

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]

Vol. 15, Issue 05-06

May-June 2017

Brotherhood of St. Poimen

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Publisher: St. POIMEN Greek Orthodox Brotherhood

Editor: George Karras

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GREAT FRIDAY

THE GOSPEL ON GOD AMONG THE CRIMINALS

By St. Nikolai Velimirovic, from "HOMILIES: A Commentary on the Gospel Readings for Great Feasts and Sundays throughout the Year," vol. one, Great Feasts, Lent, Eastertide and Pentecost (1996), pp. 195-198.

Christ on Golgotha! The Saviour on the Cross! The Righteous One in torment! The Lover of Mankind killed by men! Let him who has a conscience be ashamed! Let him who has a heart weep! Let him who has a mind understand!

With what can we compare this event—mysterious as infinity, hard as earth and terrible as hell? Of millions of happenings every day throughout the universe, that our eyes can see and our ears hear, with what event can we compare this unmentionable act of wickedness on Golgotha? With a lamb among ravening wolves? Or an innocent child in the jaws of a snake-like king? Or a mother surrounded by insane sons and daughters? Or with a skillful man's fall into a machine that he had himself assembled, to be cut to pieces by the machine's wheels? With Abel, whom his brother killed? But then the greater sinner killed the lesser, while here wicked men fall on the sinless. With Joseph, whose brothers sold him in Egypt? But that was a sin against their brother, not against a benefactor, while here the sin is against the Benefactor. With righteous Job, whose flesh Satan turned to corruption and a stench, a meal for worms? But then Satan rose up against God's creature, while here the creature rises up against the Creator. With wondrous David, against whom his son Absalom raised a rebellion? But that was a small punishment for David's great sin, while here the

innocent One, the Most Righteous, suffers so terribly!

The merciful Samaritan, who had saved humanity from injury by thieves, has Himself fallen into the hands of thieves. Seven sorts of criminal surround Him. The first is represented by Satan, the second by the elders and leaders of the Jewish people, the third by Judas, the fourth by Pilate, the fifth by Barabbas, the sixth by the unrepentant thief on the cross and the seventh by the penitent thief. Let us pause a moment, and look at this company of criminals in the midst of whom the Son of God hangs crucified, bloody and wounded.

In the first place comes Satan, the one who wishes the greatest harm to the human race. He is *the father of lies*, and the criminal of criminals. The temptations by which he tempts the human race, to bring it to ruin, are twofold: he tempts by ease and by suffering. At the beginning, he tempted the Lord on the Mount of Temptation with ease, power and riches; now, at the end, he tempts Him through suffering. When he had been overcome and shamed at the first temptation, he left the Lord and fled from Him. He did not, though, abandon Him completely, but only for a time. As the Gospel records: *he departed from Him for a season.* (Lk 4:13). Now this season has passed, and he shows himself again. This time he does not need to appear openly and visibly; this time he works through men, through the sons of darkness, who have been blinded by Christ's great light, and in their blindness have put themselves into Satan's hands and serve him as a weapon against Christ the Lord. But he is there, close to every tongue that blasphemes against Christ, to every mouth that spits upon Christ's most pure face, to every hand that flogs Him

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Orthodox Heritage is published bi-monthly by the “Greek Orthodox Brotherhood of St. Poimen,” a laity brotherhood.

All correspondence should be addressed to the Brotherhood at the Phoenix address or the e-mail address above.

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and pierces Him with the crown of thorns, to every heart that burns with the fire of jealousy and hatred for Him.

The second criminal, or group of criminals, is the leaders and elders of the Jewish people: political, religious and intellectual. These are the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and priests, with King Herod at their head. Jealousy and fear have turned them to crime against the Lord—jealousy of One mightier, wiser and better than themselves; and fear for their position, authority, honor and wealth if the people support Christ. *Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? Behold, the world is gone after Him* (Jn 12:19), was the cry from their weakness, envy and fear. What is the worst of their banditry against the Lord? It is their having, with no legal trial or condemnation, arrested and killed Him. It is written in the Gospel: *Then assembled together the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, unto the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and consulted that they might take Jesus by subtlety, and kill Him.* (Mt 26:3-4). They do not, then, take counsel together how to accuse Him and bring Him to court, but to take Jesus ... and kill Him and this by subtlety! When law-abiding Nicodemus suggests that the Lord first be given a hearing by the court, *to know what He doeth*, they reject this suggestion with displeasure and mocking smiles. (Jn 7:50-52).

The third criminal is Judas, the seeming, shameful apostle. Satan took part in the shedding of Christ’s blood out of hatred for God and man; the elders and leaders of the people took part out of envy and fear; Judas joins the company of Satan and the elders of the people out of covetousness. His crime consists in betraying his Teacher and Benefactor for thirty pieces of silver. He himself later acknowledges his crime to these same elders, who had hired him for the act

of betrayal: *I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood ... and he cast down the pieces of silver in the Temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.* (Mt 27:4-5). And his horrible death itself testifies against him, for it is written of him: *and falling head-long, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out.* (Acts 1:18).

The fourth criminal is Pilate, Caesar’s representative in Jerusalem, and in some mysterious way the representative of the pagan, godless world in the condemnation of the Son of God. He scorns the Jews, as the Jews do him. At first, he has no intention of becoming involved in Christ’s condemnation: *Take ye Him, and judge Him according to your law* (Jn 18:31) are his words to Christ’s accusers. Later, he is on Christ’s side and, after a form of trial, tells the Jews: *I find in Him no fault at all* (Jn 18:38). Finally, cowed by threats: *If thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar’s friend* (Jn 19:12), Pilate gives sentence that *it should be as they required* (Lk 23:24), and orders that Christ be flogged and crucified. Pilate’s crime consists in his being able to protect the Righteous One, and in not doing so. He himself says to the Lord: *Knowest Thou not that I have power to crucify Thee, and have power to release Thee?* (Jn 19:10) With this statement, Pilate takes upon himself for all time the responsibility for Christ’s death. What drives Pilate to commit this crime, and what places him in the company of the other criminals? Weak-mindedness and fear; weak-mindedness in defense of justice and fear for his position and Caesar’s mercy.

The fifth criminal is Barabbas. He is in prison at this time *for sedition ... and for murder.* (Lk 23:19). For such crimes, he is, under both Jewish and Roman law, deserving of death. He has not personally or consciously sinned against Christ

in any way. It is those who put him above Christ who sin. Pilate has thought to use Barabbas as a means of saving Christ from death; the Jews, however, use the innocent Christ to save Barabbas, Pilate having placed before the Jews the free choice: Christ, or Barabbas—and like calls to like. God or a criminal? And the criminals choose the criminal.

The sixth and seventh criminals are those who hang, each on his cross, on Golgotha, one at Christ's right hand and one at His left, as Isaiah the prophet foresaw and foretold: *He was numbered with the transgressors.* (Isa 53:12). One of these criminals, even in his death-throes, is blaspheming, but the other is praying. Here are two men in the same predicament: both of them nailed to a cross, both at the point of leaving this world and looking for nothing more from it. But what a great difference! Here is the answer to all who say: place

people in the same material circumstances, give them all the same honor and possessions, and they will all have the same spirit. One criminal, near his last breath, mocks the Son of God: *If Thou be Christ, save Thyself and us!* (Lk 23:39), but the other begs the Lord: *Lord, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom.* (Lk 23:42). The pain of crucifixion kills the one in both body

and soul, but although it kills the other's body, it saves his soul. **Christ's Cross is a scandal to the one, but salvation to the other.**

These were the types of criminal around Christ. But, O gracious Lord, help us to look at our own lives before we condemn these criminals who nailed the Lord of love to the Cross, and ask ourselves if we do not also belong to their company. Oh, that we could be even like the seventh of them, who repented on the cross and, in the midst of his physical pain, sought and found salvation for his sinful soul.

If a man breathes out hatred for God and man, the same is Satan's closest friend and his sharpest weapon.

If a man is filled with envy towards God-pleasing men and servants of Christ, this man is a criminal and a God-killer like Annas and Caiaphas, and the rest of the leaders and elders of the Jews.

If a man is covetous, he is not far from betraying God, and his closest friend in the criminal company of this world is Judas.

If a man is weak-minded in defense of the righteous, and so fearful for his position and comfort that he would even agree to the killing of the righteous, he is a criminal as Pilate was.

If a man raises a rebellion and sheds men's blood, and another suffers in his place, either through miscarriage of justice or human wickedness, he is a criminal as Barabbas was.

If a man blasphemes against God his whole life long, either in word or deed, and this blasphemy is on his lips even at the moment of death—he is indeed a spiritual brother of the blaspheming criminal on the cross.

Blessed, though, is he who, suffering for his sins, neither blasphemes against any man nor condemns any, but calls his sin to mind and cries to God for forgiveness and salvation. **Blessed is this seventh criminal**, who understood that his pains on the cross were deserved because of his sins, and understood the pains of the innocent Saviour as being undeserved suffering for the sins of others, and who repented, begged for God's

mercy and found himself first in the Paradise of eternal life together with the Saviour! These revelations come to us through him: saving repentance, even at the moment of death, the saving nature of prayer to God and the swiftness of God's compassion.

He has left us all a wonderful example, whatever sort of sin we have committed, in whatever way we have separated our-

selves from God and numbered ourselves among the criminals. Every sin is a crime against God, and he who commits a single sin is numbered among the criminals: that is, the servants of Satan. Let no one, therefore, grumble that his suffering is to his peril rather than to his salvation, but may the darkness of his suffering be illumined by reflecting on his sin, and by repentance and prayer. Only thus will suffering be, for him, not to his peril but to his salvation.



Father, forgive them; they know not what they do. That is not only a good wish, but a good work, the greatest good work that sinful men can ask of God. On the Cross, under death's hand, all twisted with pain, the Lord is filled with concern for man's salvation. He, at the time of His Crucifixion, fulfilled the great commandments that He had given to men: commandments on constant prayer, on compassions, on forgiveness, on love.

St. Nikolai Velimirovic

OUR LORD'S DESCENT INTO HADES

By St. Epiphanius of Cyprus (+403).

St. Epiphanius was born in the village of Besanduk in Palestine probably in 310. Of Jewish descent, he was well educated and became a Christian after seeing how a monk named Lucian gave away his clothing to a poor person. Struck by the monk's compassion, Epiphanius asked him to instruct him in Christianity.

After his baptism, he became a member of a monastery in Egypt under the guidance of the elder St. Hilarion the Great. As he progressed as an ascetic in the monastic life, he occupied himself copying Greek books. In his quest to avoid human glory, Epiphanius set out to the Spanidrion desert where robbers fell upon him and held him for three months. By his talk about repentance, Epiphanius brought one of the gang of robbers to the faith in the True God. When he was set free, the robber joined him. Epiphanius took him to his monastery and baptized him with the name John. From that time John became a faithful disciple of Epiphanius and carefully recorded in writing about the life and miracles of his spiritual guide.

Returning to the wilderness of Palestine about 333, St. Epiphanius again sought the ascetic life with his disciple John. As the reputation of Epiphanius spread, more disciples came to him leading to his founding a monastery in Ad. There he was ordained a priest and became the abbot. He led the monastery for some thirty years during which he further gained in knowledge and faith as well as gaining the ability to speak many languages including Hebrew, Syriac, Egyptian, Greek, and Latin.

In 367, St. Epiphanius was chosen by a council in Salamis on Cyprus as their bishop. In 368, he was elected to the cathedra of Cyprus, a position he held until his repose. During the following year, Bp. Epiphanius traveled throughout the area to participate in events that protected the Orthodox faith. He participated in the synod of 376 in Antioch where questions about the Trinity were debated against the heresy of Apollinarianism. In 382, he was present at a Council of Rome that attempted to reconcile the Meletian schism.

In 402, at the urging of Abp. Theophilus of Alexandria, Epiphanius traveled to Constantinople to support Theophilus in his campaign against Abp. John Chrysostom of Constantinople, and the four "Tall Brothers" monks. When he realized he was being used as a tool by Theophilus against St. John Chrysostom, who had given refuge to the monks persecuted by Theophilus and

had appealed to the emperor, Epiphanius returned to Salamis, only to die on the way home in 403.

† † †

Something strange is happening—there is a great silence on Earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. The earth trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and he has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began.

God has died in the flesh and Hell trembles with fear. He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, he has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, He who is both God and the Son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the Cross, the weapon that had won him the victory.

At the sight of him, Adam, the first man he had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone, *My Lord be with you all.* Christ answered him: *And with your spirit.* He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: *Awake,*

O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.

I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise.

I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in Hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in Me and I in you; together we form one person and cannot be separated.

For your sake I, your God, became your son; I, the Lord, took the form of a slave; I, Whose home is above the heavens, descended to the earth and beneath the earth. For your sake, for the sake of man, I became like a man without help, free among the dead. For the sake of you, who left a garden, I was betrayed to the Jews in a garden, and I was crucified in a garden.

See on My Face the spittle I received in order to restore to you the life I once breathed into you. See there the marks of the blows I received in order to refashion your warped nature in my image. On My back see the marks of the scourging I endured to remove the burden of sin that weighs upon your back. See My hands, nailed firmly to a tree, for you who once wickedly stretched out your hand to a tree.



I slept on the Cross and a sword pierced My side for you who slept in Paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side has healed the pain in yours. My sleep will rouse you from your sleep in Hell. The sword that pierced Me has sheathed the sword that was turned against you.

Rise, let us leave this place. The enemy led you out of the earthly Paradise. I will not restore you to that Paradise, but will enthrone you in heaven. I forbade you the tree that was only a symbol of life, but see, I who am life itself am now one with you. I appointed cherubim to guard you as slaves are guarded, but now I make them worship you as God. The throne formed by cherubim awaits you, its bearers swift and eager. The Bridal Chamber is adorned, the banquet is ready, the eternal dwelling places are prepared, the treasure houses of all good things lie open. The Kingdom of Heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity.



There is another necessary reason as far as those on earth are concerned why the Word of God took flesh or became man. If He had not been born like us according to the flesh, if He had not partaken of the same elements as we do, He would not have delivered human nature from the fault we incurred in Adam, nor would He have warded off the decay from our bodies, nor would He have brought to an end the power of the curse which we say came upon the first woman. For it was said to her, *in pain you shall bring forth children*. (Gen 3:16). But human nature, which fell sick through the disobedience of Adam, now became glorious in Christ through His utter obedience. For it is written that *as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous*. (Rom 5:19). In Adam it suffered the penalty: *You are earth and to earth you shall return*. (Gen 3:19). In Christ it was enriched by being able to overcome the snares of death and, as it were, exult in triumph over decay, repeating the prophetic text, *O death, where is your victory? O Hades, where is your sting?* (1 Cor 15:55). It came under a curse, as I have said, but this too was abolished in Christ. And indeed it has been said somewhere to the Holy Virgin, when Elizabeth prophesied in the Spirit, *Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb*. (Lk 1:42). Sin has reigned over us and the inventor and father of sin has lorded it over all who dwell under the sky, provoking the transgression of the divine laws. But in Christ we see human nature, as if experiencing a new beginning of the human race, enjoying freedom of access to God. For He said clearly, *the ruler of this world is coming and he has no power over Me*. (Jn 14:30).

St. Cyril of Alexandria

THE PATH WE TAKE IN LIFE IS OUR CHOICE

A Gerontikon story from "The Evergentinos: A Complete Text," vol. II of the first book (1991), pp. 22-27.

An ascetic Elder related the following: There once lived an aged nun who excelled in virtue and piety. When I asked her why she fled from the world, she told me this. "When I was still a young girl, reverend Father," she began, "I remember that my father was a very tender and good man. He was thin and sickly in body, so that the majority of his time he passed confined to his bed. He was marked by such simplicity that he spoke only when compelled. When he was well, he dedicated himself to tilling the land, thereby occupying himself and bringing to our home the produce that he cultivated. However, he was so reticent to speak that those who did not know him thought him to be mute.

"Wholly the opposite of my father was my mother. She was such a busybody and so idle that she was anxious to learn about things even outside our village. She talked so much that nobody ever saw her silent, even for a little: rather, one time she would be seen arguing and quarrelling, and another time saying obscene and indecent words in jest. Most of the years of her life she wasted in drunkenness and in the company of profligate men. She was often away and was immoral, and, like a prostitute, badly looked after our household, so that we could no longer get by—despite the fact that our assets were not few—since it was to her that my father had entrusted the administration of the household. However, she lived in this way, yet she nonetheless never became sick and never felt the slightest pain; for all of the wretched life that she lived, she maintained her bodily health.

"It happened, anyway, that my father died, ravaged by many years of illness. Now, what happened at his death? Immediately a fearful wind came up and almost razed the area. There was continual thunder, and the rain poured so violently that no one dared poke his nose out of his house even for a moment. This foul weather lasted three days, and out of necessity, we kept my father inside the house, unburied.

"Our fellow villagers, seeing all of these obstacles, greatly condemned my dead father, saying: 'My, my, what evil was living in our midst, and we did not know it! It seems that this dead man must have been an enemy of God, and for this reason God has not even allowed him to be buried yet.'

"We however, so that the corpse would not start decomposing in the house and make it uninhabitable because of the stench, risked, despite the violent rain, transporting the body to the cemetery, and buried it.

"From that time on my mother had even greater freedom to devote herself with great brazenness to orgies and debauchery. Indeed, she became so audacious that she transformed our home into a house of immorality and, indulging her unceas-

ing sensual pleasures, squandered away all of our holdings; so, in a short time we had nothing left. Some years after the death of my father, my mother died. She had such a splendid and magnificent funeral that one could say that nature itself cooperated in conducting it.

Since my mother had died and I had passed the age of childhood, the flames of youth being kindled and tempting me, one evening the thought came to me: Which path shall I follow in my life? Occupied with this thought, I said off the top of my head; talking to myself: 'Should I choose; I wonder, my father's way of life, and live with kindness, modesty, and judiciousness?'

" 'But my father, even if he did live virtuously, nonetheless never enjoyed even one good thing, but was always devoured by illness and misfortunes. He was so unfortunate that he was not even allowed in his torments to be buried like other people. If my father's conduct and behavior were pleasing to God, why was he tested by so many disasters? And what was my mother's life like? Did she not live a healthy life, even though she was plunged into a life of pleasures and desires? I will also, therefore, live the life that my mother did, for I prefer to believe in what I can see than in promises about what is to come.'

"By the time that I had decided to follow in the steps of my mother, night had fallen. And when I went to sleep, there appeared before me a man of enormous dimensions and with a savage face. Staring at me with rage and a wild look, he asked me in a dreadful voice: 'Tell me what is in your heart.' I was so frightened that I dared not even look at his face.

"This fearful man, with the same sternness, asked me again:

" 'Tell me, then. What have you decided?'

"When he saw that I was paralyzed by fear and was in danger of losing my senses, he himself reminded me in detail of all that I had just been thinking of myself.

"Recovering from my fear and astonishment and being unable to deny anything that the man had said, I began begging and imploring him to forgive me.

"Then, as though he had become calmer, he took me by the hand and said: 'Come and see where your father and mother are. On the basis of this you can choose which way of life you want for yourself.'

"Taking me from where I was, he guided me to a vast garden, which was planted with various beautiful trees, beyond description in their charm and filled with different kinds of fruits. And there, as I was walking, with this fearful man, my father came up to me, embracing me and covering me with tender kisses, saying, 'My beloved child.'

"I embraced my father with joy, asking if I might remain with him. My father sweetly replied:

" 'Now, my child, this is not possible; if, however, you will follow my own way of life, not much time will pass and you will be here, too.'

"Just as I was about to continue in my requests to remain with my father, the Angel who was accompanying me pulled me by the hand and said:

" 'Come, now, to see your mother, too, so that you can determine first-hand which way of life you want to lead.'

"Then, taking me to a place that was all dark, in which one could hear great disorder and groans, he showed me a furnace, the fires of which would spill over every time it surged up. And outside the furnace a number of ghastly and frightening individuals gazed on the sight.

"As I was looking at this frightening and terrible place of torture, I saw my mother, submerged to her neck in the flaming furnace, numberless worms gnawing on her all over. From my pain and fear, I was trembling, while my teeth began to chatter and to gnash.

"When my mother raised her eyes to look at me, she began to cry harrowingly and said to me:

" 'Alas, my child. My pains are unbearable. My torments are unceasing. For a few years of delight and sinful pleasure, I brought all of this terrible punishment on myself: Woe to me, such an unfortunate one. Woe to me, wretch that I am! Because of the ephemeral pleasures of temporary life, I am now tormented eternally. But, my child, take pity on your mother, who, as you see, is in flames and is being devoured by fire. Remember, my child, how I gave you suckle and reared you, and take pity on me. Give me your hand and pull me out of here.'

"I, however, did nothing, and could not even approach my mother, who, out of shame before those who were around her, cried out even more strongly and with tears:

" 'My child, help me and do not scorn your mother and her lamentations. Do not close your eyes to this unfortunate mother, who is tortured in the Gehenna of fire and continually consumed by unsleeping worms.'

"Moved by sympathy for my mother, I stretched out my hand, so that I could pull her out of that frightful Hell. No sooner had the flames of the fire only slightly touched my hand, than I felt great pain and began to cry in moans. From my lamentations and moans, I awoke everyone in the house. They got up, turned on the lights, and ran to my bed, asking with incessant questions to learn why I was crying in my sleep and groaning.

