

Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko, Dean Emeritus of St Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, now lives in retirement, with his wife, in Pennsylvania. From there, he travels to speak in many places, he writes, and most importantly, he prays.

The Article, and the Maxims, that I received from him recently, reflect the work of his life. True, he is a gifted teacher, and lecturer, and writer. God has also given him to touch the lives of very many persons very directly. He has read the spiritual fathers, and mothers, and he has applied them, and their teaching, to the lives of these persons, to their benefit. For this reason, it seems useful to make these short reflections, and advice, available to those who are led to them on the internet. May the Grace of the Holy Spirit touch for good, for life, those who read these words, and also him who wrote them.

† Seraphim, Archbishop of Ottawa and Canada, March 2008

HOW CAN I KNOW? By Father Thomas Hopko

How can I know God as God really is?

How can I know Christ as the way, the truth, and the life of God, and humanity, the light of the world? How can I know the Orthodox Church as “the household of God,” and “the pillar, and bulwark of the truth” - God’s kingdom on earth? If you want to find answers for yourself to these questions, Orthodox Christian saints, and spiritual teachers would ask you to do the following things as faithfully, and honestly as you can, and to see for yourself what happens.

1. Be ready to do whatever it takes to know. Humbly, and courageously do what you are told without questioning it in any way. Be determined to follow what you come to know, whatever the cost.

2. Pray for enlightenment, even if your prayer is “to whom it may concern.” Pray something like this: “God, if you exist, reveal yourself to me.”

If you already believe in God somehow, then pray: “God, reveal yourself to me as you really are.”

As you pray, do not look for anything. Let whatever happens, happen.

3. While praying this way, read through the New Testament very slowly, at least three times. Take several months to do this. Do not be bothered about what you don’t understand, but try to put into practice what you do understand.

4. During this time, go to Orthodox Church services if you can. Just stand, or sit there, and listen. Do not judge the people who are there, in any way. Do not be bothered about what you don’t understand. If you are a confused, and troubled member of the Orthodox Church, do not serve at the altar, or read, or sing in the choir, during this period.

5. During this time, do not lie about anything, do not consciously harm anyone, try to be kind, and good to everyone you meet, without exception. If possible, do some good work for others, even if just for an hour or two a week, as secretly as possible. Also if possible, give away some money secretly to those in need.

6. During this time, if you are not married, do not engage in any sexual acts at all, of any kind, even with yourself alone. If you fail in this, forget it immediately, and start over.

7. During this time, do not get drunk. Do not eat too much. Do not eat unhealthy foods. And try to eat, and drink less than normal, a couple of days a week, e.g. on Wednesdays, and Fridays.
8. During this time, sit in total silence, at least 10 to 15 minutes a day, or even up to 30 minutes a day, if you can, watching the thoughts that come to your mind, and letting them go with a prayer: "God [if you are there] enlighten my mind. God [if you are there] help me with this. God [if you are there] help these people who come to mind."
9. During this time, try to speak as little as possible, without irritating others. Do not try to make your opinions known, or accepted in conversations, unless asked. Listen to others. Be attentive to their presence, and their needs. Do not argue with anyone about anything.
10. During this time, find someone that you fully trust, and share with him/her your thoughts, feelings, dreams, hang-ups, compulsions, etc. in detail. Do not, however, go into detail about sexual things, or about other people. Discuss in detail your family of origin, and your childhood experiences — good, and bad. Focus on what memories distress, and sadden you, and what memories bring you joy.
11. During this time, do a "check list" for possible food, alcohol, drug, or sex addictions, and other addictions that you may think that you have, like, e.g. rage, gambling, or shopping. If you see that you are addicted in some way, enter a treatment programme (or a support group).
12. During this time, do your work, or your studies, to the best of your ability: carefully, responsibly, conscientiously, and devotedly. Live a day, even a part of the day, at a time. Focus fully on what you are doing at the given moment.

55 MAXIMS (2008)

01. Be always with Christ, and trust God in everything
02. Pray as you can, not as you think you must.
03. Have a keepable rule of prayer, done by discipline.
04. Say the Lord's Prayer several times each day.
05. Repeat a short prayer when your mind is not occupied.
06. Make some prostrations when you pray.
07. Eat good foods in moderation, and fast on fasting days.
08. Practice silence: inner, and outer.
09. Sit in silence 20 to 30 minutes each day.
10. Do acts of mercy in secret.
11. Go to liturgical services regularly.
12. Go to confession, and holy communion regularly.
13. Do not engage intrusive thoughts, and feelings.
14. Reveal your thoughts, and feelings to someone regularly.
15. Read the scriptures regularly.
16. Read good books, a little at a time.

17. Cultivate communion with the saints.
18. Be an ordinary person, one of the human race.
19. Be polite with everyone, first of all with family members.
20. Maintain cleanliness, and order in your home.
21. Have a healthy, wholesome hobby.
22. Exercise regularly.
23. Live a day, even a part of a day, at a time.
24. Be totally honest, first of all with yourself.
25. Be faithful in little things.
26. Do your work, then forget it.
27. Do the most difficult, and painful things first.
28. Face reality.
29. Be grateful.
30. Be cheerful.
31. Be simple, hidden, quiet, and small.
32. Never bring attention to yourself.
33. Listen when people talk to you.
34. Be awake, and attentive, fully present where you are.
35. Think, and talk about things no more than necessary.
36. Speak simply, clearly, firmly, directly.
37. Flee imagination, fantasy, analysis, figuring things out.
38. Flee carnal, sexual things at their first appearance.
39. Don't complain, grumble, murmur, or whine.
40. Don't seek, or expect pity, or praise.
41. Don't compare yourself with anyone.
42. Don't judge anyone for anything.
43. Don't try to convince anyone of anything.
44. Don't defend, or justify yourself.
45. Be defined, and bound by God, not by people.
46. Accept criticism gracefully, and test it carefully.
47. Give advice only when asked, or when it is your duty.
48. Do nothing for people that they can, and should, do for themselves.
49. Have a daily schedule of activities, avoiding whim, and caprice.
50. Be merciful with yourself, and with others.
51. Have no expectations, except to be fiercely tempted until your last breath.
52. Focus exclusively on God, and light, and never on darkness, temptation, and sin.
53. Patiently endure your faults, and sins peacefully, under God's mercy.
54. When you fall, get up immediately, and start over.
55. Get help when you need it, without fear, or shame.