

Orthodox Heritage

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

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

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Brotherhood of St. Poimen

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THE HOLY THEOTOKOS AND THE CHURCH

Source: "The Life of the Virgin Mary, the Theotokos," published by the Holy Apostles Convent and Dormition Skete, Buena Vista, CO (1989), pp. 495-501.

The Holy Virgin Mary is more than an example of piety. She is more than a saint. She is *All-holy, Ever-Virgin* and *Mother of God*. She is the Church's greatest theologian. She is the one human—body and soul resurrected, united and complete—and now deified person who is *more honorable than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim*. In her the whole mystery of the divine economy is personified, writes St. John of Damascus (c.676-c.750).

As we have seen, the Scriptures say more about the Theotokos than most people perceive, albeit, in a hidden manner, revealed only to the faithful through Holy Tradition and the writings of the holy Fathers. If there was a general silence about her in the early Church, it was intentional, to avoid comparisons with the pagan religions which provide anti-typical divine, mother and child similarities, such as the Egyptian Isis and Serapis or the Oriental Cybele and Attis. Only later, during the fourth and fifth centuries, did circumstances demand an elucidation of the Virgin Mary's role in the plan of salvation.

Since Mary Theotokos is one flesh with her divine Son, she is, therefore, necessarily the Mother of those baptized, into His body, the Church. Not without purpose does St. Epiphanius of Cyprus (c.315-403) write that she is *the holy Jerusalem, Virgin of Christ, His Bride*; for what is granted in the flesh to the Virgin is granted spiritually to the Church. Let us see how, in the writ-

ings of the holy Fathers, the Theotokos is, among other things, portrayed as the Church; for as St. Andrew of Crete (c.660-740) chants, she is *the living city of the King and God, in which Christ has dwelt, and worked our salvation*.

Saint Cyril of Alexandria (+444), in his famous litany of praise spoken after the Council at Ephesus, where he was a dominant figure, ends with these words: *Let us give glory to Mary, Ever-Virgin, that is to the holy Church, and her Son and Immaculate Spouse; to Him be glory forever and ever*.

Clement of Alexandria (d. before 215) points to the Mary-Church parallel, saying, *O mysterious wonder! There is only one Father of all, only one Word of all, and the Holy Spirit is also one and He is everywhere. There is but one Virgin Mother. I like to call her the Church... she is both Virgin and Mother—immaculate as a Virgin and loving as a Mother. She calls her children and feeds them with holy milk: the Word, a child*.

Therefore, in giving birth to the body of Christ, Mary gave birth to the Church, the unity of all that are incorporated into Christ. She is the progenitress of the Christian race, that is, the historical Church that is forever united to divinity.

Saint Ildefonsus (+667), Archbishop of Toledo, affirms that *the form of our Mother the Church is according to the form of the Lord's Mother*. The mysteries of the Virgin's life are daily renewed in the Church; for, as one wedded, she is at the same time immaculate. As a Virgin, she conceives us by the Spirit, yet brings us forth without pain, so the venerable Bede (c.673-735) was to write. The influence of Saint Ambrose (339-397) is also evident here. *Mary is truly espoused but a Virgin, because she is a type of the Church which is immaculate but wedded*. And, *What was prophesied*

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of Mary was as a type of the Church. In another place, he writes: *How beautiful are those things which have been prophesied of Mary under the figure of the Church.* In other words, she is the Church because she is the Mother of Christ, even as she is Mother to all Orthodox, His *brethren*.

Since Mary Theotokos is the Church, the *perpetual virginity* of Mary also signifies the *perpetual virginity* of the Church, that is, her inviolate fidelity to Christ. Deny the one, and one must deny the other: the Church and the Theotokos stand together; ecclesiology and Mariology safeguard each other. Thus, too, the Orthodox Church insists upon the *all-holiness* of the Virgin Mary, for the same reason that she speaks of the Church as *holy*. She is Panaghia or *All-holy*, because she is the Church.

The types of the Virgin are everywhere associated with the types of the Church. It may seem strange that she, the Virgin, is sometimes cast in the role of Mother, Sister, Daughter, Bride and Child of Christ, but those are the relationships found in old Israel between God and His people. This explains why the Church (the Virgin), the new Israel, is depicted as the *Bride of Christ* while, at the same time, His body.

Saint Paulinus (353-431), Bishop of Nola (near Naples) writes: *What a great mystery was this, by which the Church*

became wedded to Christ and became at once the Lord's Bride and His Sister! The Bride with the status of Spouse is a Sister... So she continues as Mother through the seed of the eternal Word, alike conceiving and bringing forth nations. She is Sister and Spouse because Her intercourse is not physical but mental, and her Husband is not man but God. The children of this Mother comprise equally old and infants; this offspring has no age or sex. For this is the blessed progeny of God which springs from no human seed but from a heavenly race.

He continues: *This is why the teacher Paul says that "there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" [Gal. 3:28] and "there is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called on one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism". [Eph. 4-5]. For all of us who acknowledge Christ as Head of our body [Col. 1:18] are one body, and are all Christ's limbs. [I Cor 12:27]. Because we have now all put on Christ" and stripped off Adam, we are at once advancing towards the shape of angels. Hence for all born in baptism there is the one task; both sexes must incorporate the perfect man, and Christ as all in all [Eph. 4:13] must be our common Head, our King Who hands over His limbs to the Father in the Kingdom. Once all are endowed with immortal bodies, the frail condition of human lives forgoes marriage between men and women. [Mt. 22:30].*



The Woman in the Twelfth Chapter of the Apocalypse of St. John

A most difficult passage in a difficult book, the Apocalypse of St. John (Revelation): *And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars. And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.* [Rev. 12:1-2]. The word *woman* was given a collective meaning by most ancient writers as describing the people of God by a female figure. There are many though who identify the *woman* as being the Virgin Mary, who shows herself forth as an image of the Holy Church. As she remained Virgin bringing forth a Son, so the Church at all times would bring forth members (sons and daughters) without losing her virginity (i.e., pure Orthodoxy). The pains the Church suffers refers to her spiritual motherhood, for neither the Church of the Old Testament or the New Testament *cried out in pangs of birth... and brought forth a male child—Christ*. Israel, as a community, did not give birth by natural generation to the Messiah—but it did issue the Virgin-Mother. A woman was at the heart of the mystery and, at the essential moment, the transition of Israel to a new and final destiny would be conveyed by the figure of a woman. This woman was the Virgin Mary who, without pain, gave birth to Christ.

The outstanding commentator and noted father, Hippolytos, (c.170-c.236), clearly states, that the Evangelist meant *the Church, endued with the Father's Word, Whose brightness is above the sun. And by "the moon under her feet" he referred to her being adorned, like the moon, with heavenly glory. And the words, "upon her head a crown of twelve stars," refer to the twelve apostles by whom the Church was founded. And that "she, being with child, cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered," means that the Church will not cease to bear from her heart the Word that is persecuted by the unbelieving world. "And she brought forth," he says, "a man child" [Rev. 12:5], a man child of God, who is declared to be God and man, who becomes the instructor of all the nations.*



Saint Methodios, Bishop of Tyre (+311) also sees the *woman* in a collective sense, the Church. He writes about the significance of the moon, saying, *and her standing on the moon... refers by way of allegory to the faith of them that have been purified from corruption by baptism... for all moist substances depend on the moon... She labors and brings forth natural men as spiritual, and under this aspect is she indeed their Mother. For just as the woman receives the unformed seed of her husband and after a period of time brings forth a perfect human being, so too the Church, one might say, is constantly conceiving those who take refuge in the Word, and shaping them according to the likeness and form of Christ, after a certain time makes them citizens of that blessed age. Hence it is necessary that she stand upon the laver, as the Mother of those who are washed. The function that she exercises over the laver is called the moon because those who are thus reborn and renewed shine with a new glow, that is, with a new light... Hence, they are designated by the expression "the newly enlightened." She continues to reveal to them the spiritual full moon in her periodic presentation of His Passion, until the full glow and light of the great day shall appear.*

He then continues speaking of the *man child*, saying, *Remember that the mystery of the incarnation of the Word was fulfilled long before the Apocalypse, whereas John's prophetic message has to do with the present and the future. Christ was not the "child who was caught up unto God, and to His throne" [Rev. 12:5] for fear lest he be injured by the serpent; rather, He descended from the throne of His Father and was begotten precisely that He might stay and check the dragon's assault on the flesh.*

Then St. Methodios brings forward the Prophet Isaias, saying, *Before she that travailed brought forth, before the travail-pain came on, she escaped it and brought forth a male. Who has heard such a thing? And who has seen after this manner? [Isa 66:7-8].* Yet, it is obvious that such a prophecy could only be applied to the Virgin who experienced no pain in birthing.

Saint Methodios then represents *the Church... to bring forth a man child, because the enlightened spiritually receive the features and image of Christ. The likeness of the Word is stamped*

on them and is begotten within them by perfect knowledge and faith, and thus Christ is spiritually begotten in each one. Thus the Church is with child and labors until Christ is formed and born within us, so that each of the saints by sharing in Christ is born again as Christ... Those who are baptized in Christ become, as it were, other "christs" by a communication of the Spirit, and here it is that the Church effects this transformation into a clear image of the Word.

Therefore, St. Methodios believes that the Woman who has brought forth continues to bring forth a male child, the Word, in the hearts of the faithful; and this same Woman went forth into the desert undefiled and unharmed by the wrath of the beast. This Woman is our Mother, the Church. He then explains that the seven heads of the dragon, the devil, signify the seven vices.

Saint Andrew of Caesarea explains that the Church is pained for each one who is reborn by water and the Spirit until Christ shall be formed in them. The same also writes that the devil always arms himself against the Church and increasingly strives to make those reborn by her his food. Concerning the man-child, St. Andrew concurs with St. Methodios, that *in the person of those who are baptized, the Church ceaselessly gives birth to Christ; just as, according to the Apostle, we come "unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."* [Eph. 4:13].

Saint Ambrose writes that most authors seem to interpret the moon, as representing the Church when referring to certain passages [Pss 135:8-9; Pss 103:21]. The Church, like the moon would have her seasons, namely of persecution and peace. Though the moon seems to lose light, she does not. She can be cast in a shadow, but she cannot lose her light. The Church, for example, is weakened by the desertion of some in time of persecution, but is replenished by the witness of Her martyrs. In fact, the moon undergoes a diminution of its light, not, however, of its mass... so that it may borrow from the sun.

Who was clad with Christ, the Sun of righteousness? Who had the moon as a footstool? Who was crowned on the head with the twelve stars? Who else but the most holy Mother, the Virgin Mary. This is the Virgin woman whom the beloved disciple saw clad with the Sun, and crowned by twelve stars, namely, the Apostles, and under her feet the moon, the sacred Church of God, imploring her intercessions for the salvation of her children.

If we examine the work of the hymn-writers of the two Akathist Hymns for the Dormition of the Mother of God, they see in the Evangelist's divine revelation the holy Theotokos at the right of her Son as a great sign in heaven.

The twenty-four stanzas of the Akathist written in commemoration of her Dormition, as celebrated on the Holy Mountain, explain St. John's vision as a type of her glory: *The heavenly sign was a type of thy glory, O Mother, which I*

beheld in the Revelation; for thou didst then appear unto me as a woman clad with the intellectual Sun, Who illumines and enlightens all, crying unto thee: Rejoice, thou who art clad with the Lord. Rejoice, thou that art embroidered before Him. Rejoice, thou that bearest the twelve-star crown on thy head. Rejoice, thou that hast the moon as a disk by thy feet. Rejoice, thou Mother of Christians.

Arethas Caesaria writes: *That woman some accepted as the Mother of the Lord... others, too, say she is the Church, clothed in the Sun of righteousness, and of the moon, the synagogue... under her feet.*

Thus, in icons depicting the Apocalypse of St. John, the Painter's Manual or *Ifermeneia* illustrates the twelfth chapter of the Revelation with the Virgin upon clouds, wearing a purple robe and with angel's wings; around her crown are twelve stars and the rays of the sun surround her from her head to her feet. Under her feet is the moon, and before her is a red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and wearing seven crowns; out of its mouth pours water, like a river, and the land opens up and swallows the river. Behind it is a mass of stars, and above the Virgin are two angels holding the child Christ in a veil; many clouds surround them. [refer to the icon depicted in the previous page, *Ed.*]

† † †

Rejoice, thou who art clothed in the Sun, who dost irradiate grace and glory upon all the universe.

[Akathist to the Most Holy Theotokosin Honor of Her Dormition, *Ekos* 12]

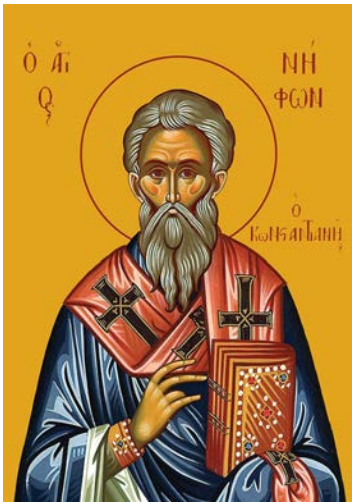


Hail, Thou that art full of grace, the Lord is with Thee! Thus does the holy Church invoke the most holy Virgin, the Mother of God. But the Lord is also with every pious soul that believes in Him. The Lord's abiding with the Virgin Mary before she conceived the Saviour is not a particularity proper to the most pure Virgin alone. The Lord is with every believing soul: *The Lord is with thee.* These words may be said to every one who keeps the Lord's commandments. And the Lord is near unto all; only men themselves are far from Him by their hearts, by their thoughts, their intentions, and the inclinations of their hearts, as well as by their words and deeds, which are contrary to the law of God. *Behold, I am with you all days,* says our Lord, Who was born of the most holy Virgin, *even to the consummation of the world;* that is, with every one of us, at every time, throughout all generations, all ages, upon the whole space of the earth, unto the end of the world.

St. John of Kronstadt—"My Life in Christ"

CONVERSATION WITH A NOBLE

Source: "Stories, Sermons, and Prayers of St. Nephon: An Ascetic Bishop," pp. 122-125.



One day when blessed Nephon was resting in his cell, a noble came and said to him:

—I came, Father, to profit some by your holiness. For my soul is grieved with a thought whose origin I do not know.

—Satan has deceived you, the saint answered him. He told you that you are not going to receive any reward from God for all the children you have baptized.

But, indeed, whoever baptizes children is blessed. The Lord says in the Gospels, *He who receives you receives Me* (Mt 10:40), and, *He took a child and put him by His side, and said to them, Whoever receives this child in My name, receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives Him Who sent Me.* (Lk 9:47-48).

—Who then is more blessed than you, who through children receive Christ, and through Christ His Father? Go, my son, and do good as you have up to now. Your work is pleasing to God. Know that all the children you have received from the baptismal font, at the Second Coming will walk before your soul to the gate of Heaven. That will be a great glory for you and great disgrace for the evil spirits in the air. Angels holding candles equal in number to the children you have baptized will direct you to the throne of God, and from there to the place of your rest. They will honor you, in other words, in the same way you also received and honored Christ in the person of these children. The baptismal font is like another Virgin who holds Christ in her arms. Then, you become like Simeon who will receive the Divine Babe in the person of the newly illumined babies.

The man stood with his mouth open before the gift of the discerning insight of the saint; before he could repeat his thought, the saint had revealed it to him. When the first shock passed, the stranger again said to the saint:

—Please, Father, since you know all my inner world, tell me where that unpleasant thought originated. Did it come from me, or from somewhere else?

—It was born of the devil, my son, the saint answered, for he wanted to distort your right thinking. But you were right in revealing it before it penetrated your heart and became difficult to uproot. Because, to be sure, man has good thoughts, but also depraved ones. Therefore, if he

examines his thoughts which go in and out of his mind, he can separate what the enemy sows and send it away.

—However, if man's mind is dimmed by the cares and pleasures of life, then he will incline toward evil, for he will not distinguish the stone from the bread. Such a man never understands what his deeds are, nor does he know whether he does good or evil. The devil clouds his mind, so that he cannot distinguish between the sweet and the bitter, but mixes absinthe and honey. Who can eat such a concoction?

Then the visitor wondered:

—But if that is the way it is, Father, who can be saved?

—On our own, this is impossible, the righteous one answered. God, however, can do everything for our salvation. Many offer gifts and honors to the earthly king, and in this way they get what they want. Others again are helped by the king; because he favors them, even if they do not offer him anything. It is the same with God: He glorifies some for their deeds, to others He is merciful because of their deep repentance, and He is compassionate to others because of the prayers of His saints. Then, again, He tries some here, and in the other world He grants them eternal good, provided they endure the sorrows patiently.

—Tell me, Father, the stranger asked again, why is it that even though some waste their bodies with abstinence, nevertheless they are seized by passions? For example, anger, enmity, resentment, envy, and worst of all, cruelty and miserliness? Conversely, there are many virtuous who both eat everything and drink wine, and nonetheless you cannot find even a trace of sin in them. How does this happen?

—As it seems to me, the saint said, all who fast a lot and do not improve at all, are not going to improve because of their tongue. For whoever does not have a stopper for his mouth, even if he fasts all year, he will profit nothing. Does the devil incite you to anger? Do not speak at all and you control the passion. Or does he urge you to envy? Do not judge and you will beat the evil one because, naturally, judgment is the fruit of envy. If again the malicious one incites the Christian to immorality, let him not open his mouth to speak to a woman nor to eat or drink a lot, and surely he will turn him to flight. Let him also take a small stick to hit himself, and the pain will chase away the warfare. It is in your interest to lose one of your members and not have your whole body thrown into the Gehenna of fire.

—If someone insults you or harms you in a similar way, remember that sinful people spat on Christ, the Son of God, mocked Him, and hit Him with a reed. Then think that you are unworthy even to live. Therefore, ignore him who insults you.

—If someone poor asks you for something he needs from the perishable goods of the world, do not be too stingy to give it to him, so that you may not be denied the immortal

and eternal goods which *eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived.* (1 Cor 2:9).

—If the treacherous enemy brings you vainglory, conceit, arrogance, glance at the older generations and see: did any arrogant people ever prosper? All of them had God as an enemy and were thoroughly crushed. It says: *God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.* (Prov 3:34, Jas 4:6, 1 Pet 5:5) And elsewhere: *All my people, your leaders mislead you, and confuse the course of your paths.* (Isa 3:12.) And elsewhere: *I have seen the ungodly man highly exalted and lifting himself up like the cedars of Lebanon. But I passed by, and lo, he was not; and I sought him, and his place was not to be found.* (Pss 36:35-36). Whisper these words unceasingly to your soul and you will remain humble.

—If the *wild boar* (Pss 79:13) opens your appetite for sumptuous food, go to the bathroom and smell their stench. As for the virtuous who eat everything and drink wine, be very careful, my son, they are brave soldiers. They trampled on the passions and sins, and now are masters of themselves, because they received the gift of dispassion. You must know that the gifts of God are stable. For this reason those who have them, even if they eat and drink, they do everything without passion. For, having first exercised self-control and discretion, they are now clothed with the armor of God and there is no one anymore who can defeat them.

—Fasting is a great weapon of the soul, but it needs unceasing prayer, quiet and silence. And all these require meditation: *If Thy law had not been my meditation, then should I have perished in my humiliation.* (Pss 118:92). Go therefore, my son, and struggle to receive the gift of dispassion with continence. Then, whether you eat or drink, you will be free from passions. In addition, know that the saints do this only in front of others, while when they are by themselves, they carry out the rules of piety. And so in their cells they make up the fast they broke in front of people...

