

Priest Dragan Petrović

FROM CONCEPTION TO REDEMPTION

The Path to Salvation

Indianapolis, Indiana
2014th Year of the Lord

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FROM CONCEPTION TO REDEMPTION

The Path to Salvation
(A Priest's Reflections)

*For my home and church families,
especially our youth*

From the writer:

If anything is good and beneficial in this spiritual booklet,
it's from God – glory and thanks be to Him.
If anything is bad in this booklet, it's from me – forgive me
and pray for me.

Dragan Petrović, Priest
fr.dragan@st-nicholas-indy.org

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St. Nicholas Serbian Orthodox Church
Indianapolis, Indiana
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FOREWORD

In the time we live in, regardless of where we live, we Christians are trying to do our best to follow, observe and preserve our Orthodox Faith. Sometimes disconnected from our ancestral roots, sometimes connected to them but unsure how to apply them in modern life, we run into dead end streets when it comes to Orthopraxia – the daily practice of our Faith. The booklet at hand – “From Conception to Redemption” covers the basics of our Orthodox Christian life both in the physical and spiritual way. The two are, after all, inseparable.

Life can be far more simple than the world makes it out to be. When one tries to obtain guidelines for life from the world and its “wisdom,” one ends up very confused, frustrated and, in the end, dejected. And then, God forbid, one gives up on higher goals altogether and simply follows the ways of the world which lead to nowhere. But in this booklet, we see how clear and simple things really can be and how easy it can be to stay on God’s path and live our lives not just with specific goals but also with awareness that we are on the right path to reaching those goals.

May God protect us all on our journey through this world – from the moment we enter it to the moment we exit it.

Hieromonk Serafim (Baltić)



Drawing by *Marija Petrović*

The Ways of Flowers

People may choose a seemingly easy and effortless downward way, which eventually leads to drying and dying out. Thorns are the only remaining fruit after them. People may instead choose a courageous and difficult upward way, which eventually leads to blossoming and beauty – to a full life. These people strive to live forever with God and His faithful; their goal is the Kingdom of Heaven, and their way is the way to salvation. They are Orthodox Christians.



GETTING DIRECTIONS

I BELIEVE

What we believe as Orthodox (right-believing) Christians is very simple but at the same time very complex. Only those who are actively part of the Church get a glimpse of living the true faith, and that can be more than enough to be overwhelming. I heard someone who became Orthodox say: “When you are not part of the Church, you can’t really understand it, but when you become part of the Church, you can’t really explain it.” We believe that God is One in Three Persons. He is Love, and out of love and because of love He created us. He created us with our free will, not as robots or slaves. Unfortunately, our first parents (who acted as we ourselves most definitely would have) were tricked by the evil

one and chose to take the route opposite the one to which the Creator had commended them. Choosing to go away from God messed up them and all of their descendants – all of us, to this day – through weakness, sickness, suffering, death, etc. Heaven became a place far away for us, a place we could not enter and be comfortable in...

We chose to go away from Him, but – thanks be to Him – He did not choose to go away from us. God did many things to restore us and lead us back to His Kingdom, to eternal life and blessedness. We would sometimes come close, but then mess up again. Thus, He Himself, God the Son, became a man to restore humankind and the whole universe with Him and to lead us into the Kingdom – that was the coming of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago. This coming of Jesus Christ was announced and prepared in many ways and from many different directions, knowingly and unknowingly: through religion, philosophy, science, paganism, and even demonism. Everyone and everything, whether they knew it or not, were announcing the Incarnation of God (the Son) – the coming

of Jesus Christ. This is why we can find similarities to and traces of Jesus in all of the above. When He came, He revealed that which is necessary for us to know in order to be truly human, to restore ourselves and the universe, and to enter into the Kingdom.

Unfortunately, we are still infected by our fallen nature, but, fortunately, having partaken of Him and continuing to partake of Him through Holy Communion, we keep going forward regardless of our setbacks – like divisions within and even breaks from the Church (for example, our Roman Catholic and Protestant brethren). God, as we have seen thus far, uses all means to bring us to Him. He will not, however, make us get there; we must remember He gave us free will. Glory be to Him!



GOD AND



CHURCH

Who is God?

God is Love. Because He is Love, His divinity is eternally shared between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This means there was no single moment when God was not the Father or was without the Son and the Holy Spirit, because for love, one is not enough – that would be a self-love or egocentric love. God the Father is the Source of Divinity. God the Son is eternally begotten of God the Father. God the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from God the Father. Yet there is one divinity – one divine essence and nature – one God, not three gods. The Trinity is impossible to understand fully and explain perfectly. It is impossible even to give a perfect example relating to the Holy Trinity, but one that has been used often is the candle: God the Father is like the flame, God the Son like the light, and God the Holy Spirit like the heat.

Who is Jesus Christ?

Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. He became that which He created – man, so He is also the Son of Man. He was incarnate (took on flesh) of (the Holy Spirit and) the Virgin Mary and became man for us men (and women) and for our salvation. He is God from eternity, but at one point in time, more than 2,000 years ago, He also became a man, remaining God. Thus, He is fully God and fully Man, a perfect God and a perfect Man. He is only One Person, not two persons. Jesus Christ as One Person has two natures (divine and human), two wills (divine and human), and two energies (divine and human) without confusion, change, division or separation. His divinity and humanity are distinct, but in perfect union. In other words, nothing that He did as God and Man was dictated or forced by His divinity, but everything involved also His free human will. That's why He is the ultimate role model and perfect example of what it means to be a true man.

Whatever is attributed to one of His natures is attributed to the whole Person – so,

although He always existed, even before His human incarnation, we call the Virgin Mary, who gave birth to Jesus Christ, the Mother of God. Also, as God, He could not taste death, and, as a man, he could not rise from the dead; yet, thanks to the other nature in His One and the same Person, Jesus Christ as a whole Person did taste of death and did not remain dead. Only our Lord Jesus Christ as such, both God and Man, could save us. That's why He is also called THE Savior.

The answers to these first two questions are summarized in the way we hold our right hand when we make the sign of the cross: the first three fingers put together represent One God in Three Persons, and the last two fingers attached to each other speak of the two natures in the One Person of Jesus Christ. Likewise, when the bishop is in our midst, he blesses us with a three-candle stick and a two-candle stick.

What is the Gospel?

The Gospel is the Good News that God became man, that “God is with us” (“Emmanuel” in Hebrew). By becoming one of us, by His

sinless life and divine teachings, by His voluntary Crucifixion and glorious Resurrection, He revealed the Truth, showed us the Way, and opened again the gates of His Kingdom and eternal life to all those who want to join Him there where He is already. (His Kingdom was closed to humankind by our own decision to use our God-given absolute freedom for sin, which brings about death.) We have the great honor to foretaste this awesome reality here and now whenever we serve the Diving Liturgy because the gates of the Kingdom of Heaven are open for us, and we are allowed to be fully united with God by partaking of the true Body and true Blood of Jesus Christ.

Who is Man?

Man was created as the crown and steward of all creation – greater than the stars and planets – to be a caretaker of the whole universe. He was created in the image and likeness of God, to be by God's grace everything God is, has and can do by nature. Man was granted absolute freedom – freedom even to choose to be away from God. Abusing his freedom to

break his union with God, man not only corrupted himself but also the perfect order in the whole universe. For this reason “the whole creation groans and labors...” (Romans 8). Yet, God didn’t leave us to eternal despair and death. By tasting death himself, the Son of God swallowed death and restored man to his initial dignity. We witness this new reality at every baptism and chrismation as the beginning of growth “from glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3) “unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4). As one Holy Father beautifully said: “God became man that man [again] may [if he wants to] become a god [not according to nature, but by the grace of union with Him].”



SUGGESTED PRAYER RULE

First of all, DO NOT use your own prayers To LEARN to pray. That doesn’t make sense even though it feels right. Praying from your heart is what’s most important. First you should use the prayer our Lord Jesus Christ Himself

taught us to pray, “Our Father” or the Lord’s Prayer, as well as other prayers of the masters of prayer, the Holy Fathers and Mothers of the Church. Your own prayer will come later, and it will be most pleasing to God, but for now pick up the prayer book. Prayer is communication with God; the more we communicate with someone, the more we get to know him. Together with using the prayer book, pray the Psalms. (You’ll find 150 of them in the Old Testament of the Bible.) Another important thing to remember is DO NOT pray too many prayers. Start with one, two or a few, and then add on as you progress in life. It’s better to start with a few and add on than to start with many and then take away. Whatever you are doing in daily prayer, make sure it is with the blessing of your priest or spiritual father. In addition to daily prayer, the following is suggested:

- On (every) Sunday sing the Resurrectional hymn: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tomb bestowing life.
- Every Sunday is the Day of Resurrection. Going to church on that day should be your main priority.

