

The Stories We Tell Ourselves
Narrative Repentance and True Stories of God, Self, Church, and Creation


by

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Date: 12/29/2021

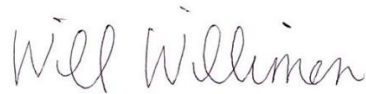
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
in the Divinity School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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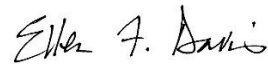
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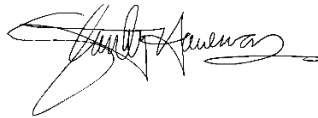
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Abstract

This thesis outlines how a Christian leader can guide the faithful to live their life rightly in light of true stories of God, self, Church, and Creation. Each of us perceives, contextualizes, and interprets our experiences in life through our social imaginary, an interpretive framework that is narratively and communally formed. This social imaginary can be distorted by false stories that corrupt our understanding of what gives meaning to our lives, leading us to embrace destructive desires and no longer live in harmony with God's intention for us.

To unlearn such false stories and to re-form our social imaginary in harmony with God's true stories is the work of *narrative repentance*, a cooperative effort of priest, parishioner, and God to heal our souls from the corrosive spiritual affliction of sin. Narrative repentance encompasses the human work of purifying our social imaginary from false stories and the hoped-for divine work of revealing to us the true story of our soul through divine illumination and communion with the life of the Holy Trinity.

Understanding narrative repentance as a pastoral principle that underlies all pastoral work impacts the Christian leader's effective practice of preaching, teaching, and worship. Most notably, an understanding of narrative repentance allows a Christian leader to enter the sacred space of parishioners' social imaginaries and collaborate with them in unlearning false stories of God, self, Church, and Creation, and in adopting the true stories that may free them from captivity to their distorted desires and thus allow them to live freely in the world as witnesses to God's love and the joy of life in His Kingdom.

To my aunt, the Rev. Lana Lisbeth Lawrence

Though my work lacks the poetry of your words,
I nevertheless offer it in continuance of the Lawrence literary tradition.
I hope you and Granddaddy Stephen would be pleased.

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Introduction

The seeds for this thesis were planted in my work as a parish priest in the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. For me, one of the great blessings of ordained ministry has been the invitation to enter intimately into the lives of my parishioners through spiritual counseling and the sacrament of Holy Confession. It would be difficult to overstate the joy of being welcomed into such sacred and vulnerable ground. At the same time, I have become acutely aware of the responsibility of such an invitation and the imperative to soberly guard against any abuse of my parishioners' trust and vulnerability. Having received confessions and offered spiritual guidance to both adults and youth over the past decade and a half, I have been surprised by the similarities and patterns of their confessions. In my encounters with the unguarded hearts of my parishioners on such sacred inner ground, I have come to believe that a common, even dominant, contemporary account of our human struggle is often superficial or even deceptive. What Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell term the "standard account of moral rationality" has come to dominate the contemporary account of what it means to "live the good life."¹ According to this account we live a moral life by making rational objective moral choices. Abiding by impersonal moral rules, by always making "good choices," we should experience the full flourishing of our human potential. Or so the account goes. What I have encountered in my parishioners' inner lives, though, is not a concern to learn how to keep a moral law. Rather, I have encountered deep shame in my parishioners and have found that they have internalized a

¹ Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, *From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics*, 159-160.

narrative of self that sees themselves as unworthy of the full flourishing of our human life, that they have somehow failed to meet the entry requirement to deserving such a life, to being loved by God.

Two further experiences gave form to and nurtured the ideas explored in this thesis. During my coursework in Duke Divinity School's Doctor of Ministry program, I became increasingly aware of the role of stories in our spiritual formation. Definitive for this was our course *Violence in the Old Testament* with Ellen Davis and Sarah Musser. It became apparent to me that stories, rightly understood, have the power to address the deceptive narratives many of my parishioners hold in their hearts. When we wrongly read Scripture, or really any story, we risk internalizing wrong ideas of our self, God, Church, and Creation. Rightly reading these same stories, or being taught to rightly read, holds the potential and promise of rewriting these false narratives which we too often hold in our hearts.

The final experience was the most formative for me spiritually, personally, and pastorally. Following the completion of my coursework I received a grant from the Lily Foundation to pursue a Clergy Renewal program while on sabbatical from my parish. I traveled on pilgrimage to monasteries in England, Scotland, and Greece. I tried, with the guidance of gifted spiritual mentors, to enter deeply into the Eastern Orthodox tradition of prayer and repentance. Learning, or at least beginning to learn, how to repent deeply and how to pray mystically in the hesychastic tradition of the Orthodox Church, I noticed a resonance between the ancient ascetic practices of the Eastern Orthodox faith and the contemporary efforts by scholars like Ellen Davis, Stanley Hauerwas, and Richard Hays to rescue a true understanding of the moral life from the rigid moralisms of objective rational ethical systems. Indeed, if it is not too ambitious a claim, I see this thesis as a sort of theologically bilingual expansion of their insights.

The first chapter is an exploration into the contemporary language of narrative. This thesis is not meant as another attempt to define narrative theology or to apply a trendy adjective

to my central subject of repentance. It is meant, rather, to recognize the fundamentally narrative shape of our human experience. What the Eastern Orthodox ascetic tradition experiences intuitively through the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, the Lives of Saints, and the guidance of monastic elders is applicable outside the monastery walls as well—we are formed, not just ethically and morally, but also spiritually by the stories we internalize. Drawing particularly from the insights of Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Root, James K. A. Smith, L. Gregory Jones, and Stephen Fowl, the first chapter situates the dynamic of our narrative identity as formative for the way we perceive, experience, and act within the world. Our actions, whether moral or immoral, are the embodied expression of our desire. Our desire, in turn, is teleologically aimed at an internalized, and not often consciously articulated, narrative of what makes life noble and filled with meaning. It is from this internalized narrative that our actions in the world arise. Coining the phrase ‘narrative repentance,’ therefore, is a way of making this unconsciously articulated narrative subject to conscious challenge and re-formation.

The second chapter is an effort to form a bridge between the Eastern Orthodox understanding of noetic repentance and contemporary scholarly accounts of ethical formation, a conscious attempt to be theologically bilingual and highlight how Eastern and Western traditions can expand and clarify each other. Chapter two attempts to explicate the Eastern Orthodox understanding of noetic repentance—the healing of the soul—in a way intelligible to a non-Orthodox reader. Then, by mapping the language of noetic repentance onto the language of narrative, the concept of narrative repentance is proposed as the central effort of Christian pastoral leadership, underlying every other pastoral task.

The final chapter presents the practical ramifications of this understanding of narrative repentance as the central effort of pastoral leadership. Since narrative repentance is not meant to be just one theory of pastoral practice among many, but rather an underlying principle undergirding all effective pastoral leadership, then it must relate to all other pastoral tasks.

Chapter three outlines how narrative repentance can inform day-to-day pastoral tasks, using examples from preaching, teaching, and worship. The end of chapter three returns to an exploration of the pastoral practice that gave rise to this thesis, encountering the inner lives of the faithful through the intimate pastoral practice of spiritual counseling and sacramental confession. By exploring the dynamic of narrative repentance within the sacred and personal inner ground of a person's heart, we can see most fully the potential impact of a conscious, informed pastoral practice of narrative repentance, both in our own lives as pastoral leaders and in the lives of the faithful entrusted to our spiritual care.

This thesis is most certainly not the sole work of my hand nor of my mind. I am deeply grateful to my thesis advisor, Ellen Davis, whose influence should be apparent throughout this thesis. Dr. Davis has labored many hours to form me as a writer and aspiring scholar. Under her guidance I have learned to be more precise in my use of language and to say what I want to say without exaggeration or unintended dogmatism. She has taught me to show hospitality toward ideas with which I do not necessarily agree yet which still warrant conversation and consideration. More than anything else, though, Dr. Davis has taught me to encounter Scripture (and the Psalms in particular) as a site of divine communion and prayer. In the language of my own Orthodox tradition, she has been a spiritual mother to me, birthing in me a more profound experience of the living God through my own narrative repentance. I am also grateful to the faculty of the Duke Divinity School Doctor of Ministry program who invested much of their time and wisdom in forming our cohort of doctoral students, for whom I am also grateful. It was the promise of enriching conversations and challenging debates with peers that drew me to the D.Min program in the first place. I was not disappointed. I also owe a deep debt of gratitude to my spiritual fathers and mentors through this process as well. Fr. Stephen Freeman has not only taught me many true stories of God, self, Church, and Creation, he has also been instrumental in giving me the courage to let go of my false stories and to be liberated from the lies which have

held my heart captive; Fr. Seraphim on the Isle of Mull in Scotland who taught me to encounter the Celtic saints through their stories; Fr. Augustine in Glasgow, Scotland, who built a chapel with his bare hands so that he could teach others the true story of their hearts; Fr. Melchizedek at the Monastery of John the Baptist in Essex, England, who shared with me precious stories of his spiritual father St. Sophrony; the monk Ermaios at Vatopedi Monastery on Mt. Athos who saw my spiritual life more clearly in a few days than I had learned to see it in years of priestly ministry; and most importantly, my spiritual father and bishop, His Eminence, Metropolitan Alexios, under whose omophorion I serve and by whose prayers I minister to the faithful he has placed in my care. Personal thanks also go to my St. Luke Greek Orthodox Church parish and its leadership, their patience and kindness gave me the opportunity to pursue this work. Finally, but certainly not least, I thank my family, Presbytera Kelley and our four children, Alec, Zac, Lucia, and Cecilia. They have made countless sacrifices in their love and support for me. They have often dealt with my absence, both physically and, more often, mentally (with my constantly wondering ruminations on stories and repentance). They have taught me more and formed me more deeply than any other teacher, mentor, or counselor. They are my most precious story. I have been blessed indeed.

Fr. Robert Lawrence
Eve of the Nativity, 2021

1. True Stories and Narrative Repentance

An age-worn tale tells of a visitor to a monastery who asks one of the monks what the monks do all day long. Living in the world outside the monastery, the visitor has difficulty imagining how a monk would fill his day. Without meetings and errands and family demands, what could possibly occupy the time? The monk smiles gently at the visitor and says simply, “We fall down and get back up. Then we fall down again and get back up again.” It is an enduring story not only due to its simplicity but also due to how profound it is within that simplicity. On the surface the story seems very straightforward—even though the visitor is asking a pragmatic question about what the monks physically do each day, the monk reimagines the question in spiritual terms. Life is a spiritual battle, the monk is saying, and our job is to simply not give up. Yet sitting with the story for a while, we notice some nuances. Is the visitor only asking out of idle curiosity? For his part, the monk seems to discern a deeper inquiry. His answer, in fact, is not limited to how a monastic community should spend their days; it is a reflection on the Christian life. Whatever else happens in each day, the monk is urging the visitor to consider that our Christian vocation is to get back up when we fall. Rather than giving the monastery’s daily calendar of activities, he instead answers the more personal, if unwitting, question, “How should I, as a Christian, spend my days?” It is simply assumed that falls will come. Our response to those falls, suggests the monk, does not need to be an abstract speculation on why we continue to fall or to dwell in the shame of our continued falls. Rather, we get back up, dust ourselves off, and try again.

It is a perennial question, “How then shall I live?” Even after two millennia of Christian practice and reflection it is still a question that captures our attention. Not only the question of what it looks like to live a Christian life but, more pointedly, what am I trying to accomplish by living a Christian life? Even setting aside the multitude of thorny questions that divide Christian traditions—competing theories of atonement, the role of human free will, or debates over works righteousness—it remains a persistent personal meditation, what is it that I envision I am doing each day that marks my life out as a Christian life? I pose these questions not simply to point us to the practical daily exercises of a Christian life—prayer, reading of Scripture, worship, generosity and the like (though we’ll explore those in a later section); rather, I pose such questions so that we consider just exactly what it is that we imagine such practices accomplish in us. That form of the question becomes even more striking when placed in the mouth of a Christian priest or pastor. What am I trying to accomplish when I lead the faithful in the daily practice of their faith?

It is the sort of question a Christian pastor asks with sleeves rolled up, elbow-deep in someone’s life, covered with the muck and mess of their fears and insecurities, their secret shames, and timid hopes. Aside from the obvious urgent need of offering comfort and hope, what is it that priests and pastors are doing in these lives into which our faithful have so courageously invited us? Given access to that sacred space, what are we actually trying to accomplish—day by day—in their lives? The beginning of an answer can be found in a return to our monk and his visitor. The point of the story, as we have seen, is to suggest that the Christian life is about the getting back up, not the falling down. But there are many other images or metaphors that could describe a monastic way of life.

Why is it that the monk answered in terms of falling down and getting up? I want to suggest that the monk engaged in exactly the kind of pastoral encounter with the visitor that answers the pressing question of what a Christian pastor is accomplishing in the life of the faithful, day by day. The monk's reimagining and reframing of the question not only wisely discerned the visitor's personal longing for an authentic, fulfilling Christian life; the monk also recognized that the visitor likely had a distorted imagination of what such a fulfilling life would entail. Thus, his answer is even more complex than first perceived. This dialogue is no mere exchange of information or a lazy conversation on an idyllic afternoon. The monk, we can suppose, has had many such encounters with visitors eager to uncover some secret to the ideal Christian life; a life where some practice or habit can somehow lead to a Christian life without falls, without slipping into sin. The visitor might as well have asked, "How is it possible that you live perfect Christian lives in harmony with God and with each other?" So, the monk's answer is both a correction to the question itself as well as an answer to the visitor's deeper query. The Christian life is not about uncovering some mystical technique so that we never fall to temptation and sin. The monk, as we have seen, simply assumes such moral falls as we succumb to the corrosive seductions of sin. The Christian life is about refusing to remain fallen, refusing to believe the lie that we are our failures. The Christian life, our monk tells us, is about getting up every time we fall—because we will fall. The monk is inviting the visitor to recognize that God does not desire perfection so much as faithful persistence.

What, then, has the monk accomplished in the visitor's life? The answer is two-fold—the monk corrected the visitor's false (though likely unwitting and not consciously

articulated) understanding of the spiritual life and then invited the visitor to rightly imagine the purpose of the Christian spiritual life. The monk, in effect, was urging the visitor to encounter the world in a different way, to see the world through different eyes, to align his imagination with a different way of existing in the world. With a brief but striking answer, the monk invited the visitor to adopt a new way of being in the world.

This invitation to adopt a new way of being in the world is, I will argue, the answer to the pastor's pressing question: the pastoral task that priests and pastors endeavor to accomplish, day by day, in the lives of the faithful is to invite them to adopt a new way of being in the world. Like the example of the monk and his visitor, this invitation comes in two parts. First, we must help our faithful to cast aside false and distorted understandings of the Christian life and second, we must inspire and empower our faithful to adopt an authentic and fulfilling Christian life. This may seem at first glance to be a simplistic and obvious assertion. However, the dynamics of this pastoral task are complex and challenging. How did we come to an understanding of the Christian life in the first place? How do we know if it is false and distorted or authentic and fulfilling? If much of our understanding is unarticulated, perhaps even unconsciously held, how do we even know what we understand about living a Christian life? How can anyone learn to 'see with different eyes' or 'align our imagination with a different way of existing in the world?' How do we let go of cherished false beliefs and how do we adopt new ways of being? It is these dynamics that the following chapters will explore. Before that, though, some clarifications on terms and method are needed.

1.1 The Narrative Formation of our Hearts

The term I propose for this pastoral task is *narrative repentance*. It is not an obvious term, yet it best captures the dynamics of the task at hand. ‘Repentance’ itself might seem an odd term to propose since it is not immediately apparent what repentance has to do with adopting a new way of being. Repentance is one of those Christian words that is often used but rarely defined. We tend to have an image in our minds of what it means, yet we would be hard pressed to remember where we got this impression. Thus, we tend to read back this assumed definition into the Scriptures and the writings of the early Church, without pausing to ask whether this is what is really meant by the notion of ‘repentance.’ Take a moment for a little thought experiment. When you hear the word ‘repentance’ what image comes to mind? Do you think of someone bowed over in remorse, soul weary from habitual sins? Or perhaps someone ruefully shaking their head at yet another fall, promising to do better next time? Someone sheepishly standing before the one offended and whispering an apology through their shame? ‘Repentance,’ in our contemporary imagination, generally points toward a genuine remorse and sorrow at our moral failings and a regret for our perpetual falling short of the commandments of our Lord. But is this what the term means in the Scriptures and the writings of the early Church?

The Greek term translated by the word ‘repentance’ is *μετάνοια*, meaning ‘a change of νοῦς, heart/mind’ (the Greek term νοῦς is difficult to translate into English; we will explore it more fully in Chapter 2). In Latin *μετάνοια* was translated with the word *paenitentia*, from a root meaning ‘to feel sorry,’ which then through Old French entered

the English language as ‘repentance.’ This is why most dictionary definitions of ‘repentance’ highlight synonyms like contrition and regret; and this is why our popular Christian imagination puts an emphasis on ‘remorse for sin’ when we hear the word ‘repentance.’ What gets lost, however, is the more positive content of changing our heart/mind and, thus, adopting a new way of being in the world. Why, though, choose a term that carries with it the danger of being misunderstood? It is certainly not my intent just to rebrand an unpopular Christian term. Rather I want to suggest that it is necessary to reclaim the Scriptural sense of the word ‘repentance’ if we are to properly read Scripture and to properly understand the guidance of the early Church in living out our day-to-day Christian lives (I will give examples of this in a later chapter). This reclaimed notion of repentance is so central to the living of our Christian life that Chapter 2 is entirely dedicated to a recovery of the Biblical notion of repentance and an exploration of how such a notion of repentance is lived out in our lives, day by day.

This discussion about the meaning of repentance reveals how challenging it can be to talk about a common term without first explicitly defining what is meant in using that term. It is not just the term itself that needs to be clarified but also the way we talk about that term and how it resonates within our minds. Another way of saying this is that we humans are such storytelling creatures that we even tell stories to ourselves about the meanings of words. Notice how often the word ‘imagination’ is used in the paragraphs above. I do not mean by this some flight of fancy or fantasy. It is, rather, an acknowledgment that the way we make sense of the things we see, hear, and read is through telling an internal story about those things which we see, hear, and read. A contemporary saint of the Orthodox Church, St. Paisios, tells a story about three old men

sitting on a park bench. Suddenly a young man goes sprinting by in an evident haste. The men's eyes follow the fleeting figure until he is out of sight. One turns to the others and says, "He must have just robbed a store and is fleeing with the money." The second replies, "Perhaps he is late to a rendezvous with a girl, and he is afraid she will leave before he gets there." Finally, the last says, "No, I imagine he is the chanter at the local parish, and he is late to the Vespers service and does not want the priest to have to wait." St. Paisios then goes on to say that all three men saw the very same thing, but the way they made sense of what they had seen revealed the desire of their own heart. The way we make sense of the 'facts' of the world reveals the story that we hold in our hearts about the world. This is what is meant by 'narrative' repentance. The way we adopt a new way of being in the world is to learn to tell a new story in our heart about that world.

It is no accident that we began with a story. It is through true and proper storytelling, I will argue, that the Christian pastor invites the faithful to repent—"to adopt a new way of being in the world." Repentance is not so much about people feeling remorseful or about the pastor correcting their bad behavior; rather it is about the narrative formation of the heart so that we desire the 'right' things, the things of God. Even this idea of 'narrative,' however, is subject to the same confusion as 'repentance.' What do we mean when we say 'narrative formation?' Is it just about telling stories and including clever illustrations in sermons? Or is it something deeper that reflects how we experience the world and form our sense of identity? Again, this dynamic of 'narrative' is so critical to understanding the pastoral task of narrative repentance that the remainder of this chapter will explore 'narrative' and 'story' more fully.

First, however, one final note on method. Despite continued ecumenical efforts, there are still many theological debates that divide Christian traditions—issues like atonement theory, the proper role of the pastor/priest, even questions about the proper form of worship. It needs to be clear from the outset that it is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to settle such pressing theological questions. I will not attempt to forge a compelling argument for a definitive vision of which Christian tradition should be normative. Thus, I will not try to argue that a particular spirituality *should* be normative or definitive. Yet I can only write from the vantage point I have inherited as a parish priest in the Greek Orthodox Church. This will not be an apologetic work attempting to defend the Orthodox understanding or practice of the Christian faith. Rather I will argue from this vantage point of Eastern Orthodoxy that, given a particular understanding of the Christian life embodied in what we call Holy Tradition, this task of narrative repentance is the primary pastoral ministry that a priest exercises in the lives of the faithful from day to day. The practical exercise of that pastoral task will be the main focus of our explorations in the chapters ahead.

1.2 A Story-Formed People

We are story-formed people. Stories have long held a central place in our lives and have been important to human communities throughout history. Even before we could write down the tales of our ancestors, we gathered to listen as storytellers told and retold the stories that reminded us who we were in community. The expansive epics of

ancient storytellers enshrined within their cultures what was the noble, the heroic, and the virtuous. We have used stories to explore what it means to be human, what it means to live in our world, and what it means to aspire to a meaningful life. We are surrounded by stories; and not just in the tales we tell. Art and music tell stories. Even where story is not essential—in a sporting event, for example—we import stories. We want to know who is the underdog and who the villain? We want rivalries which stretch back decades and tales of overcoming adversity. It is never enough for us to simply experience something; we need to locate that experience in a larger story so that we can know how to make sense of that experience.

