

# Spirituality In The Eastern Orthodox Tradition

Benjamin Williams,  
St. Barnabas Project

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Bob pulls his car into the parking lot, hoping that he can find a space near the entry door; it is windy and there's a light rain, and he has an important meeting in ten minutes. After hassling the traffic, having a near miss at the freeway exit and basically being frazzled, the last thing he wants is to have to hoof it across the lot. "Why do those inconsiderate project managers schedule meetings so early in the day?" he asks himself. He has forgotten his umbrella once again! Bad luck: all the covered spots are taken, and the best he can do is a two and a half minute walk in the rain. "Damn, I'll be wet and wind blown, and won't be looking my best for the meeting: and I'm supposed to be making the management presentation!"

By the time he gets freshened up and organized his mood has changed from harried to irritated. He's can't put his hands on a couple of important examples he was going to use in today's project meeting: "This'll look good," he thinks, "I am the executive member of the project team and am supposed to be setting the example." A thought flashes through his mind: an image of his father telling him that good people are well organized, and that his lack of organization speaks for itself. He hurriedly assembles his materials considering how to put a spin on not having all his illustrations, charges to the conference room at the other end of the building, and arrives thirty seconds prior to the scheduled start time. "Good", he thinks to himself, "Lou, Betty, John and Fred are here and ready to go. But where is Harry? Damn it, he's late again!" Harry is the project manager, and Bob knows he really can't start the meeting without Harry, and that his presentation won't be complete without Harry's project management update. "Relax", he says to himself, "a couple of minutes won't matter." Bob takes a couple of deep breaths, takes his usual chair, arranges his material, and begins to chat with those already present. Three minutes go by and Bob can feel the anger beginning to rise even as he exchanges niceties with the team. Five minutes after the scheduled start time, Harry ambles into the room into the room with a casual "Sorry I'm late. The traffic and weather were bad. Good, you didn't start without me." Bob swallows hard, takes another deep breath, and says to himself "Relax, a few minutes is no big deal. Besides, you pride yourself on being so good at interpersonal relations and employee communication!"

The meeting starts off typically, and good progress appears to be taking place in reviewing project status, performance to budget, and the role of individual team actions. Bob finds himself thinking that completing this project the way it is going will be good for his career, and moves to the next agenda item: assessment of a major milestone for project advancement. He presents the overview of completed steps and summarizes by suggesting to the team that they accept milestone completion and advance the project, when Harry looks over at him and says, "Bob, you know, I'm sorry but I'm here to tell you that I completely disagree with your assessment. You are not applying good project management criteria to your assessment and are way too optimistic. You can make this milestone look good, but this project won't come in on time and at budget. You just need to go and tell executive staff the truth." Bob feels his stomach tighten and his face start to flush. Within ten seconds he can feel his temperature rising as Harry continues to ramble on about how hard it is to work with people that aren't really engineers--even though they try hard! In spite of his conscious determination to remain calm, and without at first realizing it is happening, Bob finds himself turning on Harry and mercilessly saying: "This is inexcusable; this project has been running fine except for your role. For you the glass is always half empty, and you have six reasons to take more time. Your inability to lead the team to meet the scheduled deadlines is the problem! If you were more serious about your role and this project, we wouldn't have these issues."

Bob realizes he is giving Harry a public tongue-lashing, but can't seem to stop himself now that he has started. "If you would be more serious about this project and spend less time promoting employee sports activities and lobbying for better quality coffee in the canteen, maybe we could move this project along on schedule. It's your own personal weakness and inability to handle leadership responsibilities that are the root cause of this project problem. I think we need to replace you and get another project manager." As the last words fly out of his mouth, he can see Harry withering in his seat and the other team members looking at him in surprise and shock. He can feel two conflicting emotions: the delicious thought that he could probably have Harry replaced, and the personal chagrin at losing his composure publicly. Another image passes through his mind: his father's reaction the day he was expelled from school for losing his temper at the principal. He wore the bruises for five days.

## **East Versus West: A Different Perspective**

There are a number of aphorisms that summarize worldviews or cultural perspectives. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" or the modern "You are what you eat" express the primacy of reason and of the body in the contemporary view of humankind in Western society. In the view of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, this is not the case: humans are psychosomatic beings that were created by God. Humans possess body and soul, and the "inbreathing" of God's spirit as described in Genesis teaches us that the soul has primacy over the body. To paraphrase St. Gregory of Nyssa, the soul is not held by the body but it is she who contains the body. In the words of Bishop Hierotheos Vlachos, a contemporary Orthodox theologian whose works have made these concepts understandable to contemporary Christians, "The body is not a vessel or wine-skin containing the soul, but rather the body is within her. The soul acts throughout the whole of man's body."<sup>1</sup>

In the Eastern tradition it is the spiritual not the rational, it is the soul not the brain that are central to human being. It is also here that the problems lie: the human condition, the need for redemption, the areas in which each believer must focus their attention to reach their potential lie in the spiritual realm. Among the unique differentiators between Eastern and Western spirituality is the fact that the Eastern Church never experienced the Renaissance and Enlightenment or the Reformation and Counter-reformation. Thus it not only reflects a very different world-view, but also an understanding of spirituality that is very much directly in keeping with that of the early Church.

