



# A Concise Overview of Moral Issues Facing Orthodox Christians Today

By V. Rev. Fr. George Alberts



# AN INTRODUCTION TO MORALITY

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Before we can consider moral issues, we need to look at such things as God, Man and Salvation. Unless we understand these things, we can't really discuss moral issues because we will have no basis for judgment. If you really understand the basic beliefs of the Church, then you can pretty much determine what is and isn't moral.

The basis of the Christian Faith is Love. God created everything out of love. God created the Angels out of love as His Ministers. They serve Him and mankind as well. These Angels are free to serve Him for eternity--They live in His presence and do not die. We know that He gave them a free will as well, because Satan--one of the Chief Angels--and others with him, rebelled against God and continue to fight against Him and us to this day. This is called Spiritual Warfare. But God's love didn't end. He didn't give up because Satan rebelled.

God created the earth and all that is in it as an expression of His love and He created man to enjoy it. He gave him rule over everything. Everything was good. God again expressed His love for man in creating woman so that man would not be alone. Woman is a part of man since they were once united. They rule over the creatures and all of creation as they interact together and enjoy all that God created out of love. In this new creation, we find an interaction and interrelationship of God, Man, Woman and creation. All was perfect and good.

Part of this perfection was the Free Will that God gave to them. Mankind was given the ability and freedom to choose right or wrong. God did not program or force man to obey Him. He did not make him a slave or robot. As a result, their love for God was a true love--not forced or coerced. Satan entered in at this point, taking advantage of the Free Will that God gave to Mankind. When tempted, man chose to disobey and leave God. Satan tempted him in order to take man away from God and further his struggle against God. Man freely chose to follow Satan's temptation to be like God. As a result of this choice, everything changed drastically. This change is known as The Fall.

With this Fall, man's relationship with God suffered greatly. (Gen. 3:1-24) Mankind had rejected its creator and now He rejected them, so to speak, by casting them out of the Garden of Eden. He put a barrier between man and beast so that they no longer had this loving relationship, which was present before the Fall. Man was forced to labor for all he desired. Sin and Evil entered into the world. No longer was the relationship between man and woman free from evil and temptation. Adam and Eve realized their nakedness. Jealousy, hatred, and murder entered into the world with the killing of Abel by his brother, Cain. (Gen. 4:1-16) The world became filled with sin and evil as witnessed in the time of Noah (Gen. 6:5-8) when God was sorry He created man; and later God's punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their sins. (Gen. 18:20-21) Man had turned his back on God and many loved evil and hated good. The second great result of the Fall was mortality. No longer could man live forever on earth. Now man faced

death. Some died old and some died young. Today, we still suffer those consequences. Sin and evil fill the world and all of us must face a physical death.

Throughout the history of mankind, God has tried to make peace and restore man to his former position and relationship. God destroyed the world in a flood, but He saved the righteous Noah and his family. In this way He gave man another chance. As a sign of this new relationship and Covenant, He created a rainbow to remind man of what happened and why it happened and to show that He would not destroy the world by a flood again.

Again man tried to surpass God by building the tower of Babel to bring God down to earth, but God confused their languages and scattered them. God then chose the Hebrew people as His Chosen People. He made a covenant of mutual faithfulness with Abraham that they would be His people and He would be their God. Circumcision would be the symbol of this Covenant. (Gen. 17:1-14) Abraham, Isaac and Jacob became the Patriarchs of Israel. Time after time the people would turn away from God and He would send Prophets to warn them to repent. Finally, He sent His Only-Begotten Son into the world to save us from sin and death and reconcile us to God the Father once again. Christ died and rose again from the dead and ascended into Heaven so that mankind could once again be reunited with God. With Christ's death, He destroyed the first of man's enemies, which is sin. With His resurrection from the dead, He destroyed the second enemy, which is death and restored us to eternal life. With His ascension, He showed us the bodily Ascension into Heaven, which will take place for all of us at His Second Coming. And at Pentecost, He sent His Holy Spirit to live in us and His Church and reunite mankind, which He scattered at the tower of Babel.

