

Fr. Alexey Young: How to Form an Orthodox Conscience



Mosaic Icon of Christ from Hagia Sophia in Constantinople

Orthodox America **How to Form an Orthodox Conscience** **by Father Alexey Young**

An Orthodox Christian conscience is created by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ acting within us. It is difficult to form this conscience. But once a Christian acquires it, an alarm is sounded in his heart and mind whenever he comes close to improper actions, lack of charity toward others, false ideas, and deviations from the holy traditions of Orthodoxy.

Here are the ways in which we can cooperate with God's grace and form this conscience within ourselves:

1 . We are to have much love for our .Saviour, with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We are not to divide our love between God

and the world. For a beginner this means that when we pray we should struggle mightily to concentrate and avoid distractions: we are to be wholly in God. Furthermore, as St. John of Kronstadt teaches:

“Love for God begins to manifest itself, and to act in us, when we begin to love our neighbor as ourselves, and not to spare ourselves or anything belonging to us for him, as he is the image of God: for *he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God Whom he hath not seen?* (I John 4:20).”

St. John says that this is the only love which is real, and lasting:

“The purer the heart becomes, the larger it becomes; consequently it is able to find room for more and more loved ones; the more sinful it is, the more it contracts; consequently it is able to find room for fewer and fewer loved ones--it is limited by a false love; self-love.”

We must pray often, both at church and at home. St. Gregory of Sinai says that the great gift which God gives us in Holy Baptism is buried by us, just as a treasure is buried in the ground--'and common sense and gratitude demand that we should take good care to unearth this treasure and bring it to light.” One of the most important ways to do this is by acquiring the habit of prayer. Blessed Theophan the Recluse explains further

“Those who only hear about spiritual meditation and prayer and have no direct knowledge [experience] of it are like men blind from birth, who hear about the sunshine without ever knowing what it really is. Through this ignorance they lose many spiritual blessings, and are slow in arriving at the virtues which make for the fulfillment of God’s good pleasure.”

We must carefully read and study Holy Scripture. Although many saints had the habit of reading through the entire Psalter and New

Testament every week, we should at least read the Gospel and Epistle appointed in the Church Calendar for each day. According to St. Seraphim of Sarov, “It is very profitable ‘to occupy oneself: with the reading of the word of God in solitude, and to read the whole Bible intelligently...in order that the whole mind of the reader might be plunged into the truths of Holy Scripture, and that from this he might receive warmth.”

Attendance at Divine Services and frequent reception of Holy Communion is vital to the development of an Orthodox conscience. Of this, St. John of Kronstadt writes:

“The Divine Liturgy is truly a heavenly service on earth, in which God Himself, in a particular, immediate, and most close manner is present and dwells with men ...There is on earth nothing higher, greater, more holy, than the Liturgy; nothing more solemn, nothing more life-giving.” St. Tikhon of Zadonsk observed: “The Christians of old frequently received communion as the cause and food of immortality, wherefore even up to our own time the Holy Church daily exhorts us to ‘draw near with fear of God and with faith’. At the present day people have neither, as the facts abundantly prove; only once a year, and even then almost under compulsion, do they approach the Table of Immortality Men hasten joyfully to banquets, but to this spiritual and most Sacred Table to which Christ invites them they come under compulsion.”

5. We should read the writings of the Holy Fathers of the Church and the Lives of the Saints. Blessed Theophan the Recluse explained this to one of his spiritual children in the following way:

“The spiritual life is a special world into which the wisdom of men cannot penetrate... This is a subject which embraces much and is lofty and sweet to the heart If you seriously desire to enter onto this path, then you won’t have time to turn to the study of other subjects.. for

human philosophizing cannot even be compared with spiritual wisdom.”

Therefore, if we wish to learn ways that are pleasing to God, it stands to reason that we will set aside time in order to study the writings and lives of those who have drawn close to Him while still in this life, for according to St. John of Kronstadt there are rich and poor in the spiritual world just as there are in worldly society:

“As the poor ask charity of the rich, and cannot live without help from them, so also in the spiritual order the poor must have recourse to the rich. We are the spiritually poor, whilst the saints, and those who shine even in this present life by their faith and piety, are the spiritually rich. It is to them that we needy ones must have recourse.”

6. We are to practice the presence of God in our daily life. St. John of Kronstadt explains it in this way:

“Believe that God sees you as undoubtedly as you believe that anyone standing face to face with you sees you, only with this difference, that the Heavenly Father sees everything that is in you, everything that you are God is nearer to us than any man at any time. Therefore we must always set God before us, at our right hand, and there behold Him; we must be strong, and in order not to sin we must so place ourselves that nothing can thrust God from our thoughts and hearts, that nothing can hide Him from us, that nothing may deprive us of our beloved Lord, but that we may every hour, every minute, belong to Him, and be perpetually with Him, as He Himself is perpetually with us, as He constantly cares for us and guards us”.

7. We should often, if not daily, examine our souls and repent of the sins we find there. St. Mark the Ascetic writes: “The conscience is nature’s book. He who applies what he reads there experiences God’s

help.” Thus, Elder Macarius of Optina wrote in a letter of spiritual direction:

“The Lord calls to Him all sinners; He opens His arms wide, even to the worst among them. Gladly He takes them in His arms, if only they will come. But they have got to make the effort of coming. They must seek Him, go to Him. In other words, they must repent. It is not He that rejects those who do: not repent. He still longs for them, and calls them. But they refuse to hear His call. They choose to wander away, in some other direction.” Therefore, St. John of Kronstadt explains:

“Conscience in men is nothing else but the voice of the omnipresent God moving in the heart--the Lord knows all Watch your heart throughout your life; examine it, listen to it, and see what prevents it from uniting itself with the Lord. Let this be your supreme and constant study Examine yourself more often; see where the eyes of your heart are looking.”

And then, as Blessed Theophan the Recluse counsels:

“Repent, and turn to the Lord, admit your sins, weep for them with heartfelt contrition, and confess them before your spiritual father.” St. Hesychios the Priest tells us that according to St. Basil the Great, “a great help towards not sinning and not committing daily the same faults is for us to review in our conscience at the end of each day what we have done wrong and what we have done right. Job did this with regard to both himself and to his children [cf. Job 1:5], These daily reckonings illumine a man’s hour-by-hour behaviour.”

Struggle mightily to avoid judging others. God alone has the right to judge, for as St. Tikhon of Zadonsk says:

“Do not judge others, for you cannot know what is inside the other man. Do not condemn, for he may still rise whilst you may fall. Be-ware of even talking about others, lest you start judging them. Enquiring into other people’s sin is a curiosity hateful to God and man...because, by judging, man usurps the powers of the only judge, Christ Above all, when judging another we cannot know whether perchance he has not already repented and been forgiven by God.”

If we are willing to arrange our lives in the above manner, resolving not to withdraw from this holy labor even if it means suffering and also death, then, from the very moment that we begin, grace starts to flow into us, according to Blessed Theophan the Recluse:

“The help of God is always ready and always near, but is only given to those who seek and work.”

Source: <http://www.roca.org/OA/6/6c.htm>