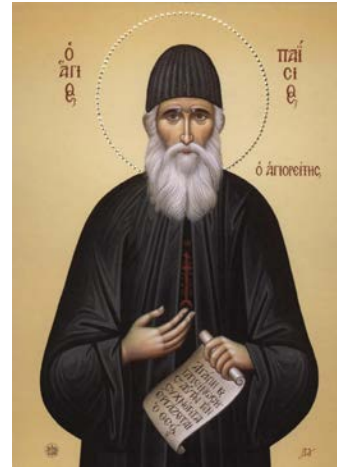


These are the works of righteousness: fasting, alms, vigil, holiness, and the rest of such works performed with the body. Love for one's neighbor, humility of heart, forgiving those who have sinned, recollection of good things, investigation of the mysteries concealed in the holy Scriptures, the mind's occupation with good works, the bridling of the soul's passions, and the rest of such virtues, are performed in the soul. All these require knowledge, for knowledge guards them and teaches their order.

St. Isaac the Syrian

SPIRITUAL STUDY

Source: "Epistles," by St. Paisios the Athonite, published by the Holy Monastery of the Evangelist John the Theologian, Souroti, Thessaloniki, Greece (2002), pp. 74-80.



Read the Lives of Saints as much as possible for these stress repentance and you can be helped by them.

Do not start reading dogmatic books because they are not suitable for beginners. If you are not educated do not read them at all, even at a later stage, for in the same way that someone who is uneducated falls into delusion from the *Philokalia* and misunderstands it, so too can dogmatic

books lead such a one into deception. The deception from the *Philokalia* will bring him a devilish calmness that he is only a bit inferior (out of humility) to Saint Gregory of Sinai. The interpretation of dogma by the uneducated will make him think he is Saint Mark of Ephesus, when in actuality he is a wild animal with dreadful obstinacy.

Of course, the novice's appointed reading is the Elder's responsibility, but I simply wish to express this thought of mine. To begin with, a chapter from the Gospel also is necessary for our sanctification, as it drives away all evil. Likewise, the works of the Holy Fathers are necessary in order to understand the Gospel, for all Patristic texts are as streams issuing forth from the Gospel. When we follow the streams, therefore, we find the source and are not led into delusion like the Protestants in the ravines. The *Synaxarion* (The Lives of Saints) is very helpful, because one can find whatever vitamin his soul is in need of in these books. The Life of the Saint of the day is also beneficial. The book of Saint John of the Ladder (the original) is a requirement for every monk, as well the *Evergetinos* or the *Gerontikon* (Sayings of the Desert Fathers), *Lausiac History*, *Leimonarion*, *Saint Ephraim* and *Unseen Warfare*. (The *Leimonarion*, compiled by the Monk John Moscos (545-619), relates instructive stories and incidents from the lives of monk and laity who lived before and during the sixth century. *Ed.*)

If you are learned you can also read the *Philokalia*, except for volume 4, "On the Jesus Prayer," because you require personal experience in order to understand it, and education is not enough (except for the experienced instructor, who is definitely necessary). For the fear is, as I said, that one confuses his own cheap tears with the precious tears of the Holy Fathers and falls into delusion, something even more treacherous for sentimental temperaments.

The same, but an even greater danger is possible in reading Saint Symeon the New Theologian, since, apart from tears, one may confuse the divine love (*eros*) of the Saint with his own sentiments. In addition, he might also associate the pure love of the Saint for his Elder with his own sentimental and, many times, unhealthy love, which is full of spiritual toxins and difficult to discern.

Particular attention is needed that women, on account of their temperament, not read Saint Symeon the New Theologian if their souls have not yet acquired a manly spirit. They need help as much from their abbess to distill their love and become spiritually manly as from themselves, in order to direct their entire struggle against the softness that creates “moldiness.” Without a doubt, toil (asceticism) is the medicine, as well as limiting oneself to only the most necessary washing and bathing. From bodily toil (done with knowledge and discernment) will arise a double health, and out of this health are born divine pleasures.

Therefore, my brother, no matter how much it may hurt, do not hesitate to cut off everything that becomes the cause of your separation from Christ. We must know that Christ will consider this martyrdom, and when we are in greater pain, with certainty we are considered great martyrs and confessors, for we confess in practice our holy faith and observe the holy commandments of Christ.

In addition to everything that I have mentioned so far, you will be greatly assisted by Abba Isaac of Syria, because he helps us understand the deepest meaning of life. Furthermore, he helps the man who believes in God to drive away every kind of complex, great or small. A little studying of Abba Isaac transforms the soul with its many spiritual vitamins.

It is true that some Elders do not recommend Abba Isaac so that their monks do not withdraw into the desert. However, Abba Isaac does not recommend to elementary students or to those still in high school to attend the university. For this reason, the Elder should assist the disciples to understand the Saint and be greatly benefited by his God-inspired book.

When a beginner presents such symptoms (i.e., he wants to leave for the desert), while not yet having graduated from spiritual high school, it means he has an empty head. When I say “empty” I do not mean completely empty, because he has a very high idea of himself inside his empty head. That

is why he needs help to realize this and to get rid of it, so that God can approach him and give him His own divine ideas, for only one single idea about ourselves hinders all of God’s divine ideas from approaching us. So what does the cunning enemy do? He examines the beginner, as if he were a physician, to find out where he hurts and also knocks on his head. If he hears that his head is hollow, he inserts his syringe, fills the head with air until it is puffed up, and lifts it up into the air. Then the novice struggles hard, but in vain, beating the air, only to be beaten by the air.

Therefore, before we begin any spiritual work, we should throw our own opinion in the trash, after having despised it; otherwise, we will interpret everything we do with our “ego-lexicon” adding fat to our fleshly self and, layered with this thick “pig skin,” we will continually increase our spiritual insensitivity. In other words, even though the Elder will severely criticize his novice for his serious mistakes, the novice

will remain indifferent, thinking that his Elder is doing it in order to test him since he has arrived at the level of sainthood.

The devil does this kind of refined work to those to whom I referred, and sooner or later they fall into great temptation.

We should be disgusted with ourselves and work only on our wretched self so we can first be reconciled with God. After-

wards, great love comes to the humble servant, and this divine love ignites the fire of his own love (as much towards God as towards his neighbor), and he casts his entire self into the service of others, believing that he is nothing but fertilizer, rejoicing that others will produce fruit.

This state is greatly facilitated when one is closed up in his cell, and has no contact with others, for then it is that he considers everyone to be as saints. Try, my brother, to love your cell and see to it that all the objects inside it are of an ascetic kind—a mat, a simple stool, planks, a sackcloth for tablecloth or a black cloth—that they may transport you to *Thebaid* and *Nitria* (ancient monastic sites in Egypt, *Ed.*) and remind you of the ethereal Holy Fathers. Do not use armchairs and formica or plastic for they will steal your mind away to the world continually and bring much to your memory and they will pollute your thoughts. It is very helpful, especially before you pray, to read a small section from the *Gerontikon* in the ascetic atmosphere of your cell, in order to warm your heart and quell all the cares of your monastic tasks, so that you can pray without distraction.



Asceticism

I would like to offer a few words of advice to beginners who are usually very enthusiastic—and so they should be—so that they do not harm themselves abruptly from non-discerning asceticism. They are often like a torrent, which abruptly pours out all of its waters all at once and then does not have even one drop for himself or a passerby. Apart from this, whatever plant has sprouted up on its shores will also dry out. It is also possible that the beginner will lose his patience and gripe in the event that his health is undermined. That is why we should always look for the greatest spiritual profit and struggle with discernment.

Because our body is connected to our soul and the purpose of our flesh is to be subdued to our spirit and to prudently offer its services for the rehabilitation of our soul, I will mention a few things which are a kind of “practical medicine” and a diet more for the body, from which we require only some of its strength, and not its disorder. That is why the care of the little donkey (the flesh) must be done with discernment, with the right amount of barley, so we can restrain it with the reins so as to not buck and kick us and even—God forbid—throw us off a precipice. The bad thing is that the flesh can throw our soul into hell, while the worse a donkey can do is throw his rider down a precipice, without, however, harming its master’s soul.

Many times the following happens: even though our flesh is emaciated, it still bucks (acts disorderly). In order to humble it, we decrease our food and double our struggles; nevertheless, our flesh continues to act like a wild beast. In such cases, we suffer the lot of the foolish villager who, because his donkey kicks constantly, he starves it and overloads it in order to tame it. However, the miserable animal is not to blame, but rather the saddle has wounded his back. For often times it is egotism, pride and judging of others with a lack of love which drives God’s Grace away, and the devil draws near and lights a fire even on our dry emaciated bones. Thus, we increase our fasting, spiritual endeavors, our prostrations, etc., in order to humble our flesh, but to no avail, for our flesh is not humbled, and our soul lacks humility and love.

Therefore, when war with the flesh approaches, if we have done a little fasting and vigil with prayer, and the war does not subside, then we must realize that the problem is elsewhere. We should immediately fall prostrate before Christ and ask for His forgiveness in advance and beg Him, at the same time, to enlighten us so we can realize our fault and who it was that we’ve hurt or wronged, and to ask his forgiveness. As soon as we humbly ask forgiveness from Christ, immediately the carnal flame departs and we recall the cause, which, in turn, helps us even more to be humble. Then God’s grace comes in abundance.

Thus, in this case, we are the cause and not our flesh, that we did not feel compassion for our brother who stumbled

and did not put ourselves in his position, so as to sympathize with him even more; rather, we judged him harshly. That is why God withdrew His Grace from us, putting His spiritual laws into operation, and then we also fell into the hands of the evil one who roasted our flesh on his spit and simultaneously sullied our soul. On the contrary, the natural war of the flesh in young people goes away immediately with a little *ascesis*, since Christ is moved by his struggling children and helps them immediately, not wanting His beloved creatures to be oppressed. He Himself told us in the Holy Gospel that *my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*. (Mt 11:29). We should also, however, be *mEEK and lowly in heart*. (Mt 11:30).

Undoubtedly, the question will be born in many young people: “Why does God allow for us to be fought by the demon of fornication when we have other passions inside us (pride, etc.) and when other demons exist as well?”

I have the impression that, since virginity comes before our two other vows, poverty and obedience, and since pride is the greatest of sins and judging of others is tantamount to a lack of love (which we do not yet comprehend), a young man usually observes his spiritual condition in terms of his carnal temptations. If a young man has dispassion (i.e., no carnal enticements), he thinks he is doing well, when, in fact, he may be found in such a state of lethargy so that he will not be able to discern his other passions that lie in hiding. God then allows for the demon of fornication to humble him involuntarily and, thus, through humility God approaches him again. To put it succinctly, the demon of fornication, with the shock that he gives the young man, makes him realize that something has gone wrong.



The Devil is the enemy, and your soul is the abode that he seeks to defile. The Enemy, therefore, does not cease throwing within the abode of your soul whatever he can come up with—littering it with every sort of filth. But you are responsible if you grow negligent and do not throw out the filth littered in your soul by the Devil. If you do not immediately attend to this work of cleansing, then the inner abode of your soul will be filled with every kind of filth; and no one will be able to enter and abide therein, on account of the unbearable stench. If, however, you straightway resolve to take out the first batch of filth the Devil throws in, then God, rewarding your intention, will preserve—in cleanliness, by His Grace—the inner abode of your soul.

By an Unknown Elder
From “The Evergetinos”

THE JESUS PRAYER

IT IS NECESSARY FOR CLERGY AS WELL AS LAYMEN WHO LIVE IN THE WORLD

By Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos, from "A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain," pp. 152-158.

You must realize the necessity of purification from passions. You should not only want to make others well but you should believe that you, too, like all of us, are full of passions. Each passion is a hell. You should also know that, according to what we have said, the Jesus prayer is a remedy which cures the soul and purifies it. That does not mean that the Jesus prayer is a panacea but rather it is the means by which man is united with God, who is the only one Who purifies and illumines the soul. He is the physician of our soul and body. He is *the true light that enlightens every man who comes into the world.* (Jn 1:9). As eye salve cleanses the vision and enables already existing objects to be seen, similarly, each person must will to be purified and transformed and seek, through prayer, illumination which comes from God.

—Do you believe that we, who work in the world, can do what the monks do concerning this divine work of prayer?

—Even if you cannot do exactly what they do, still you can achieve many things. It must be made clear, however, that noetic prayer is one thing and praying the Jesus prayer another. Noetic prayer, as some hesychasts practice it, requires a life without distraction.

It requires quietness and many other things. If you cannot practice noetic prayer in the world—and this is very difficult—you must pray with the Jesus prayer at set times or say it whenever you can. It will do you great good.

—Can you suggest to me some useful and practical ways?

—Apart from church services, you should also designate a certain hour for the practice of the Jesus prayer, for meditation on the name of Jesus. You should start the practice of the Jesus prayer gradually and proceed according to your thirst and the grace you feel. One can start by saying the prayer for half an hour in the morning before sunrise, and half an hour in the evening, after the compline, before sleep. It is necessary for there to be a fixed hour for prayer which should not be changed for any reason, not even for good works. It is possible, for example, that somebody may come for confession at that particular time. If he is not ill or if it is not very urgent, you should not postpone the time you have set aside for the Jesus prayer. The same should happen concerning good works. A peaceful and quiet room where no noises are heard

is also necessary for one to start the work of the Jesus prayer, in the way we mentioned before. That is, in the beginning, we should warm our heart or read a book of the Fathers, which creates in us a feeling of compunction, and then we should say the Jesus prayer with either the lips, the mind or the heart, according to our spiritual progress. Little by little the time devoted to the Jesus prayer will increase and it will sweeten our hearts, and we shall long for it. But, I repeat, in the beginning we need to force ourselves to say the prayer even for a short time. It will do us great good.

—Is it enough, this short period of time?

—It is not enough but when there is a good disposition and humility, God fills up what is lacking in prayer. Since God is so sympathetic to our downfalls, will He not be extremely merciful to us in the struggle for our transformation? He fills up whatever is lacking. He takes into account even the special circumstances of each one of us. It may be that one hour of your prayer will be more blessed than the many hours of a monk, because you are also busy with other works.

I admired the discretion of this Athonite monk, of this incarnate angel. He distinguishes all problems with admirable ability and puts everything in its proper perspective.

—You should know, however, he went on, that the devil will expose you to many temptations during prayer, as I said previously. Many incidents will come up to make you stop praying. But you should also know that God is testing you through these trials to determine if you really want to practice the Jesus prayer. In such

a case, if you persevere, God will come to your aid and drive away all difficulties.

—But, Geronda, if, while praying, thoughts come to my mind of preparing a speech or a sermon; of doing something for the love of my brother, must I abandon them?

—Yes, you must abandon them. For, even when good thoughts come during prayer (I refer to the set times of prayer), the devil exploits them to obstruct us from prayer. If the devil realizes that we are ready to give up the Jesus prayer for such things, he will send us many thoughts of the same kind even at the restored set time. But in this case, neither do we pray, nor are we purified nor have our brethren really benefited. For the preparation of a sermon, which has replaced prayer, is without fruit. It will not benefit the brethren.

—It happens sometimes that we return to our cell exhausted, after having spent a lot of our strength, and then we cannot pray our usual rule. What should we do in these cases?

—We should not give up the Jesus prayer even then. St. Symeon recommends that serving our brothers should never



be the cause for us to be deprived of the Jesus prayer, because we then lose many things. We should never find excuses to avoid prayer: *Labor in service according to your strength; and in your cell, persevere in prayer with contrition, vigilance and continuous tears; and do not have it in your mind; I have labored exceedingly today, let me diminish the time of prayer because of physical tiredness. For, I tell you that no matter how much you work beyond your strength in serving others, if you deprive yourself of prayer, be sure that you have lost something very great.* Half an hour of the Jesus prayer is worth as much as three hours of deep sleep. The prolonged Jesus prayer rests and calms us. So, even from this point of view, it is an invigorating physiological remedy.

He continued:

—My dear father, wrap up all your works in the golden mantle of the Jesus prayer. It is because they work much with their brain and not with their heart, that many of the brethren have tribulations and are in anguish in their spiritual endeavor. They become tired by thinking what to say, whereas when they live in grace, then the thoughts come, they literally spring forth like a rushing river. It is because they do not have a good link with the Jesus prayer that the brethren quarrel among themselves, do not have peace, are afflicted by unjust attacks and do not rejoice over them, according to the commandment of Christ. St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, being guided by a long tradition of several centuries, suggests that the Bishop should be elected from the rank of the monks. Having a monastic consciousness, he will not be troubled by persecutions, slander, accusations or the anger of men, since he himself is the first to recognize his own sinfulness and to accuse himself. Thus, he acquires all the fruits we mentioned before—mainly love, which flows from much grace, and freedom from falling into sin, as the Fathers say.

—What do you mean, father, by monastic consciousness?

—I mean obedience, humility, self-condemnation and an insatiable thirst for the Jesus prayer—obedience to the Geronda and the spiritual father. The monk should be humble toward all people and his humility should be connected with the struggle for purification from passions. We should not undertake many works, because, unfortunately, we are influenced in this matter by other heresies. The greatest work is to acquire humility and holiness. Then we are truly rich. The Church is not a ministry of social services, but it is the treasury of divine grace. Priests are not social workers but those who guide the people of God. And this cannot be done unless they have humility and holiness. Without holiness and humility the greatest social work is soon obliterated, whereas when we have humility and holiness of life, even the smallest social work acquires extraordinary dimensions.

—Humility, he went on, should be connected with self-condemnation, too, that is with self-accusation. We should be the first to accuse ourselves. We should attach the respect that

the others show us to our priesthood and not to ourselves. We should attribute the accusations of others to our own sinful state and not to our priesthood. We will then experience peace and much grace from God, and will drive out every cause that makes us hate our brother. There must also be insatiable thirst for the Jesus prayer. We should not consider the Jesus prayer an opportunity, but we should consider it as life itself. We should move within prayer. Our theology and our preaching should be born within its holy atmosphere. We should also have our rule and do it every day. When we live in this way the world is then benefited beyond measure. Whoever one may be, either priest or bishop, he should always have one concern: not to lose his monastic consciousness. It is written in the “Sayings of the Desert Fathers:”

It was related of Abba Netras, the disciple of Abba Sylvanus, that when he dwelt in his cell on Mount Sinai, he treated himself prudently, with regard to the needs of his body, but when he became bishop at Pharan, he curbed himself with great austerities. His disciple said to him, “Abba, when we were in the desert, you did not practice such asceticism.” The old man said to him, “There in the desert I had interior peace and poverty and I wished to manage my body so as not to be ill and not to need what I did not have. But now I am in the world and among its cares, and even if I am ill here, there will be someone to look after me and so I do this in order not to destroy the monk in me.” (Sayings of the Desert Fathers, trans. by Sr. Benedicta Ward SLG, Oxford, 1975).

—Thus, those who have the consciousness of a monk feel the need to receive a blessing for whatever work they do. They entrust it to the Bishop and to an experienced spiritual father to check it and correct it during its course and at its end. They do not want praises for what they do, because he who is honored or praised more than he deserves loses much. Wherever you are, in the street, or in the car, you should say the Jesus prayer; *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me* and *Most Holy Mother of God save me*. We should often attend the Divine Liturgy with the proper preparation and participate in the undefiled Mysteries. All creation praises and glorifies God. A priest who does not offer the Divine Liturgy is in discord in this wonderful praise. It would be good to chant from time to time the Canon to our Lord Jesus Christ which is found in the Book of Hours. You should also chant the special prayers addressed to our Lord Jesus Christ and found at the end of the book “The Unseen Warfare,” composed by St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite. He urges us to evoke often, the most sweet, joy-producing and the cause of all good, saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ, not only with our lips, but also with our heart and mind.