God, who had created Man in His own Image and Likeness, became man so that man could become like God. Those who followed Christ, all of us, became the New Israel, the New Zion, and the New Chosen People of God. What Adam had destroyed--sinlessness and eternal life--the New Adam, Jesus Christ, had restored by bringing forgiveness of sins and eternal life into the world. What Eve brought into the world, the New Eve, the Virgin Mary, changed. She gave birth to God the Word, the Life of the World, and the forgiver of sins and conqueror of death.

This in short is Salvation History. We Orthodox Christians participate in this story, which is both His story and our story, when we accept Christ, believe in Him and follow His commandments.

Now that you have this brief background in what the Church teaches us about Salvation History, we can look at several things that we need to be sure of and focus on when we discuss moral issues.

If we really understand our Orthodox Faith, then we will have a better chance at making a judgment as to the morality of a situation. Let's remember that we learned the following important things: God is perfect love. Man is made in the image and likeness of God. Man and creation are good. Because of these things, anything that tries to warp, tarnish or destroy man and creation is evil.

Out of love, God created man in His own likeness and Image and therefore, man is an Icon of God. What does this mean? All of us are called to reflect the qualities of God. As Christ said, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matt. 5:48) We must avoid sin. These sins are spelled out for us in Holy Scripture. Second, we are the temples of God's Holy Spirit, which dwells in us (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:9-20). That Temple should not be defiled by sin. Our body is sacred and should be treated with respect in both life and death. Finally, we should love, honor and respect others, as they too, are icons of God and temples of His Holy Spirit.

Since Man and Creation are good and holy to God, whatever tries to warp or destroy them is evil and sinful. It is then sinful to destroy God's Creation. It is also sinful to take away life, which God creates. It is also sinful to warp what God created. This means we should not misuse it, mistreat it, or use it in an Unholy and sinful manner-a manner contrary to what God intended it to be used for. It is also sinful to warp and distort the positive attributes of God into something Ungodly. These attributes include things like love, forgiveness, mercy, justice etc.

When we are asked to judge an action as moral or immoral; ethical or unethical; sinful or sinless, we should ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Is life destroyed by the action?
2. Is what God created misused or mistreated?
3. Are we doing evil in order to get what we want?
4. Are the rules, laws, and guidelines given to us by God followed, broken or warped?
5. Would the consequences of our actions be acceptable to God?
6. Are we tarnishing God's image in us or in others by our actions?
7. Are we breaking any promises or covenants we made with God?
8. Would God approve of our actions?
9. Would I be doing this if God were standing next to me?
10. Can I defend my actions before God?

If we use what we know and have learned about who man is, our relationship to God and His relationship to us, we should be able ask ourselves these questions and feel comfortable with the answers we give. By understanding what Christ and the Church teaches us, we can usually make very good decisions about moral and ethical questions, even more modern problems that we will face in our lives. We will be looking at some of the issues, both old and new, that we face today and see what the Church has to say about them. As we go along, ask yourselves the above questions and see if you can figure out why the Church says what it does.

## **MORALITY II--LOVE, SEX, DATING AND MARRIAGE**

The teachings of the Church about love, sex, dating and marriage are very important to us in our world today. If you watch TV, go to the movies, read popular magazines, or even talk with your friends, you will see that there are many different views and teachings about these topics. Unfortunately, most of what you see and hear is contrary to what the Holy Scripture and the Church teaches.

The beginning point for us is Love. As we learned earlier, God created mankind out of love. He wanted us to enjoy all of His creation. Scripture tells us that woman was created from the rib of man out of God's love as a helpmate for man so that together they could enjoy all of God's creation. God said that it was "not good that man should be alone" so He created Eve. When Adam saw Eve, he said, "This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. (Gen.2:18-23). They were originally one and now there were two. Adam and Eve were to love one another as they enjoyed God's creation. They were also given the ability to have children together in imitation of God's creative power. God created sex for this purpose. Sex was the means for uniting a man and a woman into one flesh once again. This union was both holy and mystical. Children were created through this union and man was given a sex drive by God to assure that this union would take place and that the human race would grow and populate the earth. In fact, the command to have children was one of the first commandments given by God to man. (Gen. 1: 28) Sex was enjoyable and pleasurable when used for the right reasons.

