



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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WHO ARE YOU, TIME?

Frederica de Graff, medical specialist at the First Moscow Hospice and author of *Nothing Will Separate Us: Working Through the Suffering and Death of a Loved One*, turns her attention to the subject of time and eternity in the Orthodox tradition, and how we participate in this post-Resurrection deified time. Frederica developed this popular talk in Russian for Muscovites, interweaving her own observations with notes of her conversations with Met. Anthony and quotes from his recorded sermons and lectures. Here she provides an English variant as a gift to *Road to Emmaus* readers.

Entering Into Time

Our attitude towards time is often very ambivalent. In Russian, there are many expressions about time, and in English we have both positive and negative expressions: Time is pressing; running out of time; time flies; time is short; the time is ripe; a time limit; a sea of time; time is against us; to be ahead of time; to abide your time; to while away your time; and time will tell. English, by the way, has a much more benevolent attitude towards time than in my native country, the Netherlands, or in Russia where people more often view time as “running out” or “time is not ours.” But all of these phrases speak of time as if it was outside of us.

Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) of Sourozh, who taught me most of what I know about time, and whom I cite in the following block quotations, said:

There is a time which refers to the clock and an inner time, our psychological condition. Time can be measured by clocks or by our inner experiences and psychological makeup. The fact that time is ticking away and that we are hurrying to get somewhere is something different. To hurry is an expression of an inner state of being, but to act quickly, precisely, and to the point is something else. We all know

Opposite: Frederica de Graff. (Courtesy Orthdiakonia.de)

how some minutes can appear infinitely long when we are waiting for someone with expectation, longing, anxiety, or fear, but we also know how very quickly happy moments pass by unnoticed.

So, this is our theme: that eternity is not simply an endless duration of time. In one of his talks Metropolitan Anthony refers to the fact that St. John the Evangelist seems almost to have made a mistake when he writes about time in Greek, because he always uses the word “he,” rather than “it.” He says that St. John does this because eternity is not just endless duration, but God himself:

Eternity is not time without end. Eternity in essence is God himself, it is the being of God. This is why, when we speak about eternity and our participation in eternity, although usually unaware of this, we are speaking about the mystery of God and about entering into the depths of this mystery.

Eternity is an aspect of God himself, his grace in the Holy Spirit and his gifts. As eternity, He also enters into time:

Eternity streams into time, into history, into the present moment in which we live, and in doing so, this world created by God opens up to his coming. Eternity takes us, as it were, unto himself. This is the mystery of salvation. Through this, (already here and now) something is happening and has already happened that we only expect to occur at the end of time: the fulfillment of all that we long for. We think that the end of time is the fullness of time, but the fullness of time is already here because the moment we are in God, eternity enters into time.

Then the question is, “How do we make eternity come alive in our own time?” If eternity is not something, but Someone – that is Christ himself, with God the Father and the Holy Spirit – then at every prayer when we call upon the Holy Spirit to come, we find that He does come. At this point, we are present in eternity:

Each prayer, whether it is a personal prayer, a collective prayer, or a prayer of the whole Church, already belongs to eternity. It is already

heaven on earth. While the earth has not yet passed, and this is not yet the coming age, we are already connected now in time with eternity.

Each church service has taken place in history, but it also happens in eternity where there is no time. Vladika Anthony once said that the crucifixion actually stands in eternity; it is time that is passing by, as in a film. We are already in eternity with the event that happened in history, but because there is no time in eternity, we stand in front of it: in the now, in the present.

We might ask, “If the Lord rose from the dead, isn’t his crucifixion finished?” Vladika says that the crucifixion is not finished, because Christ still has the wounds of the crucifixion on his body, and that He will be crucified until the end of time every time we sin. This does not mean that the crucifixion repeats itself historically, but that it is with us and with Christ until the end of the temporal world when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor: 15-28).

