God is within you.*” In other words, the kingdom for Gregory is an interior reality. As Christians, we do not seek God in faraway places. He is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997) wrote: “Don’t search for Jesus in far lands; He is not there. He is close to you; *He is in you.*” St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) laments in his *Confessions*, “Late have I loved you, beauty so ancient and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there....”<sup>161</sup>

In addition, St. Gregory tells us that even while the Divine is beyond our grasp or our mental capacity to fully comprehend, we should not despair in our desire for God because even though God Himself remains beyond our human capacity, our ability to experience Him is not. For within our human nature, God has “imprinted the likeness of the glories of His nature” and he describes this so eloquently by saying, “as if molding the form of a carving in wax.” Thus, God left His imprint within each of us – the beauty remains there for us to discover.

However, Gregory tells us this is not easy. He writes that evil has coated this Divine Image (“vile coverings”), like plaster covering a heart, and rendering it useless. This coating, this filth, must be removed by living a good life, following the way of Beatitude (Gregory’s term), which is the way Jesus modeled for us. This allows us to understand the current state of our human condition

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<sup>160</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa. Sermon No. 6. *On the Beatitudes*. Taken from *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*. Vol. 18. Edited by Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe. Translated by Hilda C. Graef (New York: Paulist Press, 1954) 148-150.

<sup>161</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions* Translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 201. Book 10 xxvii (38).

(coated) and our future destiny (divinized), a destiny which is only possible by following Jesus who is the way to the Father.

St. Gregory goes on to describe the effort of removing the filth from the Divine Image within each of us using the analogy of iron in need of polish:

It is the same as happens in the case of iron. If freed from rust by a whetstone, that which but a moment ago was black will shine and glisten brightly in the sun. So it is also with the inner man, which the Lord calls the heart. When he has scraped off the rust-like dirt which dank decay has caused to appear, he will once more recover the likeness of the Original Divine Pattern and be good. For what is like to the Good<sup>162</sup> is certainly itself good. Hence, if a man who is pure of heart sees himself, he sees in himself what he desires (God); and thus he becomes blessed, because when he looks at his purity, he sees the Original Divine Pattern in his image.<sup>163</sup>

So what can we see? We cannot see God, at least not the Divine Essence of God or have a direct vision of Him. However, what we can see is an image of God in our purified hearts because He has left His own pattern imprinted within each of us. For St. Gregory of Nyssa, “the purified soul becomes a mirror of divine perfection.”<sup>164</sup>

We have God’s fundamental goodness within us<sup>165</sup> and, if we purify the soul, cultivating a virtuous life by following the example of Jesus, we can see the attributes of God within ourselves (goodness, love, mercy, compassion, longsuffering, patience, purity, and pure love of neighbor) and, of course, within others who live a virtuous life as well.

***“You must become yourself, according to the will and with the grace of God, by releasing the Divine Image within you from the dust and camouflage which currently obscure it. You must be like the sculptor who chisels and files away at a piece of rock so that the features of the image already inside can be seen.”***<sup>166</sup>

***(Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, 1928-2002)***

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<sup>162</sup>The ultimate “Good,” per St. Gregory of Nyssa, is God. Being made in the image of the Original Divine Pattern (Jesus, the Image Absolute) is what grants dignity to every human person.

<sup>163</sup>St. Gregory of Nyssa. Sermon No. 6. *On the Beatitudes*. 148-150.

<sup>164</sup>Norman Russell. *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009) 117.

<sup>165</sup>St. Gregory of Nyssa provides a definition of Beatitude: “*Beatitude, in my opinion, is a possession of all things held to be good, from which nothing is absent that a good desire may want*” (See Sermon No. 1. *On the Beatitudes*. 85. Goodness is one of the essential perfections of God; in it God lacks for nothing. However, since the soul is made in the image of God, these attributes are present within each human person (copies of the Original Divine Pattern). This sets the stage for humanity’s current condition and its possible future destiny in terms of deification.

<sup>166</sup>Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan. *The Road of Hope: A Gospel from Prison*. Translated John Peter Pham (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press of the Focolare, 2013) 141.

## E. Purification of the Soul

In our first conference, we discussed two qualifications for *theosis*, which can be used to cultivate the soil of our hearts: humility and asceticism. These are tools that can be used to purify the soul.

### 1. Humility

The purification of the soul St. Gregory of Nyssa describes is the transformation in *theosis*. We become more God-like by imitating the example of Jesus in His supreme obedience and self-surrender of will, loving God and loving humanity. He stresses that the purification begins by cultivating a life of virtue, with *humility* being the foundation of all the virtues. To follow the way of Jesus, to make true progress on the spiritual journey, we need to seek Jesus as our guide, allowing Jesus to fill our hearts and slowly replacing the pride, self-centeredness, jealousy, pettiness, anger, judgments, covetousness, carnal desires, and all the other filth we have within. It is a daily effort to maintain a level of cleanliness and continue forward.

Elder Porphyrios would advise that for Christ to love us, he must discover something special in us and that special ingredient is humility.<sup>167</sup> Without humility, the divine grace we need to achieve *theosis* will not enter in. We cannot undergo this transformation alone. We have the guide in Jesus, so let us consider his example. He tells us: “Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart.”<sup>168</sup>

- Jesus embraced poverty:
  - Jesus entered the world without attachments: He did not have his own bed (a manger)<sup>169</sup> or clothes (swaddling clothes),<sup>170</sup> despite our romanticized view of the Christmas story, were strips of scrap cloth or dirty rags).
  - Jesus left this world without attachments, stripped of his garments at the foot of the cross.<sup>171</sup>
- Jesus experienced temptation<sup>172</sup>, temptations that are similar to what we as human beings experience, most revolving around pleasure (bread represents giving into self-desire, food, drink, lust, etc.), self-importance/recognition (“throw yourself down” is putting the Lord our God to the test), and power (“all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence”).

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<sup>167</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wound by Love*. 109.

<sup>168</sup>See Matt. 11:29.

<sup>169</sup>See Luke 2:7.

<sup>170</sup>See Luke 2:7.

<sup>171</sup>See Matt. 27:35, Mark 15:21, Luke 23:24, and John 19:23.

<sup>172</sup>See Matt. 4:1-11.

- Jesus fed the hungry, attending to their basic needs (multiplication of loaves and fish) before teaching them.<sup>173</sup>
- Jesus healed the blind,<sup>174</sup> the lame,<sup>175</sup> and the deaf;<sup>176</sup> he cleansed the leper<sup>177</sup> and he drove out demons.<sup>178</sup> These were the people labeled as “sinners” by the social conventions of the time and were shunned. Jesus restored their dignity as sons and daughters of God.
- Jesus showed compassion such as to the woman caught in the act of adultery<sup>179</sup> and the Samaritan woman at the well.<sup>180</sup>
- Jesus embraced the outcasts and the outsiders such as the blind man on the road to Jericho,<sup>181</sup> Zacchaeus the tax collector,<sup>182</sup> the Syro-Phoenician woman who requested healing for her daughter,<sup>183</sup> and the Roman centurion who wished his serving boy to be healed.<sup>184</sup>
- Jesus demonstrated humility, performing the task of a slave when washing the feet of his disciples.<sup>185</sup>
- Jesus suffered rejection in both his hometown of Nazareth<sup>186</sup> and in Jerusalem.<sup>187</sup>
- Jesus surrendered to the Will of His Father: “Not my will, but yours.”<sup>188</sup>
- Jesus was silent when he was humiliated. He opened not his mouth when he was scourged, insulted, spat upon, crowned with thorns, slapped, and stripped of his garments before the crowds.

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<sup>173</sup>See Matt. 14:14-20, Mark 6:35-44, Luke 9:12-17, and John 6:5-13.

