

Spiritual Life in An Anti-Christ World: Fr. Maximus Marretta



Fr. Maximus (Marretta), of Holy Ascension Monastery, 2008, during his ordination to deacon at the parish of St. Maximos the Confessor, Owego, NY, 2008.

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The Spiritual Life In An Anti-Christ World

Fr. Maximus Marretta

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Your Graces, Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters in Christ,

The world we find ourselves in today is one of almost total abandonment of God. We live in a complete secular society, where religion is at best ignored and at worst actively harassed. Every aspect of our culture fights against the knowledge of God and against the Christian lifestyle. How are we Orthodox Christians supposed to lead a devout and serious life, which has Christ at its center? How can we follow in the footsteps of the Holy Fathers and imitate their mindset and way of life?

Part of the answer, in my opinion, is that we must try to understand the writings of the Fathers. What I would like to do today is to make an outline of the spiritual life for you according to the teachings of the Fathers, Although some of what I am going to talk about may seem at first a little abstract or even inapplicable to the life of the average person in the world, I think that having an understanding of the theory behind the spiritual life is immensely useful for everybody. All of us, whether we are clergy or monastics or laypeople, ultimately have the same goal: to be united with Christ. The same spiritual laws apply to all of us, even though some of the specifics may be different depending on a person's station in life. We are all human, and we are all Orthodox Christians, and we all follow the same Gospel and the same Fathers of the Church. The Fathers wrote not simply for monks, but for all people; and everyone who is serious about leading a life in conformity to the Gospel needs to understand the fundamental rules of spiritual warfare and the basic framework in which we work out our salvation.

One of the great boasts of the Orthodox Church is that we do not engage in spiritual warfare blindly as do Protestants and sectarians, but rather with a definite plan in mind. According to St. Maximus the Confessor, we must fight "scientifically." "Scientifically" means that the spiritual life can be analyzed and broken down into parts, so that we know what we are doing on each step along the way. We seek to understand what obstacles confront us, how we can overcome temptations, what are the manifestations of grace, what is the difference between grace and delusion, and so on.

The spiritual life is broadly divided into three stages, which were first clearly articulated by St. Dionysios the Areopagite. He refers to the stages as purification, illumination, and perfection. Other Fathers refer to the last stage as deification. Purification is the stage in which all people begin: it is when we cleanse ourselves of the eight general passions in order to prepare ourselves to receive God's grace. The simplest way to think of the passions is as bad habits. By purifying ourselves of them, we attain to the state of dispassion, which is the prerequisite for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and ceaseless prayer.

The Fathers enumerate eight general passions: gluttony, fornication, greed, anger, listlessness or boredom, depression, vainglory, and pride. These eight passions proceed from three root passions, which are love of pleasure, love of possessions, and pride. These are described in scripture as "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." These three passions in turn derive from one source of all evil, which is self-love.

Now, the passions are listed in a certain traditional order which is not random, but rather related to the way in which they dominate us and the order in which we must combat them. Thus, the first passions to be listed are gluttony and fornication, which are sins relating to the flesh. Sins of the flesh tend to be the first into which we fall (thus Adam fell into gluttony in Paradise), since they offer immediate pleasure and gratification. Thus where Adam fell, so must we also begin our spiritual life; that is with fasting. So it was that Christ began His ministry by fasting forty days in the wilderness. The other passions follow in sequence, ending in pride, which is the both worst of all and entirely immaterial.

In the stage of purification, our primary goal is to eradicate and destroy the passions. However, God's grace is always with us: usually in imperceptible ways, but sometimes in ways that are quite obvious. The three stages each have their own level of grace, which gradually become more intense and more noticeable. These workings of God's grace are beautifully described by John the Venerable, a Syrian ascetic whose works are compiled together

with the works of St. Isaac the Syrian. He describes the grace we receive while we are being purified in the following manner, which most of us can relate to on some level.

“The Visitations of the First Stage [i.e., of purification from the passions]”

Sometimes grace sows humility in a person’s heart and makes his thought lower than dust and ashes.

Sometimes it causes him to shed tears through the remembrance of his sins.

Sometimes it makes recitation of the Psalms sweet to his heart, giving him facility and enjoyment in his lengthy service.

Sometimes it makes him love frequent prostrations, stirring up in him impulses of sorrow and humility, or of joy and confidence.