When the Holy Liturgy is celebrated, it is not only the commemoration of something which happened once in history, but it continues as a reality for the whole of eternity. During the liturgy we don’t only live in the present moment of time, and we don’t go back to the moment in history when Christ was crucified, but we stand face to face with the mystery of the crucified love of God. The Last Supper only happened once, but it is a reality for us in our time and in our world. There is only one Golgotha, only one historical Last Supper, but because we are entering into eternity, we find ourselves face to face with this unique happening and with all of its eternal reality.

God in Christ is the One who celebrates the Divine Liturgy and Metropolitan Anthony was adamant that we have to be deeply silent during the liturgy, because this is a moment in which God himself enters into time:

Each time the Church celebrates the sacrament, we find ourselves facing a miracle – not that it is defined by its miraculousness, but by the fact that every time a sacrament is served, God himself enters into our world with power and sovereignty. The liturgy is one of the most blessed and complete gifts which God gives us, and where we earthly people find ourselves in heaven in the full and rich meaning of the word. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the Living God in our human life and condition.

Metropolitan Anthony continues to say that Christ and the Holy Spirit have already come. God is with us and in coming to us in the mystery of Communion He remains in our deepest selves. His gifts will never be taken away from us, but these sacraments must act in us and transfigure us.

Sobriety of Mind and Heart

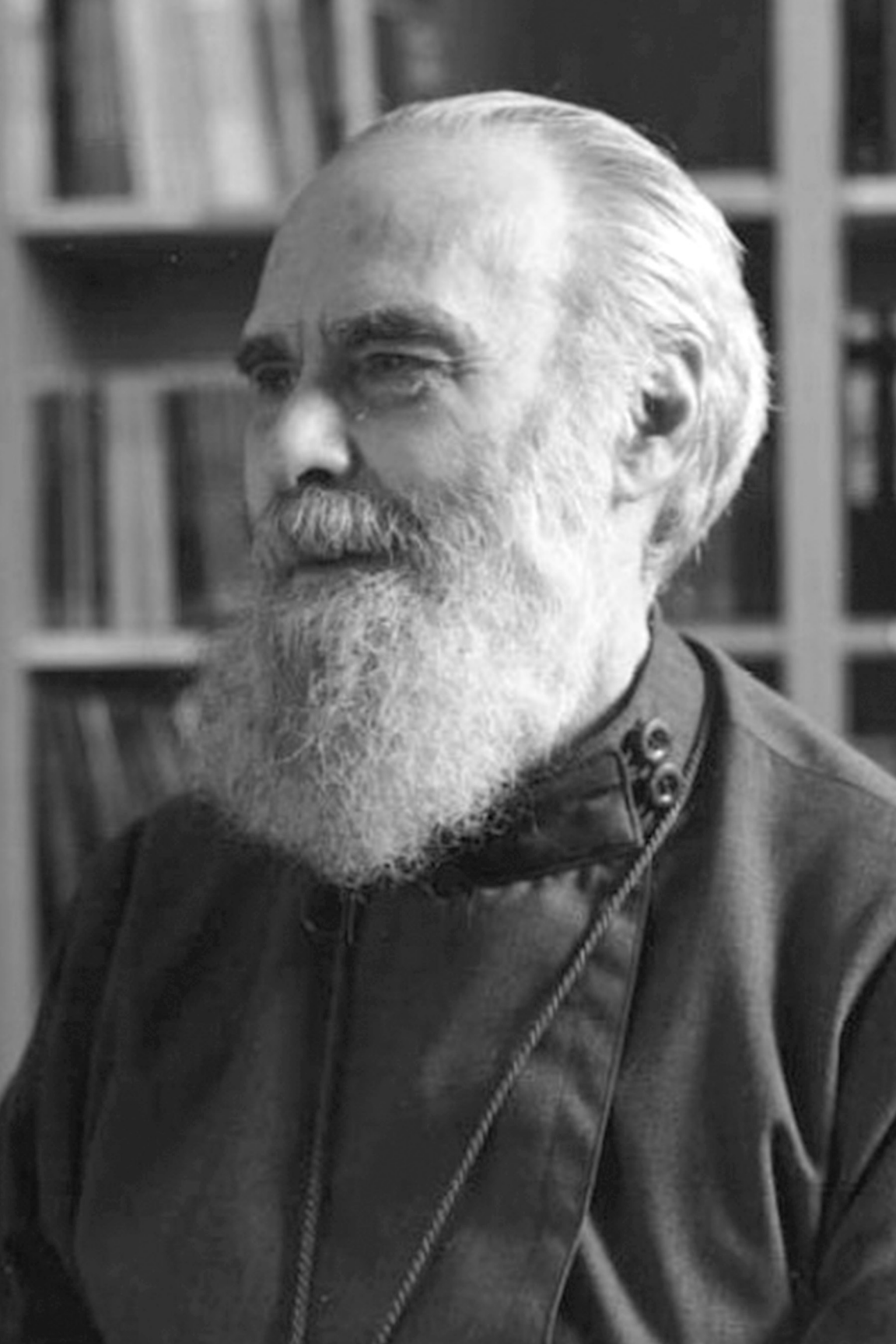
The question to all of us then is: To what extent do we find ourselves in eternity? Are we connected to ourselves? If we are sober and able to be deeply silent, then our emotions, thoughts and even our bodily movements will be still, and can remain in the presence of God as eternity. Only then can eternity enter into time for us.

