



GOYA

Y<sup>2</sup>AM  
Ministry Plan  
2019-20

Finding Christ  
Through Commitment (May 2020)



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# LEARNING SESSION ONE

MAY 2020

## **Finding Christ Through Commitment**

**MONTH:**

May 2020

**GOAL:**

To learn about commitment

**OBJECTIVE:**

To describe how they are connected to God

**ESTIMATED DURATION:**

45 minutes

## SUPPLIES NEEDED:

1. blank paper for each participant
2. pen for each participant
3. poster board
4. bibles

## OPENING PRAYER

*In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*Lord, allow us “to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice,” one that is, “holy and acceptable to God for this is Your true and proper worship.” Allow us “not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of our minds.” So that we may be able to “test and prove what is God’s will, His good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

***Amen.***

*(a passage from Romans 12:1-2)*

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## ICEBREAKER:

*10 minutes*

Tell us your name, and the best invitation you have ever received.

### **Remember:**

*It's always helpful to start with an activity to help participants relax and allow community to build. Early in the session, focus primarily on getting participants to open their hearts and connect with what's happening in the group. This is an opportunity to encourage participants to share their honest opinions and thoughts, as well as listen to those of others. Take this time to connect with what's important to them, and to understand what they've connected with.*

## ACTIVITY 1: BIBLE VERSES

*10 minutes*

Pass out a piece of paper, a pen, and a Bible to each participant. Give each participant one of the verses below and ask them to look them up in the Bible:

***Matthew 4:19***

***Matthew 16:24***

***Mark 10:21***

***Luke 5:27***

***Luke 18:22***

***John 1:38-9***

***John 1:43***

***John 8:12***

***John 21:19***

### **Debrief:**

- Ask each participant give a brief description of their reading.
- What do these stories have in common?
- What invitation did Christ give to each of these people?
- How might Christ be inviting you, in your life, to follow Him?

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## ACTIVITY 2: DISCUSSION

*10 minutes*

Write the following 3 words on a board or poster board:  
***agreement, promise, and commitment.***

Ask participants the following questions to facilitate the discussion:

- How do you define each of these words?
- What is the difference between the three words?
- What do these words have in common?
- How do you live out these words in your lives?

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## ACTIVITY 3: SCRIPTURE

*10 minutes*

### **Luke 5:1-11**

“1 While the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. 2 And he saw two boats by the lake; but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. 3 Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. 4 And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” 5 And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” 6 And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, 7 they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” 9 For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish which they had taken; 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men.” 11 And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.”

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### **Debrief:**

- Who are the characters in this passage and what are their roles?
- What conversation did Christ have with these individuals?
- How did these conversations transform them?
- How did Christ make something impossible, possible?
- How could Christ be inviting each of us to deepen our relationship with Him?

## CONCLUSION: WRAP-UP

*5 minutes*

Go around the circle and ask each individual to name one new idea they learned during the session.

## CLOSING PRAYER

*In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*“Thank You, Lord, for Your strength and guidance in my work. You are the fulfillment of all good things. Fill also my soul with joy and gladness, that I may praise You always.”  
Amen.*

## LEARNING SESSION TWO

MAY 2020

# Finding Christ Through Commitment

**MONTH:**

May 2020

**GOAL:**

To learn about worship

**OBJECTIVE:**

To create a commitment to God

**ESTIMATED DURATION:**

45 minutes

## SUPPLIES NEEDED:

1. Divine Liturgy books
2. blank paper for each participant
3. pen for each participant
4. a few copies of the Saint story below
5. a few copies of the debrief questions
6. copies of the small Paraklesis

## OPENING PRAYER

*In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*Lord, allow us “to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice,” one that is, “holy and acceptable to God for this is Your true and proper worship.” Allow us “not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of our minds.” So that we may be able to “test and prove what is God’s will, His good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

**Amen.**

*(a passage from Romans 12:1-2)*

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## ICEBREAKER:

*10 minutes*

Tell us your name, the first word that comes to mind when you hear the word “commitment.”

### **Remember:**

*It's always helpful to start with an activity to help participants relax and allow community to build. Early in the session, focus primarily on getting participants to open their hearts and connect with what's happening in the group. This is an opportunity to encourage participants to share their honest opinions and thoughts, as well as listen to those of others. Take this time to connect with what's important to them, and to understand what they've connected with.*

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## ACTIVITY 1: SAINT STORY

*10 minutes*

Break up the large group into three small groups based on their answer to the icebreaker question. Give each group a copy of the story of Saint Maria of Paris and the debrief questions.

