Let’s begin with prayer, invoking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and Of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

_O Heavenly King the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who are in all places and fill all things, treasurer of blessings and giver of life. Come and dwell within us and cleanse us from every blemish and save our souls, O Blessed One._

In the Name of the Father and Of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

_Glory Be to Jesus Christ! Glory Forever!_

Last week we spoke about the prayer life of the Church - This topic reminded us why we have gathered together these past five weeks, in a class room setting to study, Orthodox Christianity. Now I have stated my objections in many different ways to reducing knowledge of the Orthodox faith, to being merely an academic exercise, or putting it in perhaps a more direct way – head knowledge. To be sure our purpose in gathering has been to learn more about the Orthodox Faith, its history, dogmas, tradition and worship. To do this, of course I have lectured to you, and some of you have taken notes and even studying them. But I hope you have
noticed that we have tried as much as humanly possible to present this in a prayerful manner, open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And in doing so we have gone off on a few tangents so to speak, but perhaps these un-planned soliloquies have been more effective in transmitting a sense of the Orthodoxy of the Heart, the process of the mind descending into the heart, where knowledge and spiritual experience converge. There is an ancient saying in the Church, in Latin that expresses this unity of the mind, heart and soul, of the life in Christ, the Christian Faith. It is as follows: lex orandi, lex, lex credendi, which is loosely translated, “we pray what we believe and believe what we pray.” And as I said last week, in quoting St. Theophan the Recluse, a Russian Saint of the nineteenth century, if prayer is right, everything else is right. So in a real sense, during these past weeks we have been learning more about the ancient Christian Faith so that we can be strengthened in prayer and in our relationship with our Lord. Our Goal in life, is to in the words of St. Paul, pray without ceasing, to be constantly united with God in our minds hearts and souls. And as I also said last week, those of us who are called to live in the world find it difficult to pray unceasingly like the monastics, the monks and nuns who have renounced the world can. Instead, those of us who are busy living life, balancing, work, home, school, social and family obligations, the church urges us to consecrate all that we do in the course of the day to God, to make our every thought and action a prayer to God, by working,
diligently, prayerfully, honestly and joyfully, and using the gift of speech to build-up rather than tear down, living in a godly, Christian, moral and ethical manner.

Today, I would like to talk about this very topic, living a virtuous and if you will an ethical life. Briefly, I will speak about ethics and morality from an Orthodox Christian Point of View. I will speak about how Orthodox Christians should react to the contemporary moral struggles and issues they face, and in doing so how we can serve as powerful witnesses to the Orthodox Christian Faith.

As a priest, I am often asked what the church teaches about a particular contemporary moral issue, be it stem cell research, euthanasia, abortion or other highly charged issues. While I can speak to the issue at hand, I am reluctant to give anyone the impression that there is an Orthodox play book, if you will, that gives a definitive answer for every situation. It is not enough to memorize the Orthodox Church’s position on certain issues. Instead, we need to develop what I call an Orthodox sense – that is an inner sensibility or intuition, that when confronted with a moral question, will help us to discern whether or not the issue at hand fits within the consciousness of the Church.

Given this, where do we start, what is the foundation of ethics and morality in the Church. The answer is found in the Book of Genesis, where it is said that man, (Adam) was created in The image and likeness of God. This tells us that you and are created to be holy people, Christ-like. Therefore we are expected to behave and
act in a Godly manner, following the precepts of God. Being created in the image of God, it is up to us each and every day of our life to become more God-like, this is our calling, this is our expectation, and this will be the criterion for our judgment at the end of all times – did we walk the path of holiness or not. Our life then, as a consequence of the fall, requires a great struggle on our part to reject that which is evil and choose that which is Good. It is a spiritual battle against the snares of the devil which manifest themselves in the passions, anger, lust, jealousy, pride etc.

So with this in mind, how are we to live? We are to live a virtuous life following His commandments, and teachings and being obedient to the Church, His bride. One may wonder why the Church has so many rules. Why does the Church tell us to fast? Why does it require us to worship regularly? Why does it have certain moral standards? Is it to punish us,? Not at all, it is to keep us safe to protect us from the deceptions of the evil one who tells us, if it feels good do it. And another of His delicious lies is, “It doesn’t matter what you do as long as you don’t hurt anyone else.”