All this should not come as a surprise. Every child slipping off to sleep while listening to a bedtime story is aware that stories are a ubiquitous part of our human experience. In recent years, nonetheless, increased scholarly attention is being paid to stories, and stories are being explored in surprising and profound ways – not just because they are so clearly a part of our human experience, but because they seem to be somehow essential to experiencing being human. In the very first line of their introduction to *Readings in Narrative Theology: Why Narrative?*, Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones note that “appeals to ‘narrative’ and to ‘story’ have been increasingly prominent in scholarly circles, to the delight of some, the consternation of others, and the bewilderment of many.”¹ The delight, consternation, and bewilderment, they go on to say, are in large part due to the different ways that various proponents (or opponents) use

¹ Stanley Hauerwas & L. Gregory Jones, *Readings in Narrative Theology: Why Narrative?*, 1.

the notion of “narrative” or “story.” Is “story” just a faddish trend that finds its expression in forced sermon illustrations or contrived metaphors? Or is “story” something more essential to our human experience? What does it even mean to claim that we humans are story-formed people?

Before we can bring clarity to such questions and show what they have to do with the practice of the Christian life, it will be helpful to make explicit two observations. The first is that the varying senses of delight, consternation, and bewilderment felt around the notions of “narrative” and “story” seem to me to be largely due to different authors intending different notions when using these terms. While one author might mean the simple telling of a tale (and tend to see “story” as a mundane, even overused, category), another might mean a far more nuanced epistemological category that describes how we make intelligible our experiences in life. Because of this potential to confuse notions, in the next section of this chapter I will clarify my use of three terms—“telling a story,” “narrative,” and “storytelling.” The second observation is that these varying senses of delight, consternation, and bewilderment also seem to relate to the uses that different authors put the notions of “narrative” and “story.” That is to say that a disembodied abstract concept of narrative (as in the label “narrative theology”) is not helpful to living a Christian life until it becomes embodied in particular practices. When one author writes of narrative and stories, he or she may mean only that sermons should use stories to good effect in the delivery of sermons.² Another author writing about narrative and

² Austin Tucker, *The Preacher as Storyteller: The Power of Narrative in the Pulpit*, 10-19.

stories may be referring to the complex dynamic of encouraging listeners to adopt the story of Scripture as their own story and configure their personal experiences within the larger communal story of Scripture.³ Thus, even once we have clarified the terminology, it will still remain to clarify what use we make of that terminology. What do we mean when we claim that we must use narrative approaches in properly forming our desire and Christian imagination? More to the particular argument of this thesis, what does it mean to claim that the primary pastoral task of narrative repentance is to guide the faithful in learning to tell true stories of our self, God, the Church, and the world?

1.2.1 Telling a Story, Narrative, and Storytelling — A Note on Terminology

The first task in answering the question of why repentance is ‘narrative’ is to clarify what exactly is meant in using the terms ‘telling a story,’ ‘narrative,’ and ‘storytelling.’ Once we have the use of these terms firmly in mind it will be much easier to demonstrate how our identities, desire, and the way we imagine the world are all narratively formed; and knowing *how* all these things are narratively formed will clarify how Christian pastors can lead the faithful in repentance—rejecting the false stories which have distorted our identities, imagination, and desires so that we can be adopted into the true story of God and enter a new way of being in the world.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Interpretation of Scripture: Why Discipleship Is Required*.

We begin with ‘telling a story.’ This term is used to indicate the most familiar sense of ‘story.’ ‘Telling a story’ is the commonplace, everyday activity of giving an account of something. This is the term that is closest to what most people are likely to imagine when we discuss stories and narratives. ‘Telling a story’ can refer to a piece of literature with a beginning, middle, and end, along with the typical elements of characters, plot, conflict, and resolution. Telling a story can be a fictional account or non-fiction. It can be written or oral. Telling a story can be through art or film or music. Telling a story even captures what we do when someone asks us the simple question, “What did you do today?” The primary point that we need to keep in mind is that ‘telling a story’ is a neutral activity, it merely describes an action without making any claims about the value or meaning of that action. Thus, ‘telling a story’ can be something comforting and inspiring; or ‘telling a story’ can be deceptive and even abusive. This is what Stephen Crites calls “mundane stories,” his way of referring to “all stories directly seen or heard.”⁴ Crites takes pains to avoid a misunderstanding of ‘mundane’ as depreciatory, rather he means it to indicate that all stories take place within a ‘*mundus*,’ because “in order to be told, a story must be set within a world.”⁵ These ‘mundane stories’ can be true or false, and teach virtue or vice. H. Richard Niebuhr notes the widespread use of stories in teaching, noting that “interpretation of our meaning with the aid of a story is a well-known pedagogical device,” citing the examples of Lincoln’s

⁴ Stephen Crites, *The Narrative Quality of Experience*, 70. Though Crites is somewhat uncomfortable with the term, it serves in contrast to ‘sacred stories’ which we will explore below.

⁵ *Ibid.*

homely tales, Plato's myths, and even Jesus' parables.⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre goes so far as to insist that "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal...a teller of stories that aspire to truth."⁷ More than simply being tellers of stories though, we ourselves live within a story. MacIntyre also notes that "we enter human society... with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed."⁸ This is why parents and teachers tell children homely tales, myths, and parables; they are teaching the children about the story into which they have been born and which has been underway long before their birth and will continue beyond their death. Our first roles are assigned to us by the circumstances of our birth; we are 'drafted' into a story not of our choosing nor of our making. Whether the story our parents and teachers tell us is true or untrue, whether our roles are rightly assigned or unjustly foisted upon us, the stories we learn become the first stories we take into our hearts. They become something more than mere 'mundane' stories, a point which brings us to the term 'narrative.'

The term 'narrative' is used in a more complex sense than 'telling a story.' I do not mean it as a synonym for 'story' but rather as a description of the *shape* of an experience, the form which makes sense of our deepest identity and desires. We are formed, not by the simple telling of stories, but rather by the deeply narrative character of

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Story of Our Life*, 23.

⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition*, 101.

⁸ *Ibid.*

our human experience. In turn, this ‘narrative’ character is how we make sense of the stories we hear. Think back to the three old men in St. Paisios’ tale. The ‘story’ which each of them ‘read’ was the same—a young man running by in haste. But the meaning they each gave to that story was different. This is because they each made sense of the story by incorporating it into a different larger story. Think of the Russian matryoshka dolls (those wooden nesting dolls so popular with tourists)—each doll fits within a slightly larger doll which in turn fits within a still slightly larger doll. To make sense of what we see, hear, and read we must incorporate what we see, hear, and read into a larger story which itself is part of an even larger story. If we were to place the smallest doll into a different set of matryoshka dolls, though it might seem to ‘fit’ into the set, it would distort the harmony of the set; it would not quite make proper sense. It would, to one degree or another, distort the meaning of the story. As we noted earlier, none of the three men knew the actual context of the young man’s haste, so each made sense of it by placing it into a larger story built from his own imaginings. Hence, St. Paisios declared that their suppositions revealed far more about their own hearts (their inner narratives) than about the true reason for the young man’s haste.

Alasdair MacIntyre describes this process of ‘making sense’ using the term ‘intelligibility.’ For an experience to be intelligible, he argues, it must be located within a narrative history. Giving the example of a man working in his garden, MacIntyre explains that it is surprisingly complex to make intelligible the answer to the seemingly simple question, “What is he doing?”:

“To the question ‘What is he doing?’ the answers may with equal truth and appropriateness be ‘Digging;’ ‘Gardening;’ ‘Taking exercise;’ ‘Preparing for winter;’ or ‘Pleasing his wife.’ Some of these answers will characterize the

agent's intentions, others unintended consequences of his actions, and of these unintended consequences some may be such that the agent is aware of them and others not. What is important to notice immediately is that any answer to the questions of how we are to understand or to explain a given segment of behavior will presuppose some prior answer to the question of how these different correct answers to the question 'What is he doing?' are related to each other. For if someone's primary intention is to put the garden in order before the winter and it is only incidentally the case that in so doing he is taking exercise and pleasing his wife, we have one type of behavior to be explained; but if the agent's primary intention is to please his wife by taking exercise, we have quite another type of behavior to be explained and we will have to look in a different direction for understanding and explanation."⁹

To make sense of the man's actions, we must first properly locate this gardening vignette within the larger narrative context of his life—is it a story primarily about his marriage or about his outdoor pastime? In making intelligible any story, we are involved in writing a narrative history because, to make sense of that story, we must locate the story's setting and the characters' intentions within a larger context that is itself narrative. All this is to say that "narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions."¹⁰ We humans make sense of the world by thinking in stories.

A second example from MacIntyre serves to illustrate how this task of making actions intelligible by incorporating them into a narrative history applies not just to the stories that we hear (or read) but also to our human experience in the world. MacIntyre tells an entertaining fiction about standing at a bus stop when a young man exclaims, "The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*."

⁹ MacIntyre, *The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition*, 91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

MacIntyre points out that there is no difficulty in ascertaining the meaning of the utterance. There is, however, a problem in answering “what is he doing uttering it?” The young man would be considered mad (i.e. unintelligible) if he simply went around randomly uttering such sentences. His action, MacIntyre claims, would be intelligible only if some broader scenario proved true. He suggests that the young man could have mistaken him for someone who had earlier asked for the Latin name of the wild duck, or that the young man had been advised to strike up a conversation, any conversation, with a stranger to overcome his shyness, or even that the phrase was a code sentence for a rendezvous with a Soviet spy. Though the utterance itself is understandable on its own, it only becomes intelligible if it finds its place in a narrative.¹¹

This second example highlights two important insights. First, it further illustrates that our human experience is narratively formed. As MacIntyre points out, we have no problem understanding the facts of the story (i.e. what the words of the utterance meant); but making sense of the utterance requires a larger narrative context. It only becomes intelligible within a larger story, the story that we tell about the story that we hear. Second, it points toward a deep danger in how we make sense of the world, a danger brought upon us precisely because of this narrative form of our human experience. What if we assumed the truth of the third narrative context (a Soviet spy) and reacted accordingly, perhaps calling the police or attempting to detain the man? And what if, in actuality, it was the second narrative context (a man overcoming shyness) that was true?

¹¹ Ibid, 95.

We would be acting out in the world in a distorted way, unintentionally being destructive of another's life. It would be like putting a mismatched matryoshka doll in the wrong set of dolls and refusing to recognize that, even though it seems to fit, it distorts the set. In making the story intelligible, we have made it a false story.

This danger of distorting our experience of the world and living within a false story offers a critical insight into the importance of narrative repentance. If the deepest narrative of our life is distorted, then we risk misunderstanding every story we encounter. If the lens through which we see the world is distorted, then we cannot hope to see truly. In truth, we do this all the time. Indeed, if the core matryoshka doll is damaged and twisted, none of the other dolls will quite fit together properly. This 'deep narrative' is the narrative context within which we make intelligible all other stories. When it is distorted, we are no longer able to make proper sense of the world and what we experience within the world. This distortion is the damage to our 'deep narrative' that narrative repentance seeks to heal.

Stephen Crites calls this deep narrative our 'sacred story' in contrast to mundane stories. A 'sacred story,' as Crites carefully defines it, is not necessarily a religious story, but rather it is the story within which all other stories we experience are made intelligible.

¹² We have seen that, to make a story (or experience) intelligible, we tell ourselves a story about that story. We locate every story we hear within the context of the narrative history of our lives and experiences. This is not necessarily a conscious or purposeful

¹² Crites, *The Narrative Quality of Experience*, 70.

process. In fact, it usually occurs without our awareness, an almost automatic processing of an experience or story. Yet, whether we are aware of this task of making intelligible the stories we encounter or not, the task itself is narrative in form and definitive of how we function within the world. If the deepest narrative of our self is ‘misformed,’ then the story we use to make sense of every other story risks distorting every other story. If our sacred story—the story of our heart—is not true, then our experience of life risks being distorted as well. Indeed, this recovering of the true story of our heart is the ultimate aim of narrative repentance. If we want to adopt a new way of being in the world by learning to tell true stories of our self, God, the Church, and the world, how do we learn to tell such true stories? This question leads us to the final term we need to clarify, ‘storytelling.’

‘Storytelling’ is the intentional telling of stories to form a true narrative of our lives and therefore to purify and illumine our hearts so that we embrace a true story of our heart. It is the adopting of narrative histories that do not distort our understanding and that lead us into our proper roles in the larger story of Creation. Storytelling obviously involves the telling of stories, but not as an end to itself. In fact, by ‘storytelling’ I mean the pastoral activity that acts as a bridge between the telling of stories and the narrative form of our lives. Storytelling uses the careful telling of stories to challenge the delusion of false narratives and to reveal the trustworthiness of true narratives. Storytelling can be accomplished through fictional stories of men on park benches, metaphors of nesting dolls, or recounted events of monks and their visitors. It can draw from literature, current events, or personal experiences. It can be public (through preaching and lecturing), or it can be more private (through counseling and

comforting). Storytelling is less the task itself of telling a story as it is the intent behind the telling of a story. Storytelling is how we get from the ‘here’ of the countless competing narratives of what is true about our self, God, the Church, and the world to the ‘there’ of adopting a new way of being in the world—God’s way of being in the world. But to get ‘there,’ we must first know the ‘here’ from where we are starting.

1.3 The Story of our Heart and our Social Imaginary

In a later chapter we will explore in depth how the pastoral task of narrative repentance employs careful storytelling (‘the intentional telling of stories to form a true narrative of our lives’) to lead the faithful toward repentance (‘to adopt a new way of being in the world’). For now, though, the task remains to show exactly how storytelling works in shaping and reshaping our way of being in the world. As a starting point, we need to recognize that the terms we have been using for the deepest sense of our personal identity—sacred story, story of our heart, and ‘deep narrative’—are themselves insufficient descriptors for what we are trying to describe. It is this core sense of self that most shapes our way of being in the world. What, then, is this core sense, how does it function in forming our self-conception, and how does it shape our actions in the world?

In his book contemplating an effective pedagogy for Christian higher education, *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith argues that education is less about the transfer of knowledge as it is about the formation of desire. Rightly done, he suggests, this formation of desire cultivates a way of encountering and experiencing the world that

shapes a Christian conscience in the students.¹³ Before we discuss the process of this formation of desire, however, we need to clarify the faculty of self in which this desire is being formed. Smith insists that the contemporary term for the target of this formation, ‘worldview,’ is inadequate to effectively capture the dynamics of what in us is actually being formed. Smith convincingly demonstrates that the term ‘worldview’ inadvertently places our perception and experience of the world as a cognitive exercise, how we *think* about the world, thus ignoring the role of desire in our actions. How we think about the world, though, is not always definitive of our desires or our actions. In fact, as Smith observes, we often act out of desire and only later assign a cognitive rationale justifying that action.¹⁴ Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell lend further credence to this observation when, arguing against the standard account of ethics as existential (‘we are but the sum total of our cognitive choices’), they note that “most of the convictions that charge us morally are like the air we breathe—we never notice them.”¹⁵ Desire, and often action, is precognitive. Thus, an account of how we encounter and experience the world must include more than how we *think* about the world. The term Smith suggests as a better descriptor of how we encounter and experience the world is our ‘social imaginary.’¹⁶ In our terms, our social imaginary is our core self, our ‘deep narrative’, the story of our hearts.

¹³ James Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 17-18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41-43.

¹⁵ Hauerwas and Burrell, *From System to Story*, 166.

¹⁶ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 65.

A social imaginary is not just how we *think* about the world, it also encompasses how we feel about the world and imagine the world to be. Smith describes this as an ‘understanding’ rather than a ‘knowing.’¹⁷ Our social imaginary often operates as a subconscious, non-cognitive perception.¹⁸ As before, though, we need to be careful with the term ‘imagine.’ Smith does not intend that our social imaginary is simply a flight of fancy, filled with fables and fairy tales, a sense of how we wish the world to be. Rather, our social imaginary holds within it our conception of what is heroic and noble, worthy of sacrifice and emulation. It includes the imagining of what sort of person we aspire to be and what sort of legacy we want our lives to leave behind. It certainly encompasses how we rationally assess the world but also includes our experiences that do not always seem so rational—how we choose friendship and love, what we value and the sort of world we dream for our children. Our social imaginary, in the broadest sense, is how we imagine the world works and how we imagine we find meaning in that world. We are drafted into a story of the world at our birth, as MacIntyre suggests, and stories of “wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, [and] wolves that suckle twin boys” teach us, rightly and wrongly, how to imagine this world into which we have been born.¹⁹ Our social imaginary encompasses how we understand the ways of the world and our place therein.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 57.

¹⁹ MacIntyre, *The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition*, 101.

Yet our social imaginary is even more than just a static idea of how the world works. There is an additional characteristic of our social imaginary that makes it critical to a proper understanding of the pastoral task of narrative repentance. As Smith develops his claim that humans are defined by our desire rather than our cognition (he is refuting a Cartesian understanding of human identity), he shows that our social imaginary has intentionality and a telos.²⁰ Our social imaginary has ‘intentionality’ inasmuch as our lives are aimed at *something*; we imagine our lives to have a purpose, we want our legacy to have meaning within the world we imagine. This *something* is our telos, the end toward which our lives move. It is not an ‘end’ in the sense that nothing comes after, rather an ‘end’ in the sense that achieving our telos makes our lives complete and fulfills our ultimate purpose. This telos does not have to be articulated or even recognized, and yet every person has some conception, some imagined idea, of their ‘good’ life; and this telos, this imagined ‘good life,’ is the target of the desire of their hearts. What is critical for our purposes is that this telos is narratively formed, it is the internalizing of all the stories and events of our lives. The story of our lives is an arc toward a meaningful telos; and that telos is formed by the stories which shape our social imaginary, especially those that form our notion of what is noble and good and filled with meaning.²¹

This is the ‘imaginary’ aspect of our social imaginary. But what about it makes it a ‘social’ imaginary? Smith rightfully recognizes that none of us live in utter isolation.

²⁰ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 47-52.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

We do not, and cannot, form a social imaginary by ourselves. Stories, in fact, are never told in isolation. We have already seen that there is the ‘factual’ story itself and then there is the story we tell ourselves about that story. The story we tell (about the story), however, is not itself even self-formed. We are taught how to tell these stories that we tell about the stories we see, hear, and read. Our social imaginary is formed in community; it is communal and traditioned.²²

Our social imaginary is communal in two ways. First, it is communal in that it is formed within community. Though not using the term ‘social imaginary,’ MacIntyre discusses this same notion as the ‘narrative concept of selfhood.’ Our concept of selfhood is narrative on two counts. First, in conceiving of our ‘self’ we become the subject of a history that is our own with its own peculiar meaning (our telos) and we are “accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life.”²³ Second, we ourselves are not alone accountable for our actions and experiences; our personal narrative is part of an interlocking set of narratives such that we are accountable to others for the narrative of our history just as they are accountable to us for the narratives of their history. In our terms, our social imaginary is interwoven with the social imaginaries of those around us. The social imaginaries of others push and pull, expand and contract, and inform and reform our own social imaginary. Thus, the formation of our social imaginary is a shared experience in community. For MacIntyre, the foundational

²² Ibid, 66.

²³ MacIntyre, *The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition*, 103.

formation of our social imaginary in childhood is like an inheritance. He notes that each of us “inherit[s] from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations, and obligations.”²⁴ These stories and experiences of childhood, encountered in community, constitute our initial social imaginary; the givenness of our lives, our moral starting point. That initial social imaginary, however, does not remain unchallenged and unaffected for long. Formed in community, the ongoing experience of living in community further refines and informs our particular social imaginary. As MacIntyre concludes, “it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, for the universal, consists.”²⁵ More pointedly for our purposes, noting the ongoing narrative formation of our social imaginary in community opens up to us the possibility of narrative repentance. If our social imaginary is subject to ongoing communal formation, then a mis-formed social imaginary can be reformed and reimagined by intentional storytelling.

Thinking further on the givenness of our lives, we encounter the second characteristic of the ‘social’ part of our social imaginary. Our social imaginary is traditioned, it is handed down to us by our forebears. On the simplest level this is the inherited starting point that MacIntyre describes. We did not choose the language we would first learn nor the culture within which we would be raised. This reality affects us in more complex ways as well. We are living out philosophies and ideologies of which

²⁴ Ibid, 105.

²⁵ Ibid, 106.

we are not always aware. We did not choose to be born into a culture formed by liberal democratic ideals, nor the progressive humanism of contemporary North American culture. All these frameworks of thought were passed down to us, they are the traditional elements of our social imaginary.

