

Saint Mary of Egypt Orthodox Church

A Handbook for Members and Future Members

The Church of God is truly heaven on earth. The Orthodox Church is the Church of God, the Church of the apostles and martyrs and of all those holy ones who have been faithful to God from beginning to end; it is the Church of Orthodox Christians today. Nothing in the universe compares to her. The wonders that God has wrought in her and continues to work in her are without number. These wonders that have been wrought throughout the ages with numberless people and in every place can also be worked in each and every one of us—in you and me! It takes faith, hope and courage to make the step to become part of God's Church, but once we make that step, once we commit ourselves to following the life of Christ in His Church, wonders will also abound in us. Those who have followed this way have already experienced the working of God in their lives. If you are considering this way, then read on; perhaps something that is written here will resonate with some spiritual longing in your heart and inspire you to forge ahead in seeking the way of salvation, becoming a dweller in heaven on earth.

The Church is one; there is not another church. The various denominations which have separated from the Orthodox Church and from one another, including the largest of them, the Roman Catholic, are not part of the Church. The Church is fully realized in the Orthodox Church which continues from her Lord to the present day faithful in all that Christ has given her. Those who come to the Orthodox Church, whether from unbelief, from one of the denominations or from other religions, are received by the holy mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation.

Upon entering an Orthodox church one immediately sees the many icons on the walls and ceiling of the temple, icons of Christ, His Mother, of saints and angels and events in the life of Christ and His holy ones. At once it is evident that everything, including all the saints and angels look toward the Lord of the temple, Christ our God. Everything in the church points to Him, Who is the Head of all things. The ceiling of the temple is like the vault of heaven, and we stand in this heaven on earth, with God in the company of His saints and angels. In many churches there is a circular icon of Christ the Almighty under the dome in the center of the temple. We stand in the middle of this great assembly with God at its head, and if our heart is open, we receive unspeakable grace from God Who is around us and within us and from the holy ones who surround us. God has bowed down heaven so that He might unite Himself to us on earth. During the Divine Services we are able to join with this great cloud of God's witnesses, saints and angels, in praising Him and receiving from Him ineffable gifts. Wonders are multiplied in us. Nothing in our lives can equal this experience of worship in His holy temple.

The gifts we receive in worship and through union with God empower us to live the life that God incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ, came to show us and to give us. God the Word took our nature and lived among us in the flesh for thirty-three years, teaching us and showing us all that will unite us to Him and His Kingdom forever and filling us with the power to attain to that Kingdom. This is the Pearl of Great Price, for which it is necessary to sell all. We are called to give up all, even our very life, in order to unite ourselves to Him. The life in His Church is precisely this, uniting ourselves to Christ and to all His holy ones. This life in Him changes everything. Even the most mundane things take on new meaning in the new life. Everything is

offered to Him and brings us closer and closer to eternal life; leading us to the life of heaven on earth.

This handbook is a very practical guide to life in the Church, and more specifically to that part of the Church known as St. Mary of Egypt Orthodox Church, one parish in the whole body of Christ's holy Church, the universal Orthodox Church including the living and the departed of all ages. Our head is Christ Himself, and in obedience to Him are our hierarchs, the Most Holy Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, and the Most Reverend Hilarion, Metropolitan of Eastern America and New York, First Hierarch of the Russian Church Abroad. In obedience to the hierarchs are the rector and other clergy of the parish. In obedience to the clergy of the parish are the faithful members of the church. In the end, all, the hierarchs, the clergy, the people and all the Church are in obedience to her Head, Christ our God. It is most important that each member of this parish and the parish as a whole strive as a part of Christ's body, the Church, to be faithful in every detail to the Holy Tradition passed down to us, the tradition that leads to salvation, to the life in heaven on earth and finally to the life in the Heaven of heavens.

Some Basics

The Orthodox Church proclaims One God in Three Persons, the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Further it teaches that One of the Trinity, God the Son, also known as God the Word, took upon Himself our nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary, by the will of God the Father and through the operation of God the Holy Spirit—so that God the Son, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, is now forever in two natures, one Divine Person, both God and Man. He took our nature to redeem it and to refashion it and unite it to God in Himself and to present it to the Father in the Holy Spirit—so that we are again united to God, the Holy Trinity, having been separated from Him because of sin, Adam's, our own and everybody else's. When we make the sign of the cross, we put the thumb and first two fingers together to represent the Holy Trinity and lay the fourth finger and the little finger on the palm to represent the two natures of Christ, and thus making the sign of the cross over ourselves from head to stomach, then from the right shoulder to the left, we proclaim our faith in God the Holy Trinity, and in our Lord Jesus Christ in two natures, Who died on the cross to free us from sin and death. As we make the sign of the cross we say, "In the name of the Father [as we touch our forehead], and of the Son [as we touch our stomach], and of the Holy Spirit [as we touch the right and then the left shoulder]. Amen." We thus proclaim that at the will of God the Father, God the Son came down to the womb of the Virgin, and that God the Holy Spirit sustains, protects and covers us with His heavenly protection.

The Holy Virgin Mary is called the Mother of God (in Greek *Theotokos*) because the Person born of her is God the Word, the Son of God Who in her womb took the human nature, so that the One, the Person, born of her is God in the flesh. We honor her above all, after God, because she is the Flower of our race whom God chose to be the vessel of our salvation. In her all the virtues are fulfilled, and she is the intercessor for all mankind before God. We go directly to God and she goes directly to God for us. She supports and strengthens us in our weakness and we approach God with her and with all saints and angels and our brethren in Christ, the living and the departed, all of us, as one Church, approaching together the Heavenly Throne.

All of life is from the Creator and Source of life, our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. Those who have gone on before are alive in Him, both the good and the evil. We are united in Him. We lift up the examples of the good, the saints, trying to follow their good example and calling upon them to pray for us and to stand with us, to support us in our feeble efforts and in our painful sufferings. We ask the saints for help. We pray for the departed, believing that the temporary separation from them through their death is just for a short time and that we are still able to commune with one another in Christ, the Source of life. We believe that all men will be raised at the Last Judgment and be reunited to their bodies, then judged and be received in the eternal Kingdom of God or sent to everlasting hell, depending upon how they lived their lives.

Salvation is the process of being united to God. We call this process “deification” (in Greek *theosis*) because in it we are made one with God. *I said: Ye are gods, and all of you the sons of the Most High. (Psalm 81:6)* This adoption of us by God does not destroy our personhood, our individuality, but, on the contrary, fulfills it and makes us what we were meant to be from the very beginning, His own sons and daughters. When asked, “Are you saved?” Orthodox Christians would have to answer, “By God’s love and mercy I am being saved; I am on the road to union with Him by His grace.” As a Church we, the members, are going together on this way into the Kingdom of God, arm-in-arm with one another and with all the righteous who have gone before, the holy angels helping, encouraging and accompanying us on the way.

The Orthodox Church offers Holy Mysteries (Sacraments) to give us new life, to nurture us on the way, and to heal our infirmities. There are seven primary mysteries: Baptism, Chrismation, Confession, Eucharist (Holy Communion), Marriage, Ordination and Unction (Healing). There are other mysteries which are very important in the life of the church: prayer, icons, relics, monastic tonsure, blessing of water and oil, offering incense, prayer services, burial of the dead, memorial services and others. God has given us all of these to bring us into His new life and to support us in it. These sacred mysteries are administered by the ordained clergy of the Church, men chosen by the hierarchy of the Church to lead the congregations of the Church toward the Kingdom of God. Holy Tradition will not allow the consideration that any but men should be chosen for this purpose.

Christian life now is the same as that taught by our Savior in both the Old and New Testaments. God created us for life in Him, and that life has not changed. The Church has never followed the various popular trends of the societies in which she lived, but she has always been faithful to the way taught her by her Lord. She has attempted to influence those societies to follow His way. Things that were destructive to life in the past remain so now, just as those things which build up our life in Christ are the same as before. “Modern morality” is not an option for Orthodox Christians. “Living together” outside of marriage, fornication, practicing homosexuality, inducing or encouraging abortion, indulging ego-centrism and selfish ambition, greed, envy, jealousy, auto-eroticism, procuring the help of sorcerers, fortune tellers, astrologers or supernatural healers (*extrasensii*), superstition, judging and condemning others, all of these are as destructive to human life as they ever were, and the Church calls to repentance all of us who fall into these or other sins, assuring us that with sincere repentance God will forgive us and give us the strength to live the life He has shown us and freely imparts to us.

