

# Practical Tips for Orthodox Living

Excerpts from *The Shepherd*

## General Tips

THE FOLLOWING "TIPS" were prepared by Mother Pelagia of Lesna Convent, who prefaces them with the remark: "Orthodox families must train their children from a very early age to acquire proper Orthodox traditional religious habits...." Her first tips are:

- 1) Prayers are said morning and evening, either together as a family or individually.
  - 2) The customary prayer is sung by the family before a meal, and a prayer of thanks afterwards.
  - 3) On entering a room where there is an icon, cross yourself before it and say a brief prayer.
  - 4) When leaving one's dwelling, make the sign of the cross over the door and pray for its protection.
  - 5) On seeing a priest, abbot or abbess or Bishop, immediately go and ask a Blessing, When phoning them, emailing or writing to them, always ask their blessing. (Bless!, Your Eminence...or Your Blessing, Father!...Mother Abbess, Your Grace!)
  - 6) After Evening prayers, make the sign of the cross over your bed and pray for protection during sleep.
  - 7) When you hear of anyone's death, immediately say a prayer for their eternal memory.
  - 8) If discussing or planning the future say: "As God wills."
  - 9) If you offend or hurt anyone, say as soon as possible, "Forgive me," always try the blame yourself.
  - 10) If something turns out well, say "Praise be (to God)."
  - 11) If something turns out badly, if there is pain, sickness or any kind of trouble, say "Praise be to God for all things," since God is all good and, though we might not understand the purpose of these things, undoubtedly they have been permitted by God
  - 12) If you begin some task, say, "God help me," or if someone else' working: "May God help you
  - 13) Cross yourself and say a brief prayer before even the shortest journey by car.
  - 14) For a longer and more difficult journey, ask a priest to sing a Molieben, failing that, at home say the troparion and kontakion for a journey.
  - 15) If there is a possibility of future trouble of any kind, either for yourself or for someone you care for, say an Akathist to the Mother of God.
  - 16) When you receive a blessing after prayer, always remember to thank God; if it is a small thing, you may add a prayer of thanksgiving to your daily prayers or make an offering. For matters of greater importance, ask the priest to serve the Thanksgiving Molieben.
- But NEVER neglect to give thanks.

## Preparing for Confession

WHENEVER POSSIBLE, make sure that you allow sufficient time for your Confession. Conditions in the Orthodox diaspora, where people sometimes live far from a church, are difficult, and often we find people cannot get to church except on the day of their receiving Communion. They are thus unable to come—as they normally would—to Confession before or after the Vigil on the previous evening. This is understandable and most sensible priests will allow for this. But if this is the case, come particularly early on the day itself. Do not expect to arrive just before the advertised time of the Liturgy or even when the Hours are already being read (when likely as not a dozen others will have done the same) and expect that the priest will have time properly to hear your confession. At that time usually he has other things to do in any case. This results in a very brief Confession—in which the priest barely has time to read the prayers and you have time only to mention a couple of things—, and all with a feeling of being rushed. This going through the outward motions of Confession will not help you much and may even be harmful to you spiritually. If it is impossible for you to come the day before, then arrange to see him sometime earlier in the week, when you can confess unhurriedly, even write your confession in a letter, and on the day itself just come to bring him up to date or hear his advice. Better still, rather than just "going to Confession" when it is required, develop a relationship with your pastor whereby he gets to know you, and you discuss things with him as a normal part of life. Then you will need less time actually in Confession. Also if you have a car, remember that there are others who rely on public transport or on lifts from friends and might have a more difficult time than you have in getting to church for Confession. Come earlier so that you can be confessed before those who have no way of getting there when they would like to, and thus might have to leave their confessions to the very last moment. Remember the old and the infirm too, who perhaps have not the strength to come early and stay long in church. Remember the priest who is hearing your confession and the strain you put on him. There is little point in coming to Confession if in the very act of doing so you are being inconsiderate of others—perhaps abusing the leniency of your pastor—and thus sinning! Incidentally, some think that you only go to Confession as part of the preparation for receiving Communion. This is not so. You may go to Confession at any time that you feel it is needed, whether or not you are preparing to receive the Holy Mysteries.

ALL ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS know the importance of Confession in their spiritual lives. However, there are practical aspects which we tend time and time again to forget, and the following might help some people. First of all, make a proper preparation before you come to confession. Examine your life, and to help in this you may use the 10 Commandments, the Beatitudes, the list of the eight principle passions, the lists of sins in the daily prayers especially those before sleep. If necessary, write out a list and bring it with you to confession. In confessing, try to be brief and concise and, although sometimes necessarily explaining the circumstances of a particular sin, refrain from excusing yourself or confessing the sins of others. *Some people like to tell a good story—this is not necessary. Some preach sermons in confession (the best are at least self-condemnatory) but this too is not the purpose of confession—let the confessor do that if necessary.*

THE MODERN WORLD TRIES TO PRETEND THAT SIN IS A MYTH and that personal accountability for one's actions before a just God is merely a quaint superstition. As Orthodox Christians, we are called to a different standard than that of the world. This has been true of Christians in all ages and is especially important in our times. We are called to be the "light of the world" and the "salt of the earth." This means that we must not only be vigilant in how we live, but we must be honest with ourselves and respond immediately to God's call to repentance when we fall short of the mark. When we approach God in a spirit of humility and repentance, Confession can bring us face-to-face with ourselves. We can learn more from our weaknesses than we ever will from our strengths, because acknowledgment of weakness is the shortest path to humility. As Abba Sarmatias said: "I prefer a sinful man, who recognizes his fault and humbles himself, to a self-complacent man of virtue." The most absurd notion that many people cling to in these times is the idea that no matter how selfish, vain, egotistical, and immoral they may be, they really are quite "good." This is a destructive delusion. Let us see how we might better examine our lives to see what the real truth about ourselves is.