In a remarkable essay, “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology,” Michael Root demonstrates how the soteriological task (how a Christian is saved) is accomplished by the redescription of the narratives of salvation in the Scriptures. The fact of salvation, Root argues, is easily (and noncontroversially) found in the narratives of Scripture. But the mechanism of salvation, the *how*, is not explicitly declared. This ambiguity opens up the narratives of salvation to interpretation. It is by this act of interpretation, Root claims, that we graft ourselves into the salvation promised by the narratives of Scripture.²⁶ Such interpretation is accomplished through what Root calls the ‘augmented narrative.’²⁷ Augmented narrative is a more concise way of describing what we have been calling the ‘story we tell about the stories we see, hear, and read.’ It is the master narrative that we use to interpret the stories that we encounter. With respect to our social imaginary, an augmented narrative is *our* way of interpreting the stories we encounter; a way of interpretation that is traditioned to us by our community. Root illustrates this very clearly as he compares two ‘competing’ augmented narratives of salvation. He demonstrates how Anselm of Canterbury and St. Gregory of Nyssa present different accounts of the

²⁶ Michael Root, *The Narrative Structure of Soteriology*, 263.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 267.

redemptive meaning of Christ's death even while using the same narratives from Scripture. Reading the same Scriptural accounts (the 'facts') of the death of Christ, Anselm redescribes it as "the voluntary payment of a debt owed to the honor of God," while St. Gregory redescribes it as "the deceptive surrender to the Devil in exchange for the souls of humanity."²⁸ Though reading the same story, the augmented narrative of our tradition forms us to interpret its meaning differently. This is not just an observation of Biblical hermeneutics, this same dynamic holds for all the stories we encounter. For Root, the narrative accounts of Scripture are not merely illustrative, describing a redemptive truth about self, God, or the world. The narrative accounts of Scripture are 'storied,' inviting and including us in the Christian story.²⁹ Because augmented narrative is needed to make sense of the story, to make it intelligible, we become active in the story. Through augmented narrative, the story comes to have meaning for us personally; and because that augmented narrative is passed down to us in community, this personal meaning (just as our social imaginary) is communal and traditioned.

This personal encounter with a story occurs through the narrative phenomenon of embedding. Though using a different term ('configurational understanding'), Root describes the phenomenon of embedding by noting that "narratives help us to understand events by locating them within larger meaningful patterns."³⁰ In other words, we understand the world by placing our experiences in the context of the stories we have

²⁸ Ibid, 276.

²⁹ Ibid, 266.

³⁰ Ibid, 270.

internalized (i.e. our social imaginary). Embedding works through three characteristics of the stories we encounter. First, they are recognizable; they “derive from...patterns of everyday life.”³¹ Second, they are relatable yet unique; we are “able to relate patterns from daily experience to patterns within narratives because of similarities between them.”³² And third, they exhibit contingency; something else *could* have happened in the story.³³ These characteristics allow us to embed ourselves in the story and ask, “What would I have done?” This is how stories come to have personal meaning.

This phenomenon of embedding, however, is not simply a one-way dynamic. Just as we can embed ourselves in the stories we hear and ask, “What would I have done?”, we can also embed the stories we hear into our lives and ask, “What *should* I have done?” In their book, *Reading in Communion*, Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones explore the necessity of reading Scripture as part of a faithful community. One of their central claims illustrates this reversal of the narrative phenomenon of embedding. Discussing the place of historical criticism in reading Scripture, Fowl and Jones point out that, just as we interrogate Scripture, we must allow Scripture to interrogate our lives.³⁴ If we do not learn to read Scripture ‘over against ourselves,’ Fowl and Jones warn, we risk becoming banal ‘lifestyle enclaves’ lacking “the virtues of authentic Christian community.”³⁵

Hauerwas and Burrell are even more insistent, quoting St. Augustine that, in order to set

³¹ Ibid, 271.

³² Ibid, 271.

³³ Ibid, 272.

³⁴ Stephen E. Fowl & L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life*, 42.

³⁵ Ibid, 67.

our hearts aright the believer must allow “the stories of the gospels to shape his story.”³⁶ Indeed, being formed as a Christian consists of “accepting a story as normative by allowing it to shape one’s own story.”³⁷ This sort of ‘reverse’ embedding is the dynamic which makes the pastoral task of narrative repentance possible. Though Root writes with respect to soteriology, I would extend his observation to narrative repentance as well: “Soteriology carries out its task by an interpretation of the story of Jesus that highlights those patterns which bring together Jesus and the Christian in a single story within which is realized the redemption of the Christian.”³⁸ The pastoral task of narrative repentance is accomplished by leading the faithful to adopt a Christian social imaginary that embraces the gospel as an augmented narrative by which we interpret and transform our own lives in harmony with Christ Jesus.

Our social imaginary, then, is a communal, traditioned way of understanding the world and how we find meaning in that world. But perhaps the most crucial point to make about our social imaginary is that it is subject to competing narratives. This is obvious when we think of our initial social imaginary. Certainly, a child born in Mongolia forms a different social imaginary than one born in Scotland, and those social imaginaries lead them to experience the world in quite different ways. As we grow, however, our ‘personal’ social imaginary, even within our own particular culture, continues to be subject to competing narratives. This is as apparent as our changing

³⁶ Hauerwas and Burrell, *From System to Story*, 183.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 184.

³⁸ Root, *The Narrative Structure of Soteriology*, 275.

political ideologies, and as definitive as our maturing notions of a life well lived.

Because our social imaginary is interwoven with the social imaginaries of those we live with and among, there is a tugging at our social imaginary to conform to those around us. As MacIntyre puts it, “we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives.”³⁹ This means that, consciously and unconsciously, we are constantly editing our social imaginary in response to external pressures, including our shifting desires. Fowl and Jones note that learning to live in the ‘new world’ created by fidelity to the Christian story often also requires the unlearning of the ‘old world.’⁴⁰

As a concrete example of the hold the ‘old world’ has on our social imaginary, Smith devotes an entire chapter of his book to exeging the secular social imaginaries bound up in malls and marketing. Absent a conscious awareness of what a Christian social imaginary should be, we are adrift to the whims of these competing social imaginaries. Smith warns that Christians have largely lost sight of, or misunderstood, this competition over our social imaginary, while secular marketing professionals seem instinctively to target our social imaginary through our desires. He issues a resounding critique of contemporary Christianity’s response to such competing narratives, “While secular liturgies are after our hearts through our bodies, the church thinks it only has to get into our heads. While Victoria’s Secret is fanning the flame in our *kardia*, the church is trucking water to our minds.”⁴¹ Smith rightly notes the myriad idolatries bound up in

³⁹ MacIntyre, *The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition*, pg. 99.

⁴⁰ Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 31.

⁴¹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 127.

the secular social imaginaries that place wealth, or power, or prestige as the telos of our human existence. Such idols seize our hearts rather than our minds, as Emily Dickinson wrote, “The heart wants what it wants, or else it does not care.” We must labor then, not to pass on a syllabus of cognitive knowledge, but rather to reach the hearts of the faithful so that they may adopt and retain an authentic Christian social imaginary. If we imagine the world rightly, then we will desire rightly.

1.4 Desire and Striving Toward our Story-Formed Telos

What do these ideas about narrative and social imaginary have to do with how we actually live out our lives in practice? Such a question grounds us in the practice of our lives. Recall the danger that Smith warns against in his critique of secular liturgies, we cannot simply appeal to the mind (what we *think* about things) when the problem is how we go about living our lives. Indeed, it could be argued that the whole purpose of repentance is to change the way we practice our lives rather than change only how we think about our lives. What does our social imaginary have to do with our practice of life?

We have already briefly noted how desire is related to our social imaginary. Our social imaginary governs how we assess and process the world but also defines the imagined purpose of our lives, our telos. This telos, we have demonstrated, is story-formed and embodies the ideals we have internalize about what is good, noble, and meaningful. We have also seen that our lives have intentionality and thus are aimed at

our story-formed telos. Desire, in this paradigm, is this intentionality—this longing for and striving toward our telos. In Smith’s language, our telos is what we love, and our desire is what moves us toward our ultimate love; and this movement toward our telos, our ultimate love, occurs through our practices and habits.

Smith defines ‘habits’ as dispositions which have become precognitive—those things we do without thinking about them. These habits, Smith says, are formed by practices—rituals and routines that become second nature.⁴² Practices, in turn, can be either ‘thick’ or ‘thin’ practices. We need to take a moment to walk through this, as it is critical to our understanding of why narrative repentance is less concerned with our external actions and most interested in our internal desire. According to Smith’s argument, most of our behavior and actions on any given day are not cognitively chosen.⁴³ They are the working out of our habits and practices. By the frequent pairing of an internal response to an external event we create default tendencies and inclinations that we follow without thinking. Smith calls this ‘automaticity.’⁴⁴ Such formation of automatic responses can be quite intentional (think of learning scales on a piano, or typing, or driving) or unintentional (think of stereotyping, or behavioral ticks). Whichever the case, the ‘frequent pairing’ is accomplished through daily rituals and routines, which become practices. Such practices can be ‘thick’ (meaning that they signal and shape our core values, or in our terms, our social imaginary) like the religious

⁴² Ibid, 80.

⁴³ Ibid, 81. In fact, the research Smith presents claims that only 5% of our daily actions involve cognitive choice.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 80.

routines which are meaningful and significant to identity, or such practices can be ‘thin’ like the simple act of brushing our teeth.⁴⁵ The critical piece of Smith’s argument is that thick practices both embody and form our desire. Practice and desire are interwoven in a mutual spiral. No habit or practice is neutral, they are all entangled in some end, whether articulated or unarticulated. Thus, our habits and practices both reveal the truth of our desire (whether we want to acknowledge such desire or not) *and* serve as the gateway into forming and reforming our desire.

All this talk of practices and desire matters because, as we have seen, our social imaginary is largely precognitive and unarticulated. It is narratively formed but such formation occurs mostly without critical assessment or consideration. This almost subliminal internalizing of stories simply becomes the air we breathe and the lens through which we see the world, and we remain unaware of any of these internal dynamics. If narrative repentance intends to use intentional storytelling to reform and transform our social imaginary, how do we transform something that we are not even aware exists? We reverse the schema. Smith’s work shows us that our habits and practices embody our desire, they make our desire incarnate in the world in an observable way. So we have to be attentive to our habits and practices, especially to our ‘thick’ practices. These practices reveal our desire, which in turn exposes the telos of our hearts (which does not always coincide with the telos our mind professes). The telos of our heart is the hearthstone of our social imaginary since it encapsulates all that we deem noble, good,

⁴⁵ Ibid, 82-83.

and worthy of sacrifice. In other words, if we get our telos right, eventually our practices and actions will follow.

We fall down and we get back up. The Christian life is about turning from the false narratives of who we are and what we should desire. Yet it is also about more than just getting back up and trying again. The Christian life is ultimately about adopting a new way of being in the world, adopting a new story as the telos of our life. This story is not a story of our making, though, it is God's story revealed to us through Christ Jesus. For Fowl and Jones an authentic Christian life is performative of Scripture,⁴⁶ we are ensouled Bibles performing Scripture in the world through our practices and lives. What, then, does all this have to do with repentance? If repentance is about adopting a new way of being in the world by learning to tell true stories about God, self, Church, and Creation; and if learning to tell such true stories is an intentional effort to reorient our social imaginary; then repentance is less about modifying our behavior by making better moral choices and more about the proper formation of our desire so that we pursue what God deems virtuous. We noted before that if we imagine rightly then we will desire rightly. Now we can go on to say, if we desire rightly then we will live rightly. So repentance must be aimed at our social imaginary through our desire rather than at the

⁴⁶ Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 136.

morality of our actions within the world. This is our map. The ‘here’ is a social imaginary distorted by false narratives and stories, by broken desire. As Fr. Stephen Freeman observes on his blog *Glory to God for All Things*, “we have internalized a cultural narrative and made it the story of our souls.”⁴⁷ The ‘there’ is a sanctified social imaginary that aligns our hearts and desires with God’s divine social imaginary, with His Kingdom as our telos. The path from ‘here’ to ‘there’ is the telling of true stories to reform our desire and reorient our social imaginary. This is why a pastor’s day-to-day pastoral task of narrative repentance is ‘narrative.’ With this firm understanding of ‘narrative’ now in place, it is time to turn to the second term of our pastoral task. It is time for a careful exploration of ‘repentance.’

⁴⁷ Stephen Freeman, *You’re Not Doing Better*.

Chapter 2

2. Repentance and the Healing of the Soul

Another age-worn tale tells of two monks traveling back to their monastery after an errand to the city. Traversing the countryside, they come to a small river with a challenging crossing. A woman stands uncertain by the side of the river, wondering how she will cross. Sensing her distress, the older monk asks if she would like help crossing the river. She gratefully accepts his assistance, and the monk carries her across the river, gently placing her on the far shore. The two monks continue their journey toward the monastery in silence. After two hours, the older monk speaks quietly to the other, “You seem agitated. What is it that is distressing you?” “Forgive me, Father,” the young monk replies, “I was taught that it is not permitted for a monk to touch a woman.” The older monk smiles patiently, “Ah, the river crossing. But my dear Father, I put the woman down two hours ago and you carry her still.”

It is, again, a story charming in its simplicity but profound in its meaning. It is also, notably, a story that hardly seems to be about repentance, at least as ‘repentance’ is understood in the popular imagination. If anything, it seems to be about failed repentance. The older monk, having broken a moral rule (“do not touch a woman”) shows no remorse or any intention to try harder next time. In fact, the intent of the story seems to be that the older monk is the bearer of wisdom, and the young monk is somehow at fault for his moral qualms. The story, however, actually profoundly illustrates repentance, at least repentance rightly understood. Further the story illustrates a number of critical aspects of repentance we briefly encountered in the first chapter: 1)

repentance is not primarily about our external moral actions but rather is primarily about our internal disposition and how we imagine the world (our social imaginary), 2) repentance is a continual spiritual effort that most often occurs before a moral choice is made, rather than as a response to an immoral action (formation of desire), 3) repentance is the story of how we encounter the world, rather than a means to judge the morality of our lives (our augmented narrative), and 4) the primary arena of repentance is within our hearts and our thoughts rather than our actions. Lurking behind these ideas, though, is a fundamental question which is not obvious yet at the same time foundational to a proper understanding of repentance. Why is repentance even necessary?

Under the contemporary popular account of ‘repentance,’ the need is obvious. If you break a rule and do something morally wrong, you should feel remorse and endeavor to correct your behavior going forward. But what about the Biblical account of repentance we briefly explored in the first chapter—‘changing our way of being in the world?’ Why do we have to change our way of being in the world? What is so wrong with our current way of being in the world? Shouldn’t we be allowed to live our lives and follow our conscience without interference? Who is to say what is the ‘right’ way to be in the world? To a modern mind these questions are urgent and challenging, but for early Church writers these questions would seem odd, even nonsensical, because these writers’ social imaginary was quite distinct from our contemporary American social imaginary. To understand this fully, the last step in changing a distorted contemporary understanding of ‘repentance’ is to allow one final image to revise our augmented narrative of repentance—the ‘healing of the soul.’

Thus far, we have used two primary images to explore the notion of narrative repentance. We began with the notion of the priest inviting the faithful to ‘adopt a new way of being in the world’ as illustrated by the story of the monk and his visitor. Then, using the language of narrative, we expanded that notion and centered on the priest’s need to guide the faithful in ‘learning to tell true stories of our self, God, Church, and Creation.’ A critical reader, however, could rightly observe that (other than the mention of God and Church) there is nothing intrinsically Christian in these images. Indeed, popular motivational literature is filled with admonitions to change our perspective and adopt a new attitude in life. What makes narrative repentance a decidedly Christian activity dependent on the Holy Trinity will become apparent as we explore this final image of repentance as the ‘healing of the soul.’

2.1 The Neptic Fathers and the Soul

The renowned Orthodox scholar and bishop Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos has written an extensive survey of the teachings of a group of Church writers often referred to as the Neptic Fathers.¹ This line of writers, primarily monastics practicing a deeply ascetic life, begins with the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century—St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. Gregory of Nyssa. The

¹ ‘Neptic’ comes from the Greek word νήπις, meaning ‘sobriety’ or ‘watchfulness.’ The Neptic Fathers are those patristic writers who recorded their (or their teachers’) experiences of keeping watch over their souls as they pursued the healing of their nous.

Cappadocian Fathers' exploration of the Christian life is continued in a group of writings from the 4th through the 15th centuries collected in 1782 by St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite into the volumes of the *Philokalia* (literally "Love of the Good"); as well as a treasured spiritual work, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* written by St. John Climacus in the seventh century. St. Maximos the Confessor continues this tradition in his writings and, finally, St. Gregory Palamas' writings in the 14th century are often seen as the culmination of this Neptic tradition. Metropolitan Hierotheos admirably synthesizes the thought of these Neptic Fathers in his exhaustive text, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*.² The title itself is somewhat a play on words since Metropolitan Hierotheos quickly distinguishes the theme of his work from the sort of counseling that often comes to mind with the word psychotherapy. Instead, he is using the word in its etymological sense, the healing (θεραπεία) of the soul (ψυχή). According to Metropolitan Hierotheos, even though there are differences in approach and vocabulary among these Neptic Fathers, his overarching study identifies a consensus about many matters of the spiritual life.³ It is his presentation of this consensus that clarifies why repentance is necessary and, indeed, how it is narrative.

The healing of the soul, according to the consensus of the Neptic Fathers, is the primary effort of our Christian spiritual life.⁴ This may at first sound surprising to those

² Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy (The science of the Fathers)*.

³ This 'patristic consensus' is termed the 'Neo-Patristic Synthesis.' For a cogent criticism of the limitations of this approach, see Jon Behr, *Passing Beyond the Neo-Patristic Synthesis*.

⁴ Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 26-27.

familiar with Orthodox theology, who rightly point to the importance of theosis, or deification, as the goal of the Orthodox spiritual life. The two claims are not contradictory. Theosis, understood as the fullest sort of communion with God, is indeed the goal of the Orthodox spiritual life; but the *means* to attaining theosis is the healing of the soul. In other words, theosis is the destination while the healing of the soul is the pathway. Mapped onto our language, the healing of the soul is what we are doing in our day-to-day lives (narrative repentance), while theosis is what we hope to eventually attain (our telos). How, then, do we understand this neptic teaching of the ‘healing of the soul’ and how does it enrich an understanding of narrative repentance?

The term ‘soul,’ like repentance, can create some inadvertent misunderstandings. As a non-technical term, it is used in popular discourse to communicate a range of meanings, thus carrying the risk of ambiguity or even of communicating connotations of meaning that are not intended. Complicating matters, the term ‘soul’ is also often used in very particular and precise ways in Orthodox theological writing, especially by monastic writers like the Neptic Fathers. Thus, the term ‘soul’ can be used both in a broad colloquial way and in a precise, technical way. To make matters even more difficult, a single neptic father often uses the term ‘soul’ to mean different things within the same literary work. It becomes necessary, therefore, to carefully define what is meant by the notion of ‘soul’ and how the term is variably used in the Neptic Fathers before we can understand what is meant by the phrase ‘healing of the soul.’

In a detailed discussion of the Hebrew and Greek words that may be rendered “soul,” Metropolitan Hierotheos notes the remark of Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras that “the word ‘soul’ is one of the most difficult words in the Bible and in

Christian literature.”⁵ In the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, the Greek term ψυχή (*psyche*) is used to translate נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*) from the Hebrew, carrying with it a range of associations. In Hebrew Scripture, according to Yannaras, *nephesh* points toward anything that has animal life, particularly toward humankind. Notably, however, Yannaras points out that this Semitic use of *nephesh* does not carry the Platonic overlay that is common in later patristic literature (an overlay which is explored below). Instead, *nephesh* “signifies the way in which life is manifested in man.”⁶ It is the ‘whole human,’ not simply an immaterial ‘essence’ but the life of a person as expressed and realized through the body. In this way, the “soul is not the cause of life. It is, rather, the bearer of life.”⁷ It is this Semitic sense of ‘soul’ that can be seen in passages like “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s *psyche* are dead.”⁸

A more technical and precise meaning for ‘soul’ is used in Scripture as well, sometimes for profound effect. Metropolitan Hierotheos notes that the same Gospel author quoted above, St. Matthew, does this in a well-known but difficult passage, “For those who want to save their *psyche* will lose it, and those who lose their *psyche* for my sake will find it.”⁹ According to Metropolitan Hierotheos, the first instance of *psyche* is meant to communicate the more widespread understanding of ‘soul’ as the animating life

⁵ Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith, An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, 55.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Matt 2:20 as quoted in Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 98.

⁹ Matt 6:25.

of a person, while the second is being used as a play on a more technical understanding of *psyche* as the “spiritual element of our existence.”¹⁰ Thus, the passage teaches that those who focus on their animate life, what we might call our biological life, will ultimately lose it since, after all, everyone within history dies. If, however, we lose the ‘spiritual element of our existence’ (importantly qualified by “for [Christ’s] sake”) then we will find that the true spiritual element of our existence has always been communion with Christ Himself. It is this second meaning of *psyche*—the spiritual element of our existence—that is most often emphasized by the Neptic Fathers, often borrowing from the Platonic idea of an immortal soul.