Sometimes it consoles him with dreams; he should be wary of these, however wonderful they may be, because of the Adversary.

Sometimes it stimulates him with the remembrance of the saints and their labors and accomplishments, giving him the fervent desire to emulate their labors.

Sometimes it reproaches him with the remembrance of his faults and how grace has borne him patiently like a loving nurse, and in this recollection he will shed tears of sorrow and of joy. Here, if grace were not sustaining the heart, he would expire because of the multitude of burning tears.

Sometimes it grants him constant praises and delight in them.

Sometimes it causes him to love constant reading and mingles tears or delight with it.

Sometimes it brings the life of our Lord to his mind, and he becomes humbled but joyful; or it portrays the Passion to him and causes passionate tears to flow without measure from his eyes.

Sometimes it inspires in him love of doing things for the pleasure of his brethren.

Sometimes it will bestow stillness on him to quell the impulses of the passions.

Sometimes it will arouse in his heart pity for the oppressed and ministering for the sick.

By these things the grace of the Spirit purifies and polishes the soul of the novice and of anyone who turns back from his heedlessness and vile actions, and drawing near to it places himself under the yoke of its obedience.”

When a person has been cleansed of the passions, the grace of the Holy Spirit descends upon him and illumines his soul. This stage is called illumination by the Fathers; and it is so called because the person perceives all reality in a radically different way. Not only is he freed from the passions, which distort our perception of things, but he also sees everything through and in God: he sees things as they are related to God and not as they are related to our own desires. In other words, he sees things as they really are. This perception is so different from the perception of a person who is under the influence the passions that it is like the difference between light and darkness. Such a person enters another world, a world full of light and grace; nevertheless, this is not the vision of the uncreated light, which pertains to those in a state of deification. There are three main characteristics of the state of illumination:

1. unceasing prayer
2. the reception of the gifts of the Holy Spirit
3. the contemplation of the logoi or inner principles of creation

Unceasing prayer is not simply repeating a prayer (such as the Jesus Prayer) over and over again, although this type of frequent prayer is a necessary prelude to unceasing prayer. Unceasing prayer is a continual awareness of God dwelling inside us, in a very concrete and personal way, so that we are always gazing upon him. We speak to Him not as to one absent or remote, but to someone who is right with us: not just beside us as a friend or before us as a conversion partner but Inside us as part of ourselves. Then we are filled with continual delight and joy. We reckon sensual pleasures as filth and dirt, and we desire nothing else except to be in His presence

forever. This is the state that is natural to man; this is the state in which and for which we were created, but which we lost through sin. A person in this state always walks with God; in all his activities he is together with Christ, and although some activity may take the part of his attention away for a time, Christ remains within him so that he can instantly turn back to Him when he has finished with his task. Or to put it more precisely and in the language of the Fathers, his reason attends to worldly business, while his intellect remains with God. In this state a person remains praying even when he is asleep. This does not simply mean that he dreams that he is praying (for this happens often to someone who is still being purified from sin), but rather that one part of his mind (the reason) sleeps, while another part (the intellect) remains awake and never departs from the presence of Christ.

We should remember that unceasing prayer is not identical to prayer of the heart or the mind. Although the Fathers often use terminology loosely, basically, prayer of the mind is any prayer in which a person concentrates on the meaning of the words he is saying; indeed, any prayer worth the name is prayer of the mind, for if there is no attention, it is mere babbling. Prayer of the heart is any prayer in which compunction is felt: this is often accompanied by tears. Unceasing prayer is always accompanied by prayer of the heart, but is not identical to it, because many - perhaps most - people experience prayer of the heart without ever tasting unceasing prayer.

A person who has attained unceasing prayer is not immune to temptation; on the contrary, he is ever subject to more and more assaults of the demons. However, since the passions have been eradicated within him, he feels no particular inclination to succumb to the temptation, and so easily repulses it. The temptation is, as it were, from without him and not from within as in the case of a passionate person who has habits of sin. Since the demons cannot directly tempt such a person, they usually resort to stirring up the most terrible and improbable circumstances around the person in order to make him exasperated and give in. Such temptations

include slander, persecution, physical ailments, and the like. This is why almost all the saints of the Church suffered such things. The demons could not attack them in any other manner, since they were protected from the passions through the grace of Christ dwelling within them. Of course, a person in a state of illumination retains his free will, and can always choose to give into the grosser passions. This has happened to many virtuous ascetics throughout history. Most of all a person in this state must fear pride, for it can slip upon him unnoticed and drag him down into the abyss.