The overarching understanding within Eastern Christian spirituality is that humans are spiritually ill, need to be healed, and that the place in which this spiritual healing takes place is in the Church. "The Orthodox Church is a Hospital, an infirmary of the soul. This does not mean that the Church disregards other domains of pastoral activity, since she aims at the whole of man, consisting of both body and soul. She cares indeed for the physical, economic and social problems as well; yet the main weight of her pastoral service is put on the soul's therapy, for when man's soul is cured then many other intractable problems are solved."<sup>2</sup>

To understand the scope of this perspective, and especially to understand its practical implications in business and life in general, we must consider the Eastern understanding of the human condition. As said above, humans are created with body and soul in unconfused union, and it is the soul that contains the body. Just as the physical center of the body is the heart which pumps blood that provides energy to the body, the soul has a center, a "heart" (*nous* in Greek), and it is the *nous* that provides the energy of divine grace to humans. The soul of the believer receives the Holy Spirit, and it is within the *nous* that the gracious work of the Spirit is manifested via spiritual energy. If the *nous* becomes clouded or dysfunctional, the person falls into spiritual darkness. This is the human condition following the Fall, and recovery from this condition requires effort on the part of the person and a healing ministry on the part of the Church. The Biblical model is the parable of the Good Samaritan, wherein the Samaritan represents Christ who cured the wounded man and led him to the Inn, that is to the "Hospital" which is the Church. In the understanding of the Eastern spiritual fathers, it is evident that Christ is presented as the Healer, the physician who cures human's maladies, and the Church is presented as the true Hospital.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Sinful Condition After The Fall**

This understanding of spirituality has nothing to do with a fall into sin based on doing the "wrong things" which result in an ontological change on the part of humankind into "bad people" (i.e. the result of the Fall is that disobeying God's commandment resulted in humankind becoming fundamentally bad). Rather it is an understanding that sees humans as fundamentally good but having disobeyed God's commandments. The word sin comes from the Greek meaning "missing the mark," in other words, falling short of the end

for which God created us. Rather than understanding sin and the fall from a legal point of view--violating a code of behavior that produces guilt--the Eastern Church has always understood it in terms of failure to meet our potential and experience the fullness of divine life. The result of which is that we now suffer from a spiritual illness for which there is a cure, and from which there is a therapeutic path that each and every believer must undertake. "Just as a medical Hospital is primarily interested in the treatment of the body--and through this therapy it gets involved with the rest of a person's problems--so it is in the Orthodox Church. She cures the core of the human personality, and through this she heals the whole person. Healing of man's personality is, in fact, his progress toward perfection which is actually identified with "theosis", for in patristic theology theosis and perfection are synonymous terms. And this therapy is absolutely necessary, because man's fall, effected in the person of Adam, constitutes the sickness of man's nature."<sup>4</sup>

It is just this sickness of his nature that caused Bob to "lose it" in his meeting, to "de-personalize" and lash out at another of God's children in unwarranted fashion. This is what accounts for the fact that while he is successful and "competent" in many aspects of his life, there are other aspects of his life that are sinful and banal. It is on a much greater scale of sickness, but none the less due to the same cause, that all of humankind's horrors from selfishness and greed to murder and genocide occur. What happened to Bob was simply a series of events that took control of him, so that he found himself, to his dismay, living out the dilemma St. Paul describes in Romans: "that which I would I do not; that which I would not I do. Wretched man that I am. Who can save me from this (dilemma) save Jesus Christ my Lord?" In the understanding of the Eastern fathers, the consequence of the Fall is the darkening of the *nous*, and with this darkening comes the loss of the work of divine grace in our lives. The darker the *nous* the greater the absence of divine grace. We all begin life with a darkened *nous*, but our choices and actions can darken it still further. Those who make spiritual progress in this life, lighten their *nous* through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Clearly the likes of Hitler and Stalin had such an absence of divine grace that they could undertake the most horrible actions against God and their fellow man. But the difference between them and us is only a matter of degree.

### **The Therapeutic Goal**

The dilemma for mankind is that when the *nous* is darkened, it is unable to encounter God, and then reason undertakes the effort. But reason, like emotions, are subject to outside influence, and we now face our humanity, God, the world and all of creation in an entirely different way: a self-centered way. The *nous*, and therefore the soul and all of the person is now under the control of the passions. The spiritual fathers understood the *nous* as the place within the soul that receives and experiences divine grace and experiences unceasing memory of God. Reason is a function in the brain, while the *nous* operates within the soul. When both are functioning harmoniously in the "spiritual person", reason works and is conscious of the surrounding world while the *nous* is within the soul praying unceasingly. Then the *nous* and reason exist and operate synergistically. Reason is engaged in earthly cares and the *nous* is engaged in remembrance of God; and because the *nous* is united with the soul and has communion with God, humans are not disrupted by unexpected temptations.<sup>5</sup>

