

## **Growing in the Knowledge of Christ**

by: His Eminence Archbishop Demetrios Trakatellis

Recently, there was an interesting article published in The Wall Street Journal. Its titles and subtitles read, “Wall Street Prodigies. Merger Whiz-Kids Seek Money and Power As They Build Careers. Young Deal Makers Find Age Doesn’t Slow Their Climb. Beginning Work at 5 a.m. Are They Too Brash, Greedy?”[1] As examples, the article describes the work and lifestyles of three young adults who are frantically involved in Wall Street activities. As the reporters who prepared the text point out, “these are some of the whiz-kids who work 80-hour weeks and worry that it still isn’t enough. Most are attracted to finance because they have been chasing excellence all their lives, and success on Wall Street has become the ultimate test ...” For these young adults, “business is God.”

This picture fits nicely into what Robert Bellah, in his insightful book, *Habits of the Heart*, characterizes with the acronym YAVIS: Young, Anxious, Verbal, Intelligent, and Sensitive people.[2]

Not by mere coincidence, a recent special issue of *Time* magazine seems to suggest a similar picture with the theme “American Best.”[3] The intensity and hard drive, the high motivation and determination for ultimate goals, appear to galvanize young adults in America today in highly diversified professions or activities like finance, show business, athletics, art, music, science, technology or industry, social or community service. It is in this contemporary backdrop that I view you today in this Conference of Orthodox Young Adults. You have your fair share of such a background. You are young, anxious, verbal, intelligent, and sensitive. You are in pursuit of excellence and success. But at this moment I would like to visualize these qualities applied to something over and above your professional life, i.e. your relationship to God, your life within the Church. If for other young adults “business is God,” “money is God,” “power is God,” or “pleasure is God,” for you, for us, “God is God.” If we talk about “The Wall Street Whiz-Kids,” or “The Computer Technology Whiz-Kids,” it is about time to start talking about the “Church Whiz-Kids.”

You are being called to fulfill this vision, to become a generation of vigor, freshness, excellence, and God’s power, to become “Orthodoxy’s Whiz-Kids.” In what follows in my presentation, I constantly have this vision before me. It is a very contemporary, very realistic one, and an authentically Orthodox one, too.

In my presentation, I will comment extensively on the biblical verse which is the motto of our Conference: “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). My comments are structured more or less along the lines of the stimulating slogan of the Conference, “To know, to grow, to go.” The theme, or focusing

point, is knowledge of Christ, a formidable one, offering splendid, challenging areas for exploration.

### **A. TO KNOW: TO HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST**

What exactly is knowledge of Christ? How should we interpret the phrase “to know Christ?” Any number of aspects which aim at analyzing or explaining such a fundamental concept could be proposed, but let us contemplate four of them which are directly related to our contemporary situation.

#### **To Know Christ, The Significant Other**

The first aspect of an authentic knowledge of Christ is to know him as the “Significant Other.”[4]

A significant other is a person of decisive importance in one’s life. He or she is a model, a guide, an inspiration, someone we follow, someone we count on, someone we admire and tend to emulate. One may even dedicate or sacrifice his or her life to a significant other whose lifestyle, principles, and values are highly influential. No one is without a significant other in his or her life. In fact, many tragedies result from a bad selection of a phony or an unworthy person as a significant other.

To know Christ as the significant other means that we consciously and deliberately select him as our significant other, over and above anyone else. It means we have him as the superb and irreplaceable model and prototype of what is really, fully, and originally human. He thus becomes the concrete image of our highest aspirations, the perfect expression of what we dream and we want to be. His person and grace become a guide and drive to continuously transform us, making us more and more like him.

The great Apostle Paul, writing to the Galatians, eloquently reveals an advanced stage of knowing Christ as the significant other: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”[5]

When Christ becomes the significant other, he automatically becomes a firm, unchanging, and eternal point of reference, a criterion for our values, priorities, and ideas. In a world of constant change, of ideological confusion, and of ephemeral options, Jesus Christ, the significant other, remains absolutely actual and relevant, “the same yesterday and today and forever.”[6] He has been the unique significant other for the people of the Roman Empire, for medieval and renaissance folks, for heroes of the industrial revolution, and for the anxious witnesses of the epoch of microchip supremacy, star wars, terrorism, and nuclear nightmares. To know him means to have him as the determining criterion and judging reference in all matters of value and priority in life and death.