I speak of this because Vladika Anthony says that as long as we live superficially, we won't meet our Lord. God does not live on the surface. If I want to be a disciple who follows his Teacher, this requires discipline. If there is no longing for God – “Come, O Lord, and soon!” – we will never attain the disciplines of attention, silence, and deep prayer that connect our hearts to the present moment. Here Vladika Anthony gives an important direction for life:

I think that a person only has to have one rule throughout his life – that the only moment we possess is the present moment. The problem is that we usually find ourselves engaged in thoughts and feelings about the past or the future. We relive what might happen in the future, and such thoughts and fears take us away from the present. In eternity there is no past or future moment, only the eternal now. Each moment, each second, lies in the hands of God; it is God's time. We need to learn to live with depth in every moment we have been given.

Time is a gift of God and, in my opinion, the reason it has been given to us is to become closer and deeper in our meeting with Christ. This is not about imitating Christ but becoming so one with him that He can act in us. “We have to look at our life as an ascent, so that, in the words of St. Paul, we can be “further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life (2 Cor: 5: 1-10).”

Opposite: Met. Anthony Bloom (Courtesy Nnini, CC BY-SA 4.0)



It is our task to learn sobriety because eternity can only meet us as we are here and now. Vladika Anthony often said to me, “Become yourself, become what Christ has meant you to be.” One way of doing this is to see not only the good, but also the dark sides that we don’t like in ourselves. In this way, we stand before our own conscience and before God. He also stated, “God can do anything, but He can do nothing with people who are not real.... We not only long for a face-to-face meeting, but to be partakers of Christ himself.”

It has been pointed out that God and his saints often come out to meet those living superficially; that being made in the image of God is enough to meet him; and it is God’s instigation, not our cooperation, which is the first step. I agree that God may go anywhere, even straight into the superficial darkness of our souls and make himself present, but this is not the meeting I’m talking about – the meeting of soul to soul in reality.

In this context, I have also been asked about the difference between the darkness of Saul stoning St. Stephen and that of a modern teenager doing dark things to be accepted by his peers. Why did St. Paul meet the living Christ and the teenager not yet? To a similar question, Vladika replied, “Is it of prime importance for you to meet God? Is it a matter of life and death or is it simply superfluous to the grace and the good things you have already been given? Only if this question is the center of your life, will you meet Him.” Paul’s desire that God be the center of his life, even though he was going about it in a wrong way, was the preparation for Christ to reveal himself.

Living in the Present Moment

To continue, we have to ask how we can live in such a way that we are always in the present moment. The answer depends on our understanding that time is a gift of God, which leads to other questions: How do we relate to time – as something positive or negative? And what does this tell us about our inner self, about our soul? It is our inner self that defines how we relate subjectively to time.

