

Connect Conference Speech

Good morning. The fine folks at Connect originally asked me to come in and speak with you all today about stewardship. Stewardship is generally giving your time, talent and treasure (your money) to the church for a specific ministry or if you are working with the church, getting other people to give their time, talent and treasure for a ministry. And I guess, between the parish council, Sunday school, school board and marketing team for the festival, I do give a lot of my time to the church. But the fact is that stewardship, whether in ourselves or in our communities, is a product, a result of something else. Do the right things over here and stewardship happens, it's a result not a goal. It's like making money. (slide- \$) You can go hang out under the bridge down there and beg for money or you can work, create something amazing and money will naturally come your way.

For example, I'm a big SEC football fan, Go Dawgs, but let's just take Alabama for an example. (Slide- Alabama logo) Do you think anyone at the Alabama administration is worried about people buying football tickets this year? Is their goal to sell football tickets? Why not? That football program helps fund all sorts of other activities, it's super important and yet they don't focus on selling tickets, they focus on coaching and recruiting on making a great football team. They focus on making the game day experience as entertaining as possible. You might think of course people are going to spend their time and their treasure at Alabama football games! People love Alabama football. But that's a result of them focusing on the right things.

Tim Tassopoulos from Chick-fil-A (slide- Chick fil-a logo) came and spoke to this crowd last year. I don't know it for a fact, but my guess is, they are not sitting around a table worrying about whether people are going to come by their stores and buy chicken sandwiches today. Why not? Because they focus on making delicious food and their service and experience you have in their stores is the best in their business. They focus over here...and the money (selling chicken sandwiches) well it just sort of happens as a product of doing things right.

Of course people will spend their time and money at these places, people love Chick-fil-A! People love Alabama football!

Don't we love God and His Church?

If we can create lovers of God and His Church within ourselves and our communities and we'll never have to be concerned about stewardship because stewardship is a product of all of us being lovers of God

(Slide- "Let all that you do be done with love" 1 Corinthians 16:14

Ask yourselves, what motivates us to go to church? Is it love?

There is some wisdom concerning this that comes to us from the Fathers of the Church. I have been told that this comes from St. Gregory of Nyssa, (slide- Gregory of Nyssa) so sometime around the 350's, so this is ancient wisdom, and yet, it always amazes me how relevant all of this is to this day.

I was actually exposed to this from a modern book, Kyriacos Markides' "Mountain of Silence". In that book the main character, "Fr. Maximos", which was just a pseudonym for an actual priest, now

metropolitan Athanasios of Limassol, echoed Gregory of Nyssa when he said that there are 3 groups of people who come to church.

The first group are the (slide) the Slaves of God

The slaves of God believe in God and they go to church but what motivates them to go to church is fear; fear of hell, fear of damnation. They don't want to go to hell, so they go to church. They fear God and it's this fear that drives them to go to church. "Fr. Maximos" points out that at least they're here in church! They could be anywhere else. If it's fear that motivates them to go to church, then that fear is a positive motivating factor.

The second group they describe as (slide) the employees of God.

The employees of God, believe in God and they go to church. These are good people, they do the right things, they play by the rules but at the end of the day what motivates them to go to church is they, like employees, want to get paid. They want a little something for their efforts. 'I didn't lie, cheat and steal. I didn't kill anyone, I didn't even cuss at that guy who cut me off in traffic on the way over here this morning. I come to church! How 'bout a little something for my efforts, God?' The employees of God want to get into heaven and it's this that motivates them to come to church. The logic is sound, we all want to get into heaven, but there's a third and final group of people who come to church.

The last group are simply (slide) the lovers of God.

The lovers of God go to church not out of fear of hell or want for heaven but simply out of love for God! They have a relationship with God. They love God and they know that God loves them despite their brokenness. They receive consolation and healing from God and they run into the arms of the church out of love and gratitude, not out of fear or want or even obligation.

I can see you all doing the math on which group you all are in. I hope you're all in the last group! I can tell you quite honestly, when I read those words, I knew for a fact I wasn't a lover of God. I wasn't and neither was my family. I can't tell you what group I was in but I can tell you we weren't lovers of God. I mean, we went to church, but not all the time and certainly not for the long services or when it was inconvenient. I can't even tell you why we went.

