

St. Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Christian Cathedral • Los Angeles, California
Fall 2021 Adult Study:

Orthodox Christian Faith and Practice

Hopko, Father Thomas. *The Orthodox Faith*. Four volumes. Revised and expanded by David C. Ford. Available in print or online at oca.org/orthodoxy/the-orthodox-faith

Dec. 8 Spirituality (Vol. IV pp. 146-82 new; Vol. IV pp. 158-99 old)
Sexuality, Marriage, Family, Sickness, Suffering, Death, Judgment

Sexuality

The sexual character of human persons has a positive role to play in human spirituality. Like all things human, sexuality must be sanctioned by God and inspired with the Holy Spirit, used for the purposes God has intended. And like all things human, through its misuse and abuse, sexuality can be perverted and corrupted, becoming an instrument of sin rather than the means for glorifying God and fulfilling oneself as made in His image, and according to His likeness.

*. . . The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body
. . . Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take
the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not
know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it
is written, "The two shall become one." But he who is united to the Lord becomes one
spirit with Him. Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the
body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your
body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not
your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body (1 Cor 6.13–20).*

The teaching of Saint Paul about sexuality is analogous to his teaching about eating and drinking and all bodily functions. They are given by God for spiritual reasons to be used for His glory. In themselves they are holy and pure. When misused or adored as an end in themselves, they become the instruments of sin and death. The apostle specifically says that all sexual perversions have as their direct cause man's rebellion against God.

In the law of Moses, adulterers, homosexuals, incestuous people and those committing sexual acts with beasts were ordered to be "put to death" (Lev 20.10–16).

In following this teaching, while hoping on the mercy of God and the forgiveness of Christ for all sinners, the New Testament scriptures are even more strict in their demands regarding sexual purity. Jesus, who forgave the woman taken in adultery (Jn 8.7–11) and the repentant harlot who washed His feet with her hair (Lk 7.36–50), gave the following teaching in His sermon on the mount:

*You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you
that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with
her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is
better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.*

Thus, according to the revelation of God, sexual relations are holy and pure only within the community of marriage, with the ideal relationship being that between one man and one woman forever. Those who are not married and those who choose by the will of God not to marry must abstain from all sexual relations since such relations cannot possibly fulfill the function given to the sexual act by God in creation. This does not mean that there will be no sexual character to the unmarried person's spiritual life, for the unmarried man and the unmarried woman will still express their humanity in masculine and feminine spiritual forms.

The single person who lives his or her whole life without husband or wife is called to virginity as a witness in this world of the Kingdom of God where "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mt 22–30).

People can serve God and live the spiritual life both in marriage and in the single life. And people can sin in both as well. "Each has his own special gift from God" (1 Cor 7.7). Saint Paul thinks, however, that among those who want to do as perfectly as they can, they who do not marry "will do better" (1 Cor 7.38–40).

The spiritual tradition of the Church clearly agrees with the apostle. This does not mean that marriage is in any way disparaged or disdained. It is given by God and is a sacrament of the Church, and those who abhor it for "spiritual reasons" are to be excommunicated from the Church (cf. Canon Laws of the Council of Gangra). It means only that, most practically, one can be a greater servant of God and more perfectly a witness to His unending Kingdom if he gives up everything in this world, sells all that he has, and follows Christ in total detachment and poverty.

The idea, however, that a single person can indulge oneself in the things of this world, including sexuality, and still be the servant of God in Christ is totally rejected and condemned. One can forsake marriage in the body only for greater freedom from "anxiety about worldly affairs" in order to be concerned with "the affairs of the Lord . . . how to be holy in body and spirit." The single person who is "holy in body and spirit" has sexual relations with no one.

Marriage

Marriage is a part of human life on this earth as created by God. God created male and female so that man and woman would live their lives together in marriage as one flesh. This union should be broken for no earthly reason.

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh (Gen 2.24, cf. Mt 19.5–6).

He said to them, "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife except for sexual impurity and marries another, commits adultery."

Human marriage exists by the will of God on the earth as the created expression of God's love for man and as man's participation in the creative love of God. The union of man and woman in the community of marriage is used in the Bible as the image of God's faithful love for Israel, and Christ's sacrificial love for the Church (cf. Is 54, Jer 3, Ezek 16, Hos).

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present the church to Himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of His body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (Eph 5.22–33).