A common example is being late. If I am late, I will hurry and everything seems to be in my way. I am irritated because the tram is late or because the people ahead of me in the street are walking slowly. Because I left too late, my irritation prevents me from being in the here and now, rousing passions that prevent me from being in eternity. So, being disciplined relates directly to my way of life. This is just one instance.

If we want to grow into communion with Christ, with God in eternity, we have to learn to stop time, to be in control of ourselves. Metropolitan Anthony says, “We can’t for a moment put off what has to be done now, because if we don’t do it now, perhaps this moment (which for us is a saving moment) will never come again and may even prevent the transfiguration of other lives.” He goes on to quote Fr. Alexander Elchaninov, the Russian émigré priest who said, “We have to hurry up to do good.” He also quotes Dostoyevsky, who defines hell as, “It’s too late.”

Here, Vladika Anthony speaks of our state after death:

Life has passed when we could have responded with our whole heart, grasped what is happening and what is needed with our whole mind, and with our whole will directed this intention to do good. That time has passed. The time of works has passed and now we stand in front of eternity – an eternity in which we can no longer bring new works or correct those things left undone during our lifetime. It is “too late.” This is a terrifying word.

How Do We Stop Time?

According to Metropolitan Anthony, “In silence we stop time.” This begins, as we said, with the quieting of the mind and body and he gives two exercises for learning to be silent. In the first he says, “When you have nothing to do, when there is even a little time, take five minutes. Sit down and say to yourself, ‘I am now sitting here and I will do nothing. I am just in the presence of God.’”

The second exercise he gives is to stop the racing of time. Whatever you are doing, you can simply say to yourself, “Stop!” – even in the middle of reading a sentence. Now for a few moments, this is God’s time. This teaches us to be a master of oneself and a master of time – first to meet oneself; then through the depths of oneself to meet God; and finally, from that place of closeness to God, to meet other people.

It has also been pointed out to me that we meet God through other people – sympathetic parents and family, spiritual friends, or a competent spiritual father. I think it is true that we can see God in other people, but meeting God deeply in oneself can only be done in silence. The moment you are in this deep silence, you are already somehow in God and then you can really meet

someone else. And if that other person is also in silence, it will be a very deep communion.

Metropolitan Anthony: “Real communication takes place without words. It is there when no words are necessary.” He is speaking here about the essence of monasticism, but this is really for everyone: “The essence of silence is the calling of each one of us. The only thing which has a higher meaning is the ability to stand in the presence of God, not in fear, but in joy.” The discipline of being in the presence of God is our own responsibility. It is our task to live in such an inner way that eternity can enter into us and then be brought back out into the world. He also says: “Time is given to us by God in order that we might grow and develop. Time is given us to become partakers of Christ’s being.”

In the ascetic life there are two ways of being in the presence of God:

We can stand in the presence of God as we are. Either we stand in front of him in God’s grace, where He is close, and we are close to the mysteries of God in ecstasy, or we can stand in front of him in the depth of despair, and from this depth, turn to Him with a cry of the soul, knowing that without Him we will perish. In either case, God is here. There is no need to seek him anywhere else....

We can turn to God either in tender feeling or with broken-heartedness. In either way, we can put ourselves face to face with him and cry out to him from the depth of our soul. If the cry of the soul seems to be the only thing that has meaning, this is precisely because at such times we live deeply and acutely. This is the only worthy aim – to stand in the presence of God. Otherwise, every activity, everything that we do without this bond with God becomes unstable. This is not a matter of nonexistence, of nonactivity, but an activity which becomes God’s own activity in us and through us. What then is the meaning of what we do? What is our aim, our result? Our aim is not to be successful, but to act perfectly, that God might act in us.

