

One of our seminarians, Subdeacon Anthony Perkins, recently completed two years of active duty as a reservist mobilized in support of Operation Enduring Freedom/Noble Eagle. Most of this time was spent stateside, but it ended with a short 40-day tour in Afghanistan. He received the Meritorious Service Medal and the Army Outstanding Volunteer Award for his efforts. These are his personal observations from his time “in the desert.”



# My Forty Days in the Desert

by Subdeacon Anthony Perkins

## Finding a Framework for the Challenge

I had been in the Army Reserves for 15 years, so I was not surprised when the Army called me up after 9/11 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom/Noble Eagle. I appreciated and looked forward to the opportunity to serve the people of this country, but dreaded the time it would mean away from my family. My first attempt to provide a spiritual framework for this personal crisis was to think of it in terms of *podvig*, or spiritual struggle: The army was providing me with yet another opportunity to hunker down and endure some relative hardship and stress. But within the first week of being gone, I realized that I could do more than “dig in”: God had provided me with a real chance to order my life more correctly around Him. This could not help but be a positive experience, despite what the world saw. For instance, for the first year of my mobilization, the world saw a husband and wife spending a few hours a month together at best. They saw us growing apart and creating new lives. But because we had reordered our lives around God and rededicated our relationship to Him, the “invisible” reality was that we grew closer together. Not just spiritually, but completely.

We are constantly given the opportunity to reorder our lives around God, but when we are uprooted and replanted, the choices are far more stark. More so when you are replanted in the high desert of Afghanistan. The desert is a wonderful metaphor for our spiritual struggle. The fact that it is also very real should not surprise us. Jesus’ time in the desert is both a salvific metaphor and historical fact. Every

aspect of our physical world is, in every dimension and aspect, pregnant with theological significance. It is in the spirit of this recognition that I offer the following observations from my 40 days “in the desert.”

### “Virtuous Warriors” or “Murderers”

*The sanctifying quality of work and service*

The biggest change in my life when I got to Afghanistan was not the heat, dust, tents, or port-a-potties, but rather the sheer volume of work: The officers and senior NCO’s in my shop worked 16-18 hours a day, seven days a week. Afghanistan is not as dangerous as Iraq, but the fact that lives were on the line shortened deadlines and added a sense of urgency to our efforts. This atmosphere was radically different from that at my stateside post (not to mention at my pre-war job in academia!). I was amazed at how well the soldiers handled the stress. Some handled it poorly, but most were ennobled by it. Looking back, I guess I should not have been surprised: Orthodox tradition is replete with descriptions of the sanctifying value of work. Unfortunately, like so many simple truths, this has been perverted by our culture. Many of us work hard, but I often doubt our motivations. Some of us work hard because we have turned our careers into idols – our careers are the gods who reward us with big houses and nice cars if we sacrifice our lives to them and serve them well. Some of us throw ourselves into our work to escape everything that is difficult in our lives. I saw some of this in Afghanistan (in myself at the very least), but mostly

I saw people enjoying the spiritual fruits of hard work, rightly done. Work can help sanctify us, but only if it is offered to God. Not every soldier I worked with was Christian (although most were - more on that later), but the vast majority were clearly working selflessly to serve something greater than themselves.

There has been much ink spilt of late debating the theological framework of war. Despite the best efforts of the instructors at St. Sophia’s, I am no theologian, so I will not weigh-in on the “just war theory, “principled pacifism, or anything else. However, I have been privileged to serve with many “virtuous warriors” and no murderers. Soldiers are on the front line of the spiritual war. They are tempted in ways that, thank God, few of us will ever know. Sometimes they succumb. But they live and exhibit many of the Christian values to which we so often give only lip service. How much sacrifice do we endure on a regular basis to serve God and neighbor? These soldiers put themselves and their families through hardships we cannot imagine. And they do it willingly, by choice, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Like I said, I do not know much about foreign policy or the theology of war, but I know Christian sacrifice and virtue when I see it, and I saw a lot of it in the soldiers of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division in Afghanistan.

