

## **In His Image and Likeness: The Orthodox Christian Vision of the Sanctity of Life**

### **The Struggle**

Every era of Church history distinguishes itself by the struggles Orthodox Christians have faced in discerning Truth from falsehood, the path to salvation from the path to perdition, what is according to God's revelation from what is vain human philosophy. Among the saints who were apologists, we find that they never argue for the sake of a rhetorical victory. They did not seek the defeat of an opponent, but sought for true conversion to Our Lord Jesus Christ. Their desire was to preserve the Truth concerning God, concerning creation, concerning God's relationship with creation, concerning our salvation in Christ.

In any issue where we, as Christians, find ourselves in opposition to a prevailing or popular understanding, we must never reduce our opposition to a crude battle of ideologies. Fr. Alexander Schmemmann once warned that "an ideology is always idolatry; thus it is evil and generates evil people."<sup>1</sup> Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, and to do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us. (Matt. 5:44)

For over 50 years, our society has been re-examining its attitude towards human sexuality. That which was once guarded as something deeply intimate and personal has been obsessed over, displayed, studied, celebrated, transformed into entire identities, and is now becoming the litmus test determining whether or not one has a viable place in our society. The post modern view of human sexuality seems to hold as axiomatic that sexual activity between consenting adults without any consequences is a basic human right. Moreover, access to this is vital for one's well-being and thus all limitations to this should be overcome.

At the beginning of this re-examination, many obstacles obstructed this new understanding- not only the Church, but other faith communities, our prevailing culture, and nature itself. What seems to be forgotten or disregarded is the truth that healthy (and godly) sexual activity creates life. Our society has attempted to bury this truth or at least marginalize it. Through technology, we have removed the constraints of nature, through pop-culture, we have changed people's attitudes, which has carried over into many faith communities. Thus, many of those forces which stood against post modernism's views of human sexuality seem now to affirm it.

The post modern view of human sexuality manifests itself in 5 ways: contraception, promiscuity, homosexuality, abortion, and the abolition of any traditional notions of masculinity or femininity. Thus, what is accomplished is not "sexual liberation", but a new type of humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Journals of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann*, Nov. 14, 1974, SVS Press, p. 54.

Consequently, when we pervert something so deeply personal as our sexuality, every other aspect of our life becomes affected. Our relationships deteriorate from a basis of love to function. The Holy Apostle Paul has given us the most perfect definition of love (agape), when he writes: “Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.” (1 Cor. 13: 4-8) Outside of this vision, love becomes distorted into a feeling, into something evoking positive emotions and pleasure. When a human being cannot evoke these things, when they cease to have function, their lives lack meaning. Thus, if a pre-born person is regarded as an inconvenience, i.e. if this child cannot, even at the beginning of its life, function in accordance with the wishes of the mother, the father, or even the immediate family, if it is perceived to negatively affect the functionality of these people, then an abortion becomes the logical solution. Likewise, if, due to old age, chronic illness, or a now increasing list of symptoms, one perceives their life to be without function, euthanasia becomes the logical solution.

Nevertheless, as Christians, we find ourselves in opposition to this logic, to this “wisdom of this world.” Yet, when we address these issues, we come across as simply fighting modernity. We are accused of holding on to old ways, which are best consigned to a history book. However, if we wish to truly understand and articulate why the Church maintains her teaching on these issues, we cannot simply look to canons, patristic quotes, or even Scripture verses, we must first understand and articulate the Church’s vision of the human person. We look to the Holy Scriptures, to the Church Fathers, to the sacred canons, and to the liturgical texts for this vision. Moreover, these life-giving sources must penetrate beyond the intellect and direct us to the Heavenly King, Who is the Giver and Sanctifier of life. Our Lord tells us that the summary of God’s commandments is to love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves. Thus, without this love, without striving to live according to this love, without longing to acquire this love, we will never understand the sanctity of life much less convey it to others, especially those who oppose this vision.