OFTENTIMES MANY PEOPLE COME TO CONFESSION AT ONE TIME—on the eves of Great Feasts, etc.—this is good and commendable, but it also makes being concise and to the point even more desirable. The priest may have to hear a dozen or twenty or more confessions, others will be waiting their turn—be considerate of him and them. If you need to come only on the day of the Liturgy at which you wish to receive, then come before the service begins, and not at the last moment when the Hours are being read. Also let the priest know beforehand when you will be coming, so that he will have some idea what to expect and will not suddenly be confronted by a queue of people wanting confession minutes before the Liturgy is to begin.

PROPERLY, THE CHURCH DOES NOT ALLOW the faithful to come to confession during the Divine Liturgy, but in the circumstances we find ourselves in the diaspora this is sometimes unavoidable. People travel long distances to church; they are unable to come the evening before, and so confessions are sometimes heard just before Communion itself. If this is the case with you, please bear in mind that this is a special concession, do not abuse it, and remember the following things: a) then it is even more desirable to be brief, such a concession does disrupt the Liturgy, and the other worshippers in church have to wait for you; b) only use this concession if it is absolutely necessary, if it is quite impossible because of infirmity, old age, or distance to come another time; c) if you are not hoping to receive the Divine Mysteries at that Liturgy, do not come to confession at that time, rather ask the priest to hear your confession after the service, so that you do not cause an unnecessarily long disruption of the Divine Service; d) if you have some personal difficulties or some particularly troublesome problems in your spiritual life, and need to discuss them at length, then arrange to come at some other time, perhaps for a talk as well as confession, and only use the concession of confessing during the Liturgy for a brief "brush-up" before receiving the Mysteries. Otherwise, at the very time of confessing and while hoping to be absolved of your sins, you might find you are adding to your sins by not showing love and consideration for your confessor or for your brothers and sisters in Christ waiting in church.

#### **Avoid Making Excuses**

BEWARE OF MAKING EXCUSES either to yourself or to / for others. In the psalm that we chant every evening at Vespers, "Lord, I have cried" (Ps.140), the psalmist inspired by the Holy Spirit identifies excuses with "words of evil," praying, "Incline not my heart unto words of evil, to make excuse with excuses in sins" (v.4). The excuse comes very close to an explanation which is of course permissible, but it does not have the honesty of an explanation, and it fails to be an apology. It has in it an element of deviousness—it is admitting that it has done wrong without really admitting it. Such an approach is of course not Christian and we see why the psalmist likens it to "words of evil," because its very dishonesty and deviousness are works of the evil one. To make an explanation is very useful at times; for instance last week we had a couple phone up and say they would not be at church on Sunday because they had flu. This is straightforward, an explanation. Particularly in a small congregation, where one tends to worry about people who are inexplicably absent, it is a great help. An apology falls after the event, and contains not only a straightforward confession of the fault but a request for forgiveness, and this is of course excellent and of the essence of the Christian life. The excuse might come after the event, or even more shamefully before it, and it is an attempt to deceive. There are several things most clergymen will have noticed, being almost continually subjected to excuses: a) they do not convince in any case; b) they are often made repeatedly, because the offending person is unable to unburden themselves of their guilt by such "words of evil," c) they are very often addressed to the wrong person. One often finds habitual excusers, making their excuses to all and sundry, whether their hearers have any interest in the matter or not. In such a way they seem to spread a knowledge of their sin or their supposed sin. In many cases this can be sadly amusing. How many times, for instance, does a pastor have to hear an excuse for someone not attending church? And

yet the excuse is directed to the wrong person in such a case. Naturally the pastor is concerned for his flock, and suffers some hurt when he sees that they are not trying to live as they should; but it is not he who is the one primarily hurt if someone does not come to church. He has his Liturgy, he has the children whom the Lord hath given him, however many or few that might be. The Church herself is not diminished—she has all the fullness of Grace. God is not diminished. The person hurt is the one who makes the excuses—they have lost out on attending church and the benefit it might bring them. They obviously feel some guilt about it and have to bear that, and they have been trapped by the author of "words of evil," the father of lies, to make excuses. So, give an explanation if it is helpful; certainly always make apology for what you have done wrong, but avoid excuses like the plague!

### **Sundays: The Minimal Obligation**

A SIMPLE THING to bear in mind (but a fundamental one for anyone who wants to live as an Orthodox Christian): Sunday is the Lord's Day. It, and the major feasts, are days on which we should go to church. Nowadays many people seem to be under the impression that going to church is an option on Sundays, and nothing more than that. (They do not even think that it is an option on other days of the week.) Sometimes one hears excuses for not coming—"I had so much to do!" and the like,—but there are no excuses from this base-line commitment. These are not excuses but admissions of sin. Church attendance on Sundays is not simply one of several options. It is essential for our spiritual well-being. In fact, Sunday church attendance and attendance on the Twelve Great Feasts is so essential for us (not for God, not for the priest, not for the parish community, but for our own spiritual lives), that even if we are away from home, on holiday, or travelling, we should make enquiries, find a church, and try our best to attend a service on these days. Of course, occasions do occur when we are prevented from going to church; but then, rather than just dismissing it, we should make a special effort to read the Scriptures and services at home, still to keep holy the Lord's day. This is particularly important for those who have the responsibility of bringing up children. Also, if through necessity you have missed a Sunday Liturgy, try to attend on some other day in that week. If we consistently neglect this, we shall find that the neglect becomes habitual and will quickly spread into other areas of our spiritual life, resulting in our becoming one of the saddest of all the creatures on the face of the earth—a nominal Christian, i.e. a spiritually dead Christian.

