

## **Lessons I'm Learning at HDM**

### **Fr. John Konkle**

Spring 2019 marks the tenth anniversary of my wife, Psa. Ana, and my coming to serve at the Holy Dormition Monastery. It is, accordingly, a time of reflection on, and thanksgiving for, the many blessings, both manifest and unseen, of the last decade. Gifts received that shape the soul, that orient the mind, that renovate the heart, that tame the passions. I discovered that I was imperceptibly being given such gifts by reflecting on what I said to others in homilies, confessions and informal conversations. I noticed that what I was saying didn't come from me, but from what others had taught me--by word or deed--sometimes with a single encounter with a single person, and other times by prolonged inhaling of the fragrance arising from scores of interactions. Here I record only a few of these gifts, ones which have congealed to the point of being concisely expressible.

#### ***Do what's in your heart***

I was walking from the Trapaza to the old St. Andrew Chapel with a monastic. The community was gathering to do a service before the Kursk Root wonderworking icon. It was the first time I had been in the presence of such a celebrated icon. I had arrived at the Monastery only a few months earlier, but I had been here long enough to know that when it came time to venerate the icon I would have to go first--out of respect for the office of the priesthood, most certainly not because I knew what I was doing. So, on the way to the chapel, I asked the monastic, "What am I supposed to do? How do I venerate a wonderworking icon?" She replied, "Do what's in your heart." "Not very helpful," I thought--but didn't say; "I want to know *the right* thing to do."

The time came to venerate the icon and, predictably, I had to go first. I did whatever I did; I can hardly say that it was what was in my heart because I had no idea where my heart was at that moment, let alone what was in it. Anxiety does that to us. But I do vividly recall doing what all of us insecure Orthodox do in such unfamiliar circumstances: nonchalantly scrutinizing what everyone else did to see if I had done the right thing. Obviously I hadn't, I thought, since no one followed my example.

As weeks became months and months years, I witnessed many people--Metropolitans, hieromonks, monastics, and pious faithful--coming to the Monastery. Their piety was expressed in a multitude of different ways. I don't mean "anything goes," but rather that love for Christ, his mother, the saints, and the Church is profoundly freeing, and the reverence that flows out of a heart of love is manifold. There are a lot of flowers in the field, and they don't all look alike; the field is more beautiful for it. Thanks to this early encounter, and the unrelenting opportunities to practice, the simplest way to sum up my past decade is my feeble but persistent efforts to find, enter and remain in my heart. How else could I do what was in it?

### ***Accept correction joyfully***

One Sunday in the summer of 2009 I was leaving the sacristy in the old St. Andrew Chapel after Divine Liturgy. As I walked through the narthex toward the doors to go to lunch, six women were lined up side by side, their backs to the pews that resided under the windows. As I passed, they each bowed down toward me. I thought this was a bit strange, a rather extreme act of honoring a priest. Not wanting to draw any more attention to myself than I had to, I continued on my way toward the trapaza, not acknowledging them in any way whatsoever. I was only a few steps out the door when one of the women scurried up to me and tried to explain, in somewhat broken English, that I had neglected to give them a blessing. She (correctly) interpreted my evasion of their actions as ignorance and not malice. She had the boldness to explain patiently to me that their bowing was a request for a blessing, which the priest performs by first blessing them on their bowed head and then letting them kiss his hand.

I don't remember who this woman was. At that point, everyone was new to me; everyone looked alike. But I will be forever grateful to her--she had the courage to correct and teach a new priest, and to do so with gentle persistence. Sure, I was embarrassed. Who likes to be ignorant? But by God's grace, I received her instruction with joy for she saved me from a practice of unintentionally insulting those who piously desire a blessing. What a kind gift she offered to me.

I have, of course, been corrected many, many times since then by many people for many things. I have not always received such corrections with joy, I'm sorry to say. But gradually I have noticed how it is possible to receive such corrections with joy *by choice*. St. James says to "consider it all joy when you encounter various trials" (Jam 1:2), and being corrected is certainly a trial. The point is not that the correction is always showing us the one and only 'right way' to do things, but often that this is how things are done at this monastery, in this parish, among the faithful of this ethnic background, under this bishop, etc. Submitting to correction from others, instead of responding defensively or clinging to 'the right way', is a tremendous expression of love, as well as the doorway to a more genuine communal life.

### ***Do what's in your heart, and accept correction joyfully.***

The two previous teachings are, in my experience, inextricably bound together. I described them separately, because they originated from different sources, but it is misleading to separate them. In practice they are woven into a seamless garment. I don't say to myself, or to others, one without the other, but rather "Do what's in your heart, and accept correction joyfully." The former without the later produces a self-assured independence divorced from communal life, and the later without the former yields a people-pleasing detachment from our innermost selves. The two fused together, however, deepens both our inner life and our communal life.

