



A NEW YEAR, A NEW HARVEST: Renewal through Orthodox Christian Community

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It's about that time...the time for New Year's resolutions: new beginnings, new goals and new inspiration. I am not talking about watching the ball drop in Times Square or counting down to midnight with your friends and family. I am talking about the Ecclesiastical New Year we just celebrated on September 1. Even though the official date may have passed, it is never too late to foster the theme of renewal and transformation in our hearts. It is often easier to talk about the things we want to change than it is to act upon them. Luckily, renewal and transformation are organically illustrated for us throughout this beautiful autumn season. There is no better time than now and no better way to try and change our

spiritual life than with a friend, a group or a parish community to lean on.

Why does the church celebrate the New Year in September? In Roman times, the calendar year began on September 1, and after the First Ecumenical Council, Christians also began to observe September 1 as New Year's Day. Throughout history, the completion of each year has taken place with the harvest and the gathering of crops. After a year of preparing the soil, sowing the seeds, and tending the crop with ardent care, the fruit finally ripens. The crops are then harvested to prepare for the long winter ahead, wherein the cycle begins again with the "sowing of seed in the earth for the production of future crops" (reading for September 1 from Holy Transfiguration Monastery).

The Church celebrates this day, asking God for "fair weather, seasonable rains, and an abundance of the fruits of the earth."

Throughout the centuries, men and women have seen the harvest season as a time of coming together in celebration for the hard work that has finally finished. It was common for great feasts to be held and bonfires lit to celebrate the fact that the community would have enough food to survive another winter together.

In many ways the harvest season can be compared to our spiritual life. Fr. Evan Armatas states:

Over the past year we too have cast our spiritual seeds upon the earth of our souls...as the year comes to a close we may find that our spiritual harvest is either bountiful or

meager. No matter the outcome, the Ecclesiastical New Year provides us with an opportunity to begin again. ("The Ecclesiastical New Year," August 30, 2011, www.stspyridons.org/ecclesiastical-new-year/)

The beauty of a new year is a clean slate and a fresh start. However, finding the inspiration to change is not always easy. As we watch as the leaves turn colors, breathe the crisp, clean air deep into our lungs, and as the earth closes up summer in preparation for winter, feel the change in the air. Look to the natural world as a muse for changing our hearts, and look to the people of the past as an example for how we should cling to our Orthodox Christian community for support in the coming year.

For most of us, January 1 serves as an inspiration to take better care of our bodies in the new year. We are often inspired to set new goals for overall health and fitness. In the same way, September 1 should serve as the inspiration and reminder to take better care of our souls. Now is the time to shake yourself up! Look in the mirror and decide if you are satisfied with the Christian you see looking back. Do you see someone who is actively seeking God in every aspect of life? Or do you see someone who is simply going through the motions? Do you see someone who says morning and evening prayers and reads the Bible? Or do you see someone who is too rushed in the morning and too tired in the evening, while the Bible collects dust on the nightstand? St. John Climacus calls this state of mind "tedium": "Tedium is a paralysis of the soul, a slackness of the mind, a neglect of religious exercises...It is an approval of worldly things...It is a laziness in the singing of the psalms, a weakness in prayer" (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, "Step 13: Overcoming Despondency," translated

ed by Norman Russell and Colm Luibheid, Paulist Press, 1982). In other words, it means our spiritual lives are seriously out of shape.

Many of us struggle with living an active spiritual life. It is not uncommon to come home and relax on the couch watching TV instead of reading about the saint of the day. It is easy to spend hours on social media and the Internet but for some reason it is difficult to spend five to ten minutes in prayer twice a day. Fr. Thomas Hopko states in a lecture on Ancient Faith Radio, "The Work of God's People" (December 9, 2011), that the work of Christians—participating in Liturgy, saying our daily prayers, etc.—is hard work! That statement, though simple, should be encouraging to all Orthodox Christians who find keeping up with their daily spiritual life difficult. The world we live in sets impossible standards of wealth, fame, fortune and glory, and it is easy to get swept up, forgetting what we are really on this earth for. But this fact should not be discouraging. It should be inspiring. What a mission! We are called for a different purpose, to be in the world but not of it. When we feel as if we are isolated in our struggles, we must remember that most of our fellow Orthodox Christians are experiencing similar trials. We are not alone! We cannot forget to use the greatest tool that God gave us: our Orthodox Christian community.

Fr. Hopko states in a talk he gave at Wheaton College (IL) in 2012: "We are the Body of Christ...and we have to be the liv-

ing Bread to other people and give our life in the way that Christ did. Otherwise, we participate unto *condemnation* and *judgment*." Mentoring, sponsoring, leaning on each other, or whatever you want to call it...this is not something we should do, it's something we *must* do. We are meant to lean on our brothers and sisters on our journey to salvation. As St. Paul tells us in Galatians 6:2, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." Of course we need the guidance of our parish priest, but it is also important to find a peer or peers that can hold us accountable to the goals we set on our journey to sanctification. If you persevere, overcome the tedium, and truly change your habits and routines, you will reap a bountiful spiritual harvest!

Just like anything, your spiritual life will have its ups and downs, and some days you will feel more motivated than others. However, during this harvest season as we reflect on the freshness of the new year and the changing environment, let us use our community to help us channel the change we want to see in our spiritual lives. As stated in Proverbs 27:17, "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend." Let us strive toward this renewal together, and together we may rejoice in the beautiful harvest.

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