

http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/pr_worship.aspx

Behavior During Divine Services

Q: *"How should Christians stand in church during services, how should they pray, and what duties do they have when they go to church?"*

A: Christians should stand in church with faith, fear of God, and attention. They should force themselves as much as possible to pray without distraction and with feeling of heart. Also, Christians have the following duties: to go regularly to church, for whoever often misses the services, except for the sick, are barred from the Holy Mysteries; to be reconciled with all men and to ask forgiveness of anyone they have hurt; to preserve their purity at least two days before going to church and at least one day after; to come early to the divine services in order to have time to venerate in peace and hear Matins. Every Christian should offer some gift to the Lord according to his ability, even if it is very small, as a sacrifice from the work of his hands. They should give names for commemoration, and ask the priest to take out parts (from the prosphora) for the living and dead members of their families. Christians should stand in church modestly and in good order, the men on the right and the women on the left. They should wear clean and modest clothes, and women should have scarves on their heads. It is forbidden to talk during services without great need. After Divine Liturgy starts, everyone should remain in his place and not move about to venerate the icons. They should follow the Liturgy with pious attention, and listen to the prayers and singing of the choir, the Epistle and Gospel readings, and the sermon. No one should leave the church before the end of the Liturgy without great need. Those who have confessed and prepared for Holy Communion should read the appropriate prayers before Communion in advance, and before they approach the Holy Gifts they should ask forgiveness of all the faithful. After the Liturgy, those who received Communion should read the prayers of thanksgiving, spending that day in spiritual joy and guarding themselves from all temptations. Parents should bring their children to church regularly, taking care that they receive communion of the Body and Blood of Christ. After the end of the divine services, Christians should reverently return to their homes, spending the rest of the day thinking of holy things, reading spiritual books, and visiting the sick. They are also obligated to tell those at home who didn't come to church about what they heard and learned in church from the troparia, readings, and the sermon. These are the most important duties of Christians when they go to church on Sundays and feast days.

Interview with Elder Cleopas (Ilie) of Sihastria Monastery.

From The Orthodox Word (Vol. 28, No. 1 (162)), pp. 19-20.

AT ALL TIMES in church one should stand as still and quietly as possible and vigorously train children to do the same, but there are times when there should be absolutely no moving about in church, and perhaps it would be helpful to remind people of some of

these: during the reading of the Six Psalms (at the beginning of Mattins or about a third of the way through a Vigil Service—when the psalm reader stands in the centre of the church), during any reading of the Gospel, during the reading of special prayers by the priest, in the Divine Liturgy during the Cherubic Hymn and again from the beginning of the Creed until the end of the consecration (i.e. until the priest blesses after the consecration with the words: "And the mercies of our great God..."), during any recitation of the Lord's Prayer, at "Holy Things for the holy," and at the blessing. If you come into church late, it is a good idea to stand for a moment and listen to ascertain whether it is appropriate to move around, venerate icons or offer candles at that point.

A "Practical Tip" from the *Orthodox Shepherd*.

<http://www.allsaintsofamerica.org/orthodoxy/olson.html>

Living in the Liturgical Cycles of the Church

This is a talk given by Reader Daniel Olson at the 2003 Southern Missions Conference, hosted by the St. Mary of Egypt parish in Atlanta, GA. Reader Daniel graciously granted permission to post his talk on the web. Section headings have been added by the webmaster with Reader Daniel's permission.

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

Your Grace, reverend fathers, honorable clergy, fellow-Orthodox Christians and guests!

In my talk today, I'll be discussing the various liturgical cycles of the Orthodox Church, and some things we can do to live in them more fully.

First, we have to consider what a cycle is? There are lots of possible definitions. The one I think that is best says: "a cycle is a recurring period of time, especially one in which certain events or phenomena repeat themselves in the same order and at the same intervals."

We see cycles in nature. There's the daily cycle of the earth rotating continually on its axis, with the constant succession of night and day.

Then there's the yearly cycle of the earth revolving around the sun, with the lengthening and the shortening of daylight and the succession of the seasons.

We use these natural cycles to delineate the passage of time, and we've devised clocks and calendars to help us do this.

The Church also uses these natural cycles, and other cycles too, as vehicles to convey to us over and over again, on a constantly recurring basis, the saving piety of our Orthodox faith in all its height, its depth, its breadth and its fullness.