<sup>174</sup>See Matt. 9:27, 12:22, 20:30, Mark 8:22, 10:46, Luke 18:35, John 5:3, John 9:1.

<sup>175</sup>See Matt. 15:20.

<sup>176</sup>See Mark 7:32 and 9:25.

<sup>177</sup>See Matt 8:2, Mark 1:40, and Luke 17:12

<sup>178</sup>See Matt. 8:16, 8:28, 9:32, 12:22, 17:14, Mark 1:32, 1:34, 1:39, 5:2, Luke 4:33, 4:41, 8:27, 9:37, and

11:14.

<sup>179</sup>See John 8:3-11.

<sup>180</sup>See John 4:7-42.

<sup>181</sup>See Mark 10:46-52 and Luke 18:35-43.

<sup>182</sup>See Luke 19:2-10.

<sup>183</sup>See Mark 15:22-28.

<sup>184</sup>See Matt. 8:5-13 and Luke 7:2-10.

<sup>185</sup>See John 13:4-15.

<sup>186</sup>See Matt. 13:54-58 and Mark 6:2-6.

<sup>187</sup>See Matt. 27:22, Mark 15:23, Luke 23:21, and John 19:6.

<sup>188</sup>Luke 22:42.

- Jesus forgave his persecutors: “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.”<sup>189</sup>
- Jesus took care of his followers at the foot of the cross. He entrusted the care of his mother to the beloved disciple and he gave the beloved disciple a mother.<sup>190</sup>
- Jesus trusted His Father implicitly: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”<sup>191</sup>
- Jesus offered his life on the cross for our redemption.<sup>192</sup>

Thus, Jesus is indeed our model for humility and we can reflect on his actions as set forth in the Gospel accounts. As Jesus tells us: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, pick up his cross, and follow me.”<sup>193</sup>

***“The Lord finds rest in the hearts of the meek, while the turbulent spirit is the home of the devil.”<sup>194</sup>***

***(St. John Climacus, 525-606)***

## 2. Asceticism

Jesus’ terms and conditions of discipleship includes denial of self, which is turning away from the “world” through ascetical practices. How can we deny ourselves in today’s day and age?

Our life of “convenience” has actually become quite complicated. In contrast, the Early Desert Fathers and Mothers sought a life of simplicity, freeing themselves of attachments and coming to a realization that what people often valued in secular society really had no value.<sup>195</sup> Admittedly, their approach was following Jesus’ commandment to the fullest: “Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”<sup>196</sup> Often we think our attachments will bring us happiness. However, only dependence upon God and allowing His plan for our lives to unfold can bring us true happiness.

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<sup>189</sup>Luke 23:34.

<sup>190</sup>See John 19:26-27.

<sup>191</sup>Luke 23:46.

<sup>192</sup>See John 19:30.

<sup>193</sup>Matt. 16:24.

<sup>194</sup>St. John Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. 215. Step. 24: “On Meekness, Simplicity, Guilelessness, and Wickedness.”

<sup>195</sup>See also Phil 3:7-8.

<sup>196</sup>Luke 18:22.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat (or drink), or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?”<sup>197</sup>

Ascetical practices are appropriate for people from all walks of life, not just monastics. A number of spiritual writers speak about a sense of “interior monasticism” to describe a sense of simplicity that all disciples of Jesus can follow. It is not necessarily about severity or “checking the box;” it is about the genuine practice of self-denial as described by Jesus in order to strengthen our relationship with our loving Father, being dependent on Him. In a world poverty-stricken for an appreciation of true love, we practice spiritual poverty in order to achieve what Jesus taught, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”<sup>198</sup> We also practice spiritual poverty to avoid self-centeredness and losing a sense of connectedness with our neighbor.

Our attachments often come through habits or practices and we may not even realize how many we in fact have. Often, these are subconscious pursuits of happiness and/or a focus on self. Yet nothing can substitute for the presence of God in our lives, who transforms our hearts restores our divine likeness, and allows us to become Partakers of the Divine Nature (*theosis*). Here are a few questions to consider:

*What attachments do I have? Why do I have them? What is necessary or sufficient and what is extra?*

- Retail therapy (*Just imagine what this term implies!*).
- Designer clothes / attachment to particular brands.
- Nicer / bigger cars.
- Bigger house.
- Spa days.
- Collections: books, CDs, wine, tools, stereo equipment, purses, shoes, ties, etc.
- Daily routines: Workouts, daily Starbucks stop, surfing the Internet, etc.
- Exotic vacations.
- Fine food and wine.
- Other? (Let’s face it, we all have them...)

*How can I simplify my life?*

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<sup>197</sup>Matt. 6:25.

<sup>198</sup>Matt. 5:3.

- Simplified meals certain days per week / fasting / meatless Wednesdays and Fridays even outside the Great Fast, following the Church's cycle of fasts.
- Weekly meals at home gathered together with family.
- Reprioritizing where and how we spend our time.
- A day without television or the Internet.
- Eliminating the attraction to brands (e.g. generic clothing versus designer label, smaller car – we are not what we own or wear).
- Removing other attachments (denial of self).
- Other ascetical practices and acts of self-denial.

Detachment is more than spatial or material. "Detachment is the spiritual capacity to focus on all things, material or other, without attachment. It is primarily spiritual, an attitude of life. And in this respect, detachment is ongoing, requiring continual refinement."<sup>199</sup>

The goal of such simplification is the purification of our lives through self-denial, the liberation of our souls and bodies from sin and attachments, and the strengthening of our human powers of love for God and neighbor by greater identification with those around us, and the enlightening of our entire being in preparation for our destiny, which is union with God. To be sure, attachments alone do not necessarily cause us to sin. However, they can dull our senses in terms of our priorities, thus diminishing our reliance upon God and our ability to trust Him as the giver of all blessings. St. John Climacus (ca. 525-606) writes

There is such a thing as exile, an irrevocable renunciation of everything in one's familiar surroundings that hinders one from attaining the ideal of holiness. Exile is a disciplined heart, unheralded wisdom, an unpublicized understanding, a hidden life, masked ideals. It is unseen meditation, the striving to be humble, a wish for poverty, the longing for what is divine. It is an outpouring of love, a denial of vainglory, a depth of silence.<sup>200</sup>

In summary, detachment is a way of renouncing the excess baggage in our life and the plain, simple truth is this: "We can always manage with less than we have, indeed, we can often manage with a lot less than we would dare to imagine."<sup>201</sup> Some have had to learn this lesson because of the economic downturn or loss of employment or crises – an involuntary forcing of detachment. However, each such experience is a gift from God, a means of purification and simplification because He knows better than anyone what we need. As Dorotheos of Gaza (c.

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<sup>199</sup>Chryssavgis. 69.

<sup>200</sup>St. John Climacus. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*: 85. Step No. 3: "On Exile."

<sup>201</sup>Chryssavgis. 83.

505-565) writes: “Above all let us be convinced that nothing can happen to us apart from the providence of God.”<sup>202</sup>

**“When the mind is no longer dissipated amidst external things nor dispersed across the world through the senses, it returns to itself; and by means of itself it ascends to the thought of God.”<sup>203</sup>  
(St. Basil of Caesarea, 330-379)**

## F. Love of Neighbor: The Liturgy after the Liturgy<sup>204</sup>

In the final analysis, it is not about the tools of *theosis*<sup>205</sup> or how well we leverage them. These are but means to an end. Rather, in the final analysis it is about who we become. Do we become more God-like? Consider the following:

There was an elderly Russian monk who was responsible for the formation of the novices within his community. One day he asked the three novices, “What is the most important part of the liturgy?” The first novice said, “Certainly it is the Word of God, hearing what Jesus has to say to us.” The second said, “Surely it is the consecration when Christ becomes present in the bread and wine.” The third answered, “It must be when we partake of the Holy Mysteries, where we receive Christ.” The elderly monk smiled, pointed to the back of the church, and wisely said: “The most important part of the liturgy is what happens when you leave those doors.”<sup>206</sup>

Ultimately, *theosis* is about who we become on the journey of transformation. Do we become more God-like? Do we exhibit the divine attributes of God such as love, mercy, and compassion? Does our capacity to love others increase? This is who we are called to be. God is not in need of our love, mercy, and compassion. Rather, we are in need of His! Those around us are in need of experiencing God’s love, mercy, and compassion *through* us. Consider the example in the Parable of the Ungrateful Servant,<sup>207</sup> which essentially tells us that we need to in turn give what we have received.

