OUR PATH

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LIVING AS A CHRISTIAN

As Christians we are called to live in the light of the great gifts we have received. We enjoy the gift of life from the hand of God our Creator and the gift of eternal life in Christ:

“Out of nothing You brought us into being, and when we had fallen, You raised us up again. You have not ceased doing everything until You graciously gave us Your future Kingdom”
(Liturgy of St John Chrysostom).

Three elements interact at the heart of our Christian life: grace, faith, and works.

- **Grace**: The source and basis of our life in Christ is God’s gracious concern for us, the sheer gift of His love for mankind, which He gives to us unearned.

- **Faith** is our saying “yes,” our enabling God to grace us, our accepting of God’s gift, allowing Him to be generous to us.

- Our **good works** do not merit God’s love for us, or even earn more of it. They are our response in gratitude for what He does for us. Having been adopted into God’s family, we are responsible for managing what we have been given.

**Synergy is the interplay of these three elements**: God’s initiative for loving us, our acceptance in faith, and our responsible management through works. God does not force His love on us: He offers it. We must accept His love openly to receive it, and then care for it responsibly to keep it. No one of these elements without the other defines the Christian life. All three together produce the fullness of God’s life in us.

**God’s Free Gift**: God gifts us with His life despite our weaknesses and failings. Though spiritually dead, we have been raised in Christ and exalted in glory with Him:

“God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”
(Ephesians 2:4-7)

**Our Active Response**:

- **We believe** that God is calling us to be divinized in Christ, by being united with Him through the Holy Mysteries.

- **We respond** in a “public life” of worship, fellowship and service in the Church and in a “secret life” of prayer, fasting and sharing in the depths of our hearts.

- All the while engaging in a “spiritual warfare”: the life of repentance.

“For we are what He has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:10)
Deification

Our life as Christians is guided by the belief that we are called “to become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). We are invited to live the very life of God and to become intimately related to Him. This seems too daring an expression for many people, but the Spirit of God is daring in the vision it sets for us as we travel on our path. Our closeness to God is described as that of branches with the vine (John 15:4), comparable to the union of the Father and the Son (John 17:22-23).

“In Christ the fullness of deity resides in bodily form. Yours is a sharing of this fullness, in Him who is the head of every principality and power” (Colossians 2:9-10).

We can approach the Unattainable God with the intimate confidence of children to their abba/Father (Romans 8:14-17). It is with this confidence that the Fathers affirmed, “God became man so that man can be made divine.”

This was God’s plan from the beginning. And so the human race was:

- **Created in God’s Image and Likeness** (Genesis 1:26-28) – capable of living in harmonious relationships with others; like the Trinity, in whose image we are.
- **Fallen, but Recreated in Christ** – “Through the fall our nature was stripped of divine illumination and resplendence. But the Word of God had pity upon our disfigurement. In His compassion He took our nature upon Himself, and on Tabor He manifested it to His elect disciples clothed once again most brilliantly. He shows what we once were and what we shall become through Him in the age to come, if we choose to live our present life as far as possible in accordance with His ways.” (St. Gregory Palamas)
- **Gifted with Eternal Life** – even now, by being physically united to Christ and to have the Holy Spirit dwell within us through the Holy Mysteries.

“What is this mystery all about me? I had a share in the image; I did not keep it. And now He partakes of my flesh that He may both save the image and make the flesh immortal. He unites with us in a second way more marvelous than the first.” (St Gregory the Theologian, Oration 33:12).
BAPTISM: A NEW BIRTH

The Lord Jesus called us to personally share by baptism in His recreation of our nature:

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above ... no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (John 3:3,5).

In our physical birth we became children of this broken world. We live in a broken world, one whose allegiance has been split, whose integrity has been fragmented. There is no way we can escape being touched by this world of sin: "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me" (Psalm 50/51:5).

We need to be healed, to be made whole again. Baptism begins this process of recreation for each of us. We are born again in the baptismal font, the "womb of the Holy Spirit":

"As the womb is to the embryo, the water is to the believer."