The Daily Cycle

The first liturgical cycle we're going to look at is the daily cycle. This cycle encompasses all the services that re-occur throughout the day, every day of the year. These services are: Vespers, Compline, Nocturnes or the Midnight Office, Matins and the Hours—First, Third, Sixth and Ninth—and also the Interhours, which are brief services that follow each of the main Hours. The services of the daily cycle occur at various times throughout the day and night, so that the whole day is sanctified at regular intervals by the Church's prayer. The daily services provide the basic framework, the unchanging structure in which all the psalms, prayers, hymns and scriptural readings that the Church has amassed over the centuries are joined together to create one harmonious whole.

In addition to these basic formal daily services, we must also add the more informal Morning and Evening prayers, the Commemoration of the Living and the Dead, and the prayers before and after meals. These all have a liturgical quality about them even though they are usually said privately. The services of the daily cycle are found in the liturgical book called the Horologion or Book of the Hours.

The Weekly Cycle

The second liturgical cycle is the weekly cycle. This cycle is not based on a natural cycle, since the seven-day week does not appear in nature. The week was given to us by God in a direct revelation. While the different themes of the weekly cycle are repeated every week, the actual hymns that express these themes are divided into an eight-week cycle based upon the eight musical modes or tones of the Church's musical system. This means that the volume of liturgical material that makes up the weekly cycle is so large that only after eight weeks is this material again repeated.

The hymns of the weekly cycle are collected into one large book—which often divided into two volumes. This book is called the Octoechos or Book of the Eight Tones, which is often printed in two volumes.

The most important day of the week is the first day, which we call Sunday, but is also known as the Lord's day. On this day, every week, the Church commemorates Christ's resurrection. This is such an important day liturgically, that it's always celebrated just like a great feast—that is, it always has a vigil the evening before. Sunday is so important that it almost never gives place to any other commemoration. The only possible exceptions are the great feasts of the Lord, which always take precedence—even over Sundays.

The character of Sunday is always festive, so during fast seasons the fast is always relaxed to a certain extent on Sunday. Thus, during Great Lent oil and wine are always allowed on Sundays, and during the other, lesser lenten periods fish is almost always permitted.

The second day—Monday—is dedicated to the Angels—the bodiless hosts. Most monastics and even some pious laymen keep this day as a voluntary fast day. By fasting, they deny the needs of the body and in this small way they strive to imitate those heavenly beings who are bodiless by nature.

The third day—Tuesday—is dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. Christ Himself said that there was no greater man born of woman, and the Church recognizes this greatness by giving the Forerunner a special place in the weekly cycle.

The fourth day—Wednesday—is dedicated to the Holy Cross of the Lord. It was on this day that Judas agreed to betray Christ, thus setting in motion the events of the Passion. This is a fast day which is obligatory for all Orthodox Christians.

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The fifth day—Thursday—is dedicated to the holy Apostles and also to Saint Nicholas. The fact that Saint Nicholas has been given a place in the weekly cycle indicates the great veneration that the Church accords him.

The sixth day—Friday—which is the day of Christ's crucifixion, is again dedicated to the Holy Cross. Like Wednesday, it is a fast day for all Orthodox Christians.

The seventh day—Saturday—is dedicated to all the saints and also to all the faithful departed. Saturday was the day of rest in Old Testament times and always had a festal character. The Church has maintained this festal character to a certain extent in its liturgical practice. We can also see this by the fact that during fasting seasons the Church's fasting rules are exactly the same for Saturdays as they are for Sundays.

The weekly cycle is always used in conjunction with the yearly cycle, but the amount of liturgical material from the weekly cycle that is used on any particular day can vary significantly from day to day. At one end of the scale the weekly cycle dominates. And at the other end, it is completely suppressed in favor of the yearly cycle.

The Yearly Cycle of Immovable Feasts

The third liturgical cycle is the yearly cycle of fixed or immovable feasts. This cycle is based on the solar cycle of 365 days (366 days in a leap year). The commemorations in this cycle are called fixed or immovable because they always fall on the same calendar date every year. These include all the great feasts of the Mother of God—her Nativity, her Entry into the Temple, her Annunciation, and her Dormition—as well as some of the great feasts of the Lord—His Nativity, His Presentation in the Temple, His Baptism, and His Transfiguration. It also includes the great feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

Each day of the yearly cycle has some commemoration or other. Usually, there are several commemorations on any given day; however, not all of them are commemorated liturgically; that is, not all of them have a special Church service. Besides the great feasts of Christ and the Mother of God, the Church also glorifies wonderworking icons and other holy objects, it commemorates its heroes, the saints—both from the Old and the New Dispensations—and it remembers important events in Church history. Unlike the other liturgical cycles, the yearly cycle is continually being added to as new saints are revealed by God. In just the last decade, a number of new saints have been glorified by the Church and added to the yearly cycle of commemorations.

