
St. John Chrysostom Oratorical Festival 2010



TOPICS, TIPS, AND RESOURCES



GREEK ORTHODOX
ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA

Department of Religious Education
(800) 566-1088 | religioused@goarch.org

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Topics, Tips, and Resources

Junior Division (Grades 7–9)

1. His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew is a champion of the environment. Present some teachings of the Orthodox Church that support environmental protection and explain how it should be practiced today.

Some directions your speech could take:

- Research an area or an ecosystem that is being threatened by development and pollution. Explore specific teachings about the natural world that you could use to convince people to help that area.
- Describe the tension between economic progress and ethical use of the created world.
- In what ways can new green technologies be used at home, in your parish, and in your community? What are the obstacles, and how can you address them in a Christian manner?
- How can we bring “green Christianity” to the table with public policy makers?

Recommended reading:

- *PRAXIS* magazine vol. 9, no. 1 (Fall 2009), published by the DRE, is devoted to the topic of “Green Christianity” and contains many relevant articles.
- The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese offers articles on the environment and the Orthodox Christian Church (www.goarch.org/ourfaith/environment).
- Fr. John Chryssavgis, *Beyond the Shattered Image* (Light & Life, 1999).
- Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009).

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2. Icons bring to life the teachings of the Orthodox Faith. In the icon of the Resurrection, Christ is portrayed as lifting up Adam and Eve. Explain the meaning of this representation.

Some directions your speech could take:

- Reflect on Christ’s resurrection and the general resurrection. How is the resurrection a part of daily life?
- What was the condition of humankind before and after the resurrection? Why did God need to lift up Adam and Eve?
- How are Christians called to lift up one another?

Recommended reading:

- John Baggley, *Festival Icons for the Christian Year* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007).
- Greek Orthodox Telecommunications, *Holy Image, Holy Space: Icons from Greece* DVD (available from orthodoxmarketplace.org).
- Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, revised ed. 1999).
- John Chirban, *Raised in Glory: Orthodox Understandings of Death, Resurrection, and Immortality* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007).
- *The Orthodox Faith*, vol. 3 of *Bible and Church History*: Chapter 4, “Salvation History” (Orthodox Church in America, 1979; available from www.oca.org/OCIndexTOC.asp?SID=2&book=Bible§ion=Salvation%20History)
- Stanley Harakas, *Orthodox Christian Beliefs* (Light & Life, 2002): “Salvation,” pages 197–217.

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3. "Love and death depend on our neighbor," according to St. Anthony the Great (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Anthony 9). Explore and expand on this teaching.

Some directions your speech could take:

- Who was Saint Anthony the Great? Who were the “desert fathers”? How does their example influence Christian life today?
- Throughout our lives, we encounter various “neighbors,” people whom we are close to and must learn to love in a Christian way. Consider the various kinds of love (agape, eros, and philia). How can we, from cradle to grave, learn to live together in Christ?
- The troubles of the world—from family arguments, peer pressure, and arguments among friends to poverty, injustice, and war—often distract our attention from God. How can we return our focus to God, and in so doing become better “neighbors”?
- “As iron sharpens iron, so does one man sharpen another” (Proverbs 27:17). How can we surround ourselves with upright, faithful people—both Christians and non-Christians—to strengthen our own faith?

Recommended reading:

- St. Athanasius, *Life of St. Antony* (Paulist Press, 1980).
- Benedicta Ward and Anthony Bloom, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cistercian Fathers, 1987).
- John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (World Wisdom, 2008).
- R. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church*, especially Chapter 5 (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991).
- Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns*, especially Chapter 6 (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).
- John Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, especially Chapter 3 (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000).

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4. St. John of Damascus wrote many hymns for the major feast days of the Church. Tell us about St. John and his contribution to Orthodox hymnography.

Some directions your speech could take:

- What is the role of music in your own spiritual growth? Have specific hymns been influential in your life?
- How do hymns explain aspects of Orthodox Faith? How do the hymns make connections to icons of the same event?
- Consider St. John’s hymns in the light of the historical development of music in Orthodox Churches. Select specific festal hymns that represent St. John’s theology.
- Can a single hymn make a difference in someone’s life?
- Is it possible for a modern hymnographer to emerge—for both Great Feasts and new feasts (e.g., Thanksgiving)? What would a new hymn’s music and poetry sound like?

Recommended reading:

- *Prologue of Ohrid*, “Life of John of Damascus” (December 4).
- Olivier Clément and Olga Dunlap, *The Living God: A Catechism for the Christian Faith* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989).
- Catherine Aslanoff, Paul Meyendorff, and Andrew Tregubov, *Incarnate God* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994).

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5. In the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14), we see that the prayer of the Publican was pleasing to God. Discuss the importance of humility in our prayers and in our daily lives.

Some directions your speech could take:

- Begin by telling a story about your own attempts to pray on a regular basis and what you learned from the experience.
- Who are the humble and meek today?
- What is humility? How does one acquire a spirit of humility in an age when people boast about and are highly rewarded for even the smallest of accomplishments?

