

Sunday of the Prodigal Son 2009

Intro to “Sin-aholics Anonymous”

Luke 15: ¹⁷“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸‘I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹“and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

The Prodigal Son is an image of every sinner. His fall, his hitting rock bottom, his moment of clarity, and his recovery are typical. The language I am using comes from someplace-AA. The image of the Prodigal Son and the forgiveness and love that are available from God are essential to the process of recovery from addiction. It is not surprising that the icon of the Prodigal Son adorns the cover of Fr. Meletios Webber’s book *Steps of Transformation: An Orthodox priest explores the Twelve Steps*. (Conciliar Press. Ben Lomond, CA. 2003.) Indeed, nothing in modern society comes closer to the ancient Orthodox spiritual teachings about healing from sin than the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, which are frequently compared to St. John Climacus’ *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. And frankly, very often, the 12 Steps does a lot more for a person than any reading of spiritual books could ever do. This is primarily due to the role of the fellowship in which the healing takes place. This Lent, but starting even now today a few weeks before the Fast, I wish to invite you to join Fr. Meletios and explore the 12 Steps and apply them to our spiritual life.

For those of you who do not know what the 12 Steps are, let us consider a quick history. In the 1930’s United States, even during and in spite of Prohibition alcoholism was a rampant problem and a group of alcoholics began meeting together to support one another in their quest to stop drinking. What they learned from their shared experience eventually coalesced into a program of recovery in twelve distinct steps. Over time the 12 Step program/approach has proven the most effective means of recovery for not only alcoholics but other addictions as well (food, gambling, sex, emotions, etc.). One of the

things about the 12 Steps that speaks so easily to the Christian worldview is that there is a recognition that the fundamental problem in the life of the addict is not physical or even mental but **spiritual**. Thus the 12 Steps represent a spiritual course of treatment, not linked to any religion, denomination, or creed, but rooted in basic principles and Truth and honesty. This approach does not require one to leave their religious identity and beliefs behind at all.

Often, the process of recovery makes those beliefs and ideals real and livable for the first time in the addicts' lives, and not another reason for shame and guilt at their own hypocrisy. This guilt is increased when religious folks like last week's Pharisee do not recognize that addiction is first and foremost an illness and not a willful choice to be immoral. Neither does recovery through the 12 steps seek to absolve the addict of their responsibility or to deny their many moral shortcomings. Fr. Meletios Webber explains succinctly:

The anguish of guilt is almost always part of the condition of alcoholism, although it may not be very apparent to the outsider. For this reason it is always important for the alcoholic to come to terms with past wrongs, or the day may come when the only way to relieve the pain of guilt is to drink, setting the whole cycle in motion once more.

There is every indication in the Twelve Steps that no matter how bad an alcoholic has been, forgiveness is still available for him. Furthermore, that forgiveness will not only take the form of removing the guilt for past sins, but may also involve the individual being freed from the shortcomings that led to the sin in the first place.

If anyone were to suggest to an alcoholic that he is simply sick, and not responsible for what he is doing, that action would be no act of kindness at all. Responsibility is the antidote to what ails the alcoholic.

Human nature, however, runs in a different direction. As a rule, what we want in an ideal situation is to have as much authority as possible, with as little responsibility as possible. In this regard, the drinking alcoholic simply amplifies the tendency of human nature in general. He wants control, but not the responsibility. Unfortunately, control without responsibility is in the end, a vile thing, and we can see evidence of that fact in the more barbaric episodes of human political history. Responsibility is the very element that is required for sane and spiritual living. [Webber, pg. 74]

Had the Publican of the Parable been unrepentant by seeking to make excuses for his behavior (or denying his shortcomings as the Pharisee did), he would not have left the temple justified or healed in

any way. In the Publican's recognition of both his powerlessness over sin and his responsibility for his state, he began the steps towards the transformation of his soul.

You may have already been asking yourself the question, "what does this have to do with me?" particularly if you are not yourself and alcoholic or addicted to narcotics or other traditionally recognized addictions. Give thanks to God if that is the case, but not like the Pharisee did! We must remember that the addict is not built of different material than any of us. Often the problems of the addict are simply exacerbated and pathological versions of our everyday problems. The addict has a problem of an impaired will. While we most likely can all relate the words of St. Paul in Romans 7:15, "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do;" for the addict this is a constant, painful, and inescapable state, which becomes self-generating. Perhaps the greatest explanation of the thinking of the alcoholic was given by Antoine De Saint-Exupery in the Little Prince when the title character meets the alcoholic who drinks in order to forget. What does he seek to forget? That he drinks! His life, his thought process, his entire will, had become dominated by his addiction and he was powerless over it.

This brings us to the first step of the twelve. Let us consider it:

1. We admitted that we were powerless (over alcohol)—that our lives had become unmanageable.

This may not seem like much but it is essential to start here. As long as the addict believes that they have control they will continue down the same roads as always. Interventions may be resisted, the problem denied. Like the Prodigal Son, there must be a moment of clarity—of coming to one's self—when the false beliefs are seen through to Reality—not the fantasy reality of the addict's own making. The Prodigal son realizes that he is perishing, starving to death, which is certainly a way of saying life had become unmanageable. This is not very different from the life of the sinner in need of repentance.

A sinner is someone who cannot live life without sinning. As Orthodox Christians we confess ourselves as chief among sinners. Try as we might we cannot attain holiness and perfection. Despite prayers, fasting, reading the bible, going to church, doing good deeds, and all our best efforts, we still discover that at the end of the day we are still just as selfish and rotten and sinful as ever, at least on the inside. Maybe we have fooled others but not ourselves.

As long as the sinner believes however that he or she can change him- or herself and stop sinning any time they want, no change in their spiritual life will take place. That which is necessary to make any recovery and to begin being able to even experience God's grace and healing is the recognition of one's own fallen state. Of course, the sinner can always justify himself like the Pharisee and say, even though I may not be free from sin, it's not really that bad, my life hasn't become unmanageable—"I am not like other men." The world supports this view by denying our everyday sins as being of much consequence. However, even the so-called little or "venial" sins wear us down and limit us from living our life to its full potential. In indulging the self in a thousand little ways we become less aware of our surroundings, our neighbor in need, and our ever-present God than the most sodden drunk whose God is always near (to help him out of trouble). We don't realize we have become perpetually intoxicated by our ego and its "stuff." And without repentance from even these sins, as we shall see, our eternal life will indeed have become worse than simply *unmanageable*.

In the Church, the Fathers talk about the **passions**. The passions are those vices which become habitual and eventually compulsive. When we are in the grip of the passions we cannot disentangle ourselves from our wrath, resentment, lust, gluttony, sloth, pride, envy, greed, and despair, to name a few. We cannot love our friends and family the way we know we should. We know longer even know if we want to. Of what value then is it for us to believe we are all powerful, at least over ourselves? In those moments of temporary insanity the injuries of a lifetime take place. **Like the alcoholic, our**

spiritual sobriety is not so far from tanking that we can cease to be vigilant.

There is hope and there is healing. The first step though can be very hard. **It means we have to admit defeat before we can receive victory.** We must leave behind our self image as the Pharisee and admit our sinfulness like the Publican. We must awaken like the Prodigal Son and recognize that on our own, we are perishing. We must begin to get honest with ourselves in ways we do not want to. So often, like the addict who uses to numb the pain of the guilt he feels for being a user, we give in to temptation in order to forget for a little while the pain of having fallen from our communion with God and each other. Let us approach this Lenten season as a time of recovery, for if we are sinners, then our entire life is either a slow process of recovery leading to salvation or a further slide into depravity and (self-) condemnation.

