



YOURS, MINE AND OURS

YOURS, MI

STORIES AND THEIR ROLE IN HUM

THEY WERE RESURRECT-
ed by love; the heart of
each held infinite sources
of life for the heart of the other
... here begins a new account,
the account of a man's gradual
renewal, the account of his grad-
ual regeneration, his gradual
transition from one world to
another, his acquaintance with a
new, hitherto completely un-
known reality. It might make
the subject of a new story — but
our present story is ended.¹

Over the winter of 1978-79 I lived
in Old Harbor, Alaska, a small village
on the south side of
Kodiak Island,
directing the
church choir
and deliver-
ing fuel oil.
At the time
I had com-
pleted six
years of
seminary
studies

and looked to this year away as a
kind of sabbatical. One of my small
goals was to complete for the first
time Dostoevsky's novel, *Crime and
Punishment*, and whenever possible
I would pick up my book and slowly
read. By the spring I had finally
managed to reach the last pages of
the novel, quoted above.

Not only had I survived the long,
dark winter, but I also had emerged
engaged to be married. And I under-
stood, like Raskolnikov in the novel,
the sense of being reborn and
renewed, and of being loved. Perhaps
what I really understood for the first
time was the reality of
allowing myself to know that I was
truly loved by another. Dostoevsky
had put that experience into words
for me.

There are many ways that stories
have been able to put not only per-
sonal but also communal experi-
ences into words, allowing for the
elucidation and transmission of
those experiences to others. In help-
ing those things to take place, sto-
ries make it possible for both indi-
viduals and communities to under-
stand their own identities and the
possibilities for their continued
"growth in life and faith and spiritu-
al understanding."²

To say that *another* story can put
my story, my experience into words
affirms, first of all, that words or *the*
word have power. The Old Testa-
ment, beginning with the first
chapter of Genesis, confirms
that when God creates and
acts, He speaks; and when He
speaks His words have
power. God's creative
actions and the power
present in his words are

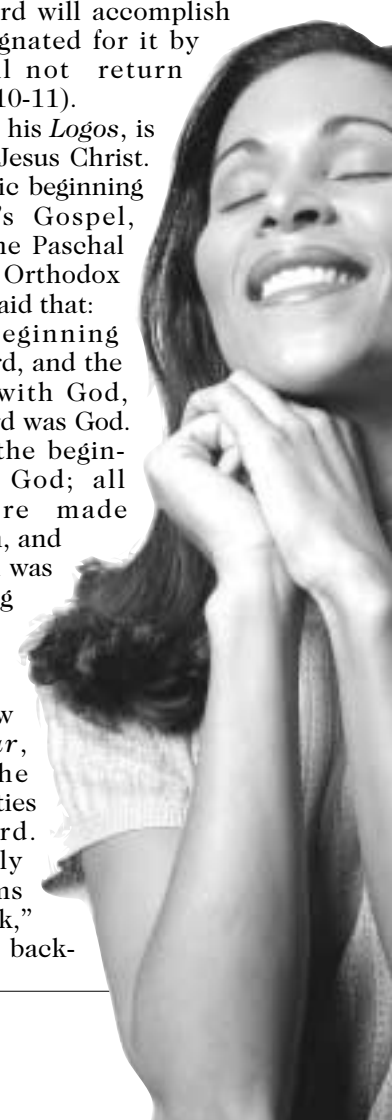
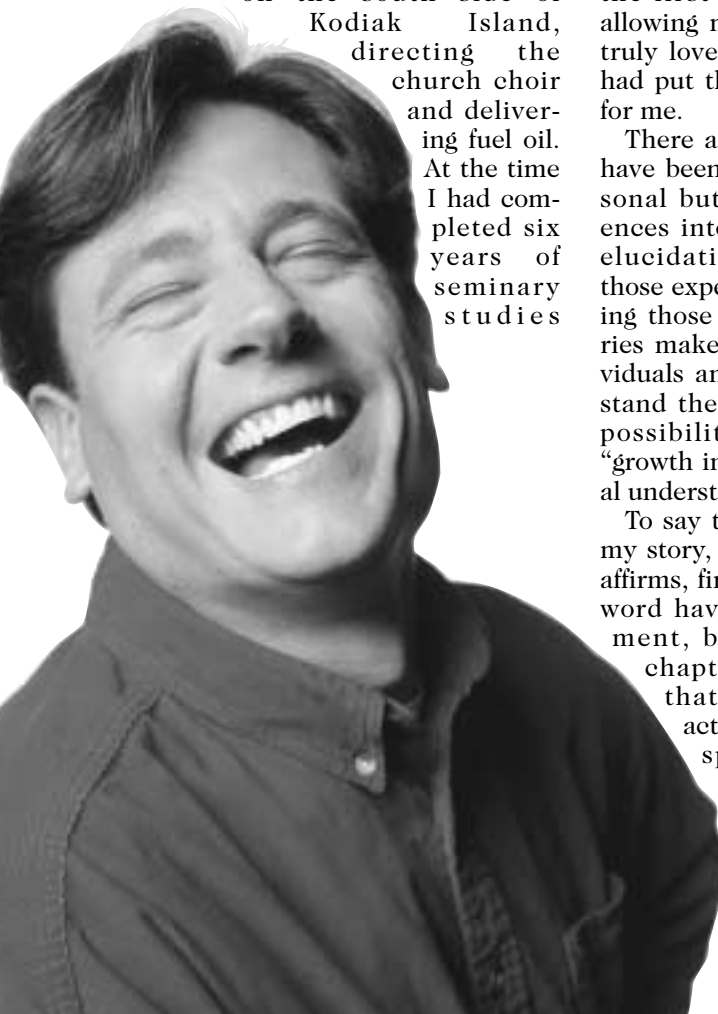
expressed in some of the Psalms,
notably Psalm 33 and Psalm 29.

