

Orthodox Theology: Odds and Ends, Curiosities and Creative Works

From the "Major Works" series

CJS Hayward

CJS Hayward Publications, Wheaton

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Preface

Here is a cornucopia of assorted works: a series of letters written by an angel, a meditation on the arena of spiritual life, a Church Father commenting on a postmodern trend, an unpleasant unfurling of what it means that the best things in life are free, a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, a few prayers, a few letters about the royalty of being human, a guide to surviving disaster, a meditation on technology and faith, and quotes on ecumenism. In this collection, the scintillating light of life shines forth in full color, and you are invited to read it.

The Angelic Letters

My dearly beloved son Eukairos;

I am writing to you concerning the inestimable responsibility and priceless charge who has been entrusted to you. You have been appointed guardian angel to one Mark.

Who is Mark, whose patron is St. Mark of Ephesus? A man. What then is man? Microcosm and mediator, the midpoint of Creation, and the fulcrum for its sanctification. Created in the image of God; created to be prophet, priest, and king. It is toxic for man to know too much of his beauty at once, but it is also toxic for man to know too much of his sin at once. For he is mired in sin and passion, and in prayer and deed offer what help you can for the snares all about him. Keep a watchful eye out for his physical situation, urge great persistence in the liturgical and the sacramental life of the Church that he gives such godly participation, and watch for his ascesis with every eye you have. Rightly, [when we understand what injures a man, nothing can injure the man who does not injure himself](#): but it is treacherously easy for a man to injure himself. Do watch over him and offer what help you can.

With Eternal Light and Love,
Your Fellow-Servant and Angel

My dear son Eukairos;

I would see it fitting to offer a word about medicating experience and medicating existence.

When one of the race of men medicates experience by means of wine, that is called drunkenness. When by means of the pleasures of the palate, that is called gluttony. When by means of other pleasures, it is called lust. When by means of possessions and getting things, it is called avarice. Escapism is an ancient vice and a root of all manner of evils: ancient Christians were warned strongly against attempting to escape this world by medicating experience.

Not that pleasure is the only way; medicating experience by mental gymnastics is called metaphysics in the occult sense, and medicating experience by means of technology is a serious danger.

Not all technologies, and perhaps not any technology, is automatically a problem to use. But when technologies become a drone they are a problem. Turning on a radio for traffic and weather news, and then turning it off, is not a drone. Listening to the radio at a particular time to devote your attention to a concert is not a drone. Turning on a radio in the background while you work is a drone; even *Zen and the Art of the Motorcycle Maintenance* discusses what is wrong with mechanics having the radio on in the background. And texting to get specific information or coordinate with someone is not a drone, but a stream of text messages that is always on is a drone. Technology has its uses, but when technology is a drone, noise in the background that prevents silence from getting too uncomfortable, then it is a spiritual problem, a tool to medicate experience. And there are some technologies, like video games, that *exist* to medicate experience.

(Of course, technologies are not the only drone; when Mark buckles down to prayer he discovers that his mind is a drone with a stream of thoughts that are a life's work to quiet.)

More could be said about technologies, but my point here is to point out one of the dangers Mark faces. Not the only one, by any means, but he has at his disposal some very powerful tools for doing things that are detrimental. It's not just a steady stream of X-rated spam that puts temptation at his fingertips. He has all the old ways to medicate

temptation at his fingertips. He has all the old ways to medicate experience, and quite a few powerful technologies that can help him medicate his experience as well. And for that he needs prayer.

But what is to be done? The *ways* of medicating experience may be in some measure than many saints have contended with; the *answer* is the same. Don't find another way to medicate experience, or escape the conditions God has placed you in, trying to escape to Paradise. Don't ask for an easier load, but tougher muscles. Instead of escaping the silence, engage it. *Prayerfully* engage it. If your dear Mark does this, after repenting and despairing of finding a way to escape and create Paradise, he will find that escape is not needed, and Paradise, like the absent-minded Professor's lost spectacles, were not in any of the strange places he looked but on his nose the whole time.

A man does not usually wean himself of drones in one fell swoop, but pray and draw your precious charge to cut back, to let go of another way of medicating experience even if it is very small, and to seek not a lighter load but a stronger back. If he weans himself of noise that medicates uncomfortable silence, he might find that silence is not what he fears.

Watch after Mark, and hold him in prayer.

Your Dearly Loving Elder,
Your Fellow-Servant,
But a Wind and a Flame of Fire

My dear, dear Eukairos;

When fingers that are numb from icy cold come into a warm, warm house, it stings.

You say that the precious treasure entrusted to you prayed, in an uncomfortable silence, not for a lighter load but for a stronger back, and that he was fearful and almost despairing in his prayer. And you wonder why he looks down on himself for that. Do not deprive him of his treasure by showing him how much good he is done.

He has awakened a little, and I would have you do all in your power

He has awakened a little, and I would have you do all in your power to show him the silence of Heaven, however little he can receive it yet. You know some theologians speak of a river of fire, where in one image among others, the Light of Heaven and the fire of Hell are the same thing: not because good and evil are one, but because God can only give himself, the uncreated Light, in love to his creatures, and those in Hell are twisted through the rejection of Christ so that the Light of Heaven is to them the fire of Hell. The silence of Heaven is something like this; silence is of Heaven and there is nothing to replace it, but to those not yet able to bear joy, the silence is an uncomfortable silence. It is a bit like the Light of Heaven as it is experienced by those who reject it.

Help Mark in any way you can to taste the silence of Heaven as joy. Help him to hear the silence that is echoed in the Church's chanting: when he seeks a stronger back to bear silence, strengthen his back, and help him to taste the silence not as bitter but sweet. Where noise and drones would anaesthetize his pain, pull him *through* his pain to health, wholeness, and joy.

The Physician is at work!

With Eternal Light and Love,
Your Fellow-Servant and Angel

Dear blessed Eukairos;

Your charge has had a fall. Do your best that this not be the last word: help him get up. Right now he believes the things of God are not for those like him.

The details of the fall I will not treat here, but suffice it to say that when someone begins to wake up, the devils are furious. They are often given permission to test the awakening man, and often he falls. And you know how the devils are: before a fall, they say that God is easy-going and forgiving, and after a fall, that God is inexorable. Do your best to aid a person being seduced with the lie that God is inexorable.

Mark believes himself unfit for the service of the Kingdom. Very

well, and in fact he *is*, but it is the special delight of the King to work in and through men who have made themselves unfit for his service. Don't brush away a mite of his humility as one fallen, but show him what he cannot believe, that God wishes to work through him now as much as *ever* And that God wishes for him prayer, liturgy, sacrament..

And open his eyes now, a hint here, a moment of joy there: open them that eternity is now: eternal life is not something that begins after he dies, but that takes root now, and takes root even (or rather, *especially*) in those who repent. He considers himself unworthy of both Heaven and earth, and he *is*; therefore, in God's grace, give him both Heaven and earth. Open up earth as an icon, a window to Heaven, and draw him to share in the uncreated Light and Life.

Open up his repentance; it is a window to Heaven.

In Light and Life and Love,
Your Brother Angel

My dear fellow-ministering angel;

I would make a few remarks on those windows of Heaven called icons.

To Mark, depending on the sense of the word 'window', a 'window' is an opening in a wall with a glass divider, or alternately the 'window' is the glass divider separating inside from outside. But this is not the exact understanding when Orthodox say an icon is a window of Heaven; it is more like what he would understand by an open window, where wind blows, and inside and outside meet. (In most of human history, a window fitted with glass was the exception, not the rule.) If an icon is a window of Heaven, it is an opening to Heaven, or an opening between Heaven and earth.

Now Mark does not understand this, and while you may draw him to begin to sense this, that is not the point. In [The Way of the Pilgrim](#), a man speaks who was given the sacred Gospels in an old, hard-to-understand

book, and was told by the priest, "Never mind if you do not understand what you are reading. The devils will understand it." Perhaps, to Mark, icons are still somewhat odd pictures with strange postures and proportions. You may, if you want, help him see that there *is* perspective in the icons, but instead of the usual perspective of people in their own world, it is reverse perspective whose vanishing point lies behind him because Mark is in the picture. But instead of focusing on correcting his understanding, and certainly correcting his understanding all at once, draw him to venerate and look at these openings of Heaven. Never mind if he does not fully grasp the icons he venerates. *The devils will understand.*

And that is true of a great many things in life; draw Mark to participate in faith and obedience. He expects to understand first and participate second, but he needs to come to a point of participating first and understanding second. Many things need to start on the outside and work inwards.

Serving Christ,
Whose Incarnation Unfurls in Holy Icons,
Your Fellow

Dear cherished, luminous son;

Your charge is reading a good many books. Most of them are good, but I urge you to spur him to higher things.

It is a seemingly natural expression of love to try to know as much about possible about Orthodoxy. But mature Orthodox usually spend less time trying to understand Orthodoxy through books. And this is *not* because they have learned everything there is to learn. (That would be impossible.) Rather, it is because they've found a deeper place to dig.

God does not want Mark to be educated and have an educated mind. He wants him to have an enlightened mind. The Orthodox man is not supposed to have good thoughts in prayer, but to have no thoughts. The Orthodox settled on the path have a clear mind that is enlightened in hesychastic silence. And it is better to sit in the silence of Heaven than

mesychastic silence. And it is better to sit in the silence of Heaven than read the Gospel as something to analyze.

Books have a place. Homilies have a place. But they are one shadow of the silence of Heaven. And there are more important things in the faith, such as fasting and almsgiving, repentance and confession, and prayer, the crowning jewel of all ascesis. Give Mark all of these gems.

With Deep Affection,
Your Brother Angel

My dearly beloved, cherished fellow angel Eukairos;

Your charge Mark has been robbed.

Your priceless charge Mark has been robbed, and I am concerned.

He is also concerned about a great many things: his fear now, which is understandable, and his concerns about where money may come from, and his loss of an expensive smartphone and a beautiful pocketwatch with sentimental as well as financial value to him, and his inconvenience while waiting on new credit cards.

There are more concerns where those came from, but I am concerned because he is concerned about the wrong things. He has well over a week's food in his fridge and he believes that God failed to provide. Mark does not understand that *everything that happens to a man is either a temptation God allowed for his strengthening, or a blessing from God*. I am concerned that after God has allowed this, among other reasons so Mark can get his priorities straight, he is doing everything but seeking in this an opportunity for spiritual growth to greater maturity.

If you were a human employee, this would be the time for you to be punching in *lots* of overtime. Never mind that he thinks unconsciously that you and God have both deserted him; your strengthening hand has been invisible to him. I do not condemn you for any of this, but this time has been appointed for him to have opportunities for growth and for you to be working with him, and the fact that he does not seek growth in this

trial is only reason for you to work all the harder. That he is seeking to get things back the way they were, and suffering anger and fear, is only reason for you to exercise more diligent care. God is working with him now as much as ever, and I would advise you for now to work to the point of him seeking his spiritual good in this situation, however short he falls of right use of adversity for now.

Your name, "Eukairos," comes from "eu", meaning "good", and "kairos", an almost inexhaustible word which means, among other things, "appointed time" and "decisive moment." You and Mark are alike called to dance the great dance, and though Mark may not see it now, you are God's agent and son supporting him in a great and ordered dance where everything is arranged in God's providence. Right now Mark sees none of this, but as his guardian angel you are charged to work with him in the dance, a dance where God incorporates his being robbed and will incorporate his spiritual struggles and, yes, provide when Mark fails to see that the righteous will never be forsaken.

A good goal would be for Mark to pray for those that robbed him, and through those prayers honestly desire their good, or come to that point. But a more immediate goal is his understanding of the struggle he faces. Right now he sees his struggle in terms of money, inconveniences, and the like. Raise his eyes higher so he can see that it is a spiritual struggle, that God's providence is not overruled by this tribulation, and that if he seeks first the Kingdom of God, God himself knows Mark's material needs and will show deepest care for him.

Your Fellow-Servant in Prayer,
But an Angel Who Cannot Struggle Mark's Struggle on his Behalf

My dear, esteemed son and fellow-angel Eukairos;

That was a deft move on your part, and I thank you for what you have helped foster in Mark's thoughts.

Mark began to console himself with the deep pit of porn, that poison that is so easily found in his time and place. And he began to pray, on his priest's advice, "Holy Father, John, pray to God for me" and "Holy

priests advice, "Holy Father John, pray to God for me, and Holy Mother Mary, pray to God for me," Saint John the Much-Suffering and Saint Mary of Egypt being saints to remember when fighting that poison. And you helped him for a moment to see how he was turned in on himself and away from others, and he prayed for help caring about others.

At 10:30 PM that night on the dot, one of his friends was walking in the dark, in torrential rains, and fell in the street, and a car ran over his legs. This friend was someone with tremendous love for others, the kind of person you cannot help but appreciate, and now that he had two broken legs, the flow of love reversed. And Mark unwittingly found himself in an excellent situation to care about something other than himself. He quite forgot about his money worries; and he barely noticed a windfall from an unexpected source. He kept company and ran errands for his friend.

What was once only a smouldering ember is now a fire burning brightly. Work as you can to billow it into a blaze.

With an Eternal Love,
Your Respectful Brother Angel

My dear, scintillating son Eukairos;

I would recall to you the chief end of mankind. "To glorify God and enjoy him forever" is not a bad answer; the chief end of mankind is to contemplate God. No matter what you do, Mark will never reach the strictest sense of contemplation such as monastic saints enjoy in their prayer, but that is neither here nor there. He can have a life ordered to contemplation even if he will never reach the spiritual quiet from which strict contemplation is rightly approached. He may never reach beyond the struggle of asceticism, but his purpose, on earth as well as in Heaven, is to contemplate God, and to be deified. The point of human life is to become by grace what Christ is by nature.

Mark is right in one way and wrong in another to realize that he has only seen the beginning of deification. He *has* started, and only started, the chief end of human life, and he is right to pray, go to confession, and

see himself as a beginner. But what he is *wrong* about is imagining that the proof of his fledgling status is that his wishes are not fulfilled in the circumstances of his life: his unconscious and unstated assumption is that if he had real faith like saints who worked miracles, his wishes would be fulfilled and his life would be easier. Those saints had *less* wishes fulfilled, not more, and much harder lives than him.

(And this is beside the point that Mark is not called to perform miracles; he is called to something greater, the [most excellent way: love](#).)

Mark imagines you, as his guardian angel, to be sent by God to see that at least some of his wishes happen, but the truth is closer to saying that you are sent by God to see that some of his wishes *do not* happen so that in the cutting off of self-will he may grow in ways that would be impossible if he always had his wishes. There is a French saying, «*On trouve souvent sa destinée par les chemins que l'on prend pour l'éviter.*»: "One often finds his destiny on the paths one takes to avoid it." Destiny is not an especially Christian idea, but there is a grain of truth here: *Men often find God's providence in the situations they hoped his providence would keep them out of.*

This cutting off of self-will is part of the self-transcendence that makes deification; it is foundational to monks and the office of spiritual father, but it is not a "monks-only" treasure. Not by half. God answers "No" to prayers to say "Yes" to something greater. But the "Yes" only comes *through* the "No."

As Mark has heard, "We pray because we want God to change our circumstances. God wants to use our circumstances to change us."

Mark has had losses, and he will have more to come, but what he does not understand is that the path of God's sanctification is precisely through the loss of what Mark thinks he needs. God is at work allowing Mark to be robbed. God is at work allowing Mark to use "his" "free" time to serve his friend. And God is at work in the latest challenge you wrote to me about.

Mark has lost his car. A drunk and uninsured driver slammed into it when it was parked; the driver was saved by his airbag, but Mark's car

when it was parked, the driver was saved by his airbag, but Mark's car was destroyed, and Mark has no resources to get another car, not even a beater for now. And Mark imagines this as something that pushes him outside of the Lord's providence, not understanding that it is by God's good will that he is now being transported by friendship and generosity, that he is less independent now.

Right now Mark is not ready either to thank God for his circumstances or to forgive the driver. But do open his eyes to the good of friendship and generosity that now transports him. Even if he sees the loss of his car as an example of God failing to provide for him, help him to see the good of his being transported by the love and generosity of his friends. Help him to see God's providence in circumstances he would not choose.

Your Fellow-Servant in the Service of Man,
A Brother Angel

My dear son Eukairos;

Your precious charge, in perfectly good faith, believes strongly in [bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ](#). His devotion in trying to bring [into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ](#) is really quite impressive, but he is fundamentally confused about what that means, and he is not the only one.

Mark would never say that you can reason your way into Heaven, but he is trying to straighten out his worldview, and he thinks that straightening out one's ideas is what this verse is talking about. And he holds an assumption that if you're reasoning things out, or trying to reason things out, you're probably on the right path.

Trying to reason things out does not really help as much as one might think. Arius, the father of all heretics, was one of many to try to reason things out; people who devise heresies often try harder to reason things out than the Orthodox. And Mark has inherited a greatly overstated emphasis on how important or helpful logical reasoning is.

Mark would be surprised to hear this; his natural question might be, "If [bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ](#) is not what you do when you straighten out your worldview, then what on earth is?

A little bit more of the text discusses unseen warfare and inner purity: [\(For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;\) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; and having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.](#)

Men's thoughts are not just abstract reasoning; they are all sorts of things, some entangled with sinful desire, that are around all the time to a mind that has not learned hesychastic silence. Thoughts that need to be taken captive include thoughts of money entangled with greed, thoughts of imagined success entangled with pride, thoughts of wrongs suffered entangled with anger, thoughts of food compounded with gluttony, thoughts of desired persons compounded with lust, thoughts of imagined future difficulties entangled with worry and doubt about the Lord's good providence. Such thoughts as these need to be addressed, and not by tinkering with one's worldview: these thoughts remain a battleground in spiritual warfare even if one's worldview condemns greed, pride, anger, gluttony, lust, worry, and doubt.

Work with Mark. Guide him and strengthen him in the unseen warfare that includes learning to cut off such thoughts as soon as possible: a fire that is spreading through a house is hard to put out, and what Mark needs to learn is to notice the smoke that goes before fire and extinguish the smouldering that is beginning and not waiting for leaping flames to make doomed efforts to fight it. Help him to see that his thoughts are not only abstract ideas, and help him to be watchful, aware of his inner state. Unseen warfare in thoughts is of inestimable importance, and do what you can to help him see a smouldering smoke when it has not become a raging fire, and to be watchful.

Do what you can to draw him to repeat the [Jesus Prayer](#), to let it

grow to a rhythm in him. If the question is, "What should I start thinking when I catch myself?", the answer is, "[The Jesus prayer](#)."

Keep working with Mark, and offer what support you can. And keep him in your prayers.

With Deepest Affection,
Another Member of the Angel Choirs

Dear fellow-warrior, defender, and son Eukairos;

I wish to write to you concerning devils.

Mark has the wrong picture with a scientific worldview in which temptations are more or less random events that occur as a side effect of how the world works. Temptations are intelligently coordinated attacks by devils. They are part of unseen warfare such as Mark faces, part of an evil attack, but none the less on a leash. No man could be saved if the devils could give trials and temptations as much as they wished, but the devils are allowed to bring trials and temptations as much as God allows for the strengthening, and the discipleship, of his servants.

Some street drugs are gateway drugs, and some temptations are temptations to gateway sins. Gluttony, greed, and vanity are among the "gateway sins", although it is the nature of a sin to give way to other sins as well. Gluttony, for instance, opens the door to lust, and it is harder by far to fight lust for a man whose belly is stuffed overfull. (A man who would fare better fighting against lust would do well to eat less and fast more.) In sin, and also in virtue, he who is faithful in little is faithful in much, and he who is unfaithful in little is also unfaithful in much. You do not need to give Mark what he expects now, help in some great, heroic act of virtue. He needs your help in little, humble, everyday virtues, obedience when obedience doesn't seem worth the bother.

The liturgy speaks of "the feeble audacity of the demons", and Mark needs to know that that is true, and true specifically in his case. What trials God allows are up to God, and the demons are an instrument in the

hand of a God who would use even the devils' rebellion to strengthen his sons. The only way Mark can fall into the demons' hands is by yielding to temptation: [nothing can injure the man who does not injure himself](#). The trials Mark faces are intended for his glory, and more basically for God's glory in him—but God chooses glory for himself that glorifies his saints. Doubtless this will conflict with Mark's plans and perceptions of what he needs, but God knows better, and *loves* Mark better than to give Mark everything he thinks he needs.

Do your best to strengthen Mark, especially as regards forgiveness to those who have wronged him and in the whole science of unseen warfare. Where he cannot see himself that events are led by an invisible hand, help him to at least have faith, a faith that may someday be able to discern.

And do help him to see that he is in the hands of God, that the words in the Sermon on the Mount about providence are not for the inhabitants of another, perfect world, but intended for him personally as well as others. He has rough things he will have to deal with; help him to trust that he receives providence at the hands of a merciful God who is ever working all things to good for his children.

With Love as Your Fellow-Warrior and Mark's,
Your Fellow-Warrior in the War Unseen

My dear, watchful son Eukairos;

Mark has lost his job, and though he has food before him and a roof over his head, he thinks God's providence has run short.

Yet in all of this, he is showing a sign of growth: even though he does not believe God has provided, there is a deep peace, interrupted at times by worry, and his practice of the virtues allows such peace to enter even though he assumes that God can only provide through paychecks.

Work on him in this peace. Work on him in the joy of friendship. Even if he does not realize that he has food for today and clothing for today, and that this is the providence he is set to ask for, help him to enjoy what he has and give thanks to God for everything he has been

enjoy what he has, and give thanks to God for everything he has been given.

And hold him in your prayers.

As One Who Possesses Nothing,
One Who Receives All He Needs From God

My prayerful, prayerful Eukairos;

Prayer is what Mark needs now more than ever.

Prayer is the silent life of angels, and it is a feast men are bidden to join. At the beginning it is words; in the middle it is desire; at the end it is silence and love. For men it is the outflow of sacrament, and its full depths are in the sacraments. There are said to be seven sacraments, but what men of Mark's day do not grasp is that seven is the number of perfection, and it would do as well to say that there are ten thousand sacraments, all bearing God's grace.

Help Mark to pray. Pray to forgive others, pray for the well-being of others, pray by being in silence before God. Help him to pray when he is attacked by passion; help him to pray when he is tempted and when he confesses in his heart that he has sinned: *O Lord, forgive me for doing this and help me to do better next time, for the glory of thy holy name and for the salvation of my soul.*

Work with Mark so that his life is a prayer, not only with the act-prayer of receiving a sacrament, but so that looking at his neighbor with chaste eyes he may pray out of the Lord's love. Work with Mark so that ordinary activity and work are not an interruption to a life of prayer, but simply a part of it. And where there is noise, help him to be straightened out in silence through his prayer.

And if this is a journey of a thousand miles that Mark will never reach on earth, bid him to take a step, and then a step more. For a man to take one step into this journey is still something: the Thief crucified with Christ could only take one step, and he took that one step, and now stands before God in Paradise.

BEFORE GOD IN PARADISE.

Ever draw Mark into deeper prayer.

With You Before God's Heart that Hears Prayers,
A Praying Angel

My dearly beloved, cherished, esteemed son; My holy angel who sees the face of Christ God; My dear chorister who sings before the eternal throne of God; My angel divine; My fellow-minister;

Your charge has passed through his apprenticeship successfully.

He went to church, and several gunmen entered. One of them pointed a gun at a visitor, and Mark stepped in front of her. He was ordered to move, and he stood firm. He wasn't thinking of being heroic; he wasn't even thinking of showing due respect to a woman. He only thought vaguely of appropriate treatment of a visitor and fear never deterred him from this vague sense of appropriate care for a visitor.

And so death claimed him to its defeat. [O Death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?](#) Death claimed saintly Mark to its defeat.

Mark is no longer your charge.

It is my solemn, profound, and grave pleasure to now introduce you to Mark, no longer as the charge under your care, but as a fellow-chorister with angels who will eternally stand with you before the throne of God in Heaven.

Go in peace.

Your Fellow-Minister,
מיכאל • MIXAHA • MICHAEL • Who Is Like God?

The Arena

1. We stand in an arena, the great coliseum. For it is the apostles who were sent forth last, as if men condemned to die, made a spectacle unto the world, to angels and men.
2. St. Job was made like unto a champion waging war against Satan, on God's behalf. He lost everything and remained God-fearing, standing as the saint who vindicated God.
3. [But all the saints vindicate God.](#)
4. We are told as we read the trials in [the Book of Job](#) that Satan stands slandering God's saints day and night and said God had no saint worthy of temptation. And the Lord God Almighty allowed Satan to tempt St. Job.
5. We are told this, but in the end of the Scripture, even when St. Job's losses are repaid double, St. Job never hears. He never knows that he stands in the cosmic coliseum, as a champion on God's behalf. Never on earth does St. Job know the reason for the catastrophes that befell him.
6. St. Job, buffeted and bewildered, could see no rhyme or reason in what befell him. Yet even the plagues of Satan were woven into the plans of the Lord God who never once stopped working all things to good for this saint, and to the saint who remained faithful, the plagues of Satan are woven into the diadem of royal priesthood

crowning God's saints.

7. Everything that comes to us is either a blessing from God or a temptation which God has allowed for our strengthening. The plagues by which Satan visited St. Job are the very means themselves by which God glorified his faithful saint.
8. Do not look for God in some other set of circumstances. Look for him in the very circumstances you are in. If you look at some of your circumstances and say, "God could not have allowed that!", you are not rightly accepting the Lord's work in the circumstances he has chosen to work his glory.
9. You are in the arena; God has given you weapons and armor by which to fight. A poor warrior indeed blames the weapons God has armed him with.
10. Fight therefore, before angels and men. The circumstances of your life are not inadequate, whether through God lacking authority, or wisdom, or love. The very sword blows of Satan glancing off shield and armor are ordained in God's good providence to burnish tarnishment and banish rust.
11. The Almighty laughs Satan to scorn. St. Job, faithful when he was stricken, unmasked the feeble audacity of the demons.
12. God gives ordinary providence for easy times, and extraordinary providence for hard times.
13. If times turn hard for men, and much harder for God's servants, know that this is ordained by God. Do not suppose God's providence came when you were young but not now.
14. What in your life do you wish were gone so you could be where you should be? When you look for God to train you in those very circumstances, that is the beginning of victory. That is already a victory won.
15. Look in every circumstance for the Lord to train you. The

dressing of wounds after struggle is part of training, and so is live combat.

16. The feeble audacity of the demons gives every appearance of power, but the appearance deceives.
17. Nothing but your sins can wound you so that you are down. And even our sins are taken into the work of the Almighty if we repent.
18. When some trial comes to you, and you thank God, that is itself a victory.
19. Look for God's work here and now. If you will not let God work with you here and now, God will not fulfill all of your daydreams and then begin working with you; he will ask you to let him train you in the here and now.
20. Do you find yourself in a painfully rough situation? Then what can you do to lighten others' burdens? Instead of asking, "Why me?", ask, "Why not me?"
21. An abbot asked a suffering monk if he wanted the abbot to pray that his suffering be taken away. The disciple said, "No," and his master said, "You will outstrip me."
22. It is not a contradiction to say that both God has designs for us, and we are under the pressure of trials. Diamonds are only made through pressure.
23. No disciple is greater than his master. Should we expect to be above sufferings when the Son of God was made perfect through suffering?
24. Anger is a spiritual disease. We choose the path of illness all the more easily when we do not recognize that God seeks to train us in the situation we are in, not the situation we wish we were in.
25. It is easier not to be angry when we recognize that God knows what he is doing in the situations he allows us to be in. The situation

may be temptation and trial, but was God impotent, unwise, or unloving in how he handled St. Job?

26. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds by any means. We live instead in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods. And that is the greater blessing.
27. Some very holy men no longer struggle spiritually because spiritual struggle has worked out completely. But for the rest of us, struggle is a normal state. It is a problem for you or I to pass Lent without struggle. If we struggle and stumble and fall, that is good news. All the better if we cannot see how the thrusts and blows of the enemy's sword burnish away a little rust, one imperceptible speck at a time.
28. Do you ask, "Did it have to hurt *that* much?" When I have asked that question, I have not found a better answer than, "I do not understand," and furthermore, "Do I understand better than God?"
29. We seek happiness on terms that make success and happiness utterly impossible. God destroys our plans so that we might have the true happiness that is blessedness.
30. Have a good struggle.
31. There is no road to blessedness but the royal road of affliction that befits God's sons. Consider it pure joy when you fall into different trials and temptations. If you have trouble seeing why, read [the Book of James](#).
32. Treasures on earth fail. Treasures in Heaven are more practical.
33. Rejoice and dance for joy when men slander you and revile you and curse you for what good you do. This is a sign you are on the royal road; this is how the world heralds prophets and sons of God. This earthly dishonor is the seal of Heavenly honor.
34. If you have hard memories, they too are a part of the arena. Forgive and learn to thank God for painful memories.

35. Remember that you will die, and live in preparation for that moment. There is much more life in mindfully dying each day than in heedlessly banishing from your mind the reality. Live as men condemned to die, made a spectacle before men and angels.
36. Live your life out of prayer.
37. It takes a lifetime of faith to trust that God always answers prayers: he answers either "Yes, here is what you asked," or "No, here is something better." And to do so honestly can come from the struggle of praying your heart out and wondering why God seemed to give no answer and make no improvements to your and others' pain.
38. In the Bible, David slew Goliath. In our lives, David *sometimes* prevails against Goliath, but often not. Which is from God? Both.
39. Struggling for the greater good is a process of at once trying to master, and to get oneself out of the way. Struggle hard enough to cooperate with God when he rips apart your ways of struggling to reach the good.
40. Hurting? What can you do to help others?

Athanasius: *On Creative Fidelity*

Translator's Introduction

In an era of political correctness, it is always refreshing to discover a new manuscript from Athanasius, a saint a bit like gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who told the community's most respected members that they crossed land and sea to gain one single convert only to make this convert twice as much a child of Hell as they were themselves ([Matt 23:15](#)). In an era of political correctness, Athanasius can be a breath of fresh air.

In this hitherto undiscovered and unknown work, Athanasius addresses a certain (somewhat strange and difficult to understand) era's idiosyncrasy in its adulation of what is termed "creative fidelity." His own era seems to be saying something to ours.

Athanasius: *On Creative Fidelity*

What is this madness I hear about "*creative fidelity*"? For it is actually reported to me that whenever one of you talks about being faithful to tradition, his first act is to parrot mad words about how "Being Orthodox has never been a matter of mindless parrot-like repetition of the past, but always a matter of creative fidelity."? *What madness is this?*

Is creative fidelity the fundamental truth about how to be an Orthodox Christian? Then why do we only hear about this at a time when people love innovation, when the madness of too many innovators to mention poisons the air as effectively as the heretic, the Antichrist, Arius? How is it that the Fathers, who are also alledged to participate in this diabolical "*creative fidelity*", did not understand what they were doing, but instead insisted in one and the same faith shared by the Church since its beginning? Is this because you understand the Fathers better than the Fathers themselves?

Is the report of blasphemy also true, that to conform to people's itching ears ([II Tim 4:3](#)) you shy back from the divine oracle, "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." ([I Cor 11:3](#))? There is something the Apostle so much wants you to understand, and perhaps if you understood it better you would not go so far astray as to seek the living among the dead ([Luke 24:5](#)) in your quest for creative fidelity.

How is it that you seek the living among the dead ([Luke 24:5](#))? Christ is the head of the Church ([Eph 5:23](#)), of every man ([I Cor 11:3](#)), of every authority ([Col 2:10](#)), of all things ([Eph 1:22](#)), and God is the head of Christ ([I Cor 11:3](#)). Christ is the one head, and because of him there are many heads. The sanctuary is the head of the nave: the place where sacred priests minister meets its glory and manifest interpretation (for as the divine Disciple tells us, the Son has interpreted the Father ([John 1:18](#)) to the world) in the nave where the brethren worship. The archetype is the head of the image, the saint the head of his icon, and indeed Heaven is the head of earth. And it is the head whose glory is manifest in the

body.

If both incorruptible and unchangeable Heaven is the head of corruptible and changeable earth and yet earth manifests Heaven, what does this say about this strange thing you laud called "creative fidelity"? Does it not say something most disturbing? Does the one and the same faith, alive from the days of the apostles, belong to the corruptible or the incorruptible? Is it not unchangeable?

What then of those adaptations you make—even if some are good and some are even necessary? Do they not belong to the realm of the changeable and the realm of the corruptible?

Which then is to be head? Is the corruptible and changeable to be the head of the incorruptible that suffers no change? Or rather is not the heavenly incorruptible faith to be made manifest and interpreted in the world of change? Such creative fidelity as there may be cannot be the head, and when it usurps the place of the head, you make Heaven conform to earth. Such a people as yours is very good at making Heaven conform to earth!

Listen to me. When you prepare for the sacred Pascha, how many fasts are there? One of you fasts most strictly; another is too weak to fast; another has an observance somewhere between these poles, so that there are several ways of observing the fast.

Are there therefore many fasts? Are there many Lords ([1 Cor 8:5](#)) honored when you fast? Or is it not one and the same fast which one observes according to the strictest letter, another with more accommodation, and each to the glory of God? Now which is the head, the variation in fasting, or the fast itself? Are the differences in observance the spiritual truth about the fast, or the one fast to the glory of the One Lord? Or do you think that because the fast may be relaxed in its observance, the most important truth is how many ways it may legitimately be observed?

