

From Crossroads, April, 2015

Fr. Thomas Hopko's Final Gift: On Finding the Right Road

The words and teachings of Fr. Thomas Hopko, presented in his written materials, classes, and podcasts, have helped many within our own community and throughout the world come to a better understanding of our Trinitarian God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the Orthodox Faith, and how we are called to live a Christian life. His death on March 18 set in motion responses that carried sadness, but also a sense of thankfulness that expressed, as one person said, a “debt of love.” Taking place during Great Lent, his life and falling asleep in the Lord can perhaps prepare us as well for finding the right road or way for knowing Jesus Christ and the “power of His resurrection” (Philippians 3:10).

With hundreds of others, including 60 or so priests, Metropolitan Tikhon and most of the OCA's bishops, I attended his funeral at the Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration in Ellwood City, PA (about an hour from Pittsburgh) on Monday, March 23. The community assembled a 154 page booklet with the complete texts. Because it can take so long, this service is rarely served in its entirety, and while even we did not go through everything it still took nearly 4 hours.

The Burial Service for a priest, as for a lay person, follows the general structure for the Matins of Holy Saturday (served on Holy Friday evening), though some of the particular hymns are different and additional materials and Scriptural readings are included. The one, and no doubt primary, similarity between all of these services is the opening recitation of Psalm 119. There are 176 verses, divided into three sections, which in a myriad of ways and expressions offer reflections on what it means to love, pursue, and keep God's law: law, not defined in a legal way, but as precepts, ways, commandments, ordinances, statutes, testimonies, words—each verse exploring the possibilities in spiraling ways that go out and come back. We do not recite all of the verses at our service for the Matins of Holy Saturday or for regular funerals, but we did all of them at this service. The last verses complete the reflection: “I long for Your salvation, O Lord, and Your law is my delight. Let me live, that I may praise You, and let Your ordinances help me. I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek Your servant, for I do not forget Your commandments.” This leads to the solemn and powerful singing of the refrain and hymn: “Blessed are You, O Lord, Teach Me Your Statutes.” The singing was led by the women's monastic choir—but it seemed that everyone, knowing the words and music, joined in.

There were other features that particularly struck me for they do not appear in a layperson's funeral. These may be particular to the funeral for a priest, but there is nothing particular to priesthood and the meaning would seem to have broader implications:

1) *The references to the Holy Spirit in the “Antiphons”:*

The Holy Spirit is the all-redeeming source of all.

If He breathes on anyone who is worthy, quickly He takes him from earthly things. He gives him wings and raises him up and establishes him on high (I).

Through the Holy Spirit come adoration, good will, and wisdom, peace and blessing to all men.

For He has power equal to the Father and the Son (II).

The Holy Spirit has dominion over all men.

The Heavenly Hosts bow down before Him, together with everything that breathes here below (III).

2) *Other Psalms:*

We are familiar with Psalm 23 (The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.) and Psalm 24 (The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein – used for the consecration of a church building), but I was intrigued in hearing *Psalm 84*, which I find comforting in many situations, particularly when considering death:

How lovely is Your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!

² My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

³ Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God.

⁴ Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise.

⁵ Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

⁶ As they go through the valley of Baca they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.

⁷ They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

⁸ O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob!

⁹ Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.

¹⁰ For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.

¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does the LORD withhold

from those who walk uprightly.

¹² O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.

3) “*The Canon*” sung comes from the Matins of Holy Saturday which is repeated on Pascha night during the opening Nocturns service.

4) “*The Ikos*”: This is second part of the well-known Kontakion (“With the Saints give rest...”), which follows the 6th Ode of the Canon, but the Ikos texts are particular for a priest. The English Orthodox composer, John Tavener, wrote a piece for selected verses and entitled it, “The Funeral Ikos.” It was his composition that I kept hearing at this part of the service. Our choir has sung it several times.

Here are the texts Tavener used and a version of it sung by “The King’s Singers”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pvS8iYx9Ak>

Funeral Ikos

by John Tavener

Why these bitter words of the dying, O brethren, which they utter as they go hence? I am parted from my brethren. All my friends do I abandon, and go hence. But whither I go, that understand I not, neither what shall become of me yonder; only God who hath summoned me knoweth. But make commemoration of me with the song: Alleluia.

But whither now go the souls? How dwell they now together there? This mystery have I desired to learn, but none can impart aright. Do they call to mind their own people, as we do them? Or have they forgotten all those who mourn them and make the song: Alleluia.