(St John Chrysostom)

A Death and Resurrection

Baptism is our personal Pascha: in it we die to this world and are resurrected anew in Christ. We "act out" our death by being "buried" in the water and being "raised up" from it again:

"Our head is plunged in the water as though in a tomb. The old man is buried and completely drowned. When we emerge from this water, the new man is risen from the dead." (St. John Chrysostom)

In baptism we encounter Christ in His victory over death – the result of His union with the Father. His entire self was filled with divine life. And so death – the absence of life – found no home in Him. "It was impossible for Him to be held by it" (Acts 2:24).

Christ, the Victor over death, offer us His new life in the Mystery of Baptism if we submit our old self to die with Him (Romans 6:3-12).

"When you are baptized, it is not by the priest that you are baptized, but it is God who touches your head with His invisible power" (St. John Chrysostom).
Baptism: A Picture of Our Life in Christ

Our celebration of Holy Baptism shows us what the Christian life is meant to be:

1. Lived in the Church – “Enroll him in Your book of life and unite him to the flock of Your inheritance” (Reception of a Catechumen)

Not solitary Christians, we are members of God’s People: the Body of Christ, the Fellowship of the Saints, empowered to worship “in spirit and truth.”

2. A Rejection of Evil and an Acceptance of Christ – “Do you renounce Satan, all his works, all his angels, all his services, and all his pride – Do you unite yourself to Christ?”

We make a personal commitment to Christ, which we confirm whenever we approach the Eucharistic Table.

3. A New Creation – “Strip her of her old self and renew her to eternal life; in the unity of Your Christ, fill her with the power of Your Holy Spirit, so that she may no longer be a child of the flesh, but rather a child of Your kingdom” (Prayer at Profession of Faith).

We are citizens of God’s Kingdom. We look to Jesus Christ as Lord, the real ruler of our lives. We are called to follow His ways and prepare for the day of His coming.

4. Armed for a Struggle – “Bless also this oil through the power, action and descent of Your Holy Spirit so that it may become an unction of purity, a weapon of justice” (Prayer of Anointing)

We are called to stand firm in the struggle against “the rulers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12).

5. Confidence in Our Father – “May [this water] be a bath of regeneration, a renewal of spirit, a gift of filial adoption, a garment of incorruption, and a fountain of life” (Blessing of the Water).

We are born anew as children of God: “You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:15-16).

6. Clothed in the mind of Christ – “All of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

We “have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed [ourselves] with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:10). We are meant “to be renewed in the spirit [of] [our] minds, and to clothe [ourselves] with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:23-24).
CHRISMATION

Chrismation is our **Personal Pentecost**. We receive “the first of God’s gifts” (Romans 8:23): the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As in Baptism we share in Christ’s death and resurrection, so too in Chrismation, we share in His anointing with the Holy Spirit. We become:

- **Other Christs** – Anointed with holy chrism, we share by grace in what Christ is by nature, anointed with the Holy Spirit.
- **Members of God’s Royal Priesthood** – “...in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9) through worship and service.

All that we received at conception is consecrated in chrismation to the service and glory of God our Father and to a servant ministry to one another in the name of Jesus Christ.

> “Having been baptized into Christ and having put on Christ, you have become like the Son of God. Because God foreordained us for adoptive sonship, He has made us like the glorious body of Christ. Rightly, then, do people call you ‘chists’ since you share in Christ ... Yes, you have become chists by receiving the mark of the Holy Spirit.

> “When Christ bathed Himself in the River Jordan ... the Holy Spirit really rested on Him. ... He was chrismated with a spiritual oil of gladness: the Holy Spirit, who is called the oil of spiritual gladness. You too have been chrismated, and that makes you sharers and associates of Christ.”

> (St Cyril of Jerusalem, Third Mystagogical Catechesis 21:2-3)

**Chrismation: A Picture of Our Life in Christ**

1. **Members of Christ’s Priesthood** – **By the coming of Your Holy and adorable Spirit, Lord, make of it a garment of incorruptibility, a perfect seal that imprints on those who receive Your divine bath the right to bear Your godly name and that of Your only-begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit so as to be known by You as members of Your family ... becoming Your own people, Your royal priesthood, Your holy nation, stamped with the seal of Your spotless chrism**” (Prayer at the Consecration of Chrism).