**<https://incommunion.org/2004/10/18/saint-of-the-open-door/>**

Instruct groups to read the story and work together to answer the questions. After a few minutes, have the groups come back together into one and have each group share their answers.

### **Saint Maria of Paris**

Elizaveta Pilenko, the future Mother Maria, was born in 1891 and grew up on the shore of the Black Sea. Her parents were devout Orthodox Christians whose faith helped shape their daughter's values, sensitivities, and goals. As a child she once emptied her piggy bank in order to contribute to the painting of an icon that would be part of a new church. At seven she asked her mother if she was old enough to become a nun.

When she was fourteen her father died, an event which seemed to her meaningless and unjust and led her temporarily to atheism. When her widowed mother moved the family to St. Petersburg in 1906, she found herself in the country's political and cultural center. In 1910, Liza married a member of Social Democrat Party, better known as the Bolsheviks. She was eighteen, he was twenty-one.

She and her friends also talked theology, but she still regarding herself as an atheist. Little by little her earlier attraction to Christ revived and deepened, not yet Christ as God incarnate but Christ as heroic man. One door lead to another and Liza found herself drawn toward the religious faith. She prayed and read the Gospel and the lives of saints. She wanted "to proclaim the simple word of God."

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Deciding to study theology, she applied for entrance at the Theological Academy of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery in St. Petersburg, in those days an entirely male school whose students were preparing for ordination as priests.

October 1913 her first child, Gaiana, was born. Just as World War I was beginning, Liza returned with her daughter to her family's country home. Her religious life became more intense. On a return visit to St. Petersburg, Liza spent hours visiting a small chapel best known for a healing icon. Here she prayed in a dark corner, reviewing her life as one might prepare for confession, finally feeling God's overwhelming presence. "God is over all," she knew with certainty, "unique and expiating everything."

Liza's son Yuri was born in Tbilisi in 1920. A year later they left for Istanbul and from there traveled to Yugoslavia where Liza gave birth to Anastasia, or Nastia as she was called in the family. Their long journey finally ended in France. They arrived in Paris in 1923. In the hard winter of 1926, each person in the family came down with influenza. All recovered except Nastia, who became thinner with each passing day. Liza's vigil was to no avail. After a month in the hospital, Nastia died.

Even then, for a day and night, her grief-stricken mother sat by Nastia's side, unable to leave the room. During those desolate hours, she came to feel how she had never known "the meaning of repentance, but now I am aghast at my own insignificance .... I feel that my soul has meandered down back alleys all my life. And now I want an authentic and purified road. Not out of faith in life, but in order to justify, understand and accept death .... No amount of thought will ever result in any greater formulation than the three words, 'Love one another,' so long as it is love to the end and without exceptions. And then the whole of life is illumined, which is otherwise an abomination and a burden."

The death of someone you love, she wrote, "throws open the gates into eternity, while the whole of natural existence has lost its stability and its coherence. Yesterday's laws have been abolished, desires have faded, meaninglessness has displaced meaning, and a different, albeit incomprehensible Meaning, has caused wings to sprout on one's back .... Before the dark pit of the grave, everything must be reexamined, measured against falsehood and corruption."

Feeling driven to devote herself as fully as possible to social service, Liza, with her mother, moved to central Paris, closer to her work. While her work for the Russian Student Christian Movement suited her, the question was still unsettled in her life what her true vocation was. She began to envision a new type of community, "half monastic and half fraternal," which would connect spiritual life with service to those in need, in the process showing "that a free Church can perform miracles."

She had a supportive bishop, Metropolitan Evlogy Georgievsky. Liza said she was willing to take such a step, but there was the obvious problem of her being married, even if now living alone. For a time it seemed the obstacles were insurmountable, as Daniel Skobtsov did not approve of his estranged wife taking monastic vows, but he changed his mind after Metropolitan Evlogy went to meet him. An ecclesiastical divorce was issued on March 7, 1932. A few weeks later, in the chapel at St. Sergius Theological Institute, Liza was professed as a nun. She was given the name Maria. She made her monastic profession, Metropolitan Evlogy

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recognized, "in order to give herself unreservedly to social service." Mother Maria called it simply "monasticism in the world."