### **What is man?**

If we wish to explore why human life is sacred, we must understand what a human being is. Two visions of humanity are prevalent in our contemporary world. This first vision is materialist. For the materialist, reality is only that which can be perceived with our senses, either now or through future potential discoveries. Therefore, a human being is simply a biological life, an animal, and an accident of evolution. Now, let me be clear that scientific discoveries about human beings are not problematic for Orthodox Christians. The problem lies in reducing our vision of the human person to only what has been discovered through the scientific method. Such a narrow vision is clearly atheistic. The second vision is Platonist. Platonist and neo-Platonist thought prevailed in Hellenic and Hellenistic civilization, prior to the rise of Christianity. On the one hand, it was part of the “seed of word”, to quote Saint Justin Martyr, which prepared Roman civilization for their evangelization. However, many of the ancient heresies also found their root in Greek philosophy. One of the central concepts in

Platonic thought is dualism, which divides reality into spirit and matter. Furthermore, while spirit is good, matter is evil. In terms of the human person- the soul is good and the body is evil. The body is viewed as prison of the soul. For this reason, you find in Ancient Greece and in the Roman Empire extremes in moral behavior: either extreme hedonism or extreme asceticism. Both parties justified their behavior on the ground that the body was wholly evil. Sadly, this dualism still prevails. One of the central teachings in Classical Protestantism is that when Adam and Eve sinned, their fall constituted a loss of both the original image and likeness with which they were created. Thus, we find this idea of the total depravity of man. Mankind can only do wickedness. Any goodness found in a person results from an irresistible grace that is divine bestowed. This line of thinking also revived the pagan concept of fate- that the events, even our salvation or damnation were predestined by God. Our salvation does not require our cooperation, rather God has chosen some for salvation and others for damnation.

You can see that a person raised with a Classical Protestant understanding of the human person- either consciously or subconsciously, who then is educated in an environment dominated by atheistic materialism, will construct a very distorted vision of the human person. Is it then any surprise that our contemporary society values wealth, power, and pleasure above all things? Furthermore, is it any surprise that we value human beings according to their perceived functionality? If our vision of humanity is thus distorted, certainly our ethics will also be distorted. When this is the case, how can we relate to God and how can we not have a distorted understanding of God, if how we understand ourselves is so distorted?

The Orthodox Christian vision of man begins with Our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Nicene Creed, we confess that all things came into being or were made through Him. In the first chapter of Genesis, when God creates, *He says*, which symbolizes God sending His Word, Who is Jesus Christ. God's creation is good and when man is created, God says, "let us make man according our image, according to our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of heaven, over the cattle, and over all the earth. So God made man; according to the image of God He made him; male and female He made them." (Gen. 1:26-27) In other words, through Jesus Christ, human beings are created according to God's image and likeness and given dominion over the earth and the rest of the creation. What does it mean that we are created according to God's image and likeness? It is interesting to note that *image* in the LXX is εἰκόνα, from which we derive the word *icon*. *Likeness* in Greek is ὁμοίωσιν, which bears a similarity to the word ὁμοούσιον (co-essential, consubstantial, 'one in essence'). They do not mean exactly the same thing but the terms are related. Saint Basil the Great, commenting on this, writes, "by our creation we have the first (image), and by our free choice we build the second (likeness). In our initial structure co-originates and exists our coming into being according to the image of God. By free choice we are conformed to that which is according to the likeness of God.... He has made us with the power to become like God. And in giving us the power to become like God, let us be artisans of the likeness of God, so that the reward for the work would be ours... I have that which is according to the image of God in being a rational being, but I become according to the likeness in becoming Christian... how do we come to be according to the likeness? Through the Gospels. What is

Christianity? Likeness to God as far as is possible for human nature. If you are shown to be a Christian, hasten to become like God, put on Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

