

Fr. Constantine Nasr visits St. Simeon Orthodox Mission

By Karen Sibert Haddy

Our parish family at [St. Simeon Orthodox Mission](#) in Santa Clarita, was singularly blessed recently when the Very Reverend Constantine Nasr arrived to lead us in a day-long retreat, titled, “Renewal of the Holy Spirit in our lives: Practical Steps.”

Readers may know of Fr. Constantine from his 25-year career as the head priest of St. Elijah Antiochian Orthodox Church in Oklahoma City, and his pioneering work in missions and evangelism. Fr. Constantine has helped establish missions in Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, and Colorado, and has been an invaluable guide to our own Very Reverend George Ajalat in the startup of our mission here in Santa Clarita, California.

Some of our parishioners know Fr. Constantine from joining him on one of his remarkable guided [tours of the Holy Land](#). Still others have heard of him as the head of the [Nasr Orthodox Foundation](#), which works to strengthen the Church’s presence and support Orthodox Christians across the Holy Land. In [Taybeh, Palestine](#), the ancient Christian village on the West Bank where Fr. Constantine was born, the Foundation supplies the Secondary Greek Orthodox School with books, sponsors tuition for students, and has furnished a computer lab, a room for Christian Education, and a teachers’ lounge among other projects.

We began the day with Holy Liturgy to celebrate the Holy, Glorious and All-Praised Leaders of the Apostles, Peter and Paul. Then, after coffee, we settled in to hear Fr. Constantine speak. Rarely sitting down, mostly standing and moving around the church, Fr. Constantine began with an introduction focusing on our need to remember that we are created in God’s image and likeness, but of course as human beings we often sin. While the Church is perfect, he pointed out, it has a human face. But if we remember to invoke the Holy Spirit for only five minutes a day, he advised, “it will be a great help to you.”

“Ask the Holy Spirit to be within you,” Fr. Constantine urged. “When you wake up, look at yourself in the mirror. Tell yourself, ‘I want the Spirit of God to be in me today to move forward.’” Don’t think about tomorrow, he said, just work on today. “You know how to please God,” Fr. Constantine said. “Do the right thing!”

“Ask yourself, ‘Will God be pleased with me today – with what I say, what I do, where I go?’ When you ask that question, God will speak to you through your conscience. Is the answer yes? Then you are on the right path. If the answer is no – you are paying a price. If you

follow that inner voice, your life will be enriched. You are the winner, because God speaks to us by the Holy Spirit. That is a real practical step,” Fr. Constantine said.

Of course, nothing comes easily, Fr. Constantine emphasized. “You have to make the effort. You have to open the book.” The Bible can be “the GPS to enable us to connect to the Creator and help us in the struggle to be like him,” he explained. “This world will lead us to darkness, but light leads to light. Abundance of life is being with God, moving with God, obeying the teachings of God. If you do that, your life is full – full of the Holy Spirit. It only depends on you and me if we wish to invoke that Holy Spirit.”

Fr. Constantine spoke on seven major topics to amplify his practical advice about bringing the Holy Spirit into our daily lives:

- **Water** – The theme of water is a constant throughout the Bible and our lives, beginning with the water of Baptism. Fr. Constantine spoke about the “living water” that Jesus offers to the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, and reminded us of the words that we sing from Galatians 3:27, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Even in a mundane act such as washing our hands, Fr. Constantine advised, we can take a moment to cleanse our thoughts from evil things. “Jacob’s well – let it be here!” he said. “Draw near to quench the thirst!”
- **Light** – Two parables in the Holy Gospel of Matthew tell us about light. The first is from Matthew 5:14, where we are advised to let our light shine and not hide it under a bushel basket. “Candles remind you of God’s light, to be illumined, to shine,” Fr. Constantine said. “Whatever you do, whatever you say, it shows. People can see, hear, analyze what kind of person you are. The light of Christ illumines us all,” he said, and we can use it to walk in the light, not in darkness, and help light the way for others.

The other parable from Matthew 25:13 tells of the ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. The five who were wise took oil with their lamps and were ready to meet the bridegroom when he came. “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming,” the gospel warns us. Fr. Constantine promised that we too can aspire to be “the light of the world” if we take care to keep the candle burning, oil in the lamp, and the light switch on. “Use practical and tangible things,” he advised. “Think of God when you turn on the light! If I have the light of Christ in me, it can change everything! That is what God expects from us: to do something good with this gift of light.”

- **Bread** – “Jesus was born for one reason only: for our salvation, yours and mine, as the expression of the ultimate love of God,” Fr. Constantine said. “He reveals Himself as the bread of life. He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” We draw near to Christ to nurture both our physical bodies and our souls, Fr. Constantine explained. “Communion requires bread and wine. The Eucharist is the medicine of immortality. We come to renew ourselves by the Spirit at the heart of the Church. This is the heavenly table of the Lamb, which is laid for you.”