The "word of the Lord" is also
understood throughout the Old
Testament as a sign of God's revela-
tion. As noted in the beginning of
several books, it is the source of the
prophet's own words (Hos. 1:1; Mic.
1:1; Zeph. 1:1). The word of the Lord
"will stand forever" (Is. 40:8). In the
examples of snow and rain which
descend from heaven and do not
return until they have watered the
earth, the word will accomplish
the task designated for it by
God and will not return
empty (Is. 55:10-11).

God's Word, his *Logos*, is
also His Son, Jesus Christ.
In the dramatic beginning
of St. John's Gospel,
assigned as the Paschal
lesson in the Orthodox
Church, it is said that:

In the beginning
was the Word, and the
Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the begin-
ning with God; all
things were made
through him, and
without him was
not anything
made that
was made"
(1:1-3).

The Hebrew
term, *dabar*,
expresses the
dynamic realities
of the word.
Etymologically
the root seems
to mean "back,"
implying "the back-





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By FATHER JOHN GEORGE SHIMCHICK, D.MIN.

ground, content, or meaning of what is said.”³ In this case, the word is able to make a thing known. But, as Walter J. Ong points out, *dabar* also means “event and thus refers directly to the spoken word. The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing — like repose of the written or printed word.”⁴ *Dabar*, connected as it is to life, has the power to put into words, to announce an event. Thus, the word served both to manifest something else and by its own character was utilized throughout the Scriptures as a means by which what was essential about God, his creative power, and life itself were revealed.

We know as well that our own words can have power, both good and bad. We can say things that can build up, support, encourage, and console another person. Likewise we can use words that are severely critical, demeaning, and destructive.

“From the same mouth,” it is written in the letter of James, “come blessing and cursing” (3:10).