Now, I won't tell you what to do or how to do it. That is not how the 12 steps work. I can only share with you a little of what the fellowship has learned about recovery. The steps are there for those who want to work them, who want to become free from their sins and their passions. Only you can decide to make use of them, but once having made that decision, you will never again be alone in them. You will have become part of a greater fellowship, because we will do it together, or not at all. According to the first of the *Twelve Traditions* of AA, **Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on AA unity.** In the Church, this principle is also clearly expressed by the apostle's maxim: "We, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another" (Romans 12:5)

Brothers and sisters, My name is David, and I am a powerless over sin. [Hi, David!]

May God bless you with sobriety and serenity this Lenten season!

Sunday of the Last Judgment
Sinaholics Anonymous Part II “The Anonymity of God”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

Today we continue with the second part of a Lenten series on the Orthodox Spirituality and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics anonymous. As Fr. Meletios Webber say in his book *Steps of Transformation: An Orthodox Priest explores the Twelve Steps*,

The Twelve steps of AA outline a plan of action the defines a process of recovery from addiction—that is certain, and borne out by evidence. However, the Twelve Steps may also have some value in outlining, in a more general fashion, a way of repentance, of *metanoia*—the repentance preached by the Forerunner and by Christ Himself as being the necessary prelude to acceptance of the Kingdom. Indeed there is a strong case for considering that the word *metanoia* in Christian theology and the word “recovery” in the vocabulary of AA have very similar meanings, even though their original goals are quite different and distinct. (pg. 89)

In the spirit then of this similitude, let us continue our exploration of the 12 Steps as a process of recovery and repentance from sin. Last week we considered the first step: “We came to admit that we were powerless over [our sins], and that our lives had become unmanageable.” Just as the Prodigal Son came to himself, and realized his life had hit rock bottom, so must we realize, if we are ever to begin the process of recovery and truly repent, that we cannot overcome our sinfulness by ourselves, and that left to our selves, our lives will suffer incalculably. But this admission of defeat is not an end in itself but a step towards real victory.

As Fr. Meletios points out, as the Prodigal realized his fallen state he also almost immediately also took the next step: “[We] Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” He did this by remembering his father, a symbol of God, and that his father could provide, even for the servants. The third step was a quick move for the Prodigal: “[We] Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood him.*” Both of these steps show us why the Twelve Steps are fundamentally a spiritual program

of recovery and not just one of psychology. There is no recovery without a relationship with a higher power.

Now there are some who when they here terms and phrases such as “higher power” or “God as we understood him,” will doubt the efficacy of the Twelve Steps on theological grounds. After all, isn’t one’s identity as a Christian tied to the ability to recognize God in Christ? Isn’t Orthodoxy tied to getting the right idea of who God is and who Christ is as fully God and Man? Isn’t our healing from sin and our eventually salvation intrinsically linked with correct doctrine? The answer to all of these is yes. At the same time, you do not need to be able to quote the exact definitions of the Council of Chalcedon to know the Lord. And frankly, in the context of the alcoholic or the addict beginning his recovery, we’re not there yet! The first steps that need to be made in recovery for the addict and the sinner alike is to recognize 1) our powerless and 2) that a power that is not us can restore us. The important part at the beginning is that the addict and the sinner alike no longer put themselves in the place of God. As long as God is not in charge, no matter how we might understand him, then the sinner will remain lost. We need to step down from our need for control and “come to believe.”

The use of this term in the 2nd step, “Came to believe” is significant. It indicates not so much an effort on the part of the addict who is learning to let go of his own efforts, but an arrival of awareness of the power of God. It reminds us of the Gospel of St. John when the twelve were faced with the difficult teaching of the Lord on the Bread of Life.

⁶⁷Then Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also want to go away?” ⁶⁸But Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹“Also we have **come to believe** and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (John 6)

The awareness of the apostles like that of the recovering addict is an inescapable conclusion. “To whom shall we go? You have the words of life...” is the cry of the sinner and the addict alike

who must fall at the feet of God.

A second reason for the vague definition of God in the Twelve Steps is that the alcoholic or addict often comes to recovery with a profoundly flawed understanding of God. Fr. Webber explains,

When the alcoholic turns to God, he meets an old adversary. The prayers of the alcoholic, long uttered in the despair of loneliness, are unanswered—at least in a form he is prepared to accept. The resentments he has about God, and most alcoholics have many, make it very difficult for him to encounter God, even if he were free of the alcoholic haze. Whatever notions he has about God from his childhood, from his upbringing, from his adolescence, they all need to be relinquished, because—like everything else about the alcoholic—they have become part of his disease. (pg. 82)

Whether our church or our homes have icons or not, we all “image” God in our minds. Our Orthodox icons seek to transform that imagining by teaching our minds to retain God’s transcendence even in the midst of His revealing Himself to us through Christ. The unrepentant sinner often has an image of God as an unsympathetic (at best), often terrifying judge. As long as God is viewed as cruel, arbitrary, and unforgiving, we cannot repent. We can only despise God as we would despise a bully. If we are ever to know God we must be willing to let go of the image of God in our minds and slowly, gently, allow Him to reveal Himself as He is. Thus, we see the wisdom of the twelve steps in approaching God the way that it does.

This brings us to the issue of anonymity. The recovering alcoholic or addict comes to meetings and remains anonymous. All discussion is on a first name basis alone. According to the 12th Tradition of AA, “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.” In some ways there is a reminiscence of the ancient practice of name changing in the Christian tradition. When we receive communion our names are offered in prayer at the altar it is always on a first name only basis. In the Kingdom of heaven family names and titles matter not. Likewise we recall how Saul became Paul, Simon became

Peter, and in the monastic tradition a tonsured monk or nun is given a new name, as a means of separating themselves from their past as an unrepentant sinner from their new life of spiritual sobriety.

Perhaps one of the most profound truths of these steps is that not only is the recovering addict anonymous, but that God also comes to them through anonymity. Fr. Meletios links this to the idea of “Kenosis” or self-emptying. Just as God emptied Himself of His Glory to humbly be born as a little child like us, to live among us, and to suffer on the Cross for us, so too He empties Himself continually in the healing of diseases like alcoholism. Fr. Meletios explains,

It was discovered that God is capable of emptying Himself even further, for the sake of participating in the recovery of the alcoholic. In this recovery, the alcoholic learns to put aside his ego and start to realize that his finest qualities rest in his becoming anonymous. However, God also participates in this action. He also clothes Himself in anonymity, and becomes “God as we understood Him.” He is prepared to subject Himself to the understanding of the person to whom He comes, for the sake of showing compassion to that person. This action of supreme condescension is the only way this could be effected. Anonymity is like a tent. The alcoholic enters the tent of anonymity, certainly, but God also enters the tent; there the meeting takes place, the confrontation, and the miracle of recovery can begin. (pgs. 84-5)

We can see that the Anonymity of God is not a phenomenon limited only to the recovery from alcoholism. God remains anonymous in our lives even while He is known. Even the names He has revealed to us retain this aspect of His character—“I am that I am,” “The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Even the name Jesus means “God saves,” and the name of God could not be spoken in Hebrew, replaced always with the word, *Adonai*, or “the Lord.” In one sense, this reflects the unknowable nature of God as transcendent. But even in His incarnation in Jesus Christ where he makes himself known, there is an element of this, as foretold by the Prophet Isaiah (53):

¹ Who has believed our report?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

² For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant,
And as a root out of dry ground.
He has no form or comeliness;
And when we see Him,
There is no beauty that we should desire Him.
³ He is despised and rejected by men,
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.
And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him;
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

In this profound condescension God appears to us in almost the same terms one would apply to the drinking alcoholic—“despised and rejected by men.”