What I can tell you is that I felt better when I went to church, even if it was in some vague way. Every time I went to church, I would literally say, "I'm glad I did that!" In fact, there are three things that make me feel better about myself when I'm doing them. The first one, as I said, is going to church. (slide-church) The second one is taking care of myself (exercise and eating right); (slide- fit guy) skip the burger and fries and have the salad, you walk out to the restaurant and think, "I'm glad I did that!" I didn't want to go to the gym, but I went anyway. I walk out, "I'm glad I did that!" And the third thing, for me is reading a book. (slide- book) Rather than flipping through my phone for hours trying to entertain yourself, or digging through Netflix, I turn it all off and read a book. When I put it down and I always think, "I'm glad I did that".

Mind, body and soul. But the thing about all those "activities" is that they all take effort on my part. So anytime I was feeling lazy or it was inconvenient or you know I was your age once, maybe I was a little hung over. Anytime I just didn't feel like it, those were the first things I would put down and stop doing.

(slide- guy on couch) Order a pizza, turn on Netflix, skip the gym...and church while we're at it. I'll do that stuff next week....okay, maybe the week after that. Suddenly you're out of the habit.

Being an Orthodox Christian wasn't who I was, it was something I did...once in a while on Sundays. Listen to the words, "I'm glad I did that". It wasn't who I was, it was something I did....sometimes. I was no more a Christian than I was an athlete or a scholar. Those were just things I did...once in a while.

The fact is for the first 16 years of my being an Orthodox Christian, I had only read one book that was Orthodox: (slide) Kallistos Ware's, "The Orthodox Church". Not exactly a page turner, but an important book if you are converting. It's the "who's what and why's of Orthodoxy", a little history of the Church. I was coming over from Anglicanism and knowing what we believe and why we believe it seemed pretty important. I'm digging through there making sure there are no magical underwear and we don't have to go knock on doors. We don't, so I was good. The conversion was an easy one for me, but it didn't turn me into a lover of God; because that's not how love works! I didn't fall in love with my wife because she is 5'2" with brown hair and brown eyes; why would I fall in love with God and His Church because I know that we don't worship icons or that Chalcedon didn't work out too well for anyone? That's just information, it's no reason to fall in love with anyone, or anything!

Slide- St. Diodochos of Photiki who wrote in the 5th century once said that "True theology isn't information about God, but an experience of God"

Christ didn't argue the disciples into believing he was the son of God, they experienced Him! They saw Him walk on water, feed the hungry and heal the sick. They touched Him and spoke to Him after he rose from the dead. St. Paul wasn't argued out of being a Pharisee, he experienced Christ on the road to Damascus. Orthodox Christianity is an experiential form of Christianity; we kiss the icons, we smell the incense, we taste the blood and body of Christ.

If we want to become "Lovers of God", we have to deepen our relationship and deepen our experience of God and His Church.

That's what I needed, a deeper experience of God!

For 16 years I stood there thinking, this is all there is to being Orthodox right? I believe what everyone else believes. I cross myself the right way, I kiss this icon the same way as everyone else, I can even say the Lord's Prayer in Greek, look at me I'm an Orthodox Christian! What more is there?

There's a story that comes from (Slide) The Sayings of The Desert Fathers, Abba Lott went to see his spiritual father Abba Joseph of Panephrisis, and he says, "Abba, I say my little office (his monastic rule of prayer), I fast, I purify my thoughts, I'm hospitable with my neighbors as far as I am able. What more is there?

Exactly! That's where I was! What more is there? We can go through the motions of doing outwardly spiritual things. I fast, I pray, I cross myself the right way...this is what it means to be an Orthodox Christian, right?

Well, in the story Abba Joseph stood up and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to Abba Lott, "If you would only will it my child, you could become all flame!"

And the takeaway from that story isn't Abba Joseph's transfiguration, it what he say's before: "If you would only will it", our desire for more has to come from us! If we want a deeper relationship with God, a more profound experience of God in our lives, we have to want more!

"The kingdom of Heaven is taken by force!" If we want to be lovers of God, the desire for that experience, for "something more" has to come from us. But it won't happen by intention, we have to work at it!

There's a wonderful saying from (slide) St. John of Apamea, "if we purify ourselves of wickedness, then we will come to see invisible realities. But there is no point, while we are still blind, in wondering why we cannot see the light. There is no point in stuffing up our ears and moaning about the fact that we cannot hear."

We fill our lives with all these things, people, electronics...all this noise.... and then wonder why we can't hear God's voice. 25 years in the music business, I know a little something about noise. I know a whole lot about distractions and spending time on things that don't bring us closer to God or His creation.

