

St. George Newsletter

November 2012

Ordinary Orthodoxy

A person who tries to keep Christ in the first place in his life lives his weekends approximately like this:

On Saturdays, he begins to think: how have I sinned during the week? That is, what have I done that separates me from God? Were there moments where I wished God had not been watching me? In short: he prepares for confession. If there is time before the evening service, he also begins to read the appointed prayers before communion.

In the evening he is in church at the evening service. Understanding that almost every word of the service is prayer, he tries to stay focused on the words. Often, he fails. Maybe the choir or reader make mistakes, maybe the priest pronounces the words badly. Maybe he himself is thinking of other things. It happens. But when he notices what is happening, he makes an effort to return to prayer. He absolutely does not put up candles during the service. After all, all the church is praying together during the service, and personal prayers should be brought to God before or after this communal prayer. He stands in line for confession, and tries to repent before God of his sins. After the service, perhaps he has a meal and tries to stay occupied with spiritual things: reading the scripture or other spiritual literature, or perhaps finishing the prayer rule. He prepares for communion by observing the commandment about the sabbath: fully dedicating the time between services to God.

In the morning, if the prayer rule is not yet completed, he finishes the other canons and prayers. He comes on time to service, or early in order to light candles and bring his own

prayers to God. Before the beginning of the service for a couple of minutes he avoids conversation in order to tune his mind and heart to the upcoming service. During service, he actively participates mentally. The same temptations occur as at the evening service. Distraction, return to attention. He communes and thanks God. After service he enjoys brotherly discourse with the other parishioners, as in the days of the ancient church.

If only our life were that organized! OK -- there are reminders in the above account about our weakness in attention, but the rest is great! The only thing missing is to go home on Sunday and quiz one's children on the daily epistle and Gospel readings!

To become such a person, one must work on oneself, and not only on weekends! One must have a burning desire to be "not of this world" and to be perpetually with God.

What sort of means are necessary on weekdays to be prepared to participate in Sunday services as described above?

1. Repentance. On Saturday, we repent before God in the presence of a priest. We fear the possibility of falling into sin after the evening service or in the morning. But then after communion we often weaken. Already after the service, maybe at lunch, we begin to judge, spread rumors, and so on. We should think and converse after services about good and beautiful things, and not immediately fall into judgment. Thus we begin to feel the grace of God on Sundays. But what about on Monday? When we feel the grace of God, we want to keep it. We should not prepare for confession only immediately before confession, but during the whole week. We try to live a new life after communion. In this grace-filled state, we are especially attuned to

seeing sin in ourselves. That is, if only we avoid self-justification! On Monday when arguments and disagreements start at work, we feel very bad. After all -- we are depriving ourselves of the grace of God! What to do? We must immediately repent of our sin before God, in our own words. And then we try again to avoid that sin. Do not give in to the thoughts that say, since I have already sinned, it is no great thing to do it again. After all, I will only have to confess it once. No! Repentance -- it's not just for Sundays.

2. Prayer. Attendance at services is mandatory. We need to dedicate Sunday to God, and "not forsake the assembly" (Heb. 10:25). Like we need exercise for the body, we need prayer for our souls. The word *religion* means renewing the connection (with God). This renewal is repeated every day. If it seems to us that we can hardly find time for prayer, we need to seriously rethink and reorder our life to make more time to be with God. We should pray with the prayer book, and in our own words. Using the prayer book is both good for personal discipline, and is also a school of prayer. After all, the holy fathers who wrote the prayers in the prayer book were masters of prayer. But our friends and loved ones are not remembered in the prayer book. Thus we should supplement the rule from the prayer book with prayers in our own words: for our concerns, for our friends, for giving thanks. After constant repentance this is the main spiritual work.

3. Learning. In the old days, it was not as necessary for Christians to study their faith. They were brought up in piety, in Sunday school, and in an altogether Christian environment. Now, many of us know our faith very poorly. Learning about our faith may consist of: a) reading the prayerbook outside of the time of prayer to learn better the content and meaning of the prayers; b) active reading of the holy scriptures, including making notes of difficult places, and seeking resolution of the difficulties through the commentaries of the holy fathers, modern commentators, or the parish priest; c) reading of other spiritual literature, or listening to

lectures on spiritual topics. In our times, these writings and lectures are easier to get because of the internet. Perhaps God will not call us to active missionary service, but all the same, we should be well-versed in the basics of our faith, and prepared to defend it.

There are of course other things: fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, reading the lives of the saints, prostrations, prayer ropes, and so on. But first one needs to attain a constant state of repentance and prayer, and a basic knowledge of the Orthodox faith. Thus, when weekends and church holidays come around, we will be prepared to repent before God and worthily partake of the Body and Blood of the Savior.

Spiritual lectures

Many of us read various books or listen to talks during the week. So that we can talk to each other about these things, I am recommending that we choose a book or some lectures each month that we can all read or listen to. This month, I recommend "Remembrances of St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco" by Bp. Peter of Cleveland.

This talk is available for download for listening on a mobile phone or iPod from:

saintjonah.org/podcasts/stherman2011/bishoppetertalk.mp3

There will also be a few copies for borrowing on CD at the candle counter.