

Tribute to Protopresbyter Thomas Hopko

By the Reverend Dr. Sergius Halvorsen, Assistant Professor of Homiletics and Rhetoric, Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program

It is difficult for me to overstate the influence that Fr. Thomas Hopko had on my life. Talking with my family on the day that Fr. Tom died, I told them that if it were not for Fr. Tom, I might not even be a Christian, let alone the husband and father I am today. During the services that we sang with Fr. Tom's family and friends, I looked at this man who had so much influence on my life, and I marveled at God's providence; how it was possible that I a person like me, would be standing there among the concelebrating clergy next to this man who means so much to so many.

Growing up in Northern California, my family attended a Protestant church until I was about five. Whatever nominal Christian formation I received in those years, was quickly replaced by a zealous form of New-Age spirituality, free from any formal creed or community. By the time I was in high school, my understanding of Christianity was little more than a ridiculous caricature: "Confess Jesus as your Lord and Savior, burn your rock and roll records, and you will be saved." This false understanding of Christianity only strengthened my resolve to avoid organized religion since it seemed that any salvation that was this simplistic was not worth having...to say nothing of the fact that I really liked rock and roll. So, as a young man I was firmly convinced that at its best Christianity had nothing to offer me, and at worst it was a close-minded cult where people turned off their brains and simply accepted a bunch of nonsense.

During these years I had with a number of high-school classmates who were members of the Evangelical Orthodox Church. They were thoughtful, intelligent people, who had a zealous faith, and even though we argued vigorously about religion, I respected them. A number of them were my friends. I graduated high school, went to college for a few years, and things happened—some not so good—and I took a few years off. In the years since high school, I had maintained a relationship with one close friend who was a member of the Evangelical Orthodox Church, which had, by that time, been canonically received into the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese. My friend and I talked about religion often, and he had suggested several times that I come to the Divine Liturgy. One day he said, "There is this priest coming to give a retreat this weekend, he's a really big deal. He'll be preaching on Sunday, you should come visit." So I accepted the invitation.

As I came into church I was led to a seat close to the front, and during the Liturgy I was stunned by what was going on around me. Having no prior experience with any sort of Christian worship, I was shocked by the intensity and power of the Divine Liturgy. Then, the visiting priest preached the sermon. I didn't really follow everything he said, since I had no real Christian background or vocabulary. (I believe it had to do with the Book of Revelation) But I had two personal revelations that pierced the depths of my heart. First, I could tell that this man was not dumb. Nothing about him seemed "close minded" or shallow. He was articulate, and thoughtful and smart...really, really smart. Not only was this man brilliant, but he really, truly believed what he was saying. His faith was obvious, and his conviction was contagious. The visiting priest did not serve that Sunday, 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 facing me, so I reach out my hand like I had to all the others. But to my utter shock, he leans over and kisses me on the cheeks. At that point in time, I had not been kissed by a man since I was a little kid, and that was my dad, not some stranger! This was the first time that I ever met Fr. Thomas Hopko.

To say the least, that first experience in the Orthodox Church completely blew my mind. I couldn't stop thinking about that preacher—that man who was brilliant, and truly believed what he was preaching—as I walked out to my car, my mind was swirling. I had no idea how it was possible, and it defied all of my expectations, but something had changed in my heart, I knew that I had to join the Orthodox Church. The one time that Fr. Tom ever visited that little parish in California, was the first time I ever attended the Liturgy at an Orthodox Church, and that encounter forever changed my life.

About a year later, I was baptized and chrismated. During the period of my catechesis, I realized that joining the Church, for me, was an "all or nothing" proposition. Orthodox Christianity was so mind-blowing, and my conversion was such a radical step from where I had been, that I couldn't imagine becoming an Orthodox

Christian and then pursuing some career that did not put me at the heart of the life of the Church. So, very early on, I began thinking about going to seminary, and perhaps serving as a priest. In these early days, I was told that I should speak with one of the senior priests in the area about my emerging sense of vocation. One day, during a gathering of area clergy at our parish, I approached this senior priest, and very timidly told him that I was thinking about maybe going to seminary, and possibly becoming a priest, and 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."

"Hmph. That doesn't have much to do with theology, does it?" he said dismissively.

"No, I guess not." I said, as I walked away with my tail between my legs.

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. This time, however, I knew much more about him. I knew that he was a professor at St. Vladimir's Seminary and had written books, some of which I had read. So, during one of the breaks, I approached him and very timidly told him that I was thinking about coming to seminary. As was his way with everyone he met, he was encouraging, and we talked for a while. He asked me,

"Are you in college?"