- Make sure Sunday is the beginning of your week.
- On Monday invoke the angels: "Holy Angels, pray to God for us (me)."
- On Tuesday, St. John the Baptist: "St. John the Baptist, pray to God for us (me)."
- On Wednesday remember the Cross. As Christ was betrayed on this day, fast on this day. Sing: "O Lord, save Your people and bless Your inheritance; grant victory to all Orthodox Christians over their adversaries, and by the virtue of Your cross preserve Your habitation."
- On Thursday invoke the Holy Apostles and St. Nicholas: "Holy Apostles and St. Nicholas, pray to God for us (me)."
- On Friday remember the Cross. As Christ was crucified on this day, fast on this day. Sing: "Before Your cross we bow down in worship, O Master, and Your holy Resurrection we magnify."
- On Saturday invoke all the saints, especially the Most Holy Mother of God and holy martyrs, and remember the departed: "Most Holy Mother of God, holy martyrs and all

the saints, pray for us (me) and all our (my) departed [names].”

In addition to the above, look daily at the church calendar and ask the saints celebrated on that day for prayers. Read the Bible readings prescribed by the Church for every day. The Orthodox Study Bible is very helpful because it contains interpretations of Church Fathers. Together with their writings on spiritual life, these interpretations are a great guide in how to understand the Bible properly and how to live it. The Bible in the Orthodox Church is interpreted within the context of community, not individually. In other words, we agree on interpretation as a community (group) led by the Holy Spirit, and we do not interpret separately. *“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”* (Acts 15:28).

Remember, the day for us begins in the evening: “there was evening, there was morning, one [first] day” (Genesis 1). So, on Sunday evening look at the calendar for Monday, and so on. When you come to a big feast day or holy day, usually marked with the color red, find a special hymn for that day, let your vigil lamp

burn all day, cense your home with incense, and have a special meal. You can even decorate your home accordingly. For example, if it's Pentecost (Birth of the Church) bring a lot of greenery into your home since greenery signifies birth, or even make a birthday cake for the Church.

The best thing you can do is go to Divine Liturgy that day, or at least to Vespers the evening prior.



FASTING IS FREEDOM

Fasting means abstaining from sin and certain foods (meat, dairy, eggs, and even fish during Great Lent) while at the same time making an effort to increase prayers and good deeds. During these periods of time, we use what the Church gave us as help to come back to what God actually created us to be, so that we can feel how awesome it is, to the point of wanting to live that way always – FREE of our own weakness as well as the temptations of the evil one.

Given that we are *in* the world but should not be *of* the world – influenced by worldly things – we must surround ourselves with God and the Church, or we will easily be led to a life away from God and into things not good for our body, mind and soul.

Why fast? Because of freedom!

Aside from the fact that we fast in preparation for and in anticipation of a great feast or holy day (Christmas, for example), and aside from the fact that we fast to give our body a break and to cleanse our system, we fast in order to regain freedom.

We become slaves to food and material things, and only a prayerful fasting season can help us free ourselves of this. It seems like the foods we take away while fasting are the foods which usually arouse our weakened nature. So, it's time to stop being a slave. Let us start fasting and be in charge of ourselves and our lives.

To do this apart from the instructions of a 2,000-year-old church – the Orthodox Church, established by the incarnate God Himself – you will need good luck.

Freedom is a wonderful thing, but *true* freedom – fasting – teaches us to be in control of ourselves and not to allow anything like cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, sexual desires or even food to be in control of us. We fast to the best of our ability. If we have special dietary needs, we need to discuss them with our spiritual father.

In addition to Wednesday and Friday fasts, there are four fasting seasons which precede the feasts of Pascha (Easter), Sts. Peter and Paul, the Dormition and Christmas. There are also a few more fast days that we can identify by looking at the church calendar.



SPIRITUAL FATHER – CONFESSION

The most dangerous thing we can do is to keep things to ourselves. In fact, it's not true that we are keeping things to ourselves: everything is actually between us and God or the evil one. If something is between us and God, that's fine, but how do we know? How do we know it's not between us and the evil one? This

is a very serious question. The evil one is like a wolf. He can't wait for a sheep to separate from the flock so he can grab the loner and devour it. This is a practical reason why you need a spiritual father or mother, a spiritually sound Orthodox Christian person whom you can trust. The reason this person is usually a priest or nun is because clergy and monastics are already checked out by the Church. Also, the priest has received the grace of priesthood. Choose your spiritual father/mother wisely; this will be the most important decision of your spiritual life. If you don't want to be bothered with this decision, simply accept your parish priest (regardless of who and what he is) as your spiritual father and be obedient to him to the point of death, but not to the point of sin. Don't judge him; God has placed you under his care, and this relationship is blessed. Be obedient unless he asks you (God forbid) to do something sinful; then you are not bound by obedience. Obedience plays a big role in this type of relationship because the disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, resulted in their separation from God – they were thrown out

of the Kingdom of Heaven – and because a radiant angel who was disobedient became the devil. Thus, to unite with God we must show obedience.

So, it's very important that at least one person, a spiritual father/mother, knows everything we know about ourselves – all our sins, inner secrets, etc.

Different people have different needs, but most people go to Confession once every two or three months. There we confront our sins and, most of all, clean our souls. After all, that's why Christ established Confession – to give us a new start on the path to salvation.

There is a danger of being deceived by the evil one when he tells you, "Why are you confessing the same sins all the time?" If you stop confessing them, you'll stop remembering them. If you don't remember them, you won't know what to fix, and that's what the evil one wants. We could ask why we should take a shower when we know we will get dirty again, but we all know the answer to this.

Please know that you should change your spiritual father only if you have to, and even

then with a blessing. If you have a spiritual mother, make sure you let your parish priest know, and make sure you still go to Confession for the priest to read the needed prayers. It also doesn't hurt to say your sins in general terms in front of your priest (lying, overeating, bad thoughts, etc.).



YOUR HOME IS A CHURCH

We consider every home, or place of living, to be a little church. This is why we call a priest to sanctify it when we move in and then confirm this every year by blessing water in it. (Serbs even have the yearly breaking of the bread service, the SLAVA, which is the celebration of their ancestors becoming Christian.) This is why we have icon corners in our homes, and we treat the table on which we eat meals as an altar table. This is why each room has icons, and why we pray daily before them. This is why we bless the food and drink through prayer, with the oldest person in the home shaping his hand as if he is to cross himself and then

blessing the food and drink as a priest would (and does, when present). By the way, we should do this when outside of the home as well. Remember that your home is a small church. If you treat your home as church, you'll treat your church as home. On the other hand, don't replace the community church with the home church. One cannot be without the other. As someone once said, "ONE Christian, NO Christian." Orthodox Christians long for community; in fact, they hope and pray that all of mankind is with them in the Kingdom of Heaven. If you don't have the urge to get together with other little churches at the community church each Sunday to unite in the Body and Blood of Christ, develop this feeling. Imitate the Church. Whatever you see at community church, try to imitate at home. That's another reason you are going there. Only within a community (many people living together) can we truly grow in virtues. For example, to learn humility, you must be humiliated; if you are not in a community, but by yourself, who is going to humiliate you? Also, to learn forgiveness, someone has to offend you, and so on.



THE CHURCH IS YOUR HOME

The most important reason for going to church on Sunday, or any other feast day, is to unite with God and our brethren through Holy Communion – or at least having the desire for that, if we are not partaking of Communion. When the bread and wine are blessed at Divine Liturgy, the prayer says: “...bless us and these gifts here offered...” This is the blessing that we bring back to our home church. This is the blessing that gives us strength, love, and wisdom to endure the upcoming week. Uniting with Christ and our brethren in such a way (Communion or the desire for it) is only possible at the community church. This community church we should treat like our home church, not in the sense of being in charge of it – because the church has its own father, the priest appointed by the bishop and the people – but in the sense of learning in it, as at home, in a family setting, and of course taking care

of it. We sometimes have specific agendas in church, and we forget that our being there is actually about being on the path to salvation – that the Church is there to save us, and that we are not there to save the Church. So, if Frank says something to me or I say something to Frank about anything that needs to be done at church, this is not just about completing the task (which of course is important). It's rather and mostly about how we go about doing the task and what we as Christians learn from it: patience, forgiveness, perseverance, unconditional love, etc.

