

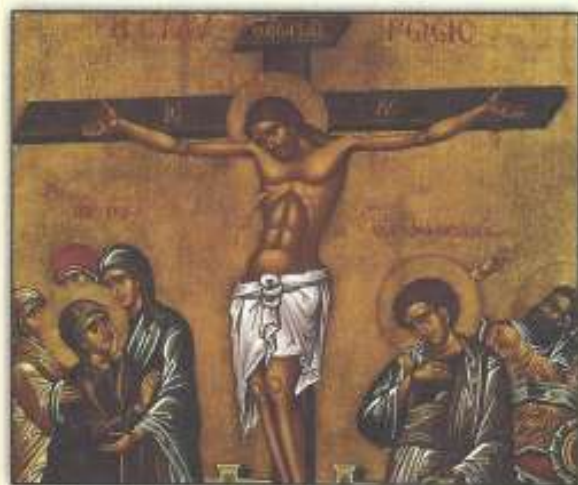
SUNDAY THEOSIS #4-25

Sacramental Living
By Michael Haldas

What is Life?

The goal of our faith journey is everlasting life with God. In the Gospel of John alone, Jesus states this multiple times. You have probably seen the sign for John 3:16 on TV at sporting events. Fans often hold this sign up and you typically see it behind football goal posts when the kicker kicks a field goal or extra point after a touchdown. In John 3:16, Christ states:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."



Some Objective Reasoning Regarding Our Bodies, Death and Life

Consider the following. It is an empirical fact that we know we will die. Further, we know when we die, we leave behind all of our material goods – homes, cars, clothes, computers, and other objects. As the Bible states:

"For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Timothy 6:7).

Our bodies either go into the ground, are cremated or are subject to other death rituals. Eventually even our bodies disintegrate over time or are destroyed.

That brings us to a few possibilities of which I will simplify into two basic ones. One is that the death of the body is the end of life – period. We live, we die and we cease to exist. But another possibility is that something of us lives which would be our soul that contains our spirit and our character. A commentary in the *Orthodox Study Bible* regarding a quote of Christ reads as follows:

The body will die eventually, one way or another. St. Ambrose even states that the death of the body is not itself a punishment, but rather it marks the end of earthly punishments. The soul continues for all eternity; since God is the judge of our soul, our efforts in this world are to please Him alone.

Per the last sentence in the quote in pleasing God we also please ourselves because God's gift back to us is fully realizing ourselves as we are meant to be.

When it comes to life everlasting it is a choice of what to believe. I myself, through both a deep conviction of my heart coupled with intense study over the years of Christianity, other world religions, myths and stories, philosophy and science, choose to believe the second possibility I have presented. Even if you are agnostic or atheist, the principles we encounter in what we know of science in terms of energy and existence makes it

difficult to sustain that we cease to exist. Most everything in nature is recycled or continues on in different forms. This is not to suggest we are recycled or are reincarnated but rather consistent with the principles of existence that we presently understand, logic would dictate the second of the two possibilities I raise.

Different Kinds of Life

If you read and really study the Gospels you'll find that Jesus says some things about life that at first can be very confusing. For example, in Matthew 19:16-22, Jesus counsels a rich young ruler. The young man approached Jesus and said:

"Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to *enter into life*, keep the commandments." [italics mine].

I find it interesting that Jesus said to the young man "if you want to enter into life." The young man clearly was born at one point so he did indeed enter into life at a minimum at the time of his birth. He is also walking, talking and breathing in his encounter with Christ and is therefore clearly alive so why would Jesus use the phraseology that He did. Why would someone already alive still need to enter into life?

On another occasion when Jesus was discussing how his disciples should follow him, one disciple said "Lord, let me first go and bury my father" (Matthew 8:21-22). But Jesus said to him, "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead." Why would Jesus call His disciple, who again is breathing and talking and thus alive, dead? Why would He equate this man with his physically dead

father?

The key to understanding what Jesus means is to understand the Greek words used for life in the New Testament. Whereas we use one word in English for life in the Bible there are actually a few words used for life in the New Testament, the most prevalent being "bios" and "zoë."