Accordingly, on the journey of *theosis*, we cannot ignore our neighbor. When answering the question regarding which is the greatest commandment, Jesus adds, “The second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>208</sup> In Luke’s account when challenged with this same

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<sup>202</sup>Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*: 143. (Discourse VII, “On Self-accusation.”)

<sup>203</sup>St. Basil the Great. *Epistola* 2. PG 32 228 A. Taken from George Maloney, SJ. *Prayer of the Heart: The Contemplative Tradition of the Christian East* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1981) 44.

<sup>204</sup>See Coniaris. *Tools of Theosis*. 85-86.

<sup>205</sup>These tools are the four qualifications: Humility, Asceticism, the Church & the Holy Mysteries, and Personal Prayer.

<sup>206</sup>Story told by Bishop Nicholas (Samra), Eparchy of Newton (Melkite Greek Catholic). Friday Evening Vespers, Homily, Sacred Heart Co-Cathedral, Houston. September 11, 2009.

<sup>207</sup>See Matt. 18:21-35

<sup>208</sup>Matt. 22:39.

question about the great commandment, Jesus is specifically asked, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with the Parable of the Good Samaritan,<sup>209</sup> essentially changing the preconceived definition of neighbor as being a narrow legal definition (i.e., who is worthy of my love) to one of self-giving: Our neighbor is anyone who is in need.

As we practice the God-like virtues in order to grow closer to Him, these should manifest themselves in our love for those around us. As Pope Francis writes, “Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God.”<sup>210</sup> Further, emphasis on the practice of these divine attributes takes on greater significance in this Jubilee of Mercy which began on December 8, 2015.<sup>211</sup> Pope Francis writes in his opening words of *Misericordiae Vultus*, the Papal Bull announcing the extraordinary holy year: “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith.”<sup>212</sup>

In a culture which places much emphasis on “me” and self-gratification, where selfishness and self-centeredness are the norm, it is often easy to overlook others. It becomes easy to judge, to decide who we will accept at the Eucharistic table, to identify the faults of others or to compare ourselves as superior to others, to gossip and slander, and to neglect those we deem unworthy or unlovable. Yet Jesus removed the judgment by welcoming all, by forgiving those deemed by his contemporary society as unforgivable (e.g. prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, Samaritans, etc.), and saying that those from the north and the south, the east and the west would find a place in the heavenly banquet.<sup>213</sup> Ultimately, we will be judged whether we are worthy of the kingdom of God by how we treated the least among us.<sup>214</sup>

St. John the Evangelist writes in his first letter: “Beloved, if God so loved us, we must also love one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and His love is brought to perfection in us.”<sup>215</sup> John goes on to say: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”<sup>216</sup>

When we consider the purity of our hearts, let us consider how well we have loved our neighbor. Jesus places the bar high because He is modeling the God-like virtues.

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<sup>209</sup>See Luke 10:29-37.

<sup>210</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 272.

<sup>211</sup>The Jubilee of Mercy, an extraordinary year, will last from December 8, 2015, through November 20, 2016.

<sup>212</sup>Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus*. Papal Bull (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Apr 11, 2015) No. 1.

<sup>213</sup>See Luke 13:29.

<sup>214</sup>See Matt. 25:31-46.

<sup>215</sup>1 John 4:11-12.

<sup>216</sup>1 John 4:20.

(1) Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.”<sup>217</sup>

- Do I grow angry or impatient with others?
- Do I find it easy to gossip or speak about others (stripping away the dignity of another person, who is also made in the Divine Image)?
- Do I find myself casting others in a negative light?
- Is it easy for me to find faults in others?
- Do I find myself judging who is worthy of being part of the parish community or find myself labeling certain individuals or groups as “those people”?
- Do I look down upon those who I judge have menial jobs?
- Am I moved to compassion when I see the homeless person under the bridge, the prostitute on the street corner, the addict collapsed on the sidewalk, or the destitute? Or, do I deliberately move to the other side of the road?
- Do I feel an obligation to those who cannot find justice for themselves: the immigrant, the unborn, the homeless, or the undocumented worker?
- Do I walk past Jesus silently crying out for help and not even recognize him?

*Note: Fasting is not just from food (see ascetical practices). It is also fasting of the tongue.*

(2) Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”<sup>218</sup>

- Do I look at another with impure thoughts or as an object of self-gratification (stripping away the dignity of another person, who is also made in the Divine Image)?
- Do I exploit the dignity of another or demean another?
- Do I indulge in pornography or other activities that portrays others as less than a son or daughter of the most-high God?

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<sup>217</sup>Matt 5:21-22.

<sup>218</sup>Matt. 5:27-28.

- Do I uphold the sanctity and dignity of all human life?
- Do I uphold the sanctity and dignity of sacramental marriage as an institution created by God?

*Note: Fasting is not just from food (see ascetical practices). It is also fasting with the eyes, the tongue, and all the other senses.*

By recognizing the Divine Presence within ourselves, we begin to recognize the Divine Presence in others. As Trappist Monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) wrote:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a *separate* holy existence is a dream.<sup>219</sup>

In our journey of *theosis*, an indication of our progress is how well we love our neighbor because love, mercy, and compassion are divine attributes which reflect the likeness of God. In considering the purity of heart we must also consider the love we have for others. As Jesus says: “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”<sup>220</sup>

***“If a man’s deeds are not in harmony with his prayer, he labors in vain.”  
(Abba Moses, d.c.375)***

### G. How can I see you, Lord?

In the beginning of this conference, we raised the question, “How can the clean of heart see the Lord?” The answer which St. Gregory of Nyssa provides is that we can see the beauty of the God by seeing the beauty of our own purified souls which is the Divine Image of God within each of us. In his writings, Gregory describes this as looking at the sun through a mirror. We can see an image of that which we desire to contemplate and know its beauty.

With purified souls, we find a “spirituality of communion.”<sup>221</sup> Consider this thought in terms of such communion:

Recognizing the divine presence:

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<sup>219</sup>Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (Doubleday, New York, 1966): 140-141.

<sup>220</sup>John 13:35.

<sup>221</sup>See Pope St. John Paul II. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. Papal Encyclical (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Jan. 6, 2001) No. 43.

- Within ourselves.
- Within others.
- Drawing us to love.
- Uniting us as the Body of Christ.

## H. Concluding Thoughts

In our first conference, we discussed the value proposition of the Gospel based on Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*: "Those who accept Jesus' offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness."<sup>222</sup> This offer of salvation means accepting the terms and conditions of discipleship, to which we discussed two qualifications for *theosis*: humility and asceticism. In this conference, we described some reflections of how Jesus modeled humility and discussed some pragmatic ways of practicing self-denial. None of these are particularly easy. However, consider that the transformational process we describe as *theosis* is step-by-step, incremental change over time. We need to start somewhere on the journey with one intention: to strive for the life to which God calls us, a life of virtue here on earth which will lead us to union with Him, to desire Him above all else, and reject the way of the world. We will not be perfect; however, God knows our intentions and our intentions are pleasing to Him.

