

Notes for *Studies in Orthodoxy* Class

“The Word of the Cross, on the Spiritual Life” (January, 2017)

“THE WORD OF THE CROSS”

Lecture made by Father Thomas Hopko, in 1983, at St Vladimir’s Seminary in Crestwood, NY.

Thomas Hopko was an Eastern Orthodox Christian priest and theologian. He was the Dean of Saint Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary from September 1992 until July 1, 2002, and taught dogmatic theology there from 1968 until 2002.

From St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, here are the links for the four parts (available online and by CD) of Fr. Tom Hopko speaking on *The Word of the Cross*:

https://www.ancientfaith.com/specials/hopko_lectures/the_word_of_the_cross_part_1

https://www.ancientfaith.com/specials/hopko_lectures/the_word_of_the_cross_part_2

https://www.ancientfaith.com/specials/hopko_lectures/the_word_of_the_cross_part_3

https://www.ancientfaith.com/specials/hopko_lectures/the_word_of_the_cross_part_4

PARTS I and II are transcribed below.

Thank you. I just realized that I forgot my wristwatch, which is *dangerous*. Our program is to be together here talking until about a quarter to one. It’s very important for us to realize, today particularly—that’s what we’re here for—that our faith is not a faith that is what you might call in modern terms a “philosophy of life.” It’s not a teaching in the sense that we have people who gave us teachings to show us the ways to wisdom and knowledge. It’s certainly not an ideology of any kind that’s in conflict with other ideologies—at least it shouldn’t be—but that our whole life as Christians, our whole identity as Christians, is not connected to a teaching or a doctrine or a set of regulations or rules or even commandments as such. It is a life that is totally defined, not by a teaching, but by a Person.

Our whole life is connected to the Person of Jesus: Jesus of Nazareth, whom we believe *is* the incarnation of all teaching. He is certainly the living presence of God’s teaching, of God’s word. One of his titles even is “the Word of God,” but he is the Word of God who is made flesh and who dwells among us, full of grace and truth. We believe that he doesn’t simply show us the way to life or the way to truth, but that he *is* the way, he *is* the life, he *is* the truth; and that our whole life and our whole way and our whole truth is connected to *him* and being in communion with *him*, following him, trusting him, receiving his Spirit, following his way, literally even becoming his members, members of him, members of his body. So that, really, Christ is formed in us, we

become by the grace of his Spirit—God’s Holy Spirit—Christ ourselves, and then live in the communion with God that *he* has, God his Father, and to have that same exact communion that Christ has with God by God’s own Holy Spirit.

This is why St. Paul said that when he comes teaching, he doesn’t come with eloquence, he doesn’t come with worldly wisdom, he doesn’t come with some kind of program or philosophy, he doesn’t come with a set of rules, but he comes with just one thing: the Person of Christ. Bringing Christ means, always and essentially, Christ and him crucified. So St. Paul says our preaching does not come with eloquence or worldly wisdom. We don’t impress people by the rhetoric or the style or what we have, he said, but we preach Christ crucified.

Then he said that the preaching of Christ crucified—the Word of the Cross—that’s the title of our day today, this preaching of the Word of the Cross, Christ crucified—for those who want power, who want God’s activity, so to speak, on the terms of *this* world—victory, power, glory, crushing the enemies, and so on—that the preaching of Christ and Christ crucified is just scandalous. It’s a stumbling block, *skandalon* in Greek, a stumbling block. It’s kind of crazy. It’s crazy to think that everything that comes from God and the meaning of life and the Person of life is connected to the person of this crucified Jew. It’s just crazy.

And the Jews themselves, he said, are totally scandalized by that. How can it be that God’s Son, God’s Messiah, the one who is supposed to come into the world as the king with all power, glory, dominion, the Son of Man, who’s supposed to be enthroned at the right hand of the Father, giving vindication to justice and having all the world worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—how can it be that this one comes and is crucified? Scandals. Scandalous. Totally unacceptable, and it’s equally unacceptable for Muslims to follow that same line, the idea [of] God becoming a man and being crucified, it’s just scandalous.

Then St. Paul said, “But for those”—he calls them the Greeks, the Gentiles—“who want wisdom”—*sophia*: they want clear explanations, rational teachings, things that are convincing to their human mind—he said that Christ crucified is just foolishness, it’s just folly, it’s just dumb. In Greek, it’s the word from which you get the English word “moron”: *mōria*, foolishness. You’re just moronic.

So for one there is a scandal, for others it’s moronic, it’s folly, but then he says—and this is where we get the title of our talk today—“Though the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” He said: For we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, to those who believe, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God, for the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is more powerful than men.

What we want to do today is we want to spend our time contemplating, meditating, thinking about, ruminating about, what is the meaning of the Word of the Cross? Why is it this way? We're not going to so much explain—because it's really hard to explain it—but what we will do is to try to think about it, to try to hear it, what it is that God is showing us, what it is that he's telling us in this very center of our faith, because the very center of our faith is the Cross. The very center of our worship is "This is my Body, broken; this is my Blood, shed for the life of the world." It's our very center of everything, and that's why in the middle of Lent we put the cross out all week, that's why the whole year is centered around the passion of Christ and his victorious Resurrection, the Pascha of the Cross, as it says, the old saying in Greek: "*Pascha Stavrou ēmon, Pascha tēs [Anastaseōs]*—the Pascha of [our] Cross, the Pascha of the Resurrection."

But it's the center of our whole existence. It's everything for us. What is this everything? What is it that we are to see and to hear, that we are to contemplate and look upon when we hear and see the Word of the Cross? By the way, it's important to note that in the Gospel, the New Testament, St. John, for example, says that the Word of the Cross, the Word of Life, is not only heard. It's seen, it's touched, it's tasted. It's not just the word that is a kind of a teaching word.

In the Greek language, many of you know here, being Greeks and being very Christianly literate, you know that the word for "word" in Greek is the "*logos*," which has that connotation of meaning the fullness of the meaning of everything. But actually the word "word," in the New Testament, when it says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. He was in the beginning with God, and then the Word became *flesh* and dwelt among us to be crucified," that "word" comes from the Old Testament, primarily, not from Greek philosophy or Greek teaching, but from the Bible. The word "word" in Hebrew, *dabar*, it doesn't only mean "word." It means "act." It means "object." It means "thing." You see? That same word means all these different things.

