

# Metropolitan Tikhon

## Opening Retreat For Seminarians

*The Orthodox Theological Seminary of  
Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk  
September 4, 2020*

### Part One: Reflections on our Current Covid Circumstances

1. *Introduction.* In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Christ is in our midst!
2. *A new year.* On behalf of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America and the Board of Trustees of the Orthodox Theological Seminary of Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk, I welcome all of you, the new and returning seminarians, as you begin the academic year at this sacred institution. This is a beginning which coincides with the Indiction, otherwise known as the ecclesiastical new year and my prayer is that each of you will receive the blessing of the renewal of this time of the year, which is the time of harvest and the preparation for the next planting season. The incoming class has been counted and now is the time plant yourselves in the earth of humility so that you might be watered by your professors, nurtured by your experience of the ascetical and liturgical life, and suffer the growth pangs of formation and blossom as genuine servants of Jesus Christ.
3. *A daily beginning.* Never forget that each day is a new beginning. The most difficult part of the spiritual struggle is often simply to begin. As the Psalmist says: *Now have I made a beginning; this change hath been wrought by the right hand of the Most High* (76:11). When he was preparing for his own death, Anthony the Great gathered his disciples and told them: "I am going the way of the Fathers, as it is written (Josh 23:14), for I see myself

summoned by the Lord. Be watchful and do not destroy your lengthy discipline, but as if you were making a beginning now, strive to preserve your enthusiasm. You know the treacherous demons—you know how savage they are, even though weakened in strength. Therefore do not fear them, but rather draw inspiration from Christ always, and trust in Him. And live as though dying daily, paying heed to yourselves and remembering what you heard from my preaching.” Saint Anthony rightly points to the unfailing source of our inspiration, whether we are ascetics in the desert or seminarians at a theological school, which is Christ Himself. Our life is short and we must make use of every minute given to us in order to strive for one thing: our eternal salvation. But more than this, we ought to take heed to the constant renewal that must take place within our heart. We can never become satisfied with whatever progress we have made, but must rise higher. And so, as the Apostle Paul also exhorts us, *having made a beginning, and set out already on the way of virtue, let us press forward to what lies ahead* (Phil. 3:13) and let us not turn back as Lot's wife did, for our Lord tells us that *No one who puts his hands to the plow and turns back is fit for the Kingdom of Heaven.* (Luke 9:62).

4. *Administration.* I know that you have all spent a few days of orientation and reorientation under the guidance of our Rector, His Eminence, Archbishop Michael, and of our Dean, Archpriest John Parker. Together with the members of the Administration and the Staff, you have probably received more than your fill of policies and procedures, rules and regulations. Do not neglect these or think that they are simply things to be heard once and forgotten. All things in the Church must be done decently and in order, and this applies both to lofty canonical principles and to the expectations placed on you for community service, for example. You must look to the Rector, the Dean, and all who work with them in the administration, as your guides during your journey here at the Seminary. Ultimately, all the rules and regulations of seminary life are there to provide you with a more pleasant and productive experience, that is, to allow you to dedicate your time to the one

things needful, which is in this context, is the offering of yourself as clay to be formed into servants of the Church.

5. *Faculty and Classmates.* This formation will come, not primarily through books and knowledge (although these will certainly be present) but through other people: first of all from your professors on the faculty who are prepared to offer you, not just the knowledge of their research, but more importantly, the wisdom of their experience. Do not be confused by these two concepts: knowledge and wisdom. Both are valuable fruit that you will need to gather here, but the first is more easily plucked than the second. You must allow yourselves the opportunity to digest the knowledge you receive so that it provides you the energy to strive for wisdom and maturity, and not let the knowledge weigh you down with indigestion. Your professors will impart this to you, not only with the words of their lectures, but by the example of their lives, which you should pay attention to.
6. *The Monastery.* Another important place to entrust yourselves in your formation in your time here is found up on the hill, at the Monastery of Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk. The Abbot, Archimandrite Sergius, and the brotherhood in Christ with him, are here for you and your families, not only as a source of prayer and guidance in the liturgical life, but as spiritual fathers and examples of humble and obedient service to Christ and his holy Church. The Monastery should be a central, if not the central, focus point of your studies, which will be useless academic exercises if separated from the living waters of worship and prayer. Do not be overwhelmed by the spiritual energy that emanates from the monastery: at times it will be inspiring and comforting, and at times it will feel heavy and oppressive. The key is to maintain the proper balance so that the moments of grace provide you with the strength to bear the moments of struggle.
7. *The Orthodox Church in America.* I stand before you as the Primate of the Orthodox Church in America but also as a brother of this monastery and the former rector of this seminary. Both the monastery and the seminary are

institutions the Orthodox Church in America and as such, they fall under the authority of the Holy Synod of Bishops. The Metropolitan of the Church is also the president of the Holy Synod and here at the seminary, this means that all seminarians that come from a diocese of the Orthodox Church in America are, for the time they are here, canonically under my omophorion. This is both for the sake of maintaining proper canonical order and to serve as a reminder that you are members of the Orthodox Church in America. Some of you come from other jurisdictions and, of course, you maintain your formal canonical attachment and obedience to your respective bishop. Nevertheless, you also have voluntarily chosen to come here (or have been sent by your bishop) and as such, we welcome you to this seminary but also ask you to live within the structures and guidelines of the seminary.