Lastly, God’s anonymity is at the center of the Gospel of the Last Judgment that we read today.

³⁴“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ ³⁷“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ ⁴⁰“And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ (Matthew 25)

What we discover is that God reveals Himself to us through others. In the fellowship of AA and other 12 step programs, it is through these others that God speaks, for the sake of recovery. In the church, it is through not only the saints and the fathers but, perhaps most importantly, through our relationships with each other that God does the same, for the healing and salvation of our souls.

Sunday of the Expulsion of Adam and Eve Sinaholics III-Step 3

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

Today we continue a sermon series on Orthodox Spirituality and the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. We have already considered the first two steps and how we might apply them to our spiritual lives in our struggle over sin. Based on the 12 steps of AA they would sound like this: 1) We admitted that we were powerless over [sin]—that our lives had become unmanageable; and 2) Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Last week we considered the meaning of that Higher Power, and how God greets the anonymous alcoholic by taking on anonymity Himself, humbling Himself to be subject to the understanding of the addict in order to show compassion on him. This as we saw also connects with the 3rd step: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*. Today we stay at the third step and explore what it means to make that decision.

Now one thing you may have noticed is that each step is really very concise, and in itself not a particularly complex plan of action. Yet each step is necessary and vital in the recovery of the addict or alcoholic, and I would hold, in the life of the sinner in general as well. The third step is like this. As we recover, as we grow in God and heal from sin, we all will need to make a decision. That decision is a turning point. In comparison to the first two steps this one is the first mountain. Compared to turning over the care of our lives and the exercise of our will to God, recognizing our own helplessness over our sinfulness is easy. We may even believe that God is our there and that He could restore us if He wanted to. We may even have asked Him to do so, but half-heartedly and without any real hope. We may have come to believe that while there is a God who is that Power, He does not really intend or desire to share that blessing with us, but

only with others, the specially “elect.” We may have fallen to such a state of despair that we can identify ourselves with the darkest of ideas about our life, such as that expressed by the band Jane’s Addiction in the profoundly vulgar song “Pigs in Zen”: “Some people should die. That’s just unconscious knowledge.” I quote this serendipitously named band not to extol it by any means but to illustrate the depth of despair that a world locked in addiction reaches. The addict and the soul enslaved by passions alike hear these hateful words and apply them to themselves. Indeed, the acting out of the addiction becomes one more slip into the long dive into suicide.

In third step, we break free of that terrible addiction-based soul-hating thought cycle and begin the tenuous act of *trusting*. And that is all the third step asks us to do. There is no plan of action here. Notice, the only thing we are called to do is “Make a decision.” At this point, we are not yet actually done or even close to fully turning our will and our lives over to the care of God. At this point, we have only made a decision to do so. We may then ask, what’s the use? Why make that it’s own step? We should not be discouraged at its limited and incomplete scope. After the first Ally victory in WWII Winston Churchill said “This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is the end of the beginning.” So too, Step Three marks the end of the beginning phase of the twelve steps, the conversion stage, if you will.

One reason we may have already hinted at: too often we want God to help us but we only take half-measures. We never really give our lives to Him, nor do we relinquish our need for control. The need to be in control, as we saw two weeks ago, is paramount to the addict. It is also essential to the unrepentant sinner. Before we can proceed in either repentance or recovery we need to make a clear cut decision. (There is a similarity between the words decision and incision here, it seems. This decision is a clear cut in the sense of marking a before and after point but also the necessary *incision* that opens the surface and get into what is going inside of us.) We

need to establish a clear line of who is really going to be in charge. And God who gives us free will for the sake of being able to turn it over to Him out of love and liberty, that we might be united to Him, does not force us to do anything. To the serenity prayer of AA is typically added the words, “Not my will be done, but Thy will be done. Amen.” This is from the prayer of our Lord in Gethsemane before His passion. It also the heart of the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done...” that Christians of all sorts pray.

Another reason that at this point we only make the decision and nothing else is that the whole rest of the steps are in essence the *process* of continual surrender to God’s will. The problem of the sinner and addict is a spiritual one, and needs to be healed spiritually. This takes time. We can say we have turned our will and life over to God but, just as faith is shown by works, there are steps we have to *work* to actualize that reality and become truly restored. We will be looking at these steps throughout the Lenten season. The next step, which is perfectly suited to the first week of Lent and the Great Canon of St. Andrew which is then served is, “Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves.” I encourage all of you to attend those services for that purpose this first week of Lent. For now, however, it is enough for us to simply make the decision.

The most proper use of the human will is not to will so much as to become willing. *Not to will, but to be willing*. One of my favorite illustrations of this step comes from the Council of Elrond in Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*. All the leaders of the free peoples of Middle Earth allowed their egos to flare and argue with one another about who would be in charge, avoiding the wisdom that the only way to defeat the Lord of the Rings (the personification of Satan) was to take the One Ring (the symbol of sin) and throw it into the fires from which it was forged. Only one of them was willing to turn his life over to the care of God, and that was Frodo,

the humble hobbit of the Shire. In the midst of the chaos and egotism his small voice cut through the nonsense. He said, "I will do it. I will go. I will take the ring to Mordor...though I do not know the way." In that moment he made a decision to turn his life over to his Higher Power. He did not know what the rest of the journey would entail. He didn't even know yet how to get there. He only knew that he had to make that decision. Those that followed his courage became the Fellowship. Though they were called the Fellowship of the Ring it was really Frodo's decision and courage and self-sacrifice that bound them, not the power of the Ring. Frodo has often been likened to a Christ figure, appropriately. But he is also a figure of any Christian who has made the decision to take up the Cross and follow Christ.

I encourage each and every one of you, if you have not already done so, to make a decision to turn your will and your life over to God as you understand Him. If you have already do so, revisit that decision and reaffirm it. Then you too will be a member of that great fellowship, of the Ring, of AA, of the Cross. Amen.

Sunday of St Gregory Palamas
Sinaholics Anonymous Step V

Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for oen another, that you may be healed. (James 5:16)

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

Today we continue a Lenten series on Orthodox Spirituality and the Twelve Steps of AA and other addiction recovery groups. Today we look at Step 5 (above), and for Orthodox Christians, we immediately correlate this to the sacrament of confession. In AA, very often Step Five is taken in the context of sacramental confession if the alcoholic is a member of a Church that includes this ministry. For our purposes as recovering “Sinaholics,” and as Orthodox Christians, we will look more closely at confession and how the wisdom of the Twelve Steps can deepen our practice.

