

# My Brother Is My Life

## *The Church Community's Role in the Cultivation of Virtue*

Herman A. Middleton, Th.D.

Note: Dr. Herman Middleton is an independent scholar, and the author of *Precious Vessels of the Holy Spirit: The Lives and Counsels of Contemporary Elders of Greece* (Protecting Veil, 2003). (Learn about his work on his website: [www.ProtectingVeil.com](http://www.ProtectingVeil.com).)

What is the role that the Christian community has played, can play, and should play in the spiritual life of the individual believer, in particular as regards the cultivation of virtue? As we search for ways to address the ethical crises of our time, we should begin by looking inwardly at what we can do as a community of believers to address these issues, to address the proverbial plank in our own eye. There is a direct relationship between these ethical crises and our failure as a community to fulfill Paul's command to "bear one another burdens."<sup>1</sup> There is no such thing as individual virtue in Orthodoxy. The cultivation of virtue is an act that happens in community, with and through other people. The more individualistic one's life becomes, the more difficult it is to cultivate virtue.

Yes, the Church needs to remain faithful to the ethical tradition that has been handed down to Her. It's not enough, however, to simply study and explain this tradition. The mystery of Christ's Economy is the mystery of His self-emptying love for His Creation. In order to be faithful to the Tradition of the Church, we

---

<sup>1</sup> Galatians 6:2.

are called to be faithful inheritors and practitioners of this Economy. Yes, we need to preach the truth; but even more importantly, we need to be a community that incarnates Christ's self-emptying love for all Creation, and especially for all humankind.

The question to address, as we approach Scripture, is what does the New Testament tell us about how our life in Christ should affect our relationships with other believers? The two main examples of Christian community that we have from the New Testament are: 1), the apostolic fellowship of Christ and His 12 disciples; and 2), the Christian community described in Acts 2.

The fellowship of Christ and His 12 disciples may be understood, in a post-Fall world, as the example *par excellence* of Christian community. This community consisted of members who shared a common purse, and who had willingly left their worldly affairs so as to tend to the work of God. However, made up as it was of imperfect humans, even this community was not without flaws. In the first Christian centuries, the Holy Spirit would inspire the establishment of monastic communities centered around an abbot or abbess, following this model of Christ and His disciples.

The other example of Christian community provided by the New Testament is described by St. Luke in Acts 2:

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as

anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.<sup>2</sup>

So, we see that this earliest Christian community was profoundly inspired by the example of Christ and His disciples. Among other things, we know that this community had a hierarchical structure, but this is not the focus of Luke's account in Acts. He is instead interested in documenting how the lives of the first Christians were radically shaped by their understanding of Christ's teaching. From this passage, we know that the earliest Christians:

- 1) Met together daily for prayer.
- 2) Owned all things in common, thus providing for all members of the community.
- 3) Led a simple, communal life, accompanied by signs and wonders, the favor of non-believers, and a daily increase in the number of the faithful.

In his interpretation of this passage, St. John Chrysostom highlights an important aspect of this early Christian community: "Consider what an advance was here immediately! For the fellowship was not only in prayers, or in doctrine alone, but also in social relations (πολιτεία)."<sup>3</sup>

St. John's words are instructive and highlight a central, but

---

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:42-47.

<sup>3</sup> St. John Chrysostom, Homily 33 on Acts; *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. XI, p. 206.

seemingly invisible, problem with contemporary Orthodox parish life. When one looks at what's considered normative for parish life in Orthodoxy in the Western world (and, to a lesser extent, in traditionally Orthodox countries), we find a heavy emphasis on prayer and doctrine, and a comparative lack of emphasis on Christian social relations. It is not that prayer and doctrine are not important, but as St. James emphasizes,

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.<sup>4</sup>

These examples from Scripture provide a vision for what Christian community can look like. This vision of Christian community should not be viewed as an historical anomaly, but rather as an ideal toward which every Orthodox parish should strive. It is the physical manifestation of properly lived Christian theology. Scripture reveals a complete picture of the Christian life, and when one piece is removed or changed it affects the other parts of the whole. For the vast majority of the faithful, the perfect fulfillment of Christ's commandments requires a more intentionally Orthodox community than what most Orthodox parishes currently incarnate. The ethical crises that we are encountering are the result of abandoning the New Testament vision of Christian community, and allowing our lives to instead be shaped by the

---

4 James 2:14-17.

increasingly individualistic and secular culture around us.

