

Orthodox Heritage

So therefore, brethren, persevere, and grasp the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word or by our epistle [2 Thess. 2:15]

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Ἄρα οὖν, ἀδελφοί, στήκετε, καὶ κρατεῖτε τὰς παραδόσεις ἃς ἐδιδάχθητε, εἴτε διὰ λόγου εἴτε δι' ἐπιστολῆς ἡμῶν [Θεσσ. Β' 2:15]

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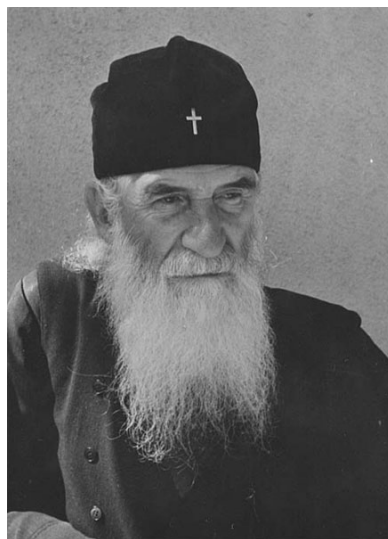
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THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE CHURCH: UNITY, HOLINESS, CATHOLICITY AND APOSTOLICITY

By St. Justin Popovich.

The attributes of the Church are innumerable because her attributes are actually the attributes of the Lord Christ, the God-man, and, through Him, those of the Triune Godhead. However, the holy and divinely wise fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council, guided and instructed by the Holy Spirit, reduced them in the ninth article of the Symbol of Faith to four—I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. These attributes of the Church—unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity—are derived from the very nature of the Church



and of her purpose. They clearly and accurately define the character of the Orthodox Church of Christ whereby, as a theanthropic institution and community, she is distinguishable from any institution or community of the human sort.

The Unity and Uniqueness of the Church

Just as the Person of Christ the God-man is one and unique, so is the Church founded by Him, in Him, and upon Him. The unity of the Church follows necessarily from the unity of the Person of the Lord Christ, the God-man. Being an organically integral and theanthropic organism unique in all the

worlds, the Church, according to all the laws of Heaven and earth, is indivisible. Any division would signify her death. Immersed in the God-man, she is first and foremost a theanthropic organism, and only then a theanthropic organization. In her, everything is theanthropic: nature, faith, love, baptism, the Eucharist, all the holy mysteries and all the holy virtues, her teaching, her entire life, her immortality, her eternity, and her structure. Yes, yes, yes; in her, everything is theanthropically integral and indivisible christification, sancti-

fication, deification, Trinitarianism, salvation. In her everything is fused organically and by grace into a single theanthropic body, under a single Head—the God-man, the Lord Christ. All her members, though as persons always whole and inviolate, yet united by the same grace of the Holy Spirit through the holy mysteries and

the holy virtues into an organic unity, comprise one body and confess the one faith, which unites them to each other and to the Lord Christ.

The Christ-bearing apostles are divinely inspired as they announce the unity and the uniqueness of the Church, based upon the unity and uniqueness of her Founder—the God-man, the Lord Christ, and His theanthropic personality: *For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.* (1 Cor 3:11).

Like the holy apostles, the holy fathers and the teachers of the Church confess the unity and uniqueness of the Orthodox Church with the divine wisdom of

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Orthodox Heritage may, at times, bring up issues or present articles that some consider controversial. Such material is presented so that a distinction is made between salvation and the 20th century heresy of ecumenism. These are confusing times for the Orthodox faithful, and political correctness must be sacrificed so that His truth be brought forth.

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the Cherubim and the zeal of the Seraphim. Understandable, therefore, is the fiery zeal which animated the holy fathers of the Church in all cases of division and falling away and the stern attitude toward heresies and schisms. In that regard, the holy ecumenical and holy local councils are preeminently important. According to their spirit and attitude, wise in those things pertaining to Christ, the Church is not only one but also unique. **Just as the Lord Christ cannot have several bodies, so He cannot have several Churches.** According to her theanthropic nature, the Church is one and unique, just as Christ the God-man is one and unique. Hence, a division, a splitting up of the Church is ontologically and essentially impossible. A division within the Church has never occurred, nor indeed can one take place, while apostasy from the Church has and will continue to occur after the manner of those voluntarily fruitless branches which, having withered, fall away from the eternally *living theanthropic Vine*—the Lord Christ (Jn 15:1-6). From time to time, heretics and schismatics have cut themselves off and have fallen away from the one and indivisible Church of Christ, whereby they ceased to be members of the Church and parts of her theanthropic body. The first to fall away thus were the gnostics, then the Arians, then the Macedonians, then the Monophysites, then the Iconoclasts, then the Roman Catholics, then the Protestants, then the Uniates, and so on—all the other members of the legion of heretics and schismatics.

The Holiness of the Church

By her theanthropic nature, the Church is undoubtedly a unique organization in the world. All her holiness resides in her nature. Actually, she is the theanthropic workshop of human sanctification and, through men, of the sanctification of the rest of creation. She is holy as the theanthropic Body of

Christ, whose eternal head is the Lord Christ Himself; and Whose immortal soul is the Holy Spirit. Wherefore everything in her is holy: her teaching, her grace, her mysteries, her virtues, all her powers, and all her instruments have been deposited in her for the sanctification of men and of all created things. Having become the Church by His incarnation out of an unparalleled love for man, our God and Lord Jesus Christ sanctified the Church by His sufferings, Resurrection, Ascension, teaching, wonderworking, prayer, fasting, mysteries, and virtues; in a word, by His entire theanthropic life. Wherefore the divinely inspired pronouncement has been rendered: *...Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.* (Eph 5:25-27).

The flow of history confirms the reality of the Gospel: the Church is filled to overflowing with sinners. Does their presence in the Church reduce, violate, or destroy her sanctity? Not in the least! For her Head—the Lord Christ, and her Soul—the Holy Spirit, and her divine teaching, her mysteries, and her virtues, are indissolubly and immutably holy. The Church tolerates sinners, shelters them, and instructs them, that they may be awakened and roused to repentance and spiritual recovery and transfiguration; but they do not hinder the Church from being holy. Only unrepentant sinners, persistent in evil and godless malice, are cut off from the Church either by the visible action of the theanthropic authority of the Church or by the invisible action of divine judgment, so that thus also the holiness of the Church may be preserved. *Put away from among yourselves that wicked person.* (1 Cor 5:13).

In their writings and at the Councils, the holy fathers confessed the holiness of the church as her essential and immutable quality. The fathers of the Second Ecumenical Council defined it dogmatically in the ninth article of the Symbol of Faith. And the succeeding ecumenical councils confirmed it by the seal of their assent.

The Catholicity of the Church

The theanthropic nature of the Church is inherently and all-encompassingly universal and catholic: it is theanthropically universal and theanthropically catholic. The Lord Christ, the God-man, has by Himself and in Himself most perfectly and integrally united God and Man and, through man, all the worlds and all created things to God. The fate of creation is essentially linked to that of man (cf. Rom 8:19-24). In her theanthropic organism, the Church encompasses: *All things created, that are in Heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers.* (Col 1:16). Everything is in the God-man; He is the *Head of the Body of the Church.* (Col 1:17-18).

In the theanthropic organism of the Church everyone lives in the fullness of his personality as a living, godlike cell. The law of theanthropic catholicity encompasses all and acts through all. All the while, the theanthropic equilibrium between the divine and the human is always duly preserved. Being members of her body, we in the Church experience the fullness of our being in all its godlike dimensions. Furthermore, in the Church of the God-man, man experiences his own being as all-encompassing, as theanthropically all-encompassing; he experiences himself not only as complete, but also as the totality of creation. In a word: **he experiences himself as a god-man by grace.**

The theanthropic catholicity of the Church is actually an unceasing christification of many by grace and virtue: all is gathered in Christ the God-man, and everything is experienced through Him as one's own, as a single indivisible theanthropic organism. For life in the Church is a theanthropic catholicization, the struggle of acquiring by grace and virtue the likeness of the God-man, christification, theosis, life in the Trinity, sanctification, transfiguration, salvation, immortality, and churchliness. Theanthropic catholicity in the Church is reflected in and achieved by the eternally living Person of Christ, the God-man Who in the most perfect way has united God to man and to all creation, which has been cleansed of sin, evil, and *death by the Savior's precious Blood* (cf. Col 1:19-22). The theanthropic Person of the Lord Christ is the very soul of the Church's catholicity. It is the God-man Who always preserves the theanthropic balance between the divine and the human in the catholic life of the Church. The Church is filled to overflowing with the Lord Christ, for she is *the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.* (Eph. 1:23). Wherefore, she is universal in every person that is found within her, in each of her tiny cells. That uni-

versality, that catholicity resounds like thunder particularly through the holy apostles, through the holy fathers, through the holy ecumenical and local councils.

The Apostolicity of the Church

The holy apostles were the first god-men by grace. Like the Apostle Paul each of them, by his integral life, could have said of himself: *I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.* (Gal 2:20). Each of them is a Christ repeated; or, to be more exact, a continuation of Christ. Everything in them is theanthropic because everything was received from the God-man. Apostolicity is nothing other than the God-manness of the Lord Christ, freely assimilated through the holy struggles of the holy virtues: faith, love, hope, prayer, fasting, etc. This means that everything that is of man lives in them freely through the God-man, thinks through the God-man, feels through the God-man, acts through the God-man and wills through the God-man. For them, the historical God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the supreme value and the supreme criterion. Everything in them is of the God-man, for the sake of the God-man, and in the God-man. And it is always and everywhere thus. That for them is immortality in the time and space of this world. Thereby they are, even on this earth, partakers of the theanthropic eternity of Christ.

This theanthropic apostolicity is integrally continued in the earthly successors of the Christ-bearing apostles: in the holy fathers. Among them, in essence, there is no difference: the same God-man Christ lives, acts, enlivens and makes them all eternal in equal measure, *He Who is the same yesterday, and today, and forever.* (Heb 13:8). Through the holy fathers, the holy apostles live on with all their theanthropic riches, theanthropic worlds, theanthropic holy things, theanthropic mysteries, and theanthropic virtues. The holy fathers in fact are continuously apostolizing, whether as distinct godlike personalities, or as bishops of the local churches, or as members of the holy ecumenical and holy local councils. For all of them there is but one Truth, one Transcendent Truth: the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ. Behold, the holy ecumenical councils, from the first to the last, confess, defend, believe, announce, and vigilantly preserve but a single supreme value: the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The principal Tradition, the transcendent Tradition, of the Orthodox Church is the living God-man Christ, entire in the theanthropic Body of the Church of which He is the immortal, eternal Head. This is not merely the message, but the transcendent message of the holy apostles and the holy fathers. They know Christ crucified, Christ resurrected, Christ ascended. They all, by their integral lives and teachings, with a single soul and a single voice, confess that Christ the God-man is wholly in His Church, as in His Body. Each of the holy fathers could rightly repeat with St. Maximus the Confessor: *In no wise am I expounding my own opinion, but*

that which I have been taught by the fathers, without changing aught in their teaching.

And from the immortal proclamation of St. John of Damascus there resounds the universal confession of all the holy fathers who were glorified by God: *Whatever has been transmitted to us through the Law, and the prophets, and the apostles, and the evangelists, we receive and know and esteem highly, and beyond that we ask nothing more... Let us be fully satisfied with it, and rest therein, removing not the ancient landmarks (Prov 22:28), nor violating the divine Tradition.* And then, the touching, fatherly admonition of the holy Damascene, directed to all Orthodox Christians: *Wherefore, brethren, let us plant ourselves upon the rock of faith and the Tradition of the Church, removing not the landmarks set by our holy fathers, nor giving room to those who are anxious to introduce novelties and to undermine the structure of God's holy ecumenical and apostolic Church. For if everyone were allowed a free hand, little by little the entire Body of the Church would be destroyed.*

The holy Tradition is wholly of the God-man, wholly of the holy apostles, wholly of the holy fathers, wholly of the Church, in the Church, and by the Church. The holy fathers are nothing other than the *guardians of the apostolic tradition*. All of them, like the holy apostles themselves, are but *witnesses* of a single and unique Truth: the transcendent Truth of Christ, the God-man. They preach and confess it without rest, they, the *golden mouths of the Word*. The God-man, the Lord Christ is one, unique, and indivisible. So also is the Church unique and indivisible, for she is the incarnation of the Theanthropos Christ, continuing through the ages and through all eternity. Being such by her nature and in her earthly history, the Church may not be divided. It is only possible to fall away from her. That unity and uniqueness of the Church is theanthropic from the very beginning and through all the ages and all eternity.

Apostolic succession, the apostolic heritage, is theanthropic from first to last. What is it that the holy apostles are transmitting to their successors as their heritage? The Lord Christ, the God-man Himself, with all the imperishable riches of His wondrous theanthropic Personality, Christ—the Head of the Church, her sole Head. If it does not transmit that, apostolic succession ceases to be apostolic, and the apostolic Tradition is lost, for there is no longer an apostolic hierarchy and an apostolic Church.

The holy Tradition is the Gospel of the Lord Christ, and the Lord Christ Himself, Whom the Holy Spirit instills in each and every believing soul, in the entire Church. Whatever is Christ's, by the power of the Holy Spirit becomes ours, human; but only within the body of the Church. The Holy Spirit—the soul of the Church, incorporates each believer, as a tiny cell, into the body of the Church and makes him a “co-heir” of the God-man (Eph 3:6). In real-

ity the Holy Spirit makes every believer into a god-man by grace. For what is life in the Church? Nothing other than the transfiguration of each believer into a god-man by grace through his personal, evangelical virtues; it is his growth in Christ, the putting on of Christ by growing in the Church and being a member of the Church. A Christian's life is a ceaseless, Christ-centered theophany: the Holy Spirit, through the holy mysteries and the holy virtues, transmits Christ the Savior to each believer, renders him a living tradition, a living life: *Christ who is our life*. (Col 3:4). Everything Christ's thereby becomes ours, ours for all eternity: His truth, His righteousness, His love, His life, and His entire divine Hypostasis.

Holy Tradition? It is the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man Himself, with all the riches of his divine Hypostasis and, through Him and for His sake, those of the Holy Trinity. That is most fully given and articulated in the Holy Eucharist, wherein, for our sake and for our salvation, the Savior's entire theanthropic economy of salvation is performed and repeated. Therein wholly resides the God-man with all His wondrous and miraculous gifts; He is there, and in the Church's life of prayer and liturgy. Through all this, the Savior's philanthropic proclamation ceaselessly resounds: *And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*. (Mt 28:20): He is with the apostles and, through the apostles, with all the faithful, world without end. This is the whole of the holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church of the apostles: life in Christ = life in the Holy Trinity; growth in Christ = growth in the Trinity (cf. Mt 28: 19-20).

Of extraordinary importance is the following: in Christ's Orthodox Church, the Holy Tradition, ever living and life-giving, comprises: the holy liturgy, all the divine services, all the holy mysteries, all the holy virtues, the totality of eternal truth and eternal righteousness, all love, all eternal life, the whole of the God-man, the Lord Christ, the entire Holy Trinity, and the entire theanthropic life of the Church in its theanthropic fullness, with the All-holy Theotokos and all the saints.

The personality of the Lord Christ the God-man, transfigured within the Church, immersed in the prayerful, liturgical, and boundless sea of grace, wholly contained in the Eucharist, and wholly in the Church—this is holy Tradition. This authentic good news is confessed by the holy fathers and the holy ecumenical councils. By prayer and piety holy Tradition is preserved from all human demonism and devilish humanism, and in it is preserved the entire Lord Christ, He Who is the eternal Tradition of the Church. “Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh” (I Tim. 3 16): He was manifest as a man, as a God-man, as the Church, and by His philanthropic act of salvation and deification of humanity He magnified and exalted man above the holy Cherubim and the most holy Seraphim.

COVID: WHERE ARE THE COURAGEOUS RELIGIOUS LEADERS?

By Jon Rappoport, a freelance investigative reporter, from his blog <https://nomorefakenews.com>.

“The people never give up their liberties but under some delusion.” [Edmund Burke, 1784]

When are religious leaders going to issue demands to their members? Demands to express a duty to God first; above and beyond the restrictions of the State.

These leaders certainly believe God created humans with the quality of freedom. The Bible irrevocably states it. Therefore, under the cover of Covid, the State cannot remove that freedom.

The religious leaders must order their flocks to object and even rebel. Not just in order to attend church services; but to live without fear, out in the open, without hiding behind masks, without keeping their distance, without lockdowns, without sacrificing their right to earn a living.

Several Catholic prelates have declared that Covid is being used as a rationale for creating an anti-spiritual new world order.

The next step is telling their Church members and believers to rebel, to choose The Good and God.

Every early story about every religion shows how the State power of the day had to be overcome. Is it now time to develop terminal amnesia about these origins?

Are those stories buried because they are inconvenient?

Quoting from an anonymously written article, “Ancient Christian Martyrdom: A Brief Overview”:

“By 200 [AD], the [Christian] faith had permeated most regions of the Roman Empire, though Christians were mostly in the larger urban areas (Gaul, Lyons, Carthage, Rome). By 325, an estimated 7 million were Christians with as many as 2 million killed for the faith.”

Among the reasons for this vast persecution: “Christian refusal to worship or honor other gods was a source of great contention.”

“Christians were accused of being atheists because of their denial of the other gods and refusal of emperor worship. Thus, they were accused of treason to the state.”

“For many provincial governors, Christians were considered social radicals, rather than being persecuted specifically for their faith only.”

And now, in 2020, the major religious objection to Covid restrictions concerns the number of worshippers allowed inside a church during services?

Is this the evolution of faith, or its destruction, at the hands of the faithful themselves?

Is conscience “outmoded”?

Is civilization now so “advanced” that suffering and even dying for one’s faith is considered absurd?

Is bargaining with the State over whether 10 or 50 members can enter a house of worship the cutting edge of rebellion?

It seems to me people should renounce their religion, if they are unwilling to go to the wall for it.

Just admit that what true faith requires is too much.

Jesus endured pain and torture, and surrendered his human form, in order to save humanity, but now faithful followers can declare their loyalty during online virtual services. Or from their cars, in a parking lot. Without feeling a tremor of conscience.

Over the years, I have heard many claims that America (and other Western nations) were created on the basis of Christian values. Putting aside counter-arguments, if that is the assertion, then where is the courage to back it up?

What good are these claims, if in a great crisis, there is no mass rebellion, out in the open, against the tyrannical State, on behalf of God?

Again, mass rebellion means the refusal to wear masks, the refusal to maintain distancing, the refusal to obey lockdowns or close businesses. It means reclaiming freedom.

But perhaps some people believe God wants obedience to the State. He wants his loyal followers to submit to the lockdowns. He wants worshippers to surrender to an all-encompassing secular new world order, in which citizens will function as pawns in a Brave New World technocracy. He wants the faithful to be stripped of their humanity.

If so, let’s hear THAT argument.

Months ago, I said pastors and priests and other religious leaders should stand up in their houses of worship and confess their lack of courage and resign their positions. Confess they are unworthy to lead congregations. Ask for the most brave to step forward and take over.

That’s a correct course of action.

Why should these religious leaders make superficial distinctions about the limits of rebellion? In order to maintain their non-profit status with the State? In order to keep their flock comfortable?

Jesus: *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

But perhaps, is it possible that in these enlightened times, people are deciding to worship a purported virus, and desert God?



Today, while the overall teaching of the Fathers is under attack and the shipwrecks of Faith are numerous, the mouths of the faithful are silent.

St. Gregory the Theologian

AN INSTRUCTIVE LESSON FOR YOUTH FROM THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

By St. John Maximovitch.

And the younger of them said to his father, Father give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.

[Luke 15: 32]

† † †

The parable of the Prodigal Son is a most instructive lesson for youth. We see in the prodigal son the true character of flighty youth: light-minded, thoughtless, thirsting for independence; in short, everything that usually distinguishes the majority of youth.

The younger son grew up in his parents' house. On reaching adolescence, he already began to imagine that life at home was too restrictive. It seemed unpleasant to him to live under his father's rule and his mother's watchful eye. He wanted to imitate his comrades, who had given themselves up to the pleasures of the world. "I am the heir of a rich estate. Would it not be better," he reasoned, "if I received my inheritance now? I could manage my wealth differently than my father does." Thus the light-minded youth was carried away by the deceitful glitter of the world's pleasures and decided to throw off the yoke of obedience and to depart from his parents' home.

Are not many inspired by similar impulses today, and, while they may not leave their parents' home, do they not depart from the home of their Heavenly Father, that is, from obedience to the Holy Church?

The yoke of Christ seems difficult for immature minds, and His commandments burdensome. They think that it is not really necessary to keep that which God and His Holy Church command us. To them it seems possible to serve God and the world at the same time. They say, "We are already strong enough to withstand destructive temptations and seductions. We can hold onto the truth and sound teachings by ourselves. Allow us to perfect our minds through acquiring many kinds of knowledge. Let us strengthen our wills ourselves amid temptations and seductions. Through experience our senses will become convinced of the vileness of vice!" Are such desires any better than the ill-considered request of the younger son to his father, *Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me?*



And so, a light-minded youth ceases to heed the commandments and admonitions of the Holy Church. He ceases to study the Word of God and the teachings of the Holy Fathers, and listens intently to the sophistries of those who are falsely-called teachers, and in these pursuits he kills the best hours of his life. He goes to church less frequently or stands there inattentively, distracted. He does not find the opportunity to devote himself to piety and to exercise himself in the virtues, because he spends so much time attending shows, public entertainments, etc. In a word, with each day he gives himself up more and more to the world, and finally, he goes off to "a far country."

