

Chapter 12: TOOLS

Discipline is not usually a popular word. When we think of someone's being disciplined, punishment comes to mind, someone experiencing a harsh consequence for bad behavior. But the noun *discipline* is something much different. A discipline is a way to accomplish a goal: a schedule, activity or tool that enables you to get where you want to go. There are some tools, some disciplines, that have been traditionally used by those who have made vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability. These tools are available to every believer who wants to grow in righteousness. It is not so much a matter of one tool or another making poverty, chastity, obedience, or stability possible, as these kinds of activities can nurture continual Christian growth.

No life is easily divided into neat sections. Aspects of all that is thought or done intermingle with other thoughts and actions. A combination of tools can be used to effect progress in a vowed-life. We have already looked at some aspects of manual labor, a frequently used tool. Prayer is another tool that is used often and has far-reaching consequences. Prayer will have a chapter of its own.

SIMPLICITY

It is extremely difficult not to be caught up in the complexity of the 21st Century. The basics of functioning in a social setting now require interactions with government and business enterprises, and usually some time as an employer or an employee. Machinery and appliances have to be mastered to have transportation, communication, and meals. Now, in the computer age and social media, even more skills must be learned to interact with others. More complexity breeds more complexity.

Simplicity is counter-cultural, and choosing simplicity requires both determination and endurance. Holy Redeemer has desired to take up this challenge for the good of its women and the encouragement of those involved with them. Some attempts have been more successful than others.

What has been tried? The initial move to the Ladoga countryside helped to slow the daily pace away from the inner city, and to lower the noise level. Leaving secular jobs and staying at the monastery full-time reduced the number of things the Mothers had to juggle. The second year there they got rid of their telephone, but they later found that it was not feasible to operate without one. They delayed adding a cell phone for 22 years until Mother Paula's health issues required one for safety reasons. They eliminated services that required monthly payments until the purchase of the farm property forced them into a mortgage. There was no credit card until air travel to visit EOC churches and other monasteries required that for the purchase of tickets. For many years there was an annual clean-every-drawer-and-closet project to eliminate excess "stuff" -- books, appliances, gadgets, unused materials.

At the time the house was designed for the Bloomfield farm, it was intentionally designed without electricity. However, those who built the house wired it, just in case the Mothers ever changed their minds about wanting it. They heated with a woodstove, used bottled gas for refrigeration and kerosene lamps at night. On a trip to visit a New York monastery, the abbot warned them to not make a god out of simplicity, so they began to make decisions that brought better balance between efforts to simplify and to be available beyond the basics of everyday living. A life given over to meeting the most basic

needs without labor-saving devices doesn't leave time or energy for much else. The electricity was finally turned on, a washing machine and dryer installed, and a used computer and microwave accepted.

Limiting possessions helped the Mothers in several ways. Fewer things require less money to own them and maintain them. Being slow to acquire things forces deliberation about what is really necessary for what you want to accomplish. In a consumer-oriented culture, being aware of the subtle pull of “buy me” and “own me” makes for better stewardship of God's resources.

This quote from Joy Davidman (*SMOKE ON THE MOUNTAIN*, 1954) the Mothers used in a newsletter to explain their understanding about possessions: “Christianity is everywhere paradoxical,...but nowhere more so than in its ideas of worldly goods. For there ARE good things, yet we must not long for them. They ARE to be enjoyed—and yet we must not make that enjoyment our goal. There are ‘things ye have need of’, yet we must not devote our lives to getting them. If we have them, the best possible thing we can do is to give them away; if we don't have them, we may expect them, but we must not worry about it! The Savior who bestows miraculous loaves and fishes is the same One who proclaims that man does not live by bread alone. He who teaches us to pray, ‘*Give us this day our daily bread,*’ also warns us, ‘*Take no thought about what you shall eat.*’

The paradox is easier once we remember: ‘*Seek ye FIRST the kingdom of God*’--once we remember the distinction between ends and means. Seeing God face to face is our goal. Therefore...all the pleasant THINGS exist primarily as a kind of currency of love; a means whereby men can exchange love with one another and thus become capable of the love of God. We value such THINGS not only for their pleasantness, but also because we can give them away and give our love with them; or else because in receiving them, we can receive other's love for us.”

ALMSGIVING

Closely tied to the matter of possessing things is the attitude toward giving them away. The Scriptures are full of instructions about giving, and Christians are encouraged to give out of what they hold dear, not just out of abundance. One of the most cherished figures in the Bible is the widow who gave a little because it was all she had (see Mark 12:41-44).

In the earlier chapter about Holy Redeemer's support, you were introduced to the Mothers' attitude toward alms given in secret, so don't expect to read here any details about the alms they have given. Know only that they have gotten great joy from the giving.

