

## Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 6 Theme: **Asceticism and Discipleship**  
Title: **“The Church is our Mother”** Author: **Mr. William Kopcha**

By Mr. William Kopcha

The priest who gave the homily at my grandfather’s funeral was a man who pulled no punches. I had once, several years before, heard him speak at the funeral of a more distant relative; his opening words were, “Those who knew her in life knew that she was a difficult person to get along with...” And, maybe not so surprisingly, nobody got mad. Not a brow was furrowed, not an eyebrow raised, not any more than a shrug and a resigned sigh and nod, because, simply put – it was true. Anyone there who had the potential to get flustered by this statement also knew that this was not the priest’s opinion – it was a fact. So, naturally, I was especially moved when this same priest said of my grandfather, “He was like Dove soap – 99.998% pure. Here was a man who understood that, in the words of St. Cyprian of Carthage, ‘unless you have the Church as your mother, you cannot have God as your Father.’ ... And because of this, everything for him was simple.”

Truer words could not have been said, and I’m fairly certain that I could see the cheeks of “Grandpa-Deacon” get still rosier beneath the foundation and other funeral-parlor fakery. And, following a send-off that was described as being like midnight on Pascha (an analogy that I extend with Holy Week in his last days), not a few hours after the fact, I was back at the University, plunged once again via total immersion in its own unique atmosphere with its own unique cares.

Specifically, we were in the middle of final exams, a time which underscores the transient nature of the University environment like no other – people giving one last-ditch effort to save their semesters before bursting, or perhaps falling, into freedom, sitting at home on the couch eating pretzels and watching every episode of 30 Rock on Hulu. Anyone who has ever had a job or internship on campus during the summer can attest to this transience, seeing the once-crowded streets deserted, the dorms silent and empty, and, every once in a while, a stray grad student stumbling out of the lab or library and blinking once or twice at this thing called “the sun” before retreating. In what amounts to a giant brick shanty-town, where, as a friend reminded me, every campus organization is “only four years away from extinction,” the idea of “community” is hard to come by. Everything is uncertain, everything is in flux, and, though we may stitch together networks of friends and companions, we are all essentially sent out alone from “home” to a temporary outpost. That is difficult.

I was particularly struck this year by the Gospel account of the healing of the Gerasene Demoniac. Everyone else whom Christ calls or who asks to follow Christ has some sort of a hang-up – they’ve bought land that they need to till, they’ve married a wife that they need to attend to, their father just died and they need to bury him. Christ tells all of them to forget about it and come anyway, even going so far as to say, “Let the dead bury their own dead” – all except this man. The only one who has no reservations about following Christ, this man from whom Christ expelled “many demons,” is told “no.” He begs Christ for a blessing to follow him, and

Christ says “no,” telling the man instead to depart into a place where he has most likely been feared and rejected for years on account of his illness and can no longer call “home.” This makes the man, in some sense, the first true *apostolos*, the first one “sent from” the Master. He is sent out, alone, into a place that is not his community. Given my recent perceptions of the University, maybe it is not so surprising that this story resonated with me so strongly.

And really, where do we encounter the Master? Every Christian since the original Twelve has been a disciple of a disciple and simultaneously of the same Master their masters serve. I am, in a sense, therefore a disciple of my grandfather and, by extension, first encountered the One Master in this one master, whose exemplary discipleship was rooted in his understanding of “the Church as his mother” – the Church, which is simultaneously the body of disciples showing you *how to be a disciple* and the body of disciples forming a community to bolster you in that effort.

A certain aspect of being a disciple and having the Church as your mother is, apparently, simply doing those things that She tells you are good for you. My own mother told me to eat chicken soup when I’m sick, so I do. And it works. I don’t know why, but it just does. Likewise, my grandfather went above and beyond what many would call a “reasonable effort” to make it to every Church service possible, became a frequent communicant when instructed to do so, and fasted when he was told to fast, right down to the substitution of non-dairy creamer for milk in his now-Lenten cereal (which, despite my “enlightened” misgivings about the letter vs. the spirit of the law does show some dedication). And he loved it, not for the sake of any personal gratification, but simply because this is how life was “supposed to be.” On top of that, in exchange for all the care bestowed upon him by the Church, he showered Her with all of the care that he could muster, fixing and cleaning what needed to be fixed and cleaned, managing what needed to be managed, filling all of her needs when they arose, including his great loves, choir-directing and the diaconate. Whatever She needed, he provided. It is probably no accident that this man who so completely absorbed every aspect of the Church’s mothering also took the most profound joy in the simplest parts of everyday life.

His most profound joy by far, though, was people. My grandmother now talks about how he always loved people, how he would talk to all the cashiers in the department stores he took her to, and especially how he lived for big church gatherings – for the assembly of his brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow disciples of the Church. Whether or not he realized it, as much as he loved this community, he also built this community. At his funeral, people came from, in some cases, hundreds of miles away simply because he had touched their lives in some way and in so doing had glued them into the network of the Church – one that he had supported and encouraged in their youth, another that he had driven an hour to deliver a home-cooked dinner to in a time of distress, and countless others that he had made laugh or just shown a genuine interest in their lives. Fast as he might have fasted and direct as he might have directed, this was undoubtedly his greatest love and life’s work – if you will, his greatest *podvig* or *ascesis*– his over-arching act of asceticism, of discipline and sacrifice, of overcoming personal boundaries and inhibitions, that cemented the discipleship of so many and solidified the foundation of a community.

How, then, can we maintain our discipleship as ones who are “sent out” from our own communities, like this Gerasene Demoniac, to new horizons? In the absence of a community, simple put – we can’t. That’s what makes existence at the University at once an exciting challenge and a difficult uncertainty. As hard as you work to build up a community, time has to put in no work at all to tear it down, to simply make it dissolve into nothing as people graduate and the population “turns over.” But, as Grandpa Deacon and countless others before him discovered in even more uncertain settings than this, this putting-aside of yourself and building-up both of others in their time of need and of the Church as your mother can bloom into your life’s crowning victory and greatest joy.

*William Kopcha is a 2nd-year graduate student at the University of Connecticut in Chemistry and Materials Science. He grew up in Connecticut and Vermont. He attends Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Willimantic, Connecticut. He is an active member and former president of the University of Connecticut Orthodox Christian Fellowship.*

**Discussion Questions:**

Who are the important models in your life of faith? Who do you follow? Who lead you to Christ?

What do you think of the Authors use of the extended metaphor of “The Church is our Mother”? It is accurate? It is flawed in any way?

How do you deal with isolation and loneliness in your life?