Being educated in Platonism and broader Hellenic philosophy, many of the Neptic Fathers—particularly St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. John of Damascus, and St. Gregory Palamas—have this Hellenic understanding of *psyche* in mind as they discuss the healing of the soul. Yet there are three critical distinctions in this Hellenic understanding of *psyche* as the “spiritual element of our existence” that must be distinguished from Platonic ideas of the soul. For the Neptic Fathers, the *psyche* is eternal but created, not immortal and uncreated as in later Platonism. This implies that we have no existence apart from our creator and thus situates the healing of our soul as a theocentric act of coming into harmony with the divine life rather than an anthropocentric act of conforming to moral and ethical norms. Second, the *psyche* (as the immaterial spiritual element of our existence) is seen as a part of a human being, but not the entirety of a

¹⁰ Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 98.

human being. This is in contrast to the Platonic view of the soul as the only truly human element of our existence which is temporarily trapped in a material shell awaiting release. Somewhat surprisingly, this emphasis on the *psyche* as only part of the human being appears to be in contradiction to the Semitic understanding of *nephesh* as the bearer of life for the ‘whole man.’ The Neptic Fathers, however, clarify this by noting that the *psyche* (in its definition as the ‘immaterial element of our existence’) is present throughout the body, giving it life and animation. Thus, the *psyche* is present in the ‘whole human’ as the bearer of life while also remaining distinct from the body. The *psyche* is necessarily distinct from the body, according to the Neptic Fathers, because our full humanity is a psychosomatic union. Both body and soul are equally necessary for a human being to be a human being.¹¹ Thus, our *psyche* are not awaiting release from our bodies in order to be fully human (as can be construed from the Platonists), but rather our *psyche* are waiting to ultimately be healed along with our bodies. Repentance as the ‘healing of the soul,’ thus involves the physical practice of our lives as well.

Finally, the Neptic Fathers insist that our *psyche* is only immortal because of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Humans are not immortal by nature but rather hope for eternal life through Christ Jesus’ life-giving death.¹² This insight is critical for situating the healing of the soul as not only a human striving toward God, but a divine condescension toward humanity as well. Narrative repentance is not just another self-

¹¹ Ibid, 108.

¹² Ibid, 100-104.

help movement with which we can engage on our own human terms. Narrative repentance is striving toward living in harmony with the Holy Trinity's eternal, pre-existing divine dance of love. A dance into which we have been invited to participate by God's love for us. We can only tell true stories of God, self, Church, and Creation because God has first authored those true stories. Repentance as the 'healing of the soul,' then, is a human endeavor to receive a divine gift.

2.2 The Anatomy of the Soul

This meaning of the soul as the 'spiritual element of our existence' is explored in depth by the Neptic Fathers and is dominant in their writing, culminating in the teaching of St. Gregory Palamas. For St. Gregory Palamas, and the patristic fathers before him, the soul bears the image of the Trinitarian God. St. Gregory Palamas expands this notion of trinitarian composition to present a sort of anatomy of the soul. Just as our physical bodies are seen as a whole composed of distinguishable parts (organs and limbs), the Neptic Fathers described the soul as a whole composed of distinguishable parts (what they called faculties or powers). Just as we can study the anatomy of the body and how its parts interact to vivify the whole, the Neptic Fathers studied the anatomy of the soul and how its faculties and powers interact in forming our spiritual life. As early as St. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century, the soul was seen as tripartite, being composed of three distinct faculties described with language borrowed

from Platonic thought; the incensive, appetitive, and the intelligent.¹³ By the 14th century and the writings of St. Gregory Palamas, however, the soul is more fully described as not simply tripartite but trinitarian. Since humanity alone is made in the image and likeness of the Triune God, our souls are different from the ‘animating life’ of both animals and angels. Explaining this, St. Gregory Palamas departs from St. Gregory of Nyssa’s description of the tripartite soul and describes the three powers of the soul¹⁴ by likening them to the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Our souls, according to St. Gregory Palamas, are composed of *nous* (Father), *word* (Son), and *spirit* (Holy Spirit). The *nous*, in St. Gregory of Palamas’ schema, is the power of our soul at the center of our being which can perceive and be in communion with God. The highest degree of communion with the divine life is an indescribable mystical perception which can only be experienced by a purified *nous* since the divine life of the Holy Trinity is beyond being captured by any conceptual images or words. The *word*, then, is the power of the soul which struggles to articulate and communicate this life-giving divine encounter of the *nous*. It gives intelligible form, however imperfect, to noetic perception. Finally, *spirit* is the power of the soul which vivifies our material body. It communicates

¹³ Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 247. These Platonic ideas were not received without controversy. Instead, beginning with St. Gregory of Nyssa, they were “baptized” and Christianized by being reimagined in the light of the story of the Gospel.

¹⁴ In Orthodox theological writing ‘powers of the soul’ and ‘faculties of the soul’ are used interchangeably. This can cause some confusion until one understands the differing, though complementary, schemas being presented. To avoid this confusion, in this thesis I will limit ‘powers’ to the trinitarian aspects of the soul (*nous*, *word*, and *spirit*) and ‘faculties’ to the passible/philosophical aspects of the soul (intelligent, incensive, and appetitive).

animate life to our flesh and allows us to embody the spiritual insight of our *nous* and *word* in the world through our actions and lived-out faith.¹⁵

These powers of the soul, though conceived and articulated in a very different context than modern explorations of narrative, nevertheless are closely analogous to the concepts of narrative we explored in the first chapter. In exploring the idea of our social imaginary, we noted that it tended to operate on a precognitive level and provided a telos (our narrative conception of a ‘good life’) toward which our lives are moving. The power of the soul that is loosely analogous to our social imaginary is the *nous*. Our *nous* encounters the divine life of the Holy Trinity in a way that is ‘beyond’ cognition and is thus caught up into the love of God such that communion with the Holy Trinity becomes the proper telos of our existence. Like our social imaginary, then, the *nous* provides a telos to our lives in a way that is difficult to articulate since it operates on a deeper level than our conscious, rational thought. Also, in the first chapter we illustrated how our social imaginary becomes active in the world through our desire, which in turn gives practical form to our striving toward our telos. Similarly, the *word* is that power of the soul which gives intelligible form to our *nous* and allows it to become present in the world. Finally, we saw in the first chapter how our actions embody our desire and make such desire incarnate and active within the world. Likewise, the *spirit* communicates the intelligible insights of the *word*, derived from the divine experience of the *nous*, into the created order through our embodied physical actions. These preliminary connections

¹⁵ Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, pg. 119.

help us to understand that we cannot hope to heal the soul by focusing on only one power of the soul. If the *nous* remains darkened and ill, then it will also distort the *word* and *spirit*. Indeed, following the teaching of St. Gregory of Palamas, since the soul is trinitarian then the soul is one unity expressed in three powers. Healing any one power involves the healing of all three.

Such a trinitarian soul is healthy if each power of the soul functions as it should in its proper order. An unhealthy soul is one whose unity and focus on the divine life is broken apart and whose powers—*nous*, *word*, and *spirit*—are scattered and distracted. An unhealthy *nous* is distracted and no longer perceives the divine life, nor does it live in communion with God but is darkened and dying.¹⁶ The *word*, unmoored from the anchor of the *nous*' communion with God, becomes susceptible to an idle curiosity easily captured by sensual desire and impassioned thoughts. Without the safe harbor of a healthy *nous*, the *word wanders* into idolatry and seeks meaning in the created rather than the Creator. The *spirit* dissipated by this weakening of the *nous* and *word*, can no longer witness to life of the Holy Trinity by making the divine life present within Creation through the embodied practices of the Christian life. Instead, deprived of the incorruptible life of God, an unhealthy *spirit* renders the body subject to death and corruptibility. Such a soul, in the language of the Neptic Fathers, is distorted and darkened, even dead. Such a soul is in desperate need of healing. How such a deadened soul comes to be points us toward the answer to why repentance is necessary.

¹⁶ Ibid, 104, 112-114.

Here we again return to stories. We can best understand how a soul comes to be distorted and deadened by reading closely the story of Creation in the book of Genesis and noting the augmented narratives by which we understand this story. In the first chapter of Genesis we read, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”¹⁷ Later in that same passage the author observes, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.”¹⁸ This climax of the first account of Creation is critical to an Orthodox Christian understanding of Creation in general and humanity in particular. All of Creation is good, even “very good.” The basic goodness of the created order is thus axiomatic in Orthodox Christianity. Every human being, therefore, is understood to be conceived and born as perfect and without any taint, a very good Creation of a perfectly good God. Then, in the third chapter of Genesis, we encounter the problem of disobedience and sin. Sin corrupts the good Creation and opens the way for toil, suffering, and death to enter the world. In Orthodox thought, sin is understood not as a thing which itself exists (like a list of spiritual trespasses) but rather as a spiritual contagion which distorts the intended good of God’s created order—it is a spiritual disease that infects the ‘very good’ of God’s Creation. Thus, the problem of sin is neither inherent nor native to the human condition. Rather we are born into a world poisoned with this spiritual contagion of sin and are quickly and inexorably infected by this corrosive spiritual disease. In his notable though

¹⁷ Gen 1:27

¹⁸ Gen 1:31

controversial work, *Ancestral Sin*, Fr. John Romanides argues for this notion of ‘ancestral sin’ to counter the more familiar doctrine of ‘original sin.’¹⁹ While the practical result is the same—each of us bears sin and is corrupted by its corrosive effects in our lives—these differing etiologies of sin alter the way we respond to sin in our lives.

Understanding ancestral sin as an external contagion which infects our souls sets sin as a disease that needs to be healed so that we may again be whole, restored to the original ‘very good’ intent of our Creator. Of course, a great deal more could be written about this subtle distinction, but for our purposes it is enough to note that repentance is less a response to our (or our ancestors’) misdeeds, as it is a healing from the infection of sin which renders the powers of our souls scattered and distracted.

The ‘problem’ we inherit, then, is a spiritual need for healing from sin. The ‘healing of the soul’ is calling back the distracted powers of the soul to again persist in devotion and communion with our first love, our Creator and God. Calling back the distracted powers of the soul, according to the Neptic Fathers, is accomplished through Christian discipline and spiritual purification. To understand how such spiritual purification is nurtured within the faithful, it is helpful to return to St. Gregory of Nyssa’s description of the three faculties of the soul—the incensive, the appetitive, and the intelligent. St. Gregory of Nyssa borrows this concept of the tripartite soul from Plato’s metaphor of the charioteer in the dialogue, *Phaedrus*. In borrowing this metaphor, however, St. Gregory modifies the image and reimagines it through a Christian social

¹⁹ John Romanides, *Ancestral Sin*.

imaginary. Plato's image is of a charioteer, a metaphor for our rational intellect, struggling to control two horses. One horse, mortal and obstinate, is ignoble and pulls toward the temporal pleasures of earthly life. The other horse, immortal and honorable, is noble and pulls toward the heights of heaven. The charioteer's task is to balance these two steeds in order to approach the heavens and behold Beauty, Goodness, and Truth. The three faculties of the soul that St. Gregory of Nyssa derives from this metaphor are thus defined as; 1) the Intelligent, which as the charioteer is meant to be in control of the soul, 2) the Appetitive, which seeks after food, drink, wealth, and all pleasures, and 3) the Incensive, which seeks after glory and honor. St. Gregory of Nyssa departs from Plato's schema and adopts it to a Christian social imaginary by placing the appetitive and incensive faculties on equal moral footing. Neither is 'bad,' drawing us toward mortality, nor 'good,' drawing us toward contemplation of immortal essences. Rather both are created faculties gifted us by God so that we may seek after communion and participation in the life of the Holy Trinity. The appetitive faculty (επιθυμία) is the seat of our desire while the incensive faculty (θυμός) is the seat of our energy. For St. Gregory of Nyssa these are neutral faculties which can either work in harmony with God's created order and draw us toward the life of the Holy Trinity, or they can be corrupted and distorted and draw us away from God.

Far from being abstract philosophical categories, these faculties of the soul retain a very practical role in our spiritual lives (as they did in Plato's practice of the good life) and explain how the powers of our soul can become scattered. Returning to the story of the two monks, the younger monk was still engaged with learning to tame the appetitive faculty of his soul. He was vulnerable to having his desire captured by things other than

the Holy Trinity—whether that be desire for luxurious foods, strong drink, or physical pleasures. Thus, acknowledging this vulnerability, moral rules were imposed upon him within his monastic brotherhood to protect him from the distortion of his desire. Rules such as ‘a monk does not touch a woman.’ But such a moral rule is relative as far as it is only necessary while the appetitive faculty of the soul is weak and easily captured. There was little danger that the older, more experienced, monk’s appetitive faculty would be captured or distorted, so he was able to ‘break’ the moral rule in order to keep the more definitive command of Christ to love your neighbor. The older monk’s soul, presumably, was more fully healed and secure enough from distortion that he could thus act more freely in the world. This is precisely what is meant by using the image of ‘healing the soul’ to understand repentance.

2.3 The Healing of the Soul

The image of the ‘healing of the soul’ in the Neptic Fathers, then, can be more precisely defined as the healing of the faculties of the soul. It is these three faculties of the soul which become infected by sin. Hence it is the healing of the faculties of the soul that the priest pursues in the lives of the faithful. As we have seen, these faculties of the soul are gifted to us by God and are thus ‘very good’ and holy. As such, we do not so much choose between virtue and vice as we cultivate virtue by pursuing the right working of these faculties and avoid vice by refusing the distortion of these faculties. What, then, is the right working of the faculties of the soul? For the Neptic Fathers, the intelligent

faculty of the soul is gifted to humanity in order to direct a rightly ordered soul into communion with the life of the Holy Trinity. It is the 'executive' function of the soul, guiding the other faculties and forming them in virtue, analogous to the Platonic understanding of the intelligent faculty as Reason. With Reason directing our appetitive and incensive faculties, argued Plato, we could wrestle our twin horses into balance and climb to the ridge of heaven. In adapting the metaphor of the charioteer to embody a Christian conception of the soul, however, St. Gregory of Nyssa reimagined the intelligent faculty of the soul more so than either of the other two faculties. Essentially, he replaced Plato's Reason with the Christian concept of the *nous*. The role of the two horses in Plato's metaphor remain fairly intact for St. Gregory of Nyssa, the only reimagining being to take away any earthward or heavenward inclination from the two horses. For him, the horses are both untamed and in need of direction, otherwise they are inclined to run wild. So, the charioteer's role in St. Gregory of Nyssa's schema becomes far more complex than in Plato's. For Plato, the charioteer must simply use reason to balance out the earthward and heavenward inclinations of the two horses and bring them into balance. For St. Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, the charioteer must not only direct the horses but must also first train and form them. The ideals of nobility and virtue are first communicated to the charioteer (through the communion of the *nous* with the divine life of the Holy Trinity) who then must bring the horses into obedience and harmony. Even though, as we will see, sin most noticeably infects the appetitive and incensive faculties, it is the intelligent faculty which must first be purified in order to direct the other faculties toward healing.

Though the charioteer directs the horses, it is the power and strength of the horses which gives the soul its movement. The appetitive faculty is gifted to humanity so that we might properly desire life in communion with God and pursue “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable.”²⁰ The appetitive faculty itself, however, has no discernment and can become attached to temporal pleasures. A healthy appetitive faculty, attached to a desire to participate in the life of the Holy Trinity, thus produces the nobility of love and self-sacrifice in pursuit of our telos. A distorted appetitive faculty, in contrast, has attached its desire to earthly things and produces the vices of lust, greed, gluttony, envy, and all the pursuits of passing pleasures. It is the intelligent faculty of the soul, the nous, which is intended to provide the critical discernment. The incensive faculty of the soul is given to humanity to energize us in the pursuit of the Holy Trinity, to overcome the challenges and obstacles of life while we persevere and labor toward the Kingdom of God. A healthy incensive faculty thus produces courage, perseverance, determination, and a readiness to strive spiritually toward the things of God. A distorted incensive faculty, on the other hand, can be over-inflamed and produce vices such as wrath, irritability, condemnation, and pride, or it can be numbed and produce vices such as sloth, despondency, depression, and hopelessness. Again, it is the intelligent faculty of the soul which restrains the incensive faculty and keeps it balanced between either excess. Our outward vices and moral failings, thus, are not simply deviations from some social norm,

²⁰ Phil. 4:8

but rather the symptoms of an inner distortion of our appetitive and incensive faculties. Sin is the spiritual contagion which gives rise to these distortions and corrupts the proper working of the faculties of our soul. The appetitive and incensive faculties of the soul, then, are the spiritual ‘tissue’ which gets infected by the spiritual ‘virus’ of sin.

Much contemporary moral discourse is directed at dealing with the outward consequences of these distortions of the appetitive and incensive faculties of our souls—our outward vices and moral failings. Yet, focusing on confronting these outward vices and moral failings is like a doctor treating a cold by only addressing sniffles, headaches, and fever. Certainly, we want these symptoms to be alleviated, if for nothing more than our comfort. But true, lasting healing can only be attained if the underlying sickness is addressed, the virus itself which causes the symptoms. In order to identify the virus that distorts a body’s health, though, the physician must first have a clear understanding of a healthy body. A priest, likewise, must start from an understanding of a healthy soul in order to labor toward healing the souls of the faithful.

We earlier defined a healthy soul as one in which the powers and faculties of the soul function according to their proper order. Following the metaphor of the charioteer, such a healthy soul is one in which the intelligent faculty of the soul rightly directs the appetitive and incensive faculties of the soul. So, the health and right functioning of the intelligent faculty of the soul is central to the healing of the soul in general, and this intelligent faculty of the soul is identified with the *nous* in the writings of the Neptic Fathers. *Nous* is a difficult concept to grasp, primarily because there is no equivalent concept in the English language. Thus, instead of a word-to-word equivalence we must try to describe the concept by explanation, metaphor, and analogy. This is why the Greek

νοῦς is variously translated as ‘heart’ or ‘mind’ and is often described as our spiritual center or the ‘eye’ of our soul.²¹ Returning to St. Gregory Palamas’ understanding of the *nous* as ‘the power of our soul at the center of our being which can perceive and be in communion with God,’²² the *nous* can most succinctly be defined as the immaterial element of our being which is endowed with spiritual perception. The *nous* is taught by the Neptic Fathers as being physically present in the heart but understood as an immaterial faculty of the heart rather than the biological organ itself. The heart as a biological organ can be studied and even understood to a large degree. Indeed the ‘heart,’ in our prevailing American social imaginary, has largely been reduced in meaning to refer simply to this biological organ. In the social imaginary of the Neptic Fathers, however, there is a more profound function to the heart in addition to its merely biological function. For them, there is a transcendent faculty located in the heart that, though bound to the heart, moves ecstatically toward the Creator, and can enter into communion with the Uncreated God.²³ This is what they call the *nous*. The Neptic Fathers make a crucial observation about the *nous*, however, that is vitally important to our exploration of repentance as the healing of the soul. This ecstatic movement of the *nous* toward God is not understood by the Neptic Fathers as a one-way striving. Rather, as the *nous* strains toward God, God in turn illumines the *nous* with an experience of the

²¹ Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, pp. 119.

²² cf discussion on 47.

²³ Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 109.

divine life and divine knowledge.²⁴ The nous, then, is that faculty of our being that is gifted to us so that we may directly experience the life of the Holy Trinity and live in constant communion with God.

This is vitally important to our exploration of repentance as the healing of the soul since it implies that repentance is not only something we strive to accomplish within ourselves but that, at the same time, it is something that is accomplished within us by God. To understand repentance as both an active striving and as a passive awaiting to receive, we look again to St. Paisios who told the story of the three men on the park bench. St. Paisios had served as a radio operator in the army and would often tell his visitors that the spiritual life was like operating a radio. You had to tune to the right frequency and keep the radio in good working order, but after that you just received the signal that another was sending and thus stayed in communication. This same two-stage process can be seen in the Neptic Fathers' understanding of repentance. First one must properly care for and tune the radio of the nous. Once you have done that, however, the work of sanctification and illumination is accomplished by Him Who is sending the signal (this illumination is often referred to as 'acquiring the Holy Spirit'). This is why, at its deepest level, repentance is not about moral action or the ethical imperative to choose rightly. True repentance must occur prior to action or even choice. Such true repentance is about producing a nous rightly formed by true stories such that it is tuned to

²⁴ Ibid 107.

the proper divine frequency of God and continually receives illumination from its communion with the divine life. This is also, of course, what makes repentance an intrinsically Christian activity.

Such, then, is the repentant nous—a healthy, healed nous. If this healthy nous can be envisioned as one which is tuned to the proper frequency of the divine life of the Holy Trinity, we can now more clearly describe the ailing nous, the sort of nous the Neptic Fathers call darkened or corrupted. According to the Neptic Fathers, the nous becomes ill and distracted when it accepts false conceptual images and becomes ‘captured’ by them.²⁵ Just as a radio is meant to be tuned to a particular frequency in order to receive its proper communications, the nous is meant to contemplate and behold the Holy Trinity. In our narrative language, communion with the life of the Holy Trinity is the true story of the nous, the divine augmented narrative in which all the other stories of our life find their meaning. So, the nous begins to be ill when it is tuned into the wrong frequency, its attention focused on something other than God. This ‘something other than God’ is, in the language of the Scriptures, what we would call the sin of idolatry. When the nous is captured by another frequency and its attention focused elsewhere than God, then in the language of the Neptic Fathers, it becomes distracted and scattered.²⁶ In this state, the nous is no longer being illumined by the divine life of the Holy Trinity and can no longer properly form and direct the other faculties of the soul. It is as if the nous were

²⁵ Ibid, 138.