They will tell you that the receiving of alms themselves has taught them the great value of all kinds of alms: money, time, physical labor, physical goods. There is never a time or place where one of these is not needed. Sometimes such things are not acknowledged and/or appreciated, but that is not the motivation for the giving. “*We love because He first loved us.*” (1 John 4:19)

The Mothers have found that one of the demands of almsgiving is intentionally putting yourself in a place where you have to trust that God is the Great Provider. Rather than hoard out of fear of a future lack, can you absolutely believe what the Lord says in the Gospels? “*Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing?...Can any of you add a single cubit to his height by worrying?...So don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For the*

idolaters eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.”
(Matthew 6:25, 27, 31-33)

SILENCE

Monastic writers talk a lot about acquiring inner silence, an attentiveness to the Holy Spirit's speaking and a willful setting aside of the busyness inside one's head. Managing outward silence is a hugely important tool for creating an environment to nurture inner silence, even if not absolutely essential.

After moving from the city to the quieter countryside, the Mothers tackled the noise of conversation. They took up the ancient challenge of hours set-aside for complete silence. They chose the time after communal evening prayers until the first praises of morning prayers. It takes some forethought and self-control to carry out necessary tasks with no conversation. When the Mothers began to have overnight retreatants at the monastery, these hours of silence were asked of everyone, and many found them refreshing but a challenge.

Another discipline the Mothers set for themselves was extending the silent hours before morning prayers to their hour+ travel in the car to Sunday parish worship in either Terre Haute or Indianapolis. The only exception to silence was preparatory Eucharist prayers read by whoever was not driving. No conversation. No music on the car radio.

When Shepherd's House became available for retreatants, the Mothers tried to get retreatants to leave their radios, MP3 players, TVs, and cell phones at home. This was done with varying success. Even silence for short amounts of time was uncomfortable for some. Others relished the opportunity for quiet. So why bother to reduce or eliminate noise? We are so used to high sound levels that we have become immune to the sensory overload they can produce. So much of our lives is filled with the artificial sounds of man-made things and the sound of our own voice. If we want to hear from God, we have to give Him some opportunity by not listening to everything else.

Everyday conversation can be filled with idle, useless talk if we don't pay attention to what we are saying and choose to make what comes out of our mouths meaningful. In addition, it is extremely difficult to serve another by listening when you are doing the talking. The Mothers have been working at paying attention to this for many years, and still don't always get it right!

SOLITUDE

Being unmarried is an advantage in finding opportunities for solitude, but even on the farm and at Agape House, creating spaces for solitude has sometimes been a challenge because our houses have been very small. Agape House's backyard has been transformed into a quiet place for sitting (weather permitting) with a screened porch and flower garden. The Bloomfield farm was the most convenient place for solitude because Mother Pilar created several trails through the woods and many meditation areas where you could sit on a bench and be still.



Agape House enclosed backyard



Meditation areas dedicated to St. Mary of Egypt (left) and St. Photini (the woman at the well)

Being alone is more difficult for some than others. Different personality types would choose this more readily than others. Nevertheless, getting away from everyone else can be an effective way to focus thoughts and calm the impact of demands and sensory overload. Christ himself went away from others for time alone with the Father. If He found it worthwhile (or perhaps even necessary), it must be important.

CONTEMPLATION & MEDITATION

To some there may be a distinct difference between contemplation (which depends a great deal on listening) and meditation (which depends a great deal on thinking), but for this discussion on tools they will be merged into opportunity for reflection. The idea is to take the time to deeply consider an idea and to let it impact your life.

Consider this metaphor from gardening used in one of Holy Redeemer's newsletters: "If we are to flourish, then we must co-operate with the Gardener of our souls, allowing Him to prune back the activities and thoughts that do not produce growth. We must weed out passions for material things, entertainments, and comforts which draw us away from God. We must be watered by the Word of God regularly that our roots may go deep. Our lives must be fertilized by spiritual reading, participation in the Church's worship, and fellowship of the saints, that we may grow straight and strong. We must be regularly nourished at the Table of the Lord, for all the gardening work will be in vain if we receive no Food from God. As Christ says about the seed in His parable of the sower in the Gospel of Mark: *'Those that were sown upon the good soil are the ones who hear the message of God and accept it and bear fruit thirty- and sixty- and a hundred-fold.'* (4:20) May His message to us be sown in good soil. May we hear it, heed it, and bear fruit abundantly."

A time of reflecting looks as if nothing productive is happening. What can be the measurable result of such an activity? However, throughout her history the Church has had people who intentionally made contemplation a priority in order to help the Church keep her eyes focused on the Kingdom and to be sensitive to the voice and work of the Spirit.

STUDY

The book of Proverbs and Psalm 119 are particularly rich in stressing the importance of knowing God's instructions in order to do them. A study of the Scriptures is a basic resource for a believer who wants to learn about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and God's intentions for His children.