Recommended reading:

- Anthony Bloom, *Beginning to Pray* (Paulist Press, 1982).
- Anthony Bloom, *Courage to Pray* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).
- R. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991).

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Senior Division (Grades 10–12)

1. In Proverbs 12:26, we read, “The righteous should choose his friends carefully, for the way of the wicked leads them astray.” What is the Christian understanding of friendship and how do social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace help or hinder true friendship?

Recommended reading:

- Explore a classic friendship from the Bible or Christian history: David and Jonathan in the Old Testament, St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory the Theologian in the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom and the Deaconess Olympias in the fourth century. How do they illuminate our ideas about friendship today?
 - Read 1 Samuel 20 about David and Jonathan.
 - Read St. Gregory’s Funeral Oration for his friend St. Basil the Great (Oration 43, in the *Nicene–Post-Nicene Fathers* series 2, volume 7, available at www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.iii.xxvi.html).
 - Read Valerie Zahirsky’s essay, “Deaconess Olympias: A Sister in Faith,” in *Encountering Women of Faith*, edited by K. FitzGerald (InterOrthodox Press, 2005).

Some directions your speech could take:

- How has social networking affected your understanding of what it means to be a friend?
- In light of the incarnation of Christ, how can we understand the depersonalization that can occur in electronic media?
- What are the positive dimensions of having hundreds of on-line friends? Can you really be in contact with them all and have a meaningful friendship? Are there superficial friends and deep friends in an online environment?

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2. Psalms are read in all Orthodox worship services. Talk about the significance of Psalm 23 (24 LXX), which begins with the words, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness.”

Some directions your speech could take:

- Verses from this psalm are used in Orthodox worship—the funeral, at Pascha, and at the opening and consecration of a church. Consider what these verses are saying to the faithful at one of these moments, and describe its implications for Christian living.
- The opening verse has environmental aspects. How might the verse challenge Christians in their stewardship of the planet?

Recommended reading:

- S. Harakas, *Orthodox Christian Beliefs about the Bible* (Light & Life, 2003).
- A Monk of the Eastern Church, *A Year of Grace of the Lord* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997).
- J. Mays, *Psalms*, in the “Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching” series (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).
- See Junior Division Topic 1 for additional resources on environmental concerns.

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3. The Annunciation is one of the Major Feast Days of our Church. In her response to the Archangel Gabriel, Mary says, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it happen to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38). As an Orthodox Christian, what does her response mean to you?

Some directions your speech could take:

- The idea of being a servant is not very appealing today. How does Mary’s affirmation of accepting God’s will challenge you?
- Are there benefits to accepting God’s will or laying aside your plans to accept a plan from another person or from God?
- How does Mary’s acceptance affect her relationship with others? Would this consideration affect your willingness to follow a command of God?

Recommended reading:

- Olivier Clément and Olga Dunlap, *The Living God: A Catechism for the Christian Faith* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989).
- Catherine Aslanoff, Paul Meyendorff, and Andrew Tregubov, *Incarnate God* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994).
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4. St. John Chrysostom closes his Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Homily 32) with the following words: "Paul was a human being, sharing the same human nature with us and having everything else in common with us. But because he has shown a great love for Christ, he surpassed heaven and stood with the angels....Let us then not only be amazed at and admire him but imitate him." In what sense can we imitate St. Paul?

Some directions your speech could take:

- Explore sainthood in general and how St. Paul best exemplifies sainthood.
- The saints are not only to be venerated but also to be imitated. Identify characteristics from the life of St. Paul that we could imitate today.
- How do the life and writings of St. Paul inform Christians striving to discern their vocations today?

Recommended reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homily 32, in *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, volume 11 in *Nicene–Post-Nicene Fathers* (available at www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf111.vii.xxxiv.html).
- *PRAXIS* magazine 2008–2009 (volume 8, numbers 1–3) had three articles about St. Paul.
- D. Pennock, *Who is God, Who Am I? Who are You?* (Department of Religious Education).
- A. Bezzerides, editor, *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007).

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5. Aristotle, the great philosopher, in speaking about virtue as a superb human characteristic, calls it heroic and divine (*hêrôikên tina kai theian*; in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 7, 1145a20). Explain why human virtue is something truly heroic and divine, especially in our days and in our world.

Some directions your speech could take:

- What is virtue? What are the obstacles to becoming a virtuous person, both from within one's life and external forces? How can one overcome those obstacles?
- Who are the heroes of today's world? Are they considered heroic for their virtue? How might virtuous individuals become examples of heroism?

Recommended reading:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 7, line 1145a20 (available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.7.vii.html>).
- O. Clément, *Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New City Press, 1993).
- David Beck, *Flames of Wisdom: Patristic Counsel for Contemporary Life* (Light & Life, 1994).
- N. Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, especially Book 7 (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).