"So, having come to a bit, I began to relate to them everything that I saw in my vision.

"From that day I most decisively resolved to live as did my father, whose way of life I longed for. I pray that God will deem me worthy to succeed therein and to see my father again and live with him, for, by the Grace of God, with my own eyes I saw the glory and honor which awaits those who ready themselves by living reverently and virtuously; and, on the other hand, again, what fearful punishment and Hell awaits those who squander their lives on pleasures and passions."

WE ARE BORN THREE TIMES! FROM THE LIFE OF ST. SYNKLETIKE

Source: "The Evergentinos: A Complete Text," vol. I of the first book (1988), pp. 82-83.

The joy of Heaven is inexpressible, as is the glory which awaits the Saints; therefore, we must remember with our whole souls the joy of Heaven and the glory of the Saints. In all that we accomplish, nothing is equal to that joy and glory.

† † †



The Blessed Synkletike said that in this world we find ourselves as though in a second maternal womb. When we were in our mother's womb, we did not live as we now live after our birth from the womb, nor did we eat, in that embryonic period, the solid foods which we now enjoy; neither, too, were we able in our mother's womb to work as we now do. And this because, as we know,

inside the mother's womb we were far from the light of the sun and not a single ray reached us; and in general we were deprived of many other earthly enjoyments. For this reason precisely, we cannot enjoy, while living in the present world, the particular magnificent and wondrous delights which are found exclusively in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Since we have come to know the present life in detail, let us in addition remember the things of Heaven, too; having tasted of earthly foods, let us have an appetite now for the divine; having been satisfied by the ephemeral material light, let us yearn for the Sun of Righteousness. Let us be moved by powerful nostalgia for the Jerusalem on high and let us strive to see it as our mother and homeland. Let us spend the rest of the years of our lives guided by the hope for heavenly blessedness, that we might, therefore, be able to enjoy also the eternal good things.

Just as babies develop slowly inside the mother with limited nutrition and life and then, as more mature organisms, come into full life and enjoy diets of wide variety, so the righteous, since they have been made perfect by the way that they conducted themselves in the world, depart for the heavenly state—*going forth*, as it is written, *from strength to strength*. (Pss 83:7).

The opposite happens to sinners. They resemble embryos which, though formed normally in the mother, die before they are born, passing, therefore, from one dark place to another. Precisely so are those sinners who pass their life

on earth in the care-worn labors of worldly things, literally enslaved by the darkness of worldly concerns. And when they die, unescorted by the treasures of good works and repentance, they are led forcibly to the darkest Tartarean haunts of Hell.

From the foregoing, then, we can conclude that we are born three times during the period of our lives: One time only from our mother, in which instance we come forth from the earthly and proceed into the earthly. In the other two births we move from the earthly to the heavenly. Of these two births, one is that of Grace, which is realized in Holy Baptism, and we rightly call this "rebirth." And the other birth is occasioned by repentance and the labors of good and virtuous deeds, in which we are now being proved.



When you pray either aloud or to yourself for others—for instance, for the members of your household or for strangers, even though they may not have asked you to do so—pray for them with the same ardor and zeal as you would pray for yourself. Remember the commandment of the law: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Observe this rule upon all occasions.

The Christian has no reason to have in his heart any ill-feelings whatever against anyone—such ill-feeling, like every other evil, is the work of the devil; the Christian must only have love in his heart; and as love cannot think of evil, he cannot have any ill-feeling against others. For instance, I must not think that anyone else is evil or proud without having positive reasons to think so, or I must not think that it will make him proud if I show him respect, or that if I forgive him he will again offend me and will mock at me. We must not let evil in any form nestle in our heart; but evil generally appears in too many forms.

Besides loving each other, we must bear with each other and pardon—*forgive them that trespass against us*—in order that our heavenly Father may *forgive us our trespasses*. Thus, with all your soul honor and love in every man the image of God, not regarding his sins, for God alone is Holy and without sin; and see how He loves us, how much He has created and still creates for us, punishing us mercifully and forgiving us bounteously and graciously. Honor the man also, in spite of his sins, for he can always amend.

Never confuse the person, formed in the image of God, with the evil that is in him; because evil is but a chance misfortune, an illness, a devilish reverie. But the very essence of the person is the image of God, and this remains in him despite every disfigurement.

St. John of Kronstadt

BEHOLD, THE CRUCIFIED ONE!

By Elder Philotheos Zervakos (+1980), from the book "Autobiography, Homilies and Miracles (2006), pp. 89-93.

Do you see His incorrupt feet, which are nailed to the Cross? They are nailed for us, to direct our own feet upon the way of truth, faith and virtue. Do you see His open arms? They symbolize the warm love, which He has for us; to embrace us, and present us to His Heavenly Father; and to make us His children and His sons, and gods by grace. Do you see that pierced side which pours forth blood and water? The water represents the baptism by which we were cleansed of original sin. The blood represents the bloodless Sacrifice which is celebrated on the Holy Altars: by partaking of it, we are sanctified and unified with Him, becoming one Body. Just as a loving mother nourishes her children with her milk, in the same manner, our sweetest Jesus nourishes us as His beloved children; however, not with milk, but with His very Body and Blood.

Behold, kings; the King of all from Whom you received the scepter and diadem! Behold, hierarchs and priests; your first Hierarch and Priest from Whom you received your office! Behold lay-people, men and women, young and old; your Loving Father Who nourishes you; He Who made the fields, the valleys, the rivers, the mountains, the ravines and the forests! All of you, Behold Him! See how He is hung upon the cross crucified, covered with bruises, and bleeding. Run, everyone, cover His incorrupt feet with kisses; shower them with tears of compunction and wash them; love Him with all your soul as He loves you and prefer to die before falling into a deadly sin and saddening such a Master and loving Father.

Every sin a Christian commits is a nail thrust into Christ's body. Christ's sadness for the Jews having crucified Him is less than His sadness that we, Christians, for whom He has shed His blood (and sheds it every day upon the Holy Altars), crucify Him every day with our sins. The divine Paul reminds of this: *For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, ... if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.* (Heb 6:4,6).

Listen Christians, and come to your senses! Whoever runs on the road of prodigality, lewdness, corruption, drunkenness, and dissoluteness is like the Jews who had put the nails in Jesus' feet! Whoever seizes the belongings of others, whoever steals and treats others unjustly puts nails in Jesus' hands!

Whoever is prideful and haughty places the crown of thorns on His head. Whoever has jealousy in his heart and envies his neighbor pierces His side! Whoever blasphemes and curses God spits in His face! Be careful, Christians! As many that sin among you must consider carefully that with your sins you are crucifying Christ as the Jews did!

Consider that He Whom you now see crucified upon the wood of the Cross and Whom you scorn with your works shall one day come upon the clouds of Heaven in great power and glory as a dreadful and impartial Judge of both the living and the dead. Woe to you then! Woe to all who die unrepentant!

O Crucified Jesus! Even if the Jews and many of the contemporary pseudo-philosophers do not believe in Thee, even if some of the Christians scorn and blaspheme Thee, Thou art still the King of all; Thou art worshipped by the angels and praised by all creation! We Christians, Thy beloved children (even if we are sinful), believe in Thee, confess Thee and preach that Thou art the King of Heaven and Earth and of all

things visible and invisible. Thou art He who Is, Who Was, and Who Remains unto the ages of ages. We see the great and glorious Kings of the earth—Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon and the other Emperors—their kingdoms lasted until their death; the kingdom of others fell even before their deaths. However, Thy Kingdom remains even after Thy death.

Some nineteen centuries ago, at this spot, Thou didst die as a human being on the Cross, but still Thou art the King of all Christian nations and Thou art worshipped by all. Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and Thy reign is from generation unto to generation. We see that no one goes to worship at the tombs of other kings, but they come from the ends of the earth to Thy life-giving Tomb—kings and rulers and people from every walk of life.

We unworthy ones present at this dreadful and terrifying Holy Place offer Thee glorification with compunction. Accept our hymns and praise as incense, accept our tears as myrrh and give us Thy Grace and Thy Blessing as well as Thy peace, enlightenment and repentance.

Our God-Man Jesus is not grieved so much that we scorn Him with our unlawful deeds, sins and transgressions against His Divine Commandments, as He is that we remain unrepentant, hardhearted and insensitive, despite the fact that He gave us repentance and confession as the means to wash our sins away. *We do not become sinners by committing sin, but rather when we do not hate sin and repent of it,* says Abba



Isaac. And the divine Chrysostom says: *It is not grievous for one to fall, but it is for him who has fallen to stay as he is being neglectful and lazy, hiding the sickness of his disposition because of thoughts of hopelessness—and not to rise again. It is human for one to sin, however to continue in this sin is not human but completely satanic.* And St. John the Theologian tells us: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* (1 Jn 1:9).

So long as there is time, let us repent, for the Lord loves mankind and is slow to anger and very merciful. He is long-suffering, full of great mercy and overlooks our sins. *He has not dealt with us according to our sins nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.* (Pss 102:10). Just as He petitioned His Father for the Jews—His crucifiers, saying *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*, likewise, He petitions for Christians who curse Him. He is loving unto mankind, but He is also just. As a lover of mankind, He is merciful; but being just, He punishes—not the offenders who repent—but rather unrepentant sinners. *If he repent not, He will whet His sword; He hath bent his bow, and made it ready. He hath also prepared for him the instruments of death; He ordaineth his arrows against the persecutors.* (Pss 7:12-13).

As a forbearing lover of mankind He forbore the Jews, that they might repent. However, when He saw that they persisted in their evil He gave them up to annihilation and destruction, and they were slaughtered by the Roman armies. They were enslaved, scattered, deprived of the Kingdom and the Priesthood, and accursed and enraged, wandering back and forth. He likewise forbears Christians when they curse, blaspheme and scorn Him, awaiting their repentance. However, when they persist in their evil and do not repent, He then gives them up to wrath and destruction. The wars which take place in our day, along with the famines, plagues, many afflictions, many sadnesses, and the great deprivation are a result of sin.

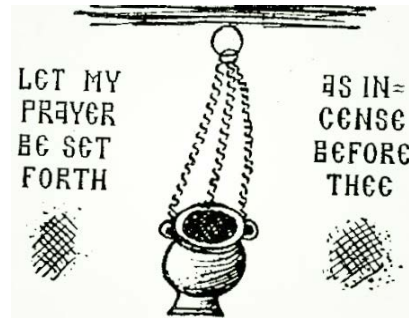
Beloved, let us repent before the hour of death arrives; for there is no repentance after death. Let us repent before the dreadful Day of Judgment, when we shall give account for all our deeds. Let us repent, that we may receive remission of sins and be granted presentation on the right hand side, and enjoy the eternal and unending bounties. May we all attain this through the Grace and compassion of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Who was crucified for our sake; and by the prayers of our Most-blessed father and Patriarch: Amen.

† † †

All of you who were blessed to come from far away places and venerate the dreadful Golgotha—the All-holy Tomb—and other sacred shrines in Jerusalem and Palestine, when with God's help you return to your homes, do not forget what the Lord has allowed you to see. Remember them, and tell your brothers, your relatives and your countrymen all about the All-holy Tomb, and encourage and exhort them to come and venerate here; for a Christian receives the greatest spiritual benefit when he comes piously to venerate the Holy Land. It

is sad to see so many fellow countrymen travel to Europe and spend an incredible amount of money on excursions, theatres and amusements, yet they will not come to venerate the Holy Land. This sacred and holy place upon which the Lord's feet stood and where the mysteries (i.e., Christ's birth, miracles, passion, etc.) were performed is guarded and cared for by the presiding Brethren of the Holy Tomb like vigilant guards and soldiers; today, they suffer materially and sigh. They should be congratulated for the manner in which they guard the sacred shrines. Many times they have even placed their lives in danger in order to guard this citadel of Orthodoxy.

It is necessary and fitting that we assist the All-holy Tomb as well as the Fathers and brothers of this monastery as much as possible. Whoever cannot be of material assistance, let him encourage his brethren to be of assistance. Thou, O Crucified Jesus, most sweet, most benevolent, most beautiful, Thou who bore the dreadful Passion and a most painful death on the Cross for us; Thou treasure of bounties and giver of life, preserve our Most-blessed Patriarch in safety, health and with long life for the good of the Church. Preserve the fathers and brothers of this monastery in peace, and calm the agitations. Send the longed for peace by all nations. Return everyone to the True Faith and piety so that we may all become one flock having Thee as our Shepherd, Deliverer and Ruler. Grant us to venerate Thy holy burial place with compunction so that we may joyfully and gladly celebrate Thy glorious and venerable Resurrection. Amen.



As the Eldress Eupraxia would relate to us, many nights it happened that she passed by outside his cell; and heard him praying with sighs, sobs, and contrition of heart ... In this way, he recovered that necessary spiritual strength, which one is only able to draw from God, in order to continue, on the following day, the same laborious work, with new experiences, new visitors, and always with the same kindness and love.

Because of this heart-centered prayer, he had managed to combine the life of a hesychast with that of one who works for the good of society. The great flame of his love for God flooded him also with love for his brethren. His life had become one continuous sacrifice. It was an inexhaustible fountain, from which welled up unending goodness and love.

On "Elder Ieronymos of Aegina" (+1966)

ON CARNAL WARFARE

Source: "Counsels from the Holy Mountain, Selected from the Letters and Homilies of Elder Ephraim," *St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery* (1999), pp. 165-169.

You wrote to me, my child, about your carnal warfare. Be patient—with the grace of God everything will pass. Nothing will be left of it, as long as you struggle. Whatever fights against you will be short-lived if you oppose it valiantly.

Carnal warfare will accompany you throughout your youth. But according to your struggle it will subside and become tolerable. The passion of pride, however, will continue for a long time, beyond your youth. But you will find some rest from this passion for a while according to the struggle and spiritual knowledge with which you resist. These two passions are the strongest of all. Upon these two passions the entire edifice of sin stands; each one is a component of the other. Both are formidable lions. But our Jesus with a single cheerful glance is able to render them carrion for the vultures.

The terrible passion of fornication is difficult to fight against, especially when it is strengthened by former predispositions. But God knows how to deliver those who take refuge in Him with humility, for He knows how easily our nature slips.

Carnal warfare stems from pride—so that you may humble yourself and learn that if grace leaves us, we fall and become a piteous spectacle. So humble yourself; blame yourself; ask our Panagia to grant you a spirit of humility so that you may come to know and feel that you are nothing, a zero. For our Jesus says, *Without me you can do nothing.* (Jn 15:5). From the temptation that came upon you, learn how man falls—and how low he can fall. There are even worse falls for those who have more pride. Do not be distressed; it is a temptation and it will pass. God permits such things to happen for our benefit so that we may become wise through temptations. Be patient and brave! Take courage; it will pass. It is a storm, and in this way will the sea throw out all the rubbish that the preceding peace accumulated!

Do not grieve more than necessary, for this is from the devil, and this grief will lead you to negligence and laxity. Persist in your struggle and do not be afraid. Disregard satan and show that you do not attach any importance to him.

Then, since he is proud, he will leave, but as long as you pay attention to his attacks, he will not.

When you have carnal warfare, be very careful with filthy fantasies, which produce dirty thoughts. Stop and expel fantasies as soon as they come. Immediately say the prayer with pain of soul and at once you will be delivered from the warfare.

Do not lose heart, my child. It is a battle and it will pass. All the saints were fought against. They had such great warfare that they took poisonous snakes in despair and put them on their bodies so that they would be bitten and die. But since we are weak, God does not allow us to be fought beyond our strength, but instead He will help us. However, since we have pride, He permits this warfare so that we may humble ourselves. Do not grieve more than necessary, but with great humility throw yourself before God and blame yourself. Immediately drive away every evil thought as soon as it comes, and I hope that the grace of God will relieve you.

Do not fear; you will suffer no harm. Drive away cowardice; have courage. Everything will pass, as you will see, while this warfare will leave behind much benefit for you, and God will give you much grace. Just do not lose heart, because this is how we lose the contest.

My beloved brother in Christ, I saw the mental warfare you are going through with the evil spirit of sin, of fornication.

My brother, listen to a pauper in knowledge with a soul bereft of any good. When one struggles against sin with humility and the fear of God, with fervent spiritual work and with the guidance of an experienced spiritual father, God will never let him be lost. Only when he neglects his spiritual duties, and especially when he becomes proud, thinking that he is something, then it is possible for him to slip. But even then, if he seeks forgiveness with humility, he gets up again and is healed again. For the Lord's mercy is near to those of a contrite heart.

However, many trials occur for one to gain experience and spiritual wisdom, for without temptations it is impossible to obtain experience. Experience is not a skill derived from learning, but it is to have practical knowledge of the benefit and harm of temptations. If God does not let a person fall into temptations a little, it is impossible for him to become conscientious. When someone does something with good intentions, yet later it turns out that what he did was not right, God—since He observes the heart and tries the pur-



pose for every deed—will bring things back to normal and will enlighten him to realize what he should have done. Infallibility belongs to God alone. No matter how perfect the saints were, they still had some blemishes. Therefore, they would go through temptations to obtain greater humility and caution, and to grow patient with their weak nature. A touch of anger, laughter, or idle talk does not take away a saint's holiness.

Only one must keep in mind not to despair. Even if one slips and sins ten thousand times a day, it is not justifiable in God's eyes for him to despair, but rather he should be hopeful and prepare for a fight, until God's mercy comes and delivers him.

There was once a monk who happened to slip and sin by himself continually, yet he would always arise at once and do his prayer rule. The demon that kept throwing him into sin lost his patience seeing the courage and hopefulness of this brother. So he visibly appeared to him, and said to him with vexation:

—Don't you fear God, you defiled wretch? You have just sinned, so with what face can you now stand before God? Aren't you afraid that God will burn you?

But since this brother had a valiant soul, he said to the demon:

—This cell is a forge: you hit and get hit. As God is my witness, Who came to save the world, I will not stop fighting you, falling and getting up, beating and being beaten, until my final breath—and let's see who will win: you or Christ!

When the demon heard this unexpected reply, he said:

—I won't fight you anymore, because if I do, I'll make you win crowns.

Thenceforth, this brother was delivered from the warfare, and he sat in his cell weeping for his sins.

When God enlightens a person and he repents for his sins and walks with humility and caution, God does not let him be lost. Of course, his predispositions for his previous sins will become thorns and hindrances to him, but when he sees the waves rising menacingly, he should not despair, thinking that he will fall and be lost. On the contrary, he should hope in God with faith and struggle with humility under the spiritual guidance and training of his spiritual father, without fearing the violent storm that arose.

The devil, of course, will not remain inactive; he also has his own weapons. Which ones? For instance, he whispers to us:

—You can't do anything. I will throw you down again. Don't you see the magnitude of this passion, the bulk of that weakness? Bear in mind that I'm not defeated so easily and that I'm not about to retreat. Besides, what have you achieved until now? Nothing! Nor will I ever let you do anything in the future. All your efforts are going to waste. I am invincible. Don't you see my might?

And at once he displays filthy fantasies with intensely powerful carnal pleasure. He seems armed like a scorpion. And then he makes the struggler think that it is impossible for him to escape and that he should put up his hands and surrender!

These and countless other things does the insidious instigator craftily display. So, onward! Let us expose the lie of his traps, and let us reveal the rustiness of his weapons. The warrior of the mighty God, trusting in Christ's invincible power and actually feeling it, begins the serious battle courageously, raising the banner of the awesome cross and armed with the name of Jesus which is dreadful to the demons. He calls upon it constantly and vigorously, and thus keeps the imagination from giving in to the insidious and silly assaults of the devil, while always reflecting on death, judgment, hell, the delight of paradise and eternal glory beside Jesus, the feats of the saints, and so on—and all this is like ammunition supplying power to prayer! Then despair, negligence, egotism, and depravity are put to flight, the struggler is filled with zeal, and satan's exaggerations collapse and burst like a thin balloon.



Do not grieve for me, my child, but struggle ardently. Struggle in silence, prayer, and mourning, and you will find the elements of eternal life. Compel yourself: close your mouth both in joy and in mourning. This is a mark of experience, so that both states are kept safely. For the mouth does not know how to guard riches.

Silence is the greatest and most fruitful virtue; for this reason the God-bearing Fathers call it sinlessness. Silence and stillness, one and the same thing.

The first divine fruit of silence is mourning—godly sorrow, joyful sadness. Afterwards come luminous thoughts, which bring the holy flow of life-streaming tears, through which the second baptism occurs and by which the soul is purified, shines, and becomes like the angels.

Where shall I place, child of Jesus, the spiritual visions springing forth from silence? How the eyes of the intellect are opened and see Jesus with sweetness greater than that of honey! What a novel wonder is worked from lawful silence and an attentive intellect! You know these things, so struggle. I have revealed a little to you; compel yourself and you will find yet greater. I keep you in my prayers just as I promised you. I wonder, are you ready?

Elder Ephraim of Arizona

THE COURTROOM AND THE TOLL-HOUSES

PATRISTIC EXPRESSIONS OF THE REVELATION

Source: From the introduction to *"The Departure of the Soul According to the Teaching of the Orthodox Church,"* by St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery, first edition (2017), pp. 39-45 (www.thedepartureofthesoul.org).