If the Word of God is God's act, God's thing, God's presence himself, it doesn't just have the connotation of an intellectual thing or a verbal word. It means a disclosure, a kind of total disclosure. Therefore we would believe that God's total disclosure, his ultimate act—God, when we speak about "doing your thing"? Well, God does *his thing* on the Cross. The Cross is God's thing. *That's* what God does in the midst of the earth.

By the way, we even sing that way on the festival of the Cross. The prokeimenon from the psalter is, "God has *worked* salvation in the midst of the earth." That working salvation in the midst of the earth is when he is lifted upon the Cross, when he is crucified. That's the ultimate, definitive, absolute, total, perfect, unsurpassable act, word, revelation, manifestation of God. In fact, we teach that beyond the Cross there's nothing God can do. Beyond the Cross, there's nothing God can say. That beyond the Cross, there's nothing more to be revealed, nothing more that can be known, at least

within the context of this world. The Cross tells it all, and if we can't understand and see the deepest mysteries of God and of our life in the Cross, we're not going to see it anywhere. There's no "where" we're going to see it. The fool says in his heart there is no God, because if you cannot see God crucified, you ain't gonna see him *anywhere*. John Chrysostom has a sermon where people say, "Why doesn't God do something?" And he says, "What do you want him to *do*?" And then he went through this whole litany of everything that God does: he creates the world, we fall. He sends the prophets, he gives the Law, he does this. He gives the commandments. Finally, he sends his own Son. Ultimately, he is crucified. What more *isthere*? So when Jesus, hanging on the Cross, says, "It is *fulfilled—tetelestai*," sometimes translated, "It is finished," it doesn't simply mean it's the end of the story. It means that it's the total accomplishment of *everything*. Everything now is done. Nothing more can be done.

This Cross, then, which is contemplated, meditated, envisioned, enacted in our midst, ultimately—and I think this is very important to mention also—it is God's word to those who have ears and are willing to hear, because the fool is exactly the one, in biblical language, who has eyes and doesn't want to see, who has ears and doesn't want to hear, who has a mind and refuses to understand. If, to use that line that Jesus often uses in the Gospel, "he who has ears to hear, let him hear. He who has eyes to see, let him see." So we have to pray to God, that he would give us ears to hear, eyes to see, minds willing to penetrate that mystery, to open up to that mystery in order to see what it is that God is showing us, what God is telling us, what he's doing.

The Word of the Cross is ultimately silent. When Jesus hangs on the Cross, crucified, he's already dead, and therefore he is totally quiet. We all know that when Jesus was hanging on the Cross, he said a few things. He said seven different things, actually, and if you're interested in that, we can talk about that, but we're not talking today about the *words from* the Cross. We're talking about the Word of the Cross itself, and the Word of the Cross itself is enacted and spoken when he gives up his spirit and he dies. That, according to the Church tradition, certainly some of the homilies of the Church Fathers, is the most eloquent word ever spoken. The most eloquent word ever spoken is spoken in silence. You just look at him hanging there, because you can't *say* it. There's nothing that could be said. In fact, one Western saint—Hugo, I think it was, of St. Victor—he said that God wants to speak to us, to reveal himself to us, and he gives us the Scriptures, he gives us the book. He says, but when Christ is coming, the incarnate Book, the incarnate Word, then you no longer have words; you have the living thing, and the real and present life.

Then he said, "And when he hangs on the Cross and his arms are open, the Book is open. The Book is totally open, like in the book of Revelation you have the book sealed with seven seals, and the only one who opens that seven-sealed book—and that means the super-duper mysteries; that's what seven seals means; you don't get more mysterious than that, you see—but who is worthy to open the book? In the book of Revelation, it's the Lamb who was slain. Everybody's crying, it says, because there's

nobody to open the book of the deepest mysteries of God, and then their tears are wiped away because the Lamb comes, who was dead and is alive again, who was crucified—and he opens the book.

This Hugo said that on the Cross, the book is open. It's open, and the Word of God is fully and totally revealed for what it is. What we have to do is to stand before it *also in silence* in order to hear. That's a very important point, because no one who cannot shut up is going to hear the Word of the Cross. No one who cannot be quiet is going to penetrate the deepest mystery. That ultimate Word, even St. Maximus, St. Issac, they said, "The language of God is ultimately silence." Silence.

In the silent depth of the Cross, the silence of God, which is more eloquent than any word, speaks to *our* silence, the silence within us, in order that we can then understand and grasp and live the deepest mysteries of God. That's why talk about God is only so much blah-blah. Even too much spiritual talk is nothing but vain babbling. We who are in church like this talk. As someone once said, "When you're dealing with what can only be expressed in silence, you have to talk a lot," because "no word is adequate, and every word is a lie," as St. Gregory of Nyssa said.

But the *word* can only be the authentic word that emerges out of the silence. That's why Lent is supposed to be a time when we try to be quiet. We try really to be silent and *hear* God speak. And yet [...] you have to make space to do that. It just doesn't *happen*. There's even a saying of the Fathers, and St. Ambrose, who's over there on the wall, his first chapter on the book of the priesthood, he said, "You must teach the priests first how to be silent," and then he quoted the desert tradition which said, "For who cannot be silent must never speak, because they'll have *nothing* to say."

Silence is really important, and contemplation, going beyond and letting the Word dwell in us and well around, this is what we have to do. The reason why I say that is because so much in theology today is just people talking all the time, arguing, trying to convince their neighbors, Sunday school projects, preaching, ministry, and so on, and then we wonder why it never works. At least one of the reasons it never works is because we're not *quiet*. We never just quietly stand in front of the cross and just *look* so we could *hear* something, as though something could *happen* to us.

And we're so busy minding everybody else's business—who should do what, what the bishop should do, what if this should happen, what our kids should do, and all this kind of stuff—we're so taken up with all of that that the whole thing just becomes crazy. It becomes just the opposite of the Word of the Cross, the Word of the Cross that ultimately says: Just look. Look. Shut up; look. And then maybe you hear something, see? And that's something that we really have to practice.

If we do, though, have to speak and break the silence, what is it that we should hear? The simple answer to that, according to Christian theology, would be: everything—

because the Cross says everything. The Cross says everything about God, everything about human life, everything about history, everything about the planet, everything about the deepest mysteries that are possibly to be known to us creatures. The Cross says everything, because Christ is all and in all, and nothing goes beyond that.