In the understanding of the Eastern spiritual fathers, the core of humanity's problem is that we are spiritually ill, and are controlled by "external" forces, rather than being spiritually illumined so as to be in control inwardly and spiritually. "Incapable of seeing man as an image of God, the *nous* encounters him under the influence of the passions. He ambitiously exploits his fellow-man, through his love of pleasure and material gain. He regards him as a vessel or instrument of pleasure; at the same time he idolizes all of creation, which is what the Apostle Paul describes in his Epistle to the Romans: Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man \*In fact, when we speak of original sin and its consequences, we mean three things: first, the malfunction of the *nous*, since the *nous* ceased to work properly; secondly, the identification of the *nous* with reason (and to a certain extent, the deification of reason), and thirdly the *nous*' enslavement to the passions, anxiety and the conditions of the environment. And this constitutes man's real death."<sup>6</sup>

What are the passions, then? What are these things that obviously play a much stronger role in Bob's life than he knows or acknowledges? They are not outside forces that enter us and must be driven out; rather, they are energies of the soul that have been distorted by sin, and need to be transformed. They are those dominant behaviors, the controlling influences that we fall prey to and control us. A comprehensive list of the passions, as understood by the early spiritual fathers, can be found in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by St. John Climacus. The thirty (rungs on the Ladder) include the passions of slander, talkativeness, lying, despondency, gluttony, love of money, insensibility, cowardice, vainglory, and pride. In the understanding of the Eastern spiritual fathers, though, they are not just external forces that have a negative effect on us, like say, radiation. They are psychological and spiritual forces that work within our reason and soul to control us. This occurs through a dynamic that acts in the reason (called *logismi*, from *logiki*, reason). These are thoughts that are connected with images along with various stimulations from the senses or the imagination. According to Bishop Hierotheos they can best be translated into English as "fixations", or in the contemporary psychological usage of the term "addictions". In other words, they are behaviors connected with the senses or imagination to which we become deeply attached or fixated, and that then control us.

This is just what was happening to Bob: He prides himself on being "cool, calm and collected," but by the time he got to the meeting he was harried and anxious, his defenses were down and his usual "calm and in control" demeanor was on edge. As the pressure mounted, pride began taking control; he needed to be organized, to appear competent and in control. The need had first been formed in the childhood interchanges with his father that demeaned his self worth. Later, as the conflict with Harry came to a head, pride coupled with anger and insensibility allowed him to crush one of God's children. The seed for this had been sown again by his father, but this time in physical abuse. It should come as no surprise them, that there are other problem areas in Bob's life. Most of the time, in most areas of activity, he is in control and competent. The triggers that pushed him over the edge were tied back to events in his early life having to do with self-worth, control, pride and shame. These very passions, now a deep and abiding part of his being, surfaced and took control.

But here Bob is, an adult and an experienced business executive, knowing full well that this is non-productive behavior. He is acting out the very dynamics (read "passions") that had been inflicted on him. Solomon was right: "the sins of the fathers are visited on the sons," and by extension, the sins of the parents on the children. The passions may be imposed on us externally, like this example, or they may be inflicted upon ourselves. The external affliction through our environment and family are almost understandable, but the most lamentable and those we impose on ourselves. Why? Because with these we further damage ourselves by our own actions via sensual experience or the imagination. In either case, the result is the same: we become ruled by our passions.

St. Maximos the Confessor (580-662) tells us "We carry about with us impassioned images of the things we have experienced. If we can overcome these images we shall be indifferent to the things which they represent. For fighting against the thoughts of things is much harder than fighting against the things themselves, just as to sin in the mind is easier than to sin through outward action. Some passions pertain to the body, others to the soul. The first are occasioned by the body, the second by external objects. Love and self-control overcome both kinds, the first curbing the passions of the soul and the second those of the body."<sup>7</sup> For the fathers, love is the "offspring of dispassion" and so to have love and self-control we must first overcome the passions.

While the concept of the *nous* and the passions may be foreign to western Christians, for Eastern Orthodox the *nous* is the basis of theology and spirituality. A fair summary of the writings of the Eastern spiritual fathers is that the darkness of the *nous* constitutes the essence of original sin, and that the place where the cure takes place is in the Church. How do these things manifest themselves? A cornerstone of the life of faith is moral and ethical behavior: we try to live the Commandments. According to Vlachos, "While attempting to keep the commandments, our old self with its passions is disclosed; subsequently we struggle to be healed of our passions. In parallel, we attempt to keep our *nous* clear from malice and arrogance and

it then distinguishes the good thought from the demonic one. We exercise ourselves in watchfulness\*"8 He goes on to say that the passions are aroused when the soul lacks love and self control.

So, the goal is to gain love and achieve a state of watchfulness. Love, because God is love; and watchfulness, so that we are spiritually proactive and not ruled by the passions. We are called to enter into the Church's therapeutic process, and in fact to take an active role in healing ourselves. In the Christian life, in the hospital of the Church, we begin to experience eternal life; we do not simply expect the life to come, we enter into it now. The Kingdom of God is communion with God, and it begins here and now. The depth of our participation in it is a function of our spiritual healing. The process has three stages: purification, illumination and communion (or *theosis*). Purification is centered in repentance, a disregard of physical things, discipline of the flesh through fasting and prayer, avoidance of those things which excite the passions, remorse for past events and shedding of tears, and purification of the *nous*. It is the classic definition of the ascetic life. It is not a way of life or a life style that requires isolation in a monastery. On the contrary, most believers in the early centuries were working class people as they are now, and this is an undertaking prescribed for all.