In the sacred works of the Fathers of the Church, it is clearly recorded that the departing soul is met by both holy powers and evil spirits. The soul's entire life is laid bare: all its thoughts and desires, words and deeds are scrutinized, according to Christ's word that we shall have to give an account even for every idle word (cf. Matt. 12:36). Accordingly, many of the Fathers described the particular judgment as a court of law with God presiding while His angels act as the defense and the demons act as prosecutors bringing charges against the soul standing in trial. The good and the sinful deeds committed throughout the defendant's lifetime are the exhibits brought forward as evidence and weighed in the balance held in the hand of the Lord Who proclaims the verdict.

Alongside the image of the courtroom trial, the Holy Fathers also use the terms "tax-collectors" and "toll-houses" as a way of representing the frenzied activity of the demons in their obstructive aerial stations. Tax collecting in the ancient world, which for the most part was violent and deceitful, provided a fitting simile depicting the demons' raging malice. The saints write about the debt accrued through sin and the demons' demand of a tax, as it were, upon the departing soul attempting to pass through. Man places himself under the demons' terrible oppression by casting off the easy yoke and light burden of God's salvific commandments (cf. Mt 11:30). We therefore willingly enter into a kind of devastating contract with these evil advisors: we consent to continue in the sins which they provoke through the passions, while they produce a record of them to use as evidence against us at our last breath.

A Brief Historical Overview of the Teaching

The chronologically arranged excerpts in *The Departure of the Soul* allow the reader to perceive the unbroken continuity of the doctrine of the trial of the soul at the hour of death throughout the entire history of the Church.

Beginning from the holy prophets and continuing to Christ's spoken word to His disciples, the teaching then appeared in several epistles of the apostles. It is present in the writings and prayers of the holy martyrs of the second and third centuries, and also flourished in the great theological works of the holy hierarchs and Fathers of the Church of the earliest eras. The revelation poured out upon the holy ascetics of the Egyptian desert was then generously imparted to the desert-dwelling monastic saints of the Orthodox British Isles. Continuing through the middle Byzantine period, the doctrine is found in the works of the greatest theologians of the Church, such as St. Maximos the Confessor, St. John of Damascus, and St. Symeon the

New Theologian. The detailed revelation of the tollhouses contained in the Constantinopolitan tenth-century *Life of St. Basil the New* reached the heights of vivid description. Within mere decades of the baptism of Kievan Rus' the doctrine is found in the Russian Orthodox Church in the eleventh-century hagiographies (*Lives of the Saints*) of the holy passion-bearer Gleb, the first saint canonized by the Russian Church, and St. Theodosios of the Kiev Caves, the first monastic saint canonized by the Russian Church. It is also found in the autocephalous Serbian Orthodox Church and the Nemanja Dynasty from their foundation beginning with St. Symeon the Myrrh-streamer's twelfth-century epistle to his son, St. Simon the First-crowned.

The teaching has continued in all quarters of the Holy Orthodox Church to the present day. The holy God-bearing Fathers of recent times—St. Seraphim of Sarov, St. Herman of Alaska, St. Ignatios Brianchaninov, St. Theophan the Recluse, Sts. Ambrose, Anthony, Anatolios, Barsanuphios, and Sebastian of Optina, Sts. Makarios and Iliodor of Glinsk, St. John of Kronstadt, St. Silouan the Athonite, St. Nikolai Velimirović, St. John of San Francisco, St. George of Drama, St. Justin Popović, St. Porphyrios of Kavsokalyvia, and St. Paisios of the Holy Mountain—all taught about the toll-houses.

Thus, the ancient and sacred doctrine of the trial has been incorporated into the Holy Scriptures, the liturgical services, the writings and lives of the saints, and the iconography of the Orthodox Church.

Demons, the tax-collectors of our souls. All a myth to the wicked....
[St. Gregory the Theologian]



This article's source is the newly published book depicted above, a unique treasure for all Orthodox to possess and study.

"The Departure of the Soul is an outstanding achievement ... There is immense value spiritually to this volume."

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<http://www.thedepartureofthesoul.org/>

The “Controversy” over the Teaching and the Discovery of Deception

In 1978, a lone author, Deacon Lev Puhalo (later Fr. Lazar Puhalo in tonsure), launched a campaign against the Orthodox Church’s 2,000-year-old teaching on the trial of the soul at death. Within two years, his theories were condemned by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, which officially ordered him to cease issuing public statements on the subject. Banning his erroneous publications from being distributed among members of the Orthodox Church, the Synod warned that his writings “can cause great harm to the souls of the faithful.” Nevertheless, Deacon Lev and several subsequent writers who reiterated his un-Orthodox views continued to issue their publications.

These writings have fueled a controversy for nearly forty years, even to this present day. Until now, a systematic investigation into the claims of these authors has never been conducted. Additionally, there has never been a comprehensive study compiling the teachings of the Orthodox saints on this significant subject in a single encyclopedic edition.

In 2011, the editors of *The Departure of the Soul* began a meticulous analysis of both the Orthodox doctrine of the toll-houses and the newly-emergent theories contradicting the Church’s teaching. The results proved positive.

The fullness of the witness to the Orthodox teaching encountered in the writings and lives of over 120 saints is presented in this volume juxtaposed with the startling discovery of over 100 falsifications, misrepresentations, and errors contained in the publications of authors who oppose the doctrine of the saints.

The majority of the errors and falsehoods in the writings of these authors stem from an erroneous tripartite thesis:

1. Their first misconception is that the Orthodox Church’s doctrine on the trial of the soul at the hour of death claims that the demons—instead of God—judge souls. This crucial misunderstanding of the saints’ teaching on the toll-houses, which unambiguously states that God alone is the Judge of every human being, forms the foundation of their incorrect theories.

2. Their second misconception, which is perhaps the most strikingly false, is that the saints’ teachings regarding the trials derive from non-Orthodox writings (specifically from heretical Gnostic and/or Bogomil sects) rather than from revelation given by God.

3. Their third misconception is that there are two separate teachings concerning the path the soul travels at the hour of death. This imaginary separation divides the unified teaching of the Church into two categories: an “acceptable teaching” of “the accounting by demons” (accepted, however, by only some of the opponents to the Church’s teaching) and an “unacceptable teaching” of “the toll-houses.”

This incorrect three-part thesis is refuted throughout the book, while light is shone on the many fabrications attempting to support it. Having amassed over 600 pages of primary source material in the first six chapters of this anthology, chapters seven and eight contain over 250 pages devoted to the identification and a refutation of the erroneous opinions of those who reject the Orthodox Church’s teaching on the departure of the soul.

“What Can We Do to Pass Safely through?”

Many have expressed concern over their loved ones, asking what can be done for those who are about to repose as well as for those who have already gone on ahead. As an answer to this most essential question, chapter six, “On Commemoration and Prayer for the Departed,” points to the indispensable elements established by the Church for the successful completion of our passage to eternal life. In describing what help can be given to those who departed from this life in a state of soul other than perfect readiness, this crucial chapter emphasizes the Orthodox Church’s offering of great hope. The Church’s ultimate goal is to prepare the innumerable faithful souls, rendering them worthy of anchoring in the safe haven of our God and Father’s heavenly harbor, and thus uniting them in the unfathomable depths of His love for all eternity.

This book’s historical–educational objective of providing comprehensive confirmation of the Orthodox Church’s salvific teaching on the trials is closely connected with its higher spiritual objective: to help *as many as are of the faithful* (Litany of the Faithful in the Divine Liturgy) to approach the mystery of the departure of the soul with the greatest possible readiness. Then, standing before our Savior Jesus Christ, the King of kings and just Judge of all, we shall have the best hopes of gazing upon His joyous countenance while hearing those most desired words:

Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord! [Mt 25:21]



Two Nuns, who had both been Abbesses, died. The Lord revealed to me how their souls had been subjected to the aerial tests, how they had been tried and then condemned. For three days and nights I prayed, wretched as I am, entreating the Mother of God for them, and the Lord in His goodness pardoned them through the prayers of the Mother of God; they passed all the aerial tests and received forgiveness through God’s mercy.

St. Seraphim of Sarov (+1833)

Ἐπτὰ Λόγοι τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἀπὸ τὸν Σταυρὸ Ὁ Μοναχὸς Μωυσῆς Ἀγιορείτης μᾶς μεταφέρει ἑπτὰ λόγους τοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ πάνω ἀπὸ τὸν Σταυρὸ τοῦ μαρτυρίου Του.

Μοναχὸν Μωυσέως Ἀγιορείτου, «Ἡ Εὐλαλή Σιωπή», ἐκδ. Ἐν Πλῶ, σελ. 213-219.

Ὁδηγεῖται ὁ Χριστὸς στὸν Γολγοθᾶ καὶ καρφώνεται στὸν Σταυρὸ. Ἀπὸ τὸν Σταυρὸ ὁ Χριστὸς εἶπε ἑπτὰ λόγους μεγάλης σημασίας καὶ ἀξίας:

(α) «**Πάτερ, ἄφες αὐτοῖς οὐ γὰρ οἶδασιν τι ποιοῦσι.**»

Δικαιολογεῖ ὁ Σταυρωμένος τοὺς σταυρωτές Του. Δὲν κακιώνει μαζί τους οὔτε αὐτὴ τὴν ὥρα τοῦ φρικτοῦ μαρτυρίου Του. Ὁ πόνος ἦταν βαθὺς καὶ μέγας. Πρόκειται γιὰ λόγο ἄφθαστου μεγαλείου. Μόνο ἓνας Θεὸς μπορούσε νὰ τὸν πεῖ. Ἡ μεγαλειώδης ἀνεξικακία ἀπέναντι στὴν ἀδικαιολόγητη ἀνθρώπινη θρασύτητα, αὐθάδεια, κακία καὶ μοχθηρία. Ἡ μεγαλόστομη καὶ ἀνυπερβλήτη ἀγάπη τῆς συγχωρητικότητας μπροστὰ στὴ βαρβαρότητα τῆς πώρωσης. Ἡ σταυρωμένη ἀγάπη ἀντίκρου στὸν ἐπιρριμμένο φθόνο. Λόγια μὲ πνεῦμα καὶ αἷμα μέσα ἀπὸ τὴν ἄφατη ὀδύνη, ποὺ τὰ ἔλεγε πρὶν, ἀλλὰ τὰ λέγει καὶ τώρα ἀπὸ τὸ ὕψος τοῦ Σταυροῦ ἀγάπη πρὸς δόλους καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἐχθρούς, ἀκόμη καὶ τοὺς σταυρωτές, ὀρισμένοι ἀπὸ τοὺς ὁποίους ἀργότερα θὰ μετανοήσουν.

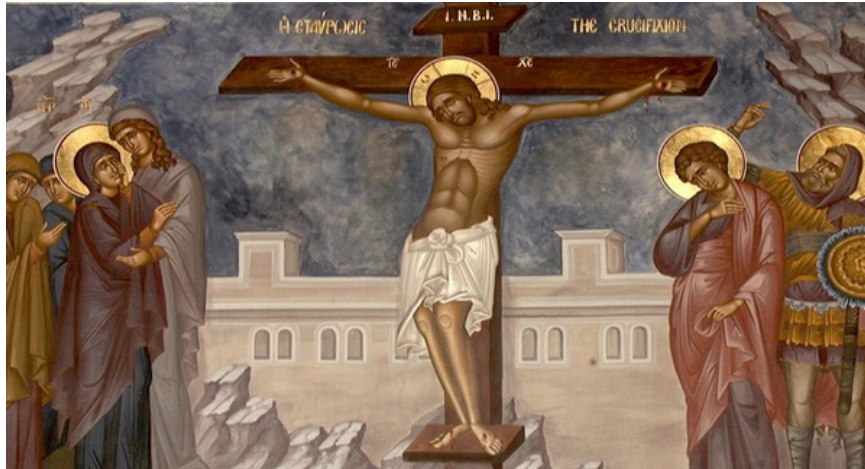
(β) «**Ἀμήν, λέγω σοί, σήμερον μετ' ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ Παραδείσῳ.**»

Ὁ ἀναμάρτητος Χριστὸς σταυρώθηκε ἀνάμεσα σὲ δύο ἁμαρτωλούς, σὲ δύο ληστές. Ὅτι ἔβλεπε καὶ ἄκουγε ὁ ἓνας, ἔβλεπε καὶ ἄκουγε καὶ ὁ ἄλλος. Ληστές καὶ οἱ δύο, σταυρωμένοι καὶ οἱ δύο. Ὁ ἓνας προκαλεῖ, βλασφημεῖ, εἰρωνεύεται, αὐθαδιάζει. Ὁ ἄλλος κάμπτεται, λυγίζει, ἐπανορθώνει, παρακαλεῖ, μετανοεῖ. Σὰν νὰ ἐκπροσωποῦν οἱ δύο συσταυρούμενοι τὴ σύμπασα ἀνθρωπότητα, τοὺς ἀμετανόητους καὶ τοὺς μετανοημένους. Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ στὸν ἐκ δεξιῶν Του ληστή εἶναι λιαν παραμυθητικὸς γιὰ ὅλους τοὺς ἁμαρτωλούς. Ἄς μὴν ἀπογοητεύεται κανένας πιά. Ἡ φράση αὐτὴ χαρίζει φτερά, κουράγια, ἐλπίδες σὲ ὅλους τοὺς πολλοὺς ἁμαρτωλούς. Μὲ πολὺ λίγα λόγια αὐτὸς ὁ ληστής φανέρωσε τὴν εἰλικρινή του μετάνοια, παραδέχθηκε τὴν ἁμαρτωλότητά του ἀπροφάσιστα,

θέλησε νὰ διορθώσει ταπεινὰ καὶ τὸν συναμαρτωλὸ του, ἔστω τὴν τελευταία αὐτὴ ὥρα, ὁμολόγησε τὸν Χριστὸ ἀναμάρτητο, Τὸν παρακάλεσε νὰ τὸν δεχθεῖ στὴν οὐράνια βασιλεία Του. Μὲ τὴ γεύση τοῦ καρποῦ τοῦ δένδρου τῆς γνώσεως καλοῦ καὶ κακοῦ, τοῦ ξύλου ἐκεῖνου, ἔκλεισε ὁ Παράδεισος γιὰ τὸν πρῶτο Ἀδάμ. Μὲ τὸ ξύλο τοῦ Σταυροῦ ἄνοιξε ὁ Παράδεισος καὶ πρῶτος τοῦ οἰκίτορας ἔγινε ἓνας μετανοημένος ληστής. Πόση ἐνίσχυση λαβαίνουν τώρα ὅλοι οἱ ἁμαρτωλοί.

(γ) Πρὸς τὴν Παναγία: «**Γύναι, ἴδε ὁ υἱός σου.**» Καὶ πρὸς τὸν Ἰωάννη: «**Ἴδοὺ ἡ μήτηρ σου.**»

Καταπληκτικὴ, κατανυκτικὴ καὶ συγκινητικὴ ἡ στιγμή. Τὴν ὥρα τοῦ ἄφατου πόνου, παραμένει ἀτάραχος, δὲν λησιμονεῖ τὴ μητέρα Του, τὴν Παναγία, τὴν πάνω ἀπ' ὅλες τὶς ἁγίες, τὴ σεμνότερη, καθαρότερη, ταπεινότερη γυναῖκα ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου, ὅλων τῶν ἐποχῶν. Ἐκεῖνη ποῦ Του δάνεισε τὴ σάρκα καὶ τὸ αἷμα τῆς, Τὸν μεγάλωσε καὶ Τὸν φρόντισε. Δὲν τὴν ἀφήνει μόνη



τῆς, ἀπροστάτευτη, ἔρημη. Τῆς δίνει νέο υἱό. Ἐναν ἐξαίρετο καὶ πολυ-ἀγαπημένο μαθητὴ Του, ποῦ τοῦ λέει καὶ αὐτοῦ πὼς ἀπὸ τώρα ἔχει νέα μάνα, ποῦ τὴ συνοδεύει καὶ τὴ φροντίζει ἕως τῆς μακάριος κοιμήσεως καὶ μεταστάσεώς της. Γίνεται ἀδελφό-

θεος. Ἀδελφότεοι γινόμαστε καὶ μεῖς παραμένοντας στὴ σκιά τοῦ Ἑσταυρωμένου.

(δ) «**Ἥλι ἡλί λεμὰ σαβαχθάνι; τοῦτ' ἔστιν: Θεέ μου, ἵνατί με ἐγκατέλιπες.**»

Μερικοὶ θεώρησαν τὸν ἐκ βαθέων αὐτὸ λόγο ὡς πικρὸ γογγυσμὸ καὶ ὡς ἀπελπιστικὴ ἱκεσία. Πρόκειται γιὰ λόγο ποῦ περιέχει ἄμετρο βάθος θεολογίας. Ὁ σταυρωμένος Χριστὸς γίνεται τὴν ὥρα ἐκεῖνη ὁ «ἐπικατάρατος κρεμᾶμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου», ἢ «κατάρρα» γιὰ μᾶς κατὰ τὸν θεῖο Παῦλο. Ὁ Σταυρωθεὶς σηκώνει τὶς ἁμαρτίες ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου, τοῦ τότε, τοῦ πρὶν καὶ τοῦ μετὰ, ὅλων τῶν αἰώνων, ὅλων τῶν ἀνθρώπων. Κατὰ τὸν ἅγιο Γρηγόριο τὸν Θεολόγο, μιᾶ γιὰ μᾶς τοὺς ἐγκαταλελειμμένους καὶ παραθεωρημένους, ποῦ ὁ Θεὸς μᾶς προσέλαβε. Ὁ ὄσιος Σιλουανὸς ὁ Ἄθωνίτης, κατὰ τὸν ἄριστο βιογράφο του Γέροντα Σωφρόνιο, ὅταν ἔχασε τὴ χάρη, αἰσθάνθηκε τὴ θεοεγκατάλειψη, τὸν πόνον τοῦ Ἀδάμ ἔξω τοῦ Παραδείσου, τὸν πόνον τοῦ Σταυροῦ, τὴν ἀπουσία τῆς θεοκοινωνίας.

(ε) «*Διψῶ.*»

Τὰ προηγηθέντα μαρτύρια, ἡ ἄρση τοῦ Σταυροῦ, ἡ κοπιώδης ἀνάβαση στὸν Γολγοθά, ἡ ἀγωνία τοῦ θανάτου, ἡ ὀδύνη τῆς σταυρώσεως, ἔφερε τὴ δίψα. Τὸν ξεδιψοῦν μὲ ξύδι καὶ χολή, πικρὸ κι ἀπαίσιον κραῖμα. Πρόκειται γιὰ τὴν ὑψιστὴ ἔξαρση τῆς ἀνθρώπινης ἀναξιοπρέπειας, ἀχαριστίας, ἀναισχυντίας κι ἀσέβειας. Ζητᾶ νερὸ καὶ τοῦ δίνουν ξύδι. Ὅρισμένοι ὥραϊα θέλησαν νὰ ἐρμηνεύσουν μεταφορικὰ τὸ ρῆμα αὐτὸ λέγοντας πὼς διψοῦσε γιὰ τὴ σωτηρία τῶν σταυρωτῶν Του, τὸ εἶδαμε στὸν πρῶτο Του λόγο νὰ τοὺς δικαιολογεῖ καὶ νὰ ζητᾶ ἀπὸ τὸν οὐράνιο πατέρα Του νὰ τοὺς συγχωρέσει. Λέγουν πὼς διψοῦσε γιὰ τὴν ἐξάπλωση τοῦ εὐαγγελίου σὲ ὅλη τὴν οἰκουμένη, γιὰ τὴν ἐπικράτηση τῆς εἰρήνης, τῆς ἀγάπης, τῆς ἀλήθειας καὶ τῆς ἐλευθερίας.

(στ) «*Τετέλεσται.*»

Μία εὐκόλη ἐρμηνεία τῆς λέξης αὐτῆς θὰ σήμαινε ὅτι ὅλα πιά τελείωσαν. Στέρεψαν ἐπιτέλους τὰ μαρτύριά Του. Τὶ ἄλλο μαρτύριο θὰ μπορούσαν ἀκόμη νὰ σκεφθοῦν; Λέγοντας αὐτὸ δὲν αἰσθανόταν ἀνθρώπινη ἀνακούφιση, Τὸ «τετέλεσται» σημαίνει τὴν ὁλοκλήρωση τοῦ ἀπολυτρωτικοῦ ἔργου Του. Ὁ δαίμονας εἶχε κατατροπωθεῖ. Τὸ πανάχραντο αἷμα Του μᾶς εἶχε ἐξαγοράσει ἀπὸ τὴν κατάρα τοῦ νόμου. Τὸ προφητικὸ κήρυγμα εἶχε πλήρως ἐκπληρωθεῖ. Οἱ πύλες τοῦ Παραδείσου ἦταν ὀρθάνοιχτες γιὰ ὅλους τοὺς μετανοημένους, μὲ πρῶτο οἶκητορα τὸν μετανοημένο ληστή.