So then, as the Church's fast is the head of the brethren's fast, be it strict or not strict, and it is one fast in the whole Church, so also there is one faith from the days of the Apostles. This I say not because I cannot

one faith from the days of the Apostles. This I say not because I cannot notice the differences between the Fathers, but because these differences are not the head. The one faith is the head of various observances and the one faith perfectly delivered is the head even of creative fidelity, which has always appeared when people pursue the one faith and which has no need of our exhortations. Have the Fathers shown creative fidelity when they sought to preserve the one faith? If you say so, what does that say about your exhortation to creative fidelity? Is it needed? Do you also exhort people to wrong others so that the flower of forgiveness may show forth? Or is there not enough opportunity for the flower of forgiveness without seeking it out? Show creative fidelity when you must, but must you seek it out? Must you make it the head? Must you make the Fathers wrong when they lay a foundation, not of each day's idiosyncracies in being faithful, but in the one faith that like Heaven cannot suffer change and like Heaven is what should be made manifest in earth?

Why do you seek the living among the dead ([Luke 24:5](#))? Our confession has a great High Priest ([Heb 3:1](#)) who has passed through the Heavens ([Heb 4:14](#)) to that Temple and Tradition, that Sanctuary, of which every changeable earthen tradition is merely a shadow and a copy ([Heb 8:5](#)) and which the saints of the ages are ever more fully drawn to participate! Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses and the Great Witness himself, let us also lay aside every weight, and change, and sin which so easily entangles, and run with perseverance the race that is set before us ([Heb 12:1](#)), changing that we may leave change behind!

Remember that you are not walking, as you say, the Orthodox System of Concepts, but the Orthodox Way. Remember that feeding the hungry ([Matthew 25:35](#)); is greater than raising the dead. Never let the lamp of your prayers go out ([I Thess 5:17](#)). Like the Father, be a father to the fatherless ([Ps 68:5](#); [Isa 1:17](#)). All the brethren salute you ([Rom 16:16](#); [II Cor 13:13](#)). Greet one another with a holy kiss ([Rom 16:16](#); [I Cor 16:20](#); [II Cor 13:2](#); [I Thess 5:26](#); [I Pet 5:11](#)).

The Best Things in Life Are Free

1. The best things in life are free.
2. The best things in life are free. But what does this mean?
3. The best things in life are free. But we do not understand the truth of these words if we think they are filled out by hugs and friendship, or even love: [If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.](#)
4. A better lens comes from the condemnation of the Pharisees: [Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity. You blind Pharisee! first cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean.](#)
5. It appears in Orthodoxy that the outside of the chalice is all feasts and beautiful liturgies, even during Lent: but on the inside is all repentance, deprivation and hardship, and being blindsided by rebukes. All of this falls under "The best things in life are free," the one as much as the other.
6. Well enough it may be said that sin is the forerunner of sorrow: [The wages of sin is death](#), and that death's sorrow begins here and now. Sin ultimately kills pleasure: [It takes humility to enjoy even pride. It takes sobriety to enjoy even drunkenness. It takes chastity to enjoy even lust.](#)

7. But this is not all. The outside of the cup is beautiful and its beauty is true and real. But the real treasure is inside. Repentance is a spiritual awakening; it terrifies because it seems that when we repent we will lose a shining part of ourselves forever, but when we repent we suddenly realize, "*I was holding on to a piece of Hell!*" and are free to flee the stench. What feast compares to the grandeur of real repentance?
8. The Great High Priest said, [I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.](#) The best things in life are free, and this pruning is a very big free gift.
9. It is when we are cleansed inside the cup that the outside is clean. Let Christ cleanse us inside the cup, and then inside and outside will both bear proper fruit.
10. The things in life that are free are persecutions, and we have on the highest authority: [Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.](#)
11. St. Paul goes so far to say, [But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.](#)
12. We may approach the outside of the chalice first, but it is a loss to stop there. We need the joyful sorrow of compunction and all that is within the chalice, and then what is on the outside of the chalice will be clean, and what is more, will reach its proper stature.
13. Every day take a little less, and pare down a little more. The Fathers do warn, "Do not engage in warfare beyond your strength,"

and the praxis is to crawl before we try to walk. But [The Way of the Ascetic](#) pares down, little by little, in humor, in luxury, in eating for a purpose other than nourishment, and aims to have none of it left.

14. [By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.](#) And by faith we wean ourselves even from a life centered on innocent pleasures, knowing that they do not hold a candle to the spiritual pleasure that is inside the chalice.
15. The cutting of of one's own will is free. And it is the experience of monasticism that this is one of the best things in life: a monk's will is cut off, not for the primary benefit of his brother monks, but for his own benefit. And the voluntary and involuntary cutting off of one's will extends far outside the monastery. It is one of the best things in life, whether we accept it as a blessing or resent it because we do not wish to grow up in the spiritual life.
16. Do you wish that this chalice be taken from you? Christ prayed the same, but he also prayed, "[Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done.](#)" For some prayers are impossible.
17. There are two answers to prayer: "Yes," and "No, please ask for something better." St. James writes, [You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.](#) Passions are sinful habits that warp us, and when we ask for something to satisfy our passions, God only ever says "No" because he wants better for us.
18. Those things that are obviously good are nothing compared to the terrible goods: *the gilded artwork outside the chalice is beautiful enough, but it is nothing next to what is inside the chalice.*
19. [The Maximum Christ wishes the maximum for our lives, and that comes through repentance and the royal road of affliction.](#)
20. [Rejoice and dance for joy when men slander you and revile you and curse you for Christ's sake. This is a sign you are on the royal](#)

road; this is now the world heralds prophets and sons of God. This earthly dishonor is the seal of Heavenly honor.

21. No one can harm the man who does not injure himself. *Nor can any circumstance.* So therefore let us not be governed by circumstances, or think the less of our God when he allows us rougher circumstances.
22. We do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but there is another shoe to drop. We live in a world governed by the best of all possible Gods, and that is a greater good.
23. Perhaps we are entering a time of struggle. (*Entering?*) Perhaps we are seeing the end of exceptionally prosperous and easy days we have no right reason to expect. The same truths apply. The same God who reigns in easy times, reigns in hard times.
24. "Give us this day our daily bread:" it is normal not to know where your next meal is from.
25. The arm of the Lord is more visible, not less, in hard times. God's providence is stronger when you know you need it.
26. The chalice offered us indeed looks easy on the outside but is full of pain within. But the sufferings are part of the treasure. And the best things in life reach deeper than the golden ornaments that belong on the outside, but extend to the joyful sadnesses within. Those who shed at least some entertainment and seek repentance and compunction for their sins find repentance an awakening and compunction to be joyful and cleansing. And that is not all. Everything inside the cup runs deep. And everything inside the cup is free.
27. The divine sovereignty is never purchased at the expense of human freedom. Human freedom is limited, but this is not where divine sovereignty comes from. The divine sovereignty has the last word after every creaturely choice has been made, and the divine sovereignty shapes joy after every draught of the inexhaustible cup.

28. The joy of the best things in life is not purchased at the expense of the chalice of suffering. Suffering is limited, but this is not something the divine sovereignty is purchased from. The divine sovereignty has the last word after every creaturely suffering has been entered, and the divine sovereignty leaves people in a better place than had they not met their sufferings.
29. The divine life is now. The divine energies are now. Not later, once some difficulties are resolved, but now.
30. In ancient times the holiday of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection were celebrated together; even now there is not a separation between them, and we speak of a three-day Pascha. There is no real separation between bearing a cross and being crowned with a crown, even if it takes time to gain the eyes of faith to see such things.
31. Orthodox are iconodules, but God is both iconodule and iconoclast: he takes things in our life and makes them icons of himself, and he also keeps on destroying and removing things to make us more free to breathe. Heaven and Hell are both inside us, and God seeks to inhabit Heaven inside of us and uproot Hell.
32. God the Father is the maker of all things visible and invisible. God is spirit, and even among created things the first excellence belongs to the invisible. Who can buy or sell invisible things? This is one reason the best things in life are free.
33. In the Incarnation, Heaven kissed earth and the visible now has a share in the excellence of the invisible. But still [if a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned](#): the sale of relics is forbidden.
34. Do you believe the best things in life are free? Excellent, but [the demons believe—and shudder](#). Do you *live* as if the best things in life are free?
35. [It is more blessed to give than receive](#). What do you have to

give?

36. If you covet something and you gain it, it will bring misery once the pleasure melts away, and the greater the covetousness, the greater the misery. Covetousness is the inverse of what is inside the cup.
37. We want to have things our way. But the Lord has other plans. And what we will find if we yield is that he has other plans for us that are not what we would have chosen, but are far better. This is at once an easy and a hard thing to do.
38. In the Bible a chalice is both a cup of suffering to drink and a cup which fills with excellent joy. The suffering is as bad as we fear—no, worse— but if we drink of it we will be drinking of the very best things in life. The divine life in the chalice immeasurably eclipses the gilt ornament outside of it. Rememberance of death, compunction, and repentance dig deeper than the music of liturgy.
39. The best things in life are not just an ornament for when our material needs are well taken care of. It is true ten times more that they are lifeblood in hard times and harder times. And the chalice is inexhaustible.
40. The best things in life are free.

The Most Politically Incorrect Sermon in History

A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit:" here begin the Beatitudes, a ladder reaching to the expanse of Heaven.

Poor in spirit was the Theotokos whose scandalous pregnancy helped prepare the way for the scandal of the cross. Poor and humble in spirit was the one who humbly prayed [the doxology, the Magnificat:](#)

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden:
For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.
He hath shewed strength with his arm;
he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.

To be poor and humble in spirit is the first rung on a ladder that

climbs to Heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

This life was given to us for repentance. Repentance is terrifying as a prospect; it seems like mournfully letting go of something we must have. Then when we let go, we find ourselves in a space more spacious than the Heavens, and realize, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell!"

To those who mourn their sins, who cry out for mercy, Christ answers by pouring out mercy and comforting them. But it is nonsense to expect such comfort without mourning; comfort is the fruit that men eat when they have planted it as a seed of mourning. And the fruit would have no taste to one who had not done the work of planting the seeds. Heaven offers nothing the mercenary soul can desire, and the Fire of Hell is itself the Light of Heaven as it is experienced through the rejection of the only Joy that we can have: Christ himself.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

One person I heard years ago said that the term "meek" in Greek was a term one would use of a horse that for all its strength was under disciplined control, and so to be "meek" was power under control. And that reading, however good or bad it may be from a scholarly perspective, *is spiritual poison*: it castrates the words that are meant to be an insult to our pride.

Part of what is not communicated clearly is that a "meek" horse was under disciplined control from another; *from its rider*: a meek horse was not exceptionally good at marching to the beat of a different drummer! [A meek horse, like you or me, is under authority, under headship, and to be meek is defined by that headship.](#) And this unfolds in showing meekness before others: the Lord was meek before his accusers because he was meek to his Father and Head. The meekness we are meant to have has an aspect of discipline, even power, but it is neither ungrounded nor headless; it reflects the headship of Christ and others over us.

The Sermon on the Mount is intended to build power in the reader;

but part of this power is the power of humility, and to be able to interpret "Blessed are the meek" without seeing a challenge to one's pride is poison. One time I confessed pride in my intelligence, and the priest told me quite emphatically, "*The only true intelligence is humility!*" Humility is the mortar that holds together all spiritual bricks and stones, the virtues in the spiritual life and the Sermon on the Mount. And we need the humbling spiritual training ground of meekness if we are going to get anywhere. Crediting ourselves with "strength under control" is worthless, penny wise and pound foolish, or worse.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is truly good for them: for they shall be satisfied.

The Greek term translated 'blessed' at one stroke means both happy and blessed. So this beatitude could be rephrased, "Blessed are those who seek for the only happiness there is; for they will be satisfied. (Others who seek happiness in the wrong places can never be satisfied, even if they find it: "Two great tragedies in life: not to find one's heart's desire, and to find it," applies to that case.)

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Here and now I would underscore something that may not have needed such emphasis in other times: the word translated "mercy" refers both to God's love, in "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,*" or giving money. St. John the Merciful and [St. Philaret the Merciful](#) are both called merciful because they are generous to those who beg them.

Now here I am entering a controversial point because many people say that it does no true help to give money to a beggar; and this is not simply an excuse of stinginess. You will hear this argument being made by people who work in soup kitchens and really care about the poor. And I would more pointedly bring something from a conversation with a friend, after we had given some money to a beggar and he quoted an anecdote where two friends were walking, one of them gave a little money

anecdote where two friends were walking, one of them gave a little money to a beggar, and the other said afterwards, "You realize that he'd have probably drunk it?" and the first answered, "Yes, but if I'd have kept I'd have probably drunk it," and I stridently objected to this anecdote. I told him that I would have no qualms about buying my next drink, or my friend's next drink, but I would have every objection to buying the next drink for a pastor we both loved, who was an alcoholic: perhaps he had been stone cold sober for decades, but he was an alcoholic and I saw nothing good in giving him his next drink.

With that stated, all Orthodox priests I've heard on the topic say that you give something to beggars. Money. Not very much, necessarily, an amount that is entirely within your power. But it is worth considering carrying a pouch for change to give. Maybe it would also make sense to give fresh oranges or clementines (don't give apples; people who have lost teeth have trouble with them), or chocolates. But when you give a beggar *money*, you are treating that person as a moral agent made in the image of God, and if he uses it wrongly, you have no more sinned than God has sinned by giving you blessings that you use wrongly. But in any show mercy and give *something*, with a kind look, as well as being merciful in other areas of your life, and you will be shown mercy in the more serious areas of your own life.

Be faithful to your neighbor in little, and God will be faithful to you in much. Be merciful to your neighbor in little, and God will be merciful to you in much. (Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.)

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are those who seek what they ought to seek, for they will receive it.

The saints shall see God: saint and sinner alike shall see the Uncreated Light which shone on Mount Tabor. God is Light; he cannot but shine, and can only shine in fulness, for every creature, for the saved and for the damned. Then why say, "Blessed are the pure in heart" as if they alone will see God?

The answer is that the pure in heart will see God in their ultimate

triumph, while the impure will see God in their ultimate defeat. God cannot do anything but shine in his Light; creatures cannot be happy, blessedly happy, except that they see this light. Now it may only be a mediated, dimmed, filtered, metaphorical sight of God who is Uncreated Light, but still: blessedness is the only entryway to happiness. (If in fact they really are two different things.)

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

In English, "peace" often means the absence of violence, though something that is soothing may be called "peaceful." In Hebrew and in Greek, the defining characteristic is not the absence of violence, but a state of well-being where love is manifest. The predominant, though not exclusive, sense is of divine blessing. One may be a peacemaker by quelling violence, but the broader sense is a way of life where divine love is manifest.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We are entering a time of trial, when darkness rises. When I was a boy it seemed obvious to me that I had good chances of living to a ripe old age. Now it seems much more possible that I may endure persecution at least. Or at least face persecution; I would compare myself to a poorly trained soldier on the eve of a battle. But the stronger persecutions get, the more powerfully some of these passages speak. The Sermon on the Mount was not given to people whose lives would be comfort and ease. The Sermon on the Mount was given to people where persecution was a fact of life, and this beatitude has good news: *persecution for righteousness' sake is the privilege of the Kingdom of Heaven*. We know enough of earthly privileges: a car, a big house, the respect of others. But persecution for righteousness' sake is not meaningless; it is the token by which saints are given the Kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward

in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

In Hebrew, to repeat an adjective three times is to give superlative force: in [Isaiah 6](#), the seraphs call to each other, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of Hosts." Here we have the same beatitude repeated three times in three wordings. The point is emphasized. The first time, Christ says, "Blessed are *they*..." as if speaking of others. Now he says, "Blessed are *ye*..." and addresses us directly. He strengthens those who will be persecuted for the sake of righteousness, and underscores the *heavenly privilege* of being "counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" ([Acts 5:41](#)).

Persecution and defamation are how the world heralds true sons of God. Satan is the ultimate sore loser, and these blows struck from below acknowledge that one is ascending into Heaven.

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

During one scandal about baseball players abusing steroids, the question was raised of what a terrible example these athletes were to younger kids looking up to them as role models. Some had the audacity to protest, "But I never tried or sought out to be a role model," and other people said, "Sorry, buddy, you are. The question is not whether an athlete like you *is* a role model. The question is whether an athlete like you *is a good* role model, or a *bad* role model. You *are* a role model."

The Sermon on the Mount does not say that if we are very holy we may become the salt of the earth and the light of the world; it says that we are, fullstop. We can lose our saltiness and become worthless as salt; but

the question is not whether we are holy enough to be salt of the earth and light of the world. We aren't, but that's beside the point. The only question is whether we exercise this role well or poorly.

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Christ changes things, but if you think he is a way to dodge the hard parts of the Law, you have another think coming.

The story of the woman at the well is a story where shame loomed large. The woman came to draw water alone because she had a terrible reputation, and when Christ announced living water, she sought his help running for her shame. [Read her story](#); Christ offers no help in escaping her shame, but instead *pulls her through her shame to the other side*, when she ran through the village, freed from her shame, announcing, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did!"

If we seek Christ to provide an easy way out of the hard parts of the Law, we seek the impossible.

But Christ can pull us through to the other side.

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall

be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

These are strong words, and if you ask if this is an example of "hyperbole", then if you mean by "hyperbole" a way to dodge their force, then no, they are not hyperbole.

Some of the Fathers look for a more than literal sense: "Agree with thine adversary quickly" does not refer to a man, but our ever-accusing conscience. And though few have had spine enough to leave a gift before an altar, we offer wrongly if we go to the altar without first coming terms with the other person.

More broadly, these words are not an exaggeration of "First things first." These words are forceful at a point where the truth is forceful, and we gain something when we look for, not *less* than these words would appear to offer, but *more*. For one example, when we have offended another person, the wrong thing to do is hope it will go away, hope that if you forget about the whole deal the other person will to. You are in their eyes as one justly in prison, and will remain so until you have made amends, and that to the uttermost farthing: "*almost* satisfied" is a very bad resting place.

Even when there was no question of conflict, the principle applies. One of my responsibilities as a web designer at my university was to take portraits of faculty members, and you could tell the difference between when a professor was *happy* with a picture, and when she was *almost* happy with the picture. There were times when a professor was almost happy and thoughtfully talked about wrapping up the photo shoot and moving on, and that was an ending I avoided like the bubonic plague. I would rather spend a full hour shooting photos to get one the professor

was happy with, and have both of us walk away happy, than have the professor decide, "I've taken enough of your time," and walk away *almost* happy. In practice it never took anywhere near an hour, but better devote an hour to getting the other person happy, to the uttermost farthing, and *both* walk away happy, than say, "Well, I suppose this is good enough." *Better to pay the uttermost farthing.*

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

This being commentary on the world's most politically incorrect sermon, perhaps it might be appropriate to give a few words here on unnatural vice.

In one sense sin and vice are never natural. But there are vices that are unnatural, such as (among sexual vices) contraception. To people who find *that* identification of unnatural vice, I extend an invitation to read [Orthodoxy, Contraception, and Spin Doctoring: A Look at an Influential but Disturbing Article](#), in which I tear to shreds the article that defined the (hotly contested) "new consensus" that contraception is permissible to Orthodox provided you follow a few guidelines.

There is a shift between patristic times and our day; it may well be that an Orthodox monk in America interacts more with women than a married Orthodox Christian in patristic times. The old rule was, "Don't go to your wife unless you're going to her to try to make a baby." And over time this harsh position has been progressively softened, and an [I would be overstepping to suggest a reconstitution of the ancient rule](#). But there has been a progression over history; once people changed their minds and said that it is *permissible* to have sex during the infertile period *despite* the infertility to such acts, to some saying that it is permissible to *limit* sex to the infertile period *in order to* enjoy sex without the encumbrance of fertility. [We have no entitlements](#), but we believe we are entitled to the pleasure of sex without the encumbrance of fertility. And in recent years we have pursued this sexual perversion further, and a man who has trouble getting it up once is *entitled* to ED drugs. Far from a St.

Maximus Confessor who regarded the pleasure of sex as not spiritually helpful and regarded sex as wrong when a man approached a woman other than his wife or approached his wife for a purpose other than conceiving a child, we understand sex as good in terms of being a potent "pleasure delivery system." [And, pop culture notwithstanding, we don't need a pleasure delivery system.](#) It is almost an act of counterculture for Orthodox Christians to refuse to practice more unnatural vice than the Greeks of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, where one philosopher was asked, "How often should I have sex?" and gave the answer, "*As often as you wish to deplete your energy.*" It's not just that ancient Orthodoxy exercised a tad bit more self-control in sex than we do; queer Greek philosophers were also just a little more self-restrained than us.

And a note to those anticipating at least a mention of queer sexuality, I will say this. *Hillsboro Baptist Church may be Christianity's greatest gift to queer advocacy yet. It spares gays the trouble of wondering whether a God who loves gays infinitely, and a God who wants far better than gay acts for them, might be one and the same God.* Before trying to straighten out queers, we might work on straightening those who appear straight.

Once a great teacher and a truth-seeker were standing in a river. The teacher asked the student, "What do you want?" The truth-seeker said, "Truth."

Then the teacher plunged the student under the water, and let him up and asked him, "What do you want?" The student said, "Truth!" Then the teacher held the student's head under the water, and the student struggled and struggled, and finally the teacher let him up and asked him, "What do you want?" The student gasped, "**Air!!!**" Then the teacher said, "*When you want truth the way you want air, you will find it.*"

The same thing goes for freedom from porn!

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it

from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

In ancient times the concensus was that this cannot be taken literally. If you sin with your right eye and pluck it out, you will go on sinning with your left eye. Furthermore, when a man decided to cut off the problem at its root, the Council condemned self-castration.

However, the fact that these words cannot be *literal* does not mean that they cannot be *true*. In ascetical struggle, there will be some sin, some thing to which one is attached in passion, that it seems we cannot live without. To give it up would be to tear out our right eye or right hand. But the Lord tells us: "Tear out your right eye and your right hand and be free," and we must cut off our own damnation. Never mind that afterwards we realize that we were afraid of letting go of Hell; never mind that once we have torn out our right eye cut off our right hand we find that we have our right eye and our right hand now more than ever: if cutting off our right hand is the price of freedom, cut it off.

And to pick a salient example: if you are one of many men who does not benefit from having a porn delivery service attached to your computer, cut off the sewer of pornography at whatever level necessary to be free. Censorware exists; not wanting to have to bring a sin to confession exists. Canceling internet service and checking email at libraries is better than having full internet access and taking that path all the way to Hell.

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.

Marriage is permanent. Civil divorce exists, and the great mercies of Orthodox oikonomia extend to allowing a second or third marriage after divorce, even if they make clear that this is oikonomia. But even with divorce in the picture, marriage is indelible: to put it bluntly, when two

divorced people sleep together, there are *four* people in the bed.

But there is another point to be made: the place of marriage, that is real, full, true marriage in the world today is almost like the place of monasticism in the desert in days past. One monk in the *Philokalia* wrote that the things that are successes for a man in the world are failures to the monk, and the things that are successes to a monk are failures to a man in the world. A man in the world wants a fine reputation and places of honor, a beautiful wife and fine children, a magnificent and luxurious house, to be able to have his way in what happens, etc. And all of these are ruin to the monk. For the monk, success consists in living in obedience and receiving painful commands, having a spartan cell, enduring shame and dishonor, being cut off from his kin, and so on. And if this happens to the man in the world, some have committed suicide. And there is something strikingly similar, spookily similar, with the faithful married life in the world and classical monasticism.

If we ask what is success in the world as a whole, it is sampling various world spiritualities, having a nice car and house, being able to buy the things you see advertised, and so on and so forth. And not all of these are ruin for faithful married life in the world, but at least the price tags are switched. To faithful married life in the world, doing some nice family activity every week, or even just doing *chores* together, is much better than two high paying jobs and a nanny. A family presumably means some income, but the faithful living married life in the world are probably not going to be good enough at running the rat race to have much more money than they need (and if they are faithful, they will be more likely to open their hands). None of this is technically a monk's "vow of poverty," but between inflation, low income, and debt, the family may have a "virtual vow of poverty." People in times before have said that marriage and monasticism are two different and possibly opposite ways to reach the same goal, ultimately a goal of living out of love for God. But that's a decoy to my point here. My point here is that compared to the success and standards of the world around us, faithful married life in the world starts to look a whole lot like monasticism and not much at all like people who look to Starbucks and yoga, perhaps also serial monogamy, to fill their deepest needs.

Marriage is given attention in the quite short Sermon on the Mount, and its sanctity is underscored by underscoring its permanence. Especially today, we should give marriage something of the recognition we give monasticism.

Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne: Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

To abolish oaths is to make every statement an oath. An oath is specially sanctioned; by saying "You know I am telling truth because I am swearing," you implicitly say, "This needed because I were not to swear it might be OK for me to lie."

God swears in the Bible, and St. Paul's letters contain much swearing, or language that is close to swearing, but none the less it is not only the radical Reformers' fixation on the Sermon on the Mount that rejected swearing: an Athonite monk refused to swear in court and went, uncomplainingly, through a four month jail term and said, "It may seem a small matter to you, but we recognize something real and important in it." And, I would expect, truthfulness was enough of this monk's character that to him every statement was made as if it were an oath.

There is also a second layer, which might be put as follows: "Swear even by your head? Guarantee that something will happen? Do you have any idea that you might not wake up tomorrow, that any number of things might change about your circumstances? Don't you understand that you cannot make one single hair white or black?"

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him

the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Is there a just war? No and never; Orthodox soldiers who kill in war must do penance. The treasury of Orthodox saints includes mighty warriors like St. George, and passion-bearers like the princes Boris and Gleb who allowed themselves to be murdered by wicked rulers usurping their throne. But even St. George did not defend himself from being martyred.

But the point here is not overstated; if anything, it is understated. It may or may not be right to defend oneself, one's loved ones, one's country, by force of arms. There may be oikonomia, leniency, to defend oneself by force even though it injures others' bodies. But the Christ before Pilate not only did not defend himself by violence; he did not resist evil even by words. And Orthodox tradition has picked up on this and said that monks are to remain silent before their accusers and not even defend themselves by words. And it is a strange thing to say that we may never injure another's body to defend ourselves; it is beyond strange to say we may not defend ourselves even by healing another's understanding. But let us recall Christ on trial. Christ did not do what was expected, make any defense against the many allegations brought before him; his entire passion is a living exposition of the claim, "My kingdom is not of this world." And this is not just that Christ's disciples did not

defend him beyond cutting off Malchus' ear (whom Christ healed), but there is something positive we will forever miss if we say that in the ideal we may not defend ourselves even by trying to heal the poison others hold in their mind when they accuse us.

When Christ had refused to play along with the Sanhedrin, the astonished Pilate asked him, "Don't you know I have the power to crucify you or to free you?" Or, to paraphrase, "Don't you see that I have all the cards in my hand, and you have none?" And Pilate was terrified as their exchange unfolded; Christ made no effort to free himself and Pilate did not know what power he was dealing with but knew that he was dealing with a power next to which his power, his pomp, his authority was but dust and ashes. Pontius Pilate sensed that he was a chintzy wooden puppet king passing judgment on the first real man he'd met. After then, Christ was crucified, but the grave was not big enough to hold him, and is the grave, not Christ, that lost in the exchange. [In the Resurrection of Christ, when the Devil appeared to have managed a decisive and final victory, "God the Game Changer" trumpeted, "Checkmate!"](#)

And here we come to something politically incorrect enough that most readers will read the text and be blithely unaware of it. It doesn't even show up as a blip on the radar.

Perhaps the best way to portray it, or at least the best I can find, is to portray two archetypes, the archetypes of the Saint and the Activist, which define a polarity. The Saint, as I use the term here, consists mostly of people who will never see canonization as formal saints, and the Activist includes mostly people who don't think of themselves as activists, not any more than people who use cars, trains, busses, and airplanes think of themselves as "motor vehicle enthusiasts." The Activist prays, if anything, "*Lord, help me change the world,*" and is concerned with the sewer of problems in the world around. The saint prays, "*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,*" and is concerned with the sewer of problems within. (G.K. Chesterton won an essay contest, and also wrote the shortest letter to the editor on record, answered the question, "What is wrong with the world?" with a Saint's, "*Sir, I am.*")

The Saint may end up changing the world; in the end the Saint *will* end up changing the world, but that must never be his goal. "*Save yourself, and ten thousand around you will be saved,*" is not about the need to straighten out ten thousand people, but the need to straighten out *one*, and the one person you may least wish to correct. The Activist says, "*Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.*" The Saint says, "[Be it unto me according to thy word;](#)" Could any difference be greater?

Since the Catholic Church, one could say, self-amputated from Orthodoxy in 1054, East and West have been separated by a growing chasm, and in an inconsistency I will use 'East' to refer to the Eastern Orthodox Church (though, in this regard, it shares much with Hinduism, (more subtly) Islam, Jainism, etc.), while by 'West' I refer to the broader Western society and specifically include elements that the Roman Catholic Church played no part in. There is a reason for this inconsistency in that the fall of the Roman Church deprived the West of a vital nutrient, however I am simply choosing terms inconsistently to best illuminate something.

In the West, the figure of the Renaissance magus looms large and still has a shadow today: job ads I see calling for an Ajax ninja or a Rails rockstar echo the Renaissance magus. The Eastern figure was the humble member of a community, one strand of an intricately woven web, relating to society, culture, and the Church as one relates to a mother. But the Renaissance magus, besides freely engaging the occult, stood over and against society, *and regarded one's culture as a sort of a despicable raw material that would gain value only insofar as one would transform it to something better.* And this attitude represented a novelty, or at least an aberration, to Orthodoxy. It would come across a bit like telling the mother who gave you birth, "*You know, I don't like the way your body is arranged. You have one arm more than you need; we can consolidate the musculature to give you a much stronger arm, and move your fingers to your feet so that you can easily use your feet to pick things up. And your present skin color is not nearly so beautiful as the royal purple with which I would see you adorned; you should go through the pain of a whole-body tattoo so that your skin may be regal in its color. And I would like to rearrange a few things inside.*" And did I mention that the

Renaissance magi claimed equality to Christian saints, saying that the Renaissance magus and the Christian saint were two sides of the same coin?

The Renaissance magus left several strands that are part of the West, and I am not here talking about increasing interest in the occult. I would recall one class where the admittedly flaming liberal professor introduced the topic of "autism and advocacy," finding it patently obvious that if you care about people on the spectrum, "care" translates immediately to political activism. One of the articles she had chosen was surprisingly a Saint talking about the asceticism of love, the spiritual discipline, of living as a father to an autistic child and facing parenting issues that simply don't come up with autism-normal children. But to an Activist, the obvious response to the autism spectrum, if you have a heart, is political advocacy. But that isn't *really* from the heart, because Activism is from a head severed from the heart. The response that had a heart was the one she was blind to even as she assigned it: the struggle of a father, in the concrete, to love and care for a highly autistic child. This *heart* had no grand schemes to transform society, even on a smaller level; it was just exercising a Saint's love and care in whatever concrete situation one is in. Including having a child and discovering that he had some unusual needs and would take a lot of love to care for.

The Activist looms large; it looms large enough that not only do liberals pursue advocacy of liberal agendas, but many conservatives shuffle a few things around and pursue advocacy of a few conservative agendas. This may seem strange enough to say, but I wince at some of the conservative, Christian pro-life advocacy I have seen, because it takes the framework of a liberal activist and fills in the blanks with something conservative instead of something liberal. Being pro-life is an area where political Activism can only take you so far: you cannot reach its *heart*, until you enter the process of becoming a Saint.

The Saint turns the other cheek. The Activist can only win by earthly victory. The Saint often wins though earthly defeat.

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is

in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

Feeding the hungry is greater work than raising the dead. the saints tell us. *Fasting benefits you alone; almsgiving also benefits your neighbor.* And these things cannot be kept secret. The harder you try to keep your almsgiving a secret, the more God will show you off as his faithful Saint.

The spiritual danger of making good deeds a means to praise is like buying food so that you can play with its packaging. It's entirely backwards, and Christ lays the axe at the root of the tree: he does not chop it off above ground so it will grow back, but cuts as deep in the roots as he needs to do uproot a deadly weed. What God does or does not do in terms of publicizing results is his concern and not ours. Our concern is that it shows severely warped priorities to seek commensurate recognition for your goodness.

I remember wishing, years back, to see some Christian institution name a building after a widow who gave \$10 a month that she couldn't afford, out of her husband's pension.

I have not lost that wish, but I am profoundly grateful that the Orthodox Church names parishes not after money bags, but after a saint or feast who has entered the heavenly mansions and is no longer in danger of sinking into pride from being so honored.

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father

which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

Almsgiving is not to be trumpeted, but few of us are so stealthy as to give alms without the recipient knowing. But prayer can be done in secret, so only God knows we pray. The text does not have mainly unspoken prayers in mind such as those coming from Protestantism may expect; purely mental prayer is one of a number of kinds of prayer there is, and the text does not discuss prayer without opening one's lips, but prayer in one's closet with the door shut, prayer which is presumably spoken aloud. But as with almsgiving, we are to seek secrecy and hidden works, and when we strive to tear away the last shred of wanting to show off our good deeds, God himself will show off our good deeds.

Orthodox writing about "much speaking" take a line of argument one might not get from the "bare text" of "use not vain repetitions." Essentially, the suggestion is that the bedrock of prayer is not from masterpieces of rhetorical excellence, but rather simple, childlike prayers which are repeated over and over. The Jesus Prayer is the crowning jewel of such prayers. But even then, it is a mistake to think one will be heard for much speaking. The Jesus Prayer is intended to sink down into you from the outside in until it becomes like the blood pulsing through your body, and even in the highest use of the Jesus Prayer there is no expectation that one will be heard from one's many words. The path that is most abundant in repeated words is the one further from thinking one is heard from much repetition.