The Church's long experience attests to the fact that Jesus, as the significant other, never disappoints the believer. When arrested for being a Christian, Saint Polycarp, a venerable old bishop of second-century Smyrna, was asked to renounce Christ. He answered: "For eighty and six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, he has not disappointed me, and how can I renounce him?"[7] Disappointments and incurable traumas occur every day with all kinds of significant others, but not with Jesus. The question is, how many young people have made the right choice? How many Christians have the saving knowledge of Christ as the significant other?

### **To Know Christ: A Relationship of True Communion and Love**

The second basic aspect of knowing Christ is a relational one. In this case to know him means to have a relationship of true communion and love with him.

Here we encounter an important biblical concept which transcends the ordinary meaning of the term "knowledge." Here, we move beyond the mere cognitive or intellectual field into a total experience involving the entire human being. To know Christ implies a deep, committed relationship with him, establishing live lines of communication; it is a state of love. Any substantive knowledge of Christ requires an advanced relationship based on love.

To know Christ in terms of true communion and love superbly combines with our quest for knowledge and the perfect relationship. What our mind is constantly dreaming of, perfect knowledge, and what our soul is desperately seeking, the perfect relationship, are present in the knowledge of Christ. Here knowledge is ultimately changed into a unique experience which encompasses and integrates the highest intellectual satisfaction with the deepest emotional fulfillment. This explains why Saint Paul, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, says that he prays fervently that they may have the power to comprehend the breadth, the length, the height, and depth, to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, so that they may be filled with all the fullness of God.[8]The subtle interface between the words "love" and "knowledge" suggests much in this instance.

The aspect of knowledge we are presently studying implies mutuality. A relationship is a two-way situation. Saint Paul emphasized this truth when he said "now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God." [9]We know him and he knows us, and this reveals, in an exciting way, the nature of knowledge of Christ as a relationship active at both ends. Saint John Chrysostom, in an inspiring homily, beautifully presents the idea of this mutuality when he has Christ speak to the believer in the following manner:

"I am a father for you, and a brother, a bridegroom, and a home, a nurse and a dress, a root and a cornerstone. Whatever you want I am for you. I don't want you to be in any

need. I will serve you, because I came not to be served but to serve. I am a friend, and a member, and a head, and a brother and a sister, and a mother. I am everything for you. Only be in contact with me. I have been poor for you and a wanderer for you, I have been on the cross and in the tomb for you. High above with the Father I mediate for you. Down here I arrived as an ambassador sent by the Father to you. You are everything to me, a brother and a co-heir, a friend, and a member of my body. What more do you desire?"[10]

The Divine Liturgy of our Church, culminating with participation in the Holy Eucharist, offers a splendid example of knowledge as an intimate mutual relationship. We approach him with all our will, soul, mind, and body. He enters into our existence with all his divinity and humanity in an ineffable, yet palpable way, and this constitutes the supreme experience of a love relationship, and the ultimate knowledge of who Christ is. What we find in one of the texts of the Early Church, the Didache, written around 100 A.D., is very indicative. There, in the prayers before and after the Eucharist, in an elated mood of thanksgiving, the believers express their gratitude for the knowledge they have received: "We thank you for the knowledge and faith and immortality which you have made known to us through Jesus your Son." [11] The knowledge this prayer speaks about is inextricably bound with the Eucharist. A relationship like participating in Holy Communion is interpreted and understood as knowledge of Christ because it is knowledge - knowledge engendered by and manifested as an intimate relationship.

### **To know Christ: Sharing in the Wholeness of the Truth**

The third aspect of knowing Christ is having access to and sharing in the wholeness of truth. Knowing Christ means to enter the realm of the truth he revealed. Here knowledge is to be thought of as content, as something that comprises a well-defined body of truths. In order to know Christ we need to be acquainted with his ideas, his teachings preserved in the New Testament, his revelation of bare, essential truth.

Such a perception of the truth is unique in many ways. It is unique because it deals with the ultimate questions which have tormented people since the world began. Who is God? What is man? What is our destiny? What is the nature of cosmos? What is behind natural phenomena? What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of the universe? Why are we subject to pain and death?

Knowledge of Christ grants access to the answers of these questions, and this is something unique. It has to do with a supernatural knowledge, an understanding which is not due to the efforts of a brilliant human mind but to God's gracious revelation.

The knowledge of this truth revealed by Christ is also unique because it engenders power for life. Any knowledge is power, but the power inherent in the knowledge of Christ's truth is something incomparable. It is a power capable of counterbalancing life's high pressures, afflictions, anxieties, diseases, even death. Millions of martyrs were able to defy political and state pressure and force because they knew and loved Christ and shared his truth, a truth which informed them and illumined them about the meaning of life and death, suffering and martyrdom.