(ζ) «*Πάτερ, εἰς χεῖρας Σου παρατίθεμαι τὸ πνεῦμά μου.*»

Παραδίδει τὸν ἑαυτό Του στὸν Θεὸ Πατέρα. Πεθαίνει σωματικὰ ὡς ἄνθρωπος, ὄχι μοναχὰ γιὰ τὸ θέλησαν οἱ ἐχθροὶ Του, ἀλλὰ καὶ γιὰ τὸ ἠθελε ὁ ἴδιος.

Ἀναμφισβήτητὰ τὸ μεγαλύτερο ἔγκλημα τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὅλων των αἰώνων εἶναι ἡ σταύρωση τοῦ Χριστοῦ, **ποὺ ἔγινε ὅμως πηγὴ ἀγιασμοῦ, σωτηρίας καὶ λυτρώσεως.** Δὲν μπορούμε νὰ μεταβοῦμε στὸ φῶς, τὴ χαρὰ καὶ τὴ δόξα τῆς Κυριακῆς τοῦ Πάσχα, ἂν ἀπαραίτητα δὲν διέλθουμε ἀπὸ τὸν λόφο τῆς Μεγάλης Παρασκευῆς, δὲν ἀναπνεύσουμε τὸ κλῆμα ποὺ ἐπικρατεῖ ἐκεῖ, δὲν σκιασθοῦμε στὸν Σταυρὸ, δὲν προσκυνήσουμε ταπεινά, δὲν προσλάβουμε γνήσιο ἀσκητικὸ μαρτυρικὸ φρόνημα, δὲν σταυρώσουμε πάθη κι ἐπιθυμίες. Ἡ μωρία, ἡ αἰσχύνη, ἡ ἀτίμωση, ἡ ἥττα τοῦ Σταυροῦ, γίνεται γιὰ τοὺς πιστοὺς καύχιση, τιμὴ, δόξα, νίκη. Τὸ νεκρὸ ξύλο γίνεται ζωοπάροχο. Τὸ σύμβολο τοῦ Χριστιανισμοῦ εἶναι ὁ ἀπλός, λιτός, ἀπέρριτος, μαρτυρικὸς Σταυρὸς.

Ἡ Ὁρθοδοξία εἶναι σταυρωμένη, ταπεινὴ, ἀμόλυντη, ἀρτυρίδωτη. Κόσμημα, ἔμβλημα, τρόπαιον τῆς Ἐκκλησίας ὁ Σταυρὸς. Αὐτὸς εἶναι ὁ πλοῦτος τῆς, τὸ κάλλος τῆς, ἡ

δύναμή τῆς, ἡ ἐπιρροή τῆς, ἡ ἔμπνευσή τῆς. Σταυρώσμη ἡ Ἐκκλησία, σταυροφόροι οἱ Χριστιανοί. Στὸν Σταυρὸ μετρούμεθα, ζυγιαζόμαστε, ὀριοθετούμεθα. **καθρεφτιζόμαστε, καυχόμαστε μὲ τὸν πρωτοκορυφαῖο Παῦλο.** Ὁ εὐλογημένος Σταυρὸς τοῦ Χριστοῦ διδάσκει, φρονηματίζει, χαριτώνει, ἐνισχύει, φυλάγει, παραμυθεῖ.



Κύριε, Ἐλέησον!

Μωυσῆς μοναχὸς Ἀγιορείτης.

Καὶ ξαφνικὰ ἀνοίγει ἓνα παραθυράκι στὸ νοῦ. Ἔρχεται ἓνα φῶς. **Τότε ἔχεις μία ἄλλη αἴσθηση.** Τότε τὰ κατανοεῖς καλά. Ὅχι πρὸς τὸ ἐτυμολογικόν. Μὰ μὲ μία κατάνυξη καὶ συναίσθηση καὶ θεία θαλπωρὴ. Καὶ λές: «Τὶ ἄλλο νὰ λέω;»

Παρὰ μόνο πάλιν καὶ πολλάκις καὶ συνεχῶς: «Κύριε ἐλέησον!»

Δίχως νὰ βαριέσαι. Δίχως νὰ κουράζεσαι. Αὐτὸ τὰ λέει ὅλα. Δὲν θέλει ἄλλα καὶ πολλά. Μόνο ποιητικὰ μπορεῖ κανεὶς μερικὲς φορὲς νὰ ἐκφραστεῖ. Ἡ προσευχὴ εἶναι ποίηση. Ὅλες οἱ προσευχῆς εἶναι ποιήματα.

Οἱ ποιητὲς νιώθουν τοὺς συναθρώπους τους καὶ τοὺς παρηγοροῦν, ὅπως οἱ ἅγιοι. Εἶναι μεγάλη εὐλογία νὰ συναντᾶς ἓνα ποιητὴ κι ἓνα ἅγιο. Οἱ ἅγιοι δὲν θέλουν νὰ ἀφήσουν πίσω τους ἴχνη. Οἱ ἄνθρωποι μόνο ἀφήνουν πάνω τους τ' ἀχνάρια τῆς κακίας τους. Κύριε ἐλέησέ τους, δὲν ξέρουν τί χάνουν καὶ τί κάνουν.

Λυπᾶμαι ὅταν δὲν μπορῶ νὰ προσευχηθῶ. Καὶ τοῦτο προσευχὴ εἶναι, μοῦ 'πε ἓνας διακριτικὸς γέροντας. Ὅπως χαίρομαι ὅταν μὲ τόση ἱκετευτικὴ στάση μοῦ ζητοῦν νὰ προσεύχομαι στὸν Κύριο. Πιστεύω πὼς γιὰ τὴν ταπείνωσή τους θὰ τοὺς ἐλεήσει ὁ Κύριος.

Προτιμῶ, ἔλεγε ἓνας ἄλλος γέροντας, τὴν προσευχὴ ἀπὸ τὰ κούφια λόγια, τὶς ψευτο-εὐγένειες καὶ τὶς θολὲς καλοσύνες. Ἡ μεγαλύτερη φιλανθρωπία εἶναι ἡ προσευχὴ καὶ ἂς μὴ τὸ καταλαβαίνουν οἱ ἄνθρωποι. Εἶναι ἡ μεγαλύτερη ἱεραποστολὴ κι εὐεργεσία τοῦ κόσμου. Τὰ πολλὰ λόγια δὲν ἀναπαύουν.

Ἡ προσευχὴ γιὰ τοὺς ἄλλους ἐπηρεάζει θερμοτέρα. Ἡ ἀγάπη εἶναι ἀβίαστη καὶ πάντα μία θυσία. Ἡ ἀληθινὴ προσευχὴ δὲν εἶναι ἡδονικὴ ἀνάπαυλα, μὰ ὀρθοστασία, μὰ περπάτημα στὶς μύτες, σὲ τεντωμένο σχοινί. Στὴν ἀληθινὴ προσευχὴ δὲν δίνουμε περισσεύματα τοῦ χρόνου, μὰ τὶς πιὸ καλὲς κι ἀποδοτικὲς ὥρες μας, τὶς κύριες ὥρες τῆς ἡμέρας, τῆς ζωῆς μας.

Κύριε, συγχώρεσέ με γιὰ ὅσα εἶπα κι ἔγραψα, ποὺ δὲν τὰ ζοῦσα καὶ τὰ πιστεύα ἀκόμη, ποὺ ἀπέφυγα νὰ μιλήσω γιὰ τὶς ἥττες καὶ τὶς ἀποτυχίες μου κι ἠθελε νὰ μιλῶ μόνο γιὰ νίκες. Δεῖλιαζα γιὰ τὸ δὲν εἶχα μετανοήσει.

Κύριε, ἐλέησον...

Τὸ Ἅγιον Φῶς Μαρτυρεῖ τὴν Ὁρθοδοξία

Συνοπτικὴ Παρουσίαση ἀπὸ τὶς ἱστοσελίδες τῆς «Ρομφαίας».

Συμβολίζει, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἀποδεικνύει περιτρανῶς τὸ Μέγα Μυστήριον τῆς ἐκ νεκρῶν Ἀναστάσεως τοῦ Κυρίου μας Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Μᾶς γεμίζει αἰσθήματα πνευματικῆς, ψυχικῆς καὶ θρησκευτικῆς ἀνατάσεως. Αἱ καρδίαι ὄλων χτυποῦν ἀπὸ πίστιν, θαυμασιμὸν καὶ ἐλπίδα διὰ τὸ Μέγα μυστήριον τῆς Ζωῆς. Πρόκειται διὰ ἀληθινὸν θαῦμα, τὸ ὁποῖον δὲν χωρᾶ καμὶαν ἀμφισβήτησιν.

Ἀπὸ τὸ πρῶτὸ τοῦ Μεγάλου Σαββάτου χιλιάδες πιστοὶ τῆς Ἱερουσαλὴμ καὶ προσκυνηταὶ ἀπὸ ὅλα τὰ μέρη τοῦ κόσμου κατακλύζουσι τὸν Ναὸν τῆς Ἀναστάσεως διὰ νὰ παρακολουθήσουν τὴν Τελετὴν τοῦ Ἁγίου Φωτός.

Τὴν 12^{ην} μεσημβρινὴν, ὁ Ὁρθόδοξος Πατριάρχης τῶν Ἱεροσολύμων, συνοδεῖα Ἀρχιερέων καὶ ἄλλων κληρικῶν, φθάνει εἰς τὸ Πατριαρχεῖον. Εἰσέρχεται εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Βῆμα τοῦ Καθολικοῦ. Κατόπιν οἱ Ἀρχιερεῖς

καὶ κληρικοὶ ντύνονται μετ' ἄμφια καὶ ὁ Πατριάρχης μετ' ἐπισημοὺς τὴν πλήρη Ἀρχιερατικὴν στολήν. Ὁ Πατριάρχης ἠγεῖται τῆς πομπῆς, ἡ ὁποία ξεκινᾶ ἀπὸ τὸ Ἅγιον Βῆμα τοῦ Καθολικοῦ καὶ βαδίζει τρεῖς φορὰς πέριξ τοῦ ἱεροῦ Κουβουκλίου ὑπὸ τῶν ἤχων τῶν ψαλμῶδων, οἱ ὅποιοι ψάλλουσι τὸ «*Τὴν Ἀνάστασιν σου Χριστέ Σωτήρ...*»



Εἶναι ἀναγκαῖον νὰ τονίσουμε ὅτι οἱ ἐτερόδοξοι ἔχουν προκαταβολικῶς ἐρευνήσει ὅλον τὸ ἐσωτερικὸν τοῦ ἱεροῦ Κουβουκλίου, διὰ νὰ πιστοποιήσουν... ὅτι δὲν ὑπάρχει ἀναμμένον κανδήλιον ἢ ἄλλη πηγὴ φωτός. Μετὰ τὴν λιτανεῖαν ὁ Πατριάρχης ἴσταται ἔμπροσθεν τῆς θύρας τοῦ Ἁγίου Κουβουκλίου, ἀφαιρεῖ τὰ ἄμφια καὶ περιμένει μετ' ἐπισημοὺς τὸ στοιχάρι, πετραχήλι καὶ τὴν ζώνην. Οἱ ἐτερόδοξοι κάνουν ἐρευνα διὰ νὰ βεβαιωθοῦν ὅτι ἐπάνω του δὲν ἔχει κάτι, τὸ ὁποῖον θὰ ἠδύνατο νὰ δημιουργήσῃ ὑπονοίας, ἢ νὰ κινήσῃ ὑποψίας. Ὅταν ὀλοκληρωθῇ ἡ ἐρευνα, οἱ φύλακες ἀφαιροῦν τὰς σφραγίδας ἀπὸ τὴν θύραν καὶ ὁ Πατριάρχης εἰσέρχεται εἰς τὸ Ἱερὸν Κουβούκλιον μετ' ἐπισημοὺς δεσμιδὰς ἐσβησμένα κεριά. Μαζὶ του εἰσέρχονται εἰς τὸν προθάλαμον ὁ Ἀρμένιος Πατριάρχης καὶ ὁ Δραγομάνος, οἵτινες παραμένουν εἰς τὸν προθάλαμον. Εἰς ὅλον τὸν Ναὸν ἐπικρατεῖ συγκίνησις καὶ ἀγωνία.

Ὁ Πατριάρχης γονατιστὸς ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ Ἁγίου Τάφου τοῦ Χριστοῦ προσεύχεται πρὸς τὸν Σταυρωθέντα,

κρατῶν δυὸ σβηστὰς λαμπάδας καὶ μετ' ἐπισημοὺς καὶ εὐλάβειαν ἀναπέμπων τὴν ἀκόλουθην εὐχήν:

«*Δέσποτα Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, ἡ ἀρχίφωτος σοφία τοῦ ἀνάρχου Πατρός. Ὁ φῶς οἰκῶν ἀπρόσιτον, ὁ εἰπὼν ἐκ σκότους φῶς λάμπει, ὁ εἰπὼν γεννηθῆτω φῶς καὶ ἐγένετο φῶς. Κύριε, ὁ τοῦ φωτός χορηγός, ὁ ἐξαγαγὼν ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ σκότους τῆς πλάνης καὶ εἰσαγαγὼν εἰς τὸ θαυμαστὸν φῶς τῆς σῆς ἐπιγνώσεως, ὁ τὴν γῆν μεν πᾶσαν διὰ τῆς ἐν αὐτῇ ἐνσάρκου παρουσίας σου, τὰ καταχθόνια δὲ διὰ τῆς εἰς Ἄδην καταβάσεώς σου φωτὸς πληρώσας καὶ χαρᾶς, μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα διὰ τῶν ἁγίων σου Ἀποστόλων φῶς καταγγείλας πᾶσι τοῖς ἔθνεσιν. Εὐχαριστοῦμεν σοί, ὅτι διὰ τῆς εὐσεβοῦς πίστεως μετήγαγες ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ σκότους εἰς φῶς καὶ γεγονάμεν υἱοὶ διὰ τοῦ ἁγίου βαπτίσματος, θεασάμενοι τὴν δόξαν σου πλήρη οὐσαν χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. ἀλλ' ὦ φωτοπάροχε Κύριε, ὁ τὸ μέγα φῶς ὢν, ὁ εἰπὼν, ὁ λαὸς ὁ καθήμενος ἐν σκότει.*

Δέσποτα Κύριε, τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὁ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. Τὸ μόνο φῶς

τοῦ κόσμου καὶ φῶς τῆς ζωῆς τῶν ἀνθρώπων, οὗ ἀπὸ τῆς δόξης ἐπληρώθη τὰ σύμπαντα, ὅτι φῶς εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἐλήλυθας διὰ τῆς ἐνσάρκου σου οἰκονομίας, εἰ καὶ οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἠγάπησαν μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος ἢ τὸ φῶς. Σὺ Κύριε φωτοδότα, ἐπάκουσον ἡμῶν τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν καὶ ἀναξίων δούλων σου τῶν τῆ ὥρα ταύτῃ παρισταμένων

τῶ παναγίῳ σου καὶ φωτοφόρῳ τούτῳ τάφῳ καὶ πρόσδεξι ἡμᾶς τιμώντας τὰ ἄχραντα πάθη σου, τὴν παναγίαν σου σταύρωσιν, τὸν ἐκούσιον θάνατον καὶ τὴν ἐν τῷ πανσεβάσῳ τούτῳ μνήματι τοῦ τεθεωμένου σου σώματος κατάθεσιν καὶ ταφὴν καὶ τριήμερον ἐξανάστασιν, ἢν χαρμονικῶς ἤδη ἀρξάμενοι ἐορτάζειν, μνεῖαν ποιούμεθα καὶ τῆς ἐν Ἄδου καθόδου σου, δι' ἧς τὰς ἐκεῖσε τῶν δικαίων κατεχομένας ψυχὰς δεσποτικῶς ἠλευθέρωσας τῇ ἀστραπῇ τῆς σῆς θεότητος φωτὸς πληρώσας τὰ καταχθόνια.

Ὅθεν διὰ ἀγαλλομένη καρδίᾳ καὶ χαρᾷ πνευματικῇ κατὰ τοῦτο τὸ ὑπερευλογημένον Σάββατον τὸ ἐν γῆ καὶ ὑπὸ γῆν θεοπρεπῶς τελεσθέντα σοὶ σωτηριωδέστατα μυστήριά σου ἐορτάζοντες καὶ σὲ τὸ ὄντως ἰλαρὸν καὶ ἐφετὸν φῶς ἐν τοῖς καταχθονίοις θεϊκῶς ἐπιλάμπαν ἀναμιμνησκόμενοι, φωτοφάνειαν ποιούμεθα, σοὺ τὴν πρὸς ἡμᾶς συμπαθῶς γενομένην θεοφανεῖαν, εἰκονίζοντες. Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ τῇ σωτηρίῳ καὶ φωταυγεῖ νυκτὶ πάντα πεπλήρωται φωτὸς οὐρανὸς τὸ καὶ γῆ

καὶ τὰ καταχθόνια διὰ τὸ ὑπερφυεὲς μυστήριον τῆς ἐν Ἄδου καθόδου σου καὶ τῆς ἐκ Τάφου σου τριημέρου ἀναστάσεως.

Διὰ τοῦτο, ἐκ τοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦτον τὸν φωτοφόρον σου Τάφον εὐλαβῶς λαμβάνοντες, διαδίδομεν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς σὲ τὸ ἀληθινὸν φῶς καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν καὶ δεόμεθα σου, Πανάγιε Δέσποτα, ὅπως ἀναδείξῃς αὐτὸ ἀγιασμοῦ δῶρον καὶ πάσης θεϊκῆς σου χάριτος πεπληρωμένον, διὰ τῆς χάριτος τοῦ Παναγίου καὶ φωτοφόρου Τάφου σου. Καὶ τοὺς ἀπτομένους εὐλαβῶς αὐτοῦ εὐλογήσης καὶ ἀγιάσης, τοῦ σκότους τῶν παθῶν ἐλευθεριῶν καὶ τῶν φωτεινοτάτων σου σκηνῶν καταξιώσης, ὅπου φῶς τὸ ἀνέσπερόν της σῆς θεότηας λάμπει. Χάρισαι αὐτοῖς, Κύριε, ὑγίαν καὶ εὐζωίαν καὶ τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ πληρῶσον.

Ναί, Δέσποτα φωτοπάροχε, ἐπάκουσόν μου τοῦ ἁμαρτωλοῦ ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ ταύτῃ καὶ δὸς ἡμῖν τέ καὶ αὐτοῖς περιπατεῖν ἐν τῷ φωτὶ σου καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ μένειν, ἕως τὸ φῶς τῆς προσκαιροῦ ζωῆς ταύτης ἔχωμεν. Δὸς ἡμῖν Κύριε, ἵνα τὸ φῶς τῶν καλῶν ἔργων ἡμῶν λάμπῃ ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ δοξάζωσι σὲ σὺν τῷ ἀνάρχῳ σου Πατρὶ καὶ τῷ Παναγίῳ Πνεύματι. Εἰς φῶς γὰρ ἐθνῶν ἡμᾶς τέθηκας, ἵνα αὐτοῖς τῇ σκοτίᾳ περιπατοῦσι φαίνωμεν. Ἄλλ' ἡμεῖς ἠγαπήσαμεν τὸ σκότος μᾶλλον ἢ τὸ φῶς, φαῦλα πράσσοντες. Πᾶς γὰρ ὁ φαῦλα πράσπων μισεῖ τὸ φῶς κατὰ τὸν ἀψευδῆ λόγον σου. Διὰ τοῦτο ὁσημέραι προσκόπτομεν ἁμαρτάνοντες, ἐπειδὴ περιπατοῦμεν ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ. Ἄλλ' ἀξιώσον ἡμᾶς τὸ ὑπόλοιπόν της ζωῆς ἡμῶν βιωτεῦσαι πεφωτισμένους τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς τῆς διανοίας ἡμῶν. Δὸς ἡμῖν, ἵνα ὡς τέκνα φωτὸς περιπατήσωμεν ἐν τῷ φωτὶ τῶν ἐντολῶν σου. Τὸ τοῦ ἁγίου βαπτίσματος φωτεινὸν ἐνδύμα, ὅπερ διὰ τῶν ἔργων ἡμαυρώσαμεν, λεύκανον, ὡς τὸ φῶς, ὁ ἀναβαλλόμενος τὸ φῶς ὡσπερ ἱμάτιον. Δὸς ἡμῖν ἐνδύσασθαι τὰ ὄπλα τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα δι' αὐτῶν τὸν ἄρχοντα τοῦ σκότους τροποῦμεθα, ὃς μετασχηματίζεται εἰς ἄγγελον φωτός. Ναί, Κύριε, καὶ ὡς ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τοῖς ἐν σκοτίᾳ καὶ σκιά θανάτου καθημένοις φῶς ἔλαμψας οὕτω σήμερον λάμπσον ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν τὸ σὸν ἀκήρατον φῶς ἵνα τούτου φωτιζόμενοι καὶ θερμαινόμενοι ἐν τῇ πίστει, δοξάζωμεν Σὲ τὸ μόνον ἐκ μόνου τοῦ ἀρχιφώτου φωτός, ἰλαρὸν φῶς εἰς τοὺς ἀτελευτήτους αἰῶνας. Ἀμήν».