Metropolitan Anthony goes on:

Days are deceptive. At the top of a wave we experience, not defeat, but victory. And if I talk about defeat and victory, I do not have in mind outer success or its absence, but inner becoming, inner growth, the capacity to be completely and totally all that we are at a

given moment.... We can learn to sit under our own skin, and it is so comforting to do so. The present moment is the only thing which is real, and so, one terribly longs to stay in this present moment under one's skin.

...Each moment is in the hands of God. It is God's time and that is why we have to live every moment with depth. While on earth we can deceive ourselves that there is still time to live, but that is not true; there is very little time. Our life can be cut short at any moment, and then we will stand before the judgment of God and it will be too late. Now, while there is time, we should strive to open up to everyone at each moment. What is important is that he is loved by God from the beginning. The image of God Himself is in him and that should be enough. Do I like him or not? Is he close to me or not? It doesn't matter. Only then will our souls mature....

What Prevents Us Being in the Present Moment?

As we said earlier, the question also stands: Is it really a matter of importance to me to stop time and to have this meeting with God, or is this just a secondary desire? Is the hunger, the longing to meet God in the Holy Spirit central to my life?

If someone says, "I don't feel that longing, although I would like to," I would advise them first of all to be silent and to go deep into that silence undistracted by television, internet, or phone calls. If there is the smallest opening, God will get in, but if there is only outer activity, there may be no room. This longing is really present in all of us, but to reach it, we must leave aside our busyness. Realizing that I don't yet have that longing may be the biggest stimulus to work for it.

When we want to meet a person, we give him time. We need time to see, to listen, and to become acquainted with the person in front of us, and it is the same with God. Vladika Anthony said, "Christ longs for friends and He is as real as each one of us."

One way to open ourselves to this meeting is by reading the Gospel to find out who He is. Metropolitan Anthony advises us to try not to read the Gospel with pious feelings, but to read it like a book – in other words, to find out about the hero. Do I like Christ? Would I like to know him or not? If you can

honestly answer, “If this is what He stands for, I want to become like him!” then you are closer. This will be the start of your friendship.

In other words, such a meeting also depends on us. Are we able to be real and honest? Can we be open, without prejudice or expectations about God? There are many ideas and false images of God that hamper us, and along these lines St. Theophan the Recluse advises, “When you pray, close your eyes, because icons are far from the full reality of God.” Often, we have an expectation of God that hampers our recognition of his presence – just as when we have prejudices about people, we can neither see nor hear them.

What else prevents us from being in the present moment? I think it is our passions and fears; fears rooted in what we anticipate will be coming. We are already in the future, agitated and restless because we are expecting something which only might happen, but it is not there as yet. Or we may dwell on physical or mental pain from the past, and by doing so, pull it into the present moment. Metropolitan Anthony stated that both of these are burdens we put on the present, burdens that we are not being asked to carry. In fact, we are only asked to deal with what is happening now. He gives the example of a joyful nine-year-old boy who frequently suffered from a painful illness. Metropolitan Anthony asked him, “How can you be so happy when you have been in pain?” The boy answered, “I am not thinking about what happened in the past and I am not thinking about what will happen in the future.”

Fears that we project into the future can also be a result of curiosity or greed, both of which are about the future and take us out of the present moment. They also can be about resentment and not forgiving, which relates to the past. One has to face these things squarely in order to be able to let them go because they prevent us being here and now, and therefore from meeting God. This also relates to the distractions and modern technologies of our time that so often take us out of ourselves, and prevent us from being rooted in our deeper selves.

As quoted earlier, Metropolitan Anthony said: “Learn to sit under one’s own skin. Nothing else will be asked of us.” He then offers the image of an octopus; whose tentacles are outside himself. He grabs at this and that, which is like us being outside the present moment. We have all experienced talking to someone, only to look into his eyes and realize that he is not at all with us, and that there is no reason for our meeting. Likewise, we cannot meet God when we are busy with our own thoughts.