On the day that man is made, we also read, “God saw everything He had made and indeed, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31) King David, in contemplating God’s creation of man asks, “What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man, that Thou visitest him? Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels; Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, and hast set him over the works of Thy hands.” (Ps. 8:4-6) Saint Gregory the Theologian describes man as a noetic soul and the Image of God, a sort of second world, a new Angel, King of all upon earth, but subject to the King above; earthly and heavenly; temporal and yet immortal; visible and yet noetic, “a living creature trained here, and then moved elsewhere; and, to complete the mystery, deified by its inclination to God. For to this, I think, tends that Light of Truth which we here possess but in measure, that we should both see and experience the Splendor of God, which is worthy of Him Who made us, and will remake us again after a loftier fashion.”<sup>3</sup> In his work, *The Mystery of Faith*, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev writes, “human beings are the crown of creation, the peak of the Holy Trinity’s creative acts.”<sup>4</sup>

In the second chapter of Genesis, we are told, “God formed man out of the dust from the ground, and breathed in his face the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” (Gen. 2:7) Saint John Damascene is adamant that the body and soul were formed at the same time. Such a teaching stands in opposition to Platonist philosophy that views the body as the prison of the soul. The Vedic and Buddhist tradition, as do the Mormons, hold that the soul pre-exists the body. Thus, reincarnation is a central belief for Hindus and Buddhists. However, the Orthodox Church has always rejected reincarnation as it denies a fundamental truth that a human person is body and soul.

To summarize: as human persons, we are body and soul, created according to God’s image and likeness, created good, created to have dominion over the whole earth, created male and female, created with a free will, commanded to be fruitful and multiply, and commanded to be obedient to God. God establishes one command, which is not to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Gen. 2:17) He placed Adam in the garden, where He enjoyed immortality and harmony with God and the creation. Eve comes from Adam so that he would not be alone and thus there was also total harmony within humanity. The Fathers teach that God did not create man out of necessity but out of His very goodness and love and so that we may share in His life.

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Basil the Great, *On the Human Condition*, SVS Press, p. 44-45

<sup>3</sup> Saint Gregory the Theologian, Oration 38: *On the Theophany*, 11, NPNF2-07, p. 348.

<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Mystery of Faith*, ch 5, p. 58.

Were we simply here for a lecture on Christian anthropology, we would continue with the fall and its consequences. But, we can simply say that that which was lost and distorted by the fall, has been restored, renewed, and healed in Jesus Christ.

Christ is the measure of all things, both divine and human. Since His Ascension, our human nature has been raised up to the right hand of God the Father. This is clearly expressed in the hymns for the Ascension feast, one of which proclaims: “Not being separated from the bosom of the Father, O most sweet Jesus, and having lived on earth as a man, Thou wast taken up in glory today from the Mount of Olives. And having raised our fallen nature by Thy compassion, Thou didst seat it together with the Father. Wherefore, the heavenly orders of the bodiless were amazed at the wonder and stood in awe and astonishment. They were seized with trembling and magnified Thy love for mankind.”<sup>5</sup> God’s purpose for humanity is seen in the union of our human nature to the divine Person of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, in its being raised to the right hand of the Father. Saint Athanasius the Great says that God became man so that we might be made gods. Likewise, all that Christ is by His very nature, we may become by grace. Thus, Saint Paul writes that our redemption in Christ came about that we might receive the adoption of sons, and thus be heirs of God through Christ. (Gal. 4:4-7)<sup>6</sup>

Our Lord once said: “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10) At Pascha, we proclaim again and again that Christ has trampled upon death and bestowed life even upon those in the tombs. Death is the result of sin as is revealed in Genesis (Gen. 2:16-17). Saint Paul writes: “as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” (Rom. 5:12) In connecting death with sin, the Scriptures condemn murder and suicide and mourn death. That which is according to God’s will bears life. In Deuteronomy, the Divinely inspired Moses proclaims: “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong *your* days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, *that* I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He *is* your life and the length of your days...” (Deut. 30:15-20)

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<sup>5</sup> Vespers for the feast of the Ascension, “Glory...” sticheron at *Lord, I have cried*.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, p. 15-16