Finally, most books or discussions on *theosis* generally include on the cover an icon or image of the Transfiguration, which is considered a foretaste of the glory and divine life to come. Jesus granted this vision to His select disciples revealing, in a sense, the transformation that will happen. In the kontakion for the feast, we sing:

You were transfigured on the mountain, O Christ our God,  
and your disciples beheld as much of your glory as they could bear.  
That when they would see you crucified,  
they would understand you suffered willingly,  
so they would preach to the whole world  
that you are truly the radiance of the Father.<sup>223</sup>

The Transfiguration gives us encouragement that no matter how difficult the journey, there is a great reward that awaits those who are faithful until the end.

In the Christian East on the Feast of the Transfiguration, it is customary to bless fruit – and in some Eastern traditions, only grapes. Consider the grape. It can proceed along one of two paths:

- (1) It can be transformed into wine, which in turn can be transformed into the Blood of Christ. Or,
- (2) It can become a raisin.

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<sup>222</sup> Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 1.

<sup>223</sup>Kontakion for the Feast of the Transfiguration. *The Divine Liturgies*.

Let us consider this analogy in terms of our own lives, making the decision of whether to strive to follow Christ in order to come to the Father, or separating ourselves from God resulting in spiritual death. Ultimately, the choice remains ours.

***"We unite ourselves to God, in so far as this is possible, by participating in the godlike virtues and by entering into communion with Him through prayer and praise."<sup>224</sup>***  
***(St. Gregory Palamas, 1296-1359)***

## Personal Reflection: The Head Priest of Kalighat

*Personal Reflection in Silence. Read the following and then consider the reflection questions.*

### Background

Mother Teresa opened her original home for the dying in Calcutta, Nirmal Hriday, in Kalighat outside Calcutta. Because it was adjacent to the site of a Hindu temple, there were many protests and death threats to Mother Teresa and her sisters working at the home and many efforts to evict them. This is also shown in the film, *Mother Teresa*, starring Olivia Hussey.

### A Story of Compassion and Mercy

Mother Teresa mirrored this kind of divine faithfulness with friend and foe alike. In the early days of her work in the Home for the Dying, the head priest of the Kali Temple, situated on the same grounds as her shelter, stirred up the people of the area against her, leading them in public protests outside Kalighat. No matter the slurs and stones thrown at her as she walked to the Home for the Dying in those days, she continued, faithful and undeterred – with no thought to whether the poor she was serving, or the people of the neighborhood, deserved or ever thanked her for her efforts.

Some months later, it was discovered that the same head priest, who had so vociferously opposed her work with the dying, was himself dying of leprosy. He was put out in the streets by his own family and shunned as unclean by his fellow priests. As soon as Mother Teresa heard about it, she went looking for him. She found him and took him in, and began tending to him herself, without a word of reproach.

Such is the beauty of God's faithfulness in action.

### Source:

Joseph Langford, MC. *Mother Teresa's Secret Fire* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2008) 104-105.

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<sup>224</sup>St. Gregory Palamas. "Three Texts on Prayer and Purity of Heart." Taken from *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*. Compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth. Vol. IV. Translated and edited by GEH Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 343.

### Reflection Questions

*Consider the following questions.*

- 1. What does “clean of heart” mean to me?** Do I find the idea of being “clean of heart” too daunting?
- 2. What does it mean to me when I am told the image of God is within me?** Does it matter? Does it give me a sense of dignity? Does it give me a sense of purpose?
- 3. When I reflect upon the fact that others have the image of God within them too, does it change the way I look at others?** Is it easier to see the Divine in some and not others? Why? We are told to love our enemies, to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.<sup>225</sup> How about those who are not Christians, like the Hindus and Muslims loved and served by Blessed Mother Teresa? Do I shy or avoid those who are different?
- 4. How can I personally begin to purify my own soul, to start removing the rust and dank decay?** What can I do to demonstrate my love for God through love of neighbor? How do I proclaim the Gospel using words only when necessary (St. Francis of Assisi)?

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<sup>225</sup>See Matt. 5:41-48.

## Conference No. 5: *Who do you want me to be, Lord?*

*“A man had two sons....” (Lk. 15:11).*

*“Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith.”<sup>226</sup>  
(Pope Francis)*

### Opening Comments

We began yesterday evening with the question: What is our purpose? We said our purpose was to become who God created us to be, namely to prepare ourselves to live in union with Him. In other words, we are called to become God-like. This preparation involves a transformation which the Early Greek Fathers called *theosis*, a process in which we reclaim the likeness of God by mirroring the God-like virtues in our own lives here on earth. What are the God-like virtues? God is love; Merciful like the Father; God is compassionate. We also discussed four qualifications for *theosis*. The first two involved encounters with Jesus.

- (1) The first was through the Church, its liturgy, and the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments). We discussed in particular the importance of Repentance and Eucharist (See Conference No. 2).
- (2) The second was encountering Jesus through personal prayer, namely contemplative prayer. We had an experience with the Jesus Prayer which is the oldest contemplative prayer tradition in the Church, faithfully preserved and practiced in the Christian East since the time of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. One of the beauties of this particular prayer tradition is how it approaches God with deep humility, reinforcing the spirit of repentance (See Conference No. 3).

The second two qualifications included actions we take to prepare the soil of our hearts in order to allow the Holy Spirit to reap a fruitful harvest, wherein we collaborate with the Divine Presence in undergoing the transformational process of *theosis*. These two qualifications included:

- (1) Cultivating a spirit of *humility*, the foundation of all the other virtues. We follow the example of Jesus who modeled a life of extreme obedience and self-surrender (See Conference No 4).
- (2) Practicing *asceticism*, or self-denial (See Conference No. 4).

We looked at this through the perspectives of St. Gregory of Nyssa, whereby these two practices purify our hearts in order to see the beauty of the Divine Presence within ourselves. We also looked at the fact *theosis* ultimately reflects who we become through our practice of God-like virtues manifesting itself in our love of neighbor (See Conference No. 4, “The Liturgy after the Liturgy”).

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<sup>226</sup>Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus*. No. 1.

Now in our final conference, we like to look at a familiar parable of Jesus through the lens of *theosis*. We will go back to our original questions: Who does God want us to be? Who were we created to be? (By the way, this happens to be the Gospel for this Sunday, so it is quite apropos that it anchors our final conference.)

## Opening Gospel Reading

*Luke 15:11-32 (The Parable of the Prodigal Son)*

### Conference<sup>227</sup>

#### A. The Younger Son (The Sinner)

How many of us can relate to the Prodigal Son? If we are honest with ourselves, we all have one thing in common. We all share in the brokenness of humanity. When we strip away all the trappings – the clothes, the car, our job, our native language, our ethnic origin, and everything that we have or are – when we consider just our basic humanity, we are all sinners, fallible human beings in great need of our Loving Father’s tender mercy. How many of us can relate to the Younger Son? We have made poor choices and, as a result, there are times in our lives when we have found ourselves in the pig-pen.

We all have our demons and our crosses to bear. Yet if we are ever tempted to think we are alone, we need only to look around. All of us are like the Younger Son.

Sometimes it is hard to be honest with ourselves. We may not want to carry the cross or acknowledge it even exists. We may want to keep it safely hidden from sight. However, we all have a cross. It might be alcohol addiction, or drug addiction, or sexual addiction, or workaholism. It might be perfectionism or impatience, pride, or a feeling of superiority. We all have an “-ism,” a demon or cross which we are called by Jesus to pick-up and carry, denying ourselves as we do so. No matter what our demon is or how hard our cross is to lift, we are not alone. That is one of the reasons we gather together as a church community, to support one another on the journey.