If we are ready to struggle against everything that prevents us from being in the here and now, according to Vladika we can start learning to forget about ourselves, and this will be the beginning of our spiritual life – when we are no longer in the center: “Sobriety and forgetting about oneself is one of the features of Orthodoxy. Every time we find ourselves in the center, we can say, ‘Get thee behind me....’”

If we are ready to continue, then the words of Christ come to mind: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Mt. 16:24). It is a question of denying ourselves for the sake of acquiring someone or something more worthwhile. It is not denying oneself in order to lose oneself totally, but to deny one’s superficial self, and through this to acquire one’s real self.

In Metropolitan Anthony’s words, this superficial self is “...everything within us that makes us stand in opposition against someone else: ‘I am this color, I’m that color, I’m not like him or her, I’m big, I’m small, I’m intelligent, I don’t know anything....’” This, he says, is the root of sin because we are opposing ourselves against someone else, which is a denial of love.

We can start to find our personality in God through the Gospels, for example, where we read a passage and cry out, “That’s beautiful!” We have found a place where we are already in harmony with Christ’s humanity. In this way, we slowly can find our real selves. To find oneself is to deny one’s superficial self in order to find the image of God which is in us. Those rare passages in which we find ourselves in harmony with Christ are sacred, and to act against them in life would mean suicide of what is most holy in us.

Metropolitan Anthony adds, “If we want to be with God, we have to accept that this will mean taking up our cross. It is not a matter of only having the joy, but to also be ready to suffer for his sake: to go with him to the end.”

How to Stand in the Presence of God

1. How, then, do I stand before God? Vladika Anthony states, “Without prayer there is no life.” How then do I learn to pray? Saint Theophan the Recluse says, “If you want to learn to pray, pray!” How do I walk in the presence of God? “Go and walk.”
2. Another way is gratitude, which is not only a key to living in the present, but of opening ourselves to eternity and the Holy Spirit, so that eternity

(which is Christ Himself, for eternity is not something but Someone), increasingly becomes a part of our time and of our own being.

3. In the words of Vladika Anthony, “When one wakes up in the morning, it’s an untrodden new day, like a field of white snow. If we walk on it in the name of our Lord, realizing that each person we meet is given to us and that either we receive or give something in each encounter, we can ‘be glad and rejoice in it.’” Even if you are not exceptionally glad, be thankful for the day that you have been given.
4. Metropolitan Anthony also advises a short prayer, like the Jesus Prayer, but warns against doing it mechanically. It is not a talisman. It is better to do it five times with attention in the presence of God, than one hundred times without this attention. An awareness of the importance of the body in prayer, of being in your body is a great help in being stable and present to oneself and to God.
5. Another suggestion which Metropolitan Anthony gave was to learn to stop time by learning the troparia from the third, sixth, and ninth hours by heart. These are moments of eternity that we are interjecting into our day.
6. Another thing which can be of support is when you remember that each person bears the image of God within himself and that Christ has died for him. If you offend him or do something against him, you do it directly against God. This helps me to learn to respect each person. Whether I like him or not is of no importance: he is loved by God.
7. If I am traveling in town and see a person who looks sad, ill, or is perhaps working hard, I ask a blessing on him. This can be a stimulus to be open to each person you meet, and to immediately turn to God for him, asking for help and support.
8. If a person is very difficult, perhaps they even unreasonably hate you, it helps to stop and not react, not let them under your skin. This is not fighting yourself to like someone, but in seeing that this person is in such darkness and outside the grace of God, brings not sentimental pity, but real compassion and prayer.