### **Do Not Be Habitually Late**

NATURALLY IT IS BETTER to go to church for part of the service rather than omit it altogether, but one should avoid making coming late habitual, as many Orthodox Christians seem to consider a quite normal and acceptable practice. Habitually coming late, if it can be avoided, is an insult to the Lord in Whose house we are guests. It is also disturbing to the other worshippers, setting a bad example for them. One would not go to a concert, a play or a sports event for only the last fifteen minutes. Nor, if invited to a dinner at a friend's house, would one turn up at the end of the meal as a matter of course. So why do we treat God in this way, and then expect His blessings? Try by all means to be present from the start of the Divine Services and to attend to them. Very often, we are phoned by people inquiring about the services—and we know other clergy are as well—and asked not only when the services begin but also—and it seems more importantly—when they end. Except on days when one might have other commitments, this should not be one's first consideration; and certainly it should not be a way of trying to calculate when one should arrive!

### **Paying Attention During the Services / Language Issues**

THIS MAY SEEM SIMPLISTIC ADVICE, but it is nonetheless something which we all very often forget and it can bear spelling out. When in church, attend to the words and actions of the divine service. Often in church we find our thoughts drifting, we sometimes become bored or tired by services which are admittedly long. But the remedy is not to seek for some distraction, or come for ever shorter portions of the services, but to apply ourselves to listening to what is being sung or said. This is especially important in the portions of the service proper to the feast or commemoration of the day, such as the canon in Matins. These portions can tell us so much about our Faith. By beginning to listen comprehendingly—and it is to remind us of this necessity, after all, that the priest or deacon so often exclaims, "Wisdom" or "Let us attend"),—not only will we find our interest is engaged, but our souls and minds will be nourished by the teaching contained in the services. Some might argue that this is not always possible, because in many churches the services are conducted in languages they do not readily understand. In which case, you do not have to do nothing. You have four positive courses of action: a) to follow what you can with a book in your own language; b) (if a sizable number of you share a need in this regard) to make your needs known to the pastor (who after all has the care of your spiritual well-being) and ask that at least some of the service might be in your language; or c) to find a church where the services are in a readily understandable language; d) make an attempt to learn the liturgical language of your church. This last idea might not seem very practicable; and of course peoples' abilities with regard to learning languages vary considerably; but it is an odd thing that people will try to learn foreign languages when going abroad for a two-week continental holiday, and will invest quite a lot of effort and money to do so, but the same people will "happily" stand in church and daydream Sunday after Sunday for years on end, without giving a thought to learning at least something of the language used. The present writer has done this, and remembers when he first started attending services in Slavonic some thirty years ago, that for about four years it did not even occur to his minute mind that one could learn to understand the language of the services! But it can be done. You may never learn much, but you will find encouragement in beginning to understand more and more. Paradoxically it seems often to be those who are born into Orthodox families and traditions who most often seem to entertain the soul-destructive idea that the services are not to

be understood—I expect our non-Orthodox readers will be shocked by such a thought, but it is prevalent, and would that all the Orthodox were shocked by it too. If you want to try and learn the liturgical language, ask help and advice of the pastor or the readers, and more particularly ask help from the heavenly choir of Saints.

### **Talking in Church**

WE MUST REFRAIN FROM ALL TALKING IN CHURCH, unless absolutely necessary. Most conversations can wait until the Faithful are outside God's Holy house. Talking becomes a distraction to everyone else, including the Priest. It is necessary for everyone to pay close attention to every word during the Divine Services. We also must refrain from any physical contact with one another, hugging, holding hands or leaning on one another. *This is something that we perhaps all need to read through again and again, and take to heart.* But we must also remember to be careful about talking AFTER the church services (*before* is not usually so much of a problem as there are so few people there!). When the service ends, often people immediately break into conversations. They thus commit two wrongs: they dishonour the house of God, wherein even when our services are over, the holy things remain and the prayer of the Heavenly Church continues; and they immediately lose what spiritual benefit they might have received in the time of prayer. It is as if one has a bath and then immediately rolls in filth. Of course, after we have left the church itself we should greet our fellow-worshippers and talk to them. If there is an opportunity to eat with them—or at least have a cup of tea with them, as happens in many parishes—, this is good too. It helps us to grow together as a church family. But in doing so we should still carefully hold fast to what we have received in church lest we lose it, making our return journey home having profited nothing.

### **The Importance of Communing Children**

PARENTS ARE USUALLY AWARE that from the age of seven, children should be brought to confession before receiving Holy Communion. In the Russian Church this is a strict ruling, in other national Orthodox Churches it is a guideline date as children vary immensely in their maturity and capabilities. In both instances it is helpful to talk with your children about it first and to talk with the priest before presenting them for their first confession. Maybe also arrange for him to talk to them with you, so that they are not anxious when they come for confession for the first time. However, it should also be emphasized that just because children are required to go to confession above this age, they should nonetheless be brought to Holy Communion no less frequently than previously. The reception of the Holy Mysteries is important for a child's spiritual growth and it is no less important after seven! Very often one notices that until they are seven children are brought perhaps even weekly to Communion (and this is commendable and something all Orthodox parents should try to do), but from about seven on parents bring their children less often for Communion. By the time they are in their teens, when perhaps they most need the anchor of confession and the contact that that gives them with their pastor, they are infrequent communicants, and so in their adult years, if they do not altogether lapse, they quite naturally descend to the widespread but deplorable custom of only receiving the Holy Mysteries on a few occasions in the year.

### **On the Use of Antidoron**

MOST ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS are aware that one should keep a strict and complete fast from midnight before receiving the Holy Mysteries, but one should also receive holy water and the antidoron (the blessed bread given out at the end of the Liturgy) fasting. If, as many do, you keep a supply at home, use a little each day to break your fast, when you have said your morning prayers and before eating anything else. If you are attending the Divine Liturgy, then keep a fast until the service is over (as in any case one should) and you receive your antidoron from the priest. If for some reason, you have eaten when you attend the Liturgy, then take the antidoron home as a blessing and consume it on another day, thus showing reverence for the things of God and the blessing which this bread has received.