The second characteristic of the person in a state of illumination is that he receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are enumerated by the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Galatians: *“Now the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, longsuffering, goodness, gentleness, faith, meekness, temperance; against such there is no law. Now they who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections [literally, “the passions”] and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.”* When this happens to a person, he not merely performs virtuous actions, but has Christ dwelling within him and actually performing the actions together with him. He does not lose control of himself or surrender his free will or becomes a puppet, but rather, Christ’s energies become his energies, so that what he does proceeds not from himself but from Christ within him. Then he says *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who liveth within me.”* And *“The life which I live, I live by my Lord, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* He has brought his will into perfect alignment with Christ’s will, even as Christ’s human will was in perfect concord with His divine will. The two concur together without any opposition between them. They are in perfect harmony and concordance. As the council of Chalcedon declares, they are united without change, without confusion, without division, and without separation. This applies first to the union of the divine and the human natures in Christ, and since Christ is our model in all things, it applies also to the union of our human nature with divine grace when the Holy Spirit descends on us. Thus our actions are Christ’s actions, and yet they are entirely our own at the same time. For Christ, in giving Himself to us, gives Himself to us as a true gift, while yet remaining Himself.

While the virtues we perform are Christ's because we have been united to Him and have clothed ourselves in Him, it is the Holy Spirit who brings Christ within us. For this reason the gifts are called the fruits of the Spirit. The saints are able to perceive the Holy Spirit making Christ present within themselves. Indeed, where one of the Trinity is, there also are the others, for the Three are inseparable and they act as one.

The third characteristic of the person in illumination is that he contemplates the *logoi* or inner principles of created things. God is unknowable in His essence, but we can come to a certain limited knowledge of Him from His energies and His works. Since all men by nature desire to know things, a person who is pursuing a godly life naturally will want to know God. In particular, he will want to understand so much of God's thought as pertains to men and the created world. The knowledge of God insofar as He is related to His creation is called the contemplation of the *logoi* or the inner principles of created beings. This contemplation belongs to those who have attained a state of dispassion and have received divine power of perception. Nevertheless, a foretaste of it is accessible even to those in a passionate state.

There exist within God *logoi* or inner principles which are both the templates or blueprints for all creation and the meaning behind it. These *logoi* are themselves uncreated and part of God, but they are God's thought insofar as it relates to creation; as such, they are uncreated divine energies. To each created nature there corresponds a *logos*, and all the *logoi* are united in the person of the Word (Logos) of God. St. Maximus the Confessor beautifully explains the Church's teaching on the *logoi*:

“If [a person] intelligently directs the soul's imagination to the infinite differences and varieties of things as they exist by nature and turns his questing eye with understanding towards the intelligible model (logos) according to which they have been made, would he not know that the one Logos is the many *logoi*? This is evident in the incomparable differences

among created things. For each is unmistakably unique in itself and its identity remains distinct in relation to other things. He will also know that the many *logoi* are the one Logos to whom all things are related and who exists in himself without confusion, the essential and individually distinctive God, the Logos of God the Father... Because he held together in himself the *logoi* before they came to be, by his gracious will he created all things visible and invisible out of non-being. By his Word and by his Wisdom he made all things and is making all things, universals as well as particulars, at the proper time.

For we believe that a *logos* of angels preceded their creation, a *logos* preceded the creation of each of the beings and powers that fill the upper world, a *logos* preceded the creation of human beings, a *logos* preceded everything that receives its becoming from God, and so on. It is not necessary to mention them all. The Logos whose excellence is incomparable, ineffable, and inconceivable in himself is exalted beyond all creation and even beyond the idea of difference and distinction. This same Logos, whose goodness is revealed and multiplied in all things that have their origin in him, with the degree of beauty appropriate to each being, recapitulates all things in himself (Eph 1:10). Through this Logos there came to be both being and continuing to be, for from him the things that were made came to be in a certain way and for a certain reason and by continuing to be and by moving, they participate in God...

