

Guiding Principles of Vision 2000: A Bible Study



STUDY 1

The Person and the Family

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FORWARD

In July of 2000, at the 20th Sobor of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, a series of resolutions were passed under the title "Vision 2000". These resolutions covered the areas of spiritual renewal, educational development, effective communication and responsible stewardship; they gave the UOCC a mandate touching upon our internal life, our relations with other Orthodox Churches, and our outreach to the wider community.

These resolutions were founded upon a set of "Guiding Principles"; these principles outline fundamental Orthodox teachings on the nature of the human journey, and on the Church in which we are called to carry out this journey. This Bible study series is designed to offer a closer look at the Guiding Principles that formed "Vision 2000". It is hoped that this endeavour will be of benefit to all who continue the spiritual journey of life in the Holy Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada.

Rev. Fr. Andrew Jarmus, Winnipeg, 2002

Guiding Principles of Vision 2000: A Bible Study

STUDY 1. The Person and the Family

- 1.1 Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God – the image of God being all our God-like qualities in potential, the likeness of God being these qualities in their fulfillment.
- 1.2 Human beings are born into a specific culture and language tradition which, according to the miracle at Pentecost, is sanctified as the means for glorifying God. In the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Canada, it is the Ukrainian cultural heritage and the Ukrainian language, supplemented by English and French, that are the vehicles for conveying Orthodox teachings.
- 1.3 The fundamental goal of human life is to grow ever more fully into the likeness of God. This is accomplished not solely as a human endeavour, but by God's grace, which becomes effective in us as we cooperate with His Will for us and for our world. This process is called "deification" ("obozhennia" in Ukrainian; "theosis" in Greek).
- 1.4 In every human being there is a desire for such growth – a desire which can be fulfilled only by an intimate fellowship/communion with God.
- 1.5 Because of sin and death (which are the results of human rebellion against God), people do not easily see that true fulfillment comes from following God's way and, instead, seek it in temporal pleasures, movements, and ambitions that, in the end, prove to be fruitless. This is the ultimate cause of existential despair and anxiety that all people inevitably face in their lives.
- 1.6 The sacraments, prayer, and the disciplines of fasting, moral life and stewardship/outreach are the vehicles through which a person is nourished and strengthened by God for spiritual growth. These are the true vehicles through which one finds personal, inner fulfillment.
- 1.7 The human relationship with God is a reciprocal one. In addition to receiving blessings from God, each person must strive to dedicate to God all his/her potential and talents, seeking always to serve and glorify Him. Every believer, therefore, has a calling, a ministry to fulfill in the life of the Church.

1.1 Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God...

- When we look at our origins, we find something unique about the human race, a quality possessed by no other created being.

Looking at the creation narrative in Genesis 1, verses 26 and 27 reveals to us the traits that set us apart from all other creatures:

Genesis 1:26,27

NOTE: *It should be noted that in Orthodoxy we do not interpret "dominion" to mean that we have a right to abuse, exploit or neglect creation. Our God-given dominion over the world means that we are the custodians of creation. "Dominion" in our Orthodox mindset is based, not on power and control, but on love and service.*

- No other creature is made in God's image and likeness.

In our Orthodox Holy Tradition, we make a distinction between these two terms, "*image*" and "*likeness*". The image of God are all those God-like

qualities that exist as inner traits, potentials.

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul lists a number of qualities that he calls the fruits of the Holy Spirit. These qualities are all part of the image of God in us:

Galatians 5:22,23

- Other aspects of the image of God in human beings are creativity, compassion and self-sacrifice.

Discuss other possible marks of God's image in us, and list them here:

- In Orthodoxy, we maintain that an "image" bears a measure of the honour and value of that which it represents.

Images are not "just" representations of something; rather, they allow us to be partakers in that which they represent.

We believe that the honour given to an image is directed also to the one who the image depicts. Since human

beings are images of God, how we relate with other people has a bearing on our relationship with God.

Jesus makes this clear in His teaching about the Last Judgement, found in Matthew 25:31-46.

In particular verse 40 contains a very important teaching:

Matthew 25:40

- The Orthodox Christian concept of image compels us to look beyond what we see and open ourselves to the reality that lies within.

It is in our encounter with this inner reality that we come face to face with the One who created the image.

Thus, a right relationship with God must be founded upon functional relationships with our fellow human beings.

1.2 Human beings are born into a specific culture and language tradition...

- An important element of God's image in us is that we are social creatures.

Our lives cannot be lived in exclusion from other people.

The fundamental social unit in which we live is the family.

In a wider spectrum, people live in communities, and these communities are component parts of entire nations.

Nations have their own specific history, culture and, in many cases, language.

God reaches out to all nations with His saving grace.

In the Gospel of St. Matthew, we find the "*Great Commission*", the mandate that Christ gives to His apostles regarding "all nations", as he ascends into heaven:

Matthew 28:16-20

NOTE: *Matthew 28:16-20 is the Gospel reading of the Baptismal service.*

- This *Great Commission* is understood to lay out the fundamental work of the Church in the world.