Illumination is the stage that follows purification, and is characterized by true spiritual knowledge, *theoria* or vision of God and participation in the Holy Spirit. The person has overcome the control of the passions and is entering into unceasing prayer and communion with God. Spiritual communion, or *theosis*, is the final spiritual stage, characterized by deep and abiding communion with God, approaching the uncreated Light, and the revelation of the depths of God through the Spirit.

### **Advancement Along the Spiritual Path**

Bob grew up in an Orthodox Christian home, attended Sunday School and the Divine Liturgy regularly, served as an Altar Boy for enough years to understand how the Liturgy was celebrated and to have much of the service engrained in his mind. In high school, though, he dropped out of the youth group and pretty well quit attending church during college. He led a pretty carefree college life, playing sports, joining a fraternity, and fully experiencing the "party side" of college. After meeting the love of his life a few years after graduating, he began attending church regularly with her. It was a couple of years after their marriage that he began to feel the relevance of Church again. It was no coincidence that this occurred about the same time as his father was dying of cancer. Suddenly life seemed to change from pretty care free with the certainty of a happy life ahead of him, to the grimness of a possible early death for his father. As Bob struggled with these pressures in his life, he started occasionally hearing phrases in the Scripture lessons or in the homily that very candidly described the situation: "in the world you will have tribulation\*" and held out the hope to "be of good cheer for I have overcome the world." How could one be cheerful about losing your Dad?

Bob was fortunate that he has a discerning priest who knew what he was going through, could see the pain he was struggling with, and made a conscious effort to provide spiritual counsel. Bob discovered that not only were these meetings encouraging, but that his outlook improved. He began to understand that this life is only "this life" and that the real life is the life of the Kingdom of God. With the encouragement of both his wife and priest, he began attending an adult study class and was quite surprised to learn the theological underpinnings of the faith he had claimed all his life. Pretty soon the subject turned to spirituality, and Bob began to find answers to some troubling questions. He began to understand that life is not a bed of roses, that the Christian life is not a "spiritual gloss" over material success. He even began understanding his own failings and limitations, and started going to confession. Other than immediately prior to his marriage, Bob hadn't done that since early high school. He approached it with fear and uncertainty, but found that, much to his surprise, it was what his priest told him: an opportunity to open his soul to God, to receive forgiveness and to be given spiritual counsel. Much to his surprise, his priest suggested he take a retreat, sent him to a small monastery to meet with an old monk. This visit developed into a relationship with a spiritual father who treated him as a disciple.

This discipleship relationship lasted a little over a year, during which Bob, through the help of his spiritual father, came to understand the realities of the spiritual life and the changes of thought and practice he was entering into. Of particular importance was the realization that this was not just new ideas or philosophies that he had added into his personal belief system. Rather, he was entering into a spiritual reality that was much more than ideas: it included Confession, participation in the Sacraments and worship. Bob remembered later that his spiritual father had strongly told him that to continue to experience progress in the spiritual life, he had to include the sacramental realities as well his own personal spirituality. He described this as "co-creating with God," and explained that by receiving the energies of God in the Sacraments, he could experience personal change and make progress in the spiritual life. "You can't do this on your own, with your own ideas and your own talents, many though they may be. There must be an opening in you for God's help."

It took some time for Bob to reflect on and fully process this instruction; but he soon found himself experiencing a new level of peace and strength. This was particularly true after fully entering again into the Sacramental and liturgical life of the Church, and continuing in the spiritual practices his spiritual father had given to him. He had never known this type of centeredness and clarity; he seemed to be able to understand himself and his motivations better than ever before. And it extended to work, where he was able to rise above the fray, see what needed to be done, and achieve the implementation desired. As the pressures of his life began to build again, his life began to change, and Bob thought back on those experiences and how he had changed.

Bob's father died within a year, and while it was terribly painful, and it took a long while to reconcile himself to the paternal loss, he was able to increasingly draw comfort from the fact that his father was in the communion of the saints in the Kingdom. His father's death not only helped him grow and mature as a person, it facilitated his spiritual growth as well. Bob continued on the advancement track at work, and was in upper middle management within two years when his company, one that had been struggling with old products in a weak economy was acquired. As a middle manager he knew that things were going to get worse before they got better, and they did. Two rounds of lay offs reduced the work force by a third, and some of his peers were caught in it. It was still a tough six-month period, living on pins and needles about having a job and still working through the pain from the death of his father. That was when he began to get in touch with the consequences of some of the things that had happened in his childhood, particularly his relationship with his father, and begin to work through them.