2. **On a Path to the Kingdom** – The newly illumined is led in procession from the baptistery to the church (or at least around the font) amid lighted candles to represent our journey to the Father, as members of His People, guided by the light of Christ.
THE EUCHARIST

Following our baptism and chrismation we begin to taste the heavenly bread and the cup of life of the Eucharist – the body and blood of Christ – which we receive as our essential nourishment. We are invited to receive Holy Communion regularly so that our soul and body may be physically and spiritually healthy, as we live on earth yet already taste of the eternal Kingdom in heaven.

“If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53)

In the Eucharistic banquet we encounter Christ who is our Host and our Food. He is:

- **The Bread of Life** – who nourishes us through His saving word in the Gospel and through His Body and Blood in the Eucharist.
- **The Passover Lamb** – “sacrificed for the sins of the world, He who is the life and salvation of the world” (Rite of Preparation).
- **The Eternal Priest** – who offers Himself to the Father and enables us to join Him in this oblation.

The Divine Liturgy –

In our Eucharistic celebration we join the generations of Christians who have passed before us in experiencing this encounter with Christ. We meet Him in three distinct ways:

- **Christ Gathers Us into One** – The Body of Christ assembles as we sing antiphons, troparia, litanies and hymns to manifest our unity with and in the Head of the Body.
- **Christ Enlightens Our Minds** – We hear Psalms sung, New Testament Scriptures read, and the Church’s faith explained, “so that ... we may begin to live according to the Spirit” (Prayer before the Gospel).
- **Christ Transforms Our Whole Being** – by granting us to share mystically in His eternal oblation. In this mystical supper we receive forgiveness of our sins from the One who takes away the sins of the world. One in the communion of the Holy Spirit, we experience a taste of the eternal banquet, a foretaste of the worship of heaven.

“And so with full assurance let us partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, for in the form of bread His Body is given to you, and in the form of wine, His Blood so that – by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ – you may be made of the same body and blood with Him. This is how we come to bear Christ in us: because His Body and Blood are distributed through our members. Thus it is that, according to the blessed Peter, we become partakers of the divine nature” (St Cyril of Jerusalem, *On the Mysteries*, IV, 3).
The Eighth Day

In the early Church the week after baptism was one of special celebration; it would end on the Eighth Day with the removal of the baptismal garments. Today this is sometimes done at the end of the baptismal ceremony. The priest prays: "Preserve pure and undefiled the garment of incorruption with which You have clothed him, keeping intact in him the seal of the Spirit by Your grace..." "Maintain unassailed the pledge of the Spirit and make her worthy of eternal life and of Your favor."

At our baptism we proclaimed our faith, we died to this world and were resurrected anew in Christ. We receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in Chrismation and began our heavenly life on earth with the Eucharist as food for the journey. Every day we are called to:

- **Discovery** of all that God has entrusted to us.
- **Ownership** of His gifts by accepting them as the basis of our new life.
- **Gratitude** to God for the abundance of His trust and love.
- **Use** of all that has been entrusted to us in service to God and to one another.

"Become what you are. Find Him who is already yours. Listen to Him who never ceases speaking to you. Own Him who already owns you." (St. Gregory of Sinai)

We are called to **work in harmony with God's grace** that we may mature in the ways of the Kingdom. Each day challenges us to seek to discover as much as possible of all that has been entrusted to our care at birth and recreated when we were united to Jesus Christ.

We best express our gratitude to God by "committing ... our whole life to Christ God" who has renewed it. This is the meaning of the last symbol in our initiation, the "first offering" cut from the hair of the new believer.

"Let us offer ourselves, the possession most precious to God and most fitting; let us give back to the Image what is made according to the Image. Let us recognize our dignity; let us honor our Archetype; let us know the power of the mystery and for what Christ died. Let us become like Christ, since Christ became like us. Let us become gods for His sake, since He became man for ours" (St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration 1:4,5*).

"You have been baptized, enlightened, chrismated, sanctified, and cleansed in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."
A PEOPLE WITH A PURPOSE

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9).

In the Mystery of Chrismation we were sealed as members of God's People, a People with a Purpose: to be His priesthood, to proclaim His mighty acts of redemption and recreation. We are fully ourselves as Christians only when we are acting as His People.

“To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (Revelation 1:5-6).

