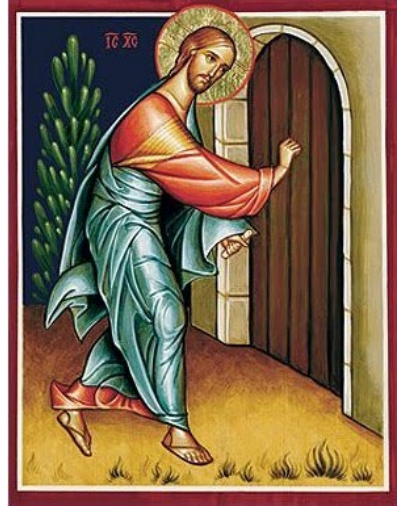


From Father: Seek Ye First...

Throughout last twenty-five years raising three boys, Presvytera and I have had our fair share of observing other parents, while we navigated our boys through academics, sports, music and many other extracurricular activities. As our families enter into a new academic year with so many additional activities, my deep concern is whether or not our busy-ness leads to the neglect of **the one thing needful** (Lk. 10:42). For the empty-nesters, my other deep concern is that, without children, some feel there is no reason to attend services or come to church anymore—what kind of message does that give our children? For the retirees, this is your time to attend the services, enjoy fellowship, and learn more about the Orthodox faith. For those without children, there are many leadership roles within the parish that need your talent.



Our Lord knew well how the world would play against His people's desire for His Kingdom: "Therefore do not become anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we clothe ourselves?' For all these things the nations seek after; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all of these things. But be seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore, do not become anxious for the morrow; for the morrow shall be anxious about the things of itself" (Mt. 6:31-34). Keeping a healthy balance between tending to the daily cares of this life and not neglecting ones' spiritual life is always a challenge. Blessed Theophylact tells us, "He forbids us to give ourselves over entirely to our cares and to neglect God. Although it is needful to cultivate our work, yet we must also provide for the soul." The tendency is that we focus on things right in front of us that demand our immediate attention. Christ is teaching that when we make seeking a deeper experience of the Kingdom of God a priority, He will provide for us what we truly need. In other words, without God in our lives, we often seek after the wrong things. By seeking the right thing first, we begin to see what is really important. The mission and purpose of the Church is to facilitate making the Kingdom of God a priority in our lives.

Orthodox Christians are called to live a profound method of making the Church first in our lives. The greatest gift of the Orthodox Church is multifaceted: the way that worship instructs us in our relationship with the world, how time itself has been changed by the advent of the Kingdom, and the joy that comes from this newness of life that is available to us here and now! The only way to enter deeper into the life of the Church is by initiating a conversation with Christ. Worship and prayer are the means of seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness in our lives. One may begin praying by simply confessing one's unbelief or doubts about God and at the same time expressing a desire to know Him. By making daily prayer a priority, the heart opens up to God, and He sends His grace to strengthen us. Consequently, we begin to see changes in how we make decisions and how we spend our time, talents, and treasure.

Part of this process is identifying the obstacles that have kept us from making the life of the Church a priority and with God's grace removing them. What do we turn to for comfort? Throughout the year, the Church invites us to honor the Virgin Mary, who serves as the highest model of what it means to be a Christian. Her life consisted of a divine calling which found its fulfillment in becoming a temple of the Holy Spirit. As the mother of all Christians, she can assist us in combating those pitfalls which keep us from realizing our Divine potential. St Paul says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (II Cor. 1:4-5). The question each must answer is "who or what" is comforting us? Human beings are expert inventors of things that comfort—music, art, food, work, sports, money, shopping, creating new things to buy, entertainment—the list goes on. It is clear that we often opt for things which are not "living" to comfort us and which may bring some limited degree of happiness but not the joy of Christ dwelling within us. "And now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy made full in them" (Jn. 17:13). St. Paul points out the fact that humans are created to be comforted by only two things—God and each other! The principle is simple; comfort comes from the joy of a relationship with God and ends with being empowered to comfort another with that same gift from God.

The founding principle of community, or *koinonia* (communion), is unity with God and one another. As we open the doors to our new Community Center, possibilities abound for us to connect and support each other in our short journey here on earth. Living a Christ-centered life is only worked out in relationships with others. The Orthodox understanding of salvation as a process of enduring afflictions knows no other arena than sharing the joys and challenges of life with others. The Church is the first place we should turn to for meaningful relationships that will assist us in this process of salvation. God created us with free-will; may we along with St Paul come to seek the fullness of God in our lives and in the lives of others.

"For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from Whom every family in the heavens and on earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the wealth of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that the Christ might dwell in your hearts through faith, having been rooted and founded in love, in order that you might be able to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of the Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you might be filled to all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:14-19).

In Christ's love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Andrew". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping underline.

Fr. Andrew