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FOLLOWING YELLOW BRICK ROADS: MINISTERING TO YOUNG ADULT PROFESSIONALS

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This year marks the 70th anniversary of the release of one of the most beloved films in cinema history, *The Wizard of Oz*! A newspaper editor and the author of a dozen-plus Oz books, L. Frank Baum, wrote his novel as a gentler fare aimed at children. He wanted to provide an alternative to the more violent cowboy films of his day. As a result, Victor Fleming's movie production of *The Wizard of Oz* became an instant American classic, nominated for six Academy Awards including Best Picture in 1939. Although *Gone with the Wind* was the first color movie in film history, the transition between the sepia-toned Kansas and the Technicolor brilliance of the land of Oz, was an inspired way for Fleming to lure audiences into accepting Baum's idea of humanity's quest for spiritual truth. Today, 70 years later, Warner Bros is celebrating *The Wizard of Oz* with the Ultimate Collector's Blu-Ray Video Edition.

Since 1939, young adults have wandered like Dorothy along yellow brick roads of scholarship, financial success, and scientific ingenuity in search of something – or Someone – that might replace their drab nihilistic realities. Research indicates that spiritual quests are increasing. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 90% of Americans believe in God. Those who express a need for spiritual growth has increased from 58% in 1994 to 82% today. Over 85% of young adults say that religion is important to them personally.

According to another study conducted by the LifeWay Research Group, 73% of young adult Americans consider themselves "spiritual" because they want to know more about "God or a higher supreme being." Unfortunately, however, only 42% of them could name five of the Ten Commandments. When compared to 76% of people 50 and older only 60% of young adults said they belong to a church or synagogue. Finally, only 31% of these young professionals claim that they attend weekly worship! Fortunately, the survey data also indicates that young adults are amicable to conversations about Christianity with 89% reporting that they would listen to what someone believes about Christianity.

The aforementioned data is supported by S.W.O.T. (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) Survey data (2006) obtained by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. The research concluded that the number one threat to the Orthodox Church in America is "Orthodox Christians who are not well-Informed about their faith." SWOT data also indicates that Orthodoxy's "unique message of theology, and spirituality" may be used as one of five major strengths to counteract the "religious illiteracy" of contemporary young Orthodox professionals.

In her book, *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (2002), Colleen Carroll provides four general patterns that run through the stories of American young professionals who now yearn to find a way back to their traditional religious roots: (1) They have achieved success at a young age that leaves them hungry for meaning; (2) They have been

exposed to "watered-down" religion, moral relativism, or theism and crave its opposite; (3) They have practiced religion out of a sense of duty and now want a more personal relationship with God and a more intentional way to worship Him; and, finally, (4) They have had a personal religious devotion since childhood but long for a more integrated faith that is supported by community.

Theologians insist that this inner desire to follow the "Yellow Brick Road" back "home" to family and community is much more than a nostalgic yearning for a way back to simpler by-gone eras reflected by our respective "Kansases." This strong inner desire reflects an early mid-life crisis among young adult professionals who are searching for sustainable answers to life's problems. They desire a sense of purpose and a way to relate to their Creator. Faced with a deep spiritual hunger and renewed curiosity about Christian teaching and tradition, young adults are inclined to attend educational gatherings and liturgical experiences that will help them re-embrace Orthodoxy in all its rigor and particularity. These are the challenges and opportunities that Christian parish leaders will hopefully recognize.

The 70th anniversary of *The Wizard of Oz* provides a valuable opportunity to reach this increasingly post-Christian generation. As church leaders we must seize the opportunity that this spiritual openness provides and share the life-transforming path of Orthodox Christianity with them. Viewed more closely, Oz reveals two rather than one path to the Emerald City, the yellow and, a less obvious, red road. Without the Munchkin Lollypop Guild to properly advise her, Dorothy would not have known which of these two roads to select. According to Carroll, most young adults similarly wonder what life course they should choose. Like Dorothy, countless young seekers throughout history have stood at the crossroads of their respective Munchkin lands, the symbolic territory of human imperfection, and questioned their life's purpose. They have inquired if, in fact, there truly is an eternal Kingdom and who, if anyone, awaits their return . . . wizard or loving Father?