All the services for the fixed cycle are contained in the twelve volumes of the Menaion—one volume for each month of the year.

The yearly fixed cycle also has two fast periods: Before the Nativity of Christ there is a 40-day fast, and before the Dormition of the Mother of God there is a 14-day fast. These two fasts always fall on the same dates and last the same length of time each year.

The Yearly Cycle of Moveable Commemorations

Besides the yearly cycle of fixed commemorations, there is also the yearly cycle of moveable commemorations. This cycle is called moveable because it varies from year to year. This happens because all the commemorations in this cycle are tied to the celebration of Pascha, the annual celebration of Christ's resurrection.

The date of Pascha changes from year to year because it depends on the lunar year, which does not correspond exactly to the solar year. The lunar calendar was used by the Hebrew people—and is still used by the Jews today—but it was not adopted by the Christian Church, except for calculating the date of Pascha. This was necessary so that the historical connection between the Old Testament Passover and the New Testament Pascha would always be maintained.

The great feasts that depend on Pascha are: The Lord's Entry into Jerusalem—commonly called Palm Sunday—which occurs one week before Pascha; Ascension Day, which falls forty days after Pascha; and Pentecost, which occurs fifty days after Pascha.

The period before Pascha can be divided into three parts. The first three weeks are called preparatory weeks because the Church prepares us during these weeks for the ascetic struggle of Great Lent. The second section is the Holy Forty days, which is a time of intensified prayer and fasting. The third section—Passion Week—is ushered in by the two feasts of Lazarus Saturday and Palm Sunday. The Holy Forty days together with Passion Week make up Great Lent

The whole cycle of moveable feasts is extremely rich liturgically. Many Orthodox Christians are acquainted with the richness of the first half of this cycle—the Great-Lenten half—but very few people experience the richness of the second half—the half that begins with Pascha.

Most churches usually offer more services during Great Lent; but the reverse is often true after Pascha. This period has become a time to take a rest from Church. Usually very few services are scheduled after Pascha and the number of people who attend services tends to drop off significantly. This attitude is absolutely opposed to the true mind of the Church. In fact, if you look closely at the structure of the services after Pascha, you see that they are almost a mirror image of the services before Pascha. The Church calls us to rejoice spiritually in Christ's Resurrection to the same extent that we prepare for it during Great Lent.

The services for the moveable liturgical cycle are contained in two large books. The one used before Pascha is called the Triodion, and the one used after Pascha is called the Pentecostarion.

The fourth fast season of the Orthodox Church—the Apostles' Fast—is somewhat unique. It always begins according to the moveable cycle on the eighth day after Pentecost—but it always ends according to the fixed cycle on the feast of the holy Apostles Peter and

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Paul—which falls on the 29th of June. So the Apostles' Fast varies in length every year from a minimum of eight days to a maximum of six weeks.

Incidentally, one of the most important objections to using the New Calendar is the unfortunate impact that it has on the length of the Apostles' Fast. Under the New Calendar, the Apostles Fast is always reduced by thirteen days, and this frequently results in it being entirely eliminated.

Other Cycles

Closely related to the movable cycle of commemorations are other cycles. One is the cycle of the eight tones, which I mentioned earlier in connection with the weekly cycle. The cycle of the eight tones always begins on the Second Sunday of Pascha (Thomas Sunday) and continues until the following Palm Sunday.

Another cycle is that of the lectionary of Epistle and Gospel readings, which begins each year on Pascha. Readings are provided for every day of the week with the exception of the Wednesday and Friday of Cheesefare Week and the weekdays (i.e., Monday through Friday) of Great Lent.

Finally, there is the cycle of the eleven resurrectional Gospel readings at Sunday Matins throughout the year. This cycle always begins on the first Sunday after Pentecost (the Sunday of All Saints).

The Church's Liturgical Ideal

The liturgical cycles of the Orthodox Church all merge into a harmonious oneness in accordance with the ingenious rules that were devised by the Holy Fathers and collected in the book called the Typicon. This book contains the key to the whole science of liturgics, which, unfortunately is terra incognita, or unknown territory for most people. The various prescriptions and rules that are found in the Typicon are often considered to be arbitrary and obscure; but this only proves how far we are from the mind of the Fathers. It also indicates how little we understand the very principles that underlie the rules, and how little we comprehend the great wisdom and artistry that the Church uses in constructing her liturgical system.