Obviously, if the Cross reveals everything, then you can talk about it endlessly. So on a day like today you have to *select* something to be said. What I have decided to do, especially seeing the list of people who are coming here today and realizing that all of you, I would say, virtually all of you that I know, this isn't your first time into contemplating the Christian faith and the Cross and Christ, so on that basis I would like to select and spend the time not so much on the meaning of the Cross and the Word of the Cross, kind of theologically, or even, you might say, what the Word of the Cross tells us about God and God's activity, but I would like to stress—which amounts to the same thing anyway, as we'll see—what the Word of the Cross tells *us* about *us*.

What does the Word of the Cross say about human life? What does it tell us about how we are to live in the time given to us by God on this planet before we die? What does the Cross tell us about death, which is the central fact in every one of our lives? We may not think it is, especially younger people, with a whole life ahead of them and so on; nevertheless, death is the central fact of life on this planet. It's the central fact of the revelation of God, in the Cross, and it is the central fact in Christian witness. Death *proves* what we really believe, what we really care about, where our treasure really is. Death is the great *martyria*, the great witness, exactly to the victory of God in Christ on the Cross.

Life and death, *our* life, *our* death, our life in relation to death, is what I would like to spend a very particular focus on today. You can't do that unless we speak about God, for a very simple reason. Every human being, whether they know it or not, or even whether they like it or not, is made in the image and likeness of God. In fact, we would say, if you know it and like it, it's the great joy of your life and it's paradise; if you don't know it and you don't like it, or if you come to know it and don't like it, then that's hell. Heaven and hell are already in us now, because the deepest element of our *being* is God himself. We are made in the image and according to the likeness of God, and there is no definition of human life outside of God. We would be very eager to hasten and to add: without the true God, without God as God is, because even Jesus said there are many gods and many lords. According to the Scripture—many of you have heard me say this a thousand times, because it's true—there's no such thing as atheists. Everybody has gods; it just depends what they are. Ultimately, the clash is between the true God and the false god, and therefore our true reality and our false reality, relative to God.

The Cross is the ultimate act and word of God, and we are made in God's image and likeness. Then the Cross is the ultimate word about us, too. It can't be any other way, and that's even a basic axiom of the Christian worldview. Whatever we say about God, we say about us, because we're made in God's image and likeness. In fact, the Church

Fathers even defined human life in this way. They say, "What does it mean to be a human being?" They said, "It means to be by grace—*kata charin*—by God's goodwill—*kata evdokia*, God's *blagovoleniye*—God's energies—*kat' energian*—[power] of God—*kata dynamis*—that it's to be, by God's grace, power, energy, goodwill, pleasure, *everything—ev'-ry-thing*—that God is by nature—*kat ousian*. So we are really called to be divine.

If we are called to be divine, we can skip over a whole bunch of stuff and end by saying: Therefore, we are called to be crucified, because if God ultimately reveals himself in this world on the Cross, that's where we reveal ourselves, too. If God fulfills himself on the Cross, that's where we fulfill ourselves, too. If God is doing the ultimate act that shows his God-ness, his divinity, what he *really is* and what he *really does*, if that takes place on the Cross in the broken body and the spilled blood of Christ, then that's where it has to take place in our life, too. That's why Jesus said—and it's interesting in the gospels, as you know—Jesus, when he first appeared, he did all the signs of the Messiah: He preached to the poor, he forgave the sins, he cast out the demons, he did all the healings: he made the blind see, the lame walk, deaf hear, dumb talk, and so on. He did all the miracles that he was supposed to do, and then he says, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And only then in the Gospel did Jesus say for the first time that he had to be betrayed, spit upon, mocked, rejected, killed, and would rise again on the third day. Those of you who know the gospels know that Peter said, "Never! That's not the way God acts. That's not the way the Messiah acts. The Messiah's supposed to come in and not get spit upon, mocked, and beaten, but he's supposed to *overcome* all of that." Jesus, as you know, even calls Peter "Satan" and says, "Get behind me," and so on. Then he goes on the mountain and transfigures in front of them and shows his glory, and then on the mountain even he talks about the crucifixion, the exodus that he will make in Jerusalem with Moses and Elijah. Then *again* he tells them that he's going to be crucified. And in between Peter's confession and the Transfiguration, you have the famous line that we heard last Sunday in the Gospel. If you went to church last Sunday, you heard it, from Mark's Gospel, where in Mark's version anyway, where he said, "If you will be *my* disciple, *you* will take up *your* cross, and you will follow me."

There's just no way to be the disciple of Jesus without taking up our cross. If he is crucified, we have to be crucified. St. Paul uses that expression: "co-crucified": "We must be co-crucified *together* with him." Co-crucified. St. Paul loves that term, "co-." In Greek, the prefix "*syn*." We *co-suffer* with him. We *co-reject* with him. We *co-die* with him. We are *co-crucified* with him. Then we are *co-rising* with him. We are *co-glorified* with him. We are *co-reigning* with him. But it's all in and with *him*.

If this is the central act of *his* life, then it has to be the central act of our life, and there's no way around it. As sometimes my students say, "That's the bad news of the good news." The good news is that God has revealed himself to us, raised us up, forgiven us, ascended into heaven, glorified us, given us eternal life, forgave every sin; where sin

abounds, grace super-abounds, and no rock, nothing ridiculous, no horrible sin is more than the grace of God. God can forgive everything. That's the good news. The "bad news" is—and I put that in quotes, of course; it's only rhetoric—that the way the good news gets enacted is through the Cross—and *no other way*.

That's what the temptations of Jesus by the devil were about. The devil wanted to get Jesus not to take the Cross, and those were the real temptations of Jesus, not wanting little domestic happiness with Mary Magdalene or something like the movie said. But those were the powerful temptations of Jesus as the Messiah: not to take the Cross. Because who wants that Cross? Nobody wants it, but it's absolutely essential, because there's no life and therefore no happiness, no joy, no peace, no nothing without it. There's just darkness and death without it, but through the darkness and death of the Cross, that's how the life and the victory [come], and no other way. And that's the Word of the Cross.

What I'd like to do today is to try as specifically as we can to apply that to our life. What does it mean to take up the Cross? What does it mean to be co-crucified with Christ? What does it mean to fulfill oneself as a person made in the image and likeness of God, who is love, who fulfills *himself*—"It is fulfilled"—by hanging, dead, on the Cross? What does that mean?