## **Christ's Commandments and Sins of Omission**

In his *Ethics* (and in particular, an introductory essay to this work, *On the Judgment of God*), St. Basil the Great addresses a similar concern. Basil's interpretation of Christ's commandments is particularly instructive for our discussion. In the *Introduction* to his translation of this work, Jacob N. Van Sickle provides the backstory for St. Basil's words:

The thesis of *On the Judgment of God* is that the theological turmoil of his day is the result of the great number of supposed Christians, and especially Christian leaders, who elect to conduct their lives not according to Scripture but according to their own pleasure and reasoning (effectively saying in their hearts, "There is no God"). The pestilence ravaging the Church is fundamentally the rampant moral failure of disobedience to God's Word, which is manifesting itself in theological strife. The solution to the Church's problems is a return to Scripture as the norm governing Christian conduct.

Basil discerns that the primary "reasoning" which has brought about such rampant disobedience is the assumption, following a "human tradition," that sins are rated on a kind of sliding scale. Christians then convince themselves that so long as they refrain from sins that are heinous (which they determine by their own reckoning), they can continue confidently in those they consider slight. Basil explodes this misconception, which is perhaps no less pervasive now than

in his day, with a sustained appeal to Scripture. God, Basil discovers, judges all sins with the same terrible judgment, no matter how trivial they might appear to us.<sup>5</sup>

My purpose here is not to point fingers, but rather, again, to make the argument that our current ethical crises are at the very least related to, if not primarily caused by, our culture's movement towards hyper-individualism. If Orthodox Christians are going to begin to address this crisis, we need to recognize our largely wholesale adoption of this lifestyle, and its deleterious effects. This is particularly problematic for Christians, because we bear the burden of the entire truth of Christ's teaching. It is not only the sins that we commit for which we will have to give account; sins of omission are every bit as condemning.

Near the beginning of *On Christian Ethics*, St. Basil makes the argument that Scripture is explicit in its insistence that sins of omission are every bit as bad as sins that we commit:

He who received from the Father all authority to judge, who comes to "enlighten the hidden things of darkness and to reveal the desires of the hearts," says to these, "Depart from me, accursed, into the eternal fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels." And he presented the cause, which was not "you murdered" or "you fornicated" or "you lied" or "you were unjust to someone" or "you did anything else forbidden, even the least." But what? "Because you neglected good works." For he says, "I was hungry and you did not give me to eat. I was thirsty and you did not give me to drink. I was a stranger, and you did not befriend me; naked, and you did not clothe me; sick and in prison, and you did not visit me."<sup>6</sup>

---

5 St. Basil the Great, *On Christian Ethics*, 18-19.

6 Ibid., 63-65.

The Orthodox understanding of sin is not primarily juridical. The inclination to view sin as “the bad things that we do,” or as “our decision to transgress God’s commandments,” makes it difficult for us to appreciate the actual nature of sin, which is death: separation from God, separation from the source of life. Sins of omission reveal to us the poverty of our understanding and the poverty of our spiritual lives. If we are guilty of sins of omission, then we are worthy of Christ’s condemnation of the Pharisees, who were reliant on their own good works and personal piety. This is precisely why St. James says that faith without works is dead.

What, then, should be our approach to sin? How do we traverse the chasm between death and life? What is the source of virtue, and how do we lead virtuous lives, pleasing to God?

### **My Brother Is My Life**

St. Silouan’s famous phrase, “Our brother is our life,”<sup>7</sup> is the natural result of Christ’s words in the Gospels, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.”<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Christ also says, “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.”<sup>9</sup>

What a revelation this must have been to the first century disciples of Christ! We know from the work of scholars who have studied the New Testament era that one of the reasons Christianity spread as rapidly as it did is that non-Christians were attracted by

---

7 *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 371.

8 John 15:13.

9 Matthew 5:44.

the love that Christians showed for one another and for their neighbors (especially during periods of epidemics).<sup>10</sup> Even Christ's disciples did not understand this. We know that the Apostles James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume a village of Samaritans who refused to receive Christ, but Christ "turned and rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.'"<sup>11</sup>

In order to begin to address sins of omission, we must daily attempt to accept and fulfill the law of self-sacrificial love that Christ came to reveal. Christ is explicit about the nature of perfect love, both in the quotes above as well as in the entire arc of His life, death, and resurrection. There is no other path forward.