And furthermore Christ de-mythologizes God. If the Father is seen as an old man with a beard, it may be entirely relevant to inform him what things one has need of. But Christ will not accept this: God knows, before we begin to ask him, what we need, and he knows better than we do. We are urged on every account to pray, but the burden does not lie on our shoulders to instruct God about what we need.

I may comment briefly that before Bultmann went through his

campaign to de-mythologize the Bible, over a thousand years before Pseudo-Dionysius had a campaign to de-mythologize the Bible, and did a better job of it. *Here Christ instructs us in appropriate prayer to a de-mythologized God.*

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

"Our Father:" in these two words alone is something astonishing, something stunning. This prayer is prayed in the Divine Liturgy in the brief period when the holy gifts have become the body and blood of Christ and before they are consumed. It is a singular prayer. And it may be noted that calling God one's Father is a strong claim in Scripture: to be a son of God is to be divine and from ancient times this prayer was seen in relation to theosis.

The first of seven petitions, "May your name be held holy," contains the other six. It is as if the prayer is given here, and then a commentary.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

This is an adult prayer. It is not a prayer that everything go according to your wishes, or mine, but God's. It is a prayer that God's reign extend, and the earth that is an icon of Heaven may ever be fuller or more complete.

Give us this day our daily bread.

This is the one prayer for material concerns, and it is exceedingly modest. It is kept by us who may have a month's food on hand as a formality; but to many of those who prayed, it was anything but formality. The faithful needed the days' bread. And here again it is modest, for it does not say "Give us this week a week's bread," but "Give us this day our daily bread." The prayer is almost a goad to say, "Stop scrambling to enlist God as your helper in your efforts to build a kingdom on earth. Don't cling to wants. You have legitimate needs, and you are invited, summoned, to ask for your legitimate need of enough bread for today "

way.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

We ask God for contradictory things, and we do that all the time. We ask for the peace that belongs to people who are not controlling, and we also ask to be in complete control of others around us. We ask God to help a child make independent adult-like decisions, and we demand that their choice agree with ours. Or we ask God to free us from the misery of alcoholism and addiction, but we ask him to let us keep whatever we are addicted to. With the Blessed Augustine, we pray, "Lord, give me chastity, but not yet."

It is incoherent, contradictory, to ask for forgiveness when we will not forgive. [We owe God billions and billions of dollars, and when he has forgiven us, we demand repayment from our brother who owes a few thousand dollars.](#) Not that a thousand dollars is any trifling sum; it is worth months of income, but if we will not forgive, God's grace bounces off of us. The door to the heart can only be opened from the inside, but we are confused if we try to open it when we have bolted and barred it with a grudge.

There are seven petitions in this singularly important prayer, and any of them could be commented on at length. In the Sermon on the Mount only this one receives further comment, and it is a comment stark and clear.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

The closing note is not addressed to the Father alone, but asserts all kingdom, power, and authority to the whole Trinity. But the main point I would note is something else.

The prayer is given slightly differently in the Orthodox practice: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One," and then a priest if present adds, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now

and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen." "Evil One" replaces "evil" because we are not praying for a delivery from some abstract, depersonalized quality like confusion or misunderstanding, but from the Devil, the Dragon who swept a third of the stars from Heaven.

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

This is the comment mentioned above. All seven petitions are inexhaustible, but this one is clear: it is a stupid thing to hold on to a grudge and expect forgiveness. (Tradition preserves the reason why: it's like holding shut the door to your heart and inviting God to come in.)

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

What has been said first of almsgiving, and then of prayer, is said of fasting, is this: if you try to show off, and your purpose is to impress others, then it is hollow and worthless. That is all the reward you will ever have, in this world or the next. But if you conceal it and perform to an audience of One, God himself, it will be full, invaluable, and God himself will show it off. By all means, choose the right path, and it will never be taken from you.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

This says more than the [Tao Te Ching](#) which I remember to say,

"Halls of gold and jade cannot easily be guarded." (The implication? If you don't *have* halls of gold and jade, neither can you *lose* halls of gold and jade.) A net of financial security paradoxically becomes one more thing to worry about.

Christ offers very simple investment advice. This investment advice may be beyond the pall even of political incorrectness, but here is his investment plan:

1. Do not store up financial resources, but give to the poor.
2. Give freely as an offering to Christ.
3. Christ will receive your gift as a loan.
4. Christ will repay you exorbitantly, but on *his* time and on *his* terms.

This cuts against the grain of every worldly advice; financial assets that you hold on to are not an asset but a liability. Now some people have said, "We may have things as long as we are not attached to them," and that is genuinely and fully true, but inner detachment is harder than just getting rid of one's possessions, and easier to fool yourself.

Having an earthly safety net to do the job of God's providence is to have an idol. Earthly worldly advice is about how to have enough treasures on earth to support oneself. But they are flimsy, worthless, and the best way to take yourself is not to store up treasures on earth, not to seek one's providence from earthly treasure, but instead store up treasures of Heaven. And having really and truly thrown yourself on the mercy of God, you will find that God is merciful beyond your wildest dreams.

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

"If thine eye be single" has an immediate sense and a more profound

sense. Marriage is honorable, but St. Paul warns that if a man is married his eye will not be single because it will be divided between the Lord and his wife. He gives advice but not a command. If it is a hindrance to divide one's eye between the Lord and one's spouse, what hindrance must it be to divide one's eye between the Lord and despicable money!

On a deeper level, I would recall an academic theology who presented as a lesson from computer science that we should switch between several activities rapidly. (In academic theology, the standard way to do name-dropping is to introduce a term from science, usually in a way that scientists could not make head or tail of.) My response was, "This may be true; what it is not is a lesson from science," but I don't believe it is true. Far from it, divided attention is a hindrance to *earthly* success, let alone *Heavenly* growth; we fragment ourselves in a way that would be unimaginable millenia ago when philosophers said then that we were fragmented.

Progress in monasticism moves through layers of contemplation that let go of worldly things and even what one has grasped in previous layers of contemplation until one is all eye and all beholding the Uncreated Light. The focus becomes progressively like a laser: the monk, who is all eye, has more and more a single eye.

Perhaps there are other ways; reading the [Tao Te Ching](#)—or, better, the "Nine Enneads" from [Christ the Eternal Tao](#), may not be on par with the Fathers, but if you let them sink in for decades you may gain something. Or simply be under the fatherly guidance of a good priest who appropriately emphasizes the Jesus Prayer. But in any case Lao Tzu complained in his day that people had fallen from an eye that is single—let alone Christ— and if we make the same claim, we have gone from out of the frying pan, not into just fire, but into termite (which has been used to burn through the armor on tanks).

One does not jump in a single moment from dismal conditions to perfection; the standard pastoral advice is to give a little more or cut back a little further, and we will not leap all in one jump from a divided eye to one that is single. But growing towards an eye that is single is growing towards contemplation in the glory we were made for.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Note that Christ does not call Money a servant, but a master. He says not, "No man can have two servants," but "No man can serve two masters." If your life is ordered so that you have money and the things money can buy all lined up to serve you, it is in fact you who are serving money. And this is not just some sophisticated insight, but something very basic. St. Paul tells us that the love of money is the root of all evil, and the *Philokalia* describe the demon of loving money as what would today be described as a "gateway drug": once one's spirit is defeated by the love of money, one is passed along to other, worse demons. As regards money, the Sermon on the Mount is uncomfortably clear.

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

Let me make a couple of brief remarks before diving to the core of

the passage. First of all, you are making a fundamental error if you assume that "Each day has enough trouble of its own" is only intended for the inhabitants of a mythical and perfect world. It is in fact practical advice for our world, and it is more practical advice for us today than ever. Second, there is a translation issue in that one verse could be rendered, "Which of you by worrying could add a single cubit [a foot and a half] to his height?" or "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour of your span of life," but in fact the word play admits an apt paraphrase: "Do you think you can add a single hour to your lifespan by worrying? You might as well try to worry your way into being over a foot taller!"

Now to the main point: "Do not store up treasures on earth" and "You cannot serve both God and Money" are not a barbed wire fence that serves only to injure. They protect a paradise which we can live in here and now: if *wealthy* Solomon in all his splendor could not match the lilies of the field, to what height will we ascend if we let go of taking up God's responsibility of providing for our needs; we will be as the birds of the air or the lilies of the field, as Adam and Eve naked and innocent in Paradise. We cast ourselves out of Paradise when we open our eyes and say, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we wear?" But the entire point of the stark, pointed fence is a buildup to a right and proper invitation to live in Paradise here and now. Not later, when the economy might be better. Here and now we are called to enter paradise and live the divine life.

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

I read a woman who was a pillar of the church I grew up in, recounting a civil union and saying, "There was not a dry eye in the

place." Even after I thought, I held my tongue from adding, "Only the sound of angels weeping."

One of the principles of mystagogy in Orthodoxy is that if you know the truth, and you know someone will reject it, you don't say it. Come Judgment Day, it is better for the other person to not have rejected the truth. And it is better for you not to have put the other person in that position. But even then we are not to judge; we have acted so that another person will not be Judged on Judgment Day, and who are we to judge? Has God asked our help judging our neighbor?

Someone sins, and that is a stench in God's nostrils. Then we see it and we judge. Now there are two stenches in God's nostrils. Is it better for you to leave God with one stench or two?

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

Keep on asking, and it will be given to you at a time you do not expect it. Keep on seeking, and you shall find at a place you would never imagine. Keep on knocking, and after you are certain your knocking is not working, the door shall be opened to you.

Sometimes it is less painful than this; but we must ask until our voices fail, because sometimes it is not until our voices fail and our petitions seem to have fallen on deaf ears are we ready to have what we ask for. Keep on asking. Keep on seeking. Keep on knocking. And if it is easier than this, count yourself blessed. If it is harder than this, still count yourself blessed. In all cases it is God's sovereign hand strengthening and growing you in all the ways you would know to ask and all of the ways you would never imagine to ask.

Never stop asking, or seeking, or knocking. And never assume that because you did not instantly receive what you asked, you will never receive what you asked. Never assume that because your request was not granted in the way you envisioned, you will not be given something better that you would never think to ask

that you would never think to ask.

Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?

We today, in our political correctness, manage others' moods by feeding their vices. We give a stream of compliments so others will feel better. Christ does not give a honey-sweet drone of manufactured compliments; he instead calls us "evil" and elsewhere, though he surely is good, reproved even the truthseeker who called him "good."

Christ says that if evil as we are, we give good gifts to children, how much will the Heavenly Father who is good give anything but excellent gifts? Quite often he gives us better than we asked and we say that our prayers were denied. We have been corrupt enough to ask for a stone to eat, or a serpent, and his work is to wean us from corrupt foods onto foods fitting in every sense to men. The original audience asked God for loaves and fishes, but we would rather have stones and serpents.

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

To pick a nit: the text does not say "Therefore all things whatsoever *they* would that men should do to you," but "Therefore all things whatsoever *ye* would that men should do to you." The single-word difference is subtle but *profound*.

We are to ask for bread and fish. But when others ask for a stone, prayerfully consider giving bread, and when others ask for a serpent, prayerfully consider giving a fish. The time may not be right, or the occasion, but if nothing else we can pray good gifts for them. And do whatever *you* would want others to do for you if you ARE seeking the Kingdom of Heaven.

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad

is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

At non-Orthodox funerals, I have always heard that the deceased is in Heaven. You die and next you go to Heaven. But there is another quite chilling possibility. Most people go to Hell and perhaps many Orthodox go to Hell. The one time I was closest to dying, I experienced and gave in to extraordinary temptations in my spirit. God graciously provided a way out, but it is common for the dying to be allowed great temptations, and I'm really not sure that if I had died then, in that state, I would be in Abraham's bosom. As Orthodox we do not say that we have been saved; we might say that we are being saved, but even great saints do not enjoy safety. The story is told of a dying monk who stepped with one foot into Paradise, and the demons said, "Glory to you, you have defeated us," and the monk said, "Not yet I haven't," and pulled the other foot completely into Paradise. The story is also told of a monk who experienced high mystical visions and was brought bodily into Heaven, and then fell and was damned.

Heaven is not the final resting place for everybody in our circle. Many we are connected to can easily be damned, and we ourselves can easily be damned. I am very wary of assuming that I am standing firm, because that is how you fall. And it is clear to me now that I could be damned no matter how good my asceticism looks to me.

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

You shall know them by their fruits: not anything else, even ecclesiastical rank.

We live in an age of false prophets, and not just those promoted on Oprah. These words of Christ have never been wisely ignored, but we need them in particular here and now: [the fruits of rhetoric](#), the fruit of people's personal lives so far as we know them, and [the fruit of what happens in their following](#). The fruit of honest or dishonest, manipulative, shady rhetoric is perhaps the least important of these three, but it is there. The fruit of personal lives is important, though it may be harder to find since anyone can choose whatever image they want on the network: here "the prophet sees through a glass, darkly, while the archivist sees through a microscope, sharply," (Peter Kreeft), and we do not have an archivist's knowledge. But perhaps the most important fruit of all is another fruit that cannot be hidden, which is what happens in a person's wake. Does the prophet leave behind a following with the fragrance of godliness, or a stench of rotting?

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Christ makes his point strongly. He does not say that many whose faith was lukewarm, many whose eyes were not single and whose hearts were divided, will be damned. That is of course true, although many "unlikely candidates" will feast in the Heavenly kingdom. But he puts the point most sharply: among those who seem to have a faith to remove mountains, who in his name have prophesied and cast out demons, who have performed miracles, will be damned.

There is an old Russian folktale that His Eminence KALLISTOS has what he calls an all-purpose story, where there was a woman who was exceedingly sharp and strict in fasting and every legalistic astonishment, and to her astonishment died and found herself in Hell. She called her guardian angel, and asked about what must be a mix-up. The angel asked if there was anything she had done out of charitable love for another, and she mentioned that she had given a long, thin onion to a beggar once. The

angel reached out into his pouch, took out the onion, and said, "Here it is. I'll hold onto one part of it and you hold onto the other, and I will try to pull you out." The woman took the onion, and the others in Hell saw that she was starting to be pulled up, and began to grab on to her, so that there was a collected web beginning to rise out of the fire of Hell. The woman said, "Stop it! Let go! It's mine!", and when she said, "It's mine!", the onion snapped, and the woman and all those attached to her fell back into Hell.

Fasting and other disciplines are important, but a legalistic fast that does not arise from Christ knowing you is worthless. Even casting out demons and working miracles is of precious little value if it is not (the power of) [Christ in you, the hope of glory](#). Neither unimpeachable fasting, nor working miracles, nor writing or reading theology, nor even almsgiving, will itself save you from being rightly damned to Hell.

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

When Y2k was approaching, I believed the grid would go black January 1, 2000. I believed in the worst case scenario, and while I did not have anything near adequate material preparation for this, I was completely wrong.

Completely wrong.

Then why do I feel like I'm crossing my fingers? Every prediction I believed about disaster on January 1, 2000 turned out to be 100% wrong.

The burr under my saddle in saying I was wrong was that I believe I

was fully wrong about the details of Year 2000 collapse, but there are still some beliefs I retain. Not, perhaps, that the Y2k prediction was a nice, poetic story, or that I wish to say, *Star Wars* style, "What I told you was true, from a certain point of view," but let me outline the beliefs I held surrounding Y2k:

1. A great disaster will occur immediately on January 1, 2000, and will shut down Western civilization.
2. If there is a great disaster, we will have physical needs.
3. If there is a great disaster, we will have spiritual needs.

Now as far as the first point goes, I think it was wrong but not entirely off the mark; I don't believe so much that deterioration *will* happen as that deterioration *is already happening*, and this is a point I don't really think I need to argue.

Now as regards the second point, I could find survivalist resources galore; if I had more oomph to my opinion, I would have dug much deeper into the copious literature on how to care for one's material needs if civilization abruptly fell apart on a particular day.

But the third point, the interesting one, is the one I had the most trouble about. It seemed obvious to me that if the grid were to go black, if all normal societal and social patterns were completely disrupted, then we would have other problems besides how much food we had in store and how ready we were to defend our resources. One friend of mine has worked on spiritual retreats for people at the bottom of the totem pole economically socially, recognizing correctly that not only do the people at the bottom of the totem pole benefit from having something in their belly and shelter from the elements, but they could benefit from a spiritual retreat for the same basic reasons middle class people would benefit from a spiritual retreat. And I deeply respect the humanness of that observation. And I asked and poked about psychological and spiritual resources for people surviving disasters, and this point was not one that survivalists seemed to have thought through. The most of a response I could get was, "*Buy plenty of condoms and stock up on board games.*"

I broadened my search, seeing if I could find clues anywhere else, and in fact there were clues. People who had been taken hostage by terrorists for years had established a rhythm of spiritual discipline, and this "treasure from Heaven" fed their spirits in terrible situations. People who survived Nazi and [Marxist concentration camps](#) had a spiritual fire already burning. And the core of this fire is found in the Sermon on the Mount.

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

What is the "flood"? Cancer, adultery, divorce, depression, being a hostage of terrorists or a prisoner of Nazis or [Marxists in concentration camps](#): all of these things are storm and flood. That some flood will come is completely non-negotiable. Whether we build on rock or sand is up to us, and as a martial arts instructor said, "*The way you practice is the way you will fight:*" if you are slow or half-hearted in spiritual disciplines now, you will arrive with disaster on half-baked preparation, whereas if you take to heart the words, "*The more you bleed in the dojo, the less you'll bleed on the street,*" you will come to the disaster as one who has already bled, as someone who is ready for the fight.

There are resources on spiritual struggle that go into more detail than this: *The Philokalia* immediately springs to mind. But there is no text so central as the Sermon on the Mount.

Prayers

A prayer of freedom

Save me from forging false gods, O Lord, and deliver me from the chains of passion I have entangled me in. Do thou raise mine eyes to Heaven, with my neck ever bowed to thee, and my hands open to thy grace and open to my neighbor. I have fallen: do thou raise me up, that I may praise and glorify thy name. Amen.

A prayer of providence

O Lord who hast created me, do thou provide for me and trust that in your heart's plans will my highest good be real. Do thou grant me humility and faith, and obedience: all things needful for me to forsake plans of my own imagining and accept what from your hand is better than mine heart could devise. Every prodigality from this trust I have entertained; do thou forgive me, for if thou wert to only look after those that trust thee rightly, O Lord, who could stand before thee? But immeasurable is thy mercy, and incomparable is thy providence: do thou O Christ bless me, with the Father, and thine all-holy, lifegiving, and all-present Spirit, both now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

A prayer of the Trinity

O Lord God and Father, Light of the ages, do thou illumine my soul with thy Holy Spirit, and ever impress on me the image of thy Son. Make me ever worshipful towards thee, and do thou grant me an image of repentance, and an image of compassion, and an image of prayer. I thank thee, O Lord, that thou hast not avenged thyself of my many sins, sins known and unknown to me, but hast reached to shape me with thy two hands of thy Son and Spirit. Do thou fill me with worship to thee, one God in Trinity, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A prayer of mercy

O Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. O Lord who hast created me, by thy salvation make me whole, and by thy mercy show lovingkindness. For as thy giving is infinite, so also is thy forgiving, and although I am wounded in sin, yet may I become wounded with love for thee. I stand before thee a sinner, having practiced and invented evil, and I ask thee to heal the wounds and bruises of my soul, take away the burden of my sins, and restore me to life eternal. Great are my sins, and I cannot worthily lament them in grief, yet they are as nothing in the ocean of thy lovingkindnesses and mercies: for thy mercy is lovingkindness and thy lovingkindness is mercy. Do thou have mercy on me, a sinner. Amen.

A prayer of fire's destruction

O Lord, grant me watchfulness of soul: when there is a smouldering of sin, an unnoticeable flame the size of a fingertip, let it be extinguished then and there. Let me be ever watchful, and never wait for the fire to spread and grow larger before I seek to extinguish it. For thou, O Christ, canst extinguish even a fire that devoureth half of my house, and my goods with it: but let me learn watchfulness of fire, and extinguish fires when they are but a candle flame, but a smouldering wick: for why should I only put out fires when they have already devoured my substance? But do, thou O Lord, share with me out of thy substance, and let me return to thee as a prodigal if an inferno is raging, and let me return to thee as a prodigal if I play with a smouldering wick. Lord, save me from my lack of vigilant watchfulness when it seems enticing to play with the beginnings of Hellfire. O Lord, save me, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

A prayer for eyes on Heaven

O Lord, however much I struggle in ascesis, let contemplation be my goal. Let me seek first the Kingdom of God, and your perfect righteousness, and trust that all the other things that tempt me to seek them first will be given to me as well. Save me, O Lord, from activism: save me, O Lord, for contemplation. Save me, O Lord, from being too earthly minded to be of any earthly good, for living to transform the world by a secular plan: save me, O Lord, from this hydra which ever groweth new heads even when we would avoid it as spiritual poison. Help me, O Lord, to ever return my gaze to Heaven: if I cast my eyes down to undertake earthly plans seven times, let me return my gaze to higher things eight times: if I lower my gaze a thousand times, let me raise it up a thousand and once. Do thou protect and save me, and show me the path of life. Amen.

A prayer of noise

O Lord, deliver me from this intravenous drip of spiritual noise, this intravenous drip of noise that I need as little and as much as a drunkard needs one more drink. Deliver me from this drip that wears away even stone, this water torture that I will not live without. Deliver me from this spiritual din that keeps me from discovering spiritual silence: a treasure hidden in a field, that holds the joy of spiritual sobriety. Do thou grant me the silence of Heaven, and stillness in prayer. Christ God still my heart, with thine unoriginate Father and thy all-holy and life-giving Spirit.

A prayer in all things

Blessed art Thou, O God of our Fathers, and praised and glorified is thy name forever. I thank thee for all the good things thou hast given me in my life even unto this day, blessings of life and health, of food and drink, and things wherein I have no need and yet still have been blessed. Do thou have mercy on me, a sinner, and restore unto me the joy of thy salvation, and grant unto me an image of repentance and grace wherewith to worthily bear the cross Thou hast placed upon my shoulders and charged me. God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

A prayer of suffering

O Christ God, who without change became man, in whose holy and pure and lifegiving and passionless passion thou triumphedst and art become the firstborn of the dead: Grant to us, amidst our change and suffering to be changeless and without suffering, immovable in thy grace. Do thou grant us illumination in every darkness. Grant unto us, unworthy thou we be, thy whole salvation, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

A prayer of dust

O Lord, who hast created me from dust, make me ever mindful that to dust I shall return. Grant thou me humility in all things: humility towards thyself, that I may not tell thee, "No, Lord," humility towards other men and the world that I may not impose my wishes of what they may be over what God allows them to be, and humility towards that which is mine own that I may recognize that all mine are given by thee and not one thing that is mine is mine but that thou gavest it me. Help me make peace with things I would not have chosen, that even when I return to the ashes from which I was taken I shall accept from thy hand the cup thou givest me and return to thee in joy. Amen.

A prayer for protection

Deliver me, O Christ God, for I walk through the midst of many snares. For demons beset me, and I bear the stench of passion in my soul. But do thou grant me penitence from sin, deliverance from passion, and faithfulness in trust and obedience that the feeble audacity of the demons may be set at naught through the might of thine outstretched arm. Fence me about with the power of thy Cross by which thou triumphest over the hollow victory of darkness. Do thou watch my steps and keep mine eyes ever transfixed on thee. Amen.

A prayer of life

Give me thy Life, O Lord, and enlighten me with thy divine energies. Let my life be whole in all ways, and let me see thy Light. Have mercy on me in my sins, and rescue me from a world fallen twice: once as all men have fallen, and once again into a life moulded of plastic. Yea here and now let me live thy Life, and not some time I imagine in future circumstances; shew me thy glory and transfigure me. Lofty visions are beyond me: but in prayer and love for my neighbor allow me to participate in thy glory, thine eternal radiant splendor. In the name of the Father of Lights, and the Son who was transfigured, and the Holy Spirit who illuminest, amen.

A prayer for contentment

Lord, I beseech thee, teach me content. Teach me to be content with less; teach me that victory and triumph and wholeness come to those who take up their emptying cross even as Christ emptied himself, became man, then a servant, then emptied himself even unto death. Do thou work with me, not as I will, but as thou wilt. Amen.

A prayer for salvation from sin

O Lord and God and King, as thy mercy is immeasurable and thy forgiveness unsearchable, receive thou me, the chief of sinners. Pour out thy lovingkindness on my soul, and restore me unto thy righteousness, that the multitude of my sins and transgressions may be annihilated by thy holy mercy which be vast without measure, my wounds be healed, and the stench of my passions banished in thy fragrance forevermore. For thou art a merciful God, the God of sinners and penitent, and there is no sin that conquereth thy love to all men, nor is there found any sin which compareth to thine immeasurable lovingkindness, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, both now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

A prayer for help

Lord, help me! For evildoers surround me, and I am beset with snares round about. O Lord who hast created me, and hast summoned me to thee every day of my life even unto this day, look neither on my sluggishness nor procrastination, but receive this day as I turn to thee, and do thou grant me strength and humility to rely on whatever aid it beseemeth thee to send me, who turn to serve thee at the eleventh hour. Amen.

A prayer in loss

O Lord, who hast said, I am the Vine, and my Father is the Vinedresser: every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away, and every branch that beareth fruit he purgeth that it may bear even more fruit: Do thou purge me; help thou my unwillingness, for I know not the sovereign love wherein thou prunest away such things as I seek. Do thou comfort me even as I am purged, and grant me to trust thy faithfulness. Amen.

A prayer for a forgiving heart

O Lord, grant unto me an image of repentance and of forgiveness, and not to hold on to the memory of wrongs done to me. O Christ, who prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," pray that we might repay evil with good and pray for all who betray us, even as they know full well what they do in treachery and betrayal. Do thou help me, for I am small in heart and not wise in the ways of a forgiving heart. Help me, with thy Father and thy Holy Spirit. Amen.

A prayer of the most excellent way

O Lord, who dost grant to mankind out of thy bounty food and drink, and more than this penitence, prayer, and perseverance: let us ascend higher still to the vertues deiform and Heavenly. Beyond all prophecy and knowledge, let us grasp unto faith, hope, and love, each one a disposition of Heaven abiding in our hearts. O Lord Christ who hast shewen the most excellent way, with the Father and the Spirit of Love, do thou instill in our hearts faith, hope, and love. Amen.

The Royal Letters

My dear son;

About your last letter, all that you say is true, but the way it is put together is missing something profound.

You say, "Are we not royalty?" Yes, indeed, and there is more to say. We will judge angels. To be human is to be made in a royal image. The oil we are anointed with is cut from the same cloth as the sacred oil anointing prophets, priests, and kings. In English we can say "Sir" and in koine Greek the same word means "Mister" and "Lord." The royal gifts of the Magi, gold an emblem of kingship, frankincense an emblem of divinity, and myrrh an emblem of suffering, are given to Christ and in him extend to the Church. We are indeed royalty, and we are more than royalty.

Now moving on to your second question, "Am I pushing this too far?" That question from you has a guilty-feeling fear to it, awaiting for me to give the real correction. And my answer to that is certain. You are not pushing it too far; you are not pushing it far enough by half. You wonder about being addressed as Your Majesty, and it is my duty to inform Your Royal Highness of something buried in [the Ladder](#), when it says: "Some stand weaponless and without armor before the kings of earth, while others hold insignia of office, shields, and swords. The former are vastly superior to the latter since they are regularly the personal relations of the king and members of the royal household."

You stand weaponless and without armor, and wish for insignia, shield, and sword. You do not understand that you have more and pine for less. And I long for the day when you wish to be addressed, not as "Your Majesty," but as "you," with no insignia needed.

With love,
Your father, Oswald

My dear, dear son;

Regarding the question you raised in your last letter, I would remind you of the King of Kings.

Two of his disciples, who had been training for years, asked for as much royal honor as there was to have: to be seated at his right and left hand. And he tries to tell them that he doesn't get it. He, the King of Kings, will never wear royal purple on earth except when he is mocked and abused by brutal soldiers; he will never wear a crown except for a twisted crown of thorns. He asks them if they can bear the sufferings of his kingship, and they blindly assure them that they can. Then he holds an example up to them and says that whoever wishes to be great must be a servant and whoever wishes to be first must be the slave of all.

What people miss in their quest for honor is the greatest gem in the crown: humility. St. Dorotheos advises people to build up their spiritual houses with all different kinds of stone: a stone of prayer here, a stone of almsgiving there, a stone of courage still there. But humility is not one more stone; it is the slime which serves as mortar and cements everything together. And this royal dignity is the bedrock that people miss hoping for royal honors, for something to feed their narcissism. Real honor is not having your narcissism fed; it is humbly rejecting narcissism. Real, industrial strength royal honor is found in the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and God of Gods:

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.
Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. Who being

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

If you want to know where the glory at the end comes from, look nowhere but the humility at the beginning. If humility is good enough for Christ, let us not consider ourselves too good for it.

Your dearly affectionate father,
Oswald

My dear son Basil;

Now I wish to show you a more excellent way.

St. Athanasios wrote of the dignity of man in *On the Incarnation*: "You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honoured, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so it is with the King of all..." Pay attention to *how* St. Athanasios proclaims the dignity of the human race! The King of Kings is the King for whom every King in Heaven and earth is named. If there is a measure of truth to say that man is the king and priest of Creation, this is because we are created in God's image, and it is the fullness of Truth to know Christ God as King and Lord. It is no accident and no error that the prayers of the Church address God as King, for such he is, incomparably more than any man on earth. Men and kings are as the moon with its reflected light; Christ God is the original Sun, shining in its full glory. If it is a wonder to know men as kings, incomparably greater is it to know Christ God as King

of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The [Revelation to St. John](#) tells of glorious creatures at the height of creature glory: "And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold... The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that lives for ever and ever..." My dear Basil, you are a king, and I hope that Your Majesty can throw his crown before the throne of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Writing with deepest fatherly affection,
Your father,
Oswald

From Russia, with Love

A Spiritual Guide to Surviving Political and Economic Disaster

Holy Russia and Holy America

It may be jolting to American Christians, at least, to speak of "Holy Russia". It smacks of a bad kind of patriotism, and it invites the same kind of response that has some devout U.S. Christians answer "God bless America!" by saying, "America, bless God!", or "God bless America... and China... and Guatemala... and Ghana... and..." Why besides the wrong kind of patriotism would some writers speak of "Holy Russia"?

The earliest story among the "founding legends" of U.S. national consciousness were of devout, faith-filled, and profoundly moral pilgrims leaving England to practice their faith on what would become U.S. soil. Before the Boston Tea Party, before the cry of, "No taxation without representation!" or the shot heard round the world, before any other legendary event is the story of *pilgrims* seeking to live their faith as purely as they could. Do the legends give us reason to speak of the U.S. as holy land? The devout American Evangelicals I know wouldn't dream of it: when they say "holy lands", they very clearly mean, "the lands of Christ and the Bible." It wouldn't occur to them to use the term "holy land" to mean "land of the pilgrims' pride" or the lands of history like the Great Awakening.

But you are missing something about Christ if you think his Incarnation is limited to when his Mother conceived him; the Incarnation of Christ unfurls in his saints, and the purpose of becoming Christian is to become a little Christ. and become by grace what God is by nature.

Equally, you are missing something about holy land if you think that Christ by living on land may make it holy, but Christians cannot do anything like this. The prolonged effect of many saints over many years is to lift their land up to God, and the Gospel that reaches out to the whole earth is a Gospel that can raise the whole earth up to God. When you understand that Christ lives in the faithful, then you see why holy land unfurls to be where Christ lives through his saints and does not stop with the list of places Christ visited personally.

Orthodoxy in the U.S. has its own "[patron saints of this blessed land](#)", and this is an excellent start. Russia has had Orthodox saints for over a millennium, and its list of saints is all but innumerable. There are Russian patriots who would agree that the communist government was godless, but the other side of what it showed in its attacks on Russian Orthodox Church was how tough a Church there was to "need" such attacks and still not be killed: National Socialism in the Third Reich killed more than ten million Jews and other unfortunates, and socialism in the U.S.S.R. killed more than a hundred million Orthodox Christians and other unfortunates: socialist persecution in the Soviet Union created more Christian martyrs than in, ultimately, the rest of history put together. And that dearly costly witness means that even the Soviet persecutions left a river of martyrs' blood to sanctify Russian soil. "Holy Russia," made holy by saints living as faithful monks and made holy by saints dying as faithful martyrs. Christ unfurls in their stories.

There are profound differences between Russia and the U.S.; any number of books could explore the differences. But there are also some similarities, and not just the profound similarities of shared humanity. There were some eerie similarities when I read about educated "progress" in Russia that was ever so much more sophisticated and enlightened than the country's backwards religious roots. The similarity to things I had grown up with in the U.S. was almost spooky.

One person surveyed a religion poll and tried to play down the exaggerated claim oddly shared by U.S. militant atheists and militant fundamentalists: "American religious roots are being rapidly abandoned," a drum that has been beating nonstop since the days of the Puritans.

Notwithstanding this claim, the person argued from the religion poll that there has never been a nation as Christian as America today: America today, he explicitly argued, is more Christian than Israel is Jewish or Utah is Mormon. Maybe people veer more towards "spirituality" and less towards "religion", and maybe there are twenty things conservative Evangelicals wince at: but to someone who said, "You have a rather, um, inclusive definition of 'Christian'," the author might well respond, "You have a rather inclusive definition of 'not Christian at all'." And, even if Orthodox may wince at this, devout American Evangelicals do have a sense of "Either you're in Special Forces or you're not really a patriot at all." Perhaps no nation ever has satisfied the devout for religious commitment, but if we can call India a Hindu nation, Turkey a Muslim nation, and Italy a Catholic nation even though none of these are theocracies, maybe it's missing the point to say, "America is not a Christian nation, at least not today. It's not a theocracy, for starters, and it's not nearly religious enough to satisfy the religious right." That's not the *point*.