8. *The Chancery.* Most of you are familiar with His Grace, Bishop Alexis, a graduate of this seminary, a member of the brotherhood, and for many years a monk on the Holy Mountain before his election this year as my auxiliary for stavropegial institutions, those institutions, such as this seminary, which lie directly under the omophorion of the Primate. His Grace happens to reside here, but he represents me as the Metropolitan, together with my Chancellor, Archpriest Alexander Rentel. We are in the process of arranging to have Fr. Alexander come to the Seminary in the next weeks to speak more concretely to the seminarians of the Orthodox Church in America concerning the responsibilities you have and the privilege and opportunities you are given as members of this Church.
9. *Coronavirus.* What I mentioned earlier about asking you to live within the guidelines and structure of the seminary applies also to our current coronavirus circumstances and the measures that have been taken by the Seminary in response to those circumstances. As the returning seminarians already know, the impact on your seminary studies has been quite significant and has disrupted the manner in which more or less everything has traditionally been done. I know that you have already received instruction in

terms of the mechanics and protocols that have been established for this year, so I will not go into any of those details. As the Primate of the Orthodox Church in America, and the President of the Holy Synod of Bishops, I would like to emphasize that all of the measures taken by the Seminary have their source in the directives that have been given by the Synod. In other words, the measures that will be in place during this coming semester are not simply there to place more burdens on you but to create a structure within which you and your families will remain safe but also have the space to enjoy the seminary experience as fully and as normally as possible.

10. *A major disruption of life.* In reflecting on the external aspects of the pandemic that we are passing through, it is clear that it had two major stages. The first stage was one of unity, and the second was one of division. We all faced the pandemic with unity at first. The federal government told us to stay put for 15 days, and we all more or less agreed that this was a good idea. We agreed to stay at home, because we did not know where the virus was, or who might be spreading it. We also did not really know how deadly it might be. Seminarians went home, classes were moved to a virtual platform, and parish assignments and field work ceased. And so we were united, for a time, against the virus, and we all stayed at home. But this brief unity against the virus was gone within a few weeks. We all soon had to change or adapt much of our usual way of existence, not only with respect to our liturgical and communal life in Church, but even in our personal and family life. We had to adjust almost everything in our daily existence, from how we work (if we indeed were still able to work), to how we shop for food and other necessities, to navigating the restrictions we are under in terms of our family life and our Church life. On top of the ecclesiastical directives, which were heavy for us to bear, the civil restrictions, and the increasing social and political upheaval in our country and in the world have added to the weight. Our deep-rooted political divisions ignited the further politicization of the virus on both sides, while different opinions and theories about the virus began to appear. Our nation

found itself unsure, confused, and divided. And in all that we did, including seminary life, we were, and continue to be, unsettled.

11. *Polarization.* I am not a scientist or a political expert, nor do I want to be. But as an Orthodox Christian Bishop, I cannot fail to notice that the result of the Coronavirus, in many places, was to exacerbate and increase divisions. Our physical isolation from one another and our spiritual isolation from the divine services and our community of fellow Christians also added to this tension. Such divisions should trouble us as Orthodox Christians, because unity in the one Body of Christ is what we are trying to bring to the world. Unity in Christ is our mission so we should be concerned by the divisions in our society, and we should do what we can to prevent them from getting worse. As His Grace, Bishop Alexis has said in response to a specific form of this challenge, “trying to hold a middle sensible ground between opposing forces of faithless reason on the one hand and spiritualized folly on the other is the challenge of our time.” We see this expressed in various opinions expressed by some scientists, on the one hand, who may have opinions on the risks of transmission of the virus through the Body and Blood of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, and by some within the Orthodox Church, on the other hand, “who propose that the entire Church is a magical haven in a thoroughly demonic world. Adopting either position, one thoroughly secular, the other thoroughly fanciful, is extremely dangerous for the Church.”

12. *Synodal balance.* The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America has not approached these matters carelessly or superficially. We wrestled with the many pastoral and liturgical scenarios that the coronavirus presented; we consulted with numerous Orthodox physicians, health care workers, bioethicists, lawyers, insurance agents, and even a senior official at the White House. The decision to suspend, either completely or in part, liturgical services was not taken lightly; neither was it taken with joy but rather with the sober realization that rational and sensible human response was required, not in the spirit of the secular world, but in the spirit of the rational worship that

we offer as Orthodox Christians. It was common sense that was called for, but this was difficult for all of us to arrive at because there was little that was common and not much that made sense.

13. *Obedience.* Some early directives from the Holy Synod were later altered; some were removed, others were added, as the situation developed; we have now come to a place where, perhaps with a sense of resignation, and perhaps still with some sense of unease or uncertainty, we have adjusted to our circumstances and are dealing with the implications on ourselves and on our families. One of my main motivations, and one of the main motivations of the Holy Synod, in responding to Covid-19 has been to maintain fidelity to the received tradition and experience of the Holy Orthodox Church and, at the same time, maintain the health, safety, and life of our clergy, our monastics, and our faithful. In this, we acted as bishops always should act, which is to rightly divide the word of truth and then, relying on the Holy Spirit, provide a clear word to guide the Church. In some cases, a clear decision, and even disciplinary action was required. Even this week, one of our bishops has suspended a priest and removed the antimimension from his parish for disobeying the directives he had given to all his parishes concerning the wearing of masks.

14. The bishop reminded the priest that we are a hierarchical church. "You are there in my place. And I am here to re-present Christ, to make Him present. The antimimension is a sign of this relationship. And, as you know, my name is lifted up during the divine services for that reason as well." He also spoke about the value of obedience: "The great thing about obedience is that, if you obey, the burden falls on my shoulders and not yours. You have not been asked to do anything immoral. The Holy Synod (whom, by the way, I swore to obey) and the Metropolitan have carefully weighed the information and together issued these same instructions throughout the church." He then spoke of the further possible implications, not only for the priest, but for himself, if something were to happen as it happened in another Orthodox

parish where the directives were disregarded and the parish became infected: “Were I to find out that you, disobeying me, had something similar happen in your parish and, God forbid, someone died, you would not only be suspended, but defrocked as the one responsible for that death. If you follow the restrictions I have put in place, the burden is shifted to me. That is the beauty of obedience.”