²⁶ Ibid, 143.

perceiving the world through a dirty window. It may be able to make out the main contours and shapes of reality, but it is unable to see clearly, and risks misinterpreting the details and nuances of our lives. Instead of being the source of clarity, illumined by the light of divine knowledge through communion with God, the nous becomes a source of uncertainty and confusion as it tries to decipher the world through the smudged lens of whatever narrative has captured it. Instead of finding itself in communion with God and capable of directing the faculties of our soul and the senses of our body, the nous finds itself enslaved to the shifting compulsions of our senses, appetites, and impulses.²⁷ This is the illness of the nous which, in turn, sickens the whole of our soul. While our moral failings and outward vices are the symptoms of our soul sickness, the underlying contagion which is the target of narrative repentance is this virus of sin which darkens and distracts our nous.

Returning to St. Gregory of Nyssa's reimagined image of the charioteer, it becomes clear how a sickened nous results in the distortion of all the soul's faculties. If the charioteer becomes distracted and its attention scattered, then it will no longer exert proper control over the horses. Left without guidance the horses can break free and run wild, dragging the now captive charioteer wherever their impulses and appetites lead them. Similarly, a nous deprived of its anchor and focus in the divine life of the Holy Trinity risks being captured by the fleeting impulses of the appetitive and incensive faculties of the soul. As we noted earlier, in moral terms this is the source of vices such

²⁷ Ibid, 134.

as greed, gluttony, lust, wrath, sloth, and envy; a soul which is not guided by a healthy nous is laid vulnerable to its bodily appetites and the pursuit of embodied pleasure. Our discussion of the anatomy of the soul, however, highlights that these ‘moral sins’ are not the proper target of repentance, as if moral choice can heal the soul. Rather, we have seen that these moral sins are the symptoms of a soul distorted at a more fundamental level. So long as the nous is distracted and disconnected from communion with God, it remains susceptible to being dragged into vice, held captive by the shifting whims of the other faculties of the soul. Equally, so long as the other faculties of the soul hold the nous captive to various and changing idolatries, it is extremely difficult to restore the communion between the nous and the Holy Trinity. Such is the challenge of the healing of the soul, the pastoral task of guiding the faithful in narrative repentance.

The healing of such a sickened soul with disordered faculties is the goal of the pastoral task of narrative repentance. Conceptually, we may be able to imagine that our nous can be guarded from all idolatrous distractions which are caused by the distorted incensive and appetitive faculties of our soul while, at the same time, training our nous to pursue communion with the divine life of the Holy Trinity with unyielding determination. In practice, however, such a task is so infinitely varied and constantly shifting that it remains impossible for us as finite creatures infected and distorted by the very sin from which we seek to be healed. Instead, the Neptic Fathers teach that the healing of the soul is best undertaken by focusing on three simultaneous practices: 1) weakening the

appetitive faculty, 2) taming the incensive faculty, and 3) pursuing stillness in the nous.²⁸ Through self-control over our physical desires (food, drink, and other embodied pleasures), we weaken the appetitive faculty of the soul such that it no longer drags the nous toward every passing impulse. Through practicing a self-emptying love that eschews judgment and strives toward forgiveness, we calm the incensive faculty and avoid its excesses. Finally, by pursuing stillness in our nous, we draw it back from its captivity to passing distractions. In a phrase playing off the charioteer metaphor, Metropolitan Hierotheos quotes St. Thalassios that “stillness, prayer, love, and self-control are ‘a four-horse chariot bearing the nous to heaven.’”²⁹

It is critical to note, however, that none of these three ascetic practices are properly seen as the healing of the soul. They are instead seen as the path toward the purification of the nous, the cleansing of its corruption and the dispelling of its darkening. The Neptic Fathers see the actual healing of the soul as both its purification *and illumination*. Up to this point we have focused on purification, how we relieve the nous of its distortions and distractions. Such purification is necessary, but it is not the healing of the soul itself. The actual healing comes from illumination, and in the teaching of the Neptic Fathers, such illumination comes only from the divine life of God Himself.³⁰ If purification is primarily the human work toward the healing the soul, the ultimate act of healing is solely the divine work of illumining the purified nous. Thus, healing the soul

²⁸ Ibid, 138-139.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, 150.

is not a work of self-improvement or psychological self-analysis. Rather, it comes through the work of the faithful in preparing the nous through purification and is accomplished in communion with the life of the Holy Trinity through the grace and mercy of God. Narrative repentance, then, is aimed at purification and awaits divine illumination. The priest assists and shepherds the faithful in an effort of learning to tell the true story of our soul and its alienation from communion with the life of the Holy Trinity and its captivity to earthly appetites and impulses. The telos of such work is a purified nous, waiting and trusting in God for illumination.

2.4 The Story of Repentance

With the vocabulary and social imaginary necessary to understand the story of the two monks more precisely, let us return to the quandary posed at the beginning of this chapter—why is repentance even necessary? If repentance is nothing more than a moral effort, then the younger monk was right to question his elder. The elder monk was clearly in violation of the moral injunction against touching a woman. Repentance properly understood from a Biblical perspective, however, is about more than the keeping of a moral law or the exertion of moral choice. It is, rather, more fully about the proper formation of our social imaginary, the telling of true stories about ourselves, God, Church, and Creation. This is not meant to dismiss the relevance of living a moral life in the sense of “doing the right thing” but situates, in a nuanced sense, the moral life as a *result* of repentance rather than the *work* of repentance. For the repentant Christian, the

moral life comes not from a strict adherence to moral and ethical rules but from a social imaginary formed to desire communion and participation in the life of the Holy Trinity as its telos. Thus, the moral life is ultimately an expression of a rightly ordered soul living out its narratively formed desire by making moral decisions, almost preconsciously, from this story-formed desire to witness to the divine life of the Holy Trinity. Understanding the moral life as nothing more than a rigid moralism that relies only on conscious, considered, rational choice reduces morality to a human enterprise, with no transcendent or eternal significance.

Further, the spiritual insights of the Neptic Fathers help us understand the anatomy of our soul and the corrosive effect of sin on our conduct and actions in the world. While our soul is still corrupted by the spiritual contagion of sin, moral codes are necessary to contain the distortions of our darkened nous. While moral effort is thus present during repentance, it is not properly understood as the work of repentance. Rather, the decisive work of narrative repentance is the healing and purifying of the nous. A purified nous is no longer susceptible to the distractions and obsessions of the unbridled incensive and appetitive faculties of the soul. A person with such a rightly ordered soul, guided by a purified and illumined nous, need no longer be woodenly bound to unbending moralisms that are ultimately devoid of both compassion and wisdom. Rather such a soul is able to function freely in the world, able to perceive moral nuances and the need, even the imperative, for certain exceptions to moral rules. Such a rightly ordered soul experiences moral discernment as a sort of choiceless right action, born within a rightly formed Christian social imaginary from a deep desire for communion with the divine life of the Holy Trinity, illumined by divine wisdom. This is

how the story of the two monks is a profound story of repentance. The continued repentance of the elder monk had taught him true stories about himself, God, Church, and Creation. He did not see the woman as a moral or immoral object, nor as a temptation. He saw her only as a child of God in need of assistance. His repentance had resulted in his adopting a different way of seeing and thus of being in the world—free to serve the woman with selfless, unselfconscious love, untainted by the inflammation of desire. His repentance had restored his nous to a state of calm stillness, firmly focused on participating in the life of the Holy Trinity and governing his soul and its faculties which had been tamed and schooled in virtue. This is why repentance is necessary. True repentance rescues us from captivity to our untamed impulses and earthly appetites so that we can freely love and serve, living in ceaseless communion with the God Who created us. Such is the true nature of repentance. Such is the end goal, the telos, of the priest's work in the lives of the faithful.

Such a pastoral task is immense and overwhelming. Yet this very immensity is what separates narrative repentance from secular psychoanalytic efforts focused on psychological ailments and self-discovery. The task of narrative repentance must, in fact, be overwhelming and beyond our human capacity, both for priest and parishioner. Otherwise, there would be no need for divine response and guidance, and narrative repentance would cease to be a cooperative task of priest and parishioner stretching out toward communion with the divine life of the Holy Trinity. It would simply be one modality among many for finding meaning in our lives. Narrative repentance, at least in its fulfillment, is a divine action in response to our human effort. Understandably then, the priest is not expected to accomplish such work in the life of the faithful, indeed the

priest is manifestly unable to accomplish such work alone. Instead, the priest must inspire, support, and sustain the parishioner's work of preparing and purifying the nous in prayerful hope of the divine act of illumination.

The priest inspires, supports, and sustains the parishioner's work of preparing and purifying their nous by telling stories that restore a right understanding of self, God, Church, and Creation. Such stories should be intentionally targeted at regaining a Christian social imaginary grounded in the scriptural accounts of God's act of Creation, thus revealing the truth of our created human nature. Such stories should train the faithful in the right ordering of their souls and how to overcome all the distortions of their nous wrought by the contagion of sin. Such stories should ultimately be aimed at restoring the nous to a purified state, receptive to illumination by the divine life of the Holy Trinity. By now mapping this profound understanding of repentance onto our earlier language of narrative we can more clearly articulate how a priest pursues this critical pastoral task of narrative repentance in the lives of the faithful.

In the first chapter we explored the narrative phenomenon of *embedding*, how the stories that form the core of our social imaginary become normative for how we understand the world. Embedding describes how we 'embed' all our life experiences—all the stories that we see, hear, and read—into the augmented narrative of our social imaginary in order to give these stories context and make our life experiences personally intelligible and meaningful. Our social imaginary, in other words, is the master narrative by which we perceive, interpret, and respond to all of our experiences in the world. Narrative repentance, however, requires an added level of conscious and intentional embedding. As Christians, we purposefully embed our social imaginary in the true

stories of God, self, Church, and Creation, so that our social imaginary becomes subject to fundamental critique, revision, and amplification. We learn to read such true stories ‘against’ ourselves,³¹ and to challenge the false, though cherished, beliefs which have distorted our social imaginary. This intentional, conscious embedding trains us to question whether our social imaginary is in harmony with the true stories of God, self, Church, and Creation—a sort of ‘narrative purification.’ Narrative purification is a humble openness to having our stories tested and found wanting by the true revelation of God’s story found in what the Orthodox Church terms Holy Tradition, i.e., the received wisdom of Scripture, Liturgy, prayer, hymnography, lives of the saints—indeed, all the collected true stories of the Church. Narrative purification is the unlearning of false stories and the rejection of any false social imaginaries which threaten to distort all stories. A refusal to undergo such narrative purification risks Christian communities becoming the “lifestyle enclaves” warned against in the first chapter, where people go (often for aesthetic or therapeutic reasons) to find people like themselves, yet have neither the humility nor the courage to question their collective social imaginary which may need to be revised if they are to truly be an embodied witness to the Kingdom of God.³² Narrative purification is this courageous work of acknowledging the possible, even probable, infidelity of our social imaginary and submitting ourselves to the

³¹ Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 48. (Quoted from *No Rusty Swords* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.)

³² cf discussion on 31.

community of God's people so that we can become rightly formed in God's social imaginary.

'Narrative illumination' then, is the embracing of true stories, specifically the true story of the divine life of the Holy Trinity revealed to our purified nous. It is "learning to live in a 'new world'"³³ as we adopt the augmented narrative of the Church, gifted to us through divine illumination, as the true story of our lives. Narrative illumination is what Hauerwas and Burrell describe as accepting "a story as normative by allowing it to shape one's own story."³⁴ This "allowing it to shape one's own story" should not, however, be understood as just intellectually agreeing with some new social narrative and then consciously revising our social imaginary. Rather, using the social imaginary of the Neptic Fathers, we can now understand this "allowing it to shape one's own story" as the purification and illumination of the nous. The nous, being the very power of the soul through which we enter into communion with God, can also be understood in the terminology of narrative repentance as the bearer of our social imaginary. Also, the purified nous is understood as the site of our hoped-for divine illumination through participation in the life of the Holy Trinity. So, the "allowing" is the humble human act of submitting our social imaginary to be tested and found wanting against the true revelation of God's story, the narrative purification of our nous. "To shape one's own story" thus becomes the divine act of narrative illumination, God's revealing of the divine

³³ Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 63.

³⁴ Hauerwas and Burrell, *From System to Story*, 184.

life of the Holy Trinity within a purified nous such that our social imaginary now resonates in harmony with the divine social imaginary. Crucially, what sets this Christian idea of narrative illumination apart from any other social narrative of how we should live rightly, including Christian moralism itself, is that these ‘true’ stories are not created by or agreed upon by humankind but rather revealed through communion with the very divine life of the Holy Trinity. It is not one social imaginary among others but rather the divine social imaginary of the Holy Trinity, inviting us to live in harmony with God’s ‘very good’ Creation.

Narrative repentance is about becoming a certain kind of people. The priest begins this pastoral task through the intentional challenging of false narratives within the social imaginaries of the faithful. In the final chapter, we will explore practical ways of accomplishing this task of ‘narrative purification.’ But the pastoral work does not end here. The priest must also act as a sort of midwife to the intentional adoption of God’s social imaginary. Certainly, illumination is a divine act. Yet, at the same time, the priest can guide the faithful Christian in the preparation of their nous to graciously receive this seed of divine illumination. The priest must tell and re-tell stories which form the social imaginary of the Christian life within the nous of faithful hearers. Through intentional storytelling, the priest re-forms the social imaginary of the faithful until they, with purified nous, no longer need the priest as storyteller. Through divine illumination, the very life of the Holy Trinity unceasingly reveals to them the true story of their souls.

Chapter 3

3. Telling True Stories

A more recent tale tells of a priest assigned to a new parish. Welcoming him to the parish, the parish leadership asks him to focus on preaching since, as a somewhat young parish, they have much to learn. Reassuring them, the priest promises to attend carefully to his preaching. The first Sunday the priest stands before the congregation to deliver the sermon and proclaims, “Love one another!” He then continues with the rest of the service. The parish leaders are perplexed but consider that the priest is newly arrived and probably needs a week or two to settle in. The following Sunday the priest once again stands before the congregation to deliver the homily, proclaims “Love one another,” returns to the altar, and continues with the service. Confused, the parish leaders confront the priest. “Father,” they insist, “we thought we were clear about how important good preaching is to our community.” “Of course,” the priest replies, “I understand.” “Then you’ll be prepared for this Sunday?” “Certainly.” The third Sunday arrives, the priest stands before the congregation, repeats yet again, “Love one another,” and returns to the altar. The parish leaders, now furious, approach him following the service demanding an explanation. Gently the priest says, “Once you start working on my first sermon, we can talk about the next one.”

This light-hearted twist in the story belies an insightful observation about effective preaching. Effective preaching is not simply about communicating information

or ideas, it is even more profoundly about transforming behavior and lives. When seminarians would compliment the preaching of Bishop Gerasimos, a beloved teacher at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Boston, he would respond, “Thank God! And how will you change your life because of it?” He wanted these future preachers to understand that the mark of a good sermon is how it impacts our practice of the Christian life, how it encourages us to ‘adopt another way of being in the world.’ The priest in the story does not simply want the parish to learn something new; he is laboring, rather, to exhort them to become something new, to become a certain kind of people. Preaching becomes an opportunity to remind them of the true story of God and humanity, and to nurture the formation of a Christian social imaginary in the hearts of the faithful. It is no accident, of course, that repentance is central to a fruitful pastoral practice of preaching. The pastoral practice of preaching can be, and should be, employed in leading the faithful toward narrative repentance.

Preaching, of course, is only one of the many pastoral practices and tasks a priest undertakes each week. The priest, as the pastor of a community, is also expected to study, teach, counsel, visit, comfort, advise, inspire, and assist the faithful in countless other ways. There is a risk, however, in seeing each of these pastoral tasks as simply “one-among-many” pastoral endeavors. It is not that a priest preaches in one moment, counsels in another, and comforts in yet another. Rather, all these tasks are interrelated activities that share a common goal, a shared telos. This shared telos is nothing less than shepherding the faithful to a right understanding of God, self, Church, and all Creation;

and this is precisely the pastoral task of narrative repentance. Narrative repentance, then, is not just one tool in a priest's pastoral toolbox. Rather, it is the central pastoral task undergirding all other pastoral activities. Preaching, for instance, should not simply be about communicating a message, however eloquent or even profound it may be. Preaching should be practiced in such a way that it tells true stories about God, self, Church, and Creation and invites the faithful to understand their own lives within these true stories. This is but one example of how narrative repentance is present in all pastoral practices. The rest of this chapter will explore practical ways that a pastor can intentionally incorporate narrative repentance into everyday pastoral work.

3.1 Discerning the Truth of Stories

If narrative repentance is not just about telling any story about God, self, Church, and Creation but rather about telling true stories, how can we know which stories are true? How do we judge among competing narratives, all claiming to be true? Why should we trust that any given story is true or that any given storyteller is trustworthy? These are the sorts of questions that do not admit to any kind of easy answer. Ultimately, of course, the answer is found in the divine illumination of a purified nous. How, though, do we get there? How do we know which stories nurture a process of 'narrative purification' within our hearts and which stories are simply further distortions?

In their essay exploring the importance of narrative context to the formation of ethics, *From System to Story*, Hauerwas and Burrell confront the challenging question of how we choose among the many, often competing, stories clamoring for the loyalty of our hearts. Having argued that the stories we adopt are ethically formative, they rightly turn to the issue of how we then discern which stories are worthy of being adopted. To cultivate a wise, Christian discernment in choosing between proffered stories, Hauerwas and Burrell suggest four compelling criteria for judging stories. Stories that are worthy of being adopted as the stories of our heart must: 1) have the power to release us from destructive alternatives, 2) help us see through current distortions, 3) create room to keep us from having to resort to violence, and 4) have a sense for the tragic, for how meaning transcends power. They go on to rigorously test these criteria, but the insight critical to our discussion of true stories is Hauerwas' and Burrell's powerful observation that these criteria are less "features which a story must display" as they are the "effect which stories might be expected to have on those who allow them to shape their lives."¹ In comparison to dominant contemporary social narratives, stories which envisage these criteria can appear as countercultural, even subversive. They privilege ultimate meaning over the will to power and the use of coercive violence to establish a 'greater good.' Yet, at the same time, these criteria resonate clearly with the witness of Scripture. It was the sinful

¹ Hauerwas and Burrell, *From System to Story*, 185.

publican whom Christ declared justified, not the outwardly pious (and culturally powerful) Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14), it was the harlot who was forgiven much rather than the religiously upright Simon at whose house Christ dined (Luke 7:36-49), it was Zacchaeus who finally saw the distortions of his own heart rather than the righteous crowd (Luke 19:1-10), and it was the poverty-stricken widow who gave out of her need who was noticed by Christ (Luke 21:1-4). In each case it was the powerful who were exposed as having a distorted understanding of God, self, Church and Creation. The tragic and marginalized were the ones who stood as witnesses to an alternative way of being. These stories from Scripture affirm a crucial insight of Hauerwas's and Burrell's criteria—such stories form us to “continue to do the right...even when we have no assurance that it will be the successful thing to do.”² Such observations lead to a critical observation about discerning the truth of stories in a Christian community.

Truth, according to the Christian faith, is not a subjective evaluation about the veracity of some story or event. Truth, ultimately, is not a judgment at all but rather a reflection of the person of Christ Jesus,³ revealed in Scripture and the life of His Church. So truth, in a Christian context, is less about criteria and meticulous measures of factual veracity and more about our fidelity to what has been revealed to us. This is the

² Ibid, 188.

³ This is made explicit in Christ's exchange with Pontius Pilate, “...the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth.” (John 18:37)

importance of ‘tradition’ within Christianity. The Greek word translated as ‘tradition’ is παράδοσις, a ‘handing over or passing down.’ Within Orthodox Christianity, Holy Tradition is the name given to that body of revelation that must be preserved and passed intact to later generations, without distortion or change. Holy Tradition is understood in the Orthodox Church, in point of fact, as the only authoritative criterion of what is true. Scripture, called the ‘crown of tradition,’ is the *kanon*—the measuring stick—of what is authoritatively true. Truth thus becomes less about our own personal judgments as it is conforming to the revelation of Truth in the divine person of Christ Jesus, entrusted first to His disciples and then having been handed down within the divinely guided life of the Church. Such a traditioned, communal concept of truth can be unsettling to a modern Western, rational social imaginary since it offers no “objective” standard which can be argued or defended. Rather, as Hauerwas and Burrell further assert in their essay, “The test of each story is the sort of person it shapes.”⁴ The only reliable criterion of truth is, then, ultimately demonstrable and performative. Are we becoming the ‘certain kind of people’ and community that is reflected in the Gospel? Truth is not something that can be possessed or personally defined. Rather, truth is only decisively found as we strive to be faithful to the revelation of the Kingdom of God in the Incarnation of Christ Jesus.

⁴ Hauerwas and Burrell, *From System to Story*, 185.