If you read the Old Testament, you see that sex was emphasized as a means of carrying on the human race, especially the Hebrew people who were God's chosen people. Because of this, certain things were done and "allowed" by God in the Old Testament so that the God's people would multiply. Many married within the same family, cousins marrying cousins for example. If one's wife was unable to have children, the husband could have children by the maid or servant. (Gen. 16, 29, 30) If a male died and he had a brother, his brother would take his wife and have children with her to preserve the family. (Deut. 25:5-6) Barrenness or being unable to have children was considered a curse from God since it was God who told man to be fruitful and multiply. There were many strict rules regarding sexual activity in the Old Testament even though some of the things listed above seem to be very lenient and even immoral by our standards today.

It is also helpful for us to consider the following ideas that come from the Old Testament and relate to the Church's teachings about sex. The first is the issue of nakedness. Why do we wear clothes? In Genesis 2:25, speaking of Adam and Eve, we read: "They were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed". After the fall of man, when sin entered into the world, we find a different and opposite reaction. Genesis 3:7 tells us that after the fall "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons". And later in verse 21 we're told: "unto Adam also, and unto his wife, did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them." This idea of nakedness was carried on throughout the Old

Testament. One was forbidden to see his parents or family members naked. (Lev. 18:6-18)

Another idea found in the Old Testament was the use of the word or phrase: to “know” meaning to have sexual intercourse with someone. Part of this involved the idea of nakedness—seeing someone totally uncovered and naked. By doing this, we know them in a very personal way that is only reserved for special relationships. It is partially because of this that the Church opposed pornography. It also tells us that pornography devalues and exploits others. It also often leads the viewer into other sins such as lust. A closely related sexual sin, masturbation, often accompanies the use of pornography whether the images are internal, like sexual fantasies, or external, like pornographic magazines, movies or internet sites. This sin focuses on the self and one's own sexual gratification rather than the blessed union between male and female that God desires.

The second meaning of this idea of “knowing” someone else is fully discovering and knowing another person in a very intimate way through sexual intercourse. Having sex should mean not only sharing our bodies, but also our thoughts, emotions, love and life. One person totally surrenders himself to the other and becomes vulnerable to the other person. Because of this, it should be private, personal and not something we share with everyone or just anyone. There must be love and a life-long commitment; which is made in the Sacrament of Marriage.

Ideas about sex in the New Testament changed greatly with the teachings of Christ and the Apostles. Jesus upheld, modified and added to the Old Testament teachings. He taught that sex was for marriage and marriage was sacred. In fact, He performed His first miracle at the marriage feast in Canaan of Galilee when He changed the water into wine. Christ was against the practice of having children by other than one's wife. When it came to divorce, He said that the only reason for divorce should be adultery or unfaithfulness. He said to marry someone who was divorced was adultery. He even went so far as to say that to look lustfully at a woman was also committing adultery in one's heart. (Matt. 5:27-32; Matt. 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18) Through sex and marriage a man and a woman are joined together for eternity. It is “for this reason a man shall leave his mother and father and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” (Gen. 2:24, Matt. 19:5-6, Mark 10:7-9; Eph. 5:31-33)

In the Epistles, we find other ideas as well. St. Paul tells us that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and he warns against committing sexual sins because they involve the body as well as the soul. These sins would include things like masturbation and oral sex, which do not lead to the proper union of a male and female or to procreation. What were considered unnatural sex acts were condemned. These include incest, adultery, fornication and homosexuality. St. Paul even went so far as to say that those committing these acts would be barred from the kingdom of heaven. (I Cor. 6:9-20) Sex was not considered to be bad or a sin if used correctly and the only correct use for sex was in the sacrament of marriage. Sex is a mystery that unites a man and woman into one flesh and reflects the mystery of the union of Christ and His Church (Eph. 5:21-33). Marriage is an

eternal union and because of this the ideal is for widows and widowers to remain unmarried. St. Paul did make an exception for those who couldn't stay unmarried. He said it was better for them to remarry than to commit sexual sins. (1 Cor. 7:8-11)