The fact that God blesses all cultures is shown in the miracle of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit, in the form of tongues of fire, descends upon the

Apostles. Acts 2:1-13 tells us that immediately after receiving this blessing, the apostles go out to preach in the streets of Jerusalem.

Acts 2:4,7, and 8 reveal the great miracle, that people from all over the known world hear the apostles in their own languages:

Acts 2:4,7,8

- The history of Orthodox missionary activities also bears witness to the understanding that God blesses all cultures.

For example, when the two Greek missionary brothers, Saints Cyril and Methodius, traveled north from Constantinople to preach the Good News among the Slavic peoples, they did not force these peoples to take on the Greek language or culture.

Rather, learning their language and cultural heritage, they brought Christ to the Slavs in this context.

We see the same pattern for Orthodox missionary efforts in Alaska, Japan, and elsewhere.

We can say, therefore, that our cultural identity is one of the things that is sanctified by God when we receive Him into our lives.

This identity and heritage is to be used as a vehicle for praising and serving the Lord.

Our earthly national identity thus becomes an icon of our spiritual identity as citizens of God's People, a holy and eternal nation.

It is only in the context of serving the One who created cultural identity, that our cultures can be properly celebrated and find lasting endurance.

1.3 The fundamental goal of human life is to grow ever more fully into the likeness of God...

- As mentioned earlier, the image of God in us involves all our God-like qualities as they exist in potential.

The likeness of God, on the other hand, involves those potentials as they are fulfilled in our lives.

In the Gospel of St. Matthew, 5:48, Jesus tells us, "Therefore, you will be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

In our Orthodox understanding, the goal of our lives is to grow more and more into the likeness of God.

This process is called "*deification*" or "*theosis*"; in Ukrainian it is known as "*obozhennia*".

In a similar vein, St. Peter, in his second epistle, writes about our high calling as human beings:

2 Peter 1:4

- We are called to be partakers in God's very self. St. Athanasius, speaking of Christ's incarnation, said, "*God became man that man might become like God.*"

This teachings is also found in Psalm 82, verse 6 (81,LXX):

Psalm 82:6

- Ultimately, this is possible only because of God's mercy and grace blessing our lives.

The saints teach that what God is naturally we can become through grace.

1.4 In every human being there is a desire for such growth...

- Just as God wants us to grow in His likeness, every human being has an innate desire for such growth.

It is said that everyone has a religion – something greater than himself or herself that they wish to achieve.

The proper achievement, "greater than ourselves", is growth in the likeness of God.

We can do nothing to achieve this growth without God.

In fact, the Saints teach us that the essence of the ancestral ("original") sin was that Adam and Eve tried to become "a god without God".

This, in essence is exactly what the serpent tempts them with in Genesis 3:1-5:

Genesis 3:1-5

- God *does* want us to become like Him; this is the very destiny He has given us from the beginning. However, He knows that growth in His likeness is not possible without nurturing a living relationship with Him.

Only by having such a relationship with God do we receive the blessings necessary to fulfill our ultimate desire for growth in perfection.

1.5 Because of sin and death people do not easily see that true fulfillment comes from following God's way...

- The Saints teach us that each person possesses a spiritual sense

that allows us to perceive God and His workings in our life.

The commonly used English term for this sense is "intellect", and the Greek term used by the Holy Fathers is the "nous".

One result of sin is that the "nous", our spiritual sense, is clouded, making it difficult for us to recognise what is truly meaningful and sacred in life.

Possessing a desire for spiritual growth, we do not always recognise what is truly needed to achieve this development in our lives.

Consider St. Paul's teachings about the tyranny of sin and death in the world, found in Romans 1:18-25. Of particular importance is what he says in verses 24 & 25:

Romans 1:24,25

- Instead of turning to the True and Living God for support and nurture, we place our hopes in false gods.

Sometimes these gods are material things, which we believe will give us happiness if we can acquire enough of them.

Other false gods involve our place in society: popularity, power, and desirability.

These false gods can also come in the forms of philosophies and ideologies by which we live.

Anything which we turn to for ultimate meaning and happiness in our lives, other than the Living God, is a false god – an idol.

Consider some of the false gods in which people put their hopes, and list them here:

- Although these false deities might seem attractive in the present, idols have no lasting value.

In the end, these gods are shown to be empty.

Sometimes the false gods in our life are aspirations that are beyond our grasp (at work, in the family, etc.).

At times, when these achievements are actually attained, people are disappointed to find that they are as

hungry and as lost as they were before.

It is said that the two most common maladies in our modern life are depression and anxiety.

These are really two sides of the same coin, and are results of people placing their hopes in false gods, in which there is no peace, no ultimate value, and no life.

1.6 The sacraments, prayer, and the disciplines of fasting, moral life and stewardship/outreach are the vehicles through which a person is nourished and strengthened by God for spiritual growth...

- We can only grow in the likeness of God if we have a living relationship with Him.

In Orthodoxy, this relationship is referred to as "*communion*".

Communion with God is a "*common*

union" of life and love; we abide in God and He abides in us.