### **Praying at Home**

WHEN SAYING YOUR PRIVATE PRAYERS, either alone or with the family, always stand before the holy icons, sitting only if you are aged, infirm or ill. Some, it seems, think that to read one's prayers, one sits as if reading a book, but unless absolutely necessary this is not a good practice. Our outward deportment effects our inward disposition. If we sit and read our prayers as if we are sitting and reading a novel or a work report, we will not bear in mind that we are coming before the Lord in prayer. At best we shall be just getting through our "prayers." There can be few of us, at least among readers of this magazine, whose prayer-rule is so protracted that they need to sit down through it.

WHEN PRAYING AT HOME before your icons, take some time to look at them. This might seem obvious, but particularly when we are reading a Prayer Rule, the Prayers Before Sleep, or the Preparation for Reception of the Holy Mysteries, to our shame we are often so determined simply to "get through the prayers" that our eyes are glued to the book and we never for a moment look up at the icons. Looking at them will remind us before Whom we stand and Whom we are addressing, and it is itself edifying and spiritually nourishing.

### **Making the Sign of the Cross**

THIS MONTH, we have the festival of the Holy Cross, and so it seems a good time to remind the faithful how to make the sign of the Cross reverently. First of all, we should always remember that in making this sign we are making an act

of worship, a confession of our Faith and a prayer, and therefore it should not be done carelessly or thoughtlessly, nor simply a matter of habit or nervous reaction. To make the sign, first join the tips of the thumb, index finger and second finger of your right hand, while folding the other two fingers into your palm. Recollect that the three joined digits represent the Three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The two folded fingers are an expression of that other fundamental teaching of our Church, the Incarnation, for folded into the palm (the earth) they recall God the Son Who came down to earth and became man and is known in two natures, being both perfect God and perfect man. With the hand held thus, make the sign over yourself by touching in turn the forehead, the stomach, the right and the left shoulder. In this way taking up His Cross, dedicate your whole being to Christ in fulfillment of the commandment to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy strength and with all thy mind." Having done this, you then bow from the waist. Oftentimes this bow is slight, but sometimes during divine services we bow deeply to touch the floor with the fingers (now extended) of the right hand, or even make a full prostration to the ground, touching it with the forehead. This bowing reminds us of the attitude of the Publican, who feeling his unworthiness to stand before God, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven. The touching of, or prostrating to, the ground, can remind us of our end, that "dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return" (Gen. 3:19). With such dispositions and such reverent care, our making of the sign will indeed be a call for God's mercy. Perhaps we should add one warning: although it is right and proper to make the sign reverently and with care, bearing in mind its rich significance, we should try to avoid doing it theatrically or demonstratively. No one in this life who sees you will be awarding prizes for the way you do it! And in the life to come, you will find that the Awarder of Crowns will have been looking rather at the disposition of your heart than your melodramatic talents.

### **Body Position While at Prayer**

WHEN STANDING IN CHURCH or during prayer at home, you will find it easier if you stand straight, with your feet a little apart and bearing your weight equally. As soon as you begin to shift the weight from one foot to another, or to lean or "relax" your posture a little, you will not only find that you can less easily pay attention (and therefore inevitably will find the service more tiring and boring), but you will find it physically more tiring. Also one should stand with one's hands at one's side so that one's hands are ready for spiritual combat, ready to make the sign of the Cross. One striking the nonchalant pose of a spectator rather than a participator in worship, will inevitably adopt the attitude of a spectator too.

The important thing is to recognize that our bodily positions both affect and reflect the attitude of our heart; and to not stand in such a way as to give a place to sloth, inattentiveness, or irreverence is wholly improper. Incidentally, all sources firmly agree that it is unacceptable for one to stand with hands behind the back, to sit with crossed legs in church (if you have the occasion to sit), or to lean against any part of the church (for the walls, pillars, etc. of the church are holy, and leaning is too casual and relaxed a position).]

### **On Prostrations**

DURING THE WEEKDAYS following Pentecost we begin again to make prostrations in church. Some have asked when these should be made. In some parishes, three full prostrations are made when one first enters the church, although that is not a custom we keep here. In some churches prostrations are made on Saturdays; in others they are not. Our custom is generally not to make them on Saturdays. This follows the pattern which is set in Great Lent, when prostrations are appointed at various points during the Monday-Friday services (the days when "Alleluia" is sung at the beginning of Matins), but not on Saturdays. Outside of Lent the times when one should make prostrations are less rigidly defined. However, the following guidelines might help if you are in doubt:

During the Divine Liturgy, prostrate to the ground at: 1) "Let us give thanks unto the Lord" (the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer); 2) at the end of the hymn, "We hymn Thee, we bless Thee" (after the consecration of the Gifts); 3) at the end of the hymn to the Mother of God; 4) before the "Our Father;" 5) at "The Holies are for the holy;" 6) when the Chalice is brought out at the words "With fear of God;" and 7) (if one has not taken Communion) at the presentation of the Chalice at the words, "Now and ever." One can make prostrations when venerating the relics and icons, and at other times during the service when you feel moved to do so. When the unconsecrated gifts are brought out at the Great Entrance, the Russian practice is to refrain from prostrating lest it seem that we are offering adoration to the unconsecrated bread and wine; however the Greeks generally see no difficulty in prostrating at this point as well. Those who have received a blessing to enter the altar / sanctuary, whether it be during the service time to serve, or outside of service time, should—if they have not already done so—make three full prostrations to the ground, bow to the High Place, and then bow to the senior clergyman present and ask his blessing. They should bear in mind the sanctity of that place, and that in entering there they are being granted something not permitted to the greater number of the believers, but only to those whose service as ordained ministers requires them to be there, or who have otherwise received specific permission from the Bishop or their parish priest.

