

## I. Introduction

It is a blessing to be here, and I thank Dr. Tal Howard for this extraordinary opportunity. It is encouraging to know that this many young Christians desire a Christian education and see academic excellence and a vibrant faith as compatible. I have a great admiration for Gordon, a Christian institution that welcomes “honest questions and adventurous thinking”... and welcomes an Orthodox Christian woman to speak you to today.

## II. My story of Eastern Orthodoxy and Christian Vocation

As I was preparing this talk on the topic, “Eastern Orthodoxy and Christian Vocation,” I was reminded that it is very popular in evangelical circles to share one’s own personal testimony, and so I will begin today with sharing my own story of Eastern Orthodoxy and Christian Vocation.

My objectives for doing this are threefold:

First: to give you a taste of the way Eastern Orthodoxy fits into American religious history through my own vocation narrative, but with my story as a type for something larger that happens in our country. There is a good chance that a number of you have Orthodox roots somewhere in your family tapestry, and these are worth discovering if you haven’t already.

Second: To make the claim that Eastern Orthodoxy is not simply “Eastern” but now exists as a vital witness in the West, and specifically for us, in the United States.

And third: To give you some concrete examples of the ways in which Orthodox and Protestant brothers and sisters have rubbed shoulders in very interesting, personal, and mutually influential ways. This is a phenomenon that has yet to be studied in depth, as far as I know, and part of my job is to stir up in the college students we work with—and perhaps you—a desire to study and write about this.

My story may be unique, as one’s vocation always is, but it is not unusual. There are countless ways in which Orthodox Christians have been drawn to the enthusiasm and scriptural focus of their evangelical sisters, and as many stories of Protestants falling in love with the history, tradition, and liturgy of the Orthodox Church.

My ethnic & religious background is part of the many stories of the melting pot which is the United States, and specifically New England. My mother is one of the thousands of New Englanders who trace their ancestry to the Mayflower, that ship of noble pilgrims seeking religious freedom “for the Glory of God and the Advancement of the Christian Faith.”<sup>i</sup> She is a part of a good Yankee family and grew up in Presbyterian, Congregational, and United Church of Christ churches.

My father’s parents emigrated from Greece in the early nineteen hundreds on one of the many thousands of ships that brought immigrants seeking better economic opportunities. They settled in nearby Lowell to work in the factories, and with their fellow Greek immigrants, witnessed the

building of three Greek Orthodox Churches in Lowell to serve the spiritual needs of the Orthodox faithful, for whom faith and cultural preservation were often one and the same.

My Yankee mother and Greek-American father met skiing at Waterville Valley in NH. A few years later, a Greek Orthodox priest served the sacrament of marriage in a small Congregational church in Rhode Island. How did the families feel about this marriage? In my mother's family, my father is the most "ethnic" of the four other spouses her siblings chose; on my father's side, the Greek world of Lowell, young Greeks were expected to marry not just another Greek, but someone of the same Greek village of origin. Miraculously, both Yankees and Greeks saw the love that Matilda and Peter had for one another, and welcomed the marriage.

I grew up in a suburb of Boston, and my parents raised their 3 children worshipping Christ in the Orthodox Church. My mother was chrismated Orthodox when we were babies and the only early hint I detected that there was perhaps something different in their religious backgrounds was that, when we prayed the Lord's Prayer before dinner each night, my father kept his eyes open and my mother shut hers. I asked my parents about this difference. My mother responded that she closed her eyes because she didn't want to be distracted when praying; my father, I think, just blinked. I'm pretty sure he had never thought about it before.

When I was in high school, a para-church organization called Young Life moved into our town. The leader was a dynamic Catholic woman. My parents joined a parent committee for Young Life and encouraged my participation. They were concerned overall that their children know Christ and were thankful that there would be some vibrant Christian witness right in our town; there was little comparable that was offered by our Orthodox church at the time. I became quite involved in Young Life—enthusiastically participating in weekly Campaigners Bible studies, club meetings, and summer Work Crew and Summer Staff. I was drawn to Young Life's fresh presentation of the Gospel, for it enabled me to really hear what was in the water of my liturgical upbringing in the Orthodox Church: humanity is sinful, and this humanity includes me; Christ died for our sins, and rose on the third day, trampling down death by his death, thus restoring life—for the life of the world and for me. I will always be thankful for hearing that Gospel through Young Life, and being challenged to study God's word regularly as it applies to my life. It was transformative for me then, and while both then and now I recognize places where the Orthodox Church diverges theologically and pastorally from Young Life, there are many aspects of that ministry that continue to influence my work today.