As my original Spiritual Father Fr. Damon Geiger often said, the Church is a “Twelve-Step Program for Repentant Sinners.” Or, as Pope Francis would say, the Church is a field hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints. We may be at different places on our spiritual journey; however, we all need the loving compassion of our Heavenly Father. So, let’s be honest: Can we relate to the Younger Son?

It is important to note something in this story. Did the Younger Son end up in the pig-pen because his father sent him there? The answer is no. Similarly, does God punish us for our sins? As

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<sup>227</sup>Some of these thoughts were inspired by Henri Nouwen. See *Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday Publishing Group. 1994).

Spiritual Father Damon Geiger would say, “God does not punish us for our sins. Our sins do a good enough job of punishing us on their own.”

The free choices the Younger Son made were the reason he ended up in the pig-pen. It was also his free choice to return to his father in a spirit of humility and repentance. It is important for us to remember the fact that we have the freedom of choice. We can accept Jesus’ offer of salvation or not. The choice is ours.

### **B. Repentance**

One of the most beautiful images in the Gospel is the Loving Father who sees his son in the distance and runs to embrace him. Despite all the failings of his child, he never hesitates. He runs to the embrace the returning son. Nor does he strip away his dignity of being a son. Remember the well-rehearsed speech of the younger son? While the younger son acknowledges sinning against God and his father, a true spirit of repentance, the father does not let him make his final statement, “Treat me as one of your hired hands.” We also hear that the father orders the servants to “put a ring on his finger,” which means the Younger Son is still a son. He has not lost his fundamental dignity. *What a wonderful image!*

As we prepare ourselves for the Great Fast, as we think about repentance and relying upon the mercy of Our Heavenly Father, is there a better image in the whole Gospel as to what the Holy Mystery of Repentance is all about? We said in our second conference that we reclaim the beauty of our Baptism through repentance, the concrete sign of this being confessing our sins to the priest and renewing our baptismal promises.

Remember, too, the description Pope Francis has of this Holy Mystery (Sacrament): “The confessional must not be a torture chamber, but an encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best.”<sup>228</sup> Is not the reaction of the Loving Father, running to meet his son, embracing him, not scolding him or berating him for his foolishness an example of what it is like to encounter the Lord’s mercy? The homecoming experience of the Prodigal Son is what all of us need and want. We need Repentance. We need and want to experience the Lord’s mercy.

### **C. The Loving Father: Called to be more**

However, if we allow the image of this scene to stop here with the Younger’s Son repentance and his encounter with mercy, we are selling the Gospel message short. Recall that we are made in the image of God, the Divine Attributes impressed within each of us. We are called to practice the God-like virtues in order to fulfill our destiny, which is union with God. We said these God-like virtues include love, mercy, and compassion. In the parable, who practices the God-like virtues?

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<sup>228</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 44.

The Loving Father models the God-like virtues to which all of us are called. So, if we are called to practice these virtues, who in the story is the model we must follow?

Each of us is called to more than the repentance of the Prodigal Son. We are also all called to be *like* the Loving Father in the story. Earlier in the conference I asked how many of us could relate to the Younger Son and I suspect the majority of us could. I am sure all of us at one time or another found ourselves in the pig-pen because of choices we made. Yet, how many of us can relate to being *like* the Loving Father? Do we see this image of ourselves? Yet, that is who we are called to become. This is particularly worthy of reflection in this Jubilee of Mercy, the theme being “Merciful like the Father.”<sup>229</sup>

Thus, we are not only called to repentance like the Younger Son, we are also called to be like the Loving Father – to allow the Divine Attributes shine forth in our lives. We pray each day, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Jesus tells us in plain language that we, too, are called to love and forgive, to show mercy and compassion. When we take a candid look at ourselves, do we see the Loving Father? Can we see the Divine Attributes shining forth from within ourselves?

This may seem like a stretch: us as the Loving Father? Yet consider, we are created in the image of God. We are patterned after Jesus himself, the Image Absolute. That image is impressed into the soul of every human person. Because of this, we have the capacity to participate in the God-like virtues: goodness, love, mercy, compassion, longsuffering, patience, purity, and having pure love for neighbor.<sup>230</sup> Remember in our first conference we said every one of us has the capacity to be another Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. There was a great deal of skepticism about that idea, but she is an example of someone who whole-heartedly followed Jesus and imitated His example.

Putting this into perspective, for us to forgive an errant child or a spouse who makes a mistake reflects a pure love of neighbor, a divine attribute that is *like* our Heavenly Father. This is the goal for which we strive, the pursuit of that all-perfect love drawing us back to Paradise and the Life of God.

Becoming the Loving Father may seem like a daunting task, some might say impossible. However, remember all the tools we have at our disposal beginning with our ability to encounter Jesus. *Theosis* is a lifelong journey of incremental transformation, step-by-step, which is only completed in the life to come.

***How many of us can relate to being like the Loving Father?*** Perhaps there have been moments in life when we have shown great love, mercy, and forgiveness. Perhaps we do not do it

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<sup>229</sup>Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus*. No. 14.

<sup>230</sup>The divine attributes or what God wants us to become can be seen through Jesus’ life in the Gospels. Taken from a Monk of Mount Athos. *The Watchful Mind: Teachings on the Prayer of the Heart*. Translated by George Dokos. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press. 2014. 160.

consistently or as well as we ought. Yet, Jesus tells, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”<sup>231</sup> We are not expected to be perfect. We are expected to try; we are expected to live a purposeful life.

***What if we fail to live up to who we are called to be?*** Let us consider the words of Desert Father Abba Sisoës. A brother asked him,

“What shall I do, abba, for I have fallen?” The old man said to him, “Get up again.” The brother said, “I have got up again, but I have fallen again.” The old man said, “Get up again and again.” So then the brother said, “How many times?” The old man said, “Until you are taken up either in virtue or in sin. For a man presents himself to judgment in the state in which he is found.”<sup>232</sup>

It is interesting to note that the Greek word for sin, *amartia* (ἀμαρτία), does not mean “transgressing the law.” It means “missing the mark.”<sup>233</sup> So if we miss the mark, if we fall short, we get up again and again. We keep trying. What did Pope Francis say the Holy Mystery of Repentance should be? “An encounter with the Lord’s mercy which spurs us on to do our best.”<sup>234</sup> Our best is what *theosis* is all about. As Fr. Stephen Krupa, SJ, Adjunct Professor and teacher for Foundations for Christian Spirituality at Loyola University Chicago said, “If I fall short 499 times today, I hope that tomorrow I will only fall short 498 times.” St. Paul tells us, grace abounds more than sin.<sup>235</sup> *Theosis* is about striving to do our best, seeking to make those incremental improvements which will help us fulfill our destiny: union with God.

### D. The Accuser

Unfortunately, the relationship equation in the parable is more complicated. If the parable ended with the Repentant Son and the Loving Father, that would be almost too easy. It would make for a nice continuum of sin, repentance, and love. However, there is a third person in the equation: the older son, who for simplicity, we will call “the Accuser.” He is the voice that tries to say to the Father, “Your younger son is unworthy of your love. Look what he did!”

How many of us have experienced the Accuser? How many times did we feel unworthy of God’s love? We accuse ourselves. How many times do we judge others as unworthy? We accuse others.

Keep in mind that the demons will try everything to undermine our relationship with God. Doubt, despair, worry, anxiety, and despondency are all effective tools of the devil. Think of the Icon of the Ladder of Divine Ascent from the Monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai, where the demons attempt to pull off those who are climbing towards Christ. Their whole purpose is to disrupt the

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<sup>231</sup>Luke 6:36. The motto of Pope Francis’ Jubilee of Mercy is predicated on this verse. See *Misericordia Vultus*. No. 14.

<sup>232</sup>*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. 219-220.