Holy Tradition, which includes Scripture, the Holy Mysteries (Sacraments), lives of saints, teachings of the holy fathers, worship of the Church, decisions of holy councils, guides

the life of the Church. As one small example of this, at the First Ecumenical Council the Church held in Nicea (near Constantinople) in 325 AD, the Church adopted for its liturgical life the calendar that had been promulgated by Julius Caesar in 45 BC. It still adheres to that calendar. The modern civil calendar followed by most of the world was made the calendar of the Roman Catholic Church by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. Over the years most of the world has adopted this calendar as its civil calendar. The Julian, or Church, calendar now varies from the Gregorian, or civil, calendar by thirteen days, so that December 25th on the Church calendar is January 7th on the civil. This is why Orthodox Christians celebrate the Nativity of Christ on January 7th on the civil calendar, which is actually December 25th on the Church calendar. Orthodox believe that it is important to be faithful in small things so that we will also remain faithful in the greater.

We are called to holiness. Countless lives of holy strugglers, men and women, are offered to us to show us that sainthood is possible for us even as it was for them. Our own patron, Saint Mary of Egypt (fifth/sixth century), was a greatly sinful woman, a prostitute of Alexandria, who was turned to repentance by the grace of God. The Virgin Mary helped her to find the way of repentance and supported her in every way as she struggled to change her way of life, living alone in the Judean desert for forty-seven years. God gave her new life in Christ, and she has become a great example of one who ascended from the depths of sin to the heights of holiness. Every part of Church life supports us in this same way. May God grant that we be willing to take up the cross and follow Christ on this glorious path to His Kingdom.

Sources for the Way to Live the Spiritual Life

The Lord said: *And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.* (Matthew 11:12)

The life in Christ involves great spiritual struggle against attacks from within: the carnal nature and the passions, and from without: the world and the devil. It involves a certain godly violence to struggle victoriously, and this is why “the violent *must* take it by force.” The Lord Who descended to us and took our nature has shown us and taught us how to live the life He gives us. He has left a wondrous account of this in His Holy Gospels and the other Holy Scriptures. He shows us how to struggle in the lives of His saints, holy strugglers who “have fought a good fight ... finished *the* course ... *and* kept the faith” (II Timothy 4:7). We have the examples of their lives as described in the scriptures and in such spiritual treasures as *The Paradise of the Fathers*, *The Lausaic History* in ancient times, and in modern times the lives of the elders of Optina. There are innumerable sources, both ancient and modern which relate the lives of holy men and women. We also have their writings in such treasures as *The Philokalia*, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, *The Evergetinos* from the early centuries and *My Life in Christ* by St. John of Kronstadt in modern times. Finally, we have life in the Church, her worship as a wondrous first-hand experience of spiritual life, examples of godly people around us and the teaching and guidance of faithful clergy to lead us on the way to salvation. In a word we have all the sources of spiritual guidance that we need in order to take the kingdom by force.

Throughout history there has been a temptation for Christians to search outside their holy faith for a higher spirituality, for a holier or more righteous way of life, for special or secret

knowledge or practices that will lift them above their fellows and assure them of a place in God's Kingdom. Even the great Origen, a theologian of the third century, fell prey to this temptation. A very early group of heresies, known collectively as Gnosticism, was wholly characterized by this temptation, teaching as it did that for a select few there was secret knowledge that would enable them to pass through celestial powers who were guarding the way to heaven.

Freemasonry is a modern-day temptation which promises secret knowledge to enhance the lives of its select members. It also attempts to smooth out all obstacles to full fellowship among its members by providing a religion which does away with any teachings which would separate them from one another. It shows contempt or simple indifference toward doctrines of the Orthodox Faith such as the Holy Trinity, the incarnation of the Son of God, the salvation of mankind through the life of Jesus Christ. It mocks the Holy Mysteries of the Church. There are other organizations which operate in a similar way, and sometimes we may be tempted to think that we ourselves have some kind of unique quality that makes us better than others, more beloved of God and more worthy of His blessings. A question comes to mind: If there is a knowledge which will benefit men, why not share it with everyone?

Far eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism also teach spiritual techniques for meditation and discipline which supposedly will enable their adherents to enter into higher spiritual realities. Such a technique is yoga, which has enjoyed tremendous popularity in modern times throughout the world. Hieromonk Seraphim Rose in his book *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future* points out that these techniques work to open the human being, soul and body, to the influence of demons whose purpose is to lead us away from God and His life to worship of them with an invitation to join them in a life of eternal suffering and darkness. Spiritualism with its promise of establishing contact with the spirits of the departed, succeeds only in putting unwitting participants in contact with demons who deceive and mock them. Transcendental meditation is another technique promising calm and leading only to disappointment, confusion and despair. Yoga, spiritualism and transcendental meditation and all other such techniques are therefore not options for Christians; they lead ultimately to eternal darkness. We have a precious treasure of spiritual guidance; we have no need of other guidance to lead us to the Kingdom of God.

The important thing is that we look to the treasure: the scriptures, the lives of the saints, the spiritual writings and, most importantly, the worship of the Church, and that we take up the struggle through repentance, prayer, fasting, watchfulness, trusting in God and sacrificing ourselves for others in order to take the kingdom by force, knowing that God is with us to strengthen us in the battle and to take us to Himself, for eternal life with Him and all His holy ones.

Married Life/Single Life

My steps do Thou direct according to Thy saying, and let no iniquity have dominion over me. (Psalm 118:133).

There are many authentic paths to salvation, as numerous as there are people on the road to salvation. Each of us is unique, and God loves each of us with an everlasting love. Each of

the many paths to salvation must be completely consistent with the way to eternal life given us by our Savior. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and besides Him there is no other. Traditionally, marriage and monasticism are offered as the two general states in which we work out our salvation. They are blessed by millennia of saints who attained paradise as either married persons or monastics. There are those, however, for one reason or another, who do not relate to either the married or the monastic state; they find themselves in the single life. It would be impossible to think that God has abandoned them and that there is no way for them to salvation.

In the married life each spouse is called to die to himself for the sake of the other, to give up his own will, each submitting his will to God and to his spouse. Women are called to obey their husbands, and husbands are called to give their lives for their wives even as Christ gave His life for the Church. "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church" (Ephesians 5:23). The married life, especially with the raising of children, is truly a form of martyrdom, a witness to the love of God and His grace, which He gives to accomplish momentous tasks and to persevere through painful and difficult times.

The monastic life will not be discussed here. Suffice it to say, that it is also a martyrdom in which the monastic sacrifices his life to God as a whole-burnt offering for his salvation. We have the very graphic image of the monk on the cross being shot through with the arrows of temptations, tribulations, sufferings and sorrows of this life. The one who perseveres to the end will be saved.

Whether married or single each of us is called to chastity. In the marriage service itself we pray "that He will grant unto them chastity, and of the fruit of the womb as is expedient for them." Marital relations do not violate chastity. In addition, with the number of fasts and the possibility of illness married people must observe restraint just as single people do. In some cases, marital relations are not possible for many years at a time or even for a lifetime.

The Orthodox Faith recognizes that sexual relations of any sort outside of marriage are never for the building up of life but always for its destruction. In our day it is proclaimed that "love" is all that matters, that if a couple love each other, they may be blessed to have sexual relations. The Church knows from her Lord that love is sacrificial, not indulgent, not self-gratifying. Sexual relations are a seal on the love of a man and a woman who have been united to each by Christ Himself in the mystery of Holy Matrimony. Any other sexual activity, for whatever reason, is outside the blessing of the One Who created it for the procreation of children and as a seal on the love of those united in marriage.

The one who finds himself in the single life, whether by his own choice or by other circumstances, is given the grace of God to be chaste in his life, just as the monastic or the married are given the power to be chaste in their lives. Chastity is both a great virtue and blessing and at the same time a cross, sometimes a very heavy one. Struggling in chastity is part of that truly shining path to salvation, and none of the efforts, not a drop of the sweat that falls from our brow, will go to waste if we offer all that we are to God and open ourselves in faith and trust to His help.

Marriage

O Lord, our God, crown them with glory and honor. (The Order of Holy Matrimony) Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine on the sides of thy house, thy sons like young olive trees round about thy table. (Psalm 127:3-4) That He will make them glad with the sight of sons and daughters, let us pray to the Lord. (The Order of Holy Matrimony) My bone is not hid from Thee, which Thou madest in secret; nor my substance in the nethermost parts of the earth. My being while it was still unformed Thine eyes did see (Psalm 138:14, 15)

Christian marriage is the union of a man and woman in Christ. God gives them the grace to live and grow together in Him, both in this world and in the world to come, the heavenly kingdom where "they neither marry, nor are given in marriage" (Mark 12:25) but where they do continue to grow in love eternally in Christ with each other and with all who are called to live with Christ forever. A very important part of the married life of Christians is the begetting of children. While in exceptional cases a married couple may decide not to have sexual relations, as in the case of St. John of Kronstadt (+1905) and his wife Elizabeth and certain other saintly couples, it is good and right that Christian couples should have these relations as a seal on their love for each other and for the purpose of begetting children. Those who determine not to have children for selfish reasons or for lack of trust in God's providence violate this fundamental purpose of marriage.