In college I became very active in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. The closest Orthodox Church was 45 minutes away, and because I didn't have a car, my attendance was sporadic. Middlebury College had a small but very active InterVarsity Christian Fellowship group with wonderful, bright leaders. The leaders encouraged a rigorous intellectual engagement in two areas: first, *what* we believed, the content of the Christian faith, and second, *how* we lived this belief, especially how we gathered as a community of Christian believers on a college campus.

Both of these areas led me, for the first time, to study and take seriously the history and tradition of the Orthodox Church. Throughout small group Bible studies, apologetics studies, and ongoing conversations, questions would be raised about a vast array of theological and doctrinal issues, and I found myself, back in my college dorm room, pulling out my Orthodox books to read up on

how the Orthodox Church responded to certain issues—the identity of Jesus’ mother Mary, the exegesis of a certain passage. Again and again I found that some issue that we had raised in small group, thinking we were the first ones to discover it, indeed had a long and rich history of theological inquiry surrounding it, often with the best minds of Christian history coming up with brilliant responses 16 centuries before our present day. I began to develop a way of thinking theologically that was, I discovered, deeply Orthodox. Instead of immediately answering a question raised by the people in the group with a few 20<sup>th</sup> century commentaries or resources, I began to desire to uncover the history of a question and the responses to it.

Meanwhile, my sophomore year I served as the Large Group Coordinator, and the IV leader challenged us to come up with a rationale for the flow of our Friday night large group meetings—how to begin, what activities to do, to what end, how much time to spend in worship, who will lead this worship, which songs to sing. I remember saying: “there has got to be a good way to do this... a rhythm and order to it that is appropriate for our needs and to adequately focus us on who God is, who Christ is, and to allow the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts and minds.” I remember asking our leader, “haven’t you found a way to do this that really works?!” And he refused to answer, trusting that the process was important.

Today I still believe that questioning process is important. Yet during my college years my questioning about rhythm and order led me to an appreciation for the liturgical tradition I had grown up in. I began to compare the prayers of small and large group IV meetings with the liturgical prayers of the Orthodox services. With the extemporaneous IV prayers, I noticed a lot of distracting issues wrapped up in the act of communal prayer—who was “good” at praying, and why? Who had a “mature” understanding of God and who was still treating Him like Santa Claus? What to do when people showed up who were not Christian and joined in prayer? When I prayed in the group setting, I was continually self-conscious—was I following a certain P-R-A-Y order we’d just talked about? Did I remember everything and everyone? Were others assessing “how good” I was at praying in the way that I would assess others?

During this time I was drawn to notice that the prayers of the Orthodox Church were profoundly scriptural and would theologically pack a punch—and their language, I came to understand, always adequately describes who God is, and who we are. Growing up I had missed this because my educational experiences within Orthodoxy were not constructed in a way that invited me to truly pray these words of the services. But through my experiences in IV, I began to be really thankful that I was able to use the words of the Church as my own words of prayer to God. Moreover, I developed a much deeper appreciation for the Orthodox liturgical services themselves, their structure and order, realizing they had withstood the test of time—and time not counted in semesters, years, or even decades, but in centuries.

These were some of the many issues that led me after college to begin a Masters of Divinity program at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York. I’m sure seminary—for anyone who attends any Christian seminary—is an experience in being blown away by how much you did not know about Christianity. For me this included being stunned by how little history I knew of any of the lands of Eastern Europe or the Middle East where Orthodox Christianity germinated and flourished, was persecuted, waned, and in places has blossomed again, over the course of the last two millennia.