First of all, the simple essential point, to kind of reduce it to its bare essence, would be to say this: It is to love. Everything is summed up in that one word: love. God is love. That's the shortest definition of God in the Bible: God is love. And God, as love, God being love, is what is revealed in the Cross. The Cross reveals who God is and *why* we say God is love, and therefore reveals what love is. Now, that's also very important for us today, because not only does everybody talk about God, and any coincidence to the real God is coincidental... Some of those TV preachers, when they say "God," I don't know what god they're talking about, but it ain't the one *we* contemplate, hanging on the Cross.

So you can say "God," and it can mean anything. Some people say, "Oh, it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe in God." But *what* God? *How* God? What does God do? Those are very important questions, the answer of which for us is given in the Cross, and all theology is about the Cross. The Word of the Cross is the Word about God; the *Logos tou Theou* is the *Logos tou Stavrou*. The Word of God is the Word of the Cross. It tells us who *God* is, but if we say, "*God is love*," then the Cross tells us what *love* is, and that's very important, because everybody's a lover.

Who doesn't want to love? Everybody wants to love. You see it on the stop sign: "Make love, not war," "All you need is love." Everyone will tell you they're for love. Dr. Ruth is for love. I mean, who's not for love? Who would be not for love, at least rhetorically? Who would get up and say, "I'm for hate; I'm for death"? No one. But the problem is: What is love? That's the question. If I'm for love, what is love? If I'm for God who is love,

who is that God who is love, and therefore what is love? If I find and fulfill myself as in the image and likeness of God who is love... Thomas Merton who was a famous monk said, "To know that we are made in the image and likeness of God who is love is enough knowledge to last us endless eternities." You don't need any more information. That's enough. If you go on a need-to-know basis, that's all you need to know: that we're made in the image and likeness of God, who is love. But what you also need to know is that the love is realized and manifested and actualized and shown for what it is on the wood of the Cross and nowhere else. Ultimately, definitively, absolutely, that's where it's shown what it is.

So if we say, "I want to find and fulfill myself in the image and likeness of God who is love, I've got, then, to do what God does." Now, you can say, "How can I do what *God does*? Isn't that like saying too much?" And the answer is: no, it's not. Not if you read the Gospel, because the whole Gospel is saying exactly this: We are made in the image and likeness of God, to be and to do what God does. And that's not a teaching of Greek patristics; that's a teaching of the New Testament.

When Jesus Christ said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another *as I have loved you*," he was talking about the Cross, because how do we love as he has loved? There's only one way: the Cross. But that's a *commandment*! The command to love one's God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength, to love one's neighbor; that's the old commandment. What that *means* is shown in Christ, and that's why he says, "The *new* commandment I give you is not just to love one another, and you figure out what love is. No. The new commandment is to love one another *as I have loved you*. That's the new commandment.

So we would ask the question: How does he love us? In what consists his love, so that I can know what I have to do? Because Jesus said, very often, "He who believes in me will do the work that I do, greater works than these, do." He said, "Be perfect, as God in heaven is perfect. Be merciful as God as merciful." This is what he commanded of us. That's why he *came*: so that we could *do it*, by his power and spirit.

But what is the *it*? What is this love? Simply, again, as simply as we can, it would be total and absolute fidelity to God in *all* circumstances without exception. No idolatry. No other gods. Trusting God absolutely in all circumstances without exception. And in the midst of trusting God, and we prove our love for God by our trust for God, our obedience to God—"If you love me, you will keep my commandments," Christ says—that this love of God in all circumstances is to have as the content of one's life only the wisdom and the power of God, and not any earthly wisdom and certainly not any earthly power.

The wisdom and the power of God *is* the power of love, and that is the Truth itself. The Truth of God, the Truth of Christ, Christ as the Truth, as the Life, is telling us that we can trust God in *everything*, through *everything*, but *trusting* it means doing it *his way* and

not *our* way. And *his* way—and this is what love *is*—is constant mercy, constant forgiveness, no condemnation of anyone for anything. “Father, forgive them.” Not giving in in the *least* way to evil by evil, and enduring, even unto death, even unto a horrid death on the cross, anything that the evil could produce—without producing the evil in return.

That’s why, if you translate the Word of the Cross into commandments, you have the Sermon on the Mountain. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right. Blessed are those whose heart is pure. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those [who] abuse you. They smash you on the one cheek; you give them the other. They ask you for your shirt; you give them your coat. Now, you know that, but the problem is this is madness as far as this world is concerned. This is totally scandalous and completely moronic behavior. The only trouble is, that’s the Word of the Cross, and it’s the only thing that *works*. It’s the only thing that *works*.

If we’re a pragmatic American society, we should be interested in what *works*. This is the only thing that *works*. Works for what? And here we might even be super-duper American—works for happiness. Works for joy. Works for peace. Works for self-dignity. Works for proper self-esteem. Works for being able to stand on two feet and look at *anybody*. Works to *know*, ultimately, *who* we are and what we have been created for. It’s the only thing that works. Nothing else works. Earthly power doesn’t work. Earthly pleasure doesn’t work. Earthly prestige doesn’t work. Earthly position doesn’t work. Earthly profits don’t work. Earthly possessions don’t work. That’s all madness; that’s madness. It’s a lie of the devil. It *doesn’t work*.

If you want the living proof, just look at American society today: it *doesn’t work*. That’s why half the people are crazy and the other half are drug addicts, sex addicts, I don’t know what, even religion addicts. They come to retreats on Saturdays... [laughter] No. When the sun is shining... It doesn’t work. Then you go looking for all kinds of things to somehow make it work. Of course, life is limited, so sooner or later you run out of time and conk off and die, and that doesn’t work either.

What the Cross is telling us is this: If you want to live—and it’s very interesting how Jesus uses that expression, “live.” Not just find the meaning of life, the purpose of life, the goal of life, but *live*. He said, “I have come that you may have life, and life in abundance.” And he said that exactly in the context when he said, “I am the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.” He said in the Sermon on the Mountain, “The way is narrow and hard. The gate is narrow; the way is hard, that leads to *life*, and few there be who find it.” Because there [are] few who really want what God wants and are willing to trust him to the end, who are willing to say, when they feel totally abandoned, “My God, my God, why hast *thou* abandoned me? Yet into *your* hands I give my spirit,” and then emerge victorious.