Perhaps the uniqueness of the knowledge of Christ's truth finds its most beautiful expression in its direct association with freedom. Jesus himself, speaking to people about the truth that he was revealing to them, said: "If you abide with my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free."<sup>[12]</sup> When we enter into the realm of Christ's truth we enter into the realm of freedom - freedom from ignorance and fear, from existential vacuum and metaphysical chaos, from guilt, sin, and evil which ruthlessly plague humankind.

Here again we contemplate an amazing integration. This time it is truth and freedom, truth and life that converge, interweave and eventually constitute a superb integrated existential reality.

It is unfortunate, or rather tragic, that many people, especially the young, ignore this integration of truth and life, truth and freedom that knowledge of Christ produces. Despite their advanced knowledge and how astonishingly informed they are in every conceivable field, they are extremely poor in knowing the wholeness of truth revealed by Jesus. As a result they turn to other sources, even to therapy, in order to obtain answers to crucial existential questions. The article in *The Wall Street Journal* mentioned at the beginning of this address spoke about therapy as a steady feature in the lives of many young adults<sup>[13]</sup> because of their great need to find answers to questions pertaining to truth and the meaning of life and existence.

Saint Paul knew this need as well as the immense, incomparable value of sharing in the wholeness of truth revealed by Christ. He therefore uses extremely intense language to underline this point when he writes to the Philippians: "I count everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of the knowledge of Christ."<sup>[14]</sup>

### **To Know Christ: Overcoming the Dichotomy Between Individual and Society**

The fourth aspect refers to a vital contemporary problem: the dichotomy between the individual and his community, between personal needs and social indebtedness. It is a well-known fact that American society is characterized by strong individualism. The individual and his or her rights, ambitions, needs, and drives has been central to American life, as Alexis de Toqueville noted as far back as 1830 in his famous book

Democracy in America, describing it “with a mixture of admiration”[15] and anxiety. On the other hand, Americans have a strong community awareness. In many instances it appears difficult to properly reconcile the two aspects. People think they should sacrifice either their individuality or the community and feel that keeping them both in balance is almost impossible. The dichotomy seems inescapable.

At this juncture, knowledge of Christ, comes as a decisive factor. To know him means, among other things, to overcome the dichotomy, because in him we see the realization of the most magnificent combination.

Christ did everything that he did for people’s salvation, for the redemption of the world. He continuously, consistently, and fully served others, the community, the people of Israel, the whole mankind. In him we encounter the perfect example, the unsurpassed model of a service-oriented life, of a steady focus on people.

Jesus, however, was not like a modern super-activist, someone who impulsively works for others because he or she is an incurable extrovert. He was a person with the sharpest and most profound personal awareness, distinguishing himself clearly from the crowd, being always one, unique, and absolutely different from the rest. In Christ, individuality, if we can use this term somewhat improperly, finds its perfect, immaculate expression. In Christ we meet not the individual, but the person. Thus, we could say that Christ is the perfect person who serves the community in the perfect way. The dichotomy is removed. Harmony between the two aspects is established.

We can hear the same theme repeated with variations throughout history. In the lives of the great Saints and Church Fathers we observe the ultimate in individuality: highly cultivated, strong-minded, independent, sensitive people. At the same time we perceive in them the ultimate in serving people, in sacrificing personal comfort, property, time, and even life for the good of others, for the benefit of the community, the ecclesial or the general community.

As we proceed in knowing Christ, we acquire, tacitly but surely, the elements that bring the two opposing poles closer and closer, and we end up with a synthesis of the two. If we really know Jesus we are in the process of overcoming the detrimental oscillation between individualism and community, between personal needs and social needs. We become a whole person integrating in the best sense individualism and commitment to others.

## **B. TO GROW AND TO GO**

### Growing in the Grace and Knowledge of Christ

Knowledge of Christ is not static, but dynamic. It is a state which continuously develops and grows. We grow in knowing Christ. We are constantly changing, evolving towards a

maturity, a more refined state, a more subtle form of spiritual existence. Our basic passage, 2 Peter 3:18, does not speak merely of knowledge, but about growing in knowledge. What are the elements of such growth? What are the main characteristics in terms of real life?

The first is the overcoming of any limit in time or status. To grow in knowledge of Christ means to grow continuously, regardless of any age factor. Saint Ignatius, the martyr-bishop of Antioch at the turn of the first century A.D., being at the end of his life, declared “now I begin to be a disciple, a student.”[16] We continue to grow up to the moment when we are called to eternity, up to the moment of death. There is a fascination in this growth process. The more you know the Lord the more you want to know him, the more you are looking for the next step, the subsequent stage.