What is the result of such an estrangement from the Holy Church? It is the same as the result of the prodigal son's leaving his parents' house. Light-minded youths very quickly waste their excellent energies and talents of soul and body, ruining for time and eternity all the good they have done. Meanwhile, there appears "a mighty famine in that land:" emptiness and dissatisfaction -- the inevitable result of wild pleasures. A thirst for enjoyments appears,

which intensifies with the gratifying of wanton passions, and finally becomes insatiable. It often happens that the unfortunate lover of the world, in order to gratify his passions, resorts to base and shameful pursuits, which do not bring him to his senses like the prodigal son and do not return him

to the path of salvation, but complete his ruin, both temporal and eternal!



Anyone who is capable of speaking the truth but remains silent, will be heavily judged by God—especially in this case, where the faith and the very foundation of the entire church of the Orthodox is in danger. To remain silent under these circumstances is to betray these, and the appropriate witness belongs to those that reproach [i.e., those who stand up for the faith].

St. Basil the Great

PHARISEES, HUMBLE YOURSELVES!

By Metropolitan Avgoustinos of Florina, from the weekly bulletin "Kiriaki," February 20, 2005 [translated from Greek by the staff of the Greek Orthodox Brotherhood of St. Poimen].

My dear brethren, if we take a quick look around us and observe nature and all in her, we will notice something astonishing: all of nature and all of God's creatures are in prayer, each of them in their own unique way. The sea thanks God through the roaring of the waves; the small stream of water through its murmuring; the trees through the rustle of their leaves; the birds through their melody; the stars through their twinkling lights. Did you ever pay attention to a chicken drinking water? During every swallow, it raises its head high, as if it is conveying gratitude to its Creator, saying, "God, I thank you!"

Now I ask you: is it possible or remotely likely that man would be absent from this Divine invitation? Of course not. Man prays as well, conveying his gratitude to his Maker. Ever since our childhood, our wonderful mothers have taught us to humbly cross our hands in front of the icons of Christ and Panaghia, and to whisper a simple prayer towards our Heavenly Father. These constitute unforgettable moments for all of us. Later in our lives, we learned, along with many other children, how to say in Church the "Our Father" and the Creed, thus joining the rest of the congregation in our mutual pleas and thanks towards our Lord.

The most noble expression and manifestation of the human heart takes place during the time of prayer. The creation communicates with the Creator. It is the exact moment that compels man to thank Him for the many benefactions he enjoys daily in his life. It is also the moment that man, feeling perhaps great sorrow and hopelessness, turns to His omnipotence and pleads for help and protection.

But what is this that I see? What is this that I observe and hear? Man, in his great sinfulness, somehow manages to profane and commit another great sin during this time of prayer. How does he do that? Our Lord provides us the answer to this question through the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee.

Our Lord through this parable transports us to the temple of Solomon, during the time of prayer for the Jewish congregation. The magnificence of this temple made man "feel" the presence of God, i.e., that God comes down to all those in prayer so that all of them in turn are elevated towards

God. Multitudes of faithful thus approached the Temple of Solomon with great piety to pray within. Their movements, attitudes, and stance were calm and noiseless.

This environment of sanctity and piety is being disturbed by someone. It is the Pharisee. What does he do? He avoids all others and walks alone. His walk is prideful and his appearance and bearing are haughty and arrogant. He considers himself saintly, righteous, and pure. He refuses to associate with others and does not mingle with them in fear that they might "pollute" him. Furthermore, he enters in a boisterous, noisy manner. All others must stop what they are doing and take special notice of him; they must turn their eyes towards him. There is only one prayer that must be heard: his and his alone! He thus directs himself towards the center of the temple and he raises his hands so that he can proceed with

his prayers in an elevated tone...

This however, is not prayer. The prayer of the Pharisee is a mockery of God. He does not take a second to consider that in front of him is not a simple Jew but He Whose presence makes the universe tremble and shiver. The Pharisee, all puffed up with ego, does not consider it proper to kneel or even lower his head and ask for God's mercy. Thus standing, he begins his "prayer."

He begins with, *I thank Thee* (Lk 18:11). I wonder what he is thanking God for. Does he thank Him for his wealthy house, for his excellent health, for his many riches that are spread all over his home, for being protected from committing sins? What is he thanking God for? Let us listen to him: *God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as*

this Publican; I fast twice in a week, I tithe all things that I acquire... Now I ask you: Did he do this "prayer" for God? No. This "prayer" was meant to be heard by the people that were present all around him. He wanted all to know his "virtues" so that they could admire him.

The Pharisee altered the prayer stance into a display of self-idolization, a show. Where is the self-awareness, the feeling of contrition, the pose of humility? Where is the consciousness of the sinful human nature and the plea for God's mercy? He is preoccupied with his ego and self-declared accomplishments. *I am not an extortioner, I am not unjust, and I am not an adulterer.* Yes, Pharisee, you are not all these things, but you are an egomaniac and prideful. And for God, there exists no human passion or evil more disliked than that of pride. Pharisee, it would have been more welcome if you were an extortioner and unjust and an adulterer, as long as you were



not prideful. Why? Because then it is possible for your humility to guide you into repentance and thus attract God's mercy.

O Pharisee, you departed the temple all puffed up since you accomplished your feat and attracted the admiration of people who eulogized you and judged you as good. Did God agree with the opinion of all others in the temple? Did God praise you like they did? Did He even accept your prayer? Let me assure you that prayers of this type cannot and do not reach God's "ears." This is why Christ, having full foreknowledge of such predispositions, explicitly told us how we must all pray.

My fellow man, do you truly wish to communicate with your Creator in Heaven? If so, then ...*enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.* (Mt 6:6) Let me also be as emphatic as humanly possible and assure you that pharisaic prayers are a complete waste of time; they are good-for-nothing and lost forever.

Now you see, my dear brethren in Christ, how it is possible and likely, through pride, for many to commit grave and terrible sins, even during this time of prayer.

But why remain with the sad and pitiful image of the Pharisee? In His parable and within the confines of the same temple, our Lord presents us with the ideal image of a praying man. Before, we had the egocentric and prideful Pharisee; now, we have a humble, sensible, and wise person. He is the Publican.

The Publican examines himself as well. There is, however, a difference. The Pharisee saw only virtues, while the Publican can only see sins. From the lips of the Pharisee we hear, *I thank Thee*, full of callousness. From the lips of the Publican, however, we hear, *God be merciful unto me the sinner.* (Lk 18:13). His words come out with immense pain and anguish. The Pharisee boasted, while the Publican *smote upon his breast.* (Lk 18:13). The Pharisee had no knowledge of Who was standing across from him, while the Publican had complete understanding that he was standing in front of God his Creator, the only One Who is without sin, Him Whose virtue covers the heavens. He has complete self-awareness of his misery, wretchedness, and sinfulness. He does not even dare to *lift his eyes unto Heaven.* He knows that as it is not possible for injured eyes to face the sun, it is equally unlikely for a sinful man to face God. He is in immense pain; he weeps; he laments; he stands afar off and smites his chest. He cries out, *God be merciful unto me, a sinner.*

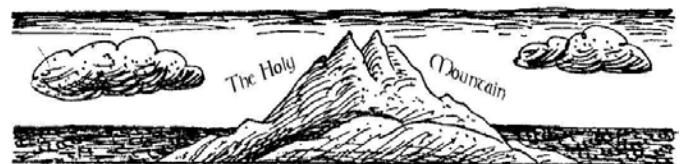
Hail to you O humble heart that is aware of the heights of God and your own wretchedness. You did not arrive to seek the recognition of people or to put on a show of ostentatious behavior. You entered the temple quietly to express your pain and anguish, to confess your sinful state, to beg for God's mercy and love.

This is why the Publican's prayer did not go to waste. It would be natural to rightfully think that the prayers of a

man as sinful as him would be unlikely to receive any type of audience from God, since everybody ignored him, especially the self-proclaimed "virtuous" Pharisee. Do you see how the judgment and discernment of people is wrong more often than not? We never have any true knowledge of what actually transpires within the hearts of people. People's judgment results in the condemnation of the Publican; God's judgment, however, results in his acquittal. People ignored him or looked upon him with contempt. God, however, welcomed and received his prayer. The Publican's humility attracted God's love.

My fellow brethren, even today (or perhaps especially today) our own world is full with Pharisees and Publicans. As during that time, people today also come to church to pray. I wonder how many of those come with a prideful air about them and a boastful attitude, just like the Pharisee. How many men and women make these big crosses and light the candles up front so that they can put on a show? How many come to church not to pray but to instead display their newly tailored suits or dresses, those fur coats or their new expensive jewelry, thus seeking admiration, recognition, or to become the topic of conversation? How many are even "praying" through self-recognition, calling themselves good Orthodox Christians? Thankfully, however, we also have Publicans. Perhaps that older lady in the corner and that weeping mother, who with contrition in their hearts, place their heads down and pray, "O Most Holy Mother of God, please save my family and me, the sinner!" They give us a renewed appearance of the Publican. O holy soul, may His mercy be with you at all times.

I am directing my words now toward the Pharisees of our days. Do not take comfort in the words of other people about you. Examine yourselves; is it possible that the serpent of pride has bit you and his evil poison has made you ill? Examine to see if God is truly with you. And if the answer is no, then weep, bow down, kneel and cry out: "God, have mercy upon us, the sinners!" It is only in this manner that you will find His justice. Do not forget that there exists nobody without sins. No matter what heights or virtues you may reach, there will always be something lacking, something on which you know you have fallen behind. It is for this reason that you must "*humble yourselves in the sight of God, and He shall lift you up.*" (Jas 4:10). We must never forget: *God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.* (1 Pet 5:5).



Repentance is never-ending. By the grace of God, we can perfect all the virtues. But no-one can perfect repentance, because we need it to our last breath, since we sin "in the blink of an eye." So repentance remains unconquered.

Saintly Elder Ephraim of Arizona (+2019)

THE LITURGICAL STRUCTURE OF LENT

By Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemann (+1983), from "The Russian Orthodox Journal," March 1959, pp. 6-8. This article is included in this issue allowing our readers an early preparatory period for the start of the 2021 Holy Great Lent (which starts on March 15th). The preparatory Triodion commences in the middle of February.



To understand the various liturgical particularities of the Lenten period, we must remember that they express and convey to us the spiritual mean-

ing of Lent and are related to the central idea of Lent, to its function in the liturgical life of the Church. It is the idea of *repentance*. In the teaching of the Orthodox Church however, repentance means much more than a mere enumeration of sins and transgressions to the priest. Confession and absolution are but the result, the fruit, the "climax" of true repentance. And, before this result can be reached, become truly valid and meaningful, one must make a spiritual effort, go through a long period of preparation and purification.

Repentance, in the Orthodox acceptance of this word, means a *deep, radical reevaluation of our whole life*, of all our ideas, judgments, worries, mutual relations, etc. It applies not only to some "bad actions," but to the whole of life, and is a Christian judgment passed on it, on its basic presuppositions. At every moment of our life, but especially during Lent, the Church invites us to concentrate our attention on the ultimate values and goals, to measure ourselves by the criteria of Christian teaching, to contemplate our existence in its relation to God. This is repentance and it consists therefore, before everything else, in the acquisition of the *Spirit of repentance*, i.e., of a special state of mind, a special disposition of our conscience and spiritual vision.

The Lenten worship is thus a *school of repentance*. It teaches us *what* is repentance and *how* to acquire the *spirit of repentance*. It prepares us for and leads us to the spiritual regeneration, without which "absolution" remains meaningless. It is, in short, both teaching about repentance and the way of repentance. And, since there can be no real Christian life without repentance, without this constant "reevaluation" of life, the Lenten worship is an essential part of the liturgical tradition of the Church. The neglect of it, its reduction to a few purely formal obligations and customs, the deformation of its basic rules constitute one of the major deficiencies of our Church life today.

The aim of this article is to outline at least the most important structures of Lenten worship, and thus to help Orthodox Christians to recover a more Orthodox idea of Lent.

SUNDAYS OF PREPARATION

Three weeks before Lent proper begins, we enter into a period of *preparation*. It is a constant feature of our tradition of worship that every major liturgical event—Christmas, Easter, Lent, etc., is announced and prepared long in advance. Knowing our lack of concentration, the "worldliness" of our life, the Church calls our attention to the seriousness of the approaching event, invites us to meditate on its various "dimensions"; thus, before we can *practice* Lent, we are given its basic *theology*.

Pre-Lenten preparation includes four consecutive Sundays preceding Lent.

Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

On the eve of this day, i.e., at the Saturday Vigil Service, the liturgical book of the Lenten season, the *Triodion* makes its first appearance and texts from it are added to the usual liturgical material of the Resurrection service. They develop the first major theme of the season: that of *humility*; the Gospel lesson of the day (Lk 18:10-14) teaches that humility is the condition of repentance. No one can acquire the spirit of repentance without rejecting the attitude of the Pharisee. Here is a man who is always pleased with himself and thinks that he complies with all the requirements of religion. Yet, he has reduced religion to purely formal rules and measures it by the amount of his financial contribution to the temple. Religion for him is a source of pride and self-satisfaction. The Publican is humble and humility justifies him before God.

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

The Gospel reading of this day (Lk 15:11-32) gives the second theme of Lent: that of a return to God. It is not enough to acknowledge sins and to confess them. Repentance remains fruitless without the desire and the decision to change life, to go back to God. The true repentance has as its source the spiritual beauty and purity which man has lost. *I shall return to the compassionate Father crying with tears, receive me as one of Thy servants*. At Matins of this day to the usual psalms of the Polyelos *Praise ye the name of the Lord* (Pss 135), the Psalm 137 is added, *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept, when we remembered Zion... If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning...* The Christian *recalls what he lost*: the communion with God, the peace and joy of His Kingdom. He was baptized, introduced into the Body of Christ. Repentance, therefore, is the renewal of baptism, a movement of love, which brings him back to God.

Sunday of the Last Judgment (Meat Fare)

On Saturday, preceding this Sunday, the *Typikon* prescribes the universal commemoration of all the departed members

of the Church. In the Church we all depend on each other, we belong to each other, we are united by the love of Christ. (Therefore no service in the Church can be “private”.) Our repentance would not be complete without this act of love towards all those, who have preceded us in death, for what is repentance if not also the recovery of the spirit of love, which is the spirit of the Church. Liturgically this commemoration includes Friday Vespers, Matins and Divine Liturgy on Saturday.

The Sunday Gospel (Mt 25:31-46) reminds us of the third theme of repentance: preparation for the last judgment. A Christian lives under Christ’s judgment. He will judge us on how seriously we took His presence in the world, His identification with every man, His gift of love. *I was in prison, I was naked...* All our actions, attitudes, judgments and especially relations with other people must be referred to Christ, and to call ourselves “Christians” means that we accept life as *service* and *ministry*. The parable of the Last Judgment gives us “terms of reference” for our self-evaluation.

On the week following this Sunday a *limited fasting* is prescribed. We must prepare and train ourselves for the great effort of Lent. Wednesday and Friday are (usually) *non-liturgical days* with Lenten services. On Saturday of this week (Cheesefare Saturday) the Church commemorates all men and women who were “illuminated through fasting,” i.e., the Holy Ascetics or Fasters. They are the patterns we must follow, our guides in the difficult “art” of fasting and repentance.

Sunday of Forgiveness (Cheese Fare)

This is the last day before Lent. Its liturgy develops three themes: (a) the *expulsion of Adam from the Paradise of Bliss*. Man was created for Paradise, i.e., for communion with God, for life with Him. He has lost this life and his existence on earth is an exile. Christ has opened to every one the doors of Paradise and the Church guides us to our heavenly fatherland. (b) Our fast must not be hypocritical, a show off. We must *appear not unto men to fast, but unto our Father who is in secret* (Sunday Gospel, Mt. 6:14-21), and (c) its condition is that we *forgive* each other as God has forgiven us—*If ye forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you*.

The evening of that day, at Vespers, Lent is inaugurated by the Great Prokeimenon: *Turn not away Thy face from Thy servant, for I am in trouble; hear me speedily. Attend to my*

soul and deliver it. After this service, the rite of forgiveness takes place and the Church begins its pilgrimage towards the glorious day of Easter.

THE CANON OF ST. ANDREW OF CRETE

On the first four days of Lent—Monday through Thursday—the Typikon prescribes the reading at Great Compline (i.e., after Vespers) of the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, divided in four parts. This canon is entirely devoted to repentance and constitutes, so to say, the “inauguration of Lent.” It is repeated in its complete form at Matins on Thursday of the fifth week of Lent.

LENT WEEKDAYS

Lent consists of six weeks or forty days. It begins on Monday after the Cheese Fare Sunday and ends on Friday evening before Palm Sunday. The Saturday of Lazarus’ resurrection, the Palm Sunday and the Holy Week form a special liturgical cycle not analyzed in this article.

The Lenten weekdays (Monday through Friday) have a



liturgical structure very different from that of Saturdays and Sundays. We will deal with these two days in a special paragraph.

The Lenten weekday cycle, although it consists of the same services, as prescribed for the whole year (Vespers, Compline, Midnight, Matins, Hours) has nevertheless some important particularities:

(a) It has its own liturgical book—the *Triodion*.

Throughout the year, the changing elements of the daily services—*troparia, stichira, canons*—are taken from the *Octoechos* (the book of the week) and the *Menaion* (the book of the month, giving the office of the Saint of the day). The basic rule of Lent is that the Octoechos is not used on weekdays but replaced by the Triodion, which supplies us each day with:

- (i) at Vespers, a set of *stichiras* (three for *Lord, I have cried* and three for the *aposticha*) and two readings or *parimias* from the Old Testament;
- (ii) at Matins, two groups of *cathismata* (short hymns sung after the reading of the Psalter), a canon of three odes (or “Triodion” which gave its name to the whole book) and three *stichiras* at the *Praises*, i.e., sung at the end of the regular morning psalms 148, 149, 150—at the Sixth Hour—a *parimia* from the Book of Isaiah;
- (iii) the commemoration of the Saint of the day (*Menaion*) is not omitted, but combined with the texts of the Triodion. The latter are mainly, if not exclu-

sively, penitential in their content. Especially deep and beautiful are the *idiornela stichira* of each day (one at Vespers and one at Matins).

(b) The use of the Psalter is doubled. Normally the Psalter, divided in 20 *cathismata* is read once every week: (one *cathisma* at Vespers, two at Matins). During Lent it is read twice (one at Vespers, three at Matins, one at the third, sixth, and ninth Hours). This is done of course mainly in monasteries, yet to know that the Church considers the psalms to be an essential “spiritual food” for the Lenten season is important.

(c) The Lenten rubrics put an emphasis on prostrations. They are prescribed at the end of each service with the Lenten prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian, *O Lord and Master of my life*, and also after each of the special Lenten troparia at Vespers. They express the spirit of repentance as *breaking down* our pride and self-satisfaction. They also make our body partake of the effort of prayer.

(d) The Spirit of Lent is also expressed in the liturgical music. Special Lenten “tones” or melodies are used for the responses at litanies and the “Alleluias” which replace at Matins the solemn singing of the *God is the Lord and has revealed Himself unto us*.

(e) A characteristic feature of Lenten services is the use of the Old Testament, normally absent from the daily cycle. Three books are read daily throughout Lent: Genesis with Parables at Vespers and the Book of Isaiah at the sixth Hour. Genesis tells us the story of Creation, Fall and the beginnings of the history of salvation. Parables is the book of Wisdom, which leads us to God and to His precepts, and Isaiah is the prophet of redemption, salvation and the Messianic Kingdom.

(f) The liturgical vestments to be used on weekdays of Lent are dark, theoretically purple.

The order for the weekday Lenten services is to be found in the Triodion (“Monday of the first week of Lent”). Of special importance are the regulations concerning the singing of the Canon. Lent is the only season of the liturgical year that has preserved the use of the nine biblical odes, which formed the original framework of the Canon.

NON-LITURGICAL DAYS

THE LITURGY OF THE PRESANCTIFIED GIFTS

On weekdays (Monday through Friday) the celebration of the Divine Liturgy is strictly forbidden. They are non-

liturgical days, with only one possible exception – the Feast of Annunciation (then the Liturgy of St. Chrysostom is prescribed after Vespers). The reason for this rule is that the Eucharist is by its very nature a festal celebration, the joyful commemoration of Christ’s Resurrection and presence among His disciples. But at least twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays, the Church prescribes the celebration of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. It consists of solemn Great Vespers and communion with the Holy Gifts consecrated on the previous Sunday. These days being days of strict fasting (theoretically complete abstinence) are “crowned” with the partaking of the Bread of Life, the ultimate fulfillment of all our efforts.

One must acknowledge the tragic neglect of these rules in many American parishes. The celebration of the so called “requiem liturgies” on non-liturgical days constitutes a flagrant violation of the universal tradition of Orthodoxy

and cannot be justified from either theological or pastoral points of view. They are remnants of “uniatism” in our Church and are in contradiction with both the Orthodox doctrine of the commemoration of the dead and the Orthodox doctrine of Eucharist and its function in the Church. Everything must be done in order to restore the real liturgical principles of Lent.

SATURDAYS OF LENT

Lenten Saturdays, with the exception of the first—dedicated to the memory of the Holy Martyr Theodore Tyron, and the fifth—the Saturday of the *Acathistos*, are days of commemoration of the departed. And, instead of multiplying the “private requiem liturgies” on days when they are forbidden, it would be good to restore this practice of one weekly universal commemoration of all Orthodox Christians departed this life, of their integration in the Eucharist, which is always offered *on behalf of all and for all*.

The *Acathistos* Saturday is the annual commemoration of the deliverance of Constantinople in 620. The *Acathist*, a beautiful hymn to the Mother of God, is sung usually at Matins.

SUNDAYS OF LENT

Each Sunday in Lent, although it keeps its character of the weekly feast of Resurrection, has its specific theme, and the *Triodion* is combined with the *Octoechos*.

1st Sunday: Triumph of Orthodoxy, commemorates the victory of the Church over the Iconoclasm heresy (842).



2nd Sunday: dedicated to the memory of St. Gregory Palamas, a great Byzantine theologian, canonized in 1366.

