

A Cure for Despondency: Loving One Another, Loving Christ

Dr. Nicole Roccas

29th Biennial Philoptochos National Assembly
Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Toronto (Canada)
Belleville, Ontario
March 27, 2017

Presidents, delegates, and Metropolis Philoptochos members, I wish to sincerely thank you for the opportunity to be here today to talk about two topics I believe are crucial to the health of the Church today: despondency and inter-generational tension. I hope that today's address begins a conversation that will continue in your Chapters and parishes in the coming weeks and months.

Boredom. Apathy. Anger. Despair. These are all aspects of what Evagrius Ponticus in the fourth century called the most oppressive passion: "despondency" (ακηδία). From that time on, despondency has been recognized among the major passions or spiritual sicknesses in the Christian life.

Although the life of the desert monastic is foreign to most of us, our society is saturated by the same restlessness and ennui of despondency. At the outset of this talk, I wish to delineate this spiritual sickness from clinical depression, which often has physical and biochemical causes.

Like two circles of a Venn diagram, despondency and depression share many symptoms in common. However, our understandings of each are rooted in very different paradigms.

For the remainder of this talk, I will turn to despondency, which in ancient Christianity was understood as a sickness of the soul. I will talk about how this condition can afflict us both as individuals, and as groups and organizations within the Church. My aim is to help you understand the different layers and causes of this condition, as well as the ways we can begin to heal from its destruction—as individuals and as a group.

What is Despondency?

Despondency itself has many faces, and its signs and symptoms vary from person to person. We've already mentioned boredom and despair. To this list we could add things like rumination, dissatisfaction, sadness, lethargy, despair, and aimlessness. But these are only one side of the coin. Despondency does not just slow us down—it can also speed us up, propelling us into frenetic activity and endless distraction, preventing us from ever slowing down and really contemplating our purpose. In this scenario, despondency prompts symptoms like anxiety, restlessness, distractibility, and purposeless activity. Still, if despondency is a sickness, then all of these manifestations are merely symptoms of an underlying condition.

What is that underlying condition? As the Greek term *ακηδία* (*a + kithos*) implies, despondency stems from an absence of care or effort. In despondency, we grow apathetic toward God, our neighbor, or the value of our limited time in life. We stop caring about fighting the good fight of faith—in our hearts or in our actions. Instead, we begin simply going through the motions. Over time, this produces what theologians refer to as a “slackness” (*ἀτονία*, *atonia*) of

the soul. Like a bow and arrow that loosens with time, our inner selves grow weak, loose, and unfocused.

But why? Why do we stop caring? Why do we stop putting forth a spiritual effort (*askesis*)?

I believe that there is something that comes before the apathy, and long before the symptoms of despondency begin to show themselves. That something is *pain*. Essentially, we turn to despondency to avoid or cover up our wounds.

In English, to “care” comes from an old Germanic word that once meant to cry, to lament. But we hardly need a linguist to tell us this. We know—as women, as human beings—that to care about anything or anyone (be it the poor, the nation, the Church, our children) is to open ourselves up to the possibility of pain. It is to open ourselves to the frailty of existence, to the reality of brokenness. In short, to care is to cry. To care is to be in pain.

As women who are actively involved in serving the Church, particularly with regards to the poor, there are a number of unique areas where we may experience pain. The first, of course, is the condition of poverty itself. Today, impoverishment and vulnerability come in numerous forms—not just financial need, but also physical, emotional, and spiritual infirmity. Things like drug addiction, domestic abuse, mental illness, depression, or hopelessness. Whatever little we have to offer—a monetary donation, for example, or a warm meal—may feel like a drop in the bucket of the vast oceans of brokenness that surround us.

That is a valid source of pain. But for now, I want to address a wound that is closer to home. And that involves all the interpersonal issues that can hinder Christian service. After all, we do not serve the Church merely as individuals, but as part of a body, members of a family.

And like all bodies and families, sometimes there are sore spots among us. Points of tension. Ailments. Injuries. At times, these sore spots not only get in the way of love and service, they also induce the growth of despondency in our hearts. One particular source of tension in our communities is that which exists between the older and younger generations of Greek Orthodox Christians in Canada. The Philoptochos is not immune to this tension. The older generations tend to prefer one way of doing things, the younger generation another. Moreover, it is increasingly difficult to attract and maintain younger members in the Church, which inadvertently creates imbalances that can fuel even more tension.