Now last week we looked at Step Four: Made a fearless and searching moral inventory of ourselves. Having done so, we are now ready to do something with that inventory. It is interesting to note that in AA, this inventory is meant to be complete, not only including the sins of drunkenness but the entire moral fabric of the alcoholic. The admission of the specific drinking history is actually a part of Step One, and the open sharing of one’s ongoing struggle in the context of the anonymous fellowship and under the guidance of a sponsor is already taking place. There is a culture of confession, in effect. Likewise in the Church, we may already be engaged in active confessing and sharing of our struggle with sin. Thus, Step Five represents a comprehensive, general or “life” confession which includes a person’s whole history and their entire moral inventory.

Before we consider such a general confession, let us first consider confession itself. Great Lent is a time when most Orthodox Christians will come to confession, even if they only go once a year (which, by the way, cannot be recommended). It is a time when often children make their first confession, hopefully between the ages of 7-9. It is also a time when catechumens and converts are being received into the church, and make a confession in preparation thereof. Lastly, the character of the Lenten services calls us to reflection and repentance, which draws us to confess our sins, that we may be healed.

There are many ways in which one can make and prepare a confession. There are certain things to avoid, certain attitudes especially. Fr. Meletios Webber in *Steps of Transformation* has some very sage advice for us on how to conduct ourselves in the confessional:

Some people spend all of their time in confession talking about the wrongs of others. This is often framed in such a way that the apparent sin (on the part of the speaker) is a feeling of anger at the actions of the person who is not present.

There are two points to watch for here. The first is that having a feeling is not, actually, a sin. Feeling angry, or feeling sad, or feeling happy are not sins: they are feelings. Certainly there is a gray area here, since we can sometimes encourage feelings (and in so doing sin may be involved), but we cannot really create them. They come and they go. Since we have very little authority over them (in this general sense). It is very difficult for feelings to be sinful, since a sin has to involve a sense that we want something bad to happen. Where we can sin, and quite easily too, is to act on a feeling—particularly a negative feeling. For example, if we are angry, and we act out that anger in the form of spitefulness, dishonesty, or in some other way, then we can certainly sin. Even if we plan to hurt someone because we are angry, we are already doing something wrong. However, the feeling of anger, on its own, is not a sin. (pg. 140)

Now this is not to say that when we come to confession we should not talk about our feelings. What it does mean is that we need to look at both from where those feelings are coming from and to what they are leading us. Feelings of anger are like smoke signaling

a fire underneath.

Sometimes anger is called a cover emotion because it is what appears on our surface but actually is hiding underneath it deeper feelings of pain, fear, resentment. When we get at that pain we are starting to dig deeper and get at the causes of our spiritual ailment. We also discover in this process that the person at which we are mad or resentful are not in the end, responsible for our spiritual state. This is not to say that people are not responsible for their actions, or that they do not do hurtful things. What it does mean is that they have no further control over us than what we allow, and that any pain, no matter how great, we can become free of without them. It is liberating, if you think of it, to realize that your emotional, psychological, and spiritual wellness does not depend on another person's actions, but only on the grace of God to whom we surrender our will and the care of our lives.

Fr. Meletios continues,

There is another point here. Sometimes in confession people are so busy justifying things that they have done that they hardly manage to mention the things they have done wrong at all. In order to stop that from happening, it is quite appropriate to say at the beginning: "here are the things I have done wrong since my last confession," then simply list events and situations in which you have done less well than you could have. (pg. 140)

I call this the laundry list. It is a good habit to develop. We can even keep this list in written form and bring it to confession to help our memory. This in itself is of course a starting platform. We also need to be able to examine our relationship with God and with others in a way that cannot just be listed in bulleted form. But before we can get to that we need to break the habit of self-justification, or explaining why we sinned the way we sinned. Many times, a priest has to ask the confessing parishioner who is confessing the

sins of another, “Ok, and what were *your sins*, exactly?” We need to K.I.S.S.—Keep It Simple, Silly! As Fr. Meletios also says,

Confession, and Steps Four and Five, are not occasions when we need to show ourselves in our best light, nor is it a time to paint the blackest picture possible. The whole point of the exercise is to see ourselves with some clarity, neither exaggerating our bad points, nor trying to provide justification for our actions. It is, in fact, very cleansing to be able to talk about oneself using straightforward language. We do not have to be proud of our sinfulness, but it is comforting to know that when we acknowledge our sinfulness in a direct and obvious manner, we are standing shoulder to shoulder with all the saints of the church, not with sinner; it is the saints who are honestly aware of their own unworthiness before the throne of God, not the others. (pgs. 140-1)

May this be a comfort to us, for it is absolutely true!

As I mentioned at the beginning, Step Five is a comprehensive, general confession of the recovering soul’s entire moral inventory. In Orthodox Tradition, there are also places for such a comprehensive confession encompassing one’s whole life. It is called for before an adult is baptized or chrismated and it is required before ordination. It is appropriate to consider before marriage, or as one approaches death or is seriously ill. It is even worth considering doing if we have never done it, and need to recollect ourselves and set ourselves back on the right path with clarity. Such a confession will likely include things we have already confessed and for which we have received forgiveness. Often, though, we may find that our sins have legacies which continue to seemingly plague us, or perhaps in a more positive light, *teach* us. Stepping back and looking at the whole scope of our life may help us realize we are still in the process of recovering from attitudes and events that shaped us years ago, and that we may have even consciously forgot. To break the cycle of a sin we may need to revisit its root, and surrender the whole thing back to God, and more than once if necessary.

Sunday of Palms
Sinaholics Finale-Steps X-XII

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

Today as we have come to the end of Great Lent and prepare for the plunge into Holy Week, we also come to the end for now of our study of the 12 Steps of AA and how to apply them to our spiritual life. We will look, briefly and inadequately, at the last three steps, for just as the first three steps are united in the theme of bringing us to our senses about the nature of our condition as sinaholics--our powerlessness over sin and our need to surrender our will to God, so too the last three steps are there to help us maintain our spiritual sobriety and chart a course for living in recovery. Sometimes the last three steps are said to refer to “promises,” because they reveal what a joyful life which is not lived in slavery to addiction would look like. They also certainly illustrate some of the most necessary elements of a life which has been born anew in Christ Jesus.

Step 10: “[*We*] continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.”

During Holy Week we come to the end of the liturgical use of St. Ephraim’s prayer which has been so much a part of our Lenten worship. In the last verse we prayer, “Yeah, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother, for holy art Thou unto ages of ages, amen.” Last week I visited the Orthodox Monastery of the Transfiguration in Ellwood City where the Abbess also led the sisterhood in the prayer in this manner: “Yeah, O Lord and King, grant me to *see myself as I really am* and not to blame others...”

Accurate self-awareness and self-appraisal are essential to a healthy spiritual life. One way to develop this gift is through continual personal inventory. On a daily basis we should reflect on what we have done, both good and bad. We may even keep a “ledger” of sorts as part

of our evening prayer discipline. This is quite useful for when we then wish to come to confession—we will have a fairly exact record of what we need to confess and will be able to answer questions regarding our spiritual progress in areas we are doing well or better. This type of discipline is very important to develop as many of us find that the Lenten season makes us acutely aware of our need for repentance but after Pascha and into the summer time we begin to slide back into the spiritual sleepiness of inattentiveness and bad habits.