These words of Saint Paul, read at the sacramental celebration of marriage in the Church, contain the whole program for spiritual life in the community of marriage. The husband must love his wife to the point of death, as Christ loves the Church. And the wife must be totally given to her husband in everything as the Church is given to Christ. The union in love must be perfect, total, complete, enduring and lasting forever. Within this union, the sexual act of love is the mystical seal of the total union in love; the act whereby the two are united in mind, heart, soul and body in the Lord.

According to the spiritual teaching of the Orthodox Church, marriage, and so the sexual act of love, is made perfect only in Christ and the Church. This does not mean that all those who are “married in church” have an ideal marriage. The sacrament is not mechanical or magical. Its reality and gifts may be rejected and defiled, received unto condemnation and judgment, like Holy Communion and all of the sacramental mysteries of the faith. It does mean, however, that when a couple is married in the Church of Christ, the possibility for the perfection of their marriage is most fully given by God.

A truly Christian and spiritual marriage is one where true love abides. In the community of marriage true love is expressed in the total union of the couple in all that they are, have and do. It is the love of each one living completely for the good of the other, the love of erotic union in total oneness of mind, heart and flesh; the love of perfect friendship.

Family

True love in marriage supposes the bearing of children. Those who truly love in marriage will naturally have children as the fruit of their love and the greatest bond of their union. Those who despise children and refuse to offer them care and devotion do not truly love.

Of course there are those whose marriages will be childless because of some -tragedy of nature brought on by the “sin of the world.” In such marriages perfect love can exist, but the mutual devotion in the service of God and man will take on other forms, either the adoption of children or some other good service for the sake of others. The childless marriage, either by voluntary choice or natural tragedy, which results in self-indulgence is not a spiritual union.

The voluntary control of birth in marriage is only permissible, according to the essence of a spiritual life, when the birth of a child will bring danger and hardship. Those who are living the spiritual life will come to the decision not to bear children only with sorrow, and will do so before God, with prayers for guidance and mercy. It will not be a decision taken lightly or for self-indulgent reasons.

According to the common teaching in the Orthodox Church, when such a decision is taken before God, the means of its implementation are arbitrary. There are, in the Orthodox opinion, no means of controlling birth in marriage which are better or more acceptable than others. All means are equally sad and distressing for those who truly love. For the Christian marriage is the one that abounds with as many new children as possible.

The abortion of an unborn child is absolutely condemned in the Orthodox Church. Clinical abortion is no means of birth control, and those who practice it for any reason at all, both the practitioners and those who request it, are punished according to the canon law of the Church with the “penalty for murder” (Council of Trullo, 5th and 6th Ecumenical Councils).

In extreme cases, as when the mother will surely die, if she bears the child, the decision for life or death of the child must be taken by the mother alone, in consultation with her family and her spiritual guides. Whatever the decision, unceasing prayers for God’s guidance and mercy must be its foundation. According to the Orthodox faith, a mother who gives her life for her child is a saint who will most certainly be greatly glorified by God; for there is no greater act of love than to give one’s life so that another might live (cf. Jn 15.13). That being said, one must consider which of two tragedies creates the greater hardship.

Within the life of the family, the father must be the leader and head. He must love his wife and children as Christ loves the Church—and Christ died for the Church. He must never be harsh. The wife must be totally devoted to her husband and must demand, encourage and enable his leadership. This is the normal way of family life prescribed in the scriptures, for “the head of every man is Christ, and the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor 11.3, Eph 5.22–23, Col 3.18–19, 1 Pet 3.1–7).

Within the family, the spiritual life of love should be sought and lived as fully as possible. This means that every member of the family should live for the good of the other in all circumstances, “bearing one another’s burdens” and in this way fulfilling “the law of Christ” (Gal 6.2). There should be the constant presence of mercy and forgiveness and mutual upbuilding. There should be every expression of true love as is generally found in those who are holy.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor 13.4–7).

Such love is the basis of enduring family life, lived and expressed joyfully and cheerfully, without reluctance or compulsion (cf. 2 Cor 9.6–12). For marriage is not “holy deadlock” as one cynical writer has put it, but, in the words of Saint John Chrysostom, a “small church” in the home where the grace and freedom of God abounds for man’s salvation and life.

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother . . . that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth” (Eph 6.1–3, Ex 20.12).