Just like in home church, in community church we all have weaknesses and are to deal with them personally and with the help of others. We try not to make it tougher on each other but help each other on the path to salvation.

A lot of times we don't even know we have a weakness (such as anger, greed, hard-headedness, or overeating) until we get married or become an active part of a community church. The good news is that when the weakness surfaces, we can deal with it and fix it, and, in the process of doing that, we grow spiritually.

Church is the best place for that. There we can truly see ourselves and, with the help of others, become the people God created us to be – children of God, virtuous and holy. This idea is the toughest for the evil one to swallow since he is constantly telling us that we are worthless.

Remember you are a child of the Almighty, Most Powerful and Loving God.



HOW IS THE CHURCH STRUCTURED?

The Church is made up of persons united by Jesus Christ. The (invisible) head of each Orthodox church (parish) is Jesus Christ. Every church has the fullness of faith and is united through the Body and Blood of Christ to all the other Orthodox Churches across the world. Each church also has a visible head – a bishop (and, in his name, a priest) who is the father or first among equals in that community of believers. We are all, individually and together, a living example of His Gospel, the Good News. Love is most important to under-

stand in church life because “by this all will know you are My disciples...” (John 13:35).

This is why, regardless of what’s going on in church life (praying, fasting or taking care of church property), it’s very important always to keep in mind that we are students (learning) and teachers (by personal example) of LOVE. *Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Finally, remember that the Church is Holy, but that not everyone within it is.

If you are honored by a leadership position

Your number one job is to keep a balance. In order to do this, you yourself have to be balanced. Make sure you pray and fast more than you did before you took on such a position. Pray for those you lead, and ask them to pray for you. Make sure you lead every assigned task and leave behind you helpful notes and a

good example for those who are to follow. Receive a blessing for your works and always be prepared to suffer, obviously looking forward to the Resurrection. Serbian Patriarch Pavle of blessed memory said: "The greater the position in the world, the greater the power; the greater the position in Church, the greater the service."

Doesn't the above remind you of the life of our Lord and His followers? Thus, it is a privilege and honor to be in a leadership position.

Who are the faithful / laity?

The faithful are called "faithful" because they are full of faith and are committed. Laity means "People of God." If you belong to a community and have no responsibility within it aside from contributing financially, something is wrong. You cannot be part of something and not take any part in it. Immediately talk to your priest. He will help you in this regard. For example, you could be given the simple task of watering the flowers occasionally. Please note that the devil will make every effort to make things hard so that you quit. Fight the temp-

tations, not the people around you. This is very important to keep in mind. Even if you think you know better than someone else, you should love, respect, support and listen to those in leadership positions, unless they are doing something sinful. If you need to put forth an opposing opinion, “Let your words be soft and your arguments strong,” as Patriarch Pavle of blessed memory used to say.

The most common killer of communities

If there is a problem within a community, pride is the reason. Look no further. It might be the pride of the priest, the pride of certain people or the pride of both. Get rid of the pride, and you will get rid of the problem. Whatever you do, don't get rid of the priest and certain people. Fix the problem, and heal it. We in church fix and heal problems; we don't get rid of people. If we do the latter, God will get rid of us.

Volunteers

May God bless your works and reward you through health, joy, and salvation.

Please know that the project for which you are responsible is being done for two reasons:

1. So that you can grow spiritually and learn patience, endurance, forgiveness, love...
2. So that the necessary work is completed.

Keep in mind that the first reason is more important both for the church and for you.

Finally, there are three practical issues to consider and only one rule throughout the process.

The one rule to follow is LOVE as based on First Corinthians Chapter 13. Please read it.

The three practical issues are:

1. Please receive a blessing from the father (priest) of the community (church).
2. Check in (by phone or email) with the church office when you are planning on doing work so that a record can be kept of what's being done. Communication is the key. When we don't communicate and when we don't understand each other, the evil one uses this against us.
3. If church money needs to be spent, contact those responsible, like the Executive Board President or the Treasurer.

Money-Donating

Everything we have is thanks to God.

At the beginning of each year, promise to give a certain percentage of your yearly income to the church, and stick to it. Let your first fruits and not last fruits (whatever is left over at the end of the year) be offered to God. There are different examples in the Bible and the life of the Church, and you should choose the most comfortable for you:

“And of all that you give me, I will give a full tenth to you” (Genesis 28:20-22).

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

“Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood” (Mark 12:43-44).





ON THE PATH

DATING

Choosing a spouse is the most important decision. Your life depends on it, so consider and think very seriously about the following.

The reason for dating is to find your soul mate, not simply to have fun. For an Orthodox Christian, the reason for dating is to find *the* person to marry: a person who will walk with you on the path to salvation, a person with whom you will spend a lifetime, a person to whom you are ready to offer yourself wholly, without any hesitation, and thus a person who is ready to offer himself or herself wholly to you. The aforementioned sums up what love is. When you find a person to share this

kind of love, you are ready to marry. You should pray to find this person and should consult with loved ones when you think you have found him/her. When you are blessed in such a way, you should get married without waiting too long. Once you've found the love of your life, wouldn't you like to tell him/her that you've saved yourself for marriage to him/her? The most intimate reality in a relationship between a man and a woman is making love. Why would you give yourself to anyone other than the one who has been waiting for you and the one for whom you've been praying? I know people who dated for years but never even kissed until that kiss in church after Holy Matrimony. Please think about this. You can start dating at the age when you can truly understand marriage as explained above. Remember, the most important decision of your life is finding the right person to spend it with; your salvation and the salvation of your descendants depend on it. Choose wisely, and know that waiting for that person pays off. Dating is strongly suggested but for one reason only: to find a soul mate. How about those who have already

messed up? Start today! If you are reading this and regret that you have not followed what it says, start today and God will restore you fully.



PRAYING TO FIND A SPOUSE

Parents, start praying for your children to find a good spouse from the day they are born. One nun said to a mother of a teenager: “It’s rather late now...”

Youth, pray for your future spouse as well.

Here is an example of a prayer of a young man or woman, which can be easily adapted for use by a parent:

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Holy Father, Almighty God, My Creator and Savior Who knows what lies in the hearts of all Your children and brings comfort to those who trust in Your compassion and mercy. Come into my heart. O Lord, and sanctify it by the Grace of Your life-giving Spirit.

My Lord and my God, You said, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him.” And so You gave him a companion to share his life and for him to come to know true love.

Help me, my loving Father, to find a life-long companion. Bestow upon me the gift of discernment so that I may know always right from wrong. Keep my body and soul pure and undefiled so that I may continue living a virtuous life according to Your will. And let all my actions bring glory to Your holy name.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.



LANES ON THE SAME PATH TO SALVATION

We believe in a community – a community of marriage (between a man and woman) and a monastic community (of all men or all women). Solitary celibacy is not recommended, for to be on the path to salvation is not easy, so wal-

king with one other (husband/wife) or others (monastic community) is much better. The choice is yours. God gave us the freedom to choose:

Marriage

Unity between a man and a woman blessed by the Church to get on the path to salvation together.

Monastic community

A community of men or women in a monastery together, blessed to walk on the path to salvation.

Celibacy

Alone on the path to salvation. There are those for whom this comes naturally, but they are rare.



MARRIAGE

Once you have found your soul mate, you have found your love – the one you will serve (yes, the one you will serve, not the one you want

to be served by). When both persons in a marriage understand this, it becomes a great marriage.

Three blessings need to be received: from your parents, from a priest (in order to start the pre-wedding counseling), and from God (at Holy Matrimony, the marriage service in the Church).

Remember, the most important part of your wedding day is Holy Matrimony. The decorations, the band or DJ, the food and drink, and the guests are all great, but the greatest is when the Holy Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, the Almighty God – blesses you upon your request (at prayer in Church) in front of many guests (living and departed) and the saints and angels. There is nothing greater than that. If we were only to see that reality physically, we would know that no party could outdo that. Having read this, make sure you prepare. Spend some time studying the actual service (prayers and traditions), and make every effort to concentrate, through prayer, on the invisible reality. Can you imagine that God Almighty will be the guest of honor at your wedding?

Following is the honeymoon, a certain period of time spent alone – with God. This is very important.

Then another reality hits: dating a person and living with a person are two very different things. In fact, now is the time when, having fallen in love, you start learning what true love is. Again, *“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails”* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Ten to fifteen years in the future, if you have worked at your marriage with God’s help, you will consider the love you now have for each other to be silly. Love grows and grows and never stops growing. In the meantime there are going to be many trials. Never give up. Love never gives up.