The priesthood of God's People is a common ministry: we are not each our own priest offering separate gifts to God. We are members of the Body of Christ, the High Priest, who offers the only gift capable of uniting us to God: the gift of His own blood. In the Divine Liturgy we are connected with the Head of the Body as He offers His eternal gift to the Father in the heavenly sanctuary. We add our voices to the heavenly powers in praise of God and our prayers to those of all the saints worshipping at the throne of God.

As members of His royal priesthood we:
- Exercise a body-ministry —as the Body of Christ, not as individual priests.
- Join the heavenly powers and all the saints in the praises of God.
- Unite with Christ the High Priest as He offers Himself to the Father.

“During the oblation the whole Church – in heaven and upon earth, the Church of the first-born inscribed in the heavens and the Church militant fighting against the enemies of salvation upon earth – is represented typically as assembled around the Lamb, who took upon Himself the sins of the world. What a great spectacle, enrapturing and moving the soul! It is possible that I too am a joint heir with the saints, if I remain faithful to the Lamb until death. And are not all my brethren, too, members of the future kingdom? ...We are the children of God... heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” (St John of Kronstadt)

Become what you are: a member of the royal priesthood by:
- Discovering the riches of the Church's worship tradition.
- Ownership of this tradition by accepting it as the basis of our daily life.
- Gratitude to God expressed in offering the sacrifice of praise.
- Use of your priesthood in service to God and intercession for one another.
Christ is our High Priest

He is appointed by the Father — “So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’; as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek’” (Hebrews 5:5-6).

He is our priest at the heavenly altar — “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 6:19-20).

He is like us in all things, except sin — “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

He is our eternal priest — “He holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:24-25).

He calls us together in the house of God — “Since we have a great High Priest who is over the house of God, let us draw near in utter sincerity and absolute confidence, our hearts sprinkled clean from the evil which lay on our conscience, and our bodies washed in pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to our profession which gives us hope, for He who made the promise deserves our trust. We must consider how to rouse each other to love and good deeds. We should not absent ourselves from the assembly, as some do, but encourage one another; and this all the more because you see that the Day draws near” (Hebrews 10:21-25).

We fulfill our priesthood in Christ when we:

- Participate actively in the Church’s worship — Vespers, Matins, the Divine Liturgy — especially on the Lord’s Day and the Feasts of the Church Year, adding our voices to the praises of the saints and our Amen to the invocations of the priest.

- Support the participation of others by using our particular gifts as a cantor, a choir member, an altar server, or a greeter. Arrange flowers, design church decorations, beautify the church grounds.
LIVING IN THE BODY

Going to church for worship is one element in living as a Christian. Being church means making an active contribution to the Church’s life, being a vital organ in a living body.

The first step in being church is being connected to others in our parish by:

- **Cultivating community** in the “fellowship of the Holy Spirit.” Get to know one another in a more than casual way.
- **Treating others as brothers and sisters in the family of God in Christ.** Give others the time and attention we would give to our blood relatives.
- **“Above all, clothing yourselves with love,** which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:14).

We nurture the relationships in the parish or the eparchy when we:

- **Share our lives** – Authentic fellowship calls for more than coffee-hour courtesies. Grow to the stage when you can share your troubles as well.
- **Learn together** - Take part in adult formation, retreats, or workshops to encourage others as well as to improve our own spiritual life.
- **Work together** - Join in parish projects or committees to support the work of others as well as to make our own contribution. “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith” (Galatians 6:10).
- **Encourage each other** – by supporting their efforts, praying for their concerns and building them up in the eyes of others. “Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10).
- **Bear one another’s burdens** – Be accepting of the weaker community members. There is no “perfect” church: every parish is made up of “saints” who are sinners, each with their own weaknesses and infirmities. “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).
- **Admonish one another** – Do not shrink from confronting “family members” who are hurting others by promoting conflicts, pettiness, or legalism. “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted” (Galatians 6:1).
- **Protect the unity of the church** – by avoiding gossip or cliques, and speaking ill of others.
- **Restore broken relationships** – when they occur by admitting our faults. No project or program is worth harming the family’s inner life. “If anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:13).
Serving as Christ Served

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ... After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:3-14).

Christ calls us to imitate Him in His commitment to service. Christ came “not to be served, but to serve” (Matthew 20:28). He put aside His heavenly glory to serve us. Washing His disciples’ feet was a graphic image of how Christ emptied Himself for us.

Corporal or physical works of mercy extend Christ’s compassion to the needs of this world.