What does the Church say about premarital sex and dating? First of all, love is important. Love is the reason God created all things. It is the reason He sent His Son, Jesus Christ into the world to save us. It is also the way that He tells us we should treat one another. Since dating is relatively new, the Church does not have any specific teachings about it other than resisting the temptation for premarital sex. It does warn us about this and other temptations and problems. Some of those include taking advantage of or using another person for our own pleasure or treating them as an object instead of a person. It warns us about the pressures we will have to face, pressures like being tempted to let our sexual desires and passions rule us. We can easily fall into the sin of lust if we are not careful. It also makes it clear to us that we should not "unite" ourselves with another unless that union is blessed by God in His Church. This is done in the Sacrament of Marriage. When we date, we should treat the other person with love and respect. We should never force them to do what they don't want to do and we should not allow others to force us to do what we know is not right.

The Church teaches us that sex is not a dirty word and it is not something bad. If it is used properly in the context of marriage, it is good, natural and beautiful. If it is misused, warped or distorted in any way, it becomes sinful. Sexual intercourse, then, is limited to married couples who have pledged themselves to one another before God and the Church. It is the total union of two people, a physical union that combines the two into one flesh. This physical union implies a spiritual union of fully "knowing" one another and being willing to totally give our self to the other person. This being willing to die for the other is the martyrdom the wedding hymn talks about. It is a personal commitment, one person to another, and it is the means for us to imitate the creative power of God by having children of our own.

Premarital sex is considered sinful because it is contrary to these ideas. There is no commitment made in the Church before God and He does not bless it. The union is often only physical and temporary while marriage is physical, spiritual and eternal. It can also cause hurt and pain through broken relationships, emotional alienation and abuse, and unwanted pregnancy.

Dating allows us to know another person and to see if we grow to love them and eventually want to share our life with them. As far as sex goes, the Church cannot set concrete limits other than forbidding any type of sex before marriage. You must know your limits, talk about those limits and your feelings about sex, and respect the other person. Don't go beyond your limits or force others to do so. Sex should be limited by self-control, body control, love and respect. You can do this by avoiding situations that might lead to temptation. Avoid playing with the emotions of others. Love should not be used to gain physical satisfaction. Consult your Spiritual Father with any questions you might have.

One thing that we need to remember is that sexual sins, like any other sins, need to be confessed and they can be forgiven. There are many Saints of the Church who led a sexually immoral life, repented for those sins, and later became Saints. With each confession we begin our spiritual journey again. It is never too late to repent, confess, be forgiven and start fresh.

## **MORALITY III--MEDICAL ISSUES**

Some of the hardest moral choices that people have to make today involve medical issues. As science and technology advances, we will probably see an increasing amount of situations that require the Church and us as its members to take a position on them. The field of medicine is growing daily with new discoveries, technologies and medical treatments that never existed before. While some moral and ethical questions have existed since the time of the early Church Fathers and Councils, today's issues seem far removed from their time and experiences. Because of this, some feel that the Church cannot help us make these decisions. This is not true! Just because the problem or technology seems to be new, we can still apply some of the things that we learned to help us make informed decisions. Remember the questions we need to ask?

Now let's look at some of these issues. We can divide the most common issues into 2 sections. The first deals with sexually related issues and the second deals with other medical issues. In understanding or dealing with this first set of issues, we have to again look at the Church's view of sex, marriage and childbearing.

At the center is our understanding of marriage. Marriage is a Sacrament. In that Sacrament one man and one woman pledge their faithfulness to one another before God in His Church. This union is sacred and blessed by God. No one else is involved in this union and this marriage in any intimate way. Marriage is the union of 2 people blessed by God with the fruits of their union being children whom they have created together in imitation of God's creative powers.