The AA classic known as *12 and 12* has some great insights about this process of daily inventory in its chapter on Step 10:

As we glance down the debit side of the day's ledger, we should carefully examine our motives in each thought or act that appears to be wrong. In most cases our motives won't be hard to see and understand. When prideful, angry, jealous, anxious, or fearful, we acted accordingly, and that was that. Here we need only recognize that we did act or think badly, try to visualize how we might have done better, and resolve with God's help to carry these lessons over into tomorrow, making of course, any amends still neglected.

But in other instances only the closer scrutiny will reveal what our true motives were. There are cases where our ancient enemy, rationalization, has stepped in and has justified conduct which was really wrong. The temptation here is to imagine that we had good motives and reasons when we really didn't.

We "constructively criticized" someone who needed it, when our real motive was to win a useless argument. Or, the person concerned not being present, we thought we were helping others to understand him, when in actuality our true motive was to feel superior by pulling him down. We sometimes hurt those we love because they need to be "taught a lesson," when we really want to punish. We were depressed and complained we felt bad, when in fact were mainly asking for sympathy and attention. This odd trait of mind and emotion, this perverse wish to hide a bad motive underneath a good one, permeates human affairs from top to bottom. This subtle and elusive kind of self-righteousness can underlie the smallest act or thought. Learning daily to spot, admit, and correct these flaws is the essence of character-building and good living. An honest regret for harms done, a genuine gratitude for blessings received, and a willingness to try for better things tomorrow will be the permanent assets we shall seek. (p. 94-5)

Step 11: *Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will and the power to carry that*

out.

This Step is in a sense a reaffirmation of what began in Steps 2 and 3, but represents the ongoing commitment to a spiritual life with God. By meditation we should not confuse it with the specific yogic and Buddhist traditions of the East, but of general contemplation of the divine which is more a cornerstone of the Christian tradition. In AA, it brings the alcoholic to the unavoidable truth that prayer and meditation “will be his lifeline in sobriety,” and will have “little, if any, resemblance to the activity he called prayer in the past” (Webber, pg. 172). In particular, prayer ceases to be a frustrating and unfulfilling means of bargaining with God and a place to vent a litany of disgruntled demands and becomes the altar at which we continually surrender our will to the care of God.

For the unrepentant sinner who has not begun any steps towards spiritual sobriety the idea of an improved conscious contact with God seems so far removed from possibility as to seem ridiculous. The alcoholic does not yet know for sure whether there really even is a God, and if even if there might be, He certainly wouldn't want anything to do with the sinner. This is why Steps like 11 are sometimes called “promises” because they refer to states of spiritual development which are far removed from the beginning. Without the necessary work before, any attempt to improve our knowledge of God will be fraught with self-delusion and grandiosity.

But even if we have done the work let us reflect on what at this point we should pray for: the knowledge of His will and the power to carry that out. Here we are brought to the Lord's prayer—Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven—as well as the prayer of the Lord before His passion—Not My will be done, but Thine, or Not as I will, but as You will. This prayer is often attached to the Serenity prayer in AA meetings, and it should be a motto for all of us. When our self-will begins to govern, that is when we are headed for trouble.

And lastly, Step 12: *Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

What this spiritual awakening is does not need to be defined much further, for the simple reason that “awakening” itself is the major part of the gift. To be awake, to be aware, to be living finally in the present with God in truth is itself the content of sobriety. Likewise our spiritual sobriety is marked by this wakefulness and watchfulness. We pray at every liturgy that those who partake of the Holy gifts do so first for purification of soul but the original language is actually more properly translated as “awakening” or “watchfulness” of soul. The ascetic fathers of the Church are also called the *neptic* or “vigilant” fathers.

Only someone who has truly become awake to who they really are and who God is and who others are will be able to effectively carry a message of spiritual sobriety to others. We see this in both AA and in the Church where enthusiastic people first come to the knowledge of their own need for conversion and repentance, and then run to try to convince everyone else of the same. Only after the patient work of the Steps in AA and their corresponding spiritual disciplines in the Church should someone try to carry the message. This is why we see in the book of Acts that when choosing deacons, for example, the apostles looked for “men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” (Acts 6:3) One of those deacons, St. Stephen would become the Church’s first martyr and a powerful witness of the message of the Gospel.

But even such men realize that their work is not over. Likewise the alcoholic knows that the 12th step is not so much the last step and then they are complete, but it is the commitment to continue their step work in all of their affairs. There is no such thing as a “former” alcoholic. The recovering alcoholic is always one drink away from drunk, something which they have had to learn often painfully through many backslides and slips. The sinaholic is no different. If we have

made some spiritual progress in our life, and have begun to taste the Grace of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we also are always one sin away from a complete fall. The Holy Fathers are painfully aware of that and we can see it in the honesty and humility of their prayers. Only in the Kingdom, in the life of the age to come, will we ever be completely free from sin and temptation. Until then, we must heed our Lord's words in Gethsemane on the night we was betrayed, "Watch and pray, lest you fall into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mark 14:38).

Lastly though, we need to remember that true spiritual awakening is not a selfish reality but brings us to a concern for the well being of all others. In Step 12 we see the final transformation of the sinaholic from one obsessed with self to a servant of others. We will never be completely spiritual healthy until the carrying of the message of the Gospel to others who are enslaved by sin becomes part of our life. We may have come to recognize that we are not saved alone, without the help of others in the fellowship of Christ. But we also need to come to realize that nobody else is saved alone either, and that means without our help and presence. Step 12 represents the fulfillment of a "promise" in that through it the recovering soul finally discovers their purpose and value in life and broader context of society. We discover that all of our life and all of its mistakes were not only allowed to happen the way they did by God for our learning and salvation, but for the salvation of those around us as well.

Thus we come to the end of our reflection on the 12 Steps of AA for now, but hopefully not the end of our use of them. The 12 Steps represent for modern man a most concise and comprehensive set of techniques for spiritual renewal. They are not exhaustive. In the end, we cannot succeed in our struggle against sin with techniques alone. We need the Gospel of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ to give us the fullness of the Truth, Life and the

Resurrection. The 12 Steps in this context give us the tools to carry out the work which our Maker and Fashioner has begun in us. They represent the spiritual Stations of the Cross that we must make as we take up our cross daily and follow Christ.

This week we are all invited to join Christ in His Passion, His Crucifixion, His Burial, and His Rising on the third day. Let our journey with Him through these events that echo through eternity echo throughout our entire inner lives and inspire us to reach out to God, open our hearts to Him, and say, with the apostles, *Maranatha*—O Come, Lord Jesus!

Sunday of Orthodoxy
Sinaholics Anonymous Step IV and V

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

Today we continue a series on *Orthodox Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*. We have already considered the first three steps of AA, and now that we have entered Lent it is the perfect time for Step 4: *[We] Made a searching a fearless moral inventory of ourselves*. The Lenten season began as a time of preparation for baptism for the catechumens, and then eventually of rededication for the whole church in anticipation of the celebration of the Lord's Resurrection. Part of this time includes not only catechesis about the faith as beliefs, practices, and Scriptures, but also spiritual as well. The confession of sins before baptism and the reception of the Eucharist is part of that process. We'll look more closely at confession in Step 5, but first, before we can get there, we should and must learn what it means to prepare for it. This is what Step 4 is all about for the alcoholic and the "sin-aholic" alike.