15. My purpose in sharing this is not to shame the priest in question or to threaten any of you with disciplinary action for disobedience. Rather, it is to remind you that we are not a corporate or civil entity but the Church, and in the Church, all things are done decently and in good order according to the divine order revealed to us by the Holy Trinity and by the theology and experience of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. When we conform ourselves to the order of the Church, then the disorder of the world becomes more manageable, and even in the midst of chaos, good things can happen.

16. *Positive Effects.* So, for example, at the same time that we witnessed an increase in confusion and division, we also witnessed, in a strange and paradoxical manner, some positive effects of the pandemic, especially as they relate to our life in the Church. In many places, parishes successfully expanded their ministries in new ways. For example, online bible studies allowed for parishioners who had never attended before to participate. Likewise, there are many people with health concerns who now have access to streaming services in their parishes. Parishioners began to reach out to one another more than ever by phone and text and by providing various services. And our clergy are now more comfortable using technology as part of their ministry. In general, our homes, which were too often separated and divided from Church life, have now become “little Churches”. All of these good things inspire me, and I hope that they will also inspire all those involved in the enterprise of theological education to approach the present difficulties with courage and with hope.

17. *Good coming through evil.* In the end, what we have seen, and what we continue to see, is the important spiritual truth that good can come through evil. We see this in the example of Joseph who was betrayed by his older brothers. When they reported to their father he had died, and sold him as a slave into Egypt, good came out of their evil deed. Because when the famine struck some years later, those same brothers came down to Egypt, where Joseph had become a ruler under Pharaoh. They needed food, and Joseph was able to provide it for them. Joseph forgave his brothers, and said to them: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph, of course, is a type of Christ, and his life prefigures in many ways the passion and resurrection of our Lord.
  
18. *Spiritual training.* It is in this light that we ought to primarily evaluate the pandemic that is upon us, a pandemic that indeed has brought disease and death, as well as division and isolation, none of which we should call "good", that is, none of it was "sent" by God. Nevertheless, God allowed it and used it for good. However, as in all things relating to our Christian life, a key component to weathering this storm is our own response, as individuals and as communities, to the challenges we are facing. This is because, in the Orthodox Church, we have already been "trained" to deal with division: we have some sense of the struggle with the passions in our own heart, we know that if we want to approach the chalice, we need to prepare ourselves, we know that, for 40 days during Great Lent, we live more ascetically, both personally and communally. On Pascha, we enjoy the great banquet that is laid out for us precisely because we have passed through the ascetical days of the fast.
  
19. We have passed through, as it were, an external trial (the pandemic and its impact on society, on our parishes, and on our families and children) but also an internal maturing and spiritual growth. Both of these were taking place at the same time, and often one or the other has been more prevalent. I am sure that, like me, all of you had moments of sorrow and feeling the impact of the

isolation, but also moments when you were energized and inspired by the grace of God. It is not easy to bear both of these realities in ourselves at the same time, but I encourage you to continue to make this effort and to support one another as fellow citizens of this seminary community.

20. *Exhortation.* And so, as you begin this new academic year at Seminary, I would like to take a moment here to give thanks to God for all of you and for all those who have offered often impressive and inspiring responses to these circumstances. By remaining constant in prayer, and through their ongoing support of the clergy, our monasteries and parishes have, on the whole, remained thriving communities, despite the lockdowns and social distancing. The monastics, the parish priests, the deacons, and the subdeacons deserve our thanks. The singers, the wardens, the council members, and all others who minister and help also deserve our thanks. Chanters and singers should be acknowledged for offering the holy services on behalf of all in very restrictive circumstances, and for streaming those services so that others could have at least some participation in church life. And I would like to thank all of you here at the seminary, both those who have worked very hard to allow our school to open its doors this Fall and those who have made the additional effort, on top of the sacrifice of coming to seminary to begin with, of shouldering the complexity of the unusual semester you will be navigating.

21. In the end, I would just remind you that it's the Gospel of Jesus Christ that will save us and our task here is to foster faith in our own hearts and to strengthen it in other people. Let others provide social services and education. Let others speak about politics, medical and bioethical matters. Those things have their place, but you are seminarians being formed to be servants of Christ. You are not students but seminarians and the difference is simple: if you want your focus to be studies, go off to a religious school at a university or college, and be a student. If you want to be changed and challenged and formed, and be obedient, be a seminarian. It's as simple as that. The elements of being a student—classes, study, professors, grades,

assignments, methods, etc., all these academic things are necessary, and all are important. But we, as Churchmen, as seminarians, have to push forward and enter further into the mystery of faith. We don't study simply to learn, but to be formed.

22. I thank you for your attention and will gladly answer any questions you may have.

## Part Two: *Diakonia*, Obedience, and Humility

1. Father John has asked me to speak this morning on *diakonia* and, this afternoon, on the priesthood. These are very helpfully broad topics which allows me the flexibility to speak on any number of aspects of both of these terms and concepts. There will, of course, be some overlap in this discussion but I hope to speak primarily to some of the practical aspects of both *diakonia* and the priesthood.
2. When we read or hear the Greek word “*diakonia*”, it is immediately obvious to us that our English word “*deacon*” comes from this word. The word *diakonia* means “*service*”, and the word *deacon*, or in Greek, *diakonos*, means “*servant*.” In our modern Orthodox Christian context, we know quite well what a *deacon* does. The *deacon* lifts up the petitions of the faithful before the holy doors of the sanctuary. The *deacon* reverently censes the altar, the icons, and the people. He dutifully carries the Gospel Book as well as the Lamb, and has the sacred task of proclaiming the very words of the Gospel itself. The liturgical service of the *deacon* is a serious matter.
3. The *deacon*, like the priest, fulfills many glorious roles, in the liturgy and outside the liturgy. But at the same time, there are many temptations. The *deacon* is often the center of attention and, as such, is subject to vanity and pride, perhaps because he has a good voice, because he serves with dignity, or because he guides and directs large gatherings or important liturgical events. This is why it is never superfluous to remind a seminarian that, in desiring to be ordained as a *deacon*, or later as a priest, he must first become a servant. He must embrace humility, and in embracing humility, become a servant, a true *diakonos*.
4. The seminarian seeking ordination in the Church looks to the example of Christ's humility. Christ was among the disciples as “one who serves” in the