We go forth on the path eternal, and as condemned, with downcast faces, present ourselves before the only God eternal. Where then is comeliness? Where then is wealth? Where then is the glory of this world? There shall none of these things aid us, but only to say off the psalm: Alleluia.

If thou hast shown mercy unto man, O man, that same mercy shall be shown thee there; and if on an orphan thou hast shown compassion, the same shall there deliver thee from want, If in this life the naked thou hast clothed, the same shall give thee shelter there, and sing the psalm: Alleluia.

Youth and the beauty of the body fade at the hour of death, and the tongue then burneth fiercely, and the parched throat is inflamed. The beauty of the eyes is quenched then, the comeliness of the face all altered, the shapeliness of the neck destroyed; and the other parts have become numb, nor often say: Alleluia.

With ecstasy are we inflamed if we but hear that there is light eternal yonder; that there is Paradise, wherein every soul of Righteous Ones rejoiceth. Let us all, also, Enter into Christ, that all we may cry aloud thus unto God: Alleluia

5) *"The Exaposteilarion:"* This is another piece that is particular to the Funeral for a Priest, but its meaning can have broader implications. One clergy friend has told me that when he dies – this is all that he would like to have sung:

Now I am at rest,
Now I have found peace.
I have escaped corruption.
I have passed from death to life.

6) *The Homilies:*

Mother Christophora, the Abbess of the Monastery, spoke on Sunday evening, March 22, and Metropolitan Tikhon shared some words following the Funeral Service. Here are their links:

<http://oca.org/news/oca-news/metropolitan-tikhon-mother-christophora-remember-fr.-thomas-hopko>

Fr. John Behr, the dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, presented the main Homily at the Funeral:

http://www.player.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/features/homily_at_the_funeral_of_fr._thomas_hopko

7) *AND FINALLY – FR. TOM'S GIFT TO US: FINDING THE RIGHT ROAD*

The Homily I really appreciated was delivered by Fr. John Jillions after the Divine Liturgy, served at the Monastery's chapel on Sunday March 22. Unfortunately, though it was available initially online, it has now been taken down.

Fr. John, developing the first part of his Homily around Fr. Tom's exploration of the Christian's experience of faith, presented a surprising example from his own life. He had been at the Monastery already for a few days and understood the isolation and terrain where it was located: amidst winding roads, small hills, forests, and wilderness. It was a challenging place in which to travel, especially at night. He had a recent dream that he found perplexing: he and his wife were in their car, driving through this area, but she was driving with her eyes closed. Fr. John alerting her to the dangers, suddenly awoke. He told her of the dream and she replied: "I know how to understand this—Fr. Tom mentioned it in one of his sermons."

In December of last year during Advent, Fr. Tom spoke at the Monastery about being guided by an inner light and he shared these words of St. John of the Cross:

On a dark starless night, inflamed in heart and yearning for God, my house at rest, I ventured forth into the darkness illumined solely by the light within.

Then he continued:

If a man wants to be sure of the road he is travelling on, then he must close his eyes and travel in the dark.

Now obviously, these words are not to be taken literally when on busy highways or isolated roads, but they do – especially when entering again into the mystery of Christ's Passion, Crucifixion, and Resurrection – challenge us to discover a relationship with Jesus that puts away the necessity for excuses and answers, at least the kinds of answers we are normally looking for when it comes to questions of faith. It encourages us to bring "rest" to our house, place our trust in Christ, and sometimes the uncertainty of darkness.

During the Divine Liturgy on Lazarus Saturday we heard from the Epistle to the Hebrews that, "since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (12:28). As we approach Holy Week, let's desire that which is reliable and cannot be shaken, giving up the turmoil and confusion which prevent us from finding the "right road" or way to knowing our Lord.

When I mentioned to Fr. John that I appreciated his sermon and the story about faith, he replied: "Well, I had some help." Perhaps this is the message Fr. Thomas Hopko wanted us all to hear.

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Recently, while visiting a parishioner, I found in their bible this passage or prayer from Thomas Merton:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact

that I think that I am following Your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope that

I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from

that desire. And I know that if I do this You will lead me by the right road though I may

know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust You always though I may seem to be lost and

in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me, and You will never leave

me to face my perils alone. (from: *Thoughts in Solitude*)