Metropolitan Eulogy remained deeply committed to Mother Maria's activities. When she had to sign the lease and had found no other donors, he paid the required 5000 francs. The house was completely unfurnished. The first night she wrapped herself in blankets and slept on the floor beneath the icon of the Protection of the Mother of God. Donated furniture began arriving, and also guests, mainly young Russian women without jobs. To make room for others, Mother Maria gave up her own room and instead slept on a narrow iron bedstead in the basement by the boiler. A room upstairs became a chapel, its icon screen painted by Mother Maria, while the dining room doubled as a hall for lectures and dialogues.

The house soon proved too small. Two years later a new location was found. While at the former address she could feed only 25, here she could feed a hundred. The house had the additional advantage of having stables in back which were now made into a small church. She saw the new property as a modern Noah's Ark able to withstand the stormy waves the world was hurling its way. Here her guests could regain their breath "until the time comes to stand on their two feet again."

Her credo was: "Each person is the very icon of God incarnate in the world." With this recognition came the need "to accept this awesome revelation of God unconditionally, to venerate the image of God" in her brothers and sisters.

As the work evolved she rented other buildings, one for families in need, and another for single men. A rural property became a sanatorium. By 1937, there were several dozen women guests. Up to 120 dinners were served each day, normally soup plus a main course that included meat plus plenty of bread supplied gratis by a sympathetic baker. Mother Maria's day typically began with a journey to the market to beg food or buy cheaply whatever was not to be donated. The cigarette-smoking beggar nun became well known among the stalls. She would later return with a sack of bones, fish and overripe fruit and vegetables. She would sometimes recall the Russian story of the ruble that could never be spent. Each time it was used, the change given back proved to equal a ruble. It was exactly this way with love, she said: No matter how much love you give, you never have less. In fact you discover you have more -- one ruble becomes two, two becomes ten.

Mother Maria's difficulties at times made her feel a terrifying loneliness. She was sustained chiefly by those she served -- themselves beaten down, people in despair, cripples, alcoholics, the sick, survivors of many tragedies. But not all responded to trust with trust. Theft was not uncommon. On one occasion a guest stole 25 francs. Everyone guessed who the culprit was, a drug addict, but Mother Maria refused to accuse her. Instead she announced at the dinner table that the money had not been stolen, only misplaced, and she had found it. "You see how dangerous it is to make accusations," she commented. At once the girl who stole the money burst into tears.

"It is not enough to give," Mother Maria might say. "We must have a heart that gives." If mistakes were made, if people betrayed a trust, the cure was not to limit giving. "The only ones who make no mistakes," she said, "are those who do nothing."

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Mother Maria and her collaborators did not only open the door when those in need knocked, but would actively seek out the homeless. One place to find them was an all-night café where those with nowhere else to go could sit as long as they liked for the price of a glass of wine. Children were also cared for. Part-time schools were opened at several locations. Turning her attention toward Russian refugees who had been classified insane, Mother Maria began a series of visits to mental hospitals. In each hospital five to ten percent of the Russian patients turned out to be sane and, thanks to her intervention, were released. Language barriers and cultural misunderstandings had kept them in the asylum.

She was certain that there was no other path to heaven than participating in God's mercy: The way to God lies through love of people. At the Last Judgment I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my ascetic exercises, nor how many bows and prostrations I made. Instead I shall be asked did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. That is all I shall be asked. About every poor, hungry and imprisoned person the Savior says 'I': 'I was hungry and thirsty, I was sick and in prison.' To think that he puts an equal sign between himself and anyone in need. . . . I always knew it, but now it has somehow penetrated to my sinews. It fills me with awe.

In October 1939, Metropolitan Eulogy send a new priest to the community: Father Dimitri Klepinin, then 35 years old. A man of few words and great modesty, Father Dimitri proved to be a real partner for Mother Maria. The last phase of Mother Maria's life was a series of responses to World War II and Germany's occupation of France. It would have been possible for her to leave Paris when the Germans were advancing toward the city, or even to leave the country to go to America. Her decision was not to budge. "If the Germans take Paris, I shall stay here with my old women. Where else could I send them?"

Paris fell on the 14th of June. France capitulated a week later. With defeat came greater poverty and hunger for many people. Local authorities in Paris declared Mother Maria's house an official food distribution point. Here volunteers sold at cost whatever food Mother Maria had bought that morning at the market. Early in 1942, their registration now underway, Jews began to knock on the door asking Father Dimitri if he would issue baptismal certificates to them. The answer was always yes.