Within the Old Testament, this dual power of words was expressed in various examples. The act of blessing, as receiving a “com-

munication of life from Yahweh,”⁵ is found in the creation account (of birds and fish — Gen. 1:22; of men — Gen. 1:28; 5:2). Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:1) and the patriarchs all received blessings (Gen. 12:2-3; 26:3-4; 32:39). But humans are also given the power to bless. They acknowledge their awe and appreciation for God’s power and revelation when they bless him (Ps. 103, 104). Likewise, to communicate one’s own life to others through a blessing is given to fathers. Noah blesses his sons (Gen. 9:26-27). Jacob blesses the sons of Joseph (Gen. 48:15f). There is a sense of permanence with blessings and curses. Even though Jacob misled Isaac when he acquired the blessing of Esau, it could not be revoked from him (Gen. 27). A curse can in some cases be overcome by a blessing: the mother of Micah, after unknowingly cursing her son, counteracts it with a blessing (Jgs. 17:1-2). There are even occasions when blessings or curses are “returned” upon those who utter them: God promises to Abram to “bless those who bless you, and the ones who curse you I will curse” (Gen. 12:3; 27:29). Thus, human words, in imitation of the expressive words of God himself, have been given the dynamic power to describe and influence life.

What kind of power can be manifested when a story, an assembly of words, is presented? Depending on the need or

function, it can have, among other things, the power to describe, clarify, teach, illustrate, remind, and make present. It can also, as a result, have the power to change, renew, form, and heal. A story can stimulate thought by providing memorable expressions or images. It may allow what was hidden or confused to appear as something now recognized. On the one hand, one might suddenly realize: “I never knew that.” Or perhaps one might realize the opposite: “I always knew that, but could never put it into words.” Sometimes the only appropriate reaction might be, “a-ha!”





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Often a story accomplishes these functions not by providing answers, but by provoking questions. The film maker George Lucas, in commenting on his *Star Wars* saga, has acknowledged that the stories were designed, “to stimulate a certain kind of spirituality in young people to make it so ... young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery [of God].” He goes further and states that not having enough interest even to ask these questions is, for him, “the worst thing that can happen.”⁶

Finally, a story can also bring together not simply the awareness, consciousness, or significance of another event, but through its repetition it can make that event seem to come alive again, and to allow the listener to become a participant.

What makes the word so powerful and what often touches us so deeply about a certain story, poem, or song is the “gathering” of the right words, the appropriate words and images put together in just the right way. “I wish I could have said it like that,” one often hears. In this sense, perhaps Adam, before the Fall, is the prototype of all poets (of those who create with words), for one of his initial responsibilities was to give each animal the right name and “whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Genesis 2:19-20).

So it is that the best or most memorable stories are usually those which “give a name to” or best put into words the human condition. Sometimes this is done not through providing the right answers, but by allowing for an accurate portrayal of the situation and conditions. The Russian writer Anton Chekhov stated that it is not the obligation of the writer to solve a problem, but to state the problem correctly.⁷

In trying to “state the problem correctly” and put the right words together, one could affirm or at least hope that a story, its author, or a storyteller is always trying to depict a person, a situation, or context truthfully. But what is truth and what does it mean to be truthful? Within modern culture it is commonly pointed out that objective

truth is becoming harder both to identify and to agree upon. Truth, as has been said about beauty, is often perceived to be “in the eye of the beholder,” to be left to one’s discretion as long as no one else is harmed or disturbed. But the classical history of story would reveal that there is a deeper, more consistent truth about human nature that is always being examined. This truth or these truths are the result of some crisis, a moment when a moral decision needs to be made. It has even been noted that it is “impossible to tell a story that is not about moral choices.”⁸ The Catholic writer Walker Percy concluded that stories should examine the “deeper truth about the way things are, the way people are; in a word, a truth about the human condition; and a truth of such an order, both old and new, that one recognizes oneself in it.” For him the unique conditions that make this kind of art form even possible are almost exclusively found in areas influenced by Christianity and the historical narrative of the Incarnation, which “gave birth to the novel,” the narrative form in literature.