Trials may be small and large, may even seem unbearable, but you’ll overcome them, and God will bless you with many wonderful

things in between. Married life is full of beautiful valleys with steep mountains in between.

At last, remember to pray daily together, and, if God blesses you with children, pray together with them. "A family that prays together stays together."

Because of everything said so far, divorce is not an option for an Orthodox Christian. If that were to happen, a person should, through repentance, seek a blessing from children (if any), parents, and church regarding what to do next. When the blessing is received, the person continues on the path to salvation.



HEAD OF THE HOUSEHOLD

A household, which is a home church, needs a head just as a community church has the priest as its head. In marriage, as the Scripture says, the husband is the head. However, please note that neither the priest in a community church nor the husband in a home church is the boss; rather, he is the loving fa-

ther or the head of that body (family or church family). He is the first among equals, not first over all, and as such he should be respected, loved and honored. His position is of great responsibility but of the same importance as everyone else's position in the church or family.

Whether in church or home, everyone should have some responsibility. In monasteries, where there are usually good examples for everything, this is called "Obedience." (A person is told what needs to be done, and in obedience he/she does the work, thus growing in virtues.)



CHILDREN

Children are a blessing, but not having them can be a blessing as well. God knows what is best for our salvation and how to bless us on our path; therefore, let us pray for children but give Him thanks whatever the blessing.

Message for young children: How much do your parents love you? A lot. Well, just so you know, believe it or not, someone loves you a

thousand times more, and that's God. If someone teaches you that God doesn't exist, or if this comes to you in your thoughts, don't worry. Those thoughts or words are from someone who doesn't like God, and they will pass. Trust your heart and those who love you.



CONCEPTION ABORTION

Make every effort to make love and not only satisfy your sexual urge. From time to time, even though you have prayed at the time of Holy Matrimony at church and in front of your home altar, pray that God blesses you with children.

Also, adopting children is wonderful and great, but make sure you ask for a blessing from church as well as from your family.

Orthodox Christians are both pro-life and pro-choice. We are pro-life in that we believe in life, not death; in fact, we believe that even when we die, we live. Therefore, we always choose life, never death. We are pro-choice in

believing that the woman or parents, who have free will given by God, do choose and have the right to do so. We strongly believe in and hold to this freedom; however, we would never choose abortion. Abortion is not an option for an Orthodox Christian. The way the issue is presented today – pro-life or pro-choice – is not good because that's not the real question. The question should simply be: are you for abortion or against it? The pro-life and pro-choice answer is: I choose not to commit abortion.

If you, with or without prior knowledge of the Orthodox teaching mentioned, have already done this, immediately go to Confession where you will clean your soul and learn how to treat this wound.



EARLY AGE

When you conceive, the child is considered a person. Treat the person as a person. Start praying for that person, going to church and

taking Communion. Also, begin exposing that little person to all that is good, keeping the person away from all that is harmful. Ask parents and godparents for prayer. On the day the baby is born, call your priest to read the prayer for the mother and her child. Around the eighth day after birth, call the priest to name the child until his or her baptism when the child will officially receive the name by which from then on he/she will be known in church.

It is said that a name sums up the identity of the one who holds it. Come up with a meaningful name. If it is a saint's, that saint will be the patron of your child throughout his/her life. Sometimes "children give their names to themselves," if they are born on a big feast day. For example, someone born on St. Nicholas Day could be named Nicholas, or at least have this as a middle name.

In many traditions, the godfather/godmother is asked to name the child or to give several names from which the parents will choose.

- Miscarriage: God forbid that this ever happens, but call the priest to come and pray and comfort. The fact is that a child was

created, but not born. It is a mystery, but a reality. Pray to God, and in your hearts the mystery may be revealed.

- Around the fortieth day after birth (when the mother is well again), the mother and the baby should go to the church vestibule before Divine Liturgy begins and have someone call the priest to come out and read the prayers for the mother (after her physical recovery) and the child to enter the church. Talk to the priest then (if not before) about the baptism because there is no reason to wait. Becoming part of the Body of Christ through Baptism is of great benefit to the child, so do it as soon as possible.
- God gives us a child, and now through Baptism we offer the child back to Him. The child becomes through Baptism a member of the Church, and so a part of the Body of God the Son, Jesus Christ. God the Son is inseparable from the Father and Holy Spirit – three Persons, one God. Therefore, through Baptism we are united to the Holy Trinity. There is nothing more beneficial or greater than being united with God.

- From Baptism to around five or six years of age (different for each child), bring them up for Communion every Sunday because this is spiritual food for them. This is how we grow in unity with Christ – by partaking of His Body and His Blood. Around that age start teaching the children about fasting before partaking of Communion. They can start by not eating anything after midnight until they partake, but allow them to drink. After a while, have them not eat or drink before Communion.
- Around the age of six or seven, bring them to Confession, and explain to them that we all have a body and soul. When the body gets dirty we wash it with water, so when the soul gets dirty with sins – bad things that we do – we wash it with Confession. From there on, start slowly teaching them to fast Fridays (Christ was crucified on this day) and Wednesdays (Christ was betrayed on this day). Then start teaching them to fast the four fasting seasons. Begin by having them fast the first and last week of the fasting seasons and Fridays every week;

then add to this until they are able to fast Wednesdays and Fridays and all the fasting seasons. This should be done by the time they are eight or nine years old – earlier for some children, and later for others. Teach your children to fast – to abstain and be in control of themselves. It will help you and them when they come to their teen stage.

- Fasting may be difficult for them (in needing to say “no” to certain desirable foods) and for you (in preparing the food), but the difficulty is a phase. Continue with fasting because it could save your child by helping them say “no” to drugs, sex, and alcohol. Health-wise, it has been proven that staying away from meat, eggs and dairy products is a benefit to us. This type of “diet” has been kept for centuries – especially at monasteries, where, to date, you find sound, healthy and long-lived monks and nuns. Fasting – praying, not eating certain foods, fighting sin, and increasing good deeds – brings us back to who we actually are, who God created us to be.

The best gift you can give your children is getting them used to regular prayer, fasting, Confession and Communion.



RAISING CHILDREN

The first goal for parents must be to raise good children – or to raise children to be(come) good people. Their eternity depends on it, as well as their earthly life. Good people live a joyous life, even though at times it may seem different. Education – developing a healthy and nourished mind – is very important. Fitness – developing a healthy and nourished body – is also important. However, most important of all is becoming a good person – developing a healthy and nourished soul. There is no better place to learn to be a good person than at home and at community church. A good person is always on the path to salvation, and that's a blessed state – a state that knows very little about depression, a state that even in darkness sees light, a state that loves and

rejoices. That's what we should want for our children. Teach them to fix their eyes on the Kingdom of Heaven, and all else will be given to them. Teach them how to fast and pray. At some point, when they are around fifteen or sixteen, stop telling them what to do but start telling God (through prayer) what you think they need to do, allowing God's will to be done. Teens are sometimes in that stage where it's hard for them to accept or comprehend things. Don't worry about them too much; just pray for them a lot. Remember, children think the world of their parents at first, then during the teen stage they don't think the world of their parents, and then, later, they think the world of their parents again. Be patient.

Pray with your children till they are fourteen or fifteen. Then simply direct them to pray the morning and evening prayers in their rooms by themselves – but do check on them – so they can establish the prayer rule for themselves.

Also, remember that one of the Holy Fathers said: "Great is a person who doesn't sin, but even greater is the person who, after he

sins, truly repents for his sins.” God forbid, but do know that sometimes it takes a lifetime for a person to change. Always pray and always hope. Whether or not we win all the battles is less important than winning the war. This is what parents should always keep in mind for their children: salvation is the key and the goal. “There is no salvation without temptation.”



TEENS – YOUTHOMANIA

It seems like kids are maturing earlier these days. Maybe they have always matured at the same age, but the time we live in enhances this feeling. Regardless, we should assume that our children are starting their teen stage at around ten or eleven years of age. It's always better to start talking to them and really concentrating on their needs and behavior earlier rather than later – later may be too late. Also, don't ever assume that “it” (using drugs or alcohol, viewing pornography, smoking, etc.) could not happen to your child.

The teen stage is the most critical time of life. Watch your children closely regardless of how well you have raised them. Very easily they can become addicted to drugs, alcohol, or sex. Then only God can help. During the teen stage, it's very important for a parent to know when and how much to push, and when and how much to let go. Even before puberty, children learn more from our example than from our words. When puberty really hits, we should talk less to them and more to God (in prayer) about them. Things going wrong at this stage may affect their whole lives, so watch them closely.