## **Murder, Mankind Wrote**

After the fall of Adam and Eve, the first act of evil recorded in Genesis is the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. God speaks to Cain, telling him that his brother's spilt blood "cries out". Furthermore, by this sin, Cain has invoked a curse upon himself. God says that he shall groan and tremble, *στένων και τρέμων*. By groan, we understand as suffering inner torment and by tremble, physically suffering as a result of this inner torment. We experience *στένων* and *τρέμων* when we fall into grave sins. Nothing in the Scriptures indicate any sort of relief from such suffering for Cain. In modern psychological parlance, we call such suffering post-traumatic stress syndrome. Interestingly, many soldiers, who experience combat, return afflicted with this. Why? Because killing another human being, even in the most justified of circumstances, is so unnatural and so destructive to the well-being of a human soul. Women, who have had abortions also experience such suffering. For those who take their own lives, we cannot imagine what state their souls find themselves once separated from their bodies as they approach the particular judgement. Thus, we return to our goal- life abundant according to God's will, which is life-giving and salvific. We oppose abortion and euthanasia, not out of ideology, but out of love, particularly for those who participate in such wickedness. We must seek to eliminate such curses.

## **Abortion- the unholy tradition**

Two major misconceptions about abortion are that it itself and the Church's condemnation are modern phenomena. The earliest Christian document after the New Testament, *The Didache*, states: "You shall not murder (*φονεύσεις*)... you shall not abort a child or commit infanticide (*οὐ φονεύσεις τέκνον ἐν φθορᾷ οὐδὲ γεννηθὲν ἀποκτενεῖς*)."<sup>7</sup> Literally, the Greek translates as "you shall murder a child by destruction neither shall you kill a newborn." Another document and one of the first apologetic writings of the 2nd century, *The Epistle to Diognetus*, distinguishes Christian behavior from pagan, among which is: "They (Christians) marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring (*ἀλλ' οὐ ρίπτουσι τὰ γεννώμενα*)."<sup>8</sup>

All condemnations, both in the Holy Scriptures and any Christian documents holding dogmatic and canonical weight, are never hypothetical but address the falsehoods and works of evil of a time and place. Thus, from the very beginning, the Church always combatted the sin of abortion. Notice also that in *The Didache*, abortion and infanticide are inextricably linked. Many Pre-Christian pagan cultures practiced infanticide, either as sacrificial offering or as a means of eliminating those infants who appeared physically inferior. Unfortunately, infanticide continues to this very day, mostly notably in China and India, where infant girls suffer such cruelty at a much higher rate than boys.

The most ancient record of abortion comes from a papyrus fragment in Egypt dated 1550 BC. Ancient records of abortion, either as laws or medical texts, can be found also in India, Japan, China, Assyria,

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<sup>7</sup> *Didache*, 2:2, Apostolic Fathers, p. 347.

<sup>8</sup> *Epistle of Diognetus*, 5:6, AF, p. 703

Greece, and Rome. They range from recommended physical activities that could result in miscarriage to recipes for potions and even surgical procedures. As can be imagined, these methods of abortion also posed great risk for the mother. Even in the 19th century, the mortality rate for women in the state of New York undergoing surgical abortion was 30%. In 1920, the Soviet Union became the first country to have legal, unrestricted abortion and Soviet abortionists made significant contributions in the development of the “suction-aspiration” procedure during this decade. In the 1960s, abortion laws began to change in the United States on a state by state basis and the *Roe vs. Wade* Supreme Court decision came about in 1973. According to the statistics of the Centers for Disease Control, between 1970-2015, there have been over 45 million abortions in the US. 1990 was the peak year with over 1.4 million abortions. However, since 1990, there has been a steady decline in that rate, with 2015 showing the lowest rate since 1974 of 638,169 procedures. Currently, several states are introducing new legislation regarding abortion. New York has stripped away most restrictions, whereas Alabama now only permits the procedure when the mother’s life is threatened.