3rd Sunday: Sunday of the Veneration of the Holy Cross; at Matins the Cross is brought in a solemn procession from the sanctuary and put in the center of the Church where it will remain for the whole week. This ceremony announces the approaching of the Holy Week and the commemoration of Christ's passion. At the end of each service takes place a special veneration of the Cross.

4th Sunday: St. John the Ladder, one of the greatest Ascetics, who in his "Spiritual Ladder" described the basic principles of Christian spirituality.

5th Sunday: St. Mary of Egypt, the most wonderful example of repentance.

On Saturdays and Sundays, days of Eucharistic celebration, the dark vestments are replaced by light ones, the Lenten melodies are not used, and the prayer of St. Ephraim with prostrations is omitted. The order of the services is not of the Lenten type, yet fasting remains a rule and cannot be broken. Each Sunday night, Great Vespers with a special Great Prokeimenon is prescribed.

At the conclusion of this brief description of the liturgical structure of Lent, let me emphasize once more that Lenten worship constitutes one of the deepest, the most beautiful and the most essential elements of our Orthodox liturgical tradition. Its restoration in the life of the Church, its understanding by Orthodox Christians, constitute one of the urgent tasks of our time.

† † †

From the Editor: In the Greek Orthodox tradition, on the first four Fridays of Lent, the Service of the Salutations to the Theotokos is chanted. In the evening, the Small Compline is read through the Creed, and then the Canon of the *Akathist* is chanted, in each ode, doing six troparia. The entire *Akathist* is chanted in its entirety on the fifth Friday evening.

The four sections into which the *Akathist* is divided correspond to the themes of the Annunciation, Nativity, Christ, and the Theotokos herself. The hymn itself forms an alphabetical acrostic—that is, each *oikos* (house) begins with a letter of the Greek alphabet, in order—and it consists of twelve long and twelve short *oikoi*. Each of the long *oikoi* include a seven-line *stanza* followed by six couplets, employing rhyme, assonance, and alliteration, beginning with the word *Chaire* (translated as either "Hail!" or "Rejoice!") and ending with the refrain, "Hail, Bride without bridegroom!" In the short *oikoi*, the seven-line *stanza* is followed by the refrain, *Alleluia!*

The Salutations to the Theotokos service is most often known by its Greek name *Chairetismoi*, from the *Chaire*, so often used in the hymn. (*Rejoice*, as proclaimed by the Archangel to the Holy Theotokos.)

PERSECUTIONS AGAINST CHRISTIANS WORSEN DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC

By Ștefana Totorcea 01/20/2021, from the *Basilica.ro* Newsfeed.

More than 340 million Christians were severely persecuted in 2020 and the phenomenon worsened during the coronavirus pandemic, announced last week Portes Ouvertes, the French partner of Open Doors International.

The numbers have gone up since the 2019 report, which found 260 million Christians persecuted globally.

The organization monitors all the incidents, from daily soft oppression to grave violence.

"Persecuted Christian minorities were confronted with unprecedented violence and a higher level of discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the trends we have monitored for years," estimates Portes Ouvertes, which makes an annual index of the persecution of Christians in 50 high-risk countries.

The most persecuted are Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has 90% of the Christians killed for their faith.

On the other hand, the number of attacked churches was slashed to half the number in the 2019 report (4,488 compared to 9,488).

In 2020 China had by far the highest number of attacked churches, even though the trend was decreasing (3,088 compared to 5,576 in 2019), followed by Nigeria.

In North Korea, faith in God remains a crime against the political regime and it can send a person to a forced labour camp, announced the organization.

Other countries where Christians are oppressed are Afghanistan, Somalia, Libia, Pakistan, Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria, India, Iraq and Syria.

Open Doors International is a global network of Christian NGOs and is active in 60 countries. It offers spiritual and moral support and also humanitarian aid to persecuted Christians.



Whoever restrains sinful thoughts, does not think of his own sins or the sins of others, neither of anything corruptible nor of anything earthly. The mind of such a man is continually in heaven where there is no evil. Thus, in him, sin gradually ceases to be, even in his thoughts.

This is what it means not to judge. Do not have hostile feelings towards anyone and do not let dislike dominate your heart; do not hate him who hates his neighbor.

St. Nikolai Velimirovich

Ἐπιστροφή στο Σπίτι τοῦ Πατέρα

ΠΗΓΗ: Περιοδικό «Κυριακή», 28 Φεβρουαρίου 2021, ἀριθμ. φύλλου 2355, ἐκδίδεται ἀπὸ τὴν Κοινοβιακὴ Γυναικεία Ἱερὰ Μονὴ Ἁγίου Αὐγουστίνου Φλωρίνης. Γράφει ὁ Ἅγιος Μητροπολίτης πρώην Φλωρίνης κ.κ. Αὐγουστῖνος Καντιώτης, (+2010).

«**Πάτερ, ἡμαρτον εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἐνώπιόν σου...**» [Λουκ. 15, 18, 21]

† † †



Ἀκούσατε, ἀγαπητοί μου, τὸ ἱερὸ καὶ ἅγιο εὐαγγέλιο. Εἶνε μία παραβολή, ἡ ὠραιότερη ἀπὸ ὅσες εἶπε ὁ Κύριος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός. Εἶνε ἡ ἱστορία ἐνὸς φαινομενικὰ ἀγνώστου νέου, ποῦ ἔφυγε ἀπ' τὸν πατέρα του καὶ ὕστερα ἀπὸ καιρὸ γύρισε κοντά του· ἀλλὰ κάτω ἀπὸ τὴν ἱστορία του εἶνε κρυμμένη ἡ ἱστορία τοῦ κάθε ἀνθρώπου· **ἡ παραβολὴ**

αὐτὴ εἶνε ἡ φωτογραφία μας. Σήμερα **ἐορτάζουμε ὅλου**· γιατί λίγο ἢ πολὺ ὅλοι μοιάζουμε μὲ τὸν ἄσωτο υἱό. Ἄς δοῦμε τώρα τὴν παραβολή.

Ὁ νέος αὐτὸς ἦταν παιδί ἐνὸς καλοῦ πατέρα. Μέσα στὸ σπίτι του τὰ εἶχε ὅλα, τίποτε δὲν τοῦ ἔλειπε. Κι ὅμως αὐτὸς δὲν ἔμενε εὐχαριστημένος. Ἐνιωθε τὸ σπίτι σὰν φυλακή, κλουβὶ ἀπ' τὸ ὁποῖο ἤθελε νὰ βγῆ ἔξω, νὰ πετάξῃ. Καὶ μιὰ μέρα, χωρὶς εὐχὴ τοῦ πατέρα, **ἔφυγε**.

Μεγάλο πρᾶγμα ἡ **πατρικὴ εὐλογία**: ὅποιος τὴν ἔχει, «χῶμα πιάνει – μάλαμα γίνεται»· διαφορετικά, μάλαμα θὰ πιάνη – φίδια καὶ σκορπιοὶ θὰ γίνωνται. Μύρια παραδείγματα δείχνουν ὅτι «**Εὐλογία πατρὸς στηρίζει οἴκους τέκνων, κατάρα δὲ μητρὸς ἐκτριζοῖ θεμέλια**». (Σοφ. Σειρ. 3:9).

Ἐφυγε ὁ νέος ἀπὸ τὸ πατρικόν. Καὶ ποῦ πῆγε; Στὰ ξένα! Κ' ἐκεῖ τί ἔκανε; Ἐμπλεξε. **Ἄχ αὐτὴ ἡ ξενιτεία!** Εἶνε ἐπικίνδυνη. Γι' αὐτὸ συμβουλεύω, μείνετε στὸν τόπο σας· τὸ ψωμάκι ποῦ τρῶτε ἐδῶ μὲ κρεμμύδι, εἶνε εὐλογημένο· τὸ ψωμί στὰ ξένα, κι ἂν εἶνε μὲ βούτυρο, εἶνε φαρμάκι. Πολλοὶ ποῦ ξενιτεύονται, συχνὰ ἔχουν τὴν ἐξέλιξι ποῦ εἶχε ὁ νέος αὐτός.

Στὰ ξένα, δηλαδή, ἔμπλεξε μὲ γυναῖκες τῆς νύχτας καὶ φίλους τῆς κακιᾶς ὥρας. Γλέντια, ξενύχτια, μεθύσια, χοροί. Στὸ τέλος ἔφαγε ὅλη τὴν περιουσία του, δὲν τοῦ ἔμεινε δραχμὴ. Τὸν ἔπιασε πείνα μεγάλη. Ἀναγκάστηκε νὰ γίνῃ βοσκός· ἔβροσκε ὄχι πρόβατα καὶ γίδια ἀλλὰ γουρούνια. Καὶ τ' ἀφεντικό του ἦταν τόσο σκληρό, ποῦ δὲν τοῦ ἔδινε οὔτ' ἓνα κομμάτι ψωμί, κι αὐτὸς περιέμενε χορτάση ἀπὸ τὰ ξυλοκέρατα τῶν χοίρων, τὰ χαρούπια—ποῦ φάγαμε κ' ἐμεῖς στὰ χρόνια τῆς

κατοχῆς.

Τότε πιά θυμῆθηκε τὸ πατρικόν του, καὶ εἶπευ: Τί ἔκανα; **Πρέπει νὰ γυρίσω στὸν πατέρα μου.** Καὶ ξεκινάει. Ἐφυγε ντυμένος στὰ χρυσαφικά· τώρα γυρίζει μ' ἓνα ῥαβδί ζητιάνος, κουρελῆς, ἀδύνατος, σκελετός, ξυπόλητος, ψειριασμένος, ἐλεεινός—τρισάθλιος, ἀγνώριστος.

Ὁ **πατέρας** ποῦ πάντα τὸν περιέμενε, τὸν εἶδε ἀπὸ μακριά. Τὸν γνώρισε καὶ **τρέχει νὰ τὸν προῦπαντήσῃ**. Ὁ νέος πέφτει στὰ πόδια τοῦ καὶ λέει: Πατέρα, δὲν εἶμαι ἄξιος νὰ λέγωμαι παιδί σου· σὲ λύπησα, σὲ πίκρανα... Κλαῖνε κ' οἱ δυό. Ὁ πατέρας τὸν ἀγκαλιάζει, τὸν φιλεῖ καὶ τὸν φέρνει στὸ ἀρχοντικό. Τὸν πλένει, τὸν καθαρίζει, τὸν ντύνει λαμπρὴ στολή, τοῦ φορᾶει δαχτυλίδι στὸ χέρι καὶ παπούτσια στὰ πόδια. Ἐτοιμάζει τραπέζι πλούσιο σφάζοντας τὸ καλύτερο μοσχάρι. Ἀνάβει φῶτα, καλεῖ τὰ ὄργανα· καὶ τὴ νύχτα **τὸ σπίτι του εἶχε χαρά**, γιατί βρῆκε τὸ πρόβατο ποῦ εἶχε χάσει.

Αὐτὸ εἶνε τὸ σημερινὸ εὐαγγέλιο. Ἀλλά, ὅπως εἶπα, πίσω ἀπὸ τὸν ἄσωτο υἱὸ εἶνε κρυμμένη ἡ ἱστορία κάθε ἀνθρώπου. Μόνον ὅποιος νομίζει πὼς εἶνε ἀναμάρτητος, αὐτὸς δὲν μοιάζει μὲ τὸν ἄσωτο, ἀλλὰ μοιάζει μὲ τὸν πρεσβύτερο υἱό, ποῦ καυχόταν πὼς εἶνε ἐν τάξει.

† † †

Ἀλλὰ ποιός, ἀγαπητοί μου, μπορεῖ νὰ καυχηθῆ, ὅτι δὲν εἶνε ἁμαρτωλός, δηλαδή ἄσωτος υἱός; **Ἡ ἁμαρτία** εἶνε σὰν τὸ μικρόβιο, ποῦ μπαίνει στὸν ὄργανισμό τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

Ἄμαρτάνουμε μὲ τὸ σῶμα, μὲ κάθε μέλος.

Μὲ τὰ χέρια· ποῦ μᾶς τὰ ἔδωσε ὁ Θεὸς γιὰ νὰ κάνουμε ὄχι τὸ κακό (ὄρκους, κλοπές, φόνους...), ἀλλὰ ἔργα πίστεως καὶ ἀγάπης.

Μὲ τὰ πόδια· ποῦ μᾶς τὰ ἔδωσε γιὰ νὰ τρέχουμε ὄχι στὴ φθορὰ ἀλλὰ στὴν ἐκκλησία κι ὅπου ἀλλοῦ καλεῖ ἡ ἀνάγκη τοῦ πλησίον.

Μὲ τὰ μάτια· μᾶς τὰ ἔδωσε ὁ Θεός, γιὰ νὰ θαυμάζουμε τὸ πανόραμα τῆς δημιουργίας του καὶ νὰ τὸν δοξάζουμε, κ' ἐμεῖς κλεισμένοι στὰ σκοτεινά, μὲ μάτια πεταγμένα ἔξω ἀπ' τὶς κόγχες, χάφτουμε ἀπ' τὶς ὀθόνες αἵσθη καὶ αἵματα, ποῦ ἀνάβουν τὸ πῦρ τῆς κολάσεως.

Μὲ τὰ αὐτιά· ποῦ τὰ βουλώσαμε νὰ μὴν ἀκοῦνε Εὐαγγέλιο, φωνὴ τῆς μάνας, τοῦ πατέρα, τοῦ δασκάλου, τοῦ παπᾶ, τῆς πατρίδος, ἀλλὰ τὰ τεντώνουμε στὰ σατανικά μηνύματα.

Μὲ τὸ μυαλό. Πές μου τί σκέπτεσαι, νὰ σοῦ πῶ τί εἶσαι. Σκέπτεσαι τὸ Θεό, τὸν οὐρανόν, τὴν Παναγία, τοὺς ἁγίους, τὸ φτωχόν; τότε εἶσαι ἅγιος. Σκέπτεσαι τὴν ἁμαρτία, τὸ βόρβορο, τὴ λάσπη, τὴν ἀτιμία; τότε εἶσαι ἄσωτος.

Ἄμαρτάνουμε ὅμως ὄχι μόνον μὲ τὸ σῶμα ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲ **τὸ πνεῦμα (καρδιά, νοῦ, φαντασία)**. Ἄντι ν' ἀγαποῦμε ὄ,τι ἀγαθόν, ἀγαποῦμε ὄ,τι φαῦλο. Ἄμαρτάνουμε κάθε

στιγμή, μέρα - νύχτα, και σε κάθε τόπο· στο δρόμο και στο δωμάτιο, σε πόλι και σε ύπαιθρο, στα έμπορικά και στο χρηματιστήριο, σε λέσχες και σε καζίνα, σε ιατρεία και σε δικαστήρια, σε σχολές και σε γήπεδα, στο στρατό και στα νυχτερινά κέντρα, σε άλση και σε δάση, σε αυτοκίνητα και τραίνα, σε πλοία κι άεροπλάνα... Άμαρτάνουμε ακόμα—ώ Θεέ μου—και μέσα στην έκκλησία!

Ποιός μπορεί να μετρήσει τ' άμαρτήματά μας; Γι' αυτό στο τροπάριο της Κασσιανής άκούμε: «*Άμαρτιών μου τὰ πλήθη ... τίς έξιχνιάσει, ψυχοσωστα Σωτήρ μου*» Όποιος λέει πως δεν είναι άμαρτωλός, άγνοεί τον έαυτό του, τὸ Εὐαγγέλιο, τὸ νόμο τοῦ Θεοῦ.

Όλες οί γενεές στην άνθρωπότητα έχουν άμαρτήσει· αλλά εγώ πιστεύω ότι ποτέ άλλοτε ὁ κόσμος δεν άμάρτησε τόσο ὅσο σήμερα. **Άμαρτάνουμε πολύ.** Αυτό φαίνεται ιδίως από ώρισμένες φρικτές πληγές τῆς ζωῆς μας.

Βλασφημία. Παλιότερα στον τόπο μας οὔτε ένας δεν βλαστημοῦσε τὸ Θεό. Τώρα; Άκόμα και τὰ βυζανιάρικα στις άγκαλιές, μαζί με τὸ γάλα πὸν πίνουν, έμαθαν τὴν βλασφημία.

Διαζύγιο. Παλαιότερα στην χώρα μας τὸ διαζύγιο ἦταν άγνωστο. Ήψαξα στα άρχεία τῆς μητροπόλεως, διαζύγιο δεν ὑπῆρχε. Μόνο τὸ φτυάρι τοῦ νεκροθάφτη χώριζε τὸ άντρώγυνο. Τώρα; Ντρέπομαι πὸν ἴμαι έπίσκοπος. Τετρακόσες αἰτήσεις διαζυγίου! Έρχονται κάθε μέρα δικηγόροι. Φάμπρικα τοῦ σατανά. Τὸ δήλωσα· ὅσο εἶμαι έπίσκοπος, διαζύγιο δεν δίνω!

Άποφυγή τεκνογονίας και έκτρώσεις. Παλαιά έρχόσουν στὴ Μακεδονία κ' έβλεπες οἰκογένειες πατριαρχικές. Τώρα δεν ὑπάρχουν. Ποιά εἶνε ἡ πατριαρχική οἰκογένεια; Τὸ άντρώγυνο μετὰ τὰ στέφανα τεκνογονοῦσε φυσιολογικά, δεν ὑπῆρχε ἡ μόδα τοῦ διαβόλου ν' ἀποφεύγουν τὴ γέννησι· έκαναν 5, 6, 7 κι 8 παιδιά. Τὰ παιδιά αὐτὰ ζοῦσαν άγαπημένα. Παντρεύονταν, και οἱ νύφες άγαπιόνταν σαν άδερφές. Έμεναν μαζί πεθερός, πεθερά, παιδιά, νύφες κ' έγγόνια. Βρῆκα κάποτε στα μέρη τοῦ Κιλίς και στὴ Νάουσα τέτοιες οἰκογένειες και δάκρυσα. Στο τραπέζι κάθονταν 55 άτομα· ὁ άσπρομάλλης παπποῦς, δίπλα του ἡ Μακεδόνισσα γιαγιά σαν τὴν Παναγιά, γύρω τὰ παιδιά του 10 λεβέντες και 10 νυφάδες, κι ὅλα τὰ έγγόνια· οἱ μανάδες κρατοῦσαν τὰ μικρά τους κ' ἦταν ὅλοι μιὰ χαρὰ Χριστοῦ. Σήμερα; Ἡ οἰκογένεια διαλύθηκε· έκτρώσεις, πορνεία, μοιχεία, διαζύγια και λοιπὴ άκαθαρότητα σείει τὸ έθνος μας.

Έγκληματικότητα. Πρῶτα δίσταζαν νὰ πιάσουν μαχαίρι νὰ σφάξουν κόκορα· σήμερα κόβει ὁ άλλος τὸ συνάνθρωπο σαν νὰ ἔνε πράσο. Χάθηκε ὅχι ἡ άγάπη μὰ κι αὐτὴ ἡ άνθρωπιά. Γι' αὐτὸ εἶπα, ὅτι καμμία άλλη έποχὴ δεν άμάρτησε τόσο πολὺ ὅσο ἡ δικὴ μας.

Και τί έπρεπε νὰ γίνη; Νὰ μᾶς τιμωρήσει ὁ Θεός. Κ' έχει πολλοὺς τρόπους τὸ δακτυλάκι του νὰ κουνήσει ὁ Χριστός, γίναμε κάρβουνο. **Και ὅμως** δεν μᾶς καιει με φωτιά, δεν μᾶς πνίγει με νερό, δεν μᾶς καταστρέφει με σεισμό, αλλά—δόξα τῆ μακροθυμία Του—περιμένει. **Τί περιμένει;** Κι από τοὺς δεσποτάδες, κι από τοὺς παπᾶδες, κι από τὰ μοναστήρια, κι από τοὺς βασιλιάδες και μεγάλους, κι από τοὺς μικροὺς και φτωχοὺς, κι από τὶς γυναῖκες κι από τὰ παιδιά, περιμένει—τί; Αὐτὸ πὸν εἶπε ὁ άσωτος· **νὰ ποῦμε τὸ «Ἡμαρτον».** Δυστυχῶς δεν τὸ λέμε, δεν αλλάζουμε. Και δεν θὰ μᾶς δικάσει ὁ Θεός γιατί άμαρτάνουμε, ὅχι· θὰ μᾶς δικάσει γιατί δεν μετανοοῦμε. Τὸ άμαρτάνειν εἶνε ανθρώπινο, τὸ έμμένειν ἐν τῆ πλάνῃ και τῆ άμαρτία εἶνε σατανικό.

Περιμένει ὁ Θεός από μᾶς τὸ «Ἡμαρτον» κι ὅχι μόνο δεν τὸ λέμε και δεν κλαῖμε, αλλά τέτοια άγια μέρα, πὸν ἡ Έκκλησία μας φωνάζει και καλεῖ νὰ μετανοήσουμε και νὰ κλάψουμε, **νὰ έπιστρέψουμε στο σπίτι τοῦ Πατέρα μας**· ν' άνοιξομε τὴ Γραφή νὰ τὴ μελετήσουμε, νὰ νηστεύσουμε, νὰ προσευχηθοῦμε, νὰ κάνουμε ὁμολογία και έλεημοσύνη, νὰ αφήσουμε τὴν κραιπάλη τῆς διεφθαρμένης Δύσεως.

Όχι καμπαρὲ κ' έκφυλισμός. Δεν εἶμαστε οὔτε Λονδίνο, οὔτε Μόσχα, οὔτε Νέα Ὑόρκη· εἶμαστε Μακεδονία, Ελλάδα, και θέλουμε νὰ ζήσουμε σαν Ὁρθόδοξοι Χριστιανοί!