The power and truthfulness of stories are not bound by time, culture, or one’s age. They can, in fact, function on different levels simultaneously, allowing each person, no matter what his age, to understand what is appropriate for him at that place in his life. A story may also seem “like a code which, the more it is listened to
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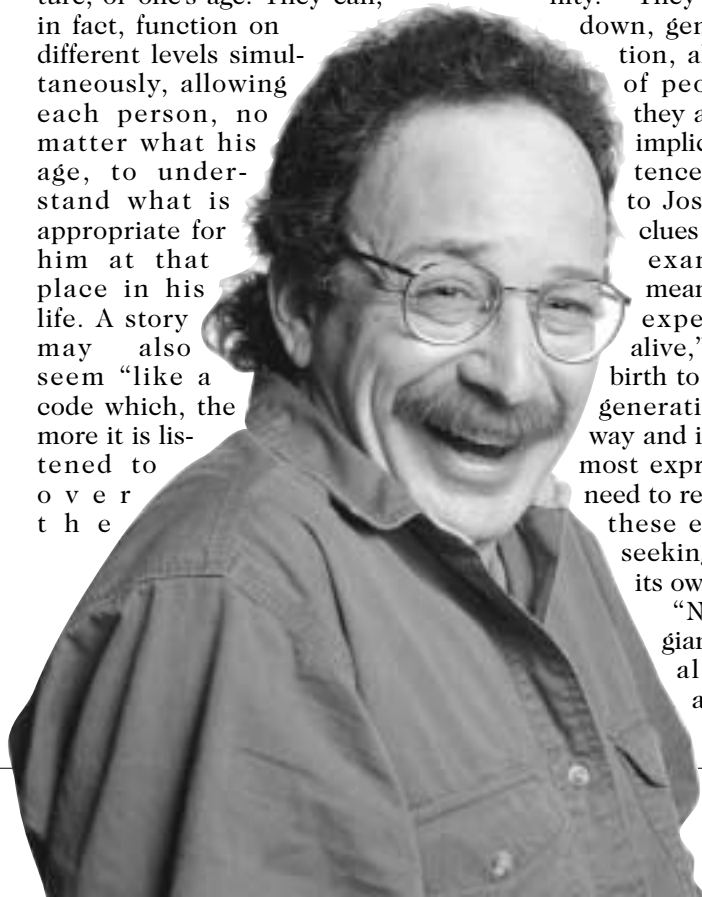
years, the more it reveals.”¹⁰ The best stories, thus, deserve to be reread or listened to repeatedly throughout one’s lifetime, usually growing in their richness, meaning, and power.

Because a story can operate on several levels at the same time it is the task of the storyteller or author to present situations that are not simply black or white, right or wrong, but “to impart the nuance, to elucidate the contradiction, not to deny the contradiction, but to see where within the contradiction, lies the tormented human being”¹¹ In this way, stories would allow for a broad examination of possible feelings and implications.

Stories can put into words the knowledge of the world as viewed and understood by an individual person. As “containers for organizing events into meaningful experiences,”¹² they can help make sense of what happens to us over time. But culturally, stories, myths, and legends have also been important for helping groups of people, communities, understand the origins and meaning of their existence. It has even been said that, “There can’t be a community without storytelling. Stories are the genes of the community.”¹³ They are told and handed

down, generation to generation, allowing each group of people to know who they are and what are the implications of their existence. Myths, according to Joseph Campbell, are clues that allow people to examine not just the meaning of life, but “the experience of being alive,” the passages from birth to life to death.¹⁴ Each generation will, in its own way and in the forms that are most expressive of its times, need to re-examine and re-tell these essential stories in seeking to make sense of its own existence.

“Narrative theologians” of the last several decades have affirmed that each group of people





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tend to be rooted in specific “bedrock” or “master” stories. Knowledge and examination of these stories would allow for the determination of one’s place within the world and for the appropriate responses to life’s various demands and questions. How one responds to these questions, according to Michael Goldberg, “often constitute our most deep-seated convictions about our identity, responsibility, and destiny over the course of our existence. Hence, our master stories not only *inform* us, but more crucially, they *form* us.”¹⁶ The knowledge of its stories therefore becomes essential in a community’s development and in the transmission of its ongoing life, its tradition to its posterity.

The act of repetition enables the subject or moment described to be re-presented or renewed. When offered in this way stories become the means for the community’s experience and participation in the moment or event described, this accomplished in ways that could only be viewed as “sacramental.” It is not just the story, but the community itself which is renewed and transformed when it is remembered.

The ability to remember is not just something that is a helpful function for the Christian community; it is one of its basic definitions: the Church is a group of people who, in remembering the Christian Story especially in the Eucharist and in remembering each other before God, are united to each other and to God, in Christ. “And unite all of us to one another who become partakers of the one Bread and Cup in the communion of the Holy Spirit”¹⁷ is the priest’s proclamation following the consecration of the Gifts during the Liturgy of St. Basil.

