

Thoughts on the Clergy Retreat

The priests and deacons of our eparchy have recently returned from a retreat. The idea of such an activity comes to our Church from the Early Fathers. Just as St Anthony of Egypt, people left the world to pray for the world. They left the world to not be distracted in their prayer. Some felt that they were not called to the solitary life. Those hermits led to the development of monasticism, joining together in communities following a rule, a way of life as that of St Pachomius.

While our clergy going to Hawaii may not seem radical, when Anthony the Great and others went to the desert, they were seen as taking a radical step in the 3rd century by leaving family and community. At that time, the Church was legal and populous. Anthony and others sought solitude from the world in the model of the radical discipleship of Jesus. Inspired by the Holy Scriptures, they gave up everything, as did Jesus, Who had nowhere to lay His head, and the apostles. In the desert, they could live a life of self-denial and prayer. Martyrs were the original witnesses to the radical demands of Christianity in terms of sacrifice and self-denial. It was now the monk who witnessed to a radical lifestyle. In the Eastern Church, it became a common expression that we are monks in the world. We lead lives of self-denial and prayer but in the world. Taking some time away from our daily distractions was seen as necessary. A priest in a parish may try to lead a life of prayer, but during his prayer, the phone rings. A parishioner is in need, distracting him, rightly, from his prayer.

So, like our Lord, the clergy went to pray. As we are told in St Mark's gospel, Jesus rose early every day to go out to pray. This is standard practice in Judaism; at the time of Jesus, a devout Jew like Jesus would begin the day with the Shema prayer, as obligated in the Book of Deuteronomy to pray this prayer every morning and night. The prayer begins, "Hear, O Israel, God is our Lord. God is one."

Jesus also went to the synagogue to pray. In the Early Church, Christians went to the synagogue to pray, and this would be followed by the "breaking of the bread" or the anaphora (eucharistic prayer) in another location, as described in the writings of St Paul. We also see that our Lord went to the temple on many occasions of prayer. The early Christians incorporated elements from Judaism into the Church.

Of course, the most significant influence in the prayer life of our Church is the activity of Christ Himself. Before significant events, Jesus went into the desert to pray. Before He began His ministry, He went into the desert, where the devil tempted Him. And sometimes, the "desert" isn't a desert but a place of desolation. Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing soon He would be arrested, tried, crucified, and die. He prayed in solitary prayer. He asked His apostles to stay awake with Him, making a corporate prayer event. Praying by oneself and praying in community are found in Judaism and in our Church.

Even though it is not mentioned in scripture, it is possible that our Lord was praying, and because of His prayer, His disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray.

Even the most "Christian" of prayers, the Lord's Prayer is based on Jewish understanding.

• The opening words calling God "our Father" are found within the Jewish tradition.

• "Hallowing" God's name follows the Jewish tradition of emphasizing the holiness of the name of God and its respectful use. (Some of our parishes had a Holy Name Society for men.)

• Jews throughout the centuries have prayed for the "coming of the Kingdom". Now, this is different than the Christian understanding. In Judaism, it refers to the Messiah or the establishment of a Jewish Kingdom. In contrast, in Christianity, "Thy kingdom come" refers to the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth at the end of the world.

• The concept of "Thy Will be done" is a theme central to both Jewish and Christian understanding of our role in God's plan.

• The phrase "daily bread" echoes Jewish prayers for God's provision of human sustenance. "Give us today" what we need for today, for we will pray again tomorrow.

• "Forgiveness" and "trespasses" acknowledge human sinfulness found in Jewish and Christian traditions. But Christians understand this also means we ask God to forgive us as much "as we forgive others".

• Leading us "not into temptation" is idea also found in Jewish prayers for protection from evil and the human inclination to sin.

• The concluding line of deliverance "from evil" reflects a common theme in both traditions: God is asked to protect and save His people from harm.

• The doxology, a phrase of praise which refers to the Trinity in our usage, is based upon a doxology used in Jewish prayer. It is commonly held that Jesus used a common doxology for His time, so the gospel writers didn't think it was necessary to include it because everyone would know to say it.

• The prayer ends with "Amen", which is used to express agreement in both Jewish and Christian worship.

This prayer, introduced to Judaism at the time of Jesus, became a bridge between the Jewish people and the Christians. This led to Jews who converted, many of whom maintained their traditions, which remnants of remain today.

Prayer is at the center of a cleric's life. His prayer life includes celebrating the divine liturgy and praying daily. St John Chrysostom's writings on prayer and his words are inspirational both through the liturgy and in the priest's life. He stresses that prayer must be heartfelt and persistent. We can especially see the persistent part in his divine liturgy text.

To St Basil the Great is attributed a eucharistic liturgy that it is crucial for all to cultivate a life of prayer.

St Maximus the Confessor believed that human beings could participate in the divine life through prayer and asceticism. In our Church, the goal of life is *theosis*, which is communion with God. Prayer is the means of establishing and growing one's relationship with God. In prayer, we enter into a personal relationship with God, seeking to draw closer to Him and discover His presence in our lives. Theosis involves transforming a person where they align



their will with the divine Will. Prayer in this transformation process allows us to surrender our will to God's Will and to be shaped by the divine energies (*grace*). This is described as "participation in the divine life", so prayer plays a central role because as we open ourselves up to the indwelling

of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to live a life that reflects the attributes of God. Hopefully, one finds a mystical union in theosis, facilitated by a deep and contemplative life of prayer.

Without a doubt, we want our priests and deacons to be righteous and holy so that

they can inspire all of us to be righteous and holy. So, we should be grateful that our clergy were wise enough to follow the bishop's invitation to pray in communion with God and each other.

Fr Jonathan Morse