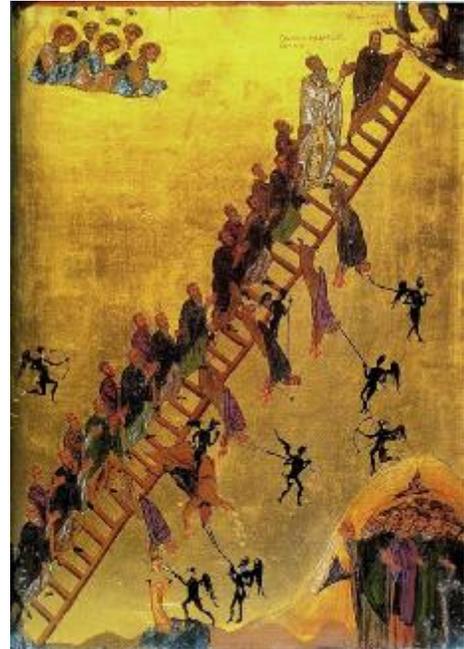
<sup>233</sup>See Coniaris. *Theosis*. 22.

<sup>234</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 44.

<sup>235</sup>See Rom. 5:20.

journey toward God. Even Jesus on the cross knew the depths of despair, crying out: “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”<sup>236</sup> Yet he never looked backward, only forward: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”<sup>237</sup> As St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) writes: “Despondency is a worm gnawing the heart.”<sup>238</sup>

***Do we know this Accuser? Have we experienced the Accuser? Are we sometimes like the Accuser instead of the Merciful and Loving Father?*** Suffice it to say, the Accuser does not exhibit the God-like virtues. Sometimes we think we are doing our duty pointing out the faults or failings of others. But the Accuser did not have the right. Only the father did, because the sin was against him. Yet, he never mentioned the faults or failings of the Younger Son.



In our journey of *theosis*, we cannot fall into the trap of being influenced by the Accuser, either through self-doubt or despair, or judging the worthiness of others. God has already judged. All are made in the Divine Image and His love extends to all.

### E. The *Theosis* Continuum

As described above, the Parable of the Prodigal Son provides a continuum for us to consider: Sin, Repentance, and Love. In our journey of *theosis*, we can choose to move away from sin and the way of the world to repentance, experiencing the divine mercy of our Loving Father, and in turn, striving daily to exhibit the God-like virtues.

Keep in mind that if Our Heavenly Father has forgiven us, we in turn need to be like Him (“Merciful like the Father”). Jesus tells us this in the Parable of the Ungrateful Servant,<sup>239</sup> who having been forgiven an unrepayable debt is unwilling to forgive the much smaller debt of a fellow servant. We must forgive others from our heart<sup>240</sup> (a reflection of *theosis*).

*Theosis* is a journey. A slow, incremental, step-by-step, sometimes painstaking process of following the example of Jesus, collaborating with the Holy Spirit, participating in the God-like

<sup>236</sup>Matt. 27:46.

<sup>237</sup>Luke 23:46.

<sup>238</sup>Valentine Zander. *St. Seraphim of Sarov*. Translated by Sr. Gabriel Anne, SSC (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1975) 103.

<sup>239</sup>See Matt. 18:21-35

<sup>240</sup>See Matt. 18:35.

virtues, slowly purifying our hearts of their vile coating, and advancing toward our destiny: union with God.

***We are called to be God-like. We are all called to be like the Loving Father in the Parable (“Merciful like the Father”).***

Remember that the operative word is “like.” We are not perfect, yet we are to strive for an all-perfect love, the yearning for the all perfect love, that calls us back to Paradise (Fr. Boniface Luykx).

### F. The Road Leading to Union with God

“Our divinization is realized with the grace of the Holy Spirit and with our own free choice. Within the Church, a constant struggle and unending journey to be with God is realized objectively through participation in the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments), with the exercise of virtues (the divine attributes), through prayer, and in love.”<sup>241</sup> To facilitate this journey, we surround ourselves with like-minded individuals pursuing the same goals, namely the Church, the same Twelve-Step Program, or said another way, in Solidarity with the Body of Christ. We do not journey alone

### G. The Value Proposition of the Journey of *Theosis*

We always want to keep in mind the value proposition for the journey, well expressed by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

- (1) “*The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.*”<sup>242</sup> Our deepest yearning is for happiness. Our desire for that all-perfect love draws us to Paradise. Most of us would prefer the Joy of the Gospel (think of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus,<sup>243</sup> “Were not our hearts burning within us”<sup>244</sup>) to the pig-pen where the Prodigal Son found himself.
- (2) “*Those who accept His offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness.*”<sup>245</sup> We all desire the promise of being set free, however, to do so means accepting the offer, which means accepting the terms and conditions of discipleship – a life of self-denial, self-giving, and embracing the Way of the Cross.
- (3) “*With Christ, Joy is constantly born anew.*” God has a plan for us, one that brings us joy, peace, and happiness.<sup>246</sup> He has no intention to slyly orchestrate our ruin.<sup>247</sup> Like the

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<sup>241</sup>Stavropoulos. *Partakers of Divine Nature*. 93.

<sup>242</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 1.

<sup>243</sup>See Luke 24:13-35.

<sup>244</sup>Luke 24:32.

<sup>245</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 1.

<sup>246</sup>Consider Jer. 29:11-14.

<sup>247</sup>Ann Voscamp. *One Thousand Gifts*. Taken from *Magnificat*. (July 2015.) 17/5. 180. This was included in the reflection for Conference No. 1. See the appendices.

Loving Father, He will embrace us, revive us, and lift us to our dignity as sons and daughters.

***“The Mystery of the Church consists in the very fact that together sinners become something different from what they are as individuals; this ‘something different’ is the Body of Christ.”<sup>248</sup>***  
***(Fr. John Meyendorff, 1926-1992)***

### Personal Reflection: Exhibiting great love, mercy, and compassion

*Personal Reflection in Silence. Read the following and then consider the reflection questions.*

Tomás Borge was one of the three founders of the Sandinista Party in Nicaragua. He had been described by Amnesty International in the early 1970s as "the most tortured political prisoner in the world." He had a hood over his face for the better part of nine months and was handcuffed for seven of those months. His wife was brutally tortured, raped, and murdered in his presence. What did Tomás do after the Sandinista victory?

On July 21, 1979, two days after the Sandinistas took power, he went to the detention center where the National Guardsman who supervised his torture was being held. He looked at his former tormentor through the heavy iron bars of the jail cell door. The proverbial shoe was clearly now on the other foot. He said to the man who had supervised his torture for nine months, *“For your punishment, I forgive you. For my revenge, you are free to go.”*

Many of us find it difficult to forgive small things (think of the Parable of the Ungrateful Servant). How much harder is it provide mercy for more egregious offenses? Could we have done what Tomás Borge did? Yet the reality is this: all of us have the capacity for great goodness, love, mercy, and compassion – the way that God loves and forgives us. We know this with certainty because all of us are made in the Divine Image, the pattern of our Creator impressed upon our souls.

***“Loving others is a spiritual force drawing us to union with God.”<sup>249</sup>***  
***(Pope Francis)***

***“Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.”<sup>250</sup>***  
***(Pope Francis)***

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<sup>248</sup>Quoted by Bishop Kallistos Ware, excerpts from *The Orthodox Church*, Part II: Faith and Worship, [http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/history\\_timothy\\_ware\\_2.htm](http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/history_timothy_ware_2.htm).

<sup>249</sup>Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 272.

<sup>250</sup>Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus*. No. 2.

### Reflection Questions

*Consider the following questions.*

1. **In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which of three people do I personally identify with the most?** The Younger Son (the Prodigal)? The Loving Father? The Accuser (Oldest Son)?
2. **Do I find myself away from God?** What is preventing me from returning to Him?
3. **Do I ever find myself accusing myself or others of being unworthy of God's love?**
4. **When told we are called to become like the Loving Father ("Merciful like the Father"), what is my reaction to this?**





## Conclusion: Becoming a Community of Missionary Disciples

*“I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization.”*

(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 1).