In the midst of this striving toward truth stands the priest as the bearer of Holy Tradition, the present link in a golden chain which connects the contemporary Christian community to the apostolic faith received from Christ Jesus, the Truth and the Way. As Hauerwas notes, “Truth...is like a “knowing how” – a skill that can only be passed from master to apprentice.”⁵ It is the priest’s responsibility to receive, preserve, and pass on the true stories which are constitutive of the community and which the community, throughout time, has embraced as true because these are the stories which are capable of forming them into the certain kind of people who bear witness to the eternal Kingdom of God. The danger in this is, of course, at once obvious. As the community’s authoritative teller of true stories, the priest must first learn to tell true stories. Not only that, but the priest must also continually question whether and how the stories told are genuinely true and reflect the deposit of faith as it has been traditioned to the community. To phrase this in the vocabulary of narrative repentance, the priest must be deeply committed to unlearning false stories and embracing true stories revealed in Christ. The priest’s own ongoing narrative repentance, then, is an unnegotiable prerequisite for his leadership and authority. In short, the character of the priest—the community’s authoritative storyteller—matters.

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character, toward a constructive christian social ethic*, 62.

3.2 The Truthful Storyteller

As the community's authoritative storyteller, a priest's ability to shepherd others toward narrative repentance is emphatically grounded in the priest's own narrative repentance. If the priest does not persevere in the unlearning of false stories while simultaneously being formed by true stories, how then can he lead anyone else toward learning true stories of God, self, Church and Creation? While modern culture imagines repentance to be a private experience (sometimes even limited to being only between a penitent and God Himself), the priest's role as truthful storyteller makes his own narrative repentance a matter of communal importance. Far from being a private affair, then, the priest's repentance is fundamental to the Christian community's spiritual formation and ultimately the community's spiritual wellbeing. What sort of leader, then, should a community expect in its authoritative storyteller and shepherd?

Metropolitan Hierotheos identifies five basic qualities of priests that are particularly critical to this role of shepherding the faithful through truthful storytelling.⁶ First, a priest must practice watchfulness. As a storyteller, the priest must be aware of the stories he tells himself as well as the stories which are being told and retold by the world around him. As a teller of true stories, the priest must have the courage and wisdom to

⁶ Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 82-85.

question his own social imaginary and constantly evaluate it according to the tradition he has received. To do this effectively and truthfully, the priest must also cultivate a second quality, sobriety. A community's authoritative storyteller must take seriously the need for truthfulness and guard against the manifold dangers of self-deception or sentimental embellishment. Such an aspiring storyteller may be beset by a multitude of intoxicating temptations—the self-ambitious pursuit of public esteem, the self-aggrandizing compulsion to micromanage the sacred internal life of another, the self-absorbed (and codependency causing) urge to be needed, or any one of the many other passions and addictions which can capture a nous lacking spiritual sobriety and distort the soul's desire. Without this steady sobriety, a priest can inadvertently slip into a sort of spiritual abuse marked by manipulation and emotional coercion. Nurturing the clear-sighted fidelity of sobriety, however, the priest can inspire and guide the faithful toward embracing their own personal narrative repentance, while guarding against any imposition of the storyteller's own spiritual struggles and shortcomings on those same faithful.

This resolve to cultivate watchfulness and sobriety is grounded in the priest's pursuit of a third quality, purity. Though it may sound circular to suggest purity as a necessary, initial quality for those seeking a forthcoming purification of the nous, Metropolitan Hierotheos here means 'purity' to indicate a firm resolve to

“sacrificially...die to the passions and to sensual pleasure.”⁷ Indeed, a priest cannot really die to a false social imaginary and its idolatry until that same priest resolves to first engage a kenotic self-emptying and the pursuit of the true divine social imaginary found in Christ. As Metropolitan Hierotheos so clearly articulates:

“The Gospel, which describes the journey of the Christian struggling to reach communion with God should be applied first of all by his servant, the priest. The ascetic life of the Church...should be known to the pastors of the Church. And when we say ‘known,’ we do not mean that it should be known in the head through lectures or reading, but *it should be their living experience*. For what passes through the heart helps faithful Christians. One person offers his blood for another to be nourished. It is shared out and the people are filled.”⁸

This is the purity, or more precisely, the resolve to pursue a life of purification, which is required of a truthful storyteller.

Such a pursuit of purity leads intrinsically to the fourth quality needed in a community’s authoritative storyteller, repentance. Again, it is important to note that by ‘repentance’ Metropolitan Hierotheos does not intend the final healing of the soul and the realization of the full illumination of the nous but rather a persistent and tenacious resolve to pursue the purification of the nous. The priest’s own ongoing personal narrative repentance, as we asserted before, is the necessary prerequisite to shepherding anyone

⁷ Ibid, 85.

⁸ Ibid. Emphasis added.

else. The priest does not need to have arrived at the final destination, but he should at least be a few steps further down the path than those he leads.

Lastly, the fifth quality identified by Metropolitan Hierotheos is the ‘basic virtue’ of humility.⁹ Often termed the ‘Queen of virtues’ in the Neptic Fathers, humility is understood in Orthodox Christianity as the very foundation of all other virtues. Though often overlooked, or downright scoffed at, in our contemporary culture, humility is the virtue which opens the gateway to personal narrative repentance by enabling us to embrace the uncertainty of our own social imaginary. By recognizing that we cannot hope to be an effective arbiter of truth ourselves, we are forced to look outside ourselves for a reliable anchor or assurance of truth. Such humility opens a pathway toward narrative purification by enabling us to admit the potential falsity of the stories we have told ourselves in the past. This in turn opens to us the realistic hope of narrative illumination, that is, of being adopted into the true story of the All-Holy Trinity.

To be the authoritative, truthful storyteller of the community, then, a priest must cultivate and pursue these qualities of watchfulness, sobriety, purity, repentance, and humility. Further, I would append one last quality to Metropolitan Hierotheos’ list. A priest, to be an effective and faithful leader, must have the courage to be vulnerable. Vulnerability, like humility, is not generally seen as a modern virtue. Indeed, in the

⁹ Ibid.

dominant American social imaginary, our contemporary celebration of rugged individualism paints humility as a lack of confidence and self-assurance, and vulnerability as evidence of weakness and lack of self-sufficiency. Yet, a priest's willingness to be transparent in his own struggle toward narrative repentance provides the faithful in his care both an insight into this narrative process of repentance and an invitation to undertake the same effort in their own lives. In fact, it is the priest's vulnerability that allows him to be a truthful storyteller and to wield transformative authority in the lives of the faithful.

As the authoritative storyteller of the community, a priest is obliged to exercise such authority to encourage the community to begin becoming what it has not yet become, to strive toward the life of the Holy Trinity even while such fullness is not yet complete. Such an authority, however, cannot be claimed coercively. The authority to call a community to exercise its freedom in Christ by relentlessly pursuing the true story of the Kingdom of God can only come from the vulnerability of the shepherd leader, from the genuineness of the priest's own journey toward narrative repentance. Such authority is what Christopher Beeley calls charismatic authority in his book, *Leading God's People*, which is a compelling exploration of patristic advice on pastoral

leadership.¹⁰ The most effective exercise of authority, Beeley convincingly argues, is not the institutional authority granted simply by virtue of position or office in a community. Rather it is the charismatic authority granted by the manifest integrity of the leader that engenders the sort of trust needed in transformational leadership. In other words, a priest must not insist on being the authoritative storyteller in the community simply by virtue of being assigned as priest to the community. Rather, an effective priest, as truthful storyteller, receives authority through the vulnerable transparency of his own repentance. Why, though, is vulnerability so important to the exercise of character-based authority?

In her 2002 sermon to the Sisters of the Community of the Holy Spirit on Good Friday, *Vulnerability, the Condition of Covenant*, Ellen Davis demonstrates that covenant, as a mutual consensual relationship, cannot exist without vulnerability.¹¹ Indeed, covenant is a relationship which can only be truly entered into without coercion. As such, each party must be vulnerable to the other, since the specter of rejection or hurt is always present, as in any genuine relationship. A priest cannot impose institutional authority upon the faithful and demand they accept him as the community's authoritative, truthful storyteller. Rather, the priest must be vulnerable in his own experience of narrative repentance. Further, as was mentioned earlier, he must be willing to question

¹⁰ Christopher Beeley, *Leading God's People, Wisdom from the Early Church for Today*, 45.

¹¹ Ellen Davis, *Vulnerability, the Condition of Covenant*.

the truthfulness of the stories he tells himself, even about the source of his authority to be the community's storyteller. In fact, the priest should be readily willing to publicly acknowledge his own false stories when they are exposed by those with whom the priest is in covenant. Such open vulnerability, but its nature, cannot assure the priest that he will be welcomed into the necessary spiritual intimacy with the faithful that is needed to lead them effectively toward narrative repentance. But, without the freedom to reject such intimacy, it cannot truly be given in any real sense. The priest, to be accepted as the community's truthful storyteller, must gracefully accept the discomfort of vulnerability. Without vulnerability, hope withers under an aloof authoritarianism, and love perishes by being compelled. Only vulnerability preserves the freedom of the faithful to accept such an intimate authority into their lives, with necessary boundaries and limits.

3.4 The Practice of Truthful Storytelling

How, then, can the priest go about the practice of telling true stories of God, self, Church, and Creation to the faithful entrusted to his care, who have accepted his vulnerable leadership as the community's truthful storyteller? There are two broad settings in which a priest is invited to practice the telling of true stories: public proclamation and private reflection. Public proclamation is the preaching and teaching of the community, in worship, song, prayer, and fellowship. It is voiced in the community's gatherings for Liturgy and sacrament, and it is examined in groups gathered to learn

about and enrich their faith together. This vibrant communal setting is well suited for telling true stories about God, Church, and Creation. Such an exposed setting, however, is not as effective for shepherding the faithful into telling true stories about themselves. The necessary vulnerability for truthful storytelling about each person's most profound experience of self is better served in a more personal setting. Public proclamation can guide us in how to fit our own personal stories into the divine story of the Kingdom of God, even as we allow God's divine story to 'edit' our own stories of self. But the actual truth-telling encounter with our deep selves is best shared between priest and parishioner in the safe confines of private counseling and confession.

Public proclamation encompasses the pastoral practices of preaching, teaching, and worship (with its hymns and prayers). But this communal telling of true stories also finds expression in the practice of our Christian lives. In other words, the priest tells true stories so that the faithful may live true lives. Proclamation and practice are inseparable.

As Hauerwas and Burrell cogently point out,

“Stories, then, help us, as we hold them, to relate to our world and our destiny: the origins and goals of our lives, as they embody in narrative form specific ways of acting out that relatedness. So in allowing ourselves to adopt and be adopted by a particular story, we are in fact assuming a set of practices which will shape the ways we relate to our world and destiny.”¹²

¹² Hauerwas and Burrell, *From System to Story*, 186.

Public truthful storytelling thus becomes the setting for revealing “the origins and goals of our lives,” an opportunity to invite the faithful to become adopted into God’s particular story, to engage as a community in becoming a certain kind of people. This is why Bishop Gerasimos would ask seminary students to consider how his preaching might change the practice of their Christian lives. How then should a priest, as the community’s authoritative truthful storyteller, intentionally incorporate an understanding of narrative repentance in the pastoral practices of preaching, teaching, and worship?

3.4.1 Narrative Repentance in Preaching

Preaching, as a pastoral discipline, is a well-trodden area of study. Such a public facing ministry is rightly scrutinized and evaluated so that the proclamation of the Gospel can be most excellent and delightful. This dedicated academic study of preaching has created a rich range of preaching philosophies and styles, reflecting the diversity of Christian communities. Narrative repentance is not intended as an alternative, or even additional, style of preaching but rather a way of being intentional about how preachers approach the content of their homilies and sermons. In his memoir, *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson recounts a conversation with his son, Leif. Leif, who is studying creative writing, tells him that novelists only ever write one novel. “They find their voice, their

book, and write it over and over.”¹³ Leif then tells Peterson that he has only ever preached one sermon. Peterson takes umbrage and retorts that he works hard on his sermons so that the people always “hear their stories integrated into God’s story, or God’s story integrated into their stories. Either way it’s a story in the making—new details every week, new in the telling, new in the making.”¹⁴ Only later does Peterson realize that the ‘one sermon’ that his son recognized in all his preaching did not prevent any newness in the telling or the making, but rather was a recognition that Peterson had found, with his own voice, God’s true story, and was telling it over and over. Narrative repentance in preaching is finding, with each of our own voices, God’s true story and telling it over and over.

The content of preaching, the enduring details of God’s true story, is found most authoritatively in Scripture. The pastoral task of narrative repentance challenges us to approach this Scripture with care and intentionality. Encountering Scripture as a site of divine action, rather than just a collection of stories, opens us to the possibility of narrative illumination through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Preaching should not treat the stories of Scripture as a cast of characters moving through a plot, nor as a treasury of illustrations for living our best moral life, but rather as an entrance into

¹³ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, 297.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 298.

communion with the very life of the Holy Trinity. Whatever style of preaching is adopted, the preacher must intentionally make explicit how the stories of Scripture can form us into the ‘certain kind of people’ who embody the Kingdom of God as performative witnesses of the one true story of God.

Whatever form it takes, however, preaching toward narrative repentance should beckon us into God’s story in a personal and transformative way. How do we preach in such a way that the homily becomes a personal encounter with God rather than simply an account of a long-ago event? One such effort can be illustrated through a sermon, “*The Fragrance of Forgiveness*,” which was preached on Holy Wednesday (the Wednesday between Palm Sunday and Easter).¹⁵ During Holy Week in the Orthodox Church each day has a different theme and includes Scripture readings and hymns that draw out these themes. This sermon was delivered on Holy Wednesday afternoon at a service for the sacrament of Holy Unction (where the faithful are anointed with a consecrated oil for healing of soul and body). The hymns and readings leading up to the service include the account of the woman who anointed the head of Jesus in the house of Simon the leper (Matthew 26:6-13) and the Hymn of Kassiani,¹⁶ a 9th century penitential hymn written from the perspective of the ‘sinful woman’ who washed Christ’s feet with her tears in the

¹⁵ cf Appendix A, *The Fragrance of Forgiveness*.

¹⁶ cf Appendix B, *Hymn of Kassiani*

house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50). While noting in passing the exegetical curiosity of whether these are accounts of the same event or two different events, the homily focuses on making the unnamed woman present in such a way that the congregation can ‘read’ themselves into her place in the story. This begins by asking,

“Who was this woman whom Christ Himself says will be remembered so long as the Gospel is preached? What was she like? What was her experience of Christ? Why has the Church in Her wisdom chosen to highlight this woman on this day of contrasts? What can we learn from her?”

With such questions planting seeds into their hearts, the congregation is invited into a personal encounter with the sinful woman. The sermon then sets about answering these questions, not as an exegetical exercise but as a poetic reflection which presses into the imagined personhood of this unnamed supporting character. Making her accessible, however, is not the purpose of the sermon. Instead, the congregation is pressed to identify with her, and not just with her but with those who condemned her. The storytelling becomes personal.

“Imagine for a moment that a prostitute came to join our parish, or an adult film star, an exotic dancer. How would we feel? Would we welcome her? Or would we protest? ‘We can’t have her around our children; goodness, we can’t have her around our husbands and our sons!’ She can’t be trusted. She is immoral, suspicious. How can we invite someone like her in? Now, it’s not so much that the Pharisee was grotesquely arrogant, judgmental, and self-righteous. It’s just that he was a lot like us. You see, too often we fear another’s sins more than we fear our own.”

With the congregation's self-reflective attention now woven into the events of the Biblical story, the sermon turns toward reading the story "over against ourselves,"¹⁷ toward critically applying the story to our own social imaginary.

"What volume of tears would it take to wash someone's feet? What depth of grief, of regret, could produce a sorrow so deep? When I am faced with Christ, do I stand self-content in my false righteousness, or do I cry tears enough to bathe His feet? Do I ask Him why He doesn't judge 'those' other people or do I bow down and offer my sinfulness to Him? Am I the Pharisee or the woman who went away forgiven?"

Of course, the story is never just about us. Care needs to be taken that such a homily does not devolve into a spiritualized therapeutic session aimed toward our own self-improvement, or simple emotional sentimentalism. It must turn toward the true story of God.

Though other sorts of true stories can be told from the pulpit, preaching toward narrative repentance should be predominantly focused on ending with true stories about God. Such preaching should concentrate on encouraging and shepherding the faithful to recognize and embrace the revealed telos of our lives, the invitation to enter into profound communion with the life of the Holy Trinity. Preaching toward narrative repentance should have as its goal the gifting of hope to the faithful, the gifting of an inspired vision of our promised life together with each other and the Holy Trinity in the

¹⁷ cf discussion on 31.

eternal Kingdom of God. Such preaching, focused on telling the true story of God, is capable of nurturing a fervent desire for communion with God in the faithful. It is not enough that we see our own arrogance and fear of others' sins in the character of the Pharisee, nor is it enough to lament our own sinful failings as we risk communion with Christ Jesus as did the sinful woman. We must allow the true story of God to become the hope-filled song of our heart.

“So think of the woman pouring perfume out on her Savior, then mopping his feet with her hair. Her love, her faith, gained her forgiveness. This extraordinary, intimate act of anointing her Savior, of demonstrating her loving repentance, delivered her from her sins. And her hair was filled with this scent, with this sweet fragrance of forgiveness. She went forth into the world, anointed by the very One that she had anointed, surrounded by a fragrant cloud, reminded of the forgiveness of her Lord. And it shaped every other thing she did. She could not go anywhere that the fragrance of forgiveness did not follow. She approached Christ a sinner, she left Him forgiven.”

The preacher's expectant hope, then, is that the faithful, filled with such holy desire, will be inspired to engage their personal practice of the Christian life with greater resolve, engaging in the sort of narrative purification that leads to the healing of the soul and the illumination of the nous. While the practice of preaching toward narrative repentance will not alone accomplish such spiritual formation in the faithful, without such preaching, how can the people be inspired to become the people they have not yet

become? The true story of God cannot become the story of our hearts if we do not first hear it proclaimed.¹⁸

3.4.2 Narrative Repentance in Teaching

Similarly, the practice of teaching as a pastoral task informed by an understanding of narrative repentance is not intended as an additional or alternative pedagogy, but rather a way of approaching teaching as an intentional effort to form a Christian social imaginary in the students. Whereas in preaching the intentionality is found in how preachers approach the content of their homilies and sermons, in teaching the intentionality is found in the ultimate end goal, the telos, of religious education. Understanding narrative repentance in teaching invites us to treat religious education less as an imparting of facts and principles and more as the intentional formation of our students' social imaginary. It is about teaching the students how to think rather than teaching them what to think.

In practical terms this means that teaching should not be focused only on teaching the stories of Scripture, or on the theological claims of our Christian traditions. Rather teaching should be about shepherding the faithful to a sort of Scriptural literacy that

¹⁸ cf Rom 10:14

allows the narratives of the faith to permeate the entirety of our lives. Teaching toward narrative repentance should aim at forming a Scriptural conscience in the faithful.

Taking seriously the claim of Hauerwas and Burrell that “the test of each story is the sort of person it shapes,”¹⁹ the test of our pedagogical efforts is the embodiment of the Gospel in the lives of our faithful. The success of such teaching is ultimately demonstrable and performative. Are we becoming the sort of persons and community that reflects the apostolic faith revealed in the Scriptural accounts? Such an embodiment of the faith, expressed through the actions and deeds of our lives, forms us into ‘ensouled Bibles,’²⁰ witnessing to the Kingdom of God through the faithful living out of our lives. Just as St. Paul endeavored “not only to change the community’s understanding, but to have its members embody this notion of dying to sin and walking in newness of life,”²¹ the priest too endeavors not only to teach the faithful but to assist and encourage them to internalize the story of the Gospel such that their entire lives become a living account of God’s revelation as recorded in the Bible. As a common maxim reminds us, “Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some person reads.”²² This is the intentional telos of education envisaged by narrative repentance, a transformed nous and rightly ordered soul which itself witnesses to the Kingdom of God through the embodied practices of the

¹⁹ Hauerwas and Burrell, *From System to Story*, 185.

²⁰ Theodore Stylianopoulos, *Bread for Life: Reading the Bible*, 22-33.

²¹ Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, pg. 59

²² Often attributed to William J. Toms

faithful; a life which has been formed into a faithful revelation of the divine life of the Holy Trinity.

Teaching in such a way is difficult because it does not rely on milestones and curricula. There is no matrix that can define which stories should be learned by what age and which theological subjects must be mastered. Instead, such teaching becomes a deeply practical exercise of helping the faithful to ‘apply’ the stories of the Church to their own lives. During an evening Bible study in my parish, a question was raised about a recent controversy over then-President Donald Trump’s reaction to some players in the National Football League who insisted on kneeling toward the US flag during the National Anthem. As the controversy was bound up in politics and varied social narratives, the parishioners were struggling to find a proper ‘Christian’ perspective on the issue. Rather than attempting to deconstruct all the narratives caught up in the controversy and give an answer, we instead asked if there were any Biblical stories that could help us frame our response. This was intentionally pursued as an exercise in nurturing the sort of Scriptural literacy described above. The flag controversy would certainly pass and be forgotten after a few news cycles, so the facts of the controversy were not particularly important to developing our Christian social imaginary. But how we thought about the facts, how we provided context to understanding the subjects in question, would be critical in learning how to embody our Christian faith in our lives. After some discussion we settled on the story of Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego (Daniel 3). The two stories, one of a flag and one of a golden statue, resonated with each

other in the sense that a national sovereign was demanding a particular sort of veneration toward a national symbol and threatening reprisal if such veneration were not offered. Placing the flag controversy alongside this Biblical story allowed the participants to consider the controversy from a Scriptural perspective rather than the political and social perspectives that were warring with one another in the popular media. Of course, we were quick to point out that this resonance had its limits and that no one intended to imply that then-President Trump was analogous to Nebuchadnezzar. As an exercise in how Scriptural literacy can become a living practice in our Christian lives, though, we practiced perceiving the events of our contemporary lives within a context created by perceiving such events through the lens of the true stories which formed the gathered people of God throughout history. It was not so important *what* we thought about the flag controversy as it was *how* we thought about the flag controversy. Such is the goal of teaching toward narrative repentance.