### The Need for Prayer

The prayers of our Church (e.g. the Hours, Matins, Compline, Morning

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## Forty Days in the Desert *(continued)*

and Evening Prayers), remind us of the nature of the world, of God as its Creator, and worship as our proper attitude toward Him. Offering these prayers brings us into conscious contact with Him and His Church. A prayer rule, properly followed, prepares us to take our Orthodoxy (“correct worship”) with us as we move through our daily routines. Regular prayer breaks are like musical “tune-ups” that keep us in harmony with God and His creation. Without stopping to tune ourselves to God’s absolute pitch, we become discordant horns and clanging cymbals. Over time, we might even forget that we are only one part in a much greater symphony. This was especially important for me in Afghanistan, miles away from any Orthodox priest or parish. A corollary benefit of prayer is that it keeps us effectively involved in the everyday life of our families and friends. This was also of immeasurable support to me when I was away; it alleviated my frustration and helplessness knowing that I could, through the mercy of God and the intercession of His saints and angels, help my wife and son in their daily struggles. Nor was I alone in seeking consolation through worship and prayer. There were no Orthodox services on base, but the chapel did offer regular Protestant and Roman Catholic services. Sunday services of all types were always full, and daily Masses, prayer meetings, and Bible studies, were well attended. In this regard, military society is somewhat like American society at large was a couple of generations ago: Christianity still plays an unapologetic and significant role in the lives of most of our soldiers.

### Hope as a Logical Reaction not a Spiritual Exercise

One of my greatest temptations is despondency. Everything falls short of its necessary and

desired state. We continually “miss the mark.” Violence, poverty, and suffering surround us and defy solutions. Despair is the obvious, albeit superficial and incorrect, response to intractable problems. For two years I devoted myself full-time to the study of Afghanistan and its problems. For 40 days I lived there. During all that time, I saw little cause for hope. God demands that we have hope, so it is hope we must find. More complete and perfect vision allows us to see that hope. But what hope is there in a devastated country where life is considered so cheap that people are killed to make a political statement? What hope is there for the people of Afghanistan? While there is some glimmer as a result of U.S. and Coalition intervention: Slow but steady progress is being made to improve the economy and discourage terrorism and brigandage. But the real hope is in Christ. But how is that hope available to people who live in darkness, not knowing Christ as the Son of God? What hope indeed! “God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son ... “Christ suffered and died for the people of Afghanistan. He loves them every bit as much as He loves the people of Ukraine or America. Afghanistan is a rugged and desolate place, but it is not “God-forsaken,” nor are its people. All things are possible through love like that.

This fact is probably obvious to most of us, but it came as a real epiphany to me. Up until then I had struggled for hope out of obedience to God, but had never really experienced it. But now hope is no longer an empty exercise in discipline for me, but an inevitable reaction to God’s love. This realization has reinvigorated me and reaffirmed my call to serve the Church. I put off that calling my entire adult life- there was always something “more important “to do. Two years ago, when I moved

to Charlottesville, I was forced to confront this calling and answer it head-on. I embraced it, but even then I saw it as a duty, an obligation, and an opportunity for struggle. For the past several years I have focused my attention on recognizing and wrestling with my shortcomings. This has been useful as it brings me to God and His service with the proper attitude of humility. But now this humility is supplemented with the joy, hope, and confidence that comes from a fuller vision of God’s love.

### Conclusion: Loving Our Enemies

The final observation I will make has to do with God’s commandment to love our enemies. For many of us, this was an academic exercise for most of our lives: It was easy to believe that we had no real enemies. This changed after 9/11. How can we love people who do and advocate such evil things? I think we have to pray for them. Every day. But not like the Publican, (“thank You that I am not evil like those Islamist terrorists; open their hearts so that they can be more like me”). Pray for their well-being like you do for your family and dearest friends. Learn to love them - not only because they are your enemies and God says you must. Try to love them because they really are lovable. Try to find things about them to love. If you cannot, then remind yourself of a couple of things. First, even the most hardened terrorist is made in God’s image. Second, God loves even the most hardened terrorist so much that He died for him. Are we better or more discerning than God? These two facts can be the foundation for building a meaningful and loving relationship with all of our neighbors, be they friends or enemies.