Gospels, while Saint Paul tells us in his letter to the Philippians that Christ “emptied himself” and took “the form of a servant.” More properly, the word here in Philippians is not just “servant”, *diakonos* or deacon, but *doulos*, which means “slave.” Christ took on the form of a slave. He was humbled, through his perfect obedience, even to the death on the Cross. So there is something more to *diakonia* in the Church, than simply the action of serving. There is something more required which is the development of an attitude of humility, of going further down, of lowering ourselves as low as possible, and willingly becoming a slave to Christ.

5. Man is made from the dust of the earth and so he is nothing in comparison to his creator. But the essence of our slavery, of our service does not simply lie in this fact. Earth is insignificant, as it were nothing, and yet there is something unique about earth – it can be formed. The seminarian is the one who willingly accepts to be formed. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons speaks of the ongoing process by which God forms and fashions man, saying that when Christ “was made a man among men... He re-formed the human race.” Christ came that you and I might be re-formed, re-fashioned, and shaped anew into his image and likeness.
6. Given this, the work that happens here at seminary is simply a more concentrated version of God's entire plan of salvation. Christ came to fashion man anew in a new creation, and here at the seminary, seminarians are given an ideal environment and wise teachers in order that Christ's formation might take place more rapidly in each seminarian. Seminary is a microcosm, a training ground.
7. On the training ground, real blood is still shed, real wounds are still made, and real pain is felt. Considering seminary as a spiritual training ground is no different: it is not a preparation before a new life of service, but it is the very initiation into the Christian life of service in imitation of Christ. Real efforts are to be made now, and real struggles are to be made now. Formation begins

in earnest now, in all its intensity, and if the seminarian is willing, will continue in the seminarian long past graduation.

8. The fact that seminary has this task of formation is why each and every seminarian, in the Master of Divinity program and on track to seek ordination, must first of all humble himself and be willing to undergo formation. Recognizing himself as earth, he can then be formed by Christ. And even once a man is ordained, Christ's formation of him will never end. Christ's creative work will never stop changing us and re-fashioning us, if we stay humble and continually allow him into our hearts to transform us. So how is *diakonia* related to obedience?
9. On several occasions during my pilgrimages to the Holy Mountain, I occasioned to become lost, which is not difficult to do for an American with little experience of the complicated path system of Athos. It becomes important especially towards the evening since the large monasteries will lock their gates at a certain point. On two of those occasions, I relied on some four-legged creatures who are often to be found at each monastery. From the record of my visit, I noted that: "A little dog led me up from the sea to the entrance of St Paul's Monastery and then continued along another path." On another occasion, I was walking towards the Great Lavra when suddenly I heard a loud crash of branches and leaves coming from around the bend. When I turned the corner, I came upon a dog, who seemed to appear out of nowhere. I wondered from the sound of crashing whether perhaps he had fallen from heaven. In any case, my Athonite canine companion walked ahead of me for a while and seemed to know the way.
10. After some time, he disappeared ahead of me and I continued on my own. Later, I came to a fork in the path and was unsure which way to go. There were no sign posts to lead me in the right direction. I looked to the left and to the right. All of a sudden, from the path on the right, my friend returned, as if to say, "Come this way." So I obediently followed and was glad to see that this

was indeed the correct path to have taken, and I arrived before the gates were closed.

11. One of the most difficult spiritual principles to grasp and implement is that of obedience. Obedience is often relegated in our minds to monasticism and to the concept of a regimented system where the superior directs his subordinates and thereby a strict order and efficient functioning of the system is implemented. But obedience in the Church has a much deeper meaning and is a concept that is, in fact, more far-reaching and more salutary than the narrow understanding we find in the world. It is an ascetical practice that, like my story of the dog, leads us on the right path.
12. Obedience is an attitude of the heart which crucifies the fallen mind in its search for the will of God. In obedience, we become wise by becoming foolish, as Saint Paul says: *If anyone among you seem to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may become wise.*<sup>1</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony writes: "In the vast sea which is the life of the Church the true tradition of the Spirit flows like a thin pure stream, and he who would be in this stream must renounce argument. When anything of self is introduced the waters no longer run clear, for God's supreme wisdom and truth are the opposite of human wisdom and truth. Such renunciation appears intolerable, insane even, to the self-willed, but the man who is not afraid to 'become a fool' has found true life and true wisdom."<sup>2</sup>
13. In this, he echoes Saint John of the Ladder who writes: "Those who wish to learn the will of the Lord must first mortify their own will. Then, having prayed to God with faith and guileless simplicity, and having asked the fathers or even the brothers with humility of heart and no thought of doubt, they should accept their advice as from the mouth of God, even if their advice is contrary to their own view, and even if those consulted are not very spiritual.

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 3:18

<sup>2</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, page 87.