Over time, all of the little generational discordances can compound and harden into despondency, first manifesting as symptoms like anger, sadness, and verbal outbursts, and then dulling into chronic numbness, boredom, distraction, and sadness. Some people may even leave the Church altogether. Out of these despondent tendencies arise a variety of group behaviors that only make things worse. We may, for example, focus on merely maintaining the status quo rather than encouraging new ideas and innovation. We may also distract ourselves by discussing non-essentials, neglecting to consider the bigger and more central questions of our mission. In despondency, we lose the vision of our vocation: to serve the poor and the Greek Orthodox Church out of Christian love. Instead, we get sucked into power dynamics, or repetitive and unproductive patterns of anger, boredom, wasting time, and distraction.

Healing Despondency

At this point, you are probably wondering what is the *cure* for all of this? That is, after all, the title of this talk.

Well, that title is perhaps a bit ambitious. I myself cannot cure you—that is only possible in Christ. To be healed from despondency requires what in Orthodox theology is called “synergy” (*synergia*), or cooperation with Christ. This means that to *be* made whole, you must *want* to be made whole. For some of us, crossing that chasm from apathy to desire for healing is among the hardest bridges we will ever face in this life. It is one many people must cross and re-cross a hundred times a day because our minds keep reverting back to despondency.

The reason it is so hard to choose healing over despondency is the pain I have already discussed. Pain is a powerful force; our souls and bodies will do anything to avoid it. To turn away from despondency requires we become willing to be soft and not allow our pain to make us bitter and hard. Where can we begin with this?

To be sure, there are many practical places we can start to heal in our individual lives, however these are better discussed in smaller groups, simply because there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Although if you have specific questions, we can discuss them in the Q&A or perhaps in a future workshop (or you can read my book when it comes out in the Fall). For now, let me specifically address what healing may look like on a group level, within Philoptochos Chapters or groups.

The word “Philoptochos,” as you know, means to love or be a friend to the poor. But you have to remember one important thing: you are a sisterhood. And loving the poor has to start with loving one another—your sisters in Christ. Because we each bear a kind of poverty within ourselves. Inasmuch as we have ever missed the mark of perfect communion with Christ, inasmuch as we have ever failed to show abundant love and mercy toward our neighbor, we are poor. We are lacking. In many ways, it is more difficult to love one another than it is to love the

homeless and the needy. We may meet a poor person once and never see them again. It is harder (much harder!) to love our sister in Christ. Our sister we see every week, our sister who stands across the aisle at Church from us, our sister who has hurt us or angered us or gossiped about us so many times over the years we've lost count. Our sister who has seemingly done nothing to deserve our forgiveness. Learning to love that sister, and all our sisters, and all our brothers, is where loving the poor—and healing from despondency—begins.

In the last hours of Christ's life, He said to His followers: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:34). Notice that He did not say "love the poor and needy as I have loved you." He distinctly said to "love *one another*," love your fellow disciples, love the people you are surrounded by. This is how we manifest the Gospel: by our capacity to love our brothers and sisters. And just in case we didn't hear it the first time, Christ repeats himself two more times in rapid succession. Perhaps Christ was so adamant in this command because He knew how hard it would to practice.

If we are serious about our faith, and serious about our desire to serve the Church, we have to ask ourselves whether we are truly loving—or at least actively trying to love—one another. Do we forgive or do we hold grudges? Do we listen to our sisters or embitter them by dominating conversations and meetings with our own opinions? Do we give others the benefit of the doubt even when their actions confuse us? Do we look down on our sisters because they are different or older or younger than us? Do we speak harshly or gently to them? Do we focus more on other people's failings than our own? These are some of the questions we must begin to ask ourselves.

For many of us, this will require taking an honest look at how we perceive people of other generations—and this goes both ways. As you may have guessed, I would consider myself as part of the so-called “younger generation.” But I have a unique vantage point, because I also work for the Metropolis and I have studied Church history, which has given me deeper knowledge of certain traditions. On top of this, I’m not Greek by birth nor was I raised Orthodox—I converted later in life. So, again, I’m really an outsider to some of the generational dynamics. Nonetheless, I hear negative views from both sides. I hear older women in the Church disparage the young, and I hear the young speak harshly about the old. The reasoning of each side is all too familiar—I don’t think we need to repeat them. But it saddens me, because when I look at the different generations of women in the Greek Orthodox Church of Canada, I see that each generation has invaluable skills and talents. Each generation brings something new and important to the table of faith and good works.