[*Webmaster note*—The guidelines for prostrations outside of the sanctuary will undoubtedly vary from parish to parish, country to country. As always, use your head and consult the priest if you are uncertain about what to do. As a general rule of thumb in unfamiliar circumstances—and especially when you are in doubt—, do as the other parishioners do unless they are clearly violating Holy Tradition (e.g., prostrations on Sundays). You should endeavor not to call attention to yourself, or have a "super-correct" attitude when it comes to matters like this, judging others who "do not do it right."]

EXCEPT FOR SUNDAYS and the days of Pentecost (the fifty days between Pascha and Pentecost-Trinity Sunday) and in many churches Saturdays too, Orthodox Christians make prostrations during their worship in church and during their prayers at home. Very often, under the guidance of their spiritual fathers, they attempt to keep a rule of making an allotted number of prostrations every day. In the weekday services in Lent, the number of prostrations is greatly increased and at various points the whole congregation make prostrations together: during the Prayer of St Ephraim, the lenten verses on the Hours, at the end of Vespers and during Great Compline. Very often those new to Orthodoxy, or new to keeping Orthodox traditions, make these prostrations in ways which are ungainly, difficult and possibly injurious—by kneeling down and flopping forward for instance. The better way to make them and the way employed by people from Orthodox cultures is difficult to explain in words, but much easier to execute; it is thus: make the sign of the Cross, bow forward from the waist, and continue down, bending the knees somewhat, until both hands touch the floor in front of you. Make sure your hands are placed directly below the shoulders, not too close and not too far apart (this will make rising easier). Then bend the knees more till they touch the floor, at the same time bringing down your forehead to the floor. In rising, first lift the head and then push up on the arms to straighten out. If you find this difficult to understand, ask an "experienced prostrater" to show you and help you. You will find this much easier than the "kneel and flop" method, and that you will almost be able to make the whole movement down (death) and up (resurrection) in one. Of course, if you are elderly, pregnant or infirm, you should be careful about making prostrations and no one will expect you to do so. One can bow at the times when the others are prostrating. Don't be too ready to excuse yourself on account of infirmity though—I can remember elderly Russian ladies at the old Cathedral at Emperors's Gate showing an example by making prostrations to the ground, even if it required two younger and fitter people then to pick them up afterwards!

**Commemoration Books (Read more about this in the leaflet "Proskomedie, Commemorations and Prospora).**

It is the custom for the faithful to send up lists of names of Orthodox Christians (both living and departed) for commemoration in the Divine Liturgy with a small prosphora to be blessed. The purchase of this prosphora is, in effect, a donation to the church. (In the ancient practice, the person who wants commemorations made usually bakes a prosphora and brings it to the church with a list a names—a much more beautiful custom.) Sometimes people deposit commemoration books at the church with the request that the names be read at the Divine Liturgy, making a donation for this. If doing so, you should be very careful to do two things: a) to keep the listing of the names up-to-date—one often finds names of people who have died months before still among the living, or people ordained to a higher rank still listed as laymen, all giving the impression that rather than really caring for the people commemorated, those who own these books are simply farming out prayers (something which cannot rightly be done); and b) make sure that you pray for these people too, at home and in church. If your list is deposited with the church, keep a duplicate and remember the people inscribed there in your own prayers, asking for the return of the book occasionally to bring it up to date. Otherwise this custom which has developed as a manifestation of our love for the people remembered will become the very opposite—a witness of our lack of concern for them and of our carelessness.

**Preparing for Lent**

IN THE SHORT TIME before the beginning of the Great Lent, find a spiritually edifying book and undertake to read it during Lent as a part of your lenten struggle. Sometimes, we simply keep Lent, if we do at all, by just adhering to the fasting regulations, by attending the more important lenten services in church, but we are somehow still left un nourished. Spiritual reading, which is something that we should do at all times of the year, is particularly important during the lenten period and is something which can deepen and broaden our spiritual lives. If necessary, take advice on which book to choose as your lenten reading.

MOST OF FEBRUARY will fall within the 22 day period that the Church assigns as a preparation for the Great Lent. Oftentimes, we treat this period as if it were something simply symbolic or liturgical, and therefore we pay it little or no heed. Spiritually a much wiser course would be to use it as is intended: to prepare ourselves for the fast. Many things can be done—we can see how best we can keep the dietary prescriptions of the fast; we can ensure that we keep the period as clear as possible of commitments which will mean that we have to travel or visit; we can mark in our diaries the extra church observances that we should keep in the course of the fast (the Great Canon in the first and fifth weeks, the Akathist hymns on Friday evenings, the Presanctified Liturgies, etc.); we can find spiritually helpful books to read; assess and perhaps make arrangements for meaningful (rather than symbolic) almsgiving; prepare for the Rite of Forgiveness by trying to be reconciled to any that have become our enemies; seek advice and counsel from our spiritual fathers if there are areas about the fast that we think will cause us difficulties. We can even do simple things by finding out, if we do not already know, how to prepare Koliva for St Theodore Saturday and the Commemorations of the Departed, or bake the special bird-shaped pastries for the feast of the Forty Martyrs [known as "Larks"]. There are a host of things to be done before Clean Monday, so by all means enjoy the blini in Cheesefare Week, but do not let your pre-lenten observance consist only in that! Lay a firm foundation now for the building of your fast.

MAKE SURE, if you have not already done so, to make arrangements so that you can attend as many of the Passion Week and Paschal services as possible. With many Orthodox Christians in this country living far from churches, they sometimes make arrangements to stay near a church at least for the end of Passion Week and the day of Pascha itself. Perhaps time will have to be taken off from work or schedules altered in other ways, and it is best to plan for this ahead.