It's *life* that we want, not just existence, not just survival, not just coping with the world, but we want to live. In fact, I used to always make jokes and they say, "Surviving," how awful it is. I've stopped doing that, because even surviving ain't bad in America now, because if you don't survive, then you'll never come to live. So the first thing is, figure out how to survive; then we'll talk about living. But that's about how bad it is. The answer to all of this is God who is love that is revealed in the Cross, and [us] taking up that Cross together with him, because what we believe in the Cross from God's side is that God tells us on the Cross many things. He tells us that he loves us and loves us and loves us to the end, and our whole life is defined by his love for us. The *content* of our life is his love for us. That we can never escape his love for us. That even hell will be the futile attempt to even *try* to escape his love for us, because he chases us even into hell. He takes the hell on himself on the Cross, becoming sin, becoming curse, becoming dead—for us, not for himself. He didn't need that. For us. So he tells us that we are loved, and that's the foundational metaphysical reality for sane existence. We are insane if we do not know in our *gut* that we are loved, and we are loved by God. By God! And there's *nothing* that we can *do* that will *stop* the love of God for us. That's what the Cross tells us.

However sinful, stupid, ridiculous, criminal, I don't know, the Auschwitzes, the gulags, the abortion centers, I don't know what, of this world, will *not stop* the love of God for us. He takes it *all* on himself. He identifies with it all. And all we have to do is want it, say yes to it, and then it'll become ours, and it'll work in us. There's nothing we can do to respond to it. We can only take it, receive it, say Amen to it. But that being-loved, boundlessly and unconditionally, this is what the Cross is telling us. As I said earlier, whether we like it or not, we are *loved*.

One of the hardest things to do in life, because of our human pride, because of our rebellion against God, much harder almost than loving, is to allow ourselves to *be* loved, to let God love us, to let godly *people* love us. But this love of God is what the Word of the Cross is: boundless, unconditional love from God's side.

How is that love expressed? It's expressed not in denying the sin of the world, not saying, "Oh, you're nice anyway." I heard a tape the other day of a Methodist named Stanley Hauerwas—highly recommended—and he said, "I'm a Methodist. We Methodists have deep belief in God. We believe God is *nice*." Then he said, "And that has heavy implications. We should be nice, too." But it's not just being *nice*. And one of the things about being *nice*, people think one of the things about being *nice* is never to say that anything's wrong. Never to admit that there's real evil, real sin, real tragedy; we just kind of "pretend" it's not there, put it away. But God doesn't do that.

The Cross tells us that this world is stinking, rotten, evil. That's what it tells us. That the world isn't *nice*—exactly. That the world *hates* light, *hates* love, *hates* truth, *hates* justice, and when that all comes

incarnate the presence of Jesus the Messiah, they say he's a Samaritan and has a devil and they've got to get rid of him. It's not nice.

God doesn't deny all that. He doesn't look down and say, "Oh, you're really *nice*." He doesn't. He says, "You're all sinners, rotten, and there's no, not one righteous, no, not one, but I love you anyway. And to prove that I love you anyway, I take all your rot on myself." And that's what love is. Love is to identify with the one who's really *bad*, *really* evil.

One of the things that we're going to talk about is: if we're going to imitate God in that, we have to *admit* the *evil* that's around. Some people have a very hard time admitting evil around, in themselves and in other people, and in other people as well as themselves, especially their family members. Other people are only too happy to admit evil around, in everybody! Sometimes even themselves: "I'm a sinner!" All right, that's part of it. But the admission has to be there.

But then the Cross says, "You *must* admit it. You *must* say: '*It is no good. It is not God's way. Things are not right.*' There is evil. There is the devil. There is sin. There is death." And these things have to be *faced*. They can't be cosmetized over, stuck in a corner. People get sick. People have cancer. People die. Airplanes crash. People blow them up. People get thrown out of their countries. People get victimized by other people. They get victimized by the sin of their parents. They get victimized by all kinds of stuff, and all that is *real*. And God on the Cross faces all that and says it's *real*. And when he faces it and says it's *real*, he *weeps* over it. He *grieves* over it. He is *appalled* by it. *But* he is not victimized or paralyzed by it, and he doesn't let it poison *him*. So no matter how bad it is—and it's as bad as you can get, especially if you're crucifying the Son of glory—and according to St. Paul, any sin crucifies again the Lord of glory, because that's why he came... So it's as bad as it can get, but being however bad it can get, he says, "You're forgiven."

"Like it or not, you're forgiven." Proud people don't like to be forgiven. In fact, proud people would rather burn in hell and think they deserve it than to [hear] "You're forgiven." "Me, forgiven? For what?" But the forgiveness is there, and, more than the forgiveness, is the identification, the baring of the burden of the sin of the other, without acting in an evil way in return. This is what the Word of the Cross tells us. And that the only way that you will redeem the other, the only way that you will help to heal the other, the only way that you can expiate the sin of the other, is to take it on yourself, but not in a sick way, not in the "Oh, I'm *suffering* for the other" way, but in a way of sovereign freedom, in total dignity, in an absolutely voluntary act of love, so that it's literally impossible that the evil will be victorious. It *can't be* because you don't give it an *inch*. And one of the ways that you don't give it an inch is not by denying it, but by disclosing it, by seeing it for what it *is*. That's why the Cross is the great clarification. The Cross is the great *illumination* of things the way they really are.

PART II

On that cross, God died. God in his own humanity, died. And he experienced abandonment by his Father, being the Divine Son – and the abandonment was real, because he totally identified with us. In his love for us he became *exactly* what we are: cursed, sinful, and dead. Not being a curse, not being a sinner, and even not being capable of *dying* in his divinity. But he died. That’s the mystery. That’s the mind-blowing, mind-boggling mystery: that he died for us. And when he dies, the experience of the wages of sin and evil and darkness and the devil – which is death – he experiences to the boundless, immeasurable parameters that don’t even exist of divinity. And therefore we cannot even begin to *imagine* or to *compare* with what happened in— on that day. But he tells us that it not only happened once for all in the final victory, but we now can participate in that victory too: if we love with the love which he loved us; if we face the evil the way he faced it; if we admit it as he admitted it; if we take it upon ourself as he took it; if we forgive and have mercy and trust in the grace no matter how abandoned we feel by God – and we have to feel it to the *end*, if we’re going to be really a mature lover. That’s why the Cross and the dark night is all a part of our life. It’s not just cheery, rosey, ha-ha, God smiles, love you, you know-smiley-face-on-a-bumper or something, smiley sticker, “God is love”. It’s not a smiley face on a bumper sticker that shows that God is love, it’s *Christ crucified* that shows that God is love. And then- and when we enter into *Him*, when our body gets broken and our blood is shed, in love with *Him*, then we destroy and co-redeem the world in him. Because we’re called to be co-redeemers in him, co-sanctifiers in him, by the power that he gives us, which is the power of the cross.