This affirmation has obvious meaning for those who are present in the community during the Church’s worship. But it is acknowledged even more powerfully when the community prays for the deceased, for those absent. “To love is to remember,” Fr. Alexander Schmemmann used to say. To love and “re-member” the departed before God is to be reunited with

them in Christ, never to forget that they remain members of the Church. It affirms that the Church, united in love, united in Christ, knows no bounds either in this life or beyond. In reference to our theme, it is to find within the Story, all of the individual stories that exist now or have ever existed before.

Stories can be helpful to the community in other ways. People can take delight in remembering significant times through their re-telling of stories. For friends and family, the sharing of their remembrances, their stories of the departed — before and after the funeral — can be one of the essential expressions of consolation. Teachers and public speakers, including clergy, use stories to introduce and entertain, but also to deliver and reinforce the points of their talk, sermon, or spiritual advice. This might be accomplished through the use of stories and examples that either clarify in ways that are simple and obvious, or shock through their directness and potency. Here the notable example from the use of words and stories by the Fathers of the Desert deserves mention. The Fathers intuitively understood the Hebrew connection previously described between “word” and the announcement of an “event.” Their *Sayings*, the responses to their disciples’ requests for a “word,” resulted in stories and “words of power, life, and salvation addressed to particular persons in concrete situations.”¹⁸

Pastors know that the words and stories they use in the delivery of their sermons have a certain power. But the meaning and power implied by them might not be what was intended: words once uttered tend to acquire a life of their own. So it is that many pastors can acknowledge that there are the sermons which they preach and there are the sermons that people actually hear. This is one of the tragic lessons presented on Palm Sunday in the life of Jesus Christ. In the Orthodox liturgical texts for this day the continually repeated theme is that of revelation: “Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord! God is the Lord and has revealed Himself to us”

(from Ps. 118:26-27). But what Christ sought to reveal about Himself and His Kingdom, and what the people seemed to celebrate on that day and later reject when they turned and sought His crucifixion, were two different things. The people did not really hear what He had to say: His Kingdom was not of this world; His power was not that of a secular authority; the freedom and new life He sought to bring would not lead to an overthrow of the Roman authorities. So, the power available in the word is also subject to its proper interpretation.

Pastors and those in other forms of ministry know that stories have, besides a homiletical and educational merit, a significant value in pastoral work. In trying to learn about a certain person or family it is important to understand and seek to interpret properly their “life stories.” One may discover painful experiences, represented in the telling of certain stories, that can help explain why various behaviors either do or do not take place. Stories can be one of the elements that hold people together.

Sometimes it might seem that the one unifying factor within a community or family, at least at certain times of difficulty and stress, might only or primarily be that reality of having shared many of the same experiences and stories.

There has also been significant interest over the last few years in reclaiming and





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utilizing stories and “classic” literature in the training of what some call the moral “imagination.” While the stress is primarily on the training of children and among families, the use of stories as a vehicle for raising ethical and moral concerns as part of the educational process for doctors, lawyers, and other professionals has been receiving significant attention.¹⁹

Finally, one could say that from a Christian perspective all stories and storytelling have their focus in the person of and “life” in Jesus Christ. As in the liturgy He is proclaimed the “Offerer and the Offered, the Receiver and the Received,”²⁰ so He could also be known as “the Narrative and the Narrator, the Story and the Storyteller.”