- Feeding the hungry
- Giving drink to the thirsty
- Sheltering the homeless
- Clothing the naked
- Visiting the sick
- Visiting the imprisoned
- Burying the dead

“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Hebrews 13:3).

The spiritual works of mercy are aspects of Christ’s priestly ministry, extending His work for our salvation into our day:

- Admonishing the sinner
- Instructing the ignorant
- Counseling the unsettled
- Consoling the sorrowful
- Bearing wrongs patiently
- Forgiving all injuries
- Praying for the living and the dead

“You should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20)

Remember: Christ served us from within, becoming one of us to serve us. If we are called to serve as He did, our first step must be to see those whom we are serving as truly our brothers and sisters.
We Are Gifted for Service

“For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness” (Romans 12:4-8).

• Like parts of the body, we all serve a different function in the Church. The body is not all eyes or all arms. We all have our own particular service to offer.
• Ministry is not only for Church “professionals.” Their duty is to prepare all of us for ministry. “It is he who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to prepare all God’s people for the work of service, to build up the Body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11).
• Our individual gifts are not given for ourselves, but so that we might serve the Body. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7).

We need to unwrap our gifts: find out what talents for ministry God has given us.
  • Has your family life prepared you to be a foster parent or a big brother/sister?
  • Have your office skills prepared you to be the parish webmaster?
  • Has a tragedy in your life giving you compassion for the sick?
  • “The only thing I can do is cook!” – Is God hinting that you should help in a soup kitchen?

Still not sure? ... Learn by Doing:
➢ Begin serving as opportunities present themselves. If you are not suited to a particular ministry, you will come to know it.
➢ If you are where you belong in ministry, you will see your role confirmed by others.

We should strive:
1. To discover our own gifts, not envy the gifts of others
2. To avoid resenting others who do not have the same commitment to or interest in the particular service to which we are called.
3. To discern whether we are truly serving the community or we are serving ourselves in the guise of serving others.
4. To continue growing in the use of our gifts through training programs and spiritual enrichment opportunities, such as retreats.
OUR PERSONAL PRAYER

"Enter eagerly into the treasure-house that lies within you, and so you will see the
treasure house of heaven: for the two are the same, and there is but one single entry to
them both. The Ladder that leads to the Kingdom is hidden within you and is found in
your own soul. Dive into yourself and in your soul; you will discover the rungs by which
to ascend."

(St. Isaac the Syrian)

Our path to God is a process in which we are being divinized: given to share in the divine nature.
It begins in the Holy Mysteries of Baptism and Chrismation and is nourished in the Mysteries of
the Eucharist and Repentance. We “become what we are” in the Church through a “public life”
of worship, fellowship and service; and in the depths of our hearts through a “secret life” of prayer,
fasting and sharing – all the while engaging in a “spiritual warfare”: the life of repentance.

Our Personal Life in Christ

The Christian life is meant to be one of ever-deepening communion with God: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the
only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3).
We affirm the communal side of this relationship in the Church. We
worship together, support one another and serve in the Body of Christ.
We recognize a more personal dimension of our life with God through
prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Without a personal relationship with God, our liturgical worship tends to become more tedious and
our interaction with others less easily endured. Fueled by an intimate communion with the Lord, our
public activities are energized and reflect this living relationship with Him.

God deals with each believer in a personal way, so our relationship with Him is traditionally expressed
in ways known only to God and our elder or spiritual guide. With the help of such a person – most
commonly a priest, monk or nun who deeply knows God from personal experience and who knows us
and our life’s challenges – we learn to grow in our life with God through exercises of Christian living
appropriate to our circumstances and spiritual development.
In our personal prayer we consciously express the personal bond we have with God by:

* **Formal prayers** compiled in prayer books over the centuries and expressing what believers
  have learned about communion with God.
* **Spontaneous prayer** expressing our feelings and needs of the moment with the confidence of
  a child of the Father.
* **Unceasing prayer**, through the Jesus Prayer, to remind us that we are continually in the
  presence of God.
* **Wordless Prayer**, expressed in reverences, prostrations, honoring the icons.
All prayer, whether communal or personal, expresses one of the following sentiments:

- **Adoration** – We acknowledge the glory of God, recognize His greatness, and confess His holiness. “We praise You, we bless You, we adore You, we glorify You, we give thanks to You for the splendor of Your glory” (Great Doxology).