The *logoi* of all things known by God before their creation are securely fixed in God. They are in him who is the truth of all things. Yet all these things, things present and things to come, have not been brought into being at the same time that God knows them [for He always knows them]; rather, each was created in an appropriate way according to its *logos* at the proper time according to the wisdom of the maker, and each acquired concrete actual existence itself. For the Maker is always existent Being, but they exist potentially before they exist in actuality... For all created things are defined, in their essence and in their way of developing, by their own *logoi* and by the *logoi* of the beings that provide their external context. Through these *logoi* they find their defining limits.”

Thus the *logoi* are the models, the principles, and the foundation of the natures of all created things. For insofar as things exist, they have a nature which is common to similar individuals. That nature insofar as it is conceived by God is a *logos*, but as exemplified in reality and apprehended by the human mind it is what we call a “universal.” A universal is a concept of unity among similar individual things which the mind abstracts from seeing that those individuals are indeed similar. That being so, the perception of universals is not at all the same thing as the contemplation of the *logoi*. Every person recognizes and classifies things as universals in daily life; for example, when I say that this maple in front of me is a tree, I am identifying what kind of universal it is: what kind of nature it has. “Tree” is a universal embracing all individual plants with a trunk and leaves. This type of identification is the basis of human cognition – of how we know the world around us -and it has nothing to do with the spiritual life. When I contemplate the *logos* of trees, however, I perceive why God made trees, what is their relation to God, what is their relation to myself, and to all the rest of creation.

A person who has not yet reached dispassion cannot perceive this as it is in reality, but he can sense a shadow of it, as it were. St. Maximus the Confessor seems to make a distinction between a natural contemplation of created things [*Ambiguum* 7, 1077C – 1084B, trans. Paul M. Blowers, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003.] which all men - even people who are not Christians - can practice in some way; and the contemplation which pertains to those purified of the passions, whose inner sight is clear. The former is most noticeable in solitary and wild places: in woods and mountains and streams, where God’s creation has not been sullied by the hand of man. There the human heart is naturally moved to delight and wonder, and one senses that there is something beyond what the physical senses perceive, that somehow the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This experience is the root of much human religious feeling, and it can lead a person closer to God. But outside of the faith, it usually leads to some form of paganism, because men apart from revelation confuse that sense of something beyond with that which lies before them;

and they think that the supernatural (which they cannot see, but only vaguely feel) proceeds from nature (which lies in plain view), rather than the other way around, as is the case in reality. Thus men have fallen into worship of the creation rather than the Creator. This feeling also has a lot to do with the modern environmental movement, which has a marked tendency towards paganism, in the sense that many environmentalists tend to deify nature, or at least think of nature as being more important than mankind. Nevertheless, for a Christian the contemplation of the natural world is profitable and can lead one towards God, albeit only in an indirect way. The direct way, of course, is through prayer and partaking of the sacramental life of the Church.

As a person is purified of his passions, he will gradually perceive things more clearly. For a passionate person views things passionately, and his perception is distorted by his desire for pleasure. But the person who has abandoned the pursuit of pleasure no longer looks upon things in accordance with how they might gratify his desires. He looks at things and sees how wisely and beautifully they were created. Such a man is advancing upward to the true contemplation of the logoi, but he has not yet arrived, for the Holy Spirit has not yet settled in him and opened his eyes to see fully. When he receives this grace, however, then he sees how God is in all things and all things are in God; he sees God as the beginning, middle, and end of everything. The material world no longer distracts him from God, but rather moves him to praise the Creator, who made all things good.

I would like to anticipate here one common misunderstanding. A person who contemplates the inner principles of creation does not gain an understanding of creatures on a scientific or sub-atomic level. That kind of knowledge is irrelevant to the spiritual life. It is useful only for manipulating matter according to the desires of the human will. In our world today, that means the pursuit of pleasure through new technology, like television, computers, video games, and so on. But the spiritual man understands what each created thing is in relation to God, man, and the

rest of creation; and this contemplation both delights him and leads him closer to God.