Salvation is found in this intimate relationship with the Lord. This is exactly what Jesus says in John 17:1-3:

John 17:3

NOTE: *In Biblical language the term "to know" means more than just intellectual knowledge. "Knowledge" of something or someone means having a personal experience of that thing or person. To know God is to have a personal relationship with God*

- A relationship with God is made possible by God's good will. God desires *"that all people should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth."*(1 Timothy 2:3)

Therefore, He has laid out a way for us to have union with Him.

Our spiritual growth is made possible when we conform ourselves to God's will and follow His way to the Kingdom.

This path involves three disciplines given to us by our Lord.

The first discipline is prayer.

Without conversing with God in a regular and frequent manner, we cannot grow in God's likeness.

We pray in two ways: by ourselves, and in church with our brother and sister believers.

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself practiced both types of prayer.

Read Mark 1:35, Luke 5:16, Matthew 9:35, Luke 4:44, and write these verses here:

Mk. 1:35 –

Lk. 5:16 –

Mt. 9:35 –

Lk. 4:44 –

- Neither of these two expressions of prayer stand alone; they are interdependent.

Each is fully rewarding only when the other is also being practiced.

- Private prayer should be carried out on a daily basis, at least in the morning and evening.

We can also offer prayers to God at any time, for any specific intention.

However, when asking God for something, we must never think of it as ordering "heavenly room service".

- Corporate prayer should include:
 - the Divine Liturgy regularly on Sundays and holy days;
 - Vespers or Vigils on Saturday evenings or the eves of the holy days;
 - special services through the Church Year (e.g. blessing of water on Theophany),
 - and services of special needs ("Treby") such as the Holy Mysteries (sacraments) and other rites.

To the question of how often we should attend church services the answer is as often as possible.

- The second basic spiritual discipline is fasting.

Fasting, abstaining from food, luxuries and superfluous items and activities, strengthens our willpower.

We cannot expect to resist temptations, which come upon our hearts in an unseen manner, if we cannot resist partaking of things that we can see.

God does answer all prayers, but sometimes the answer is "No."

When we pray, every request must be made trusting in God's will and reflecting the spirit of Jesus' words: *"Nevertheless, not my will, but Thy will be done."* (Luke 22:42)

Liturgical services feed us spiritually and help us to bring our personal journeys into the context of the common journey of all believers.

There is strength and comfort in knowing that we don't have to "go it alone".

The Lord is with us, as is His most-holy mother, all the saints who have victoriously run the course of this life, and all our brothers and sisters in the faith with whom we struggle along together.

We pray with each other... we pray for each other.

The physical fast helps us to carry out the great spiritual fast – the fast from sinning.

In the New Testament we find that Jesus practiced fasting and He gave clear directives to His disciples regarding how to fast.

Consider what our Lord says in the sixth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount:

(Continued on next page.)

- Like fasting, works of charity are not optional in our life.

Every believer must intentionally take part in such activities, both personally and through supporting the wider charitable initiatives of the Church.

Based on the Orthodox understanding of the human being as an icon of God,

such acts of service to others are also a service to the Lord.

This service is something well-pleasing to the Lord.

Thus, in Acts 10, verses 1 to 8 (in particular verse 4) we read about how the centurion Cornelius' acts of charity to the needy are viewed as acts of service to the Lord:

Acts 10:4

1.7 The human relationship with God is a reciprocal one...

- The person who takes an active part in the life to which God calls us receives many blessings from God.

In the Divine Liturgy, we thank God for all His blessings in this way: *"For all these (gifts) we give thanks to You, and to Your only-begotten Son, and to Your Holy Spirit; for all things of which we know and which we know not, and for all the benefits which You have bestowed upon us, whether manifest or unseen."*

Of primary importance among these gifts, we can list the "fruits" of the Holy

Spirit mentioned earlier in Galatians 5:22,23.

However, we not only receive from God, but we must also give to Him.

For example, when someone says, *"I don't get anything out of the Divine Liturgy,"* we must ask, *"But how much of yourself do you put into it?"*

Salvation is a gift, but it does not come cheap.

Over and over again in our divine services we hear the call to *"commend ourselves and each other and all our life unto Christ our God."*

- It is vital that, in committing ourselves to God, we hold nothing back.

Either God is the God of *"all our life"* or He is not really the God of any of our life.

In Acts 5:1-11, the account of Anaias' and Sapphira's attempt to withhold part of their offering from God presents a clear warning to those who think they can "hold out" on the Lord.

Every human being is brought into the world for a purpose, each with his or her own calling.

When we diligently work on developing our talents, and commit them to serving and glorifying God, He grants us strength, wisdom, perseverance, His abiding peace, and an abundance of blessings.

In Ephesians 4:11-13, St. Paul teaches us that it is in following our calling that we are lead to spiritual maturity:

Ephesians 4:11-13

- The ultimate blessing for those dedicated stewards is a place in God's eternal Kingdom.

The Kingdom of God, however, should not be thought of as something coming in the future.

Jesus teaches that *"the Kingdom of God is within you."*(Luke 17:21)

We must always bear in mind that the heavenly Kingdom is won or lost for each of us in this life.

Knowing and embracing God's Truth, living by it and offering ourselves to the worship and service of God are the pillars of our spiritual growth in the likeness of God.