- **Contrition** – We admit our unworthiness in the presence of the Holy One like Simon Peter: “Depart from me, Master: I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8) or the Publican in the parable: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13).

- **Thanksgiving** – We express our gratitude for the gifts of life and for the gifts of eternal life: “for all the blessings both known and unknown, manifest and hidden which have been lavished upon us” (Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom).

- **Supplication** – We ask the Giver of all good gifts for our needs, as He taught us: “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

We are urged to set aside **specific times for prayer** in the midst of our daily activities: “In the evening, in the morning and at midday we sing to You, we bless You, we give thanks to You…” (Vespers Prayer). Determine with your spiritual guide the best time to observe your **Rule of Prayer** (the minimum daily prayer which you commit yourself to observe) according to your family or work responsibilities and your personal disposition (early riser, night person). Then resolve to give God the best part of the day He has given you.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

How can we pray without ceasing? Early Fathers developed the method of continually repeating a brief prayer, such as the **Jesus Prayer**, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner,” until it becomes part of a person’s subconscious. Frequent repetition of this prayer, which is both adoration and contrition, can bring us to the continual remembrance of the presence of God, once the name of the Lord Jesus descends into the depths of the heart. Discuss with your spiritual guide how best to enter into this prayer.

“I implore you, brethren, never to break or despise the rule of this prayer. A Christian when he eats, drinks, walks, sits, travels, or does any other thing must continually cry: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.’... Do not estrange your heart from God, but abide in Him; and always guard your heart by remembering our Lord Jesus Christ, until the name of the Lord becomes rooted in the heart and it ceases to think anything else” (St John Chrysostom).

Remember:
- **Listening** is the first step in communication: “listen” to God speaking in Scripture as part of your rule of prayer.
- God **always answers** prayer; sometimes the answer is “No” or “Not yet.”
- Authentic prayer **supposes that we forgive** one another: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive...”
FASTING IN OUR LIFE

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus discusses the most basic spiritual practices of His day: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. He tells us to “pray to your Father in secret” (Matthew 6:6), and to act in such a way that “your almsgiving may be secret” (Matthew 6:4). And He also tells us how to fast:

“When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.” (Matthew 6:16-18)

Jesus Himself fasted for forty days before beginning to teach, as Moses fasted for forty days before proclaiming the Ten Commandments to the people. The Church continued the practice from its earliest days. The Apostles fasted before appointing presbyters (Acts 14) and people were directed to fast before baptism: “Before a baptism, let him who baptizes and him who is baptized fast, and any others who may be able to do so. And command him who is baptized to fast one or two days beforehand” (Didache 7:4). This second-century instruction also instructs all believers to fast twice each week, on Wednesdays and Fridays.

What Is Fasting?

Fasting simply consists of not eating or drinking anything for a specific period of time. Christians fast before a special encounter with God, as in the Eucharist.

During fasting seasons, people may fast for a certain part of the day – until noon, for example – and then, when they do eat, eat only the “Food of Paradise” (the fruits of the earth given for our use according to Genesis 1:29) and avoid animal products (meat, fish, dairy) and alcohol, which appear only later in Biblical history.

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; they shall be your food.”

(Genesis 1:29)
Fasting becomes a **burden** when people focus on the negative elements: not eating, or avoiding certain foods.

Fasting becomes **uplifting** when people concentrate on its positive aspects:

- It **anticipates encounter with God**, saying that “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).
- It affirms that **our true nature and purpose is communion with God**, given in Paradise along with the fruits of the earth. “*Let us enter a second Paradise, full of the virtues of the holy Ascetics. Let us taste with joy the living and life-giving fruits which grow there, and with faith let us sing their praises.*” (Matins, Saturday of Cheesefare)

### When Should We Fast?

From the earliest days of the Church, Christians have fasted before Pascha, as well as on every Wednesday and Friday, remembering the betrayal and crucifixion of Christ. Traditionally our Church observes the following fast periods:

- **Every Wednesday and Friday** (except during the weeks immediately following Pascha, Christmas, Theophany, the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, and Pentecost);
- **The Great Fast** (forty days before the Great and Holy Week);
- **The Great and Holy Week** (commemorating the Lord’s Passion);
- **The Christmas Fast** (November 15 through December 24, although some Churches shorten it, beginning on December 10 or 12);
- **The Fast of the Theotokos** (August 1 to August 14);
- **The Fast of Peter and Paul** (the day after All Saints Sunday through June 28).