### **Orthodox Christians and Abortion**

Orthodox Christian attitudes toward abortion reveals a deep crisis for our Church. Firstly, countries whose population are by majority at least Orthodox in name have some of the highest abortion rates in the world. According to the most recent Pew Research Religious Landscape Study regarding Orthodox Christians in the US: 53% believe abortion should be legal in all/most cases, 48% of Orthodox men hold to this and 52% of Orthodox women hold to this. Interestingly, the poll asked about their church attendance and, among this 53%: 64% admit to only going to church services a few times a year, 17% attend once a week, and 19% admit to either seldom or never attending services. When asked about their participation in parish activities such as prayer or study groups 69% answered that their participation was seldom or never, 17% once or twice a year, 9% once or twice a month, and 6% once a week. When asked how their view on abortion is shaped, 60% replied “common sense” , 15% “philosophy/reason”, 14% “religion”, and 9% “science”. When asked how often they read the Bible, 56% replied seldom or never, 20% once a week, 13% several times a year, and 11% once or twice a month. When asked about their political views 48% replied moderate, 27% liberal, 23% conservative. Moreover, they are evenly divided regarding the question of whether the government should be larger or smaller. 76% believe that homosexuality should be accepted, with 70% favoring same-sex marriage. Ironically, 83% said that religion played either a very or somewhat important role in their lives.

So, the “pro-choice” Orthodox Christian identifies as being a member of the Church, but rarely attends services, rarely participates in other parish activities (including study groups), bases their view on abortion on their perceived “common sense”, almost never reads the Bible, is often moderate politically, and in favor of same-sex marriage.

By simple observance, we must admit to ourselves that Orthodox Christianity is very weak in North America. Firstly, we are divided into ethnic jurisdictions which are too often content remaining

isolated. The two largest jurisdictions: the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese and the Orthodox Church in America, have seen a steady decline in membership. The liturgical life in parishes is too often lackluster and regular attendance, especially at Vespers, Matins, and weekday feasts is beyond poor. There are only 58 Orthodox schools, two Orthodox universities, 9 seminaries, and one accredited non-seminary post-graduate institute. There are no Orthodox Christian hospitals, hospices, or clinics. There are very few old age homes, homes for single mothers, and zero homeless shelters. Most Americans come into contact with Orthodox Christianity via Greek festivals, where presenting the Faith has a minimal emphasis.

So, when a 17-18 year old woman gets pregnant out of wedlock; perhaps she is a high school senior living in a middle class suburban neighborhood, whose parents work and they do not really attend any church, but may show up for Christmas or Easter; in this moment she must deal with her parents, her boyfriend, her peers, she is looking to attend university. She is not a bad person, but is your typical middle class suburban high school senior. Will the Orthodox Church's teaching on abortion have any influence on her decision as to whether or not to have an abortion? In light of the statistics revealed by the Pew Forum, if she does know any Orthodox Christians, they are more likely to support her decision to abort and thus, our Church, our voice is meaningless, just as the Church's voice was ineffective over every other aspect of this person's life. I fear that I am painting an accurate picture. The crisis is neither abortion or euthanasia- these are among many symptoms that point to a crisis in our present-day church life here and now.

### **The Orthodox Church and abortion**

Now that we have looked at the roots of our Church's teaching on the sanctity of life, let us look at specifics. We have seen the great dignity God has bestowed upon humanity. He created man according to His image and likeness and redeemed humanity by becoming fully human. The Gospel of Luke tells us: "And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit: and she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed *art* thou among women, and blessed *is* the fruit of thy womb. And whence *is* this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy." (Luke 1:40-44) The Gospel is clear that both Mary and Elizabeth carry fully human persons in their wombs.

The hymns of the Church affirm this. At the feast of the Annunciation, we sing: "How shall He Whose throne is heaven and Whose footstool is the earth be held in the womb of a woman? He upon Whom the six-winged seraphim and the many-eyed cherubim cannot gaze has been pleased at a single word to be made flesh of this His creature. It is the Word of God who dwells within her."<sup>9</sup> God becomes man at the moment of His conception, which is why, liturgically, the *ordo* for the feasts of the

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<sup>9</sup> Annunciation, Great Vespers, "Glory, both now" sticherion at *Lord, I have cried*, FM, p. 440-441.