Όσοι σκέψεις, ὡ μέρμινες τοῦ βίου, πὸν δεν μᾶς αφήνετε οὔτε τὴν ὡρα τῆς Θείας Λειτουργίας, αλλά έξακολουθεῖτε και τότε νὰ μᾶς ένοχλήτε!. Σαν τὶς σφήγκες μᾶς περικυκλώνετε, μᾶς κεντᾶτε, μᾶς ένοχλεῖτε. Αλλά ὅπως μιὰ σφηγκοφωλιά πὸν ένοχλεῖ τοὺς διαβάτες βάζουν φωτιά και τὴν καινε και άπαλλάσσονται οἱ διαβάτες από τὴν ένοχλητικὴ παρουσία της, έτσι και τὶς πονηρὲς αὐτὲς σκέψεις, πὸν μᾶς ένοχλοῦναι και δεν μᾶς αφήνουν άνεπηρέαστους νὰ παρακολουθήσουμε τὴ Θείας Λειτουργία, πρέπει νὰ βροῦμε τρόπο νὰ τὶς έξοντώσουμε, νὰ τὶς απομακρύνουμε από τὴ συνείδησή μας και νὰ κάψουμε τὴ φωλιά τους.

Ἡ αἴθουσα τῆς Ἱεραρχίας δεν εἶναι αἴθουσα κάποιας μασονικῆς στοᾶς, ὅπου ὡρισμένα μόνο άτομα συνεδριάζουν και λαμβάνουν μυστικὰς αποφάσεις. Όχι! Ἡ αἴθουσα τῆς Ἱεραρχίας πρέπει νὰ εἶναι ὡς τὸ ὑπερῶον τῆς Πεντηκοστῆς, ὅπου έπνεε ἡ ὕρα τοῦ Παναγίου Πνευματος: «*Οὐδὲ τὸ Πνεῦμα Κυρίου, ἐκεῖ έλευθερία*» (Β' Κορ. 3:17).

Θεολογικὸς Γέρον Αὐγουστίνος Καντιώτης (2010)

Ὁ Ὀρκος στὸν Διάβολο

Πρωτ. Γεωργίου Δορμπαράκη.

Γονατιστὸς ὁ Γέροντας καὶ μὲ τὸ κεφάλι τελείως γεμμένο ὥστε νὰ ἀκουμπᾶ στὸ ἔδαφος τρανταζόταν ἀπὸ τοὺς λυγμούς. Πύρινα τὰ δάκρυά του χύνονταν στὸ χῶμα τοῦ κελιοῦ του ἔχοντας σχηματίσει ἤδη μιὰ μικρὴ λίμνη ἀπὸ λάσπη. Μὰ δὲν τολμοῦσε νὰ ὑψώσει τὸ κεφάλι καὶ νὰ ἀντικρούσει τὴν γλυκιὰ μορφὴ τῆς Ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου ποὺ δέσποζε στὸ εἰκονοστάσι του κρατώντας τὸν μικρὸ Χριστό.

—Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, ἐλέησόν με. Ὑπεραγία Θεοτόκε, σῶσον με, ψέλλιζαν διαρκῶς τὰ χεῖλη του. Βοήθη με, Παναγιά μου. Δὲν ἀντέχω ἄλλο τὸν πειρασμό. Νιώθω τόσο βρωμερὸς ἐνώπιόν σου καὶ ἐνώπιον τοῦ Κυρίου καὶ Θεοῦ μου.

Σταμάτησαν κάποτε οἱ λυγμοὶ καὶ τὰ δάκρυα. Ὁ Γέροντας σηκώθηκε ἀργά, μὰ δὲν τόλμησε γιὰ μιὰ ἀκόμη φορὰ νὰ κοιτάξει πρὸς τὴν Παναγία Μητέρα τοῦ Κυρίου καὶ τὸν Ἰδιο. Τοῦ φαινόταν ὅτι ὁ Οὐρανὸς ἦταν κλειστὸς ἀπέναντί του. Ἀμέτοχος σὲ ὅ,τι διαδραματιζόταν στὴν ψυχὴ, ἀλλὰ καὶ στὸ σῶμα του. Ἡ ἐνίσχυση ποὺ περιέμενε δὲν ἐρχόταν.

Ἔσυρε τὰ βήματά του καὶ σκέφτηκε νὰ πάρει καὶ πάλι ἓνα ξύλο ποὺ ἔχε μαζέψει στὸ φτωχικὸ κελί του καὶ νὰ κτυπήσει τὸ σῶμα του. Ἡ πύρωση τῆς σάρκας ποὺ εἶχε ξεκινήσει ἐδῶ καὶ κάποιον καιρὸ τὸν εἶχε τρομοκρατήσει καὶ βλέποντας τὴν διάρκειά της τὸν εἶχε σχεδὸν καταβάλει.

«Μὰ δὲν εἶναι δυνατὸν στὴν ἡλικία μου νὰ ἔχω τέτοιους λογισμοὺς γιὰ γυναίκα καὶ νὰ εἶμαι τόσο ξαναμμένος στὴν σάρκα, σκεφτόταν καὶ ξανασκεφτόταν διαρκῶς. Ἀσφαλῶς πρόκειται γιὰ δαιμονικὴ ἐπίθεση. Γιὰ πειρασμὸ τοῦ διαβόλου».

Ἀὔξησε ἀπὸ τὴν ὥρα ποὺ ξεκίνησε ἡ σαρκικὴ πύρωση τοὺς ἀσκητικὸς του ἀγῶνες. Ἦδη βεβαίως ἔτρωγε ἐλάχιστα, ἀφότου ἐδῶ καὶ πολλὰ χρόνια εἶχε ἀποσυρθεῖ σὲ μιὰ σπηλιὰ ποὺ ἔκανε κελί του στὸ ὄρος τῶν Ἐλαιῶν. Τὸ γεγονὸς ὅτι βρισκόταν σὲ μιὰ περιοχὴ ποὺ εἶχαν ἀγιάσει ὁ ἴδιος ὁ Κύριος καὶ ἡ Παναγία Μητέρα Του τὸν ἔκανε κάθε φορὰ νὰ νιώθει ἰδιαίτερα εὐλογημένος καὶ τὰ κατανυκτικὰ δάκρυα νὰ μὴν τὸν ἐγκαταλείπουν σχεδὸν καθόλου. Εἶχε ἀποφασίσει νὰ μείνει ἐκεῖ μέχρι τὸ τέλος τῆς ζωῆς του καὶ μάλιστα χωρὶς ποτὲ νὰ βγεῖ ἀπὸ τὴν σπηλιὰ.

Ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ ἐγκλειστοῦ ἀσκητῆ ἦταν ἐκείνη ποὺ τὸν εἶχε θέλξει καὶ λειτουργοῦσε ὡς ὄραμα καὶ στὴν δική του ζωὴ. καὶ πράγματι γιὰ πολλὰ χρόνια βρισκόταν ἐκεῖ καὶ ἡ φήμη του ὡς ἐγκλειστοῦ ἄρχισε νὰ ἀπλώνει. Πολλοὶ ἀνέβαιναν στὸν τόπο ποὺ ἀσκεῖτο, φέρνοντάς του μερικὰ παξιμάδια καὶ χόρτα ὡς φαγητό, ἐπικαλούμενοι ἐπιπλέον νοερὰ τίς εὐχές

του. «Ἐνας τέτοιος ἄνθρωπος ἀφιερωμένος στὸν Θεὸ ἀσφαλῶς θὰ ἔχει μεγάλη παρρησία σ' Αὐτόν» ἦταν ἡ λογικὴ σκέψη τῶν καλῶν ἀνθρώπων. Κι ἔβλεπαν τὸ ἀποτέλεσμα ἅμεσα στὴν ζωὴ τους. Πολλὰ ἀπὸ τὰ προβλήματά τους ἐπιλύονταν μὲ τὴν ἐπίκληση τῶν εὐχῶν τοῦ Γέροντα.

Ὁ Γέροντας περιορίσε ἀκόμη περισσότερο τὸ λιτότατο φαγητὸ του. Ἐτρωγε πιά μιὰ φορὰ τὴν ἑβδομάδα λίγα παξιμάδια καὶ χόρτα, ἐνῶ οἱ γονυκλισίες καὶ οἱ ἀγρυπνίες του πολλαπλασιάστηκαν. Κάποιες φορὲς κτύπησε καὶ τὸ σῶμα του. Ἦλπιζε ὅτι μὲ τὸν τρόπο αὐτὸν ὁ σαρκικὸς πειρασμὸς θὰ ἔφευγε. Μάταια ὅμως. Ἡ πύρωση στὴν σάρκα του ὄχι μόνον δὲν ἔφευγε, ἀλλ' αὐξανόταν ὀλοένα καὶ περισσότερο. Ὁ δαίμονας τῆς πορνείας ἔκανε καλὰ τὴν δουλειά του. Ποιὸς ξέρει ποιὰ δίοδο κενοδοξίας βρῆκε στὸν μεγάλο ἀγωνιστὴ καὶ ἀσκητὴ καὶ τοῦ ἔδωσε τὸ δικαίωμα τέτοιου πειρασμοῦ του!

Ὁ πειρασμὸς τοῦ Γέροντα δυστυχῶς μὲ τὸν καιρὸ γινόταν ἐπικίνδυνος. Ὅχι γιατί ἐξακολουθοῦσε νὰ ὑφίσταται, ἀλλὰ γιατί ὁ Γέροντας ἄρχισε νὰ παρουσιάζει σημάδια παραίτησης καὶ ἀπελπισίας. μιὰ μέρα μάλιστα ποὺ ἡ ἐπίθεση τοῦ πονηροῦ ἐγίνε πολὺ σφοδρὴ, ποὺ ὁ Γέροντας ὀρθίος πηγαινοερχόταν μέσα στὸ μικρὸ κελί του χωρὶς νὰ ξέρει τί νὰ κάνει γιὰ νὰ κατευνάσει τὸ ξάναμμα τῆς σάρκας του, ἄρχισε νὰ χάνει τὸ κουράγιο του.

Ἐέσπασε. «Ὡς πότε, πονηρὲ καὶ ἀρχέκακε, θὰ μὲ πολεμᾷς; Ποτὲ δὲν θὰ ὑποχωρήσεις; Γέρασα πιά, μαράθηκε τὸ σῶμα μου, γι' αὐτὸ σοῦ δίνω κι ἐγὼ ἐντολὴ νὰ γεράσεις κι ἐσὺ μαζί μου. Φύγε, σατανᾶ. Ἔπαγε ὀπίσω μου».

Σάν νὰ ἔκουσε ἓνα μικρὸ γέλιο πίσω του ὁ Γέροντας. Ἐαφνιάστηκε καὶ ἔστρεψε τὸ κεφάλι του ἀπὸ τὴν μεριὰ ποὺ ἀκούστηκε. Πάγωσε τὸ αἷμα στὶς φλέβες του. Μπροστά του ὀφθαλμοφανῶς στεκόταν τὸ πονηρὸ πνεῦμα, μαῦρο στὴν ὄψη καὶ μάτια κόκκινα γεμάτα ἀπὸ ταραχὴ.

«Γέρο», ἄκουσε νὰ τοῦ λέει. «Δὲν ξέρεις ὅτι ἐμεῖς δὲν γερνᾶμε; Ποτὲ δὲν πρόκειται νὰ σταματήσω ἀπέναντί σου τὸν πόλεμο. Μέχρι νὰ πεθάνεις, δὲν θὰ σὲ ἀφήσω σὲ ἡσυχία. Εἶσαι τὸ θήραμά μου καὶ θὰ σὲ καταπίνω σιγὰ σιγὰ, θὰ σὲ ταλαιπωρῶ συνέχεια. Εἶμαι πολὺ πιὸ ἰσχυρὸς ἀπὸ σένα. Κι ἀπ' ὅ,τι βλέπεις...», ἄφησε ὁ πονηρὸς νὰ σερνεται ἡ φράση του, «ἀπ' ὅ,τι βλέπεις, δὲν ἔχεις κανένα σύμμαχο. Ἐγὼ κι ἐσὺ εἶμαστε».

Ὁ τρόμος καὶ ὁ πανικὸς ἄρχισαν νὰ καταβάλλουν τὸν ἀσκητὴ. Τὸ δόλωμα τῶν λόγων τοῦ πονηροῦ πνεύματος σάν νὰ ἔπιαναν τόπο στὴν κουρασμένη ψυχὴ του.

«Ὅμως», ἀκούστηκε καὶ πάλι ἡ συριχτὴ φωνὴ τοῦ δαίμονα, «ἐπειδὴ σὲ λυπᾶμαι, ὑπάρχει τρόπος νὰ

ἀπαλλαγείς ἀπὸ ἐμένα. Στὸ χέρι σου εἶναι». Εἶπε καὶ περιμένε.

«Τί ἔναι αὐτό;» εἶπε ἐντελῶς ξέψυχα ὁ Γέροντας. «Μὲ ποιὸν τρόπο θὰ μὲ ἀφήσεις ἐπιτέλους ἡσυχος;» Φαινόταν παραδομένος.

«Θέλω νὰ μοῦ ὀρκιστεῖς βέβαια ὅτι αὐτὸ ποὺ θὰ σοῦ πῶ δὲν θὰ τὸ πείς σὲ κανέναν ἀπολύτως. καὶ σοῦ ὑπόσχομαι ὅτι δὲν θὰ σὲ ξαναπολεμήσω ἄλλο».

Χωρὶς νὰ πολυσκεφετῆ ὁ ἐγκλειστος ἀσκητής, μπροστὰ στὴν ἀπαλλαγὴ τοῦ ἐξουθενωτικοῦ πολέμου του, ἔσπευσε νὰ συμφωνήσῃ. Ὁ ὄρκος του ἀκούστηκε φρικτός.

«Μὰ Αὐτὸν ποὺ κατοικεῖ στοὺς οὐρανοὺς δὲν θὰ πῶ σὲ κανέναν ὅσα μοῦ πείς».

Σάν νὰ τοῦ φάνηκε ὅτι τρεμπόπαιξε τὰ σκοτεινὰ μάτια του ὁ πονηρὸς στὸ ἡμίφως τοῦ κελιοῦ, ποὺ φωτιζόταν γλυκὰ ἀπὸ τὸ καντήλι ποὺ ἔκαιγε μπροστὰ στὴν εἰκόνα τῆς Παναγίας τῆς Γλυκοφιλούσας· δὲν γύρισε ὅμως νὰ δεῖ τὸ δάκρυ ποὺ κύλισε ἀπὸ τὰ μάτια Της. Ἡ ὑπαρξή του ἦταν κυριευμένη τὴν ὥρα ἐκείνη ἀπὸ τὸ πνεῦμα ποὺ ὑπουλα τοῦ μιλοῦσε καὶ τὸν καθοδηγοῦσε στὴν καταστροφή.

Ξανάρχισε πάλι ὁ δαίμονας: «Θέλω...», εἶπε καὶ κοντοστάθηκε, «θέλω... νὰ μὴν ξαναπροσκυνήσεις τὴν εἰκόνα αὐτὴ ποὺ ἔχεις στὸ κελί σου». Δὲν τόλμησε νὰ ὀνοματίσῃ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς Ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου κι οὔτε κἂν νὰ στραφεῖ νὰ τὴν δεῖ. Γιατὶ ὅσες φορὲς τὸ εἶχε ἐπιχειρήσει εἶχε νιώσει νὰ καίγεται. Καὶ μόνο ἡ ἀναφορὰ στὸ ὄνομά Της καὶ μόνο ἡ θέα τοῦ προσώπου Της τὸν ἔκαναν νὰ ἐξαφανίζεται μέσα σὲ μιὰ φωτιά τυραννική.

Σάν νὰ συνήλθε λίγο ὁ ἀσκητής ἀπὸ τὴν χαίνωση ποὺ βρισκόταν. «Νὰ μὴν ξαναπροσκυνήσω τὴν εἰκόνα τῆς Παναγίας;» Ἀπὸ τὴν ἄλλη σκεφτόταν τὴν ἀλάφρωσή του ἀπὸ τὸν πόλεμο τοῦ πονηροῦ.

«Ἄφησέ με νὰ τὸ σκεφτῶ λίγο», εἶπε κι εἶδε ὅτι ὁ δαίμονας ἐξαφανίστηκε.

Πάλευσε πολὺ μὲ τοὺς λογισμοὺς του ἐκείνο τὸ βράδυ ὁ Γέροντας ἀσκητής. Θολωμένος ἀπὸ τὴν ταραχὴ του ἄκρη δὲν ἔβγαζε. «Μπρὸς γκρεμὸς καὶ πίσω ρέμα» μονολογοῦσε διαρκῶς. Ἡ καταφυγὴ στὸν Κύριο καὶ τὴν Παναγία Δέσποινα ὅμως δὲν γινόταν ἡ προτεραιότητά του. Ἡ ἀπελπισία συνέχιζε νὰ τὸν κρατᾶ συντετριμμένο κάτω.

Ξαφνικὰ φωτίστηκε ὁ νοῦς του. Ἐπερώτησον τὸν πατέρα σου καὶ ἀναγγελεῖ σοι, θυμήθηκε τὸν λόγο

τῆς Γραφῆς. «Αὔριο θὰ περάσει κατὰ τὴν συνήθειά του ἀπὸ ἐδῶ ὁ ἀββᾶς Θεόδωρος ὁ Ἠλιώτης ἀπὸ τὴν λαύρα τῆς Φαράν. δὲν μὲ ξεχνᾶ ποτὲ καὶ αὔριο εἶναι ἡ ἡμέρα τῆς ἐπίσκεψής του. Αὐτὸν θὰ ρωτήσω γιὰ νὰ μοῦ πεῖ». Ἐνίωσε μιὰ βαθιὰ ἀνακούφιση. Οἱ λογισμοὶ του πήραν νὰ ἡρεμοῦν. Στράφηκε καὶ πρὸς τὴν εἰκόνα τῆς Παναγίας. «Μὲ ξεγελοῦν τὰ μάτια μου», ψιθύρισε. Τοῦ φάνηκε σάν νὰ χαμογελᾷ ἡ Μητέρα τοῦ Κυρίου. «Παναγία μου, βοήθησέ με. Κύριε, σῶσε με», εἶπε κι ἐνίωσε πολὺ βαριά καὶ κουρασμένη τὴν ψυχὴ του.

Ἦλθε ὁ ἀββᾶς Θεόδωρος τὴν ἐπομένη. Συντετριμμένος ὁ Γέροντας καὶ μὲ δάκρυα στὰ μάτια τοῦ ἐξομολογήθηκε τὸν ὅλο πόλεμό του, τὴν πύρωση τῆς σάρκας του ποὺ τὴν ἀπέκρυβε τόσο καιρὸ, γιατί ἐνίωθε βαθιὰ ντροπὴ ποὺ ἔχε συμβεῖ στὴν ἡλικία του, τὴν ἀπελπισία ποὺ

τὸν εἶχε καταλάβει, τὴν ἐμφάνιση τοῦ πονηροῦ καὶ τὸν ὄρκο ποὺ τοῦ ἔχε δώσει. «Ἀββᾶ, ἔδωσα ὄρκο στὸν διάβολο ὅτι δὲν θὰ πῶ τίποτε ἀπὸ τὴν πρότασή του. Κι ἡ πρότασή του ἦταν νὰ μὴν ξαναπροσκυνήσω τὴν εἰκόνα τῆς Παναγίας μας». Ξέσπασε σὲ ἀναφίλητὰ ὁ Γέροντας, κατανοώντας προφανῶς τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ σφάλματός του καὶ τὸν ἐμπαιγμὸ ποὺ εἶχε ὑποστῆ ἀπὸ τὸν πονηρὸ.

Ὁ ἀββᾶς Θεόδωρος τὸν παρηγόρησε καὶ τὸν νουθέτησε. Ἐκλαψε κι αὐτός, κατανοώντας καὶ συγκαταβαίνοντας στὸν πειρασμὸ τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγωνιστῆ ἀδελφοῦ του. Τρόμαξε μὲ τὴν πονηριὰ τοῦ δαίμονα ἀλλὰ ἐλεεινολόγησε καὶ τὴν ἀνημπορία του μπροστὰ στὸν Κύριο Ἰησοῦ Χριστὸ καὶ τὴν Θεοτόκο Μητέρα Του.

«Μὴ στενοχωριέσαι, ἀδελφέ μου», τοῦ εἶπε ταπεινὰ καὶ μὲ ἀγάπη. «Ὁ Κύριος δὲν σὲ ἄφησε. Ἐκεῖνος σὲ ἐνίσχυσε νὰ ἀποκαλύψεις αὐτὸ ποὺ σοῦ συνέβη μὲ τὸν δαίμονα, γιατί ἡ ἀποκάλυψη τῶν λογισμῶν καὶ τῆς ὅλης ζωῆς μας στὸν πνευματικὸ καὶ σὲ ἄλλους ἐμπείρους τῆς χριστιανικῆς ζωῆς ἀδελφούς καίει τὸν τρισκατάρατο, τοῦ τυφλώνει τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς γιὰ νὰ μὴ βλέπει τίς πτώσεις μας καὶ τὸν ἀποδυναμώνει πλήρως. Οὐαὶ σ' αὐτοὺς ποὺ τὰ κρατᾶνε μέσα τους. Αὐτοὶ γίνονται τὰ παιχνίδια κυριολεκτικὰ τοῦ σατανᾶ. Ἀκόμη καὶ τὸ παραμικρὸ ἀμάρτημα ἂν τὸ θεωρήσουν περιττὸ πρὸς ἐξομολόγησι, θὰ θεριέψῃ μέσα τους καὶ μέσω αὐτοῦ θὰ ἀλώσει ἐντελῶς τὴν ψυχὴ τους ὁ πονηρὸς. Ἐκανες λοιπὸν τὴν καλύτερη δουλειὰ ποὺ ἀποκάλυψες τὴν ψυχὴ σου.