"The proverbs...(are) for gaining wisdom and being instructed; for understanding insightful sayings; for receiving wise instruction in righteousness, justice, and integrity; for teaching shrewdness to the inexperienced, knowledge and discretion to the young. A wise man will listen and increase his learning, and a discerning man will obtain guidance." (Proverbs 1:1-5) "...If you call out to insight and lift your voice to understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it like hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." (Proverbs 2:3-5) "Help me understand the meaning of Your precepts so that I can meditate on Your wonders.... Help me understand Your instruction, and I will obey it and follow it with all my heart." (Psalm 119:27, 34)

There are many areas of study in addition to the Scriptures which are worthwhile for mentoring the Christian life. The Mothers have been enriched by the writings of the Church Fathers from the first centuries of the Church (such as Athanasius, Chrysostom, John Damascene) as well as the books of more contemporary spiritual writers (such as Thomas Merton, Hannah Whitall Smith, Kathleen Norris, C.S. Lewis, Alexander Schmemmann, Brother Andrew, Corrie ten Boom). Agape House is blessed to have the beginnings of a small library.

Study has been so important to the Mothers that they self-published their own book to help in the study of icons. In the early years in Ladoga the local parish wanted them to teach the small children about

icons, and the Mothers could find no resources with basic explanations and easily understood theology. **ICONS: THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF ORTHODOXY** was initially written by them in 2003 as a resource for EOC parishes. It incorporates color prints of eleven of the major feast icons and their meanings with other topics such as the meaning of icons, the artistic creation of icons, the symbols used in icons, the history of icon use in the Church, and the place of icons in the home.

FASTING

As part of the Evangelical Orthodox Church, the Mothers and Carol participate in church-wide fasts that are regular parts of the annual preparation periods before Christmas and Easter. This intentional action involves not only a reduction in the consumption of food, but also a reduction in aspects of the popular culture—entertainment and social media. The fasts offer practice in self-control in order to focus on matters of eternal importance. They also use fasting in connection with intense times of intercessory prayer as a measure of the seriousness of their involvement.

In **CHRISTIAN PERFECTION**, 1726, the English cleric William Law described the hoped for result of fasting like this: “Fasting, as it is a denial of bodily indulgence, as it disciplines the body into a state of obedience and contradicts its appetites, is the most constant and universal means of procuring liberty and freedom of the mind. For it is the love of our body and too much care for its enjoyments that makes us too sensitive to its demands. Whatever we nourish and cherish gains our interest and rules us to a marked degree, for every indulgence adds power and makes all our ways of thinking subservient to it.

It is no fixed degree of sorrow that is the common repentance of all men; it is no particular sum of money that is the common charity of all men; it is no fixed form or length or hour of prayer that is the common devotion of all men. Yet all these are constant and universal duties. In like manner, even though fasting may be subject to variations, it is a constant and universal duty.

The reason for self-denial and abstinence is constant because we are perpetually united to a body that must be directed into actions consonant with a holy life. This means that one should be temperate in all things, if he is to put on Christ. He must practice the subjection of his body if he is to nurture virtue and lessen the strength of temptation.”

HOSPITALITY

Since Abraham welcomed the Angel of the Lord to his table for food and drink (Genesis 18:1-22), hospitality has been an earmark of God's people. For monastic communities, it is fundamental. When Moses gave the Lord's instructions of how and why God's people should conduct themselves, he explained about having a welcoming attitude. “*You must regard the foreigner who lives with you as the native-born among you. You are to love him as yourself, for you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.*” (Leviticus 19:34) We have all needed care, comfort, attention, and when we are in a position to be able to extend that to someone else, it manifests gratitude for what has been done for us. It expresses God's own love.



Hospitality of Abraham icon

Within the first year in Ladoga the Mothers renovated one of the bedrooms in the old house as a guest room. When the house was built on the Bloomfield farm, an extra bedroom was included for guests. When Shepherd's House was purchased on the property south of the farm, there was a tiny house just for guests. Now that the women are in Agape House and all of the bedrooms are taken, sleeping arrangements are still shuffled as needed to accommodate overnight guests.

Offering meals has been and continues to be a blessing. There have been workday groups, women's groups, personal and holiday celebrations, expected and unexpected visitors, family gatherings, Board meetings, retreatants, small group teaching sessions, and pastoral visits. Now that Carol is a part of Agape House, there are sometimes grandchildren and parents at the table. "Breaking bread" together enhances communion with one another. In some cases, providing nutritional food is a special bonus for those who don't eat well. (They love to feed the bachelors of the parish!) Cooking for all these different encounters is a creative outlet for God-given skills and creativity.

"Let brotherly love continue. Don't neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:1-2)