There are those who curse their fathers and do not bless their mothers . . . If one curses his father or his mother, his lamp will be put out in utter darkness (Prov 30.11, 22.20).

Saint John Chrysostom says that those who cannot honor, love and respect their parents can certainly not serve God, for He is the “Father of all” (Eph 4.6), the One “from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Eph 3.15).

The true father loves and disciplines his child as God loves and disciplines His people (cf. Heb 12.3–11).

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it (Prov 13.24; 22.6,15; 23.13).

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up with discipline and instruction in the Lord (Eph 6.4).

Like the pastors of churches, the fathers of families must be “temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome and no lover of money” (1Tim 3.2). He must be an example for his children “in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4.12). Like the father in Christ’s parable, the human father must always be ready to receive home with joy his prodigal children. The wives and mothers of families must be fully devoted to their husbands and children. They must be the very embodiment of all of the fruits of the Holy Spirit as those who give life, both physical and spiritual.

A good wife, who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her . . . she does him good and not harm all the days of her life. Strength and dignity are her clothing and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth in wisdom and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, he praises her, saying: “Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all.” Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is greatly to be praised (Prov 31.10–31).

Thus in the “small church” of the family, with each member living according to God’s will, the Kingdom of God is already present and active, waiting to be perfectly fulfilled in the Kingdom of heaven which never will end, where all are God’s children, the bride of His Son.

Sickness

Sickness exists in the world only because of sin. There would be no sickness at all, neither mental nor physical, if man had not sinned. According to Christ sickness is bondage to the devil (Mt 8.16, 12.22; Lk 4.40–41, 13.10–17). And Christ has come to “destroy . . . the devil” (Heb 2.14). With Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, the healing of the body, the destruction of the devil and the raising of the dead are all one and the same act of salvation.

For which is easier to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say “Rise and walk”? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—He then said to the paralytic—“Rise, take up your bed and go home.” And he rose and went home (Mt 9.4–7, Mk 2.9–12, Lk 5.23–25).

In that hour He cured many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many that were blind he bestowed sight (Lk 7.21).

. . . the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news of the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not scandalized at Me (Lk 7.22–23; cf. Is 29.18–19, 35.5–6, 61.1; Mt 4.23–24, 11.4–6).

When one is delivered from sin and evil, one is also freed from sickness and death. In the Kingdom of God there will be “no sickness or sorrow or sighing, but life everlasting” (Requiem Kontakion of the Church). When one is visited by sickness in this world, whether bodily or mental, he is a victim of the devil and the “sin of the world” (Jn 1.29). This does not mean that people are necessarily being personally punished with their diseases. It means rather, as in the case of those born with infirmities and children who are ill, that where sin abounds, sickness and disease are also rampant. It is the teaching of the Church that those who are innocently victimized by sickness, such as small children and the developmentally disabled, are certain to be saved in the Kingdom of God.

This is the teaching of the book of Genesis. God did not say to man, “Sin and I will kill you.” He said, if and when you sin, “you will die” (Gen 2.17, 3.3). Thus when man sins and ruins himself by evil, he brings the curse of sickness and suffering to the world for himself and his children; and his life becomes toil until he returns to the dust out of which he is made—and which he is by nature without the grace of God in his life (cf. Gen 3.17–19). It is in this sense that the “prince of this world” is the devil (Jn 12.31, 14.30, 16.11).

God is not the cause of sickness, suffering and death; but given their existence because of the devil’s deceit and man’s wickedness and sin, God employs them that man might be healed and saved in the forgiveness of sins. In this sense, and this sense only, can it be said that “God sends sickness to man.”

When a spiritual person is sick he recognizes that his illness is caused by sin, his own and the sins of the world. He does not blame God for it, for he knows that God has not caused it and does not wish it for His servants. He knows as well, through the providential plan of God and the salvation of Christ, that his sickness will be healed. He knows also that if God so wills, he can be healed of his sickness in this life in order to have more time to serve God and man on earth, and to accomplish what he must according to God’s plan. He knows as well that the very sickness itself can be the means for serving God, and he accepts it in this way, offering it in faith and love for his own salvation and for the salvation of others.