3.4.3 Narrative Repentance in Worship

Alongside the pastoral practices of preaching and teaching, narrative repentance is also practiced through the truthful storytelling of Christian worship. It is in worship that we hear the true stories of God, Church, and Creation told and retold, year after year. This repetition becomes deeply formative of our social imaginary. James Smith observes that “Christian worship functions as a counter-formation to the mis-formation of secular

liturgies into which we are ‘thrown’ from an early age.” This means, according to Smith, that “Christian worship needs to be intentionally liturgical, formative, and pedagogical in order to counter such mis-formations and misdirections.”²³ Indeed, worship is where the Christian community gathers to celebrate and practice their identity as the gathered people of God. Worship, then, is the primary occasion where we counter the mis-formation wrought in our hearts by the false social imaginaries of the world. It is also the primary occasion for hearing the true stories that can heal our souls and purify our nous. This is, of course, the language of narrative repentance. Thus, our narrative repentance is anchored in our worship, because it is in worship that we hear the true story of the Church, the true story of our identity as a people precious to God, the true story of God that becomes the defining story of our hearts.

Though worship practices vary widely between Christian traditions, every practice of worship has some sort of rhythm, some sort of movement. Approaching worship with an understanding of narrative repentance means being intentional about this movement. In the tradition of the Orthodox Church, the central act of worship is in the service of the Divine Liturgy. The Divine Liturgy includes prayers and litanies ascribed to St. John Chrysostom which have been repeated by generations of the faithful. These are interspersed with hymns (many of which date back to the fourth – eighth centuries),

²³ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 88.

verses from the Psalms, and readings from Scripture. Though rubrics for celebrating the Divine Liturgy are straightforward and easily taught, there are finer points in the Liturgy that can be missed by inexperienced liturgists. Primary among these finer points is the narrative form of all these liturgical elements—litanies, prayers, hymns, Psalms, and readings. It is not a complicated task to simply follow rubrics and celebrate the Divine Liturgy as a collection of movements, actions, and words. Such a Liturgy, though, risks becoming empty and mechanical. Rather, the narrative movement of the Liturgy must be recognized and intentionally embraced by the celebrant. Litanies and prayers should not be read in isolation but rather studied to note the rising crescendo of our self-offering in the Liturgy. Though an exhaustive exploration of the narrative form of the Divine Liturgy is beyond the scope of this thesis, there are a few observations that will illustrate what it looks like to approach worship with an intentionality grounded in an understanding of narrative repentance.

First, the Divine Liturgy (really any worship service) should be celebrated as an intentional telling and retelling of God's story. The first part of the Divine Liturgy, sometimes termed the Liturgy of the Word, is a joyful movement of trust in God's mercy in revealing Himself to us. The petitions and prayers ask for God's providence in ordering and sustaining Creation and beseech Him to grant us mercy, protection, sanctification, and life in His Kingdom. This creational emphasis culminates in the reading of the Gospel passage and the sermon, a present incarnation of God's revealed truth into the circumstances of the congregation's present moment. Then, as a sort of

bridge between the two parts of the Liturgy, the priest begins to pray the 51st Psalm quietly underneath the choir's singing of the Cherubic hymn. This marks a turning point in the narrative mood of the Liturgy as the congregation moves into the second part of the Liturgy, the Liturgy of the Faithful, which culminates in the Eucharist. The faithful slowly chant, "We who mystically represent the Cherubim, sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity. Let us lay aside all the cares of life, that we may receive the King of all..." While the congregation begins to narratively enter the sacred moment of the Eucharist through their chanting of the Cherubic hymn, the priest contritely intones the plaintive prayer of the 51st Psalm while censuring the sacred worship space and the *ecclesia*, the gathered people of God. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."²⁴ This is the first point in the Divine Liturgy that the priest prays in the first person. In Orthodox teaching, the Divine Liturgy is not simply an oft-repeated worship service, but rather a participation in the one eternal Divine Liturgy celebrated once-and-for-all by Christ Himself in the Kingdom of God. So, while the congregation is preparing in hopeful anticipation to participate in this divine worship, the priest solemnly offers the prayer of the 51st Psalm, profoundly conscious of a personal unworthiness for such a sacred task. The narrative rhythm of the

²⁴ Psalm 51. It is of significance that this Psalm is the only Psalm that ends on a note of unresolved penitence.

Divine Liturgy moves from God's gracious act of creation and revelation toward a mournful mindfulness of our disobedience and sin, which has given an opening for death to threaten God's 'very good' Creation.

In many parishes, the petitions which follow in the Liturgy are now chanted in a minor key, rather than the more joyful major tonality of the first part of the Liturgy. This awareness that sin and the Fall have now marred the spotless Creation of our good and loving God does not prevail in the Divine Liturgy, however. The next set of petitions, meek but trusting, plead for God's mercy and forgiveness in our sin. The final movement of the Liturgy climaxes in the reception of the Eucharist and the forgiveness of the people of God and their sending out into the world, "like lions breathing fire, having become terrible to the devil."²⁵ Having proclaimed, "Let us depart in peace," the priest offers a final prayer for God's blessing over His people who go forth renewed by the Eucharist into the world:

"O Lord, Who blesses those who bless You and sanctifies those who put their trust in You, save Your people and bless Your inheritance. Protect the whole body of Your Church. Sanctify those who love the beauty of Your house. Glorify them in return by Your divine power and forsake us not who have set our hope in You. Grant peace to Your world, to Your churches, to the clergy, to our civic leaders, to the armed forces, and to all Your people. For every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from You, the Father of lights. To You we give glory, thanksgiving, and

²⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on John XLVI (John 6:41-42)*, 330.

worship, to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages.”²⁶

Thus, each Divine Liturgy narratively moves from Creation to the Fall and sin, and from the Fall and sin to forgiveness and salvation, and from forgiveness and salvation to our own weekly Pentecost, being sent out into the world to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Such narrative movement is not clearly apparent to a casual observer, nor likely even consciously noticed by the faithful who participate in worship week after week and year after year.²⁷ But this narrative movement is critical in forming, even if only intuitively, a Christian social imaginary within the hearts of the faithful. The priest, having reflected on this narrative movement, can better nurture the congregation’s formation as a people worshipping in spirit and truth²⁸ through an intentional celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

Second, the hymnography of the Orthodox Church is deeply narrative, as are the hymns in many other Christian traditions. Orthodox hymns aspire to capture the central meaning of the saint being celebrated or the festal event being commemorated. It is critical to the narrative repentance of the faithful that the chanters and choir clearly (and

²⁶ The “*Prayer Behind the Amvon*” from the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom

²⁷ This narrative movement is even present in the liturgical calendar. The Orthodox Church celebrates 12 Great Feasts in addition to Pascha (Easter). The liturgical year begins with the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary on September 8th and ends with her Dormition on August 15th. The Great Feasts primarily follow the life and ministry of Jesus Christ—Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation at the Temple, Baptism, Transfiguration, Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday, and Ascension. Together these feasts impart a narrative character to the annual liturgical calendar.

²⁸ cf John 4:24

beautifully if such artistic capacity is present in the parish) offer such hymnic formation. The hymns of the Church are the exegesis of the Scriptural readings and hagiographical commemorations which are part of that day's Divine Liturgy. Thus, when the faithful want to know how to understand the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, we turn to the narrative hymn offered on that day:

“When You were baptized in the Jordan, O Lord, then was the worship of the Trinity made manifest. For the voice of the Father bore witness to You, naming You the beloved Son. And the Spirit in the form of a dove, affirmed the certainty of the word. O Christ God, Who appeared and illumined the world, Glory to You.”

This festal hymn illustrates that Christ's baptism, according to the hymnographic tradition of the Orthodox Church, is primarily important as a Theophany and revelation of the Holy Trinity. Certainly, other narrative aspects are important as well, yet this interpretation of the Baptism of Christ as Theophany becomes definitive for the augmented narrative by which we should understand the Feast of the Theophany in our own lives. Such hymns embody the social imaginary of the Church, and their artful presentation can be deeply formative of the narrative repentance of the congregation.

Finally, the movements and processions of the Liturgy are part of this narrative experience. Censing the icons and the people during the praying of the 51st Psalm marks out an important narrative moment. The Small Entrance as we bring the Gospel book into the altar, as well as the Great Entrance when we bring the holy gifts, the bread and wine, into the altar are woven into the narrative movement of the Divine Liturgy. The sacred space delineated by the iconostasis marks off paradise from the fallen world, and

life from death. So, the narrative movement of being cast out of paradise is marked by the processions and then our promised entry into the Kingdom of God through the offering of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice is captured physically in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. The faithful are not simply passive observers in this either, sitting indifferently in the pews. They stand to offer their respect during the processions, kneel in honor of the sacred moments of the Liturgy, offer the sign of the cross to bind themselves to the prayers, and some even reach out gently to brush the vestments of the priest during the Great Entrance to join their prayers to the holy gifts. An intentional awareness of this narrative physicality allows the priest to deliberately celebrate the Divine Liturgy so that the Liturgy itself becomes a true story which revises and re-forms the social imaginary of the faithful. This embodied narrative experience of the Divine Liturgy thus reinforces the intentional formation of a Christian social imaginary in the faithful through our Christian worship.

3.5 Telling the True Story of Self

While we most often hear the true stories of God, Church, and Creation in public proclamation, the telling of true stories of self is better served in private reflection and confidential counseling. Telling these true stories of self, in fact, requires an even more complicated practice of narrative repentance. In telling true stories of God, Church, and Creation, the priest—watchful, sober, humble, pursuing purity, and vulnerably present—

serves as the authoritative truthful storyteller, as far as the stories told are directly grounded in the stories of faith revealed in Holy Tradition. The priest should be vigilant and take particular care when employing illustrations, personal accounts, or examples from surrounding culture so that such secondary stories never overshadow the true, sacred story at the heart of the priest's truthful storytelling. Narrative repentance as a pastoral task must be resolutely anchored in God's true story, especially the publicly proclaimed true stories of God, Church, and Creation.

In telling stories of self, however, the priest can only offer authoritative truthful stories about human 'selves' in general, about our God-given identity and created human nature as it applies to every human soul. While this framework is important, even necessary, in learning to tell true stories about ourselves, the particular story of each individual person is a story which only that person can tell authoritatively. This becomes fraught with challenges when we also consider that we are simply not trained to tell truthful stories about ourselves. Rather, we have a tendency toward self-delusion. We utilize false stories to cope with the trauma and disappointment of our lives. Among the many false stories with which we deceive ourselves, our strongest tendency is to justify and rationalize our actions to preserve the notion of our own goodness. Hauerwas and Burrell refer to this dynamic as the notion of 'sham.' Studies of the notion of sham, they explain, suggest "that we do not lie because we are evil, but because we wish to be good or to preserve what good we already embody." As the authors observe, "we are trapped in self-deceptive accounts of what we have done...because we are unable to do what is

right without the assurance that such an action will be successful.”²⁹ We want so badly to do the right thing that we are afraid to risk any attempt at moral action that we cannot be assured will be right. Thus, when a well-intentioned attempt to do what we hope is right fails, we lack the necessary courage to accept our failure and admit to the inadequacy of our moral efforts. We feel compelled to justify and rationalize such a failed action, rather than to admit to our creaturely weakness, even if such justification requires us to falsify our narrative of self. We do not lie to ourselves because we are bad, we lie to ourselves so that we can continue thinking that we are good.

How, then, do we learn to tell true stories about self if we are inclined toward self-deception in order to protect a sense of our own goodness? This is where the priest’s role in leading the faithful toward narrative repentance becomes prominent. While the priest cannot tell authoritative true stories about each person’s self, the priest can tell authoritative true stories of who we are not. It is the priest’s role to teach us to question our false narratives of self—the self-deceptive accounts of what we have done—so that we can then embrace the true story of our self which is revealed in our nous by the divine illumination offered in communion with the life of the Holy Trinity. In engaging in the pastoral task of narrative repentance toward this end, the priest needs to focus on three activities. First, the priest gently guides the faithful to understand how sham drives us to

²⁹ Hauerwas and Burrell, *From System to Story*, 189.

embrace self-deceptive narratives because we cannot bear to admit, along with St. Paul, that “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”³⁰ Second, the priest invites the faithful to embrace the true story of our Christian identity which is “hidden in Christ.”³¹ Finally, the priest equips the faithful to engage in the spiritual work of bringing the story of their own self into harmony with the true story of our selves found in communion with the Holy Trinity.³² Learning to tell truthful stories of self is where narrative repentance becomes personally transformative. The priest’s public proclamation of true stories of God, Church, and Creation all strive to instill a social imaginary within the faithful that is in harmony with God’s revelation of the true nature of His Kingdom. With this framework in place or, more properly, as this framework is slowly being affirmed within the hearts of the faithful, the priest then invites them to adopt a new way of living as their true story of self becomes more and more incorporated into the one true story of God, lived out in the world as they witness to His Kingdom through the practice of their lives.

3.5.1 Rejecting False Stories

³⁰ Rom 7:18-19

³¹ Col 3:3

³² Rom 12:2

The first step toward teaching the faithful to tell true stories of self is to help them see how sham operates in their lives, corrupting their social imaginary with self-deceptive narratives. The faithful need to be taught to be self-reflective and attentive to their social imaginary. Since so few are even aware of this narrative substrate which undergirds our perception and action in the world, even becoming aware of the narrative form of our social imaginary is transformational. Once we realize the foundational importance of our social imaginary, we can begin untangling all the competing claims and narratives which have formed it. But this work must be gentle and led by the faithful, not by the priest. Such pastoral leadership must be revelatory rather than corrective.

In my early ministry, I visited a woman who was only peripherally engaged in the life of the Church. In getting to know her, she mentioned how revealing her past lives were to her. I, unfortunately and inexperiencedly, responded dogmatically and blurted out, “But reincarnation is not compatible with Orthodox Christianity. Surely you can see how it dismisses the miracle of Christ’s resurrection?!?” It was a clumsy moment which, unsurprisingly, drove her from the tenuous connection she had with the parish. She never returned to church. When I later discussed this pastoral failure with a mentor, he wondered why I had not asked why her past lives were important to her. I realized then what I had done. The priest has to approach the social imaginary of any parishioner as sacred ground. Even if such ground is doctrinally unstable, the parishioner’s social imaginary serves as a bearer of their identity and their meaning in life. The priest can, and should, encourage the faithful to question the truthfulness of this ground of identity

but should never outright deny it. Even a false social imaginary meets some need in the heart of the faithful. They must be invited, themselves, to compare their social imaginary to the revelation of God's Kingdom and thus to begin the slow process of reimagination that lies at the heart of narrative repentance. The publicly proclaimed true stories of God, Church, and Creation can then serve as an appropriate means of creating the needed internal tension within the faithful so that their falsely held narratives become open to questioning. The faithful, struggling with this internal tension, can then invite the priest into the sacred ground of their social imaginary as an ally to resolve the tension, rather than as a judge who condemns their cherished beliefs, however false they may be. Granted access to this sacred ground the priest can then teach the faithful to meet their genuine need for identity, dignity, and meaning with the true story of their self, while also teaching them to stand guard against the false social imaginaries which threaten to profane this same true story of their self, which is definitively grounded in communion with the divine life of the Holy Trinity.

3.5.2 Embracing True Stories

Once a parishioner has invited the priest to walk alongside them in their own personal narrative repentance, the priest is empowered to tell true stories of the human soul and the telos of our spiritual life. Telling such true stories provides a new narrative to fill the vacuum created by the rejection of false narratives and the deconstruction of

our social imaginary. This is the time when the faithful are most open to embracing the divine social imaginary revealed through the collected true stories entrusted to the life of the Church. They need to be reminded of who they are in God's eyes. They need to be inspired by a hope in the revealed telos of our lives as heirs of God's Kingdom. By telling true stories of God's relationship with humanity and incorporating our own personal story into that larger narrative, the faithful can be led to trust in God's Providence. They can be liberated from the limitations of their false stories.

During a sabbatical from my parish, I spent time in an Orthodox monastery in Essex, England. Struggling with my self-perceived reluctance to trust others, I asked a gifted confessor to hear my confession. Trying to understand why I felt such anxiety and need for control, I confided to him a story from my childhood. When I was three or four years old, my mother fell into a deep clinical depression. Fighting for her life against a pernicious mental illness, she could not be present to me in many ways. A counselor once told me that these years of childhood, according to theories in child development, are when a child learns to trust that his or her needs will be met by someone who loves them. Hence, due to her illness, my mother inadvertently taught me that I could not trust anyone to meet my needs. I had to take care of myself. When I neared the end of my confession, the priest asked me if I wanted to be free of my anxiety. Thinking it a clearly unnecessary question I said that I did. He gently, but forcefully, challenged me, "Stop blaming your mom." I wanted to protest and explain that I did not blame my mom. Indeed, I routinely defended her and excused her because of her despondency. But he

just repeated, “Stop blaming your mom.” It took days of reflection for me to finally reach the place my confessor was leading me. I was not anxious and untrusting because of how my mom had treated me (whether intentionally or unintentionally). I was anxious and untrusting because I had told myself a lie in order to cope with how her illness affected me. My four-year-old self could not understand the complexities of the situation, so I had formed a narrative that I had to take care of myself. But it had never been true, it was self-deceptive. My confessor was trying to lead me to see God’s Providence and His care for me, even during that time in my childhood. It was not the trauma of my mother’s illness, but rather the lie that I had told my four-year-old self in order to cope with the trauma, that had formed this false narrative at the heart of my social imaginary. Decades after the lie had served its purpose it lingered in my social imaginary. If anyone had accused me of such a lie, I would have refuted them. But, finding myself in a place of questioning by my own accord and gently offered the true story of God’s care for me, I was finally able to embrace a truer story of my ‘self.’ Just as the old adage reminds us that ‘nature abhors a vacuum,’ our spiritual lives abhor narrative emptiness. When the faithful reject their own false stories, the priest must be there to offer them the true stories revealed to us through Christ Jesus, else they risk simply adopting other false stories. Seeing the telos of their lives, the faithful then gain the strength to engage ever more deeply in their own narrative repentance.

3.5.3 *Living Faithful Lives*

Our lives are lived in the space between the hoped-for telos of our lives (our participation in the life of the Holy Trinity) and our present uncertainty in the face of the unpredictability of life. To live a faithful Christian life means to embrace this unpredictability and acknowledge that we are not in control of our lives. It is not our choices which define us, rather it is the relative harmony of our social imaginary with the divine social imaginary which undergirds all of Creation. To deal with the uncertainty of our lives and our inability “to do what is right without the assurance that such an action will be successful,”³³ the priest must then teach the faithful to trust in God’s good intent for Creation and equip the faithful with the true stories that empower them to work toward the purification of the nous.

Metropolitan Hierotheos identifies five primary illnesses of the heart that interfere with the purification of our nous: ignorance of God, forgetfulness, hardness, blindness, and imprudence.³⁴ Ignorance of God is more than a simple lack of stories about God or lack of education in theological doctrines. Ignorance of God refers to a heart which never knew its first love. It describes not a mental or rational deficiency, but rather a deficiency

³³ Hauerwas and Burrell, *From System to Story*, 188.

³⁴ Hierotheos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, 53-63.

of communion. The cure for this sort of ignorance is not didactic teaching, but rather embodying the love of God in such a way that the God Whom no man has ever seen can be seen manifested in our love for one another.³⁵ Forgetfulness does not connote a complete forgetting of God Himself, but rather a distracted unawareness of His presence *at all times*. Forgetfulness is the failure to live each moment of life in prayerful communion with God.³⁶ Hardness of heart is defined as an impenetrable focus on worldly affairs, pleasure, and wealth—the thorns which choke out the seed sowed by Christ in our hearts.³⁷ Blindness refers to the blindness of the nous, an inability to perceive God. It often manifests as a lack of gratitude from our failure to recognize all Creation as the gift of a loving Creator.³⁸ Finally, imprudence describes a heart that is not aware of its true interests, choosing the fleeting happiness of life at the expense of its eternal joy.³⁹ The cure for these ills, according to the Neptic Fathers, is a two-fold treatment: the remembrance of God and the rejection of the enslavement of worldly desires. Remembrance of God is through the telling of true stories, in liturgy, Scripture, and hymns. Such remembrance is nurtured by the priest in the lives of the faithful by teaching them to pray and to encounter one another as bearers of the image of God. The

³⁵ cf 1 John 4:12

³⁶ 1 Thess 5:17

³⁷ Luke 8:4-15

³⁸ 1 Thess 5:18

³⁹ Matt 6:19-20

rejection of our enslavement to worldly desires is accomplished through the ascetic practices of the faith, and the cultivation of a trust in God's providence that frees us from worldly anxieties and worries.