Someone else has said, "If India is the most religious nation on earth, and Sweden is the least religious nation on Earth, then the U.S. is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes." There is a grain of truth there, and it is a grain of truth reminiscent of Russia as it was engulfed with socialism. Russia, too, was a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes, and it has been a long and difficult struggle for Russia's Indians to start regaining ground.

There are other spiritual similarities; Russia's story does not begin with socialism. To Russians, nineteenth century Russia may be a proverbial golden age, spoken of as some Orthodox theologians speak of the fourth century and its Christological victories, or as Protestants might speak of the days of the Reformation. On the Orthodox humor site [The Onion Dome](#), the loving caricature of Fr. Vasily habitually derides proposals by saying, "Was [*such-and-such proposal*] in nineteenth century Russia?" (The obvious answer was no, and if it wasn't to be found in nineteenth century Russia, the implication was that Orthodox Christians have no need for it.) But some Orthodox in the gulag—I think in particular of [Fr. Arseny](#)—explained the terrors all about them as a divine chastisement for Russia's arrogance in the nineteenth century.

Russia fell when it was struck because it was rotted from within.

We speak today of the global economic crisis. The word *crisis* comes from the Greek word for judgment, and we are in a moral and spiritual crisis that comes from seeking treasures on earth and ignoring treasures in Heaven, a charge I am guilty of too. We believe in a high and rising standard of living, and here in America we will mortgage our future if it will only let us try to keep our standard of living for now. And that is the kind of rottenness from within that leaves us vulnerable to blows. Or one kind; there are others.

50 Things You Can Do Even If the Writing Is on the Wall

As I write, some U.S. journalists have started to say, "We really like our President, but we still have big problems as a country."

Expecting socialism to neatly give us we want is, perhaps, naïve: but it is not my main intent to ask people to read the introduction to [The Black Book of Communism](#), or to organize a crusade to straighten out Washington. I would rather talk about what we as people can do if more trouble happens.

Out of the many saints in Russia, God did not stop the concentration camps, but he was at work, in his saints, *in* the concentration camps. It may seem strange to say that Heaven could be present in socialist concentration camps—horrid camps where Hitler sent observers for guidance and inspiration, for the camps planned for Jews—but there were saints sent to those socialist camps, and those saints brought Heaven with them, because Heaven is there wherever God's saints live and die in faithfulness and prayer. Think I'm being a bit too poetic and unreal? [Read about a devout priest who was sent to concentration camps with all manner of painful realities, and brought Heaven with him in the death camps.](#)

The Orthodox Church has great experience living under adverse circumstances, and it is simply not the case that the Church can only function normally in easy times. When St. Constantine ended Roman persecutions against the Church, some saints complained because times had become easy: hard times adorn the Church with martyrs, and what do soft times offer that compares with that? The Church may be stronger under some persecution than when everything goes our way. We may be in for more of a rough ride, and the bad news is that there may be no way to escape it to live normal life. But the good news is that there is an *alternative* to trying to escape it: we can live normal life *in* the rough ride. Orthodoxy is a way of living normally in a hard world.

What I most want to do in this piece is share some of what the Orthodox Church has lived under socialism. There could be significance in the fact that one of the patron saints of America was born in Russia, came over to America and ministered among some very poor people, and then returned to Russia and became the first priest to be martyred under the socialists: [St. John Kochurov](#). Orthodoxy in Russia has had a lot of opportunity to learn to live under socialism.

Here are **50 things you can do even if the writing is on the wall:**

1. Don't believe spam.

Don't believe spammers (and other advertisers) who offer ads of a classy-looking watch that will make you happy and contented. Asking a watch to make you *either* of these things is like asking a stone to lay an egg or using gasoline to extinguish a fire. Watches can tell time and maybe do other things, but *no* watch can make you permanently happy.

If you try to buy a watch to make you content, a nice-looking "replica luxury watch" will only feel good for so long; then you'll need the real thing, or think you do, until your discontent grows and you want something you can't get like a watch that is worth as much as your car. But even if you could get it, there would be more standing between you and happiness than not having enough money to keep indulging yourself. You would still be discontent—until you got a watch worth as much as a good house, or maybe a collection of exotic watches, or maybe some super-special watch that ought to be in a museum. But still you won't be content; you'll be less content than when spammers told you you needed a replica watch to live well. And, for that matter, even if you had the money to indulge that fancy, you will paradoxically be less content with a unique, handmade, multi-million-dollar Swiss watch than you were with that first almost-convincing "replica" watch sold to you by a spammer. Trying to get more and more things that will make you happy doesn't work. As far as the game of being happy by owning a good enough watch goes, *the only way to win this game is not to play at all.*

2. The Bible says, "In humility consider others better than yourself," and it really would have been a lot easier if it said, "Be grateful to God for making you superior." Or at least *I* would have found it easier, at least if an exception were made for me.

But these offensive words conceal a treasure. When I am full of myself, I find it difficult to enjoy and appreciate others. Nietzsche thought of most others as scum and slime and could not enjoy their company. But humility is more than not being so full of yourself; it is a key to enjoying others.

In terms of difficult co-workers, [Fr. Arseny](#) lived in a concentration camp where the food was rancid (and tasted like kerosene), there was not nearly enough of it, and some of the people assigned to be his co-workers were hardened criminals (one liked card games where the loser paid with his life, and tried to have him killed). And yet reading his story is not a morose pity party, but a tale of a saint's triumph. *And* Fr. Arseny lived with profound respect for his nasty co-workers and the people in charge of the camp, and found some spark of beauty, some reflection of God, in even the most blackened soul. And his tale is profoundly uplifting.

He knew the secret of in humility considering others better than himself. And he lived a joy unlocked by many holy keys, *including* a humility that lived respect for others.

3. Share.

There was one woman who posted a note to a forum I read, saying that after being distressed that she could not find work, she began volunteering and, if she had no money to give, gave her time to others. There is a seed of the Kingdom of Heaven in her response, and also a seed of how people survived the Great Depression.

I do not say that you should share a big gift that will make things all better. It is better to try starting off by giving a dollar or two when you know it is inadequate: if you can easily write a big cheque that will completely solve a problem, God may not really be ~~working through you. Far from feeling a godlike power to put an end~~

working through you. Far from feeling a godlike power to put an end to suffering, most doctors feel powerless in the face of real suffering. (Are we more powerful than doctors?) But what about going to church and putting a dollar or two in the collection plate, even or especially if you cannot afford it, or if you do have a job, bring a meal—nothing fancy, a cheap meal is fine—to a friend or neighbor who cannot find work?

What brought a lot of people through the Great Depression was pulling together: in a situation where people could not live separate lives, dependent on wealth and independent from others, people pulled together and even if they had less, shared the little they had—as some people are doing, and discovering, today.

"He saved others, but he cannot save himself" is a definition of the Kingdom of Heaven, and some people who have been stripped of the treasures of wealth—no one-person cars, no fancy meals in restaurants, no iPhones and consumer electronics—have grown so poor that they have moved on to *real* treasures, the treasures of God, and communities pulling together, of love and service to others. (The best things in life are free!) They have been, perhaps, like children whose parents pulled them away from their beloved mud pies until it dawns on them that the reason their parents took them away from their mud pies wasn't cruelty at *all*—it was a vacation better than Disneyland.

4. Take the worst parking spot.

I remember a poster which encouraged people to "take the worst parking spot," out of a concern for physical health: if you are going to drive rather than walk, a minute or two extra walking is worth it. But taking the worst parking spot can also be excellent for our *spiritual* health. And our survival.

We often take as much luxury as we can have. And we are softened by it: we get new conveniences, and we find that we need them. Part of a good preparation for disaster is to wean ourselves, or at least try to weaken our dependency just a little. We become more independent even if we still use them.

What can we do besides take the worst parking spot? We can wear clothing we don't like, for one day only, or spend a weekend without touching a computer, or use desktop computers but leave our smartphones at home. The Orthodox ways of fasting from certain foods are in part a way to take the worst parking spot: the principle is, "Foods have their place but I want to be more spiritually independent and less ruled by my belly." It may be much more than this, but there is a core principle that is not only good for spiritual health when times are easy, but good for survival when times are hard.

How could you stretch your spiritual muscles? What could you do to "take the worst parking spot?"

5. Remember that life neither begins at 18 nor ends at 30.

In older Russian tradition (and, for that matter, older American tradition), children are held very dearly, and elders are held dearly too. One hears a lament that the Russian Orthodox Church has seminaries to form priests but no such schooling to make its devout old women. These elders are not looked on as has-beens but as treasurehouses.

One (American) friend has said that one decision that he has *never* regretted was that, for the last two years of his grandmother's life, he wrote her a letter each week. After she passed away, he learned that she kept the stack of his letters close by, in her bedstand.

If hard times strike, we will not be able to afford to segregate ourselves by age and market segment.

6. Live real life in a virtual world.

There are many good uses for technology: perhaps the good uses have no exotic sizzle, but technology has been used to support human life: the letter mentioned above uses the full technology of a postal system, online libraries make classic books available, forums work very well for certain discussions and cars and watches have

work very well for certain discussions, and cars and watches have their uses.

But using technology to escape basic spiritual discipline—I will elaborate shortly—is like using whisky to chase your blues away. However attractive it may seem, it will bite you in the end.

Using technology to anaesthetize boredom—to have the chatter of the TV on, or always be texting when you have time to kill—is using technology to avoid feeling uncomfortable and maybe practicing a little spiritual discipline. Something deep in older Russian tradition (but not really foreign to older American tradition) is the discipline of silence, a discipline of life without added distractions. It may be hard to explain what the advantage is of not carrying around distractions to anaesthetize boredom, but we grow in silence, and trying to become a mature and rounded person without working through waiting and silence (sometimes *uncomfortable* waiting and silence) is like trying to be healthy without cutting back on junk food or making a deliberate attempt to exercise consistently.

Today it is an exotic storybook image to ride a horse or live "in harmony with nature" in an old rural village where you saw peasants and a priest, guildsmen and maybe a knight; not long from now it may be a faroff, exotic storybook image to meet most of your friends face or show the harmony of nature to go in person to a university where people come face-to-face to study, teach, and learn like scholars had since medieval times, or work at a quaint "company" where telecommuting is not yet the norm. The ancient reality of face-to-face community *may* become more exotic than riding horses, but it is profoundly more important.

Growing spiritually has never been easy, but it's harder when technology makes it easier to dodge foundational lessons in the spiritual life. But the solution needs to go beyond what technologies we do and do not use. It is not about not-technology. It is about God; the stories of the saints are not stories about how most of them lived before our cherished technologies, but about how they lived and grew in the divine life. It is about their love for their neighbor, about

their prayer, and yes, about their letting go of luxuries: but one hardly walks away impressed with how deprived they were, any more than one learns of the struggles, training and victory of an Olympic gold medalist and says, "Wow, there was one deprived athlete!"

Virtual life is always at our fingertips, but the door to real life is and ever shall be open to us, whether our life is easy or hard.

7. Don't be a cowboy.

The U.S., more than most nations in history, has a rebel for its hero: a Western never has a tight-knit band of warriors sharing the limelight, but a lone, solitary cowboy. Its religious roots are Protestant, not really Catholic and far less Orthodox. And it's not just Protestants who may have more than a streak of the Independent Christian: the expression "American Catholic" has connotations of a sort of Burger King "Have it your way!" version of Catholicism where people announce, "Hi. I'll have an order of ritual, hold the guilt and authority, with a side of feeling extra special, and could we make it a bit more progressive?" This mentality is simply not helpful. There may be enough points of contact between, for instance, older Russian tradition and older American tradition, but being a cowboy Christian simply does not cut it.

Finding a good Orthodox parish can be hard, but it's worth it. A great many things about the spiritual walk are hard enough *with* the support of a good parish and priest—but much harder without.

8. Pray the [Psalms](#).

I had read through a couple of Shakespeare plays and simply not connected, and then went to a live performance of a play and was riveted. When I asked a Shakespeare-loving friend for his thoughts, he explained, "With due respect to my friends in the English department, Shakespeare (or at least most Shakespeare; I don't mean his sonnets) is not *literature*." I looked at him in puzzlement until he continued. "It's *drama*." That is, *Romeo and Juliet* is not in its living and dynamic form when it is read like a novel, but when it is

performed as live drama. Something like this is true for the Psalms: they are in their living and dynamic form not when they are merely read, but when they are prayed, chanted, or sung. And I know I've made the mistake of merely reading them when I should have been *praying* them.

The Psalms offer up the whole human life to the Lord: everything from exultant glory and thanksgiving to, "[My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?](#)" And I know that I, at least, don't know them well enough. I've done a couple of things; besides reading them, I have created the [Psalm Picker](#), which pulls a random Psalm each time you visit. It's something I made in the first place, not for other people, but first and foremost to help myself. There's also [the whole book of Psalms in the Powered Access Bible](#). And a trusty paper Bible is even better.

I hope to pray the Psalms more.

9. Make peace with death, and remember the fact that you will die.

Unlike Russian culture, either ancient or modern, American culture is in strong denial about death. Our medical system does not just prevent (or, rather, *postpone*) death; it hides it when it happens, and death is more off-camera than in most societies. There is a great, often unspoken, collective effort to avoid unpleasant reminders that (if the Lord tarries) each one of us will die. Denial is rarely a helpful way of coping with life or with death.

There is an alternative, and one can ultimately live one's whole life preparing to die. This is not morbid: if every moment brings us to death, it is unreal and therefore morbid to try to live as if this were not the case. Dying each day means in part not only realizing that our bodies will not live forever, and even that our bodies are aging day by day, but it also means dying to have our way: as in the Rolling Stones song, "You can't always get what you want." It is a dying that day-by-day gives birth to maturity and spiritual resurrection. And *this* is how we can avoid recoiling from aging and death as horrors we are trying to dodge: death, as well as life, is like a thistle: touch it timidly and it

will prick you, but grab it boldly, and its spines will crumble in your grasp. When Christ drank his cup to the dregs, there was no bitterness left in the cup: only resurrection that would trample death by death. Few of us get quite *that* far along while we are alive. Still, an imperfect job of facing death with resolve and acceptance is better than a perfect job of sticking your head in the sand. Whether we will die in gruesome circumstances or pass away peacefully in old age, we are all headed towards the grave that holds beggars and kings alike. Today is a good day to begin dying, to die to our self-will and graspingness, to die to how we would like to run the world, and to make peace with the fact that none of us will live forever and triumph over it in that peace. Our triumph comes by accepting it, not by running away from the thought, and if this is a difficult thing that takes years to accept, we might as well begin making peace with death now.

10. Read **from** the *Philokalia* ([Volume 1](#), [volume 2](#), [volume 3](#), [volume 4](#)).

The Philokalia is a classic anthology that has been very influential in Orthodoxy in recent years: the more recent classic [The Way of a Pilgrim](#) shows the place the *Philokalia* holds in the heart of Russian piety.

When I was an Evangelical, some of the biggest excitement we had was when we discovered something about how the spiritual life works, or where we read something that had its finger on the pulse of how spiritual life works. And I would add to both of those, "because both of them were something like the *Philokalia*." The *Philokalia* is not the only Orthodox theology and is not the only kind of spiritual writing out there, but it is, more than anything else I've read, the "science" of spiritual struggle and spiritual growth towards contemplation.

I don't want to give a heavy reading assignment, or give the sense that you must read the *Philokalia* cover to cover if you're serious. Many people would be better to dip into it now and then—or, even better, have sections suggested by a good priest (which is

probably more like how it was first used than simply reading it cover to cover). But a little bit each day can be very valuable, and I would underscore my remark that it is the "science" of spiritual struggle and growth.

11. Say, "Thank you!" But not like they do in *The Secret*.

For people who are not satisfied with their current clunker and wish they had a really nice car, the popular New Age book *The Secret* encourages people to imagine they were wrapping their hands around the leather steering wheel of a top-notch luxury car, and say "Thank you!" for the car they were attracting to themselves.

The Secret really does encourage saying "Thank you!" but never does it suggest we might say "Thank you!" for the things we already have: certainly the book never suggests that if we are dissatisfied with a regular car that works quite well, we might say "Thank you!" for the car we already have. And they seem to be pretty safe in their assumption that the reader who is invited to drool over a luxury car will not protest, "But I already have a car that works. Can't I say 'Thank you!' for the car that I have?"

All of us have a habit of being ungrateful. There was one time when I was a graduate student who had to choose between paying for medical care and paying for books, but many people who heard of my salary (a bit below \$15000) would be astonished and wish their village could have some fraction of that much wealth to share. And as the case may be, I *survived*. That's something to be thankful for, along with much bigger things: the love of friends, talents and virtues with which to love and serve, the grace of God, and a Heaven that begins in this life and is perfected in the next. There are any number of graces large and small, from being saved from a nasty situation, to eating for one more day, to that daily comic strip or funny story from a friend, to a pleasant chat with a loved one, to the pile of dirty clothes that belong to someone with more than one change of clothing. It is a profound mistake to think that if we lose our wealth we lose all that we have to be grateful for. Life may be harder. Indeed, it may be so hard that we start to appreciate how much we

still have to be grateful for!

We can thank God by praying aloud through Psalms and liturgical prayers (such those in the [Jordanville prayer book](#)), by keeping our eyes open to what we have to be grateful for and inwardly thanking God when we recognize a blessing, by spending time to "count your blessings," and by sharing with others out of grateful recognition of what we have received as gifts we have not earned.

12. Don't live for activism: live for sonship.

The Renaissance *magus* lived to transform the world, and the *magus* is the grandfather of the Western idea that it is worthy to transform the world. In the *magus's* eyes, society as it exists then and now is just a rather pitiable raw material which gains value when the *magus* starts improving it. The *magus* is also grandfather to statism and grand social programs: the idea that whatever problems a society may have, the solution is for the government to fix it.

The 19th century Russian great Nicolas Federov said, "Our social program is the Trinity." It may take some strained imagining to see the the Trinity as another secular program to improve society, but that's *almost* the point. The insight could also be restated, "If you look at the Trinity and think that a Church with the Trinity additionally needs a social program as well, you don't get it." In that sense Orthodox saying "Our social program is the Trinity." is like Amish saying, "Our medical system is a lifetime of hard exercise and healthy food," or devout Evangelicals saying "Our juvenile correctional system is families applying love and discipline to our children."

There are saints who have transformed the world, but this was a side effect of their seeking a life of sonship before God. To pick a Protestant example, one of the Wesleys believed that there were Christians, and then there were super-Christians, and then they were missionaries. So he crossed land and sea to be a missionary, and failed completely. He finally returned home as a defeated failure, and

while he was on the ship there was a tremendous storm. He heard the sound of singing from the deck, and when he asked the Christians on deck why they were singing in this deadly storm, they simply said that they believed in God. And the terrified Wesley broke down and wept. And after he had hit rock bottom, God used him as a tremendous force in American Christianity, but not before. Even if God did want to make a mark on the world through him, it was not nearly so important as having that Wesley sit at the Lord's feet in sonship. I know it is a tough lesson, but if God is at work with you, he will wait for you to flounder through your plans as an instrument to change the world for however long it takes for you to let go of them and approach him, not as a mere *instrument*, but as a *son*, and work out of sonship.

Sonship is a theme that may or may not be hit on today (not just because it may be seen as politically incorrect), but it is woven through the Bible. The New Testament does not just talk about the Son of God; it also talks about the sons of God, and there is an ancient maxim that the Son of God became a man that men might become the sons of God. Don't live for a secular transformation of the world; live to let God transform you in sonship. Anything else is putting the cart before the horse, and it's hard to be practical and get a horse to keep pushing a cart in a straight line!

13. Empty yourself of noise.

All of the Christian walk is a walk of being emptied; to become of like mind with Christ is to empty yourself ([Philippians 2:5-11 RSV](#)):

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should

bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Other things in Orthodoxy involve emptying yourself (humility, for instance, or chastity), but here I would like to talk about emptying oneself of idle noise. The idea that idle chatter is something to avoid is not obvious because noise is indispensable to our way of life. We have not only noise in conversation and technology, but inner noise.

My priest has said more than once that when we are praying, we should not strive to have *good* thoughts, however good, but *no* thoughts. Heaven is silent, without our worrying and plans and schemes to have things our way, and a saint is not someone who has nothing to worry about or who has very good plans and has God's blessing on those plans, but someone in whom the silence of Heaven has taken root.

The place for this silence is not sometime in the future when, maybe, we imagine we will have nothing to worry about: it is now. There will always be something to worry about, but the [Sermon on the Mount](#) with its "Do not worry" does not say, "Here is how you should live life if everything goes your way," but "Here is how to live life now, in the situation you are in here and now."

I write this as a worrier who has just begun to experience the peace and silence of Heaven.

14. Mind more than what you eat.

The U.S. has been called a "toxic environment" for weight: it's not just supersized meals that make it easy, easy, easy to eat more than is good for you.

But what isn't talked about is that the toxic environment is more than oversized food portions: the toxic environment is in us, and if we understand it simply as a battle of willpower, we have *already*

lost. Perhaps you have bent over to uproot a weed and pulled until you almost strained yourself because you had not imagined what a root system that tiny-looking weed had. Overeating has a remarkably deep root system.

Do you watch a lot of television, for instance? What I am interested in here is not that the human body burns fewer calories watching television than sleeping; it is that, even if food is never even *mentioned*, watching television feeds the root system of overeating. Or are you big into fantasy? Playing obscure games? Chances are that you aren't a big TV watcher, but this feeds the root of the problem as well. Or are you interested in the occult? Do you read a lot of romance novels? Do you dally around with SecondWife? *Guess what?* You're doing the same thing.

"*Foul!*" I expect to hear: "*It's none of your business!*" And perhaps it isn't my business, personally, but this has every relevance to what we have to do if we are really going to uproot this weed.

The common thread running through all of these things—and more—is that they are different kinds of medication to provide a painkiller for our life. And if we want a painkiller to adjust life, we want it for all of our life: someone who wants a painkiller for constant backaches wants the pain to be continuously medicated away, not just every once in a while. This basic habit is one we can use with different drugs, and one of them is food. If we treat existence as something to medicate, and look for things to medicate it, then we may use food to medicate it—and it's awfully hard to say no to the pleasure of food, and staying in it as long as we can, if life is something we want medicated away.

This is what is missing if you are only told how many calories to take from what food groups and what food to avoid. If you are trying to use food and other things to medicate life, continuing in that basic attitude while trying to cut back is a nasty game: the only way to win that game is not to play at all. Not that it is easy to uproot the whole root system: trying to reject and progressively uproot using things like food to medicate is not an easy game at all. But it is a game that

can be won, and the prize is much better than a smaller waistline.

We're obsessed with waistlines. But the biggest cost of eating too much is *not* what it does to your waistline, but to your immortal spirit: people who indulge too deeply in physical sweetness lose the ability to enjoy or even seek spiritual sweetness. The lie that traps is to think that good is a way of delivering pleasure that happens to nourish the body. The truth that frees is to know that food is a way to nourish the body that happens to deliver pleasure. And there is more than this.

Fasting is good, but eating is a much more powerful good. One Orthodox bishop, in a place where there are many faithful but shockingly few clergy, gave advice to a community that rarely had a priest. He said two things:

- Keep meeting together.
- Eat together.

Family eating around a table is a powerful thing. Friends eating together is a powerful thing. Table fellowship is a powerful good, and we have not progressed because we have moved to individual meals fried in microwaves.

And this is leaving out the greatest meal of all. The Orthodox teaching is clear: Adam and Eve lost paradise by eating, and we are called back to paradise by eating. The Eucharist is the one sacrament from which every other sacrament flows, and it blesses our whole lives.

The ultimate alternative to a life that is medicated away is a life offered to God, and received back, under the brilliant, blazing shadow of the Eucharist. The unspoken command of "Do not escape" is not given to us for misery, but joy, given that we may find the paradise, here where God has put us, rather than in a doomed effort to escape. "Eucharist" comes from the Greek for thanksgiving, and it is a life unlocked by thanksgiving and in touch with the many things it can be thankful. The "bad" news is that you can't escape, but the

It can be thankful. The bad news is that you can't escape, but the good news is that you don't need to.

15. Don't live by throwing things away. Or at least cut back a bit. Living in a disposable world is not good for us, and it's definitely not going to help if disaster strikes.

One Ukrainian friend who immigrated to the U.S. wrote about defeating clutter, writing that her more Spartan husband, who is Russian, purchased few things, but then chose good quality items that was built to last. And this relates, perhaps somewhat strangely, to what another friend said about buying clothing: don't buy a shirt at Navy Pier because, however fashionable it may be, the shirt will wear out quickly. Just go to a second-hand store, and find something that may well "work like iron" because the clothing, even if it is second-hand, was made a time when clothing was *not* made to wear out. These two people's attitudes, of "Don't buy much, but buy high quality" and "Don't buy your clothes at Navy Pier: shop at second-hand stores" have a lot more in common than you might think.

The U.S. economy works by having people buy things more often, and part of this is that things are meant to break down (or go out of fashion, or become obsolete, or...). The disposable mindset is deeply enough rooted that even if Orthodox Christians really try to avoid throwing away "prophora" (bread that has been blessed), there is nothing like an Orthodox Jewish seminary practice of burying paper in a Jewish cemetery if it has the Divine Name or part of the Mosaic Law written on it. When we need to dispose of worn-out icons, we bury them according to canon law, but it is common practice to print bulletins with maybe an icon on the front and some bit of liturgy or Scripture inside, created to be used once and then thrown away. This is a major red flag.

One joke tells of a couple of students who wanted to try out marriage, for as long as they both shall love. And a professor who had warned them about treating marriage as something you can throw away *did* attend the wedding—and gave the gift of paper plates. A lot more is "disposable" in American culture than just paper

plates: we have disposable relationships, disposable personal philosophies, disposable jobs and careers. We assign a shelf life to almost everything. It is true that if the economy comes to a grinding halt, a stack of paper plates won't last very long. But we have other problems with disposable relationships, beliefs, and the like if disaster strikes. It's not just that, in a depression, disposable plates are a luxury you cannot afford: disposable relationships are a luxury you cannot afford, too, even more than disposable plates. Disposable relationships aren't exactly good for us even in good times, but then there's at least the illusion we can afford such luxuries. In a disaster we do not have even *that* illusion.

We need places to take root and deepen. Even warts have something to give to us: it is a mistake to think that saying we need to take root with people and communities is the same as saying that they will always be perfect. It has been said that a person knows the meaning of life when he plants a tree with the full knowledge that he will never live to sit in its shadow. That may be beyond most of us, but we can all strive for a little more permanency each day, each week, each month, each year, each decade.

16. Rethink harmony with nature.

In [Exotic Golden Ages and Restoring Harmony with Nature](#), I wrote about restoring some bygone age:

Here is what you might do one day to live a bit more like prehistoric Grecians, or ancient Celts, or medieval Gallic peasants, or whatever. Keep in mind that this is at best half-way to its goal, not a full-fledged return to living like an ancient in harmony with nature to a day, but making a rough equivalent by using what is closest from our world:

1. However exotic the setting may seem to you, remember that it is a fundamental confusion to imagine that the setting was exotic *to those inside the experience*. We not only meet new people frequently; we see new technologies invented frequently. In The Historic Setting,

people most likely were born, lived, and died within twenty miles, and even meeting another person who was not part of your village was rare. A new invention, or a new idea, would be difficult to imagine, let alone point to. So, for one day, whatever you're doing, if it feels exotic, avoid it like the plague. Stop it immediately. Don't read anything new; turn off your iPod; don't touch Wikipedia. Don't seek excitement; if anything, persevere in things you find boring.

2. Remembering that there was a lot of heavy manual labor, and stuff that was shared, spend your nice Saturday helping a friend move her stuff into her new apartment. Remember that while stairs were rare in antiquity, it would be an anachronism to take the elevator. Be a good manual laborer and do without the anachronism.
3. Remembering how the Sermon on the Mount betrays an assumption that most people were poor enough that houses would only have one room, spend your time at home, as much as possible, in one room of your house.
4. Remembering that the ancient world had no sense of "Jim's trying to lose weight and is on an old-fashioned low-fat diet, Mary's a vegan, Al's low carb...", but rather there was one diet that everybody day ate, go to McDonald's, order a meal with McDonald's McFries McSoaked in McGrease, and a sugary-sweet, corn-syrup-powered shake.

If you just said to yourself, "He didn't say what size; I'll order the smallest I can," order the biggest meal you can.

5. Remembering that in the ancient world the company you kept were not your eclectic pick, spend time with the people around you. Go to your neighbor Ralph who blares bad '80s rock because he thinks it's the best thing in the world, and like a good guest don't criticize what your host has provided—including his music. Spend some time playing board games with your annoying kid sister, and

then go over to visit your uncle Wally and pretend to tolerate his sexist jokes.

6. Lastly, when you head home do have a good night's sleep, remember that a bed with sheets covering a smooth mattress was only slightly more common than a Frank Lloyd Wright home is today, go to sleep on a straw pallet in your virtual one room house. (You can use organic straw if you can find any.)

This may seem, to put it politely, a way you would never have thought to live like an age in harmony with nature. But let me ask a perfectly serious question:

What *did* you expect? Did you imagine dressing up as a bard, dancing on hilltops, and reciting poetry about the endless knot while quaffing heather ale?

When we think of "harmony with nature", we often associate it with some exotic experience: it's like getting out of the office and going camping on vacation. Or maybe something more exotic and special than that. The idea that chores could be a form of harmony with nature—even the chores associated with technology and luxury—is almost inconceivable.

But there is a truer and deeper harmony with nature in a trip to the grocery or hardware store than an adventure vacation. One LinkedIn question was quite perceptive: it noted that in other days people hunted or gathered or farmed their food, and people's relationship to nature was not an extra, but the core of how life itself worked. Now it is an add-on and a special luxury: if we fish for our food on vacation, it is never simply how we can get food. It's almost like Wii warriors meticulously donning period-accurate athletic garb and playing frisbee as a full-fledged historical re-enactment, like a Civil War re-enactment.

There is a reason parents have assigned chores, and not just because the chores needed to get done. Persevering through chores instead of always having your way helps children grow to be mature

instead of always having your way helps children grow to be mature adults and not be spoiled brats. And it has a connection to the more ancient understanding of being in accord with nature, a deeper understanding that ultimately reached into virtue. (Not to mention that it's just a little bit more like what living off the land was like when there was no alternative!)

It may be that if something seems hollow about robotic pets (if not vampiric), it has something to do with a pet that needs no chores from you—no feeding when you don't feel like it, no arrangements if you are going to leave town, no cleaning out the litterbox. Your pet is there when you want to give it attention, but you can ignore it whenever you want. It is a pet on your terms, and it is entirely at your disposal. And it doesn't compare to the old-fashioned kind of puppy that whines when you want to leave it alone, misbehaves, and is alive enough to need you to do chores.

Learn to love your chores.

17. Don't have all your experiences made for you.

One of the computer professions that has been on the rise is "user experience", which is not exactly about getting the basics to work or even making things be friendly, but about creating a smooth and enchanting experience. This isn't just a computer thing: music, for instance, or movies have their own user experiences, but this sort of thing has been neglected with computers and is now coming into the limelight.

I've read a fair amount about user experience, but one article today drew my attention to something of a spiritual bad smell. It talked about "user enchantment" as a better way of looking at things than "user experience," and to explain the red flag, I would like to talk about experience and enchantment in Orthodox liturgy.

For many people, a first visit to an Orthodox Church may be an enchanting experience. Things look strange (dare I say *mystical*?): liturgy is chanted, there are pictures all around that may not look anything else they have seen, and different things happen. And this is

just on a material level. But for all this, the experience has things that a user experience professional aiming for enchantment would wince at. In many parishes, most people stand, and your first time standing for over an hour brings pain to your legs and back. And, if you come more than once or twice and want it to be exotic, you will find that it's not that exotic after a while. If you look for an experience that will simply be like Disneyland, you will almost certainly be disappointed.

Something about the pictures is hard to see. If you look at them in the hope that they will be normal pictures, you will be disappointed: the pictures look awkward and oddly proportioned, and that impression may last a while. What you may not guess at is that after something has happened, there is something in the pictures, or rather *icons*, that goes much deeper than famous oil paintings in museums. The icons are *windows of Heaven*, something like a fantasy portal or a time machine, or a meeting-place, and something *alive*. Heaven and earth meet there, and the reason that people do things with icons—offer kisses, for instance—is that they are not just a picture to look at on a wall, any more than an open doorway to the outside world is simply a tall picture of the world outside. But it takes spiritual sight to see this, and despite the images I have used, the experience is not exotic like getting swept off your feet by a movie's special effects is exotic.

What unlocks icons, and other things in Orthodox worship, is a gradual but lifelong process of transformation of which worship with the parish plays a *part*. It's a bit like saying that hitting a baseball on television is the result of years of disciplined practice. The point isn't to get to the experience of icons being alive and windows you can see through to Heaven; the point is a many-sided spiritual walk.

And the experience is not stand-alone. I have spoken about the experience of Orthodox worship, but the point is not to deliver an experience, but to transform people. The experience may be meticulously cultivated, and it *is* important, but it is one dimension of something deeper. It's not just that there are things you contribute, but it is somewhat myopic to make the experience the center.

This is not just true of Orthodox worship. It is true of human life: marriage, parenting, friendship, work, leisure, and more. You should be giving of yourself, it should hurt at times, and never is there a standalone experience delivered to you. And it is a much greater good than the kind of experience movies and music deliver.

For now we may have the luxury of standalone experiences being delivered to us. But seeking experiences is a way to create a dependence, and it is a dependence that does not prepare us for rough times. People in the Great Depression had marriage, parenting, friendship, and work. Few of them had iPods with music whenever they wanted.

