

DO YOU HAVE A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST?

Popular Orthodox Christian author and pastor Fr. Anthony Coniaris writes, “The question is often asked by evangelical Protestant Christians, ‘Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Savior?’ This is a very Orthodox question... Without such a personal acceptance of Christ and commitment to Him, one cannot be an Orthodox Christian.” (1)

Fr. Anthony Coniaris teaches us that, “Salvation for Orthodox Christians involves a relationship - a personal relationship with Jesus who is the door to the Trinity. This relationship takes place in the Church. Relationships, we know, are fragile. They have their ups and downs. We need to work on them constantly... If faith is a personal relationship with Christ, what are some of the factors involved in such a relationship? If you are a spouse or a parent, you know what they are. They involve saying, ‘I love you. I appreciate you. I love to be in your presence. I give myself to you totally. I am sorry I hurt you. Forgive me...’ In other words, we have to work hard on a relationship to keep it alive, vibrant, growing, and in constant good repair. So it is with our relationship with Jesus.” (2)

Orthodox theologian Fr. Alexander Schmemmann writes, “in its essence, Christian faith is a personal encounter with Christ, an acceptance not of this or that teaching or dogma about Christ, but Christ Himself. In other terms, Christianity is extremely personal. This in no way implies that it is individualistic, for all believers encounter, recognize and love exactly the one and the same Christ. But Christ addresses Himself to each person, so that each faith is at the same time unique.” (3)

Fr. Anthony Coniaris says, “For Orthodox Christians, religion is a relationship with God in the Person of Jesus. It is on this personal relationship to Jesus that the happiness and the purposefulness of life depends. And it shall be on the basis of this relationship to Christ that our eternal destiny will be decided. Jesus is the door... What kind of relationship do we have with Jesus? Is it a relationship that is kept alive through faith, prayer, the sacraments and obedience to His commandments? Or is it a relationship that has died through sin and indifference?” (4)

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk reminds us of just how personal the Christian faith really is. He says that every Christian can say, “For my sake God created the world. For me He became man in Christ. For me He suffered on the cross. For me He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.”

In both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism a theologian is someone who studies philosophy and systematic theology to know about God and earns advanced degrees in these areas of study. In Orthodox Christianity a theologian is someone who truly prays and experiences God personally. Orthodox priest Fr. Anthony Coniaris writes, “theology is understood less in terms of intellectual understanding and more on a level of personal

experience. We Orthodox learn our theology not just from books but more especially from the liturgy, from prayer, from hysychia (silence), and from the Jesus prayer.” (5)

Bishop Kallistos Ware wrote in his forward to Romanian Orthodox theologian Fr. Dumitru Staniloae’s English translation of *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: The Experience of God* (HCO Press, 1979): “Theology, talking about God presupposes a personal relationship. It presupposes faith and ascetic purification, the quest for continual prayer, the thirst for sanctity; the true theologians are the saints... The only genuine theology is that summed up by Evagrius of Pontos in a phrase which Fr. Dumitru likes to quote: ‘If you are a theologian you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian.’”

Fr. John Beck says, “All those spiritual giants who are venerated as Fathers of the Church in fact base their theology on knowledge of God acquired not by rational speculation but by personal living experience.” (6)

In Orthodoxy the age of the Fathers is not past but present. In Orthodoxy there is no looking back to a lost Golden Age of “the Undivided Church” because Orthodox Christians do not believe that the Church can be divided. Churches and churchmen can fall away into heresy or schism, but the Church cannot be divided. Tradition, according to Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky is living, it is “the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.” It is not a dead corpus of facts for historians and theologians to dig up from the past and argue about. Jaroslav Pelikan, perhaps the greatest Lutheran theologian and Luther expert of the 20th century, and a convert to the Orthodox Church, put it this way: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

In his book, *The Orthodox Way*, Bishop Kallistos Ware put it this way, “Tradition is far more than a set of abstract principles - it is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit. Tradition is not only kept by the Church - it lives in the Church. It is the Life of the Holy Spirit in the Church... it is not static but dynamic, not dead acceptance of the past but a living experience of the Holy Spirit in the present.”

There is no dry Ivory Tower theology in Orthodoxy and Orthodox theologians are not mere academics. Orthodox theologians are clergy and lay people, men and women, of deep prayer with intimate personal relationships with Christ and who do not merely know about God, but know Him personally. That is why there cannot be liberal or even unbelieving “theologians” in the Orthodox Church as there are in the Roman Catholic and Protestant West.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann taught, “We cannot have trust in someone whom we only know superficially. We must know this someone, we must have created a relationship with him. In the end it is necessary to love this someone in order to have confidence in him... Our knowledge of God comes not from books, nor is it the result of reflection. To arrive at a knowledge of God, it is necessary to cultivate a relationship with Him... God is known through an immediate relationship, and it is this which we must seek.” (7)