9. Another thing that particularly helps when I feel dry is praying for the living and the dead. This brings me back to the here and now. It brings back life, especially when I don't feel anything. Praying for others is the simplest thing to do, and by praying for them, you can feel more alive in the presence of God.
10. If, in the busyness of the day (for me working in the hospice) I realize that I've lost my contact with God, just sitting for two or three minutes – even in the bathroom if there is no other place – helps one to become connected again and to act from one's rootedness in Christ.
11. Another thing that helps to remain in the present is not to engage in empty talk, curiosity, or gossip. These things only take one out of oneself.
12. There is a lot of time during the day when you can be with God. If you are on the bus or the tram, or waiting in a line, you can just be consciously in your body, standing in front of God. This is a discipline one can learn – to immediately go into prayer when there is nothing else to do. Theresa of Lisieux, a western saint, once said, "When you are busy, you can just smile at Him – smile and go on."
13. One can also learn to eat consciously, not mechanically, because, as Fr. Elchaninov said, "Food is the love of God made edible." A person once came to Metropolitan Anthony and said, "I so like good wine." Vladika replied, "Well, have a sip and really enjoy it." Feel it in your mouth – the smell, the taste, everything. Then have a second, and a third sip, but at the moment you feel that you are just tossing it down, stop." At this point, drinking wine is no longer being in the moment because the enjoyment has become greed.
14. Another help is to try not to be late. When you are late you become agitated and irritated. You are not here but imagining yourself in the place you should be.
15. Another thing I find helpful is that when you feel tired or sorry for yourself, to cut the feeling off immediately because self-pity makes you go down. Self-pity is an emotion that comes and goes, it's not a deep feel-

ing. If you can say, “The root of this feeling is in this situation, but I won’t accept it. I will go on.” (This helps because it gets you out of yourself and into the present moment.)

Someone once responded to my saying this by asking, “You talk about self-pity and cutting it off, but surely you have to first look at what it is about.” I replied, “Yes, that is true, but if one goes deep into self-pity you will drown. It’s a recognition, “Oh, there you are again. Go away!” It’s not about analyzing and thinking about it but knowing that it is an emotion that I don’t want at this moment. On an infinitely smaller scale, it is like Christ being tempted in the desert, and later, when He was very weak, tempted on the Cross: “Come down now and we will believe.” It always happens when you are tired, when you are low on energy, when you are at the end of your strength. You just have to be alert to say, “No, not now, and never. Get thee behind me!”

Meeting Eternity

When someone is very ill, it is important to be there, not only to act. Metropolitan Anthony once advised me, “When you are with a person who is very ill or dying, you can be sure that Christ is in you. He is in you and you don’t have to do anything very special. Just be there. But you can also invite Him. It’s one thing to know that He is there, but another to say, “Come, be with us.”

Something Metropolitan Anthony said that I found very moving:

Where your heart is, there your treasure will be. In the love of the person who is now alive in God, a part of the one still on earth will already be in God through the loved one...

For those who are left behind on earth, every moment in which we are deeply rooted in God we are also in eternity together with all those people we have loved on earth and who we continue to love in our seeming separation. In becoming one with the moments in the liturgy, we find ourselves in eternity....

Our relations with those who have already left this earthly life lie neither in the past nor in the future, but in our meeting with eternity and with God. Our relationships with those who have already left this life are still being built in the present, and they belong precisely to the category of eternity, not of time.

The last moment of life is the meeting of time with eternity. It is the most mysterious moment, because it is the moment of going over to eternity, and in eternity there is no time, just the presence of God and the love of God. This will be the summing up of our life in time – an end and also a judgment.”

The Joy of the Resurrection

In summing up, Metropolitan Anthony says:

The last thing I have to say is that we also need to know the joy of the Resurrection in our own experience, but this is only possible if we first know the tragedy of the Cross. In order to be reborn in such a way, we have to die to the egotism that enslaves us, and to our fears.

It is such a joy to know and experience that eternity has already come into time and that it will stream into time to live with us and in us, to the extent that we hunger for this and are open to God. At these times we know that eternity and the Holy Spirit are working strongly in us and in the world. All of this, I believe, can be an inspiration, an intense joy, and a stimulus to struggle with oneself and with everything that prevents us from allowing eternity to flow into time.

This is the glory of Pascha night. We don't only rejoice that something joyful happens to Our Lord after his crucifixion; we rejoice precisely because in this event we all are taken up and united to eternity. Although at the moment we are still in history and in the world, we are now in the world as the presence of eternity. ✦