—You should also pray for others, too, because God has entrusted his own people to you. Therefore it is your duty to withdraw and pray for peace and illumination of his people. As great Moses did...

THE ORTHODOX THERAPIST

Source: "Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science of the Fathers," by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, *Nativity of the Theotokos Monastery, Levadia, Greece* (1997), pp. 57-62.

So far, I hope we have established the truth that Christianity is mainly a therapeutic science. It is seeking the spiritual healing of man. Yet the right practice of medicine requires a good physician, a professional physician, and this applies to spiritual healing as well. There has to be a good doctor. He is the bishop and the priest.

As we have noted before, people today feel that the priest's function is to enable them to take part in the holy sacraments. They feel that he has been commanded by God, as His servant and deacon, so that they may confess their sins and have spiritual relief. They feel him to be the deacon of God, called to pray to Him that their labors may be blessed, and so forth. Certainly no one can deny that the priest will do such work as well. However, people usually seem to regard the priest rather as a magician (if I may be forgiven for using this expression). For when we look at the life of worship apart from curing, then it does rather appear as magic-like!

We repeat, however, in order to make it clear, that the priest is properly a spiritual physician who cures people's sicknesses. Worship and sacraments must be placed within the therapeutic method and treatment.

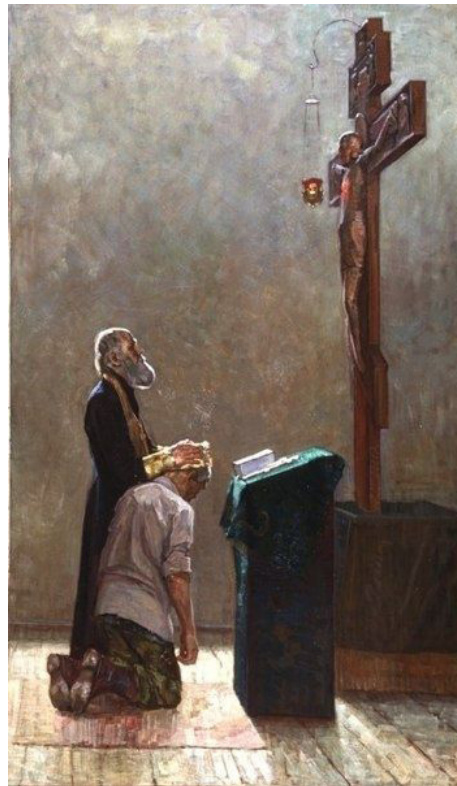
Even as a confessor the priest is mainly a therapist. The sacrament of confession is not simply a formal absolution, especially of the Western type, as if God were angry and demanded expiation. It is something more. It is a part of the therapeutic treatment. There are numerous Christians who make confession over a period of many years but are not healed of their spiritual ills. Ignorance on the part of both the people and the pastors contributes to this.

The task of the bishop, priest or confessor is to lead the people out of Egypt into the promised land, like another Moses. This guidance requires toil and labor, privation and anguish. It is mainly therapeutic supervision. The Fathers are very insistent upon this truth. Let us take St. John of the Ladder as an example. He advises that *those of us who wish to get away from Egypt and the Pharaoh need an intermediary with God, to stand between praxis and theoria and stretch out his arms to God, that those led by him may cross the sea of sin and put to flight the Amelek of the passions.*

The saint goes on to say that *those who rely on their own powers and claim to have no need of a guide are deceiving themselves.* (Ladder Step 1). From the Old Testament story we know what Moses endured and how he guided that stiff-necked people.

This spiritual Moses is a physician. Furthermore, all of us are sick and have need of therapy and the physician.

St. Symeon the New Theologian, speaking to monks, makes this truth clear. As we know from the Orthodox Tradition, the monasteries are properly hospitals. It would be better to claim that they are medical schools. As sick people we are cured and after that we learn how to cure. That is why the early Church took priests from the monasteries, which are medical schools, to place them at the observation post of bishop.



Therefore, in speaking to monks, St. Symeon does not hesitate to say that we are all poor and needy. He then tells how all of us who are in the cells are injured and affected by different illnesses; therefore we can do nothing but cry out day and night for the doctor of souls and bodies to heal our wounded hearts and give us spiritual health. The saint writes: *And that is not all: (apart from being poor and naked) we lie pitifully wounded, affected with various illnesses, or move with difficulty in our cells or monasteries as if in so many hospitals and homes for the aged. We cry out and groan and weep and call upon Him who is the physician of souls and bodies—at least in so far as we are aware of the pain of our wounds and ailments, for there are those who do not even know that they have a disease or an ailment—that He should come and cure our wounded hearts and give health to our souls that lie in the bed of sin and death. For all of us have sinned, as the holy Apostle said, and we have need of His mercy and grace.*

We have quoted this whole text because the mission of monasticism and the Church, as well as the work of the pastors, is shown clearly. It is chiefly a therapeutic task. We are sick in the bed of sin and death. Any who do not sense this truth are "mad." Therefore, the Christians who do not remain in the Church in order to be healed or who feel that they are well, are mad.

According to St. Symeon the New Theologian, the priest is a physician: a person comes to the *spiritual doctor ravaged with passion, his mind all distraught...* The "expert doctor, who is human and compassionate, understands his brother's weakness, the inflammation caused by the ailment, the tumor; he sees the

sick person wholly in the power of death. Then the saint describes the way in which the spiritual and expert physician approaches the sickness, and how it is to be cured.

We have previously mentioned two basic images which characterize the pastor's work: that he is a Moses who leads his spiritual children, and he is at the same time both a scientist and a sympathetic physician. Both these qualities are contained in one of St. Symeon's poems describing his own healing by his spiritual father, his "personal" Moses. He applies to his life the journey of the Israelite people and the guidance by Moses. He writes:

*He came down and found me to be a slave and a stranger,
and he said: Come, my child, I will take you towards God!*

He asked his Moses for "assurances" that he could do such a thing.

*He brought me close, he clasped me tight
and again he kissed me with a holy kiss;
and there was a scent of immortality all about him.
I believed, I loved to go with him
and I longed to serve him alone...*

*He took me by the hand and walked before me
and in this way we began to travel the road.*

And after a long journey in which, through the intervention of his spiritual father, he has succeeded in confronting the passions and being freed from slavery to them, St. Symeon begs his spiritual father:

*Come, I said, my lord, I will not part from you
I will not disobey your commands but will keep them all.*

However, in order for a person to be an Orthodox therapist and cure the spiritual ills of his spiritual children he himself must previously have been healed as far as possible; he must stand *in the middle between praxis and theoria*. How can one heal without having previously been healed or without having tasted the beginning of healing? Therefore, St Symeon accuses those who regard themselves as spiritual directors before being imbued with the Holy Spirit, rashly receiving others' confessions and daring to rule monasteries or occupy other positions of authority, *pushing themselves forward shamelessly by a thousand intrigues to be made metropolitans or bishops to guide the Lord's people...* before they have seen the bridegroom *in the bridal chamber* and become *sons of light and sons of the day*.

All this has been put matchlessly by St. Gregory the Theologian who writes: *It is necessary first to be purified, then to purify; to be made wise, then to make wise; to become light, then to enlighten; to approach God, then to bring others to him; to be sanctified, then to sanctify...*

St. John Chrysostom, who has been hailed as an expert on the priesthood, writes in a famous passage in which he seeks to justify his refusal to be made a bishop, that he is aware of the weakness and smallness of his soul as well as

the importance and difficulty of guiding the people: *I know how weak and puny my own soul is. I know the importance of that ministry and the great difficulty of it.*

In his discussion with St. Basil he asks him to have no doubt about what he has said, that while he loves Christ, he is afraid of provoking scandal by taking up the spiritual ministry *since the infirmity of my spirit makes me unfit for this ministry*. The great purity of his thoughts and feelings caused him to feel that the weakness of his soul made him unfit for this great ministry. For indeed, unhealed passions prevent a priest from helping to heal his spiritual children.

If the therapist has not previously been cured, he is "commonplace." "They simply take commonplace men and put them in charge of those things..." ("On the Priesthood," III, 17, p. 91).

All these things to which we have already referred point to the great truth that the priests who wish to cure the illnesses of the people must themselves have previously been cured of these illnesses, or at least have begun to be cured, and must feel the value and possibility of healing.

What is to follow (i.e., within the source text, in the study of "Orthodox Psychotherapy," Ed.) will also be placed in this context. We should make it quite clear that we are not planning to look at the whole spectrum of the priesthood or the role of priests. It is not our purpose to explain the value and importance of the priesthood, but to look at this great and responsible office from the point of view that it is a therapeutic science whose main work is to cure men. If at some points we seem to be trying to undermine the value of the priesthood, we do it solely in order to look at this side which we wish to emphasize here.



The Holy Spirit acts mystically through the spiritual father, and then when you go out from your spiritual father, the soul feels her renewal. But if you leave your spiritual father in a state of confusion, this means that you did not confess purely and did not forgive your brother all of his sins from your heart.

St. Silouan the Athonite



We wish to remind our readers to not neglect sending us their annual contribution to help us cover the costs associated with our humble publication. In addition, we kindly request of those who have the financial ability, that they consider sending us an amount over the requested annual contribution of \$24 to assist us with our educational and philanthropic activities.

Ἡ Κοίμησις τῆς Ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου

Ὀμιλία τοῦ ἀειμνήστου Κυθήριου Ἀγιορείτου Ἡγουμένου π. Γεωργίου Καψάνη.

Ὅτι ἑορτὲς τῆς Παναγίας μας, οἱ Θεομητορικὲς Ἑορτὲς καὶ μέσα σ' αὐτὲς ἡ μεγαλύτερη εἶναι ἡ ἑορτὴ τῆς Κοιμήσεως τῆς Θεοτόκου, ἓνα Πάσχα μικρό, ἓνα Πάσχα μέσ τὸ καλοκαίρι, μᾶς δίνει τὴν εὐκαιρία νὰ ἐκφράσωμε τὴν βαθειά μας εὐγνωμοσύνη πρὸς τὴν Μητέρα τοῦ Λυτρωτοῦ μας καὶ δική μας Μητέρα γιὰ ὅτι ἔχει κάνει γιὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινο γένος καὶ γιὰ τὸν κάθε ἓνα ἀπὸ μᾶς. Διότι, χωρὶς τὴ δική της συνέργεια καὶ προσφορὰ εἰς τὸν Ἅγιον Τριαδικὸν Θεὸν δὲν θα ἐνσαρκουτο ὁ Λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ. Περίμενε ὁ Θεὸς νὰ βρεθεῖ μία τέτοια ἀγία ψυχή, πανάσπιλη, παναγνή, ἡ ὁποία θὰ προσέφερε ὅλη τὴν ἐλευθερία της εἰς τὸν Θεόν, ὥστε καὶ ὁ Θεὸς νὰ προσφερθῇ ὁλόκληρος σ' Αὐτήν.

Κι αὐτὴ ἦταν ἡ εὐλογημένη Μαρία, ἡ ταπεινὴ κόρη τῆς Ναζαρέτ· τὴν εὐγνωμονοῦμε. Μᾶς ἔδωσε ὅτι

κυρία Θεοτόκος ἔτεκε Θεὸν ἐνανθρωπήσαντα. Ὅμως ἡ Ἐκκλησία διετράνωσε τὴν πίστι της ὅτι ἡ κυρία Θεοτόκος ἐγέννησε Θεὸν ἐνανθρωπήσαντα, τὸν Λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ. Ὅτι ἐγίνε τὸ ἐργαστήριον τῆς ἀπορρήτου ἐνώσεως τῶν δύο φύσεων, τῆς Θείας καὶ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης. Διότι, μέσα εἰς τὴν ἀγίαν κοιλίαν της ἀπὸ τὴν ὥρα τῆς συλλήψεως τοῦ Μονογενοῦς της Υἱοῦ ἠνώθη ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη μετὰ τὴν Θεία φύσι καὶ ἐκνοφορήθη ὁ Θεάνθρωπος Χριστός. Γι' αὐτὸ λοιπὸν καὶ χαρακτηρίζεται ἐργαστήριον τῆς ἀπορρήτου ἐνώσεως τῶν δύο φύσεων. καὶ αὐτὰ ὅλα δὲν πρέπει νὰ τὰ ξεχνᾶμε, δὲν τὰ ξεχνᾶει ποτὲ ἡ Ἐκκλησία· γι' αὐτὸ καὶ ὁσάκις ἡ Ἐκκλησία δοξάζει τὸν Μονογενὴ της Υἱόν, δοξάζει καὶ τὸ πρόσωπο τῆς Παναγίας.

Δὲν ὑπάρχει Ἀκολουθία τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, σὺνάξι τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, ποὺ νὰ μὴν καλεῖται καὶ ἡ Κυρία Θεοτόκος νὰ παρίσταται κι ἐκεῖνη καὶ μᾶλλον καὶ νὰ προϊσταται τῆς Συνάξεως τοῦ λαοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ. Ὅπως καὶ προϊστατο τῶν Ἁγίων Ἀποστόλων, κατὰ τὸν Ἅγιο Γρηγόριο τὸν Παλαμᾶ. Διότι, ὅταν ἀνελήφθη ὁ Κύριος εἰς τοὺς



πολυτιμότερο ἔχουμε στὴ ζωὴ μας τὸν Σωτῆρα μας. Τι θὰ εἴμαστε χωρὶς τὸν Σωτῆρα Χριστόν; Οἱ ἀπελπισμένοι κατάδικοι τοῦ θανάτου. Οἱ αἰώνιοι αἰχμάλωτοι τοῦ διαβόλου χωρὶς ἐλπίδα. Ἐάν λοιπὸν ἔχουμε Σωτῆρα καὶ Λυτρωτὴ καὶ Θεὸν τὸν Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν Θεὸν ἐνανθρωπήσαντα, αὐτὸ τὸ ὀφείλουμε εἰς τὴν Κυρίαν Θεοτόκον. Γι' αὐτὸ ὁ ἔπαινος τῆς Ἐκκλησίας εἶναι παντοτινός. Οἱ ὕμνοι τῆς Ἐκκλησίας εἶναι παντοτινοὶ κι ἀνεξάντλητοι πρὸς τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς Κυρίας Θεοτόκου. Κανένα πρόσωπο ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς δὲν ἐτιμήθη μετὰ τόσους ὕμνους, μετὰ τόσες δοξολογίες, μετὰ τόσες διακοσμητικὲς ἐκφράσεις μετὰ ὅσες ἡ Παναγία μας.

Ἡ Ἐκκλησία ἤδη ἀπὸ τὴν 3^η Οἰκουμενικὴ Σύνοδο τῆς ἔδωσε τὸν τίτλο Θεοτόκος, ὁ ὁποῖος ὄρος «Θεοτόκος» κατὰ τοὺς ἀγίους Πατέρες, τὸν Ἅγιο Γρηγόριο τὸν Θεολόγο περικλείει ὅλο τὸ μυστήριον τῆς σωτηρίας καὶ τῆς εὐσεβείας. Διότι ἠρνοῦντο οἱ αἰρετικοὶ ὅτι ἡ

οὐρανοὺς ἡ Κυρία Θεοτόκος ἐνεψύχωνε, ἐνεθάρρυνε, ἐδίδασκε, καθοδηγοῦσε τοὺς ἀγίους Ἀποστόλους. Ἦταν τρόπον τινὰ ἡ Γερόντισσά τους καὶ ἐξακολουθεῖ νὰ εἶναι ἡ Γερόντισσα, ἡ πνευματικὴ Μητέρα ὅλων τῶν Χριστιανῶν, ὅσων Ὀρθοδόξως πιστεύουν εἰς τὸν Τριαδικὸν Θεόν. Καὶ ἰδιαίτερος νὰ εἶναι ἡ Γερόντισσα καὶ ἡ Μητέρα τῶν Μοναχῶν καὶ διὰ τῶν Ἀγιορείτων.

Ἐκεῖνο ποὺ ἔκανε τὴν Παναγία μας καὶ τὴν ἀνέδειξε εἶναι ὄχι ἀπλῶς ὅτι ἐγέννησε παθητικὰ τὸν Θεόν, τὸν Θεάνθρωπον Χριστόν, ἀλλὰ συνήργησε εἰς τὴν Γέννησιν τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ εἰς τὴν κνοφορίαν τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ συνήργησε διότι, ὅπως λέγει τὸ σχετικὸν Ἀποστολικὸν Ἀνάγνωσμα, τῆς πρὸς Φιλιππησίους ἐπιστολῆς, συμμετεῖχε κι αὐτὴ εἰς τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ Χριστοῦ. Αὐτὸ εἶναι τὸ φρόνημα τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἡ ἄκρα ταπείνωσις, ἡ κένωσις, ἡ θυσία, ἡ προσφορὰ στὸ ἀνθρώπινο γένος. Κι αὐτὸ ἦταν καὶ τὸ φρόνημα τῆς Παναγίας μας.

Δὲν μπορούσε ἐκεῖνη ἢ ὁποῖα ἐβάσταξε εἰς τοὺς κόλπους τῆς τὸν Θεὸν νὰ μὴν εἶχε τὸ ἴδιο φρόνημα μὲ Ἐκεῖνον, τὸν ὁποῖον κυφοροῦσε. Αὐτὸ τὸ φρόνημα ποὺ εἶχε ὁ Σαρκωθεὶς Κύριος καὶ ἔνεκα τοῦ ὁποῖου ἐνεσαρκώθη καὶ ἐταπεινώθη καὶ ἐκένωσεν ἑαυτόν, αὐτὸ τὸ φρόνημα εἶχε καὶ ἡ ταπεινὴ κόρη τῆς Ναζαρέτ. Κι αὐτὴ ἐκένωσε τὸν ἑαυτό της, προσέφερε τὸν ἑαυτό της, τελείαν προσφορὰν, δὲν κράτησε τίποτα γιὰ τὸν ἑαυτό της. Καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ φρόνημα ζητάει καὶ ὁ Κύριος Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἡ Κυρία Θεοτόκος ἀπὸ μᾶς τοὺς Χριστιανούς, τὰ παιδιά τῆς Παναγίας μας, τὰ τέκνα τῆς Παναγίας μας.

Τὸ ἀκήρατον σκήνωμά της νοερώς τὸ περιπτυσσόμεθα, τὸ ἀσπαζόμεθα καὶ τρόπον τινα καὶ μεις μετὰ τῶν ἁγίων Ἀποστόλων συμμετέχουμεν εἰς τὴν πάνσεπτον κηδεῖαν της, ἢ ὁποῖα ὅμως κηδεῖα δὲν ἦταν παρὰ τὸ μεταίχιμο τῆς ἀναβάσεώς της εἰς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς. **Διότι ἡ Κυρία Θεοτόκος**, χάριτι καὶ φιλανθρωπία τοῦ Μονογενοῦς της Υἱοῦ, ἐξεδήμησε καὶ σωματικῶς πρὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἀνήλθεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, διότι δὲν μπορούσε ἐκεῖνο τὸ Πανάγιο Σῶμα, τὸ ὁποῖον ἐκυοφόρησε τὸν Θεὸν νὰ τὸ φᾶνε τὰ σκουλήκια μέσα στὴ γῆ. Ἔπρεπε δεδοξαμένον νὰ ἀναστηθῆ καὶ νὰ καθῆσθαι στὰ δεξιά τοῦ Κυρίου καὶ νὰ πρεσβεύη γιὰ ὅλη τὴν ἀνθρωπότητα. Καὶ ἄλλοτε τὸ ἔχουμε πεί, τὸ λέω καὶ γιὰ ὅσους δὲν τὸ ἄκουσαν, τοὺς ἀδελφούς προσκυνητάς, ἡ Παναγία μας εἶναι τὸ πρῶτο πρόσωπο τῆς Καινῆς Διαθήκης τὸ ὁποῖον ἀνέστη, ἐκρίθη, ἐδικαιώθη, ἐδοξάσθη καὶ κάθεται εἰς τὰ δεξιά τοῦ Χριστοῦ, πρεσβεύουσα ὑπὲρ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου. Συνεπῶς τὴν Δευτέρα Παρουσία, ὅταν ὅλοι θὰ ἀναστηθοῦμε καὶ θὰ βρεθοῦμε μπροστὰ στὸ Βῆμα τοῦ Κυρίου θὰ ἔχουμε τὴν Παναγία μας μεσίτρια καὶ προστασία καὶ βοήθεια.