And iPods wear out.

18. Treat your situation as a spiritual training ground.

In some monastic literature, one reads of spiritual fathers giving rather nasty orders ("obediencies") to their monks. At first brush, it seems to be cruelty, pure and simple. The more you understand it, the less cruel it is. These unpleasant "obediencies" may sometimes be bitter medicine, but they are the medicine of a physician. The purpose is to bring freedom to the monk: spiritual freedom that dwarfs political and economic freedom, the kind of freedom that even an icy labor camp could not take from [a monk, priest, and spiritual father like Fr. Arseny](#). And the entire of monastic life is meant to be a training ground where even the hard parts are there to build up the monastery's members.

This is a microcosm of life for all of us. It may be true, as some say, that all Orthodox are called to asceticism, not just monks, but there is a bigger point. All of us, whether or not we have the monastic kind of spiritual father, have an even bigger Spiritual Father, God, who arranges a spiritual training ground in this life. "All things work together for good" ([Rom 8:28 KJV](#)) for those studying, being trained, and being formed in the great spiritual academy called life. It's just a little easier to see when you understand monasticism as a training

ground.

This is easy enough to say as eloquent words and impressive rhetoric; it is much harder if your life has not been easy, you have been scarred by rough experiences, and it seems that random forces buffet you and knock you away from where you want to be. But let me give an analogy.

My brother, then working at a major internet corporation, mentioned that one of the system administrators, whenever a higher-up would come up to him and ask, "Is there a way to—" would cut him off and say, "Stop! Tell me what you want to do." Wanting to give an example, he described a manager saying, "Is there a way to run a `df` [an obscure Unix command that gives a page or two of information about disks] and send the output to a system administrator's pager?" And a terrible response would be for him to say, "Yes," at which point the manager would say, "Why don't you do that," and have him do something that would look good on paper to a manager, but not even look good on paper to a system administrator. The core issue, the "Tell me what you want to do," might be "A disk got too full recently", with an implication of "I don't want this to happen again. What can we do so system administrators can deal with this?" And there are things that could be done. Perhaps one might write a program to check if a disk is too full, and send a warning (perhaps even to a system administrator's pager), and another tool to sound an alarm if a disk is filling up quickly. But the Unix `df` command is not just obscure; it was much too verbose for the pagers of the day; even an excellent system administrator would have to do a lot of scrolling to find out if the page was a warning about a problem. So the solution as proposed is to cry "Wolf!" every five minutes, and make on-call system administrators do a lot of busy work to figure out if the constant cries of "Wolf! Wolf! Wolf!" actually correspond to a rare enough real problem. The system administrator mentioned by my brother did not like implementing solutions that were not in his employer's best interests, and what different managers were coming to him and saying, with "Is there a way to [*insert solution that only looks good on paper*]?" is, "I've

solved a problem badly, and I want you to implement it."

This is not just a story about managers and rude system administrators. It's also the story of much of our prayers: "God, I've solved a problem badly, and I want you to implement it." And we bitterly resist when God offers us something that actually *is* in our best interests. On the one hand, St. James tells us, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions." ([James 4:3 RSV](#)) Our plans to have what we believe will make us happy have much to do with what it means to "spend it on your passions." On the other hand, Christ tells us, "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." ([John 15:2 RSV](#)) The "pruning", for many of us, means progressively liberating us from our plans to arrange what we think will make us happy. It is God, the Spiritual Father, ever seeking to spur us to grow up.

Blessed are they who struggle in earthly pain, for they may rest in Heavenly victory. Blessed are they whom God frustrates in their desires, for they may reach true satisfaction. Blessed are you when your earthly training ground includes suffering you would never have chosen, because in the same way God has trained legion upon legion of saints before us. Thank God, and ever pray for the spiritual sight to see his loving providence in your life.

19. However terrifying it may be to repent, repent anyway.

Sin is not the most popular term today; saying that we are all terrible sinners is not something we want to hear. But we have sins, and we need to repent of them.

One counselor wrote of a man who was preparing to break off an affair forever, and wept: he had come to the insight that what made it so hard to break things off was not because he was going to lose the woman he was having an affair with, but because he feared that "some shining part of him would be lost forever." This is a tiny slice of why the [Philokalia](#) says that *people hold on to sin because they think it adorns them*.

Repentance may be the most terrifying experience a human can adorn; sin is a disease of the soul, and part of its damage is that even if it makes us miserable we are afraid to let it go. Among Protestants repentance has been called "unconditional surrender", and this is absolutely true: lifelong repentance is lifelong surrender, and it is surrender more than once.

But there is another side to repentance. *Before*, it is terrifying and painful surrender. *Afterwards*, there is more than relief: you realize that what you were holding on to, because you thought it adorned you and you would not be able to live without it, was in fact a piece of Hell, and you needed it like you needed one foot stuck in a cruel bear trap. Orthodox speak of repentance from sin as awakening, and part of John the Baptist's proclamation, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is here," is, "Wake up, for God's glorious reign is coming here." This is why St. Paul quotes, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light." ([Ephesians 5:14 RSV](#)) Sin is sleep. It is also spiritual sickness, and for that matter it is worse than standing in something gross: and repentance is awakening, being healed, and stepping out of something vile and feeling truly *clean*—repentance is all of this and much more. It may be Heaven's best-kept secret.

What are you trying to forget you need to repent of? Call it sin, and repent of it.

20. Learn how to make things and make at least minor repairs.

One of the prominent present-day philosophers of virtue wrote [Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues](#). The argument is that in real life, dependency is a normal part of human life, and virtues help us with a real life that includes sickness and not being able to do everything you imagine.

One of those ancient virtues is thrift, and Dorothy Sayers's classic essay, "The Other Six Deadly Sins," talks about how thrift was always considered a virtue. Even if we can dodge this virtue, it's still not a good idea.

It is not that hard to check (or change) a car's oil or sew back a missing button, and if you don't know how to do these things, I'd encourage you to visit [a how-to site like eHow.com](#). You don't have to digest the whole site at once, but what might be a better idea is, when something minor breaks, instead of paying someone to fix it, see if you can fix it instead. And, for that matter, buy a basic cookbook (if you don't want to use the internet) and start cooking. (You might find that you start feeling better. If you cook food yourself, your body is running on a higher grade of fuel than horrid microwave dinners.)

21. If not now, when?

There is a temptation to believe, "Life will really begin when I grow up," or "when I get into college," or "when I get married," or "when I get a job," or on a smaller scale "when I get my next paycheck," or "when so-and-so comes to visit," or "when quitting time rolls around." Happiness is something we imagine in the future, and sometimes we don't really enjoy what we were waiting for: we have made our habit to be waiting, and we often find something else to wait for. This dirty secret may be enough of a secret that we don't even know it ourselves: it's just that when The Moment We've Been Waiting For finally rolls around, we find ourselves looking forward to another, more remote, Moment We've Been Waiting For. And we still believe, "Then I'll be happy."

There is profound wisdom in the [Sermon on the Mount's](#) words, "Take therefore no thought for the morrow" ([Matthew 6:34 KJV](#)). The issue is not just worrying; God keeps giving us this now and this today, and we exhaust ourselves trying to arrange our future and waiting for life to *really* begin. Perhaps there is some place for planning, but there is no place for being so preoccupied that you are not grateful for what God has given you today, and it is something of a missed opportunity to keep pushing back the date when life really begins. Paradoxically, the best way to arrange for contentment when you cross the next big threshold is to begin living that contentment in this now that God has given us (a now, incidentally, in which many of the things you were waiting for have already been given).

The Sermon on the Mount, in saying not to borrow trouble from tomorrow because "each day has enough trouble of its own," is giving very practical advice. The [Bible](#) says a great deal to the modern world: in stress management terms, it says, "Do not give yourself double stress by adding tomorrow's stress to today's stress. Today has enough stress by itself." The more stressful things get, the more essential it is to cut needless stress. And it is very hard not to keep being preoccupied with tomorrow in stress if you are preoccupied with tomorrow whenever you look for happiness. Eternity and Heaven are in this *now* that God has given us.

Don't say "This sounds great," and decide to start tomorrow. Start today.

22. Don't wonder why you don't have a good enough [*fill in the blank*]. Wonder instead why you have a [*fill in the blank*] that you are unworthy of.

We live in an economy fueled on discontent: advertisements are designed with the powerful unstated purpose of making us discontent with what we have. And discontent has become a way of life. It is no longer mere possessions that we are discontent with: even friendships and family are the sort of thing we wish we could trade up for something better.

"Who is rich? The person who is content," reads one church sign, and it's true. Advertisements perversely promise exactly what they take away: they invite you to be discontent so you can "trade up" in the hope that something better will give you the contentment they beckoned you to cast away.

Think it would be nice to be a king in the Middle Ages? Here's something to think about. In those days, the higher up you were on the pecking order, the less physical exertion you was expected of you. *However*, royalty needed to do more physical exertion than one would expect of a middle class exercise enthusiast today. If you wish you were a king in the Middle Ages, why don't you sit down and try to make a list of the luxuries you have today that no medieval king

could even dream of? The list doesn't just include an obsolete computer or even a car that breaks down. To pick just the area of plumbing, hot and cold running water were unimaginable, like it would be unimaginable today to have a faucet that would pour out clothing whenever you want. Nor would a king have had daily showers / baths to have a body that didn't smell: a gamy-smelling body was just part of the picture. Nor would there be an indoor toilet that so cleanly removes unpleasant odors. Armchair fantasies of being a king are one thing, but there are things no king could dream of that we take for granted.

Instead of taking things for granted and pining for possessions, or friends, or whatever else that are "worthy" of us, why not be not only thankful but mindful of our many blessings?

It is [a strangely joyful thing to realize how many good things God has given us that we do not observe.](#)

23. Live in the real world. (Wishful thinking doesn't really help.)

C.S. Lewis scholar Jerry Root wrote, [C.S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil: An Investigation of a Pervasive Theme](#). The book is a study of how C.S. Lewis treats "subjectivism": trying to choose your version of reality over God's. Subjectivism is the belief that corresponds to being curved in on yourself in narcissism and pride.

Root's readable scholarship looks both at Lewis's nonfiction work, but four works of fiction from different decades of his life. The villains all act and talk like subjectivists, and the villain in "Dymer", a magician who has taken the hands off a clock because he does not want to be subject to time, calls to mind for me my own subjectivism/narcissism/pride in employing almost the same image in [A Personal Flag](#).

The Greek word *hubris* refers to pride that inescapably blinds, the pride that goes before a fall. And subjectivism is tied to pride. Subjectivism is trying, in any of many ways, to make yourself happy by being in your own reality instead of learning happiness in the

God-given reality that you're in. Being in subjectivism is a start on being in Hell. Hell may not be what you think. Hell is light as it is experienced by people who would rather be in darkness. Hell is abundant health as experienced by people who would choose disease. Hell is freedom as experienced by those who will not stop clinging to spiritual chains. Hell is ten thousand other things: more pointedly, Hell is other people, as experienced by an existentialist. This Hell is Heaven as experienced through subjectivist narcissism, experiencing God's glory and wishing for glory on your own power. The gates of Hell are bolted and barred from the *inside*. God is love; he cannot but ultimately give Heaven to his creatures, but we can, if we wish, choose to experience Heaven as Hell. The beginning of Heaven is this life, but we can, if we wish, be subjectivists and wish for something else and experience what God has given us as the start of Hell. When I foolishly wished I could live in the Middle Ages, I found the contemporary abundance around me drab, and that is a bit of how God can offer us joy and we can experience it as Hellish. Whether you experience the temptation exactly as I do, or in a different form, the end is always the same. And trying to be somewhere else than reality, even in your mind, is only a liability in dealing with the only reality that counts.

If you want to cope successfully even in a disaster, live in the real world you as you are in it.

24. Don't kick against the goads, and that includes in matters of sex, men, and women.

When I was an undergraduate, I gleefully passed on what I had heard, all the more gleefully as it seemed an opportunity to take a stand against wrongful prudishness: a friend, in class, had heard a professor lecture against alleged [ludicrous Victorian prudish advice to brides](#), advising brides-to-be to "GIVE LITTLE, GIVE SELDOM, AND ABOVE ALL, GIVE GRUDGINGLY."

I had gleefully retold the story to over a dozen people until the deflating experience of hearing a friend, whose judgment I otherwise respected, express skepticism about whether it held the ring of truth.

Now, some years later after I have developed more of an interest in history, his skepticism makes sense. The external details all look right, at least at first pass, but the letter is too crisp, too clean, and too perfect. It is too perfect in a way where real historical sources seem to be intractably messy and hard to pin down. There is not a single sentence which does not create or contribute to an effect of more-than-idiotic sexual prudishness and hatred of sexual pleasure. I've read a number of historical sources where the author was suspicious of how deep a good sexual pleasure really is—and not one of them is like this. Some contain even more striking statements—but not one contains sentence after sentence that reads as ludicrous to the modern reader. It's not just a historical forgery; that's almost a surface detail. It gives the impression that someone Wanted to Take a Stand Against Sexual Prudishness, picked a time frame associated with Sexual Prudishness, namely the Victorian era, and wrote for no other purpose than to impress the modern reader with how absolutely ludicrous Sexual Prudishness in any form really is.

Fast-forward a decade and a half. Retro aesthetics have resurrected 1950's black-and-white photography, or photos made to look to us today like they had been taken in the 1950's. Photoshop is on the scene, and hobbyists can make photoshopped images and send them to the web or email. And one of the things passing around the net now is the, um, uh, *authentic* [The good wife's guide](#), complete with the, um, uh, *authentic* words "Advertising Archives" next to the retro picture of a wife happily greeting her husband. However convincingly ragged the *visuals* may look, the *advice* is too crisp, too clean, and too perfect in its offensiveness, and where every sentence in the other forgery—the alleged Victorian advice ("alleged", as in *Monty Python's* "alleged Hungarian-English phrase book") for brides-to-be—is apparently written to impress the reader with how ludicrous Sexual Prudishness is, *every single suggestion* in the more recent "discovery" appears written as if to rile up feminists today. (Even if feminists today might not approve of real 1950's advice to housewives, the 1950's-ish [Letters to Karen](#) is absolutely *nothing* like this.) It appears that someone wanted to impress readers with How Bad Sexism Really Is, picked a time frame popularly associated with

How Bad Sexism Really Is, and wrote a forgery (even if "forgery" isn't really the point) designed to impress today's reader with How Bad Sexism Really Is.

These kinds of forgeries reveal something, but not about the Victorian era or the 1950's: people who pick the Victorian era or the 1950's as a popular emblem of something they hate rarely have a particularly empathic understanding of the time period in question, even if they do a good imitation of its external trappings. But that's only half the story. They do take in a lot of people and spread far and wide, and that reveals something about the audience that repeats them.

I'll leave treatment of Bold Denunciations of Sexual Prudishness to the last volume of Foucault's history of sexuality; what I am interested in is not only why [The good wife's guide](#) would be created in the first place, but why it would spread like wildfire, as it manifestly has. The answer has to do with a way we are kicking against the goads.

[The good wife's guide](#) is very revealing. It tells something about the sort of society where it would be so quickly passed on. It tells something about us.

If you've had the misfortune to hear enough dirty jokes, you may notice that when a "beautiful woman" occurs in a dirty joke, unless it's a feminist joke, she does not correspond to the psyche of *any* woman you know. In most dirty jokes, a "beautiful woman" is not a whole person, but something else, the other "person" implied by male desire in its unrefined, unchanneled state. The academic term is "implied other", as when Orientalist Westerners project onto the East the mirror image of what they imagine as Western tendencies: a projection that tells much more about the West than Asia. And here is fleshed out the "implied other" to a decently broad group of feminism as it exists in popular culture today.

If the question is, "Who does feminism see as the enemy?" the best answer is not "Sexist men." Nonfeminist men may be treated as

part of the problem rather than part of the solution, and some feminist writing may speak fondly of castration, but the real enemy is wives who stay home, raise children, and may write [a blog about passionate homemaking](#), but don't want anything more, or rather "more" (the assumption being that an independent, at least part-time professional career is an acceptable aspiration for a woman, but being a stay-at-home mom is despicable). Feminists may take offense at nonfeminist men, but not like nonfeminist women.

Feminism kicks against the goads. Of all the ways that Christians kick against the goads today, I don't know of any that are as acceptable to people, or at least an agree to disagree matter, as feminism or Biblical egalitarianism. If I were to go through queer readings of key passages, I could say that the scholarship is misusing cultural context to neutralize the passages in the Bible where God vetoes their claim, and hold up the scholarship as an example of subjectivist adjustment of Tradition to fit contemporary ideologies. I could pointedly say that every single queer interpretation I've read uses cultural context as a drunken man uses lampposts—for support rather than illumination. And if I were to do this, the more liberal scholars would challenge me, but most conservatives and moderates would be sympathetic, or at least open, to my argument. But if I were to make the same arguments about Biblical egalitarian scholarship, I would hear cries of "*Foul!*", cries that I was imposing something political on the study. But I've spent a lot of time reading Biblical egalitarian scholarship closely—read through everything I could find in Tyndale's library (on one point) and written a thesis, as well as reading queer scholarship under liberal scholars—and even if the conclusions are different, the scholarship is disturbingly similar. And subjectivist scholarship is a red flag: it is a red flag for socially unacceptable queer scholarship, and it is also a red flag for perfectly socially acceptable egalitarian scholarship. The fact that egalitarianism is seen as a normal position, entirely consistent with being the sort of person who can say the Creed without crossing his fingers, may be a fact about our cultural and historical context but does not change the reality of kicking against the goads.

I've written above that it is a good thing to learn how to cook, for

instance, and sew, and change a car's oil. Doesn't that mean androgyny? Well, I cook, sew buttons and have used sewing machines, change my car's oil, fix flats, and lift weights. Sounds a bit androgynous, and I would like to reply to that. (And not just by saying that I work in a male-dominated field where the odds are good but the goods are odd, and for that matter I've lifted weight machines.)

Neither masculinity nor femininity come from imitating what we think the 1950's were like, nor will they come from any other historical reconstruction. What they do come from is not easy to say. Stephen Clark tried to answer that question in [Man and Woman in Christ](#) (online edition of a thick book). Clark is quite conservative, and he asserts that simple repetition of the past is impossible. He offers few neat boxes: he does *not* give a simple endorsement of a husband working and a wife staying at home. What he says is rather messy; the only clean statement he makes on that point is that the arrangement of "The husband works a full-time job; the wife works a full time job, and in addition she does all the housework," is clearly condemned (even if it is the most common arrangement). In step with his argument, feminists complain about housewives suffering from depression, this may be because having a woman destitute of adult company for over eight hours a day is *not* truly traditional; in older traditional societies women were in adult company during the day, and may have had much less depression. For reasons like this, Clark gives a rather serious analysis but seems to always end with messy recommendations.

This messiness is appropriate. I've tried to explore this in some of my writing: both in essays like [Knights and Ladies](#) and longer fiction like [The Sign of the Grail](#). And the best answer I can give after my own digging is, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you."

But why am I claiming that feminism kicks against the goads? Journalist Wendy Shalit's [A Return to Modesty](#) is first about modesty and second about feminism, and it is an exposé of how immodest

living such as feminism has encouraged is a recipe for women's heartbreak. In that regard, it offers detail into a remark in a counselor's book on friendship, on how in years of practicing psychology in California he has seen every sexual arrangement you could imagine, and the more he sees, the more convinced he is that the rules God has given are intended to help us and not to harm us. Shalit discusses how sleeping around and hooking up rips up women: their modesty is still there, but it is driven underground and clogging the pipes with vomit. Not that she is setting out to criticize feminism: Shalit was delighted to meet Mary Daly and to have Daly sign Shalit's copy of Daly's *Wickedary*. But when feminism says that old-fashioned modesty and chastity are not good enough for today's women, Shalit says, "No." She exposes how abandoning the protection of modesty is kicking against the goads. And this is not the only way feminism kicks against the goads.

There's an old joke about a boy whose parents were trying *very* hard not to raise him with any gender preconceptions; his mother worked as a pilot. Someone asked if he wanted to fly airplanes when he grew up, and he said, "No, that's women's work!" And that may be funny, but it is not funny to find out that when kibbutzes ran their experiment on raising children free from sexist preconceptions, the result of this grand experiment was children who were as confused as any about who they were and what it meant to be human. And there are other signs that the kibbutzes were kicking against the goads. Some of their best efforts to free women from traditional behavior kept finding more traditional behaviors that were

Let's return to what we are supposed to think is the only real alternative to feminism. [The good wife's guide](#) shows a caricatured "other" that we are to react against, and realize that a woman should be concerned for herself alone, should push back against traditional expectations. The "good" wife we are to react against has no hopes, needs, desire, or personhood of her own; she absolutely does not contribute to shared life with her husband except as an empty slave, and there is not a shadow of the traditional Christian "two shall become one" that can mean anything but unilateral absorption of the

wife into the husband. And something of the fallacy of the excluded middle is at play: one gets the impression that progressive feminism, and [The good wife's guide](#), represent the two basic options: up-to-date feminism, and a caricature that is no closer to nonfeminist women's aspirations than a "beautiful woman" in a dirty joke matches the psyches of real women.

It tells something, not about the 1950's, but about us that today's pop feminism confuses a beautiful-woman-as-in-a-dirty-joke version of 1950's advice to housewives with a real glimpse into the soul of the Bad Old Sexist 1950's. To be a little more picturesque, [The good wife's guide](#) is the Bad Old Sexist 1950's as today's pop feminism would like to jack off to it, as the example of alleged Victorian sexual prudishness was before it. The joke ain't on the Victorian era or the 1950's. It's on us.

I wrote above that we shouldn't believe spam when it tells us that we need replica luxury watches. Truth be told, we also shouldn't believe spam that tells us how empty our lives are without Viagra and its kin. I thought I knew several happily married couples in their seventies, and I thought I heard the consistent claim that they were more and more happily married as the years wore on, so that each decade of marriage was better than the last. But my old pharmacy knows better, or say they do; they clearly inform readers that you can't be happily married if you lose 17-21 year old desires. Or maybe the pharmacy is, in fact, *wrong*. There is a great spiritual force bombarding us; it urges on women a feminist duty of stepping outside of modesty and chastity, and into a world of heartbreak; though this is hardly feminist, it urges another kind of heartbreak on men bombarded by spam which hawks porn that is in the beginning as sweet as honey and is in the end as bitter as gall and as sharp as a double-edged sword, as those who have fought addiction to porn can attest.

God has created us men and women, and we are trying to escape this fact and ancient wisdom about how to best live as men and women. And we live in a time where, as in feminist fairy tales, we are working hard to subvert what we were given.

It still hurts to kick against the goads.

25. "Put not your trust in princes." ([Psalm 146:3 KJV](#))

Barack Obama may well have unearthly charisma unlike any other U.S. President, ever. I've never heard of anyone else needing to quip, "Contrary to popular opinion, I have not walked on water, nor was I born in a stable." It may be one thing to approve of his achievements or his policies, but it is another to start believing in him as one believes in God—such as "Change you can believe in," and "Yes, you can!" seem to invite. Of course it would be just as bad to believe in John McCain that way, only he does not have such an enchanting charisma, and it's a whole lot harder to confuse him with a Messiah.

[The Bible](#), alongside human experience, warns about putting too much trust in political leaders, even when leaders were much less charismatic and people were much less inclined to look to governments to be their saviors. Government has its place, but please do not believe in it as you should believe in God. Governments will all ultimately fail us, and it's best not to be caught off guard.

If you believe government is not to be trusted too far, and your government fails you, you have a problem. But if you trust government as a savior and your government fails you, you have *two* problems. *When*—not *if*—something goes awry, it's really better to have just the *one* problem, and look to God for your salvation.

26. Waste not, want not.

For now, we've been taught to waste, so that it is normal to throw perfectly good things into the trash / recycle bin. This wastefulness has never been good for us as humans, but the poorer we get, the less waste we can afford.

There is a story about a young man who was on a boat who was sinking, and told his friend, "Help! Show me how to swim—I don't know how!" But the time to learn how to swim is not when you are

on a sinking boat, and it is better to learn how to cut down on unnatural waste when you can.

27. Beware of subjectivism in the small.

In Orthodoxy there is a *watchfulness*: an inner mindfulness that guards the heart. Learning this watchfulness, however imperfectly, is a foundational aid in spiritual growth and repenting from sin.

This watchfulness helps uproot problems when they are just a little thought or desire, and uproot them as soon as possible. This applies to anger, to lust, and to the subjectivism in the small that is also called wishful thinking.

The saying, "Procrastination is the thief of time," is true, and it wasn't until I started fighting procrastination that I understood why people would say that—and finally realized how much work *and* leisure time I was losing to the useless time sink of procrastination. I still procrastinate some, but I procrastinate less, and that makes a tremendous difference.

On more of a microscale, there are times that I wasn't *exactly* procrastinating in the sense of dodging work with Facebook, playing games on company time, or making excessive non-professional conversations, but after I read [Jerry Root's study of subjectivism as treated by C.S. Lewis](#), I started finding subjectivism even in things I wouldn't think to hide if someone walked by. For one example, part of my job is troubleshooting computer software. When I had created some new feature and it didn't work, I almost always tested the problem a time or two or three more before starting to investigate why it didn't work. The reason? However irrational, I was hoping that the problem would go away if I tried again. Not that double-checking can never have the right motive; sometimes trying again is the best thing to do. But my motive was wrong, and I was wasting too much time checking. My motive was wishful thinking, wishing the problem would go away so I wouldn't have to do the hard work of fixing the problem at its source, and this "subjectivism in the small" is no help to my productivity at work. As things are, I noticed a sharp

productivity boost when I started exercising watchfulness and began fighting this wishful thinking.

I doubt if this is just an Information Technology issue. The advantage of learning to fight your "subjectivism in the small" is important enough in good times but all the more in a bad economy. [Proverbs 22:9](#) says, "Do you see a man who is diligent/skillful/swift in his work? He will stand before kings, he will not stand before obscure men." If you're unemployed, this is relevant to a jobhunt where it may be hard to stay on task after a demoralizing string of rejections. If you're trying to hold on to your job, this could also help.

28. Remember why you are on earth.

The Westminster Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" and answers, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." This is the question that sets the stage for everything else. It is an exceptionally well-chosen opening that puts first things first.

There is a saying among some Protestants, "Mission exists because worship does not." And I misunderstood it at first, but the point is this: God does not create people so that they can be missionaries. Absolutely no one is created for that purpose. Everyone is created, not for the purpose of being a missionary, but for the sake of worshiping God. However, there are some people who are not in a position to worship God; they cannot do what they were made for. *Therefore*, Christians are responsible for mission and some Christians should be missionaries.

It is in the same spirit that one might say, "Asceticism, or spiritual discipline, exists because contemplation does not." This work is largely about asceticism in its concrete forms, but God did not create us for asceticism; he created us to contemplate him: in the language of the Catechism, "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." But we ourselves may not be in a position to contemplate God fully; we need the cleansing, the surgery, of asceticism. If asceticism exists because contemplation does not, all Christians are responsible for asceticism and *all* Christians should be ascetics.

But however important asceticism may be, it is not an end unto itself. Contemplation shines through it; for that matter, asceticism is what contemplation looks like when it puts on work gloves and starts scrubbing. Asceticism and contemplation are at the heart of the Orthodox maxim, "Save yourself and ten thousand others around you will find salvation." To Protestants, this may sound like a warped prescription for missions, but it has a lot to do with how [St. Herman of Alaska](#) and other missionary monks brought Orthodoxy from Russia to Alaska. Asceticism for the sake of asceticism is missing the point, and however much asceticism may contribute to survival, it's not enough to just view asceticism as a survival tool. Asceticism is for the sake of contemplation. Survival, missions, and ten thousand other things all fall under the umbrella of, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." ([Matthew 6:33](#))

29. Use money, but don't trust it.

[Proverbs](#) says money is not to be trusted: "Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death," "He who trusts in his riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like a green leaf," "Riches do not last for ever," "Do not toil to acquire wealth; be wise enough to desist." Money seems like a way to control the riskiness of life, but part of human existence is that we will never be in control. We need to be at peace with not being in control, and be at peace with being under God's care.

God's hand shows more strongly and more plainly when we have little power than when it seems we can get along well enough without him. People who have no blanket of wealth, and those who face great danger, seem to see providence much more clearly. If praying "Give us this day our daily bread." is a ritual formality to us, we will gain, not lose, the meaning of these words if we can no longer buy a month's food at once. We may exhaust our money, but we can never exhaust God or his care for us.

If you have money, try to use it well, but do not fear that all is lost if you only lose money. You may see God's providence as you

have never known it before.

30. Dig deeper than "Eat, drink, and be merry."

The movie *Dead Poets' Society* enchants the reader with what may seem to be a tremendous summons to the fullness of life. And it is not an accident that the movie's celebration of life has the teacher showing students old pictures of athletes who are all dead. A form of "Eat, drink, and be merry" is quoted with warning in the Bible: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" ([I Corinthians 15:32 RSV](#)). This "exhortation" is no more an exhortation to true joy than students saying before a wickedly tough high school physics test, "Be sure to write your name at the top of the page, because that's the only two points you're going to get." G.K. Chesterton writes, "It is the *carpe diem* religion; but the *carpe diem* religion is not the religion of happy people, but of very unhappy people. Great joy does, not gather the rosebuds while it may; its eyes are fixed on the immortal rose which Dante saw." Chesterton lived and died decades before *Dead Poets' Society*; it's odd that his words in [Heretics](#) read so much like a reply.

However bad things get, don't believe that grasping all-too-fleeting pleasures is all you can get. Don't sell yourself short with, "Be sure you put your name at the top, because those are the only two points you are going to get." The best things in life, now as ever, are free: friendship, family, the different loves, God, grace and providence, wisdom, rightly used suffering. Some very nasty things may happen, and they may take away what we think are the best things in life. But it's good to remember what's important in life, and the best things in life are free.

31. Ignore brands.

One teacher asked his students, "Imagine your successful self in the future. With which brands do you see yourself associating?" He looked, and saw no raised eyebrows, no puzzled looks, and certainly no one offended by the question or its implications. All of the students answered it as a straight question, and all of them succeeded in identifying brands that their successful future selves

succeeded in identifying brands that their successful future selves would fit in with.

This teacher mentioned this in writing about how the brand economy does the job today that spiritual disciplines did in earlier ages. He never to my memory used the term "ersatz," but identifying with a brand is all too often an ersatz spiritual discipline. Russian Orthodoxy is shaped by prayer and fasting, and America's orthodoxy is shaped by iPods and Coke. And people say, "I'm a [*name of brand*] person," and no one really seems to ever be offended.

Sometimes some brands are better: if you are buying an external hard drive, I would recommend Seagate over Western Digital. But I would really wince at saying, "I am a Seagate man;" I may appropriately understand myself as a man, as an Orthodox Christian, as having certain people for friends and family, and in other ways as well, but *not* define my identity by a brand of hard drive. And brand loyalty often exceeds what the products justify. You know all those Chevy fans' bumper stickers that show Calvin relieving himself on the Ford logo? The fanaticism goes well in excess of the functional superiority of the average Chevy over the average Ford, if any such superiority exists. Almost certainly one of the better Chevies is better than one of the worse Fords, and one of the better Fords is better than one of the worse Chevies. Even if Chevies tend to be slightly better than Fords, this is *not* a rational comparison of mere material tools. It's buying into an identity.

For some of us, the items we need to buy are almost branded: it's a tall order to walk into an electronics store and ask for an a computer that is unbranded. And for things that are available in generic, buying generic may or may not be the best purchase. I can hardly say, "Don't buy branded merchandise." But what I can say is, "Don't buy into the *mystique* of branded merchandise, and never let brands become your spiritual discipline." And practice all the classic spiritual disciplines: reading the Bible, going to church, praying, fasting, silence, giving to the poor, repentance, and the like. Brands are a distraction from these, and we need true asceticism, not ersatz spiritual discipline.

32. Limit your exposure to advertising.

Some years ago, I used to say that a television is the most expensive appliance you can buy. The reason? All appliances have an up front cost, and there are electrical bills to pay, and maybe repairs. But the expense is usually limited; an air conditioner may take a lot of electricity, but you pay your electric bill and the expense is paid.

A television, by contrast, costs more than sticker price, electricity, repairs, and perhaps today removal expenses when you want to get rid of it. A television exposes you to the most effective propaganda in history: commercial advertising meant to manipulate you to buy, buy, buy, and seek your happiness in one product after another, always discontent. An article from *The Onion* tells us,

Amazing New 'Swiffer' Fails To Fill The Void

CINCINNATI-The blank, oppressive void facing the American consumer populace remains unfilled today, despite the recent launch of the revolutionary Swiffer dust-elimination system, sources reported Monday.

The lightweight, easy-to-use Swiffer is the 275,894,973rd amazing new product to fail to fill the void-a vast, soul-crushing spiritual vacuum Americans of all ages helplessly face on a daily basis, with nowhere to turn and no way to escape.

"The remarkable new Swiffer sweeps, dusts, wipes, and cleans with a patented electrostatic action that simply cannot be beat," said spokeswoman Judith McReynolds, media-relations liaison for Procter & Gamble, maker of the dustbroom device. "Whether it's vinyl floors, tile, hardwood, ceilings, or stairs, the incredible Swiffer quickly cleans any dry surface by attracting and trapping even the tiniest dirt and dust particles."

"The incredible Swiffer's extendable telescoping action has just what it takes to cut clean-up time in half," McReynolds continued. "Say goodbye to tedious dusting chores forever... the

Swiffer way!"