The second important element in the process of growing in the knowledge of Christ is the idea of maturity. Contrary to what happens to our natural age-growth, there is no clearly definable age of maturity in knowing Christ. We are maturing, and yet we are still growing. We grow unceasingly because Christ is the prototype, the standard or model of maturity. Saint Paul has expressed this splendid idea with a striking image. “We, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.”[17] Our growth is a transformation from glory to glory as we behold the image of Christ, as we deepen our perception of him; therefore, there is no end, no definitive stage. Maturity is reached with every step, yet growth continues. We enjoy the fruits of maturity in knowing Christ, and at the same time we see the unlimited possibilities of growing more and more, of transformation and transposition into higher, increasingly enriching, sophisticated, and refined realms of experience.

Growth has another important aspect. The guiding biblical text for this Conference, 2 Peter 3:18, speaks about growing “in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Enhancement of knowledge goes hand in hand with an enhancement of grace, the free gift of God, as illumination and inner strength, as joy and uplifting of the heart. Thus, growth in knowledge is accompanied by growth in grace, by an inundation or permeation of our existence with this indescribable gift called the “grace of God.”

This is the big difference between ordinary knowledge and knowledge of Christ. The latter, aside from being superior as to value in life, is inseparably associated with the priceless element of grace which gives a totally new dimension to the entire understanding of knowledge.

Growing in knowledge and grace of Jesus Christ is a continuous process wherein the synergistic principle appears fully developed. Here the human person, the believer, offers his or her will, intellectual capacities and emotional powers, and God provides the supernatural gift of grace, the mysterious regenerating energy that renews and

refashions our entire being. He provides it constantly, through many channels, particularly through the sacraments of the Church.

Growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ ultimately means to become a Christ-like person. The Fathers of the Church used a variety of words and expressions to indicate this state in the true believer. Let me present here a few examples from Patristic literature having a common characteristic: they are all compound adjectives in which the first part is always the name of Christ. All these adjectives reveal in one way or another the state of growing in the knowledge and grace of Jesus Christ:

Christadelfos (Christa´delphos) – of the brotherhood of Christ

Christeponymos (Christepo´nymos) – called by the name of Christ

Christogonos (Christo´gonos) – a child of Christ

Christodidaktos (Christodi´daktos) – taught by Christ

Christodochos (Christodo´chos) – a receiver of Christ

Christoeides (Christoede´s) – after the likeness of Christ

Christokinetos (Christoki´netos) – moved by Christ

Christokletos (Christo´kletos) – called by Christ

Christolatres (Christola´tres) – a worshiper of Christ

Christoleptos (Christo´leptos) – possessed by Christ

Christomathes (Christomathe´s) – a student of the things of Christ

Christomakar (Christoma´kar) – blessed by Christ

Christomimetos (Christomi´metos) – an imitator of Christ

Christomorfos (Christo´morphos) – one in Christ's likeness

Christonomos (Christo´nomos) – governed by Christ

Christoprepes (Christoprepe´s) – in a manner befitting Christ.[18]

The number and variety of these names show how impossible it is to describe adequately the state of the man or woman who grows in the Lord's knowledge and grace. This is a state without limits, open to everybody, open to every human being.

**To Go: Knowledge Becomes Witness**

Knowledge of Christ, constantly supported and nurtured by the grace of God, grows quietly but steadily and becomes a unique and precious characteristic of an authentic Christian. As he/she grows and matures, he/she reaches a new stage. This is a stage where the experience of knowledge and grace of Christ needs to be expressed or articulated in various forms. Knowledge nurtured by grace is transformed into an energy that takes shape in one's personal life and begins pouring out, radiating, flowing and affecting the people with whom Christian comes into contact. From the phase of growing in grace and knowledge, we pass into the phase of "going," i.e. an explosive or subtle spreading of the experience of knowing Christ. An experience of grace and knowledge of that kind cannot be contained within the confines of the individual. It reaches out; it is like an embryo that grows and in time must be born, must get out of the maternal body.

When we study the spread of the new faith among early Christians, we are amazed at the decisive missionary role played by simple people like merchants, sailors, and soldiers. Having known Christ and grown in his grace and wisdom, these people shared their Christian experience and spoke about their new life in Jesus wherever they went. Even without speaking they let their knowledge of Christ, their communion with God, be visible through their lives. A real knowledge of Christ and experience of his grace is a mobile entity, it has a contagious nature; hence, it can be and actually is transmitted in a thousand ways, both verbal and non-verbal.