«Βεβαίως, πρέπει να παραδεχτείς ότι κάποια δίοδο βρήκε ο πλάνος μέσα σου για να προκαλέσει τον πειρασμό αυτόν. Ίσως κάποια αδιόρατη κενοδοξία και υπερηφάνεια. Και σὺ μὲ τόσα χρόνια πνευματικῆς ἀσκητικῆς ζωῆς δὲν θὰ ἔπρεπε νὰ τοῦ δώσεις αὐτὸ τὸ δικαίωμα. Γιατὶ ὁ διάβολος ὅ,τι λέει εἶναι ψέμα. Ὁ Κύριος δὲν μᾶς λέει ὅτι εἶναι ὁ πατὴρ τοῦ ψεύδους; Ἀκόμη καὶ οἱ ἀλήθειες του στὸ βάθος λειτουργοῦν γιὰ τὸ ψέμα, μὲ σκοπὸ τὴν ὑποταγὴ τοῦ ταλαίπωρου ἀνθρώπου. Καλὰ λοιπὸν ἔκανες καὶ πάτησες τὸν ὄρκο σου στὸν ψεύτη αὐτόν. Τώρα χαίρεται μαζί σου ὁλος ὁ οὐρανός, γιατί βλέπει τὴν μετάνοιά σου, καὶ νὰ ξέρεις, Γέροντα, τώρα θὰ δεῖς τὴν δύναμη τοῦ Κυρίου καὶ τῆς Παναγίας μας γιὰ τὸ ξεπέρασμα τοῦ πειρασμοῦ σου. Γιατὶ ἔδειξες ταπεινώση. Κι ὅπου ὑπάρχει ἡ ταπεινώση ὑπάρχει ἡ χάρη τοῦ Θεοῦ».

Σταμάτησε ὁ ἄββας Θεόδωρος. Κοίταξε τὸ γαληνεμένο τώρα πρόσωπο τοῦ Γέροντα καὶ χάρηκε γιατί εἶδε τὴν χάρη τοῦ Θεοῦ. «Κύριε, ἐνίσχυσέ τον» ἔστρεψε τὸ βλέμμα του πρὸς τὴν εἰκόνα τῆς Θεοτόκου. Σάν νὰ 'δε πιὸ φωτεινὸ τὸ καντήλι τῆς ποὺ κουνιόταν πέρα δῶθε, χωρὶς ἰδιαίτερο φυσικὸ λόγο. τὰ μάτια του γέμισαν δάκρυα. Ἡ Παναγία συγκατένευε στὴν μετάνοια ποὺ ἐξελισσόταν ἐνώπιόν τῆς καὶ ἐνώπιον τοῦ Υἱοῦ καὶ Θεοῦ τῆς.

«Καὶ θὰ σοῦ πῶ καὶ κάτι ἀκόμη, Γέροντα», εἶπε ἄργα καὶ μὲ ἐπίγνωση τοῦ βάρους τοῦ λόγου του ὁ ἄββας Θεόδωρος τῆς λαύρας τῆς Φαράν, ὁ ἔμπειρος πνευματικὸς, ὁ σοφὸς καὶ διακριτικὸς ἀσκητής, στρέφοντας τὸ βλέμμα του καὶ πάλι πρὸς τὸν γερμένο στὸ ἔδαφος ἐγκλειστο ἐρημίτη.

Ἀνασήκωσε τὸ πρόσωπό του ὁ Γέροντας, γιὰ νὰ ἀκούσει αὐτὸ ποὺ φαινόταν ξεχωριστὰ βαρυσήμαντο.

«Λοιπὸν, νὰ ξέρεις μιὰ γιὰ πάντα στὸν πειρασμὸ ποὺ περνᾶς. σὲ συμφέρει—ναί, μάρτυς μου ὁ Θεὸς γιὰ τὴν ἀλήθεια τοῦ λόγου μου—σὲ συμφέρει πολὺ περισσότερο νὰ μὴν ἀφήσεις πορνεῖο γιὰ πορνεῖο σὲ ὅλην τὴν χώρα στὸ ὁποῖο δὲν θὰ μπεῖς μέσα, ἀπὸ τὸ νὰ ἀρνηθεῖς νὰ προσκυνᾶς τὸν Κύριό μας Ἰησοῦ Χριστὸ μαζί μὲ τὴν Ὑπεραγία Μητέρα Του! Γιατὶ στὴν πρώτη περίπτωση ὑπάρχει τίς περισσότερες φορὲς ἡ ἐπίγνωση τῆς ἁμαρτίας ποὺ φέρνει τὴν μετάνοια. στὴν δευτέρῃ ὅμως; Ποῦ θὰ στραφεῖ κανεὶς γιὰ μετάνοια, ἂν ἀρνηθεῖ τὸ λατρευτὸ πρόσωπο τοῦ Κυρίου καὶ τῆς Παναγίας Μητέρας Του; Ἡ ἄρνηση αὐτὴ σημαίνει τὴν πλήρη ἀπώλεια τοῦ ἀνθρώπου».

Τοῦ 'πε κι ἄλλα ὁ ἄββας, στήριξε καὶ παρηγόρησε τὸν Γέροντα, τοῦ διάβασε τὴν εὐχή. τὸν ἀγκάλιασε καὶ ἔφυγε, ἀφήνοντάς τον μὲ εἰρήνη ψυχῆς, κυρίως ὅμως γιγαντωμένο τόσο, ὥστε νὰ ἀντιμετωπίσει εὐκόλα τὸν δαίμονα, ὁ ὁποῖος πράγματι δὲν ἄργησε νὰ ξαναφανεῖ. Αὐτὴν τὴν φορὰ ὅμως εἶχε φύγει ἀπὸ τὸ ταραγμένο καὶ

μαῦρο πρόσωπό του ἡ μάσκα τῆς ὑποκρισίας.

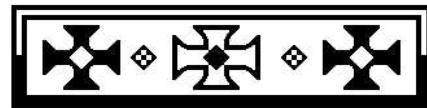
«Τὶ συμβαίνει, κακόγερε;» τοῦ εἶπε τώρα ἐντελῶς ἐπιθετικά. «Δὲν ὀρκίστηκες ὅτι δὲν θὰ πεῖς τίποτε σὲ κανένα; καὶ πῶς τόλμησες νὰ τὰ πεῖς σ' ἐκείνον ποὺ ἦρθε σὲ σὲ να;» Καὶ πάλι δὲν μπόρεσε νὰ ὀνοματίσει τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ ἄββᾶ, τοῦ ἐκλεκτοῦ σκεύους τοῦ Θεοῦ ὁ πονηρός. «Σοῦ λέω λοιπὸν, κακόγερε, πῶς θὰ κριθεῖς σάν ἐπίορκος τὴν ἡμέρα τῆς κρίσεως, γιατί παρεβῆς τοὺς ὄρκους ποὺ μοῦ 'δωσες».

Ἦταν ἡ σειρὰ τοῦ Γέροντα νὰ γελάσει μὲ τὰ λόγια τοῦ δαίμονα. «Ἦξερα πάντα βέβαια» τοῦ εἶπε, «ὅτι εἶσαι πονηρός, ἔστω κι ἂν προσωρινὰ φάνηκες νὰ μὲ γελάς. Ἀλλὰ ἐκτὸς ἀπὸ πονηρὸς φαίνεται ὅτι εἶσαι καὶ ἀνόητος. Μοῦ λές ὅτι ὀρκίστηκε καὶ παραβίασα τὸν ὄρκο μου. Τὸ ξέρω. Ἀλλὰ γιατί; Γιὰ νὰ μείνω πιστὸς στὸν δικό μου Δεσπότη καὶ Ποιητή. Μακάρι ὅλοι νὰ παραβιάζουν τὸν λόγο τους καὶ τοὺς ὄρκους τους σ' ἐσένα, γιατί ἡ ὑπακοὴ σ' ἐσένα εἶναι ἡ τέλεια καταστροφή τους. Κι ἄκου κι αὐτό, τρισκατάρατε ποὺ νὰ 'σαι πάντα ἔξω ἀπὸ ἐδῶ. Ἄκου κι αὐτὸ ἀπὸ ἐμένα, ἓνα ταπεινὸ πλάσμα τοῦ Θεοῦ ποὺ μὲ δυνάμωσε ὅμως ὁ Κύριος μὲ τὸν ἀπεσταλμένο δοῦλο του: θὰ τιμωρηθεῖς ἀπὸ Ἐκείνον πολὺ περισσότερο μ' αὐτὸ ποὺ μοῦ ζήτησες, γιατί ἐσὺ ἦσουν ὁ αἴτιος καὶ τῆς κακῆς συμβουλῆς καὶ τῆς ἐπιορκίας».

Μ' ἓναν ἰσχυρὸ κρότο κι ἀφήνοντας πίσω του μιὰ μεγάλη βροῦμα ἐξαφανίστηκε τὸ πονηρὸ πνεῦμα, μὴ ἀντέχοντας τὴν δύναμη ψυχῆς τοῦ πλάσματος τοῦ Θεοῦ.

Ὁ Γέροντας στράφηκε μὲ δάκρυα στὸν Κύριο καὶ τὴν Παναγία Μητέρα Του, προσκύνησε βαθιὰ κι ἔμεινε ἐκεῖ γιὰ πολλές ὥρες δοξολογώντας τὸ ἅγιο ὄνομά Του.

Μέχρι τὸ τέλος τῆς ζωῆς του ἡ ταπεινώσή του ἦταν μεγάλη κι ἔκτοτε οὐδέποτε προσβλήθηκε ἀπὸ τὸν πειρασμὸ τῆς σάρκας.



Ἐσὺ λοιπὸν δὲν εἶσαι πλεονέκτης; Ἐσὺ δὲν εἶσαι ἄρπαγας, ἀφοῦ οἰκειοποιεῖσαι, ὡσὰν δικά σου, ἐκείνα, ποὺ δέχτηκες ἀπὸ τὸν Θεόν, γιὰ νὰ τὰ διαχειρισθῆς ὡς οἰκονόμος;... Τὸ ψωμί, ποὺ ἐσὺ παρακρατεῖς, ἀνήκει στὸν πεινασμένον, τὸ ἔνδυμα, ποὺ ἐσὺ κρατᾶς σὲ ἀποθήκες ἀνήκει στὸν γυμνόν. Τὸ παποῦτσι, ποὺ σαπίζει στὸ σπῆτι σου ἀνήκει στὸν ξυπόλυτον, τὸ χρῆμα, ποὺ τὸ κατακρατεῖς καὶ τὸ κρύβεις, ἀνήκει σ' ἐκείνον, ποὺ τὸ ἔχει ἀνάγκη. Ὡστε τόσους ἀνθρώπους ἀδικεῖς, ἐνῶ θὰ μπορούσες νὰ τοὺς εὐεργετήσῃς μὲ τίς δωρεές σου.

Μέγας Βασίλειος

Οικουμενισμός, ὁ Ἐχθρὸς τῶν Θεῶν Ἀρετῶν

Γράφει ὁ Σάββας Ἡλιάδης, δάσκαλος.

Ὁ Οἰκουμενισμός, ποὺ ἀποτελεῖ τὸ ὄργανο τῆς Νέας Τάξης Πραγμάτων στὸ χῶρο τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, μεταξὺ τῶν ἄλλων κακῶν, ἐργάζεται μεθοδικὰ γιὰ τὴν ἀλλοίωση, κατάργηση καὶ ἀντικατάσταση τῶν ἁγίων ἀρετῶν στὴν Ὁρθόδοξη Ἐκκλησία, καὶ μάλιστα ἐκ τῶν ἔσω. Ἀγωνίζεται, ἐπὶ παραδείγματι, γιὰ τὴν ἀνάδειξη τῆς ἀγάπης ὡς κορυφαίας ἀρετῆς καὶ παράλληλα ἀπαξιώνει καὶ σχετικοποιεῖ τὴν πίστη στὴν Ἀλήθεια. Ἀγάπη ὅμως δίχως πίστη στὴν Ἀλήθεια εἶναι ψέμα καὶ ἀπάτη. Ἐνεργεῖ καταχρηστικῶς, ἀφοῦ καπηλεύεται μὲ περισσὸ θράσος αὐτὲς τὶς θεόσδοτες, ζωογόνες καὶ ἀληθεῖς ἀρετές, ὅπως ἐξαρχῆς καὶ διὰ παντὸς φανερώνονται καὶ ἐνεργοῦν μέσα στὴν Παράδοση, μὲ τὴν πλήρη καὶ καθαρὴ μορφή, ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲ τὴν οὐσιώδη καὶ σωστικὴ δύναμή τους.

Οἱ ἐργάτες του τὶς ἰδιοποιοῦνται καὶ τὶς διδάσκουν αὐθαίρετα, χωρὶς νὰ ἔχουν ζήσει τὴν ἐμπειρία τους. Καὶ ἐπιπλέον, ἐνῶ ἀποσιωποῦν καὶ βάζουν στὸ περιθώριο βασικὲς εὐαγγελικὲς ἀρετές, ἀνακαλύπτουν καὶ «κατασκευάζουν» νέες, ἐπίπλαστες, ἀνάρετες



ἀρετές, τὶς ὁποῖες προωθοῦν, διδάσκοντας τες στὸ λαό. Προσπαθοῦν νὰ τὶς θεμελιώσουν ἀναιδῶς καὶ ἀνενοδιάστως πάνω σὲ μεταπατερικὲς, καὶ νεοπατερικὲς θεολογίες καὶ σὲ ἀντιπατερικὲς θεωρίες, ἀλλοιώνοντας τὴν Ἀλήθεια, τὴν Ὁρθόδοξη πίστη. Μιλᾶνε, δηλαδή, γιὰ τὰ ἴδια θέματα ποὺ μίλησαν οἱ ἅγιοι, ἀλλὰ, ὡς ἀμέτοχοι τῆς Θεῆς Χάριτος, προσπαθοῦν νὰ περάσουν τὴν πάσχουσα δογματικῶς θεολογία τους μὲ σκοπὸ τὴν ἀλλοίωση τοῦ ἡθους καὶ ὀρθοδόξου κριτηρίου τοῦ λαοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ.

Οἱ ἀρετὲς εἶναι ἀπόσταγμα τοῦ αἵματος καὶ τῶν δακρῶν τῶν ἁγίων μας, ἄρα καὶ γέννημα οὐράνιο, γνήσιο καὶ καθαρὸ τῆς Παράδοσης τῆς Ἐκκλησίας μας. Ὁ ἅγιος Γρηγόριος ὁ Θεολόγος συνοψίζει αὐτὴν τὴν ἀλήθεια, ἀρχίζοντας τὸ λόγο του γιὰ τὸν ἅγιο Ἀθανάσιο μὲ τὴ φράση: «Ἀθανάσιον ἐπαινῶν, ἀρετὴν ἐπαινέσομαι. Ταυτὸν γὰρ, ἐκεῖνόν τε εἰπεῖν, καὶ ἀρετὴν ἐπαινέσαι, ὅτι πᾶσαν ἐν ἑαυτῷ συλλαβὼν εἶχε τὴν ἀρετὴν, ἢ, τό γε ἀληθέστερον εἰπεῖν, ἔχει. Θεῷ γὰρ ζῶσι πάντες οἱ κατὰ Θεὸν ζήσαντες, κἀν ἐνθένδε ἀπαλλαγῶσι». (Λόγος κα', εἰς τὸν Μέγαν Ἀθανάσιον, ἐπίσκοπον Ἀλεξανδρείας).

Αὐτὲς τὶς ἀρετὲς τὶς μεταλλάσσουν, τὶς προσδίδουν ἄλλο νόημα καὶ ἀπὸ σωστικὰ πνευματικὰ ἰάματα τὶς μετατρέπουν σὲ θανατηφόρα δηλητήρια, γιὰ τὴν νέκρωση τῆς ψυχῆς. Ὡς συνεργάτες δὲ τῶν κοσμικῶν ἀρχῶν καὶ ἐξουσιῶν, μεθοδεύουν δολίως τὴν χειραγώγηση τοῦ λαοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τὴν ἐπιβολὴ μίας κακόζηλης, καινοφανοῦς, κενόσοφης ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀπάνθρωπης κοινωνικῆς, πολιτικῆς, πολιτιστικῆς ὁμογενοποίησης. Κυρίως ὅμως, ἐνὸς ἐξουθενωτικοῦ θρησκευτικοῦ συγκρητισμοῦ, κατάλληλου γιὰ τὴν προετοιμασία τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὥστε νὰ ὑποτάσσονται εὐκόλα, δίχως ἀντιστάσεις σὲ ὅποιασδήποτε μορφῆς ὀλοκληρωτικὰ συστήματα.

Οἱ Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας μᾶς διδάσκουν καθαρῶς, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐμμέσως, πλὴν σαφῶς, πῶς νὰ φυλαχτοῦμε ἀπὸ αὐτὲς τὶς παγίδες καὶ νὰ στηριχτοῦμε πρῶτα στὶς ἔνθεες ἀρετές. Σ' αὐτὲς ποὺ δωρίζονται στὶς ταπεινὲς καρδιὲς ἀπὸ τὴ Χάρη τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος καὶ μᾶς φωτίζουν, γιὰ νὰ ζήσουμε μακριὰ ἀπὸ τὴν πλάνη καὶ

μέσα στὴν πραγματικὴ ἐλευθερία. Αὐτοὶ ἀπηχοῦν καὶ ἐρμηνεύουν κατὰ κανόνα τὶς ἀπόψεις τῆς Ἁγίας Γραφῆς περὶ ἀρετῆς. Προκειμένου δὲ νὰ τονίσουν τὶς ἐπὶ μέρους ἀρετές, ἀναφέρονται στὰ πρόσωπα, καὶ στὰ ἰδιαίτερα χαρίσματά τους, τῆς Παλαιᾶς Διαθήκης καὶ

τῆς Καινῆς ἢ σὲ μάρτυρες καὶ ἁγίους τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, τοὺς ὁποῖους παρουσιάζουν ὡς ὑποδείγματα ἀρετῆς.

Ἡ ἐνάρετη ζωὴ καὶ ὁ ἀρετηφόρος λόγος τῶν ἁγίων, ποὺ λάμπουν καὶ φωτίζουν ἀπὸ τὴ Χάρη τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος, μᾶς στηρίζουν, μᾶς καθοδηγοῦν καὶ μᾶς βοηθοῦν, νὰ θεμελιώσουμε ἐσωτερικὰ τὸ ἔνθεο φρόνημα. Νὰ μπορέσουμε νὰ δοῦμε καὶ νὰ ἐκφράσουμε στὸ βίο καὶ στὴν πολιτεία μας τὶς ἀρετὲς μὲ ὀρθὴ ἀξιολόγηση. Ἐξάλλου, στὴν ἐν Χριστῷ ἀληθινὴ ζωὴ, ἡ ἀξιολόγηση καὶ ἡ κατάταξη τῶν ἀρετῶν δὲν γίνεται μὲ τὰ γνωστὰ ἀνθρωποκεντρικὰ κριτήρια ἀλλὰ μὲ τρόπο μυστικὸ καὶ ἱεροκρύφιο: «Ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι πάσα ψυχὴ ζωοῦται, καὶ καθάρσει ὑψοῦται λαμπρύνεται, τῇ τριαδικῇ Μονάδι ἱεροκρυφίως».

Οἱ ἀνθρωποὶ λησμονοῦν, ἀλλὰ οἱ πνευματικοὶ νόμοι δὲν παύουν ποτὲ νὰ λειτουργοῦν! Διότι συνεχίζει στὸ λόγο του ὁ ἅγιος Γρηγόριος: «Ἀρετὴν δὲ ἐπαινῶν, Θεὸν ἐπαινέσομαι, παρ' οὗ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἡ ἀρετὴ». Σύμφωνα μὲ αὐτό, ἡ αὐθαίρετη ἀλλοίωση τῶν ἀρετῶν εἶναι ὕβρις κατὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ, πλάνη καὶ αἵρεση.

Ὅλα τὰ κακά, ποὺ κατὰ τρόπο χεμαρρῶδη πνίγουν σήμερα τὸν κόσμον καὶ τὴν πατρίδα μας, ἔλκουν τὴν

γέννα τους από τὸν Οἰκουμενισμό! Κάτω ἀπὸ τὴ σκιά τοῦ Οἰκουμενισμοῦ συνεχίζονται νὰ διενεργοῦνται σήμερα ὅλα τὰ προδοτικὰ ἀντιχριστὰ καὶ ἀντεθνικὰ ἔργα, ὅλων τῶν ἐπισήμων κρατικῶν, ἐκκλησιαστικῶν, καὶ λοιπῶν, προσώπων καὶ φορέων. Τίποτε δὲν εἶναι τυχαῖο οὔτε ἄσχετο καὶ ἀνεπηρέαστο ἀπὸ τὴν κακοδοξία αὐτή, ποὺ ἐργάζεται πλέον ἀνεμπόδιση σὲ ὅλες τὶς ἐκφάνσεις τῆς ζωῆς. Ἀπολύτως τίποτε! Ἄκομη καὶ αὐτὴ ἡ συνάλγηση τῆς φύσεως, μὲ τὰ ἀκραία καταστροφικὰ ξεσπάσματα! Εἶναι νόμος πνευματικὸς! Δὲν μπορεῖ νὰ τρελάθηκε ἔτσι ξαφνικὰ ὁ κόσμος! Δὲν εἶναι δυνατὸν νὰ ἀνατρέπονται ἀρχές, ἀξίες, σεβάσματα καὶ ἱερὰ καὶ ὅσα αἰώνων μέσα σὲ τόσο σύντομο χρόνο καὶ μάλιστα μὲ τέτοια ὀρμὴ καὶ πάθος!