Upon completing the statement, McReynolds was struck, as she is most days, with a sudden, unbearable realization that she has wasted her life.

Despite high hopes, the Swiffer has failed to imbue a sense of meaning and purpose in the lives of its users.

"The new Swiffer, as seen on TV, requires no spray or chemical cleaners, so I'm sure you can understand how excited I was to finally find something that could give my sad, short existence a sense of worth," said Manitowoc, WI, homemaker Gwen Hull. "When you finish the clean-up job, simply tear off the patented Swiffer Cloth and throw it away-as easy as one, two, three. But when I did this, tossing the soiled, disposable Swiffer Cloth into the garbage can like so many hollow, rejected yesterdays, I thought to myself, 'Is that it? Aren't I supposed to feel more fulfilled than this?' It all felt so futile. I felt like that Swiffer Cloth in the trash represented me, my hopes and dreams made manifest. I felt like it was my goals and aspirations for a better life that were lying there in the garbage, never to be heard from again."

"I felt so alone," added Hull, loosening her grip on the Swiffer's convenient extendable handle-which can reach even the tightest corners-causing the product to fall to the floor. "So very, very alone."

Bridgeport, CT, homemaker Christine Smalls tries in vain to overcome her clinical depression using the amazing new Swiffer sweeper.

Hull's reaction was echoed by fellow Swiffer owner Glenn Pulsipher. A 45-year-old telemarketing coordinator for a Van Nuys satellite TV company, he said his recent Swiffer purchase has proven to be an ineffective void-filling measure.

"Ever since my divorce nine years ago, I'd been meaning to

keep this place a little more clean and presentable for visitors," said Pulsipher, who last had a houseguest in April 1997. "But with all the different sprays and sponges you have to use, who has the time? But when I saw the Swiffer ad on TV, I thought to myself: Wow, all that cleaning power in one simple, easy-to-use tool! And such a bargain! I guess I thought that maybe if I bought one, my life would be easier, more fun, more special. Well, I thought wrong."

"Not that it doesn't work," Pulsipher added. "It does: It works exactly like they said on TV. But after using it once or twice, the sad fact was I no longer cared."

"Why would I?" he continued, sinking into his living-room La-Z-Boy to watch ESPN alone for the 478th time this year. "I mean, it's a dustbroom. What more is there to say?"

"Dust in the wind," said Pulsipher, his voice taking on a muted tone of resignation as the TV blared. "That's all our various pitiful and deluded human endeavors ever amount to in the end. My job, my marriage-dust. All dust. And all the Swiffers in the world can't sweep it all up."

Many Swiffer owners have attempted to bolster the fleeting satisfaction the product offers with other Swiffer-related activities, but to no avail. In the past four weeks, more than 40,000 aching empty consumers have logged on to www.swiffer.com to download pages of "Swiffer FAQs" and "Useful Tips" on optimal Swiffer use. Also widely downloaded was the tour schedule for the "Swiffer Mobile," a Swiffer-themed truck-complete with promotional displays, demonstrations of anti-dust technological innovations, and a stated mission to "examine the mundane task of housecleaning under the keen eye of science"-which will travel to 20 markets across the U.S. this summer. None of these efforts, however, have met with anything but crushing, soul-depleting disappointment and failure.

The hope that the right product will one day come along and bring happiness to consumers' lives is a longstanding American tradition. However, the Swiffer's failure to fill the void has led some to doubt that any product, no matter how revolutionary and convenient, will ever do so.

"It's time we woke up and realized that the wait is never going to end," said Dr. James Ingersoll of the D.C.-based Institute For American Values. "The void is never, I repeat, never going to be filled by something we see on TV and can order with our credit cards."

For others, however, there remains hope.

"Just because the Swiffer and the other 35 new products I've bought over the past three months haven't filled the void, that doesn't mean the next product won't be the one," said Minneapolis homemaker Ellen Bender. "I just ordered the new HyperVac Advanced CyberCarpet CleanWare System, and I just can't wait until it arrives and completely transforms my flat, unsatisfying life."

Procter & Gamble offered its apologies to those who had pinned their hopes on the new dustbroom.

"We are deeply sorry for the Swiffer's failure to ease the crushing ennui faced by U.S. consumers, and we promise to redouble our efforts to one day develop a product that will succeed in soothing your tortured souls," a statement released by Procter & Gamble read in part.

What more is there to say?

Try to avoid the manipulative illusions in advertising.

33. Avoid Facebook at work.

Facebook can be rightly used: for instance, to log on, get a friend's contact information, and log off. And of course if you are

your company's representative on Facebook, you shouldn't stay off of Facebook. But both of these cases represent an atypical use of Facebook. The usual use of Facebook is as an absorbing place where you don't notice the passage of hours. And there is something there that doesn't belong at work, and should at least be used in moderation outside of work.

Some people who know the history of technology may point out that email, and for that matter computers themselves, were things bosses tried to keep out of work because they weren't useful and they distracted people from useful work. Today it would be quite provocative, to say the least, for a company to get rid of office workers' computers as distracting and simply pointless for office productivity. And isn't it benighted to fail to learn from history and be superstitious about, in this case, Facebook?

It's *not* superstitious. There ~~may someday be a time~~ will almost certainly be a time where Facebook is no longer such an absorbing place, and saying that office workers can productively use Facebook will be as obvious as saying that they can productively use web browsers or email. And that time is probably just a few years away. But bosses who want to limit Facebook today are not being superstitious.

Robert A. Heinlein, in *Stranger in a Strange Land* has the "man from Mars," who is at first biologically human but raised on Mars, by Martians, in the alien world of Martian culture and language, come to earth and among other things kiss girls in the most impressive way. A little later on, an inquisitive host tries to understand:

"What's so special about the way that lad kisses?"

Anne looked dreamy, then dimpled. "You should have tried it."

"I'm too old to change. But I'm interested in everything about the boy. Is this something different?"

Anne pondered it. "Yes."

"How?"

"Mike gives a kiss his whole attention."

"Oh, rats! I do myself. Or did."

Anne shook her head. "No. I've been kissed by men who did a very good job. But they don't give kissing their whole attention. They *can't*. No matter how hard they try parts of their mind are on something else. Missing the last bus—or their chances of making the gal—or maybe worry about jobs, or money, or will husband or papa or the neighbors catch on. Mike doesn't have technique . . . but when Mike kisses you he isn't doing *anything* else. You're his whole universe . . . and the moment is eternal because he doesn't have any plans and isn't going anywhere. Just kissing you." She shivered. "It's overwhelming."

Now this is part of a Messiah story, of sorts, but a Messiah story where the hero kills lightly and without guilt, and encourages people to throw off sexual shackles: in other words a Messiah story as written by a sex-crazed, anti-Christian libertine. So of course, if this insight is expressed, it may well be portrayed in erotic terms. And as an insight from alien Martian culture which has nothing to do with earth. But portraying it that way is backwards.

This alien Martian kissing insight is in fact an insight that the older generation knows, or at least knew, well. When Walkmans were first becoming popular, one friend recounted to me, his mother talked about how if you were running and had a Walkman on, you were not being attentive to your surroundings. There is a basic principle of asceticism: a principle of being attentive that used to be bedrock to American culture (and, quite obviously, Russian culture) that when you are talking with someone, or working, or at church, or practicing a hobby, the moment is eternal because you don't have any plans and you aren't going anywhere. And we have more and more ways to dodge this spiritual lesson, and have noise to keep us away from a life where eternity is in our moments. And this is not good for our spirits.

good for our spirits.

But it's also practically relevant to work; a company that tries to stamp out Facebook at work is not trying to take on the job of your spiritual director; it is trying to make ends meet. Unrestricted Facebook use doesn't just cost time; it costs momentum and energy; it costs attention; it's a way to take bright employees and have them make poorer decisions and make lower quality work.

Being able to work in an office, or jobhunt, or work at home, is an area where this spiritual discipline affects success. If the stakes are survival, then this spiritual discipline becomes a matter of survival.

34. Don't try to wag the dog. More specifically, don't try to wag God.

One of my friends has a print-out of two poems side by side:

"Invictus"

by William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

I am the captain of my soul.

"The Soul's Captain"

by Orson F. Whitney

Art thou in truth? Then what of Him
Who bought thee with His blood?
Who plunged into devouring seas
And snatched thee from the flood,

Who bore for all our fallen race
What none but Him could bear—
That God who died that man might live
And endless glory share.

Of what avail thy vaunted strength
Apart from His vast might?
Pray that His light may pierce the gloom
That thou mayest see aright.

Men are as bubbles on the wave,
As leaves upon the tree,
Thou, captain of thy soul! Forsooth,
Who gave that place to thee?

Free will is thine- free agency,
To wield for right or wrong;
But thou must answer unto Him
To whom all souls belong.

Bend to the dust that "head unbowed,"
Small part of life's great whole,
And see in Him and Him alone,
The captain of thy soul.

Trying to be "the captain on your soul" today is often more of a Oprah-style touchy-feely self-improvement project than an abrasively stiff Nietzschean campaign. But the core is unchanged and the end is the same, and it is a real temptation. It's there when we

make our plans without first seeking the Lord's guidance, and then ask God to give a rubber stamp blessing. The severity varies, but all of us do this at least a little. (I know *I* do.)

Peter Kreeft said that the chief advantage of wealth is that it does not make you happy. The statement may sound strange, but it is sensible. If you are having trouble financially, you can believe that if only you had enough money, the toughest difficulty in life would be taken care of. But if you have lots of money and you still have problems, you don't need more money; you need something more *than* money. And something like this—but dealing with much more in life than money—is at the heart of George Bernard Shaw's "There are two great tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it." The first tragedy is the tragedy of seeing ads for the Amazing New Swiffer, pining for how perfect your life would be with it, yet despite all your longing and all your best efforts, the Amazing New Swiffer forever remains beyond your grasp. The other tragedy is getting the Amazing New Swiffer, finding that it really does have the Cool Telescoping Handle the ads say it does, and then becoming painfully aware that you have the same spiritual void as you did before you owned the Amazing New Swiffer. But these two tragedies in life are not the only possibilities.

The third option is the way of the [Sermon on the Mount](#). It is the way of letting yourself be clay, shaped in the hands of the potter; it is the way of trust in providence. The dreams we imagine for our success could be incapable of making us truly happy; but the plans God provides for our growth and maturity can give us a joy we would never expect. There was an Evangelical T-shirt that shows one Christian fish symbol swimming in the opposite direction from a number of predatory fish, and says, "Go against the flow." And if it is talking about what is wrong in the world, then the message is true. But there is another sense of "going with the flow": the lifelong and difficult struggle of cooperating with the flow of God's providence. It may be paradoxical that we need to work to go with the flow, but it really is work to go with the flow, and it really is a flow, such as an Orthodox priest-monk wrote in [Christ the Eternal Tao](#): which, from

what I've heard, is like what I wrote in, [The Way of the Way](#) before becoming Orthodox—but better. [Christ the Eternal Tao](#) places the Fall in relation to the human race leaving a first tranquility and entering worry and becoming distracted with plans to arrange things our way. If we chase after our own versions of the Swiffer, whether or not we succeed, the chasing and the goal are marks of the Fall. You cannot get happiness either if you fail in your quest for the Amazing New Swiffer or if you succeed in the selfsame quest, but there is another option: to give up the quest altogether and live in something better. And that something better is Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Happiness can never come from trying to wag God. It comes from God wagging us: it comes from praying, not in order to change God, but to actively work with God changing us. Virtue is easy, much easier than vice. Getting to virtue may seem harder than remaining in vice, but this is because we do not see how hard vice is. And something funny happens along the way. If we are wise, we see our quests to be the captain of our souls as sin, nothing less, and we repent of it. And we let God work on us, slowly shaping us. Some time along the way, we think of something else we did not think to ask for: God is the Great Choreographer and we have fought his invitations to happiness by dancing the Great Dance, often without ever recognizing the invitation. And second, in his work with us, in our situations, in our prayers and other ascesis, in our successes and failures, our greatest joys and our greatest pains, he is there, working with us, mending our spiritual diseases and freeing us from internal chains that were invisible us, preparing us for freedom. And what we find, long after we realized chasing after being the captain of our souls was a silly fantasy that could never satisfy us, we realize that God is preparing us for deep spiritual freedom: beyond a freedom *in* doomed quests, a freedom *from* doomed quests, a freedom not to have one's soul chained by chasing after the Swiffer. God is the Great Physician, ever working to free us from spiritual disease and the constriction of sin; God is the great Spiritual Father arranging everything in our lives for our freedom: beyond the freedom we know to ask for, another, deeper kind of freedom that we would never even

think to ask. God ever seeks to free from chains we do not see how we can live without. And God is the giver who gives us ever better, ever wilder gifts than we ask.

It matters not how strait the gate, nor how charged with punishment the scroll: we turn to God with head ever bowed: and the Master of Our Fate shapes us to be, after him, *the captains of our souls*.

35. Never settle for ersatz sacraments.

There is something that might be called "sacramental shopping:" buying something, not really for the use you will get out of it, but to adjust things inside. This chief ersatz sacrament, and the ersatz spiritual discipline of consuming brands, are two major pillars in the ersatz religion of the ersatz god called Money. But it is not the only ersatz sacrament.

Many first world nations are working really hard to unleash the goodness of sex; and yet their birth rates are almost morbidly low compared with nations with no pretension of such a "celebration" and "unleashing." The chief good of sex is seen as a pleasurable experience. If you say that the chief good of sex is that it brings life in the world, you are seen as a bit of a sophist or a slightly self-deluded fool. These are symptoms of a real problem, the same problems that are blared loud in spam hawking a range of porn up to and including smut that makes *Penthouse* look like Botticelli. (And, as mentioned before, Viagra ads that proclaim that our natural lust, even if we lay the reins on the horse's neck, is never enough: we always need to goad ourselves more, more, more.) We are trying more and more to get the ultimate sexual thrill, and somehow it never satisfies. And where an older generation would merely call using porn (and relieving yourself) sin, and serious sin at that, we *know* it as an addiction; men are learning the hard way that addiction to porn is as joyless a chain as addiction to some narcotics. All this is tied to approaching sex chiefly as means to pleasure, and used that way it is much worse than what happens when we use eating as our constant pleasure delivery system.

This is a much nastier ersatz sacrament, partly because sexuality runs to the core of our being.

The *only* way to win this game is not to play at all...

We need *real* sacraments.

36. Live the Eucharist.

Orthodox believe in seven sacraments, but you can also say that there are a million sacraments, or only one: the Eucharist.

I am not sure what really to say about the Eucharist; perhaps one starting point might be the Holy Grail. Respected Arthurian scholar Richard Barber wrote [The Holy Grail](#) that he began his research expecting a paper-thin Christianization of originally pre-Christian pagan sources, and came to believe that the Holy Grail in medieval literature centered on the Eucharist, so much so that the so-called secrets of the Grail were in fact the so-called secrets of the Mass, an orthodox spiritual interpretation of the Mass and its various details. I am not sure I believe him all the way; I'll get to that momentarily, but this adds weight to C.S. Lewis's and Charles Williams's Arthurian commentary where they talk about the Holy Grail absorbing into itself all the Celtic pots of plenty, a Holy Grail which is significant precisely as the first fount of the Eucharist. Whatever other influences may be present in medieval Arthurian legend, it is a clumsy move to try to interpret Christianity as at most a superficial influence in the Arthurian legends and the Grail, and it really tells more about the reader than the text.

And I wanted to make an Orthodox treatment of the Holy Grail, and engage the legends. I wrote my last novella, [The Sign of the Grail](#), after reading a lot of medieval forms of Arthurian legends, and I believe there is more than meets the eye to the legends' presence in [The Sign of the Grail](#): if the narrative is dreamlike, it follows the Arthurian tellings of never-never land. And, sadly enough, part of my impetus was that I was studying in a theology program with not-very-theological theology; reading the legends almost felt like

theology compared to my coursework. But I found out something during and after my writing: I succeeded, in a way, but found that I was trying to do something that was impossible, or rather didn't make sense.

In the days that the legends of King Arthur and his court began spreading, the Western Church discouraged people from involving themselves with "idle romances;" online versions of *The Catholic Encyclopedia* are no warmer; and the Eastern Church's response is more, "the holy what?" I had to overlook a spiritual foul smell to become engrossed in the legends, and the foul smell has become a full-fledged stench over the centuries—it's not just *The da Vinci Code*. Richard Barber may be right that the Holy Grail in the medieval legends was not taken from non-Christian legends and given a Christian resurfacing. But in today's Grail questing, the Christian dimension has shrunk almost to oblivion, and been replaced by more occult forces.

In the medieval legends, the Holy Grail is something elusive: if you grasp it, it very soon slips through your fingers. You may quest for it, but it is almost by definition something beyond your reach. It has been said that if the *definition* of dinosaurs includes being extinct, then it is true on purely philosophical grounds that no dinosaurs exist: if Jurassic Park were to open up, it would still be true that no dinosaurs exist: even if enormous, ancient kinds of reptiles were right next to you, they could not be dinosaurs *by definition*, because they are not extinct. And this is very much like the quest for the Holy Grail. It is like King Pellinore in his pursuit of the ugly Questing Beast that would forever elude him. Part of the (implied) definition of the Holy Grail is that it is something you can't have.

Orthodoxy doesn't really have a tradition of questing for the Holy Grail, nor does it offer any obvious means to possess the Holy Grail. The only game in town is to *become* the Holy Grail.

The sanctification of Holy Communion is a mystery *en route* to the transformation of the faithful. Bread and wine really and truly

become the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist is not consecrated to remain in the chalice; it reaches its full stature only when the vessel that receives it is no longer a lifeless cup, but a living vessel: a living person. And that reaches its full stature in transformed believers and transformed lives. The wine becomes the blood of Christ, and becomes the divine life that is lived by the body of Christ, the Church. There are icons where the chalice is present: one layer of Rublev's [icon of the Trinity](#) is the Father and the Spirit on either side in the Heavenly reality reflected in earthly chalices. The chalice is easier to see in [an icon of Christ, the bread of life](#). But in these layers, not only is every chalice mystically the first chalice: we are made to be more truly the Holy Grail than the Holy Grail itself. We are to receive the Eucharist, and live it in our lives.

There was a Russian saint who authorized more frequent participation in Communion when hard times were descending on Russia. I am wary of treating why some devout Orthodox receive Communion almost every week, and others only on the highest of feasts, but whether Communion is frequent or not, it is a powerful aid for hard times.

37. Hope for God to be a cruel man, harvesting where he has not sown and gathering where he has not scattered (see [Matthew 25:24](#)).

There is a Chinese saying associated with Taoism: "Heaven's greatest mercy is without mercy." And there are senses in which Orthodox would not say this: Orthodoxy decisively rejected Novatianism, which is an Orthodoxy without the principle of oikonomia. Both oikonomia, the principle of mercifully relaxing strictness, and akgravia, the principle of striving for strict excellence, are of profound importance. But there is another way in which God's greatest mercy is without mercy. All of us have the spiritual disease called sin, and God the Great Physician will never stop until he has uprooted all of it. Sin is a spiritual cancer, and as long as we live on earth, we need to repent. And the Great Physician will not stop so long as there is one tiny tumor hidden in our smallest toe. In that way, the Great Physician who is also the Great Choreographer arranging for our good in hard times and easy is merciless: he is a

cruel man, altogether without mercy. I've been through chemotherapy; it could perhaps have been worse, but it was one of the nastier things I've been through. But, in my chemotherapy and radiotherapy, the doctors and nurses weren't aiming to give me an enjoyable experience; they were aiming to give me my *life*, and I am profoundly grateful to them for this. Sometimes God's work with us is very pleasant. He wants to give us every good, and even his calls to repentance are meant to give us a host of good things, joy included. But all of us have the seeds of Hell inside us, and all of us need unconditional surrender to the Great Physician. And to those of us who hold on to sin because in our warped state we think it adorns us, God's greatest mercy is without mercy.

How then does God harvest where he has not sown? The Nicene Creed's opening words announce, "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." The first chapters of [Genesis](#) proclaim that the world is God's creation. God has created everything outside himself: the very demons owe their existence to God as much as the angels do. Every fish, rock and tree; every good or bad person, every angel and demon, time itself—all these are sown by the Great Sower. Then what is there to harvest that God hath not sown?

The answer is that God has not sown evil, nor sin, nor death. And he harvests where he has not sown. The Devil killed Christ in the hour that darkness reigned, but this was the beginning of the three-day Pascha of Christ's resurrection, where Christ crushed death, the Firstborn of the Dead ([Colossians 1:18](#)), who opened the doors of death so that all might enter: the moment Satan seemed to secure certain victory was only the final sacrifice by which God secured checkmate. God did not sow the death of his Son, but he harvested where he had not sown: God harvested from the death of his Son the resurrection of his sons, the saints, his whole Church. And the same is true in the saints' lives. The gulag where [Fr. Arseny](#) served was nothing other than the work of the Devil. God did not sow this, but he worked in it, and he harvested from it a saint's life that touched others. God did not sow those evils, but he worked in them. As "The

reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" ([1 John 3:8](#)), but not by turning back the clock and simply erasing them, but by moving forward and transforming them. And the story of [Fr. Arseny](#) is the story of God's triumph in and through his people, triumph even in a death camp. Have you ever met a recovering alcoholic who has been dry for years, and who shows a singular warmth and caring for others? Some of the most beautiful people I know have been recovering alcoholics, and God has harvested where he has not sown and destroyed the Devil's work. And the same is true of our sins and the problems in our lives: God will, if we let him, transform them and harvest where he has never sown.

We live in a time of unusual fragmentation; the postmodern age is more of a bazaar than much that went before, but one and the same God who harvests where he has never sown also gathers where he has not scattered, and gathers into himself. We were all made for communion with God, but sin has scattered us much farther than our expulsion of Paradise. But God is stronger. Even if he has not scattered, he wills to gather all to himself.

Must we allow God to be cruel? We do not have the authority to veto God on this. Some have complained about "The God I believe in would never [*fill in the blank*]," but the God we believe in surprises us and catches us off guard. If we correct God on how he may love, this is a problem, and sticking our head in the sand does not make hard times genuinely easier. Better open ourselves to the infinite mercy of a God who is cruel, harvests where he has never sown, and gathers where he has never scattered.

Fighting this will never help us, and certainly not help us survive hard times.

38. Pray all the time.

The *Philokalia* say a lot about the Jesus Prayer, and [The Way of the Pilgrim](#) tells not only of the life and survival of a homeless man amidst many dangers, but of God truly blessing him. Much of his

book is about him living the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

39. Read the saints' lives.

I didn't really know what I missed until I started reading the saints' lives. Difficult lives are not the exception in the saints' lives: they are the rule. Yet the deepest thing one encounters is not this, but God's triumph in his saints.

[The Orthodox Church in America page for saints' lives](#) links to different saints each day, and it is an excellent place to read something each day. ([The Natural Cycle Clock](#) includes related links for the so-called Old Calendar.) Either of these can be bookmarked and revisited for a daily portion of spiritual nourishment.

40. Work hard.

There are different kinds of work in life: work that earns money, work at home, and spiritual work among others. We often pray for God to make life easier for us, when we should pray, "God, give me mountains to climb and the strength for climbing." Every kind of work has merit, and wisdom literature tells us ([Proverbs 6:6-11](#)),

Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer or ruler, she prepares her food in summer, and gathers her sustenance in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a vagabond, and want like an armed man.

A lot of work we need to do is work without any chief, officer, or ruler: job hunting, for instance. The word "wisdom" in the Bible does not conjure up the image of a seer with deep, piercing insights; we would do well to read it as "skill for living" if nothing else.

[Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#) makes an interesting

point in its introduction. When the author looked through wisdom literature from different ages, he noticed a recent trend. All of the wisdom literature aimed for skill for living, but the most recent wisdom literature offered what he called a "personality ethic" that sought success in superficial tricks and techniques. Almost all of the other wisdom literature recognized a "character ethic" that said true success in life is a matter of character and virtue that reaches to the core of our being. "Get rich quick" has been called "the perennial cry of the lazy man," and lots of ads on the web promise a secret that will provide lots of steady income but require little time or work. And the best response is like the wisdom books: "Consider the ant, lazybones. How long will you fall for these scams? Get off your duff, roll up your sleeves, get to work, and keep working!"

41. Go beyond work.

It is true, not only that virtue is easier than vice, but that the Christian life is a life of grace, a Sabbath rest in God: "Be still, and know that I am God" ([Psalm 46:10 KJV](#)). Someone said, "I wouldn't give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." The rest on this side of hard work is only laziness, but the rest on the other side of work is Heaven, and it begins in this life.

42. Go beyond nice, but don't settle for mean.

Being nice is not enough. We in America work hard at being nice, at making other people feel good and at trying to avoid hurting other people's feelings.

But do not confuse being nice with Christian love. Love, like a person, has soft flesh and a hard spine. How a person feels now is not the only concern to love: a much bigger concern is giving what you can to the other person's growth for a lifetime. George MacDonald said that love is easy to please but difficult to satisfy, which is a much greater gift than nice. Life is hard, and people can have trouble believing both that God is in charge and that he is good when really hard things happen. But God is *both* in charge *and* good.

The problem is that we have confused being nice with being good. We ask what is wrong with God when he fails to be nice, and the answer is that God has never been merely nice. He works for our good on a deeper level, concerned with discipleship and growth and doing better things for us than simply be nice and give us what ask when we try to inform him what will make us happy.

Our hard work to be a nice world may or may not last. I would not assume that nice is permanent any more than a booming economy is permanent, and some have suggested that nice will come to be replaced by mean. But as for us, we don't need to be merely nice, let alone merely mean. We need a concern for others' growth as people, and we need love with soft flesh and a hard spine.

43. Pay attention to the wallflowers in life.

One theologian, speaking in a chapel, told how when he was younger his mother told him, to pay attention to the wallflowers at a dance, not the eye-catchers dancing in the center of the room. The wallflowers were ultimately much more interesting, his mother told him. And, he said, she was right, and the lesson wasn't just about dancing. When they are considering what doctrines to explore the most, he suggested that we look at the wallflower doctrines.

This is not just a truth about dancing and theology either. Good software developers may use buzzwords on an as-needed basis when dealing with people who expect them, but in the best software developers' favorite professional conversations, the discussion is all about professional wallflowers that the best computer science has been discussing for years, if not decades. It is a *faux pas* to use a string of buzzwords, much like trying to show off your vocabulary by constantly dropping the F-bomb.

"Local" is one of the eye-catchers, and there may be something to it; there is a good case that our ability to make our own private worlds with likeminded friends from the internet loses something that was part of life when life was local because there was scarcely an alternative. "Green" is far from being a wallflower, and there's

something to it. But turning off the lights (like reducing and reusing) was once part of the old-fashioned virtue of thrift before it was rediscovered as being green, and for that matter Christians spoke of stewardship before being green was such a watchword. Ages before that, Christian theologians spoke of the tie between humans and nature, looking on the natural world with respect. But the point is not just that local and green have taken a few moves from the wallflowers. The eye-catchers are not as interesting as the wallflowers.

There are other wallflowers in life, and they are also interesting.

44. Don't assume that because Church Fathers could not imagine the world we live in that their words are irrelevant.

The wisdom of the Fathers may be all the more relevant. It is true that we have been able to cast off much of thrift like a shackle, but the words of the Fathers on thrift were not just because of economic conditions unlike ours; they are written because thrift is good for us as humans. The Fathers could not imagine porn as it comes to us, but what is obsolete about the words of [Proverbs](#) on lust is all on the surface: if [Proverbs](#) tells us that lust is toxic, these words lose nothing today. (Ask a recovering porn addict.) If our technologies and our culture give us more ways to indulge narcissism, the words of the Fathers on pride are far from obsolete. Old warnings about addiction to too much alcohol are *more* relevant, not *less*, when drinking too much alcohol serves as a gateway to meth and cocaine. And this is just some of what the Fathers say about sins; what they say about goodness is even deeper.

The Fathers represent advice that transcend their historical situation to speak to other times and ages. Possibly some of the details need to be adapted, but this is really a side issue. The Holy Spirit moves in the Fathers, they speak to human life, and they have much to teach us.

Some postmodern scholarship that I've read makes a critique of the philosophies that immediately preceded postmodernism, and then assumes "without loss of generality" as mathematicians say

then assumes, without loss of generality – as mathematicians say, that nothing more needs to be said about anything else people have said in the ages before. It does help keep articles to a manageable length if postmodern philosophy is compared only to one other philosophy. But more is going on. There is a real temptation to compare a new trend only with what came right before it, and not consider that much older trends may have a better alternative. This is a loss; we need wisdom that has been accumulating for ages.

45. Store up treasures in Heaven.

The [Sermon on the Mount](#) speak to us today:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

If danger is looming, we may conceive of a practical response in terms of laying up treasures: gold, which can be stolen, or stocks, which can crash, or money itself, which can fall prey to inflation. But we shouldn't be reaching for treasures in earth: we need treasures in Heaven: golden virtues that can strengthen us for hard times, community that can pull together, and kindnesses that may be responded to when we least expect it. And even this much is a materialist view of treasures in Heaven: storing up treasures in Heaven teaches us to work with the divine providence that we need most in disasters. It puts first things first:

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

These words are tied, if subtly, to their context: storing up treasures in Heaven gives us a sound eye, while merely storing up treasures on earth stores up blindness, the blindness of being penny wise and pound foolish. The last thing we need in a rough situation is

for the light in us to be darkness; it is in disasters we need a sound eye more than any other time, and trying to solve our problems by storing up treasures on earth is simply not up to the task before us.

The [Sermon on the Mount](#) continues after this:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.

Virtues are one kind of treasure in Heaven, and they are powerful in themselves: one Greek word, *arete*, means both virtue and excellence. But this last passage from the [Sermon on the Mount](#) says more. The [Sermon on the Mount](#) does not *need* to say, as I have, that virtues and other treasures in Heaven can do things on earth.

The major point is that God looks out for us in his divine providence, and we are better building our lives on this providence than trying to do everything ourselves. We are better off living the lifelong lesson of trusting in God than trying to get enough money to replace the providence we do not trust God for.

It is a mistake to say, "Yes, but we do not live in a perfect world and I need something more practical." The [Sermon on the Mount](#) is concerned with practical realities in practical life. When it says, to paraphrase, "Don't make yourself bear tomorrow's stress today; each day has enough stress of its own," it is not telling us that it would be nice to have our lives be stress-free. It's telling wise advice for people whose lives are not stress free, and the more stress you are under, the more practical the advice becomes. Having problems in your life but being too practical for the [Sermon on the Mount](#) is like having a computer program that you can't get to work, but being too smart to read the manual or try to Google a solution on the web. It's a very *impractical* way to be practical.

46. "Stand back, and take off the shoes from your feet, because the place where you are standing is holy ground!" ([Exodus 3:5](#))

Take off the shoes from your feet. In ancient times, shoes were dead things, made not from synthetic materials but from the leathery dead skin of animals. And these words first spoken to Moses still speak today. If we encounter God, we must spiritually take off dead shoes from our feet: if we are to meet God, it will cost us our dead preconceptions and the dead idols that are a dead weight to us. These words come in Moses's great encounter with God in [Exodus 3:13-15](#), and when Moses draws near he is told to shed his dead shoes on sacred ground.

Today's New Age works very hard to dislodge dead preconceptions. What better way to strip off dead preconceptions than to celebrate any and all religions? To pick a popular topic—an eye-catcher these days—the Mayan "astrological" calendar is a cultural work of beauty; one of the core insights is that each day has an appointed purpose, and Mayan practitioners meet their spiritual

leaders to work out how to best live the day as is fitting to its place in the cycles of their calendar. Orthodoxy has something like this: there is a liturgical rhythm which its people are to live out, and what I first read about the Mayan calendar in anthropology helped me to start living a real asset in Orthodoxy. Orthodox, among others, distinguish chronos from kairos:

There are two [Greek] words [chronos and kairos] that are both translated time, but their meanings are very different. Translating them both as time is like translating both genuine concern and hypocritical flattery as "politeness" because you are translating into a language that doesn't show the distinction.

as I wrote in [The Horn of Joy](#). Kairos is appointed time, time where moments are there with a purpose, time such as liturgical time highlights with its rhythms of seasons and days and the varying ways they are lived out. Chronos is time without this meaning, time such as a clock can measure, and in the words of one Orthodox homily, the time of "one damn thing after another." We have largely fallen into chronos and largely forgotten kairos even if we still yearn for what we miss, and the Mayan calendar did and does understand kairos extremely well. But something more (or, rather, less) appears to be going on in the sudden interest in the Mayan calendar.

This something ~~more~~ less has to do with how New Age fails to really remove dead shoes from our feet. New Age is like waterskiing: one moves along quickly, skimming along the top very quickly, where really removing dead shoes from our feet is like swimming: you fall in the water and stay in. What may be going on in the sudden interest in Mayan time is, as I wrote in [Technonomicon](#),

There was great excitement in the past millenium when, it was believed, the Age of Pisces would draw to a close, and the Age of Aquarius would begin, and this New Age would be an exciting dawn when all we find dreary about the here and now would melt away. Then the Age of Aquarius started, at least officially, but the New Age failed to rescue us from finding the here and now to be dreary. Then there was great excitement as

something like 97% of children born after a certain date were born indigo children: children whose auras are indigo rather than a more mundane color. But, unfortunately, this celebrated watershed did not stop the here and now from being miserable. Now there is great hope that in 2012, according to the Mayan "astrological" calendar, another momentous event will take place, perhaps finally delivering us from the here and now. And, presumably, when December 21, 2012 fails to satisfy us, subsequent momentous events will promise to deliver us from a here and now we find unbearable.