St. Ignatius of Antioch, after proclaiming that one should do nothing except that which is, “according to the teaching of Christ,” heard someone say: “If I do not find [it] in the archives, I do not believe [it to be] in the Gospel.” With the canonical New Testament still not in place at this time in the second century, the “archives” were understood as the Old Testament; the implication is that the Old Testament did contain the revelation of Christ. But St. Ignatius understood the significance of this remark a little differently... “For me the archives are Jesus Christ, the inviolable archives are His cross and death and His resurrection and the faith which is through Him.”²¹ Dr. John Behr expresses this even more emphatically: the “Old Testament simply is Jesus Christ — the Word made flesh.”²²

He is *the* story, for biblical history finds its fulfillment and meaning in Jesus; “in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). If the concern of the ancient stories and myths was an understanding of the “experience of life” from birth to death, so the Scriptures realize the story of life from humanity’s creation and fall to the anticipation and fulfillment of its redemption in Jesus Christ. He is also *the* storyteller for He reveals in His life and ministry everything that is essential about the meaning of stories. His words have power; they

expressed the truth. No one, it was said, “had ever spoken” like Him (Jn. 7:46). The people “were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Mt. 7:29). His words made paralytics rise from their beds, healed the afflicted, and raised the dead. His words alone were events. His stories, the parables, through simple language and examples from ordinary life, allowed for levels of meaning and nuance. They became the catalysts for continual re-examination and change. They manifested God’s Kingdom to those “able” to hear them. One could even acknowledge that Jesus did not merely tell the parables, “but is instead *the parable of God himself*; he is the transcendent touching the worldly in and through ordinary life.”²³ Jesus Christ, as the Word and through His words in the Gospel, continues to be the means by which human language and human life experience and participate in divine life.

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Endnotes:

- ¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, tr. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 1993) p. 549 & 551.
- ² *The Divine Liturgy according to St. John Chrysostom*. Second Edition. (New York: The Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of America, 1977) p. 52.
- ³ Gerhard Kitel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translated and Abridged in One Volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985) p. 508.
- ⁴ *Orality and Literacy* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982) p. 75.
- ⁵ John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) p. 98.
- ⁶ “Of Myth and Men — A conversation between Bill Moyers and George Lucas on the meaning of the Force and the true theology of Star Wars,” *TIME*, April 26, 1999, The Arts/Cinema.
- ⁷ V.S. Pritchett, *Chekhov — A Spirit Set Free* (New York: Random House, 1988) p. 37.
- ⁸ Graceanne A. Decandido and Keith R.A. Decandido, “Orson Scott Card,” *Publishers Weekly*, November 30, 1990, p. 54.
- ⁹ “Another Message in a Bottle,” *Sign-posts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar,

Straus and Giroux, 1991) p. 365-366.

- ¹⁰ Peggy V. Beck, Anna Lee Walters, and Nia Francesco, *The Sacred — Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life* (Tsaile, Arizona: Navajo Community College Press, 1992) p. 59.
- ¹¹ Philip Roth, *I Married a Communist*, reviewed by Sanford Pinsker, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 25, 1998, Q3.
- ¹² James Hillman, “A Note on Story,” *Children’s Literature: The Great Excluded*, Vol. III, Francelia Butler and Bennett Brockman, eds. *Journal of the Modern Language Association Seminar on Children’s Literature* (Storrs, CT: 1974) p. 43.
- ¹³ Orson Scott Card, p. 54.
- ¹⁴ *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday) p. 13. See also: Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989) p. 65-88.
- ¹⁵ Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians, Getting our Stories Straight: the Exodus and the Passion-Resurrection* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991) p. 13.
- ¹⁶ *The Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great — Service Books of The Orthodox Church*, Vol. II. (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1984) p. 78.
- ¹⁷ Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 78.
- ¹⁸ For the use of stories among children and families see: William Bennett, ed. *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) and *The Moral Compass: Stories for a Life’s Journey*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); John L. Boojamra, ed. *Children’s Literature for the Christian Home and Parish*. (Englewood, NJ: Department of Christian Education, Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, 1998); Vigen Guroian. *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken A Child’s Moral Imagination*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Madeleine L’Engle. *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Spiritual Values in Children’s Literature* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985). For a wider use of stories: Robert Coles. *The Call of Stories — Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989). For a Christian appreciation of classical literature: Louise Cowan & Os Guinness, eds. *Invitation to the Classics*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998).
- ¹⁹ *Divine Liturgy*, p. 53.
- ²⁰ Phil. 8:2-9:1, context and quotation taken from the Introduction, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, tr. by John Behr (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1997) p. 10.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ²² Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians, Getting our Stories Straight*, p. 164.
- ²³