First of all, the older women. Among (many) other things, older women in this Church know how to fundraise. You know how to cook for vast armies of people, and make even a simple meal feel special. On top of that, you know how to get people together, and you know how to get people to be more generous with their money than they would otherwise be. And here’s another thing: you also know how to be generous—with your time, your energies, and your talents. There are many women in this audience right now who rarely show up for Church empty handed. You’ve either got a loaf of *Prosfora*, a basket of *Arktoklasia*, a jar of oil, a bottle of wine, a tray (or six) of *koulourakia* for coffee hour, a Basil plant—or all of the above. It takes a level of planning, sacrifice, and generosity to show up to Church like this, faithfully, always with something more to give, which I think women of my generation could really learn from.

These are just some of the many things I see and am inspired by when I look at the older generation of women in our Church.

I see a slightly different set of skills and ideas at work in the younger generations of women in our Church. In them, I see a hunger to carry out good works in more practical, hands-on ways—they do not just want to give money to the poor, they want to encounter the poor. I see younger women who want to simplify the vocation of service and get their hands dirty in the work that is to be done. I see women who desperately want to give their time to meaningful causes, who want to go beyond fundraisers and meetings and love and serve the poor with their actual hands, face-to-face. I see women who are trying to figure out what it means—and what it will mean in the future—to be an Orthodox Christian in a multicultural, pluralistic, and increasingly post-Christian society. For them, what makes the Orthodox faith worth adhering to is its ability to bring goodness in the world. Just as older generations of women don't want to come to *Church* empty handed, younger generations don't want to exit the Church after liturgy and walk back out into *society* empty handed. They want to bring whatever fruits of their faith they can to the world around them, whether they are encountering Christians or non-Christians, Greeks or non-Greeks. Because of this, they are increasingly reluctant to follow their faith, offer their money, or commit to activities in a way that does not enact something good, loving, and healing in their immediate surroundings.

At first glance, these two positions—young and old—may seem to conflict with one another. However, the Church needs and can learn from both—we must learn to work together, across the generational divide. Older women should try to teach younger women how to fundraise, how to show hospitality (and hopefully we will listen). And we should value and

support younger generations as they try to forge meaningful bridges between the historical Orthodox faith and the current needs of the society around us. It is my hope, for my generation, that we will learn to grasp new ideas and approaches to Christian ministry with one hand, without letting go of all we've been given from our mothers and grandmothers with the other hand. Both are things are important, both have been given to us by God.

The future stability of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Western world depends on all the generations working together. Change is never easy, but our world and culture is changing rapidly. And if we do not learn together to move past our despondency and face these changes as a unified family, our Church, too, will grow poor—not necessarily financially, but spiritually, intellectually, and culturally. But working together is also necessary for our *souls*, for our *salvation*—in the here and now. What are we saying when we turn our back on one generation or another? What are we saying when we fail to appreciate the old *or* the young for their knowledge, their skills, their unique gifts as human beings? What we are saying is that we don't care, and that we don't *care* to care. We are placing limits on the love and fellowship we have been granted in Christ. And we are setting ourselves up for a life of despondency, of apathy, of love-lessness toward our neighbor and eventually toward Christ. This should bother us as Christians, and especially as Christians who Philoptochos members—because we are called to be leaders of love and service in the Church. People look to you in their parishes, they look to your motherly example.

I would like to close with the words of St. Paul in first epistle to the Corinthians, when he said: “If I give all I possess to the poor [...], but do not have love, I gain nothing” (I Cor 13:3). At the risk of sounding cliché, I think if there is any one word that stands as an antidote to

despondency, it is love. The kind of love Christ demonstrated in His Life, death, and resurrection; the kind of love we witness on Christmas or Holy Friday or Holy Pascha. To the best of our human ability, exercising this love must come first—before the fundraising, before the planning, before venturing out to serve or give to the poor. It must start in our meetings, in our interactions, and in our minds and hearts as we remember one another. If each of us as individuals actively and persistently tried to love one another, as Christ commanded us—even (and especially!) when it is difficult, when no one else notices or cares—then it would be impossible for despondency to survive. You cannot love and be despondent at the same time. But of course, all of this is easier said than done. Again, because it involves some element of pain. The pain may come in the form of being misunderstood, of being afraid of change, of being interrupted or scorned or undervalued. Or the pain can come in a deeper, more personal way. Whatever the case, let us not be afraid to turn to Christ in our pain—again and again, as often as is necessary. Let us not be afraid to pray “Lord, teach us the meaning of your command; teach us to love one another; teach us to care.” And when, in despondency, even these words are too difficult, let us not be afraid to pray “Lord, help us to *want* to care; help us to *want* to love one another.” It is only when we draw near to Christ and to one another in faith and love that despondency can be cured.

A transcript of this talk was shared via the Time Eternal blog:

<http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/timeeternal/>, where more of Dr. Roccas’ writing can be found.