There is also another sense in which the word *logos* is used, and it is intimately related to what we just described, although it may not seem so at first. This is the inner meaning of Holy Scripture. In part, it means interpreting the Scriptures in an allegorical (or rather, spiritual) way, although it goes beyond that. Anyone can interpret the Scriptures allegorically with a little practice, but only the person who has been enlightened by the Holy Spirit can understand all passages in their deep and true meanings. This takes place on a couple of levels. Historical events - especially in the Old, but also in the New Testament - are referred to either the life of Christ or our life; the words of Christ are understood not merely as moral precepts, but as events in our spiritual life. As we experience God acting within us, we understand that this is what the words of Scripture are referring to; and this understanding spurs us onto greater zeal and greater love towards God. At the same time it makes the ways of the spiritual life clearer and grants us insight and discernment into how we should act and think. This perception of the *logoi* of Scripture is not a function of the reason which weighs and compares and calculates the meaning of passages by reference to other scriptural passages or to known facts of history or philosophy. It is rather a perception of the intellect, of the soul's noetic power, which occurs through the action of the Holy Spirit upon the mind purified of passions. This perception is in a way parallel to possession of the fruits of the Spirit, for the power acting within us is the uncreated Spirit Himself, and the contemplation of the *logoi* of Scripture is possession of His uncreated energies.

Just as there is a foreshadowing and beginning of the true contemplation of the *logoi* of created beings by the passionate in the pondering upon the natural world, so there is a foreshadowing and beginning of the contemplation of the *logoi* of Scripture in the interpretation of Scripture in its allegorical or spiritual way. Thus the city of Jerusalem symbolizes the human soul, and the Church, and the Jerusalem on high, which is the

Kingdom of Heaven. The allegorical method of interpreting Scriptures may be learned from studying the works of the Fathers; and once the general principles are understood much of Scripture will be easily interpreted in its deeper sense. Nevertheless, this is not the true contemplation of the *logoi* of Scripture; for that only takes place in those souls illumined by the Spirit, who are able to contextualize the words in their own experience of Christ's indwelling. This contemplation is usually accompanied by compunction, tears, or delight.

The workings of grace in the person who is in the stage of illumination are described in the following terms:

The Middle Stage, [i.e., the state of illumination]

Henceforward the Spirit alters His operations in the soul notably so that it is thereby illumined and sanctified for the reception of gifts, for the vision of revelations, and for the perception of hidden mysteries.

Sometimes grace comes to rest upon him during his service and stills his mind from wandering thoughts, and even interrupts the service, sending his mind into ecstasy over the understanding of some mystery.

Sometimes it interrupts his service with tears over the love of his Lord.

Sometimes it imparts a stillness to his mind, and makes his chanting cease, without thought, without memory of anything, or meditation, though it sometimes holds back his service for more excellent meditation.

Sometimes it stirs up hot fiery impulses in his heart in the love of Christ, and his soul is set afire, his limbs are paralyzed, and he falls on his face.

Sometimes it works up a fervent heat in his heart, and his body and soul are enkindled so that he supposes every part of him is being consumed in the blaze.

The highest stage in the spiritual life is called perfection or deification. Deification means that we become by grace what God is by nature. That is, the energies of God, which are already active in the person who has been illuminated by the Holy Spirit, now act in such a way that the person starts to acquire those supernatural qualities which belong to God. First, he begins to behold the vision of the uncreated light. Here, the eyes of the mind and even of the body are altered by grace so that they can see God Himself, insofar as God deigns to reveal Himself. He does not see God's essence, for that is utterly beyond everything and totally inaccessible forever, but he sees God manifesting himself in His energies; that is, in His actions. Now, I do not want to dwell on this topic because it is really beyond us, but suffice to say that the vision of the uncreated light is pure union with God and a taste of life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The person who is deified also acquires the gift of working miracles. He has become a god by grace and thus, little by little, gains those traits which characterize God. God is omnipotent, and so the saint partakes to a slight degree in God's omnipotence by performing various wonders. God is omniscient, and so the saint begins to know people's thoughts. God is omnipresent, and so the saint knows what is happening in far-away places. The normal boundaries of time and space do not apply anymore, for God transcends them, and the saint, who lives in God, also transcends them to the extent that he partakes of divine grace. There is a certain sequence of miracle working which generally holds true for the saints: the lowest is clairvoyance and prophecy, followed by friendship with wild animals, then healing of minor diseases, multiplication of food, control over weather and nature, healing of major ailments and restoration of body parts, and finally raising of the dead. Nevertheless, these are gifts of God and not proper to our nature. God bestows them as He wishes and knows best. They are granted for the benefit of those around the saint, not the saint himself, and are often given for a specific purpose; for example, the conversion of a nation, which is usually effected by a saint who converts the ruling class of the country through his miracles. Another example is St. John of