Μετὰ τὸ πέρας τῆς εὐχῆς τοποθετεῖ τὸ βαμβάκιον εἰς τὸν Πανάγιον Τάφον καὶ με θαυμαστὸν τρόπον ἀνάβει. Με αὐτὸ ἀνάβει τὰ κεριὰ καὶ ἐξέρχεται ἀπὸ τὸ Ἱερὸν Κουβούκλιον. Τὸ σπουδαῖον εἶναι ὅτι τὸ ἅγιον φῶς διὰ ὀλίγα λεπτὰ δὲν ἔχει πυράδα. Δηλαδή ἐὰν εἰς ἀκουμπήσῃ τὸ ἅγιον φῶς εἰς τὰ χέρια του δὲν θὰ καῖ. Πραγματικῶς εἶναι ἐν ἐκ τῶν μεγαλυτέρων Θαυμάτων τῆς Χριστιανοσύνης, τὸ ὁποῖον ἐπαναλαμβάνεται κάθε χρόνον τὸ Μέγα Σάββατον.

Τὶ ΔΕΝ Εἶναι τὸ Πάσχα...

Πηγή: Ἐφημερίδα Διψῶ, τ. 77.



Πάσχα δὲν εἶναι τὸ κρόκινο αὐγὸ, δὲν εἶναι τὸ τσουρέκι, δὲν εἶναι ἡ λαμπάδα, δὲν εἶναι τὰ καινούρια ροῦχα, δὲν εἶναι ἡ παρουσία μας στὴν Ἐκκλησία δέκα λεπτὰ πρὶν τὸ «Χριστὸς Ἄνέστη» καὶ ἓνα λεπτὸ μετὰ. Πάσχα δὲν εἶναι ἡ λατρεία τοῦ φαγητοῦ, τὸ πανηγύρι, ὁ χορὸς καὶ τὸ ποτό. Πάσχα δὲν εἶναι οἱ σοῦβλες στὸ δρόμο, δὲν εἶναι ἡ ἀνταλλαγὴ εὐχῶν, δὲν εἶναι ἡ ἐπιστροφή στὸ χωριό. Ἦ, τουλάχιστον, δὲν εἶναι μόνο αὐτά.

Πάσχα εἶναι πάνω ἀπ' ὅλα ἡ γεύση τῆς Βασιλείας τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἡ φωνὴ τοῦ Οὐρανοῦ ποῦ ἔρχεται μέσα μας, ὅταν μεταλαμβάνουμε στὴν Θεία Λειτουργία. Τότε ἡ ψυχὴ μας, ἔστω καὶ γιὰ λίγο, μεταμορφώνεται, ἡρεμεῖ, νιώθει κάτι ἀπὸ τὴν συγγνώμη καὶ τὴν ἀγάπη ποῦ ἀνατέλλει μέσα ἀπὸ τὸν Τάφο. Τότε, νιώθουμε πὼς μ' ὅλο τὸν κόσμο εἵμαστε ἀδελφία, γιὰτὶ μετέχουμε τοῦ κοινοῦ ποτηριοῦ τῆς Ζωῆς. Πάσχα εἶναι ἡ ἀλλαγὴ τῆς ζωῆς μας, ἡ ἀνάστασή μας ἀπὸ τὰ πάθη καὶ τὶς κακίες ποῦ μᾶς δέρνουν. Δὲν ἀξίζει νὰ λέμε ὅτι ἦρθε τὸ Πάσχα κι ἡμεῖς δὲν εἵμαστε συμφιλιωμένοι μετὰ τὸ Θεό, τὸ συνάνθρωπο, τὸ γείτονα, τὸν ἑαυτό μας, ὅτι δὲν νιώθουμε πῶς ἐλεύθεροι ἀπὸ τὰ δεσμὰ τῆς κακίας καὶ τοῦ θανάτου. Πάσχα ἄλλωστε εἶναι ἡ συντριβὴ τοῦ ἔσχατου ἐχθροῦ τῆς ἀνθρώπινης φύσης, ποῦ εἶναι ὁ... θάνατος: «**Θανάτω θάνατον πατήσας**».

Πάσχα εἶναι ἡ ἀφορμὴ γιὰ ἐνότητα, ἐνότητα μετὰξὺ τῶν λαῶν καὶ τῶν κοινωνιῶν. Δὲν γίνεται νὰ λέμε ὅτι γιορτάζουμε τὴν Ἀνάσταση καὶ ὁ πόλεμος καὶ ἡ διχόνοια κυριαρχεῖ στὶς ψυχές μας. Δὲν γίνεται νὰ λέμε ὅτι πιστεύουμε στὰ μηνύματα τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ νὰ ἐπικαλούμαστε αὐτὴ τὴν ιδιότητά μας καὶ νὰ συντριβούμε λαοὺς, ὑπολήψεις, συνειδήσεις, συνανθρώπους, πλησίον, ἀδελφούς μας. Δὲν γίνεται νὰ κάνουμε Πάσχα με κακία γιὰ τοὺς ἄλλους, ὅποιοι κι ἂν εἶναι αὐτοί, ὅ,τι κι ἂν εἴχουν κάνει!



Αὐτοὶ οἱ τρεῖς κανόνες ζωῆς εἶναι χρήσιμοι, τὸ νὰ ἀφοβᾶσαι τὸν Θεόν, τὸ νὰ προσεύχεσαι ἀδιάλειπτα καὶ τὸ νὰ κάνῃς τὸ καλὸν στὸν πλησίον σου.

Ἀββᾶς Ποιμὴν ὁ Μέγας

Πώς να Μιλᾶμε στὰ Παιδιά μας: Γιὰ τοὺς Δαίμονες, τὴν Κόλαση καὶ τὸ Θάνατο

Απόσπασμα ἀπὸ τὸ βιβλίο «Σκέψεις γιὰ τὰ Παιδιά στὴν Ὀρθόδοξη Ἐκκλησία Σήμερα», Ἀδελφῆς Μαγδαληνῆς, Ἱερὰ Μονὴ Τίμιου Προδρόμου, Ἑσσεξ Ἀγγλίας, 1994.

Εἶναι σοβαρὸ παιδαγωγικὸ σφάλμα νὰ μιλᾶμε στὰ μικρὰ παιδιά μὲ κάθε λεπτομέρεια γιὰ τοὺς δαίμονες, διότι, ἂν ἓνα παιδί ἀκούσει μία φορὰ πῶς ἀκριβῶς εἶναι, εἶναι ἀδύνατο νὰ μὴν ἀρχίσει νὰ τοὺς φαντάζεται.

Οἱ ἐνήλικες εἶναι δυνατὸν νὰ προειδοποιηθοῦν γιὰ τὸν κίνδυνο ποὺ διατρέχουν, ἂν ἀφήσουν εἰκόνας τῶν δαιμόνων νὰ εἰσβάλουν στὸ μυαλό τους, ἀλλὰ ἓνα μικρὸ παιδί, ἀκόμη κι ἂν τὸ προειδοποιήσουμε, δὲν μπορεῖ εὐκόλα νὰ σταματήσει νὰ σκέπτεται κάτι ποὺ τὸ βασανίζει, καὶ αὐτὸ μπορεῖ νὰ τὸ ὀδηγήσει σὲ μία ἐπικίνδυνη πνευματικὴ κατάσταση ἢ, τὸ λιγότερο, νὰ ὑποφέρει ἀπὸ ἐφιάλτες.

Ὅταν τὰ μικρὰ παιδιά ρωτοῦν γιὰ τὸ διάβολο ἢ γιὰ τὴν ὑπαρξὴ τῶν πνευμάτων τοῦ κακοῦ, εἶναι προτιμότερο νὰ μὴν κάνουμε διεξοδικὴ ἀνάλυση ἀλλὰ νὰ λέμε ὅτι δὲν πρέπει νὰ δίνουμε σ' αὐτὰ περισσότερη προσοχὴ ἀπ' ὅ,τι στὰ ὄνειρα ἢ κάτι παρόμοιο. Γενικὰ πρέπει νὰ στρέφουμε τὸ μυαλό τῶν παιδιῶν πρὸς τὸν Χριστό, τοὺς ἀγίους καὶ τοὺς ἀγγέλους.

Εἶναι καλύτερα νὰ διδάσκουμε στὰ παιδιά τὸ Χριστιανικὸ ἀγῶνα χωρὶς ἄμεση ἀναφορὰ στὴ μάχη ἐναντίον τῶν δαιμόνων. Τὰ παιδιά μποροῦν νὰ μάθουν ἐντελῶς φυσικὰ νὰ κάνουν τὸ σημεῖο τοῦ σταυροῦ πρὶν κοιμηθοῦν (ἐπάνω τους καὶ πάνω στὸ κρεβάτι ἢ τὸ μαξιλάρι τους) ὡς εὐλογία γιὰ τὴ νύχτα, νὰ χρησιμοποιοῦν τὴν προσευχὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (Κύριε Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ ἐλέησον με) ἢ νὰ μιλοῦν στὸν Κύριο καὶ τοὺς ἀγίους μὲ δικὰ τους λόγια, ὅποτε θέλουν. Ἔτσι ὅταν δοκιμάσουν κάποιο πειρασμὸ (π.χ. ἀπὸ φόβο ἢ ἐφιιάλτες), θὰ χρησιμοποιήσουν ἐντελῶς φυσικὰ τὰ σωστὰ ὄπλα. Τὰ παιδιά μποροῦν νὰ κοιμοῦνται μὲ ἓνα κομποσκοίνι στὸ χέρι ἢ κάτω ἀπ' τὸ μαξιλάρι τους καὶ νὰ λένε τὴν προσευχὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ (ἔστω μόνο λίγες φορὲς στίς καθημερινές τους προσευχές).

Ἡ ιδέα τῆς κολάσεως φοβίζει τὰ παιδιά. Βέβαια φοβίζει κι ἐμᾶς ἄλλα ὁ φόβος μας δὲν εἶναι παθολογικός, πηγάζει ἀπὸ τὴν ἀγάπη μας γιὰ τὸν Θεὸ καὶ ἀπὸ τὸ φόβο μας μήπως ἀποξενωθοῦμε ἀπ' Αὐτόν. Αὐτὸ τὸ ὅποιο πρέπει νὰ καλλιεργήσουμε στὰ παιδιά δὲν εἶναι ὁ φόβος τῆς κολάσεως ἀλλὰ ἡ ἀγάπη γιὰ τὸν Θεό. Τὰ παιδιά μποροῦν νὰ σκεφθοῦν σοβαρὰ τὸ μεταφυσικὸ πρόβλημα τοῦ κακοῦ καὶ τῆς ἀγάπης τοῦ Θεοῦ. Ὅταν μιλᾶμε γιὰ τὴν κόλαση (ὄχι, φυσικὰ, σὲ μικρὰ παιδιά) πρέπει νὰ τονίζουμε ὅτι ἡ κόλαση δὲν εἶναι ἓνας τόπος ὅπου ὁ Θεὸς θέλει νὰ στείλει τοὺς κακοὺς ἀνθρώπους,

κόλαση εἶναι ὁ πόνος ποὺ ἐπιβάλλουμε στὸν ἑαυτό μας μὲ τὴν ἀπόρριψη τῆς ἀγάπης τοῦ Θεοῦ. Κόλαση εἶναι ἡ θέα τοῦ φωτὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ ποὺ κατακαίει ὄσους δὲν ἔχουν γίνει ὅμοιοι μ' Αὐτόν.

Ἡ ἀκόμη μποροῦμε νὰ ποῦμε ὅτι, ἂν κάποιος εἶναι ἄρρωστος ἀλλὰ ἀρνεῖται νὰ πάρει τὰ φάρμακα ποὺ συνιστᾷ ὁ γιατρός, δὲν φταίει ὁ γιατρός, ἂν δὲν θεραπευθεῖ. Ὅπως πάντα δὲν ὑπάρχουν συνταγές, δίνω μόνο μερικὰ παραδείγματα. Ὑπάρχουν πολλές περιπτώσεις ἐνηλίκων οἱ ὅποιοι ἀπέρριψαν τὸ Χριστιανισμὸ, ἐπειδὴ αὐτὸ νόμιζαν ὅτι ἦταν ὁ καλύτερος τρόπος νὰ ἐλευθερωθοῦν ἀπ' τὸν ἀσφυκτικὸ φόβο τῆς κολάσεως μέσα στὸν ὅποιο ἀνατράφηκαν. Ἀκόμα κι ὅταν μιλᾶμε γιὰ κακὲς πράξεις ἢ γιὰ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ποὺ τὶς διέπραξαν, εἶναι σημαντικὸ νὰ γνωρίζει σίγουρὰ τὸ παιδί ὅτι ὁ Χριστὸς εἶναι πάντα ἔτοιμος νὰ συγχωρήσει ὅποιοδήποτε ἁμάρτημα.

Ὅταν τὰ παιδιά μιλοῦν γιὰ τὸν Οὐρανὸ, ἐκφράζουν συχνὰ διάφορες ιδέες γιὰ τὸ τι μποροῦμε νὰ συναντήσουμε ἐκεῖ, ιδέες οἱ ὁποῖες θεολογικὰ φαίνονται ἴσως λανθασμένες. Πρέπει ὅμως νὰ εἴμαστε πολὺ προσεκτικοὶ γιὰ νὰ μὴν καταστρέψουμε μέσα τους τὴν ἐπιθυμία νὰ πᾶνε στὸν Οὐρανὸ. Μπορεῖτε νὰ φαντασθεῖτε ὅτι θὰ ἐπιθυμοῦσε κανεὶς νὰ πᾶει σ' ἓναν τόπο, ὅπου δὲν ὑπάρχει οὔτε φαγητό, οὔτε παιχνίδια, οὔτε ἀγαπημένα ζώακια; Πρέπει νὰ δίνουμε τὴν ἐντύπωση (καὶ δὲν εἶναι ἐσφαλμένη ἐντύπωση) ὅτι ὁ Οὐρανὸς εἶναι ἀσυγκρίτως καλύτερος ἀπ' ὅ,τι μποροῦμε νὰ φαντασθοῦμε. Μερικὰ παιδιά, μόλις τὸ ἄκουσαν αὐτό, ρώτησαν αὐθόρμητα:

Καλύτερος κι ἀπ' τὴ νύχτα τῆς Ἀναστάσεως; Καλύτερος κι ἀπ' τὸ παγωτό; Καλύτερος κι ἀπ' ὅταν ἡ μαμά σὲ βάζει νὰ κοιμηθεῖς; Ἡ Βίβλος μᾶς διδάσκει ὅτι θὰ ὑπάρχει οὐράνια τροφή, οὐράνιο γέλιο κ.λ.π. Ὅσον ἀφορᾷ τὰ ζῶα, τὰ παιδιά θέλουν νὰ ξέρουν ἂν τὸ ἀγαπημένο τοὺς ζῶο θὰ ἔχει μία θέση στὸν οὐρανὸ. Δὲν ὑπάρχει λόγος νὰ ἐξηγήσουμε θεολογικὰ αὐτὴ τὴ στιγμή σ' ἓνα παιδί σὲ τι διαφέρει ἡ ψυχὴ ἐνὸς ζῴου ἀπὸ τὴν ψυχὴ ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου. Εἶναι προτιμότερο νὰ τοῦ θυμίσουμε πόσο φροντίζει ὁ Θεὸς γιὰ κάθε μικρὸ σπουργίτι. (Βλ. Ματθ. 10:29).

Δὲν πρέπει ποτέ, ὅταν μιλᾶμε θεολογικά, νὰ καταστρέψουμε μία ιδέα ποὺ ἔχει κάποιος μέσα του, ἂν δὲν τὴν ἀντικαταστήσουμε μὲ μία ὀριμότερη ιδέα, ἡ ὁποία δὲν ξεπερνᾷ τὸ ἐπίπεδο ἀντιλήψεώς του. Στὸ Γεροντικὸ ὑπάρχει μία διήγηση γιὰ κάποιο μοναχὸ ὁ ὁποῖος ἦταν ἀνθρωπομορφιστὴς (δηλαδὴ ἐρμηνεύε στὴν κυριολεξία ἀγιογραφικὲς ἐκφράσεις ὅπως τὰ χέρια τοῦ Θεοῦ, τὰ μάτια τοῦ Θεοῦ κ.λ.π.). Οἱ Ὀρθόδοξοι μοναχοὶ τὸν διόρθωσαν. Τὸν ἐπισκέφθηκε ὅμως κάποιος ἄλλος μοναχὸς καὶ τὸν βρῆκε νὰ κλαίει. Ὁ ἐπισκέπτης τὸν ρώτησε: Γιατὶ κλαῖς, πάτερ; Δὲ

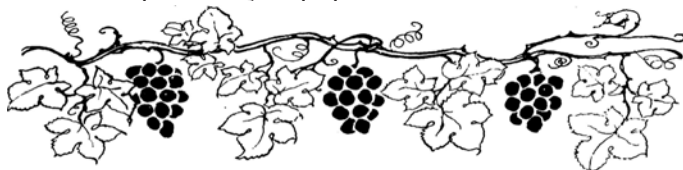
χαίρεσαι ποῦ ἐπέστρεψες στή σωστή πίστη; Ὁ μοναχὸς ἀπάντησε: Κλαίω, γιατί μου πήραν τὸν Θεό μου καὶ τώρα πιά δὲν ξέρω ποιὸν νὰ λατρέψω.

Δὲ θέλουμε τὰ παιδιά μας νὰ φοβοῦνται τὸ θάνατο. Πρέπει νὰ μιλάμε γι' αὐτὸν ὡς ἓνα κομμάτι τῆς ζωῆς μας—τὸ κατώφλι τῆς οὐράνιας ζωῆς—τὸ σκαλοπάτι πρὸς τὴν αἰώνια ζωὴ μὲ τὸν Χριστό. Μερικὲς φορὲς ὀρισμένα παιδιά θέλουν τόσο πολὺ νὰ πᾶνε στὸν Οὐρανό, ὥστε ἐκφράζουν τὴν ἐπιθυμία νὰ πεθάνουν ἢ ἀκόμα νὰ θέσουν μόνα τους τέρμα στὴ ζωὴ τους. Δὲν πρέπει νὰ βάζουμε μέσα σ' αὐτὰ τὰ παιδιά ἓνα νοσηρὸ φόβο τοῦ θανάτου γιὰ νὰ μετριάσουμε αὐτὴ τὴν ἐπιθυμία, ἀλλὰ νὰ τοὺς ἐξηγοῦμε ὅτι ὁ θάνατος εἶναι εὐλογημένος μόνο ἂν φύγουμε ἀπ' αὐτὸν τὸν κόσμο ὅταν μᾶς καλέσει ὁ Θεός, ἐπειδὴ Ἐκεῖνος μόνο γνωρίζει πότε εἴμαστε ἔτοιμοι.

Δὲν πηγαίνουμε στὸν Οὐρανὸ πρὶν μᾶς στείλει τὸ εἰσιτήριο. Δὲν ὑπάρχουν συνταγὲς γιὰ τὸ τί θὰ πούμε στὸ κάθε παιδί, πρέπει νὰ προσπαθοῦμε νὰ προσαρμόζουμε τὴν ἀπάντησή μας στὴν κάθε περίπτωση.

Πρόκειται γιὰ ἓνα πρόβλημα τὸ ὁποῖο συχνὰ βρῖσκει τοὺς γονεῖς ἀπροετοίμαστους. Εἶναι λυπηρὸ το γεγονός ὅτι μικρὰ παιδιά ἔχουν ἔστω ἀκούσει γιὰ τὴν αὐτοκτονία ἀλλὰ εἶναι μία πραγματικότητα τὴν ὁποία οἱ Χριστιανοὶ κατηχητὲς πρέπει νὰ ἀντιμετωπίσουν.

Οἱ ἐρωτήσεις γιὰ τὴν κόλαση καὶ τὸν Οὐρανό, τὸ κακὸ καὶ τὸ καλὸ, τοὺς δαίμονες, τὸ θάνατο, τὴν αὐτοκτονία κ.λ.π. θὰ τεθοῦν πολλὲς φορὲς κατὰ τὴ διάρκεια τῆς παιδικῆς ἡλικίας. Οἱ ἀπαντήσεις μας σ' αὐτὲς (ὅπως καὶ **στὴν ἐρώτηση πὼς γεννιοῦνται τὰ παιδιά**) πρέπει νὰ εἶναι ἀνάλογες μὲ τὸ ἐπίπεδο ἀναπτύξεως τοῦ παιδιοῦ. Δὲν ἀπαντοῦμε σ' ἓνα πεντάχρονο παιδί μὲ τὸν ἴδιο τρόπο πὸν θὰ ἀπαντούσαμε σ' ἓνα δεκάχρονο, ἂν ἔθετε τὴν ἴδια ἐρώτηση.