Now all of this has to take place in our life. If it doesn’t [take] place in our life, we are still dead. If it doesn’t take place in our life, we are not human yet: we are still subhuman. See, because we’re made in the image and likeness of love and this is the way it’s done.

Now, what I plan to do is to try to describe at least, or to apply specifically, how that actually gets done in *our* life. See, what are the conditions of our life that make a co-crucifixion and a co-redemption with Christ possible? How do *we* destroy the devil? How do *we* overcome death? How do *we* become victorious? How do *we* get risen unto everlasting life, by being co-crucified with him? How do we do it in our day-to-day existence? What is necessary to do it? How does it work? This is what I’d like to talk about this afternoon.

One of the crosses that we bear is in fact physical suffering. I mean, there’s no doubt about it. If the Cross is the real criterion of the evaluation of our life in this world, then it is absolutely mind-blowing that after 2,000 years of Christianity, people still have trouble with physical or mental or emotional suffering – as if it’s something alien to our life on this earth. Let me show my sinfulness here: it really bothers me, at this point in my life (I turned 50 last week) when you still hear people saying, “God is good? I went to church, I prayed, I joined St. Vladimir’s foundation, and I went and skied and broke my

leg." You know, "Where is God?" you know. Of course, skiing and breaking one's leg you could probably put up with and say "Well," but suppose it's cancer, like Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Ziadic. Suppose it's a baby born with 12 kinks in its intestines like little Ruth. And people say "Where is God?" Well, if you read Matthew, Mark and Luke, I challenge you to find one sentence where God says, "I exist so that people would not get cancer and die." Or "I exist so that babies wouldn't be born retarded or crippled." You can't find one word of that in the Gospel. Jesus never promised earthly health. He never promised endless happy life in this world. He *certainly* never said that if you're healthy and wealthy until 90 and die on a golf course in Florida, God has blessed you. Never said that. Just the opposite: the Bible is filled with the question, "Why do evil people not get sick, and live to 90 and conk off?" You know, where here who are good, you know, die early?

We have in the back on the wall Saint Panteleimon. He's one of the great healers in Christian history, a physician, a doctor. He died at 29! Now Jesus healed people, even bodies, let alone souls. And by the way it's a clear teaching of our church tradition: everyone's soul can be healed on this earth, but it takes death and resurrection for the body to be joined to it. Saint Macarius of Egypt says we can be resurrected spiritually before we die, and we even must be, because if we are not resurrected spiritually before we die, we never get resurrected to glory after. We'll be resurrected to condemnation after. But the body has to suffer right through. The body has to be broken, the blood has to be shed. But you can't touch the soul if it's with God. That's the whole point of Christ, too.

So the point would be, if someone is really suffering and sick, it seems to me that we should by now come to the Christian perspective where that would not be considered alien to our life. It certainly would not be considered some instance of the hatred of God for us. And in fact, in the real Christian perspective it would be considered as an opportunity for love. An opportunity for witness. An opportunity for glorifying God. An opportunity for redeeming the world in your own person. An opportunity for overcoming the devil and death. That's why martyrdom is at the heart of our Christian worldview. We don't say, "Where was God, he let them die," you know. Usually he did not let them die for a while to prove he had the power, until finally they got him, you know. (In the lives of saints they like to do that, you know, they try to kill him 40,000 ways and finally they make it.)

But in any case the death, the suffering: that's part of our life in the earth. And I think that we should get to the point where we should *expect* it. We should even wonder, *if it doesn't happen, why not? What's wrong with us that we are not allowed to make this witness?* That would be the super-duper Christian approach. And that's not sick, and that's not masochistic, either. That's simply realistic relative to the life of this world. And the story that pops into my mind which makes this point absolutely crushingly (and I have to tell it, and I think she was probably the only person alive on the planet who could pull it off right now, and that was Mother Theresa of Calcutta):

Mother Theresa, on a television interview I saw once, was being asked by this journalist these questions, and she was asked— this journalist asked her, “Don’t you think you’re wasting your time with all these dead people,” you know, “Don’t you think we should work to restructure society and everything so there would be less death?” and so on. And so, she kind of didn’t even know what the heck she was talking about, and Mother Theresa kind of looked at her and said “Oh they’re dying, and my Lord died, and when they die they are with him, and I have to be with them,” and all this kind of stuff, “I do it for Jesus.” Then she says, “Yeah, but what about abortion? You’re against abortion, there’s a population, and all these kids get born just to die on the streets,” and so on, “Isn’t it better if they didn’t live?” Mother Theresa didn’t even know what she was talking about! I mean she doesn’t even have the antennas to even understand the question, you know. And then she said, “Oh but there’s life in the womb, and when Jesus was in the womb and John the Baptist was in the womb they greeted each other, and even if they died, they lived for one minute, they’re precious in God’s eyes and God takes them to heaven,” so that didn’t work. So, and then this woman, I could see the journalist, the woman journalist, she’s getting a little bit angry, you know. She’s getting kind of upset with this woman. So then she said to her, “But, okay, okay, but look how many dead people there are! Look how many suffering people there are! You can only help a handful of them! You see? And anyway you’re not very successful, you know? I mean, don’t you wish you were more successful, you could do more?” and so on. And Mother Theresa says, “Oh yes, we cannot help everyone, but each one of them is Christ, and each one of them is a life, and if we could just do that, we’ll do it.” And then she said, about being successful, she said, “My Lord never commanded his people to be successful. He commanded them to be faithful. Not successful. If there’s success, that’s his business. I don’t know how many people are going to die. All I know is that I have my life and these are these dying people and I will help them.” Then the journalist came to the knockout punch. Being really agitated at this point, she said, “Okay.” You could even feel — maybe it’s just my paranoia, but I felt a kind of nasty streak in her voice. And she said, “But you are helping all those suffering people who are dying on the streets and dying, and *you’re* not suffering. *You’re* not dying. You have food to eat, you’re healthy. How come your God does that? See, it’s not just. Look at *you*.” Mother Theresa said, “Yes, it’s not just. But God takes this injustice upon himself. And he came, and he died with everyone who died, and there will be a kingdom where there’s no sickness, no sorrow, no dying, no injustice but life everlasting. And that’s what I believe in. And therefore I believe that any suffering connected to his suffering has a value for the recreation of the world when we do it without yielding to the evil.” Then that woman said, “Yes, but *you* don’t suffer.” And Mother Theresa — and she’s the *only* one that could pull this off in my opinion — she said, an absolutely straight face, without even taking a breath, she looked at that woman lovingly in the eyes and said, “Yes: because I’m not worthy.” And she said, “If I am not worthy to suffer with my Lord, at least I can be with those who are.”