There are many references in the Bible to "the way of the Lord," "the path of the righteous" (Prov. 4:18), "the way of righteousness" and "its pathway" (Prov. 12:28). In the book of Acts, Saint Luke makes reference to the Christian faith itself as the "way of the Lord"(Acts 18:25) or "the way of God" (Acts 18:26). But what, exactly, is entailed in following this path? To follow the pathway of righteousness, one must take God at His word in childlike innocence. One must be loving, charitable, forgiving, and willing to suffer for that which is good. One must be obedient to God. If we follow this pathway, we are assured of God's sovereign care over our lives. The prophet Isaiah promises, that under these circumstances "the floodwaters will not overwhelm us and the fire will not scorch us" (43:2).

The witness of Scripture and the advice of the Holy Fathers both concur that, in order to draw near to God, we need to earnestly seek His guidance. It would be wise, therefore, for local Greek Orthodox parishes to develop educational programs and offer appropriate liturgical opportunities for young adults to gather for fellowship, meaningful prayer and spiritual guidance. Such assemblies, however, should always focus on serving the expressed religious needs of the participants and not cater to the favorite topic or theological expertise of the speaker! The highly successful *FOS* (Forum on Orthodox Spirituality) program sponsored by the Archdiocesan Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in New York City is an example of a well-attended gathering of

100-150 young Manhattan professionals who meet once a week after work to discuss the impact and relevance of Orthodox spirituality in their lives. The *FOS* model might be used as a template for replicating similar programs throughout the country. In this fashion, the S.W.O.T. supported strength of Orthodoxy Christianity may be successfully leveraged against a major threat to its future in America.

First, care should be taken to conduct formal and informal focus groups with prospective young adult participants. In this fashion, specific needs can be discerned and later developed into overall program themes with specific spiritual objectives. Second, emphasis should be given to creating elegant brochures with nuanced catchy-titles that will draw the more sophisticated and savvy by integrating Orthodox truths with contemporary issues and contexts.

Third, while ideas come easy, strategic execution takes preparation and diligent work. Most parish programs aimed at young adult professionals dwindle and finally fail due to improper implementation. As some workshop leaders may indeed be experts with theological content, they may not be as qualified to prepare proactive schedules of organizational and curricular objectives. Such conditions, however, provide valuable opportunities to solicit the advice and expertise of young adults knowledgeable with advertising, corporate training, and media. By inviting them to offer a stewardship of their time and talent, parish educational programs may receive important buy-in from future participants who now feel that Church leaders respect their highly specialized knowledge, skill, and opinion.

Fourth, networking is essential. Email, podcasting, blogging, and other technologies should be employed to sustain the feeling of community and connectedness between gatherings. In fact, FOS distributes a multi-page email synopsis of each week's conversation to over 700 individuals who have specifically requested to be subscribers. In this fashion, young adults feel that Church leaders are taking a proactive role in their spiritual development.

Fifth, efforts should be made to provide opportunities for informal social fellowship. FOS participants gather at various Manhattan restaurants and pubs after every weekly session. It is significant to note that the conversation frequently revolves around the issues just discussed at the formal gathering. FOS organizers underscore the need to respond to Carroll's fourth general observation. Consequently, a social outreach event kicks-off each new 12-session module. Aside from promoting FOS to potential young adult attendees, the outreach socials provide a wonderful venue for personal testimonies from regular members.

Finally, every program should be evaluated for effectiveness and impact. FOS participants are regularly invited to submit anonymous e-mail evaluations. After each session many are queried in small focus groups gatherings. Suggestions as to how to more effectively present material are integrated into existing patterns. Topic ideas are always taken seriously and used to develop creative titles for future FOS modules.

In the end, however, the primary question remains. How can we utilize the context of the 70th Anniversary of *The Wizard of Oz* to minister to the spiritual needs of young Orthodox Christians today? Are there parallels that can be drawn between Dorothy, her three fellow travelers, and the lives of cotemporary young Orthodox professionals? While on the surface Oz is a wonderful,

family-friendly classic, many may correctly warn that the film is often used to advance Hollywood's classic anti-religious message of secularism! Our task is to, therefore, effectively argue against such nihilistic allegories by re-interpreting Baum's powerful message for those seeking hope, wisdom and holiness. The actual personal items that Dorothy and her three companions are lacking are not humanist abilities but, in fact, important spiritual qualities . . . heart, mind, and spirit!

Dorothy's tornado-tossed arrival in Oz signals the defeat of the Witch of the East. The message for an understanding audience is clear. As Christianity first defeated the ancient paganism of the East, they must now courageously confront the secularist broom of the West. However, while the early Church swiftly defeated eastern paganism, the victory over western humanism demands prudence, patience, and proactive effort. Consequently, *The Wizard of Oz* chronicles the journey of Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion as they make their way to the Emerald City towards a goal they hope will provide the answers they seek.