The services of Passion Week and Pascha are the most important in the Christian Year and every conscientious Orthodox should try his or her best to prepare for them, participate in them, to confess, and to receive the Holy Mysteries.

### **Breaking a Fast**

BE ON GUARD at the end of the Nativity Fast. Very often the more conscientious among the faithful make real efforts to keep the fast, both with regard to the dietary disciplines, and with regard to their inner life: contending with the passions and thoughts, avoiding and resisting temptations, spiritual reading, prayer, preparation for confession, more frequent reception of the Holy Mysteries, etc; but then in the first hours of the feast itself they completely lose the profit they might have gained by abandoning all that they have so carefully practised during the fast. It is true that we keep the feasts as times of rejoicing and that we are released from the discipline of fasting, but we should be careful not to do this in such a way that we abandon every appearance of Christian struggle.

TRY TO REMEMBER TO KEEP PASCHA HOLY. This might seem an odd and unnecessary tip, but it happens that at all the greater festivals, and particularly at Christmas and Pascha, one finds that after the fast, there is a temptation simply to let go. True, we can start eating non-lenten products again, but this does not mean that we should plunge into gluttony or drunkenness. The church services are shorter and the typicon less demanding, but very often one notices that there is a veritable apostasy after a major feast. If we have gained anything spiritually in the course of the fast, let us try to hold it fast and not to lose it heedlessly. In this way, step by small step, with each fast and each feast we shall be able to make some little progress spiritually, using each as the rungs of a ladder.

### **Changes for Pentecost & Kneeling in Church**

REMEMBER that during Pentecost—the fifty days between Pascha (Easter) and Pentecost or Trinity Sunday—we do not kneel in church at all, nor do we make prostrations. It is as if every day was a Sunday. This is a very ancient practice of the Church dating back at least to the second century, and a canon of the First Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, 325 A.D) confirmed the practice. Our not kneeling indicates that we have risen with Christ and is a proclamation that we look forward to the future Resurrection and the life of the Age to come, when our bodies will be resurrected and stand in the Kingdom.

### **Changes for Pentecost: Our Prayers**

REMEMBER that from Pascha until the Vigil for Pentecost, we do not use the prayer, "Heavenly King, O Comforter," in our prayers at home or in church. Until, but not after, Ascension Day, it is replaced by the threefold repetition of the Paschal troparion: "Christ is risen from the dead, by death hath He trampled down death, and on those in the graves hath He bestowed life." In church, when a service begins with the threefold, "O come, let us worship..." this too is replaced by the Paschal troparion throughout the forty days of Pascha, but is re-introduced at Ascension.

### **Patron Saints and Saint's Days**

REMEMBER to keep holy your Saint's Day, the annual commemoration of the Saint after whom you were named in Holy Baptism. You should make every attempt to attend the services for this day in church, and prepare yourself to receive the Holy Mysteries on this day each year. Godparents should also attend church on the Saint's Days of their Godchildren. If, as so often happens, this is not possible, then all involved should at least obtain a copy of the service to the Saint and read it with your prayers at home. Ask that you be remembered in the prayers in a church where the Liturgy is being celebrated, even if you cannot attend. Ask for your loved ones too. Always keep an icon of your Patron Saint at home and take it with you when you travel; also keep and read often the life of the Saint after whom you are called. In this way you will begin to form a spiritual bond with that Saint, and will experience the benefit of their intercessions for you. For children, especially young ones, it is good to make their Saint's Day MORE important to them than their birthday, not only with the church practices but by giving presents or even having a party. In fact, it is much more important, because the birthday simply marks the passage of time, whereas the Saint's Day links us to one of the citizens of Heaven who has already shown his or her love for us by granting us their name. We should respond to that love and try in every way to enflame it.

### **On Pilgrimages**

THIS ISSUE already contains a practical tip in the suggestion that we make pilgrimages to the sites associated with the saints. We might add to this that if you do plan to make such a pilgrimage, do a little preparation first. Read about the saints, and if possible the place associated with them. Also, and perhaps more importantly, take with you the hymns appropriate to the saint, if only the troparion and kontakion from the General Menaion, so that you can chant them at the holy place. Particularly if you are going alone, take with you the Scriptures or the life of the Saint so that you can read them quietly at the holy place, so that your visit becomes something more than just religious tourism but is truly a pilgrimage, a time set apart to pray, to reflect, to grow closer to the communion of the saints.

### **Be On Guard Against Deception**

AT ALL TIMES be on your guard against deception. In the West there seems to be almost a culture of accepting

deceptions—even of seeking them!—, especially if they come decked out in religious finery. A monastic correspondent recently sent us the following edifying story: "Two years ago a visitor told us of what had happened to an inexperienced monk in his monastery. One night he was awoken by a bright light, and there was a beautiful Angel gazing down at him with loving eyes. 'Get up and pray,' he said, so the monk obeyed. The vision was repeated the next night, and again the monk prayed. When it had happened on four consecutive nights, he became anxious and went to his Abbot, who wisely told him that if the Angel came again, he should just turn over and go to sleep. The Angel came as before, but this time the monk ignored him and turned over as if to sleep. No sooner had he done so than there was a violent slamming of doors and such a disgusting stench that the monk could no longer remain in his cell. The next day he repented of his pride which had led him to think he was worthy of seeing an Angel, the consequence of which was that he had willingly obeyed the devil." In all probability we shall not be tempted by such a manifest appearance of the demon. Nonetheless, in all circumstances we must be on our guard against his deceits; and rather than ready to accept such deceits, we should be on guard against them.