There is no greater witness to the love of God and faith in Christ than sickness endured with faith and love. The one who bears his infirmities with virtue, with courage and patience, with faith and hope, with gladness and joy, is the greatest witness to divine salvation that can possibly be. Nothing can compare to such a person, for God’s praise in distress and affliction is the greatest possible offering that man can make of his life on earth.

Every saint who ever lived suffered bodily infirmities. And all of them, virtually without exception—even when healing others by their prayers—did not ask for or receive deliverance for themselves. This is the case most evidently of Jesus Himself, the suffering servant of God.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; as one from whom men hide their faces . . . Surely He has borne our grieves, and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, upon Him was the chastisement that healed us, and with His wounds we are healed . . . the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. And they made His grave with the wicked and with a rich man [i.e. Joseph of Arimathea, cf. Mt 27.57] in His death . . . when He makes Himself an offering for sin . . . (Is 53, cf. Pss 22, 38, 41).

All spiritual persons follow the example of Christ and Saint Paul and all of the saints in their appreciation of sickness. They say to the Father, “Thy will be done,” and transform their weakness, by the grace of God, into the means of salvation for themselves and others.

Suffering

There is no life in this world without suffering. The cessation of suffering comes only in the Kingdom of God. There are generally three sources of suffering in this world: suffering from the persecution of others in body and soul, suffering from sickness and disease, and suffering in spirit because of the sins of the world. There are only two possible ways to deal with such sufferings. Either one humbly accepts them and transforms them into the way of salvation for oneself and others; or one is defeated by them with rebellion and rejection, and so “curses God and dies” both physically and for eternity in the ages to come (cf. Job 2.9–10).

We have seen already that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (1 Tim 3.12); and that Christians should “count it all joy” when they “meet various trials” (Jas 1.2), “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5.41).

We have also seen that those who suffer through sickness and disease with every virtue of Christ will receive “sufficient grace” from God to be strong in the Lord in their bodily weakness, and so direct their sufferings “not unto death” but to the “glory of God” (cf. 2 Cor 12.7–10, Jn 11.4).

Since therefore Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same thought, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of time in the flesh no longer by human passions, but by the will of God (1 Pet 4.1–2).

The spiritual person, when suffering in the flesh, uses his afflictions to be set free from sin, and to be made “perfect through suffering” like Jesus Himself (Heb 2.10). He knows that as his “outer nature is wasting away” he is being born into the Kingdom of God if he suffers in and with Jesus the Lord.

In a very real sense the most grievous suffering of all is not in the flesh but the spirit. This is the suffering which torments the soul when, by the grace of God and in the light of Christ, the spiritual person sees the utter futility, ugliness and pettiness of sin which is destroying men made in the image of God. According to one great theologian of the Church, this suffering was the most grievous of all for the Lord Jesus Himself (cf. Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitskii, 20th c., *The Dogma of Redemption*).

Jesus knew the fullness and perfection of the divine beauty of God; He knew His mercy and love, the glory of paradise, the goodness of His creation. Beholding all of this, given to man as a gift, and beholding it scorned and rejected in His own person, was infinitely more painful and torturing to the Lord than were any beatings and scourging and being nailed to the cross. For the cross itself was the great scandal of man's hatred and rejection of the love and light and life of God as given to the world in the person of Christ. Thus the agony and torment of the Lord in His being killed on the cross was the divine agony, in body and soul, of man's refusal of divine life. No greater agony than this can possibly exist, and no human mind can fathom the infinite scope of its horror and tragedy.

The spiritual person, according to the measure of grace given by God, participates spiritually in this agony of Christ. It is the greatest suffering of the saints, infinitely more unbearable than any external persecution or bodily disease. It is the torment of the soul over the utter foolishness of sin. It is the agony of love over those who are -perishing. It is with this same agony of love that Saint Isaac of Syria could say about the saints, "if they were cast into fire ten times a day for the sake of their love for man, even that would seem to them to be too little." (Mystic Treatises, Wensinck, ed.) This same Saint Isaac himself was known to weep fervent tears of suffering love for all men, the whole of creation, and even the devil himself.

Thus the ultimate form of all suffering which leads to salvation is compassionate love for all that are perishing through the ridiculous foolishness of sin. Christ suffered from such love to the full and unlimited extension of His divinity. And each person suffers it as well to the extent that he or she is deified in Christ by the grace of the Spirit.

