

CHALLENGE

THE PULSE OF ORTHODOX YOUTH

Lent: A Time To Take the 'I' Out of the Equation

by Fr. Nikolaos Karloutsos



"The fire of love must be kept burning warmly and brightly with the sweet wood of sacrifice. In teaching us to cross the 'I' out of life, our Lord tells us the secret of happiness. Divine love seeks to give rather than to receive, to serve rather than to be served, to love rather than to be loved, and will sacrifice anything for the beloved. Only then does love become a clean and holy fire in the heart." St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833).

Judging by the number and variety of Google search results for the phrase "secret of happiness," there are tons of people, companies, books, and products that claim to have an answer and even more folks apparently looking for the so-called "secret." I doubt the Web crawlers came across St. Seraphim's Orthodox Christian words of wisdom which can offer a solution to this quest for happiness. The secret (which is no longer a secret and is available to everyone and everything) is divine love. And we are called to play a part in actually sharing our Lord's secret of happiness, in sharing God's love. "For we are God's fellow workers." (I Corinthians 3:9)

The title of this article boils down the wisdom of the saint by stating it as a formula, a concise way of expressing information symbolically (thank you Wikipedia!). As we know from our science and math classes, formulas are a bit easier to memorize than Shakespeare's sonnets! The "formula" basically tells us that we are truly loving when we take the "i" out of living or, in reverse, we are truly living when we are loving. This formula is inspired by the beautiful words of St. Seraphim, by his holiness in life, by the example of other saints of our Church and ultimately by our loving and merciful God. When we strive to imitate the love of God, we are actively working on our relationship with Him, on taking the "i" out of life, on putting away our selfish and self-centered ways, on loving one another as Christ has loved us (see John 13:34). And conventional wisdom tells us that if we are not working on something, then something is working on us.

Now, love was a hot topic especially in the month of February, when much of the world celebrates Valentine's Day which has evolved from a liturgical celebration for many Christians into an occasion to express our love with flowers, candies, greeting cards, and all things red and heart-shaped.

FOR PARENTS AND YOUTH WORKERS

Are you on FACEBOOK? If you are a member of Facebook, you can visit us on our GOA Youth and GOA Young Adult Pages! Just search for GOA Youth or GOA Young Adults and BECOME A FAN TODAY!!

Don't forget to sign up for the YOUTH WORKER PULSE! This is the weekly listserv of the Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. Subscribers will receive valuable tips, tools, and resources for creating a successful and transformative youth ministry experience. Sign up today at www.youth.goarch.org.

But more importantly for us as Orthodox Christians, in March we celebrate the major church feast of the Annunciation or Evangelismos, a feast celebrating the divine love of God for humanity. This is the celebration of the proclamation by the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary of the "Good News"

of God's plan of salvation for the whole world and her loving, sacrificial response to God's grace.

It is also significant that this is the one major feast of the Church that always falls within Lent. During Lent, as we take a little more time to examine our souls through prayer, fasting and almsgiving, we avail ourselves of the time-tested remedies that the Church offers us to bring us back into communion with God if we have strayed from the path, to work on ourselves, and to rekindle the fire of love that St. Seraphim writes about. Our Church offers us remedies which help us to curb, or better yet, to deny our appetites for whatever unholy and selfish desires we may have as we attend more consciously to the needs of others, in order to truly encounter Christ in our neighbors. We can truly love others when we take the "i" out of the equation.

And that's exactly what Mary did. We read in Luke's gospel that when the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced God's plan, he first greeted her: "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you." And observing her confusion, he told her: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name

Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest..." In the person of Mary, we see that her living without the "i" is all about giving, serving, and sacrificing.

In receiving the Word of God in her womb, "Mary gave a 'city,' a dwelling place, back to God, the 'king without a city.'" (St. Nicholas Cabasilas, 14th century) She consents with the powerful statement of faith: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." In this way, she responds with faithful obedience as a servant of God, expressing her willingness to participate in the saving work of our Lord. And in so doing, she no doubt sacrificed her selfish desires, and any hopes and plans she may have had for herself and her family.

