

The Reverend J. Sergius Halvorsen, Ph.D.
Homily: 40th Day of the Repose of Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko
April 29, 2105

Christ is Risen!

Today we give thanks to God for the life and witness of Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko: a husband, a father, a teacher, a pastor, a dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, a friend, a mentor, a man whose love of Jesus Christ touched all of us. Whether we knew him personally or knew him through his writing or podcasts, Fr. Tom's ministry and life of faith has deeply touched all of us.

More than twenty five years ago, I attended the Divine Liturgy for the first time in a mission parish near my hometown in the mountains of Northern California. A friend of mine, who was a member of the parish, invited me to come that Sunday because a guest priest was visiting that weekend to give a retreat. I was un-baptized, un-churched and my estimation of Christianity was pretty low: somewhere between a closed-minded ritual, and some sort of cult. So I came to church on that Sunday morning extremely skeptical.

I was led to a seat near the front of the church, and was quickly captivated by the beauty and grandeur of the Liturgy. Then, during the sermon I had two realizations that pierced my skeptical heart. The visiting priest who delivered the sermon that morning was not dumb. Nothing about him seemed closed-minded or shallow. He was articulate, and thoughtful and intelligent...very intelligent. Not only was this man brilliant, but also he really, truly believed what he was saying. His faith was obvious, and his conviction was contagious.

The visiting priest did not serve that morning, so when he finished his sermon he came back and stood among the faithful, just in front of where I was standing with my friend. Later in the Liturgy, it was the practice of that community for everyone to exchange the "kiss of peace", except that it was more like the "handshake of peace." People were shaking hands, saying "Christ is in our midst." They were smiling, and warm and enthusiastic, and this was fine, I could do this. So, I'm exchanging the "handshake of peace" with the people around me, and I happen to turn and see the visiting priest looking right at me, so I reach out my hand like I had to all the others. But to my complete surprise, this priest with thick glasses and a neatly trimmed beard, greets me, and then kisses me on the cheeks. The last time a man had kissed me was when I was about five, and that was my dad, not some stranger!

This was the first time I met Fr. Tom. To say the least, that first experience in the Orthodox Church completely blew my mind. I had no idea how it was possible, but on that morning something had changed in my heart, I knew that I had to become an Orthodox Christian. The one time that Fr. Tom ever visited that little parish in California, was the first time I ever attended the Divine Liturgy, and that meeting forever changed my life.

About a year later, I was baptized and chrismated, And early on, I began thinking about going to seminary, and maybe serving as a priest. One day, I approached a senior priest from another parish and very timidly told him that I was thinking about going to seminary, and possibly becoming a priest. I asked him if he could give me any advice. In a very gruff way he said, "Are you in college?"

"Yes" I said.

"What is your major?"

"Biology."

"Humph. That doesn't have much to do with theology, does it?"

"No, I guess not." I said, and I walked away disheartened.

Some months later, I attended a national college conference at the Antiochian Village. This was the second time I met Fr. Tom, who delivered a number of the talks during the conference. Again, I was captivated by what he had to say, and inspired by his contagious enthusiasm. Knowing that he was a professor at St. Vladimir's, I approached him during the conference and very timidly told him that I was thinking about coming to seminary. As was his way with everyone he met, he was kind, and encouraging, and we talked for a while. Then he asked me, "What is your major?" This was the question I had dreaded. Sheepishly, I apologized, "Uh, well, Biology...and yes, I know, it doesn't have much to do with theology." Fr. Tom said, "You know, St. Isaac the Syrian says that we must love all of God's creation, even the lizards. And for someone who lived in the desert, that's really saying something. It's good to study biology. So finish your degree, and then apply to seminary." So I did, and a few years later I came here to St. Vladimir's.

During my years at seminary, Fr. Tom's classes were some of my favorites, but they were hard. They forced me to ask hard questions about my faith and my understanding of God and the Church; my understanding of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. One of the many engaging topics that we covered in Fr. Tom's classes was the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas. Not only did the topic capture my imagination, but a number of my classmates and I got into a heated debate about the uncreated energies. In retrospect, of course, it is painfully obvious how utterly ridiculous and arrogant this was: seminarians, engaging in a heated debate about the finer points of the very summit of the ascetical life. It was as foolish as a bunch of teenagers arguing about how to be a grandparent. Yet, there I was with my classmates, going at it, out on the front porch of the Germack Building. The argument was in full swing as Fr. Tom walked by. He stopped, listened for a bit, and then one of us tried to get him to endorse our side of the argument. (If you could get Fr. Tom to agree with you, then who could argue against you?) Fr. Tom thought for a moment, and said, "Yes, the uncreated energies are important, but just stay with Jesus." and then he walked away.