The quotes are because the anthropology I've read talks about the Mayan calendar without making any connection to astrology, even if they find it beautiful and deep. I have run into New Age hope for a Mayan 2012 watershed, but it never discusses things like, "The Quiché [Mayan calendar-based] reality causes them to scrutinize each day and its character as it relates to their own character, their desires, and their past, as well as the tasks that lie ahead," as *The Dance of Life* tries to explain the beauty and wisdom. *The Dance of Life* is written to challenge one's dead preconceptions; that it does so in an occult way is not the point. No New Age hubbub about December 21, 2012 seems to really challenge the dead shoes we need to be freed from—certainly not the dead shoe of trying to escape a miserable here and now, an idol diametrically opposed to the spiritual beauty not only of the Mayan calendar, but of the Christian calendar too. Whether the Mayan calendar should be understood as "astrological" I am not sure; certainly *The Dance of Life* with its occult bent never connects the Mayan calendar with astrology. But to ask the Mayan calendar to deliver an escape from the miserable here and now is to ask it to work against its fundamental beauty and its fundamental principle: the point of the Mayan calendar, like the Orthodox Christian one, is not to provide *escape* from the here and now but further provide us help to *engage* the here and now. However much New Age may offer to open our minds, what it gives here at least is further help nailing the dead shoes to our feet.

All of us stand on holy ground. The whole world is created by God, and to God it returns. Can we escape? *Never!* [Psalm 139 KJV](#)

reads,

Whither shall I go from thy spirit?
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:
If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me,
And thy right hand shall hold me.
If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me;
Even the night shall be light about me.
Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee;
But the night shineth as the day:
The darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

The whole world is an emblem of God's glory: God's plan to share his glory with the human race is ultimately the glorification of the entire Creation, and God wills to engage us in the situations we are in. And his glory will ever shock us to remove our dead shoes and enter life more abundantly. There is no place we can flee from God, nor any place that is not holy ground where God will tell us we have dead leather shoes to remove. And taking off our dead leather shoes is lifegiving.

47. Take a cue from an older kind of fermented drink.

[Nourishing Traditions](#), which calls for a return to less plastic-y industrial foods such as was eaten in nutritional golden ages, has a curious inconsistency. She grinds an axe against what you could buy at a liquor store: her nutritional golden ages include colonial America, but in the "traditional" recipe for punch she censors rum and even substitutes something else to make up the five ingredients for an alcohol-free punch. Not that she is a teetotaler: she advocates another kind of rather different alcoholic beverages that are made by another process, "lacto-fermented" beverages made by a process that isn't found in today's commercially prepared beer, wine, and liquors. But, none the less, she grinds quite an axe against drinks that are

commercially available. She offers no convincing, or even unconvincing, explanation for how negatively she treats modern drinks as used in her nutritional golden ages.

When I spoke with a friend who was a big advocate of the [Nourishing Traditions](#)-style movement, she openly acknowledged that this was an inconsistency and made no blanket condemnation of the modern drinks a liquor store sells (I think she said she enjoys a glass of wine now and then), but she did say something that [Nourishing Traditions](#) could have said but didn't. The older kind of drinks, home-made fruit of lacto-fermentation rather than yeast fermentation, satisfy in a way that yeast-fermented commercial drinks don't. And there's something to that. When I brought a jar of lacto-fermented water kefir to church for a special occasion, the remark I got, completely unsolicited, said it was satisfying.

I remember when I was in France, hearing some of the history of Champagne and how it came to be. Early on was discussion about how they raised the alcohol content; today's wine is 12-13% alcohol, but in the ancient world wine was around 4% alcohol. And I'm not sure I've ever had a lacto-fermented drink above 2% alcohol, but there is a difference. However much I may love a good wine, I have to be disciplined because if it tastes good, I could drink a drop more than is good for me if I don't pay close attention to how much. But the difference with a good home-made lacto-fermented drink is that the temptation to drink and drink is much less. It's not just that it would take much more of it to get drunk; even if you like it you don't want to keep on drinking because you are satisfied the way you are after a good meal.

This is of course dwarfed by the real motivation for lacto-fermented drinks, namely that they are believed to offer much better nourishment, (*probiotic* and all that), but I mention this because this is a microcosm of pervasive changes that have taken place and are taking place throughout the world we live in, and affecting all our life. If I may make a table of what this is a microcosm of, with one column for each vastly different fermented drink:

Yeast-fermented modern Lacto-fermented ancient wine drinks

At least a little buzz. Satisfaction.

Unwinding to technology like Unwinding to friends' conversation television and radio. or music played by your friends.

New Age exotic tripping through Orthodoxy's sublime and (attempts at) various traditions sublimated way of giving the and their practices. exotic.

The thrill of new narcissism. The joy of humility.

Postmodern pursuit of Growing roots, in beliefs and in philosophical adventure. life.

Cycling through new, short-lived Owning things built to last and possessions. intended to be kept.

Seeking good nutrition and Making Splenda your tool to lose eating to nourish the body. weight.

Going on a crusade to solve the world's problems. "Just" being a member of society and penitently turning the crusade against your own sins.

Having friendships that are Having friendships that last for beyond disposable: years unless something goes transactional seriously wrong.

Trying to make friendship with people you choose. Learning to make friendship with people who are in your life that you cannot choose.

Porn and related pleasures. Marriage and children.

We seem to be shifting further left, and this is not a good thing.

48. Prepare for losses.

Christ told St. Peter, [John 21:18 RSV](#),

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.

These words may be given to all of us.

The Christian Way is a Way of being emptied; its triumph is a triumph precisely *in* loss, a way of life resurrected from death.

The Way before us may be, as for St. Peter, "you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go." We may have enough to forgive now, but we may have much more to forgive in the future. If that is the case, the best preparation in the future is to work on forgiveness now, even if you make a mess of it as I do. Forgiveness is a way of emptying, a letting go that is connected to the Man who said from the Cross, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do" ([Luke 23:34](#)). And this forgiveness is key to opening us up to receive forgiveness: of all the points in the Our Father given as a model prayer, forgiveness alone is singled out for further comment ([Matthew 6:14-15 RSV](#)):

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Unforgiveness, trying to hold on to what we think is our due, locks us out of God's work to give us a greater good than we are wise enough to look for. But if we surrender to God in forgiveness, emptying ourselves, our emptying is in continuity with the emptying of Christ, who again ([Philippians 2:5-11 RSV](#)):

though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

This Way of forgiveness, this emptying, is the Way, the Truth, and the Life who is Christ Jesus himself who gives triumph where we

and the one who is Christ Jesus himself who gives triumph where we can anticipate only defeat. Christ's words to St. Peter announce a martyr's triumph, and Tradition holds that St. Peter was sentenced to be crucified, and said that he was unworthy to be crucified as his Lord was crucified, and asked to be crucified upside down: inverted crucifixion being the one form of crucifixion more excruciatingly painful than Christ's kind of crucifixion. But this is triumph, eternal triumph, a triumph in St. Peter's humbly emptying himself. And if we are emptied, if we forgive, Christ will triumph in us. And this may be the kind of triumph that God works in and through us.

49. Light one candle: it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Some have said that a candle, such as Orthodox use in prayer, is an emblem of Christ: it gives light, and it gives light by emptying himself. Not everyone uses that image, but God is light, and Christ shone with the uncreated light as he was transfigured. The halo of light around the head of a saint on an icon is not just convention: it is there because Christ blazed with glory so that his face shone like the sun. And this same glory manifests, to some degree, in his saints. One saint, at the end of a holy life, lay on his deathbed with his face shining with the light of Christ, and said, "I have not even begun to repent." This is a microcosm of God's emptying victory.

Light a candle. Or *be* a candle.

50. "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his perfect righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

All else is commentary.

All of what I have said above has real imperfections and leaves enormous gaps. But I would like to address one question: Have I said I was going to offer guidance for rough situations and pulled a bait and switch, offering spirituality instead? To answer that, I recall one friend in high school who said with some disgust that he wished C.S. Lewis had left his religion out of [The Chronicles of Narnia](#). I kept my mouth shut, but the suggestion struck me as strange, even clueless, like saying you wished

Newton had kept all math out of his physics. To dislike Newtonian physics may be one thing, but it betrays some confusion to say that you like Newtonian physics but treat the math as an intrusion, as if the math had been artificially inserted like zombies and ultra-violence into [Pride and Prejudice](#). C.S. Lewis was a man fascinated by myths and legends even before he became a Christian. Tolkein and others showed him his inconsistency in praising a pagan myth of a dying and rising god and then turning his nose up at Christianity as utterly trite; C.S. Lewis became a Christian precisely because he came to believe that the myths he loved all came together in Christ. Lewis crafted [The Chronicles of Narnia](#) out of love for all of these stories, and it is, to put it politely, a somewhat surprising suggestion to say that the story Lewis found truest and most beautiful simply does not belong in [The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe](#). And perhaps it is a bit of a surprising suggestion to say "Tell me what you can about surviving in a disaster, but recognize that your religion is irrelevant to this question."

Robert Heinlein, in [Stranger in a Strange Land](#), wrote, when the characters faced a rather daunting emergency,

"...But I took other steps the first night you were here. You know your Bible?"

"Uh, not very well."

"It merits study, it contains practical advice for most emergencies..."

And this in a distinctly anti-Christian book. Perhaps the text goes on to a rather secular application of [John](#), but the Bible is, among other things, God's own manual for how to deal with rough situations. (And this is to say nothing of the Orthodox Church.)

Saints Cheering Us On

The famous Hall of Fame ([Hebrews 11:4-40 RSV](#)) tells,

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts; he died, but through his faith he is still speaking. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his burial.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the first-born might not touch them. By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land; but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given friendly welcome to the spies. And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets -- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were

killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated -- of whom the world was not worthy -- wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

The image is of a stadium where athletes have run the full race, have received their crowns of victory, and now stand around cheering those who are still running: the faithful who are still in life's struggles.

This is not just the prophets and righteous saints from the Old Testament cheering on the first Christians; it is also the saints from the ages cheering on Christians today. If in America we have a revolution, and it turns out horribly, we will enter it with the prayers of the host of Russian saints. In the worst case, it will be an extremely difficult struggle, but there are others who have struggled before us and will stand, crowned in victory, cheering us on to join them in victory.

The text continues to call these saints, "a great cloud of witnesses." We do not know, for sure, what will happen, but whether we have a recovery or a maelstrom, the whole world, including the United States, will have the prayers of this great cloud of witnesses, including the vast army of Russian saints from ancient and modern times.

We have prayers, *from Russia with love.*

Twelve Quotes on Orthodoxy, Ecumenism, and Catholicism

1. *Ecumenism*: Invented by Protestants. Adapted by Catholics. Foisted on Orthodox. Won't you agree it smells fishy?
2. Many Protestants see Catholics generously, looking at them as basically equivalent to a Protestant. Catholics extend the same spirit of generosity to see Orthodox as essentially Catholic. But the differences are fundamentally deeper.
3. What Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant share is genuinely significant. There is really a lot in common. But there is also remarkably much in common between Christian, Hindu, and classical Taoist, even if there is less in common than what Christians hold in common. The commonalities are significant, but beyond the differences also being significant, Orthodox communion makes a profound difference. Looking at theological similarities and ignoring the point of communion is a way to strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.
4. The Church must breathe with both lungs. (And the sooner she starts breathing with the Western lung, the better.)
5. I've seen the shirts that say, "Orthodox Christian in communion with Rome" and wished to make, among other things, a shirt that says "Catholic Christian in communion with the [Archdruid of](#)

[Canterbury](#)." Trying to be Orthodox without being in communion with the Orthodox Church is like trying to be married without a spouse.

6. The Orthodox Church shares common ground. It has common ground in one dimension with Catholics and Protestants, and it has common ground in another dimension with Hindus and Buddhists, and you are missing the point if you say, "Yes, but other Christians share the *true* common ground." For all of this, the Orthodox Church is capable of sharing common ground and recognizing differences that exist. And there is a way for Catholics and Protestants, and Hindus and Buddhists as well, to receive full communion with Orthodoxy: *they can become Orthodox*.
7. In matters of ecumenism and especially intercommunion, Rome is Orthodox in her dealings with Protestants, and Protestant in her dealings with Orthodox. If you want to know why Orthodoxy refuses intercommunion with Rome, you might find a hint of the answer in why Rome refuses Protestant intercommunion. And if your immediate reaction is, "But our theology is equivalent," ponder this: that is also what ecumenist Protestants say to *you*. (And they say it in perfectly good faith.)
8. It would be strange for every pope from here on to be like Pope Benedict XVI and not Pope John XXIII. And under Pope John XXIII, the question, "Is the Pope Catholic?" might have best been answered, "Well, from a certain point of view..."
9. In the history that is common to Catholics and Orthodox, every time someone proposed a solution like ecumenism, the Church soundly rejected it. If we have reached a state where we can reject the ancient wisdom in these decisions, this is another reason why we have departed from Orthodoxy and another reason Orthodoxy should spurn our advances.
10. Christ prayed that we all may be one. But hearing "ecumenism" in that prayer is a bit like hearing a prayer that a room may be cleaned and pushing all the clutter under a bed. Christ's prayer that

his disciples may be one transcends the mere whitewash that ecumenism can only offer. (Christ's prayer that we may all be one is solid gold. Ecumenism is a rich vein, but only of fool's gold.)

11. In Catholic ecumenical advances, I have never heard anyone mention any of the concerns about things Rome has done that may be obstacles to restoring communion. What kind of healthy advance bowls over and ignores the other's reservations?
12. Good fences make good neighbors. Ecumenism tramples down fences and invites itself into others' homes. Orthodox can be good neighbors, but when they reject ecumenical advances, it is part of keeping good fences for good neighbors.

"Physics"

I included [Aristotle's *Physics*](#) when I originally posted [An Orthodox Bookshelf](#), then read most of the text and decided that even if the Fathers' science was largely Aristotelian physics, reading the original source is here less helpful than it might appear. The Fathers believed in elements of earth, air, fire, and water, and these elements are mentioned in the Theophany Vespers, which are one of the primary Orthodox texts on how the cosmos is understood. However, even if these are found in Aristotelian physics, the signal to noise ratio for patristic understanding of science is dismal: [Aristotle's *Physics*](#) could be replaced with a text one tenth its length and still furnish everything the Fathers take from it.

I would like to take a moment to pause in looking at the word "physics." It is true enough that historically Aristotelian physics was replaced by Newton, who in turn gave way to Einstein, and then quantum physics entered the scene, and now we have superstring theory. And in that caricatured summary, "physics" seems to mean what it means for superstring theory. But I want to pause on the word "physics." Orthodox know that non-Orthodox who ask, "What are your passions?" may get a bit more of an earful than they bargained for. "Passions" is not a word Orthodox use among themselves for nice hobbies and interests they get excited about; it means a sinful habit that has carved out a niche for itself to become a spiritual disease. And "physics", as I use it, is not a competitor to superstring theory; etymologically it means, "of the nature of things," I would quote C.S. Lewis, [The Voyage of the Dawn Treader](#):

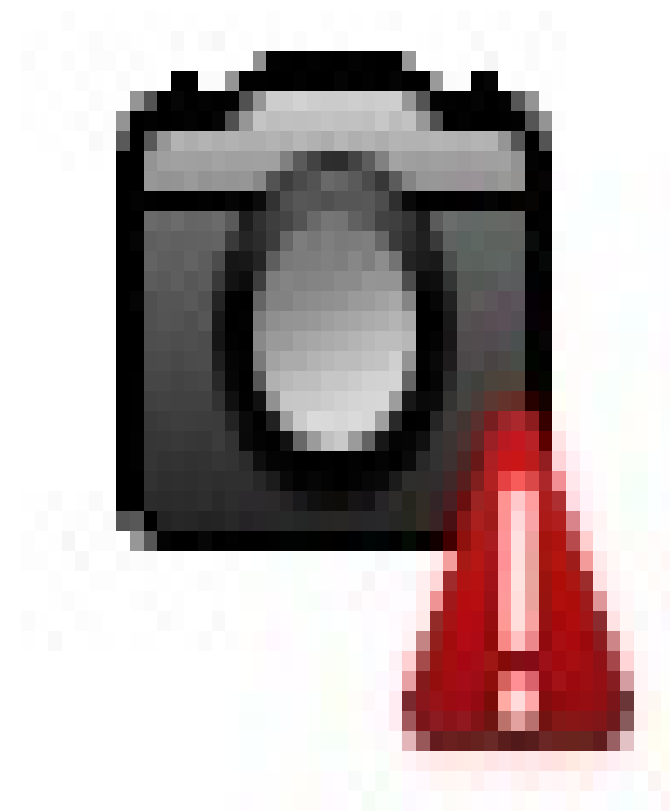
"I am a star at rest, my daughter," answered Ramandu. "When I

set for the last time, decrepit and old beyond all that you can reckon, I was carried to this island. I am not so old now as I was then. Every morning a bird brings me a fire-berry from the valleys in the Sun, and each fire-berry takes away a little of my age. And when I have become as young as the child that was born yesterday, then I shall take my rising again (for we are at earth's eastern rim) and once more tread the great dance."

"In our world," said Eustace, "a star is a huge ball of flaming gas."

"Even in your world, my son, *that is not what a star is but only what it is made of.*"

What is a star? I would answer by quoting an icon, of the creation of the stars. The text on the icon does not refer to Genesis at all, but [Job 38:7, "...when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"](#):



The stars in the icon are connected with the six-winged seraphim, the highest rank of angels. The Heavens are an icon of Heaven, and the icon says something very different than, "What are stars if we view them as reductionists do?"

And this article is not intended to compete with physics as it is now understood, or to defend patristic Aristotelian physics against its challengers, or to demonstrate the compatibility of theology with the present state of scientific speculation: words that I choose carefully, because theology is about divine revealed doctrine while science is the present state of speculation in a very careful system of educated guesses, and scientific theories will not stop being discarded for newer alternatives until science is dead. It is therefore somewhat of a strange matter to demonstrate the compatibility of theology with science, as conforming timeless revealed doctrines to the present best educated guess that is

meant to be discarded.

Of the nature of things

The central mystery in the nature of things is the divine nature. [No man can see God and live](#), and the divine essence is not knowable to any creature. The divine energies are available, and indeed can deify creation, but the central mystery around which all else revolves is God's unknowable essence and nature.

This is the central mystery around which everything else revolves, but the divine essence is not part of a larger system, even as its largest part. God lies beyond the created order, and perhaps the greatest failure of Aristotelian physics to understand the nature of things lies in its tendency towards materialism, its sense that you understand things by looking down. Some have said, in introducing [Michael Polanyi's theories of personal knowledge](#), that behavioralism in psychology does not teach, "There is no soul;" rather, it induces students into investigation in such a way that the possibility of a soul is never even considered. And Aristotelian physics started a trajectory that has lingered even when the specifics of Aristotelian physics were considered to be overturned: you understand the nature of things by looking at them materially. Aristotelian physics, in asking, "What is the nature of this?" leads the listener so as to never even consider an answer of, "Because that is how it functions as a satellite of God." And the entire *phusis* or nature of every created being is as a satellite of God: the atheist who says "The very notion of a God is incoherent," does so with the breath of God.

Headship and harmony with nature

Many Westerners may identify the goal of harmony with nature with the East, but the concept as we have it is essentially Western in nature. Orthodox monasticism may look a lot like harmony with nature to the West: it often takes place in rustic surroundings, and animals are not afraid of monastics: deer will eat from a monk's hand. But there is a fundamental difference between this and the Western concept of harmony with nature: the harmony does not come from our taking our cue from plants and animals. Monks and nuns are to take their cue from God, and harmony with animals comes from how they take their cue from God.

All creation bears some resemblance to God, and God himself is called the Rock. For every creature there is a *logos* or idea in God's heart, that is what that creature should strive to be. But there is a distinction among creation. Some are given the image of God: men and angels, and we exist in a fuller and deeper sense than creatures that do not bear such an image. God exists in a unique and deepest sense, and if we say that God exists, we cannot say that we exist in the same sense, and if we say that we exist, we cannot say that God exists in the same sense. Those who are given the image, who have a human or angelic mind, are more fully nature than those creatures who have do not exist in the same way on the same level. And we who bear the royal image, even if liturgical asceticism removes barriers between us and the rest of Creation, are to take our cue from God our head.

Getting past "the politics of envy"

The concept of headship is a difficult and perhaps touchy one, not least because the only place where people think it applies is the husband being the head of the wife. But it is written into the cosmos in larger letters. St. Maximus the Confessor spoke of five divisions that are to be transcended:

Head Body	
Man	Woman
Paradise	The inhabited world
Heaven	Earth
Spiritual creation	Tangible creation
God	Creation

All these differences are ultimately to be transcended, and many more not listed. But the project of transcending them assumes there are differences to start off with, which we do not transcend by closing our eyes and pretending they are not there. And this feature of creation runs aground what might be called "the politics of envy", whose central feature is an equality that boils down to saying, "*I don't want anybody to be better than me.*"

And this brings me to the point of inequality. Not only are the politics of envy toxic, but unequal treatment bears something that the politics of envy would never imagine. The kindest and most courteous acts are most often not those that treat the other as an equal, but those that treat the other as not equal. The man who buys six dozen roses for his wife does not treat her as an equal: the thought would not occur to him to buy six dozen roses for one of his fellow workmen. The mother who holds and comforts a child after a scrape extends a courtesy that would not be extended quite so far for an adult capable of managing moods and life's scrapes. The greatest courtesies are extended precisely at the point when someone in a position of headship treats someone else, not as an equal, but as the head's body as in the chart above. The same is

implied for authority, or some of the more painful social lessons having to do with profound giftedness. Perhaps people may say "Treat me as an equal" instead of "treat me well," but it has been my own experience that treating people as equals in an area where they request equality has given social explosions that I could have avoided if I were wise enough to realize that the point where I was asked, "Treat me as an equal," were precisely the situations which demanded the wisdom not to treat people as intellectual equals that could handle the full force of what I was thinking, but extend some of the most delicate courtesy and social graces. Exactly what is needed is hard to say, but precisely what is **not** needed is to say, "*Great, I've found someone gifted in exactly the same way I am,*" and launch into the full force of your deepest thought. God does not create two blades of grass alike. He has never created two humans who are equal, but after each, he broke the mould.

Microcosm and mediator

Mankind was created to be a microcosm, summarizing both the spiritual and tangible creation, and a mediator. All the Orthodox faithful participate in a spiritual priesthood, and its sigil is the sacramental priesthood that a few identify. We are called to mediate and help transcend the differences above. Our worship of the God who is Light, and ourselves being the light of the world, is as the vanguard of Creation returning to the Creator, the firstfruits of a world created by and for God.

Symbols

I would like to close on an understanding of symbol. Men are symbols of God; that is what it means to be made in the image of God. The material world is best understood, not as things operating under mathematical laws, but as having a symbolic dimension that ultimately points back to God. The theory of evolution is not a true answer to the question, "Why is there life as we know it?" because it does not address the question, "Why is there life as we know it?" If it is true, it is a true answer to the question, "*How* is there life as we know it?" The sciences answer questions of "How," not questions of "Why," and the world is best understood as having a symbolic dimension where the question of "Why?" refers to God and overshadows the question of "How?"

Even if physics answers its questions with accuracy, it does not answer the deepest questions, and a deeper level has three kinds of causation, all of them personal. Things are caused by God, or by humans, or by devils. When we pray, it is not usually for an exception to the laws of physics, but that nature, governed by personal causes on a deeper level, may work out in a particular way under God's governance. And the regular operations of physics do not stop this.

Miracles

Miracles are very rare, if we use the term strictly and not for the genuine miracle of God providing for us every day. But the readings for the Theophany Vespers repeat miracles with nature, and they present, if you will, nature at its most essential. Most of the matter in the universe is not part of icons of Christ, his Mother, and his Saints, and yet even outside of men icons are a vanguard, a firstfruit of a creation that will be glorified. Mankind is at its most essential in Christ himself, and the natural world is at its most essential as an arena for God's power to be displayed. And God's display of power is not strictly a rarity; it plays out when bread comes out of the earth, when [The Heavens declare the glory of God / And the firmament sheweth his handywork. / Day unto day uttereth speech / And night unto night sheweth knowledge.](#)

Sweet Lord, You Play Me False

All of this may be true, but there is an odor of falsity built in its very foundations, to provide an Orthodox "physics" (or study of "the nature of things") analogous to Aristotle's original "physics." Anselm famously wrote the "Monologion" (in which Anselm explores various arguments for God's existence) and the "Proslogion" (in which Anselm seeks a single and decisive proof of God's existence). Once I told an Anselm scholar that there had been a newly discovered "Monophagion," in which Anselm tries to discern whether reasoning can ever bring someone to recognize the imperative of eating, and "Prospagation," in which Anselm gets hungry and has a bite to eat. For those of you not familiar with Greek, "prospagation" means "a little smackerel of something."

This work is, in a sense, an exploration about whether philosophy can bring a person to recognize the necessity of eating. But that's not where the proof of the pudding lies. The proof of the pudding lies in the eating, in the live liturgical life that culminates in the Eucharist, the fulcrum for the transformation and ultimate deification of the cosmos. The proof of the pudding lies not in the philosophizing, but in the eating.

Technonomicon: Technology, Nature, Asceticism

1. Many people are concerned today with harmony with nature. And indeed there is quite a lot to living according to nature.
2. But you will not find something that is missing by looking twice as hard in the wrong place, and it matters where one seeks harmony with nature. In monasticism, the man of virtue is the quintessential natural man. And there is something in monasticism that is behind stories of the monk who can approach boar or bear.
3. Being out of harmony with nature is not predominantly a lack of time in forests. There is a deeper root.
4. Exercising is better than living a life without exercise. But there is something missing in a sedentary life with artificially added exercise, after, for centuries, we have worked to avoid the strenuous labor that most people have had to do.
5. It is as if people had worked for centuries to make the perfect picnic and finally found a way to have perfectly green grass at an even height, a climate controlled environment with sunlight and just the right amount of cloud, and many other things. Then people find that something is missing in the perfect picnic, and say that there might be wisdom in the saying, "No picnic is complete without ants." So they carefully engineer a colony of ants to add to the picnic.

6. An exercise program may be sought in terms of harmony with nature: by walking, running, or biking out of doors. Or it may be pursued for physical health for people who do not connect exercise with harmony of nature. But and without concern for "asceticism" (spiritual discipline) or harmony with nature, many people know that complete deliverance from physical effort has some very bad physical effects. Vigorous exercise is part and parcel to the natural condition of man.
7. Here are two different ways of seeking harmony with nature. The second might never consciously ask if life without physical toil is natural, nor whether our natural condition is how we should live, but still recognizes a problem—a little like a child who knows nothing of the medical theory of how burns are bad, but quickly withdraws his hand from a hot stove.
8. But there is a third kind of approach to harmony with nature, besides a sense that we are incomplete without a better connection to the natural world, and a knowledge that our bodies are less healthy if we live sedentary lives, lives without reintroducing physical exertion because the perfectly engineered picnic is more satisfying if a colony of ants is engineered in.
9. This third way is asceticism, and asceticism, which is spiritual discipline or spiritual exercise, moral struggle, and mystical toil, is the natural condition of man.
10. The disciples were joyous because the demons submitted to them in Christ's name, and Christ's answer was: "Do not rejoice that the demons submit to you in my name. Rejoice instead that your names are written in Heaven." The reality of the disciples' names being written in Heaven dwarfed the reality of their power over demons, and in like manner the reality that monks can be so much in harmony with nature that they can safely approach wild bears is dwarfed by the reality that the royal road of asceticism can bring so much harmony with nature that by God's grace people work out their salvation with fear and trembling.

11. The list of spiritual disciplines is open-ended, much like the list of sacraments, but one such list of spiritual disciplines might be prayer, worship, sacrament, service, silence, living simply, fasting, and the spiritual use of hardship. If these do not seem exotic enough for what we expect of spiritual discipline, we might learn that the spiritual disciplines can free us from seeking the exotic in too shallow of a fashion.
12. The Bible was written in an age before our newest technologies, but it says much to the human use of technology, because it says much to the human use of property. If the Sermon on the Mount says, "No man can serve two masters... you cannot serve both God and money," it is strange at best to assume that these words applied when money could buy food, clothing, and livestock but have no relevance to an age when money can also buy the computers and consumer electronics we are infatuated with. If anything, our interest in technology makes the timeless words, "No man can serve two masters" all the more needed in our day.
13. Money can buy everything money can buy and nothing money cannot buy. To seek true glory, or community, or control over all risk from money is a fundamental error, like trying to make a marble statue so lifelike that it actually comes to life. What is so often sought in money is something living, while money itself is something dead, a stone that can appear deceptively lifelike but can never hold the breath of life.
14. In the end, those who look to money to be their servant make it their master. "No man can serve two masters" is much the same truth as one Calvin and Hobbes strip:

Calvin: I had the scariest dream last night. I dreamed that machines took over and made us do their bidding.

Hobbes: That must have been scary!

Calvin: It wa—*holy*, would you look at the time? My TV show is on!

But this problem with technology has been a problem with property and wealth for ages, and it is foolish to believe that all the Scriptural skepticism and unbelief about whether wealth is really all that beneficial to us, are simply irrelevant to modern technology.

15. There was great excitement in the past millenium when, it was believed, the Age of Pisces would draw to a close, and the Age of Aquarius would begin, and this New Age would be an exciting dawn when all we find dreary about the here and now would melt away. Then the Age of Aquarius started, at least officially, but the New Age failed to rescue us from finding the here and now to be dreary. Then there was great excitement as something like 97% of children born after a certain date were born indigo children: children whose auras are indigo rather than a more mundane color. But, unfortunately, this celebrated watershed did not stop the here and now from being miserable. Now there is great hope that in 2012, according to the Mayan "astrological" calendar, another momentous event will take place, perhaps finally delivering us from the here and now. And, presumably, when December 21, 2012 fails to satisfy us, subsequent momentous events will promise to deliver us from a here and now we find unbearable.
16. If we do not try to sate this urge with New Age, we can try to satisfy it with technology: in what seems like aeons past, the advent of radio and movies seemed to change everything and provide an escape from the here and now, an escape into a totally different world. Then, more recently, surfing the net became the ultimate drug-free trip, only it turns out that the web isn't able to save us from finding the here and now miserable after all. For that, apparently, we need SecondLife, or maybe some exciting development down the pike... or, perhaps, we are trying to work out a way to succeed by barking up the wrong lamppost.
17. No technology is permanently exotic.
18. When a Utopian vision dreams of turning the oceans to lemonade, then we have what has been called "a Utopia of spoiled children." It is not a Utopian vision of people being supported in the

difficult ascetical pursuit of virtue and ultimately God, but an aid to arrested development that forever panders to childish desires.

19. Technology need not have the faintest conscious connection with Utopianism, but it can pursue one of the same ends. More specifically, it can be a means to stay in arrested development. What most technology offers is, in the end, a practical way to circumvent asceticism. Technological "progress" often means that up until now, people have lived with a difficult struggle—a struggle that ultimately amounts to asceticism—but now we can simply do without the struggle.
20. Through the wonders of modern technology, we can eat and eat and eat candy all day and not have the candy show up on our waistline: but this does not make us any better, nobler, or wiser than if we could turn the oceans to lemonade. This is an invention from a Utopia of spoiled children.
21. Sweetness is a gift from God, and the sweeter fruit and honey taste, the better the nourishment they give. But there is something amiss in tearing the sweetness away from healthy food, and, not being content with this, to say, "We think that eating is a good thing, and we wish to celebrate everything that is good about it. But, unfortunately, there is biological survival, a holdover from other days: food acts as a nutrient whether you want it or not. But through the wonders of modern science, we can celebrate the goodness of eating while making any effect on the body strictly optional. This is progress!"
22. Statistically, people who switch to artificial sweeteners gain *more* weight. Splenda accomplishes two things: it makes things sweeter without adding calories, and it offers people a way to sever the cord between enjoying sweet taste, and calories entering the body. On spiritual grounds, this is a disturbing idea of how to "support" weight loss. It is like trying to stop people from getting hurt in traffic accidents by adding special "safety" features to some roads so people can drive however they please with impunity, even if they develop habits that will get them *killed* on any other road. What is spiritually unhealthy overflows into poorer health for the body.

People gain more weight eating Splenda, and there are more ways than one that Splenda is unfit for human consumption.

23. The ascesis of fasting is not intended as an ultimate extreme measure for weight loss. That may follow—or may not—but there is something fundamentally deeper going on:

Man does not live by bread alone, and if we let go of certain foods or other pleasures for a time, we are in a better position to grasp what more man lives on than mere food. When we rein in the nourishing food of the body and its delights, we may find ourselves in a better position to take in the nourishing food of the spirit and much deeper spiritual delights.

Fasting pursued wrongly can do us no good, and it is the wisdom of the Orthodox Church to undergo such ascesis under the direction of one's priest or spiritual father. But the core issue in fasting is one that matters some for the body and much more for the spirit.

24. Splenda and contraception are both body-conquering technologies that allow us to conquer part of our embodied nature: that the body takes nourishment from food, and that the greatest natural pleasure has deep fertile potential. And indeed, the technologies we call "space-conquering technologies" might more aptly be titled, "body-conquering technologies," because they are used to conquer our embodied and embedded state as God made it.

25. Today, "everybody knows" that the Orthodox Church, not exactly like the Catholic Church allowing contraceptive timing, allows contraception under certain guidelines, and the Orthodox Church has never defined a formal position on contraception above the level of one's spiritual father. This is due, among other factors, to some influential scholarly spin-doctoring, the academic equivalent of the NBC *Dateline* episode that "proved" that a certain truck had a fire hazard in a 20mph collision by filming a 30mph collision (presented as a 20mph collision) and making sure there was a fiery spectacle by also detonating explosives planted above the truck's gas

tank ([see analysis](#)).