Γιὰ ὅλα αὐτὰ λοιπὸν τὴν εὐγνωμονοῦμε καὶ τὴν παρακαλοῦμε νὰ μᾶς φωτίσει νὰ μὴν εἴμεθα ἀνάξια παιδιά της, ἀλλὰ νὰ κάνουμε τὸν ἀγῶνα μας τὸν καθημερινὸ καὶ νὰ ἔχουμε τὸ φρόνημά της, αὐτὸ τὸ φρόνημα ποὺ εἶχε καὶ ὁ Κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, τὸ φρόνημα τὸ ταπεινὸ, τὸ θυσιαστικὸ, τὸ φρόνημα τῆς ἀγάπης καὶ τῆς θυσίας. Βοήθειά μας ἡ Παναγία καὶ καλὴ δύναμι στὸν ἀγῶνα ποὺ ἔχει ὁ καθένας ἀπὸ ἐμᾶς διὰ πρεσβειῶν τῆς Ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου.



Οἱ ἐμπειρίες τῆς θεώσεως εἶναι ἀνάλογες μὲ τὴν κάθαρση τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Ὅσο περισσότερο καθαρῶς ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἀπὸ τὰ πάθη, τόσο ἀνώτερη ἐμπειρία λαμβάνει τοῦ Θεοῦ, βλέπει τὸν Θεό, κατὰ τὸ «*Μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῆ καρδία, ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν Θεὸν ὁψονται.*» (Ματθ. 5:8).

Ἀρχ. Γεώργιος Καψάνης

Παπα-Γιάννης ὁ Ἐξορκιστὴς

Ἀπόσπασμα ἀπὸ τὸ βιβλίον «Ἀσκητὲς Μέσα στὸν κόσμον», Ἅγιον Ὅρος (2008), Γ. Ησυχαστήριον Ἁγ. Ἰωάννης ὁ Πρόδρομος, Μεταμόρφωσις Χαλκιδικῆς.



Οταν τὸ 1917 στὴν Ρωσία ἐγένετο ἡ ἐπανάσταση τῶν Μπολσεβίκων, συνέλαβαν στὴν Ὀδησσὸ 17 ἱερεῖς γιὰ νὰ τοὺς ἐκτελέσουν. Ἐνας ἀπ' αὐτοὺς κρύφθηκε στὰ δάση καὶ σώ-

θηκε· μετὰ βρῆκε τὰ δύο του παιδιά, ἕνα ἀγόρι καὶ ἕνα κορίτσι, τὰ ὁποῖα εἶχαν κρύψει οἱ γείτονές του καὶ γλύτωσαν ἀπὸ τοὺς κομμουνιστές. Τὴν πρεσβυτέρα του ὅμως τὴν συνέλαβαν καὶ τὴν ἐκτέλεσαν.

Ὁ ἱερέας αὐτὸς ὀνομαζόταν παπα-Γιάννης καὶ ἦταν Ἕλληνας. Πῆρε λοιπὸν τὰ δύο του παιδιά καὶ περιπλανώμενος ἀπὸ τόπου εἰς τόπον, πεζοπορώντας τὸ περισσότερο διάστημα, ἦρθε μέσω Ρουμανίας καὶ Βουλγαρίας στὴν Ἑλλάδα, τὴν πατρίδα του. Ἐκανε ἐφημέριος στὴν Μακεδονία καὶ στὴν Θράκη. Ἐπειτα ἦρθε στὸ χωριὸ Σκουτερὰ Ἀργινίου, διότι ἦταν κενὴ ἡ θέση τοῦ ἐφημερίου.

Ὁ παπα-Γιάννης ἦταν ρακένδυτος. Φοροῦσε ἕνα τριμμένο ρᾶσο μὲ ἕνα ξυλάκι ἀπὸ ρεῖκι γιὰ κουμπὶ καὶ στὸ λαϊμὸ του εἶχε κρεμασμένο μὲ μαῦρο κορδόνι ἕνα ξύλινο Σταυρὸ. Ἐμοιαζε μὲ τὸν ἅγιο Κοσμά τὸν Αἰτωλό. Ἀπὸ τὴ νηστεία καὶ τὶς ταλαιπωρίες εἶχε ὄψη ἐξαυλωμένη, ἦταν «πετσὶ καὶ κόκκαλο»...

Τὸ χωριὸ Σκουτερὰ τὸν καλοδέχτηκε καὶ τὸν βοήθησε στὶς ἀνάγκες του. Ἔμενε σ' ἕνα δωμάτιο μαζὶ μὲ τὰ δύο του παιδιά, τὸ κορίτσι δέκα ἐτῶν καὶ τὸ ἀγόρι ὀκτῶ ἐτῶν. Ἄρχισε λοιπὸν ὁ παπα-Γιάννης νὰ λειτουργεῖ τακτικά, νὰ κηρύττει τὸν λόγον τοῦ Θεοῦ, νὰ ἐξομολογεῖ καὶ νὰ κοινωνεῖ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους. Ἐτρεχε νὰ βοηθᾷ πνευματικὰ ὅπου τὸν καλοῦσαν, νὰ διαβάξει εὐχὲς σὲ ἀρρώστους καὶ σὲ ἄρρωστα κτήνη ποὺ ἀμέσως θεραπεύονταν.

Μία νέα ἀπὸ τὴν Σκουτερὰ εἶχε παντρευτεῖ στὴν Σταμνὰ. Ὅταν ἐπισκέφθηκε τὸ χωριὸ της ἄκουσε νὰ μιλοῦν μὲ θαυμασμὸ γιὰ τὸν παπα-Γιάννη. Τῆς εἶπαν: «Μᾶς ἔστειλαν ἕναν παπά, λὲς καὶ εἶναι ὁ ἴδιος ὁ Χριστός, τόσο καλὸς εἶναι».

Ἡ νέα εἶπε ὅτι στὴν Σταμνὰ ὑπάρχει μία γυναίκα δαιμονισμένη ἐπὶ δεκαοκτῶ χρόνια. Οἱ συγγενεῖς της τὴν γύρισαν σὲ γιατροὺς καὶ σὲ πολλὰ Μοναστήρια, τρέξανε σ' ὅλη τὴν Ἑλλάδα, ἀλλὰ αὐτὴ δὲν θεραπεύτηκε. Ζήτησε καὶ εἶδε ἡ ἴδια τὸν παπα-Γιάννη καὶ τὸν

παρακάλεσε να θεραπεύσει την πάσχουσα. Αὐτὸς ζήτησε νὰ δῆ πρώτα τὴν δαμονισμένη. Ἔκανε προσευχὴ καὶ ἀποφάσισε νὰ τὴν ἀναλάβει.

Τὴν Κυριακὴ στὸ τέλος τῆς θείας Λειτουργίας ὁ παπα-Γιάννης ἀνακοίνωσε τὰ ἐξῆς στὸ ἐκκλησίασμα: «Χριστιανοί, θὰ κάνουμε ἕναν ἀγώνα γιὰ νὰ θεραπευτῆ ἡ γυναίκα ποὺ τὴν βασανίζει ὁ σατανᾶς ἐπὶ 18 χρόνια. Θὰ νηστεύουμε 40 μέρες, θὰ κάνουμε κάθε μέρα Λειτουργία. Θὰ ἐξομολογηθοῦμε, θὰ κοινωνήσουμε, θὰ φέρνουμε τὴν γυναίκα κάθε βράδυ στὴν Ἐκκλησία καὶ θὰ κάνουμε Παράκληση. Στὴν Λειτουργία δὲν θὰ τὴν φέρνουμε ἐδῶ, διότι ὁ σατανᾶς θὰ δημιουργήσει φασαρία. Θὰ εἰδοποιήσουμε καὶ τὰ γύρω χωριὰ ὅποιος θέλει νὰ ἔρθει».

Τὴν Κυριακὴ το βράδυ ἔφεραν τὴν γυναίκα στὴν Ἐκκλησία τοῦ ἁγίου Νικολάου. Μαζεύτηκε πολλὸς κόσμος. Στὴν Ἐκκλησία δὲν ἤθελε νὰ μπεῖ μὲ κανένα τρόπο. Τὸ δαμόνιο μούγκριζε, ἔβριζε τοὺς πάντες, ἀπειλοῦσε ὅτι θὰ κάψει τὴν Ἐκκλησία, καὶ ἔβγαζε ἀφροὺς ἀπὸ τὸ στόμα της. Τὴν ἐπίασαν μερικοὶ δυνατοὶ ἄντρες καὶ τὴν ἔφεραν κάτω ἀπὸ τὸν πολυέλαιο.

Ὁ παπα-Γιάννης κρατώντας τὸν Σταυρὸ διάβαζε ἀπὸ τὸ Εὐχολόγιο τοὺς ἐξορκισμοὺς καὶ τὴν σταύρωνε. Κρατοῦσε τὸν Σταυρὸ πάνω στὸ κεφάλι της καὶ ἐκείνη φώναζε: «Πάρε αὐτὸ τὸ σφυρὶ ἀπὸ τὸ κεφάλι μου, μὲ πληγώνεις· δὲν ὑποφέρω αὐτὸ τὸ σφυρὶ». Τὸ πλῆθος τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἔκαναν μετάνοιες καὶ ἔλεγαν τὸ «Κύριε ἐλέησον».

Ὁ παπα-Γιάννης ἔλεγε στὸν κόσμο: «Χριστιανοί, κάνετε ὑπομονή, θὰ τὸν ἐξοντώσουμε τὸν σατανᾶ».

Εἶχε πει καὶ στὸν Δάσκαλο ὁ παπᾶς νὰ φέρνει ὅλα τα παιδιά τοῦ Σχολείου, ποὺ ἔλεγαν κι αὐτὰ τὸ «Κύριε ἐλέησον» καὶ ἔκαναν μετάνοιες. Αὐτὸ γινόταν κάθε μέρα. Ὁ διάβολος μὲ τὸ στόμα τῆς δαμονισμένης ἔλεγε στὰ παιδιά τοῦ Σχολείου: «Πηγαίνετε ἔξω παιδάκια, σᾶς κοροϊδεύει αὐτὸς ὁ παλιο-παπᾶς ποὺ βρωμᾶνε τὰ χνώτα του ἀπὸ τὴ νηστεία. Μία ὥραία νύφη περνᾶ, πηγαίνετε ἔξω, περμιένη ἢ μαμά σας μὲ μία φέτα καθάριο ψωμὶ μὲ ζάχαρη πάνω στὸ ψωμὶ». Δηλαδή ἔλεγε ὅτι ζήλευαν καὶ ἐπιθυμοῦσαν νὰ ἔχουν τὰ παιδιά τότε, μὲ σκοπὸ νὰ τὰ βγάλει ἔξω.

Ἐρχονταν καὶ ἀπὸ τὰ γύρω χωριὰ κόσμος. Μία μέρα μπήκε μέσα κάποιος καὶ τοῦ λέγει ὁ διάβολος μὲ τὸ στόμα τῆς δαμονισμένης: «Καλῶς τὸν φίλο μου τὸν τάδε, ἐσὺ εἶσαι ποὺ τὴν τάδε μέρα ἔκανες αὐτὸ καὶ αὐτό, ἦρθες καὶ ἐσὺ νὰ προσευχηθεῖς γιὰ νὰ μὲ βασανίσεις;»

Ὅντως ἦταν ἀλήθεια αὐτὰ καὶ ὁ ἄνθρωπος αὐτὸς ἔφυγε κατατροπιασμένος, δὲν ἄναψε οὔτε κερί. Τὸ παράδοξο εἶναι ὅτι ἡ δαμονισμένη ἔβλεπε πρὸς τὸ Ἱερό, δὲν γύρισε νὰ δῆ πίσω της, ποὺ ἦταν πολλὸς κόσμος, ἀλλὰ τὸν εἶδε μὲ ἄλλο τρόπο καὶ τοῦ ἀποκάλυψε τὶς ἀνεξομολόγητες ἁμαρτίες του.

Κάποιο βράδυ, ἐνῶ εἶχε μαζευτεῖ πολλὸς κόσμος καὶ ὁ παπα-Γιάννης διάβαζε τὴν δαμονισμένη, εἶπε κάποιος στὸν διπλανό του: «Κάνε καλὰ τὸν σταυρό σου. Σταυρὸς εἶναι αὐτὸς ποὺ κάνεις, λὲς καὶ παίζεις μαντολίνο». Ἀκούστηκε τότε ἡ φωνὴ τῆς δαμονισμένης νὰ λέει: «Ἄφησε τὸν ἄνθρωπο, καλὰ κάνει τὸν σταυρό του».

Ἡ δαμονισμένη φώναζε κάποτε: «Στείλτε νὰ φέρετε τὸν φίλο μου τὸν τάδε παπᾶ». Ἦταν ἕνας παπᾶς σὲ κάποιον χωριὸ ποὺ ἡ ζωὴ του δὲν ἦταν καλὴ. Αὐτὸς ὁ παπᾶς δὲν τόλμησε νὰ ἔρθει στὴν Ἐκκλησία.

Ὁ ἀγώνας τοῦ παπα-Γιάννη συνεχίστηκε γιὰ νὰ βγάλει τὸ δαμόνιο ἀπὸ τὴν γυναίκα. Σ' αὐτὸ τὸ διάστημα πληροφορήθηκε ἀπὸ τὸ ἴδιο τὸ δαμόνιο ποὺ ἦταν μέσα στὴν γυναίκα, ὅτι εἶναι ὁ Ἐωσφόρος, ὁ ἀρχηγὸς τῶν δαμόνων. Μπήκε μέσα της κατὰ τὴν ὥρα ποὺ τηγάνιζε ψάρια, ἐπειδὴ ὁ ἀδελφός της, ἀγανακτισμένος ἀπὸ κάποια ἀφορμὴ, τῆς εἶπε νὰ μπεῖ ὁ διάβολος μέσα της. Ἀπὸ ἐκείνη τὴν στιγμὴ δαμονίστηκε ἡ γυναίκα. (Γι' αὐτὸ ποτὲ δὲν πρέπει νὰ στέλνουμε στὸν «ἐξαποδῶ» τοὺς ἄλλους, καὶ μάλιστα τὴν γυναίκα μας καὶ τὰ παιδιά μας, εἶναι πολὺ μεγάλη ἁμαρτία!)

Ὁ ἀγώνας τώρα γιὰ τὸν παπα-Γιάννη ἦταν σκληρός. Ὁ διάβολος τὸν ἔβριζε, τὸν ἀπειλοῦσε λέγοντας ὅτι θὰ γκρεμίσει τὴν Ἐκκλησία, θὰ κάψει τὸ χωριό, «θὰ βγῶ ἀπ' αὐτὴ τὴν σκύλα», ἔλεγε, «καὶ θὰ μπῶ στὴν κόρη καὶ στὸν γιό σου».

Ὁ παπα-Γιάννης τοῦ ἀπαντοῦσε: «Δὲν ἔχεις δικαίωμα νὰ μπεῖς πουθενά, μόνο στὴν ἄβυσσο ἔχεις δικαίωμα νὰ πᾶς».

Μετὰ ἀπὸ ἕνα μῆνα, ἕνα βράδυ, ἀφοῦ τελείωσε ἡ Παράκληση καὶ ἔφυγε ὁ κόσμος μαζί καὶ ἡ δαμονισμένη, ὁ παπα-Γιάννης ἔκλεισε τὴν πόρτα τῆς Ἐκκλησίας, γονάτισε μπροστὰ στὴν εἰκόνα τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἄρχισε νὰ προσεύχεται μὲ δάκρυα γιὰ νὰ ἐλευθερωθεῖ ἡ βασανισμένη ψυχὴ ἀπὸ τὸ δαμόνιο.

Ἀπὸ τὶς ὀκτῶ τὸ βράδυ μέχρι τὶς τρεῖς το πρωὶ προσευχόταν συνεχῶς. Ἀνησύχησαν οἱ χωριανοὶ γιὰ τὸν παπα-Γιάννη ποὺ δὲν ἐπέστρεψε σπίτι του, κοντὰ στὰ



παιδιά του πού τὸν περιέμεναν. Πήγαν μαζί με τὰ παιδιά του καὶ τὸν βρῆκαν γονατιστὸ νὰ προσεύχεται. Ἡ κόρη του πού ἤξερε ἀπὸ ἄλλες φορές, εἶπε: «Ἀφήστε τον νὰ προσευχηθεῖ». Ὅταν συνήλθε ὁ παπα-Γιάννης ἀπὸ τὴν προσευχὴ πού εἶχε ἀπορροφηθεῖ, πῆγε στὸ σπίτι του νὰ κοιμηθεῖ. Στὸν ὕπνο του ἄκουσε φωνὴ πού τοῦ εἶπε: «Παπα-Γιάννη, ἡ γυναίκα μετὰ τὶς τριάντα ἐννιά μέρες, ἀφοῦ περάσει ἢ 12^η ὥρα, τὰ μεσάνυχτα, θὰ ἐλευθερωθεῖ ἀπὸ τὸν σατανᾶ».

Τὴν τελευταία ἡμέρα εἶπε ὁ σατανᾶς στὸν παπα-Γιάννη: «Παπα-Γιάννη με ἐξόντωσες». Καὶ πράγματι τὴν 40^η ἡμέρα βγήκε ἀπὸ τὴν γυναίκα ἡ ὁποία ἐλευθερώθηκε ἀπὸ τὸ μαρτύριο καὶ ἔζησε ἔκτοτε ὑγιῆς πολλὰ χρόνια.

Ὁ παπα-Γιάννης στὸ δωμάτιο πού κοιμόταν με τὰ παιδιά του, δὲν εἶχε σχεδὸν τίποτε ἐκτὸς ἀπὸ δύο «τσόλια» (σκεπάσματα, κουβέρτες), τὰ ὁποῖα εἶχαν δώσει οἱ γυναῖκες τοῦ χωριοῦ. Στὸ ἓνα κοιμόνταν τὰ παιδιά του καὶ στὸ ἄλλο αὐτός. Ἔστρωνε τὸ μισὸ κάτω στὸ πάτωμα καὶ μετὰ τὸ ἄλλο μισὸ σκεπαζόταν. Εἶχε μεγάλη πίστη στὸν παντοδύναμο Κύριο. Αἰσθανόταν ὅτι ἡ προσευχὴ του εἰσακούεται ἀπὸ τὸν Θεὸ καὶ γι' αὐτὸ γίνονται θαύματα. Ἔλεγε: «Ὅταν ζητήσω ἀπὸ τὸν Θεὸ νὰ ἰσοπεδώσῃ τὸ βουνὸ διὰ τῆς προσευχῆς, τῆς νηστείας καὶ τῆς ἐλεημοσύνης, θὰ ἰσοπεδωθεῖ. Ὁ ἄνθρωπος, ὅταν τηρήσει αὐτὰ τὰ τρία εἶναι ἀπὸ τώρα στὸν Παράδεισο».