To give you a helpful visual map, I will share a map I found on Wikipedia entitled “Predominant Religious Heritages in Europe.”<sup>ii</sup>



Reading counter-clockwise:

- the purple in the upper left is labeled Protestant Christianity;
- the blue is Catholic Christianity;
- the green is Sunni Islam;
- the darker green is Shia Islam;
- and the red is Orthodox Christianity.

Starting in 9<sup>th</sup> grade public school I had been taught an intricate story of European history, but this history was only that of Western Europe (the purple and the blue). The little history I had had of Eastern Europe focused on only the parts of Russian history where Russia strove to emulate the West; it is amazing for me to admit now that it was not until I was 21 that it really clicked that Russia, from 988 AD until the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, considered itself an Orthodox land.

I was also impressed by my professors who presented a vision of the Gospel that was breathtaking in its richness while, at the same time, they avoided any pious sort of triumphalism about Orthodoxy itself. I became riveted by my studies. Too often Orthodox Christians have the habit, in comparing Orthodoxy and Protestantism, to demote scripture or pit it over and against “tradition.” But we were taught—what was to me a mind-blowing concept—that “tradition is scripture rightly interpreted.” Read in this light, Orthodox tradition is an exegesis of Scripture and the Bible retains a primacy of place in Orthodox life and thought. The liturgy is also then Scripture in action.

What became arrestingly clear to me in seminary was that the rich material I was learning was simply not making it into parishes and to Orthodox laypeople who were hungry for substantial teaching. Making it available seemed a worthy end to devote one’s life to, and the rest of the details of my vocational narrative are simply an *ekphrasis* on this point.

### III. Eastern Orthodoxy and Christian Vocation

So for me, my Christian vocation is deeply tied up with the historical roots of Orthodox Christianity. But there is a great irony in my making this statement to you today. Four years ago, before I was hired as the director of the Lilly Endowment vocation grant at Hellenic College, I never would have used the word “vocation” to describe the pattern of my life. I may have told you more or less the same story of my journey, but I would not have used the word “vocation” at all. Your collegiate critical thinking skills may also have detected what I have left out of my narrative—the way I have not used the word “vocation” and the way I have not used the word “calling.” I have not said that my vocation was to attend the particular college I attended; I never mentioned that God called me to Orthodoxy from the para-church Protestant organizations; I did not say that I heard the voice of our Lord calling me to seminary. This might be the case, but my life is not scripture, and I will not canonize it.

It is almost impossible for me to explain exactly what I mean by this. The best I can do is sketch a few details about what we have uncovered through this Lilly grant at Hellenic College about Eastern Orthodoxy and Christian Vocation. As I speak a slideshow will run on the screen that will give you a cursory visual introduction to Orthodoxy—its icons, churches, people in worship, etc. I can’t stress enough how introductory these are, but it’s important for you to have a visual sense of Orthodoxy to understand what I’ll say next.

**A. Quick history lesson.** When we first received the grant, the programmatic work was challenging because “vocation” is not a word Orthodox people naturally use to talk about their lives/callings. Indeed, we could not sidestep an important aspect of our project: the grant asked Orthodox Christians to answer a question—about the theological exploration of vocation—that there was no tradition of asking. When searching through the sources of Orthodox theology—the Scriptures, the writings of the Church fathers, the canons, the lives of the saints, the hymnography of the liturgical services—there is little that speaks directly to a theology of vocation.<sup>iii</sup>

There are good historical reasons for this: Martin Luther is credited with sparking the debate over the meaning of vocation throughout the Christian West. The Roman Catholic Church had

been reserving the term for clergy and monastics; Protestant reformers broadened the definition to include every job or station in life. As a theology of vocation evolved in the West, the Christian East remained relatively isolated from this. The Orthodox churches had been distanced from Western Christendom by events that culminated in the Schism of 1054. Then in 1453 the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks deepened this East-West divide. Economic and political differences were contributing factors as well. In the West, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Industrial Revolution gave rise to the capitalist economies and liberal political orders, and led to an increasing variety of jobs and social mobility. This in turn furthered the need for a theological outlook on vocation. In the East, the Industrial Revolution did not take hold in Orthodox lands ruled by tsars and sultans, and later Soviet communists. Therefore, the need for a theological outlook on vocation did not materialize.

However, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this need has indeed materialized for Orthodox Christians. Here in the United States, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Orthodox Christians from Greece, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe have flooded into this country. Immigrants planted Orthodox roots into American soil and those roots are now a growing presence in the North American religious scene. New generations of Orthodox Christians, born and raised here, are now asking the same vocational questions asked by many in our post-industrial, diversified economy: What do I do with my life? So although Orthodox Christians do not have a tradition of a formal theology of vocation, the fact that they are currently raising questions about vocation forces theologians to work out some answers. We are thankful that the Lilly Endowment invited us to wrestle with these issues, for it would likely have taken us a long time—perhaps even decades (or centuries!)—to recognize they are worthy of our best attention.

What does the Orthodox theological tradition have to offer to a dialogue from which we have been more or less isolated? What wisdom can the Orthodox Church offer those seeking faith-inspired vocational guidance in the contemporary world? The answers to our vocation questions can be discerned from Orthodox sources, despite the challenge of asking these sources to answer a question they were not originally addressing.<sup>iv</sup>

**B. Definition of Vocation.** Over and over again we find in Orthodox sources a call to holiness—this is the ultimate vocation of every human being. The question, “What am I supposed to do with my life?” can only be answered by taking seriously God’s commandment in Leviticus: “For I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.” The vocation of every person is to be holy as God is holy, to be a saint. But isn’t holiness reserved for God alone? And aren’t the saints, for the Orthodox, those people across the centuries who lived radically pure lives, and are now in icons on the church walls? Yes and yes. But let me continue.

This focus on holiness points our vocation exploration in an important direction. We find that most people assume that *the* vocation question is “*What* will I be?” (or “What am I going to do with my life?” or “What should I do for a career?”). The “what” question. But the “what” question is really a secondary question.

The real vocation question is a “who” question. “*Who* will I be?” And this question is best answered through wrestling with the scriptural question that Christ asks: “Who do you say that I

am?” Christians believe that *in coming to know Christ better* we come to know who we are and what we are called to do with our life. The theological exploration of vocation is the pursuit of Christ, and the process of this relentless pursuit leads us to our vocation. Our working theological definition is, then, this: vocation is *our unique and ongoing response to Christ’s call to love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and the neighbor as ourselves*. As such, it is not so much about *what* we do but about *who* we are in all aspects of life, responding to Christ’s call and witnessing to Him—in our careers, in our friendships, in our decisions regarding family life, in our engagement with society, in our participation in our church community, and in our radical love for the needy neighbor. Fr. Stanley Harakas, a leading contemporary Orthodox theologian, explains,

The basic “call” we have is to be fully human, growing in holiness so as to fulfill the image of God in us, precisely as a result of the restoration of the likeness of God in which we have been created by the redeeming and saving work of Jesus Christ. [And this] fundamental Christian call to which we have been called is not exercised in a vacuum. It must be incarnated in real experience.<sup>v</sup>

Through this process of theological engagement incarnated in real experience, we are each becoming holy. And this process is essentially what it means to be human. We are called to be saints. Holiness is not reserved for priests, monks, nuns, bishops—indeed, the ordained or tonsured have the same call to holiness. Nor can average, everyday Christians ignore this call to sainthood. As the Blessed Father Justin Popovich explains, (in a quote that goes on and on so I will pick out my favorite pieces from it...)