So let me go down this road for just a minute, let me repeat to you what you and I hear everyday in the daily arena of life. We hear it everyday, those things that are explicitly condemned by Scripture and the Church, such as cohabitation in the traditional and alternative life style settings, abortion and euthanasia are seen as acceptable because they are personal matters, and none of anyone else’s
business. While to an extent this is true, and I only mean in the sense that indeed one is free to make a personal decision about these matters, it does not make them right, it does not make them acceptable in the eyes of the one who counts the most, GOD! And why is this unacceptable to God, because simply it shows a great disrespect for the sanctity, the holiness, of the gift of life and the family.

Yes a lot of today’s moral issues have to do with sexuality and many accuse the church of being out of step with the times, reactionary, homophobic, or controlling. In this area we must remember that the Church views the physical union of man and woman as something holy, as its ultimate consummation is in creating life. And once consummated it is supposed to be forever. Unfortunately the statistics bear out that 1 in two marriages end in divorce and for those who lived together before marriage, once married, the odds of the relationship surviving is less than 50-50. So the church in discouraging such unions, is actually only looking out for the best interest of her children. It is not seeking to be “Big Brother,” or controlling, or be a moral policeman, but rather to protect and heal. The nature of the Church is not to be a judge and jury but rather to be a hospital for sinners. And even when we gravely sin, the church is ready to receive us back if we truly repent and exhibit a firm intention to avoid the same in the future.

I would like to share a true story with you about a youth retreat, I attended with some of the teenagers from my Church a few years ago. It was held at a local
Greek Orthodox Church. It was given by a Seminarian from Holy Cross Theological Seminary in Brookline, Mass. There were about 40 teenagers in the room and the seminarian was impressive in keeping their attention. He brought in a laptop computer and showed them images of celebrities, interspersed with pictures of saints, asking them to tell a little bit about each of them. He also played some audio clips from their favorite pop music stars. Now mind you some of them were pretty suggestive – and it brought up a whole wonderful conversation about morality, and how as Orthodox Christians we need to rise above the standards set by the world to that of God. By this time, the conversation was going well and was spirited and the teens were incredibly honest. Also they forgot there was a priest in the room, I was sitting in the back corner. One student got up and said, so why is it so terrible to have sex outside of marriage if you love some one. Coming out from behind the shadows, I got up and asked them what they thought the Church’s view on sex was. The room was silent now, I turned to them and said, the Church views sex as a beautiful and holy gift, something very special. I reminded them that the Church sees us as being special and holy. I reminded them that in the mysteries of baptism and Chrismation, our bodies have been set aside as holy as temples of God or tabernacles. I then reminded them that our bodies are like the tabernacles that sits on the top of the altar table in Church where the reserved sacrament for the sick is kept, for when we receive Holy Communion, we
contain within our body the same eucharist that is consecrated and maintained on the holy altar. I then said we strive to only have sex in marriage, because it is holy, to engage in it casually and without the proper blessing in marriage, we disrespect this gift. I then asked how would we feel if someone came into church, and desecrated the tabernacle on the altar. I then said it is the same when we cheapen sex we desecrate the holiness and the beauty of this gift. When I finished their mouths were open, the funny little comments stopped and their attention was fully given to the seminarian’s presentation.

I wanted to share this experience with you, because I think it points out just how far the world has shifted from God’s plan for salvation and how the world does not appreciate the sacredness of the gift of life. And what those who accept the world’s agenda are missing out - they are missing out on an opportunity to find inner spiritual peace and the happiness they are ultimately seeking in turning to the gospel of pleasure and convenience.

Going back to my original point, in order to function as Christians in such a world, we need to develop what I like to call an Orthodox consciousness or sense about us to help us know what is God’s will in the moral dilemmas in which we find ourselves.

In developing this Orthodox Conscience or sense, I find the reading of Holy Scripture to be extremely helpful. In particular the sermon on the Mount which
contains the greatest of all moral teachings, (Matthew- Chapters 5-7) and the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament. The frequent reception of the Holy Mysteries of Confession and Communion is critically important because by eating the Flesh and drinking the Blood of Christ, we have Christ within us at all times – thus helping us to be more Christ-like in our minds, hearts, souls and bodies. It is important that we go to Church and pay attention to the hymns we are singing, especially at the Vespers services which tells us about the lives of the saints and how they lived a virtuous life. We need to be aware of the writings of the Saints of the Church, and their counsels on the spiritual life. We need also to come to Church and learn from the examples of pious parishioners who live God-fearing lives and have followed in the footsteps of the saints who came before them. As a pastor, I can tell you that I have learned so much about virtue, holiness, dignity and piety from my own parishioners. That is why it is important that children be brought to Church and interact with the elder parishioners, so that they can witness first hand how the “saints” of the Church struggle and triumph. (Tell Story about Helen Zysk – and losing her daughters)