Annunciation, Nativity, and Theophany are identical. God becomes man in the womb of the Virgin Mary, He is revealed as perfect man at His Nativity, and as perfect God at His baptism. At the feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, we proclaim: “Thou wast shown to be a prophet and forerunner from thy mother’s womb, O John, baptizer of Christ, leaping up and rejoicing within her belly when thou didst behold the Queen, bearing the Timeless One Who was begotten of the Father without mother, coming to her handmaid and to thee, who shone forth from a barren woman and an elderly man according to God’s promise.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, John the Baptist begins his ministry as prophet and forerunner within the womb of his mother.

The Old Testament also proclaims that what dwells within a mother’s womb is a human being. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I sanctified you.” (Jeremiah 1:5) “Thus says the Lord God who made you , and formed you from the womb.” (Isaiah 44:2) “What then will I do when the Lord brings me to trial and visits me? How shall I answer Him? Did not He who made me in the womb make them? So we were fashioned in the same womb.” (Job 31:14-15) “... from the womb before the morning star have I begotten Thee.” (Ps. 109:3, LXX)

I have already cited *The Didache* as a clear ancient Christian condemnation of abortion. Saint Hippolytus of Rome, Saint Athenagoras of Athens, Tertullian, Saint Basil the Great, Saint John Chrysostom, and Saint Jerome all specifically condemn abortion. Tertullian labels as heretics those who teach that “the soul is not conceived in the womb, nor is formed and produced at the time that the flesh is moulded.”<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, in the same treatise, Tertullian describes surgical procedures for abortions, making clear that it brings about the death of the infant and calling the procedure “infanticide” and the “furtive robbery of life”.

The canons of the Church condemn abortion.

“Concerning women who commit fornication, and destroy that which they have conceived, or who are employed in making drugs for abortion, a former decree excluded them until the hour of death, and to this some have assented. Nevertheless, being desirous to use somewhat greater lenity, we have ordained that they fulfil ten years [of penance], according to the prescribed degrees.” (canon 21, Council of Ancyra)

“Those who give drugs for procuring abortion, and those who receive poisons to kill the foetus, are subjected to the penalty of murder.” (canon 91, Quinisext Council)

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<sup>10</sup> Nativity of the St. John the Baptist, Great Vespers, 5th sticheron at *Lord, I have cried*, composed by St. Andrew of Crete

<sup>11</sup> *Treatise on the Soul*, ch. 25, ANF-03, p. 205.

“Let her that procures abortion undergo ten years’ penance, whether the embryo were perfectly formed, or not.” (canon 2 of Saint Basil the Great)

“He that kills another with a sword, or hurls an axe at his own wife and kills her, is guilty of wilful murder; not he who throws a stone at a dog, and undesignedly kills a man, or who corrects one with a rod, or scourge, in order to reform him, or who kills a man in his own defence, when he only designed to hurt him. But the man, or woman, is a murderer that gives a *philtrum*, if the man that takes it die upon it; so are they who take medicines to procure abortion; and so are they who kill on the highway, and rapparees.” (canon 8 of Saint Basil the Great)

Saint John the Faster provides further commentary in three of his canons.

In 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church published the *Basis of the Social Concept*, which addresses many contemporary issues and is truly a document with which all Orthodox Christians should familiarize themselves. Therein, it states: “The Church sees the widely spread and justified abortion in contemporary society as a threat to the future of humanity and a clear sign of its moral degradation. It is incompatible to be faithful to the biblical and patristic teaching that human life is sacred and precious from its origin and to recognize woman’s ‘free choice’ in disposing of the fate of the fetus. In addition, abortion presents a serious threat to the physical and spiritual health of a mother. The Church has always considered it her duty to protect the most vulnerable and dependent human beings, namely, unborn children. Under no circumstances the Orthodox Church can bless abortion. Without rejecting the women who had an abortion, the Church calls upon them to repent and to overcome the destructive consequences of the sin through prayer and penance followed by participation in the salvific Sacraments. **In case of a direct threat to the life of a mother if her pregnancy continues, especially if she has other children, it is recommended to be lenient in pastoral practice. The woman who interrupted pregnancy in this situation shall not be excluded from the Eucharistic communion with the Church provided that she has fulfilled the canon of Penance assigned by the priest who takes her confession.** The struggle with abortion, to which women sometimes have to resort because of abject poverty and helplessness, demands that the Church and society work out effective measures to protect motherhood and to create conditions for the adoption of the children whose mothers cannot raise them on their own for some reason.