Death

There is no person who will not die. The preparation for death is at the center of the spiritual life. Death is the result of sin. It is the final victory of the devil, the result of his destructive activity. If man had not sinned, he would not have died. His body may have changed and evolved over great periods of time, but it would not have been separated from his spirit to return to the dust, and man's soul itself would not have been corrupted, losing power over its body and becoming its slave. This is the meaning of the sin of Adam, that man has emerged on the face of the earth, made in God's image and inspired with His Spirit, and has chosen death instead of life, evil instead of righteousness, and so through defilement of his nature in rebellion against God, brought corruption and death to the world (cf. Gen 3, Rom 5.12–21).

Even the all-pure Virgin Mary who gave birth to Christ in the flesh could not escape the snares of death. For all her innocence and spiritual perfection, she too needed salvation from death by her Son, and her spirit rejoiced in God her Savior (cf. Lk 1.47).

According to the Orthodox Christian faith, Jesus Christ alone, of all men, as the incarnate Son and Word of God, need not have died. His death alone of all human deaths was perfectly voluntary. He came in order to die, and by His death to liberate all who were held captive by death's power.

For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it again; this charge I have received from My Father (Jn 10.17–18).

Jesus came “for us men and for our salvation” in order to die (Nicene Creed). He came that through His death and resurrection all men might be raised from the dead for eternal life in the Kingdom of God. This is the Christian faith.

. . . for the hour is coming when all who are in the graves will hear the voice of the Son of God, and come forth, for those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of damnation (Jn 5.25–29).

The whole essence of the spiritual life is to die with Christ to the sins of this world and to pass through the experience of bodily death with Him in order to be raised up “on the last day” in the Kingdom of God (cf. Jn 6.39–44, 54).

By the power of Christ and the grace of the Holy Spirit, Christians can and must transform their deaths into acts of life. They must face the tragedy of death with faith in the Lord, and defeat the “last enemy—death” (1 Cor 15.26) by the power of their faith.

None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, if we die, we die to the Lord, so whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living (Rom 14.8–9).

Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has eternal life; he does not come to judgment, but has passed from death to life (Jn 5.24, cf. Jn 6.29–58).

I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die (Jn 11.25–26).

For Christians, as for all men, death remains a tragedy. When confronted by death, like all men, and like Jesus Himself and His apostles, Christians can only mourn and weep (cf. Jn 11.35, Mt 26.37–38, Mk 14.33–34, Lk 22.42–44, Acts 8.2). But for Christians, filled with faith in Christ and His Father, the tragedy of death can be transformed into victory.

The Final Judgment

Every man will stand judgment before God for his life in this world. Each person will be judged according to his words and his works.

For the Son of Man is to come with His angels in the glory of His Father, and then He will repay every man according to his works (Mt 16: 27, cf. Rev 2.23).

The judge will be Christ Himself, for He is the one who, by His suffering and death, has received the power to judge. It is the Crucified One who will call men to account at the end of the ages. He has won this right as a man through the perfection of His human life.

For the Father . . . has given Him the authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of Man (Jn 5.27).

Christ will judge all men exclusively on the basis of how they have served Him by serving all men—the least of the brethren.

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. Before Him will be gathered all the nations, and He will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and He will place the sheep at His right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at His right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer Him, "Lord, when did we see Thee hungry and feed Thee, or thirsty and give Thee drink? And when did we see Thee a stranger and welcome Thee, or naked and clothe Thee? And when did we see Thee sick or in prison and visit Thee?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Then He will say to those at His left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave Me no food. I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome Me, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see Thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to Thee?" Then He will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to Me." And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Mt 25: 31–46).

All spiritual life is fulfilled in this one parable of Christ, for the heart of it is love, both for God and for man. In commenting on this teaching about the final judgment, Saint Augustine has said that Christ Himself is truly the one who is found in all of these conditions, just as He is the one who is the Savior in each of them. He Himself was hungry; who is the "bread of life," which if a man eats of it, he will never hunger again (Jn 6.35). He Himself was thirsty, crying out "I thirst!" (Jn 19.28); who gives the "living water," which, if a man drinks of it, he will never thirst again (Jn 4.13, 6.35, 7.37). He Himself was a stranger with "no place to lay His head" (Mt 8.20, Lk 9.58), who "came to His own home, and His own people received Him not" (Jn 1.11); who brings all men home to the heavenly house of the Father (Jn 14.1–2). He Himself was naked, in the manger in Bethlehem, in the streams of the Jordan, and on the cross of Golgatha; who clothes all men with Himself (Gal 3.27), and with the "robes of salvation" (Is 61.10, Rev 6.11). He Himself was sick, "wounded for our transgressions" and "bruised for our iniquities," left alone hanging on the cross (Is 53.5, Mt 26.56); who Himself heals all the wounds of men, for "with His wounds we are healed" (Is 53.5). He Himself was in prison, arrested as a criminal and thrown into jail, forsaken by His disciples (Mt 26.56, 27); who Himself proclaims "liberty to the captives" (Is 61.1, Lk 4.18), setting men free from everything that binds them, and forgiving their crimes.