### **1. ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION, TEST TUBE BABIES AND SURROGATE MOTHERS**

If we look at artificial insemination, we see that the sacramental bond between husband and wife is broken when the sperm of a stranger or 3<sup>rd</sup> party is used. In the same way, taking or using the egg of another woman and fertilizing it with the sperm of the husband and then implanting it in the wife's womb is also involving a stranger or 3<sup>rd</sup> party. Because of this, our Orthodox Church opposes this type of artificial insemination. It involves someone else in the marital relationship and in a strict sense is almost like committing adultery. If the egg and sperm in artificial insemination are from the wife and husband, then this does not break the marriage bond or covenant. In this case, medical technology is used to help the husband and wife achieve the fruits of their union, which are children.

This brings us to the second issue, which is test-tube babies. As with artificial insemination, the same idea applies. There can be no acceptable donors other than the husband and wife for the same reasons. In addition to this, we have to consider this as an unnatural process that separates the couple from the childbearing process. But perhaps the major objection here, even if it is the egg and sperm of the husband and wife, is the process involved. In the fertilization process, many more eggs are fertilized than can be used. As a result, those not used are disposed of. This is then seen as destroying life, which is abortion.

Now we must consider the idea of a surrogate mother or artificial womb (if one is invented). Here again, the major problem is the interference of this 3<sup>rd</sup> party. The Church would have to consider it an intrusion into the marriage by the surrogate mother. But along with this, we also have to consider that we are causing the surrogate mother to sin by impregnating her with the child of someone else. For these reasons the Church is opposed to the use of surrogate mothers. It would also be opposed to the use of an artificial womb, if one were developed, which would be unnatural and an interference in the Sacrament of Marriage.

What we have to keep in mind again is the fact that children are seen as being the fruits of a marriage. Marriage is not a selfish state of existence between a man and woman. They should desire to share their life with children if so blessed by God. In fact, the Orthodox Church allows some types of birth control if it is used for a period of time until the couple is ready and able to have children. It is not to be used as a permanent means to never have children. Also, birth control medications and devices, such as the intra-uterine device (IUD), which work on the principle of abortion (not allowing an already fertilized egg to implant in the uterus), are not to be used by Orthodox Christians. If a couple is unable to have children even through the use of church approved medical techniques, the Church does not consider them as sinners or being somehow punished by God as was thought in the Old Testament times. We are living in a fallen world where things are not perfect. The couple can also adopt children in this case, and share their love with their adopted children just as God, who adopted us as His sons and daughters, shares His love with us.

## **2. ORGAN DONATION AND TRANSPLANTS**

Several issues exist here. Jesus tells us “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”(John 15:13). What greater love can we express than donating an organ that we have no more use for in order to save a life? We are literally saving someone from death. But a different approach looks at what St. Paul says: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple, and that God’s Holy Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy and that temple you are”(1 Cor. 3:16-17). Is it right, then, to cut up this temple and remove parts of it even if it means bettering or saving a life? What organs, if any, really matter; the heart, the lungs, the brain? Can’t God resurrect our body if we donate parts of it to save others? Is dying “God’s will”? If I have a terminal illness, why should I want a transplant? Shouldn’t I allow myself to die naturally?

These are difficult questions that have divided even the “expert” church theologians. Some seem to favor the “lay down ones life” idea. They feel that if a life can be saved, why not save it. After all, it was not God’s will that man should die. We should fight death until our last breath. Besides, God can resurrect us with or without all of our organs. (Ezek. 37:1-14) Even though the body was the “temple of the Holy Spirit” during life, removing the organs after or just before death is not a defilement but a type of offering of ourselves to others in need.

On the other hand, you have some who feel that the body should not be defiled either before or after death. It is still sacred even when our life is over simply because it was the temple of the Holy Spirit. Because of this, it should remain whole with all of its parts untouched unless they were destroyed by disease or the result of an accident. They look at the removal of organs as a violation of the body, the former temple.

You also find some whose views fall somewhere in the middle. They feel that “minor things” like corneas or bone marrow are not a problem. They also believe that major organs like the heart should not be removed. They look at the biblical references to the heart as well as its medical function of keeping the body alive. The same might be said for the lungs that give us breath and sustain our life. How do you determine what is and is not acceptable, since even the theologians are divided?