**In the Lives of the saints there are very many marvelous examples of how a youth becomes a holy youth, a maiden becomes a holy maiden, an old man becomes a holy old man, how an old woman becomes a holy old woman, how a child becomes a holy child, how parents become holy parents, how a son becomes a holy son, how a daughter becomes a holy daughter, how a family becomes a holy family, how a community becomes a holy community, how a priest becomes a holy priest, how a bishop becomes a holy bishop, how a shepherd becomes a holy shepherd, how a peasant becomes a holy peasant, how an emperor becomes a holy emperor, how a cowherd becomes a holy cowherd, how a worker becomes a holy worker, how a judge becomes a holy judge, how a teacher becomes a holy teacher, [how an instructor becomes a holy instructor, how a soldier becomes a holy soldier, how an officer becomes a holy officer, how a ruler becomes a holy ruler, how a scribe becomes a holy scribe, how a merchant becomes a holy merchant, how a monk becomes a holy monk, how an architect becomes a holy architect, how a doctor becomes a holy doctor, how a tax collector becomes a holy tax collector, how a pupil becomes a holy pupil, how an artisan becomes a holy artisan, how a philosopher becomes a holy philosopher, how a scientist becomes a holy scientist, how a statesman becomes a holy statesman, how a minister becomes a holy minister, how a poor man becomes a holy poor man, how a rich man becomes a holy rich man, how a slave becomes a holy slave, how a master becomes a holy master, how a married couple becomes a holy married couple, how an author becomes a holy author, how an artist becomes a holy artist.**<sup>vi</sup>

As we read and hear the beautiful lives of the saints, it is clear that people across occupations and roles of life have become holy. Life in the Orthodox Church for every Christian is about submerging yourself in this calling to holiness, the call to be a saint.

I know that the ornate nature of the Orthodox Church is probably what makes the Church feel so foreign and strange for American Christians. In fact, what you see visibly as the Orthodox Church—its artistic splendor by way of its icons and domes and gold crosses and strange robes and incense—invites and proclaims this call to holiness. As Fr. Thomas Hopko explains regarding the icon,

The icon is Orthodoxy's highest artistic achievement. It is a gospel proclamation, a doctrinal teaching and a spiritual inspiration in colors and lines.<sup>vii</sup>

It is the Orthodox faith that icons are not only permissible, but are spiritually necessary because "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). Christ is truly man and, as man, truly the "icon of the invisible God" (Col 1:15; 1 Cor 11:7; 2 Cor 4:4).<sup>viii</sup>

The traditional Orthodox icon is not a holy picture. It is not a pictorial portrayal of some Christian saint or event in a "photocopy" way. It is, on the contrary, the expression of the eternal and divine reality, significance, and purpose of the given person or event depicted. In the gracious freedom of the divine inspiration, the icon depicts its subject as at the same time both human and yet "full of God," earthly and yet heavenly, physical and yet spiritual, "bearing the cross" and yet full of grace, light, peace and joy.

For our vocational questions, the icon gifts us with the reality of what we are called to be. And together with other church arts, music, architecture, needlework, wood carving, poetry, etc., this tradition of iconography is based on the Orthodox Christian doctrine of human creativity rooted in God's love for man and the world in creation. As Fr. Hopko puts it,

Because man is created in the image and likeness of God, and because God so loved man and the world as to create, save and glorify them by His own coming in Christ and the Holy Spirit, the artistic expressions of man and the blessings and inspirations of God merge into a holy artistic creativity which truly expresses the deepest truths of the Christian vision of God, man, and nature.<sup>ix</sup>

To experience life in the Orthodox Church is to be called—through all five senses, sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—to be holy as God is holy. Understanding this has unraveled for me the mystery of why my father kept his eyes open in prayer: in the context of worship, Orthodox Christians are led through what they see (and smell, taste, touch, hear) to proper contemplation of God.

Now if I am to responsibly introduce you to this call to holiness as a fundamental Orthodox approach to vocation, I must add an important caveat—a caveat that is very Orthodox but is very un-American and very un- GenX or GenY or Millennial Generation or Generation Me (as Jean Twenge calls it).<sup>x</sup> America has us puffed up with self-esteem, full of ourselves, on Facebook

publicly documenting the wonders of our lives, on YouTube broadcasting ourselves. And this has grave implications for Christian Vocation. Fr. Paul Tarazi argues:

The “conventional” wisdom of our time, which in Western and especially American culture bases itself on self-fulfillment, urges us to “follow our dreams,” and “do what we love.” Even the churches have picked up on this line of thought, so that “personal growth in Christ” and “unlocking our spiritual potential” have become watchwords for “discerning” our callings from God, not to mention the idea that developing one’s innate talents can be equated with one’s Christian vocation. But these approaches focus inward on the self, not outward on the neighbor. God’s gifts come from God, not from oneself, and are made by God according to current needs.<sup>xi</sup>