The ideal in Christian marriage is to have as many children as God provides through the normal marital relations of a man with his wife. In the service of Holy Matrimony we pray that God "will grant unto them ... of the fruit of the womb as is expedient for them," not what they want but what God wills for them. Anything short of this means failure on the part of the married couple to fulfill the ideal married life in Christ. We are, however, growing in the life in Christ; we are not fully living this life. This growth is, in fact, an eternal growing in Him. Courage and trust, for example, are in their infancy in some of us, while others are more advanced in these virtues. Some do not have the courage or the faith and trust to submit themselves fully to the will of God in determining how many children He will give them. With the ready availability of contraception they are strongly inclined to make use of it in an attempt to regulate the number of children they will have. In this regard, it is important to know that most types of contraception involve aborting a conception, sometimes before and sometimes after its implantation in the womb. In any case, any form of contraception which involves aborting a conceived child, at whatever stage in development, is totally unacceptable for Orthodox Christians. Perhaps the barrier method of contraception is the only one which could never involve aborting a conceived child. If the couple is determined to use contraception, it is essential that they do this only with the blessing of their spiritual father and as he directs.

Some couples who are not able to have children on their own are strongly advised to consider the possibility of adopting a child. The process of adoption has become exceedingly complex and expensive, but still well worth the effort when it provides a child with a truly Christian upbringing and parents with the great joy—and challenge—of raising a child in the loving fear of God. Other couples want to find medical help so that they can conceive a child on their own. It is reasonable for them to seek therapeutic and surgical help that could support the possibility of their conceiving children. However, artificial insemination of a woman with sperm from a man other than her husband violates the sanctity of the marriage of a Christian man and

woman, as does the practice of surrogate motherhood. The artificial insemination of a woman with her husband's sperm is, however, allowable according to *The Basis of the Social Concept*, an official document of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Marriage is a way for a man and a woman to lead each other into Paradise, each dying to himself. It takes its meaning and purpose from the fact that Christ Himself is "the Priest of mystical and pure marriage" (from *The Order of Holy Matrimony*). As Christ, the Heavenly Bridegroom, gave Himself for the Church, so the husband is to sacrifice his life for his wife, and she is called to give her life for him by taking on the sacrifice of obedience to him. Everything in the married life must be done with this in mind, neither partner acting from selfish willfulness, each always sacrificing himself for the other, and both submitting themselves with loving obedience to each other and to Christ Himself.

Prayer

And in mine affliction I called upon the Lord, and unto my God I cried; He heard my voice out of His holy temple, and my cry before Him shall enter into His ears. (Psalm 17:6) The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. (James 5:16).

For the Christian prayer is more important than breathing and absolutely essential if life in Christ is to be sustained and to grow. His day begins and ends with prayer; it is filled with prayer and the remembrance of God as the hours pass, as he encounters each situation and deals with others. He prays before and after meals and before and after the various tasks he takes up during the day. Special prayers are said to prepare for his regular confession and for his supreme joy in receiving Holy Communion, the Body and Blood of his Savior. He prays again after the holy mysteries to thank God for His forgiveness, for the power to live in Christ and for His ineffable indwelling within him.

The Christian prays for others, for his family, loved ones, enemies and those in need, with the faith that his prayer will be a channel of God's loving compassion for them. He knows that prayer has no boundaries, that it can help those on the other side of the earth just as readily as those beside him. The power of prayer also reaches beyond those in this world to those in the world to come, and from them to us. He experiences the reality of being united to those for whom he prays, united to them in the Holy Spirit Who sustains and holds us all.

True prayer must be from the heart, that is, it must be completely sincere and honest. The Holy Fathers teach us that we are to strive in prayer to put the mind in the heart, to pray from the very depths of our being. They also teach us that our goal must be continual prayer, even as the Holy Apostle Paul admonishes us in his First Epistle to the Thessalonians: "Pray without ceasing" (*I Thessalonians 5:17*). A most wondrous prayer has been passed down to us by our holy fathers; it is called the Jesus Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*. How simple and yet how powerful this prayer is! We are taught to say it at any time and at any place, putting the mind into the heart. What a wonderful gift this prayer is for us!

It is most important that every Christian have a prayer rule. This rule involves establishing times and places for praying in the morning, the evening, during the day and

sometimes during the night as well. Icons should be set up in these established places. The rule also involves praying certain specific prayers provided in an Orthodox prayer book as well as one's own prayers. In the prayer book these rules of prayer are already provided for us. If we wish to change these established rules, it is important to do so in consultation with our spiritual father. This is also true in determining how we will pray during the day and night, and also how we will pray the Jesus Prayer.

Prayer in church is especially important because it is the union of all our prayers along with those of the saints and angels. Special efforts must be made, putting the mind in the heart, to concentrate on every word of the divine services, uniting our prayer with that of the whole Church in order to be open to the glorious gifts God wills to give us. In the end, this is the true purpose of prayer, to unite ourselves to the Divine Life so that we will be open to the life in God which He wills for each of us.

Fasting

The Lord said: *"... but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast."* (Matthew 9:15)

Fasting is an essential part of the life of Christians. It is a tool in the continual effort to subject the flesh to the spirit, and to bind the passions so they do not control us. Fasting shows us our true hunger, the hunger for God, and at the same time it rejects the demands of the stomach to satisfy its hunger, thereby helping to enthrone the spirit over the body, and God over all.

The Church prescribes fasting throughout the year; more than half the days of the year are fast days. Most Wednesdays and Fridays are days of fasting, commemorating the Precious Cross, Wednesday because it is the day on which Judas betrayed the Lord by arranging for His arrest in the garden, and Friday because it is the day on which the Lord was crucified. The day commemorating the finding of the Cross, September 14/27, the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, August 29/September 11, and the eve of Holy Theophany, January 5/18, are also fast days. On fast days we fast from meat, meat products, dairy products (milk, eggs, butter, cheese), fish, wine and olive oil. On some fast days we may eat wine and olive oil and on some even fish. The church calendar must be consulted for the fasting discipline for each day.

In addition to these days, the Church has prescribed four fasting seasons. The first is the forty-day fast before Holy Pascha, called the Great Fast or Great Lent. Before it we have Cheesefare Week in which we fast from meat but not from fish, dairy products, wine and oil. After the forty days, we enter into Passion Week and continue the fast until Holy Pascha. On Great Friday, the day on which we commemorate the crucifixion of Christ, we are encouraged to fast completely from all food and drink. There is also the Fast of the Holy Apostles before we celebrate the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul and the Twelve Great Apostles. It varies in length depending upon the date of Pascha but it ends on June 29/July 12. The third fast prepares us for the great feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God and extends from August 1/14 until August 15/28. The fourth fast prepares us for the Nativity of Christ and extends from November 15/28 until December 25/January 7.

It is most important that we follow the example of the Lord and His saints and keep the fasts to the very best of our ability. The proper ordering of our lives depends upon it.

Caring for Others

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. (Luke 6:31). For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. ... Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. (Matthew 25:35, 40)

Caring for others is caring for the Lord Himself. Like prayer, doing good to others unites us to them and also to God. Our Savior has made it abundantly clear that works of charity are absolutely essential to life in Him both now and in the age to come. If we do not love our neighbor, then it is not possible to love God. When we do not love and care for our neighbor in his need, we wall ourselves off from the love of God and His mercy towards us.

Our Savior has taught us that if we want to save our lives, that is, if we are concerned primarily about ourselves, that we will lose our lives. If, on the contrary, we lose our lives, if we are concentrated on God and others, then we will save our lives. He has also taught us that the greatest love is to lay down our life for our friends, for others, just as He gave His life for us.

It is most important that we care for others: for family members, friends, strangers and enemies. This caring should take exactly the form of those things mentioned by the Lord in the parable of the Last Judgment quoted above, that is, feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, taking in the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison. These are examples of ways to care for those in need. God will send them to us, and it is our privilege to care for them. Perhaps at times we feel overwhelmed by those in need who come to us, but God will strengthen us and provide the means for helping them. He will not send us more than we are able to help, and He will always give us the means to care for them.

Caring for others can take the form of major commitments in time and resources to help them in their need, but it can also take the form of simply listening to them as they pour out their cares and their grief. It can take the form of defending a weaker child on the playground against the attacks of a bully or another person against the insults and mocking of others. It may mean that we have to take courage and walk away from those gossiping about someone else. Caring can be as little a thing as saying a kind word to someone who is troubled. We may also be given the opportunity to receive the blessing of being maltreated or insulted by others or even giving our life in place of another. How powerful for good it is if we simply endure all insults and persecutions and thank God for the opportunity to unite ourselves to our Savior Who endured infinitely greater sufferings.