Bishop Kallistos Ware writes, "Because of the Comforter's (the Holy Spirit's) presence in our heart, we do not simply know Christ at fourth or fifth hand, as a distant figure from long ago, about whom we possess factual information through written records; but we know Him directly here and now, in the present, as our personal Savior and our Friend. With the Apostle Thomas we can affirm, 'My Lord and my God' (Jn. 20:28). We do not merely say, 'Christ died,' but 'Christ died for me.' We do not merely say, 'Christ rose,' but 'Christ is risen!' He lives now, for me and in me. This relationship with Jesus is precisely the work of the Holy Spirit." (8)

This may sound much like what is heard in many evangelical churches today, but there is a profound difference. Fr. Anthony Coniaris writes, "Evangelicals have so separated the personal from the communal that finding a church after coming to Christ is often a mere afterthought or appendage to what is seen as able to stand by itself: one's personal, private, individualistic 'relationship with Jesus.' However, to emphasize a new birth without corresponding emphasis on the Church is like an obstetrician who goes to great lengths to help the infant come forth from the womb, only to place it on the sidewalk with the exhortation that it go and find food. The newborn needs its mother: the Church. The Orthodox Church, as did the early Christians, does not separate the personal from the communal. We do not confuse 'personal' and 'individual.' Our personal relationship with Jesus is anchored on our communal relationship to the Church as the nurturing and soul-sustaining Body of Christ." (9)

It is not a choice between a personal relationship with Jesus Christ or a corporate relationship with Him through the Church. Our relationship with Jesus is personal, but it cannot be individualistic. It is both personal and communal: a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and incorporation into the Church which is the Body of which Christ is the head. It is not either/or, but both.

Orthodox theologian Fr. John Meyendorff reminds us that Church membership is not enough. He writes, "What makes a Christian a Christian is this personal commitment to Christ. One's formal belonging to the church through Baptism and the sacramental participation remains a mere potential if the individual commitment does not take place." (10)

Fr. Anthony Coniaris says, "if it's not personal it's not real;" and the Holy Scriptures tell us, "And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). The personal and the ecclesial go together.

So, *how* do we develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ in His Church? "The big question is HOW? How does one experience God in life? The answer is through the commitment and surrender of one's life to Jesus, by speaking to Him each day in prayer, by turning to Him for guidance and strength, by reading daily His personal love letter, the Holy Bible, by praying for and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, by receiving Him in the Holy Eucharist." (11)

Like any personal relationship, developing and sustaining a personal relationship with Jesus Christ takes time and effort. As Fr. Anthony Coniaris has said, "Relationships, we know, are fragile. They have their ups and downs. We need to work on them constantly..." So, how do we begin?

First, invite Christ into your heart through prayer. Praying the beautiful prayer to Jesus of St. Dimitrii of Rostov, a 17th century Russian Orthodox saint, is a good way to begin:

Come, my Light, and illumine my darkness.
Come, my Life, and revive me from death.
Come, my Physician, and heal my wounds.
Come, Flame of divine love,
and burn up the thorns of my misdeeds,
kindling my heart with the flame of Thy love.
Come, my God, sit upon the throne of my heart
and reign there.
For Thou alone art my God and my Lord. Amen.

Second, read the article *Introducing the New Testament Church*, by Fr. Victor Novak. You will find it on the Sidebar of the website of Holy Cross Orthodox Church: www.holycrossomaha.net or you can obtain it directly from Fr. Victor: venovak@hughes.net.

Third, if you are an Orthodox Christian talk with your priest. Ask him for spiritual direction, for help in developing a personal prayer life and in more fruitfully participating in the sacramental and communal life of the church.

If you are not yet an Orthodox Christian, talk with an Orthodox priest. Tell him that you want to be received into the Church and to live a life of serious discipleship.

Finally, prayerfully read the book *GOD AND YOU: PERSON TO PERSON. Developing a Daily Personal Relationship with Jesus*, by Fr. Anthony Coniaris. This easy to read and understand 160 page book can be purchased from Light and Life Publishing: www.light-life.com, (952) 925-3888. This is one of those rare books that can change your life. If you are going to read only one spiritual book this year make it this one! Fr. Stanley Harakas of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary said, "My advice - put it at the top of your reading list."

1. GOD AND YOU: PERSON TO PERSON. Developing a Daily Personal Relationship with Jesus, by Fr. Anthony Coniaris, Light and Life Publishing Company, C. 1995, p. 88.
2. Ibid, Coniaris, p. 19.
3. Celebration of Faith, Volume 1, by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, SVS Press.
4. Ibid, Coniaris, p. 27.

5. Ibid, Coniaris, p. 34.
6. Cited in Coniaris, p. 112.
7. Cited in Coniaris, p. 39.
8. The Orthodox Way, by Kallistos Ware, SVS Press, 1979.
9. Ibid, Coniaris, p. 41.
10. Cited in Coniaris, p. 88).
11. Ibid, Coniaris, p. 39.