There is something profoundly refreshing about the fellowship and the writings of AA and other addiction recovery groups based on AA. In them, there is no need for any more illusion, false fronts, good faces, etc. No one is there because they have it all together. On the contrary, they are there because they have come to admit that they do not. There is an honesty, candor and humility that perhaps are found nowhere else in modern society. One would hope that one could find such genuineness in the churches, where souls are supposed to be humbled before Christ. We all know how rarely that is the case. This is the last place where we should play the Pharisee but the first place we usually do.

In the "Big Book" of AA, we do find that candor. At the beginning of the famous chapter "How it Works," which explains the 12 steps, we hear the following:

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path.

Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to the simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. Their chances are less than average. There are those too who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed. AA World Services, New York, 2001. pg. 58)

We see the honesty here already about what it takes to recover, but also a humility and compassion which comes from being honest about one's self. Even those who are "constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves" are regarded as "unfortunate ones," reminding us of how the criminals in old Russia were called. The key for us here is very important however. Just as recovery from addiction requires rigorous self-honesty, so too does any genuine life of repentance from sin.

Here and now begin the work of the 12 steps. The first steps were about an adjustment of attitude and awareness, towards our selves, our problems, and our God. Now we are asked to undertake action. AA calls it a fearless and searching moral inventory. The term inventory comes to us from the business world, that very American approach to life and contribution to culture.

The Big Book goes on to say

Therefore we started upon a personal inventory. This was step four. A business which takes no regular inventory usually goes broke. Taking a commercial inventory is a fact-finding and fact-facing process. It is an effort to discover the truth about the stock-in-trade. One object is to disclose damaged or unsalable goods, to get rid of them promptly and without regret. If the owner of the business is to be successful, he cannot fool himself about values.

We did the same thing with our lives. We took stock honestly. First we searched out the flaws in our make-up which causes our failure. Being convinced that self, manifested in various ways, was what had defeated us, we considered its common manifestations. (pg. 64)

This is absolutely essential for spiritual growth as well. How often have we found ourselves lax in this regard and found ourselves suddenly realizing we had become spiritually bankrupt!—with

no life of prayer, with no joy, with no warmth of hear or care about God or neighbor. We may wonder how we had fallen to such a state. Assuredly, we had not been keeping stock.

What the founders of AA discovered next is quite compelling. They discovered in their honest inventory that two factors were the most prevalent in their problem. What do you think they are? Pride? Gluttony? Lust? Envy, greed, wrath or sloth? Certainly the vices and the passions were present, and pride amongst them first. But the “Number one” “offender” was resentment, and tied to it, fear. Resentment and fear were usually found at the base of the inventory. The Big Book says that resentment “destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease, for we have not only been mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritual sick” (ibid.) It is not surprising then that St. John of Sinai, in his *Ladder of Divine Ascent* summons the most visceral images for describing resentment, or Malice, the “remembering of wrongs”:

Remembrance of wrongs comes as the final point of anger. It is a keeper of sins. It hates a just way of life. It is the ruin of virtues, the poison of the soul, a worm in the mind. It is the shame of prayer, a cutting off of supplication, a turning away from love, a nail piercing the soul. It is a pleasure-less feeling cherished in the sweetness of bitterness. It is a never ending sin, an unsleeping wrong, rancor by the hour, a dark and loathsome passion... (The Ladder, Step 9)

For the alcoholic, the alcohol consumption is not the source of the problem, but its pathological symptom. Likewise the other addictions take what are normally innocent things and turn them into destructive “instincts run amok.” Whether it be eating, drinking, emotions, sex, or a neutral substance, addiction takes what is normal and natural and turns it into something perverse. The church fathers understood this in regard to the passions—that typically the passions represent normal or natural human elements twisted and distorted through abuse and the tempting workings of the devil. What is the main means by which our naturally good aspects are distorted? We would be wise to begin with our resentments and fears. In Step 4, part of the moral

inventory is putting down in writing all the people against whom we hold grudges, the reasons thereof, and what those relationships affect. I encourage anyone to do this, but to also make sure that they understand the previous three steps as well. This type of moral inventory is not about self-condemnation which can lead to fueling despair and thus further sin. It is about being honest with ourselves. We may not like what we find. But then again, we may try to look at it another way.

When I was a child, our house backed onto an area of former farm fields left fallow for many years and grown wild again. One of our favorite pastimes in summer was to adventure around the “field” as we called it. If we came upon a board of plywood left there as trash or the abandoned fortifications of older kids, we would lift it up to see if we could catch a garter snake underneath. Very often we did so. We also found worms and bugs galore, a whole habitat. We would take what we wanted and leave the rest. Spiritual introspection can be like that. We try to find the snake inside of us causing us so much trouble but leave it at that. But if we want to keep it away, we will have to expose the whole world underneath.

It is not uncommon knowledge that the drinking alcoholic or addict justifies their acting out by blaming others. The alcoholic drinks because his boss doesn't appreciate him. Or maybe he expects too much of him. The addict uses drugs because her parents never loved her enough, or maybe because *they* spoiled her and kept her like a princess. The sexaholic commits serial adultery because his spouse doesn't understand him, etc. etc. Underneath all of these rationalizations lies resentment. It is perhaps less obvious that for us to sin requires us to justify our actions in a similar manner. Why should I bother to pray? Will God really listen? Do others really deserve my prayer? Do they deserve my charity and compassion? Why shouldn't I indulge myself, my pleasures, my self-righteousness, my resentments? Why shouldn't I just look at what

tempts me and indulge my imagination for awhile? If we look at the story of the Fall, does not the serpent appeal to Eve's sense of resentment by suggesting that it is God's fault for making such a nice-looking fruit and for not wanting her and Adam to be like Him? If we are ever going to get serious about overcoming sin, we will need to stop pointing the finger at others, especially God.

Intrinsically tied to resentment is the issue of fear and the anger that often goes with it. Fear and anger are tied into us instinctually, as a fight or flight reaction to danger. Any kind of insecurity can be sensed by us as danger, and our emotional response to that is a register of our spiritual health. The soul locked in addiction does not process insecurity well at all. Fr. Webber says

There are three main areas of life where almost everyone has problems, at least some of the time. Money is often a cause of anguish, whether because of extravagance, or fear of monetary insecurity, or both. Almost everything to do with sex can be a problem, whether one is single or married. Eating habits and food in general is another source of great pain for many people. Thus even without alcohol or other addictive substances to worry about, the nonaddict has plenty of these common areas of problems on which to concentrate, quite apart from things of a more idiosyncratic nature. (Webber, pg. 135)

All of these everyday problems can generate fear, anxiety, and resentment within us. If we are not honest with ourselves, do not surrender these fears and resentments up to God immediately, but instead cling to them and let them fester, a fall is heading our way, or rather, we are falling headlong into it. How much liberating it is therefore, to accept the care and will of God and to look fearlessly and rigorously at our selves and take stock.

Once having done so we will be able to move forward to the next step: by admitting to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. This is *Step Five* which we will look at next week. May we each be encouraged this week to sit down, with pencil and paper, and write down a list of our resentments, their causes, and their effects. God bless!

Sunday of the Cross Sinaholics Steps 6 and 7

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Christ is among us!