### **On Death**

By and large we have abandoned a Christian attitude to death and adopted the attitudes of the world around us. Death is a natural part of our existence; indeed it might be said that the whole point of our being Christians is to prepare for death. And yet, so often we try to hide it and hide from it. This causes two deep hurts. First of all it can hurt anyone in our immediate circle or family who is dying. They can be made to feel that somehow they are failing, that they are causing embarrassment, and the like. And very often because they are not given an opportunity by their loved ones to accept their impending death openly, they are denied opportunities to prepare for it. Rather, as Christians, we should strive to help people approach death openly and give them opportunities to prepare for it—by spiritual reading, prayer, going to church if possible, by receiving the Mysteries, by talking about what they are going through. Secondly our faithless attitude often hurts those who have died, because, having tried to hide from the reality of the approaching death, we are spiritually thrown off balance when they die. We have lost an opportunity to do some little preparation (albeit always inadequate) for it ourselves, and so we are taken by surprise. We throw ourselves into a host of things which profit little and often completely neglect the needs of the soul that has departed from us. We think of flowers and types of coffin and the like, and forget that at that moment that what the departed needs is our prayers and those of the Church, that we should have memorial services chanted, commemoration made at the Liturgy, that we can give alms in remembrance of our loved one, and that above all we should show obedience to the teachings of the Church with regard to the funeral rites for the departed—(cremation and embalming, for instance, are never permitted Orthodox Christians)—and thus bring them and ourselves another blessing. If in any doubt, as most assuredly most of us are at such times, we should immediately contact our parish pastor so that he can guide us and help us.

### **Asking Others for their Prayers**

THERE is an ancient and commendable custom among Orthodox Christians, rooted in the Apostolic teachings, of asking prayers of one another in times of sickness or need, and especially of asking prayers at churches and monasteries. We would like to suggest two things with regard to this practice. The first is of primary importance! That is that we should not only pray and ask prayers in time of need, but we should also give thanks when, as we desired or otherwise, our prayers have been answered. How many ask for prayers for various needs, but never ask for a thanksgiving Moleben when the hour of need has passed! Secondly, on a more mundane level, if you ask prayers or for commemoration at church, then show courtesy to those whose prayers you ask, whether they be monastics, clergy or lay people, by keeping them informed about the matter. In our own small world, we have often been asked to pray for someone who is sick, and try to do so—perhaps weeks later, we see the person again, ask how their loved one is, only to find that not only has the illness long passed but it has been forgotten.

### **Learn As Much As You Can!**

Learn! Learn as much, as broadly, and as deeply as you can about your Faith. Very often, and perhaps especially among those who come to Orthodoxy as adults, we tend to think that in becoming Orthodox we have reached the peak—just as in some ways many people think that getting married is an aim and goal and one achieved at the wedding ceremony (!), whereas in fact rather than having finalised the matter we have only just begun it. Also having "become Orthodox," many cease to inquire and so their understanding of the Faith remains shallow. After the initial exaltation it becomes lack-lustre, and people often drift away. So take every opportunity to learn more. Read, for sure: the Scriptures, the lives of saints, the writings of the Fathers, commentaries. Ask questions and don't be embarrassed to do so. But take every opportunity to learn in practical ways too: how to bake prosphora, how to chant, how the services are put together. If you have any gift or talent, find a way to use it for the Church. Ask for help if you have any difficulty or need in doing this. Ask for guidance too. Do not be ashamed even to learn the simplest of things: the names of the saints on the icons in church for instance, and from that go on to learn about and from their lives. Learn to turn to them in prayer. If there is anything that you realize that you do not know; seek to find out. Lose no opportunity to learn. The Saviour said, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matt.18:3). This, of course, refers to the guilelessness and innocence of little children, but we who claim to be "converted," to be "converts," must become little children in this too, for little children are always ready and eager to learn and seeking out new things to learn, and so must we be.



### **Don't Hesitate to Ask the Priest**

IF ANYTHING in Church-life worries you or disquiets you in any way—however trifling it may seem—, ask about it. This could be either something in your personal spiritual life or, in the life of the parish or community to which you belong. It could be something incidental, or something about the Faith and practice of the Church itself. Often people do not ask because they think that it will make them look stupid or ignorant, or that it will cause offence; but then they waste an opportunity to learn more and they probably give the evil one occasion to tempt them at some stage. For however insignificant the matter might seem, it will be like an untreated wound that will likely go septic. They may even cause hurt to their fellow Orthodox Christians; for very often when people have difficulties and do not set about resolving them in a right way, they talk about them with people from whom they cannot hope to receive help. In this way they not only receive no help themselves, but perhaps also spread their doubts, worries, or complaints to others, ultimately becoming a source of temptation for them.

### **Preparing to Travel**

IN PLANNING your holidays for the coming year, try to remember three things which are very often completely neglected even by conscientious Orthodox Christians.

a) First study the calendar before deciding on dates. One should try to avoid travelling during the four fast periods in the year, and should also try and ensure that you will be at home, in your parish church, for the principal feasts, particularly for the dedication festival of your parish. It is not always possible to choose a time so as to be at home for all the Great Feasts, but at least try and ensure that you are not holidaying during the fasts.

b) In contemplating where to go, don't simply be concerned with sightseeing, pleasures and pastimes. Try to find somewhere, where you will be able to find an Orthodox church nearby so that you can at least attend the Sunday Liturgy. If need be consult with your parish priest, who may have directories which can help you, before finalizing your plans. Remember we should never take a holiday from our church observance! If we do, it takes a lot of struggle to re-establish our spiritual life.

c) Make sure that you take with you some notice of your being Orthodox, and a request that in case of emergency a priest should be contacted. This notice could also have on it the name and address of your home parish and of your spiritual father, so that they might be contacted if necessary.