For God is not unjust, and will not lead astray souls who with faith and innocence humbly submit to the advice and judgment of their neighbour. Even if those who were asked were brute beasts, yet he who speaks is the Immaterial and Invisible One.”<sup>3</sup>

14. Our life of obedience is a sometimes surprising one: one can choose one of two paths on an Athonite road by following the guidance of a brute beast or one can be lead back to the monastery of their repentance by observing the struggles of elderly monastics in a foreign land, as I was when I observed two holy monks fighting over a prayer rope in Church, a reminder to me that there is human struggle wherever one may go, even the most sacred places. In this understanding, there is a great difference between discipline and obedience. Discipline is a human thing (one human will submitting to another human will in order to organize life) but obedience is a mystery of the Church. And it is our choice to approach our brother or sister with an attitude of rebellion to authority to another human will, or in humble obedience to the will of God.
  
15. If we trust our own fallen will, this brings division and estrangement from God. Rather, we look for the will of God which unites all things. And this can be discerned not only through obedience to those who are above us, but also to those who are the least among us. In a paradoxical way, the will of God can also be found by, in fact, exercising our own will. On one of my visits to the Holy Mountain, I wanted to ask the elders what I should say to someone who wants to discern the will of God in their life, for example, whether they should become a monastic or get married. One elder's answer was very helpful to me. He said: “Sometimes it's not a matter of us doing God's will, but of God doing our will. If we are presented with a choice in life, for example, to become a monk or to be married, it is better to make a choice, that is, to exercise our will, but then to persevere in the choice that we have made. That perseverance then becomes the will of God.”

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<sup>3</sup> *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 26:111.

16. All of this, discerning the will of God, being obedient, persevering on the path we have taken, is *diakonia* informed by obedience.
17. You might rightly ask: how does all this apply to those of us who are not living in the monastery? Saint John of the Ladder addresses the question of how to live the principles of the monastic life in the world: “Some people living carelessly in the world have asked me: ‘We have wives and are beset with social cares, and how can we lead the solitary life?’ I replied to them: ‘Do all the good you can; do not speak evil of anyone; do not steal from anyone; do not lie to anyone; do not be arrogant towards anyone; do not hate anyone; do not be absent from the divine services; be compassionate to the needy; do not offend anyone; do not wreck another man’s domestic happiness, and be content with what your own wives can give you. If you behave in this way, you will not be far from the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>4</sup>
18. All of these things speak of obedience: obedience that leads to Christ and to the love of God. Archimandrite Zacharias offers some perhaps more contemporary word about this: “Almost all the principles of monasticism are also valid in family life. In monasticism, we speak of the ‘first love,’ the ‘first grace’. It is the same also in marriage. In the first period there is a lot of love and happiness. However, when the accounts billow and our children deprive us from sleep, when generally life becomes more demanding, let us remember that we must continue with the same faithfulness and love which God gave us when we began our life together. ‘Remember thy first love.’ If we continue to apply the lessons that we learned in the beginning, the ending will be blessed.”<sup>5</sup>
19. For parents, he offers the following practical advice: “Each spouse must learn not to accept a negative thought for the other, but to compete as we do in the

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<sup>4</sup> *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 1:21

<sup>5</sup> Archimandrite Zacharias, *The Engraving of Christ in Man's Heart*, page 21.

monastery in the mystery of obedience, considering the other as always more important. So whatever the Abbot says, we answer "Yes, your blessing!" I accept the will of the other, because the other is more important than myself. Therefore, finally, I learn to accept the will of the ultimate Other, the will of the Saviour Christ. If couples compete as we do in a monastery, each striving to do the will of the other more perfectly, then their life will be enriched and established in the antechamber of paradise. In the monastery, everyone who has learned this competition, to humble oneself more before the other, is spiritually reborn. The same occurs also in a family. We don't accept an evil thought for another member, but compete to do the will of the others and to humble ourselves before them."<sup>6</sup>

20. This sacred competition is something that you can begin to practice here at seminary. To the competition of fasting, praying, and repenting, must be added the competition of striving to outdo the other in humility and obedience: all of these things together are *diakonia*. This means, conversely, that we must also strive to avoid the temptation of dominating others, whether it is our spouse, our children, or our fellow seminarian. Lust for power is always a temptation, as we continually remind ourselves in the prayer of St Ephrem. And that lust for power is a temptation not only to those who have positions of authority, but for us in our families. If I don't humble myself before my spouse, then it is more likely that I will then begin to exert my will over him or her. If I don't give an example of obedience to my own children, then I will deprive them of the ability to learn the life-giving obedience to God that I hope to instill in them. This is a long struggle and one that takes our entire lifetime. Once again, Fr Zacharias provides the example of his own parents as encouragement:

21. "I observed this even within my own family. For the first eighteen years the married life of my parents was difficult. With time they became more patient with each other; they found a way and made a new beginning, and they lived

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, page 20.

another thirty years with great peace and love. They died in the fullness of days. This does not mean that they just had many days but that the days they had were full. When, in the biographies of the saints, it is said that they died 'in the fullness of days' it means that every day brought the fullness of grace and the peace of God." "It is worthwhile, therefore, to live patiently for eighteen years, in order to live another thirty years full of joy, completely fulfilled and to arrive at a wondrous end."<sup>7</sup>

22. Perfect love and perfect knowledge and perfect service are beyond our reach.

As Archimandrite Sophrony writes: In order to hear the word of God speaking in his heart, a man must have a still heart that is filled with constant prayer. "But [further] in order to hear the Divine voice more surely in himself, man must cast off his own will and be prepared for every sacrifice, like Abraham – even like Christ Himself, Who, in the words of Saint Paul 'became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.' (Phil. 2:8)<sup>8</sup> So obedience is necessary, not as a requirement for the proper functioning of an institution, but as a sacrifice which allows us to enter into the Tradition of the Church in a real and profound way, that is, to imitate our Lord Himself, and thereby enter into the love of God more fully.