So for this approach to Christian vocation, while we know that we are called to be holy as God is holy, we never say of ourselves: I have become a holy person. In fact, we never are aware ourselves that we have arrived at holiness. This is spiritually dangerous. As soon as we say “I am holy” we find ourselves in the position of the Pharisee in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee lists off his positive attributes, when it is the publican, bent in repentance, who is the one deemed righteous. We are called to follow Christ, we are called to love our neighbor as Christ, and the bi-product may, God willing, be holiness, but we don’t let the right hand know what the left hand is doing. And in truth we have no clue about where we stand ourselves until we come before the Judgment seat of Christ. Even at the Last Judgment in Matthew, the ones who are deemed righteous by the Lord *did not know* when they had nourished Christ, for they ask him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry/thirsty/stranger/naked/sick/in prison?” (Matthew 25:37-40)

In fact, Orthodox tradition teaches us that the holiest of saints as they age in wisdom become more and more aware of their own sin and their own need for repentance, both personal and communal. They would always reject the claim by others that they are holy. And in the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church, just before Holy Communion the priest says to the congregation, “The holy Gifts for the holy people of God.” And the people respond, “One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.” There is this living tension, even a paradox, that we are called to be holy, and are even called holy as a people of God, but yet—while others may say it of us—we may only say ourselves that one is holy, and that is our Lord, Jesus Christ, and He is holy to the glory of God the Father.

Here you get a glimpse of one of many living tensions within Orthodoxy that are really not resolvable with any systematic thinking or theological suppositions, but rather must simply be lived. This paradox and tension protects us, on the one hand, from making holiness itself an idol or thinking we are God. And on the other hand, the tension protects from going too far in the opposite direction, walking around with rocks in our shoes or intent on self-flagellation. In the end, it’s not really holiness we’re striving for actually at all; holiness is the ideal bi-product of striving to know Christ, responding to His call, and then witnessing to the salvation he is working in us, loving the neighbor as Christ. In truth, if we love the neighbor as we should, contemplation about our own holiness becomes irrelevant.

**(3) Fleshing out the definition at Hellenic College.** Finally, let me conclude with three points that we stress in our programming in at Hellenic College as we explore vocation.

1. **Vocation is now.** If vocation is our unique and ongoing way of being in the world that is our response to Christ's call to know God with heart, soul, mind, strength, and the neighbor as oneself, then vocation is not something we are preparing for as something in our future. This is especially relevant for college students who can easily get lured into thinking that college is a four-year holding tank...a sort of pre-vocational hiatus. But every day of our life we are called to live our vocation—as we study, as we eat, as we work, as we serve, and as we make decisions about how to use the time God has given us for his glory. We love Gandalf's wisdom from *Lord of the Rings*, "All you have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to you." This time is now.
2. In the words of Fr. Stanley Harakas, "**God is not a celestial employment agency.**" Fr Stanley argues directly from a study of the scriptural use of calling that "it is hard to make the case that anyone who is a wife, an employer, an employee, a factory worker, a salesperson, and so on, precisely and exclusively because of that status or role has a specific calling from God to be that."<sup>xii</sup> Essentially, we should not expect to hear God call us to a particular profession. In saying this, I do not exclude the possibility that individuals may hear God's voice calling them to follow Him in specific ways. But in general, we have all we need by way of the scriptural witness of Christ's calling us. Orthodox New Testament professor Dr. John Barnet asks the question directly, "Does God call us for a special purpose?" And his response is, "If by 'special purpose,' ... we mean a life of witness that informs all vocations, then the answer is 'yes.' Indeed, we Christians have only one true vocation—to witness to the salvation that God has accomplished in us."<sup>xiii</sup>
3. **And finally, we believe that Life in the Orthodox Church provides a matrix of discernment.** All of vocation exploration in the Orthodox Church is coming to know the Christ of the Bible, allowing Him to form us, as a potter shapes clay, into his image and likeness. Then what we do is a natural extension of who we are; knowing how to do His will does not provoke anxiety or inner turmoil because we have an increasingly clear vision of who He is. What is God's will and how do we do God's will in our life? We believe that life in the Church provides a matrix of discernment. This matrix includes prayer and fasting, repentance and confession, seeking wisdom from the rhythm of the liturgical year, and from a spiritual father or mother. It includes participation in the liturgical services, in the sacramental life of the Church, its dogmatic decisions and the acts of its approved churchly councils, the writings of the church fathers, the lives of the saints, the canon laws, and finally the iconographic tradition together with the other inspired forms of creative artistic expression such as music and architecture. All of these are, in the words of Fr. Thomas Hopko, "organically linked together in real life. None of them stands alone. None may be separated or isolated from the other or from the wholeness of the life of the Church. All come alive in the actual living of the life of the Church in every age and generation, in every time and place."<sup>xiv</sup> And similarly, no one's vocation may be worked out in isolation, or even just between "Me and Jesus"—for, quite honestly, the possibilities for self-delusion are too strong. For Orthodox Christians, calling is worked out in community. Through this life in the Church Orthodox Christians are