Some brethren in the desert asked a spiritual father to tell them which was greater, prayer or fasting, and the spiritual father answered that even if those who pray and fast were suspended by a hook in their nose, they could not equal the one who cares for the sick. Prayer, fasting and caring for others are all essential to the life in Christ. Let us strive not to allow opportunities to care for others to pass us by, because in the end we are allowing the Lord Himself to pass us by.

On the other hand, if we use each opportunity to care for others, in each instance we unite ourselves more closely to the Lord of our life and to His people. This blessing also is given in return to the one who have offended us, and it can even bring him to repentance.

Feasting in the Lord

I will confess Thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart, and I will glorify Thy name forever. (Psalm 85:11)

Feasting is an essential part of our life in the Church. Sometimes it is easier for us to fast properly than to feast properly. Feasting is the celebration of the glorious things that God has done for us and also the celebration of the lives of His saints and angels, who shine forth with His light, living in Him and serving as examples to us of the life in Christ, interceding for us and supporting us, going with us on the way to salvation.

True feasting, like true fasting, has its roots in the spiritual life. The bodily manifestation of feasting should reflect the spiritual joy we feel as we celebrate Christ's resurrection, His nativity, His baptism in the Jordan, His transfiguration, the dormition of the Mother of God, her nativity, her entry into the Temple, the lives of St. John the Baptist, St. Nicholas, St. George, St. Mary of Egypt, the Holy Prophets, the Holy Apostles, the Holy Martyrs, and many more events and innumerable saints.

Feasting is a rejoicing in the things of God and a participation in saving events and lives of His saints and angels. The most important part of it is uniting ourselves to God Himself and to His holy ones by partaking of Christ's Body and Blood. As we feast truly, God within us enlivens us, enlightens us and becomes a well-spring of joy within us. Because we are in the world we must struggle to keep the life in God protected from all the attacks of our own flesh, of the world and of the devil. If we are not vigilant, they will destroy our joy in God and replace it with fleeting pleasure, depression and despondency which many experience at times of celebration.

Probably the first attack on our joy will be a temptation to gluttony and even to drunkenness. While we may feel quite justified in overeating or drinking too much at celebrations, especially when we have fasted for a long time before the feast, the results of these excesses will again put the flesh over the spirit and put a quick end to our joy, subtly substituting worldly pleasure for joy in such a way that we do not even realize that we have ceased to celebrate as Christians and have begun to gluttonize as pagans.

As we continue through the feast, it is essential that we meditate on it, recalling the details of the wonderful things the Church is celebrating, and persevering in prayer, remaining at peace with all, being hospitable and generous and returning to fasting when it is prescribed.

Becoming a Member of the Church

So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. (Romans 12:5)

If you are not yet Orthodox and wish to investigate the Orthodox Church, then please speak with one of the clergy who can direct you to on-going classes of instruction in the Orthodox Faith. Know that you are welcome here and your sincere questions are welcome also. Reading further in this handbook will answer some of the obvious questions you may have, but the handbook does not attempt to cover the basic teachings of the faith. These can be investigated by further suggested readings and attendance at the classes of instruction just mentioned and, most important of all, by attendance at the Divine Services of the Church. If you wish to continue on the path to becoming an Orthodox Christian, a course of instruction will be given to you leading eventually to baptism and full membership in the body of Christ.

If you are already an Orthodox Christian and wish to be a member of this parish, please speak to one of the clergy about this. Becoming a member is first a matter of making known your intention. Membership is then a process of committing yourself more and more to the life in Christ: the life of prayer, fasting, spiritual struggle and vigilance, care for others and, in sum, the love of God and neighbor. To be a true member of the Church means to attend her Divine Services whenever possible, certainly never to miss without urgent necessity the services of the Lord's Day (Sunday) and the vigil on Saturday evening nor to miss the services for the great feasts and saints. Members of Christ commit themselves to love of brother, neighbor and enemy alike. Refraining from both judgment of others and from pushing forward one's own will is essential. Sacrificing time, talents and financial resources is a necessary part of being a member. Members serve God and their brethren by using their time and talents, working for the church. They offer a sacrificial amount of their resources for God's work in the Church. Membership is never occasional attendance at church just to put up a candle and grudging work or paltry donations to the church. Our goal is to grow *unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13)*

To be a "member-in-good-standing" of the parish requires as an absolute minimum:

- 1) To be a baptized/chrisdated member of the Orthodox Church;
- 2) To be at least twenty-one years of age;
- 3) To have confessed and communed at least once in the year;
- 4) To be attempting to live a Christian life;
- 5) To make and fulfill a financial pledge to the work of God in the church.

Please understand that this is an absolute minimum. The preceding paragraph is an explanation of what a true and sincere member of the church should be striving for.

This provides short explanations of various aspects of Church life. It will help the newcomer to understand the meaning and value of these outward expressions and experiences of life in the Church. It will enhance the knowledge of those who are already Orthodox Christians. All outward activities are manifestations of a God-given inward life. The outward expression without the inward reality is empty. Conversely, the inward reality requires an outward expression so that both together, the physical and the spiritual, work toward the ultimate transformation of the whole person, both body and spirit, in the new life in Christ.

Working in the Church

I have chosen rather to be an outcast in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of sinners. (Psalm 83:10)

It is a joyful thing to serve in the church, in the house of God. There are many ways in which we may serve, using the talents that God has given us. Some of the ways in which we can offer our talents and our service to God are:

- 1) Cleaning in the church: floors, rugs, tables, icons, candle stands, dishes, brass, windows, walls, etc.
- 2) Preparing coffee hour and other meals for brothers and sisters in Christ;
- 3) Caring for the church grounds: cutting grass, trimming, planting flowers and shrubs;
- 4) Assisting with the Divine Services by serving in the holy altar and reading at the services;
- 5) Directing and singing in the church choir;
- 6) Serving on the Parish Council;
- 7) Teaching Church School or other instructional courses;
- 8) Helping with written materials and publications, such as the Bulletin and the Newsletter;
- 9) Decorating the church with flowers and icons;
- 10) Repairing and maintaining the church buildings and equipment;
- 11) Mending and sewing vestments;
- 12) Visiting the sick and those in need;
- 13) Caring for those with special needs: the hungry, the destitute, the sick and those in trouble;

If you should know of anyone who is seriously ill, who is in the hospital or who is about to go to the hospital or anyone who is in dire straits, please inform a member of the clergy so that he can take the appropriate action. Visiting the sick and imprisoned, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked are all commandments of our Lord Himself, commandments that each must obey if he hopes to be called to the Lord's right hand at the Dread Judgment. As for the other duties, and those like them, it is important that each member choose those things he can do to serve God and his brethren in the church.

Tithing

Thou shalt truly tithe all the increase of thy seed, that the field bringeth forth year by year. And thou shalt eat before the Lord thy God, in the place which He shall choose to place His name there, the tithe of thy corn, of thy wine, and of thine oil, and the firstlings of thy herds and of thy flocks; that thou mayest learn to fear the Lord thy God always. (Deuteronomy 14:22-23) Saint John Chrysostom (4th century AD) made this comment in regard to tithing: *"For what did not they of old do? They gave tithes, and tithes again upon tithes for orphans, widows, and strangers; whereas some one was saying to me in astonishment of another person, 'Why, such an one gives tithes?' What a load of disgrace does this imply, since what was not a matter of wonder with the Jews has come to be so in the case of the Christians? If there was*

danger then in omitting tithes, think how great it must be now!" (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, volume XIII, First Series, page 69).

The tithe (one-tenth) was the standard for offering to God in the Old Covenant. It is evident from the passage above that tithes were brought to the tabernacle and later to the temple as an outward sign of the inward "fear of the Lord," that is, heartfelt gratitude, awe and belief in His ineffable power and in His merciful providence. The offerings were eaten in joy before the Lord by those who brought them, in company with the priests and levites who offered them in sacrifice to God. The offering is sent up before God, and He sends down His bounty to those who offer.

Saint John Chrysostom, a great hierarch and Church father of the fourth century, wrote that if the Hebrews brought a tithe as an offering in the Old Covenant, that we of the New Covenant, we who enjoy the fullness of God's blessings through our incarnate Lord, must certainly not neglect the tithe. What we actually do decide to pledge to the work of God in the church must be a sacrifice which comes straight from our heart, made in joy and gratitude to God, much greater than the joy and gratitude of those who feasted on the offerings brought to God in the Old Covenant. Our offerings, like theirs, sanctify all the rest of our resources, the part that we use for our day-to-day lives. The tithe does not diminish our resources but blesses them to cover all our needs. The offering to God is a commitment to use all the rest of our resources for His glory and for our well-being and ultimately for our salvation. After all, our resources came from Him and ultimately belong to Him; He shares them with us.

