

Disciples and Discipline

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All of us, Bishops, priests, and faithful, are called to be disciples of Christ. I'm sure that most of us feel that we are. But what does it mean to be a disciple?

Etymologically the word disciple is intimately tied to the word discipline - so one definition of a disciple of Christ is "one who follows Christian discipline". In our post-modern, democratic, "free" society, discipline is not always a "politically correct" word - in fact, the very word "discipline" often has negative connotations, i.e. we "discipline" our children, etc. Likewise, anyone who has any experience with discipline realizes that in the end there is only one type of discipline - self-discipline. No matter what anyone (even God) tells me to do, I'm the one who decides to do it. And in the pastoral experience of any Bishop, priest or parish, some of the most difficult and heartbreaking problems we deal with are those caused by the breakdown of Orthodox Christian discipline in our spiritual life.

Like much else in our earthly life, the breakdown of spiritual discipline is neither consistent, nor systematic. Occasionally we have people who feel themselves to be Orthodox, who feel that they have the right to dictate where, when, and how various things will be done - often without any knowledge of or regard for the Church's teaching or practice. The classic story about this type of person is that they approach the priest to arrange a wedding and proceed to inform the priest that the prospective spouse is not Christian and has no desire to become one; they wish to be married during Great Lent; they wish to have their friends singing secular songs and playing musical instruments during the service; they want to "write their own vows"; and they would like to be married at the local provincial park next to a waterfall. When they are informed by the priest that, from the standpoint of the Church, all of the above requests are problematic, they then go out into the world, exclaiming for all to hear that "the Church (or priest) doesn't care about us and is driving us away"!

While the above example is extreme (but not, unfortunately, without substance), we often see smaller breakdowns in our Church discipline, which often contribute to friction in families and communities.

A common sin against our Orthodox Christian discipline has to do with fasting. We know from scripture and tradition that we must fast, and the Church, from the earliest days, has given us a specific rule for how and when we should fast. But how many of our faithful and clergy do not practice the beneficial discipline of fasting?

An even greater sin against our discipline is the absence of many (if not most!) of our parishioners at Liturgy on Sunday mornings. Even the basic building-block of "Church membership" has become something which for most people is not normative or formative, but simply a "lifestyle choice," based upon my perception of my own personal needs.

Why do we have "Church discipline"? Why are we called upon to do certain things, and not to do others? First and foremost, we must understand that everything we do in Church, all our dogma, and all our discipline, are given to us for the salvation of our soul. Our True Christian teachings (Orthodoxy) and our saving Christian practice (Orthopraxy) were given to us, by God, for our salvation - not made up by some "old men" to make our lives difficult.

Why does the breakdown of discipline in the Church, the parish, and in the individual Christian contribute to difficulty and problems for all concerned? Because every time we act against the discipline or teaching of the church we act in a sinful manner - and according to the teaching of the Church sin is sickness. By being undisciplined we introduce sickness into the body of Christ (the Church), and as those who have suffered from the flu this winter can testify, illness never makes you feel good about yourself or those around you.

We know that God's explicit commandments, like "thou shalt not murder", "thou shalt not steal", "love the Lord God with your whole heart, soul and mind", etc. are "non-negotiable". But why should we follow these "other" rules, such as fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, attending services regularly and often, etc.? The answer to this question we find in one of the prayers we say every Sunday during the Liturgy - the Symbol of Faith, "I believe".

As we say the symbol of Faith, we notice that we express our belief in four particulars: "I believe in One God, *the Father Almighty . . .*"; "And in One Lord, *Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God . . .*"; "And in *the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life . . .*"; "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic *Church . . .*" *We believe in the Church.* We believe in the Church as much as we believe in God. Orthodox Christians believe in the Holy Trinity, and in the Church. And this is why the matter of Christian discipline is so important. Anyone who would dispute the right of the Church to "tell them how to live their lives"; in other words, to ask them to apply real, beneficial, traditional apostolic practice to their daily life, *disputes with the Christian Faith itself.*

In the end, we see clearly that one of the greatest differences between our Orthodox faith and the faith of other Christian groups is that we have maintained faith in *the Church* - not simply in the Bible (although we believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God), nor in individual people (whether they be the Pope of Rome or any other individual who feels they can legislate "Christian" behaviour for themselves or others). And as the Greek word for Church - *ecclesia* - means "the assembly" or "the gathering", we understand as the apostles did that those who are gathered together do things together. In the end, Orthodox Christian discipline is simply that which we "do together", for the salvation of our souls, both "in Church" and throughout the week.