Contemporary young adults can be divided into two distinct, yet similar, groups of seekers. The first group remains close or within the religious boundaries of the Church. They are like the shepherds tending their flocks on the surrounding hill countryside of Bethlehem. The journey of this first group of seekers is often short and comparatively easy. Their commitment to faith is frequently made quickly and without hesitation.

Since faith for this first group of seekers is not experienced in foreign territory, many of them have come to know Christ and the message of His gospel via the route of propinquity. The message of Orthodoxy is clear. It is close and not difficult to find. They experience it in worship, see it reflected in the lives of their parents, and simply respond to it without argument. Such young adults do not debate, question or feel the need to renegotiate their lives and professions with it. However, as short and straightforward as it may be, their approach to God is still a journey.

The second group of seekers, however, may be compared to the Wise Men, who discovered at a distance something significant through their expertise in astronomy, but, most assuredly, had to consider and discuss its meaning. Only when they were convinced that the star would lead them to the object of their longing, did they undertake the demanding trek that would lead them to their goal. Today's young professionals seek "stars" that will lead them from their bucolic life to a life-enriching relationship with the Holy One promised by the prophets. For the most part, they discover the truths of Orthodox Christianity through a longer path. Dorothy's yellow brick road is the Magi's route. It is filled with the contemporary lions, tigers and bears of skepticism, cynicism, and secularism.

Like the Magi, Dorothy, and her three companions, today's young adults must therefore continually recalculate their yellow brick route to follow the star of their respective professions as it leads them towards God and His eternal truths. While they seek in their own way and time, both shepherds and Magi discovered what they had been looking for. While their journeys are as diverse as the professions they have selected, each should be considered valuable and legitimate. Both the shepherds and the Magi arrived at the manger. The holy family did not consider the local shepherds any less because they did not travel as far as the Magi. Nor were the Wise Men questioned about the method they used to discover the Newborn's location. What is significant is that they both arrived successfully.

In the final analysis, the characters of the Scarecrow, Tin-woodsman, and Cowardly Lion may be used to illustrate the spiritual needs of today's young adult seekers. The Scarecrow represents, what Stephen Prothero (2007) refers to in his provocative and timely book, the religious illiterate of America. While eager consumers of secular knowledge, many young adult professionals readily confess their ignorance of religious knowledge. Posted in the market fields of life, however, they are taunted by the circling crows of competition, ever fearful of the straw-consuming fires of failure. Consequently, these young adults now seek to replace their misinformed view of God with a renewed sense of honest appreciation.

Other young professionals, holding the axes of science and technology in their hands, represent the pragmatic excellence of a tin-covered humanity that yearns for the vulnerability of a sensitive heart. Tired of chopping at the long-standing tree of Christianity, these young adult professionals seek the touch of something more than miniature text-messaged mechanisms. These contemporary prodigals desire the belonging and unwavering acceptance of family and community who, they hope, lovingly await their return.

Finally, like the lion that at first attempted to intimidate and threaten, the inner verve of many young adult professionals has, unfortunately, been cowered by financial collapse and dwindling job markets. Once a symbol of Wall Street's power at its height, the lion, no longer frightens, but now resembles a toothless, cowardly mess. Jobless and anxious over an uncertain future, such young professionals now seek the courage to stand firm against those who previously held powerful sway over their lives. Unwilling to comply with anti-Christian secularist agendas, they now desire the grace and strength to remain faithful to God's wise directives.

With a marvelous twist of Carl Marx's classic notion that religion is the opiate of the masses, Baum has Dorothy and her three companions fall asleep in a poppy field just outside the gates of the Emerald City. Like Linda, the good witch rescuer, the Church must be willing to help seekers wake from the grip of such secularist stupors often encountered at the very threshold of their journey's end.

The 70th anniversary of *The Wizard of Oz* provides an opportunity to remind ourselves that the fully realized life is the result of a search for Christ. It is a movement from incompleteness to fulfillment, from ignorance to enlightenment, from estrangement to returning home. It is the realization that the Kingdom of God, the Emerald City, is not someplace at the end of a rainbow of scholarship, financial success, or wizard-like technological power. It is the desire of young shepherds and wise men and women to return to our heavenly Father.