Through the liturgical system, through the use of the various liturgical cycles, the Church provides us everything that we need to work out our salvation. It is our task, then, is to make the best use of what the Church offers us.

Unfortunately, we don't accomplish this task very well.

The Church sets before us the ideal of daily services, and in earlier times this was not just an ideal, but a norm; this was the standard practice of the Church. But in our time, and especially here in America, daily services have become a rarity, something almost

exclusively limited to monasteries and a very few cathedrals. In all honesty, such a situation must be called an aberration.

What's worse, though, is that such an unfortunate state of affairs doesn't bother us in the least. Many people are not even aware of the Church's standard. We've come to accept the aberration as the norm, and we see the results in the sad state of Orthodoxy in this country.

By every objective standard, the level of Orthodox piety in this country is abysmally low, and, tragically, we have become satisfied and complacent—even comfortable—with this situation. The Church, in her liturgical life, presents us with a banquet table heavily laden with all manner of wonderful foods, but we are all basically starving of malnutrition. And for the most part, we don't even realize that we're starving.

The image of the banquet reminds us of the very striking Gospel parable, in which Christ tells us about the man who made a great supper and invited many people to come. But they all began to make excuses. They all had other things to do, things that were more important to them. Isn't this precisely the attitude that we display when the Lord, through His Church, invites us to His banquet? Don't we also have our own heavy load of excuses? Aren't we also just the same as those men in the parable who were invited but begged off?

What can we do about this? I think that before we can hope to do anything of a practical nature, we have to start making some fundamental changes in ourselves.

Reordering Our Priorities

We have to change our basic attitude. We have to reorder our priorities. We have to arrange our hierarchy of values in the proper sequence, in accordance with the mind of the Church.

This means, basically, that we've got to begin putting God and the Church first in our lives. Generally speaking, as we arrange our lives every day, as we deal with all the demands placed on our time, the Church has a low priority. Whether it's our attendance at Church services, whether it's our involvement in other aspects of parish life, whether it's our monetary contributions—the Church is usually far down on our list of priorities. We do what we can to fit the Church into our busy lives, but more often than not, other things take precedence. This is exactly the opposite of how we should be living as Christians.

Let's look at an example. It's a sad fact that our Church attendance at Saturday-evening Vigils is haphazard at best. Some people never attend, while others do so sporadically. Of those few people that do come at all, some arrive late, some leave early and some do both. It can only be called a scandal that Orthodox Christians act this way.

If we were to be invited to the White House or to Buckingham Palace, wouldn't we jump at the chance? Wouldn't we be there well ahead of time and in our best clothes? Wouldn't

we stay as long as we could? Wouldn't we revel in the occasion? Wouldn't we be enthralled by all the important people and celebrities that we'd encounter?

And yet in Church, it is not just a president or a king who's inviting us, but the King of kings and the Lord of Lords. We are not just meeting worldly officials and celebrities in Church, but the angelic powers and the saints, of whom the whole world is not worthy. We should be trembling with awe in contemplating such an assembly, and yet, for the most part, we are coldly indifferent.

Let's take another perspective. The word "liturgical" comes to us from the Greek and originally pertained to "public work." In the Christian context, of course, it pertains to the "work" we perform as a community—the "work" of common prayer. However, if we approached our secular work with the same haphazard attitude that we approach the Church's "work," we all would have been fired long ago.

We've got to reverse this trend; otherwise, it won't be long at all before we lose our great liturgically heritage. If we want a preview of what's ahead for us, just look at the liturgical life of the other jurisdictions in this country. Feast days have almost disappeared. Vigils are unknown. Matins, if it is served at all, is almost unrecognizable. Some years ago I saw a schedule of church services for a parish where Matins was listed as fifteen minutes in length. I can't imagine what such a Matins must be like. But aren't we too headed in that direction?

Undoubtedly, many people will say, "It's impractical to think we can re-institute the Church's system of daily services in our parishes. Given the circumstances under which we must live, it's just unrealistic to have daily services."

The problem with this kind of reasoning is that it substitutes a worldly judgment and understanding for that of the Church. If the Church had been "practical" and "realistic," if it had given way to the circumstances of any particular time or place rather than overcome them, we wouldn't have any Orthodoxy today.