Each year the parish of St. Mary of Egypt has a pledge campaign, usually in December. At that time all members make a pledge to the church from their resources. The tithe, the old standard, is still a good standard to use in deciding what we will offer for God's work in His Church.

Icons

And He [Jesus Christ] is the head of the body, the Church: Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell. (Colossians 1:18)

Traditional Orthodox churches are covered with icons of the Savior, His most holy Mother, saints, angels, and depictions of sacred events. These icons serve to unite us to our God, to His holy ones, and to the events which are for our salvation. When entering the church, after the traditional reverences, we reverence the icons and offer any candles we have procured. When reverencing each icon, we cross ourselves twice, bowing deeply each time or making prostrations, and then kiss the icon and place our forehead on it, and then cross ourselves and bow deeply or prostrate once more. We should venerate the feet of the icon if they are showing; if not the feet, then the hands; if not the hands, then the right shoulder; but not the face. We may put candles in the candle stands nearest the icons of the Savior, His Mother or saints which we particularly want to invoke. This kissing of an icon (and placing our forehead on it) is both a sign of our veneration of the one or the event depicted on it and also a way of uniting ourselves to that one or to that event. We honor, or venerate, icons; we do not worship them. They are a

means to unite us to the person or the event depicted and ultimately to Christ Who shines forth in the lives of the saints and angels and all of the events that are for our salvation. The honor paid to the icon passes to the one or to the event depicted and ultimately to Christ Who is all in all.

Orthodox Christians also keep icons in their homes and businesses. We have a special icon corner, a “bright corner,” or a place where there is a concentration of icons. It need not always be a corner, but it should always be positioned so that those facing it are facing east, the direction of the rising sun and the direction from which the Lord came to us when He was born of the Virgin and the direction from which He is to appear when He comes to judge the world. There may be several concentrations of icons throughout the house, certainly at least one icon in each person’s bedroom, where he says his morning and evening prayers and prays at other times as well, for example, when he reads the prayers in preparation for receiving Holy Communion or when he prays about a special need. In the dining area there should always be one or more icons which we face when we pray before and after meals. In general, every room, except the bathroom, should have at least one icon, not forgetting to put one over the bed of any infant in the house. The icon(s) should never be part of a display of worldly pictures, but always separated from other pictures and specially honored. Often vigil lamps or candles are placed before the icons as a way of honoring them and symbolizing and encouraging our prayer.

If there are any questions about the proper arrangement of icons, the clergy in the church can always be consulted. It is good to have in the house at least icons of Christ, His Mother, and the patrons of each member of the household

Relics

And it came to pass, as they were burying a man , that, behold, they spied a band of men; and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha: and when the man was let down, and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet. (III Kings 13:21) And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: So that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them. (Acts 19:11-12)

Relics are parts of the bodies of saints or parts of their clothing, homes, sepulchers or other items identified with them. From earliest times contact with and veneration of relics have been associated with healing, with protection from harm and with obtaining those things which are for the salvation of those who honor them. As with icons, the honor given to relics passes on to the saints or events associated with them and ultimately to Christ Himself Who heals and blesses those who honor the relics of His holy ones. In churches, relics of saints are often embedded in their icons and pieces of the True Cross are often attached to a cross. We offer prayers to God and the saints before these relics and often kiss the containers in which they are held, kissing them and placing our forehead on them. These prayers with faith unite us to the saints who unite their prayers with ours to open the mercies of God for us. The saints are alive in God and they are able to strengthen us by their holy presence with us, leading us to God and standing with us before His Throne on high.

Relics, icons and holy objects must never be thought of as having magical properties or “energy.” They are imbued with the grace of God Who works through them, opening our hearts and raising up our faith so that we can receive His gifts of healing, of protection, of strength, of forgiveness, of salvation and of love. In God we are all alive and we are one in the Living God. This union with God’s holy ones leads us to union in Him and thus opens us to all that He wills for us. Obviously, He also reaches out to those not yet in the Church, but the ultimate goal of all His gifts to human beings is to unite us to Himself in His One Church, the Orthodox Church.

We reverence relics in the same way as icons. We cross ourselves and bow deeply (or make prostrations) twice, then kiss the relic and touch our forehead to it, and make the sign of the cross and bow deeply or prostrate a third time.

Incense

Let my prayer be set forth as incense before Thee, the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice. (Psalm 140:2)

Incense do we offer unto Thee, O Christ our God, as an odor of spiritual fragrance; accepting it upon Thy most heavenly altar, do Thou send down upon us the grace of Thy Most Holy Spirit. With this prayer the hierarch or priest blesses each censuring. Offering incense to Christ God we ask that He send down upon us the grace of the Holy Spirit: to purify, to sanctify, to protect and to lift us up in its clouds to Him. It is part of the worship of the Church uniting earth to heaven.

From earliest times incense has been offered to God as a sign of our prayer to Him. It is also a symbol of His presence with us and His blessing of us. Like candles, it represents both His love for us and our love and zeal for Him. The Law of Moses was very specific in its directives about the use of incense in the worship of God, and the Church has continued to use it in very special and specific ways. Normally, it is used as a sign of sanctification. The temple and the worshippers are sanctified at the beginning of worship and at significant times during worship. It is evident why we cense the saints and holy things, to honor them. The worshippers are also censed, both to sanctify them and to honor them as the people of God, each having within himself the image of God.

When we are censed, we bow (without making the sign of the cross) as a sign of humbly receiving the blessing. As the temple is being censed, we do not turn around in place and follow the censer, but merely turn toward it when we are censed and then turn back toward the holy altar. Throughout the Divine Services we stand facing east as we worship “the Orient (East) from on High,” Christ our God.

Dressing for Church

O Lord, I have loved the beauty of Thy house, and the place where Thy glory dwelleth. (Psalm 25:8)

The greatest joy in this life is the worship of God in His Church. It is most important that we prepare ourselves well for this joy. Preparing our spirit is, of course, the most important part of getting ready for worship. It is important that we say our morning or evening prayers and, when appropriate, our prayers of preparation for confession or for receiving the Holy Mysteries and that we be at peace with all before we come before the Throne of God. It is also important that we prepare ourselves physically before entering the church.

Pious dress reflects inner piety. Our clothes should be clean and respectful, not casual or flashy. They should reflect the honor that we have for “the place where Thy glory dwelleth.” Men and boys over seven should wear long pants and shirts with sleeves, long sleeves ideally, without any words on their shirts. T-shirts and shorts are not appropriate for church. Men and boys do not cover their heads. Women should wear dresses or skirts which fall below the knee and blouses or dresses with sleeves covering their shoulders and necklines close to the neck, again with no messages on them. Clothes and jewelry should never be ostentatious, and make-up should not be worn in church at all. Women and girls should cover their heads for worship and also for prayer at home. These standards for dress are part of the ancient tradition of the church and cannot be abrogated because of modern conventions.

When we come to church to receive the Holy Mysteries, it is most important that we be especially diligent in our preparation of soul and body. We are to receive the God of all into the temple of our body and soul, and we are to be lifted up to the very Throne of God to be united with Him Who sits on that awesome Throne of the Cherubim. We must be careful to wipe everything from our lips. Lipstick should not in any case be worn in church. If we have any medication on our lips, it must be removed before we approach the fiery Chalice.

It is important to follow these guidelines whether we are coming to the church for a service of worship or just to offer our private prayers to God. It also applies to cleaning the church or entering the holy precincts for any other reason. The whole church is holy; it is essential that we honor it at all times in soul and body alike. There should be no smoking on church grounds, and we should never leave any trash in any part of the church or on its grounds, always keeping “the beauty of Thy house.”

Coming to Church on Time

*I was glad because of them that said unto me: Let us go into the house of the Lord.
(Psalm 121:1)*

The Holy Apostle Paul has admonished us to do all “decently and in order” (I Corinthians 14:40). We must order our lives so that we always come to the Divine Services before they begin so that we can prepare ourselves properly for the services. If we are unavoidably detained, we should still come to the church and enter in such a way as not to disturb the service. Ideally, candles should be offered before and after the services, not during them. In any case, we must never disturb the worship of the Church. We should not move about the church but stand in one place with our arms to our side always ready to make the sign of the cross at the appropriate

times. We should remain in the church until the very end of the service and after venerating the icons leave quietly and with thanksgiving.