Since Christ has identified Himself wholly with every man, in every one of his sad and most sorrowful states, the person who "does it to the least of his brethren" does it to Christ Himself—not "as if" to Christ, but to Christ in reality, for Christ is most truly within every man, and every man is the bearer of Christ, the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1.15).

It is also the teaching of the spiritual masters that what must be given to all men is Christ Himself: the Bread of Life, the Living Water, the Home of the Father, the robes of salvation, the healing of wounds,

the liberation and forgiveness of all sins. In this sense every man, no matter how rich or how righteous, is poor, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, sinful and imprisoned by evil and death. Thus to “do it to the least of the brethren” is to offer Christ to all men, to give them the eternal and unending satisfaction of all their needs and desires: bread which is never consumed, water which eternally satisfies, a home which is never lost, garments which do not grow old, healing which never suffers again, liberation which can never revert to captivity. Thus, “to do it to the least of the brethren” is to bring them the Kingdom of God. In doing this one offers to all men and so to Christ Himself what already belongs to them from God; as in the liturgy of the Church we offer to God that which already is His. In every case, this is Christ Himself.

This, therefore, is perfect love; the love of God and the love of man, the love for God and the love for man, becoming one and the same love. It is accomplished in Christ and is Christ. To love with this love is to love with the love of Christ and to fulfill His “new commandment” to “love one another even as I have loved you” (Jn 13.34–35, 15.12). In this is the whole of spiritual life. In this, and this alone, man will be finally judged. It is the crown of all virtue and prayer, the ultimate and most perfect fruit of God’s Spirit in man.

Heaven and Hell

The Kingdom of heaven is already in the midst of those who live the spiritual life. What the spiritual person knows in the Holy Spirit, in Christ and the Church, will come with power and glory for all men to behold at the end of the ages.

The final coming of Christ will be the judgment of all men. His very presence will be the judgment. Now men can live without the love of Christ in their lives. They can exist as if there were no God, no Christ, no Spirit, no Church, no spiritual life. At the end of the ages this will no longer be possible. All men will have to behold the Face of Him who “for us men and our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate . . . who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried . . .” (Nicene Creed). All will have to look at Him whom they have crucified by their sins: Him “who was dead and is alive again” (Rev 1.17–18).

For those who love the Lord, His Presence will be infinite joy, paradise and eternal life. For those who hate the Lord, the same Presence will be infinite torture, hell and eternal death. The reality for both the saved and the damned will be exactly the same when Christ “comes in glory, and all angels with Him,” so that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15–28). Those who have God as their “all” within this life will finally have divine fulfillment and life. For those whose “all” is themselves and this world, the “all” of God will be their torture, their punishment and their death. And theirs will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 8.21, et al.).

The Son of Man will send His angels and they will gather out of His kingdom all causes of sin and all evil doers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father (Mt 13.41–43).

According to the saints, the “fire” that will consume sinners at the coming of the Kingdom of God is the same “fire” that will shine with splendor in the saints. It is the “fire” of God’s love; the “fire” of God Himself who is Love. “For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12.29) who “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6.16). For those who love God and who love all creation in Him, the “consuming fire” of God will

be radiant bliss and unspeakable delight. For those who do not love God, and who do not love at all, this same “consuming fire” will be the cause of their “weeping” and their “gnashing of teeth.”

Thus it is the Church’s spiritual teaching that God does not punish man by some material fire or physical torment. God simply reveals Himself in the risen Lord Jesus in such a glorious way that no man can fail to behold His glory. It is the presence of God’s splendid glory and love that is the scourge of those who reject its radiant power and light.