Now it seems to me, *that’s* the Christian worldview. *That’s* the Word of the cross. We’re not scared or scandalized by suffering. Because we know suffering comes from our sin

and not from God. Suffering comes because of *our* evil and not God. God does not cause suffering, God does not cause death. But he allows it. Why does he allow it? He doesn't have another alternative! He deals with what he's got, and what he's got is us! Who torture each other every day, and bring all kinds of evil and rot into the world, and sickness and death. It's not his fault; it's our fault. That's the meaning of the Adam and Eve story: God knew that it would happen even before he created us. God didn't create Adam and Eve and tell them, "Now, be good and I'll love you," and then they sinned and he said "Ah! What happened?" God *knew* that it would happen. He knew before made us; he knew before we were *created* that we would suffer all this stuff. He knew that it would be boundless suffering, and all he could do was come in and suffer even more boundlessly in his divinity to expiate it and to bring the Kingdom. And the Word of the Cross tells us that our vision (to use big theological language) is *radically* eschatological: there is no justice in this world. There is no possibility of a painless, deathless life in this world. But there *is* the possibility by God's power not to let it *win*. You see? *Not to let it win*. And to say "no" to it to the end — out of love for God — and then the very power of this death and evil and sin is broken. And then for the great saints to even suffer with him was the greatest joy. It became the greatest joy.

Now that doesn't mean that we consecrate suffering. We do not deify or idolize suffering. Suffering is alien. Suffering is no good. And it is *not* Christian to say, "Suffering is really good! Death is really good! Death is the last stage of life. Death is where we, you know, our soul goes out of our body and we see light or something." That's not the Christian view. In fact, I would even go so far as to say the Kübler-Ross model, the resignation to death, the acceptance of death, is *not* the final stage of our growth. We have to accept the fact that we die, yes. But we never accept *death*. You see? And we fight against it to our last breath. That's why we are against euthanasia. That's why we are against abortion. That's why we are against anything that would rob us of our chance to be victorious over the devil.

Another story popped into my mind which I can't resist saying (you know I like stories): Once I was in Greece and there was a meeting of theologians. All the professors from the theological school, you see, were there debating, debating everything, you know, answering all the questions and everything and so on. Clearly. And then they were discussing you know, why the trouble of the Church, this and that and this, and how bad it is, and so on, and the Greek government and this and I don't know what, it's so bad, it's so bad. Then it came time for the word of Father Vasileios of Stavronikita, the abbot of the monastery of Mount Athos Stavronikita. And this was about oh, 10 years ago? More, '74 I think it was. About 15 years ago, and he was real young, I bet he was only about 39 years old, maybe, then. He's the one who wrote the book "Hymn of Entry." Have you read the book, the Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, \$6.95? [Laughter].

Anyway, this Vasileios gets up there, this monk, you see, gets up there, and it was the most, one of the most amazing things I ever heard in my life. It almost rivaled Mother Theresa, almost. (It certainly didn't, but almost.) He said, he got up there, he said, "Yes,

things are bad, and the world is bad, and there's materialism and secularism and atheism," and this and that, you know. He said, "But, let us rejoice! Let us have hope!" You know? And I was thinking he was going to say, "Christ is risen!" But he didn't! He said, "Let us have joy! Let us have hope! Because they can take everything from us. But they cannot rob us of our death." He says, "They cannot rob us of our death." He says, "In fact, they may even *help* us to glorify God!" And then he got into the Word of the cross. That no one can rob us of our death. And therefore, the ultimate absolute most perfect way of glorifying God, no one can take from us. Maybe no one comes to Sunday school. Maybe — I don't know why — no one comes to the liturgy. Maybe half the people are interested in stuffed cabbages and not Jesus? Who knows why? It causes us agony and so on. But we should rejoice! Why? We can still suffer and die. And if we suffer and die we will do more than anything else that we can do with our blah-blah here today. And if we don't do it, then our talk is *worse* than vain babbling. It's unto condemnation and judgment. So this monk said, "We can glorify. We can redeem the world. No one can take from us our means of doing that. They can close churches, they can declare atheistic regimes, they can teach our children any garbage and crap, and so on. But as long as we are able to suffer and die, we can glorify God." And that's the Word of the cross.

And that's why I think we Christians had better start getting psyched in that direction, you see, and stop thinking of God as the one who blesses us and gives us cars, and makes our color TV work, and all this kinda stuff. I mean, it's *not* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who does *that*. It's *not* the God who sends his Son to hang on a Cross who does *that*. You know? And I like to quote — some of you have heard me quote this before — H. Richard Niebuhr, a protestant, who said: "For us American Christians," (he said this in the 1930s, so I don't know *what* he would say *now*), but he said in the 1930s that, "for most of us, we have a God without wrath, bringing man without sin, into a Kingdom with no judgment, by Christ without a cross." And you just go to church to make things 'better.' To 'feel good.' You know, we don't want to hear about sin, we don't want to hear about death, we don't want to hear about bodies broken, we don't want to hear about repentance, we don't want to hear about suffering. We want to go and hear how *nice* God is, and how he takes care of us, and if we go to church, our business will be nice, and so on. But that is a *lie*. It's a *lie*. We can't do that, it's not *true*, you see? It's not true. It's not the way God works, you see? The *cross* is the way God works. This is not morbidity. This is not gloom. This is the only way to joy! This is the only way to peace! This is the only way to *real* happiness! If people are really miserable, unhappy, don't know what to do, we should tell them: "Pick up your cross! You'll be happy! Because at least you'll be in reality. You're sick? Offer it to God. Be victorious! Use the Holy Spirit!" Now I admit, if you're standing by the bed, fat and rosy, you can't just glibly say this. And that's why probably Mother Theresa had even the *right* to say it, because she *was* with the people. But on the other hand, she even said herself, "I stand by the bed because I'm not worthy." And I think even if we had that attitude, too, that could help us a lot to approach things in a realistic way that could finally bring us what we're looking for: identity, fulfillment, and so on. Americans don't know who they are.