Youth, this is for you

Regardless of who says what or what feeling you may have, trust those who know you best and love you most: your family and church. Many thoughts and feelings will come your way. Don't trust them immediately; instead, test them, think about them, and talk to family at home or at church. Your priest will keep things confidential. It's normal for the most awkward things to come to heart and

mind, but it's not normal (right) to accept them all. At this stage of your life (on the border between childhood and adulthood), you are being tested big time. Make the right decisions, I beg of you.

Parent martyrs

At a youth retreat in 2013, Bishop Longin of New Gračanica-Midwest Diocese was asked at what time the Church suffered most. He started talking about the first three centuries of the suffering of Christians, and he explained suffering through the ages – the suffering of Serbs, Russians and so on. Then, he took a deep breath and said: “However, dear children, don't think that your parents are any less martyrs than all of them. Your parents suffer through everything with and for you – hoping and praying you will make right decisions and choose wisely.” There is nothing more to be said here.

Parents

Don't be alarmed; just quietly pray and be patient. Your children will likely go through a godless stage – doubting or not believing in

God. Don't worry much, as this will pass. Every person at one time in life feels God and gets back to Him. Just pray for your children, love them, and hope.

Life after high school

When we think about what we are to do in life and which route we are to take, let us think first about others and then about ourselves. When we think about serving others (and do serve others), everything else will be given to us. If we simply think about ourselves, we may have money, a house and a car, but not a life of satisfaction.

The spirit of today's age unfortunately is "just think about yourself." This is not the Christian way. So, whatever we may become, let us think about serving others. This will bring us much joy and satisfaction, which is much greater than money and cannot be bought with money.

College or not – "Freedom"

You are now on your own. In fact you can do whatever you like, whenever you like and however you like. It seems like complete free-

dom – if that’s what freedom is. The Holy Fathers tell us that real freedom is being free of sin. We all know that addiction – even though one chooses to do something (like drugs) – leads to imprisonment. You can’t release yourself from it. That’s definitely NOT freedom. Therefore, it makes sense, as the Fathers say, that being free is being free from sin, being in control, and not allowing anything to be in control of you. If you are in control, you are free. Only then does one experience freedom. Remember Apostle Paul says: “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify” (1 Corinthians 10:23). Remember you are on the path to salvation.

The Holy Trinity is a community of Three Persons; therefore, God has created us *from* a community *for* a community. Become part of a community, an Orthodox church community at college or nearby. Keep in touch with your home church. Make sure you stay in contact with God through prayer and fasting, Confession and Communion, and reading of Scripture and writings of the Church.

Granted, your rule of prayer and fasting won't be as it was – for your schedule has changed – but push yourself a little, and do the best you can under the circumstances. This is a great beginning of your spiritual journey on your own. The Holy Fathers say it's better to pray and fast less at the beginning and to increase this over time than to pray and fast much and decrease this over time. It's ok. Just do something, and don't allow yourself to completely disconnect. If you disconnect yourself from God (prayer and fasting) and people (church community), you are putting yourself in harm's way. When you separate from a group, as a sheep from a flock, you become a more obvious target for the evil one, as one sheep is for the wolf.

In life, remember, regardless of how busy you are, always put prayer and fasting in the first place. The moment you succumb to not having time for prayer and fasting, you will not stop there. You won't have time for family and friends and then for yourself, and ultimately you'll come to the point of failing even in that to which you were committing so much time. Then what?

This is also the time to learn to prioritize:

God ✧ Family ✧ Friends.

i and my obligations should come last. (“i” is intentionally in lower case. Only in the English language is “I” the only personal pronoun spelled with a capital letter. This almost promotes egoism, as one elder once said.)

If you don’t master this now, you’ll have a harder time later. If you never master this, you’ll live an empty life, and, by the time you realize, it may be too late to fill it. I’ve met many accomplished people with no one around them – at least no one who truly loves them and sincerely cares for them. Our patriarch Pavle of blessed memory used to say: “When a child is born, it cries (it’s not going into an easy life), and everyone around it rejoices. We should live life in such a way that when we die, we rejoice (we are among the saints with God), and those around us cry because a good person is no longer with them!”

Whatever you’re doing, whenever you’re doing it, don’t lose sight of the fact that you are on the path to salvation. All that comes your way is to teach you and better equip you for that path.



KNOWLEDGE / EDUCATION

It is most important to be a good person; however, it is very important to be highly educated, so grow in education and earn a degree. It will be a great benefit to you and others, including your family, friends and church. Whatever your education, use it for the good of your brethren, and use it for your salvation and the salvation of others. Learn the most you can, be the best you can be, and ask as many questions as you can, but trust the Church. She has been around too long to know little, and She has loved you too much to betray you. That's why ultimately you should trust the Church, with the understanding, of course, that the Church is Holy but that not all of us in it are. Keep in mind also that the Church concentrates many times on things which the world doesn't, and that's why there may be a misunderstanding. The Church concentrates on the essential – both immaterial and mate-

rial – while the world often concentrates on only the superficial and material. In other words, if you need answers, search even within the Church. Not everything you hear in church (from clergy and/or laity) is necessarily true. Check with others in church, and even take something to a bishop or bishops if you need to. Also, learn about your faith. Such knowledge is not only for bishops and priests; in my experience, when people don't like something about the Church, it's usually because they don't understand it, or it was not explained to them well.



WORKING STAGE

Serbian poet Branko Radičević said: “Od kolevke pa do groba najlepše je djačko doba,” or “From birth to death, best is the school stage.” Truly, until the working stage, the decisions and responsibilities were not nearly as intense. In fact, as wonderful as this stage can

be, it is the stage of many serious decisions and great responsibility – as a spouse, parent, employee, employer, etc.

Remember you are still on the path to salvation. In fact, everything is about that path and learning on it through all that has been mentioned. The most important thing to learn in life is LOVE – unconditional love.

Again and again, the best guide to true love is found in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

All the attributes of love mentioned in this excerpt can be learned: patience, kindness, humility, joy, and so on.

Learning how to love truly – to love as God loves – may seem easy, yet it's anything but that. On the other hand, it's supremely rewarding – the only truly and fully blessed state.

Whether we are at home with family, at church with spiritual family, at work with co-workers, or anywhere else (even in jail), remember that we are learning – learning how to love truly.

The following need to be in order: God, family, and work. All are necessary but need to be prioritized.



DISABILITY / WORK / LAZINESS

First of all, let us remember the old saying “a lazy mind the devil quickly puts to work.” This is why, aside from the fact that work is necessary in life, it’s important to work and stay busy in body and/or mind (when the body and mind are able). It is important that the body always be physically active somehow – through working, or, if your work is not physical, through exercise. The body and soul are of equal importance and should both be regularly maintained. When you work, give all that you are able, but DON’T overdo it, and don’t take away from God, family and friends. Everything should be done moderately – including work. If you don’t adhere to this, it will cost you, sooner or later, and the cost is great. It could be your relationship with:

God
spouse
children

family
friends

And lastly, believe it or not, the cost could be your very own job (work), for which you sacrificed everyone and everything else. Please, choose wisely, and prioritize properly.

Regardless of what kind of work you do (doctor or garbage man), before God all are equal, and His judgment won't concern your title but for what and how well you used it. He won't judge simply on work results either, but also on your relationships with your colleagues – your brothers and sisters, and/or animals and things (depending on the kind of work). The following may sound silly but benefits you as much as your brethren. If you are a garbage man, pray for those whose garbage you are collecting and for your co-workers; if you are a doctor, pray for your patients.

Also remember, even if you are disabled, you can still work, and your work can be very beneficial. You can pray for your loved ones and for the whole world. Prayer is work – great work. If the disabled are disabled in body and mind (so that they can't pray), they may con-

tribute even more than those who are able – by moving people's emotions and thereby moving them closer to God and each other.

Whatever you do, do it to the glory of God, not to your own glory (vanity).



HEALTH ISSUES

Our spiritual health (not in all, but in many cases) affects our mental and physical health, and our mental and physical health affects our spiritual health. Our sickness may be a result of our inadequate care for any of these aspects of our life, or it simply may be evidence that we live in a fallen world, corrupted by sin – which affects us in so many ways. Try to find a doctor who is aware of all of this – who is a complete person, not just an expert in his field – if you can. In any case, pray for your doctor and nurses, because, ultimately, as you are in their hands, they are in God's. Listen to your doctor and nurses, but most of all pray for them. Ask your priest and your

parish to pray for you, especially before going through surgery or therapy, and to instruct you in how to pray. If you have a problem and need to make a major decision regarding your health, again consult your priest and ask for his blessing. Take part in the sacrament of Holy Unction, which our Church administers to restore to good health all those who are in need. We are all sick in this world in one way or another. As with any other challenge in our life, sickness may be an opportunity to take another major step on our path to salvation and to grow as a person – to become closer to God and the people around us.