If we want something more, we have to want it and be willing to do something about. That's the first step. "Pick up your cross and follow me" (Matt 16.24) . Isn't that why you are all here? For something more? That's why you all drove here and plopped down your money, right?

A lot of you are just out of college. I remember when you get to a point in your lives where you think, if one more idiot yells (slide) "shots" or if one more person judges me on what my major is or what fraternity I was in, I'm going to scream....I just want to have a conversation about something that matters....something more...

Those are "light bulb" moments....you want something more. That's the first step.

For me it happened when my oldest daughter came up to me and said, I know more about Buddhism, Hinduism and Daoism than I do our own faith. She even had a Buddhist quote of the day app on her phone that she found useful. So, she was looking for something spiritual, but wasn't finding it here in The Church, at least not the way she was experiencing it in our family. So I go and talk to my spiritual Father and in his very loving way, he says that there is certainly wisdom in those philosophies, but I don't think she will find the fullness that she will find here in The Church.

The fullness? You mean there's more to this? How could I possibly talk to my daughter or exemplify the fullness in any way if I had no idea what the fullness really was. And suddenly, this stopped being about my daughter and it became about me....that was my moment where I wanted more....more than just standing there expecting something to happen without my giving any real effort.

You know we talk about the fullness of The Church and living a life of Fullness in Christ. Well, I also think that the fullness also refers to the tools that The Church gives us in order to live that life. But it's also up to us to pick up those tools. (slide) The Orthodox Church has the liturgy and the sacraments and if we just stopped there, we would have an abundance that likes of which most churches around here couldn't fathom. (slide) But we also have architecture that sings to the glory of God; the domes in our churches are symbolic of God bending the heavens to hear our prayers. (slide) We have iconography and the psalter, we have the sayings of the desert father and the lives of the saints and 2,000 years of

Christian experience that says you and I can experience God, here and now...and here's how! But we have to use the tools that are available to us.

Find something that deepens your relationship with God and his church, that deepens your experience of God and we can all become lovers of God.

For me, it has been through the books. And I know, you're probably thinking, "isn't that just more information about God?" Well, yes and no". I'm not really talking about the dogma books as much as the lives of the saints and the sayings of the Fathers and their theology. Anytime you read a book, you get inside the authors head. You can hear their voice, listen to the way their mind works, their logic, their reasoning, their thought patterns. Imagine how this can affect you when you're reading something written by a true lover of God? Not only do you get to know them. You acquire their mindset, their (slide)"phronima". The mind of The Church isn't one person but more of a symphony of voices all singing to the glory of God. When we acquire the phronima off the Saints and true lovers of God, we tune ourselves to the symphony. We tune ourselves to Christ.

(slide)There is something called the law of association. It basically says that everything we associate with, come in contact with is either lifting us up or pulling us down. So everything you read, listen to, the news, the music, social media, the people around you, even the fats and sugars and carbohydrates that we take in are lifting us up, or pulling us down. Imagine, the lift you will get when you spend time with Saints.

They not only become your companions, they become your friends. I'll give you an example, I worked with Island Def Jam, Geffen Records and I was always struck by how people would react to the artists, especially the female artists at the meet and greets. They would wanted to hug them. They didn't know these artists, but they wanted to touch them, hug them, and even kiss them. They'd never met them and yet they treated them like long lost friends...because they'd spent time with them, with their music, with their lyrics, in their cars, at home, at the beach. These artist's words and music had been with them when they were happy, sad and alone. So, when they finally saw them they wanted more than an autograph, they wanted to greet them like family, like friends, with a kiss and a hug.

Imagine how you'll react to the (slide)icon on St. Nectarios after you spend time reading about his life, when you know how he suffered from the slander of others and how he reacted to that with humility, love and forgiveness...not bitterness. Suddenly, you venerate his icon, not out of obligation but out of love. You know him, you love him and you kiss his cheek with love and affection. It deepens that experience.

These books affect how you perceive the world. They have been for me, a guide. (slide)It's like going to a wine tasting and they pour out the wine. My level of perception is simply, "it tastes like wine". Maybe I like this, better than that. But then the sommelier comes by and asks, "can you taste the plums, or maybe the dark cherry, or if it's a white wine maybe the pear, or butter. You take another sip and "Oh yeah, I can totally taste that." Those flavors were always there, you just needed a guide to say "Look here for a deeper experience, look here for something more."