### **Cultivate Quietness**

PARTICULARLY DURING LENT, but at all times, try to regain a measure of quiet in your lives. Today we are bombarded with noise, with news bulletins, opinions, even piped music in shops, and as a result we are frazzled, but do not know the cause of this and seek solace in more noise. Just recently I was struck by a statement from an elderly Orthodox person, who had grown up in the "Old Regime" and remarked on the need of quiet in the life of children. Seeing how through the media, at home and at school, as well as at play, we seem now to try and fill their lives with noise, this remark was all the more striking, but on reflection how true it is. We, adults, also need quiet and a time to reflect, and should actively strive to make such times in our daily routines. Switch the television or radio off for a while, do not bother to peruse the papers or magazines to find something to distract, but instead just sit quietly or go for a walk. During such quiet, you can begin to pray, and then the periods of set prayer at the beginning and end of each day will also seem less of a chore.

### **The Importance of Communal Life**

THERE is an old dictum that "One Christian is no Christian." And this is certainly true. Of course there is the specific calling of the eremitic life (the life of the hermit or solitary), but this is something which few if any of us can aspire to. For the generality of us, we are saved by living in communities: in parishes or monasteries, in families. The necessity for our salvation of living in communities does not simply concern our worshipping together, although this is of paramount importance. It means that we must also, as much as circumstances allow, live together, bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ (see Gal. 6:2). Perhaps in earlier generations when society was broadly ordered along Christian principles, this did not need to be stressed. But now we live in a mammon-motivated society, within which the conscientious Christians are fairly lightly scattered. We must bear this in mind, and take measures to ensure that we have some 'community care' within our own Orthodox community, and real community care rather than the state sponsored variety where the very expression is just another example of governmental "economy with the truth"! It is for this reason that we always have a parish breakfast after our Sunday Liturgies—so that we can grow together. This itself is, of course, only a small beginning. There are a host of other things that we can do to help, support and care for each other, and one that particularly came to our notice recently is simply offering people lifts to church. Our Orthodox community is extremely widely scattered; some people are elderly, have no means of transport, or sick and therefore cannot easily get to church. Try to find out if there are such people that you could help by picking them up and taking them to church. Ask the priest if he knows anyone in your area who would appreciate a lift; maybe even put an advert in the local paper, library, or neighbourhood notice board, to find people (this might or might not find people, but at the very least it will let others know that there are Orthodox Christians trying to exercise brotherly love, and that itself would not be without profit).

### **Preparing for a New Year**

THE FAITHFUL SHOULD ALWAYS BEAR IN MIND, both Spiritually and practically in our lives, that all plans are conditional on God's will for us; carefully read James 4:13-15 and take it to heart. But on a practical level there are two things which we can do to help us spiritually in the coming year. First of all, if you do not have a church diary, mark the feasts for 1997 in your diary, mark in when Lent begins, remember to note that eves of Feasts are times for Vigils and so mark these in as well, so that your church observance will be for the coming year "as at the head of your joy" (see Ps. 136:8). Secondly, in planning holidays for the next year, ensure now that they will not coincide with the fast periods, that you will avoid (if at all possible) missing an important feast in your home-church, particularly the feast of the church itself, and that you will be going somewhere where you can get to an Orthodox church or contact a priest if necessary. Obtain the addresses of the local churches and clergy before setting out—make this an essential part of your holiday planning.

### **House Blessings**

AT HOLY THEOPHANY, it is traditional to have one's house blessed by the priest, with the waters sanctified at the festival. In Orthodox countries, the priest will make a circuit of the houses in his parish on the day of the feast. In the situation that we now find ourselves in, this is rarely possible, because the faithful rarely live in the immediate neighbourhood of their church. However, they should invite their pastor to bless their homes during the feast, or if this is not possible as soon as is practicable afterwards. Make an appointment for him to come. Often the priest will lead a short prayer service in each home, before going through the house, gardens and outside-buildings, blessing with Theophany water. Prepare for this by setting up a table in front of the principal icon corner in your home, the one where the family prayers are usually said. The table should be covered with a clean cloth, and there should be a lighted candle or lamp there. A bowl of Theophany water with a sprinkler (or twig of greenery), a Gospel Book and hand Cross will also be needed. In some instances the priest will bring these with him with his vestments, but it is as well to ask if he would like you to have them ready. A hand censer might also be lit. If possible all the believing members of the family should gather, properly attired as if for church, for the service. They should lead the priest round the house chanting the troparion of the festival, as he sprinkles the rooms, and so they should have this hymn ready too. At the end of the service, the priest will bless each member of the household by sprinkling them with holy water as they approach to kiss the Cross. Each month of the year thereafter, and on special occasions (both festivals and family celebrations, as well as in times of temptation or after arguments and unpleasantness), the blessing can be "renewed" by the family themselves sprinkling their home with the waters blessed at the monthly Lesser Blessings of Water which take place at the beginning of each calendar month.

MAKE ABSOLUTELY SURE that you have your home blessed by your parish priest at Theophany. The home is for an Orthodox Christian a house-church, and yet it is also the place of their spiritual struggle and so a place where there are often temptations and trials. This annual blessing dedicates it again to the Lord and brings refreshment for those who live there. Ensure that the priest knows that you want your house blessed, make a definite appointment with him, and prepare for his coming. This preparation should be that you set up a small table, covered with a clean white cloth, before the icon corner or the place where you say your family prayers. Have on it a lighted candle and a bowl of the water blessed at the Theophany service. Try if possible to get all the family there for the blessing, dressed and behaving as though at church. Leave a list of the Christian names of all the house's occupants for the priest to commemorate, and when the time comes lead him around the house from room to room to sprinkle it with the holy water. As different priests have slightly different ways of going about these things, it is a good idea to check with the priest before he comes if anything else is needed. If you know of other Orthodox Christians in your area, it would be a great help to arrange the blessing of your home and theirs together, so that the priest does not have to make several journeys in the same direction. You might also find someone who is largely cut off from church-life and perhaps feels neglected, who would find it a joy to have their house blessed but is not sure how to go about it—maybe you can help them.

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