If indeed we are pursuing the "secret of happiness," perhaps we can take time to cross the "i" out of life this Lenten season. Maybe then our living might become indistinguishable from our simply loving. Maybe then we will be doing the will of God in this world, thereby letting everyone in on the secret of happiness.

Fr. Nikolas Karloutsos is a 2012 graduate of Hellenic College Holy Cross currently serving as an assistant priest at Archangel Michael Church in Port Washington, NY.

2013 Orthodox Christian Camp and Youth Worker Conference Highlights

by Steven Christoforou

The 11th annual Orthodox Christian Camp and Youth Worker Conference took place at the Transfiguration Church in Austin, Texas, Jan. 24-26. More than 100 youth workers from around the United States and Bahamas assembled for this three-day conference hosted by the Archdiocese Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. This year's theme was "Shine Forth: Helping Our Orthodox Youth Follow and Represent Christ."

Fr. Apostolos Hill of St. George Church of Prescott, Ariz., offered the keynote address. He distilled his years of pastoral experience into a talk that urged his listeners to maintain a focus on the transformative power of Christ. He stressed an "openness to the truly broken" as essential to any true Christian ministry, however, he was careful to note that a youth worker cannot open a young person's eyes to the Gospel without attempting to live it oneself. He stated that "You cannot push a rope;" just as a rope is used to pull a person towards oneself, a youth worker needs to be grounded in Christ so he can pull a young person towards Him. He also cautioned that a parish's budget, both of time and money, says a lot about its priorities, and that these are messages our youth absorb. Finally, he insisted that a call to service is a necessary part of youth ministry: no matter how effectively we educate young people, if we do not engage them then they will disconnect from Christ and His Church.

Friday featured workshops led by youth workers from various jurisdictions. Subjects included keeping college-aged young adults connected to Christ and His Church to protecting our youth.

Fr. Jason Roll, director of the Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, left the conference enthused. "It's great to see old and new faces developing their talents together and sharing best practices with one another. We put our heads together and came up with some great ideas while cementing crucial ties with our fellow youth workers."

The Ukrainian and Carpatho-Russian Churches will host the next conference, slated for January 2014. The conference provides an arena for Orthodox youth workers from different jurisdictions to share and provide resources. All Orthodox parish and diocese youth workers, camp directors and staff, and OCF chaplains are invited.

Steven Christoforou is the new Youth Protection / Parish Ministries Coordinator of the Archdiocese Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries Originally from Astoria, NY, he is in his fourth and final year of the Masters of Divinity Program at Holy Cross School of Theology. A graduate of Yale University and Fordham University School of Law, Steve worked as a corporate attorney on Wall Street for two years before enrolling at the seminary. This year, he has been serving as lay coordinator for the Harvard and MIT chapters of Orthodox Christian Fellowship. He has extensive parish experience, as a former parish council member, Sunday School teacher, and youth volunteer. He also has extensive experience in youth and camping ministries, having led retreats around the country as a member of the Seminary's Ambassadors Program, and having served at the Direct Archdiocesan District's Camp St. Paul, both as a counselor and boys director.



Five Ways to Prepare for Great and Holy Lent

Great and Holy Lent begins on Monday, March 18th. Here are five simple ways that you can prepare for this very important spiritual journey:

1. **Understand what Great and Holy Lent is all about!** – Talk to your parish priest. Learning about Great Lent will make it a more meaningful and beneficial spiritual journey.

2. **Check your parish calendar for the Lenten services** – Most parishes post a schedule for the Lenten services well in advance. Check it out!

3. **Add "PRAYER" to your daily schedule** – No, seriously! Actually write it down in your calendar or make a reminder on your smartphone. Prayer is an essential part of Orthodox Christian living. Lent is the perfect time to work on this discipline.

4. **Pick a book to read for Lent** – Talk to your parish priest about the books he might recommend for your Lenten reading. Make it a point to read this book instead of watching too much TV or playing video games.

5. **Plan to fast** – Go grocery shopping with your parents and encourage them to purchase foods that are appropriate for the Fast. Talk to your priest about what is appropriate and how to prepare.