If you want to be a lover of God, find something that deepens your experience of God and His Church. Maybe for you it's the iconography, for you the architecture, maybe for you the theology, but find something that lifts you up. Even if you just read the books for the stories; when (slide) St. Euphemia

knocks of the door of Elder Paisios hermitage or when (slide) St. Anthony raises a hand to God and says, "Where were you?" and God answers, "Anthony, I was here. But I wanted to see your contest"!

Even these simply stories can deepen our experience of God and lead us to becoming Lovers of God.

The third part of all of us becoming lovers of God and so good stewards of His Church, is actually the theme for the conference this year. (slide) "What is your purpose?" Why are you here, why are any of us here?

The evangelicals do a great job of letting you know why you are there. You've seen it on bumper stickers; (slide) "Are you saved?" But we're Orthodox Christians, we don't even know what that means! "Am I saved? Saved from what, saved for what?"

"Well, saved from Hell brother, saved for heaven!"

"I don't know, how do I get saved?"

"Well, all you have to do is accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior"

"Yeah, sure of course, I believe in Jesus."

"Well, congratulations Brother, you are saved!"

"Awesome, do I have to do anything else?"

"Nope, just sit here, the band is gonna play a couple tunes that sound like Matchbox 20 but with vaguely Christian lyrics; lift you up, hold my hand, he died for you, something like that and then I'm going to go up there and give a 45 minute "Ted Talk" about Jesus and you're gonna walk out of here fired up about being a follower of Christ!"

"Fantastic, do I have to wear anything nice?"

"Hell, you don't even have to wear anything clean! Come On!"

They've made it simple for everyone. Everybody wants to get into heaven. And it's very employees of God. But I have some bad news for you all, you all are Orthodox Christians and heaven isn't our purpose and if you read Matthew 24:35 "Heaven and Earth will pass away", it may not even be our final destination.

In fact there's a great book (slide) by an Anglican biblical scholar, Paula Gooder called "Heaven" where she suggest that when you ask people what heaven is, they will tell you that it is the place where I will go when I die. She says "We (the protestants) have privatized and postponed heaven. We've made it about me, then, rather than about God, Now! And the problem with that is that when you read through the biblical narrative, heaven doesn't primarily refer to the place where I go when I die but rather the place where God dwells now, because God wants to be as close as possible to His creation that he loves.

When I read those words, I thought, wow, what an amazingly Orthodox perspective! We surround ourselves with Iconography in order to remind ourselves that the veil between this world and the next is thin and that God and the Saints and the Angels, they're all right here!

Slide- St. John of Kronstadt said, "God is closer to me than my own clothes and that if more people understood that, they might act a little better."

Heaven is not our purpose, heaven is here, heaven is now! The problem, as I see it, is that **(slide)** Theosis doesn't fit on a bumper-sticker or if it did, the definition certainly wouldn't. And even when we hear the definition, it doesn't really mean anything to us. Theosis means **(slide)** deification, reflecting the likeness and image of God.....yeah, still not helpful.

Saint Athanasius famously said, **(slide)** "God became man, so that man could become God."

What? I'm not going to become God!

The problem is we're thinking about the wrong God. Athanasius isn't talking about this God **(slide-** picture of Sistine Chapel) or this God **(slide-** Zeus)...no one here is going to shooting lighting-bolts out of their hands. God became man, so that man could become THIS God **(Slide-** Christ on the cross). The suffering servant, the Lamb of God.

In his book "Becoming Human", **(slide)** Fr. John Behr suggest that Christ showed us what it means to be God and what it means to be fully human, by the way he died on the cross. **(Slide)**

This is what God looks like. When we hear that we are made in the image of God, this is the image they're talking about. Christ is the original stamp and we're all punched out in His image. So this is what God looks like and this is who were are meant to become because "My strength is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:8. God's greatness is show in humility, through love, through sacrifice.

Fr. John Behr continues his argument by pointing out that Christ showed us what it means to be fully human, by the way he died on the cross.

(slide) "Behold the man"-John 19:5, said Pontius Pilate. This is what one looks like, in all of its fullness, because we don't live lives that are fully human until we live a life of sacrifice for others, of humility, of love.

If you want to know what your real purpose is here, look to your left and look to your right. It starts there, with those around us, our neighbors.

(slide) St. Jon Climacus said that "He who loves God (and that's what we're talking about today, is for all of us to become lovers of God) He who loves God must first love his neighbor, because the 2nd is proof of the first."