Like most of us, Bob discovered that much of what he carried into adulthood, and particularly into his marriage relationship, was perspective, values and behavior he had observed in his own home. His relationship with his father was one of love, but included enough deeply painful experiences that he had repressed a good deal of his childhood family experiences. As he worked through his own sense of identity after his father died, and his own personal difficulties at work, he discovered that much of what he had repressed in his youth was not only still repressed, but had caused him to be disconnected from significant areas of his life. What he thought of as being "cool, calm and collected," in fact turned out to be indifference about many things in his life; and while he told himself that he wasn't indifferent, that he was really just "unattached" to many things in life, he came to realize he was in denial. This was when his priest helped him understand what St. John Climacus called "insensibility\* deadening of the soul and the death of the mind before the death of the body" (Step 18 of the Ladder of Divine Ascent). He points out that insensibility both in body and in spirit is deadened feeling, loss of feeling. In modern terminology we could call it numbness; St. John describes it as "\*negligence that has become habit, benumbed thought, the child of predispositions\* He who has lost sensibility is a witless philosopher, a self-condemned commentator\* a blind man who teaches others to see. He talks about healing a wound and does not stop irritating it. He complains of sickness, and does not stop eating what is harmful. He prays against it, and immediately goes and does it. He blesses silence, and praises it with a spate of words. He teaches meekness, and during the actual teaching frequently gets angry\* All the time he is his own accuser, and he does not want to come to his senses."<sup>9</sup>

As Bob worked through these new-found truths about himself, he not only felt he was making personal spiritual progress, but was better able to deal with the flux of life. He realized that as he became more honest about himself and more in touch with what really mattered, the vagaries of life had less impact and he was able to do better work because he was focused on the important things. Fortunately, the ongoing question about survival at work was resolved favorably and Bob was given an opportunity; his priest described it paraphrasing St. Paul to the Romans: "all things work together for the good for those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose." The acquiring company, having reduced costs and improved profitability, was willing to invest in products for new markets. Bob was promoted to run one of the divisions, and he was now in a position that would have a major impact on the success or failure of the company. As Bob started trying to turn the new division around he realized that there was a significant cultural disconnect with the parent company. The employees were used to a very authoritarian, top down approach to management, they expected to be told what to do, and when he looked at the personnel records he realized that it must not have been too pleasant to work there based on the high levels of turnover. Bob realized, though, that not only did he have to be successful, he had an opportunity to change the culture--to put his beliefs into practice.

First and foremost, he realized, he had always been a "people person" and valued people. He had come to learn that there was a theological reason to do so: people are created in the image of God. They are people because God the Holy Trinity is person. In as much as they are God's creation, they should be treated as such. He also found that it is a lot easier to accept that as theory than it is to put it in to practice. It is always more expedient to tell people what to do; but persons need to be empowered. It is always quicker to terminate under performers, but people need to be coached and developed; those who can't make the grade need to be graciously parted with. Putting this theology into practice was hard. But as he grasped the fundamental Trinitarian theological precepts of unity as a communion of love, hierarchal conciliarity, first among equals, and unity as a communion of love, he found he was a better manager. As he came to understand his own faults and sinful inclinations, he was better able to see and tolerate faults in others, and to invest in people and their development. He realized that he was doing his job less to satisfy himself and make money than to do God's will. He found himself less concerned with specific objective outcomes, and more concerned with the people doing the work. And he found the work was getting done, getting done well, and the employees were generally happier.

Bob's division had two particularly productive managers. He had never felt a particular kinship to either one; they just didn't seem to have much in common. But while both had very different styles, both were productive. One of them had a very different view of life and its purpose, and regularly manipulated people for his own purposes. There was a certain deceptive aspect to him, and Bob never felt like he was quite getting the whole story when he was meeting with him, and was always sure there was something else going on. For the most part, though, unless the behavior was unethical, or employees were getting hurt, he decided not to intervene: to let the manager manage his own team. At one point the tension turned into disagreement and almost conflict over an employee who filed a grievance about how was being treated. Bob got involved, and while it was clear that the employee was not being treated optimally, certainly not the way Bob would treat him, there was no clear evidence of wrong doing. The situation went on for some time, and the interpersonal tension built. Bob felt that it was having a negative influence on his management team and company morale, but there was no basis for remedial action, let alone termination. He went to his spiritual father with the problem, and much to his surprise, was asked a very simple question: "are you praying for this person?"

He was dumbfounded. While he had begun to say morning and evening prayers some years back, and to pray for his friends and family, and especially those he knew who were in need or ill, he had never thought of praying for his employees; especially not problem employees. His spiritual father pointed out to him that he was falling prey to the common "sacred/secular" dichotomy. He had to realize that all life is spiritual, because not only was it created by God, it exists in God. There is no "sacred" part as opposed to a "secular" part, no church part as opposed to a business part: it is all spiritual, and he should be praying for all God's children. Bob's spiritual father gave him a book to read about a monk who lived in the early twentieth century, and for many years was the steward of a large monastery. Most were poor and

uneducated, earning very little, and their lives were difficult in spite of the fact that they worked at a monastery. The author described how a typical day began: "In the morning the Staretz would go round the workshops, giving the foremen general instructions for the day. Then he went back to his cell to weep for the 'people of God.' His heart ached for his men and he shed tears for each one of them. The Staretz prayed in secret of the 'people of God' but they felt and loved him. He never hung over them, never drove them hard, yet they worked better and more cheerfully for him than for anyone else. The other stewards were primarily concerned for the economic interests of the monastery, and, as always happens when economic interests predominate, the person was overlooked. The Staretz believed that the interests of the monastery, the real interests, lay in keeping Christ's commandments."<sup>10</sup>