Ἄν δὲν τὸ πιστέψουμε αὐτό, ἂν δὲν τὸ τοποθετήσουμε στὴν κορυφαία θέση τῆς καρδιάς μας, ἂν δὲν κάνουμε αἴτημα προσευχῆς τὴν μετάνοια τῶν πρωτεργατῶν ἱεραρχῶν καὶ λοιπῶν συνενόχων τους, ὥστε νὰ ἐπιστρέψουν στὴν Ἁγία Πατερικὴ Παράδοση καὶ νὰ ἐπανορθώσουν, δὲν θὰ ὑπάρξει θεῖο ἔλεος, διότι, ἀπλούστατα, δὲν θὰ εἶναι τοῦ συμφέροντός μας!



Εχουμε μεγάλη δύναμι ὡς πλήρωμα τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, ἂν προσευχώμαστε μὲ ὀδύνη ψυχῆς καὶ ταπεινὴ καρδιά. Δὲν χρειάζεται νὰ περάσουμε τὸ πέλαγος, οὔτε νὰ κάνουμε μεγάλες ἀποδημίες· κάθε ἕνας καὶ κάθε μία, καὶ ὅταν συναντιῶνται στὴν Ἐκκλησία καὶ ὅταν μένουν μέσα στὸ σπίτι, ἄς παρακαλοῦμε μὲ πολλὴ κατάνυξι τὸ Θεὸ καὶ ὅπωςδήποτε θὰ εἰσακουσθοῦν οἱ προσευχές μας.

Ἄπὸ ποῦ εἶναι φανερὸ αὐτό; Ἄπὸ τὸ ὅτι ἐπιθυμεῖ πολὺ πάντοτε νὰ καταφεύγουμε κοντὰ Του, καὶ νὰ Τὸν παρακαλοῦμε σὲ ὅλες τὶς περιπτώσεις καὶ νὰ μὴν κάνουμε τίποτε ἢ νὰ λέμε τίποτε χωρὶς Αὐτόν. Διότι οἱ ἄνθρωποι, ὅταν τοὺς ἐνοχλοῦμε συνέχεια γιὰ τὶς διάφορες ὑποθέσεις μας, μᾶς συμπεριφέρονται ἐχθρικά· ὁ Θεὸς ὅμως κάνει τὸ ἐντελῶς ἀντίθετο· καὶ ὄχι ὅταν Τὸν ἐνοχλοῦμε συνέχεια γιὰ τὰ προβλήματά μας, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅταν δὲ τὸ κάνουμε αὐτό, τότε πρὸ πάντων «ἀγανακτεῖ».

Ἄκουσε λοιπὸν γιατί κατηγορεῖ τοὺς Ἰουδαίους λέγοντας: *Λάβατε ἀπόφασι, ἀλλὰ χωρὶς ἐμένα καὶ κάνατε συνθήκες, ἀλλὰ χωρὶς τὸ πνεῦμα μου.* (Ἦσ. 30:2). Διότι ἡ συνθήθεια αὐτῶν ποὺ ἀγαποῦν εἶναι ἡ ἐξῆς: θέλουν νὰ ἐκπληρώνουν ὅλα τα θελήματα ἐκείνων ποὺ ἀγαποῦν καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοὺς δὲν θέλουν νὰ κάνουν ἢ νὰ ποῦν τίποτε. Γι' αὐτὸ καὶ ὁ Θεὸς ὄχι μόνον ἐδῶ ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄλλοῦ τα ἴδια ἐπαναλαμβάνει λέγοντας: *Ἐκαναν βασιλεῖς, ἀλλὰ ὄχι διὰ μέσω ἐμοῦ ἔκαναν ἄρχοντες καὶ δὲ μοῦ τὸ γνώρισαν.* (Ψηψ 8:4).

Ἁγίου Ἰωάννου Χρυσοστόμου

Ὅταν Ἐπρεπε Σιωπούσαμε, Τώρα Κλαίμε καὶ Ὀδυρόμαστε

Γράφει ὁ Δημήτρης Νατσιὸς, δάσκαλος.

Δικαίως διαμαρτυρόμαστε καὶ πονᾶμε καὶ αἰσθανόμαστε ὀρφανοί, γιατί κλειδαμπαρώθηκαν οἱ ναοὶ τῆς Ἐκκλησίας μας. Καὶ ὅπως οἱ ἄνθρωποι ποὺ ἔχασαν ἕνα πολυαγαπημένο πρόσωπο, τὸ θυμοῦνται μὲ συγκίνηση, θρηνοῦν περισσότερο καὶ νιώθουν ἔντονα τὴν ἀπουσία του, τὶς «χρονιάρεις» ἡμέρες, Πάσχα καὶ Χριστούγεννα, ἔτσι καὶ ἐμεῖς, οἱ Ὀρθόδοξοι Χριστιανοί, αἰσθανόμαστε θλίψη καὶ σπαραγμό, γιατί δὲν μπορέσαμε οὔτε τὰ φετινὰ Χριστούγεννα, νὰ «δειπνήσουμε» στὸν οἶκο τοῦ Πατέρα τους. Ὅπως καὶ τὸ περασμένο Πάσχα, δὲν εἰσέλθαμε στὴν χαρὰ τοῦ Κυρίου μας. Ὁ σύγχρονος Πιλάτος ἔχει τοποθετήσει φρουρὲς καὶ κουστωδίες, νὰ ἀπαγορεύουν διὰ ροπάλου τὴν εἴσοδο.

Γράφονται πολλὰ καὶ ἀπὸ πολλοὺς. Ξιφουλκοῦν ἐπόνυμοι καὶ ἀνώνυμοι κατὰ τῆς ἀπόφασης. Συμφωνῶ, μὲ χέρια καὶ ποδάρια προσυπογράφω, ὅσα ἐμπόνως γράφουν ἱεράρχες, ὅπως τὸ παλληκάρι τῆς Κύπρου μας, ὁ ἐπίσκοπος Μόρφου κ. Νεόφυτος.

Νὰ σημειώσω ὅμως κάτι. Αὐτὴ τὴν στιγμή φοιτοῦν στὴν Ἑλλάδα, στὴν Πρωτοβάθμια καὶ Δευτεροβάθμια ἐκπαίδευση, περίπου 1.400.000 μαθητές. Εἶναι, ὅπως συνηθίζεται νὰ λέγεται, τὸ μέλλον τῆς πατρίδας μας.

Ἄπὸ αὐτοὺς οἱ μισοὶ φοιτοῦν στὸ Δημοτικὸ σχολεῖο, στὴν κρίσιμη, ἐξοπλιστικὴ ἡλικία, ὅπου ἐντυπώνονται ἀνεξίτηλα στὴν μνήμη τους γνώσεις, δεξιότητες, συνήθειες καὶ συμπεριφορές. Ἐνας καλὸς δάσκαλος ἀφήνει τὴν εὐεργετικὴ θυμὴσή του ὀλοζωῆς στὸν μικρὸ μαθητὴ. Ὅπως καὶ τὸ ἀντίθετο.

Στὸ Σύνταγμά μας, προβλέπεται στὸ ἄρθρο 16, ἡ «ἀνάπτυξη τῆς ἐθνικῆς καὶ θρησκευτικῆς συνείδησης» τῶν μαθητῶν καὶ—οὐδεὶς τὸ ἀμφισβητεῖ—αὐτὸ ἐρμηνεύεται ὡς καλλιέργεια τῆς φιλοπατρίας καὶ τῆς Ὀρθόδοξης πίστεως. Μὲ λίγα λόγια τὸ μέλλον τοῦ μέλλοντος τῆς πατρίδας κρίνεται στὶς σχολικὲς αἰθουσες. Ἐνας ἐκπαιδευτικὸς ζεῖ πολὺ περισσότερες ὥρες μὲ ἕνα παιδί, ἀπ' ὅσο αὐτὸ ζεῖ μὲ τοὺς γονεῖς του, λαμβάνοντας ὑπ' ὄψιν τους καὶ τοὺς φρενήρεις ρυθμοὺς τῆς ζωῆς, ποὺ ἀναγκάζουν πολλὰς φορὲς καὶ τὴν μητέρα νὰ ἀπογαλακτίζει τὸ παιδί της γιὰ λόγους βιοπορισμοῦ, πράγμα ἐπιζήμιο γιὰ τὴν ἀνατροφή του.

Καὶ ἐρωτῶ: Ἐδῶ καὶ τρία χρόνια καταργήθηκε ὁ ἐκκλησιασμὸς τῶν μαθητῶν, ὁ ὁποῖος πραγματοποιεῖται—τὸ πονήρευμα, τὸ σύνθηδες δημοκρατικὸ καρύκειμα—μετὰ ἀπὸ ἀπόφαση τοῦ συλλόγου διδασκόντων, δηλαδή, σχεδὸν ποτέ. Ρωτῶ τοὺς ἀναγνώστες. Πότε εἶδαν τελευταία φορὰ σχολεῖο νὰ πηγαίνει γιὰ ἐκκλησιασμό; (Ἐκτὸς ἀπὸ τὶς ἐλάχιστες

έθμιοτυπικές επισκέψεις και αυτές με λειψές τάξεις ή ελάχιστους μαθητές). Μήπως έκλεισαν οι ναοί, έδώ και τρία χρόνια, για 1.400.000 Έλληνες και μάλιστα στο πιό λαμπρό τιμήμα της κοινωνίας; Αντιδράσαμε; Όχι.

Καταργήθηκε ή μηνιαία έπαρση της Έλληνικής Σημαίας, την πρώτη Δευτέρα κάθε μηνός, με την ταυτόχρονη άπαγγελία - ψαλμωδία, του Έθνικού μας Ύμνου. Πλέον—νόμος Γαβρόγλου, πρόλαβε κι αυτός να αφήσει τις κουτσουλές του στην Παιδεία—«ή σημαία παραμένει άνηρητημένη στον ιστό του σχολείου, όπως προβλέπεται σε όλες τις δημόσιες υπηρεσίες». Έρωτώ: είναι κάποια δημόσια υπηρεσία το σχολείο, όπως το ΚΕΠ, σε κάποια πολίχνη; Πότε άκουσαν τα τελευταία έτη, όσοι διαβάζουν αυτές τις άράδες, να ψάλλεται ο Έθνικός Ύμνος στην αύλη ένδος σχολείου, με παρατεταγμένους όλους τους μαθητές και τους δασκάλους τους; Υπήρξε κάποια δυναμική αντίδραση γι' αυτήν την κακοβουλία; Όχι.

Να γράψω κι ένα τελευταίο, από τα πολλά που βιώνουμε στην εκπαίδευση. Τούτες της ήμέρες του αναγκαστικού έγκλεισμού μας και της τηλεκπαίδευσης, που μόνο έθισμο και καταπόνηση προκαλεί στα παιδιά που στήνονται άποσβολωμένα και άκίνητοποιημένα δέκα ώρες μπροστά στις οθόνες. (Θα μπορούσε να άποφευχθεί αυτός ο ψυχοβγάλτης με μία έπιμήκυνση του σχολικού έτους κατά 15 ήμέρες. Και αναφέρομαι κυρίως στο Δημοτικό). Όπως και την προηγούμενη, ύποχρεωτική οίκουρία μας, από τα διαδικτυακά μαθήματα ένα μόνο λείπει. Το μάθημα των Θρησκευτικών. (Παραπέμπω και σε άρθρο μου στις 25 Φεβρουαρίου του 2020 με τίτλο «ποιό μάθημα ξεχάστηκε στις τηλεδιδασκαλίες; Μά τα Θρησκευτικά»). Γιατί; Για τον ίδιο λόγο που καταργήθηκε ο εκκλησιασμός, ή έπαρση της σημαίας, όσονούπω ή πρωινή προσευχή, ή εικόνα του Χριστού στις αίθουσες, λόγω πολυπολιτισμικότητας, που είναι το καλλιτεχνικό όνομα του αντιχριστιανισμού. Να ξεμυρωθούν, να ξεβαπτιστούν και να άφελληνιστούν τα παιδιά μας, έπαναλαμβάνω το μέλλον, για να χορεύουν άπτόητοι οι «άνθρωποκάμπιες που μαραζώνουνε το πνευματικό όλόδροσο δέντρο της φυλής μας», κατά τον Φώτη Κόντογλου. Έρωτώ: Υπάρχει κάποια αντίδραση γι' αυτό; Η Ίερά Σύνοδος άντέδρασε; Όχι.

(Προσωπικώς διδάσκω, όπως και μες στην αίθουσα, κάθε Παρασκευή το Εύαγγέλιο της Κυριακής ή συναξάρια άγιών και αυτήν την περίοδο έχουμε πολλούς άθλητες της Πίστεως. Πειθαρχείν δεί Θεώ...).

Να κλείσω με μία εύφρόσυνο παραπομπή. (Διδάσκοντας δεκαετίες μικρά παιδιά, βλέπω πόσο λυτρωτικό είναι, όταν βαρύνονται από μαθήματα και ασκήσεις, να γλυκαίνεις λίγο το «κλίμα», διηγώντας τους κάτι που θα άποκαλύψει την άνθοβολή και την

εύωδία τους; το γέλιο.) Είναι μία νόστιμη έπιστολή του λόγιου Κωνσταντίνου Δαπόντε, (1713-1784), ο όποιος άργότερα έγινε μοναχός με το όνομα Καισάριος. Έζησε και έκοιμήθη στο Άγιον Όρος. Διαβάζω λίγες εισαγωγικές γραμμές από την έπιστολή, που την άπέστειλε σε κάποιον Πούρβουλο, άπαντώντας, μάλλον, σε πρόσκληση για τραπέζι.

«Έπιθυμίαν έπεθύμησα τούτην την έβδομάδα φαγείν μετά της εύγενείας σου· εις το τραπέζι δέν θέλω να είναι άρτος άρπαγής, πρόβατον άδικίας, όρνιθα άσελγείας, ούτε δορκάς ύπερηφανείας, ούτε όρτύκι μνησικακίας, ούτε λαγός φιλοχρηματίας, αλλά ούτε χοίρος άκαθαροσίας. Θέλω δε και παρακαλώ να είναι άρτος ίδρωτος, φακές ταπεινοφροσύνης, φασούλια σωφροσύνης, ρεβίθια έλεημοσύνης, ίχθύες άπλότητος, έλιές ίλαρότητος και λάχανα εύλαβείας...».

Στα «δέν θέλω», στα άνεπιθύμητα έδέσματα του Καισάριου, περιγράφεται ή Ελλάδα της παρακμής, των μνημονίων, των προδοτικών συμφωνιών, του έξευτελισμού από την εύφημιστικώς λεγόμενη Εύρωπαϊκή Ένωση, την χώρα των Γαδαρηνών. Η Ελλάδα που ταΐζεται με λαγούς φιλοχρηματίας και πρόβατα άδικίας. Στα «θέλω» είναι ή Πονεμένη Ρωμισύνη, της νηστείας, του φιλότιμου, της οίκογένειας, της άξιοπρέπειας, της φιλοπατρίας, του Χριστού οι «φίλοι». Η Ελλάδα που δειπνεί με φακές ταπεινοφροσύνης και λάχανα εύλαβείας.

Όσο δε για την έσταυρωμένη Παιδεία μας; Άς κοιτάξουμε πίσω, τί έκαναν οι παλιοί, καλοί μας δάσκαλοι. Έρωτώ: Τελείωνε ποτέ μαθητής του Δημοτικού χωρίς να γνωρίζει το άπολυτίκιο της Γέννησης του Χριστού; Το θαυμάσιο «*Η Γεννησίς σου Χριστέ ο Θεός ήμών...*». Η άκόμη το έκπληκτικό Κοντάκιο «*Η Παρθένος σήμερα...*». Η το «*Πιστεύω*». Ποιός τα μαθαίνει αυτά σήμερα στα παιδιά, που έχουμε σιχαθεί τα γλυκανάλατα φράγκικα μουρμουρητά; Ποϋ άφήσαμε τα παντερπνά λόγια των άγιών, τα όποια γαληνεύουν τις πεινασμένες ψυχές των παιδιών— «άπό την Εύρώπη γυρίσαμε πεινασμένοι», έγγραφε ο Σεφέρης—και τα «ταΐζουμε» με τα ξέψυχα, μίζερα και ψευτορομαντικά «μπαχαρικά» και ψελλίσματα της άθεις Δύσης.



Χριστιανός είναι εκείνος, που άποτελεί άπομίμηση του ίδιου του Χριστού, όσον είναι δυνατόν στον άνθρωπον, και στα λόγια και στα έργα και στην σκέψη. Και πιστεύει όρθα και άλάνθαστα στην Άγία Τριάδα.

«Η Κλίμακα» για Όλους»

THE HOLY ORTHODOX FATHERS ON ILLNESS, PART I

Fr. Alexey Young, *FatherAlexander.org*. Due to its length, this article's second half will be included in our March-April 2021 issue.

Everyone, whether or not he is a Christian, must expect a certain amount of sickness and discomfort to enter his life. Physical pain is universal; no one escapes it. Therefore, how much we suffer from illness, or how intensely, does not matter so much as how we understand these infirmities. The understanding is all.

If a man supposes that life should be one long, luxurious «vacation,» then any amount of suffering that comes to him is unbearable. But if a man views life as a time of sorrows, correction, and purification, then suffering and pain become not only bearable, but even useful.

Saint Ambrose of Milan says of the Christian attitude toward sickness: “*If the occasion demands it, a wise man will readily accept bodily infirmity and even offer his whole body up to death for the sake of Christ... This same man is not affected in spirit or broken with bodily pain if his health fails him. He is consoled by his struggle for perfection in the virtues.*” (“Exegetical Works”). Hearing this, the man of the world is quite likely to exclaim: “What an idea! How can a man ‘readily accept’ illness and disease?”

To an unbeliever this is indeed an incomprehensible thing. He cannot reconcile the *fact* of human suffering with his own *idea* of God. To him, the very thought that God would allow pain is repugnant; usually he sees every kind of suffering as evil in an *absolute* sense.

Without the aid of Divine Revelation man cannot understand the origin and cause of pain, nor its purpose. Many people, not having help in understanding, are haunted by fear of pain, terrified at the thought of a lingering illness, and quick to seek medical relief because they believe illness is only the result of «chance.»

If it is true that infirmity comes through mere «bad luck» (which even common sense tells us is not so, since much disease is the result of immoderate living), then indeed it is permissible and even desirable to use all means to avoid the pain of illness and even the illness itself. Furthermore, when a disease becomes irreversible and terminal, worldly wisdom teaches that it is acceptable to end the life of the patient—what is called euthanasia, or «mercy killing»—since, according to this view deathbed suffering is useless and cruel, and therefore «evil.»

But even in everyday life we know that suffering really is not «absolutely evil.» For example, we submit to the surgeon's knife in order to have a diseased part of the body cut away; the pain of the operation is great, but we know that it is necessary in order to preserve health or even life.

Thus, even on a strictly materialistic level, pain can serve a higher good.

Another reason why human suffering is a mystery to an unbeliever is because his very «idea» of God is false. He is shocked when the Holy Fathers speak of God in the following way: *Whether God brings upon us a famine, or a war, or any calamity whatsoever, He does so out of His exceeding great care and kindness.* (St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 7, “On the Statues”*).

The God-bearing Elder Macarius of Optina, in 19th century Russia, wrote thusly to a friend: *Being weak in health as you yourself are, I cannot fail to feel much sympathy for your plight. But kind Providence is not only more wise than we are; it is also wise in a different way.* It is this thought which must sustain us in all our trials, for it is consoling, as no other thought is.

Wise in a different way... Here we can begin to see that the Patristic understanding of God's ways is contrary to the world's view. In fact, it is unique: it is not speculative, scholarly, or “academic.” As Bishop Theophan the Recluse has written: *Christian faith is not a doctrinal system but a way of restoration* for fallen man. Therefore, the criterion of faith—true knowledge of God—is not intellectual. The measure of truth, as Professor Andreyev wrote, is **life itself**; Christ spoke of this clearly, plainly, and definitely: *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.* (Jn 14:6). That is, I am *the Way* of perceiving the Truth; I am Myself the incarnate *Truth* (everything I say is true), and I am *Life* (without Me there cannot be life)” (“Orthodox Christian Apologetics”). This is very far from the wisdom of this world.

We can either believe or disbelieve Christ's words about Himself. If we believe, **and act upon our belief**, then we can begin to ascend the ladder of living knowledge, such as no textbook or philosopher can ever give: *Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?* (1 Cor 1:20)

One of the difficulties in compiling a handbook of Patristic teaching on illness is that sickness cannot be strictly separated from the general question of pain (e.g., psychological pain and the suffering which results from war, famine, etc.). Some of what the Holy Fathers have to say here about illness also establishes a foundation for their teaching about adversity.

Another difficulty is that the Orthodox Fathers sometimes use such words as «sin,» «punishment,» and «reward» without limiting themselves to the meanings our modern society gives them. For instance, «sin» is a transgression of the Divine Law. But in Patristic thought it is also **more** than this: it is an act of «treachery,» a faithlessness to God's love for man and an arbitrary violation of [man's] sacred union with God. Sin is not something we should see within a

strict legal framework of «crime and punishment»; man's faithlessness is a universal **condition**, not limited to just this or that transgression. It is always with us, *for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.* (Rom 3:23).

God's dealings with man are not limited to our legalistic ideas about reward and punishment. Salvation, which is the ultimate goal of Christian life, is not a «reward,» but a **gift freely given** by God. We cannot «earn» or «merit» it by anything we do, no matter how pious or self-effacing we think ourselves.

In everyday life we naturally think that good deeds should be rewarded and crimes punished. But our God does not «punish» on the basis of human standards. He corrects and chastises us, just as a loving father corrects his erring children in order to show them the way. But this is not the same thing as being «sentenced» to a «term» of pain and suffering for some misdeed. Our God is not vindictive; He is at all times perfectly loving, and His justice has nothing to do with human legal standards.