Εἶχε πολὺ μεγάλη φτώχεια ὁ παπα-Γιάννης γιατί ὅσα τοῦ ἔδιναν τὰ μοίραζε ἐλεημοσύνη. Κάποιος τὸ πρῶτο Πάσχα πού ἔκανε στὸ χωριό, τοῦ χάρισε μία γίδα μετὰ τὸ μικρὸ της κατσικάκι. Τὸ κατσικάκι νὰ τὸ σφάξει γιὰ νὰ γιορτάσει τὸ Πάσχα, καὶ τὴν γίδα νὰ τὴν ἔχει νὰ πίνουν λίγο γάλα, ὅταν δὲν ἔχει νηστεία. Ὁ παπα-Γιάννης δὲν κράτησε τὴν γίδα καὶ τὸ κασίκι. Τα πούλησε καὶ μετὰ τὰ χρήματα ἀγόρασε ροῦχα γιὰ τὰ ὄρφανά του χωριοῦ, νὰ χαροῦν κι αὐτὰ τὴν ἡμέρα τῆς Ἀναστάσεως.

Ἦταν ἐπίσης μεγάλος νηστευτής. Τὴν Σαρακοστή νήστευε ἐξήντα μέρες ἀπὸ λάδι, καὶ γι' αὐτὸ στὸ χωριὸ τὴν Σαρακοστή τὴν ἔλεγαν Ἐξηντάρρα.

Ὁ παπα-Γιάννης ἓνα βράδυ εἶδε στὸν ὕπνο τοῦ ἓνα σπίτι σὲ μία ἄγνωστη τοποθεσία καὶ τὸν νοικοκύρη τοῦ σπιτιοῦ νὰ τρώγει ἓνα ψόφιο σκυλί. Ρώτησε πού βρίσκεται αὐτὸ τὸ σπίτι μετὰ τὰ συγκεκριμένα χαρακτηριστικὰ καὶ τὸν κατατόπισαν. Πῆγε ὁ παπα-Γιάννης με συνοδεία, βρῆκε τὸ σπίτι, χτύπησε τὴν πόρτα καὶ τοῦ ἄνοιξε ἡ γυναίκα.

Μαζί της ἦταν καὶ τὸ παιδί της. Ὁ ἄνδρας της ἔλειπε στὰ κτήματα. Πάντως ὅταν τὸν εἰδοποίησαν ἤρθε τρέχοντας, πλύθηκε, τοῦ ἔβαλε ἑδαφιαία μετάνοια καὶ τοῦ φίλησε τὸ χέρι. Εἶχε ἀκούσει γιὰ τὴν ἀγιότητα τοῦ παπα-Γιάννη καὶ τὴν θεραπεία τῆς δαιμονισμέ-

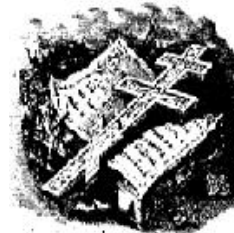
νης, ἀλλὰ δὲν τολμοῦσε νὰ τὸν συναντήσῃ, διότι ἡ συνειδησὴ του ἦταν βεβαρημένη. Στὴν ἐκκλησία δὲν πήγαινε, κρεοφαγοῦσε στὶς νηστείες, βλασφημοῦσε καὶ μετὰ τὴν γυναίκα του ζοῦσε παράνομα γιατί ἦταν ἀστεφάνωτοι. Εἶχε ὅμως καλὴ διάθεση. Ζήτησε καὶ ἐξομολογήθηκε ἀμέσως. Μετὰ στεφανώθηκε ἀπὸ τὸν παπα-Γιάννη καὶ ἔζησε ὡς καλὸς Χριστιανός.

Ὁ παπα-Γιάννης, ὁ χαριτωμένος λειτουργὸς τοῦ Ὑψίστου μετὰ τὴν ἀσκητικὴ του ζωὴ, τὴν ἀκτημοσύνη του καὶ τὴν ἀδιάλειπτη προσευχὴ, εἶχε γίνει γνωστὸς σ' ὅλη τὴν γύρω περιοχὴ. Ἔρχονταν οἱ ἄνθρωποι νὰ τὸν συμβουλευτοῦν καὶ νὰ τοὺς διαβάσει εὐχὴ νὰ γίνουν καλά. Τὸν θεωροῦσαν μεγάλο Προφήτη καὶ θαυματουργό. Ἔρχονταν ἐπίσης ἄγνωστοι ἄνθρωποι ἀπὸ διάφορα μέρη καὶ αὐτὸς ἔλεγε: «Ἐσὺ εἶσαι ὁ τάδε καὶ ἦρθες ἐδῶ γι' αὐτὸ καὶ γι' αὐτὸ τὸ λόγο».

Διηγεῖται κάποιος ἀπὸ τὴν Σκουτερὰ πού στὸ πατρικὸ του σπίτι ἔμενε ὁ παπα-Γιάννης, ὅτι εἶχε πεῖ κάποτε: «Μία ἡμέρα θὰ ἀποκαλυφθεῖ τὸ λείψανο ἑνὸς Ἁγίου στὸ μοναστήρι τῆς Παναγίας τῆς Λυκουρσιωτίσσης καὶ ὑστέρᾳ τοῦ Μοναστηρίου θὰ πάρει μεγάλη φήμη».

Ἀλλὰ τὸ χωριὸ του πού τὸν λάτρευε δὲν τὸν χάριξε πολὺ, γιατί τὸν πῆραν γιὰ ἐφημέριο στὸ χωριὸ Καινούργιο. Μετὰ τὸν ζήτησαν καὶ τὸν πῆραν στὴν Πελοπόννησο. Ἐκτοτε ἀγνοοῦνται τὰ ἔχνη του καὶ τώρα σίγουρα θὰ ἔχει κοιμηθεῖ.

Αἰωνία του ἡ μνήμη. Τὴν εὐχὴ του νὰ ἔχουμε. Ἀμήν.



Ἔχουμε οικονομικὸ πρόβλημα γιατί εἴμαστε ἄπληστοι. Ἄν ἡμεθα ὀλιγαρκεῖς, δὲν θὰ ὑπῆρχε τέτοιο πρόβλημα. Ἡ πλεονεξία δημιουργεῖ τὸ οικονομικὸ ἀδιέξοδο. Δὲν μᾶς ἀρκοῦν αὐτὰ πού ἔχουμε. Θέλουμε ὅλο καὶ περισσότερα. Ποιὰ ἄλλη καλύτερη λύσις τοῦ οικονομικοῦ προβλήματος ὑπάρχει, ἀπὸ τὴν ὀλιγαρκεία; Κυνηγᾶμε τὸ περισσότερο. Νὰ μάθουμε νὰ εἴμαστε ὀλιγαρκεῖς. Δύο μέτρα χῶμα εἶναι ἡ κατάληξις ὅλων μας. Καὶ ἂν εἶναι κάποιος πλούσιος καὶ δυνάστης καὶ μεγάλος καὶ τρανός, τί θὰ κερδίσῃ παραπάνω ἀπὸ δύο μέτρα χῶμα; Τὸ πολὺ-πολύ, νὰ τοῦ κάνουν ἓνα ὠραῖο τάφο. Αὐτὸ εἶναι τὸ κέρδος του! Ἄν ὅλοι οἱ ἄνθρωποι ὑπήκουαν σὲ αὐτὸ πού λέγει ὁ Ἄπ. Παῦλος καὶ ἤρχοῦντο στὰ ἀπολύτως ἀπαραίτητα καὶ δὲν ἤθελαν ἓνα σωρὸ περιττά, δὲν θὰ ὑπῆρχε οικονομικὸ πρόβλημα.

Πρ. Ἐπιφάνιος Θεοδωρόπουλος (+1989)

Διδάγματα από την Κοίμηση τῆς Θεοτόκου

Τοῦ Μητροπολίτου Φλωρίνης Ἀγιοσύνη Καντιώτου (+2010), ἐκφωνήθηκε στήν Ἀθήνα, πρό τοῦ 1967, σέ ἀγρυπνία τήν παραμονή τῆς ἑορτῆς.

Ποιά διδάγματα, ἀγαπητοί μου, ἀποκομίζουμε ἀπό τήν ἑορτή τῆς Κοιμήσεως; Ὅσα θά σᾶς πῶ, τὰ ἀντλοῦμε ὄχι ἀπό τήν Καινή Διαθήκη, ἀλλ' ἀπό τήν ἄλλη πηγὴ τῆς Ὁρθοδοξίας, τὴν Ἱερὰ Παράδοσι. Τί λέει λοιπὸν ἡ Ἱερὰ Παράδοσις γιὰ τὴν Κοίμηση τῆς Θεοτόκου;

Μετὰ τὴν ἀνάληψη τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ Παναγία ζοῦσε μὲ τὶς ἀναμνήσεις τοῦ μονογενοῦς Υἱοῦ της, καὶ εἶχε συνήθεια νὰ ἐπισκέπτεται τὸν τόπο τῆς προσευχῆς Του, τὴ Γεθσημανῆ. Πολλὲς φορὲς πῆγε ἐκεῖ. Ἀλλὰ κάποιον ἄνθρωπο πῆγε ἐκεῖ γιὰ τελευταία φορὰ. Τότε συνέβη κάτι ἕκτακτο. Καὶ ἄς μὴν τὸ πιστεύουν οἱ ἄπιστοι, ἐμεῖς πιστεύουμε. Στὸ πέρας τῆς Θεοτόκου, καὶ μάλιστα ὅταν γονάτισε νὰ προσευχηθεῖ, τὰ δέντρα ἔγειραν, λύγισαν τὶς κορυφές των πρὸς τὰ κάτω. Σὰν νὰ ἔκαναν μετάνοια νὰ τὴν προσκυνήσουν. Καί, ὅπως στὸν Εὐαγγελισμό, ἦρθε πάλι ὁ ἀρχάγγελος Γαβριήλ. Κρατοῦσε ἓνα κλάδο φοίνικος, τὸ σύμβολο νίκης κατὰ τοῦ θανάτου. Χαιρέτισε τὴν Ὑπεραγία Θεοτόκο καὶ τὴν εἰδοποίησε, ὅτι σὲ λίγο φεύγει πλέον ἀπὸ τὴ γῆ γιὰ νὰ συναντήσῃ τὸν Υἱό της.

Γεμάτη ἱερὰ συγκίνηση, ἡ Θεοτόκος κατέβηκε ἀπὸ τὸ λόφο τῆς Γεθσημανῆ καὶ ἦλθε στὸ φτωχικὸ τῆς σπιτί. Γνωρίζοντας ὅτι ἔφθασε τὸ τέλος τῆς ἐπιγείου ζωῆς της σκούπισε, ὅπως λέει ἡ Ἱερὰ Παράδοσις, καὶ εὐτρέπισε μὲ τὰ χέρια της τὸν οἰκίσκο, ἔτοιμη νὰ ὑποδεχθεῖ τὸν Κύριο, πὺν ἐρχόταν νὰ τὴν παραλάβει. Κάλεσε καὶ δύο γειτόνισσές της, χῆρες μὲ ὄρφανά, καὶ τοὺς μοίρασε τὸν φτωχικὸ τῆς ἱματισμό. Μετὰ ἀνήγγειλε στὸ περιβάλλον της, ὅτι σὲ τρεῖς ἡμέρες ἀπέρχεται ἀπὸ τὴ γῆ. Τέλος ξάπλωσε στὴν κλίνη της, σταύρωσε τὰ ἅγια χέρια της, καὶ βυθίστηκε σὲ προσευχή.

Τὸ ὅτι ἡ Ὑπεραγία Θεοτόκος προετοιμάστηκε γιὰ τὸν θάνατό της πόσο μᾶς διδάσκει!

Εἶναι εὐλογία τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν τοῦ Θεοῦ νὰ εἰδοποιῶνται γιὰ τὸ θάνατό τους. Ὅταν οἱ ἄνθρωποι ζοῦσαν μὲ ἀφοσίωση στὸ Θεό, προαισθάνονταν τὸ θάνατό τους. Καὶ ὅπως αὐτὸς πὺν πρόκειται νὰ ταξιδέψῃ ἐτοιμάζεται ἀπὸ μέρες, ἔτσι καὶ οἱ εὐλαβεῖς ψυχὲς προετοιμάζονται γιὰ τὸ αἰώνιο ταξίδι.

Εἶναι κακὸ ὁ αἰφνίδιος θάνατος. Ἀκούσατε τί λέει ἡ Ἐκκλησία; Νὰ μᾶς φυλάξῃ ὁ Θεὸς ἀπὸ πολλὰ δεινὰ. Ποιά δεινὰ; «Ἀπὸ λοιμοῦ, λιμοῦ, σεισμοῦ...» καὶ «... ἀπὸ αἰφνιδίου θανάτου». Γιατί εἶναι κακὸ; Διότι δὲν δίνει στὸν ἄνθρωπο οὔτε λεπτό. Μοιάζει μὲ τὸ γεράκι. Οἱ κότες βοσκοῦν στὸ γρασίδι, καὶ νομίζουν ὅτι θὰ ἐπιστρέψουν στὸ κοττέτσι. Ἄμ' δὲν θὰ ἐπιστρέψουν. Ἀπὸ πάνω, ξαφνικά, τὸ γεράκι πέφτει μὲ ὀρμὴ καὶ ἀρπάζει τὴν ὀρνιθα. Σὰν γεράκι καὶ ὁ θάνατος φτερου-

γίζει ὀρμητικὸς καὶ πέφτει στὸ δρόμο, στὸ πεζοδρόμιο, στὸ ἀεροπλάνο, στὸ γραφεῖο..., ὅπου νὰ ἔναι. Ἀρπάζει τὸν ἄνθρωπο καὶ τοῦ λέει, Ὅλα ἔδω!... δὲν τὸν ἀφήνει νὰ πεῖ τὸ «Μνήσθητί μου...».

Ἀλλὰ προσέξτε κάτι ἀκόμη. Πρέπει ὁ Χριστιανὸς, προαισθανόμενος τὸ θάνατό του, νὰ κάνει καὶ τοῦτο. Βλέπετε, ὅτι μεγά-

λωσες πλέον, τὰ χιόνια ἔπεσαν πάνω στὸ κεφάλι σου. Ὁ ἅγιος Κοσμάς ὁ Αἰτωλὸς ἔλεγε: «Τὰ σπαρτά, ἅμα ἀσπρίζουνε, τί περιμένουν; Περιμένουν τὸ δρεπάνι». Κι ὅταν ἀσπρίζουν τὰ μαλλιά, τί περιμένουμε, ἀδέλφια μου; Τὸ δρεπάνι τοῦ ἀρχαγγέλου. Προτοῦ λοιπὸν φτάσει τὸ δρεπάνι, οἱ μητέρες καὶ οἱ πατέρες πὺν ἔχουν παιδιά νὰ τακτοποιήσουν τὰ τοῦ σπιτιοῦ των. Ὅ,τι ἔχουν, νὰ τὰ μοιράσουν μὲ δικαιοσύνη στὰ παιδιά τους. Νὰ μὴν ἀφήσουν ἐκκρεμότητες. Ἄν ἀγαπᾶτε τὰ παιδιά σας, μιμηθεῖτε τὸ παράδειγμα τῆς ὑπεραγίας Θεοτόκου, πὺν ζωντανὴ μοίρασε ὅ,τι εἶχε. Διότι μετὰ τὸ θάνατό σας, ἐὰν ἀφήσετε ἐκκρεμότητες, τὰ παιδιά σας θὰ τρέχουν στὰ δικαστήρια!

Ἀκόμη ἡ ὑπεραγία Θεοτόκος μᾶς διδάσκει καὶ τοῦτο. Τὴν ἐλεημοσύνη μὴν τὴν κάνετε μετὰ θάνατον. Ὅσο ζεῖτε, ὅσο τὰ χέρια αὐτὰ μποροῦν καὶ κινοῦνται καὶ μπαίνουν στὸ πορτοφόλι, τότε ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη ἔχει μεγάλη ἀξία. Διότι μετὰ θάνατον δὲν λέγεται πλέον ἐλεημοσύνη· εἶναι χρήματα πὺν δὲν ὀφείλονται σ'



έσας. Άκοϋς, ότι ένα φιλανθρωπικό ίδρυμα τὸ ἔκτισαν μετὰ θάνατον. Άπήλυσαν δηλαδή τὰ χρήματά τους ἐν ζωῇ, τὰ γλέντησαν ὅσο ζοῦσαν, καὶ μετὰ τὸ θάνατο πλέον κάνουν τὴν ἐλεημοσύνη. Γι' αὐτὸ νὰ κάνουμε τὴν ἐλεημοσύνη ὅπως τὴν ἔκανε ἡ Παναγία.

Άλλὰ προχωροῦμε. Ἦλθε καὶ γιὰ τὴ Μητέρα τοῦ Θεοῦ ὁ θάνατος. Ἡ ὑπεραγία Θεοτόκος εἶναι πλέον τώρα νεκρὰ ἐπὶ τῆς κλίνης της. Νεκρὰ ἐκεῖνη, πὸν ἐγέννησε τὸν ἀρχηγὸ τῆς ζωῆς. Ποιοὶ τώρα θὰ τὴν κηδεύσουν; Τὰ παιδιά κηδεύουν τοὺς γονεῖς. Άλλ' ἐκεῖνη εἶχε παιδιά; Εἶχε. Τί παιδιά; Κατὰ σάρκα ἕνα καὶ μόνο Υἱὸν εἶχε, τὸν Κύριον ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, καὶ δὲν παραδεχόμεθα τὴν βέβηλο καὶ ἀνίερο σκέψη τῶν αἰρετικῶν ὅτι εἶχε κι ἄλλα τέκνα. Άλλ' ἐνῶ δὲν εἶχε κατὰ σάρκα τέκνα, εἶχε πνευματικούς υἱούς. Καὶ πνευματικά της παιδιά ἦταν οἱ δώδεκα ἀπόστολοι.

Ποῦ ἦταν ὅμως κατὰ τὴν κοίμησή της οἱ ἀπόστολοι; Ἔλειπαν μακριά. Ὁ Πέτρος στὴ Ρώμη, ὁ Παῦλος πρὸς τὴ Μακεδονία, ὁ Ἄνδρέας στὴν Πάτρα, ὁ Θωμᾶς στὴς Ἰνδίες, ὁ Ἰωάννης στὴν Ἐφεσο... Ἔλειπαν ὅλοι στὴν διασπορά. Πῶς νὰ τοὺς εἰδοποιήσουν; Αὐτὸ ἀπορεῖτε; Πιστεύετε. Καὶ ἐὰν πιστεύετε, τότε θὰ πιστεύσετε καὶ αὐτὸ πὸν ἔγινε στὴν κοίμησή τῆς Θεοτόκου. Φτερωτοὶ ἄγγελοι πέταξαν σ' ὅλα τὰ σημεῖα τῆς ὑδρογείου καὶ ἔσπευσαν νὰ εἰδοποιήσουν τοὺς ἀποστόλους.

Καὶ νά. Ἐπάνω στὸν οὐρανὸ, σὰν τὰ περιστέρια, σὲ φωτεινὲς νεφέλες ὡς ἐπὶ ἵππων, νὰ καὶ ἔρχεται ὁ Πέτρος, νὰ καὶ ἔρχεται ὁ Παῦλος, ὁ Ἰωάννης καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι ἀπόστολοι. Ἦρθαν κοντὰ της. Καὶ πάνω στὴν Παράδοσι αὐτὴ στηρίζεται τὸ γλυκύτατο καὶ ὠραιότατο ἐκεῖνο ἄσμα, «*Απόστολοι ἐκ περάτων συναθροισθέντες ἐνθάδε...*».