Fr. Constantine looked around the church and asked many in the group how they came to be Orthodox. The answers were surprisingly varied, including Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Jewish, Byzantine Catholicism, and Evangelical. This shows, Fr. Constantine explained, that so many people have “hunger for the truth, for the right food. We have the food! What was given to us – this is the Church handed down. Nothing has been changed; it is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Because of the Holy Spirit, we have the one true, catholic, and apostolic Church.” To remind ourselves, he advised, we can take a bit of the blessed bread home after church, symbolic of the feeding of the 5000, to remember during the week that we are a family, sharing the same food and the same blessing.

- **The Cross** – “The cross of Jesus is heavy,” Fr. Constantine said. “Whether we wear a cross or not, we have a cross to bear. Just by being Christians, we have a cross to bear. Christ said, ‘Take up your cross and follow me.’” However, Christians are not alone; we help each other. By wearing a cross, in a practical way we connect with our Savior and his sufferings. “All of us have crosses in all colors and in all shapes. We all have our sorrow days,” Fr. Constantine declared. “We all have our victorious days. The way to have abundant life is to connect with the cross. Let it shine!”
- **The Span of Life** – “When I was a little boy, I could not wait to grow older,” Fr. Constantine said. “To shave my beard. But as I became older and older, I realized that time passes so fast. We need to understand that life is a gift and lifespan is a little measure: threescore years and ten. Beyond that is a bonus! Time passes and we are climbing the steps, ascending to the glory of God.”

The more we think of death, the more we come to value life as a precious gift of God that must not be wasted, he advised. But we can’t wish it back again. “Wishing will take me down to depression,” Fr. Constantine said. “But in God, our life will be

eternal. At the end, you want to be with Christ as a triumphant – remembered as a faithful man, mother, grandmother, servant. What kind of crown in the end are you going to have? Making the sign of the Cross, saying we are Orthodox, will mean nothing if we don't make it our daily life. But with repentance and change, you reconnect with your Savior. God will send us a Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to lead us to eternal life, to have our name written in the Book of Life."

- ***The Tree of Life*** – The theme of trees is woven powerfully throughout the Old and New Testaments, beginning with the Tree of Knowledge in the garden of Paradise. "Many people today are trying to find their roots, where they came from," Fr. Constantine said. "Those of us who share a family tree, we are blessed. We are living in a transient society. Our relationships may be cut as time passes, but they are restored through connections," as they are here at St. Simeon for us.

Just as branches must be trimmed from a tree to keep it healthy, and branches may be grafted for new growth, "if I don't trim, fertilize, protect my garden, I am going to get nothing out of it," Fr. Constantine explained. "Your mind is the branches of the tree. If they are going right, left, and everywhere, trim those things that will lead you to darkness, will not lead you to good fruit. Invest your time and talent. I can see in Scripture how we can put on Christ by grafting Christ in us."

"We look at God's creation and see if we are connected to that eternal tree of life," Fr. Constantine said. "Love and compassion in maintaining a tree of life is like fertilizer and water. Without it, there is nothing there. God wants us to be in that tree of life, and our church is that tree. Through that baptismal fountain, we become part of that grafting."

- ***The Aroma of Life*** – Near the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, there is a street where you smell all kinds of spices, Fr. Constantine said. But as everyone knows, aromas can be good or bad. The smell of incense is a source of aroma giving thanks to God, he explained, an aroma of the spirit to connect us to God. "The censer has four chains with three bells each, representing the apostles who've come to tell you a story. When the priest censers the icons and then you, he is honoring you for being in the likeness of God."

The question for us to answer, Fr. Constantine said, is what kind of aroma we bring to Christ? "We must take all this outside into the world; share the aroma of Jesus,

the Gospels, with people outside. Wherever you go, represent Christ in all things. Whatever we do, we impact this world either for good or bad.”

Conclusion – “The last word I want to say,” Fr. Constantine said, wrapping up the day, “is that this life that we receive is given to share the love and compassion of Jesus. We are created after the image to become like God. We are to be reminded of all cleansing and washing of sin through confession. We are reminded to be his light, to share his light. To partake of and remember Him as the bread of life. We are remembering all other things: aroma, the tree of life, the span of life. Finally, we remember that life is a gift, and life should not be taken for granted, should not be abused. It should be appreciated and lived to the fullest in Christ. I hope that your light will shine. Let your light shine for all men.”

Of course, it isn't possible to do justice to the full depth of Fr. Constantine's discourse in one brief article. For the listeners, it was a remarkable opportunity to hear a great speaker give us advice of incalculable value, along with some very practical tips for inviting the strength, solace, and guidance of the Holy Spirit into our lives every day.