He knows that we cannot come to Him without purity of heart, and He also knows that we cannot acquire this purity unless we are free from all things: free of attachments to money and property, free of passion and sin, and even detached from bodily health if that stands between us and true freedom before God. He instructs us, through both Revelation and correction, showing us how we may acquire this freedom, for *Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* (Jn 8:32). As St. John Cassian teaches: *God leads you on by a still higher step to that love which is free of fear. Through this you begin effortlessly and naturally to observe all those things you originally observed out of fear of God and punishment, but now you do them no longer from fear of punishment, but from love of Goodness itself, and delight in virtue.* (“Institutes”).

Keeping in mind this deeper spiritual meaning of such words as “sin,” “reward,” and “punishment,” we can proceed to study the divinely-wise discourses of the Holy Fathers on the subject of illness, thanking God that *our Faith has been made secure by wise and learned Saints.* (St. Cosmas Aitolos), *for truly, to know oneself is the hardest thing of all,* as St. Basil the Great writes. The Holy Fathers point the way. Their lives and writings act, as it were, like a mirror in which we may take the measure of ourselves, weighed down as we are by passions and infirmities. Illness is one of the ways by which we can learn what we **really are.**



The Origin and Cause of Pain

For we know that all creation groans and travails in pain until now. [Rom 8:22]

The way of salvation which leads to eternal life is **narrow and hard** (Mt 7:14). *It is appointed both by our Lord's holy example and by His holy teaching. The Lord foretold to His disciples and followers that in the world, that is, during their earthly life, they would have tribulation* (Jn 16:33; 15:18; 16:2-3)... *From this it is clear that sorrow and suffering are appointed by the Lord Himself for His true slaves and servants during their life on earth.* (Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, “The Arena”).

But why is this? Why are “sorrow and suffering,” together with attendant ills, actually “appointed” for together with attendant ills, actually “appointed” for us? The teaching of the Holy Fathers shows how suffering is to be understood in the context of man's first-created state and his subsequent fall into sin.

In the beginning, there was no pain, no suffering, no illness or

death. Man was a *stranger to sin, sorrows, cares, and difficult necessities.* (St. Symeon the New Theologian, “Homily 45”).

If Adam and Eve had not transgressed, *they would in time have ascended into the most perfect glory and, being changed, would have drawn near to God... and*

the joy and rejoicing with which we then would have been filled by fellowship one with the other would, in truth, have been unutterable and beyond human thought. (Ibid). Since there would have been no suffering, there would have been no illness, and consequently no need for the science of medicine.

But when man had been deceived and beguiled by the wicked demon...God came to man *as a physician comes to a sick man.* (St. John Chrysostom, Homily 7, “On the Statues”). God descended to Eden *in the cool of the day,* and called out, *Adam, where art thou?* (Gen 3:9). His first manifestation to man after the sin of disobedience was not as a vengeful Judge, *for God, when He finds a sinner, considers not how He may make him pay the penalty, but how He may amend him and make him better.* (St. John Chrysostom, Ibid).

Man, the creature, had succumbed to the temptation to be like unto God the Creator—something against all reason or possibility. This, the first sin, brought with it not “godhood,” but pain, disease, and death—and not by “chance,” but for a specific corrective reason: in order that man might know without doubt and for all time that he is not “as God.”

Therefore the Heavenly Physician “made the body [of man] subject to much suffering and disease, so that man might learn from his very nature than he must never again entertain the thought *that he could be like unto God*. (St. John Chrysostom, Homily 11, “On the Statues”). God said to Eve: *In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children* (Gen 3:16); and to Adam: *Cursed is the earth in thy word; with labor and toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life. In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread until thou return to the earth.* (Gen 3:17, 19).

It is extremely important to understand this at the outset, for if we do not grasp this truth about the nature of fallen man, nothing else the Holy Fathers teach on this subject will have any meaning. On the other hand, *if we can understand this, we will be able to learn about ourselves and we shall be able to know God and worship Him as Creator*. (St. Basil the Great, “Hexaemeron”). *Sin breeds evil, and evil breeds suffering*, writes Professor Andreyev; *yet this very suffering, which originated with Adam and Eve, is a blessing for us all because it forces us to realize how harmful to our souls, and even to our bodies, our faithlessness to God is.* (“Orthodox Christian Apologetics”).

The Purpose of Illness

But if we are sons, we are heirs also: heirs indeed of God and joint heirs with Christ, provided, however, we suffer with Him that we may also be glorified with Him. [Rom 8:17].

Our Savior and the God-bearing Fathers teach that our only concern in this life should be the salvation of our souls. Bishop Ignatius says: *Earthly life—this brief period—is given to man by the mercy of the Creator in order that man may use it for his salvation, that is, for the restoration of himself from death to life.* (“The Arena”). Therefore, we must look upon everything in this world as upon a fleeting shadow and cling with our heart to nothing of it... *for we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.* (St. John of Kronstadt, “Spiritual Counsels”). For Orthodox Christians, the center of our life is not here, but there, in the eternal world.

How long we live, what disease or illness accompanies our death—such things are not the proper concern of Orthodox Christians. Although we sing “many years” for one another at namesdays and other celebrations, this is only because the Church in her wisdom knows that we indeed need “many years” to repent of our sins and be converted, not because a long life has any value in *itself*. God is not interested in how old we are when we come before His Judgment, but whether we have repented; He is not concerned about whether we died of a heart attack or cancer, but whether our soul is in a state of health.

Therefore, *we should not dread any human ill, save sin alone; neither poverty, nor disease, nor insult, nor malicious treatment,*

nor humiliation, nor death (St. John Chrysostom, “On the Statues”), for these “ills” are only words; they have no reality for those who are living for the Kingdom of Heaven. The only real “calamity” in this life is offending God. If we have this basic understanding of the **purpose of life**, then the spiritual meaning of bodily infirmity can be opened for us.

We have learned how the all-wise God allowed suffering to enter the world in order to show us that we are but creatures. It is a lesson still not learned by the race of Adam which, in its pride, ever seeks to be like “gods”: for every sin is a renewal of the sin of the first-created ones, a willful turning away from God towards self. In this way we set ourselves in the place of God, actually worshipping self instead of the Creator. In this way the suffering of illness serves the same purpose today as it did in the beginning: for this reason it is a sign of God’s mercy and love. As the Holy Fathers say to those who are ill: *God has not forgotten you; He cares for you.* (Sts. Barsanuphius and John, “Philokalia”).

Yet, it is difficult to see how sickness can be a sign of God’s care for us—unless, that is, we understand the relationship that exists between body and soul. Elder Ambrose of Optina Monastery spoke of this in a letter to the mother of a very sick child: *We should not forget that in our age of “sophistication” even little children are spiritually harmed by what they see and hear. As a result, purification is required, and this is only accomplished through bodily suffering... You must understand that Paradisal bliss is granted to no one without suffering.*

St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain explained that since man is dual, made up of body and soul, *there is an interaction between the soul and the body* (“Counsels”), each one acting on the other and actually communicating with the other. *When the soul is diseased we usually feel no pain*, St. John Chrysostom says. *But if the body suffers only a little, we make every effort to be free of the illness and its pain. Therefore, God corrects the body for the sins of the soul, so that by chastising the body, the soul might also receive some healing... Christ did this with the Paralytic when He said: Behold, thou art made whole; sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee. What do we learn from this? That the Paralytic’s disease had been produced by his sins.* (Homily 38, “On the Gospel of St. John”).

On one occasion a woman was brought to St. Seraphim of Sarov. She was badly crippled and could not walk because her knees were bent up to her chest. She told the Elder that she had been born in the Orthodox Church but, after marrying a dissenter, had abandoned Orthodoxy and, for her infidelity, God had suddenly punished her... She could not move a hand or foot. St. Seraphim asked the sick woman whether she now believed in her Mother, our Holy Orthodox Church. On receiving a reply in the affirmative, he told her to make the sign of the Cross in the proper way. She

said that she could not even lift a hand. But when the Saint prayed and anointed her hands and breast with oil from the icon-lamp, her malady left her instantly. *Behold, thou art made whole; sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee!*

This connection between body and soul, sin and sickness, is clear: pain tells us that something has gone wrong with the soul, that not only is the body diseased, but the *soul* as well. And this is precisely how the soul communicates its ills to the body, awakening a man to self-knowledge and a wish to turn to God. We see this over and over in the lives of the saints, for illness also teaches that our *true self, that which is principally man, is not the visible body but the invisible soul, the "inner man."* (St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain, "Christian Morality").

But does this mean that the man who enjoys continual good health is in "good shape" spiritually? Not at all, for suffering takes many forms, whether in the body or in the mind and soul. How many in excellent health lament that life is not "worth living"? St. John Chrysostom describes this kind of suffering: *Some think that to enjoy good health is a source of pleasure. But it is not so. For many who have good health have a thousand times wished themselves dead, not being able to bear the insults inflicted upon them... For although we were to become kings and live royally, we should find ourselves compassed about with many troubles and sadnesses... By necessity kings have as many sadnesses as there are waves on the ocean. So, if monarchy is unable to make a life free from grief, then what else could possibly achieve this? Nothing, indeed, in this life.* (Homily 18, "On the Statues").

Protestants often "claim" health in the "Name of Christ." They regard health as something to which the Christian is naturally *entitled*. From their point of view, illness betrays a *lack of faith*. This is the exact opposite of the Orthodox teaching as illustrated by the life of the Righteous Job in the Old Testament. St. John Chrysostom says that the saints serve God not because they expect any kind of reward, either spiritual or material, but simply because they *love Him*: *For the saints know that the greatest reward of all is to be able to love and serve God. Thus, God, wishing to show that it was not for reward that His saints serve Him, stripped Job of all his wealth, gave him over to poverty, and permitted him to fall into terrible diseases. And Job, who was not living for any reward in this life, still remained faithful to God.* (Homily 1, "On the Statues").

Just as healthy people are not without sin, so too, God sometimes allows truly righteous ones to suffer, *as a model for the weak.* (St. Basil the Great, "The Long Rules"). For, as St. John Cassian teaches, *a man is more thoroughly instructed and formed by the example of another.* ("Institutes").

This we see in the Scriptural case of Lazarus. *Although he suffered from painful wounds, he never once murmured against the Rich Man nor made any request of him... As a result, he*

found rest in the Bosom of Abraham, as one who had accepted humbly the misfortunes of life. (St. Basil the Great, "The Long Rules").

The Church Fathers also teach that illness is a way by which Christians may imitate the suffering of the martyrs. Thus, in the lives of very many saints, intense bodily suffering was visited upon them at the end, so that by their righteous suffering they might attain to physical martyrdom. A good example of this may be found in the life of that great champion of Orthodoxy, St. Mark of Ephesus: *He was sick fourteen days, and the disease itself, as he himself said, had upon him the same effect as those iron instruments of torture applied by executioners to the holy martyrs, and which as it were girdled his ribs and internal organs, pressed upon them and remained attached in such a state and caused absolutely unbearable pain; so that it happened that what men could not do with his sacred martyr's body was fulfilled by disease, according to the unutterable judgment of Providence, in order that this Confessor of Truth and Martyr and Conqueror of all possible sufferings and Victor should appear before God after going through every misery, and that even to his last breath, as gold tried in the furnace, and in order that thanks to this he might receive yet greater honor and rewards eternally from the Just Judge.* ("The Orthodox Word," vol. 3, no. 3).

You who believe when you are well, see to it that you do not fall away from God in the time of misfortune.

[St. John of Kronstadt]



And if it is not this temple, a shack, and if it is not a shack, a catacomb, a room. And if there is no such thing, the forest. The night will cover with her veils so that those who worship God are not seen.

Nothing can ever prevent us from worshiping God. I insist very much on this point. I do not know what days are coming. However, I will always insist on the uninterrupted worship of God. It will never cease. Never ever think that God's word will be interrupted. The interruption will be on the obvious, the open worship, no doubt; however, the hidden will never be interrupted. Do not think that the religiosity of our people will be interrupted, never think that. Because the word of God is rooted in the hearts of men, and whatever prevails, the word of God always bears fruit.

Fr. Athanasios Mitilinaios (+2006)

THE CANAANITE WOMAN AND THE MOTHER OF GOD

Archbishop Christodoulos (Paraskevaïdis) of Athens (+2008).

The Gospel of the first Sunday during Triodion is about a Canaanite woman. We hear how she called out to the Lord, followed Him, and was ignored by Him. His disciples were at a loss to understand why He did not either help her or tell her to go away, instead of leaving her to plead. He explained His silence: *I came only for Israel, not for foreigners, for the Gentiles, such as this Canaanite.* But the woman persisted, approached Him and asked for His assistance. The Lord's answer was a lesson to her, to His disciples and to all of us ever since then. He said harshly: *It is not right to take the food out of the mouth of your children and to give it to the dogs.* He compared God's blessing with the most basic human need: food. But the woman did not give up. She answered back: *Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.* Christ then told her: *Woman, your faith is great, so I'm granting you your wish.*

Let us dwell on this a little. The Lord had left Judaea and was on His way to Sidon, in the Lebanon. This was the land of the Canaanites, a nation which had been living in the region even before the Israelites came from Egypt with Moses. They worshipped idols and their women practiced magic.

So while it was true that Christ went to their land, the woman herself had to want to see Him, to call to Him from the depths of her soul. She felt His presence beside her and started calling to Him. She was not calling to some enchanter, to some magician who worked "miracles." She called to Him in His own specific capacity, in a sense by His own name: *Son of David*, the Lord. And the more she calls out to Him, the closer she gets; the more she seeks, the more she finds. At first, the Lord does not even speak to her, which is a severe test of her faith. He lets her follow on behind, without any response, and when he does reply it is with harsh words. Obviously, there is no question here of any racial prejudice. Christ was talking about idolatry and magic. But we see that the faith of the Canaanite woman is not shaken at all by the comparison. She continues to ask for mercy and for His intervention in her life and that of her daughter.



What are the cries of the Canaanite woman if not a prayer to the Lord? What is her pursuit of Him if not a pivotal point in her life where she turns to His word? Her humility, her acceptance of the fact that, yes, she was an unworthy dog who was asking only for a few crumbs as a blessing, only what was left over from the table of the masters, what is that if not repentance and confession? And the final answer of the Lord is nothing other than His open embrace, God's acquiescence in the face of unshakeable faith.

Today's Gospel does not merely tell us about a miracle performed by the Lord. It presents us with the way to approach the Lord, the only way by which we avoid the traps of the idols of this world and are able to cast ourselves, in tears, into the embrace of our Father. It presents us with how the Father operates in order to open to us the path of return to Him, without doing away with our freedom. It presents us with the face of our Savior. It presents us with the way in which we must open our souls to His miraculous Grace. In other words, it presents us with the feast of our salvation, it presents the Church.

The Church is the mystical locus where we all meet. Here are the Lord, the angels, the saints and the faithful. And here also, drawing us to her with great love, is the lady of this house, the Mother of God.

The Mother of God labored long for God to open His embrace to the Canaanite woman and to all of us. Mary was not simply a pious girl who participated in our salvation in a passive way by accepting God's will, when she spoke to the angel. It is not like when God took earth and made humankind, without us doing anything ourselves. Mary took an active part in God's plan, she labored in order to bring to God all the elements His merciful plan required so that He could take flesh and redeem us.

Saint Nikolaos Kavalas, one of the Church's holy Fathers, explains what these features were: *Blameless conduct, pure life, rejection of all wickedness, practice of all the virtues, a soul purer than light, a body spiritual in all things...* As we chant at Matins on the eve of the Annunciation: *Christ loved your beauty, most pure Maiden, and dwelt in your womb... that the human race might be saved...*

By accepting active participation in God's merciful plan, Mary herself says, in a prophetic spirit: *For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed.* And indeed, the same year, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, did that

very thing: *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb... And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*

We cannot enter any Orthodox Church without being greeted by an icon of our Lady the Mother of God, bringing us into the mystery of our salvation. We cannot pray, we cannot think about the Church, without reference to her whom God's grace- and her own perfect conformation to His will- made the All Holy Mother of God and Mother of the Church.

Saint John Chrysostom calls Our Lady the Mother of God the pride of the human race, the gateway to our life, the agent of our salvation. Wonderful pages have been written explaining the position of the Mother of God as the Mother of Christ and of the Church. The Fathers of the Church have written incomparably more wonderful, inspired texts explaining Mary's achievements and hymning the august person she is.

And we also know that all Orthodox Christians have her image in their hearts. In the hidden depths of their souls, ordinary, anonymous people who escape the web of history but not the gaze of God, always have a candle lit for Our Lady. And the more the pall of darkness thickens, the fiercer our torments become, the more we hasten to hide in her arms, to let our tears flow on her lap. We flee to her as our Mother, expecting to feel her hand wiping away the tears, giving us strength and calming our turbulent souls.



God is everywhere. There is no place God is not... You cry out to Him, 'Where art Thou, my God?' And He answers, 'I am present, my child! I am always beside you.' Both inside and outside, above and below, wherever you turn, everything shouts, 'God!' In Him we live and move. We breathe God, we eat God, we clothe ourselves with God. Everything praises and blesses God. All of creation shouts His praise. Everything animate and inanimate speaks wondrously and glorifies the Creator. Let every breath praise the Lord!

The only hope of salvation from the delusions and the heresies, the innovations and the traps of wicked people and of the devil is prayer, repentance and humility.

God always helps. He always comes in time, but patience is necessary. He hears us immediately when we cry out to Him, but not in accordance with our own way of thinking.

St. Joseph the Hesychast

ON THE BEAUTIFUL ROAD OF LOVE

By the Saintly Elder Ephraim of Arizona (+2019).



I pray that the All-good God will send down upon you the All-holy Spirit, as He did to His divinely sent holy Apostles, so that you may be enlightened to walk the arduous path of salvation. *Behold now, what is so good or joyous as for brethren to dwell together in unity with love?* (cf. Pss 132:1). There is nothing more beautiful than for a *synodia* to be

replete with godly love. Then, everything is radiant; everything is full of beauty, while God above delights, and the holy angelic spirits rejoice above where love is boundless. *Love one another, as I have loved you. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.* (Jn. 13:34, 35).

O love, whoever possesses you has a truly blessed heart, for within love, what could one possibly want and not find! Humility, joy, patience, goodness, compassion, forbearance, enlightenment, and so on, are all there. But in order to obtain this supremely wondrous love, we must constantly call upon the God of love to give it to us. When the name of God is remembered through the prayer *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me*, it contains within it eternal life, and eternal life is the God of love! Therefore, he who prays this prayer obtains true, godly love. So, onwards; behold the way and means of victoriously conquering love. Take courage and bravely proceed into the battle. Say the prayer constantly: orally and noetically. It is more beneficial to say it orally during the day, because at that time the nous is scattered by one's work.

The beautiful road of love is effortless, and there is neither blemish nor stain in love, but rather the conscience testifies that the soul has boldness towards God. But when there is no love, the soul has no boldness in prayer, and as one defeated and cowardly, it cannot lift its head because it feels remorse for not having loved as God has loved it; it is a transgressor of the commandment of God.

If we do not love our brother whom we have seen, how can we love God whom we have not seen? (cf. 1 Jn 4:20). He who has true love has God; whoever does not have love does not have God in himself. The Holy Fathers say, *If you have seen your brother, you have seen God; your salvation depends on your brother.* The holy monastic fathers of old walked the path of salvation effortlessly, because they sacrificed everything so that they would not fall away from love. Love was their goal

in life. Our path, though, is completely strewn with thorns which sprouted because we lack love. And this is why when we walk, we constantly bleed. The foundations of the house shake when we do not lay the foundation of love well.

Compel yourself, my child, for the sake of your soul. Compel yourself to comfort the brethren, and the Lord will comfort you—He will give you His grace. Have patience, have patience. Let everyone treat you like dirt, and He will give you His grace. Great is he who has more humility. God gives grace to the person who has fear of God and obeys everyone like a small child and constantly seeks God’s holy will. Such a person never seeks that his own will be done, but the will of God and of the others. He always says, “As you wish, as you know best.” He does not give his own opinion because he considers himself lower than everyone. When they tell him to do something, he eagerly says, “May it be blessed.” So, my child, this is what you should do, too. This makes the demons tremble, flee far away, and not approach anymore. They are very afraid when they see humility, obedience, and love towards all.

My child, just do your duty. If the others do not obey, leave it to God and be at peace. It is due to the devil’s jealousy, my child. Will the devil go out perhaps to the mountains to create temptations? He goes wherever people are struggling for their salvation. And since we, too, are seeking our salvation, he jumbles us up without our realizing it. Carry the burden of the brethren. God rewards everyone justly. The time will come when you will see how much He will give you for the pains you went through to look after so many souls.

Labor in this world; keep helping, and you will never be deprived of God’s help. Now you are sowing; the time will come for you to reap. Pray that God will make you strong in patience, discernment, enlightenment, etc. I am constantly praying for you, but I have no boldness before God, and thus my prayer bears no fruit. Just think what the Fathers went through to save others. It is no small matter; you are helping the others, which is why the devil will take it out on you and afflict you. So start showing patience and bravery, and say: “I am ready to die in the battle helping my brethren to be saved, but God will not let me perish, since I am doing it for the sake of His love.” Yes, do so, and you will see how much strength and joy you will receive in the struggle. For sometimes impatience, despair, and pessimism deprive a person of God’s grace, and then he wrongly attributes it to the burdens he is bearing. But courage, self-sacrifice, bravery, and faith in God bring the grace of God. I pray that God will invigorate your spiritual nerves to fight with renewed strength.

Abide in the bond of mutual love, for love is the beginning and the end—the foundation. It is on love towards God and your brothers that *all the law and the prophets hang* (cf. Mt 22:40). Without love we are a clanging cymbal—a big zero. According to the Apostle Paul, even if we give our body to

be burned for Christ and distribute our belongings to the poor and mortify our life with harsh asceticism for Christ, yet lack love, we have accomplished nothing (cf. 1 Cor 13:3). Therefore, with all our strength we must see to it that we keep a strong hold on mutual love, so that our trivial works may be approved by Him Who examines the secret thoughts of our hearts.