We need to ask ourselves how we feel about this issue. Which of these views best reflects our own feelings and beliefs? We need to talk to our Spiritual Father about it also. Even though the views differ, there are some points upon which they all agree:

1. No one should be forced by anyone else to donate his or her organs. We must make sure that the person whose organs are taken made it clear that he wanted his organs donated. A gift is to be given freely at the will of the one giving it, not taken from him. If it is taken, it is not a true gift.
2. Someone whose life will be put in danger by the donation should not make donations.
3. Likewise, organ donations should not be made to the point of the suicide of the donor. In other words, this means no vital organs from a living donor, which, if removed, could cause their death.
4. It is also wrong to hasten or cause the death of a donor.
5. Finally, the Church does not condemn those who choose not to be donors.

We also have another problem today with fetal tissue and stem cell research. This could involve people having abortions in order to save their own life or help a family member or friend. It can also lead to abortions being used as moneymakers where the woman is paid to have an abortion much like some are paid today to donate their blood. The way is opened up for fertilized eggs developing into embryos to be killed in order to test theories and study results of medical trials. The Church cannot condone this destruction of innocents.

Finally, while some would disagree on the issue of organ donations by humans, what about animals? Why not transplant a monkey's heart or a cow's lungs into a patient in need?

This issue seems to be more clear-cut. First of all, the animal is not "freely giving" its organs for the higher purpose of saving some one's life. Second, God's creation should not be tampered with. It is a warping of His creation to mix and match the organs of animals and humans. You can probably see it more clearly if you ask yourself "would I donate my kidneys to keep a cow alive?" "What would give me the right to take a kidney from a cow, or any other animal, just because I want to use it? Remember, donating means we freely give. They can't freely give!

These are just a few of the moral and ethical questions you will have to face in your lifetime. There will be many, many more as our knowledge and technology increases. When faced with a moral dilemma, do some research. Ask yourself the key questions you learned, talk with your Spiritual Father about it and pray about it. Ask God to help you make the right decision.

## **MORALITY IV—DEATH AND DYING, EUTHANASIA, ABORTION AND SUICIDE**

From the earliest times, humans have had some sort of belief in life after death. This belief has varied from culture to culture and from religion to religion. It is what has made man's life worth living by giving him something to look forward to when this life was over. It also plays a role in our earthly life as well. Expressions like "before I die I want to..."; "my biological clock is ticking"; and terms like "midlife crisis" all show the role death plays in our life.

The belief in life after death is at the very heart of the Church's teachings. As St. Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." (1 Cor. 15:13-14) Christ's purpose for coming into this world was to save us from sin and grant us eternal life. As Christ Himself said, "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day." (John 6:40) (Cf. John 6:38-39; 2 Tim. 3:1; 1 John 2:18; Jude 1:18; 1 Peter 1:5)

The results of the fall of man are sin and death. Man was no longer sinless and immortal, but he took on sin and physical death. Life on earth became a kind of testing ground in which we are given a free will to make a choice of either following or rejecting God and His teachings. Life on earth and earthly things became secondary; the primary goal is to gain an endless life with God in His Kingdom. As Christ puts it, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?" (Matt. 24:26) Immortality of our soul and everlasting life with Jesus Christ is the result of our living a life with God, struggling each day to live as the Gospel tells us.

All of us experience an inner feeling that life does not stop after with death. From the first records of man, we can find proof of this. Many were buried with their household goods and even their servants to aid them in their journey and to serve them in the next life. The exact form of this next life was not really known. Even though we as Christians believe in an everlasting life, it is hard for our minds to comprehend what it will be like to live forever in a place we have never seen. St. Paul tries to describe this feeling to the people of Corinth saying, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully..." (1 Cor. 13:12) "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit." (1 Cor. 2:9) All of us have this feeling that death is not the end. We have this carry-over from our ancestors, Adam and Eve, this taste of immortality.

