

**IS LIFE REALLY MEANINGLESS? ~ PUT ON TENDER MERCIES AND KINDNESS  
Col. 3:12-16**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**

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(Photo from the internet)

Recently on one of the coldest days of the year, while driving and stopped at a red light, I saw a young homeless man with a small dog sitting by the side of the road. A number of thoughts raced through my mind. I understand the reason why some young people are homeless.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes they suffer from mental illness. Sometimes they have substance addiction problems or they may be involved in criminal activities, and their families won't let them live at home unless they work on these issues. Sometimes it is the family itself that is the problem and it is just impossible to live with them. I wondered what this young man's story was. I knew that he could not sleep on the street because the weather was so severe and cold, so I wondered what his plans might be for the night. Sometimes homeless people do sleep in the street on a freezing night, and sometimes they die as a result. I considered offering him some help. He was young enough that he could have been my own son. In any case, he was someone's son. Somewhere, I thought, there was a good chance that there were a mother and a father who loved him, were worried sick about him, and didn't know where he was. Thoughts also raced through my mind that he could be dangerous, a criminal, or just seeking money to feed a drug habit. Nonetheless, I decided to offer him some money. If he were my son, I would want someone to help him.

I honked the horn and he eagerly ran over to the window. I gave him what I could get my hands on and was sorry that I did not have readily available more to offer him. The light had changed and the car behind me honked at me. I thought, "My God! This is a human being in the freezing cold! Doesn't that mean anything to you? How can people be so callous and uncaring? Can't you wait for just a few seconds?" When he took what I gave him, I could see that he was sincere, a poor suffering and freezing young soul, and he was genuinely in need and grateful. I was surprised when he said, "Thank you, Father. I appreciate it." His words cut through me because I didn't have more to offer him. Why did he address me as "Father?" I

was not dressed as a priest. Fr. Tom Hopko said that people somehow know that you are a priest, even when you are not dressed like one. I guess there must be some kind of invisible sign on our foreheads that says “priest.” This isn’t the first time that I have had an experience like that.

As I drove away and headed home, more thoughts raced through my mind. I was sorry that I hadn’t pulled over and spoke with him. I wondered if perhaps someone else might do that and try to help him get out of the cold, and maybe even persuade him to go home to his family if that were an option, or at least call his family if they haven’t heard from him. A suffering human being tugs at the heart, but especially a suffering young person or a child can tear your heart to shreds. St. Paul tells us today that we must “put on tender mercies and kindness” (Col. 3:12). There are so many opportunities and ways for us to fulfill this injunction.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann said that some people believe that the role of Christ and the Church is to solve our social and personal problems,<sup>2</sup> and if this does not happen, then Christ and the Church are irrelevant. In other words, the world rejects the Cross, the essential and fundamental part of Christianity. The world says “worship me” and tells us to “be happy,” but the happiness the world offers us is a demonic happiness, and not true happiness, which comes only through God. We must give Christ our hearts and struggle on the narrow path that He has indicated to us. Once we have put our hands to the plough, we must go straight and avoid the temptation to look back (Lk. 9:62). When we see others in need, in pain and suffering, then we are driven to want to help them. This is natural and good, but at some point we must realize and accept our limitations. At some point we must acknowledge that we have done all that we can, even if we are not satisfied because it is not enough. There is always prayer, and prayer is always helpful and powerful. We must not be tempted to despair, because not all crosses can be taken away, because the Way of the Cross is the way of salvation. You cannot have one without the other. Nothing, however, stops us from being like St. Simon of Cyrene, and helping others in whatever way we can to carry their cross. In fact, it is our Christian duty to bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). Above all, and first of all, we must do this for ourselves, and learn to accept and carry our own cross. If we cannot accept and reconcile ourselves with the cross that we have been given, then how can we help others to carry their cross? And there is nothing wrong in seeking and accepting help from others to carry our cross, to accept the St. Simon of Cyrenes that God sends to us in our life to help us along the way.

What is it all for? In the 1960’s existentialism was a very popular philosophy, such as expounded by the philosophers Albert Camus and Jean Paul Sartre. They felt that life was meaningless, and that for this and other reasons God was “created” by man in order to give purpose to life. I reject this notion. Just from a point of view of logic, I don’t believe that human life is some kind of cosmic “accident” and that life has no real purpose. This blasé attitude of indifference and lack of passion and emotion is, in my opinion, not a true reflection of the reality of human life. Naturally I also don’t accept the viewpoint that “God” was created by man, or that “God is dead” as Nietzsche (another philosopher who was popular in the 1960’s) taught. I believe in the reality of the existence of God. Human suffering and the crosses we carry in life can tempt us to go down this slippery slope of indifference and unbelief. Or, we can instead accept that the way of the Cross is the way of life and the path to salvation. There are many things that are beyond our comprehension and there are many undeniable truths that may be hard for us to swallow. However, if I have love and compassion in my heart, and if I feel empathy, care and concern for my fellow human beings, and if I base this love on my faith and love of the Lord, then life for me is livable. Life is filled with many joys that temper the sorrows and makes them bearable, and in Christ I can find true happiness. I may not be able to verbalize the answer to all of life’s questions and mysteries, but I can accept them and not be scandalized by them.

Life has the greatest meaning and fills us with the greatest joy when we heed St. Paul’s words to “put on tender mercies and kindness.” Doing for others, helping those in need, putting a smile on someone’s face, giving instead of receiving, this is where true meaning and

happiness come from. Put on tender mercies and kindness. Let this be the anthem of our life. Besides bringing us joy, the greatest by-product of this way of life is that it will bring us closer to Christ Himself. Amen.

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1. See the movie “Beautiful Boy” (based on a true story), 2018, starring Steve Carrell and Timothée Chalamet, the documentary “I Am Another You” by independent filmmaker Nanfu Wang, 2018, and “Into the Wild” (based on a true story), 2007. directed by Sean Penn.
  2. “Lies about Christianity: Words from Fr. Alexander Schmemmann,” video/podcast posted on St. Vladimir’s Seminary website, Crestwood, NY.