Over the past two days, we have examined the purpose of our lives, becoming who God created us to be, and how we fulfill our destiny: union with God through the divinization of the human person. We explored the Doctrine of *Theosis* and the Jesus Prayer tradition, two of the great spiritual treasures of the Eastern Christian Churches. So as we come to end of the retreat, what is next? How do we keep the spirit of this retreat alive? How do we continue to prepare ourselves for the Great Fast (Lent)?

To this end, perhaps we should consider what Pope Francis has encouraged us to become: “a community of missionary disciples.”<sup>251</sup> This would sustain a three-fold effort related to the journey of *theosis*.

- (1) **Personal Effort** – We must live *theosis* through a daily renewal and commitment to turn to God and reject the way of the world. We cannot do this alone, but only through divine grace, collaborating with God (Synergy). *Theosis* itself implies more than salvation or redemption. It implies a relationship with God. We forge this relationship by leveraging the tools and practices which we receive through the Church: the traditions and knowledge of our spiritual fathers and mothers, the sacramental life, and tradition of personal prayer faithfully practiced and preserved by the Church.
- (2) **Communal Effort** – We must support and strengthen one another as community. Pope Francis describes this as “spiritual accompaniment,” that we support one another, “removing our sandals before others in humility,” walking with each other “in a steady and reassuring manner, reflecting our closeness and a compassionate gaze which heals, liberates, and encourages our growth in the Christian life.”<sup>252</sup> Our unity as a parish community can be a great source of strength for the journey of *theosis*.
- (3) **Evangelical Effort** – Many people today are seeking for meaning and purpose in life. A large number do not know that it is Jesus whom they seek, choosing instead to seek happiness in the empty promises of the secular world. (“My people have forsaken me, source of living waters; they have dug themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”<sup>253</sup>) We as Eastern Catholics have treasures that we can share, guiding people out of darkness and into the light. These include the Doctrine of *Theosis* and the Jesus Prayer tradition, both faithfully preserved and practiced from the time of the Early Church Fathers. We cannot keep these spiritual treasures to ourselves. (“You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives

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<sup>251</sup>See Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 24.

<sup>252</sup>See Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*. No. 169-170.

<sup>253</sup>Jer. 2:13.

light to all in the house.”)<sup>254</sup> With regard to the New Evangelization, Pope St. John Paul II writes, “Those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves; they must proclaim him.”<sup>255</sup>

Why should we be concerned about others? As St. Paul writes, “So, we though many, are one Body in Christ and individually members of one another.”<sup>256</sup> Blessed Teresa of Calcutta would tell us, the entire ocean would be impoverished if a single drop was missing. Thus, we are bound by Solidarity in the Body of Christ to share our spiritual treasures with those who are seeking. Consider our discussion on “The Liturgy after the Liturgy,” above.

As Eastern Catholics, we have inherited and are stewards of spiritual treasures desperately needed by the Universal Church and the world at large. Can we keep them to ourselves?

Accordingly, the concept of building up a “community of missionary disciples” has merit. It is in community that we can strive to find the all-perfect love that draws us back to Paradise. It is in community that we can become what God created us to be. It is in community that we accompany one another on the journey of *theosis*. After all, how will people know if we are truly disciples of Jesus? He tells us: “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”<sup>257</sup> Our love should radiate joy and this joy will draw others to the Christian community.

Practically, what can we do and where do we begin? It is worthwhile to continue reflecting upon *theosis* and seeking the wisdom of the Spiritual Fathers and Mothers on this topic through their writings. To this end:

- (1) Start small discussion groups that meet regularly, leveraging specific readings to facilitate the discussions. Share with one another and learn from one another. This is part of the Melkite Greek Catholic Theosis Program, which offers some follow-on guides. In Houston at St. John Chrysostom, our Theosis Group has been meeting since the initial Theosis Retreat in 2009. They have worked their way through a number of spiritual writings over the years (e.g., the Melkite follow-on discussion books, *The Pilgrim’s Tale*, selected writings from the *Philokalia*, and currently *Unseen Warfare*).
- (2) Invite others to join the discussion. Begin by building up the parish, introducing them to the concepts and spiritual treasures of our shared Eastern patrimony. Then also include those outside the parish, especially those who are seeking answers to questions regarding purpose and meaning in life. We all know people who are seeking. Invite them with the words of gentle persuasion, “Come, and see.”<sup>258</sup> Faith-sharing is extremely effective in accompanying people on the journey.

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<sup>254</sup>Matt. 5:14-15.

<sup>255</sup>Taken from *Magnificat*, (April 2013.) 15/2. 361.

<sup>256</sup>Rom. 12:5.

<sup>257</sup>Jn. 13:35.

<sup>258</sup>See John 1:46(b). This is the response of Philip to Nathanael, an invitation to encounter Jesus.

- (3) Consider reading some of the writings of Pope Francis (e.g., *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Misericordiae Vultus*, etc.) which provide perspective on his vision for the Universal Catholic Church.
- (4) Begin a prayer group that meets regularly and practices the Jesus Prayer. Spend time in silence and talk about the experiences. Encourage others who are struggling or going through periods of spiritual dryness. Especially pass on the practice to our youth, assisting them to understand those traditions unique to their Eastern Catholic heritage.
- (5) In this Jubilee of Mercy, consider how to be engaged in ways of being “Merciful like the Father.” This could mean involvement in social outreach or other ways of modeling love, mercy, and compassion to those most in need of receiving it. As we prepare for the Great Fast (Lent), we can reflect upon the words of Pope Francis, “The season of Lent during this Jubilee Year should also be lived more intensely as a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God’s mercy. How many pages of Sacred Scripture are appropriate for meditation during the weeks of Lent to help us rediscover the merciful face of the Father!”<sup>259</sup>

These are just a few ideas to support the journey of *theosis* and evangelize those who are seeking.

Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.”

***“Living faith moves people, regenerates them and changes them, whereas words alone remain fruitless. The best form of mission is through our own example, our love and meekness.”***<sup>260</sup>

***(Elder Porphyrios, 1907-1991)***

## Personal Reflection: Who are you?

*Personal Reflection in Silence. Read the following and then consider the reflection questions.*

The Apostles were young, several not so young, others, yes. John was very young. And they were struck by the person of Jesus, they were enthusiastic with that astonishment one experiences on meeting Jesus. And they hurried to tell their friends: “We have met the Messiah! We have found the One of whom the prophets speak!”

Encounter Jesus! Look at how the Apostles behaved: later they gave in, they did not behave very well. Peter denied him, Judas betrayed him, the others fled. In other words, one has to struggle to be faithful to his encounter, to the encounter with Jesus.

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<sup>259</sup>Pope Francis. *Misericordiae Vultus*. No. 17.

<sup>260</sup>Elder Porphyrios. *Wounded by Love*. 187.

I ask you: “When did you meet Jesus? What your encounter with Jesus like or are you experiencing it now?” The young Apostles! Think of Peter, James, John, Nathaniel, how they encountered Jesus.

Another young man who came to mind is the rich young man, the one who approached Jesus with blameless life, a good young man, and he asks him, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied: “Observe the Commandments and you go forward.” “But I have always observed them!” The Gospel says: “Jesus loved him,” and then said to him, “Look, you lack one thing: give all that you have to the poor and come with me and preach the Gospel.” And that young man went away sorrowfully for he had great possessions, and he did not have the courage to leave them behind for Jesus. And he went away with his money and his sadness. The first were joyous with that beautiful joy that an encounter with Jesus gives. The latter went away sorrowful....