Bob took the advice and the teaching of the book to heart and began to pray for his employees, including the manager with whom he was having difficulty. Within a couple of months his own boss asked him in a business review how things were going with the manager. He reported that things were getting better, and was asked why. To his surprise he found himself saying "I started praying for all my employees, especially for him. Then I found that my attitude about them changed\* and I think their attitude about me changed."

### **Spiritual Direction and Spiritual Development**

The practical importance of this for all of us correlates with a fact of life. Most people simply gain more control of themselves and of their urges and desires as they mature and grow up. As we leave the teenage years and enter young adulthood, there is generally an increase in temperance, responsibility and balance. A spiritual correlate exists: if we understand the spiritual situation we are in, we can enter into the healing process the Church offers us to gain further control of our lives, to achieve much deeper levels of balance and peace. Not only will we be advancing spiritually, growing closer to God, but we will also be better parents, managers and workers. Most people don't understand this, and thus the ongoing sadness of the human condition. "Today most people live in the prison of the senses. We are confined in prison and are given the right to decorate its dreadful atmosphere. And we like living and passing our lives "imprisoned." That is why the so-called psychological and the agonizing existential problems develop intensely and cannot be solved by human solutions."<sup>11</sup>

Within its therapeutic regimen for the spiritual healing of God's children, the Church has a variety of tools and disciplines. The role of spiritual father or mother and spiritual direction (or spiritual mentoring) are among them. Spiritual direction has a long tradition in Christian spirituality, and Bob was fortunate to experience much of what Bishop Kallistos Ware has described as "Spiritual Direction in the Christian East." He points out that the role of the spiritual father or mother "was by no means limited to instruction in the narrow academic sense, to the bare transmission of facts. The teacher was also a spiritual guide to his pupils, a living model and exemplar, providing them not only with information but with an all-embracing personal relationship." The spiritual director fulfilled five roles: doctor, counselor, intercessor, mediator and sponsor. As doctor, he cares for the "sick man;" in other words, he strives to heal the spiritual illness of the person. As counselor, she teaches and counsels the learner by her words. As intercessor, the mentor heals with his prayers. As mediator she strives to reconcile the learner to God through the integrity and spiritual focus of her life. Finally, as sponsor, he assumes responsibility for the learner by providing security and direction; this role correlates to that of the godparent at a baptism or the sponsor of a monastic profession.<sup>12</sup>

Spiritual direction usually takes one of two forms: that provided by one's parish priest, or that provided by a spiritual father or mother. The figure of the elder (*geronda* in Greek, *staretz* in Russian) occupies a major place in Eastern monastic life and spirituality from the fourth century onwards. St. Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism became a standard and norm still revered today. Most spiritual fathers and mothers are monastics, and thus entering into spiritual direction under one requires the presence of monasteries and personal proximity to a monastery. Generally the parish priest can provide spiritual guidance and counsel, but the role of spiritual director is understood as a charism and gift of God, and thus advanced spiritual

direction usually requires that the disciple come under the care of one. Bob was fortunate to have a priest who had a comprehensive understanding of Christian spirituality and proximity to a spiritual father to whom his priest sent him.

Bob's spiritual growth and progress helped him achieve balance and sensitivity, compassion and humility. He was able to understand some of the things that had happened to him in his life, see how they contributed to those aspects of his personality and behavior that he didn't like and hadn't understood. As he developed personally and spiritually, he became a better manager and was perceived at work as being mature and responsible, compassionate and motivational. He was given the lead position in a number of projects, and began to be promoted. Sadly, after a few years of visiting the monastery occasionally, the old monk became ill and died. Bob had been promoted and could visit less frequently than before: it seemed like life was now a sixty-hour workweek. He struggled to maintain a spiritual center in his life while fulfilling his responsibilities to family and company. About this time his priest was transferred, and the replacement priest was young and inexperienced, and Bob couldn't relate to him. It wasn't long before the spiritual practice that had been the center of Bob's life and that had helped him to grow and advance, had spiraled down to saying morning and evening prayers.

This was a gradual process for Bob, but what he didn't realize was that he was no longer aware of and working to improve his spiritual condition. He thought of himself in a kind of "holding pattern" that would be replaced with time for more focus on the spiritual things of life when this project was over and the company was doing better and the economy had recovered. What he didn't realize was that in the spiritual life there is no holding pattern: one is either making progress toward God or moving away from Him. As Bob moved away, his *nous* became darker, his communion with God decreased, and he came more under the sway of the passions.