At the time, in my youthful arrogance, I found this answer to be a bit unsatisfying. "What? Just stay with Jesus? What about the 'light' what about

Motovilov and St. Seraphim?” But of course Fr. Tom was right. While Fr. Tom’s knowledge of theology, philosophy, history and culture was encyclopedic, and while he brought this knowledge to bear in his teaching, preaching and writing, he always remained focused on Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. And whenever I would get sidetracked, or worked up, about one detail or another, Fr. Tom would always remind me to just stick with Jesus: focus on Christ. That extremely sound advice, has, on several occasions, served as a beacon of light in the midst of the dark storms of temptation and controversy. No matter what else may be going on, as Fr. Tom says, “Be always with Christ, and trust God in everything.”

During my years at St. Vladimir’s, my grandmother passed away, and my relatives asked me if I preach at the service. I had never preached at a funeral before, so I asked Fr. Tom for advice on what to do, what I should say. He said, “If you say anything at all, speak about how the life of the departed is a Word of God. Answer this question: How can we see God at work in the life of this person we loved?” This really defined Fr. Tom’s entire ministry. Whether he was talking about dogmatic theology or the Liturgy, or about history, or culture, Fr. Tom always showed us how God was at work in the world, at work in our lives.

As St. Paul says, “to the pure all things are pure” (Titus 1.15) and Fr. Tom was a herald of God’s presence in the midst of a dark and broken world. But most importantly, Fr. Tom saw the *image of God* in the people he met, the students he taught: he saw the image of God in us. Fr. Tom embodied the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one that is lost. As Jesus says, “God the Father does not desire that one of His little ones should perish.” (Mt. 18.14) In Fr. Tom’s ministry, everyone mattered, everyone was worth his time. He always saw the good in people, perhaps even sometimes to a fault. This is why so many people sought him out as a father confessor, and this is why Fr. Tom would so often be the last one in the chapel, late on a Saturday night, hearing confession after confession after confession.

Fr. Tom was the person who saw something good and pure and holy in every one of us, he was the one who saw the image of God in us...especially when we couldn’t see it ourselves. Fr. Tom helped us to experience the love of God in Jesus Christ, in everything he did, in his teaching, in his writing, in his countless letters and cards and phone calls, in his hundreds of hours of podcasts, Fr. Tom shared with us the love of Jesus Christ: the love that does not forget, that love that heals the broken hearted, the love of the Crucified Messiah who stands with us in our darkest hour. Through Fr. Tom, God worked miracles in the hearts of so many of us: miracles of repentance, miracles of reconciliation, miracles renewed faith.

Now Fr. Tom and I did not always agree, and he was not perfect. Fr. Tom had his faults, and he was quick to say as much in private, and in public. But in Fr. Tom, in his life, in his ministry, I was able to see Christ. Perhaps one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith is that Christ reveals himself to us through one

another. Helping us to see Christ in our neighbor, and showing us that God is truly present in our lives, is one of Fr. Tom's greatest gifts.

We will dearly, dearly miss Fr. Tom, who was a spiritual father to so many in the truest sense. But today, as we bring to a close the forty days since Fr. Tom departed this life, we stand like Jesus' disciples, on that mountain in Galilee on the fortieth day after the Lord's Pascha. Today we commend Fr. Thomas into the hands of God. And just like those disciples on the day of Ascension, we are commanded to "forge on" as Fr. Tom always said, to "forge on" in the same ministry to which he dedicated his life: the ministry of teaching the commandments of Jesus Christ; ministering to the lonely and broken hearted; and bringing the love of God into the world through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Thank you Lord, thank **you**, for the gift of your servant Protopresbyter Thomas, and may his memory be eternal.

Christ is Risen!
Christos Anesti!
Christos Voskrese!