Ναί, μαζεύτηκαν οἱ ἀπόστολοι. Καὶ τί μᾶς διδάσκει αὐτό; Ὅτι ὅταν πεθαίνει κάποιος γνωστός μας, πρέπει νὰ διακόπτουμε κάθε ἐργασία. Τὸ πρῶτο καθῆκον εἶναι νὰ πᾶμε στὸ νεκρὸ, γιὰ νὰ ἐκπληρώσουμε ἕνα χρέος ἱερό. Πρῶτον μὲν πρὸς ἐκεῖνον πὸν ἔφυγε. Ἔπειτα πρὸς τοὺς συγγενεῖς, πὸν παρηγοροῦνται μὲ τὴν παρουσία μας. Πρὸ παντὸς ὅμως πρὸς τὸν ἑαυτὸ μας νὰ τοῦ ὑπενθυμίσουμε δηλαδή τὴν αἰωνιότητα. Ὅταν βλέπεις νεκρὸ αὐτὸν πὸν μέχρι χθὲς ἦταν μαζί σου, αὐτὸ σοῦ φωνάζει: «*Ματαιότης ματαιότητων, τὰ πάντα ματαιότης*» (Ἐκκλ. 1:2). Γι' αὐτὸ ὁ ἅγιος Κοσμᾶς ἔλεγε: «Ὅταν πεθαίνει ὁ ἄνθρωπος, νὰ μὴ τὸν

θάβετε ἀμέσως, ὄχι νὰ τὸν κρατᾶτε εἰκοσιτέσσερις ὥρες, καὶ νὰ μαζεύετε γύρω του, νὰ τὸν βλέπετε καὶ νὰ προσεύχεσθε· γιατί καλύτερος ἱεροκήρυκας ἀπὸ τὸ νεκρὸ δὲν ὑπάρχει.»

Μαζεύτηκανε, λοιπὸν, οἱ ἀπόστολοι. Κρατοῦσαν τὸ φέρετρο καὶ τὸ μετέφεραν ἐκτὸς τῆς πόλεως. Ἐκεῖνη ὅμως τὴ στιγμή τί συνέβη; Μία ὄχι, ἕνας Ἐβραῖος, ἄπλωσε τὸ βρωμερὸ του χέρι στὸ φέρετρο. Άλλ' ἀμέσως, ἀστραπιαίως, κόπηκε τὸ χέρι του κ' ἔμεινε ἐκεῖ κρεμασμένο, ὅπως φαίνεται στὶς εἰκόνες.

Αὐτὸ εἶναι, ἀδελφοί, μὲ λίγες λέξεις τὸ ἱστορικὸ τῆς ἐορτῆς τῆς Κοιμήσεως. Καὶ ἀκούγεται ἡ φωνὴ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ νὰ μᾶς λέει: Μανάδες, ἐλάτε κοντὰ στὸ Πρότυπο τῶν μητέρων. Παιδιά καὶ πρὸ παντὸς τὰ ὀρφανά, ἐλάτε κοντὰ στὴ γλυκεῖα Μάνα τοῦ κόσμου. Ὅσοι εἶστε παρθένοι, ἐλάτε κοντὰ στὴν Παρθένο, καὶ φυλάξτε «*τὴν ὠραιότητα τῆς παρθενίας*». Ὅσοι εἶστε ἀγράμματοι, ἐλάτε στὴν Παναγία γιὰ νὰ μάθετε τὴ



μεγαλύτερη φιλοσοφία. Ὅσοι εἶστε σοφοί, ἐλάτε στὴν Παναγία γιὰ νὰ μάθετε, ὅτι σοφία εἶναι ἡ ταπείνωση. Ὅσοι εἴμεθα ἀμαρτωλοί, ἄς ἔλθουμε στὴν Θεοτόκο, γιὰ νὰ μᾶς ὀδηγήσει κοντὰ στὸ Χριστό. Ἡ Κοίμησις αὐτὰ μᾶς διδάσκει.

Τὸ σπουδαιότερο ὅμως μάθημα εἶναι, ὅτι ὁ θάνατος ἄλλαξε ὄνομα. Ἄφ' ὅτου σταυρώθηκε ὁ Χριστός, ὁ θάνατος δὲν

ἐμπνέει πλέον φόβο, ὅπως πρὶν. Στὸ ἐξῆς δὲν λέμε, ὅπως πρὸ Χριστοῦ, ὁ θάνατος τοῦ Σωκράτους, τοῦ Ἀριστοτέλους, τοῦ Πλάτωνος. Ἄλλὰ τί λέμε; Θάνατος ἴσον κοίμησις. Γι' αὐτὸ δὲν λέμε, ὁ «θάνατος τῆς Θεοτόκου», ἀλλὰ λέμε, ἡ «Κοίμησις τῆς Θεοτόκου». Ἄν πιστεύεις στὸ Χριστό, πὸν εἶπε «*Ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ἀνάστασις καὶ ἡ ζωὴ*» (Ἰωάν. 11,25), ὁ θάνατος εἶναι κοίμησις· ὄχι, δὲν εἶναι ψέμα. Οἱ νεκροὶ θ' ἀναστηθοῦν. Γι' αὐτὸ τὰ νεκροταφεῖα πρέπει νὰ λέγωνται κοιμητήρια.

Αὐτὰ μᾶς διδάσκει ἡ ἐορτή. Λοιπὸν ἄς προετοιμάσουμε κ' ἐμεῖς τὸν ἑαυτὸ μας.

† † †

Δεῦτε ἀνυμνήσωμεν λαοί, τὴν Παναγίαν Παρθένον ἁγνήν, ἐξ ἧς ἀρρήτως προῆλθε, σαρκωθεὶς ὁ Λόγος τοῦ Πατρὸς, κράζοντες καὶ λέγοντες, Εὐλογημένη σὺ ἐν γυναιξί, Μακαρία ἡ γαστήρ, ἡ χωρήσασα Χριστόν, Αὐτοῦ ταῖς ἁγίαις χερσί, τὴν ψυχὴν παραθεμένη, πρέσβευε ἄχραντε, σωθῆναι τὰς ψυχὰς ἡμῶν.

Ἰωάννης Καποδίστριας: Τὸ Ἄγνὸ Πρότυπο κάθε Χριστιανοῦ Ἠγέτη (1776-1831)

Τοῦ π. Ἐμμανουήλ Ἀνδρέου Γιαννοῦλη, πρωτο-πρεσβυτέρου,
πτυχ. Νομικῆς καὶ Θεολογίας Πανεπιστημίου Ἀθηνῶν.



Ἡ Καποδίστριας εἶναι τὸ τέλειον παράδειγμα πολιτικοῦ ἀνδρὸς ὁ ὁποῖος ἀκολούθησε ἐκούσια καὶ συνειδητὰ στὴ ζωὴ του τὴν ὁδὸ τῆς θυσίας καὶ τῆς αὐταπαρνήσεως, ἀρετὲς ἀπόλυτα συμβατὲς μὲ τὴ Χριστιανικὴ διδασκαλία ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲ τὴν ἰδέα τοῦ ἑθελοντισμοῦ.

Γεννήθηκε στὴν Κέρκυρα τὸ 1776. Ὑπῆρξε τὸ ἕκτο παιδί εὐσεβοῦς πολύτεκνης

οἰκογένειας, δύο μάλιστα ἀπὸ τὶς ἀδερφές του ἔγιναν μοναχές. Ὁ Καποδίστριας ὑπῆρξε μία συγκροτημένη καὶ ὀλοκληρωμένη προσωπικότητα. Ἐβίωσε τὴν Ὁρθόδοξη πίστη καὶ ὅλες του οἱ ἐνέργειες διαπνέονταν ἀπὸ τὶς ἠθικὲς ἀρχές καὶ τὰ φιλάδελφα αἰσθήματά του. Θαυμάζουμε τὴν ἀκεραιότητα τοῦ χαρακτήρα του καὶ μέσα ἀπὸ μία ἐπιστολὴ πρὸς τὸν πατέρα του. Ἐγραφε: «Εἶμαι εὐχαριστημένος... Ἀντιστάθηκα στὶς πιδὲ μεγάλες καὶ γοητευτικὲς προτάσεις... Μοῦ προσφέρθηκαν περισσότερες ἀπὸ μία ὠραῖες ἀποκαταστάσεις. Τὶς ἀρνήθηκα χωρὶς δυσαρέσκειαν. Θὰ εἶχα γίνεαι κροῖσος στὰ πλούτη, ἀλλὰ στοὺς ἀντίποδες. Θὰ εἶχα προχωρήσει κατὰ χίλια βήματα στὴ σταδιοδρομία μου, ἀλλὰ ἔξω ἀπὸ τὶς ἀρχές μου, ἀπὸ τὴν ἀτμόσφαιρά μας. Δὲν τὸ θέλησα καὶ οὔτε θὰ τὸ θελήσω ποτέ... Ἐλπίζω στὴ Θεϊκὴ προστασία».

Σὲ ὅλες τὶς φάσεις τῆς ζωῆς του παρέμεινε πάντα σταθερὸς στὶς οἰκογενειακὲς ἀρχές καὶ στὴν Ὁρθόδοξη πίστη του. Τὸ Πάσχα 1811 ἔγραψε στὸν πατέρα του: «Μεθαύριο, Μεγάλῃ Πέμπτῃ, θὰ ἐκκληρώσω τὰ Χριστιανικά μου καθήκοντα. Θὰ κοινωνήσω...».

Στὸ Συνέδριο τῆς Βιέννης τὸ 1815, ἐνῶ ὅλοι διασκέδαζαν, ἐκεῖνος ζοῦσε λιτὰ καὶ ὑπεύθυνα: «Οἱ Αὐτοκράτορες χορεύουν, οἱ Βασιλεῖς χορεύουν, ὁ Μέττερνιχ χορεύει, ὁ Καστελρέϊ χορεύει, ὅλος ὁ κόσμος χορεύει», γράφει ἐφημερίδα τῆς ἐποχῆς. Μόνον ὁ Καποδίστριας δὲν χόρευε. Σοβαρὸς καὶ μετρημένος ξενυχτοῦσε πάνω στὰ διπλωματικά του ἔγγραφα, σκεπτόμενος μὲ ποιὸν τρόπο θὰ μπορούσε νὰ βοηθήσει τὴ σκλαβωμένη πατρίδα του. Ἦταν τότε ποὺ προέτρεψε τὸν τσάρο Ἀλέξανδρο νὰ ἠγηθεῖ μιᾶς Συνομοσπονδίας Ὁρθοδόξων κρατῶν, στὰ ὁποῖα θὰ συγκαταλεγόταν βέβαια καὶ ἡ ὑπόδουλη τότε Ἑλλάδα, μὲ σκοπὸ τὴν

ἀποτίναξη τοῦ ὀθωμανικοῦ ζυγοῦ καὶ τὴν ὁμαλὴ ἐνσωμάτωσή της σὲ μία μεγάλη εὐρωπαϊκὴ οἰκογένεια «γύρω ἀπὸ μίαν κοινὴν Πατρίδα, τὴν Ἠνωμένην Εὐρώπην», ὅπως ἔγραψε. Αὐτὸ τὸ σχῆμα θὰ βασιζόταν πάνω στὶς Χριστιανικὲς ἀρχές τῆς ἀλληλεγγύης καὶ τῆς ἰσότητος καὶ θὰ περιελάμβανε καὶ τὰ μικρότερα κράτη, μὲ τὴν κατάθεση ἑνὸς ὑπομνήματος γιὰ μία πανευρωπαϊκὴ συνεργασία καὶ ἐνότητα.

Ἔτσι ὁ Καποδίστριας ἀναδεικνύεται ὡς ὁ **πρῶτος ὄραματιστὴς μιᾶς ἐνωμένης Χριστιανικῆς Εὐρώπης**. Τὸ ὄραμα τῆς ἐνωμένης Εὐρώπης πραγματοποιήθηκε, δυστυχῶς ὅμως ἡ Εὐρώπη σήμερα τείνει νὰ ἀρνηθεῖ τὴ Χριστιανικὴ καταγωγὴ της καὶ παρατηρεῖται μία μεγάλη ἀνισότητα ἀνάμεσα στὶς χώρες τοῦ Βορρᾶ καὶ τοῦ Νότου της...

Ὁ Καποδίστριας μόχθησε ὡσαύτως γιὰ τὴν πνευματικὴ ἀναβάθμιση τῆς νεολαίας. Πίστευε πὼς ἡ ἀνόρθωση τοῦ Γένους συνδεόταν ἄμεσα μὲ τὴ μόρφωση τῶν Ἑλληνοπαίδων: «Χωρὶς πίστιν εἰς τὸν Θεόν, ἀγάπην εἰς τὴν Πατρίδα καὶ ἐκμάθησιν τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς γλώσσης, τὰ Ἑλληνοπούλα θὰ χαθοῦν στὶς ξένες χώρες. Φροντίστε, λοιπόν, νὰ διατηρεῖτε ἄσβεστες στὶς ψυχὰς τῶν μαθητῶν σας αὐτὲς τὶς ὑψιστὲς ἀξίες», ἔγραφε τότε πρὸς τοὺς διδασκάλους τοῦ ἐξωτερικοῦ. Μὲ τὴν συνεργασία τοῦ λογίου ἀρχιμανδρῆ Ἀνθίμου Γαζῆ ἴδρυσεν τὴ «Φιλόμουσον Ἐταιρείαν τῆς Βιέννης», μὲ σκοπὸ τὴ μόρφωση τῶν Ἑλληνοπαίδων. Διέθεσε μάλιστα σημαντικὰ ποσὰ γι' αὐτὸν τὸν σκοπὸ.

Τὸ 1817 ἐκκλησιαζόταν τακτικὰ τὶς Κυριακὲς στὴν Ἑλληνικὴ ἐκκλησία τῆς Μόσχας, ὅπου: «Αἰσθανόταν ἰδιαιτέραν χαρὰν, ἐπειδὴ εἶχεν τὴν εὐκαιρίαν νὰ ἀκροᾶται καὶ νὰ ἐννοεῖ τὴν γλώσσαν εἰς τὴν ὁποίαν δεόμεθα», δηλαδὴ τὴν ὠραιότητα καὶ συνεκτικὴ Ἑλληνικὴ γλώσσα, τὴν ὁποία ἐμεῖς σήμερα, δυστυχῶς, τόσο κακοποιοῦμε!

Ὁ ἔξοχος ἄνδρας ἔπραττε πάντα κατὰ συνείδησιν. Ὅταν διεπίστωσε τὴν ἀλλαγὴ πολιτικῆς τοῦ Τσάρου— ὑπὸ τὴν ἐπίρρεια τοῦ Μέττερνιχ—πάνω στὸ Ἑλληνικὸ ζήτημα, τότε δὲν δίστασε νὰ ὑποβάλει εὐθαρσῶς τὴν παραίτησή του. Μάλιστα τοῦ ὑπενθύμισε τὰ λόγια του κατὰ τὴ στιγμὴ τῆς ἀναλήψεως τῶν ὑψηλῶν καθηκόντων του: «Μεγαλειότατε, ὡσὰκις εὐρεθῶ πρὸ τοῦ τραγικοῦ διλήμματος νὰ ὑποστηρίξω τὰ συμφέροντα τῆς σκλαβωμένης Πατρίδος μου ἢ τὰ συμφέροντα τῆς ἀχανοῦς Αὐτοκρατορίας Σας, δὲν θὰ διστάσω οὔτε στιγμὴ: θὰ τεθῶ μὲ τὸ μέρος τῆς πατρίδος μου. Εἶμαι Ἕλλην καὶ θὰ μείνω Ἕλλην γιὰ πάντα». Δὲν δίστασε νὰ θυσιάσει ἀκόμη καὶ τὸν ἀγνὸ ἔρωτά του πρὸς τὴν ἐκλεκτὴ Ἑλληνίδα Ρωξάνδρα Στούρτζα, ὅταν ἀπεφάσισε νὰ κατέβει πρὸς ἐκεῖνο τὸ «ἀπέραντο ἐρείπιον», τὴν ἀγαπημένην του Ἑλλάδα, ὕστερα ἀπὸ τὴν πρόσκληση τῆς Γ' Ἐθνοσυνελεύσεως τῶν Ἑλλήνων, τὸ 1827.

«Άγωνιώ να προγνωρίσω τί θέλω απογίνει και αν μου έχει όρισθεί να σηκώσω τον ουρανόθεν επικαταβαίνοντα εις έμε σταυρόν με την ψήφον της Συνελεύσεως της Τροιζήνος... Η κάθοδος μου εις την Ελλάδα σημαίνει άνοδον εις τον Γολγοθάν μου», έγραψε τότε προς τον έκλεκτό φίλο του Έλβετό τραπεζίτη Ιωάννη Έυνάρδο. Άποτελεί μοναδική ίσως περίπτωση πολιτικού άνδρος, ό όποιος ξεκίνησε τη σταδιοδρομία του με την αίσθηση πως δεν τον περίμεναν δόξες, τιμές και όφέλη, αλλά σταυρός και μαρτύριο! Σε αυτό το σημείο μάλιστα μιμήθηκε τον Κύριο Ιησού Χριστό, όπως άπεδείχθη από την μετέπειτα πορεία του.

Στις 12 Ιανουαρίου 1828 στον προαύλιο χώρο της εκκλησίας έγινε η πανηγυρική ύποδοχή του Κυβερνήτη από την—ένωμένη πλέον—Βουλή, την Αντικυβερνητική Έπιτροπή και έναν ένθουσιώντα—πλήν καταρημαγμένο—λαό. Μετά τη Δοξολογία, από το πλατύσκαλο του έξώστη προσεφώνησε τον Κυβερνήτη ό Θεόφιλος Κάιρης. Όπως ό ίδιος άπεκάλυψε άργότερα, η καρδιά του ράγισε άντικρίζοντας τη δυστυχία και τις όψεις των σκελετωμένων παιδιών!

Με την έγκατάστασή του στο Κυβερνείο άρχισε άμέσως το τιτάνιο έργο του, από το χάος να δημιουργήσει κράτος. Έστειλε δικούς του άνθρώπους και με δικά του χρήματα έξαγόρασε σημαντικό άριθμό παιδιών που είχαν αίχμαλωτισθεί και μεταφερθεί από τον Ίμπραήμ στην Άλεξάνδρεια.

Άς άναφεροϋμε έδώ μόνο στην κοινωνική μέριμνα του Κυβερνήτη, η όποία επεκτάθηκε μέχρι και στην ίδρυση Ύγειονομείων και λοιμοκαθατηρίων. Σ' ένα τεράστιο κτήριο έκτάσεως 4.000 τ.μ., που έκτισε το 1829 στην Αίγινα με τον πρωτοεμφανιζόμενο στην Ελλάδα ρυθμό της άπλης δωρικής άρχιτεκτονικής, λειτούργησε ουσιαστικά η πρώτη Σχολή Τεχνικής και Έπαγγελματικής Έκπαίδευσης στην Ελλάδα. Οι 500 τρόφμοι του όρφανοτροφείου, άγόρια και κορίτσια, είχαν τη δυνατότητα να παρακολουθούν μαθήματα οίκοδομικής, ξυλουργικής, τορνευτικής, σιδηρουργικής, ώρολογιοποιίας, ραπτικής, ύποδηματοποιίας, βιβλιοδετικής και τυπογραφίας. Οι άποφοιτώντες έπαιρναν από το Κράτος ένα μικρό χρηματικό κεφάλαιο για την άγορά των όργάνων της τέχνης τους, δηλαδή έδώ βλέπουμε τη λειτουργία του κράτους προνοίας. Παράλληλα, εϋνοήθηκαν η καλλιέργεια πατάτας, σιταριού και η έκτροφή μεταξοσκωλήκων. Χορηγήθηκαν και καλλιεργητικά δάνεια στις κοινότητες για την καλλιέργεια της έλιάς και της σταφίδας. Ο Κυβερνήτης ζούσε πολύ άπλά. «Έμένα μου χρειάζονται 60 λεπτά για να ζήσω», έλεγε. Και ό Μακρυγιάννης: «Ο Κυβερνήτης έτρωγε επί τέσσερις μέρες μία κότα».

