

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

ABUNDANT LIFE. Each person in his daily life frequently senses the difference between existing and living. We want to live but often merely exist as we deal with self, others, job, marriage, family, problems, and responsibilities. Christ said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

Christ's words were not spoken only for the future in His Kingdom, but also for our daily lives. Christ completed His redemptive work through His person, teachings, death, and resurrection. Those who believe in Him can now enjoy the fruits of new life - true communion with God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Both the Holy Bible and Holy Tradition assure Orthodox Christians that the new life in Christ is possible for us now, that it is meant for ordinary Christians, and that it is a sure gift flowing from the saving work of Christ. The Apostles, Martyrs, Church Fathers, Saints, and countless Christians were empowered by this new life and testify to it as a dynamic reality which changed their lives.

How can this new abundant life become part of our daily existence?

Cooperation, Man and God! According to Orthodox teaching, authentic Christian life is a synergy, a cooperation, between man and God. Synergy does not of course, mean that God does half the work and man does half. Rather, it means that while God does all the saving work, man freely responds to God with his whole being.

For the majority of Orthodox Christians the response to God begins at infancy with Baptism. Through Holy Baptism each Orthodox Christian receives Christ and the Holy Spirit mystically. The response to God is first made by one's parents and sponsor who acknowledge and pledge to Him, as it were: This young person is yours!

Afterwards, the goal of Christian life is to become aware of Christ and the Holy Spirit actively or consciously. As the baptized Christian grows from child to adult, and participates in the sacramental life of the Church, his personal response to God becomes crucial. Each Christian must personally re-affirm the baptismal pledge and himself say by free choice to Christ: Yes, I am yours! Spiritual renewal comes from this adult commitment to Christ, sharing in the Holy Eucharist, daily prayer, and sincere efforts to live the kind of life Christ lived and preached. A genuine response to God involves faith, repentance, and obedience.

FAITH is the acceptance of the Holy Gospel, that is, the acknowledgment of Christ as our Lord and Savior.

REPENTANCE is through conversion of the mind and heart to Christ, with sincere confession of sins, so that He may forgive them and reconcile us to God.

OBEDIENCE is the willing use of one's total inner and outer resources toward the building up of a life worthy of Christ.

That we may stumble and fall does not so much matter because God lovingly forgives us and teaches us precious lessons through our shortcomings. What does matter is that we turn to Christ as often as we fall, tell Him everything about everything, trust Him for strength and guidance, and learn daily dependence on Him. As we keep our eyes on Him, and united with Him in prayer and sacrament, He renews our lives in the course of daily tasks and responsibilities by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual Renewal is ordinary Christian life in its fullness - through Baptism, Chrismation, the Eucharist, Confession, all the sacraments, corporate worship, daily prayer, study of God's Word and the teaching of the Holy Fathers, and authentic Christian living in the world. For the Orthodox Christian spiritual renewal is not separate from the life of the Church. It is the life of the Church, effectively lived, in all its sacramental, catechetical, and pastoral ministries.

GROWTH IN CHRIST. If God has through Christ granted new life to the world, why do many Christians not experience it more tangibly? If Christians are promised a life of joy and victory in Christ, why are so many baptized believers leading spiritually defeated lives marked by dissatisfaction, fear and boredom, or even conflict, sin, and guilt?

There are several answers to these difficult questions. First, the new life in Christ involves growth. Various persons are at various stages. People are different, with different experiences and different spiritual struggles. But the same Spirit is given to all. The same Lord is Lord of all. Christian love does not permit comparisons, self-righteousness, and elitism. What is important is to hold on to the Orthodox Christian Faith, to share fully the life of the Church, and to continue to grow in the new life granted to us by God, each according to one's gifts and capacities.

But secondly, we must also consider that a Christian may not have let Christ truly reign in his heart. A Christian adult may not have consciously acknowledged Christ with genuine repentance and loving obedience. In that case the believer is still self-centered, not Christ-centered; he remains inwardly unconverted, living on the basis of ego, rather than on the basis of baptismal grace. Another problem may be a particular unconfessed sin or the unwillingness to forgive someone who has wronged us.

In spiritual renewal Christ is the center of the Church and the believer. As we pray in the Liturgy, we must "commit ourselves and each other and our whole life to Christ our God", entrusting ourselves to Him and placing our lives in His hands. At the core of our being, where thoughts and feelings are born, where motivations and decisions have their root, we must trust Christ. In this trust, we must let Him rule so that all we think, say, and do is according to His love, not according to our self-will. When we ask Him to come into our hearts, a personal relationship develops between Christ and the believer, as real as that between two good friends or a husband and wife. Spiritual renewal is a deeper

knowledge of Christ Himself. As a Church Father has written: "For the believer Christ is all".