SPOUSE

Your spouse is your house. In other words, your spouse should mean the whole world to you. Your spouse is your home church, your best friend and your lover. Should anything be said about how such a person should be treated? Aside from God, your relationship

with your spouse is the most important one you should work on daily. Your spouse is your lifelong companion on the path to salvation. Pray for your spouse, fast for your spouse, and serve your spouse. Because of the above, the evil one works very hard (usually through our passions) to break this God-united bond. When you go on a business trip, keep his/her picture together with your icons to remind you of the holiness of marriage and to protect you from temptations of the enemy. Your spouse is one with you – wherever you are, your spouse is with you. Think of your spouse every moment of the day.



PARENTS / GRANDPARENTS

We have our heavenly parent, God, Whom we praise and love and serve. We should do the same with our parents and grandparents. How can we love Him Whom we don't see and not love them whom we do? In fact, I dare to say that God uses our parents and grandparents to see how we honor Him. Granted, it's

not easy dealing with elders who are worn out – as life is not easy and is full of experiences. Our elders don't like to be told what to do when they are sick or aching – as everything bothers an ill person – but we will be old one day too, God willing, and someone is going to have to deal with us. What actually hurts and bothers elderly people, and everybody else for that matter, more than anything else, is loneliness – a scary feeling that nobody loves you, needs you, or cares for you anymore. Then you feel dead even before dying. So first and foremost, our elders need our love, but they also need our physical help. Many of them become dependent physically the same way children are dependent on grownups. When elders turn seventy, consider having them with you at your home, or somewhere nearby where you can visit them often and easily. Don't wait for them to become totally disabled; then it's usually very hard for them to get used to a new place. On the other hand, regardless of how much is on the web, there is much to learn from our elders. That which we learn from the web is not personally tied to us; therefore, it

may not be a perfect match, but they are. In fact, when you visit any doctor nowadays, you are first asked about your family history of illnesses so that the doctor can foresee and/or treat you and help you. After all, we only have our elders with us for so long, so let us cherish every moment. Take them to church, as long as they can go. Communion with God and each other is something we all need, regardless of age. When they are not able to come anymore, bring them holy bread from Sunday Liturgy, tell them what the priest said in his sermon, and share the news from the parish. Be in regular contact with the priest concerning their health and any needs that may require a priest's special visit and prayer. Invite the priest to come to visit. Our parents and grandparents are praying for us daily and will continue to pray when they pass from this life unto life everlasting. They live for us and those moments spent with us. They are our flesh and blood. Because of them, we are flesh and blood, and they don't deserve to be lonely. To be blunt, they changed our diapers and endured many sleepless nights and worries for us. We should do the same for them.



GODPARENTS / GODCHILDREN

Godparents and godchildren are spiritual family and considered greater than blood relations. Stay in close contact with them. We are responsible for this relationship. The Serbian people have a saying: “Bog na nebu, kum na zemlji,” or “God in heaven, godparents on earth.” In other words, our relationship with our godparents/godchildren is as important as our relationship with God Himself. Godchildren, be obedient to your godparents; godparents, constantly pray for your godchildren, and make sure they are on the path to salvation. Just as priests at the Day of Judgment will be asked to account for their flock, you will be asked to account for your godchildren. This is a great honor and blessing for you, but also a great responsibility. “You are responsible to do that which you can; that which you can’t, you are not responsible for,” as Patriarch Pavle of blessed memory used to say.



FRIENDS

Someone once said: “It takes a lifetime to gain a friend, and it takes a moment to lose him.” The more I think about this, the more it seems, on one hand, that we should keep this saying in mind simply to help us treat our friends right, and, on the other hand, a friend that can be lost in a moment may not be a true friend. Regardless, friends are those who help us and whom we help on the path to salvation. As with anything that is to last long, or in this case even forever, friendship requires maintenance and investment. Christ considers us friends, and, even though we don’t treat Him as a friend at all times, He forgives and loves us, and we go to Him and love Him.



NEIGHBORS

Neighbors are here considered those who reside around you. Your neighborhood is

worth more than the house in which you live. Establish and maintain good relationships with your neighbors regardless of who they are; they are, after all, children of God just like you. They also are contributing (for good or bad) to your path to salvation, as you are to theirs. Make sure you are a good neighbor. Remember: “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father Who is in Heaven” (Matthew 5:16).



CO-WORKERS

Co-workers, like our neighbors (good or bad), should be important to us, and we should know they also contribute much to our salvation even when we don't recognize this. To our co-workers and/or neighbors, we may be a last resort, and we may not expect or be aware of this. “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned?” (Matthew 5:13) Also, let us not make a big difference between employers and employees, for places can switch very quickly.



STRANGERS

All people on the face of this earth – whether they know it or not – have the same Father (God). If their Father is also your Father, that in every way makes you siblings. One day when we pass from this life to life everlasting, that fact will be so obvious that it may be embarrassing to have seen, met, or by-passed so many people without considering that we are blood-related, having come from the same parents (Adam and Eve). The Bible story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) answers the question, “Who is my neighbor?” He is the one who takes care of me, though a stranger he may be.



ENEMIES

Enemies are also your brethren, and, believe it or not, they contribute most of all to your path to salvation. St Nikolai (Velimirovich) compared our enemies to a fox chasing a rab-

bit: the fox unwittingly chases the rabbit to a safe place (a hole in which nothing can be reached). Our enemies actually do us more good than bad because they push us to a safe place. The Saint also said that in his life he received more benefit from enemies than from friends, for from the former, more and better than from the latter, he learned humility, forbearance, patience, forgiveness and love. That's why he called enemies his "cruel friends." Most religions preach about love, but only Christians say: "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in Heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:44-45).



EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING

Bless everything and everyone. This is what makes you an Orthodox Christian, not to mention that it is a protection and great blessing

for you. By crossing yourself, you are actually blessing yourself. This is why, when the priest is present, you ask him to bless you, and why, after he makes a cross for you, you kiss his hand. Thus, form your fingers on your right hand as if you would cross yourself, and make the sign of the cross to bless food at home, school or work, bless your car before driving it, bless the plane before getting on it, bless your dog or cat, bless the hotel room in which you are staying, bless the X-ray/MRI machine, bless the garden, and bless the water in which you bathe. Simply make the sign of the cross over everything.

Don't forget that if God is the King of Glory and you are His child, then you are a prince or princess. You are the crown of His creation, in charge of taking care of it and sanctifying it. You have the power to tell a mountain to move: "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).



LIVING AS AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN IN A NON-ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN COUNTRY

We as Orthodox Christians are used to living in the world and not being “of the world.” The world has both good and bad to offer, and we must always discern. Regardless, we always focus on love. At times, things may be hard to discern, so we need to consult with others of our faith, especially our spiritual father and/or priest and family.

Generally speaking, if we approach anything with caution, deal with it in love, and protect ourselves with prayer, we should be fine.

During a visit to Serbs in Hungary in 1997, Patriarch Pavle of blessed memory told them (and indirectly all of us living all over the world) the following:

“There were, there are, and there will be migrations of people. Also there were and there will be humane (good) people and inhumane

(bad) people. Where we will live (in which part of the world) does not always depend on us. But, whether we will be humane or not, depends on us. Beware of the inhumane, but even more let us beware that we do not become inhumane...

“As you live in this beautiful country, treat people of other faiths with brotherly love. Respect the laws of the country by your honorable behavior and work. Be good neighbors in your neighborhood, and be good workers at your work place; always be aware that people around you will judge us and our whole nation and our faith based on your behavior. Especially be aware that based on our behavior and works, we will be judged by our and their God, when we stand before His righteous judgment seat.”



ORTHODOXY VS. OTHERS (HETERODOXY)

What is the difference between our Church and other churches, religions, faiths and beliefs?

Why should I be or remain an Orthodox Christian?

First of all, we don't proclaim, as others may, that if you are not one of us (an Orthodox Christian), you're going to hell.

We don't pretend we are gods, saying who will be saved and who won't. Those decisions are His to make.

The following story, which is paraphrased from a reading during one of the meals on Mount Athos, best explains the difference between Orthodoxy and other faiths.