It is important that we be at church in time to offer candles and the names of those for whom we ask the whole Church to pray, that we venerate the icons and find our place and establish ourselves in it. We should arrive at church at least fifteen minutes before the beginning of services. In the case of the Divine Liturgy, which is preceded by the reading of the Hours, we should ideally come before the beginning of the Hours. We may, however, come during the reading of the Hours but in any case before the blessing at the beginning of the Liturgy: "Blessed is the Kingdom" If we have prepared to receive Holy Communion, it is essential that we be in church by this time. If we are unavoidably detained, and we hope to partake of the Holy Mysteries (Communion), then we must send a message to one of the priests asking for a special blessing to receive with an explanation of why we were late (traffic, illness, etc.). Under no circumstances may any adult who arrives in church after the reading of the Holy Gospel partake of the Holy Mysteries. In such a case, it would not be appropriate even to ask for a blessing to do so. When a hierarch celebrates, it is essential that the people be in the church to greet him when he arrives.

Entering and Leaving Church

And I shall go in unto the altar of God, unto God Who giveth gladness to my youth. (Psalm 42:6)

Having come in good time to the church we enter it with reverence, joy and thanksgiving. At the outer doors we make the sign of the cross and bow one or three times before the icon. Having entered the church we make the sign of the cross and bow again once or thrice before the icons over the inner doors. We then go to obtain candles and we may also submit the names of the living and the departed for whom we request prayers. Only Orthodox Christians may be put on these lists. At this time we may also obtain prospora, or memorial loaves, to offer along with the names. We leave these in the appropriate tray. We take our candles and make the sign of the cross one or three times with bows before the main doors of the church, called the Holy Doors. We enter and again make the sign of the cross three times with bows (or prostrations during weekdays of fasts) as we say: (1) Thou hast created me, O Lord, have mercy. (2) O God, be merciful to me, a sinner. (3) Countless times have I sinned, O Lord, forgive me. We then proceed to the icons and before each we make the sign of the cross twice with bows (or prostrations during weekdays of fasts), kiss the icon placing our forehead on it, and then make the sign of the cross with a final bow (prostration).

As we put candles for the living and the departed we pray briefly for each person by name. We may pray for the non-Orthodox as well as the Orthodox. We may also venerate other icons around the church. When we have finished venerating the icons, we find a place where we will stand during the service. It is essential that we keep a prayerful attitude during the entire service, keeping our hands at our sides always ready to make the sign of the cross. We should not talk at all during the entire service or during the reading of prayers following the service.

When we leave the church, we follow the order described in reverse. As we leave the church it is most important that we take with us into the world the grace of God which has been given us so that our lives may be sanctified and protected by it.

Offering Candles in Church

Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. (John 8:12) And again: Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

At Holy Baptism each of us is given a candle after he is clothed in the robe of righteousness, the white robe of baptism. Sometimes the priest will even say aloud the verse quoted above. The candle is a symbol of Christ, the Light of the world, Who enlightens us. It is also a symbol of our new enlightened life in Him, so symbolizing both Christ and us and our union with Him.

When we arrive at church, after we enter the outer narthex, one of the first things we do is make an offering and obtain one or more candles to place in the church as a sign of our prayer for ourselves or for others, both the living and the departed. Entering the temple and after making the sign of the cross with bows three times we go to the icons, and after venerating the icon(s) we go to the candle stands to offer our candles. We light each candle and place it in the candle stand saying a brief prayer for the person(s) we wish to remember, making the sign of the cross before and after the prayer. Candles for the living may be placed in any of the candle stands, except at the memorial table for the departed. Candles for the departed are usually placed at the memorial table of the departed or in the candle stand behind it, but they may also be placed in any of the other candle stands.

Candles should be offered before and after services, not during them. This is the ideal. It is possible to offer them at certain times during the services but not at times when it will be a distraction to others to do so, not during processions, entrances, readings from scripture, consecration of the Gifts, communion of the faithful, the sermon or the announcements.

The burning candles symbolize our fervent prayer for those we wish to remember before God. They also symbolize Christ Who gives light and life to us, to those we are remembering, and to all the world. Our prayer and our life symbolized by the candle become a channel of His grace to those for whom we pray, and in Him we are united to them. All of the candles burning together in the church are a sign of our union with all our brothers and sisters in Christ and with all humanity. All men are his children and, therefore, our brothers and sisters.

Often people ask if they may offer candles for the non-Orthodox. There are varying opinions about this, but the opinion of the writer of these words is that we may and should offer candles for them. By offering candles and praying for them we lead them before the Throne of God asking His mercy and guidance for them, that they be led to the Truth, Jesus Christ Himself, the Light of the world.

Memorial Lists and Loaves

Give rest, O Lord, to the souls of Thy servants who have fallen asleep. (From the Memorial Service)

Praying for others is one of the most important things a Christian can do. God uses us as channels of His grace for one another. Our prayer can help others throughout the world and in the world-to-come, both the living and the departed.

When we enter the outer narthex of the church, even before we go to get candles, we may offer names on lists to be prayed for at the Divine Liturgy. Praying for others at this most holy of the divine mysteries is the most effective prayer we can offer. We may write the names of the living on a sheet which indicates “for the health of” and for the departed on a sheet which indicates “for the repose of.” Only the names of Orthodox Christians may be put on these lists. The completed lists are left in the appropriate tray and are then taken by servers to the priest who is performing the Proskomedia, or Preparation, for the Divine Liturgy. The names on the lists are remembered before God and they are in this way united in the Divine Liturgy to their Lord and to us. The priest takes particles of bread for living and departed persons and places them on the discos (paten) below the cube of bread called the Lamb which will be consecrated as the Body of Christ. After the communion of the faithful the priest or deacon puts all these particles in the Chalice where they are immersed in the Blood of Christ, and he says these words, “By Thy precious Blood, O Lord, wash away the sins of those here commemorated, through the intercessions of Thy saints.”

Along with the lists, we may also make an offering and obtain prosphora (memorial loaves) to be included with the lists that are taken into the holy altar (the area behind the iconostas). We may offer one or more loaves, for the living and the departed. The priest will take particles and a triangle from each loaf in commemoration of all those on the lists. The loaves and the lists are then returned to the outer narthex to be taken by the ones who offered them. They may be eaten after the service or taken home to be cut into small pieces and dried, so that they do not mold, and a piece eaten each day with holy water before we have eaten anything else. In this case we take a piece of the holy bread into our mouth and drink three sips of holy water, “in the Name of the Father, amen, and of the Son, amen, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.” This is a blessing for the day and also a way to continue to remember those for whom we offered the loaf (prosphoron).

We may also obtain memorial books and write the names of the living and the departed for whom we regularly pray and submit these at the church before the Divine Liturgy either with or without memorial loaves. These memorial books may be kept at the church in the appropriate box or they may be kept by us and brought to church. It is important that the names on our lists and memorial books should be persons close to us for whom we ourselves pray regularly and that we not risk the sins of pride and false piety by writing a multiplicity of names.

Standing in Church

Praise ye the name of the Lord; O ye servants, praise the Lord, ye that stand in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God. (Psalm 134:1-2)

Standing is the normal Orthodox posture for worship. We stand as sons and daughters of the God Whom we worship knowing that He is God over us and that we are His children. Standing is the posture that gives us the greatest possibility of using the strength and effort required to worship God with all our being from the depths of our heart. Our hands should be at our sides always ready to make the sign of the cross at appropriate times during the Divine Services. There can never be talking during the Divine Services. *The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be reverent before Him. (Habakkuk 2:20)* It is essential that we exert our full strength in keeping our hearts and minds on the central task, that is, the worship of Almighty God, listening to the psalmody, hymns, prayers, readings and instruction with our full attention and with pure hearts inasmuch as it is possible for us. The physical brain which is wont to wander must be forced to do its duty, and we must employ our soul to bring it back time and again from its willful wanderings.

It is essential that we come to church in repentance and humility, having forgiven all who might have offended us, seeking forgiveness from all we have offended and rejecting our own will so that we can rightly discern the will of God. At appropriate times we should offer prayers for those who love us and those who hate us as well. If we remember a wrong, we should immediately determine to forgive it, asking God to help us to forgive completely. We must fight judgment of those both inside and outside of church, not allowing ourselves to judge another's behavior, how he lives, how he offends us, how he bows, how he makes the sign of the cross, how he prays. This is "the appointed time" to open our hearts to God and receive all that He wills for our life and for our salvation.

Children in Church

Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. (Mark 10:14)

How important it is that we bring our children to church every Lord's Day (Sunday) and Feast and to the Vigils the night before! They should know that being in the church is the most important part of their life. In a very real sense they, in their innocence, deserve to be in the church much more than any of the rest of us. It is essential that we teach them with the greatest care how to behave in church. Otherwise, they may come to think of the church as no more than an extension of their playroom.