You write, my child, about someone who kept grieving you, and you cursed him, etc. No, my child, do not curse anyone, no matter how much he has harmed you. Our Christ tells us to love our enemies, so how can we speak evil? Seek forgiveness from God, and henceforth love him as your brother, regardless of whether or not you agree with him. Didn’t Christ on the Cross forgive his crucifiers? Then how can we do otherwise? Yes, my child, we must love everyone, regardless of whether they love us or not—that is their business.

My child, always justify your brother and reproach yourself. Never justify your deeds. Learn to say, “Bless”—in other words, “Forgive me”—and humility will dwell within you. Have patience and overlook your brother’s faults, remembering God’s forbearance towards your own faults. Love as Jesus loves you and as you want others to love you. Hold on to silence, constant prayer, and self-reproach, and then you will see how much mourning and tears and joy you will feel. But if you fail to hold on to them, in other words, if you neglect to apply them, then coldness and dryness will replace the above graces. Love the brethren. Your love will show when, despite all your brother’s weaknesses, you count them as nothing and love him. Love will keep you from all sins. Think of nothing but your own sinfulness. Reproach yourself constantly—this is the best path.

I pray your soul is in good health, for when it is healthy, it has patience in afflictions, it has self-denial with the body and in its thoughts; and it fears neither illnesses nor selfish thoughts. When the soul is healthy, it has love within itself; it does not scandalize others; it endures a brother’s harsh words; it does not expose his faults in public; it always has something good to say about his brother; it gives way in quarrels and escapes having bitter thoughts and distress. When the soul is healthy, it does not get angry, complain, talk back, murmur, disobey; it does not follow its own whims, and it does so many other things indicative of spiritual health. This health is what I seek from you; this is what I advise; for this do I pray.



Read the Holy Scriptures and the Lives of the Saints, especially those of the holy Great Martyrs..., because each saint gives a little piece of his strength to those who read his life with faith, and he will help them to pass through the toll-houses.

St. Barsanuphius of Optina

YOU WERE SENT TO ME BY CHRIST!

From "Memoirs of a Greek Taxi Driver," translated by Constantine Zalalas.

One morning, I received a call by the taxi call center directing me to a nearby shore. When I arrived at the address, I saw a very elderly man slowly coming towards the taxi, accompanied up to the door by his daughter. When this elderly man entered inside and sat in front, he made a very good impression on me. His smile, his courteousness, his entire demeanor drew my attention. He also had an appetite for discussion during our trip since the route was quite long. We were heading to some village where his summer house was. Thus, with the appetite to talk and much time at our disposal, we discussed various social matters. In the beginning, I politely asked him about his field of work. From what this man was saying, I realized that he must have been very educated.

"I am a doctor Mr. Thanasi, but I have been retired for many years. I spent most of my life in an operating room. I also had my own clinic on such and such street; do you remember it?"

"Although I was born in 1961, I remember something about it."

"So, as a scholar, I loved medicine very much, and I loved mankind. In my zeal and thirst for knowledge, God granted me on top of material wealth, an invention in the surgical field which made my name very well known. Patients would visit me not only from all over Greece, but also from abroad. I worked many hours and on quite a few nights, one would find me with the lancet in my hand. Sometimes, I would even sleep in the clinic because I would be too tired to return to my home. I considered it my duty to help my fellow man over and above everything else."

"Doctor, please allow me to tell you that I am so pleased that we have met."

"The feeling is mutual Thanasi, and I am sincere in saying this; by the way, I am also interested to find out your educational level because I have the feeling that you are not just a taxi driver."

"I am an elementary school graduate, I replied."

"Thanasi, I understand that you are trying to be humble, but please, tell me the truth, what did you major in?"

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Well, I am sorry, but I don't believe you."

"Then, you will allow me to tell you a very true story from my childhood which is a little comical, and then I am certain that you will believe me. When I was little, the greatest nightmare for me was school and education. Just imagine, it took me eight years to finish that wretched elementary school. During the last grade, I was already shaving. I was a foot taller than the other children. So in all these eight years, I don't remember, even once, answering my teacher correctly

on the verbal quiz on the daily lesson. Every day in class, I would try to hide behind my fellow students. I didn't want my teacher to see me, so she wouldn't call me up to the blackboard for the daily lesson drill. Every time I was called up to the blackboard, I was not only clueless of the daily lesson, but I didn't even know what subject we were on, whether it was geography, history or religion.

"In order to hide very well behind the back of the student who was in front of me, who was also hiding behind the one in front of him, I would whisper to him, 'Hey, don't move and don't bend down.' He, would then turn and tell me, 'What are you saying you dunce? You want me to be get in trouble instead?' And despite my hiding attempts, my name would be called out loud and clear to walk towards the board and to demonstrate my knowledge of the daily lesson in that class. The mere announcement of my name was enough to make my legs tremble.

"I will never forget during one of these times, when I was standing for quite a while at the board and I would say, 'Today we will learn about our fatherland.' I stopped for about five minutes, and then again, 'Today we talk about our fatherland,' since I didn't know what else to say. So I turned and saw the teacher's gaze. She was looking at me from above her glasses and gritting her teeth. In that nasty voice of hers she said, 'You deafened us.' I barely kept from soiling myself. The children were bursting with laughter, and the whip would fall like a storm. As you can understand, doctor, from the frequency of the daily beatings, when I heard my name, I would no longer go to the board. Instead, I would make the trip shorter by going straight to the desk to reap what was due. So what do you say, now, do you believe me?" [Note: Corporal punishment was the rule in those decades.]

The doctor broke out in laughter and said, "Thanasi, you are a riot, truly awesome," and he continued to laugh. We both laughed very much, and while we spent some time discussing much about the fruitless public educational systems, I wanted to shift the conversation a bit towards spiritual matters, before our arrival.

I had this good persisting thought working inside of me: I wonder, if this good doctor, and very dear elderly man, who must be nearing his nineties, is ready for heaven? Thus, after a brief prayer, and the use of much discretion, I shifted the conversation towards this area. By the grace of God, the doctor was very open for spiritual conversation. Furthermore, he told me, "Thanasi, I see that you are very religious."

"The Scribes and the Pharisees were religious as well, but they remained outside the kingdom. You, doctor, are you are you in good standing with the church?" I asked.

"Yes, I don't have a problem, although I didn't have much time over the years for church attendance. I had, however, my own way all these years, to approach and to believe in Christ."

"Would you mind sharing your way with me, doctor, so I can understand?"

“Let me tell you; every time I was faced with a difficult operation, I would spend some time in the room adjacent to the operating room, which I had transformed as my own personal chapel. I would kneel, pray extensively and lift my hands, to ask Christ to help me and my patient.”

Oh, my friends, when I heard the doctor speaking like this, I was overflowing with joy, especially since it is not very common to hear such words from the mouths of today’s doctors. Unfortunately this joy did not last very long because when we focused the conversation more directly to the area of repentance, confession, Holy Communion, the doctor was not on board. He became increasingly defensive and justifying himself and said, “What area of my life do I need to repent for, and why do I need to go to confession? I don’t remember having done anything evil. Thanasi, please listen so you can see where I am coming from. I have my own philosophy in matters of faith, and I have held on to it throughout my life.”

I replied, “Doctor, it is not a matter of philosophy. Here we are dealing with matters of faith. There are many philosophers, but there is only one Savior.”

He came back with, “Please consider that being older than you, I may know something more.”

I added: “It is not a matter of age, either. It is about the teachings of the Gospel which calls one to sincere repentance and confession so he or she may properly prepare to often partake with reverence of the Body and the Blood of our Christ,” I replied.

“No, Thanasi, I don’t agree with repentance and confession. Furthermore, I don’t feel the need to repent for anything nor to go to confession.”

“Very well, since you don’t agree with repentance, and since you happen to be wiser than me, tonight when I go home, I will open the New Testament, and wherever I encounter the word repentance, I will draw a smudge or better yet, rip the page out, which means that I will remove over 100 pages from the New Testament. What do you say?”

“Well, now, I didn’t mean it like that!”

“Doctor, since you don’t agree with it, and I don’t agree with it, we can wipe it out with one stroke of the pen so it’s no longer there to reprove us.”

“Now just a minute Thanasi, so I can get things straight. To begin with, why must I go to a physical church? Isn’t the Church of God everywhere? Furthermore, why must I have any dealings with a priest? That’s what I could not understand all these years. Why should I go to the priest?”

“Doctor, please allow me to ask you, are you married?”

“Why, what are you saying now? I have grandchildren.”

“Great! Where did your marriage ceremony take place?”

“What, do you mean where did it take place? We went to church, where else?”

“Ohhh! So, you went to church, in front of a priest. Doctor, why the church and not the patio on the flat roof of your house? What would the church possibly have more so than

your roof top patio? You could call fifty, one hundred friends, open a few bottles of wine, play some music, and have someone from your group bless the crowns. What more could the priest offer you? Everything would be just fine. So, why did you go to a church, and why did you go to a priest? I would like you to answer me. Moreover, when you baptized your children, and your grandchildren, where did you go? I will tell you, my doctor. You went to the church. But why the church? Why didn’t you stay at your home, fill your bathtub with water, and have someone dip the children three times and why not thirteen times since these things don’t have much significance? Someone could slap a little oil on them, and everything would be just fine. So, what more could the priest do for you that you couldn’t take care of yourself. Furthermore, for you to understand it better, the next time my stomach hurts, and I choose to go to a plumber, what would you think? Oh, my dear doctor, for all sacraments, we go to a priest, but when it is time for repentance and confession, we are so quick to say ‘Why should I go to a priest?’

“I am very much afraid, that many of us, due to the great egotism and pride we have, will not only be separated with houses, land, money, stocks and bonds, taxis, and clinics, but worst of all, we are in danger of being separated with Christ eternally. My dear doctor, as a man of high education, I would like you to consider eternity without Christ! The loss of Christ! God forbid!

My friend, in a few minutes as you enter your home, stand before your iconostasis, and ask the saints there, ‘My saints, did any of you reach sainthood without holy confession and shedding tears of repentance?’ And I’m certain the answer will come to you soon enough.”

At that point, the doctor refrained from asking me any other questions. Seemingly perplexed, he lowered his head, and remained silent.

And my last words were, “My doctor, forgive me, but you forgot one thing in your life. You have been holding the surgical scalpel in your hand for so many years, and it has healed thousands of people, it has performed some miraculous healings, but it never occurred to you to turn it inside of you to make your own incision, your own personal surgery in order to excise your spiritual maladies. As you understand, I’m referring to the spiritual lancet, which hurts even more.”

Here, my friends, these words finally touched a sensitive chord in the doctor. As his tears began to flow, he tried to apologize and I said, “No, my doctor, don’t apologize because these tears are the most beautiful tears Christ has been waiting from you for ninety years now.” My dear Lord, how could I possibly describe the indescribable? He cried and sobbed like a child and in this spiritual wailing, he turned and said to me, “My dear Thanasi, Christ sent you my way today!”

My God! My God! What beautiful words! What a beautiful outcome! What beautiful moments. These special blessings will stay with me for the rest of my life! In the last couple of

miles our relationship became completely different. He asked me to come by two days later to take him to a good spiritual father if I happen to know of one.

I said, "My doctor, I have a wonderful spiritual father for you, full of meekness and love. By the way, have you ever been to confession?"

"I have never confessed, my dear Thanasi, ever."

"Nor have you communed?"

"Not even once."

Oh, my dear Lord, a ninety year old man who never communed even once after his infant baptism.

When I left, I immediately called Father Thomas, because Father Triantafyllos was not available. I gave him a brief account of the events, and precisely what transpired with our dear doctor, and Father Thomas asked me, "Are you speaking about the world-renown doctor who had the clinic on such and such street?"

"Yes, father, do you know him?"

"What are you saying, Thanasi? All of Greece and Europe knows him. Please bring him; just call me a few minutes before you come."

"It will be my pleasure," I said and I was flying with untold joy. Sure enough, I drove with my private car to the doctor's house to pick him up, and we had a soul-benefitting conversation on the way concerning confession. I wanted to prepare him so that he understood that repentance needs to precede confession. Among other things, I said, "Confession, my doctor is not merely a pronouncement of a list of sins; it must be accompanied with pain of soul, and compunction, it is an acknowledgment of our sinfulness, just like the prodigal son's."

The doctor was accepting and understanding everything I was telling him, without any objection. Thus we finally ascended the stairs of the church, and we arrived at the confessional to find many people waiting and most of them young students. Of course, they immediately requested that we go ahead of them, understanding that an elderly man could not remain standing for a long time. Father received the doctor with much joy and love. While my elderly friend was in the confessional, I was praying through the inner depths of my soul. I was asking our sweetest Jesus to enlighten and soften this heart, regardless of my sinfulness. The devil had trapped his heart in the passion of self justification for 90 years, and I prayed and wished for both of us to be together again, not just here on earth, but in heaven for all eternity.

In a few minutes, the door opened and I apprehensively went to receive our elderly doctor. Father Thomas smiled and told me, "Everything is fine, Thanasi. Everything is fine. He may commune whenever he wants." "Glory to Thee our Lord, glory to Thee." My joy was complete. I thanked the student who had given us his turn telling him, "May the Panaghia reward you for your kindness!" His eyes glowed

with emotion. As we were exiting the church, the doctor was very happy and told me, "My dear Thanasi, you don't know what the father told me."

"What did he tell you?"

"To begin with, when I entered, he immediately recognized me. He knew me from the days I ran the clinic. As soon as I entered, he told me, 'Come, my doctor, come, because we are colleagues.'

'Really, my father, are you a doctor as well, I asked?'

'Yes, I am a doctor of the soul, as a priest of the Most High, and you are a doctor of the body.' This helped us to connect, and from there we progressed into confession and the prayer of absolution."

"Didn't I tell you that father is wonderful? He is full of meekness and love."

We continued our joyous discussion in the car, and in a few minutes we arrived outside his home. I offered to give him a ride to Church so we could take Holy Communion together next Sunday morning, but out of courteousness and humility, he didn't accept my offer. As we bade each other farewell with much joy, the elderly gentleman, deeply touched by the day's events, reiterated, "My dear Thanasi, I know and fully understand that Christ sent you on my path. From here on, I know the way."

I escorted him to the door of his house, and after we exchanged a warm handshake, I wished him "the joy and eternity of paradise." Even though I knew where his house was, I never saw the doctor again. I had the sense that my mission had come to an end. Now that I'm sitting and narrating this event, years later, I would like to say to him the same thing over again, "Doctor, may you abide in the joy and blessings of paradise, and please remember us in your prayers."



Here I am again, writing against those who say they have the Spirit of God unconsciously, who think that they have Him in themselves as a result of divine Baptism and who, while they believe they have this treasure, yet recognize themselves as wholly deaf to Him. I am writing against those who, even while confessing they felt nothing whatever in their baptism, still imagine that the gift of God has indwelt and existed within their soul, unconsciously and insensibly, from that moment up to the present time. Nor are they the only ones, but I am also against those who say they have never had any perception of that gift in *theoria* or in revelation, but that they still receive it by faith and thought [reason] alone, not by experience, and hold it within themselves as a result of merely hearing the scriptures.

St. Symeon the New Theologian

WHAT ARE THE SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMILITY?

By St. Isaac the Syrian, from "The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Abba Isaac the Syrian," Homily 71.

Just as presumption dissipates the soul through imaginings that distract her and gives her free rein to fly among the clouds of her thoughts and to circle round all creation, so humility collects the soul through the stillness of the thoughts and concentrates her within herself. As the soul is unknown and invisible to corporeal eyes, so a humble man remains unknown amid men. As the soul abiding within the body is hidden from the sight and association with all men, so the truly humble man not only does not wish to be seen or known by men (for which reason he is secluded and distant from all men), but more, his will is—if possible—to plunge himself away from himself into himself. He wishes to enter and dwell in stillness, to forsake totally his former conceptions together with his senses, and to become as something that does not exist in creation, that has not come into being in this world, that is totally unknown even to his soul and his senses. And so long as such a man is hidden, locked away and withdrawn from the world, he remains wholly with his Lord.

A humble man is never pleased to see gatherings, confused crowds, tumult, shouts and cries, opulence, adornment, and luxury, the cause of insobriety; nor does he take pleasure in conversations, assemblies, noise, and the scattering of the senses; but above all he chooses to be by himself and to collect himself within himself, being alone in stillness, separated from all creation, and taking heed to himself in a silent place. Insignificance, absence of possessions, want and poverty are in every wise beloved by him.

He is not engaged in manifold and fluctuating affairs, but at all times he desires to be unoccupied and free of the cares and the confusion of the things of this world, that he may keep his thoughts from going outside himself. For he is persuaded that if he becomes involved with many activities, it is not possible for him to remain without confused and disturbed thoughts. For many activities collect many cares and a swarm of diverse and complicated thoughts. These cause a man to leave the peacefulness of his thoughts (whereby he was superior to all earthly cares, except for the small necessities of life which are inevitable), and a state of mind that has a single concern amid peaceful reflections. And when necessities do not permit him to restrain his mouth from speaking, he is both harmed and causes harm. Then the door is thrown open to the passions, the tranquillity of discernment retires, humility flees, and the door to peace is shut. For all these reasons a humble man unceasingly protects himself from many affairs, and thus at all times he is found to be tranquil, gentle, peaceful, modest, and reverent.

A humble man is never rash, hasty, or perturbed, never has any hot and volatile thoughts, but at all times remains calm. Even if heaven were to fall and cleave to the earth, the humble man would not be dismayed. Not every quiet man is humble, but every humble man is quiet. There is no humble man who is not self-constrained; but you will find many who are self-constrained without being humble. This is also what the meek and humble Lord meant when He said, *Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.* For the humble man is always at rest, because there is nothing which can agitate or shake his mind. Just as no one can frighten a mountain, so the mind of a humble man cannot be frightened.

If it be permissible and not incongruous, I should say that the humble man is not of this world. For he is not troubled and altered by sorrows, nor amazed and enthused by joys, but all his gladness and his real rejoicing are in the things of his Master. Humility is accompanied by modesty and self-collectedness: that is, chastity of the senses; a moderated voice; mean speech; self-belittlement; poor raiment; a gait that is not pompous; a gaze directed toward the earth; superabundant mercy; easily flowing tears; a solitary soul; a contrite heart; imperturbability to anger; undistracted senses; few possessions; moderation in every need; endurance; patience; fearlessness; manliness of heart born of a hatred for this temporal life; patient endurance of trials; deliberations that are ponderous, not light; extinction of thoughts; guarding of the mysteries of chastity; modesty; reverence; and above all, continually to be still and always to claim ignorance were any truly humble man who would venture to supplicate God when he draws nigh to prayer, or to ask to be accounted worthy of prayer, or to make entreaty for any other thing, or who would know what to pray.

The humble man keeps a reign of silence over all his deliberations, and simply awaits mercy and whatever decree should come forth concerning him from the countenance of God's worshipful majesty. When he bows his face to the earth, and the divine vision within his heart is raised to the sublime gate leading to the Holy of Holies, wherein is He Whose dwelling place is darkness which dims the eyes of the Seraphim and Whose brilliance awes the legions of their choirs and sheds silence upon all their orders [and when they are waiting for mysteries to shine forth from the Invisible One, in that airless realm through a soundless motion, through bodiless senses, through image less perception of that formless Essence and of revelations which surpass them, the power of their thoughts being too weak to contain the waves of those mysteries]: then he dares only to speak and pray thus, *May it be unto me according to Thy will, O Lord.* And may we also say the same for ourselves. Amen.

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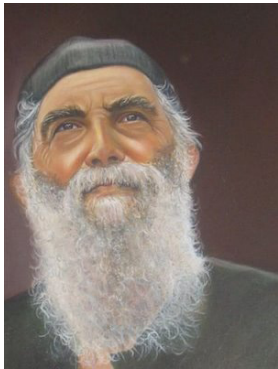
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ELDER PAISIOS AND THE BOILED MILK DURING LENT

By George Skambardonis.



At Panagouda, the hut of Elder Paisios, there are two visitors from Thessaloniki. They stand, leaning on the chestnut tree. Both in their fifties, they are pale and cantankerous. They seem to be from an ecclesiastical organization, because they are looking reproachfully at the Elder, and making comments to each other quietly. The children are playing, making a fuss—at which Paisios turns and says

quietly, in a soft voice:

“Do not make noise, because beside here, beneath the earth, Americans are hidden and we will wake them, and they will come to interrupt our silence.”

The children stop, and are silently puzzled. At the opposite end, John leans sideways against the rock atop his sack. He lights a cigarette. The two visitors, who appear to be harsh pietists, continue to look at the Elder with disapproval as he boils milk and oversees that it does not spill over. One of them can't stand it anymore and tells the monk:

“Elder Paisios, we are in the first days of Lent, we have a strict fast, and you are boiling milk to drink?”

The Elder is silent. He does not respond. He grabs the pot and lowers it, since the milk is now boiled.

He then goes into his hut, bringing six small, old china cups, he puts them next to each other, and carefully pours the milk into each one. He waits a bit for it to cool off, while everyone looks at him with amazement and silence. The two pietists observe this with disgust, thinking that since there are six visitors and six cups, perhaps the monk will offer them milk during these strict days of the fast.

Elder Paisios takes the full cups one by one, places them on a wooden tray, and carries them seven meters away, where he places them down on the dirt, at the edge of a bush.

He places them there in order, then he comes, sits next to us, and begins to do something with his mouth silently, an eery whistling, while looking towards the bushes. Not a few moments pass, and over there, from the bushes, comes out a viper with five small snakes very carefully—her children. I hold my breath.

The snakes are coming, all of them approaching, one by one, slithering, passing right next to us, and they go slowly-slowly to the cups, and begin drinking calmly, slurping their morning milk...

† † †

The devil does not hunt after those who are lost; he hunts after those who are aware, those who are close to God. He takes from them trust in God and begins to afflict them with self-assurance, logic, thinking, criticism. Therefore we should not trust our logical minds.