Είχε φοβερά άδυνατίσει. Στην παράκληση του ίατροϋ του η άπάντησή ήταν: «Τότε μονάχα θα βελτιώσω την

τροφήν μου, όταν θα είμαι βέβαιος ότι δεν ύπάρχει ούτε ένα Έλληνόπουλο που να πεινάει». Δεν επιθυμούσε να τον άποκαλούν «κόμη». Πολύ καλύτερα άποδεχόταν το «μπάρμπα-Γιάννης» του λαού. Ντυνόταν άπλά. Ο Νικόλαος Δραγούμης περιγράφει εκείνο το χαριτωμένο περιστατικό που συνέβη στην πρώτη περιοδεία του στην Κορινθία, όταν τον παρεκάλεσε ό Κολοκοτρώνης να άλλάξει στολή, έπειδή ό λαός ζητωκραύγαζε για Κυβερνήτη του τον προπορευόμενο ταχυδρομικό διανομέα Καρδαρά «ένδεδυμένον βελούδιον χρυσοκέντητον σεγκούνιον». Η στολή όμως που τελικά φόρεσε δεν διέφερε από εκείνη των δασονόμων της εποχής της Άντιβασιλείας επί Όθωνος (κοινώς του δραγάτη!). Ός άνθρωπος, βέβαια, ό Καποδίστριας δεν άπέφυγε τα λάθη στα 55 χρόνια της ζωής του. Τα άγνα κίνητρα, όμως, όπως και οι άρετές του δίκαια μπορούν να τον χαρακτηρίσουν πρότυπο Χριστιανού ήγέτη ιδεατό, με την έννοια ότι κάλλιστα μπορεί να άποτελέσει πρότυπο για άλλους.

Στη «Μεγάλη Έλληνική Έγκυκλοπαίδεια» διαβάζουμε: «Κατά την πρώτην δοξολογίαν θρόνος του Καποδίστρια ήταν ένα άπλούν ξύλινο στασίδι. Αυτό έχρησιμοποεί όταν τακτικώς εκκλησιάζετο τας Κυριακάς και έορτάς». Πρόκειται για τον «θρονίσκον Δεσποτικών» κατά τον Κασομούλη, που κατεσκεύασε η Αντικυβερνητική Έπιτροπή για την ήμέρα της ύποδοχής του.

Μέχρι σήμερα αυτό το κάθισμα βρίσκεται στην Έκκλησία, άπέναντι από το Δεσποτικό, μέσα στη «Μεγάλη Έκκλησία», κατά την έκφραση του ίδιου του Καποδίστρια μέσα σε κείμενό του, όπως στα χρόνια τα βυζαντινά ό θρόνος του Άυτοκράτορα βρισκόταν άπέναντι από του Πατριάρχη.

Ο Καποδίστριας ήθελε και με αυτόν τον τρόπο να καταδείξει τη συνέχεια αυτής της παράδοσης. Σκόπευε, μάλιστα, να εφαρμόσει το βυζαντινορωμαϊκό δίκαιο, το όποιο έξ άλλου δεν έπαυσε να ισχύει στον τόπο κατά την περίοδο της Τουρκοκρατίας με την «Έξάβιβλο» του Άρμενοπούλου. «Καθώς άντικρύζει κανείς το άδειο στασίδι του Καποδίστρια μέσα στη Μητρόπολη, είναι εύλογο να φαντάζεται και να διερωτάται: ποιά θα ήταν η μορφή της πατρίδας μας σήμερα, αν δεν είχε τόσο νωρίς μεσολαβήσει το τραγικό γεγονός της δολοφονίας του;». Το έρώτημα πάντως παραμένει: Σε ποιές άξίες άραγε βασίστηκαν οι σύγχρονοι πολιτικοί μας, ώστε να όδηγηθεί η χώρα στα σημερινά άδιέξοδα; Έχω τη γνώμη πως, αν δεν βρεθούν άνθρωποι που να διακατέχονται από τα ίδια με τον Καποδίστρια ιδανικά, πολύ δύσκολα θα προκύψει η επιθυμητή άπ' όλους μας άνάκαμψη...

Όπως έλεγε και ό Steven Runciman: «**Άν όλοι οι λαοί, για να προοδεύσουν, πρέπει να κοιτούν μπροστά, οι Έλληνες πρέπει να στραφούν πίσω, στις άξίες και στις παραδόσεις τους...**».

ON THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD

By Elder Sophrony, from "Saint Silouan the Athonite," St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY (1999), pp. 390-393.

When the soul abides in the love of God—how good and gracious and festive all things are! But even with God's love, sorrows continue and the greater the love, the greater the sorrow. Never by a single thought did the Mother of God sin, nor did she ever lose grace, yet vast were her sorrows; when she stood at the foot of the Cross her grief was as boundless as the ocean and her soul knew torment incomparably worse than Adam's when he was driven from Paradise, in that the measure of her love was beyond compare greater than the love which Adam felt when he was in Paradise. That she remained alive was only because the Lord's might sustained her, for it was His desire that she should behold His Resurrection, and live on after His Ascension to be the comfort and joy of the Apostles and the new Christian peoples.

We cannot attain to the full love of the Mother of God, and so we cannot thoroughly comprehend her grief. Her love was complete. She had an unlimited love for God and her Son but she loved the people, too, with a great love. What, then, must she have felt when those same people whom she loved so dearly, and whose salvation she desired with all her being, crucified her beloved Son? We cannot fathom such things, since there is little love in us for God and man. Just as the love of the Mother of God is boundless and passes our understanding, so is her grief boundless and beyond our understanding.

O holy Virgin Mary, tell us, thy children, of thy love on earth for thy Son and God.

Tell us how thy spirit rejoiced in God thy Saviour.

Tell us of how thou didst look upon His fair countenance, and reflect that this was He Whom all the heavenly hosts wait upon in awe and love.

Tell us what thy soul felt when thou didst bear the wondrous Babe in thine arms.

Tell us of how thou didst rear Him, how, sick at heart, thou and Joseph sought Him three long days in Jerusalem.

Tell us of thine agony when the Lord was delivered up to be crucified, and lay dying on the Cross.



Tell us what joy was thine over the Resurrection.

Tell us how thy soul languished after the Lord's Ascension.

We long to know of thy life on earth with the Lord but thou was not minded to commit all these things to writing, and didst veil thy secret heart in silence.

Many are the marvels and mercies that I have witnessed at the hands of the Lord and of the Mother of God but there is naught I can render in return for this love of theirs.

What could I give our most holy sovereign Lady for coming to me and bringing enlightenment, instead of turning away in loathing for my sin? I did not behold her with my eyes but the Holy Spirit gave me to know her through her words, which were filled with grace, and my spirit rejoices and my soul leaps to her in love, so that the mere invocation of her name is sweet to my heart.

Once, when I was a young novice, I was praying before an icon of the Mother of God, and the Jesus Prayer entered into my heart and there began to repeat itself of its own accord. Moreover, another time in church I was listening to a reading from the prophet Isaiah, and at the words, *Wash you, make you clean*, (Isa 1:16), I reflected, "Maybe the Mother of God sinned at one time or another, if only in thought." And, marvelous to relate, in unison with my prayer a voice sounded in my heart, saying clearly, *The Mother of God never sinned, even in thought.*

Thus did the Holy Spirit bear witness in my heart to her purity. However, during her earthly life, even she was not quite perfect and complete—she did make some "mistakes" that did not involve sin. We can see this from the Gospel when on the return from Jerusalem she did not know where her Son was, and together with Joseph sought Him for three days: *And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple.* (Lk 2:44-46).

My soul trembles and is afraid when I consider the glory of the Mother of God.

Small and of no account is my mind, poor and sickly my heart, but my soul rejoices and would fain set down if but a little concerning her.

My soul fears to touch upon this matter but love constrains me not to conceal my thankfulness for her compassion.

The Mother of God committed to writing neither her thoughts nor her love for God and her Son, nor her soul's suffering at the Crucifixion, because in any case we could not have understood, for her love for God is stronger and more ardent than the love of the Seraphim and Cherubim, and all the hosts of angels and archangels marvel at her.

And though the life of the Mother of God is hidden, as it were in a holy silence, our Lord allows our Orthodox Church to know that she embraces the whole world in this love of hers, and in the Holy Spirit sees all the peoples of the earth, and like her Son pities all men and has compassion on them.

O, if we might only know the love of the most holy Mother of God for all who keep the commandments of Christ, and how she pities and sorrows over sinners who do not reform! I had experience of this myself. Of a truth I say, speaking before God, *Whom my soul knoweth*: in spirit I know the Most Pure Virgin. I never beheld her but the Holy Spirit gave me to know her and her love for us. Were it not for her compassion I would have perished long ago but she was minded to come to me and enlighten me, so that I should not sin. This is what she said: *It is painful for me to look upon thee, at what thou doest.* And her words, soft, quiet and gentle, wrought upon my soul. Over forty years have gone by since then but my soul can never forget those sweet words, and I know not what return to make for such love towards my sinful self, nor how to give thanks to the good and forbearing Mother of God.

Verily she is our advocate before God, and alone the sound of her name rejoices the soul. But all heaven and earth, too, rejoice in her love.

Here is a wondrous thing, which passes understanding: she dwells in heaven and ever beholds the glory of God, yet she does not forget us, poor wretches that we are, and spreads her compassion over the whole earth, over all peoples.

And this most pure Mother of His, the Lord has bestowed on us. She is our joy and our expectation. She is our Mother in the spirit, and kin to us by nature, as a human being, and every Christian's soul leaps to her in love.



It was right that the eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word should see the Dormition of His Mother according to the flesh, even the final mystery concerning her: hence, they might be witnesses not only to the Ascension of the Saviour but also to the translation of her who gave Him birth. Assembled from all parts by divine power, they came to Sion, and sped on her way to heaven the Virgin who is higher than the Cherubim.

St. John of Damascus

HAVE YOUR MIND ON GOD AND YOUR HEART WILL LEAP FOR JOY SPONTANEOUSLY

Source: "Wounded by Love: The Life and Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios," published by Denise Harvey, Limni, Evia, Greece (2005), pp. 122-126.



Listen and I'll tell you about something that happened to me a few days ago. A monk who practices the Jesus Prayer came here from the Holy Mountain and he asked me:

—How do you say the Jesus Prayer? Do you sit on a low stool? Do you lower your head and concentrate?

—No, I replied. I say, *Lord Jesus Christ...* clearly in my mind, giving attention to the words. *Lord Jesus Christ, have*

mercy on me... Lord Jesus... That's how I do it in my mind and pay attention only to the words.

—That's not right at all, Elder, he said. The way you describe it is quite erroneous, not to say deluded. The mind needs to be in the heart. That's why it's called "prayer of the heart."

—I'll tell you something else, I said to him. Sometimes when I would be facing some temptation, I would bring into my mind the image of Christ on the cross with his transfixed hands and feet dripping blood and with the crown of thorns piercing his brow and with myself kneeling before him and saying to Him, *Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.*

—And you didn't bring your mind into your heart?' he interrupted.

—No, I replied.

—You are deluded, he said to me. The mind must be in the heart. Again, that's why it's called "prayer of the heart." Delusion!

He got up to leave.

—Elder! I said to him. Listen and I'll tell you something. When I am repeating the prayer in my mind, sometimes my joy becomes more and more intense. Moreover, when my joy becomes ever stronger with the words, *Lord Jesus Christ...*, I feel my mind leaping within me along with my heart. That is, I feel my mind plummeting into my heart and there I experience all this joy as I say the prayer. I begin with the mind and then my mind moves on its own when joy comes.

—So that's how you pray! That indeed is the way!' he said to me. Forgive me for accusing you of "delusion."

It is the mind that thinks. The heart does not think. Have your mind on God and your heart will leap for joy spontaneously. It will feel compunction. For Christ to enter your heart you must love Him. In order to love Him, He must first love you. God must first know you and then you Him. He will stoop to you, if you first seek Him. In order for Him to love you, you must be worthy. In order to be worthy, you must prepare yourself.

First, you must shun all self-interest. Prayer must be entirely selfless. Everything must happen mystically and without self-interest. That is, do not think that if you concentrate with your mind then grace will come into your heart also and you will experience that leap of joy. Do not pray with that motive, but with simplicity and humility. Aspire always to the glory of God. What did I tell you about the nightingale? It sings without anyone seeing. Be like that—selfless. Give yourself over to the worship of God in secret.

However, be careful! As we said, *do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.* (Mt 6:3). Do not let your malicious self know what is going on. Live in Paradise and do not let your evil self know and envy it. Do not forget that there exists the envy of the evil one.

Preparation is also to learn to keep the commandments of God. To expel the passions—condemnation, anger, etc.—in a subtle way. That is, do not strike at the evil directly, but, disdaining the passion, turn with love to God. Occupy yourself with singing hymns, the triumphant hymns of the saints and martyrs and the Psalms of David. Study Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers. In this way your soul will be softened, sanctified and assimilated to God. It will be ready to hear the disclosures of God. ‘

Gradually grace will visit you. You will enter into joy. You will begin to live in peace and then you will become stronger by virtue of the divine grace. You will not become angry, or irritated, you will not be offended, you will not judge others, but rather receive everyone with love. You will have that which Saint Paul describes: *Love does not boast... it does not behave in an unseemly manner... it does not rejoice in injustice, but rejoices in truth; it covers and protects all things, it believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.* (1 Cor 13:4-8). The prayer purifies the soul and keeps the mind in check. The most perfect work is done in the depths of the human soul, which is hermetically sealed and known only to God. And so we witness something extraordinary: people who

are transformed into children of God, even though they had reached the very depths of their self-destructiveness.

And I, too, wretched and crooked-up fellow that I am, make this effort. I do not give myself over openly in prayer, but secretly I pray. Do you understand? The grace of God comes and overshadows you too. It brings a freshness and joy to you also as we live together, eat together, talk and pray and simply keep company with one another. Do you understand? Only someone who is thoughtless, someone who is “thick-skinned” and cannot be moved by prayer, remains a stranger to grace. Pray for God to reveal to you the *unseen* things. There is much that we do not know. Say to Christ, “Whatever You want. Whatever Your love desires.” He will lead you. Look to Him.

Prayer of the Heart Is Impossible Without a Spiritual Guide

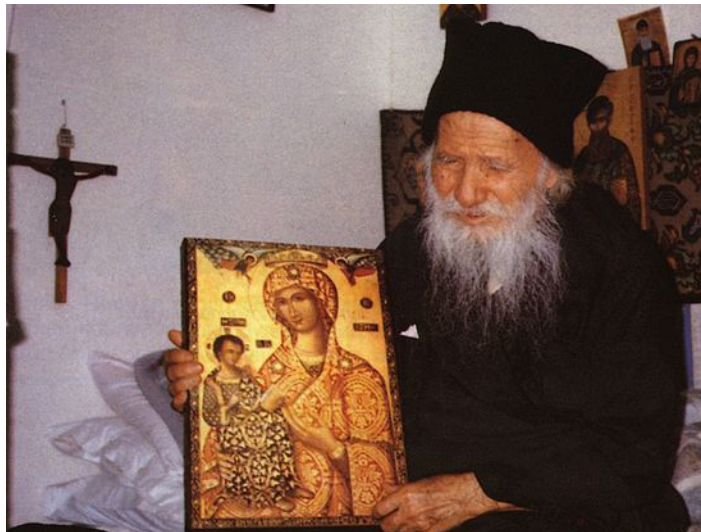
If you are going to occupy yourself with prayer of the heart exclusively you must have the guidance of a spiritual father. Prayer of the heart is impossible without a spiritual guide.

There is a danger of the soul being deluded. Care is needed. Your spiritual guide will teach you how to get into the right order for prayer, because if you do not get into the right order, there is a danger of your seeing the luciferic light, of living in delusion and being plunged into darkness, and then one becomes aggressive and changes character and so on. This is the splitting of the personality. Do you see how delusion is created? If, however, you

progress in prayer with the counsels of a spiritual father, you will see the true light.

The spiritual guide must be experienced in prayer of the heart. If he prays mechanically and has not experienced prayer with the grace of God, he is unable to tell someone else how to pray. Certainly, he will be able to say what he has read in books and what the Fathers say. Whole books have been written which talk about prayer. And so many people read them and none knows how to pray. “But,” you will object, “we read these books, we learn the method of prayer, we prepare ourselves and God gives His blessing and sends us His grace and we understand them.” That is all very well, but it is a mystery. Prayer is a mystery, and above all prayer of the heart is a mystery.

The most dreadful delusion can be created by spiritual prayer. Other prayers are prayed to a large extent by our mind. We simply say them and our ears hear them. They are said in a different way. But spiritual prayer is something else.



And if in this spiritual dimension desire is enkindled, not by your good self, but by the other self, the egotistical self, then undoubtedly you will begin to see lights, but not the light of Christ, and undoubtedly you will begin to experience a pseudo-joy. But in your outward life, in your relations with other people, you will be ever more aggressive and irascible, more quick-tempered and fretful. These are the signs of the person who is deluded. The person who is deluded does not accept that he is suffering from delusion. He is fanatical and does harm. This is what happens with zealots, those who act with a zeal that is not tempered by divine knowledge. Listen to an example of this:

Saint Makarios, the famous Desert Father, had decided to go to a church festival along with the monk who was subservient to him. The young monk had gone on ahead. He was a beginner and had a beginner's zeal. As he was walking along he met an idolater, a priest of a pagan temple. He spoke harshly to him and said:

—Where are you off to, you deluded soul?

The priest was enraged and attacked the novice, leaving him virtually unconscious.

A short time later the priest met the elder. When Abba Makarios, blessed as he was by divine grace, saw the man in a state of shock and aggravation, he said to him:

—Good man of God, where are you going to?

As soon as the priest heard these words his heart softened, he stopped in his tracks, and said:

—Your words have calmed me down.

—Yes, said Abba Makarios. I see you're in a hurry, only you don't know where you're hurrying to.

But he said it in a humble and brotherly tone of love.

—When you speak, said the idolater, your words open my heart, but a short time ago another monk spoke to me in a very different way and I gave him a good beating.

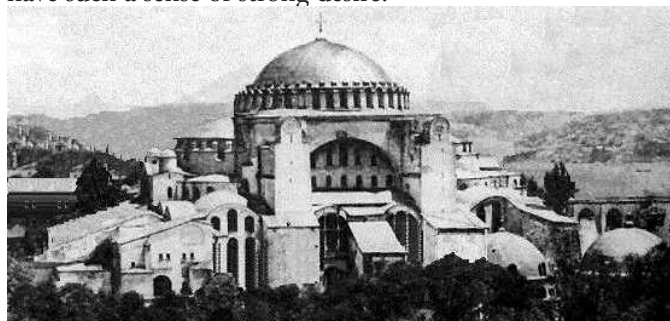
Abba Makarios spoke to him in such an inspired way, that the idolater gradually changed his beliefs, became a monk and was saved. With his good words and manners he communicated the good spirit. He communicated the uncreated energy and entered the soul of the idolater. The novice, on the contrary, communicated a spirit of anger and aggression from the spirit he had within him.