On February 8, 1943, while Mother Maria was traveling, Nazi security police entered the house and found a letter in her son Yuri's pocket in which Father Dimitri was asked to provide a Jew with a false baptismal document. Mother Maria was confined with 34 other women and sent to the Gestapo headquarters in Paris. In April the prisoners were transferred to Compiègne, and here Mother Maria was blessed with a final meeting with Yuri, who crawled through a window in order to see her. In a letter Yuri sent to the community, he said his mother "was in a remarkable state of mind and told me ... that I must trust in her ability to bear things and in general not to worry about her." Hours after their meeting, Mother Maria was transported to Germany.

Mother Maria, prisoner 19,263, was sent in a sealed cattle truck to the Ravensbruck camp in Germany, where she endured for two years, an achievement in part explained by her long experience of ascetic life. She was assigned to Block 27 in the large camp's southwest corner. Not far away was Block 31, full of Russian prisoners, many of whom she managed to befriend.

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Unable to correspond with friends, little testimony in her own words has come down to us, but prisoners who survived the war remembered her. One of them, Solange Perichon, recalls: "She was never downcast, never. She never complained.... She was full of good cheer, really good cheer. We had roll calls which lasted a great deal of time. We were woken at three in the morning and we had to stand out in the open in the middle of winter until the barracks [population] was counted. She took all this calmly and she would say, 'Well that's that. Yet another day completed. And tomorrow it will be the same all over again. But one fine day the time will come for all of this to end.' ... She was on good terms with everyone. Anyone in the block, no matter who it was, knew her on equal terms. She was the kind of person who made no distinction between people."

Anticipating her own exit point from the camp might be via the crematoria chimneys, she asked a fellow prisoner whom she hoped would survive to memorize a message to be given at last to Father Sergei Bulgakov, Metropolitan Eulogy and her mother: "My state at present is such that I completely accept suffering in the knowledge that this is how things ought to be for me, and if I am to die, I see this as a blessing from on high."

On the 30th of March Mother Maria was selected for the gas chambers -- Good Friday as it happened. She entered eternal life the following day. The shellfire of the approaching Red Army could be heard in the distance. Accounts are at odds about what happened. According to one, she was simply one of the many selected for death that day. According to another, she took the place of another prisoner, a Jew, who had been chosen. Her friend Jacqueline Pery wrote afterward: "It is very possible that [Mother Maria] took the place of a frantic companion. It would have been entirely in keeping with her generous life. In any case she offered herself consciously to the holocaust ... thus assisting each one of us to accept the cross .... She radiated the peace of God and communicated it to us." Her day of commemoration is 20 July.

### **Debrief:**

- How does this story relate to the theme of commitment?
- What type of life did you expect this Saint to have?
- How did St. Maria answer the call to commit herself to Christ?
- What is the lesson learned from this story?
- How can we follow the example of St. Maria to practice commitment to God in our busy daily lives?

## ACTIVITY 2: DIVINE LITURGY

*10 minutes*

Read the following lines from the Divine Liturgy and then ask participants the following questions and facilitate a discussion:

*“Commemorating our most holy, pure, blessed, and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, with all the saints, let us commit ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God.”*

### **Debrief:**

- Where can the theme of commitment be found in this passage?
- What types of things do you think you would need to do in order to commit to God?
- How can you begin to commit yourself (and your life) to Christ?

## ACTIVITY 3: CREATING A COMMITMENT

*10 minutes*

Pass out copies of the questions below and pens to the group. Allow a few minutes for participants to complete the questions on their own .

- 1.** How do you pray, talk, or relate with God?
- 2.** How do you understand God to be working in your life?
- 3.** How can you follow Jesus in your life?
- 4.** What commitment can you create to live a life close to God?
- 5.** What steps can you take everyday to commit yourself to this calling?

## CONCLUSION: WRAP-UP & COMMITMENT

*5 minutes*

Go around the circle and ask each individual to name one new idea they learned during the session.

## CLOSING PRAYER

*In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*“O Lord, You who steadied the hand of Peter as he began to sink on the stormy sea, if you are with me, no one is against me. Grant to me the shield of faith and the mighty armor of the Holy Spirit to protect me and guide me to do Your will. The future I put into Your hands, O Lord, and I follow You to a life in Christ.”*

*Amen.*