26. St. John Chrysostom wrote,

Where is there murder before birth? You do not even let a prostitute remain only a prostitute, but you make her a murderer as well... Do you see that from drunkenness comes fornication, from fornication adultery, and from adultery murder? Indeed, it is something worse than murder and do not know what to call it; for she does not kill what is formed but prevents its formation. What then? Do you despise the gift of God, and fight with his laws? What is a curse, do you seek it as though it were a blessing?... Do you teach the woman who is given to you for the procreation of offspring to perpetrate killing? In this indifference of the married men there is greater evil filth; for then poisons are prepared, not against the womb of a prostitute, but against your injured wife.

27. The Blessed Augustine devastatingly condemned Natural Family Banning: if procreation is sliced away from marital relations, Augustine says point blank, then true marriage is forbidden. There is no wife, but only a mistress, and if this is not enough, he holds that those who enjoin contraception fall under the full freight of St. Paul's blistering words about forbidding marriage:

Now, the Spirit expressly says that in the last days some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences have been seared with a hot iron: for they forbid marriage and demand avoidance of foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

Augustine absolutely did not believe that one can enjoy the good of marriage and treat the blessing of marriage's fertility as a burden and a curse. Such an idea is strange, like trying to celebrate the good of medical care while taking measures to prevent it from improving one's health.

28. Such condemnations stem from the unanimous position of the Church Fathers on contraception.
29. Such words seem strange today, and English Bible translations seem to only refer to contraception once: when God struck Onan dead for "pull and pray." (There are also some condemnations of *pharmakeia* and *pharmakoi*—"medicine men" one would approach for a contraceptive—something that is lost in translation, unfortunately giving the impression that occult sin alone was the issue at stake.)
30. Contraception allows a marriage *à la carte*: it offers some control over pursuing a couple's hopes, together, on terms that they choose without relinquishing control altogether. And the root of this is a deeper answer to St. John Chrysostom's admonition to leave other brothers and sisters to their children as their inheritance rather than mere earthly possessions.

(This was under what would today be considered a third world standard of living, not the first world lifestyle of many people who claim today that they "simply cannot afford any more children"—which reflects not only that they cannot afford to have more children *and retain their expected (entitled?) standard of living for them and their children*, but their priorities once they realize that they may be unable to have both.)

31. Contraception is chosen because it serves a certain way of life: it is not an accident in any way, shape, or form that Planned Parenthood advertises, for both contraception, "Take control of your life!" For whether one plans two children, or four, or none, Planned Parenthood sings the siren song of having your life under your control, or at least as much under control as you can make it, where you choose the terms where you will deal with your children, if and when you want.
32. Marriage and monasticism both help people grow up by helping them to learn being out of control. Marriage may provide the asceticism of minding children and monasticism that of obedience to one's

elder, but these different-sounding activities are aimed at building the same kind of spiritual virtue and power.

33. Counselors offer people, not the help that many of them seek in controlling those they struggle with, but something that is rarely asked: learning to be at peace with letting go of being in control of others, and the unexpected freedom that that brings. Marriage and monasticism, at their best, do not provide a minor adjustment that one manages and is then on top of, but an arena, a spiritual struggle, a training ground in which people live the grace and beauty of the Sermon on the Mount, and are freed from the prison chamber of seeking control and the dank dungeon of living for themselves.
34. "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, nor about your body, what you will wear. Isn't there more to life than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than them? And why do you worry about the lilies of the field: how they grow. They neither toil nor spin;" they have joy and peace. The height of technological progress in having pleasure without losing control—in artificial sweeteners, contraceptives and anything else—utterly pales in comparison.
35. Technology is not evil. Many technologies have a right use, but that use is a use to pursue maturity and asceticism, not an aid to living childishly.
36. Wine was created by God as good, and it has a right use. But the man who seeks in wine a way to be happy or a way to drive away his problems has already lost.
37. One classic attitude to wine was not "We forbid drinking wine," or even "It would be better not to drink wine at all, but a little bit does not do too much damage," but goes beyond saying, "The pleasure of wine was given by God as good" to saying: "Wine is an important training ground to learn the asceticism of moderation, and learn a lesson that cannot be escaped: we are not obligated to learn

moderation in wine, but if we do not drink wine, we still need moderation in work, play, eating, and everything else, and many of us would do well to grow up in asceticism in the training arena of enjoying wine and be better prepared for other areas of life where the need for the asceticism of moderation, of saying 'when' and drawing limits, is not only something we *should not* dodge: it is something we *can never* escape."

38. The ascetical use of technology is like the ascetical use of wine. It is pursued out of maturity, and as a support to maturity. It is not pursued out of childishness, nor as a support to childishness. And it should never be the center of gravity in our lives. (Drinking becomes a problem more or less when it becomes the focus of a person's life and pursuits.)
39. The Harvard business study behind [Good to Great](#) found that the most effective companies often made pioneering use of technology, but technology was never the center of the picture: however many news stories might be printed about how they used technologies, few of the CEOs mentioned technology at all when they discussed their company's success, and none of them ascribed all that much importance to even their best technology. Transformed companies—companies selected in a study of all publicly traded U.S. companies whose astonishing stock history began to improve and then outperformed the market by something like a factor of three, sustained for fifteen years straight—didn't think technology was all that important, not even technologies their people pioneered. They focused on something more significant.
40. [Good to Great](#) leadership saw their companies' success in terms of people.
41. There were other finds, including that the most effective CEOs were not celebrity rockstars in the limelight, but humble servant leaders living for something beyond themselves. In a study about what best achieves what greed wants, not even one of the top executives followed a mercenary creed of ruthless greed and self-advancement.

42. If people, not technology, make businesses tremendously profitable, then perhaps people who want more than profit also need something beyond technology in order to reach the spiritual riches and treasures in Heaven that we were made for.
43. The right use of technology comes out of asceticism and is therefore according to nature.
44. In Robert Heinlein's science fiction classic [Stranger in a Strange Land](#), a "man" with human genes who starts with an entirely Martian heritage as his culture and tradition, comes to say, "Happiness is a matter of functioning the way a human being was organized to function... but the words in English are a mere tautology, empty. In Martian they are a complete set of working instructions." The insight is true, but takes shape in a way that completely cuts against the grain of [Stranger in a Strange Land](#).
45. One most immediate example is that the science fiction vision is of an ideal of a community of "water brothers" who painstakingly root out natural jealousy and modesty, and establish free love within their circle: such, the story would have it, provides optimal human happiness. As compellingly as it may be written into the story, one may bring up studies which sought to find out which of the sexualities they wished to promote provided the greatest pleasure and satisfaction, and found to their astonishment and chagrin that the greatest satisfaction comes, not from any creative quest for the ultimate thrill, but from something they despised as a completely unacceptable *perversion*: a husband and wife, chaste before the wedding and faithful after, working to become one for as long as they both shall live, and perhaps even grateful for the fruitfulness of their love. Perhaps such an arrangement offers greater satisfaction than trying to "push the envelope" of adventuresome arrangements precisely *because* it is "functioning the way a human being was organized to function."
46. People only seek the ultimate exotic thrill when they are unhappy. Gnosticism is a spiritual porn whose sizzle entices people who despair: its "good news" of an escape from the miserable here

and now is "good news" as misery would want it. Today's Gnosticism may rarely teach, as did earlier Gnostic honesty, that our world could not be the good creation of the ultimately good God, but holding that we need to escape our miserable world was as deep in ancient Gnostics' bones as an alcoholic experiences that our miserable world needs to be medicated by drunkenness. Baudelaire said, in the nineteenth century: "Keep getting drunk! Whether with wine, or with poetry, or with virtue, as you please, keep getting drunk," in a poem about medicating what might be a miserable existence. Today he might have said, "Keep getting drunk! Whether with New Age, or with the endless virtual realities of SecondWife, or with the ultimate Viagra-powered thrill, as you please, keep getting drunk!"

47. What SecondLife—or rather SecondWife—offers is the apparent opportunity to have an alternative to a here and now one is not satisfied with. Presumably there are merits to this alternate reality: some uses are no more a means to escape the here and now than a mainstream business's website, or phoning ahead to make a reservation at a restaurant. But SecondWife draws people with an alternative to the here and now they feel stuck in.
48. It is one thing to get drunk to blot out the misery of another's death. It is another altogether to keep getting drunk to blot out the misery of one's own life.
49. An old story from African-American lore tells of how a master and one of his slaves would compete by telling dreams they claimed they had. One time, the master said that he had a dream of African-American people's Heaven, and everything was dingy and broken—and there were lots of dirty African-Americans everywhere. His slave answered that he had dreamed of white people's Heaven, and everything was silver and gold, beautiful and in perfect order—but there wasn't a soul in the place!
50. Much of what technology seems to offer is to let people of all races enter a Heaven where there are luxuries the witty slave could never dream of, but in the end there is nothing much better than a Heaven full of gold and empty of people.

51. "Social networking" is indeed about people, but there is something about social networking's promise that is like an ambitious program to provide a tofu "virtual chicken" in every pot: there is something unambiguously social about social media, but there is also something as different from what "social" has meant for well over 99% of people as a chunk of tofu is from real chicken's meat.
52. There is a timeless way of relating to other people, and this timeless way is a large part of asceticism. This is a way of relating to people in which one learns to relate primarily to people one did not choose, in friendship had more permanency than many today now give marriage, in which one was dependent on others (that is, interdependent with others), in which people did not by choice say goodbye to everyone they knew at once, as one does by moving in America, and a social interaction was largely through giving one's immediate presence.
53. "Social networking" is a very different beast. You choose whom to relate to, and you can set the terms; it is both easy and common to block users, nor is this considered a drastic measure. Anonymity is possible and largely encouraged; relationships can be transactional, which is one step beyond disposable, and many people never meet others they communicate with face-to-face, and for that matter arranging such a meeting is special because of its exceptional character.
54. Social networking can have a place. Tofu can have a place. However, we would do well to take a cue to attend to cultures that have found a proper traditional place for tofu. Asian cuisines may be unashamed about using tofu, but they consume it in moderation—and *never* use it to replace meat.
55. We need traditional social "meat." The members of the youngest generation who have the most tofu in their diet may need meat the most.
56. Today the older generation seems to grouse about our younger

generation. Some years ago, someone in the AARP magazine quipped about young people, "Those tight pants! Those frilly hairdos! And you should see what the girls are wearing!" Less witty complaints about the younger generation's immodest style of dress, and their rude disrespect for their elders can just as well be found from the time of Mozart, for instance, or Socrates: and it seems that today's older generation is as apt to criticize the younger generation as their elders presumably were. But here something really is to be said about the younger generation.

57. The older generation kvetching about how the younger generation today has it so easy with toys their elders never dreamed of, never seem to connect their sardonic remarks with how they went to school with discipline problems like spitwads and the spoiled younger generation faced easily available street drugs, or how a well-behaved boy with an e-mail address may receive X-rated spam. "The youth these days" have luxuries their parents never even dreamed of—and temptations and dangers their parents never conceived, not in their worst nightmares.
58. Elders have traditionally complained about the young people being rude, much of which amounts to mental inattention. Part of politeless is being present in body and mind to others, and when the older generation was young, *their* elders assuredly corrected them from not paying attention in the presence of other people and themselves.
59. When they were young, the older generation's ways of being rude included zoning out and daydreaming, making faces when adults turned their back, and in class throwing paper airplanes and passing notes—and growing up meant, in part, learning to turn their back on that arsenal of temptations, much like previous generations. And many of the older generation genuinely turned their backs on those temptations, and would genuinely like to help the younger generation learn to honor those around with more of their physical and mental *presence*.
60. Consumer electronics like the smartphone, aimed to offer

something to youth, often advertise to the younger generation precisely a far better way to avoid a spiritual lesson that was hard enough for previous generations to learn without nearly the same degree of temptation. Few explains to them that a smartphone is not only very useful, but it is designed and sold as an enticing ultra-portable temptation.

61. Literature can be used to escape. But the dividing line between great and not-so-great literature is less a matter of theme, talent, or style than the question of whether the story serves to help the reader escape the world, or engage it.
62. In technology, the question of the virtuous use of technology is less a matter of how fancy the technology is, or how recent, than whether it is used to escape the world or engage it. Two friends who use cell phones to help them meet face-to-face are using technology to support, in some form, the timeless way of relating to other people. Family members who IM to ask prayer for someone who is sick also incorporate technology into the timeless way of relating to other people. This use of technology is quiet and unobtrusive, and supports a focus on something greater than technology: the life God gave us.
63. Was technology made for man, or man for technology?
64. Much of the economy holds the premise that a culture should be optimized to produce wealth: man was made for the economy. The discipline of advertising is a discipline of influencing people without respecting them as people: the customer, apparently, exists for the benefit of the business.
65. Advertising encourages us to take shopping as a sacrament, and the best response we can give is not activism as such, but a refusal of consent.
66. Shopping is permissible, but not sacramental shopping, because sacramental shopping is an ersatz sacrament and identifying with brands an ersatz spiritual discipline. At best sacramental shopping is

a distraction; more likely it is a lure and the bait for a spiritual trap.

67. We may buy a product which carries a mystique, but not the mystique itself: and buying a cool product without buying into its "cool" is hard, harder than not buying. But if we buy into the cool, we forfeit great spiritual treasure.
68. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and all of your life and all of your mind and all of your might, love your neighbor as yourself, and use things: do not love things while using people.
69. Things can do the greatest good when we stop being infatuated with them and put first things first. The most powerful uses of technology, and the best, come from loving those whom you should love and using what you should use. We do not benefit from being infatuated with technology, nor from acting on such infatuation.
70. The Liturgy prays, "Pierce our souls with longing for Thee." Our longing for transcendence is a glory, and the deepest thing that draws us in advertisements for luxury goods, does so because of the glory we were made to seek.
71. But let us attend to living in accordance with nature. Ordinarily when a technology is hailed as "space-conquering," it is on a deep level *body-conquering*, defeating part of the limitations of our embodied nature—which is to say, defeating part of our embodied nature that is in a particular place in a particular way.
72. Technologies to pass great distance quickly, or make it easy to communicate without being near, unravel what from ancient times was an ancient social fabric. They offer something of a line-item veto on the limits of our embodied state: if they do not change our bodies directly, they make our embodied limitations less relevant.
73. A technology can conquer how the body takes nourishment from food, for instance, and therefore be body-conquering without being space-conquering. But whether celebrated or taken for granted, space-conquering technologies are called space-conquering

because they make part of the limitations of our embodied nature less relevant.

74. There is almost a parody of asceticism in space-conquering technologies. Asceticism works to transcend the limited body, and space-conquering technologies seem a way to do the same. But they are opposites.
75. "The demons always fast:" such people are told to instill that fasting has a place and a genuine use, but anyone who focuses too much on fasting, or fasts too rigidly, is well-advised to remember that every single demon outfasts every single saint. But there is something human about fasting: only a being made to eat can benefit from refraining from eating. Fasting is useful because, unlike the angels and demons, a man is not created purely a spirit, but created both spirit and body, and they are linked together. Asceticism knows better, and is more deeply attuned to nature, to attempt to work on the spirit with the body detached and ignored.
76. Even as asceticism subdues the comforts and the body, the work is not only to transfigure the spirit, and transform the body.
77. In a saint the transfiguration means that when the person has died, the body is not what horror movies see in dead bodies: it is glorified into relics.
78. This is a fundamentally different matter from circumventing the body's limitations. There may be good, ascetical uses for space-conquering technologies: but the good part of it comes from the asceticism shining through the technology.
79. The limitations of our embodied existence—aging, bodily aches and pains, betrayal, having doors closed in our face—have been recognized as spiritual stepping stones, and the mature wonder, not whether they have too many spiritual stepping stones, but whether they might need more. Many impoverished saints were concerned, not with whether their life was too hard, but whether it was too easy. Some saints have been tremendously wealthy, but they used their

wealth for other purposes than simply pandering to themselves.

80. Some might ask today, for instance, whether there might be something symbolic to the burning bush that remained unconsumed which St. Moses the Lawgiver saw. And there are many layers of spiritual meaning to the miracle—an emblem of the Theotokos's virgin birthgiving—but it is not the proper use of symbolic layers to avoid the literal layer, without which the symbolic layers do not stand. If the question is, "Isn't there something symbolic about the story of the miracle of the burning bush?", the answer is, "Yes, but it is a fundamental error to use the symbolic layers to dodge the difficulty of literally believing the miracle." In like fashion, there are many virtuous uses of technology, but it is a fundamental error to expect those uses to include using technology to avoid the difficult lessons of spiritual ascesis.
81. Living according to nature is not a luxury we add once we have taken care of necessities: part of harmony with nature is built into necessities. Our ancestors gathered from the natural world, not to seek harmony with nature, but to meet their basic needs—often with far fewer luxuries than we have—and part of living according to nature has usually meant few, if any, luxuries. Perhaps there is more harmony with nature today in driving around a city to run errands for other people, than a luxurious day out in the countryside.
82. Some of the promise the Internet seems to offer is the dream a mind-based society: a world of the human spirit where there is no distraction of external appearance because you have no appearance save that of a handle or avatar, for instance, or a world where people need not appear male or female except as they choose. But the important question is not whether technology through the internet can deliver such a dream, but whether the dream is a dream or a nightmare.
83. To say that the Internet is much more mind-based than face-to-face interactions is partly true. But to say that a mind-based society is more fit for the human spirit than the timeless way of relating, in old-fashioned [meatspace](#), is to correct the Creator on His mistaken

notions regarding His creatures' best interests.

84. People still use the internet all the time as an adjunct to the timeless way of relating. Harmony with nature is not disrupted by technology's use as an adjunct nearly so much as when it serves as a replacement. Pushing for a mind-based society, and harmony with nature, may appeal to the same people, especially when they are considered as mystiques. But pushing for a mind-based society is pushing for a greater breach of living according to nature, widening the gulf between modern society and the ancient human of human life. There is a contradiction in pushing for our life to be both more and less according to nature.
85. There is an indirect concern for asceticism in companies and bosses that disapprove of clock watching. The concern is not an aversion to technology, or that periodically glancing at one's watch takes away all that much time from real work. The practical concern is of a spiritual state that hinders work: the employee's attention and interest are divided, and a bad spiritual state overflows into bad work.
86. In terms of asceticism, the scattered state that cannot enjoy the present is the opposite of a spiritual condition called *nepsis* or, loosely, "watchfulness."
87. The problem that manifests itself in needing to keep getting drunk, with New Age and its hopes for, at the moment, 2012 delivering us from a miserable here and now, or needing a more and more exotic drugged-up sexual thrill, or fleeing to SecondWife, is essentially a lack of *nepsis*.
88. To be delivered by such misery is not a matter of a more radical escape. In a room filled with eye-stinging smoke, what is needed is not a more heroic way to push away the smoke, but a way of quenching the fire. Once the fire is quenched, the smoke dissipates, and with it the problem of escaping the smoke.
89. *Nepsis* is a watchfulness over one's heart, including the mind.

90. Nepsis is both like and unlike metacognition. It observes oneself, but it is not thinking about one's thinking, or taking analysis to the next level: analysis of normal analysis. It is more like coming to one's senses, getting back on course, and then trying to stay on course. It starts with a mindfulness of how one has not been mindful, which then flows to other areas of life.
91. The man who steps back and observes that he is seeking ways to escape the here and now, has an edge. The same goes with worrying or other passions by which the soul is disturbed: for many of the things that trouble our soul, seduce us to answer the wrong question. This is almost invariably more pedestrian than brilliant metacognition, and does not look comfortable.
92. Metanoia, or repentance, is both unconditional surrender and waking up and smelling the coffee. It is among the most terrifying of experiences, but afterwards, one realizes, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell!"
93. Once one is past that uncomfortable recognition, one is free to grasp something better.
94. That "something better" is ultimately Christ, and there is a big difference between a mind filled with Christ and a mind filled with material things as one is trying to flee malaise.
95. The attempt to escape a miserable here and now is doomed. We cannot escape into Eden. But we can find the joy of Eden, and the joy of Heaven, precisely in the here and now we are seduced to seek to escape.
96. Living the divine life in Christ, is a spiritual well out of which many treasures pour forth: harmony with nature, the joy of Eden and all the other things that we are given if we seek first the Kingdom of God and His perfect righteousness.
97. It was a real achievement when people pushing the envelope of technology and, with national effort and billions of dollars of

resources, NASA succeeded in lifting a man to the moon.

98. But, as a monk pointed out, the Orthodox Church has known for aeons how to use no resources beyond a little bread and water, and succeed in lifting a man up to God.
99. And we miss the greatest treasures if we think that asceticism or its fruits are only for monks.
00. And there is something that lies beyond even asceticism: contemplation of [the glory of God](#).

An Orthodox Bookshelf

The Greatest Treasures

These are some of the greatest treasures around to read, and there's a lifetime worth of reading in them. I may be critical in some of my reviews, but I only list books I think are worth reading, and the pieces I criticize are probably worthy of a more charitable spirit.

[The Orthodox* Study Bible](#) (Kindle)

In this Orthodox bookshelf, a decisive pride of place goes to [The Orthodox* Study Bible](#). I have felt more comfort in reading it than any other Bible, and it gives a real sense of reading the Bible, not privately, but in community with the saints across the ages. The footnotes are decisively better than the *Bible de Jérusalem* / [New Jerusalem Bible](#), and those responsible for [The Orthodox* Study Bible](#) decisively understand that the proper use of footnotes in a text is not to speculate about how a text came together across the ages, but to illumine the Bible as the ultimate work of practical, spiritual, and mystical theology, with footnotes oriented towards practical, spiritual, and mystical theology.

Then why have I put an asterisk in [The Orthodox* Study Bible](#)?

[The Orthodox* Study Bible](#) shows signs of a group of converts who have described as trying to do too much, too fast. Their selection

of saints for commentary is limited to the first millenium (have no nineteenth century saints *already* stood the test of time?), and the introduction harps on the ancient Church.

If harping on the antiquity of the Church doesn't seem strange, think about how we are all the continuation of the royal, ancient bloodline of His Majesty King ADAM and Her Majesty Queen EVE. Poetry and meaning are alike profound when, to quote a Protestant author, C.S. Lewis has Aslan proclaim "Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve." Such a thing may be poetic to note, and quaint, but it would be a strange thing to harp on and say that you respect other people primarily as carriers of an ancient bloodline. Most of the respect we have, or should have, for other people is not for the antiquity of our bloodline, but because they are fully human, however we may understand being human, because they are made in the image of God and can be transformed into the likeness of Christ. It may be a useful thing to remember that a beggar or a person we can't stand is ultimately family to us, but very little of the language of respect for the human person, whether Orthodox, other religious, or secular, states that we are the fullness of the ancient bloodline of our first parents. And, notwithstanding that eagerness to re-create the ancient Church was foundational to the Reformation and can still be found in Protestant influences, the basis of respect for Orthodoxy is not that it is Ancient Orthodoxy, but that it is *Holy* Orthodoxy.

Though [The Orthodox* Study Bible](#) introduces its material by talking about the authentic continuity of the Orthodox Church (without so much as a brief passing mention of our antiquity as the authentic continuity of the bloodline of Lord Adam and Lady Eve), I have never heard such harping on the ancient Church among cradle Orthodox. Admittedly the Orthodox Church is the same living organism as the ancient Church, but in the altar at my parish, most of the books are ancient in character (service books, Gospel books, a Greek New Testament), not one of them is labelled as ancient: no service book touts "the ancient Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom." 'Ancient' is not the point.

For more information, see [Note to Orthodox Evolutionists: Stop](#)

[Trying to Shanghai Recruit the Fathers to Your Camp](#) and [Creation and Holy Orthodoxy: Fundamentalism Is Not Enough](#).

And there are other things like that are written to "smooth things over" at the expense of truth in [The Orthodox* Study Bible](#). **For one instance**, the note on Creation on page 2 says like a politico, "Regarding scientific questions about the scientific accuracy of the Genesis account of creation, and about various viewpoints concerning evolution, the Orthodox Church has not dogmatized any particular view." This is misleading disinformation; origins questions may well be among the many areas "not dogmatized", but there is a near-universal consensus among the Church Fathers, including the Church Fathers of the first millenium that [The Orthodox* Study Bible](#) returns to, that the earth was created in six days about six thousand years ago. This may be inconvenient to point out, and it might be easier to help people get along if we say that several views are legitimate, but this is twisting facts for the sake of convenience. (And for the record, I believe in a billions of years old earth and legitimate disagreement over how God created the world), although [the world was created 3:00 PM, March 25, 28 AD.](#))

With all that stated, [The Orthodox* Study Bible](#) has a number of helpful and edifying notes in an overall tenor that provides guidance in reading the Bible, and nothing better has come to fill its place.

Perhaps another work will come along that is not trying to do "too much, too fast," but [The Orthodox* Study Bible](#) has left behind a pretty big pair of boots to fill, and there is much profit in it whether you know the Bible well or are just beginning to dive into it.

[Sir Lancelot Brenton's translation of the Septuagint Old Testament \(Read online\)](#) and [The King James Version of the New Testament](#)

One tacit assumption about the Bible is that we have to have it in one volume. In fact, we do not, and when I read the Bible in Greek, one volume is [a copy of the Septuagint](#) (with [Sir Lancelot Brenton's translation](#) on the side), and the other is [a Greek New Testament](#) (admittedly, a Western critical edition rather than the Byzantine

text). This works quite well.

The language of both is a little unfamiliar today, but there is something unsurpassed in [the King James Version](#). Modern translations of the Bible are the work of specialized language scholars, and their technical skill in the original language is not matched by being able to write well in English: in fact the only time I've heard of someone selected to help in translation based on being able to write well in English is the very tangential involvement of J.R.R. Tolkien in *The New English Bible*(?). [The King James Version](#) is the work of generalists, Renaissance men whose technical knowledge of original languages was matched by aptitude as English wordsmiths. And that is something that modern bureaucratic translations don't even try.

The best alternative I am aware of to [The Orthodox* Study Bible](#) is a combination of [Sir Lancelot Brenton's translation of the Septuagint](#), which was clearly written to match the excellence of [The King James Version](#), and [the King James Version of the New Testament](#).

And if the language seems a little unfamiliar at first, I would recall one encounter in [The Way of the Pilgrim](#), where a man had been cured of alcoholism by a priest who gave him a Gospel book and told him to read one Gospel each day (which he made a part of his practice). The Gospel was in Slavonic, which is further from that day's Russian than the Elizabethan English of [The King James Version](#) is from our English. The priest, giving him the Gospel book, said, "Do not worry if you do not understand [all of] what you are reading. *The demons will understand.*"

The Philokalia ([Volume 1](#), [Volume 2](#), [Volume 3](#), [Volume 4](#)),
([Kindle](#))

The Philokalia is a library of practical theology, and there is nothing else like it. It is a collection about the science of spiritual struggle, and though entries can vary substantially from each other, they are very edifying and can orient us to what is truly important in

life.

The Philokalia is best viewed, not as a book, but as a library of classics, and the intent is that people would read specific works as selected by a clergy member. I can attest that simply reading it cover to cover is a second-best solution.

Many Orthodox give *The Philokalia* first place outside of the Bible.

The Prologue of Ochrid ([Volume 1](#), [Volume 2](#) ([Daily selections online](#); [Old Calendar](#)))

The Orthodox Church has a great tradition of biography as theology: one grasps holiness by reading the lives of the saints. A rich sampling of these lives is found in the daily readings of the [Prologue](#), which tells of all the saints commemorated on a particular day.

[The Jordanville Prayer Book](#)

Praying the prayers of the Church is a great help along the way, and [The Jordanville Prayer Book](#) (or any other good prayer book) is like the script to a play: it is not primarily meant to be read silently while sitting in a chair, but spoken aloud, brought to life, preferably from a standing position.

Prayers, with fasting, are an area to work out with one's priest or spiritual father. They come alive when they are practiced as part of the life of the Church.

[Akathists](#) (links to many good Akathists; note that the website, Orthodox Wiki, should be taken with a little grain of salt).

St. Romanos the Melodist is said to have miraculously received the prayer of the [Akathist to the Mother of God](#). Since then there is a tradition of Akathist prayers; the term "akathist" means "not seated," i.e. standing to deliver the prayer. The first Akathist, and many of the ones that follow, are beautiful and powerful prayers.

[The Ante-Nicene Fathers](#) and **[Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers](#) collections ([Read online](#))**

For more information on contraception in particular, see [Orthodoxy, Contraception, and Spin Doctoring: A Look at an Influential but Disturbing Article](#).

[The Ante-Nicene and Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers](#) provide the standard reference translations to a great many Church Fathers. This collection receives its own asterisk because while the texts are Orthodox they were translated by Anglicans grinding a massive axe against Rome. Hence a condemnation of contraception, abortion, and infanticide by St. John Chrysostom is turned into a condemnation of abortion and infanticide alone; Augustine may be allowed to condemn Natural Family Planning, but there is an axe that is ground in the texts and is even more explicit in the accompanying notes and introductions.

Still, this does not stop a great deal of glory from the Fathers; read, for instance, [St. John Chrysostom's Treatise to Prove that No One Can Injure the Man Who Does Not Harm Himself](#) ([Kindle](#)). The collection, for all its deficiencies, is still a great treasure.

[St. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*](#) ([Kindle](#)), [Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works](#), etc.

I have picked these two examples of works that it is work to read. I read them, not because I have grown enough that they seem easy and natural to read, but because they stretch me and challenge me to enter into a larger space. Fr. John Behr said, "The only thing worse than not reading the Fathers and reading them systematically;" in a similar fashion, the Fathers are of the most value to us, not when we find an endorsement of what we have always believed, but when we are challenged and invited to grow. I am challenged by these works, and I pick out these two as representative examples of innumerable works that challenge me to grow bigger and unpleasantly challenge me to enter a larger world.

Lesser Classics

This is a collection of lesser greats, limited in number by the limitations of what I am familiar with. Note that this does not include a lot of popular authors, such as [Fr. Seraphim \(Rose\)](#), or Met. John (Zizioulas); in the latter case, I answered the question, "Is John Zizioulas an existentialist in disguise?" by asking, "Where's the disguise?" However, there is some good work produced recently, and I've even read a little of it.

[The Orthodox Way](#)

The standard print introduction to Orthodoxy is His Eminence Metropolitan Kallistos's [The Orthodox Church](#), but what captivated my attention was not that more systematic work but the less systematic and more mystical [The Orthodox Way](#). It is an excellent introduction to Holy Orthodoxy.

[The Way of the Pilgrim](#) (Kindle)

[The Way of the Pilgrim](#) is a glimpse of one pilgrim for whom the *Philokalia* unlocked the treasures of the Gospel. The author, whose name is lost, would today be considered a vagrant; that was the form taken by his pilgrimage. Along the way [the Jesus Prayer](#) unfolds in his heart. The book is a lesser classic, but it is a classic.

External Influences

One queer postmodern theologian speaking in class spoke of how the Fathers used "the best philosophical resources of their day," the implication being that we should use the postmodern resources fashionable today. To that I might reply: the best philosophical resources available to the Fathers were neo-Platonism, and the best philosophical resources available today are neo-Platonism. That may sound harsh, but the Church that said "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" used philosophical resources without limiting themselves to them as captives. Neo-Platonism was at once the air the Fathers breathed and the opponent they struggled against; in today's terms, slightly clumsy to apply to them, they strove for a critical reception of neo-Platonism, or developed (or rather preserved) a counterculture.

These books are not exhaustive; but they serve to point to an area that is worth reading. But perhaps this section of this Orthodox bookshelf is less important than one might think.

Note here that there is one category I have deliberately excluded: Gnostic and other heretical writings. Gnostic writing is spiritual pornography and I regret I have ever set eyes on it. I thought it would provide perspective to help me understand Orthodoxy. It did not, and I would rather have read any Orthodox resource than that form of spiritual poison.

[Plotinus: The Enneads](#) ([Kindle](#))

A central work of neo-Platonism, and possibly the best single resource in philosophy from outside the Church into what the Fathers drew from when they drew from pagan philosophy, in the image of one Church Father, "like a bee that goes straight to the sweetest nectar and ignores all else."

[Plato: The Republic](#) ([Kindle](#))

A seminal work that was the first domino that would build to

neo-Platonism. There are parts of the work that seem strange today; Derrida called it "the world's oldest, longest, and least funny political joke". I would amend that to "the world's oldest, longest, least funny, *and least intentional* political joke." The treatment of sexuality reads like something plagiarized from *Monty Python* today, but viewed in relation to historical context (in books I shouldn't have read), it does not seem nearly so provocative a stance against currents of its own day as in currents of our own day. It sets forth one of the oldest radical political ideologies, but for all that it is a seed of many important things, many good things, and I lightly adapted its most famous passage in [Plato: The Allegory of the... Flickering Screen?](#).

Almost last, and certainly least,

I would at least like to mention my own offerings, not because there is any conclusion that they are classics, but because I cherish them and they are what I have to offer. They are in:

[The theology section at Jonathan's Corner.](#)

[I invite you to visit my collection of theology Kindle eBooks!](#)

The "Big Room"

Programmer slang uses "the Big Room" for outside, the "room" one is in when one is not hunched over a computer indoors. And there is something profound to looking beyond books and learning from life.

Monasticism has a maxim, "Your cell will teach you everything you need to know." And the precept holds whether or not one is a monk; staying in one's place and learning things is powerful. Most monks have been illiterate and not owned books; the maxim is not simply "Your bookshelf will teach you everything you need to know," but "Your cell will teach you everything you need to know." The here and now that God has put you in, that you are tempted to escape by real or virtual means, will teach you everything you need to know.