Δύσκολον εἶναι χωρὶς ἄσκηση νὰ δεσμευθῇ ἡ νεότητα στὸν ζυγὸ τῆς καθαρότητος. Ἡ ἀρχὴ τοῦ σκοτεινιάσματος τοῦ νοῦ πηγάζει, κατὰ πρῶτον ἀπὸ τὴν ὀκνηρία, ἡ ὁποία ἐκδηλώνεται στὴν πνευματικὴ ἐργασία καὶ στὴν προσευχή. Διότι ἄλλη ὁδὸς πλάνης δὲν ὑπάρχει στὴν ψυχὴ, παρὰ τὸ νὰ ἐκπέση προηγουμένως ἀπὸ τὴν πνευματικὴν ἐργασία καὶ τὴν προσευχή. Ἐπειδὴ πέφτει εὐκόλα στὰ χέρια τῶν ἐχθρῶν τῆς ἡ ψυχῆ, ὅταν στερηθῇ τὴν βοήθειαν τοῦ Θεοῦ. Καὶ πάλιν ξαναλέγω ὅτι, ὅταν ἡ ψυχὴ δὲν φροντίζει γιὰ τὰ ἔργα τῆς ἀρετῆς, εὐκόλα ἔλκεται ἀπὸ τὰ ἐνάντια τῶν ἀρετῶν.

Ἅγιος Ἰσαὰκ ὁ Σύρος

Τι Εἶναι τὸ Κουτσομπολιό

Ἀρχιμ. Παύλου Παπαδόπουλου.



Ἦταν κάποτε μία κυρία ἡ ὁποία προσήλθε μὲ μετάνοια νὰ ἐξομολογηθεῖ σὲ κάποιον ἱερέα. Ὁ ἱερέας τὴν καλοδέχτηκε, ἔβαλε τὸ πετραχίλι του καὶ τὴν παρότρυνε νὰ ἀρχίσει νὰ τοῦ λέγει τὰ λάθη της. Ἡ γυναίκα κομπίαζε.

Μετὰ ἀπὸ λίγη ὥρα καὶ μετὰ ἀπὸ τὰ πειστικὰ λόγια τοῦ ἱερέως ὅτι δὲν χρειάζεται νὰ ντρέπεται ἢ νὰ φοβᾶται νὰ ὁμολογήσει τὰ λάθη της, ἡ γυναίκα ἄρχισε νὰ τοῦ διηγῆται τὰ λόγια, τίς κατακρίσεις καὶ τὰ κουτσομπολιὰ πὸν σὲ ὅλη της τὴν ζωὴ ἔλεγε γιὰ ἀνθρώπους πὸν εἶτε τοὺς γνώριζε εἶτε δὲν τοὺς εἶχε συναντήσῃ ποτέ.

Ὁ ἱερέας τὴν ἄκουσε ὑπομονετικά. Ὅταν τελείωσε ὁ ἱερέας σηκώθηκε ὀρθιος. Τῆς διάβασε τὴν συγχωρητικὴ εὐχή. Ἡ γυναίκα νόμιζε τελείωσαν καὶ πῆγε νὰ φύγει.

Ὁ ἱερέας ὁμως τὴν εἶπε: «Μὴν βιάζεσαι, θέλω νὰ πᾶς στὸ σπίτι σου, νὰ πάρεις τὸ μαξιλάρι σου καὶ νὰ ἀνέβεις στὴν στέγη. Ἐκεῖ, νὰ πάρεις ἓνα μαχαίρι καὶ νὰ ἀνοίξεις στὰ δύο το μαξιλάρι. Θέλω νὰ τὸ κάνεις αὐτὸ καὶ νὰ παρατηρήσεις τί θὰ γίνῃ. Ἐλα αὔριο νὰ μοῦ πεῖς τί ἔγινε.

Ἡ γυναίκα πῆγε καὶ ἔκανε ὅτι τῆς εἶπε ὁ ἱερέας.

Τὴν ἐπαύριον ἡ γυναίκα ξαναπῆγε στὸν ἱερέα. «Ἐκανα ὅτι μου εἶπατε», εἶπε ἡ γυναίκα. Ὁ ἱερέας λοιπὸν τὴν ρώτησε: «Τι παρατήρησες καθὼς ἔσκιζες τὸ μαξιλάρι»; Ἡ γυναίκα χωρὶς δισταγμὸ εἶπε: «Μὲ τὸ πὸν ἄρχισα νὰ σκίζω τὸ μαξιλάρι ἄρχισαν νὰ βγαίνουν τὰ πούπουλα πὸν ὑπῆρχαν μέσα του καὶ νὰ γεμίζουν τὸν τόπο... κάποια τὰ ἔπαιρνε ὁ ἀέρας καὶ τὰ πῆγαινε πολὺ μακριά».

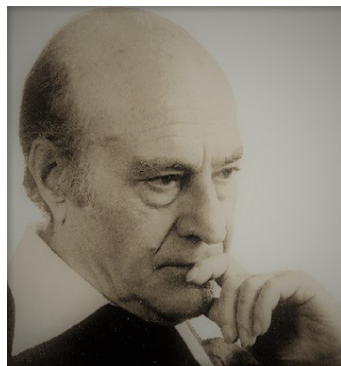
Ὁ ἱερέας μετὰ τὴν σύντομη αὐτὴ περιγραφή τῆς εἶπε: «Τώρα λοιπὸν, θέλω νὰ πᾶς σπίτι σου καὶ νὰ μαζέψεις ὅλα ἐκεῖνα τὰ πούπουλα πὸν ὑπῆρχαν μέσα στὸ μαξιλάρι σου»!

Ἡ γυναίκα τὰ ἔχασε. «Μά, τί λέτε πάτερ, πὼς νὰ τὰ μαζέψω ὅλα ἐκεῖνα τὰ πούπουλα; Ἕνας Θεὸς ξέρει πὸν ἔχουνε πάει τώρα μὲ τὸν ἀέρα. Αὐτὸ πὸν λέτε εἶναι ἀδύνατο νὰ τὸ κάνω». Ὁ ἱερέας τὴν κοίταξε στὰ μάτια γεμάτος ἡρεμία καὶ τίς εἶπε: «Νὰ λοιπὸν τί εἶναι τὸ κουτσομπολιό»!!!

Ἡ γυναίκα σάστισε. Κατάλαβε ὅτι ἂν καὶ μετανίωσε γι' αὐτὰ πὸν εἶπε, τὰ λόγια της ἀκόμα καὶ τώρα πληγώνουν ἀνθρώπους καὶ γίνονται αἰτία σκανδαλισμοῦ κι ἄλλων.

Μ' Αὐτὰ καὶ μ' Αὐτὰ Ἐφτάσαμε στὴν «Ψευδοφάνεια»

Ὀδυσσεύς Ἐλύτης (+1996), ὁ Νομπελίστας ἐθνικός μας ποιητής.



Δὲν μ' ἐνδιαφέρει ὁ ἐπίσημος ὄρος τῆς δουλοπρέπειας. Μ' ἐνδιαφέρει ἡ οὐσία. Κι ἐκεῖνο ποὺ ξερω εἶναι ὅτι μ' αὐτὰ καὶ μ' αὐτὰ ἐφτάσαμε σὲ κάτι ποὺ θὰ μοῦ ἐπιτρέψετε νὰ ὀνομάσω «ψευδοφάνεια»...

Ἔχουμε, δηλαδή, τὴν τάση νὰ παρουσιαζόμαστε διαρκῶς διαφορετικοὶ

ἀπ' ὅ,τι πραγματικὰ εἴμαστε. καὶ δὲν ὑπάρχει ἀσφαλέστερος δρόμος πρὸς τὴν ἀποτυχία, εἴτε σὰν ἄτομο σταδιοδρομεῖς εἴτε σὰν σύνολο, ἀπὸ τὴν ἔλλειψη τῆς γνησιότητας· τὸ κακὸ πάει πολὺ μακριά.

Ὅλα τὰ διοικητικὰ μας συστήματα, οἱ κοινωνικοὶ μας θεσμοί, τὰ ἐκπαιδευτικὰ μας προγράμματα, ἀρχῆς γενομένης ἀπὸ τοὺς Βαυαροὺς, πάθθηκαν μὲ προχειρότατο τρόπο ἀπὸ ἔξω, καὶ κόπηκαν καὶ ράφτηκαν ὅπως-ὅπως, ἐπάνω σ' ἓνα σῶμα μὲ ἄλλες διαστάσεις καὶ ἄλλους ὄρους ἀναπνοῆς...

Καὶ δὲν πρόκειται βέβαια γιὰ «προγογοπληξία».

Τὰ λέω, ἄλλωστε, αὐτὰ ἐγὼ πού, σ' ἓναν τομέα ὅπως ὁ δικός μου, κήρυξα μὲ φανατισμὸ τὴν ἀνάγκη τῆς ἐπικοινωνίας μας μὲ τὸ διεθνὲς πνεῦμα, καὶ ποὺ σήμερα μὲ ἐμπιστοσύνη ἀποβλέπω στὴ διαμόρφωση ἑνὸς ἐνιαίου εὐρωπαϊκοῦ σχήματος, ὅπου νὰ ἔχει τὴ θέση τῆς ἠ Ἑλλάδα. Μὲ τὴ διαφορὰ ὅτι ὁ μηχανισμὸς τῆς ἀφομοιώσεως τῶν στοιχείων τῆς προόδου πρέπει νὰ λειτουργεῖ σωστά, καὶ νὰ βασιζέται σὲ μιὰ γερὴ καὶ φυσιολογικὰ ἀναπτυγμένη παιδεία.

Ἐνῶ σ' ἐμᾶς, ὄχι μόνον δὲν λειτουργεῖ σωστά, ἀλλὰ δὲν ὑπάρχει κἄν ὁ μηχανισμὸς αὐτὸς γιὰ νὰ λειτουργήσει!

Καὶ μὲ τὴ διαφορὰ ἀκόμη ὅτι, ἐκτὸς ἀπὸ ἐλάχιστες ἐξαιρέσεις, ἡ ἠγετική μας τάξη, στὸ κεφάλαιο τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς παιδείας, ἔχει μαῦρα μεσάνυχτα!

Κοιτάξτε μὲ προσοχὴ τὰ ἐντυπα ποὺ εκδίδει ἡ ἴδια, ἢ ποὺ προτιμᾷ νὰ διαβάξει, τὰ διαμερίσματα ὅπου κατοικεῖ, τὶς διασκεδάσεις ποὺ κάνει, τὴ στάση τῆς ἀπέναντι στὴ ζωὴ.

Οὔτε μιὰ σταγόνα γνησιότητας! Πῶς θέλετε, λοιπόν, ν' ἀναθρέψει σωστὰ τὴ νέα γενιά;

Ἀπὸ τὰ πρῶτα διαβάσματα ποὺ θὰ κάνει ἓνα παιδί ὡς τὰ διάφορα στοιχεῖα ποὺ θὰ συναντήσει στὸ καθημερινό του περιβάλλον, καὶ ποὺ θὰ διαμορφώσουν τὸ γοῦστο του, μιὰ συνεχῆς καὶ ἀδιάκοπη πλαστογραφία καὶ τίποτε ἄλλο!

Θὰ μοῦ πεῖτε: εἶσαι λογοτέχνης, καλαμαράς, καὶ βλέπεις τὰ πράγματα ἀπὸ τὴ μεριά ποὺ σὲ πονᾶνε. Ὅχι, καθόλου! καὶ νὰ μοῦ ἐπιτρέψετε νὰ ἐπιμείνω.

Ὅλα τὰ ἄλλα κακὰ ποὺ θὰ μπορούσα νὰ καταγγείλω—ἡ ἔλλειψη οὐσιαστικῆς ἀποκεντρώσεως καὶ αὐτοδιοικήσεως, ἡ ἔλλειψη προγραμματισμοῦ γιὰ τὴν πλουτοπαραγωγικὴ ἀνάπτυξη τῆς χώρας, ἀκόμη καὶ ὁ τρόπος μὲ τὸν ὁποῖο ἀσκεῖται ἡ ἔξωτερικὴ μας πολιτικὴ—εἶναι ζητήματα βαθύτερης Ἑλληνικῆς παιδείας!

Ἀπὸ τὴν ἄποψη ὅτι μόνον αὐτὴ μπορεῖ νὰ προικίσει ἓναν ἠγέτη μὲ τὴν ἀπαραίτητη εὐαισθησία ποὺ χρειάζεται γιὰ νὰ ἐνστερνιστεῖ, καὶ ἀντιστοιχῶς νὰ ἀποδώσει, τὸ ἦθος τοῦ λαοῦ. Γιατὶ αὐτὸς ὁ λαός, ποὺ τὴν ἔννοιά του τὴν ἔχουμε παραμορφώσει σὲ σημεῖο νὰ μὴν τὴν ἀναγνωρίζουμε, αὐτὸς ἔχει φτιάξει ὅ,τι καλὸ ὑπάρχει—ἂν ὑπάρχει κάτι καλὸ σ' αὐτὸν τὸν τόπο!

Καὶ αὐτὸς, στὶς ὥρες τοῦ κινδύνου, καὶ στὸ πείσμα τῆς συστηματικῆς ἠττοπαθείας τῶν ἀρχηγῶν του, αἴρεται, χάρη σ' ἓναν ἀόρατο, εὐλογημένο μηχανισμὸ, στὰ ὕψη ποὺ ἀπαιτεῖ τὸ θαῦμα!

Ὅσο, λοιπόν, καὶ ἂν εἶναι λυπηρό, πρέπει νὰ τὸ πῶ: Ὁ Ἑλληνισμὸς, γιὰ τὴν ὥρα τουλάχιστον, ἐπέτυχε ὡς γένος, ἀλλ' ἀπέτυχε ὡς κράτος!

Καὶ παρακαλῶ νύχτα μέρα τὸν Θεό, καὶ τὸ μέλλον, νὰ μὲ διαψεύσουν.

† † †

Καὶ ἀναρωτιόμαστε—ποῦ νὰ ζοῦσε στὶς μέρες μας ὁ προφητικὸς, ἐθνικὸς μας ποιητὴς καὶ νὰ ἔβλεπε τὴν κατάντια τῆς σημερινῆς κρατικῆς, κοινωνικῆς, καὶ θρησκευτικῆς «ψευδοφάνειας»...

ΚΥΡΙΕ ΕΛΕΗΣΟΝ!



Γέμισε ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη κοινωνία ἀπὸ ἀνασταυρωτὰς τοῦ Ἐσταυρωμένου! Καὶ τί νὰ εἶπῃ κανεὶς γι' αὐτοὺς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἐξ αἰτίας τῶν ὁποίων σεῖεται ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη κοινωνία καὶ σκοτίζεται ὁ ἥλιος τῆς καλωσύνης, ὅπως σεῖσθηκε ἡ γῆ καὶ σκοτίσθηκε ὁ ἥλιος κατὰ τὴν σταύρωσι τοῦ Θεανθρώπου;

Γιὰ τοὺς ἀνασταυρωτὰς τοῦ Κυρίου καὶ Θεοῦ καὶ Σωτῆρος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἓνα νὰ εἰποῦμε· ὅσοι δὲν ἔχουν διαστραφῆ ὅπως οἱ δαίμονες καὶ μποροῦν νὰ μετανοήσουν, ἄς μετανοήσουν, γιὰ νὰ μὴν ἔχουν τοῦ Ἰούδα, τοῦ Καϊάφα, τοῦ Πιλάτου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων σταυρωτῶν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ τὸ τέλος καὶ τὴν ἄνευ τέλους δυστυχία, ἀλλὰ νὰ τύχουν ἐλέους καὶ σωτηρίας ἀπὸ τὸν Ἐσταυρωμένο.

Νικόλαος Ἰω. Σωτηρόπουλος (+2014)

THE FINAL GOAL OF MAN: A LIVING UNITY WITH GOD

By St. Theophan the Recluse, from "The Path to Salvation, A Concise Outline of Christian Asceticism," translated by Hieromonk Seraphim (Rose), published by the Holy Monastery of St. Paisius, Arizona (2016), pp. 181-190.

Let us recall that the person has just turned from darkness to light, from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God; he just entered a new path, on which he has not yet made a single step. But he burns with zeal to do everything necessary in order to establish himself in the work he has begun and not to give in again to his former tyrants, who separated him from God and the Saviour, dragging him to destruction.

We might ask: Where is he to go, and what should he do in order to arrive where he should, and to arrive surely, directly, quickly and successfully? The goal towards which the convert should direct all his attention and labors is the final goal of man and the economy of salvation, namely: pleasing God, a living unity with God, becoming worthy of His kingdom. The searching, zealous spirit will only be at peace when he attains God, tastes Him and is filled. Therefore the first law for him is: *Seek ye the Lord, and be strengthened; seek ye His face at all times.* (Pss 104:4). The blessedness of this is incomprehensible to man. He himself could not even have conceived of such a height. But when it pleased God to give him this dignity, it was audacious for man to refuse it through his unbelief, inattentiveness, and neglect of it in his thoughts, even during his labors. *I will dwell in them* (2 Cor 6:16), says God, and this is all three Persons of the Most-Holy Trinity. The Lord says of God the Father and of Himself: *We will come unto him,* (to him who believes in Him and loves Him) *and make our abode with him.* (Jn 14:23). And about Himself Alone: *I will come in to him, and will sup with him.* (Apoc 3:20); and even more clearly: *I am in My Father, and ye in Me, and I in you.* (Jn 14:20). The Apostle says about the Holy Spirit: *The Spirit of God dwelleth in you* (1 Cor. 3:16), or: *that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.* (Gal 3:14).

We should note that God's indwelling is not merely mental, as sometimes happens during divine contemplation, but it is a living, enlivening thing, to which contemplation should only be considered a means. Mental and heartfelt longing for God, that has come by God's good will, prepares a person to truly receive God. It is a kind of unity in which, without eradicating human strength and personality, God manifests Himself as one that *worketh* in him *both to will and to do* (Phil 2:13); and the person, according to the Apostle, does not live but *Christ lives in him.* (Gal. 2:20). This is not only the person's goal, but also the goal of God Himself. All is created in God and endures in God. Free creatures are given over to their own volition, but not finally and not forever, so that they would give themselves to God All-powerful, not making any particular kingdom of themselves independent of God's kingdom.

It may seem strange that communion with God must be attained when it is already present, or is given through the Sacrament of Baptism or Confession, for it is said: *For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ* (Gal. 3:27); or: *For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.* (Col. 3:3). Indeed, according to a simple understanding God is everywhere: *That they should seek the Lord, if perhaps they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us* (Acts 17:27), and He is ready to abide in anyone who is ready to receive Him. Only lack of desire, coarseness and sinfulness keep us from Him. Now that the penitent has renounced everything and given himself to God, what hinders God from dwelling in him?

I. Various Aspects of Communion with God

To clear up such a perplexity, we must discriminate between the various aspects of communion with God. Communion begins at the moment of awakening. Man discovers it through searching and longing for God, and God reveals it through His good will, assistance, and protection. But God is still outside of man and man is outside of God, not commingling and not freely mutually accepted. In the Sacrament of Baptism or Confession the Lord enters a man by His grace, is in live communion with him, and allows him to taste all the sweetness of Divinity, so abundantly and perceptibly, as though it were essentially culminated in him. But then He again hides this manifestation of His communion, only renewing it from time to time—and at that only lightly, as if in a reflection and not in His original state. He leaves man in ignorance of Himself and His dwelling in man until the man has reached a specific level of maturity or education, according to God's wise guidance. After this, the Lord perceptibly manifests His dwelling in the man's spirit, which has by then become a temple of the Tri-hypostatic Divinity filling him.

Thus, there are three forms of communion with God: One is mental, which happens during the period of conversion; and the other two are actual, but one of them is hidden, invisible to others and unknown to us ourselves, while the other is obvious to us and to others.

The first form of communion, the most understandable and common, does not cease during the second or even third stages, because spiritual life is mental life. However, in these stages it differs characteristically from its first quality, which is something impossible to explain in words. All spiritual life consists in the movement from mental communion with God to actual, live, perceptible and manifest communion.

II. How Grace Settles In the Repentant Soul

In looking at a person who has repented, we are looking at a person who has actually entered into communion with God, but this communion is still hidden, secret, unmanifest. His goal is to attain communion that is complete, tangible, and perceptible. We must precisely determine all of this for ourselves and be assured, because all the penitent's labor for salvation should be built upon this foundation, namely: that

in the Sacrament of Confession (or Baptism) grace descends perceptibly to the spirit but then hides itself from the awareness, although it does not in fact go away. It remains imperceptible until the heart is purified, at which time it dwells visibly and finally. It is obvious that our only instructors in this matter can be the Holy Fathers. None of them expresses it so well as St. Diadochos, Bishop of Photiki, and St. Makarios of Egypt. We present their witness to our suppositions.

Grace settles in a person and stays with him from the moment he receives the Mysteries

“From the instant we are baptized,” says St. Diadochos, “grace is hidden in the depths of the intellect.” Also: “For when through Holy Baptism divine grace in its infinite love permeates the lineaments of God’s image—thereby renewing in the soul the capacity for attaining the divine likeness—what place is there for the devil?” (St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Philokalia*, vol. i, nos. 77-78, p. 279-280). St. Makarios says: “Grace is constantly present, and is rooted in us, and worked into us like leaven, from our earliest years, until the thing thus present becomes fixed in a man like a natural endowment, as if it were one substance with him.” (St. Makarios the Great, Homily 8:2).