23. I will end this discussion with another extended passage from one of the fathers whom I had the blessing to meet on the Holy Mountain, Archimandrite Vasileios. Here, he writes of the falling asleep of one of the monks in his monastery after a long life of obedience, repentance, prayer, and service:

24. *"I remember the repose of Father Hesychios, some six years ago. I saw him before he died. I saw him as he was dying, wasting away from cancer and becoming bare bones, yet having no complaint about it, nor about anything else in his life. He was able to look at everything peacefully, to laugh and*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, page 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Archimandrite Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, page 78.

*have a sense of humour, to accept death joyfully as it approached. I saw him thanking everyone for the care they had given him; he beseeched us at one point to cease our efforts for there was no longer a need. Others had come to take him – they were already in the room. His face shone. He spoke in silence. He had begun to speak the language and live the life of the age to come. We wanted him to say something to us and he spoke in his own way: 'Now leave me be. I thank you for what you have done for me; I don't need anything anymore. I am still with you but in another way; speak to me no more. The hour has come. The Master of the house has arrived; life has begun. The life which exists as a seed in this temporary life is now blossoming into uncreated light.'*

25. *Saint Isaac the Syrian wrote that 'everything that has humility is, by its nature, beautiful.' Father Hesychios then departed but yet remained. He died and was lost to us. He disappeared into the other life, the true life, into the abundance of glory which unites us all. The room was filled with unseen light: the place was flooded with indescribable fragrance. The hearts and souls of the people gathered around could sense it. Father Hesychios could not adulterate nor betray the truth because he had no pretense when it came to himself. And he told us everything with a silence which could speak and by the resplendent joy on his face.*

26. *Now that he has departed his silence is explained: his grace and his witness are palpable. He speaks to us continually. He did not prepare himself for it; in that difficult moment, it was someone else who spoke, just as the Lord had promised. He filled us all with the joy on his face, like the beauty of the rising and setting sun, a joy granted to him by the panagia. He had a smile which was completely pure, and which shone all the more brightly as the end drew near. He displayed an expressive movement in his eyebrows and eyes which perhaps hearkened back to his earliest infancy when his mother had cared for him. Now at his departure another mother, the Theotokos, cared for him. He was not at all alone. He wasn't dead or cut off from life, from consolation*

*or from exultation. The only thing that happened was a noiseless departure, a passage on to a better and more pleasing existence. For us, his departure became an occasion for the descent of grace and comfort. It was an unexpected and inexpressible blessing, given by God through His saints. What the departure of Father Hesychios says to us is the same message which the Holy Mountain has given perpetually with all its existence: 'A Beauty exists which abolishes death; a Stillness (hesychia) exists which abounds with eternal blessedness and splendour for all of us.'*<sup>9</sup>

27. To me, this passage speaks of one thing above all; It speaks to me of the goal of all our ascetical labors: our fasting, our offering of hospitality, our obedience, and our prayer and our service; it speaks to me of what Archimandrite Zacharias calls "the one thing worth living for," and "the one thing that can give meaning to our life." And this one thing is love.

28. But the love we speak about, the love that we seek, the love that we are journeying towards in our earthly journey, in our seminary experience, is not the human and imperfect love that we all clumsily attempt to express in our own ways, as it were in a shadow. That imperfect human love is a shadow of the true and eternal love of God, which abolishes darkness, which abolishes loneliness, and which abolishes death. All of this is beautifully conveyed in the above description of the repose of Father Hesychios and it should bring comfort to all of us who must prepare ourselves for that moment as well. I leave you with the words of Archimandrite Zacharias who writes:

29. "For us, paradise is Christ. Saint Silouan says, 'If all men would repent and keep God's commandments, there would be paradise on earth, for the Kingdom of Heaven is within us. The Kingdom of Heaven is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is the same in heaven and on earth.' Paradise begins on earth through love for God and love for our fellows. In this lies the entire wealth of eternal life, for man has been created to give eternal glory to God.

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<sup>9</sup> Archimandrite Vasileios, *Beauty and Hesychia on the Holy Mountain*, pages 15-17.

His delight is to return this glory to His image, man, who then returns greater glory to His Creator. And so we enter into this endless cycle of glorification and love, the 'divine increase' of which is man's true fulfillment, as his calling is to become the very likeness of God.<sup>10</sup>

30. This is diakonia.

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<sup>10</sup> Archimandrite Zacharias, *The Engraving of Christ in Man's Heart*, page 19.

## Part Three: An Apophatic Approach to the Priesthood

What I would like to share this afternoon is a continuation of what I spoke about this morning but I will focus on some practical realities of the priesthood. Ultimately, all of our theology is useless if it does not have a practical application: the theology of loving our neighbor means nothing if we don't actually put up with the annoying habits of our brother, etc. You will learn a lot of theology in your classes: patristic theology, dogmatic theology, liturgical theology, pastoral theology, etc. But the real test of your knowledge, the proof that you have truly absorbed what you are being taught, is found in your actions and in your lives.

So today, I would like to offer some reflection on some practical tasks that will be helpful in terms of defining priesthood but also in terms of preparing you, as seminarians, to be priests, if you are indeed so called. These are things that perhaps apply to all Christians, but are even more necessary for those who are entering a deeper path of service to Christ and His Holy Church. In the Church, everything is a mystery, and everything is a paradox. We would like everything to be clearly laid out for us, but this is rarely the case. So even with the guidance of our spiritual fathers, even with the canons of the ecumenical Councils, even with the Holy Scriptures, we still need to know HOW to live our lives, HOW to heed the advice of our Spiritual Father, HOW to follow the spirit of the canons and the Scripture and not the letter.

St Nikolai writes: "Our Christian mysticism is wholly different from Buddhist mysticism, just as much as from modern materialism. It is a vision of realities beyond man and through transparent symbols and signs of the material universe."<sup>11</sup> The surest way to enter onto this path which leads to the vision of divine realities is to keep our feet firmly planted on the ground.