In his *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, Dr. Georgios Mantzaridis provides a nice synopsis of the relationship between authentic Christian life and the cultivation of virtue. In particular, he charts the path out of the hell of individualistic self-reliance into the communal life of love offered by Christ in the Church:

It is certainly not by chance that the beginning of the Christian life is baptism, and that the means for the sustenance of this life is the eucharistic Communion. Baptism is the mystery of man's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. And eucharistic Communion is the mystery of the Christian's sustenance in the body of Christ. At the same time, however, baptism and Holy Communion are indicators of life, which call man to come out of his fragile individualistic self-reliance and to join himself, as a person, to the community of the body of Christ, to the community of the

---

<sup>10</sup> See Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 9:51-56.



new creation. In other words, baptism and eucharistic Communion are the presuppositions and indicators of the life of love.

It is this love that transforms time from being a factor of destruction into a factor of perfection. In this way, love, which already exists as a “*spermatikos logos*” [a seed] in the soul of every human, takes on its completed hypostasis in the new person in Christ, while at the same time it becomes a synopsis of, and the completion of all the virtues in the personal and social life of humans.<sup>12</sup>

The perfect love that Christ describes and embodies is the fulfillment of all the virtues. The cultivation of Christian virtue has this self-sacrificial love as its ultimate goal. Without this goal, there is no Christian cultivation of virtue, and all of our efforts are “as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.”<sup>13</sup>

## **The Contemporary Reality**

We have been discussing contemporary ethical crises and how the Orthodox Church can address them; we cannot properly address these crises without looking at the root of the problem. The root of the problem, of all problems, is death and division. Our culture is a culture of death and division, and this is the reality that children from their earliest days increasingly experience.

Years ago there was a great deal of concern about the rise of the nuclear family and how it would affect society. Those now appear as halcyon days. According to a Pew article from 2018,

---

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Georgios Mantzaridis, *Εισαγωγή Στην Ηθική*, 46-47 (translation mine).

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:1.

“The share of U.S. children living with an unmarried parent has more than doubled since 1968, jumping from 13% to 32% in 2017. That trend has been accompanied by a drop in the share of children living with two married parents, down from 85% in 1968 to 65%.” We know, also, that the marriage rate has declined substantially. The percentage of 25 to 37 year olds who are married today is just 46%, whereas it was 83% in 1968.

The usefulness of statistics is limited, but I do believe that the above realities point to the bigger picture problem that we need to be discussing: the family unit has diminished substantially. Children are increasingly born into a world that does not provide them with the stability, cultural meaning, emotional and spiritual support, etc., that previous generations enjoyed. It should come as no surprise, then, that largely unsupported by a traditional family and community, children are shaped by the shifting fads of a culture obsessed with shiny new things.

While the culture has changed substantially, the Orthodox response to these new realities has not altered much. We remain a church with a largely insular, liturgical, and doctrinal focus, while largely lacking the emphasis on social relations that St. John Chrysostom notes and lauds in the early Church. If we want to be faithful to the gospel and to our own tradition (the Byzantine philanthropic legacy is substantial, with Saints such as Basil and John Chrysostom leading the way in caring for the poor and needy), and if we really want to provide an answer to contemporary ethical crises, we need to get serious about becoming a church that is known for its care of the marginalized.

Flannery O’Connor once famously wrote that Christians need to “push back against the age as hard as it pushes against you.

What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross."<sup>14</sup>

We contemporary Orthodox Christians have largely allowed ourselves to be pushed around by our culture. Again, I don't want to point fingers (the things I point out I firstly see in myself). I realize that life is complicated, that each situation is unique, and that ultimately every Christian needs to follow the dictates of his or her own conscience. That said, I would like to make sure that the question of how to conscientiously structure one's life in such a way as to best fulfill the gospel of Christ is on every Orthodox Christian's list of concerns. In my experience, this criterion is rarely considered when one decides, for example, which university one will attend, what career path one will pursue, what job one will take, where one will live, and how one spends the days between Sundays.

According to the account in Acts 2, the Christian life of the earliest Christians was not only a Sunday affair. It was a way of life that demanded everything, but also provided everything — material as well as spiritual. We Orthodox Christians find ourselves today, along with the rest of the culture, divided from one another and dying in the desert of the modern world. It should come as no surprise, then, that there are spiritual consequences of our spiritual malaise. While we appear to have the right doctrines and the right prayers, we lack the social relations (πολιτεία) of the early Christians.

St. Maximus the Confessor famously said, "Theology without action is the theology of demons."<sup>15</sup> What good is knowing the right things and praying the right prayers, if our lives do not

---

<sup>14</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, 229.

<sup>15</sup> *Epistles* 20, 601C.

reflect our Orthodoxy? When loneliness and isolation are the fabric of one's life, how can one expect that Christian virtue will be the result?