"Yes," I said, dreading where this was going.

"What are you studying?"

Sheepishly, I apologized for my major, "Uh, Biology." And then I quickly added, "I know, it doesn't have much to do with theology."

Then Fr. Tom thought silently for a moment and said, "You know, St. Isaac the Syrian says that we must learn to love all creation, even the lizards. And for someone who lived in the desert, that's really saying something. Biology is a great subject to study."

Buoyed by this encouragement, I "forged on" as Fr. Tom always used to say, applied to St. Vladimir's and was accepted. St. Vladimir's is where I studied, where I met my wife, where I worked for a few years, and where I would ultimately return as a professor.

As it is for many who come to St. Vladimir's, I was thoroughly enamored with seminary life. The liturgical life in Three Hierarchs Chapel, spending time with classmates from all over the country and all over the world, and of course, studying with SVS professors was challenging and stimulating and life-changing. My classes with Fr. Tom were some of my favorites. The topics that we covered forced me to ask hard questions about my own faith and my understanding of God and the Church. On an intellectual and spiritual level, it was a road of repentance, realizing how very little I actually knew about Christ and the Gospel, and seeking to understand better. One of the more engaging topics that we covered in Fr. Tom's classes was St. Gregory Palamas' teaching on the uncreated energies. Not only did the topic capture my imagination in the most dramatic way, but a number of my classmates and I got into a heated debate about the uncreated energies. Now, in retrospect, it is painfully obvious to me how utterly ridiculous this was: seminarians, engaging in a heated debate about the finer points of the very summit of the ascetic life. It is as foolish as a bunch of teenage boys discussing what it means to be a grandfather. Yet, there I was with my classmates, going at it, out on the front porch of what is now the Germack Building. The argument was really in full swing, when 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 stick 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 stick 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, just stay close to Jesus.

After graduating with my MDiv, Fr. Tom invited me to work in the Advancement Office at St. Vladimir’s. Staying in New York which turned out to be a miraculous blessing, I got engaged, then married, and our first child was born. During these years working at St. Vladimir’s, my grandmother passed away, and as I was making plans to go back to California for her memorial service, some of my relatives asked me if I would speak a word at her service which was going to be a very small non-denominational event, just with our family, at the cemetery. 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 advice on preaching at funerals, in some way, defined Fr. Tom’s entire ministry. Whether he was talking about dogmatic theology or the Liturgy, or about history, or culture, Fr. Tom was always showing us how God was at work. As St. Paul says, “to the pure all things are pure” (Titus 1.15) and Fr. Tom was able to see so much good in the midst of a dark and broken world. Fr. Tom had the amazing ability to see the hand of God working in so many different ways. But more importantly, he was able to see the *image of God* in so many different *people*.

Father Tom embodied the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to find the one. I count myself, a one-time California, new-age pagan, as one of the countless people in whom Fr. Tom saw the image of God. Recently, I listened to a number of the podcasts that Fr. Tom did on Charles Darwin, and what struck me was the charity that Fr. Tom shows for the renowned and controversial figure. By the end of the series, you sense that Fr. Tom has a love for Charles Darwin, and despite the controversies, he takes time to speak about the fundamental goodness that he sees in this man. This was Fr. Tom’s way, this is how Christ worked through Fr. Tom. 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, this is why Fr. Tom would often be the last one in the chapel, late on a Saturday night, hearing confession after confession. Fr. Tom was the person who saw something good inside every one of us, he was the one who saw the image of God within us, especially when we could not see it ourselves. Fr. Tom must have spent literally years of his life ministering to “lost souls” like myself, and bringing them closer to Jesus Christ. The love of God, the love that does not forget, that love that remembers, this is what we will perhaps most miss about Fr. Tom.

The week before Fr. Tom died, I sent him a letter, and unfortunately I don’t think he had a chance to read it. But in that letter, I thanked him for showing me the love of Jesus Christ in so many ways. God worked miracles in my life through Fr. Tom, and I am merely one among the countless multitude of people whose lives God touched through him. 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. In that letter that I sent him, I said that perhaps one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith, perhaps even the greatest sacrament of all, is that Christ makes himself known to us through one another. This experience of encountering Christ in the neighbor, this understanding that God is truly present in our lives, is Fr. Tom’s greatest gift to me. We will dearly, dearly miss Fr. Tom, who was a spiritual father to so many in the most truest sense. But, inasmuch as we are in communion with Jesus Christ whom Fr. Tom tirelessly preached and proclaimed, we are as close to him as we have ever been, and in that great mystery of God’s mercy, in Jesus Christ we are even closer to Fr. Tom now than we ever were before.

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