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<sup>11</sup> Nikolai Velimirovich, *The Universe as Symbols and Signs*.

## How can you do this in Seminary?

What you will learn here are the mysteries of our faith, which should compel all of us to live as proper Christians: to be humble, to be obedient, to be loving men and women. And where does our learning lead us? To Church, to the liturgy. It is there where Christ reveals himself to us, and it is there that the words of scripture, patristics, dogma, spirituality all find their true meaning - or where we find the true meaning of these things. The words of the Psalmist should be taken at face value: we should be - it is our true existence - praising God and giving him glory. This is what the Great Apostle means when he says, "we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1.12)."

This is true liturgical theology: a theology of experience, but not individual or idiosyncratic experience, but the "canonical" experience of the Church, which is the liturgy. And all of this is what, positively, it means to be a priest. And you will spend the next several years of your seminary life learning those things. What I would like to present today is what I call an apophatic approach to the priesthood and share a little bit, with some supporting stories, of what you should not do if you want to exercise a legitimate priesthood. I present these not as rule, per se, but as principles to guide your seminary life.

- 1. Do not talk.** If you have the choice of speaking or keeping your mouth shut, always choose to remain quiet. This is a rule of the priesthood. Even if that moment of silence lasts less than 5 seconds, you need to maintain it so as to allow the Holy Spirit to work. If, on the other hand, you have trouble speaking, you should make an effort to speak, and this effort also will allow the Holy Spirit to work. If you feel that you should give a word or if you are asked to give a word, make sure that the Holy Spirit is actually inspiring you to offer that word and if you remain silent, make sure that your silence is not harming someone who is in need of consolation or encouragement. If there is uncertainty, however, the safest approach is always to remain silent.

- 2. Do not complain.** The greatest temptation you will have as seminarians is to complain and this temptation will carry through to your priestly service. Do not do this. Your role as a priest is to hear and to listen. You may complain to God, and, with discernment and trepidation, you may complain to your wife, but under no circumstances should you be heard to complain in front your faithful or before your brother clergy. This is a supremely difficult task, but it will serve you well in many circumstances, from the hearing of confession, to preaching, to leading a parish council meeting.
- 3. Do not try to be a prophet.** Today we celebrate the feast of the Prophet Moses. Along with all the prophets, he provides an example of the priesthood. Most people interpret this to refer to the charism of prophetic ministry, speaking to God and on behalf of God, beholding the glory of God, shining with uncreated light, and all of that. It is certainly possible that you might be called to be such a prophet but you must start as one who stutters, like Moses, or one who is reluctant, like Jonah or Isaiah. Best of all is to follow the example of St John the Baptist, and simply repeat to yourself and truly accept that your work as a priest is to say: "I must decrease so that he may increase."
- 4. Do not imagine that you are spiritual fathers.** When I was a young priest and beginning to take on the responsibility of a spiritual father I will tell you a story

  - a. Fr Anthony
- 5. Do not sing.** I would like to share a story from the ancient desert-dwellers of Egypt. The story concerns Abba Pambo, who sent his disciple to the great city of Alexandria to sell the monks' handiwork. While in the city, the disciple observed the liturgy at the Church of St Mark, and upon his return to the quiet of the desert, the elder asked him: "Son, I see that you are disturbed. Were you beset by a temptation in the city?" The brother answered: "Father, we spend our days here serenely and we sing neither canons nor *troparia*. But when I came to Alexandria I saw the choirs in the church and how they sing, and I became very sad that we do not sing canons and *troparia*." Then the elder said to him: "Woe to us, my son! The days have come when monks turn away from the enduring nourishment which the Holy Spirit gives them and

surrender themselves to singing. What kind of contrition is that? How can tears come from the singing of *troparia*? How can a monk possess contrition if he stays in the church or in his cell and raises his voice like the lowing of the cattle? For when we stand in God's sight we must be most contrite and not presumptuous. Monks have not come into this desert to place themselves before God in pride and presumption, to sing melodic songs and make rhythmic tunes, to shake their hands and stamp their feet. Our duty is to pray to God in holy fear and trembling, with tears and sighing, with devotion and vigilance, with modesty and a humble voice.<sup>12</sup> Historically, this particular interaction between the elder and his disciple illustrates a tension that existed in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries between the developing liturgical and musical life and the hesychastic life of the desert anchorites, where silence, work and prayer were the main occupation. Although the reaction of Pambo may strike us as somewhat extreme, I share this story because it points us to something important, which is not simply the contrition that Pambo mentions, but the attitude of one's heart. Saint John of the Ladder, another elder of the ancient past, even goes so far as to allow that worldly songs can lead us to God. He cites the example of Saint Nonnus, Bishop of Heliopolis, who saw a beautiful woman and glorified the Creator. "And it was wonderful to see how what would have been a cause of destruction in one was for another the supernatural cause of a crown."<sup>13</sup> He then continues: Let us be guided by the same rule in singing melodies and songs. For lovers of God are moved to gladness, to divine love and to tears both by worldly and by spiritual songs; but lovers of pleasure do the opposite.<sup>14</sup> This, too, is your task as a priest, to discern this first in your own life and then to help others to discern it in theirs.

**6. AVOID HYPOCRISY.** *Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.* I am sure most of us, when we hear such

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<sup>12</sup> Quasten, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, pages 94-95.

<sup>13</sup> Step 15:60.