Furthermore, such an attitude admits defeat even before the battle is engaged. Rather, we ought to set before us the Church's magnificent ideal, and then we should start moving towards it—to the best of our ability, with God's help. Our progress may be slow, and there may very well be setbacks; but unless we engage in this struggle, we will never make any gains. And we will never retrieve what we have already lost.

How can we begin to turn this situation around?

How We Can Involve Ourselves in the Liturgical Life of the Church

First, we can start by having more church services. In many places, liturgical life has been reduce to what can only be called the bare minimum—Sundays and the great feasts. This means that there are tremendous possibilities for adding more services. The feasts of many wonderful saints and other significant commemorations are almost universally

neglected in our parishes. And yet, it is precisely these commemorations that are so filled with the Church's theology, with its sacred history, with its inspiring examples of piety, virtue and morality. These are all things that we desperately need in our lives. So we need to start adding more services to our schedules.

Another thing that we can do is to stop shortening our services. Whenever we shorten the services, we're only depriving ourselves of spiritual nourishment. We're only impoverishing ourselves of our spiritual riches, of our true inheritance. Since we don't come together in church very often, we need to make the most of the time, and not try to reduce it to some bare minimum.

Besides, just why are we shortening the services? Are we hurrying to go somewhere else, to do something else? What place could possibly be better for us than our church—where heaven and earth meet? What activity could possibly be more important to us than worshipping our Creator? What could be more beneficial for us than conversing with God's angels and His saints.

But we can only accomplish these things if we have a greater involvement, a greater participation by the whole church community. This means, first of all, regular attendance at services. The divine services are not just something for the priest and the choir. We expect the priest and the choir to be at the services—to be on time and to stay to the end; but we don't hold ourselves to the same high standard of behavior.

The needs of our communities are great. We need singers who are willing to learn how to execute our Church's wonderful music, which is such an important part of Orthodox worship. We need people who will acquire the specialized knowledge of the Church's Typicon, which so masterfully regulates the interaction of the liturgical cycles with one another. We need people who can learn how to be readers, servers and deacons. Finally, we need lay people who can participate intelligibly in the services, who will make the effort to master the Church's rich vocabulary, imagery, and symbolism. All this requires dedication and commitment—things that we are sorely deficient in. Hopefully, this conference will serve as a spur for us all to reassess our commitment.

In general, as far as the Church is concerned, we all have very little continuity in our lives. Our experience of Church life is, at best, episodic. We are present at a Church service for a brief space of time and then we return to what we consider to be our "real" life—to our jobs, our schools, our families, our worldly pursuits—until the next brief Church episode occurs—whenever. There is little continuity from one Church episode to the next, and what we consider to be our "real" life is often influenced very little by the Church.

The Church has established the system of daily services precisely in order to help us maintain this vital and necessary continuity in our spiritual lives. Daily services are not just something nice to have; they are a necessity for spiritual well-being. And if we have so many spiritual maladies abroad these days, it is undoubtedly because we are no longer drinking sufficiently from the healing waters of the Church's liturgical life.

Someone might ask: But surely not everyone attended services every day in earlier times? No, of course not. The difference, however, between our time and earlier times, is that previously daily services were at least available for people to attend whenever they could.

Unfortunately, the present reality is that we don't have daily services in our churches. And until such a time that this situation improves, the only alternative is to start doing more on our own at home. And this is not an unreasonable proposition. After all, every home should be a "little Church." Besides, there's really no other course available to us. So I want to talk about some things we can do at home to incorporate the liturgical cycles into our daily lives to a greater extent.

Incorporating the Liturgical Cycles into Our Daily Lives

To begin with, we must cultivate our individual prayer life more assiduously. This means, first of all, that we have to get serious about saying our morning and evening prayers. These are not just something nice to do when it is convenient or when we feel like it—which is rarely. They are precisely the foundation we need in order to build and develop our involvement in the Church's liturgical life. Once we have securely established this foundation, we can begin to add to it in any number of ways. The possibilities are numerous. The liturgical cycles are extremely rich in material—psalms, hymns, readings, canons, akathists, prayers—all of which can be added to our daily prayer rule and enhance it significantly.

It is not at all unrealistic to think of doing whole services at home. For instance, one of the Hours only takes about ten minutes and can be done at different times of the day as is convenient. Little Compline only takes about fifteen minutes and can easily be added to our evening prayers. Nocturnes takes only about half an hour and can be said together with our morning prayers without much difficulty at all. And these particular services are not at all complex; they change hardly at all from day to day.