Several people are going to a faraway place during the night. One is given five candles (an Orthodox Christian); the rest (non-Orthodox others) are given four, three, two, one, or no candles.

Whose route will be easiest? The one who has five candles, of course, will have the easiest route.

On the other hand, carrying five candles is the greatest responsibility.





APPROACHING DESTINATION

LIFE AND RETIREMENT

Unfortunately, the first thoughts which come to our mind when we think of retirement are of a material nature, such as a house, car, or money. Even though these are somewhat necessary and not wrong, consider the following: a house without people is empty, a car without a driver stands still, and money without someone to spend it on is worthless. Thus, love your spouse, children, family and friends while you are young, always take care of your body (the temple of the Holy Spirit), and, while you are working, share your riches with family, friends and the needy. Then you'll have someone to fill the house, you'll be able to drive the car, and God will bless you so that regardless of how much you have or

don't have when you retire, it will be more than enough. Don't forget for a moment while you are married that when all go their way, your spouse will be the only one with you. The way you take care of your children will be the way they take care of you. Remember that the way you take care of your elders (parents and grandparents) is the way you will be taken care of. You will have as many family members and friends in your old age as you have kept in touch with. Retirement and old age can be very lonely without godparents/godchildren, family and friends. In fact, a funeral director shared with me that he has the most funerals during holiday seasons. I thought overeating/overdrinking was the cause, but he said: "No, it's because of loneliness" – usually among elders in nursing homes.

The reality is that you can acquire material things for a life-time and at last lose them all, but the relationships which you establish remain regardless of your material wealth. Prepare for your retirement first of all by what kind of life you live and then by what you can save and buy. Again, live such a life that when

you die, all may cry for losing such a person, and you may rejoice for being welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven, as our Patriarch Pavle of blessed memory said and confirmed by example. He was an orphan (alone), but when he died, the whole country of Serbia plus many others mourned, and thousands came to his funeral. Also, don't feel sure that you will live to be one hundred years old, since the Lord may call you earlier. Work like you are going to live eternally (on earth), and live like you're going to die any minute.

A friend of mine at the age of 74 told me he was “keeping oil in his lamp” and “preparing his wedding garment” – preparing to meet the Bridegroom at the Wedding Feast. Remember, Christ is the Groom and the Church is His Bride.

“Behold! The Bridegroom is coming! Come out to meet him!”

“Friend, how did you come in here not wearing a wedding garment?”

(Parables of the Ten Virgins and the Wedding Feast; St. Matthew 25 and 22)



PREPARATION FOR SEPARATION

Any type of separation is hard. We learn that in life. When we die, we undergo many kinds of separation:

- Body from soul
- From this world (the world we know)
- From our loved ones
- From our enemies

Anytime we know we will undergo any kind of separation, we prepare for it if we are wise.

- Body from soul – Make sure the priest and/or family are there praying. If a priest is not there, have the Psalms read to you out loud.
- From this world – When you go from one place to another, you make sure you do three things: 1) leave behind everything in good order; 2) take anything/everything necessary for the road; and 3) learn ahead of time everything you can about the place to which you are going.

- From our loved ones – Say your goodbyes.
- From our enemies – Forgive, and beg to be forgiven.



WRITING A WILL

A will doesn't have to be a legal document. Simply say a prayer (and perhaps fast a few days), gather your thoughts, and write down on a piece of paper the most important things for you and for your spouse, children, family, friends and acquaintances.

Suggestions:

- Personal letter in case of sudden death or serious illness.

Sample:

My dear ones,

First and foremost, I want you to know that my life has been lived fully in every way, most of all thanks to your love. Please know that even though I'm no longer with you in body, I am in spirit. Pray to God for me – that's all I ask for now. As for your grief – STOP. We all



believe that life doesn't stop at death; there is life everlasting with our Good and Loving Father. Well, ok, cry a little because you miss me, but please not too much because that may hurt me. See you after your 100th birthdays. As for me, time passes by here very, very quickly. At last, if you hear that I have offended or done something wrong to anyone, please go and in my name ask for forgiveness.

- Life support: Yes (for how long) or No.
- Funeral arrangements: NO cremation. (The body should be laid to rest, not burned).
- Your suggestions regarding the things left behind.
- A possible request that embalming and make-up not be used on your dead body.

Such instructions could really help your family in their toughest time. Please note that you will rewrite this will when you retire.

Keep the will in a safe place, and let at least one person know about it. The priest can keep it.

GETTING OLD

Some people may be concerned about getting old. Consider two things: 1) It's better to

get old than to die young, and 2) Every stage of life has its beauty if you stay on the path to salvation. If time is used properly, getting old may be associated with becoming more experienced, mature, wise and spiritual, being surrounded by more people whom we love and who love us, being more able to help others, and being more ready to face the Lord and to join Him and His community of saints for eternity. Getting old is also part of the path to salvation.



RETIREMENT

Your long life on the path to salvation has at times not been easy. Thus, give yourself a little break, and, as King Solomon said in the Book of Ecclesiastes (9:7-9): “Go, eat your bread with merriment and drink your wine with a happy heart; for now God is well pleased with your works. Let your garments be always white, and let your head lack no oil. Experience life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He gave you under the

sun all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life and in the labor you performed under the sun.” Notice the words “little break.” You are still on the path to salvation. Also, please know that regardless of how much experience you’ve had with the evil one, you still need to stay busy, for the lazy person is quickly put to work by the evil one. Be available for your children, grandchildren, family, friends, neighbors and anyone who needs you.

Obviously, things don’t need to be as structured now as before retirement, but make sure you live for others as much as you live for yourself. Spend more time in and around church.



REWRITING YOUR WILL

Retirement is the time to rewrite your will with changes and specifics and perhaps even legalize it. Don’t hesitate to go into specifics because this will help your family a lot. Don’t exclude your church from your will; your church is your home/family too. In your will, mainly tell your family to consult with your

parish priest (after and even before your passing, if necessary) whenever things are not clear, and to do whatever the Church blesses. Before you write your will, you should pray and give it much thought. When it is done, let it be. Don't change your will with the change of your mood.



CREMATION

Cremation is not an option for an Orthodox Christian. We don't burn bodies to ashes; we lay them to rest. The human body, we believe, is a living church, a temple of the Holy Spirit. If cremation, for some reason, is considered, the Church must be consulted.





YOU HAVE ARRIVED

NOW THE HARD PART – DEATH

Every person who is born must die, sooner or later. Even though we should have been thinking about death every day of our life – “Work like you’re going to live a thousand years, and live like you are going to die tomorrow” – and even though it may be far off (with people living to be 100 nowadays), we should be responsible, realistic and reasonable, and make a point to start preparing for death sooner rather than later. It’s a tough subject and really a horrible reality – unnatural for us since we were not originally created to die – but we must face it. It’s best that we prepare for death as much as we can, not allowing it to overpower our present life and the life to come in God’s Kingdom (eternal life).



PREPARING FOR DEATH AND LIFE EVERLASTING

Death is like Holy Friday services during Great and Holy Week. You come to the church and see Christ on the Cross and hear the hymns of weeping by His Cross, but at the same time you look at Him risen from the dead. In fact, one of the hymns says: “Before Your Cross we bow down in worship, O Master, and Your Holy Resurrection we magnify.”

Death itself is a horrible reality and a consequence of sin, but let us not forget that it is only the tunnel to Life Eternal. We should remember this for ourselves and even more if our spouse or someone else very close to us is called by God before us. As one priest wrote about his wife, who spent the last month of her life in a hospital, she talked about everything with a social worker but refused to talk only about death, because we never look at death (and the Cross) as overshadowing life and

resurrection. The same priest pointed out: “Orthodox Christianity is about living in Jesus Christ.” Never forget that physical death brings only temporary separation; do your best and pray to God that your separation doesn’t become spiritual too. In other words, through prayer, through Liturgy, through Communion, and, ultimately, through Christ and His Church, in Whom we are all one and alive (if we want to be), stay united with your loved ones, and hope for a full reunion, spiritual and physical, in the Kingdom of God, where there won’t be any separations anymore.