This process of learning to tell true stories of self is difficult to describe, in large part because it takes on a very personal form for each person. At the same time, there are patterns and rhythms that hold true for nearly everyone. This has become especially clear to me as I have ministered to youth each summer at camp. I have discerned a pattern over the years which, as camp director, I now try to highlight for new priests and counselors so that we can intentionally engage the practice of narrative repentance as it manifests at camp with the teens. One of the sessions the youth attend each day is a Christian Life class, which typically follows a rotating curriculum and teaches the basics of the faith. While following this curriculum, though, we intentionally tell stories of the faith that challenge the false social imaginaries of the world. Without naming the five illnesses of the heart, we nevertheless describe them and suggest how our loneliness, anxiety, shame, and insecurity are grounded in our false expectations and understanding of what makes a 'successful' life. It is deeply moving to see the youth begin to soften their hearts as they feel safely vulnerable to share their internal confusion over the competing narratives they encounter and to begin to realize that there is another story of life that offers liberation from their confusion and shame. Almost universally they confide to each other in these small groups that they do not feel connected and known, that they feel pressured to chase after all the worldly pleasures and accolades, and that

they are afraid of being seen as different from their peers. The campers begin to feel free to question the narratives around which they have organized their high school lives. This voluntary, even communal, questioning peaks at the end of the week when we offer the sacrament of Holy Confession to the campers. No one is required to confess, but the youth are invited to speak with a priest.

Contrary to American culture's popular imagination, confession does not typically entail a mere listing of transgressions followed by the priest's imposition of some sort of recompense or even punishment. In the Orthodox Church at least, sacramental confession is less about conforming to a moral code and being chastened when we depart from the approved behavior, and more about the priest speaking true stories into the hearts of the penitents when they are most receptive to the true, therapeutic stories of who we are in God's eyes. The prayers in confession focus almost exclusively on God's forgiveness, referring to Biblical stories of God's mercy. Thus, the prayer which invites the penitent to offer their confession begins, "May God Who, by the prophet Nathan, forgave David when he confessed his sins and accepted Manasseh's prayer of repentance, will You the same God forgive Your servant (name) who repents of all the sins (he or she) has committed. For You have said 'I do not desire the death of the sinner but rather that he should turn back and live' and have commanded us to forgive sins seventy times seven." Later, after hearing the confession, the priest begins the prayer of absolution with similar references:

“May God Who, through Nathan the prophet, forgave David when he confessed his sins, and Peter when he wept bitterly for his betrayal, and the harlot who shed tears upon His feet, and the publican and the prodigal; may this same God forgive you through me, a sinner, everything both in this present age and the age to come. May He make you stand uncondemned before His awesome judgement seat. As for the sins you have confessed, have no further anxiety about them but go in peace. The grace of the Holy Spirit, through my insignificance, has you loosened and forgiven.”

With these prayers in mind, rather than rebuking the campers for their transgressions, I and the other priests spent most of our time in Confession reminding these precious children about their true story in God. Their angst and remorse were rarely grounded in any real act of profound moral failure, but rather in a false conviction that they were not good enough in God’s eyes, that they were somehow a mistake, that they had squandered their virtue and were no longer loveable. As paradoxical a dynamic as it is, the bravado with which they faced the world was an effort at sham, a self-deceptive posture of goodness hiding their own conviction that they were, in reality, not even ‘good’ enough to merit God’s love. Many of these teens had internalized the delusion that, rather than just having made mistakes, they were a mistake. To cope with this corrosive lie, they had adopted distorted social imaginaries in an effort protect themselves from their fear of not being good enough. The loss of their protective social imaginaries, even though false, left bare their insecurities and fears of inadequacy. Their rejection of these false social imaginaries cried out, not for moral castigation, but for reassurance. So, we told these campers of God’s love and forgiveness, of His mercy to the sinner, of His rushing out to embrace the prodigal. We reminded them of their first

love, the One Who created them personally and on purpose. Thus, with the vacuum of their uncertainty filled with these true stories of God, their hearts were liberated from shame and self-recrimination so that they could confidently enter more deeply into communion with the God Who chose to love them rather than to judge them. Filled with this love, this desire, the campers themselves became curious about how to live out a Christian life. It was no longer something morally imposed upon them, but a telos toward which they longed to strive. Their social imaginary had been opened to the possibility of a new way of being in the world. They had taken their first steps toward engaging their own narrative repentance.

This is the power and the goal of narrative repentance. Our souls are ill, infected by sin and corrupted by misdirected desire. The healing of our souls—narrative repentance—frees us from the tyranny of our sin so that we can freely love God and love one another. As the priest enters into the lives of the faithful, bearing the vulnerable authority to be accepted as the community’s truthful storyteller, the faithful become empowered to adopt the true story of God, Church, and Creation as the definitive true story of their souls. But this is not a linear process. It is not so much that one first learns the true story of God, then of Creation, then of Church, and then of our self within all those contexts. Rather the true story of God reveals and refines the stories we have of

self, Church, and Creation; and the true stories of self, Church, and Creation reveal and refine each other's stories as well as the true stories of God. Narrative repentance is a sort of spiral of purification. Anchored in the true story of God revealed in Christ Jesus, each turn of the spiral leads us to question what may be false in our social imaginary, what false stories we still hold about God, Church, Creation, and self. Then, as we more fully embrace the true stories of God, Church, Creation, and self, we learn to recognize ever more subtle falsities in our social imaginary. Each turn of this spiral of purification leads us more deeply into the true story of the Holy Trinity. This is passing from glory to glory,⁴⁰ entering ever more deeply into communion with the God Who created us in His infinite love. This is how we pursue the telos of our lives. This is the work of the priest in the day-to-day life of the faithful. This is narrative repentance.

⁴⁰ 2 Cor 3:18

Conclusion

The notion of *narrative repentance* is not meant to be a theological neologism nor even really a new idea. Rather it is meant as a way of making intentional what has been intuitively practiced throughout the history of Christianity, to clarify the work that all Christians, consciously or unconsciously, are engaged in as they cultivate their spiritual life and strive toward the Kingdom of God. The growing awareness of the narrative form of our human experience opens to us language that can articulate the ascetic struggle of repentance in terms that highlight the positive intent of repentance, rather than the remorse and regret with which repentance is so commonly associated. Repentance becomes something to be joyfully and hopefully engaged rather than a shame-ridden disgrace to be avoided. Narrative repentance rescues the Christian moral life from a downward spiral of moral effort, followed by moral failure and remorse, leading to renewed moral effort that, it seems, inevitably leads to yet another moral failure. Narrative repentance's upward spiral of noetic purification through the learning of true stories of God, self, Church, and Creation nurtures a healthier, truer, social imagination which understands our moral failures as a symptom, rather than the cause, of our spiritual illness. By intentionally cultivating the divine social imaginary we can begin to challenge the distorted narratives which falsely form our desire and thus actions in the world. While the healing of our soul—and hence our social imaginary—is a divine act of illumination, we can purposefully and tenaciously pursue our own narrative purification

and unlearn the false narratives by which we are held captive. A priest or pastor who understands this underlying principle of pastoral work will more effectively collaborate with the faithful as they pursue communion with the life of the Holy Trinity each moment of each day of their Christian life. The telling and internalizing of true stories of God, self, Church, and Creation holds the promise of guiding us to the telos of our lives, abiding in the Kingdom prepared for us by the God Who loves us and desires our salvation and eternal life.¹

As this concept of narrative repentance is foundational to the practice of a priest's or pastor's pastoral ministry, a full exploration of its ramifications and practical expressions is beyond the scope of this thesis. There are a multitude of lines of inquiry that can be pursued from this conceptual root of narrative repentance. Much more can be said about the intentional development of authoritative truthful storytellers and the sort of character that a pastor must cultivate in order to guard against pulpit abuse or any other pastoral or spiritual abuse. Pastorally, the concept of narrative repentance invites us to consider how true stories of God, self, Church, and Creation then inform our actions in the world. A rich topic of consideration would be the care for God's Creation. His All-Holiness, Patriarch Bartholomew, the spiritual leader of the Orthodox Church, is often called the "Green Patriarch" for his insistence that care for the created world is a

¹ cf. Ezekiel 18:23, which is quoted in the service of Confession in the Orthodox Church.

Christian imperative. In the face of environmental collapse and global warming, a new and indeed more truthful narrative of humanity's relationship to Creation is urgently needed. Another line of inquiry would be to consider how congregations also have social imaginaries. How can the pastor help lead the congregation itself to challenge the narratives which form its self-conception? The notion of the 'other' and our hospitality to the 'other' is also critical to questioning our personal and congregational social imaginaries. How do we engage in dialogue with those who hold other social imaginaries in a way that is enriching and challenging for both sides?

There is also abundant space for further inquiry. The very concept of narrative repentance suggests the opportunity to explore what social imaginaries we hold, both within culture and within Christian communities. What stories are vying for our attention? Which stories are true and how can we discern truth? What exactly are the true stories of God, self, Church, and Creation? Can such stories even be defined or does the element of divine illumination put such academic clarity beyond our human scope? At the intersection of pastoral care and intellectual curiosity we can ask what does it look like to deconstruct our social imaginaries and untangle all the stories which have formed it? Is such a methodical approach even practical or is our social imaginary too entangled in the less rational parts of our soul? And, of course, there is much work that can be done in applying the underlying principle of narrative repentance to all the pastoral tasks Christian leaders undertake throughout their days, weeks, and years. The observations in chapter three only serve as the proverbial "tip of the iceberg" in terms of applying

narrative repentance to pastoral ministry. Further exploration can be made in applying narrative repentance to preaching, teaching, and worship as well as expanding inquiry to other areas of pastoral care.

My deepest hope in writing this thesis, however, is in the personal application of narrative repentance. As I mentioned in the introduction, my pastoral ministry has been immeasurably enriched by the invitation to enter the sacred ground of my parishioners' social imaginaries. What I have seen has repeatedly broken my heart. So many people labor under false stories and stumble beneath unbearable burdens of shame which we unknowingly impose upon ourselves. I am incontrovertibly certain that God's intent for us is not that we wilt under a sense of unworthiness or shame, or chase after divine approval by being morally "good enough." While I do not think most people would characterize God in such negative terms, nevertheless I have frequently heard God cast as a harsh judge and oppressive authoritarian, with no empathy for our spiritual efforts, as feeble as they may be. In contrast to this, through the witness of my spiritual fathers and mothers, God has been revealed in His self-emptying on the Cross as our loving Champion, willing to bear any burden, to endure any humiliation, so that He can remind us that we are His precious children, in whom He is well pleased. We do not have to be "good enough." We are already the "very good" creation of the God Who loves us. If we make that the story of our hearts, then we can begin to live and love free from the distortions of false stories, with hope and confidence in the divine love of the Holy

Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the One God Who loves us now and forever and
unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Glory to God
Δόξα τω Θεώ

Appendix A – The Fragrance of Forgiveness

The Fragrance of Forgiveness

A Sermon Delivered on Holy Wednesday

Today is a day of contrasts. It stands exactly halfway between the resurrection of Lazarus and the Resurrection of our Christ. It stands between Christ's Triumphant Entry as King into Jerusalem and His Triumphant Entry as King and God into Hades. It stands between Christ's teaching in the Temple and His trial by the Temple authorities. And it stands between the washing of His feet by the woman and His washing of the feet of the Disciples. It stands in the middle of Holy Week, trembling at what is to come, yet comforted by reflecting back on what Christ has taught us to expect in four days' time. Yes, today is a day of contrasts; and the Church highlights this so poetically in the hymns last night. They are almost cinematic; the focus rapidly alternating between the sinful woman bowed down before Christ's feet, bathing them in tears. Then, with that image seared into our minds, shifting to Judas – one of Christ's inner circle, a beloved disciple and confidante – standing before the chief priests betraying our Lord. The woman, shattered by Her love of Christ; then, Judas, casting aside his love for his Master. Back and forth, each time more poignant, each time more tragic. For you see, my dear brothers and sisters, today our precious Christ is betrayed. Today, Judas sells our Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Yet today is also the day that we traditionally receive the healing Mystery of Holy Unction. Christ today is offered to Death; and in return, today He offers

us healing and Life. How can that be? What meaning is hidden in these contrasts? What message does Today hold for us?

On Palm Sunday, Dn. Gavriilo asked me if I ever wondered about the minor characters in the Gospel stories. He'd noticed the man carrying water – you probably don't remember him. He was given no name, and really no role in last Sunday's Gospel passage. He was just the guy that Jesus told His disciples to follow back to his master so that they could ask that master for a donkey. But who was this unnamed man? And do you think he woke up that day thinking that, by wondering around the city lugging a jar of water, he'd be remembered 2000 years later? The inspiration that the good Deacon had, though, is very profound. You see, too often we focus so hard on the main characters that we miss the beauty and profound insight offered by the unnamed supporting cast. The Gospel lesson for today, for Holy Wednesday, is no exception. We hear of Christ's anointing, of the woman who pours out a jar of costly ointment to perfume Him and prepare Him for His coming burial. But when we preach about this event, when we comment on this reading, too often we focus only on Christ. The story becomes only about Him and His coming death; it's almost as if the woman is just a prop in Jesus' story. Or perhaps we see her as a foil for Judas; as an opportunity to expose the superficiality of Judas' faith in Christ. Her act of love and devotion diminished into a sort of mirror exposing the self-deception and disillusionment of Judas; her act existing only to solicit his response. But who was she? Who was this woman whom Christ Himself says will be remembered so long as the Gospel is preached? What was she like?

What was her experience of Christ? Why has the Church in Her wisdom chosen to highlight this woman on this day of contrasts? What can we learn from her?

What we know of the woman from Scripture is actually a little confusing. It is not clear whether Christ was anointed on three occasions by three different women, on one occasion by one woman, or on two occasions by one or two women. Some minor details are also somewhat mysterious; was Jesus anointed 6 days or 2 days before His arrest? Now, while such details are doubtless important and fascinating for a Bible study or for writing a commentary, I'd like to suggest that these details are not the point of the story; that the Gospel writers remembered the woman's story, recorded this event because of what it teaches us about approaching Christ. So leaving those details behind, I want you to imagine the woman we remembered last night in the Hymn of Kassiani. Who was she? A sinner the Pharisee said – an unclean, impure harlot. A woman whose sin was so well known, so infamous, that the religious elite were shocked that she would even approach Christ, let alone touch Him. Imagine for a moment that a prostitute came to join our parish, or an adult film star, an exotic dancer. How would we feel? Would we welcome her? Or would we protest? 'We can't have her around our children; goodness, we can't have her around our husbands and our sons!' She can't be trusted. She is immoral, suspicious. How can we invite someone like her in? Now, it's not so much that the Pharisee was grotesquely arrogant, judgmental, and self-righteous. It's just that he was a lot like us. You see, too often we fear another's sins more than we fear our own.

So here stood this woman, bent down under the weight of everyone's disapproval, humiliated by the public exposure of her private sins. With their eyes piercing her with disapproval she approached Jesus – perfect, sinless, blameless; the source of all holiness and undiluted fountain of righteousness and purity. And slowly she bowed down at His feet. This woman, despised and rejected by every respectable and honorable man, reached out for God's feet, and pleaded, "Reject me not, O Savior of my soul." And she began to cry. She cried so intensely, so profoundly, and for so long that she began to wash Christ's feet with her tears. Let's not pass that up too quickly. I have cried on many occasions and have even wept deeply. But I don't know that I have ever cried tears so copiously that I could do anything more than wet the back of my hand. What volume of tears would it take to wash someone's feet? What depth of grief, of regret, could produce a sorrow so deep? When I am faced with Christ, do I stand self-content in my false righteousness, or do I cry tears enough to bathe His feet? Do I ask Him why He doesn't judge 'those' other people or do I bow down and offer my sinfulness to Him? Am I the Pharisee or the woman who went away forgiven?

Having washed His feet, the woman anoints Christ with a jar of perfume costing a year's wages. This is the act she is most remembered for, the act that causes Judas to protest. It is an act of extravagant love. Scripture tells us that this is Christ's anointing for His burial – remember He will not be there when the Myrrh-bearing Women come to anoint His Body at the tomb. But his anointing is not the woman's final act. Having washed and anointed her Savior, she takes her hair and dries His feet. It's as if washing

His feet weren't an intimate enough act to demonstrate her love; and what an intimate act it is. Fr. Paul and I have been discussing the possibility of doing a Washing of the Feet service at some point. But it is a daunting idea; not so much for the doing – both he and I would love to demonstrate our love for you and our commitment to serve you in such a way – not so much for the doing, then, as for the being done to. It is such an intimate experience to allow someone to clean your feet; to sit with someone bowed to the floor in front of you washing away the dust and fatigue of your day. Tomorrow Christ will wash His disciples' feet to show us how to serve one another; but yesterday He allowed a woman to wash His feet to show us how intimately we must serve Him. And then she dried His feet with her hair.

This is the image I pray you will remember; this the thought that you take with you through this weekend. Not just the woman bowed down before Christ; not just the woman weeping waves of tears upon His feet; not just the woman anointing Him with perfume; not even just the woman drying His feet with her hair. But a thought of that same woman leaving the house, departing in peace, returning to her life – I want you to remember this image because of something extraordinary. Today we spend enormous amounts of money on perfumes and shampoos. There are a hundred brands scented with one fragrance or another: mango shampoo, kiwi conditioner, chamomile body wash. All because the marketing machine has figured out what a friend told me once; that, especially for a woman with long hair, whatever scent gets caught in your hair fills the air with its perfume the rest of the day. The fragrance follows you; wherever you go and

whatever you do. The mood of your entire day is shaped by the fragrance of your hair. So think of the woman pouring perfume out on her Savior, then mopping his feet with her hair. Her love, her faith, gained her forgiveness. This extraordinary, intimate act of anointing her Savior, of demonstrating her loving repentance, delivered her from her sins. And her hair was filled with this scent, with this sweet fragrance of forgiveness. She went forth into the world, anointed by the very One that she had anointed, surrounded by a fragrant cloud, reminded of the forgiveness of her Lord. And it shaped every other thing she did. She could not go anywhere that the fragrance of forgiveness did not follow. She approached Christ a sinner, she left Him forgiven.

Today, on this day of contrasts, if you are prepared, please approach for Holy Unction. Pray for physical healing but pray also for spiritual healing. Approach as the woman, sorrowing for your sinfulness but rejoicing in the intimate embrace of your Savior. And as you are anointed remember the woman, remember the fragrance of forgiveness.

May our loving Christ reject us not as we approach His feet, to wash Them with the tears of our repentance. May He in return fill our souls with His sweet fragrance of forgiveness and have mercy on us.

Amen.

Appendix B – The Hymn of Kassiani

The Hymn of Kassiani

From the Orthros Service of Holy Wednesday

Lord, when the woman who had fallen into many sins perceived Your divinity,

she assumed the role of a myrrh-bearing woman,

and lamenting brought fragrant oils to anoint You before Your burial.

"Woe is me," she says. "Night for me is a frenzy without restraint,

very dark and moonless, a sinful love-affair.

Accept the fountains of my tears,

You who draw out from the clouds the water of the sea.

Take pity on me, and incline to the sighing of my heart,

You who bowed the heavens by Your ineffable self-emptying.

I shall cover Your unstained feet with kisses,

and wipe them dry again with the locks of my hair;

those feet, whose sound at twilight in Paradise echoed in Eve's ears,

and she hid in fear.

Who can reckon the multitude of my sins,

or fathom the depths of Your judgments, O my life-saving Savior?

Do not despise me, Your handmaiden, since without measure is Your mercy."

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Biography

Robert Lawrence is the parish priest of St. Luke Greek Orthodox Church in Mooresville, NC. He is married to Kelley, a family physician, and they have four children, Alec, Zac, Lucia, and Cecilia. Robert graduated from Duke University in 1992 with a BA in Classical Studies. He studied abroad his junior year in Greece with the College Year in Athens program and assisted with an archaeological excavation in Crete. Robert spent five years in the United States Navy as an Intelligence Officer, serving in Japan and Bahrain, and left active duty in 2000. He graduated as valedictorian from Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology with a Master of Divinity in 2006, attending Duke Divinity School for the 2004-2005 academic year after getting married to Kelley in December 2003, who was then in Medical School at UNC-Chapel Hill. Robert received a Leadership 100 scholarship to attend Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, as well as a Doctor of Ministry and the Alice Azouri Mack Scholarships at Duke Divinity School.

Robert was ordained to the Holy Diaconate at Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Houston, TX in February 2006 by His Eminence, Metropolitan Isaiah of Denver, and then to the Holy Priesthood at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in Raleigh, NC in October 2006 by His Eminence, Metropolitan Alexios of Atlanta. He served as Assistant Priest at Holy Trinity from 2006-2008 and then as Presiding Priest at Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church in Lowell, MA from 2009-2012. Robert has been the Presiding Priest at St. Luke Greek Orthodox Church since July 2012.