Some of these Fasts are marked by **special liturgical services** that convey the spirit of the season. Attending them helps us acquire the spirit of the feasts for which they prepare.

### How Should We Fast?

To enter into the spirit and practice of the Church’s Fasts:

- **Learn the current practice of your own Church** community and strive to practice it. Each self-ruling Church has its own traditions about how fast days and seasons should be observed.
- **Consult with your spiritual guide** to determine how to make the fast most fruitful for you in your current spiritual condition. Your spiritual guide may set for you a rule of minimum observance, without which you may be missing the whole blessing of the fasting season.
- **Recognize that we are called to fast spiritually as we fast bodily**, putting aside all resentments and hurtful attitudes towards others so that our fast may be an acceptable offering to God.
- **Above all, give Jesus lordship over your entire being**, so that you may receive His gifts and live to your fullest potential in His grace and in the light of His Face.
ALMSGIVING: SHARING WHAT WE HAVE

"Prayer and fasting are good, but better than either is almsgiving accompanied by righteousness" (Tobit 12:8).

The third fundamental practice mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount is almsgiving. The word alms comes from the Greek word for mercy. Giving alms, then, means showing mercy to those in need of it. Almsgiving is, first of all, a matter of attitude.

Our practice of almsgiving is based on three fundamental principles:

- **Everything we have comes from God and remains God’s.** Nothing that we are or that we have is really ours. Everything is a gift, “on loan” from the Giver of all good. As St John Chrysostom wrote, “Our money is the Lord’s, however we may have gathered it” (On Wealth and Poverty).
- **Every gift of God is given “for the good of all”** (1 Corinthians 12:7). Our material goods as well as our individual talents are not meant to be hoarded but shared. St. Basil the Great said, “The bread you do not use is the bread of the hungry. The garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of the person who is naked. The shoes you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot. The money you keep locked away is the money of the poor. The acts of charity you do not perform are the injustices you commit.”
- **The gifts we have received include what is sufficient to cover the necessities of life and an abundance over and above that for almsgiving,** that “we may abound in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8). The Church’s prayer for Christian families is based on this distinction: “Fill their houses with wheat, wine and oil, and with every good thing, that they may give in turn to them that are in need” (first prayer, Mystery of Crowning).

Alms includes gifts of money, but is not limited to it. People may need money, food, or clothing; but they may also need direction, referrals, hospitality, or just a sympathetic ear. Christian almsgiving is basically a giving of oneself to the other in the name of Christ. “...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

For Almsgiving to Fulfill God’s Purpose in Our Lives we need:

- **To recognize what life’s necessities really are** and what are luxuries. We may find ourselves called to simplify our lifestyle to carry out God’s will for us.
- **To make almsgiving a priority in our life,** setting aside resources “off the top,” rather than hoping we have left overs to give or waiting for “our ship to come in.”

How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action (1 John 3:17-18).
The Practice of Hospitality

The most revered exercise of almsgiving in the Christian East is practicing hospitality: opening one’s home or parish to strangers. It is the sharing of who one is and what one has with those whom God has sent our way. Recalling the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18), the Scriptures tell us, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2).

*Hospitality is Not* — hosting one’s friends and relatives:
“For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” (Matthew 5:46-47)

*Hospitality is* — greeting the outsider and making them welcome in the Lord’s name:
“Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward” (Matthew 10:42) In monasteries and many homes visitors are first greeted with a glass of cold water, and perhaps a cup of coffee and a sweet to fulfill this command of Christ.

“...Even if you have only bread or water, with these you can still meet the dues of hospitality. Even if you do not have these, but simply make the stranger welcome and offer him a word of encouragement, you will not be falling in hospitality. Think of the widow mentioned in the Gospel by our Lord: with two mites she surpassed the generous gifts of the wealthy” (St. Theodore of Edessa).