On the other hand uniquely selected people like the Apostles were entrusted by God with the precise and authentic formulation of the revealed divine truth and the universal proclamation of the gospel. They felt consumed by the passion to communicate their faith and knowledge of Christ. This urge was so strong that Saint Paul wrote, "woe to me if I do not preach the gospel." [19]

There is, however, a delicate and sensitive issue involved in the evangelization activity as viewed in the contemporary world. The articulation and proclamation of the truth revealed by Christ and experienced by believers in the Church cannot be done in an impulsive or forceful way. A familiar picture, but a sad and negative one is that of different fanatics who grab you in the subway or on the street and tell you that you must repent immediately and confess Christ on the spot. Certainly, this is not the way of the Church, nor part of her rich experience, or what she follows or requires. The needed transformation of personal knowledge of Christ into an articulate, well-formulated communication should be controlled by discretion, by spiritual maturity, by a deep love and respect for other people and their freedom.

The proclamation of the gospel, the need to "go" and spread the experience of "growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord" is not even a matter of using a specific or exclusive language. It is a matter of the content, spirit, subtlety, and suggestiveness of

the language used. Sometimes it could be a different manner of communication, a silence, a non-verbal contact. Saint John Chrysostom in his comments on the passage from 2 Corinthians 2:14, “thanks be to God who through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere,” rightly observes that this picture is absolutely fitting.[20] We transmit the knowledge of God like a fragrance. People smell the exquisite aroma but they may not even know its source.

In his profound book, *Stories of God*, R. M. Rilke presents a number of unusual tales or stories in which God plays an absolutely unique role.[21] This, however, is not made immediately evident throughout the narrative from which, sometimes, even the name of God is missing. Only when a story is finished, the subtle, short comments offered by the narrator or his listeners reveal the truth about God’s role in the events presented. Rilke was a brilliant poet and knew well the tremendous power of language when used handsomely and suggestively. It is the beauty, suggestiveness, and vibrant experience that are important in conveying the knowledge of Christ. It is the need to communicate authentically God’s truth that matters here.

To the young adults present in this Conference, a unique gift has been given: to know Christ the Lord “in whom,” as Saint Paul says, “are hid all the treasures of”[22] wisdom and knowledge.

The gift is accompanied by a superb perspective: to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, to be continuously transformed by it from glory to glory, to mature and to reach “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”[23]

Growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ will lead to the need to go and communicate the experience, to proclaim the truth of the gospel in its powerful and convincing beauty. Any means, verbal and non-verbal, can be fruitfully used by young adults of the Church to convey the message of God. The important thing is to convey this message intact, whole, and vibrant in its ineffable splendor.

[1]G. Anders, et al., *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2, 1986, p. 1.

[2]Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, (New York, 1985), p. 70.

[3]*Time*, June 16, 1986.

[4]The term “significant other” is used by contemporary psychology and sociology as a value and priority reference.

[5]Galatians 2:20. See also the eloquent comments on this passage by Saint John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Galatians, Homily 2* (Migne, P. G. 61:645-46).

[6]Hebrews 13:8

[7]“Martyrdom of Polycarp,” 9:3. Original Greek text with English translation in K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, (Cambridge, repr. 1976), 2, pp. 312-45.

[8]Ephesians 3:18-19.

[9]Galatians 4:9.

[10]Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, Homily 76 (Migne, P. G. 58:700).

[11]Didache, 9:3 and 10:1-2. Original Greek text with English translation in K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1, pp. 308-33.

[12]John 8:31-32.

[13]Cf. the succinct observation by R. Bellah (*Habits of the Heart*, p. 113) that “therapy as a general outlook on life has spread over the past few decades from a relatively small, educated elite to the middle-class mainstream of American life.”

[14]Philippians 3:8

[15]R. Bellah, *Habits*, p. vii.

[16]Saint Ignatios of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 1:2, *Epistle to the Romans*, 4:2, 5:3., K. Lake, *Apostolic Fathers*, 1, pp. 172-96 and 224-38.

[17]2 Corinthians 3:18

[18]For the specific usage of these particular adjectives by various Fathers and ecclesiastical authors see C. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1968) pp. 1529-31.

[19]1 Corinthians 9:16

[20]Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Second Corinthians*, Homily 5 (Migne, P. G. 61:429-30.)

[21]Reiner, Maria Rilke, *Stories of God*, English transl. by M. D. H. Norton (New York, 1963).

[22]Colossians 2:3.

[23]Ephesians 4:13.

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