### **Conclusion: The Need for Community**

If and when Orthodox Christians embrace the path towards perfect love described by Christ and revealed and fulfilled in the lives of the Saints, we will return to the fulness of the gospel vision of Christian community. Why? Because the fulfillment of Christ's commandments heals Creation and brings about the unity that Christ came to establish.

Again, I realize that every situation is unique and that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution for every Orthodox community. That said, I do think that there are principles that can guide Orthodox communities as they seek to build stronger ties and to better fulfill the commandments of Christ. The following are just a few ideas:

- 1) The adage "charity begins at home" is instructive. Is the community aware of the needs of individual members? Is there a mechanism for members to seek help and to offer help? Every parish should have a philanthropic organization that addresses the internal needs of the parish. In my experience, the current reality is that if this mechanism exists at all, it works poorly.

- 2) When deciding on a new parish location, realize that where the church is placed will affect the kind of community that is created. Prioritizing convenience above all is to decide to continue with the (greatly problematic) commuter church model. A good question to ask is: "What kind of community life would make us most able to fulfill the commandments, and what location would

best support this kind of community life?” I believe that the correct answer will always be that the physical proximity of parish members matters. One of the reason so many needy people slip through the cracks is because they are invisible—how can I address the needs of my brother if I don’t see them?

3), How do I spend my free time? Are there ways I could serve the parish rather than spending my free time and resources on pursuing my own pleasures and good? If regular opportunities to serve do not exist, can I work with my parish to create them? Again, proximity to the parish will usually make serving the parish considerably more likely.

4), Can the parish find a way to purchase a group home near the church? (Ideally two, one for single men and the other for single women.) Single people find themselves particularly isolated, while they also generally have a good deal of free time on their hands. Single Orthodox folk usually seek meaningful ways to serve the Church as well the camaraderie of other Orthodox.

A group home could also be purchased/run for the elderly, for single mothers, for unwed mothers, for those who have recently been released from prison, etc. There are many needs, but these needs usually go unmet in the contemporary Orthodox parish.

There are many ways that our Orthodox parishes can do a better job of providing for the needs of the faithful and of the culture around us. We cannot expect the cultivation of Christian virtue if we continue to ignore the sins of omission that are the result of a malformed spiritual life.

Yes, it is important that the Church stands firm in the preservation of the doctrines and ethical teachings that have been handed down. Our preaching will sound hollow, however, if we do

not address in practical ways the nihilistic individualism that is the fabric of most people's lives. The witness of Christ and His Saints is clear: it is not enough to simply preach the truth. We must also be witnesses to the truth through the holiness of our lives; and there is no holiness or Christian virtue without love for our brother. If we do not live as though our brother is our life, then we are not living Christian lives.

I'd like to leave you with one last quote from St. Basil, which seems to speak to our present crises:

Therefore God removes evil, and evil is not from God; since likewise the physician removes illness and does not produce it in the body. But razings of cities, earthquakes and floods, and destructions of armies, and shipwreck, and every occasion when many people are killed either by earth, or by sea, or by air, or fire, or by whatever cause it befalls, these happen for the correction of the survivors, as a collective wickedness is corrected by a public flogging from God. So sin is evil in the proper sense, and it is especially worthy of the name of evil. It is brought about by our free choice, since it is up to us either to abstain from vice or to be wicked.<sup>16</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Basil the Great, St., *On Christian Ethics*, Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2014.

Basil the Great, St., "Homily Explaining That God is Not the Cause of Evil," *On the Human Condition*, Yonkers: St. Vladimir's

---

<sup>16</sup> St. Basil the Great, "Homily Explaining That God is Not the Cause of Evil," *On the Human Condition*, 71.

Seminary Press, 2005.

John Chrysostom, St., *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First series, Volume 11*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2nd edition, 1996.

Mantzaridis, Georgios, *Εισαγωγή Στην Ηθική*, Thessaloniki: Pounaras Publications, 1995.

Maximus the Confessor, St., *Epistles* 20, PG 91.601C.

O'Connor, Flannery, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979.

Pew Research, Single Parents:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/27/about-one-third-of-u-s-children-are-living-with-an-unmarried-parent/>

Pew Research, Marriage Rate:

[https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/millennial-life-how-young-adulthood-today-compares-with-prior-generations/psdt\\_02-14-19\\_generations-00-06/](https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/essay/millennial-life-how-young-adulthood-today-compares-with-prior-generations/psdt_02-14-19_generations-00-06/)

Sakharov, St. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite*, Essex: Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1991.