# CHALLENGE

by **Eva Kokinos** 

But He said, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

– Luke 11:28

We are quickly approaching Thanks-giving and then we will be one month away from Christmas... It's hard to focus on the true meaning of Thanksgiving with all that fogs up our minds. We become preoccupied with Thanksgiving meals, football games, decorating, visiting family and friends, the remaining days we have to shop for Christmas gifts and what deals we are going to get on Black Friday or Cyber Monday.

In the meantime, while our vision is fogged up by our "food coma," screaming at our favorite football game, or feverishly reading the Black Friday ads, we miss the true meaning of Thanksgiving. Of course, Thanksgiving is not an Orthodox Christian holiday. However, it is a beautiful American tradition where family and friends gather around a feast, expressing their gratitude for the blessings in their lives.

Unfortunately, this "fog" isn't simply reserved for the Thanksgiving holiday. We find that throughout the year we have our everyday concerns... work, school, family, bills, health, relationships, etc. So with all this fog that obstructs our view... we have to ask ourselves "what are we missing?" Let's look at the Holy Scriptures, which offer us a glimpse into what happens when we get caught up in the fog of our busy lives and what we think is a priority.

In the Gospel of Luke (10:38-42), we read about sisters Mary and Martha. Jesus entered the village and was received into the home of Martha. While Martha worked endlessly to serve the Lord, Mary sat at His feet and was listening to Him teach.

Martha, who was working alone, got upset. She even asked Jesus to send Mary away from Him to help her. But Jesus Christ told Martha that she was anxious and worried about so many things. But she only needed one thing. Mary knew that... and that was something that couldn't be taken away from her.

Now, there is nothing wrong with being prepared. We can all appreciate Martha wanting to prepare and offer the best for



Jesus who was a guest in her home. But what good is our preoccupation with the many, many temporary things of the world if we miss the one thing that is eternal? Imagine inviting family and friends over for Thanksgiving dinner, but never spending quality time with them. But instead, we might be working feverishly in the kitchen to make sure everything is perfect.

Unfortunately, we end up missing those special moments we meant to share with those we love.

Take a moment to think for a moment about your daily schedule. Most of us are bustling around like Martha, usually with very good intentions. We want to make sure everything else is in order in our lives, and THEN we will settle down to think about God and our faith. However, we forget that Jesus Christ is right here... right now.

So in order that we can truly sit at the feet of our Lord, to learn and to grow and to receive His blessings, we must get out of the fog... Instead, we should Focus on God.

We must get out of the fog and focus on God by giving God priority on our schedule. Whether it is our time, our talents, or our treasure, we must think of God. We tend to give from our schedules, our gifts, and our pocketbooks to everything else first. Then, with whatever we have left, we offer that to God. But instead, we must focus on God by giving of our first fruits of our labor and our efforts.

We must get out of the fog and focus on God by anchoring ourselves in His Word. At the end of Mary and Martha's story, Christ says "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" We must continue to learn, to meditate on, and to put into practice the teachings of our Lord. These teachings recalibrate our direction, even if we are blinded by the fog. Like a lighthouse that helps ships find their way through the fog, the word of God guides us to solid ground.

Finally, we must get out of the fog and focus on God by being present at the Thanksgiving feast that He has prepared for us every Sunday. Yes, thanksgiving is not just the third Thursday of November. For Orthodox Christians, thanksgiving is every Sunday! It is at this feast during the Divine Liturgy that we all gather to receive the Holy Eucharist. When we come to Divine Liturgy, we should be prepared like Martha, BUT we must be actively listening and learning like Mary to truly experience God in His house.

May God grant each and every one a safe and blessed Thanksgiving holiday. May our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who rose from the dead to lead us out of the darkness of sin, offer us that same light to help us navigate through the fog of everyday life. If we can stay focused on God, the incredible gift of salvation will be in our sights and within our reach.

Eva Kokinos serves as the Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries of the Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Detroit. She received a Masters of Theological Studies from Holy Cross School of Theology in 2003.

### LIVING YOUR FAITH OUT LOUD

Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. – Matthew 5:14-16

Last month, four young men known as "The Painted Posse" attended a Louisiana State University game. Although they love their school, LSU will always be second in their hearts. These young men have made it clear that they love God first.

During the October 13th game against South Carolina, "The Painted Posse" decorated themselves in paint to show their school pride. This decoration included a cross near their left shoulder, making a personal statement that they are Christian.

They happened to be photographed at the game. But when the photo was published, the four fans noticed that the crosses had been digitally removed. The young men were disappointed because they were simply showing their love for God, as well as their beloved LSU team. In an article on www.foxnews.com, one of the young men explained why they chose to add the cross: "The cross painting is important to me because it represents who I am as a Christ follower. And it reminds me who I need to act like in Death Valley,' Cooke added, referring to Tiger Stadium's nickname i

The article continued with a

# Witnessing your faith at all times and in all places

statement from School spokesman, Herb Vincent, who said they did remove the cross to prevent other students from being offended. There was, in fact, one complaint from a student about the photo.

As Orthodox Christians, we have incredible examples of individuals who lived their faith even in the face of critics and those who disagreed. The Holy Martyrs of our Orthodox Christian faith were individuals who, even unto death, stood up for what they believed. If we read their stories, we can gain inspiration to witness our faith in the simplest of ways.

Take a moment to think about how YOU express your Orthodox Christian faith in all that you do. You might not need to paint a cross on your shoulders like the gentleman of "The Painted Posse."

However, there are practical ways that one can live their faith and witness what they believe every day. Pray before eating lunch at school, pray before a test or a big game, or simply take a moment to pray if people are getting on your nerves. The fact is... there is no way that anyone can "remove" the image of God from within you when you let it shine through your actions!

#### SIMPLE WAYS TO CELEBRATE THANKSGIVING

1) Attend Church: During these holiday/vacation weekends, we tend to "slack off" when it comes to our attendance in Church services. However, the Divine Liturgy and other services are the best way to give glory

## FOR YOUTH WORKERS AND PARENTS

- SAVE THE DATE for the 2013 Annual Orthodox Christian Camp and Youth Worker Conference Jan. 24-26, 2013 The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America is hosting this event in Austin, TX. Details are coming soon!
- Are you on FACEBOOK? Search for GOYA – Greek Orthodox Youth of America or Greek Orthodox National Young Adult Ministries and BECOME A FAN TODAY!!



and thanksgiving to God. Make it a point to attend Divine Liturgy as a family!

2) Make a "Thank You" List: Sometimes it is hard to really understand how many blessings we have been given. So sit down and make a list of people or things for which you are thankful. Whether you have three or thirty things on your list, say a special prayer on Thanksgiving and every day for those blessings.

3) Volunteer at a homeless shelter: With the incredible feasts that we partake of during the Thanksgiving holiday, it is easy to forget all those who will go without a simple, hot meal. During Thanksgiving, many homeless shelters serve Thanksgiving meals to those who come. So take the time to volunteer at a shelter that is serving meals

4) Plan a Food Drive: It sounds like an overdone idea. But nearly 17.2 million households in the United States are considered "food insecure." So even if you have already held a food drive in your youth group or parish, sponsor another one! Contact your local food bank to see how you can help.

5) Simply remember to say "Thank You": Seems pretty basic, right? But all too often, we find ourselves forgetting to say "thank you" to those who do good things for us. So say "thank you" to your youth group advisors... Say "thank you" to your teachers... Say "thank you" to your parents... Even say "thank you" to someone who holds the door open as you enter a store!