

A Message from the Patriarch of the Apostolic Orthodox Church

The Spiritual Life

In reading the contents of this website or in other writings of the Apostolic Orthodox Church, one happens upon the phrase “spiritual life” with great frequency. To us, there is no other life. Often I’m asked to give a succinct definition of that phrase, but as each must come to his or her own understanding of what this entails, that is a difficult undertaking. In this short essay, however, I’ll attempt to give a view of spirituality as we of the AOC view and practice it.

The first step one must take is that of discipline. This does not mean that hour upon hour must be spent in subduing the mind and body, making them seem subjective to the soul. Were this the case, and total subjection necessary, few but Saints could live the spiritual life, as they alone would have mastered those techniques. In the AOC, we recognize two distinct, yet interdependent disciplines: the discipline regarding oneself and the discipline regarding one’s spiritual Master. In the former, one must develop a *knowledge* of one’s mind and body, for with knowledge comes mastery of them. For instance, if one comes to realize that the most convenient time to meditate is, say, after the evening meal, yet finds it difficult to do as the stomach is churning in digestion of food, then it is best to choose another time to meditation, even if less convenient. In the latter, one must have sufficient discipline to follow his or her guideline, even if they may seem to be counterproductive. As was explained in an earlier *Message*, the Master seeks to bring out various traits in his disciple, the methods of which may not immediately be comprehended.

When one thinks of the spiritual life, it is most often connected with organized religion. Depending upon the individual and the religion, this may be an help or an hindrance. All religions seek to instill discipline in their adherents, and it is the “method,” when combined with the personality of the individual, which determines success or failure. It may be odd to read the following words, considering they come from a Bishop, but it is better to subscribe to no religion than to have one’s religion be a hindrance. In the centuries before the availability of books, accessible schooling, and this marvel known as the Internet, little, if anything, was known of other Paths. The general public was not taught to question authority, but rather submit to it—sometimes blindly. The request of the beggar to Christ, “Lord, that I might see,” is a gift given to us all in this century, and with this new-found sight does the spiritual life beckon to more and more people.

But what is the spiritual life? Perhaps it would be easier to first describe what it is *not*. It is not piously rising at 3:00am to flagellate oneself with a knotted cord, then don one’s hair shirt in preparation for a glorious day of self-mortification. It is not hours spent on one’s knees in prayer. It is not holding only pure and holy thoughts throughout one’s waking hours. It is not reading only spiritual classics and associating with “acceptable”

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people. It is not the smug, misguided self assurance that one's Path/religion/philosophy is the "only true" one. It is not taking oneself too seriously.

All right, so what *is* it? In the words of Brother Lawrence, a 17th Century Monk, it is the "Practice of the Presence of God." You see that as over-simplistic and may ask, "But isn't that praying, isn't meditation?" I'd have to concede that you are partially correct, but by putting a "label" on it, you have limited it. If we turn to prayer, we miss God in meditation; if we seek Him through meditation, we miss him in prayer. Everywhere we turn we seem to be limited. In the AOC, we have a simple saying: "God *IS*." That's it—to go further is moot. What we are trying to convey through those two simple words is that as there are no set limits to Who, What, When, Where and How God is, there can be no set manner to how one leads the spiritual life—a life in communion with Him. So the spiritual life might be said to be seeing our life and our relationship to all that is, was and shall be through the eyes of the soul rather through than physical ones. It is not so much as forcing ourselves to see God face-to-face as it is not turning the other way. When we have developed the discipline to do just that, we will not have to further consider how to lead the spiritual life—we will be doing it.

May the Light of Lights enfold you!

Mathias Mar Yusef, Patriarch

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