From the very beginning children should be taught that the church is the most special place on earth, none other than the house of God. They should know for sure that they belong there. At the same time they must be taught that their behavior in church must be most special as well. They must not bring their toys there, because the church is not the place to play. They should not be allowed to sit on the floor for extended periods of time but only for a short time to give a rest to the very tired arms of a mother or father. Children should never be allowed to crawl on the floor and certainly never to walk about or to run in church. We may think that our children are cute when they do such things, but we have an awesome task in church, the worship

of God, and it must not be distracted even by the cute actions of children. Children at church should be with their parents at all times, and parents must be responsible for the safety and behavior of their children. If children persist in talking, crying, trying to run or crawl, they must be taken out until they can again take up the task of worship to the very best of their ability. During children's early years parents may often spend a lot of time in other parts of the church away from the services for the sake of good order. It is part of being a good parent, and God rewards our efforts in fulfilling this sacred responsibility.

Children should be brought regularly to Holy Communion. Their fasting and prayer rule should be discussed with the parents' father confessor as the children advance in years. Those who bring infants to Holy Communion should cradle their heads in their right arm and hold both arms and legs. Children coming by themselves should be taught to say their name clearly to the priest at the time of communion, cross their arms over their chest right over left, open their mouth wide to receive the Mysteries, and kiss the rim or base of the Holy Chalice, as the priest directs, after receiving. Pacifiers should be removed from the mouths of babies before receiving and not given again until after the baby has eaten something following communion.

Preparing for Confession

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. (1 John 1:9)

Those who wish to grow spiritually must make regular confession. Each day we should examine our lives at evening prayers to open ourselves to the forgiving love of God. Sometimes it is good even to make a written note of those sins we have committed that day so that we will not forget to confess them when we come to the father confessor. It is essential that we be completely honest with ourselves, with the father confessor and with God, and that we not try in any way to justify ourselves for the sins we have committed nor to blame anyone else for them.

As we prepare for confession we should try to remember all the sins we have committed since our last confession. We should also ask ourselves if we have neglected to confess any sin in the past because we had forgotten it or because we were ashamed to confess it. It is also helpful to use an "examination of conscience" prepared to help us to uncover all our sins. Such a leaflet is available upon request. There is also a more detailed book in our bookstore, *Confession: The Holy Mystery of Repentance*, which has an expanded "examination of conscience" and other materials helpful in preparing for confession. Those sins which we knowingly do not confess still have power over us and are obviously not forgiven.

Opening our life to ourselves requires real courage. Even greater courage is required to open it to God before the father confessor. This courage itself comes from God. We should pray to Him to help us confess all our sins and come to true repentance. Reading a Canon of Repentance before confession is very beneficial for this. We must keep in mind that the real purpose of confession is to lead us to repentance, that is, a change of heart which orients us once again toward God and His light and away from the Evil One and his darkness. After we have confessed our sins, we should thank God for His forgiveness and then have faith that God has truly forgiven us and strengthened us to sin no more. The sins that had power over us are rendered powerless. The "second baptism" that God gives us in the Mystery of Repentance

(Confession) once again empowers us to live the life that Christ taught us and showed us how to live.

The proper time for making confession is before or during the service the evening before we hope to partake of Holy Communion or at a time arranged with the father confessor. Sunday morning is not the proper time for confessions. Only the confessions of elderly persons and those coming from a great distance should be heard on Sunday mornings. At weekday Divine Liturgy it is possible to confess before the service but it is necessary to come at least half an hour before the beginning of the Hours (usually by 9:15 AM).

Preparing for Holy Communion

I will take the cup of salvation, and I will call upon the name of the Lord. (Psalm 115:4)

Receiving Holy Communion is the most important thing that we can do in this life. We are receiving Christ our God, in His humanity and His divinity, into our bodies and souls. It is essential that we prepare ourselves to the very best of our ability for this most holy event. To partake of this Mystery of our Lord's Body and Blood, we must:

- 1) Be at peace with all others, to forgive them and be forgiven if we have offended others or been offended by them;
- 2) Fast according to the Church's fasting discipline at least the week before (Wednesday and Friday, other fast days, or the entire week if it is one of the four fasting seasons);
- 3) Make our confession the day before, the day of, or a very few days before receiving Holy Communion, take a blessing to commune and complete any penance imposed, striving to keep ourselves at peace with God and men;
- 4) Attend the services (vigil, vespers/matins/first hour) the day before receiving;
- 5) Read all the Prayers of Preparation before Holy Communion, and the prescribed three canons and akathist (if the father confessor so directs) before receiving;
- 6) Fast completely from all food, drink and smoking from midnight of the night before receiving Holy Communion;
- 7) Refrain from marital relations the evening before receiving Holy Communion;
- 8) For women, be free of menstruation;
- 9) Come in repentance with fear of God and faith, crossing our arms right over left on our chest, opening our mouths wide with joyful expectation of union with God in flesh and spirit and kissing the rim of the chalice after receiving.

On the day that we receive the Divine Mysteries we must be on time to the Divine Liturgy. If we come late but before the reading of the Holy Gospel, we must send a message into the altar to ask for a blessing to receive. If we come after the reading of the Gospel, we must not commune or even ask for a blessing to do so.

We should prepare ourselves regularly to receive the Lord's Body and Blood. In the early years of the Church Christians often received daily. St. Basil the Great wrote in the fourth century that he received four times a week, that is, on Sunday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. Regardless of how often we receive, we must use the same diligence in preparing ourselves. We

must never receive carelessly, always acknowledging that we are uniting ourselves to the Living God.

Prayer Services (*Molebens*)

I have cried with my whole heart; hear me, O Lord, and I will seek after Thy statutes. (Psalm 118:145)

Prayer services, or *molebens*, are special supplications to God, often including an akathist (a structured collection of liturgical hymns in thirteen parts), imploring God, often through the intercession of saints, for special needs. One may ask a priest to serve a *moleben* with special prayers for the healing of those who are ill, for a blessing to find work, for guidance in making important decisions, for protection in travel, for relief in times of affliction, for protection from enemies visible and invisible, for pacification of enmity and for thanksgiving to God for His benevolence toward us. As with all other services only the names of Orthodox Christians are mentioned in church. Asking for or attending a prayer service demands that we ourselves be ready to pray fervently during the service, supplicating God and His saints from our hearts, with faith in His mercy to answer our prayers, being ready to submit to His will with the understanding that He may not give us what we want and at the same time trusting that He will give us and those for whom we pray all that is needed for salvation. Our efforts in cooperation with the grace of God are needed to gain His gifts.

Prayer services are not magical incantations to God or His saints to call down upon ourselves good fortune. They are ways to open ourselves to the gifts that God wills to give us. Through prayer to God or His saints and angels we stand before Him with open hearts. In the case of the prayer service to a saint, we ask the saint to intercede before God for us and become a channel of His grace to us. The saints and angels are in a far better state to pray with completely pure hearts and with all fervor and with faith, love and humility. The saints and angels also stand with us as we pray to God strengthening our faith and our prayer. Some saints are especially skilled because of their life experience in helping us to open our hearts and the channels of God's grace for His particular gifts. That is why we sometimes pray to specific saints for specific needs. Everything in the end depends upon God, for He wills that we make ourselves ready to receive His gifts.

The all-encompassing prayer of the Church is offered at the Divine Liturgy. Names of those in special need should always be submitted for prayer at the Divine Liturgy. At this supreme time of prayer all are lifted up to God. For this reason *molebens* should not be served after the Divine Liturgy but at other times so that we are not found guilty of having a lack of faith in the awesome power of prayer offered at the most glorious of mysteries, the Divine Liturgy.

Memorial Services (*Panikhidas*)

Praying for comrades who had fallen in battle Judas Maccabaeus and the faithful Jews with him “*turned to supplication and prayer that the sin they had committed might be completely blotted out.*” (*II Maccabees 12:42*)

One of the most loving things we can do for our departed loved ones is to pray for them. The most effective prayer we can offer for them is, of course, at the Divine Liturgy when they are united with us and with their Lord at the Holy Mystery of His Body and Blood. After the communion of the people the deacon or priests wipes all of the particles which commemorate the living and the departed into the Holy Chalice immersing them in the Blood of Christ, and he prays, “By Thy Precious Blood wash away, O Lord, the sins of those here commemorated, through the intercessions of Thy saints.” For this reason memorial services should not be served after Divine Liturgy but at other times.

It is, of course, good to commemorate our departed loved ones at memorial services, also called *panikhidas* from the Greek word for all-night, because the *panikhida*, or memorial service, is modeled on the All-night Vigil. We should submit names to be remembered at the general memorial Saturdays served often throughout the year (Meatfare, second, third and fourth Saturdays of the Great Fast, the day before Holy Pentecost, Saturday closest to St. Demetrius Day, at the feast of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, Saturdays during the Nativity and Apostles Fasts when a simple service is prescribed, and at certain other times). Names should be submitted well in advance so that they may be commemorated at the General Memorial Service on the evening before and on the next day at the Divine Liturgy itself. We should always remember a departed loved one on the third, ninth and fortieth day after his repose, and then at least yearly after that.