Today we come to the mid point of Great Lent, venerating the Cross of the Lord to remind us of our destination at the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. We venerate it that we might take it up daily, and be strengthened by His power through it, and follow Him. It is through the Cross that the Lord humbly accepts to take from us our all of our sins, destroying their power as he tramples down death by dying for us. Our task, is to be ready and willing to accept that Cross and allow Him to do so in our lives, removing from us all of our shortcomings. This, brothers and sisters, is all the essence of Steps 6 and 7 of the 12 Step program which we will explore today.

Step 6: [We] were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Up until now, the steps have primarily addressed the foundations of the addict's personality—attitude, personal history, belief system, self-honesty, etc. Now, half way through the journey we are at last discussing *change*. And even now, this change is not so much about the problem that brings us to the 12 steps but is about a comprehensive change to our whole spiritual constitution—"all these defects of character." These steps also have nothing to do with our doing anything to change. Instead, we are being led to fulfill the decision we made earlier to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God. Here we are learning to surrender. And this is where lasting change really begins.

It is often pointed how subtle Step 6 is, how understated, but how profound. Here we are not being asked to do anything, to make a decision. In Step 6 we simply accept to be entirely ready and willing for God to act. Fr. Meletios Webber describes this as Waiting:

Waiting for God to act is, in some ways, the natural state of the saint, and the learned behavior of the person who is experiencing spiritual growth. Waiting is also the natural state of the Church... The life of the Church is an eternal vigil, watching and waiting for the Bridegroom to return. (*Steps of Transformation*, pg. 146)

For many of us, the idea of embracing a state of waiting sounds like torture. Waiting in line at the DMV seems like hell on earth. Yet there can really be no peace in our souls if we cannot be completely at peace in a state of waiting. (I hate waiting, I confess. I used to torture myself with anticipation when I expected someone to arrive or call on the phone. Now I see a choice between standing by the door or the phone or going about my day as if nothing was different. If someone is early or late, I don't even notice because I was occupying myself with something other than agonizing! I am still at the ready, but I am not weighed down with worry.)

The Vigil of the Church reminds us of the Parable of the Bridegroom, which serves as the theme of the Bridegroom, or *Nymphios*, Matins at the beginning of Holy Week:

Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight,
and blessed is the servant whom He shall find watching;
and again, unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless.
Beware, therefore, O my soul, do not be weighed down with sleep,
lest you be given up to death and lest you be shut out of the Kingdom.
But rouse yourself crying: Holy, Holy, Holy, are You, O our God!

All throughout that week we are in a heightened state of watchfulness and anticipation liturgically, so that we might carry that vigilance into the rest of the year and be renewed. It should not be surprised that the ascetic fathers are often called the *Neptic* or “vigilant” fathers. Watchfulness and readiness—both against temptation and for God’s action—are essential to a successful spiritual life.

But this readiness of Step 6 is far more difficult than it might seem at first. Remember that is based on the previous work: that we have made a searching and fearless moral inventory of our selves and admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of

our wrongs (Steps 4 and 5). On the basis of that inventory and confession, we are now being asked to be ready and willing to have God remove ALL those defects of character. Before we ask Him, as perhaps we have done many times before, we have to be truly ready and truly willing. How many times have gone to confessions knowing that what we were confessing we did not yet really intend to give up. We knew we were doing something wrong, but we didn't believe it could be helped, or that we were not really going to change—that is was not in us to do so or that this was just who we were. We treated confession like an oil change when what we needed was a new engine. We try to get by on maintenance when what we need is a total overhaul.

This is particularly true of sins which have become habitual vices, or passions. Like the alcoholic, our identity has become fused with our vice, so much that we really don't know who we would be without it. And all of this might be completely internal and secret to the rest of the world—a hidden life of thinking, emotion, and acting out the full extent of which only God and we know. At Step 6 we are being asked if we really a) trust God to remove our sins, especially our secret sins; and b) are willing to give them up. Even if we know we are doing wrong, that our sins hurt us and others, and that in despair and hopeless we have asked for deliverance, it is quite possible that we still cling to them.

We may be afraid of what might happen if we tried to live a different way, as we know God is calling us. We might be afraid to die, in so many ways. We might be afraid we would lose our ability to function (if we can call it functioning) around other people, with our family, at work. We might be afraid of losing our friendships, our relationships, our ambitions. We might be afraid to simply discover who we truly are, because we know we can no longer cling to false images of self. But for the addict, alcoholic and lifelong *sinaholic*, sobriety and victory over sin is a vast and undiscovered country. This can be terrifying, at first. It is also the greatest adventure

we can experience in this life.

This is why Step 6 comes only after lots of hard work, in the middle of the 12. We cannot honestly arrive at this state of willingness without first surrendering to God and also uncovering our whole inner life and exposing them to God and another human being first. Those preliminary steps give us the trust in God that we need to say the Serenity prayer (or variations thereof):

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.

Once we have reached that state of preparedness, when we are finally at peace with just waiting, and we don't feel the overwhelming need to get back in there and take control of everything that bothers us, then we can move to Step 7: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

In the Big Book of AA the following prayer or one like it is recommended:

My Creator, I am now willing that You should have all of me, good and bad. I pray that you now remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and to my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding. Amen. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, pg.76)

In the Church we have a similar prayer, which is prayed daily during Lent in the services (but is also good for anytime of the year). It is the prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian:

O Lord and Master of my life, take from the spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power, and idle talk. But give rather to me, Your servant, the spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love. Yeah, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my Brother, for blessed are You unto ages of ages. Amen.

These prayers have much in common. While the 7th Step prayer is more general, and thus allows all defects of character, the precision of St. Ephraim is useful for everyday life as it points to the main vices which trouble us all, and the proper virtues which set us free. Both also are importantly concerned with going beyond self. The AA prayer points out that our defects of

character affect our usefulness to God and our fellow human beings, and that our goal will be service to others. Likewise, St. Ephraim's prayer ends with us thinking no longer about ourselves but about our brother, that we might be better servants of God for them.

I have also recommended to the Mother's group that they use this prayer with their children and modify the language so that they might understand it better: "O Lord, take from me the spirit of being lazy, grumpy, bossy, and chattering," etc. They need to learn at the earliest stage not just good manners for the sake of appearances, but that they are called to a spiritual state of virtue.

We all need to learn the art of asking God humbly and patiently to remove our shortcomings. This is more than simple forgiveness—this is transformation of character. When Christ forgives, He also commands, "Go and sin no more." This tall order is only possible when we involve all the components of surrender, confession, and readiness and to them add correction—the righting of wrongs and the transformation of how we go about handling temptations, resentments, and all which causes us to stumble. This is the work of Steps 8,9, and 10, at which we will look next week. [This Wednesday evening we will take a side trip by looking at the specific difficulties of co-addiction and co-dependency, where someone else's problems become the thing with which we are addicted and obsessed.]

May God bless you with serenity, courage, and wisdom through the power of the Cross!

Sunday of St John of the Ladder
Sinaholics Anonymous Steps 8 and 9

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Christ is among us!

Today the Church remembers the life and contribution of St. John of Sinai, the author of the Ladder of Divine Ascent. He wrote it in the 7th century, and the book has remained one of the most popular and beloved works on asceticism and the spiritual life in the Christian East. Because it is stylized as a Ladder composed of thirty steps, many comparisons have been made between it and the modern 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Some Orthodox Christians have been bold enough to tout that “our program has 30 steps! It’s more comprehensive.” (I hastened to point out that this does not necessarily make for a positive difference.) But we must realize that the use of the step image is not the same in each “program.” Their purposes are not exactly the same. However, we can see that there are some striking similarities.

