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The Journey to God begins with the First Step (Abbot Tryphon)

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Confession

The spiritual struggle that is required of us can not depend on having a spiritual father. Most Orthodox Christians do not have one, and the average parish priest is not equipped, either with the time, nor the inclination, to take on the role of spiritual father to members of his flock.

Just carrying the load as rector, preacher, councilor, confessor, teacher, CEO, and priest, can be an overwhelming burden to the average cleric. Add to the above duties, the obligation a priest has to his wife and family, and you have the potential for burnout. Is it any wonder so many priests get that glazed look on their faces

when someone approaches with spiritual questions that would require more time than the average priest is able to give.

Added to this is the fact that most Orthodox seminaries do not teach pastoral psychology, leaving the priest feeling overwhelmed with often troubled parishioners who's needs are too great for one man. Many of the denominations have rather large staffs, making them better able to help their people with all aspects of their lives, with many lay ministers contributing much to the overall help that these protestant churches are able to offer.

The fact that the Church has guidelines governing the many periods of fasting must often suffice for the parishioner, since the priest may not have the time to be the guide in such matters. The need for discerning one's spiritual struggle, often without a prayer rule, can compound the struggle for the person who wishes to deepen their spiritual life.

We want to dedicate our lives to God on a full-time basis, but we don't have the needed guide to keep us on track. Opportunities for service to the Church, whether by serving in the altar, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday school, or serving on the parish council, can often be the best way we can commit more of our time to living Orthodoxy in a way that is not limited to Sunday services.

What to do? Praying for God to send us a spiritual father or mother can be a good first step in deepening one's commitment to Christ. We can't just order up that which God has for us, but we must make sure we are open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Making life around the Church a high priority in our week can serve as a good start. Orthodoxy is by nature a faith that demands full participation and deep commitment, otherwise it becomes just another religion, devoid of salvific, transformational value.

If Orthodoxy is to be something other than mere magic, with the priest as some sort of wizard who performs the right formulas, thus allowing us to feel we've done all that is needed, our Orthodoxy will have failed us. Do we read the daily prescribed scripture readings? Do the lives of the saints impact our lives, because we read about them? Are we preparing ourselves for the Saturday night confession by taking note of our sins during the week, and being ready to be accountable before God, with the priest as our witness? Are we holding up the Orthodox standard in our public life, or do we allow ourselves to be lost in the crowd, dismissing our obligations to God during the week?

It is always good to have a spiritual father, but the absence of one can not be an excuse for living our Christianity lite. If we allow our pride to keep us from

disclosing our sins in confession, we doom ourselves to mediocrity, and will see no spiritual growth whatsoever. If we feel we need not challenge ourselves to a deeper walk with Christ, because others probably won't notice, we cheat both God and ourselves.

The spiritual life is an adventure, full of pitfalls AND great heights. If we take this journey as the prime reason for living, the reward will be great. If we try living our life with the Church placed in a secondary roll, we will end our lives as losers, and having lost the battle and the reward. Yes, it is best that we have a spiritual father, and we should pray that God send us such a guide, but the road to paradise must begin with a commitment to make this journey our main priority. We are on a journey, and it begins with that first step. Christ stands with us, ready to lift us up when we fall, and even pull us along when we stumble or grow fainthearted.

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