Having acquired this Orthodox Consciousness, we then have the necessary tools to discern what is the mind of the Church in regards to moral issues. When confronted with a certain moral question, this is how we need to go about discerning, the mind of the Church. First, we need to see if the fathers of the
Church had anything to say about it. For instance, much is written by the fathers condemning abortion. There are even Church Canons or rules that expressly forbid it and seeks the repentance of those who have them, those who perform them and those who condone it or were involved in the procreation of the life that is aborted. If the issue is not one that has been dealt with by the Church before, then we need to ask, is it in direct violation of the Gospel and specifically the commandments of Christ, does this issue violate or compromise the sanctity of life or does it interfere in the sacred bond between husband and life, for example surrogate parenting.

There is so much that we could and should discuss this evening regarding morality and ethics as understood in the context of the Orthodox Church. There are many hot button issues of our day that need the light of Christ to shine upon them to discern what is the right way to handle them, too many to discuss this evening. However, I thought we should discuss an area that touches all of our lives in one way or another – medical ethics.

In discussing this topic I want to remind you that I approach this as having been a pastor of a small parish, less than 100 souls for 25 years, and now a moderate size parish, although large is small in comparison to the protestant mega churches. Obviously there is more of an opportunity for hands-on pastoring in this situation than in a mega church. The relationship between the priest and the
flock is much more intimate in this setting, and there is a family character to the dynamics. So when dealing with a medical emergencies in the parish, often I have been invited to take part in family consultations with doctors and in some cases as an advocate for the family or patient themselves. In one of the nursing homes I regularly visited in CT, I was invited to take part in meetings of the ethics board. Because of this I have noticed some trends, and movements that are subtly undermining the Christian ideal of treating a patient with dignity and respect, in recognition of their being created in the image and likeness of God.

One of the biggest issues that are faced in this realm are regarding the care for the critically ill and the elderly especially when end of life issues are involved. Such dilemmas faced are, when to withdraw life support, if at all, when or if we should remove feeding tubes, when or if should we withdraw critical medical care, to let nature take its course. In the old days, when medical technology was limited, such decisions were often not necessary – as people did not survive most severe medical conditions. There were no such things as feeding tubes, respirators, artificial hearts and the like. It was easier to see God’s will in such situations. Today it is more complex, for on the one hand we recognize that all such advances in medical technology that saves lives is a blessing from God. People are surviving many serious illnesses and going on to live productive lives. On the other hand, sometimes people who have been saved from death, by the same
technology, have been rendered in an alive but seriously impaired state. Then there is the issue of hospice care, which when practiced with respect for the sanctity of life and the Will of God, is a blessing but when used as a means of legal euthanasia is repugnant. I have seen both examples and have vivid pictures in mind. I have experienced the nightmares of hospice care in what I would describe as death camps – where as one patient told me, he felt guilty because in the morning, when one of the 10 patients in his room died, he felt happy that it was that man and not him. This was the same place that recycled flowers from funeral arrangements that were no longer needed, to add to the peaceful character of the dying experience, to compliment the piped in music and supercharged doses of morphine. It did not matter how much pain the person was in or not, the doses of morphine grew steadily larger - I’ll let you connect the dots. I have also seen hospice done right, allowing the patient to be comfortable in their own home, with just the right amount of medication to take the edge off, without compromising their cognitive abilities and their ability to pray.

As I said before technology is a two edged sword, it is neither good nor bad, it depends on how it is used, how it is applied. In all cases of medical ethics issues, and I dare say all ethical dilemmas, discernment is the key – we need to seek and pray for the will of God. We must protect the sanctity of life, the holiness of life. In end of life situations, I have seen miracles occur, no I have not participated in
someone turning around and surviving and being miraculously cured, but have instead, witnessed a glorious transformation take place in the suffering and dying person. Those who loved the Lord, experienced pain with grace and dignity and in it they felt privileged to participate in the sufferings of Christ. In their sufferings, they realized how strong the love of the Lord is for them, especially since in His case he suffered willingly.