There are also many little things we can do to enhance our appreciation of the liturgical cycles. For instance, whenever a great feast is celebrated, we can read or sing the troparion of the feast before meals and the kontakion after meals throughout the festal period. We can obtain icons of the various feast days and saints' days and put them up in our icon corners on the appropriate days to remind us of the main celebrations.

We should follow the Church calendar closely every day. In fact we should live by the calendar—without fail. We should know what saints are being commemorated each day, and we should invoke them in our prayers. We should become more familiar with their lives. One of the best tools for this is the Prologue from Ochrid, by the wonderful Serbian Bishop Nicolai Velimirovic, who was recently glorified as a saint by the Serbian Church. In it, on a daily basis we can read the short lives of the saints of the day and other inspiring materials. It only takes about ten minutes to read the daily entries such—time is certainly well spent.

As part of the moveable cycle, the Church has established a system of readings for every day of the year. We need to nourish our souls with the word of God on a daily basis, so we should always be reading the scriptures. And there is no better way to read them than by following the system devised by the Church. This system is also found in the Calendar.

When we read the scriptures, we should also read one of the commentaries of the Holy Fathers. It is vital that we understand the scriptures the way the Church does, and not according to our own understanding. Already three volumes of the interpretation by Blessed Theophylact have been published. This is an excellent aid, and we all should have it and use it continually.

Closely related to the Church's liturgical life are the various fast days and fast seasons. Fasting is a vital part of an Orthodox Christian's life, and its importance cannot be overemphasized. We all need to be extremely careful in keeping the fasts of the Church. We not only derive great spiritual benefit from fasting, but if we neglect it, that means we are neglecting our salvation.

One of the reasons why fasting is so beneficial is that it requires us to change the way we live, to change the entire focus of our lives. We cannot possibly be true to fasting and still live like the world around us lives.

But it is important that we follow the Church's fasting regulations, as found in the Calendar, and not make up our own rules. We must humbly accept the Church's wisdom, which is tried and true, and not think that we somehow know better.

If we follow the fasting rules closely, we will quite naturally participate more fully in the Church's liturgical life with its alternating seasons of fast and feast. There is an old saying that good fasts make for good feasts, and this is very true.

Furthermore, the system of mitigations on fast days, such as wine and oil and fish, is primarily designed to handle situations where feast days and fast days coincide. Thus, when a great feast falls on a fast day, the Church grants a mitigation of the fast by allowing the use of fish in honor of the feast. If we indiscriminately use fish every fast day, then we have no special way to mark a great feast when one occurs on a fast day except to dispense with the fast—something which is totally unacceptable. The same principle applies to the use of wine and oil in conjunction with middle ranked feasts.

While we are talking about fasting, I would like to discuss a matter which sometimes comes up, and that is: When does a fast day begin? There is an erroneous opinion abroad that a fast day begins in the evening. Under this understanding, for example, the Friday fast begins with the evening meal on Thursday and continues on through Friday. However, the Friday evening meal is not a fasting meal. This understanding is not at all in accord with the Church's age-old practice.

The proper practice is to begin a fast day upon arising in the morning and continue the fast until the next morning. Thus the Friday fast should begin Friday morning and pertain to all food eaten during that day, including the evening meal.

These are just a few things that we can do in order to live more fully in the Church's liturgical cycles. And this is precisely the correct image: We must live in these cycles just as a fish lives in water.

This all may seem very difficult, and I suspect that a lot of people are thinking that we cannot expect people to live this way. My answer is this: If our fathers lived this way, why can't we? What really has changed. Certainly not God. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today and forever. If we say that we cannot change, aren't we actually denying Christ's power to act in our lives, just as He acted in the lives of our fathers.

What really is the problem? Isn't it our sinfulness, which so dominates our existence? Isn't it our passions, which rule our lives so completely? Isn't it our laziness, our negligence, our indifference? And finally, isn't it our lack of love for God, our Creator and Redeemer? These are tremendous burdens that we bear about; but we have become so fond of them that we can't bear to part with them.

It's time for us to wake up to the reality of our true spiritual state. This could be a decisive moment for us. But if we don't start now, when will we start? As Father Seraphim Rose used to say: It's later than you think! And truly this is so!

And so, as Saint Paul says, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that doth so easily best us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. Amen.

*All Saints of North America Russian Orthodox Church
3648 Middlebrook Village Road, Middlebrook, Virginia 24459*