They want to be fulfilled, they want to know why they live. And the answer is, “For God, who is love.” And that answer means the cross. If we followed Mother Theresa’s teaching, we not only are supposed to give bread, we are supposed to *become ourself* bread.

I heard a tape that she talked to her novices, and she said, “If you’re here cause you want to help people, you want to be a do-gooder, you want to feel good about your life — don’t come, we’re not here for that. If you’re here for social improvement, or recreating the planet — don’t come here, we’re not for that. We’re here for one thing: to show the love of God in Christ to people, in the way Christ did. Period.” And then she went on to say, “And therefore, if your greatest joy is not to be like Jesus, the bread of life, who is everyday broken and distributed to feed the others with the bread of life, don’t come here.” And then she went on to say, “If we are to be what Christ is, and Christ is the bread of life whose body is broken and blood spilled for the food of the faithful, that’s what we must become ourself.” And it’s interesting in our Holy Liturgy, when we invoke the Holy Spirit on the bread and the wine, we invoke the Holy Spirit first on ourself. We say, “Send down Thy Holy Spirit upon *us* and upon these gifts, and show them to be the bread and the body and the blood of Christ.” We become the body and blood of Christ by the Holy Spirit’s power when we commune to Christ. And therefore we must be distributed to feed the people, living bread for the people.

And, by the way, here you have a wonderful sermon of Saint Augustine, and a very similar one I found in Saint Symeon the New Theologian (in the 11th century, Augustine in the 5th century), where he said this: “Christ — the Logos, the Divine Son of God — is the one by whom, through whom all things were made; he’s the one [in] whose image we are all made; he’s the one in whom everything holds together.” And then he said, “But he’s the one who emptied himself and came upon the earth.” And then he picks up the [Matthew 25](#) parable of the Last Judgment, and he says, “Jesus is the bread of life. But he comes on the world, and he said, ‘I hunger.’ So that hungering with those who hunger, he could feed them with the bread of life through his hungering.” Then he said, “Jesus is the one who hangs the earth upon the waters, who sends the waters upon the earth to bring fruit; who sends the living water into the hearts of the disciples. But he comes on the earth, emptying himself, hanging on the cross, and he says, ‘I thirst.’ And by his thirsting, he satisfies every thirsting person with the water of life that flows from his side from the tree of the cross. So by thirsting, he becomes the water of life.” Then he said, “Everything belongs to him, and he comes on the earth and is alienated, ‘I had no home,’ he said, ‘Birds have nests, foxes have dens, the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’ And so he comes into the world, rejected by the world, outside the walls of Jerusalem, hanging on the cross, so that by his rejection, we could all be taken home again, and overcome all alienation in communion with God, and living in a house with many mansions forever and ever with God. So by his alienation and estrangement, he takes us home.” And then he said, “He’s the one who clothes the world with light as with a garment. He’s the one who feeds every living thing,” and so on. And he says, “He who clothes the world with light as with a garment, who clothes us with the robe of

salvation, how does he do it? He does it by coming on the earth and being naked. Naked in the Bethlehem cave. Naked in the Jordan River. Naked hanging upon the cross. Naked in the tomb. That by his nakedness we could be clothed with divinity." And everyone baptized in Christ clothes themselves with Christ, and then he becomes himself the robe of salvation. But he only does it by being naked first. And then he says, of course, "He is the one who heals everyone. But how does he heal? By being wounded. By his wounds we are healed. His wounds become our wounds. Our wounds are connected to his wounds, and that's the way we get healed. And then ultimately, he's life itself, and how does he give life to the world? By dying. And through his death, life comes." So if you take that parable, "I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was in prison," and he was in prison, he was arrested to set us free, *he* undergoes all of that. That's why he can say, "If you did it to the least, you have done it to me." Because he *is* everyone.

And that's the only way we prove our love for God: by how we prove our love for each other. And that means mercy, forgiveness, identity, bearing the burden of the brother — which, by the way, Thomas Merton also said, "It's the only burden you can bear with joy." And the burden that crushes you is your own ego. The minute you give up yourself and bear the burden of the other, it's light. When bear yourself as a burden, you can't do it. So this is what he does, and that's what we have to do. We must always, always, always, *always* remember: we really don't know what's going on in people's lives and people's souls. Our task is just to love them, to forgive them, to show the truth to them, to embrace them, to identify with them, to be one with them. No to judge them, not to condemn them, not to be mean to them, not to gloat over their evil. That's what *we* have to work on in our *own* life. And if that happens, we have done everything we can do and God will find ways to bring good out of it if he can. And that's where we trust God! That's where we have hope. See? Hope. Now hope is not an expectation of an agenda that we have set up ahead of time. "I will convert my daughter by 1992. And I expect God will do this because he said, 'Whatever you ask...'," and so on. No! No.

We *hope*. We trust God. We trust not only *what* he will do, but that he will know *how* to do it. That we don't. We can want even to convert other people because we want them to live the way *we* want them to live. We want them to do what *we* want. And very often there's even other interests. And that's especially true with parents and children, you know. We want our kids to be bright, beautiful, and go to church because *What will other people say?* You know, that's what really interests us. What other people will say! We don't even care about God or their salvation! And one of the proofs of that is how much we overlook when no one knows. You know? Because as long as you're not bringing some kind of embarrassment to the family, well, it's okay. You can always tell impurity sneaks in there. I think that's the narrow path, and I think the best thing is just to pray to God, don't analyze too much, beg God to get rid of all ego and impurity, and just beg God to give total identification with the other for their sake. And break down that barrier between, and get out all that's impure in there. And then trust God that if we do that, even pragmatically, that's the only thing we can do! That's the *only thing* we can do. Heal yourself, and then we can serve for the healing of others. If we don't, no

matter what we say or do, it's not going to help. In fact, it's going to hurt. It's going to hurt. And that's why, I think, a lot of people are really put off by Christians: because they feel the impurity of our approach to them. That we're out to get them. We want more bodies in our parish or something. We want them to live the way we want them to live, and so on. And they don't feel the peace and the joy and the real identity with them that real love should have. You see? We're condemning them somehow. Or manipulating them somehow. And they feel it. So, be careful.