Only Orthodox Christians may be commemorated at memorial services. They must have died in the Faith; they must not have taken their own life. If they were cremated at their own request, they may not be commemorated at a memorial service nor can an Orthodox funeral service be held for them. If they were cremated without their consent, then we may commemorate them in church with funeral and memorial services.

A memorial service must be scheduled in consultation with the priest who will serve it. Memorial services should not be served on Sundays since Sunday is the day of resurrection. They are not served on the Twelve Great Feasts because our focus on those days should be on the salvific feast we are celebrating. They are also not served on certain other days. If the third, ninth or fortieth day should fall on one of these days, then we serve the memorial service on the closest appropriate day **before** that day. In preparation for the memorial service we may prepare *kutiya* or *kolyva*, rice or boiled wheat with fruit, which will be blessed at the service itself and eaten afterwards as a memorial to the departed we have commemorated. The grain represents the resurrection and the sweetness symbolizes the sweetness of eternal life. A memorial meal may also be prepared and offered after the service in commemoration of the departed. The meal whether at home or at church should be in accord with the fasting discipline of the day or season. We may also offer alms to the needy on behalf of the departed making a channel for God’s grace through this charity and through the prayers of the needy for the departed. Because the all-

encompassing prayer of the Church is offered at the Divine Liturgy, we do not serve memorial services immediately after the Divine Liturgy. They must be scheduled at other times.

Our prayers for the departed unite us with them and strengthen both them and us in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Source of all life. They are an important part of life in the Church.

House Blessings

And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up, and saw him and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house. (Luke 19:5)

The blessing of our home is a way of offering it and all our possessions to God, committing them to be used for His glory and for our salvation. Asking for our home to be blessed presupposes that we are ready to use the house and all that is in it in accord with His commandments; it is a commitment to try to live in every way as Christ has commanded us. Then the blessing protects and strengthens us.

There are two types of house blessings. If we are about to move or have already moved into a new house, or one that is new for us, and we plan to live there for an extended time, we may ask for the full blessing, called “the blessing of the foundation of a new house.” This blessing, done only once for a particular house, involves blessing the whole house with holy water, anointing the house with blessed oil on the inner eastern, western, northern, and southern walls, and finally censuring the whole house. The Gospel reading from St. Luke’s Gospel recounts the salvation of Zacchaeus and those in his household when the Lord visited his house. The second type of house blessing usually takes place shortly after Holy Theophany. It is a blessing of the rooms of the house with holy water with prayers for all in the house. It may be repeated many times, and it may be done at times other than around the feast of Theophany.

To prepare for these blessings a table should be covered with a clean tablecloth with an icon and a candle set in front of the icon so that when the priest stands before the table he will be facing east. All members of the household should be present and dressed appropriately as if going to church. Televisions, radios and other electronic audio and video devices must be turned off. If a meal or refreshments are served, they should be consistent with the fasting discipline of the day.

If any in the house are “living together” outside of Christian marriage, the house cannot be blessed. Some people think that having their house blessed is a way of getting “good luck” or being protected from “bad luck.” Orthodox Christians, however, do not believe in luck, a purely pagan superstition. To ask for a house blessing with the purpose of procuring “good luck” when we are not attending church regularly or while someone in the house is determined to live a sinful life is to invite the judgment of God rather than His blessing. If, however, we ask for the blessing with pure hearts, ready to take up the cross of Christ, trying earnestly to live the life He taught and showed us how to live, then it can be a powerful incentive to persevere in our Christian commitment and a protection against the attacks of our ancient enemy, the devil.

A Day in the Life of a Christian

Let my mouth be filled with praise, that I may hymn Thy glory and Thy majesty all the day long. (Psalm 70:7)

A Christian begins and ends his day with prayer. Arising he makes the sign of the cross and says, "This is the day which the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad therein" (Psalm 117:24) or "Glory to Thee, our God, glory to Thee" or some other exclamation acknowledging that God is over all. Then shortly he says his morning prayers, and checking the calendar he reads from the scriptures, notes his fasting discipline for that day; if time permits he reads the lives of the saints of the day saying a short prayer to them and then with hope and complete trust in God he begins the day. If it is Sunday or a Feast Day, he prepares himself and goes to church.

As he goes through the day, working, studying, walking, driving, resting when necessary, the Christian brings God to mind, thanking Him and being in awe of His majestic glory, recalling the wondrous things He has done for his salvation, imploring forgiveness for his sins, praying for others, asking for strength to accomplish all he needs to do and the grace to overcome the temptations which will inevitably come, trusting that nothing happens without God's approval, asking His blessing for every task, keeping in his heart the Prayer of Jesus: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Not a minute should go by, and certainly not an hour, when he does not remember God.

As he deals with others the Christian keeps in mind the teachings of our Savior. He approaches others with an open and compassionate heart, not with suspicion and judgment. He is honest and generous in all his dealings, preferring to be offended himself rather than to risk offending anyone else. If he has the opportunity, he helps anyone who approaches him in need, not making excuses or justifying himself for refusing to help, trusting that God will always give him the means for helping any who come to him. The Christian immediately forgives any who offend him, blessing them and praying for them. He takes humiliations as a medicine against pride, thanking God for them but he never humiliates others.

At the end of the day the Christian prays the evening prayers and examines his conscience opening himself to God's forgiveness for any sins he may have committed. He never seeks to justify himself. Before getting into bed he makes the sign of the cross praying, "Into Thy hands, O Lord Jesus Christ my God, I commit my spirit. Do Thou bless me, do Thou have mercy on me, and grant me life eternal. Amen."

Invitation to Take Up the Cross

Then said Jesus unto His disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

All who are members or future members of St. Mary of Egypt Orthodox Church are invited by the Lord of the church to take up the cross and follow Him. This is an absolute requirement for anyone who calls himself by the name of His Savior, that is, "Christian."

What does it mean to take up the cross? It means first that we believe with all our heart that Christ, our God and Savior, has freed us from sin and death by His ineffable sacrifice upon the Cross. We unite ourselves to Him on that Cross through Holy Baptism which empowers us to live the life He showed us, to take up our cross and follow Him. As we go through this life we will encounter many difficulties, sufferings, pains, disappointments, frustrations, even horrors, and finally death. The Cross of Christ makes it possible for us to endure these troubles and death itself as we put all our trust in the God-Man Who was crucified on it, knowing that He bears them with us and for us, carrying us through them and using them to help us on the way to salvation, our salvation and the salvation of others. In the end we must be willing to give up everything, including our very lives, to remain with Him on His Cross and to be taken up with Him in His Resurrection. He is our life, our joy, our strength, our salvation; He is everything to us. He calls us to die to ourselves and to live in Him and in communion with one another. If we are not willing to give up our will, our pride, our desires, our possessions, our very lives, then we are not worthy of Him and can have no part in Him. When we come to the Church pushing our own will, our own agenda, with our own pride, then we put up a wall between ourselves and God, and our paltry and misguided efforts then become meaningless.

As sincere and committed members of the Church we will come as often as we can to the Divine Services. We will come with open hearts in humility, not demanding what we want but asking humbly for the gifts of God, knowing that we do not deserve them. We should never approach the Church with the intent of using her mysteries and then going our own way. Instead, we should approach humbly, wanting to serve God and others by becoming part of the saving fellowship of the Church and in turn receiving the gifts which God wills for us to have. This is why the clergy insist that those who want baptisms and weddings in the church must first start attending the church so that they can be prepared to receive the mysteries they desire and that in the end they will become zealous members of the Church, working with God for their own salvation and supporting others in this most important work.

As we go forward in the Christian life, let us help one another in all possible ways, pushing some ahead of us and dragging others behind us. As members of His body God has made us brothers and sisters, related even more closely to one another than to our own blood kin. *Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess: the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit: the Trinity, one in essence and indivisible. (The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom)*

We will end with these words from *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, written in the seventh century by St. John, Abbot of the Monastery of St. Katherine at Mt. Sinai. St. John called this “a brief exhortation summarizing all that has been said at length in this book,” a book which is a veritable textbook for the Christian life.

Ascend, brothers, ascend eagerly, and be resolved in your hearts to ascend And hear him who says: Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of our God, who makes our feet like hind’s feet, and sets us upon high places, that we might be victors with His song.

Run, I beseech you, with him who said: Let us hasten until we attain to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of God, unto a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, who, when He was baptized in the thirtieth

year of His visible age, fulfilled the thirtieth step in the spiritual ladder; since God is indeed love, to whom be praise, dominion, power, in whom is and was and will be the cause of all goodness throughout endless ages. Amen.