Kronstadt, to whom God gave great miracle-working powers in order to call Russia back to the faith from the edge of ruin -- unsuccessfully, as it turned out. But most saints never receive more than clairvoyance or the healing of minor maladies, either because they have not reached the heights of holiness required or more usually, because their time and place does not call for such miracles. Some saints, especially bishops, never receive more than clairvoyance; this is because God has given them a different grace, one more appropriate and useful to their station: the grace to expound accurately dogmas of the faith. For as the Apostle says, there are diversities of gifts, but one and the selfsame Spirit working in all. Deification properly speaking belongs to the world to come. In this life is only a temporary state; one only beholds the uncreated light for limited amounts of time, it may be for one second or for many days. It occurs entirely at God's discretion as a free gift; there is no way we can induce this state within ourselves, as Hindus or Buddhists try to do. John the Venerable describes this state thus:

The Stage of Perfection [i.e. of deification]

Here begins the entering into the treasury, the place of glorious visions, the place of joy and exultation, the place without shadow, the place of light where no mention of darkness is made, the place of light and delight, the place of peace, whose inhabitants are illuminated by the sight of the beauty of the King.

Now their heart will rejoice, those who sought the Lord in adversities, who thirsted for the sight of Him, and to whom He has shown His face. Enter now and take your rest, you who were wearied and exhausted. Recline with the Lord in the bridal chamber, you who were weeping at the door. The tears of sorrow have been stopped, and the struggles and battles have been taken away; the travail and conflict have ceased. Now is the time of rest. Fear has been removed out of the way of ardent love.

The mind's impulses are stayed in amazement at the wondrous sights.

This is the place in which the inhabitants inhale the Spirit; their mind stilled of impulses, the Spirit speaks His secrets into it.

This is the place of beauty and serenity; it is called light without likeness.

An invitation to enter it comes from the Spirit to the energetic mind, the impulses of whose visionary powers are wearied, to gaze, to behold the One Who is in all and in Whom is everything. And when it comes to prayer it sees its own glory, and upon the soul there dawns the beauty of its own nature and it sees itself as it really is, and sees the divine light dawning in it and changing it into His likeness, while the likeness of its own nature is taken away out of its sight, and it sees itself as the likeness of God, being united with the light without likeness, which is the light of the Trinity, shining forth in the soul itself. It becomes immersed in the waves of its beauty and remains in ecstasy for a long period.”

Essential to the spiritual life is having a guide who has experience in fighting the passions and is illumined by the Holy Spirit. These people are the clergy, who are ordained to their respective ranks corresponding to their level of holiness. Thus, as St. Dionysios the Areopagite explains, there are three levels of clergy corresponding to the three stages of the spiritual life. The deacons are those who are in an advanced stage of purification and who teach others how to purify themselves. This is why deacons are traditionally in charge of catechism. The priests are those who are illumined and who lead others into illumination through their teachings and through the sacraments. The bishops are those who are in a state of deification and who lead others into the same state by presiding over the whole assembly of the Church.

Obviously, this picture is considerably divorced from the current reality of the Church. Nevertheless, it remains the theoretical ideal, which we must pursue to the extent possible. This is true in spite of the fact that many holy men refused to be ordained out of humility, as well as the fact that

within the system there is a certain amount of flexibility.

The spiritual and ascetic life as outlined in the writings of the Fathers is inseparable - even inconceivable – apart from the sacraments and presumes active participation in them. This is because the life described is a Christian life, not a merely philosophical life of virtue such as described by pagan authors like the Platonists and Hindus. As such, our every thought and action must take place only in the context of Christ, for the spiritual life of a Christian is the life of Christ; and the life of Christ is mediated, made present, and expressed through the sacraments.

In baptism, we are regenerated and receive illumination – potentially, if we are infants or still in a passionate state, but actually if we are purified from the passions. We are baptized into Christ's death – meaning that we die to the passions; and in so doing we accept Christ and are justified; that is illumined. Thus a person who is baptized can be referred to as both illumined and justified, even though if he is not entirely purified this reality is not fully realized within him yet. And if we continue to progress we are glorified; that is deified. So when we read about death or dying in Holy Scripture, we should understand it to mean purification from the passions; that is, we die to the passions through asceticism. When we read about justification, we should understand illumination, for illumination describes our spiritual experience when the Holy Spirit descends upon us, while justification means simply our relationship to God vis-à-vis sin when we are in this state. When we read about glory or glorification, we should understand deification, for we partake in the glory which belongs to God. As an example, we may examine what St. Paul says in the Epistle to the Romans, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that

henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:3-11).