Our purpose, is with each other, that's what gives us meaning in our lives. **(slide)** Renowned psychologist Martin Seligman said "meaning comes from belonging to and serving something beyond yourselves.

Suddenly, we're back to stewardship. Once we realize that our purpose in life is to serve others and that we derive meaning and purpose when we live lives of sacrifice for others, suddenly, people don't have to be asked to serve, they run to The Church and ask, where can I help, who can I serve?

What happens is that we all live our lives in our own heads, carry all these hurts, judgements, slights and worries but we can't carry them and help others. So we put those burdens down and offer up a hand. When we're done, a lot of the time, we don't want to pick those burdens back up. We don't need them.

We don't want them anymore. So it's through these acts of kindness for others that we are the ones that are healed.

Find someone who is hungry, lonely, isolated, and be there for them. Open your hearts to others and you will open your heart to God. (slide)

This way, we can all become lovers of God and His creation.

One more thing about purpose; know your purpose in Church. I teach Sunday school and I had a kid come in one day. This kid had been an acolyte his entire life, raised in The Church, walks in and announced, "Church is boring." I said, "what are you praying for that's so boring?" He said, "I'm not praying." So, I said, "What are doing in there then?" and he said, "I don't know, just waiting for it to over I guess."

For 17 years that kid had held his pike for no other reason other than to make his yia yia and Papou proud. It didn't turn him into a lover of God. He had no idea why he was there. (slide) He had no idea that we are given an opportunity each week, in one of the most beautiful places on the planet, surrounded by iconography, with a choir that sounds like angels or chanters whose baritones echo around our churches, for an hour and a half, to get to set down all of that baggage I was talking about, to set it down and just quiet ourselves for a little while and just pray. And while you're there, maybe ask for a little help.

If we don't know what our purpose is in church, we can miss the opportunity that has been there the whole time. If we don't take the time to talk to God, how can we know and love Him?

Finally, if we want to become lovers of God, we have to actually participate in being Christian. I can watch football all day long, but that doesn't make me a football player. I can know all the players, where they're from, they formations and all the plays...still not a football player.

If we want to become lovers of God, we have to participate in being Christians. (slide) Go to church, pray, take part in the sacraments, fast, take communion, go to confession...all of these are tools that the church gives us to commune with God. Take advantage of them. But almost as important, and certainly harder, is we have to actually do the things that Christians are called to do; like forgive others. We pray all the time, (slide) "as we forgive those who trespass against us." That prayer should scare the hell out of all of us, because we don't forgive people. We hold grudges and old hurts. We pet them and keep them close until we become bitter and hardened. We have to learn to forgive people.

We have to stop judging everyone and everything. (slide) "Judge not lest you too shall be judged." Matt 7:1...Social media? Certainly He's not talking about me! We judge constantly and it separates us from our fellow man, it puts us above others and removes from us the ability to love one another the way God intended.

If we don't actually do the things that Christ called us to do, are we really Christians? What you will find is that all of this is very hard. Have you met my neighbor? I'm pretty sure Jesus' neighbor cut his grass once in a while. But this is the hard work of reflecting God's image back into the world. This is where the bar is set:

(slide) St. Justin Popovich said, “Man sentenced God to death and He sentenced them to immortality by His resurrection. In return for blows, He embraces. In return for abuse He, blesses. In return for death, He gives immortality.”

Can we forgive in return for hate? We can't even be Facebook friends with them!

None of this is easy and what you will find is you need help. (slide) Speak to God, the His mother and the Saints. They're right here. If you don't need help, then you don't need a savior, you don't need Christ.

(slide) St. Athanasius said that, “Man was created so that the savior would not exist in vain.” We were made in order to be saved.

And when you receive that help, or that consolation, you can't help but to want to come to Church and thank God for all He has given you.

So, if we want to be good stewards of Christ's Church here on earth, we have to become lovers of God. In order to do that we have to want more than just knowledge, but a deeper experience of God. That desire has to come from us. 2nd, find something that helps you in that journey for more; scripture, Icons, liturgy, theology, architecture. 3rd, remember why we're all here, what's our purpose?....Theosis, to reflect God's image back into the world. But remember what that image is: The crucified Christ, humble, loving forgiving and sacrificial. And Finally, we have to do the things that Christians are called to do; love one another, help each other, forgive.

In this way we can all become Lovers of God, stewards of Christs Church and children of light.

May God Bless you all and thank you all for having me today.