When grace first settles in a person through a Sacrament it vouchsafes that person a complete taste of the blessedness of communion with God

“If we fervently desire holiness,” says St. Diadochos, “the Holy Spirit at the outset gives the soul a full and conscious taste of God’s sweetness, so that the intellect will know exactly of what the final reward of the spiritual life consists.” (St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, no. 90, p. 289). In addition: “At the start of the spiritual way, the soul usually has the conscious experience of being illumined with its own light through the action of grace.” (St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, no. 90, p. 276). This most perceptible illumination of grace is at first expressed by the white clothing that the newly baptized wear for seven days. That this is not just a formality is seen from the examples of the holy converts, for some were visibly clothed in light, upon others a dove descended, and the faces of others became bright. In general all who have truly come close to the Lord have felt a certain leaping of spirit, similar to the leaping of the Forerunner of the Lord in the womb of Elizabeth when the Mother of God approached her carrying the Lord within her. In the Lives of Sts. Symeon and John is written that they saw a light around a brother who was baptized and received the monastic habit—and it lasted seven days. Feeling a particular action of God upon receiving the monastic habit, they sought to preserve it forever, and immediately departed to a solitary place more suitable for that form of asceticism.

Grace hides itself from the one who is laboring for his salvation

Then grace hides itself from the one who is laboring for his salvation, and although it dwells and works in him, it does so unnoticeably to him, and he is so unaware of it that he often

considers himself to be abandoned by God and perishing, which causes him to fall into constrictions, lamentations and even light depression. Thus St. Diadochos continues, from the foregoing citation: “Incidentally, it hides the treasure of this life-creating gift for a long time, so that we would count ourselves as nothing though we fulfill every virtue, for we have not yet made holy love habitual in ourselves...” “But as we continue our ascetic struggles, it produces in the theologizing soul its secret activity in a manner unknown by the soul, so that it might incline us who have been called, at the first opportunity, from the unknown to the known, to enter the way of divine visions; and secondly, so that amidst our ascetic labors we might preserve our knowledge from vainglory.” (St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, no. 69, p. 276).

In another place he explains how grace works in general: “Grace at first conceals its presence, in those who have been baptized, waiting to see which way the soul inclines; but when the whole man has turned towards the Lord it then reveals to the heart its presence there with a feeling which words cannot express, once again waiting to see which way the soul inclines. At the same time, however, it allows the arrows of the devil to wound the soul at the most inward point of its sensitivity, so as to make the soul search out God with warmer resolve and more humble disposition...” “And I am speaking here of the struggle that takes place when God recedes in order to educate us—then grace conceals itself a little, as I have said, but nevertheless supports the soul in a hidden way, so that in the eyes of its enemies the victory appears to be due to the soul alone. This brings great sadness, humility and even some measure of despair to the soul.” (St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, nos. 85-87; pp. 285-287).

St. Makarios of Egypt also says: “God’s grace in man (which is already present, already granted), and the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is vouchsafed to a faithful soul, proceeds with much contention, with much endurance and long suffering, and temptations and trials.” (St. Makarios the Great, Homily 9:7). This refers of course not to the first time grace is received, but its complete indwelling and activity, as we can see from his own words, where he says that “The spiritual influence of God’s grace within the soul works with great patience, wisdom, and mysterious management of the mind, while the man for long times and seasons contends in much endurance; and then the work of grace is proved to be perfect in him.” (St. Makarios the Great, Homily 9:1). He explains this using the examples of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and David, who, having received great promises, were made to suffer a long time in unknowing until they finally saw the fulfillment of the promise. (St. Makarios the Great, Homily 9:2-6.).

It is necessary to note that this hiddenness and imperceptibility is not all-encompassing, but is sometimes mixed with consolations, although these consolations are something entirely different from those which occur with the indwelling of the Spirit.

Finally, God dwells in man in a special manner

Finally, when this period of hidden communion with God and His mysterious activity in the soul is over (the duration of this period not being in man's hands but in the guiding wisdom of man-saving grace), *God dwells in man in a special manner.* He visibly fills him, unites Himself to him and communes with him. This is the goal man strives to achieve through all his ascetic struggles and labors, all the economy of salvation from God Himself, and all that happens to each person in the present life from birth to the grave. St. Makarios writes that the work of grace after long trials finally shows itself fully, and the soul acquires full sonship of the Spirit. God Himself proves the heart, and man is made worthy to be of one spirit with the Lord. According to St. Diadochos, "If a man, while still alive, can undergo death through his labors, then in his entirety he becomes the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit." (St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, no. 82, p. 284). "Grace illumines his whole being with a deeper awareness, warming him with great love of God." (St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, no. 85, p. 2.85). This action reveals itself or is accompanied by different manifestations with different people.

III. Two Ways of Communing with God

These two ways of actually communing with God were beautifully described by the wise Sirach, speaking of wisdom, which is the very grace of God which saves us: *For at the first she will walk with him by crooked ways, and bring fear and dread upon him, and torment him with her discipline, until she may trust his soul, and try him by her laws. Then will she return the straight way unto him, and comfort him, and show him her secrets.* (Eccl 4:17-19).

For at first she will walk with him by crooked ways—that is, austere, strictly, unmercifully, with a seeming lack of love; *and bring fear and dread upon him*, the fear of God's abandonment and the ever-imminent threat of attack from vicious enemies. According to St. Diadochos, grace acts like a mother who hides from her children so that from fear they would begin to cry and seek her, especially when they see strange faces before them (St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, no. 86, p. 286);

and torment him with her discipline—it will keep him a long time in this period of hidden and severe instruction. According to St. Makarios, grace in many and various ways, as it wills and corresponds to the person's needs, orders everything for him, keeps him in many temptations and mysterious trials of the mind (St. Makarios the Great, Homily 8:2), and so on; *until she may trust his soul, and try him by her laws*—that is, grace leads him to the point where he can be relied upon completely as one tried and true. St. Makarios says that when after many temptations the will has come to please the Holy Spirit, and over a long period of time has shown itself to be patient and unwavering in this; when the soul does not offend the Spirit in any way, but is cooperative with grace and all the commandments (St. Makarios the Great, Homily 9:1), then

will she return the straight way unto him—that is, openly, face-to-face appear to him as if after a separation. Then, according to St. Makarios, "the work of grace is proved to be perfect in him—he acquires full sonship" (St. Makarios the Great, Homily 9:1); or according to St. Diadochos, grace illumines his whole existence with some kind of deep feeling, and he becomes entirely the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit—the light of God's face (Ps. 4:7). Our Lord and God comes and makes His abode with him (Jn 14:23); and comforts him.

And your heart shall rejoice, says the Lord, and your joy no man taketh from you. (Jn 16:22). The kingdom of God is *joy in the Holy Spirit.* (Rom 14:17). The light that shines in man, says St. Makarios, so penetrates all the inward parts of a man, that he, immersed in this sweet and pleasant feeling, is totally outside himself because of the super-abundance of love and the hidden mysteries that he himself now sees. St. Diadochos says that the soul then flames and yearns with an indescribable kind of joy and love to leave the body and depart to the Lord, and as if to forget this temporary life. (St. Diadochos of Photiki, *Philokalia*, vol. 1, no. 13, p. 256).

And show him her secrets—the secrets of divine wisdom, the Trinity worthy of worship, the economy of salvation, the acquisition of salvation, the secret of sin and virtue, Providence for creatures rational and material and, in general, the whole divine order of things, as described in great detail by St. Isaac the Syrian in his epistle to St. Symeon. "When the intellect is renewed and the heart is sanctified... His intellect perceives the spiritual knowledge of created things, and the divine vision of the mysteries of the Holy Trinity together with the mysteries of the worshipful economy on our behalf shines forth in him; then he becomes one through the completeness of the knowledge of the hope of future things ... For if the intellect, which beholds hidden spiritual mysteries, is in its natural state of health, it distinctly beholds the glory of Christ. It does not question or receive instruction, but more than in the freedom of the will it delights in the sweetness of the mysteries of the new world ... " (The Ascetical Homilies of St. Isaac the Syrian, Appendix B, Part II, p. 437). Such perfect knowledge comes with the receiving of the Spirit, which leads our spirit into that world, or realm of contemplation. The Holy Spirit takes the covering away from the soul, transports his soul to the future age and shows it everything wondrous. (St. Makarios the Great, Homily on "Exultation of the Mind," sec. 13, On Freedom, 24, 20 and 21, conv. 17, sec. 4).

Thus, it is now clear that the grace that comes to the convert through the Sacraments unites with him and gives him at first a taste of all the sweetness of life in God, and then hides its presence from him, leaving him to act on his own in labors, sweat, perplexities and even falls; finally, after this period of trial is over; it abides in him obviously, actively, powerfully, and perceptibly.

A GOOD DISBELIEF [JN 20:19-29]

By the late Metropolitan Avgoustinos N. Kantiotis (+2010) from his book "Follow Me," published by the Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Inc., Belmont, Massachusetts (1989), pp. 269-276.

Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

[Jn 20:28]

† † †

Illusionism

If there is one event in evangelical history at which disbelief more tempestuously hurls its fires, it is the Lord's Resurrection. What haven't disbelievers said, and what haven't they written against the Resurrected Lord? "The Resurrection was not an actual event," they said. "The Resurrection is the product of excited minds and the gullible believed it to be real."

But who, I ask, are the imaginative and who are the gullible? The disciples? The myrrh-bearing women? When Mary Magdalene went to the tomb very early that morning, she had no thought of a Resurrection. Her desire was to anoint Jesus' Body. Her only concern was who would remove the heavy stone which blocked the door of the tomb. When to her surprise she found it open and the tomb empty, she might have suspected Jesus' Resurrection as a likely reason for this phenomenon; however, Mary Magdalene had no thought of the Resurrection; instead, her thoughts were of one who, gazing into the empty tomb of an ordinary mortal, suspected the body had been stolen and began to weep.

When a stranger appeared and asked why she was weeping, the thought never entered her head that the stranger might be Jesus; she mistook Him for the gardener. Where, then, do you see an overactive imagination in Mary Magdalene? She was in the midst of events which must have evoked thoughts of the Lord's Resurrection, but she did not abandon her lowly, pessimistic suspicion that Jesus' Body had been stolen. Nor did the disciples believe the joyful message of the Resurrection when it was delivered to them. They rejected the myrrh-bearers' story as make-believe—an old wives' tale, *an idle tale* (Lk 24:11). Two of them, Peter and John, decided to go to the grave and look carefully inside to make sure it was empty. The Resurrected Lord appeared to the disciples, and they thought He was a ghost. He invited them to touch His hands and feet, and before their eyes He ate roasted fish and a honeycomb, so that they would believe.

Who, then, was overly imaginative or gullible among the disciples?

Thomas Was Not There

It is with the case of Thomas that the opinion about overactive imaginations and gullibility is crushed. As the Evangelist John states, Thomas was not there when the Lord first appeared to the disciples. Where he was we do not know.

Thomas was a melancholy character who more than anyone had sunk into despair because of his Teacher's tragic end. In vain he had tried to dissuade the Teacher from His martyrdom, and now it appeared as if everything was ruined. He had no desire to speak to anyone. As happens with this personality type, Thomas went into seclusion; he withdrew into himself and became painfully nostalgic of the days he had spent with the Teacher.

Was it only his depression that caused him to be absent on that unforgettable day, that day after the Sabbath when the Resurrected Lord appeared to the disciples? We think not. Believing that God's Providence is in the details of everyone's life, much more in those of the faithful, and to an even greater degree in those of the Apostles, we think that Thomas' absence on that evening was not by chance; it was in God's plan. It served a higher purpose. As an ancient church writer stated, *This was also a work of divine economy, that the absence of the disciple became a cause of full assurance and certainty. For if Thomas were present, he would not have doubted; and if he had not doubted, he would not have curiously sought; and if he had not sought, he would not have touched; and if he had not touched, he would not have proclaimed Him Lord and God; and if he had not called Christ Lord and God, we would not have been taught to hymn Him so.* (Migne 63:927).

Thomas' Incredulity

Thomas was not present, but when he met with the disciples, they told him all the details of the Lord's appearance. "Thomas, we have seen the Lord. We heard His sweet voice which calmed our hearts, gave us tranquility, calmness, and His inexpressible peace. We saw the marks which the nails and lance left on His Body. We dared to go near and touch them, and we were convinced that He was the Lord. We fell down and worshiped Him. We received a puff of wind from His mouth, a spiritual wind that bears every grace. We received authority to forgive sins. We poor men were enriched that evening with spiritual riches ineffable! Thomas, *We have seen the Lord!*" (Jn 20:25).

After this testimony, what would you expect? Do you think Thomas would have believed? Because the witnesses were not strangers to Thomas, but his fellow disciples whom he had come to know well over three years, he had no reason to doubt their sincerity. The testimony of ten witnesses worthy of belief should have become his own.

Alas, if we had to be present for every event that occurred on earth to verify it personally, history would cease to be. Our knowledge would be confined, limited only to those things we happened to witness personally. We see and hear through the eyes and ears of others, everyone worthy of credence.

Thomas, were any others more worthy of credence than your fellow disciples? Why did you doubt their words? Why

did you scourge their hearts? But Thomas was incredulous; he did not believe. He believed only his own senses and did not accept any other proofs. Was he not heard to say, *Unless I see... I will not believe?* (Jn 20:25).

How saddened the ten must have been at Thomas' response. "Ten people assured him and he will not believe us! What kind of man is this? The word of God says that *by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.* (Deut 19:15). And we, who are many more, you do not judge worthy of credit!" This is perhaps what the other disciples thought and said, being indignant at Thomas' incredulity.

The Lord's Condescension

And the Lord? In His infinite condescension and love He didn't let Thomas drown in the sea of doubt and disbelief. The following Lord's Day He appeared again in the same manner. Thomas was also present this time. After His blessing, *Peace to you!* the Lord turned to Thomas and said, *Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.* (Jn 20:27). Thomas heard the Lord's invitation in amazement, for now he had proof not only that the Lord had risen and lived, but that He knew the arguments he put forth with the other disciples raising as dogma his "Unless I see, I will not believe."

What could Thomas say here? "Had the Lord heard me when I spoke so insolently about His Resurrection? Was He invisibly present?" Did this revelation serve to convince Thomas that the risen Lord was before him? After this revelation did Thomas dare touch Him? The Gospel does not say whether he touched Him or not, and the opinions of interpreters are divided. We tend to agree with the opinion that Thomas did not touch Him. The vision of the Lord, as well as the words heard from His mouth, made every trace of doubt vanish from Thomas' heart, and he considered touching Him entirely fatuous. He therefore immediately cried out and said, *My Lord and my God!* (Jn 20:28).

The same thing happens to those who doubt Christ enough to attempt to explain Christianity with the aim of defining Christ's Person and work down to the last detail—that is, to touch Him. But as soon as they begin their investigation, because their intentions are good, such light shines up from within them that they are wrapped in wonder and belief, leaving further interpretation to the wind, and they cry out like Thomas, *My Lord and my God!*

Gullibility and Incredulity

Thomas finally believed, but belief attained after much searching and roaming is inferior. Superior faith, the best faith, does not busy itself with details or try to balance everything, but eagerly opens the ears of the soul, hears God's word, and places Him above the senses and precarious reasonings. Its tongue moves in praise and glorification, and its hands stretch out to receive His priceless gifts. It is this faith the Lord commends, saying, *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.* (Jn 20:29).

This faith, abiding in simple, humble souls, is scorned and mocked by those of proud spirit. This faith, they tell you, is for little children and old ladies. We need proof to believe. How curious! They need proof of the religion of Jesus Christ, yet like mindless fish they gulp down other things offered them without examination, research, or proof, even if the hook of death be hidden beneath the alluring bait. They unreservedly accept theories and hypotheses, and



senseless false philosophies and sciences. They blindly follow arrogant political leaders of unproven moral status or intellectual prowess. They anxiously listen to the prophecies of "sages," astrologers, and mediums as though they were commandments. They entrust their persons and possessions to individuals and anonymous societies and organizations. They believe everyone and everything, and so they tra-

verse the land, sail the oceans, and fly into space. When they are sick, they take medicines and submit to painful operations, believing in humanity.

In Him alone they do not believe. Gullible in everything, credulous of the devil, incredulous toward the Christ. Like Thomas, they want to touch everything connected with the Lord, to submit it to research, to "control" it. The Lord condescends; the Highest submits to investigation. How is it that they do not hear His bitter complaint against those who constantly seek a sign to believe, yet when signs are given, they, hard-necked and unaffected, will not believe? How is it that the Lord does not say to them again, *O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?* (Mt 17:17).

Continuous Investigation

In this category of people, can we not include disbelievers, those who deny the Lord's Resurrection? They say they want proof, yet we give them the greatest proof—the testimony of Thomas, one of the most incredulous of people, who said,

Unless I see . . . I will not believe. Because he was a sincere person, however, he believed from the depths of his heart and cried out in a loud voice, *My Lord and my God!* which for many like Thomas became an aid to belief. For this reason Thomas' disbelief ended exquisitely in a loud declaration of the Lord's Resurrection. The Fathers of the Church call this "a good disbelief." The hymnist sings, *O good disbelief of Thomas! It led faithful hearts to recognize.*

Beloved, may your own doubt and disbelief culminate in faith. You will become a staff of faith for others, but for the coldly corrupt—those who close their ears to the word of truth and have the attitude of "try as you might, you can't convince me"—no proof will ever lead them from the labyrinth of their incredulity. If thousands of Thomases were to appear and give testimony, repeating that bright declaration, *My Lord and my God*, the corrupt would not believe. For this reason, an illiterate shepherd who goes to church on Resurrection eve, hears *Christ Is Risen*, breathes the pure air of faith, and rejoices is far superior to the philosopher who is still at home studying, examining, and investigating the Gospel texts without ever attaining the faith that simple, humble people have. It is for this reason the Lord said, *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.* (Jn 20:29).



I know that a physiologically healthy young person cannot easily attain a spiritual state where *there is neither male nor female* (Gal 3:28). This is why the Spiritual Fathers recommend that young men and women—no matter how spiritual they may be—should not spend time together; [because]—at their age—problems will naturally arise, and then temptation will step in and take advantage of their youth.

It is better for a young man or a young woman to bear this heavy cross, and risk being considered a fool by the opposite sex for his or her spiritual prudence and innocence. This heavy cross hides all the power and wisdom of God, making the young man stronger than Sampson and wiser than Solomon. Better, then, that he walk down the street praying, rather than looking left and right, even if relatives may misunderstand him and think that he snubbed them by not speaking to them. Otherwise, if he walks looking around with curiosity, he may get in trouble; or get misunderstood by lay-people who always harbor suspicious thoughts.

It is a thousand times better to leave Church right away after Liturgy, like a lone animal, and keep his spiritual good sense and whatever he learned intact, rather than stay around and stare at fancy furs or ties, and become spiritually agitated as the enemy starts scratching his heart.

St. Paisios the Athonite

ADVICE TO HUSBANDS...

YOU, THE MAN THAT HEARS ST. PAUL, ADVISING THE WOMAN TO SUBORDINATE HER WILL TO HER HUSBAND, YOU PRAISE AND ADMIRE HIM. LISTEN, HOWEVER, WHAT ELSE HE SAYS AFTER THESE ADMONITIONS. LISTEN TO WHAT HE ASKS OF YOU!...

By Iliadis Christodoulos, from the web pages of "Agioreitika," translated from Greek by the staff of "Orthodox Heritage."

St. John Chrysostom's Words

Man is the head and the woman is the body, as evidenced through this timeless apostolic reasoning: *For the husband is the head* (i.e., the leader) *of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.* (Eph 5:23-24).

You, the man that hears St. Paul, advising the woman to subordinate her will to her husband, you praise and admire him. Listen, however, what he says right after this first advice. Listen carefully to what he asks of you: *Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for It.* (Eph 5:25). You noted previously the demand for excessive and absolute obedience. Now observe the Holy Apostle's demand for absolute love! Therefore, you wish and desire your wife to be obedient to you and your wishes, just as the Church obeys Christ. Then you ought, at all times, to care for her just as Christ cares for the Church. In addition, should it become necessary that you sacrifice your life for her, stand ready to be broken up in a thousand pieces and endure everything that may be necessary for her; never refuse to do so. Be advised that even with such a sacrifice, you still have not endured anything equitable to what Christ sacrificed for the Church; your sacrifice and suffering would be on behalf of the person with whom you have been willingly united—Christ, on the other hand, suffered on behalf of a people that abhorred and despised Him.

So, then, Christ, with neither threats, nor swearing, but with humility, love and affection, with care and immense sacrifice, He succeeded in inspiring docility to the people who had so saddened Him; likewise, you as well must treat your wife equitably. If she displays lack of care or interest in you, if she confronts you with pride, indifference or even contempt, you must respond with love and kindness, never with rage and threats. Rage and threats may be effective towards your servants, albeit that even is doubtful for the long-term—for the servant shall become despondent and eventually depart from your service. Your life's partner, the mother of your children, the basis of any real joy in your family, must never be treated with any type of threats, screaming, indignation or indifference; instead, love and Christ-like mannerisms ought to characterize your behaviors, attitude and thoughts.

What kind of married life would it be when the wife is terrified and trembles in front of her husband? Furthermore, what possible family warmth and true peace can a husband possibly enjoy when sharing his life with a wife whom he treats in a slave-like manner? Moreover, if you should suffer something on her behalf, never blame it on her, even if it was the result of her possible carelessness. For Christ behaved in the same exemplary manner towards the Church: *And gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it.* (Eph 5:25-26). Thus, the Church (its people) was filthy, had defects, was ugly and despicable.