The beliefs of the Church on the survival of the soul after death are twofold. First of all, the soul is given a partial judgment or primary judgment immediately after death and receives a foretaste of its reward or punishment. This is based in scripture when Christ told the repentant thief, "Truly, I say to you today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43) The soul is judged right after death on the two great commandments of loving God and loving our neighbor. (Cf. Matt.27:37-39) As Christ said, "On these two commandments depends all the law and prophets." (Matt. 22:40) Another example of judgment after death is that of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus. (Luke 16:19-31)

The second or final judgment is at the second coming of Christ. In this judgment, all are included, both the living and the dead. The souls of the departed will be reunited with the body. The body of both the living and the dead will not be the type of physical body we have now, but what is referred to as a resurrected body; the type of body that Christ Himself had after He rose from the dead. At this time, Christ will come to judge all of us in the glory of His power. Those in the graves will rise from the tombs and join the living in standing before Him for judgment. Reference to this is made in the Old Testament books of Daniel 12:2 (cf. Job 19:25; Exe. 37:1; Isa. 26:19; 2 Mac. 7:9, 14f; and in the New Testament books of John 5:25-29; Acts 4:2; 17:18, 32; 1 Cor. 15:3-15; Rom. 8:11; 1 Thes. 4:14)

As you can see from scripture and the teachings of the Church, there are two judgments, a partial judgment after death and a final judgment at the second coming of Christ. Because we believe in this partial judgment, we can ask the saints in prayer to intercede for us with God since they are close to God in His Kingdom already. We can also remember the departed and pray for God's mercy on their souls; that He will forgive their sins and accept them into His Heavenly Kingdom. We remember the departed at each Divine Liturgy and at special Memorial or Soul Saturday Liturgies. We also remember the departed at Trisagion memorial services. These are held at special times set by the church very early on in its history. In the Constitution of the Holy Apostles (Book 8, Section 4, Paragraph 42) we read one set of practices used in the early church and followed today. "Let the third day of the departed be celebrated with psalms and lessons, and prayers, on account of Him who arose within the span of three days; and let the ninth day be celebrated in remembrance of the living and of the departed; and the fortieth day

according to the ancient pattern for so did the people lament Moses; and the anniversary day in memory of him. And let alms be given to the poor out of his goods (his earthly possessions) for a memorial of him.” We also use wheat at these services since wheat is the symbol of life after death. Christ tells us this in John 12:24: “Truly, truly, I say unto you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears fruit.”

Death for us is only a transition from this earthly mortal life to a heavenly immortal life with Christ in His Kingdom. Death is difficult to face because it takes us away from the life we have known. It is a mystery because we have not experienced anything like it and because of that, we can sometimes be afraid of death. As Christians we have to put our trust in God and have faith that when our life ends, we will join the Saints, our departed loved ones and Him in His Kingdom for eternity. In the meantime, we can prepare ourselves by living a life pleasing to God. This includes regularly receiving the Sacraments of Confession and Communion and constantly being prepared to stand before God having a “Christian ending to our life...and a good defense before the dread judgment seat of Christ.” (Petition of the Divine Liturgy)

Now that we know what the Church teaches about death and dying, we need to address some related issues.

## **1. EUTHANASIA, MERCY KILLINGS OR ELECTIVE DEATH**

Whatever name we use for this practice we know that it has been around for centuries. Old people, the infirm and even infants were often left to die. The Church had to address these practices since the Gospel was being preached to all peoples of many varied cultures. This issue still needs to be addressed in our culture today. Many people rally around the idea of what some call “death with dignity”. One of the factors that is cited for the support of euthanasia is the fact that today people who would normally have died years ago can technologically be kept “alive” almost indefinitely. The pro-euthanasia group says that this is carrying on a life that is meaningless and undignified. Therefore, they say that we should be allowed to practice euthanasia in order to provide them with a dignified death. The argument for euthanasia goes beyond this sort of agreeable idea. It deals with what the Orthodox Church would clearly call murder or suicide. This murder involves things like the starvation of infants afflicted with treatable medical problems. It can also involve the “putting out of his misery” of someone who is physically or mentally handicapped or deformed. “Let’s kill them in order to spare them from suffering.” The suicide aspect is involved with the push towards allowing and encouraging others to take their own life. One example of this is the Hemlock Society and the literature it and other groups like it put out to instruct people on the ways to commit suicide. Another more recent development is the suicide machine that delivers lethal drugs much like those used to execute criminals.