Bios, the word from which we get biology (i.e., the study of life), means physical life or finite life. Zoë means spiritual life or eternal life. When Jesus tells the rich young ruler what he needs to do to enter into life, He is instructing him how to transcend mere physical life, or bios, and begin walking the path toward eternal life, or zoë. Further, the Orthodox Study Bible says in its notes to Matthew 8:21-22, "Jesus is not negating the command to honor parents but is teaching us to put the things of the Kingdom as the highest priority. Those who ignore this priority are spiritually dead." C.S. Lewis explains bios and zoë as follows:

But what man, in his natural condition, has not got, is Spiritual life—the higher and different sort of life that exists in God. We use the same word life for both: but if you thought that both must therefore be the same sort of thing, that would be like thinking that the "greatness" of space and the "greatness" of God were the same sort of greatness. In reality, the difference between Biological life and Spiritual life is so important that I am going to give them two distinct names. The Biological sort which comes to us through Nature, and which (like everything else in Nature) is always tending to run down and decay so that it can only be kept up by incessant subsidies from Nature in the form

of air, water, food, etc., is Bios. The Spiritual life which is in God from all eternity, and which made the whole natural universe, is Zoë. Bios has, to be sure, a certain shadowy or symbolic resemblance to Zoë: but only the sort of resemblance there is between a photo and a place, or a statue and a man. A man who changed from having Bios to having Zoë would have gone through as big a change as a statue which changed from being a carved stone to being a real man.

And that is precisely what Christianity is about. This world is a great sculptor's shop. We are the statues and there is a rumor going round the shop that some of us are some day going to come to life.

Acquiring Life through the Holy Spirit

This is the reason we go to church, pray and try to live sacramentally and draw closer to Jesus and become more and more like Him. We never want to be spiritually dead. Jesus teaches us that our first priority should always be God and His kingdom. The great thing about this is our joy and happiness is so much greater when in fact we are spiritually alive.

But it's not our joy and happiness we should be concerned about. If we really embrace and believe our Christian faith, then we accept and believe that this physical life we live is not the whole story. Jesus tells us "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63) and that "I have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). This abundant life means living God's grace here on earth with the

promise of the Kingdom to come.

It also means that if we don't care about God and just live to please ourselves and our physical senses or simply live as if this life is the only true reality, then we are in fact the walking dead. I know this sounds a little weird or perhaps harsh so let me try this analogy. In his book, *The Language of God*, France Collins reminds us of an interesting scientific truth. He writes "nearly all of the atoms in your body were once cooked in the nuclear furnace of an ancient supernova - you are truly made of stardust."

I had read before that our bodies and the stuff of stardust are essentially the same but this fact really struck me this time in the context of this chapter. I was reminded of the quote from the first book in the Bible, the book of Genesis when God is speaking to Adam and Eve: "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19, New King James Version). Dallas Willard explains the context of this quote as follows:

Human beings were once alive to God. They were created to be responsive and interactive with Him. Adam and Eve lived in conversational relationship with their Creator, daily renewed. When they mistrusted God and disobeyed Him, that cut them off from the realm of Spirit. Thus they became dead in relation to it - much as a kitten is dead to arithmetic. God had said of the forbidden tree, "in the day you eat of it you shall die" (Genesis 2:17). And they did.

Biologically they continued to live, of course. But they ceased to be responsive and interactive in relation to God's cosmic rule in His Kingdom. It would be necessary for God to confer an additional level of life

on them and their children, through "being born from above" (John 3:3) in order for them to once again be alive in God, to be able to respond toward Him and to act within the realm of Spirit.

According to our faith, if we are not spiritually alive then we are just temporary animated dust. The good news is that as we live sacramentally, we begin to enter into life.

The person who has been brought into the additional life by the creative action of the word of God now lives between two distinct realms of life and power: that of the natural or fleshly and that of the supernatural or spiritual. Even while dead in our sins and unable to interact constructively with God, we are still capable of sensing the vacuum in the natural life apart from God and of following up on the many earthly rumors about God and where He is to be found. Once the new life begins to enter our soul, however, we have the responsibility and opportunity of ever more fully focusing our whole being on it and wholly orienting ourselves toward it. This is our part and God will not do it for us.

I want to conclude using an illustration from one of Jesus' parables to explain the importance of life through the Holy Spirit. It is the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-12).

"Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. And at mid-

night a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!' Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. 'Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.'"

Consider this commentary: "Many of the Holy Fathers leave us serious comments concerning this possibility. Seraphim of Sarov rejects the idea that the lack of oil on the part of the foolish virgins meant a lack of good deeds in their lifetime. Why should they be lacking in good deeds if they are called virgins? Virginité is the supreme virtue, an angelic state....I think that what they were lacking was the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God.... in their spiritual ignorance they supposed that the Christian life consisted merely in doing good works....The acquisition of the Holy Spirit is, so to say, the oil which the foolish virgins lacked."

It is good to remember that we are animated bodies not incarnated souls and that we need to strive to grow spiritually.

For more educational information, visit:

Books: www.ecpubs.com
Media: www.olfoundation.net
StreamingVideo: www.oltv.tv