### ***You'll be judged in the condition you're found***

I had been angry for nearly three weeks. Not a volatile anger. A quiet seething, more like a tea kettle that is letting off steam, but not enough to make the whistle blow. I don't now recall at whom I was angry, or why, but I do recall it dampening my spirits, covering my soul with a invisible dust cloud like Pig-Pen in a *Peanuts* cartoon. Internally irritable but outwardly presentable. I finally made it to confession and asked for advice on how to overcome my slavery to anger, and the judgment and defensiveness that accompanies it. My confessor simply and without hesitation replied: "When that happens to me, I try to remember that Christ could come back for me at this very moment. When I do that, the anger departs." Immediately upon hearing his humble words, the anger left me. I was free for the first time in weeks. I do not recall any time since then that anger has held me in bondage. Sure, I've succumbed to anger on different occasions, but not persistently so. His simple instruction became so associated in my mind with anger, that soon after an occasion of becoming angry I am reminded of what it would be like if Christ were to return for me *now*. The anger always leaves at that very moment.

The vividness of this experience opened my eyes to the practical implications of our Lord's teaching on His Second Coming. When he comes again, when he comes for us, we will be judged in the state that we are found. If the master of the house would have known when the thief was coming, he would have prevented the robbery (Mt 24:43-44), but as it was he was robbed in the state he was found. If the servants would have known when the master of the house was coming, they would have been ready to receive him instead of partying (Mt 24:45-51); they will be judged as they are found when the master returns. The five foolish virgins should have had oil, but they are judged in the state they are found, as are the wise virgins (Mt 25:1-13). This teaching should apply, of course, to all my sins, and I pray that in time the leaven I've been given will leaven the whole of me. For now, I'm grateful for the leaven I've been given.

### ***Prepare for the future by living in the present***

I find myself frequently advising people with these simple words: The best way to prepare for the future is to live in the present. We are so often stressed about some upcoming events, about what might, or might not, happen. We quickly find our thoughts pulled into future scenarios which seem ever more real and certain to us, even though in truth they are completely products of our hyperactive imagination. Indeed this is a vortex that we all enter from time to time, some of us more than others. Due to my zealous inexperience, I'm sure in the early years of my time here I tried to encourage people in this situation by helping them evaluate and plan more realistically about their future uncertainties. I suspect that this is sometimes what is needed, but I increasingly realized people were coming to the Monastery for *spiritual* advice, and not crisis management skills.

What spiritual advice did I have to offer? I was so often seized by the same magnetic pull into imaginary futures. At the risk of oversimplification, God provided two avenues of teaching that greatly help me personally, and I hope have been a help to others. The first came from the Scriptures. In the morning service we read a Gospel for the saint of the day, which is often a martyr. The Gospel reading typically includes words like these: “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Lk 12:11-12; cf. Lk 21:14-15; Mt 10:19-20). No one was persecuting me, but as I reflected on these words so frequently repeated, I began to realize that someone being arrested for their faith would be tempted to start planning their future defense before the authorities--exactly what Jesus was warning them not to do. It’s as if the advanced planning would cut them off from attentiveness to the Holy Spirit at the moment of inquisition. How should they prepare, then, I asked myself? The answer that kept coming to me was simple: the best way to be attentive to the Holy Spirit in the future is to be attentive to the Holy Spirit now. Was that what Jesus was telling them to do? If so, it seemed applicable to the many times that my thoughts are drawn into imaginary futures of my own making--even if not in contexts of persecution. By letting my imagination run wild, I was severing my attentiveness to the Holy Spirit not only in the present, but in the future as well.

This way of understanding our Lord’s words was reinforced when I was given a copy of *The Orthodox Word* from 2011 containing an article entitled “Eternity Hidden in the Moment” about the Romanian Elder Arsenie (Papacioc). Here, in a mere 40 pages of text, I experienced one man’s life totally devoted to experiencing eternity in every moment. Having our thoughts caught in the past or the future was a lethal distraction from experiencing God in the moment, from being attentive to the Holy Spirit, from tasting eternity now. Our Lord’s teaching, incarnated in the life of Fr. Arsenie, planted in me the desire to forsake self-constructed imaginary futures and live in the present reality. I do succumb more often than I wish to a mind that wanders into future worries, schemes, and dreams; but I now often hear a quiet voice in the midst of my uncontrolled thoughts: “Prepare for the future by living in the present.”

Glory to God for all things! And thanks to you, my many teachers!

(Note: for those interested, the translation into English of Elder Arsenie’s life and teachings has been completed, and is available from St. Herman’s Press, 2018, under the title, *Eternity in the Moment*.)