Those who argue for “active” euthanasia use an argument similar to the pro-abortion movement. They say that people have autonomy or the human right to end their life if they wish. But since euthanasia also involves others who can’t or are unable to decide for themselves, who makes the decisions for them? Do parents have a right to kill or

allow a newborn baby that may not be physically or mentally “normal” to die? Should a spouse or a child determine whether their elderly or ill parent or spouse should die because their life is no longer meaningful? These are the hard questions put to us today.

In response the Church has to rely on its teaching and past experience. As we learned before, God created all things. He is the giver of life. We have to protect the life He gives us and guard it from all evil. Taking a life in any fashion is condemned as a sin by the Bible and the Church (Exodus 20:13) Only God knows the time of our birth and death. To take a life for any reason is “playing God” and is condemned by the Church. Man not only has the ability to take a life, but also to preserve it medically and technologically. The church would not oppose using new methods and technology to aid the body in getting well. On the other hand, the Church tells us that there is a time to die and when this time comes, we should let them die in peace and not keep a “dead” body artificially alive. When the body and its systems are totally broken down and dying, then we are not obligated to use extraordinary means to keep it alive. But in keeping with Holy Scripture and the Church, we must not actively take the life of someone else or our own.

## **2. SUICIDE**

Suicide is found in the Bible. Saul committed suicide to avoid dishonor and suffering at the hands of the Philistines. As a result, he was acclaimed as a hero by the Israelites. (1 Sam. 31:1-6) Samson committed suicide as a means of retribution to God’s enemies. He was considered a hero for sacrificing himself while destroying God’s enemies (Judges 16:23-31) Judas committed suicide because of a stricken conscience after betraying Christ. He was condemned before and after his suicide. (Matt. 27:5-7) In Exodus 20:14 suicide is equated with murder. It is the taking of a life (one’s own). This taking of one’s own life assumes that God cannot help us. In a sense, it denies Him. Only God has a right to allow our life to end. We do not only belong to ourselves, but we belong to God as well. St. Augustine lists several reasons why suicide is wrong. First, Christians are never without hope and always have the opportunity to repent. Suicide takes away that possibility of repentance. Second, suicide is really homicide, which is forbidden by God. Third, there is no sin worthy of death. Christians are not their own judges. God alone is the judge of all mankind. Suicide is considered as greater than any other sin since there is no way to repent for it. A Christian should make any other choice because he can repent for a mistake or sin if he is still alive.

## **3. ABORTION**

Abortion is not new. It has been known and performed for thousands of years. The earliest recipe for an abortion drug is over 4,500 years old. The Church had to deal with abortion throughout its history. By reading the Canon Laws of the Church, we see that it was performed in a number of ways. The Church from the very beginning has always treated it as murder and the same penance was given. The Church today still condemns abortion as a form of murder. From the time of conception, a growing child is developing. We are often lead to believe that the growing baby (fetus) is nothing more than a mass of cells or tissue, but in reality it is a developing person. Even though it is carried and nourished by the mother, it is not a body part but a separate individual. To

take the life of an infant no matter how young or old, whether in the womb or outside of the womb is wrong. When the life of the mother is truly in danger (and those circumstances are very rare today) then a decision must be made with much prayer, thought and consultation with physicians of both the body (doctor) and soul (Father Confessor). Another difficult case is in the instance of rape. First of all, very few rapes end in pregnancy for a number of reasons. To abort a child of rape is basically killing the child for the sin of his father. We need a strong Church community and support system for victims of rape. Rather than rumor or ridicule, we need love, compassion and assistance.

What we also have to consider is the means used for abortion. They generally cause a very cruel death to the growing child. Besides this, any type of abortion can be dangerous physically and emotionally. It is not the simple safe operation that we often hear about. Even the so-called "morning after pill" has many side affects that can be very harmful.

Death is our enemy. We fight hard to stay alive. When we are ill, we join our sufferings to those of Christ who suffered for us. But we also know that He rose again from the dead so that we could have eternal life. By destroying the power of death, He made death a passage for us from one life to the next; from earth to heaven; from mortality to immortality. That passage should be made in God's time, not our time.