guided—in and through our ecclesial, communal existence—to a proper discernment of how we each are going to use our gifts to serve, “as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (I Peter 4:10).

#### IV. Conclusion

It is time to conclude, and there is so much I have not said, so much I have left out. But I hope this has given you food for thought regarding some Orthodox thoughts and practices on vocation as they fit into a larger picture of Orthodox Christians on American soil.

An Orthodox Christian approach to vocation is one which looks to the sources of our faith—and places great weight on ancient Christian sources—for ongoing, contemporary guidance. It veers away from asking individuals to verbally proclaim particular career paths as God’s calling to them, for in the cooling shadow of two millennia of the amassed wisdom of the Church, it asks us to be radically humble about who we are and what we are doing. We are called to holiness, but may not call ourselves holy. Vocation is about who we are, not what we are, and it is now—our unique and ongoing response to love God and the neighbor *today*. Our one common true vocation is to witness to the salvation Christ is working in us—and in any station of life or any occupation.

I hope this has given you food for some honest questions and adventurous thinking. If nothing else, I hope that some of you who become history teachers will study and teach the Christian history of the parts of Europe and the Middle East that are usually left out; I hope that those of you who have relatives from these regions might sit down with them over Thanksgiving or Christmas break and invite them to share their religious backgrounds and understandings; and I hope that you will see Orthodox Christians as not radical strangers, but as people whose faith invites them to know the Christ of the Bible. There is much that Evangelicals and Orthodox have learned from one another; and there is much we still have to learn.

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<sup>i</sup> Mayflower Compact 1620.

<sup>ii</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Europe\\_religion\\_map\\_en.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Europe_religion_map_en.png)

<sup>iii</sup> We are not surprised that William Platcher’s collection, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, devotes so little attention to the first five centuries of Christian history (an era considered by Orthodox as the “Patristic Golden Age”) and includes only one selection from an eastern Christian writer that is post sixth century (and this of a literary giant, Fyodor Dostoevsky—but not expressly a theological work).

<sup>iv</sup> Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides, ed., *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Theologians on Vocation* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006).

<sup>v</sup> Stanley Samuel Harakas, “Vocation and Ethics,” in *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Theologians on Vocation*, ed. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 183.

<sup>vi</sup> Blessed Father Justin Popovich, *Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ* (Belmont, MA: The Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Inc., 1997), 49-50. Bold emphasis added

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.oca.org/OCchapter.asp?SID=2&ID=9>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.oca.org/OCchapter.asp?SID=2&ID=47>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.oca.org/OCchapter.asp?SID=2&ID=9>

<sup>x</sup> Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>xi</sup> Paul Nadim Tarazi, "Pursuing the Mind of Christ," in *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Theologians on Vocation*, ed. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 37.

<sup>xii</sup> Stanley Samuel Harakas, "Vocation and Ethics," in *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Theologians on Vocation*, ed. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 182.

<sup>xiii</sup> John Barnet, "Seek First His Kingdom: An Invitation to Christian Vocation" in *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Theologians on Vocation*, ed. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006), 62.

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.oca.org/OCchapter.asp?SID=2&ID=2>