It is for these reasons that you must not seek of your wife what is not hers. You see that everything the Church became, She received it from our Lord. He alone turned Her into Her glorious and brilliant self. Never, ever must you feel any type of aversion towards your wife because she might not be as beautiful as you might want her to be. Hear what the Bible says:

The bee is little among such as fly; but her fruit is the chief of sweet things. (Sir 11:3). Your wife is God's creation and any type of disdain or disgust you exemplify towards her, you offend not her, but the Creator Himself! Which one of her possessions is her own? Absolutely none—God has given her everything. Be advised that even the most beautiful woman is not to be admired or praised, for admiration towards one woman and contempt towards another one exemplifies the presence of a debauched and lecherous man. Seek beauty of the soul and imitate the Bridegroom of the Church. Physical beauty, apart from being full of arrogance, causes jealousy, and at times even baseless suspicions. Does a wife's physical beauty, though, not grant the husband pleasure? For a while yes, for a month or two, a year at most; never any longer than that. Why this short? Because the continuation of its presence becomes a daily habit and as such no longer impresses your senses, albeit physical beauty retains its arrogance. This, however, is never the case for a woman who possesses internal rather than external beauty. In such a case, the love and continued pleasure of the husband remains from the beginning to the end unabated, because such love and pleasure arise from the beauty of her soul and not of her body.

When God created the stars, the angels were full of astonishment. Likewise, you equally observe and admire God's creation, but never as much as when you first saw it all. That is the result of your human habitual nature; it reduces sur-

prise, and in turn admiration and attraction. Now think how much more this is the case as you daily live with your wife. If physical beauty is all that your attraction is based upon, then God forbid she gets ill—all admiration and attraction shall be lost at once. That is why we must seek in our wife kindness, humility, openness and honesty. These are the traits of spiritual beauty. We must never seek or ask for physical beauty. Surely, you must be fully aware of the countless cases whereby men wed exclusively beautiful wives, only to see their lives become miserable and often destroyed. And others, those who pursued spiritual rather than physical beauty, all of them experience long and blissful married lives.

Neither should you ever seek a wealthy wife. Let no one be deceived that he shall become rich through marriage. Such enrichment is vile and despicable. Moreover, as the Holy Apostle says, *they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men*

in destruction and perdition. (1 Tim 6:9). Seek virtues of your prospective wife, never money and wealth. Doing otherwise would mean to disregard the important and instead seek the trivial.

Unfortunately, however, we all choose to behave in ways that do not follow such spiritual logic. Thus, even when God blesses us with a child, we are less concerned with whether he will grow up to be a good man and instead

tirelessly aim to secure him wealth and other worldly "virtues." Our focus remains on wealth and not on spiritual health. This further extends to our vocation/profession, whereby again, we seek the acquisition of money and positions rather than focusing upon the honest exercise of our profession.

All that we do, all that we think, is for money—the love of money has us conquered and as such, we are always self-guided towards disaster and spiritual destruction...



It is by faith that all things, both human and spiritual are sustained. For without faith neither does the farmer cut his furrow, nor does the merchant commit his life to the raging waves of the sea on a small piece of wood, nor are marriages contracted, nor any other step in life taken.

St. John Damascene



CHRIST'S PRAYER IN THE GARDEN

By Saint John (Maximovitch).



Having celebrated the Last Supper with His disciples and given them His precepts, the Lord *walked with them to the Mount of Olives* (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26; Lk 22:39). On the way, He continued with His final instructions. Then He turned to the Heavenly Father with a prayer for His disciples and for those who would come to believe in

Him through their word. (Jn 17).

Crossing the brook Cedron, the Lord and His disciples entered *the garden of Gethsemane* where they frequently used to gather (Mt 26:36; Mk 14:32; Jn 18:1-2). Then He left His disciples, asking them to sit there while He went off to pray. Accompanied only by Peter, John and James, He went a little further. He needed to be alone, but knowing all that should come to pass, He began feeling sorrowful, sad and heavy, and He said to those with Him, *My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death; tarry ye here, and watch with Me.* (Mt 26:38). And, having gone a little further, He fell with His face to the ground and prayed.

Twice the Lord interrupted His prayer and walked up to Peter and the sons of Zebedee. Alas! They were still there, but they were overcome by sleep. In vain did their divine Teacher persuade them to watch and pray, so as not to enter into temptation: *The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak!* (Mt 26:41; Mk 14:38). The disciples fell asleep again as soon as the Saviour left them to continue His prayer, which ended only when the hour drew near that the Son of Man was to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. The agony of Jesus' prayer reached its climax, and His sweat was, as it were, *great drops of blood* falling down to the ground. (Lk 22:44).

What was Jesus praying about so fervently? What was He entreating the Heavenly Father, thrice falling with His face to the ground? *Abba, my Father, all things are possible to Thee. Oh, if Thou wouldst deign to take this cup away from Me! If possible let this cup pass by Me; nevertheless, not as I will but as Thou wilt, not My will but Thine be done. My Father, if this cup cannot bypass me, so that I will not have to drink of it, Thy will be done.*

The Lord Jesus Christ was the God-Man. Both the Divine and the human nature, undergoing neither change nor fusion, *without confusion, without division* (dogma of the Council of Chalcedon) united in Him in one Person.

In conformity to the two natures, the Lord also had two wills. As God, Jesus Christ was of one essence with God the Father and of one will with Him and the Holy Spirit. However, being perfect man, with a body and soul, the Lord also had human feelings and will. His human will was totally submitted to the Divine will.

The Lord submitted His human will to that of God and sought only to do *the will of His Heavenly Father.* (Jn 5:30); His spiritual food was to do *the will of Him that sent Me and to finish His work.* (Jn 4:34). And He had to accomplish a task equal to none, a task which was to astonish even insensible, inanimate nature. He was to redeem mankind from sin and death, and to reestablish man's union with God. The sinless Saviour was to lift upon Himself all of mankind's sin, so that He, Who had no sins of His own, would feel the burden of the sins of all mankind and would experience such sorrow over it, as can only perfect sanctity, which clearly senses even the slightest deviation from the commandments and will of God. In His holy and sinless humanity, He in Whom Divinity and humanity were hypostatically united was to experience all the horror of man's separation from his Creator, of sinful humanity's alienation from God, the source of sanctity and light. At this moment, the depth of mankind's fall was to become exposed.

The man who refused to obey God in Paradise but heeded the devil who defamed Him, was now about to rise against his Divine Saviour, to slander Him, and, having declared Him unworthy of life on earth, to hang Him on a tree between the earth and the sky, thus bringing Him under the curse of the God-given law. (Deut 21:22-23). The sinless Holy One, rejected by the sinful world for which and from which He suffered, was to forgive mankind this evil deed and to raise His prayer to the Heavenly Father, imploring the Divine Truth to likewise forgive mankind, which had been blinded by the devil, for this rejection of their Creator and Saviour. Such a holy prayer could not remain unheard, such power of love could not but unite the source of love, God, with those who, at least now, would become aware of this love and, having understood how far their ways were from the ways of God, would now resolve to return to God the Father through the incarnate Creator.

Now came the hour when all this was to come to pass. In a few hours, the Son of Man, lifted up on the Cross, would draw everyone to Himself through His self-sacrifice. Compelled by His love, sinful human hearts would not be able to resist Him. The love of the God-Man would break the stone within men's hearts. They would become aware of their impurity and darkness, of their insignificance. Only stubborn God-haters would not wish to be illumined by the light of Divine greatness and mercy. But all those who did not turn away from the Divine call, illumined by the light of the God-Man's love, would become aware of their separa-

tion from the loving Creator and would crave to be united with Him. The greatest mystery would take place: mankind would return to their Creator, and the merciful Lord would joyfully receive those who leave the slandering devil and hasten to the One in Whose image they were created. The wall of enmity has been destroyed. **Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace, have kissed each other - righteousness looks down from Heaven, for Truth incarnate shines forth from the Cross on earth.** The hour had come when all this was to happen.

The world was as yet unaware of the greatness of the coming day. But before the eyes of the God-Man all that should come to pass was revealed. He was sacrificing Himself voluntarily for the salvation of the human race. And now He has come for the last time to pray alone to His Heavenly Father. He will offer here the sacrifice that will save mankind—He will voluntarily give Himself to suffering and commit Himself to the power of darkness.

However, this sacrifice will bring no salvation if He is to experience only His personal suffering. He has to be tormented by the painful wounds of sin which afflict mankind. The heart of the God-Man fills with inexpressible grief. All human sins, beginning with Adam's transgression and finishing with those to be



committed at the sound of the last trumpet, all the great and small sins of all people appear before His mental eyes. As God, He always had them before Him, *all things are manifest before Him*, but now His human nature, too, experiences all their burden and abomination. The holy, sinless soul fills with horror. His suffering surpasses that of the sinners themselves, whose hardened hearts are not aware to what extent sin defiles a man and alienates him from the Creator. His sufferings are more acute because He sees this hardening of hearts. He sees that people have blinded their eyes so as not to see, and that they do not want to hear with their ears and to *turn to Him to be healed*. (Isa 6:10). He sees that even now the whole world is turning away from God, Who has come to it in the form of a man. *The hour has cometh* (Jn 16:32) when even those would disperse who only recently assured Him of their readiness to die for Him. The God-Man will hang on the Cross, alone, ridiculed by the people who come to see this spectacle. Only a few souls would remain faithful to Him, but even they, with their silent grief and helplessness, will only increase

the suffering of the loving heart of the Virgin's Son. No help from anywhere...

True, even in these moments He is not alone because His *Father is always with Him*. (Jn 8:29; 10:30). But in order to feel the full weight of the consequences of sin, **the Son of God voluntarily allows His human nature to feel the horror of estrangement from God** as well. This awful moment will be unbearable for the holy and sinless One. A loud cry will escape Him: *My God my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?* (Mt 27:46). Foreseeing this hour, the holy soul is filled with horror and indignation.

Earlier, when certain Greeks came to see Jesus, He allowed His human nature to experience the approach of this dreadful hour. When these *sheep from another fold* arrived, the God-Man knew that the hour was near when people would come to see Him raised up on the Cross. His human nature shuddered, His soul was filled with indignation. But Jesus

knew that without His sufferings the salvation of men was impossible, without them His life's work on earth would be as fruitless as a grain of wheat that had been lying on the earth until dried out by the sun. Therefore, He entreated the Father not to allow human weakness to take hold of the thoughts and desires of His human nature: *Now is My soul*

troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour; but for this cause came I unto this hour. As if heartened by the remembrance of the purpose of His sojourn on earth, Christ prayed for God's will to be done—for the salvation of mankind: *Father, glorify Thy name; glorify it on the earth, among men. Show Thyself not only as the Creator, but also as the Saviour* (St Basil, "Against Eunomius," Bk 4). *And the voice from heaven said, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again* (Jn 11:27-28), thus announcing that the time had come for the fulfillment of God's mystery which *hath been hid from the ages*. (1 Col 1:26; Eph 1:9, 3:9).

And now this time has come. If even earlier Christ's human nature had shuddered and felt indignation at the thought of what was to come, what was He feeling now, when, waiting for the arrival of His enemies and His betrayer, He prayed privately to God for the last time? The Lord knew that *any prayer of His would be heard*. (Jn 11:42). He knew that if He were to entreat His Father to deliver Him from torments and death, *more than twelve legions of angels* (Mt 26:53) would appear to defend Him. But is this why He

came? To refuse, in the last moment, to fulfill that which was foretold by the Scriptures?

The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Even now Jesus' spirit was aflame, desiring only one thing: To accomplish God's will. But as a man, in His human nature, He would have turned away from suffering and death. (*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 3:18, 20, 23, 24; Blessed Theophylact; St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, ch. 6, "On Remembrance of Death"). The Son of God had voluntarily adopted this weak human nature. Therefore, He now offers Himself to death for the salvation of the world. And He is victorious, although overcome by the feeling of an approaching fear of death and loathing of sufferings (Climacus, *Ibid.*; Blessed Augustine; *Exact Exposition*, 3:24). Now these sufferings will be particularly terrible, terrible not as such, but because the soul of the God-Man is shaken to its very depths.

Man's sins, which Jesus has taken upon Himself, are inexpressibly burdensome. They press heavily upon Him, making the imminent sufferings unbearable.

Christ knows that when these sufferings reach their utmost intensity, He will be all alone. Not only will there be no human being capable of alleviating them—I waited for one to grieve with Me, but there was none; and for one to comfort Me, but I found none (Pss

68:21; Isa 63:5)—but in order to feel the full burden of sins, He would be made to experience the torment of separation from the Heavenly Father. At this moment, His human will might wish to avoid the sufferings. However, let it not be! May His human will not depart from God's will even for a moment. This is what the God-Man prays for to His Father. If it is possible for mankind to reestablish its union with God without this dreadful new crime against the Son of God (St. Basil the Great, *Ibid.*), may this hour be averted. However, if this is the only way for mankind to be brought to its Creator, let God's will be fulfilled. Let His will be done and may Jesus' human nature in these terrible moments desire nothing but the fulfillment of God's will, the accomplishment of the Divine economy. This, then, is what Christ prayed for in the Garden of Gethsemane, *in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and*

supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death. (Heb 6:7).

Indeed, He offered up prayers and supplications to the One capable of saving Him from death, but He did not pray to be delivered from death. The Lord Jesus Christ was saying, as it were, to His Divine Father, *Abba, My Father, the Father of the One whom Thou sent to unite the people of Israel and the scattered children of God, the heathens, in order to create out of two peoples a new people, and to reconcile them both with Thyself through the Cross. Everything is possible for Thee, everything that corresponds to Thy boundless perfection. Thou knowest that it is characteristic of human nature to turn away from sufferings, that man always wants to see good days.* (I Pet 3:10). *But whoever loves Thee with all his heart, with all his soul and with all his mind, desires only that which is pleasing to Thy good and perfect will. I, Who came*

down to earth for the fulfillment of Thy wise will and for this purpose became clothed in flesh and blood and took upon Myself human nature with all its weaknesses except sin, I, too, would wish to escape sufferings, but only under one condition—that this be in accordance with Thy holy will. If it is possible for Thine economy to be accomplished without this horrendous crime of men; if it is possible for Me not to experience these sufferings of the soul, to which in a few

hours will be added the terrible agony of the body; if this is possible, then deliver Me from these present sufferings and the impending trials and temptations. Spare Me the necessity of suffering the consequences of Adam's transgression. However, this entreaty is being suggested to Me by the weakness of My human nature. But let it be as it is pleasing to Thee. Let not the will of weak human nature prevail, but rather Our common pre-eternal counsel. My Father! If according to Thy wise economy it is necessary that I offer this sacrifice, I do not refuse to do so. I pray for one thing only: May Thy will be fulfilled. May Thy will be done always and in everything. Just as in Heaven, both Thou and I, Thine Only-begotten Son, have one will, so let also My human will here on earth not for one moment desire anything contrary to Our common will. May that be fulfilled which We decided upon before the creation of the world, may the salvation of mankind be accomplished.



May the sons of men be delivered from their enslavement to the devil, redeemed at a high price—by the sufferings and selflessness of the God-Man. And let not the burden of men's sins, which I am taking upon Myself, as well as the added torments of soul and body, make my human will waver in its desire to fulfill Thy holy will. May I comply joyfully with Thy will. Thy will be done.

Thou hast prayed that the voluntary cup of the redeeming Passion be removed as if it were not voluntary (Sunday Matins, Tone 5, Canticle 8 of the canon), thus demonstrating two desires of two natures and asking God the Father to render His human will unwavering in its submission to God's will (*Exact Exposition*, 3:24). *And there appeared an angel unto Him from heaven, strengthening Him* [His human nature] (Lk 22:43). Nevertheless, while offering His self-sacrifice, Jesus prayed with increased fervor, until He became bathed in a bloody sweat. And for His reverence and His constant submission to His Father's will, the Son of Man was heard.

Thus strengthened and encouraged, Jesus rose from His prayer. (*Exact Exposition*, lbid.). Now He was sure that His human nature would not waver any more, that soon the burden of human sins would be lifted from Him, and that, through His obedience to God the Father, He would bring to Him errant human nature. He walked up to His disciples and said, *Sleep on now, and take your rest. Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray Me* (Mt 26:45-46), *rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation.* (Lk 22:46).

Going forth to meet those who came after Him, the Lord voluntarily gave Himself into their hands. When Peter, anxious to defend his Teacher, struck the chief priest's servant with a sword and cut off his ear, the Lord healed the latter and reminded Peter that He is giving Himself into their bands voluntarily: *Sheathe your sword, He said Am I not to drink of the cup which My Father gave Me? Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He shall presently give Me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled that thus it must be?* (Mt. 26:53). And, having voluntarily emptied the cup of sufferings of body and soul, Christ glorified God on the earth; He accomplished the task no lesser than the creation of the world itself. He restored fallen human nature, reconciled God and mankind, and *made men partakers of the Divine nature.* (2 Pet 1:4).

Having accomplished the work which His Father had given Him to do, Christ was glorified also in His human nature with that glory which, as God, He had *before the world was* (Jn 17:5), and with His human nature He *sat down on the right hand of God the Father from henceforth expecting till His enemies be made His footstool.* (Heb. 10:13).

Having become the *author of eternal salvation for all who obey Him* (Heb 5:9), even after His Ascension into Heaven He remains known *in two natures without confusion* (Sunday Dogmatikon, Tone 6), *For Thou hast borne two wills according to each of Thy two natures, O Thou Who art Christ forever.* (Sunday canon, Tone 5, canticle 8). However, His glorified body can no longer suffer and is in no need for anything, and likewise also His human will can in no wise depart from God's will. In this very body Christ will come on the last day *to judge the living and the dead*, after which, as King not only according to His divinity but also in His humanity, He will subject Himself with all His eternal kingdom to God the Father, *that God may be all in all* (1 Cor 15:28). Amen!



On no account, beloved, must you flee from what may be a chance for acquiring virtue. On the contrary, whenever such a chance offers itself, you should accept it with joy, regarding as best and most welcome such things as are unpleasant to your heart and evoke no sympathy in you.

You should realize that the opportunities for virtue you meet with are the best means you can have for acquiring it, given you by God in answer to your prayer. Having formed a desire to gain virtue, you have, of course, prayed God to grant it to you; and in praying for it, you could not avoid praying also for the methods and means of acquiring this gift. But God does not give, for instance, the virtue of patience without afflictions, nor the virtue of humility without humbling occasions of degradation and dishonor. So, after your prayer about these virtues, He sends you corresponding opportunities. What are you doing, then, in running away and avoiding them?

So decide to welcome gladly the chances you meet for virtue, and the more gladly, the more difficulties they offer. For in such cases our virtuous actions evoke great courage and reveal great moral strength; and through this we make each time a considerable step forward on the path of virtue, which alone should be our constant aim.

St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain

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BEHOLD THE MAN WHO IS GOD!

By St. Nikolai Velimirovic.



In the same way that the Lord Jesus hungered and thirsted as a man, that He was wearied as a man, that He ate and slept as a man, walked and spoke, wept and rejoiced, so He suffered as a man. Let none of us, then, say “it was easy for Him to suffer—He was God!” but how shall I cope with suffering? Such words are empty words, that stem from ignorance and lassitude of spirit.

Christ did not find suffering easy, for He suffered, not as God, but as man. And furthermore, suffering was harder for Him, the innocent and Sinless One, than for us, who are guilty and sinful. Let us never forget that, when we suffer, we are suffering for our sins. The Lord Jesus did not suffer because of Himself or for Himself, but because of men and for men, for many men and for all men’s sins.

When one sin brought death to Adam; when one sin placed an eternal mark of shame on Cain’s forehead; when, for two or three sins, David suffered so much; when, for many sins, Jerusalem was destroyed and Israel taken off into captivity - you can imagine the suffering that He had to endure, when great mountains of the sins of all people in all ages were heaped upon Him! These

were terrible sins: sins because of which the earth opened up and swallowed men and cattle; sins because of which whole cities and peoples were destroyed; sins because of which the Flood came, and famine and drought and pestilence and grasshoppers and caterpillars; sins that brought about wars between nations, wastes and destruction; sins that opened the gates of the human soul to invasion by mad spirits; sins because of which the sun was darkened, the sea was troubled and the rivers dried up.

What is the use of counting them? Can the sand in the sea or the grass in the meadow be counted? All these sins, each one of which is as mortal as the venom from the most poisonous snake—for *the wages of sin is death* (Rom 6:23)—every single one was heaped upon the innocent Man Jesus. He took our sins upon Him. Is it, then, strange that sweat falls from His brow as it were great drops of blood? Is it strange that He should plead: *Remove this cup from Me?* Lo, *scarcely for a righteous man will one die ... but ... while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* (Rom 5:7-8).

Imagine yourself being taken to the scaffold for the sake of one righteous man, and think how difficult it would be. And imagine yourself on the scaffold for a criminal—and at that, one who has committed a crime against you. Think of your being condemned to death for his salvation! Sweat will pour from you at the very thought! Only then will you have some idea of Christ’s bloody sweat. And then you will, terrified, amazed and driven to the edge of sanity, cry aloud: ***Behold the Man who is God!***