For example, just as the first 3 steps of AA deal with the need to surrender our will and our lives to God after admitting our powerlessness over the sin that enslaves us, the Ladder begins with the monastic version thereof: Renunciation, Detachment, Obedience and other fundamental virtues. While Steps 4-7 of AA deal with making moral inventories, confessions our wrongs, and humbly asking God to remove our shortcomings, the Ladder goes on to catalogue the passions, not surprisingly starting with anger and resentment. Then we come to today’s subject: Steps 8 and 9 where we make a list of all those we have harmed and seek to make amends to them. Likewise in the Ladder, having recognized the passions and how to undermine them, we are called to focus on simplicity, humility and discernment. The three steps of AA deal with the ongoing life of sobriety and recovery, including having a spiritual awakening because of the work of recovery and thus being able to serve others. The Ladder reaches its heights by likewise describing a life of spiritual sobriety in terms of Stillness, Prayer, Dispassion, and

finally, at Step 30, Love.

Thus we can see that both systems share much in common. They have to. Both are rooted in the experience of those who had successfully overcome their passions with the grace of God in a fellowship of faith. The humanity of the 7th century is no different than the humanity of the 20th or 21st. Today we look at Steps 8 and 9 and see how we might apply them to our lives.

8. Made a list of all the persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

We will notice a similarity between these two steps and the four before them. They are a linked pair; the first introspective, the second active and requiring us to “get the inside out.” These steps represent yet another type of inventory. Now we are looking at how our behavior has affected others. This is not as easy as it sounds. We read in Twelve Steps and twelve Traditions,

This reopening of emotional wounds, some old, some perhaps forgotten, and some still painfully festering, will at first look like a purposeless and pointless piece of surgery. But if a willing start is made, then the great advantages of doing this will so quickly reveal themselves that the pain will be lessened as one obstacle after another melts away.

These obstacles, however, are very real. The first, and one of the most difficult, has to do with forgiveness. The moment we ponder a twisted and broken relationship with another person, our emotions go on the defensive. To escape looking at the wrongs we have done another, we resentfully focus on the wrong he [or she] has done us. This is especially true if he has, in fact, behaved badly at all. Triumphantly we seize upon his misbehavior as the perfect excuse for minimizing or forgetting our own. (12 and 12, pgs. 77-78)

Sound familiar to anyone? You don't have to be an alcoholic to fall into this pattern.

Another very real obstacle is coming to terms with harm. We are like the flipside of the young lawyer who tested Christ asking, “Who is my neighbor?” I.e., whom do I really need to love as myself? We want to ask, “Whom have I *really* harmed?” It is the same question we may

ask at the beginning of Lent when we are faced the first time with the ceremony of Mutual Forgiveness. “Do I really need to ask for forgiveness from complete strangers?” AA also addresses this question:

We might next ask ourselves what we mean when we say that we have “harmed” other people. What kinds of “harm” do people do one another, anyway? To define the word “harm” in a practical way, we might call it the result of instincts in collision, which cause physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual damage to people. If our tempers are consistently bad, we arouse anger in others. If we lie or cheat, we deprive others not only of their worldly goods, but of their emotional security and peace of mind. We really issue them an invitation to become contemptuous and vengeful. If our sex conduct is selfish, we may excite jealousy, misery, and a strong desire to retaliate in kind.

Such gross misbehavior is not by any means a full catalogue of the harms we do. Let us think of some of the subtler ones which can sometimes be quite as damaging. Suppose that in our family lives we happen to be miserly, irresponsible, callous, or cold. Suppose that we are irritable, critical, impatient, and humorless. Suppose we lavish attention upon one member of the family and neglect the others. What happens when we try to dominate the whole family, either by a rule of iron or by a constant outpouring of minute directions for just how their lives should be lived from hour to hour? What happens when we wallow in depression, self-pity oozing from every pore, and inflict that upon those about us? Such a roster of harms done to others—the kind that can make daily living with us as practicing [*sinaholics*] difficult and unbearable—could be extended almost indefinitely. When we take such personality traits as these into shop, office, and the society of our fellows, they can do damage almost as extensive as that we have caused at home (12 and 12, pgs. 80-1)

If we continue to conduct ourselves with rigorous self-honesty, we will likely find that we have caused some harm by even our smallest sins. Learning to identify these right away and make amends is part of what it means to remain sober spiritually.

But this brings us to the actual task of making amends. How are we to do so? It is both as simple as not as simple as simply asking for forgiveness. How so? As Step 9 points out there are times when our trying to make amends may actually cause more harm than good. This is where a great discernment is required. Fr. Meletios Webber points out the following: “For any statement to be authentic or legitimate, the statement has to be *true*, it has to be *necessary*, and it has to be

kind.” (Steps of Transformation, pg. 158). The classic example of where making an amends by admitting guilt to a person harmed would be if the person did not know anything about it *and* finding out would cause them great pain. Likewise, we can use this step as an excuse to criticize others: “I want to ask your forgiveness for being upset with *you* because *you* did this and that and the other.” We must also show discretion particularly in the case of adultery, if we have tragically succumbed to it. We should not lie about such things if asked, but we might consider the effects of admitting it, especially to the spouses of those involved in the adultery.

On the other hand, if it is a case in which we might face some actual punishment or even legal liability for admitting our wrongs, the experience of AA and other groups has shown that fearless self-disclosure in the quest to make amends is almost always the best path to pursue. It is also a necessary step to really coming clean and being freed from the legacy of our sins. In confessions, I often must advise those who confess that they must not only confess to God but also to those they have wronged. Otherwise, they may harbor the secret thought that “aha, I have gotten away with it!” and then turn around and not really change their way of life. Making ourselves accountable before those whom we have grieved is an essential element in becoming accountable before God.

Likewise, attempting to make amends may not meet in success as we might traditionally define it. We might seek to ask for forgiveness and be rebuffed. Years ago I attempted to do this with someone whom I had harmed. I called them and asked if I could talk to them. Their answer was a curt “no” followed by a click. I might try again someday, but at that time it was too painful for them to discuss. We might also find ourselves in the position of not being able to talk to someone because they have died or otherwise become inaccessible to us. Those are times when prayer becomes most helpful. We may pray for them, and ask God to convey to their souls our

love and humility in asking forgiveness. We may find other meaningful ways to honor them as well.

On the other hand, there is no better time than the present. 10 years ago I attended my 10 year High School Reunion. I had among my hopes one major one—that I would be able to ask forgiveness from as many people as I had harmed during my rebellious adolescence as possible. It was a fantastic experience. Those whom I was able to find there were extraordinarily forgiving and accommodating to me an unworthy sinner. It lifted their souls as well as mine. And it was one of the easiest things I had ever done to get right with God and my fellow human beings! This year will be my 20th anniversary. I hope to be able to do more of the same!

As we complete the course of the Lenten fast, now over half way complete, let us make sure that we also make a list of those whom we have harmed in any way, and seek to make amends to them. Let us continue to practice this principle as well throughout all of our lives. How we treat others is how we treat Christ, and the basis on which we are judged. Let us leave this life with no accusation against us without answer without confession, and without amends.

Through the prayers of our holy father John of the Ladder, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us!