<sup>14</sup> Step 15.61.

passages in the Gospel, quietly believe that we are exempt from such strong words of condemnation from the Lord. But I think they are particularly appropriate for all of us who teach and learn in the setting of a Seminary and a Monastery. We are blessed with a great source of divine grace, but we are also confronted with temptations in the most direct way. And if we do not respond to those temptations with the proper spirit, we will indeed become hypocrites. Theological education provides us with many good things, but it can be easy to lose sight of the meaning for which we are applying ourselves to this study. And for this we must be watchful. *Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.* Here is the most cutting definition of hypocrisy, of the spirit of the world: to appear outwardly righteous but inwardly to be full of darkness. And what does this mean but that our hearts are cluttered with the spirit of the world and are unable to rise to higher things. So all of these warnings are given to us, not to scare us or force us into the slavish submission to the law or to the commandments. Quite the contrary, the harsh words of the Lord are there to inspire us to seek the spirit of humility, to acquire the proper attitude that will lead us to the Kingdom and will shield us from the arrows of the world around us.

7. **Do not use your wits.** I offer you, by way of example, a transcript from a most remarkable encounter, a historically inconceivable example of a battle of wits, which took place between a certain “man in black” and the great Vizzini. Vizzini, having kidnapped the princess, was holding her captive when the man in black challenged him to a duel of wits. He poured wine into two cups, placed some poisonous Iocaine into one of the cups without revealing which one, and asked the Great Vizzini to indicate to him where the poison was by drinking of the cup that was not poisoned:

*Vizzini:* But it's so simple. All I have to do is divine it from what I know

of you. Are you the sort of man who would put the poison into his own goblet or his enemies? Now, a clever man would put the poison into his own goblet because he would know that only a great fool would reach for what he was given. I am not a great fool so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you...But you must have known I was not a great fool; you would have counted on it, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of me.

*Man in black:* You've made your decision then?

*Vizzini:* [happily] Not remotely! Because Iocaine comes from Australia. As everyone knows, Australia is entirely peopled with criminals. And criminals are used to having people not trust them, as you are not trusted by me. So, I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you.

*Man in black:* Truly, you have a dizzying intellect.

*Vizzini:* Wait 'till I get going!! ...where was I?

*Man in black:* Australia.

*Vizzini:* Yes! Australia! And you must have suspected I would have known the powder's origin, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of me.

*Man in black:* You're just stalling now.

*Vizzini:* You'd like to think that, wouldn't you! You've beaten my giant, which means you're exceptionally strong...so you could have put the poison in your own goblet trusting on your strength to save you, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you. But, you've also bested my Spaniard, which means you must have studied...and in studying you must have learned that man is mortal so you would have put the poison as far from yourself as possible, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of me!

*Man in black:* You're trying to trick me into giving away something. It won't work.

*Vizzini:* It has worked! You've given everything away! I know where the poison is!

*Man in black:* Then make your choice.

*Vizzini:* I will, and I choose...[pointing behind the man in black] What in the world can that be?

*Man in black:* [turning around, while Vizzini switches goblets] What?! Where?! I don't see anything.

*Vizzini:* Oh, well, I...I could have sworn I saw something. No matter.  
[Vizzini laughs]

*Man in black:* What's so funny?

*Vizzini:* I...I'll tell you in a minute. First, lets drink, me from my glass and you from yours.

[They both drink]

*Man in black:* You guessed wrong.

*Vizzini:* You only think I guessed wrong! That's what's so funny! I switched glasses when your back was turned! Ha ha, you fool!! You fell victim to one of the classic blunders. The most famous is never get involved in a land war in Asia; and only slightly less well known is this: Never go in against a Sicilian, when death is on the line!

[Vizzini continues to laugh hysterically. Suddenly, he stops and falls right over. The Man in black removes the blindfold from the princess]

*Buttercup:* Who are you?

*Man in black:* I'm no one to be trifled with. That is all you'll ever need know.

*Buttercup:* And to think, all that time it was your cup that was poisoned.

*Man in black:* They were both poisoned. I spent the last few years building up immunity to Iocaine powder.

The moral of this story is simple: never engage in a battle of wits with anyone. Focus on building up your immunity to crazy ideas, stubborn people, needy people, broken people, in short, all the people you will encounter in your ministry, all of whom are in need of healing, healing which is very unlikely to occur because of your clever wit.

- 8. Never neglect your family.** Even though the Altar should be your home, you still have to care for your portion of that home, which is your family. Those of you who are not married must preserve the bond of love in the dormitory community. Those of you who are married must preserve the peace in your own families.
- 9. Don't minimize the following of the commandments.** This is the goal of our asceticism. There are many definitions, also, of asceticism, but I like the following description which is offered to us by Archimandrite Sophrony: "For us," he says, "Christ is the absolute truth. He is God-the-Creator and God-the-Saviour. His commandments are the Uncreated Light of divinity. The essence of Orthodox asceticism lies in striving to make these commandments the one law of our whole temporal and eternal being."<sup>15</sup> The prayer before the Gospel gives us a hint when it adds: *Both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto thee.* Elder Paisios the Cypriot from Dionysiou: It is not important whether we know the commandments or not; the principal is to ACT upon those commandments. Or as one clergy wife I know has put it: "Be good, don't be dumb, don't be immoral"

As you begin this new academic year at St Tikhon's Seminary, I encourage you to follow this path: to go down voluntarily before all the struggles that will face you, to humble yourselves before your wives and before your brother seminarians, to keep your heart focused on the God-man, Jesus Christ. THEN, with the proper spirit you can direct yourselves to your reading, to your research, to the care of your children and to all the work that will be required of you. But if you have Christ in your heart, if you keep him there through the constant calling on his name, then all of those activities will become powerful tools for prayer and not distractions that lead to the spirit of the world.

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<sup>15</sup>Archimandrite Sophrony, "Principles of Orthodox Asceticism," in A.J. Philippou, ed., *The Orthodox Ethos: Studies in Orthodoxy*, volume 1, page 259.