Who are you? An enthusiast, like the Apostles, before beginning the journey? The one who wants to follow Jesus because he likes him but who is hindered by many things that keep him bound and who unable to follow him, like the rich young man who is blocked by worldliness, by so many things?

***Tell me, who you are? Tell yourself, and this will give you strength.***

Source: Pope Francis. Taken from *Magnificat*. August 2015, Vol. 17, No. 6. 265-266.

**“The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew.”  
(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 1)**

## Reflection Questions

*Consider the following questions.*

- 1. Who am I?** Have I encountered Jesus? What was it like?
- 2. How has the encounter changed me?** Do I enthusiastically follow Jesus? Have I accepted his offer of salvation? Or, am I like the seed that fell on rocky ground – it sprang up at once but soon withered because it had no depth (cf. Matt 3:5, Luke 8:6)? Am I held back by worldly attachments?
- 3. What am I willing to do to sustain my encounter with Jesus?** How will I keep the experience alive? How will I sustain myself on the journey of *Theosis*?
- 4. What am I willing to do to help others encounter Jesus?** Many are seeking purpose and meaning in life. How can I help them? Can I be merciful just as our heavenly Father is merciful (“Merciful like the Father”)?

## Other Resources Available

### Resources Available From Hearts Afire Ministries

Hearts Afire Ministries has produced two books which may be helpful resources for those wishing to further explore the concepts discussed in this retreat. In addition, there are other retreats also available.

#### A. Books

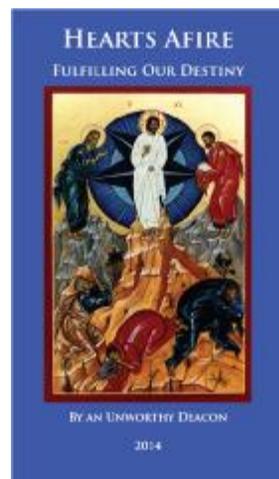
1. *Hearts Afire: A Personal Encounter with Jesus*, which discusses in more depth the ancient practice of the Jesus Prayer, turning our hearts to God (2nd edition, 2016). Published by Eastern Christian Publications. Imprimatur: Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, Archbishop of Galveston-Houston.

This book considers the importance of personal prayer as a companion to the Sacramental Life of the Church, the history of Jesus Prayer, methods for practicing the prayer, and frequently asked questions about this prayer practice.



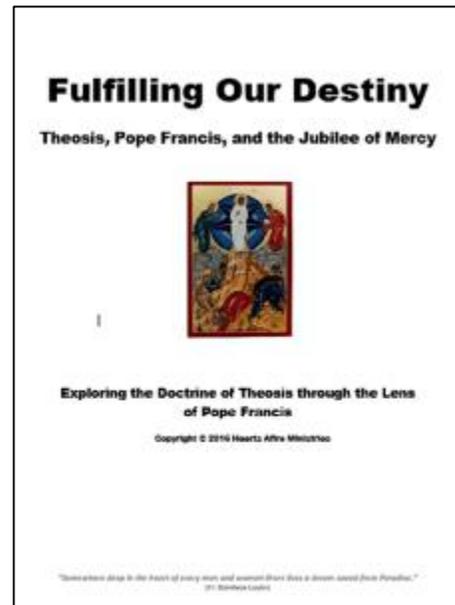
2. *Hearts Afire: Fulfilling Our Destiny*, which discusses regaining the likeness of God (*theosis*). It is a series of conferences each with reflection questions which a group might find useful for ongoing discussion regarding the topics from this retreat (1st edition, 2014). Published by Eastern Christian Publications. Imprimatur: His Grace Bishop John M. Kudrick, Eparchy of Parma (Ruthenian Byzantine Catholic).

Includes 15 conferences and is an ongoing series of reflections around the spiritual journey.

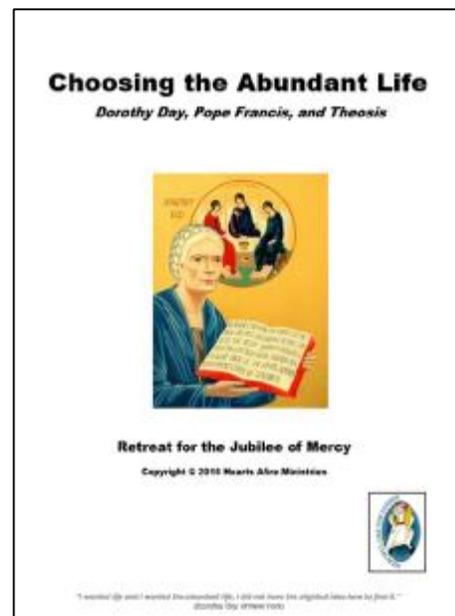


## B. Retreats, Day of Prayer, and Parish Mission Material

1. *Fulfilling Our Destiny: Theosis, Pope Francis, and Jubilee of Mercy.* This retreat explores the Eastern Christian Doctrine of Theosis through the lens of Pope Francis' writings, especially *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Misericordiae Vultus*. It has five conferences exploring our destiny (to become "Sharers of the Divine Nature) and how we obtain that destiny through the Sacramental Life of the Church, Prayer, Ascetical Practices, and love of neighbor ("Merciful like the Father"). First delivery: January 2016.



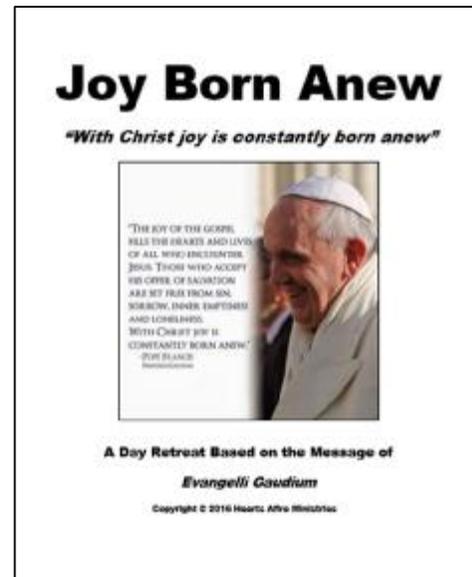
2. *Choosing the Abundant Life: Dorothy Day, Pope Francis, and Theosis.* A five-conference retreat targeting high school youth and young adults, exploring the teachings of Pope Francis and the Doctrine of Theosis using the example of modern day social advocate Dorothy Day of New York, co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. Pope Francis specifically cited her as an example when he addressed a joint session of the US Congress on September 24, 2015. The life of Dorothy Day, we believe, is particularly relevant for young people wrestling with their faith or searching for meaning and purpose. Leverages the Paulist Press film *Entertaining Angels*. Especially relevant for the Jubilee of Mercy.



3. *Joy Born Anew*: This retreat explores the source of joy in our lives (“the Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus”) and discusses how we encounter Jesus and accept his offer of salvation. It is based on the writings of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. The original retreat was designed as a single Day of Prayer for high school youth (four conferences). There is also a version available for adult study or enrichment groups such as Team of our Lady (TOOL). First delivery: February 2015.

Versions include:

- High school youth
- Adult faith formation and enrichment
- Two-conference version available, ideal for a four-hour Day of Prayer for parish ministers and staff



4. *Hearts Afire: Living in the Ordinary with Extraordinary Love*. This five-conference retreat explores the Simple Path of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta:

- The Fruit of Silence is Prayer
- The Fruit of Prayer is Faith
- The Fruit of Faith is Love
- The Fruit of Love is Service
- The Fruit of Service is Peace

This retreat was the foundation of all the other retreats and books listed above and has been delivered to many groups including high school youth, young adults, and adults including religious communities in the United States and across China. Leverages the film, *Mother Teresa*, starring Olivia Hussey. First delivery: January 2013.