Responsibility for the sin of the murder of the unborn child should be borne, along with the mother, by the father if he gave his consent to the abortion. If a wife had an abortion without the consent of her husband, it may be grounds for divorce. Sin also lies with the doctor who performed the abortion. The Church calls upon the state to recognize the right of medics to refuse to procure abortion for the reasons of conscience. The situation cannot be considered normal where the legal responsibility of a doctor for the death of a mother is made incomparably higher than the responsibility for the destruction of the fetus — the situation that provokes medics and through them patients, too, to do abortions. The doctor should be utterly responsible in establishing a diagnosis that can prompt a

woman to interrupt her pregnancy. In doing so, a believing medic should carefully correlate the clinic indications with the dictates of his Christian conscience.”<sup>12</sup>

## **The Orthodox Church and Euthanasia**

Euthanasia, or more accurately, assisted suicide directly contradicts Our Lord Jesus Christ’s way of living, which He Himself revealed during His earthly sojourn. The temptation to end one’s life through euthanasia typically comes after a terminal diagnosis that involves a painful and agonizing death. Nevertheless, as Christians, we are called to imitate Jesus Christ, not only in His life, but also in His death. By accepting whatever may befall us as from the hand of God, Christians transform a potential painful death into a glorious death and this they do by voluntarily following the Way of Christ, in obedience to His ordinances and example. <sup>13</sup>

The *Basis of the Social Concept* gives us very sound teaching and pastoral guidelines in regards to euthanasia and other end of life issues. **“Holy Scriptures treats death as the separation of the soul from the body** (Ps. 146:4; Lk. 12:20). **Thus it is possible to speak about a continuing life as long as an organism functions as a whole.** The prolongation of life by artificial means, in which in fact only some organs continue to function, cannot be viewed as obligatory and in any case desirable task of medicine. Attempts to delay death will sometimes prolong a patient’s agony, thus depriving him of the right to ‘honorable and peaceful’ death, for which the Orthodox Christian solicit the Lord during the liturgy. When intensive care becomes impossible, its place should be taken by palliative aid (anaesthetisation, nursing and social and psychological support) and pastoral care. All this is aimed to ensure the true humane end of life couched in by mercy and love.

The Orthodox understanding of an honorable death includes preparation for the mortal end, which is considered to be a spiritually significant stage in the life of a person. A patient surrounded with Christian care can experience in the last days of his life on earth a grace-giving change brought about by a new reflection on his journey and penitent anticipation of eternity. For the relatives of a dying man and for medical workers, an opportunity to nurse him becomes an opportunity to serve the Lord Himself. For according to the Savior’s word, ‘inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it to me’ (Mt. 25:40). The attempt to conceal from a patient the information about the gravity of his condition under the pretext of preserving his spiritual comfort often deprives a dying person of an opportunity to be consciously prepared for death and to find spiritual consolation in participation in the Sacraments of the Church. It also darkens his relations with relatives and doctors with distrust.

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<sup>12</sup> *Basis of the Social Concept*, ch. 12, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*, p. 77-78.