Welcoming visitors to your home — You can make your home a place of hospitality to:
- **Students**: become a sponsor for summer visitors, or sponsor a foreign student at a local university.
- **Hospital visitors**: register to host out-of-town relatives visiting patients at your local hospitals or nursing homes.
- **Church personnel**: extend hospitality to visitors from churches abroad.

Welcoming visitors to your parish — When strangers visit your church...
- Would they be made to feel welcome?
- Would something make them uncomfortable?
- Would someone offer them a service book, holy bread, or refreshments?
- Would anyone introduce them to other parishioners?
- Would anyone invite them home for dinner?

➤ *Remember: Almsgiving is “God’s business,” no one else’s* —
“When you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:2-4).
A LIFE OF REPENTANCE

The traditional milestones on our Christian Path – both the public practices of worship, fellowship and service as well as the secret practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving – can become routine and even killing without an underlying spirit of repentance.

Repentance is not –

- **Gloomy** - “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death” (2 Corinthians 7:10). “Worldly grief” looks backwards at missed opportunities and sees no hope. “Godly grief” looks forward to the forgiveness and love of God. “Repentance is the daughter of hope and the renunciation of despair” (St John Climacus).

- **Simply the “first” step of the Christian life** – Turning away from a life of sin and turning toward God is *initial repentance*. Ongoing repentance is a continuing process: “the rest of our life spent in peace and repentance.” We are not people who *have been* converted, who *have* repented. We are people who *are being* converted, who *are* repenting.

> “Repentance, rather, provides the abiding and formative structure of the whole life in Christ.”

Repentance is –

- **Realizing That Our Way Is Far from God’s Way** – Ongoing repentance means that we grow to see how much our thoughts, actions, and values are the product of a broken world and far from God.

  Abba Dioscorus was once found weeping by a younger monk. When asked why he did so, Dioscorus replied, “I am weeping for my sins.” The young monk knew Dioscorus had led a valiant and holy life for many years, and said, “My father, you do not have any such sins.” Dioscorus told him, “Truly, my child, if I were allowed to see my sins, three or four men would not be enough to weep for them” (Sayings of the Desert Fathers).

- **Continually Redirecting Our Way of Life** – Despite this sense of separation, there is a gentle but intense joy, because “The kingdom of God is in your midst!” Ongoing repentance means that we come to reject the indifference to God typical of modern life. It means that we strive to live each moment conscious that the Holy Spirit “is everywhere present and fills all things.” It means that we change from seeking self gratification, our natural human tendency, to seeking after God.

- **Showing Forth the “Fruits of Repentance”** (Matthew 3:8) – Our lives show more focus on the things of God. We become more committed to following the Christian Path every day. We see the presence of God in the people and circumstances of our lives which we have missed before.
We Do Not Walk Alone

There are many expressions of repentance in the Tradition, many practices to engage in, many books to read – how do we know which are right for us at the place where we find ourselves today?

We rarely do – and so the Christian seeking to walk the Path needs a Spiritual Guide, to serve as a navigator assisting us along the way. This Guide should be one:

- **Who Knows Us** – Our strengths, our weaknesses, the road we have traveled. This Guide may be, but need not be, the priest who hears our Confession.
- **Who Knows the Tradition** – The teachings of the Church, the practices of the Holy Fathers, the pitfalls others have encountered on the journey. Monks or nuns are often the most adept as Spiritual Guides.
- **Who Walks With Us** – The ideal Spiritual Guide does not simply advise us, but shares the burdens of our life in prayer and fasting.

“Today I received your letter and once again I weep and mourn. Once again I shall lay down my life for you... Anyway, no matter what happened, we shall not despair. I shall also repent together with you... Not just for forty days, but for a hundred and forty days shall I gladly fast for you, keep vigil and toil with you.” (From a letter of Joseph the Hesychast, +1959, to a spiritual son)

If we seek to “become what we are,” our lifetime of efforts will lead us to discover the unlimited blessings of God that are already part of our being from our baptism and chrismation. Baptism united us to Christ in His death and resurrection; we live this by embracing the asceticism of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Chrismation gave us a share in Christ’s priesthood, anointing us with the Holy Spirit; we live this by exercising the gifts given us in service. To the extent that we are faithful to this Path, we too will receive the “crown of glory” bestowed upon all who are true disciples of Jesus Christ during this life.

“And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.”

[1 Peter 5:4]