Is it possible to use technology and medicine to help someone die with dignity and peacefully, yes of course, yet there is a fine line we dance along which separates us from being the hands that assist God, and the hands that play God and usurp his role. The good doctors I met understood this.

To point out the wisdom of the Saints in regards to ethical questions, I would now like to bring your attention to the writings of St. Basil the Great, who was instrumental in the establishment of the first Hospitals, regarding whether or not Christians should seek medical care.

The Art of Medicine St. Basil, The Long Rules

Q. 55. Whether recourse to the medical art is in keeping with the practice of piety.

R. Each of the arts is God’s gift to us, remedying the deficiencies of nature, as, for example, agriculture, since the produce which the earth bears of itself would not suffice to provide for our needs: the art of weaving, since the use
of clothing is necessary for decency’s sake and for protection from the wind; and, similarly, for the art of building. The same is true, also, of the medical art. In as much as our body is susceptible to various hurts, some attacking from without and some from within by reason of the food we eat, and since the body suffers affliction from both excess and deficiency, the medical art has been granted to us by God, who directs our whole life, as a model for the cure of the soul, to guide us in the removal of what is superfluous and in the addition of what is lacking... (T)he medical art was given to us to relieve the sick, in some degree at least.

2. Body and Soul

Whatever requires an undue amount of thought or trouble or involves a large expenditure of effort and causes our whole life to revolve, as it were, around solicitude for the flesh must be avoided by Christians. Consequently, we must take great care to employ this medical art, if it should be necessary, not as making it wholly accountable for our state of health or illness, but as redounding to the glory of God and as a parallel to the care given the soul. In the event that medicine should fail to help, we should not place all hope for
the relief of our distress in this art, but we should rest assured that He will not allow us to be tried above that which we are able to bear.

3. Compassionate Love

... Nor because some sinners do not make good use of the art of medicine, should we repudiate all the advantages to be derived from it; for we need not in general condemn all the arts together merely because undisciplined pleasure seekers abuse the art of cookery, or baking, or weaving, for the purpose of ministering to their own delight, by overstepping the limits of what is strictly necessary. On the contrary, their abuse of these arts ought to be made evident by our demonstrating the proper use of them. Similarly with the medical art--we ought not commit outrage against a gift of God by putting it to bad use. To place the hope of one’s health in the hands of the doctor is the act of an irrational animal. This, nevertheless, is what we observe in the case of certain unhappy persons who do not hesitate to call their doctors their saviors. Yet, to reject entirely the benefits to be derived from this art is the sign of a pettish nature.

4. Wholeness of Life
So then, we should neither repudiate this art altogether nor does it behoove us to repose all our confidence in it; but, just as in practicing the art of agriculture we pray God for the fruits, and as we entrust the helm to the in pilot in the art of navigation, but implore God that we may end our voyage unharmed by the perils of the sea; so also, when reason allows, we call in the doctor, but we do not leave off hoping in God.

Thus from the writings of St. Basil, we see the Orthodox understanding of synergy or cooperation with God. In life, we are called to cooperate with God, to follow His will for our life. When faced with ethical dilemmas, we must never ever forget to get down on our knees in prayer and supplication to our Lord for his help and guidance. Yes life is complicated and sometimes there are no clear right and wrong choices, and there is a whole lot of grey area, and in those situations, we often have to chose the lesser of two evils and throw ourselves on the mercy of God.

The most important thing to remember, when faced with such decisions, is that the Church is there to help and guide us, through the ministry of ones pastor, and fellow Christians to help us ease our burdens. In my former parish and as I am coming to learn here at Holy Ghost, we are blessed to have several nurses of various specialties, geriatric nursing, intensive care nursing, and in education, who give unselfishly of their time to help the elderly, and comfort the families of those
who are ill, helping through their practicing their medical skills with hearts filled with the love of Jesus Christ.

I hope and pray that this evening, I have conveyed to you that morality and ethics, from an Orthodox Christian standpoint, is not a lifeless science or the study of abstract concepts, it is a way of life. Living a moral and ethical life, is the fruits of a healthy relationship with God and demonstrates a respect for the wisdom of the Church, and humility on our part. The fruits of living a life of integrity are inner peace, that passes all understanding and an intense experience of the Love of God. Having this in mind, let us seek the higher things in life, and do nothing without the blessing of God and the Church, and you and I will find abundant life.

May God Bless you for your attentiveness and desire to understand more deeply our precious Orthodox Faith. Amen.

Questions Anyone?