## Vocation

In the next few years Bob continued to produce good results at work, and continued to advance. But he was also becoming less tolerant and supportive, less humble and compassionate; the very qualities that had been the basis for his advancement. Some of Bob's peers and superiors started wondering if he was as good as they had thought, and when he lost his temper with a major customer, very much like he had done with Harry, the project manager, he realized he was out of control and began to worry about what else could happen. He specifically sought out a priest for spiritual counsel and was loath to be told that having allowed himself to be consumed by his work responsibilities and realigning his priorities to the job and material compensation, he had fallen into insensibility. He realized it was true when his priest read him St. John Climacus' phrase, "He teaches meekness, and during the actual teaching frequently gets angry." He took the spiritual counsel he received seriously, and began working on his own spiritual life.

One of the first things he had to learn was the truth of what his vocation really was. While the English term is derived from the Latin "*vocare*" meaning, "to be called," the question is called to what? Is it just a "personal calling," or is there a more general, and in fact, spiritual calling? He found the answer to that question in a book by a contemporary theologian who radically challenged his previous beliefs in saying: "God blessed the world, blessed mankind, blessed the seventh day and this means that He filled all that exists with His love and goodness; made all this 'very good.'" So the only natural reaction of mankind, to whom God gave this blessed and sanctified work, is to bless God in return, to thank Him, to see the world as God sees it and--in this act of gratitude and adoration--to know, name and possess the world. All rational, spiritual and other qualities of mankind, distinguishing him from other creatures, have their focus and ultimate fulfillment in this capacity to bless God, to know, so to speak, the meaning of the thirst and hunger that constitutes life. "*Homo sapiens*," "*homo faber*" \*yes, but first of all, "*homo adorans*." The first, the basic definition of mankind is that he is *the priest*. He stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God--and by filling the world with this eucharist (thanksgiving), he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world, into life in God, into communion with Him."<sup>13</sup>

Beginning to participate in that new understanding of life and calling began to change Bob's life once again. It re-oriented him to the fundamental spiritual realities of life, and fortunately Bob's priest provided him with a practice so that it would not become just a disconnected spiritualism. Bob had never had the negative view of monasticism that many do, viewing asceticism negatively because they conceive of ascetics only as unwashed monks with long beards in old monasteries practicing self-denial, fasting and keeping all-night vigils--the exact opposite of the "good life." In fact, his early experience with a spiritual father had confirmed the value of monasticism. What he hadn't really done was brought home the fact that it didn't just have value for "them," (that is, the monastics), but had the same necessary value for him. What Bob had come to understand is that because all are called to be *homo adorans*, to be priests and offer life back to God in thanksgiving, all are called to be ascetics. Whether homemaker, monastic, businessperson, priest, electrician, school teacher, etc., all of us are called upon to practice asceticism, to struggle against the temptations of this life--to be in the world but not of the world.

Through asceticism each person works to transcend his/her fallen nature and its tendencies to individualism and selfishness. And under the guidance of the spiritual father or mother, one learns to manifest this knowledge in a context that is kingdom-centered. Asceticism and its discipline enable us to move beyond selfishness. This is a critical part of the Christian life, as St. Dorotheos of Gaza assures us when he says: "self-indulgence does away with the respect of others, drives away the fear of God, generates contempt."<sup>14</sup> The context for asceticism is the body of the Church. Asceticism is an act of communion, not an act of deprivation or a negative attitude towards life. It is not scorn for the body and matter as much as it is a love for the beauty of personal fulfillment and restoration to the image of God. It is the struggle to renounce our egocentric tendency to see everything as neutral objects, subject to our needs and desires. Asceticism is clearly tied to leadership, as Bob was finding out, for good leadership has to do with renunciation of self and selfishness. Is it possible to be a good leader if I care more about myself than I do about those whom I lead? Probably not! This is just what a nineteenth century Russian bishop had in mind when he said: "Whoever wishes to rule and govern others must learn to rule and govern himself beforehand, and he must first do himself what he wishes and commands others to do."<sup>15</sup>

## **Discernment**

In the New Testament usage, the Greek word *diakrisis* can be translated as either discernment or discrimination. It appears both ways in the New Testament, but in the early spiritual Fathers the term most often used is discernment, but in both instances the meanings are quite different from modern English usage. In today's English we tend to use discrimination as the ability to distinguish, to be able to make distinctions between different things, in an almost aesthetic way. Discernment is commonly understood as the mental power or faculty that allows one to discern or discriminate. In other words, one may be seen as more aesthetic, the other as more intellectual. For the early spiritual Fathers of the Church, these were not seen as either intellectual or aesthetic faculties, but rather spiritual ones. *Diakrisis*, as discrimination, is defined thus: "a spiritual gift permitting one to discriminate between the types of thought that enter into one's mind, to assess them accurately and to treat them accordingly. Through this gift one gains 'discernment of spirits' --that is, the ability to distinguish between the thoughts or visions inspired by God and the suggestions or fantasies coming from the devil. It is a kind of eye or lantern of the soul by which man finds his way along the spiritual path without falling into extremes; thus it includes the idea of discretion."<sup>16</sup>