MORE TO CONSIDER

First and foremost, don’t forget for a moment that you are still on the path to salvation; the evil one will tempt you until your last breath. The temptations will not be the same as in the young age; in fact, they may change all the time. You may even be surprised at what comes to mind, but don’t worry. Simply continue living an Orthodox Christian life,

fighting off the temptations to the best of your ability, and Christ will do the rest. You are weak before the devil; however, Christ is the power in you, so depend not on your own strength – which would be spiritual pride – but on Him, and you'll be fine. **Be in constant prayer, and practice fasting.**

Ask yourself the following: On the day that I die, **is He going to recognize me?** Am I going to feel good around Him? Will the Mother of God recognize me, and will I feel good around her? Will the saints and angels recognize me, and will I feel good around them? Will this be a reunion or an uncomfortable reality? All these questions come to mind, and the answers are simple: if I make an effort to know Him and them before I die, I will know them and will be recognized by them after I depart from this life unto everlasting life. If I remember our God and His Mother, His saints and His angels daily, when I pass to the other world, they will remember me as one of theirs, and I will be able to spend the “Eternal Day” with them. It will be a reunion and not a meeting of strangers. It will be Heaven and not hell.

There are people who don't have a chance to learn (enough) about the true God in this world, but we did – to the point of being able to confess and worship Him in the Orthodox manner. Yet, some of those other people unconsciously had God in their hearts and acted accordingly. Therefore, it is God Who will judge and accept all those who strove to live a godly life. Especially pray that the Lord will be gracious to you on that day of passing from this life to eternal life. He will hear your plea.

Make peace with your enemies and those with whom you had difficulties, even if they weren't your fault. If such people choose not to be at peace, let them be; you've done your part. Also, given that you can become irritable at this stage, really make an effort to stay at peace with all around you.

Take Confession, even though it may seem like there is nothing to confess. Look deeper into your soul. **Partake of Communion** as often as possible. There is no better way to prepare for eternal life than cleansing your soul through Confession and uniting with Christ by Communion.

A lady shared with me that she is not afraid to die; she just doesn't want to leave her loved ones. They will also have a hard time when you leave, so spend some time preparing them and yourself: talk to them, advise them, and bless them. If those around you will listen, **share your experience**. That may help them; don't push it on them, but simply share it if they are ready to listen. You may also write down or record a message for those left behind or even for your future descendants. Your family may not be ready to listen to it right away, but it may help them in the future. Experience has always mattered. There is a Serbian saying: "Pametan se uči na tuđim greškama, a lud na svojim," or "A wise man learns from others' faults, and a fool, from his own." Especially tell your loved ones what God and His Church did for you in your lifetime, how important it is for them to stick to God and His Church, and how important it is to be part of the Church that has the fullness of faith – the Orthodox Church. Finally, before you die, make sure you bless all your children, grandchildren and others who were your responsibility.

Many people start **giving away things** that they acquired over their lifetime so that when they are close to their departure they have nothing except their soul – which is the only thing God will look at anyway. We will not be able to take anything with us but our deeds. If you are starting to give away things, do so meaningfully.

Buy (choose) **a place for burial**, if possible in a cemetery where many Orthodox Christians are buried, or around an Orthodox church or monastery, as prayers for the departed are said there regularly.

Funeral arrangements are very expensive nowadays BUT don't have to be. A friend of mine told his family that if they really want to spend money on his dead body, which is to return to the earth from which it was taken, they should do him a favor and look at the most expensive things they can afford, then buy the cheapest casket, vault, flowers, etc., and give the difference to the poor and to churches and monasteries to pray for his soul. A body should be laid to rest with much prayer and dignity. The body of a good man or woman is

adorned with the reality of its past and not diamonds or gold coffins. The concentration should be on the good person whom we love, not the rich- looking casket and vaults.

Consider not embalming. In most cases it is truly not necessary. Embalming has never been the practice of Orthodox Christians. It is not true that it is illegal or that you cannot have an open casket. Just insist on it. The chemicals put in the veins of our loved ones can be unpleasant and even unhealthy for us who come to venerate (kiss) the body. In some cases embalming must be done and that's ok; otherwise, a cooler can keep the body well for several days.

Makeup on the dead body is not usually necessary. The body is dead; we know the person (soul) is alive in Christ. We don't need makeup to show that. In fact, the body needs to look dead, empty of life, and disfigured – to show to all who come to venerate (pay last respects to) it that they also will die and thus should be preparing for death and eternal life. Many times we can't even recognize the person (our loved one) because of so much makeup.

The dead body can teach your loved ones more than you can imagine, so let the dead body look dead.

This makes us concentrate on the soul of our loved one rather than on the body which is obviously dead.

It makes us think of the life we are living and appreciate each other more.

It makes us consider, prepare for, and direct our thoughts toward the Kingdom of Heaven.

Finally, a dead and desperate-looking body reminds us to pray for the soul of our loved one. We always assume the worst and hope for the best. This is the safest approach considering that no one except God knows exactly what happens to the soul of a person after physical death. One thing we do know is that our loved one who has passed on cannot communicate with us and tell us what they need – so we pray.

The tomb stone is placed primarily so that the location of our burial can be found. Simply mark the stone with your first and last name and of course something that makes it obvious that you are an Orthodox Christian – such as an Orthodox cross, an icon, or even the sta-

tement “Orthodox Christian.” This way your family and the church (priest) can find the place of your burial to pray there, to be reminded, and to visit. If you do write things on your tomb stone, make sure these could be beneficial to others and also to your soul – for example: “Waiting for the Resurrection from the dead and the life to come. Amen,” or “Pray for us [who are buried at the cemetery] – don’t simply pass by us, for soon you will be one of us.”

Please note that the body’s system is weakest at around 3 am (in a 24 hour period). Someone from the family should be present so a loved one is not alone if it is time to pass.

What should the family do? **While the loved one is dying, the family should provide physical and spiritual support.** Physical support includes holding hands, wiping moisture from the mouth, putting a towel on the forehead, kissing, etc. Spiritual support consists of continuously reading the 150 Psalms in the Old Testament of the Bible.

Prayers during and after death: When your loved one is on his or her death bed, the priest should be called to read the prayers for

the departure of the soul. These prayers are rough, but keep in mind that they are generally assuming the worst and hoping for the best, and that they are from the experience of the Church which is 2,000 years old. After the person dies, immediately call the priest to ask him to come to pray, as well as to ask his advice and support from then on. He's had this experience with many others. Follow the Church tradition regarding **the memorials offered on the first, third, ninth and fortieth day after the repose and annually on the day of repose**, as well as on a few days prescribed by the Church as **Memorial Days** during the year. In addition to this, we can remember our dear ones on any day, but the Church specifically recommends **every Saturday** – the day Christ Himself was in the tomb with His body – for personal prayers commemorating the departed and for possible visits to cemeteries.

Organ Donation is a fairly new practice, but, if we can continue doing good with our bodies by giving of ourselves even after we die, or possibly before, we should donate if we feel good about this. We are not obligated though.

Funeral Service: Our Church has been our faithful companion on the path to salvation from the very beginning to the very end, and She now gives us a farewell with tears and hope, entrusting us to God's love and mercy. What exactly happens to us after death remains a mystery revealed only to the chosen. Yet we all do know what is important for our salvation; we will be accountable for everything we thought, said and did in this life. Life does not end with death, and our existence after death will be full after Christ's Second Coming and the resurrection of our bodies. If we repent sincerely and entrust ourselves to God, nobody and nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God, and the evil forces will not be allowed to claim us. In the funeral service we pray also that the departed may be restored to their former, original beauty – to finally and completely be that which God created them to be. Death is the crown of our earthly life. Its end is, at the same time, the beginning of our heavenly life, which has no end. In this endless life, with all Church members whose earthly life has ended, we par-

ticipate already here each time we serve Divine Liturgy. “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen!”

LIFE ETERNAL



Life is not easy and can seem at times to be not worth living. However, when you consider that earthly life passes in a second (compared to eternity), and when you affix your sight on the life to come (salvation in the Kingdom of Heaven), then every moment of it can be wonderful regardless of its tribulations. The Kingdom of Heaven is like going to a beautiful far-away place for vacation. In spite of trials during the trip (the life we live), we feel awesome.

In 1 Corinthians 2:9, the following is said regarding the Kingdom of Heaven: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”

∴ GLORY TO GOD FOR ALL THINGS ∴



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BIOGRAPHY

Priest Dragan Petrović was born in Serbia from parents Priest Petar and Gordana. He graduated from high school seminary in Serbia and college seminary in America. He is married to Vesna and is the father of three children. Fr. Dragan has been serving as priest of St Nicholas Serbian Orthodox Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, since 1998. He also serves as Diocesan Youth Director. This book was written during Great Lent of 2013.

*Back cover photo by Kristina Petrović
(taken on a mountain in Serbia, above the village of Šljivica)*