In baptism we are initiated into the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, but in Holy Communion, we partake of the fullness of the life of Christ. That is why the Eucharistic canon which the priest recites during the Liturgy contains a summary of the life of Christ, for in Communion we participate in all of Christ’s actions. In Communion the fact of us being one Body with Him is realized and made manifest. Naturally, the summit of this is His death and resurrection; and the Eucharistic sacrifice is not a repetition of Christ’s sacrifice, but a making present of it. Thus, even as Christ accepted death upon Himself, and in so doing overthrew it – for death could not hold the hypostatic Life Himself – so we partaking of the immaculate Mysteries are raised up into the glory of Christ’s resurrection. In both baptism and communion and in all the sacraments, we receive God’s grace in proportion to the level of our purity, which is why we must prepare ourselves to receive the sacraments and why the sacraments cannot be divorced from the ascetic life. For asceticism is both the means of purification from the passions and also, for the baptized, a participation in the suffering and death of Christ. For one who is still being purified this may not seem so obvious, but the person who has become a vessel of the Holy Spirit perceives clearly the union of his own life with Christ’s life. This is why it is the priests – that is; those whose way of life is proven to be holy – who perform the sacraments.

The scheme and order I have outlined should not be taken as a rigid pattern which is always followed without variation. It is simply a generalization based on the usual order the spiritual life takes. In most people the actual events of one’s spiritual life involve considerably more

flux than the theoretical model. Thus, it is common for a person who is still being purified of the passions to experience to some degree or for some time some of the gifts of the Spirit or to be granted ceaseless prayer. Sometimes the granting of grace in this fashion is deliberately temporary on God's part, something that lasts a few moments or a few hours or a few days, and is given as an encouragement to console the struggler in his fight and to spur him on to greater achievements. Sometimes grace is given in a more lasting and all-enveloping way; and it is then incumbent on the struggler to cultivate the gift and not to neglect it. In this way, one may be granted the characteristics of illumination before dispassion is fully attained, and the grace given then helps the Christian toward total dispassion. However, this more lasting and full granting of grace is granted to those who have made some serious progress, not to those still beginning, for if it were otherwise, the grace of God would be held very cheap. The lesser and shorter manifestations of grace are however granted sometimes even to beginners and even many pious layfolk experience them. I want to emphasize this fact, because everything that I have been talking about is attainable – at least in part – by everyone, laypeople included. Remember, the state of unceasing prayer and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit should be the normal state of a human being. In the early centuries of the Church, a large proportion of layfolk were in this state. That is why the early Christians are called “saints” in the Epistles of St. Paul. That is why the apologists who defended the faith against criticism from pagans could state that there was a real difference in the way of life between a Christian and a pagan, and that one of the proofs of Christianity being true is that Christians are notable for their superior lifestyle. It is no coincidence that all the early sources claim that Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond because of the great number of miracles the Christians were continuously working. That is also why the Fathers, when they are defining what the Church is, state that one of the characteristic marks of the Church is that its members are distinguished for their holy way of life.

In our day, that fiery zeal has died down, and we often feel like we are

barely hanging on to a small part of our Orthodox heritage. Our task needs to be to recover the zeal of the early Christians, the zeal the Fathers of the Church displayed in the spiritual life and which they meticulously outlined for later generations to study and imitate. If I have gone on at length about topics which seem theoretical or removed from our daily lives is because I want you to be filled with the spirit of the Fathers. I would like all of us to study the Fathers closely and then to do what they say! If we have that attitude, the desire to understand the Holy Fathers, to understand the spiritual life, and to put the Patristic writings into effect in our own life, I believe that God will not forget us. Even if we are only able to do a small portion of what we read in the books, He will send down His grace upon us and help us, unworthy though we be. Let us therefore apply ourselves diligently to reading the Fathers, to applying their counsels to ourselves, and to imitating them as much as we can. In so doing we will be vouchsafed to partake with them in God's grace both in this life and in the life to come. Amen.

[Source: <http://orthodoxyinfo.org/OctoberConference/2011Conference.html>]