For the spiritual Fathers, discrimination results from ascetic practice and overcoming the passions. It follows overcoming desire and anger, of attaining the state of being "subject to himself, that God makes all things subject to him through dispassion and by the grace of the Holy Spirit."<sup>17</sup> St. John Damaskos makes clear that this is not a gift or condition of prophecy or foreseeing the future; rather, through humility one reaches the place where he or she is no longer seduced by the outward appearance of things, as they were before. They look dispassionately on all things: gold and silver, stock options and promotion, acquisition and business opportunity, and does not assess them falsely because of his or her passions. "He looks at a man and knows that he too is from the earth and is going to return to it. And he does not simply think

about this in an abstract way, for we all know from experience that this is the case, yet because we are tyrannized by the passions we still have a craving for material things."18 St. John Cassian tells of a monk who asked Abba Moses, "\*you have made it clear that discrimination is the source, root, crown and common bond of all the virtues. We would like very much to know how we can acquire it\* Abba Moses then said: True discrimination comes to us only as a result of true humility, and this in turn is shown by our revealing to our spiritual fathers not only what we do but also what we think, by never trusting our own thoughts, and by following in all things the words of our elders, regarding as good what they have judged to be so."19

What Bob began to discover as he recommitted to a spiritual focus in his life, as he put on the spiritual practice and mindset of the faith, was that many of the things he "needed" to be successful in life, came about as a result of the spiritual undertaking. He understood, of course, that "success" in this context meant fulfilling the will of God in his life, but more importantly that the most important single pursuit was the spiritual one which resulted in discovering the true person in God, in existential growth and communion, in overcoming the passions and reaching the state of no longer being controlled by externals. As he undertook these tasks, as he willingly entered into the practices, as he made progress in becoming who he is in God, not only did he find himself, not only did he grow and develop spiritually, but this very experience manifested itself in unexpected way in the rest of his life.

Once he accepted that his vocation was to offer thanksgiving back to God, he found that he quit worrying about whether he was in the "right" profession, and worried less about advancement for the sake of advancement. As he found himself being grounded spiritually, recognizing his own weaknesses and overcoming them, he discovered he was much more discerning about the decisions that came before him, as well as the problems and weaknesses of the people that brought them. As he gained humility through a true understanding of his own limitations and failings, he found himself to be far more effective in managing his reports and dealing with those around him.

### **Theoretical Possibility or Practical Reality**

Is this just theory, or is this a reality in the Eastern spiritual tradition? Among the oldest axioms of Christianity is the Latin phrase "*lex orandi, lex credendi*": that which is prayed is what is believed. Perhaps the best test, then, of the reality of these precepts in the Eastern Christian tradition is to look for them in the worship services. Two examples may suffice.

Palm Sunday is a feast that comes at the end of the Lenten period, and which offers the entrance into Holy Week and a foretaste of the joy of the Resurrection celebrated on Easter Sunday. Even a Feast such as Palm Sunday, contains examples such as this from the Matins service.

*"Ever since my youth I am at war with many passions; but You will be my help and save me, O Savior."*

The service picks up this theme a little later with,

*"In Your ineffable compassion, O Christ our God, make us victors over our unreasoning passions. Deem us worthy to witness Your swift triumph over death, and Your joyful and life-giving Resurrection, and have mercy on us."*

During the Divine Liturgy on every Sunday, daily hymns (commonly referred to as *Apolotykia* or Dismissal Hymns) are sung in a cycle of eight tones (or modes). The Dismissal Hymn in the Eighth Tone:

*"From on high You did descend, O Compassionate One, and accepted burial for three days, so as to free us from the passions; our Life and our Resurrection, O Lord, glory to You."*

1 Vlachos, Hierotheos; *Orthodox Spirituality*; Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, Levadia, Greece; 1994; p. 34

2 *ibid*, p. 40

3 *ibid*, p. 40

4 *ibid*, p. 41

5 St. Basil the Great, *The Greek Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 1, Thessaloniki, 1972, pg. 68

6 *ibid*, p. 41-42

7 St. Maximos the Confessor, "The First Century on Love" in *the Philokalia*, Faber & Faber, Winchester, MA, 1981, p. 59.

8 Vlachos, H. *The Illness and Cure of the soul in the Orthodox Tradition*, Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, Levadia, Greece, 1993, p. 51.

9 St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, MA, 2001, p. 124-6

10 Archimandrite Sophrony, *The Monk of Mount Athos*, Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989, p. 44

11 *Ibid*, p. 123

12 Ware, Kallistos; in *Spiritual Direction in the Early East* by Irene Hausherr, SJ, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 1990, p. ix.

13 Schmemmann, Alexander, *For the Life of the World*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1973, p. 15

14 St. Dorotheos of Gaza, *Discourses and Sayings*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI, 1977, p. 114

15 Tikhon of Zadonsk, *Journey to Heaven*, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, NY, 1991, p. 104

16 Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, Editors, *The Philokalia, Vol. III*, Faber and Faber, London, 1984, p. 357

17 St. Peter of Damaskos, *The Philokalia, Vol. III*, Faber and Faber, London, 1984, p. 245

18 *ibid*, p. 244

19 St. John Cassian, *The Philokalia, Vol. I*, Faber and Faber, London, 1984, p. 103