

Byzantine Special Forces Training

There is a story of General Patton meeting a group of paratroopers before a drop. He asked the first one if he liked jumping from planes and received an enthusiastic yes from the first. As he went down the next five, he got similar responses. When he came to the sixth, he received an enthusiastic, "No, Sir." Patton asked him why then he was jumping from planes, and the soldier responded that "I like being around soldiers that do." It is for this reason that I am an Army Chaplain. I do not do what they do, nor do I receive all the training that they get, but I like being around soldiers.

While there are things, I can teach them, there are many things they can teach me even in terms of faith. We all are involved in spiritual warfare. We are against evil in the world and our lives.

The goal of our spiritual life is Theosis. This is not something that happens overnight. The Fathers had some different approaches to this end. St Gregory Nazianzus was very personal and individualized in his approach. While there are many steps, this article will look at only that which is under the concept of praxis. Byzantines are usually identified with the contemplative side of the Church, but praxis is the living out of our "orthodoxy," our giving the right glory to God in all that we do. St Maximus the Confessor wrote that contemplation alone is fruitless. It must be accompanied by observance of the Ten Commandments. Referring to St Paul, Maximus reminds that no one hates his own flesh, but he makes it his slave.

Some of the secrets of Special Forces are part of our tradition to control our passions, open us up to contemplation and lead us to Theosis. Our mission is Theosis.

Interestingly, the first secret is to breathe slowly, breathe deep, and clean your mind. Whether it is shooting a weapon with accuracy or offering prayer to God, we have to be 100% focused on our goal. In the Mystical Prayer we pray that we lay aside all earthly cares. We put aside distractions. Our liturgy is sung at a rhythmic beat so that we can bring our breathing and our prayer together. For example, in the Jesus Prayer, we tie our breaths to the words of the prayer. We cannot say it quickly while breathing in "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God," and then exhaling, "have mercy on me a sinner." The wisdom of the Fathers can be seen in inhaling takes longer than exhaling. Not only do we slow down our breathing, but we are also more focused initially on our prayer.

The second secret is rehearsals bring mastery. If you do something often enough that you can do it without thinking of it step by step. How many of our grandmothers when it comes to sharing recipes have a problem because they do it without thinking. When a child learns to hit a baseball, they have to be given step by step: batter's box, secure feet, put the bat over the shoulder, etc. In time they do all of these things without even thinking.

One of the little chuckles in life is watching Roman Catholics go to the movies. So often they come to the row, genuflect; make the sign of the cross and go in. It is only theaters and churches

for most adults that they go into seating in a row. This constant repetition of one action becomes automatic with enough practice. It is for this reason that I believe the Fathers of our Church have us say so many "Lord, have mercy"s and make the sign of the cross. When we are in a moment of temptation, without thought since we need to pray and we need to do it immediately, "Lord, have mercy" should automatically come to our lips. Or for those who practice the Jesus Prayer, the prayer should come out of our mouth before our brain even thinks of it. Whenever we think of prayer, our hands should form the traditional three-two finger configuration and go to our forehead before we decide what to pray.

The third secret is to do the best you can for the next five minutes. Too often, people are introduced into our tradition, and there is so much to learn, understand, and do that they are overwhelmed. When people come to our Church and ask about what they should do because they have heard about all the bowing, signs of the cross, sitting and standing, they panic. I tell them do not worry, just relax and let your senses take everything in. Smell the incense, hear the music, taste the Eucharist (if they can), touch the icons, and see the all the ritual; then the rest will follow. Theosis is not accomplished in a day but a lifetime, so take the spiritual life one step at a time.

The fourth secret is to put your mind on autopilot. This is related to the rehearsals above. Not related to our spirituality but our safety, it is recommended that people who use cell phones practice 20 times a day with the phone on airplane mode to dial 911. Why because most people in a panic situation cannot remember where the numbers are and most importantly, to hit send. They dial the numbers and wait for a response that never comes. By practicing when trouble hits, you do not think you just dial and hit send. This is why the Jesus Prayer is tied to our breathing. So, we keep praying always as St Paul teaches. Also, when temptation comes into our AO (Area of Operation) we immediately, without wondering what we should do, prayer comes to our lips, the sign of the Cross is made, and all our mental activity is focused on our mission of Theosis.

Lastly, act and look relaxed. First, no one wants to go into a Church where everyone looks miserable. If you look relaxed and comfortable, your mind will pick up on this and remove stress factors. "Lay aside all earthly cares."

Our military has to keep in physical shape. Fasting does just that. When we discipline our bodies, we make our flesh stronger. St Paul reminds us that that spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. We can resist physical sins involving anger and inappropriate behavior by keeping our bodies under our control. This is developed through, as our Lord says: prayer and fasting.

If you want to succeed in your mission of holiness, use the special forces skills present in our Church.

Fr Jonathan Morse