**Death throes cannot be always effectively alleviated with anaesthetics.** Aware of this, the Church in these cases turns to God with the prayer: ‘Give Thy servant dispensation from this unendurable suffering and its bitter infirmities and give him consolation, O Soul of the righteous’ (Service Book. Prayer for the Long Suffering). The Lord alone is the Master of life and death (1 Sam. 2:6). ‘In his hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind’ (Job 12:10). Therefore, **the Church**, while remaining faithful to God’s commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’ (Ex. 20:13), **cannot recognize as morally acceptable the widely-spread attempt to legalize so-called euthanasia, that is, the purposeful destruction of hopelessly ill patients (also by their own will).** The request of a patient to speed up his death is sometimes conditioned by depression preventing him from assessing his condition correctly. Legalized euthanasia would lead to the devaluation of the dignity and the corruption of the professional duty of the doctor called to preserve rather than end life. **‘The right to death’ can easily become a threat to the life of patients whose treatment is hampered by lack of funds.**

Therefore, **euthanasia is a form of homicide or suicide**, depending on whether a patient participates in it or not. If he does, euthanasia comes under the canons whereby both the purposeful suicide and assistance in it are viewed as a grave sin. **A perpetrator of calculated suicide**, who ‘did it out of human resentment or other incident of faintheartedness’ **shall not be granted Christian burial or liturgical commemoration** (Timothy of Alexandria, Canon 14). If a suicide is committed ‘out of mind’, that is, in a fit of a mental disease, the church prayer for the perpetrator is allowed after the case is investigated by the ruling bishop. **At the same time, it should be remembered that more often than not the blame for a suicide lies also with the people around the perpetrator who proved incapable of effective compassion and mercy.** Together with St. Paul the Church calls us: ‘Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ’ (Gal. 6:2).”<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Saint Maximus the Confessor once wrote: “He that loves God cannot help loving also every man as himself, even though the passions of those not yet purified disgust him. So then as he sees their conversion and betterment, he rejoices with a boundless and unspeakable joy.”<sup>15</sup> Proclaiming the Church’s teaching on the sanctity of life must be based on such love. Our Savior Himself has made clear: “this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” (John 17:3) If we wish to defend the unborn and help those tempted to end their lives, we must become the presence of Christ to them. Yet, we cannot give to people that which we do not have. It is good to be involved in the pro-life movement, to support pro-life legislation, and to hold the Church’s teaching as one’s own personal opinion, but these things, in and of themselves will save no

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<sup>14</sup> *Basis of the Social Concept*, ch. 12, 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Centuries on Love*, I, 13

one. This year's laws can always be undone next year. Likewise, we may live in a time and place where unrestricted abortion and assisted suicide are legal, but if we manifest God's love, both individually and through our communities, we may see souls converted, who otherwise may fall into the culture of death.

For this to happen, we must love God above all things. Our faith is about the grace of God coming into us and being manifested for our salvation. Thus, life, the virtues, the Scriptures, the Church, the sacraments, dogma are all about God. God desires all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. God is the Savior of all human beings, especially those who believe. Our confession and our manner of living must itself confess that God, in Jesus Christ, has already, on the Cross, saved everyone and everything. That is the Gospel. God, who created, is saving His creation in Jesus Christ. If this is the source of our joy, if this is our confession, if this is what we live by, then we will glorify God and strive to keep His commandments, because we will love Him. We will try to love Him with all our mind, soul, heart, and strength. We will try to love our neighbor, even our worst enemy, as ourselves. We will not judge anyone for anything. Rather we will seek to be in communion with God at all times, to love all the time, to give everything, to share everything, and to have joy in everything. Fr. Thomas Hopko once said that "we are saved *for* loving God, glorifying God, praising God with every breath. We are saved for work, for activity, for rejoicing in one another, for serving one another."<sup>16</sup>

So, we must transform ourselves because the sanctity of life begins with our own lives. If we have departed from eternal life, from the life of God's Kingdom, we cannot proclaim the sanctity of life in a manner that will transform others. So, have faith, pray, fast, go to every church service you can, read the Scriptures, follow the commandments, and then inspire your family, your friends, your colleagues, your parish community to do the same. Maybe then, our Church here will have a voice that reaches those tempted to terminate their pregnancies or end their lives. Until then, in the words of the Holy Apostle Paul, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling... Do all things without murmurings and disputings: that ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life." (Philippians 2:12, 14-16)

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<sup>16</sup> *The Names of Jesus*, ch. 2, p. 18-19.