Do you see what delusion means? When you have a spiritual guide you are not in danger of delusion. When you have a good, God-inspired elder you learn the secrets of prayer. You pray with your elder and you gradually begin to enter into the spiritual life and to learn how the elder prays. He is not able to tell you, "Do this or do that." But you do what you see him do. When you go to your elder, certainly, he tells you about the prayer of the heart. You need to know, however, that if he does not experience the prayer of the heart himself, he will not be able to communicate anything. But when the elder has experienced (and continues to experience)

the prayer of the heart, something mysterious takes place. The mystery is that the novice hears his words, but more importantly, he sees the way his heart opens and how he speaks to God in his heart. His soul watches him. And not only this, but soul communicates with soul and the one soul senses the other. The novice feels how the whole "frame of mind" is created, how this state is created through divine grace.

This is not a simple matter. This is the teaching. We say that prayer cannot be taught, but in point of fact it can be taught when you live with someone who truly prays. When you take a book about prayer and read it, it may be that you do not understand anything. However, when you have an elder next to you who prays, whatever he tells you about prayer you understand and take to heart. You enter into his prayer, and you pray too without realizing it. You communicate. It's not the book or the knowledge, it's the sensation, it's the manner, it's the opening of the heart, it's the embrace of prayer.

And is not what we are doing now as I am speaking to you, is this too not a prayer? Am I not speaking from my heart and do we not feel that leaping sensation of joy and impellent desire? If this is not prayer, how can it be explained that we have such a sense of strong desire?



It is a great art to succeed in having your soul sanctified. A person can become a saint anywhere. He can become a saint in Omonia Square (the commercial center of Athens, also synonymous with vice and corruption), if he wants. At your work, whatever it may be, you can become a saint through meekness, patience, and love. Make a new start every day, with new resolution, with enthusiasm and love, prayer and silence — not with anxiety so that you get a pain in the chest.

Our religion is perfectly and profoundly conceived. What is simple is also what is most precious. Accordingly, in your spiritual life engage in your daily contest simply, easily, and without force. The soul is sanctified and purified through the study of the Fathers, through the memorization of the psalms and of portions of Scripture, through the singing of hymns and through the repetition of the Jesus Prayer. Devote your efforts, therefore, to these spiritual things and ignore all the other things.

St. Porphyrios the Kapsokalivite (+1991)

ON TRUE REPENTANCE AND THE ANGELIC LIFE

By St. John Climacus, from "The Ladder of Divine Ascent," Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, Massachusetts (2001), pp. 23-28.

Terrible indeed was the judgment of a good judge and shepherd which I once saw in a monastery. For while I was there, it happened that a thief sought for admission to the monastic life. And that most excellent pastor and physician ordered him to take seven days of complete rest, just to see the kind of life in the place. When the week had passed, the pastor called him and asked him privately:

— Would you like to live with us?

And when he saw that he agreed to this with all sincerity, he then asked him what evil he had done in the world. And when he saw that he readily confessed everything, he tried him still further, and said:

— I want you to tell this in the presence of all the brethren.

But he really did hate his sin, and, scorning all shame, without the least hesitation he promised to do it. — And if you like, he said, I will tell in the middle of the city of Alexandria.

And so, the shepherd gathered all his sheep in the church to the number of two hundred and thirty, and during divine service (for it was Sunday), after the reading of the Gospel he introduced the irreproachable convict. He was dragged by several of the brethren, who gave him moderate blows. His hands were tied behind his back, he was dressed in a hair shirt, his head was sprinkled with ashes. All were astonished at the sight. And immediately a woeful cry rang out; for no one knew what was happening. Then, when the thief appeared at the doors of the church, the holy superior who had such love for souls, said to him in a loud voice:

— Stop! You are not worthy to enter here. (*Orthodox churches are divided into the narthex, the nave and the sanctuary. In ancient times, the unbaptized were admitted to the narthex but not the nave. The thief was already in the narthex, He was halted not at the outer door, but at the doors of the nave.*)

Dumbfounded by the voice of the shepherd coming from the sanctuary (for he thought, as he afterwards assured us with oaths, that he had heard not a human voice, but thunder), he instantly fell on his face, trembling and shaking all over with fear. As he lay on the ground and moistened the floor

with his tears, this wonderful physician, using all means for his salvation, and wishing to give to all an example of saving and effectual humility, again exhorted him, in the presence of all to tell in detail what he had done. And with terror he confessed one after another, all his sins, which revolted every ear, not only sins of the flesh, natural and unnatural, with rational beings and with animals, but even poisoning, murder and many others which it not lawful to hear or commit to writing. And when he had finished his confession, the shepherd at once allowed him to be given the habit and numbered among the brethren.

Amazed by the Wisdom of that holy man, I asked him when we were alone:

— Why did you make such an extraordinary show.

That true physician replied:

— For two reasons: firstly in order to deliver the penitent himself from future shame by present shame; and it really did that, Brother John. For he did not rise from the floor until he was granted remission of all his sins. And do not doubt this, for one of the brethren who was there confided



to me, saying: "I saw someone terrible holding a pen and writing tablet, and as the prostrate man told each sin, he crossed it out with a pen." And this is likely, for it says: *I said, I will confess mine iniquities before the Lord against myself. And Thou forgavest the ungodliness of my heart* (Pss 31:5). Secondly, because there are others in the brotherhood who have unconfessed sins, and I want to induce them to confess too; for without

this no one will obtain forgiveness.

I saw much else too that was admirable and worth remembering with that ever-memorable pastor and his flock. And a large part of it I shall try to bring to your knowledge also. For I stayed a considerable time with him, following their manner of life, and was greatly astonished to see how those earth-dwellers were imitating the Heavenly beings.

In this flock, they were united by the indissoluble bond of love; and what was still more wonderful, it was free from all familiarity and idle talk. More than anything else, they tried not to wound a brother's conscience in any way. And if anyone ever showed hatred to another, the shepherd put him in the isolation monastery, like a convict. And once when one of the brethren spoke ill of his neighbor to the shepherd, the holy man at once ordered him to be driven out, saying:

—I cannot allow a visible as well as an invisible devil in the monastery.

I saw among these holy fathers things that were truly profitable and admirable. I saw a brotherhood gathered and united in the Lord, with a wonderful life of action and divine vision. For they were so occupied with divine thoughts, and they exercised themselves so much in good deeds, that there was scarcely any need for the superior to remind them of anything; but of their own good will they aroused one another to divine vigilance. For they had certain holy and divine exercises that were defined, studied and fixed. If in the absence of the superior one of them began to use abusive language or criticize people or simply talk idly, some other brother by a secret nod reminded him of this, and quietly put a stop to it. But if, by chance, the brother did not notice, then the one who reminded him would make a prostration and retire. And the incessant and ceaseless topic of their conversation (when it was necessary to say anything) was the remembrance of death and the thought of eternal judgment.

I must not omit to tell you about the wonderful achievement of the baker of that community. Seeing that he had attained to constant recollection (i.e., consciousness of God) and tears during his service, I asked him to tell me how he came to be granted such a grace. And when I pressed him, he replied:

—I have never thought that I was serving men but God. And having judged myself unworthy of all hesychastic rest (i.e., quiet, stillness, silence, peace...) by this visible fire (i.e., the bake-house over fire), I am unceasingly reminded of the future flame.

Let us hear about another surprising attainment of theirs. For not even in the refectory did they stop noetic activity (i.e., noetic prayer) but according to a certain custom, these blessed men reminded one another of interior prayer by secret signs and gestures. And they did this not only in the refectory, but at every gathering and every encounter.

And if one of them committed a fault, he would receive many requests from the brothers to allow them to take the case to their shepherd and bear the responsibility and the punishment. That is why this great man, on learning that his disciples did this, inflicted lighter punishments, knowing that the one punished was innocent. And he did not even inquire who had actually sustained the fall.

Could any hint of idle talk and joking exist among them: If one of them began a dispute with his neighbor, then another, passing by, assumed the role of penitent and so dissolved the anger. However, if he noticed that the disputants were spiteful or revengeful, he would report the quarrel to the father occupying the second place after the superior, and prepare the ground for their mutual reconciliation before sundown. But if they continued obstinate, they would either be punished by being deprived of food until they were reconciled, or else be expelled from the monastery.

And it is not in vain that this laudable rigor is brought to perfection among them, for it bears and shows abundant fruit. And among these holy fathers, many become proficient both in active life and clairvoyance, both in discernment and humility. And there was to be seen among them an awful and angelic sight: venerable, sacred and white-haired men running about in obedience like children, and glorying in their humiliation. There I have seen men who had spent some fifty years in obedience. And when I asked them to tell me what consolation they had gained from so great a labor, some of them replied that they had attained to humility's abyss, by which they had permanently repelled every assault. Others said that they had obtained complete insensibility and freedom from pain in calumnies and insults.

I have seen others of those ever-memorable fathers with their angelic white hair attain of their own volition to the deepest innocence and to wise and divinely achieved simplicity. (Just as an evil man is somewhat double, one thing outwardly and another inwardly, so a simple person is not something double, but something of a unity.) Among them, there are none who are fatuous and foolish, like old men in the world who are commonly said to be "in their dotage." On the contrary, outwardly they are utterly gentle and kindly, radiant and sincere, and they have nothing hypocritical, affected or false about them, either in speech or character (a thing not found in many); and inwardly, in their soul, like innocent babes, they make God Himself and their superior their very breath, and the eye of their mind keeps a vigorous and strict watch for demons and passions.

The whole of my life, dear and reverend father and God-loving community, would be insufficient to describe the Heavenly life and virtue of those blessed monks. But yet it is better to adorn our treatise and rouse you to zeal in the love of God by their most laborious struggles than by my own paltry counsels; for without any contradiction, *the less is adorned the better*. (cf Heb 7:7). Only this I ask, that you should not imagine we are inventing what we write, for such a suspicion detracts from its value. But let us continue again what we were saying before...



It is only necessary to seek one thing: to be with Jesus. The man who remains with Jesus is rich, even if he is poor with regard to material things. Whoever desires the earthly more than the heavenly loses both the earthly and the heavenly. But whoever seeks the heavenly is lord of the whole world.

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov

DOGMA AND MYSTERY

By Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos (from the lectures of Fr. John Romanides)

It is essential to make a distinction between dogma and mystery. The mystery of the Holy Trinity is experienced, to the extent that this is possible, by the glorified human being and is different from the dogma, which is the rational formulation concerning the mystery of the Holy Trinity or the revelation. This distinction is fundamental to Orthodox theology: *God is always a mystery. The mystery of the Holy Trinity must be separated from the dogma of the Holy Trinity. The dogma is not the same as the mystery.*

This means that the dogma can be understood rationally, but not the mystery. There is confusion on this issue among some contemporary theologians and a serious problem arises. For instance, when we speak about the Holy Trinity, we are referring to the dogma, the terminology concerning the Holy Trinity, as formulated by the holy Fathers of the Church (*essence, hypostases, hypostatic property*, and so on) and not to the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

There is so much confusion in recent theology, under the influence of Russian theology, that anyone would think that an expert on dogmatics or a theologian of the Orthodox Church is someone who reflects deeply and immerses himself in the mystery of the Holy Trinity, and attempts to put it into words. The patristic tradition has absolutely no connection with this sort of perception of theology.

The names and concepts that a God-seeing saint formulates when necessary are one thing and the experience that he has acquired of this reality is another. The mystery remains a mystery. We do not put the mystery into words, but the dogma about the mystery. We speak about the dogma about the mystery of the Holy Trinity; not about the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

The same can be said of the distinction between Holy Scripture and God. Holy Scripture consists of the words and concepts expressing the experience of the mystery of God, and these words and concepts are not identical to God. God is not identified with the words and concepts. Identifying God with them leads to idolatry.

For this reason you must have a firm grasp of this distinction between the mystery and the dogma. They are not the same thing, because theology, dogma and noetic prayer will be abolished: they are temporary in character. It is idolatry for us to identify God with words and concepts about Him. From this point of view, you can take the existentialism of certain (at least in my opinion) pseudo-theologians and throw them all into the waste paper bin. Because the only correct existential philosophy from the Orthodox point of view is the atheistic one and not the theistic.

To say that we understand dogmas is foolishness. No one understands the dogma of the Holy Trinity, because the dogma

of the Holy Trinity is not intended to be understood. Anyone who gives the impression that he understands the dogma of the Holy Trinity is a fraud. This is the worst deception. It is possible to understand the purpose of the dogma, its origin and its history. But it is impossible for someone to understand the dogma itself, because understanding the dogma means understanding the mystery. The dogma and the mystery are different things. They must never be confused.

Dogma exists as man's guide. It is a signpost that shows him where he ought to be going. When, however, he reaches his destination, it is done away with. For that reason, dogma is a guide for those who are passing through purification, and carries on being a guide for those who continue in illumination. It is a guide and nothing more. But those who are at the stage of illumination know that one day dogma will be abolished. When someone reaches glorification, dogma is abolished. Dogma ceases to exist. Noetic prayer itself stops. Although the Spirit of God prays within man with psalms, hymns or phrases—the Spirit Himself prays with human words within man—when man attains to glorification even this noetic prayer of the Holy Spirit ceases.

This is what the Apostle Paul says: *When that which is perfect comes, then prophecies will cease*, in other words, theology will come to an end; *tongues will cease*, that is, the various kinds of noetic prayer will stop; and *knowledge will vanish away*, (cf. 1 Cor 13:8-13), in other words, what are nowadays called dogmas and theology. All these things come to an end in glorification. Certainly, when someone returns from glorification, when he ceases to have the vision of God, he continues praying once again with dogmas and the Spirit again prays within him as before. In this life the state of glorification is not permanent.

Neither the incarnation nor the dogma of the Holy Trinity can be understood. For that reason, even when God is revealed, then especially, He remains a mystery. The human nous cannot penetrate this mystery of uncreatedness, and how what is uncreated took flesh and is united with human nature. We only know, because it is clear from the experience of Pentecost and the Transfiguration and from St. John the Forerunner's experience of glorification at the Baptism, which is a revelation, the supreme revelation, of the Holy Trinity; that God remains a mystery.

As this is so, it is nonsensical for us to sit there asserting, like the Protestants and the Latins, that as time passes we have a deeper understanding of the dogmas of the Church. What does a deeper understanding mean, when, in the experience of glorification, of Pentecost, dogma has been abolished and the concepts and words that constitute dogmas have been done away with? The experience of glorification is not dogma. It is higher than dogma. Dogma is the expression of the mystery, but expressing the mystery is not the same as comprehending the mystery, because *it is impossible to express God and even more impossible to conceive Him.*

ON GOD-CREATED INEQUALITY

A homily on the Gospel on the Talents by St. Nikolai Velimirovic, bishop of Ochrid, from "Homilies, vol. Two: Sundays after Pentecost," Lazarica Press, Birmingham (1998).



God creates inequality; men grumble at it. Are men wiser than God? When God creates inequality, it means that inequality is wiser and better than equality. God creates inequality for man's good, but men cannot see the good in their

inequality. God creates inequality because of the beauty of inequality, but men can see no beauty in it. God creates inequality out of love, that is aroused and sustained by inequality, but man can see no love in it.

This is a primitive human revolt of blindness against perception, of folly against wisdom, of evil against good, of ugliness against beauty, of malice against love. Eve and Adam gave themselves into Satan's power in order to become equal with God. Cain slew his brother Abel because their sacrifices were not equally righteous in God's sight. From then till now, sinful men have waged war on inequality. Before then, though, God created inequality, and it is still with us. Before then, we say, because God created the angels unequal.

It is God's desire that men be unequal in all externals: riches, power, status, learning, position and so forth, but He does not recommend any sort of competitiveness in this. *Sit not down in the highest room*, commanded the Lord Jesus. (Lk 14:8). God desires that men compete in the multiplying of the inner virtues: faith, goodness, charity, love, meekness and gentleness, humility and obedience. God gave both inward and outward gifts, although He considers outward gifts as lower and of less significance than inward ones. He gave outward gifts for the pleasure of animals as well as of humans, but He has scattered the rich treasury of inward, spiritual gifts only in men's souls. God has given to men something more than to the animals, and He therefore seeks more of men than of the animals. This extra that He has given consists in the spiritual gifts.

God does not regard what a man is in this world and what he has: how he is clad, fed, taught and respected by others; God looks on a man's heart. In other words, God does not look on the external status and position of a man, but on his inner progress, growth and enrichment in spirit and in truth. The Parable of the Talents speaks of this, or of the spiritual gifts that God has bestowed on the souls of all men, and shows the great inner inequality of men in their very nature. However, it shows much more than this. In its eagle-like ascent, this parable flies over the whole length of

the history of the human soul, from its beginning to its end. If a man were fully to understand just this one parable and its teaching, and fulfil it in his life, he would achieve eternal salvation in the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one: to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey. The man must be understood as God omniscient, the Giver of all good gifts. The *servants* are angels and men. Going on a *journey* signifies God's long-suffering. The *talents* are the spiritual gifts with which God endows all His rational creatures. That all these gifts are great is seen from their specifically being called "talents," for a talent was a high-value coin, worth five hundred gold ducats. We reiterate that the Lord deliberately called God's gifts "talents" to show their greatness, to show that the most gentle Creator has richly endowed His creatures. These gifts are so great that he who receives one talent receives quite enough. The *man* also signifies the Lord Christ Himself, as is seen from Saint Luke's Gospel: *A certain nobleman.* (Lk 19:12). This nobleman is the Lord Christ Himself, the only-begotten Son of God, the Son of the Highest.

This is also clearly seen from other words in the same Gospel: *A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return.* After His Ascension, the Lord Jesus went up to heaven to receive for Himself a Kingdom, promising the world that He would come back to earth as Judge. When we understand the man to be the Lord Jesus, then we see that His servants are the apostles, the bishops, the clergy and all the faithful. The Holy Spirit has poured out many good gifts (though differing and unequal) on each of them, so that the one should complement the other, and so that all together should come to moral perfection and spiritual growth. *There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal, and this same Spirit divides to every man severally as He will.* (1 Cor 12:4-7,11).

Through the mystery of baptism, all the faithful receive these gifts abundantly and, through the Church's other sacraments, they are strengthened and multiplied by God. By the *five talents*, commentators understand the five senses, by the *two talents* the soul and the body, and by the *one talent* man's unified being. The five bodily senses were given to man to serve his spirit and his salvation. It must be man's concern to serve God in body and soul, and to enrich himself with the knowledge of God and with good works. The whole man, as a unity, must be placed at God's disposal. In childhood, a man lives by his five senses, in a wholly sensual life; in greater

maturity, a man is aware of a duality in himself and a battle between body and spirit; and in full spiritual maturity a man feels himself to be a united spirit, overcoming the division of himself into five or into two. But it is precisely in this full maturity, when a man thinks that he is the victor, that he is threatened by the greatest danger from pride in himself, denigration of others and disobedience to God. Reaching the greatest heights, he then falls to the deepest destruction, and buries his talent in the earth.

God gives to each according to his strength: as much as each can carry and use. Of course, God gives His gifts to men also according to the plan of His dispensation, as the members of a household neither all have the same capacities nor do the same job, but one has a particular capacity and one another, and each works according to his capacity.

And straightway took his journey. These words signify the speed of God's creating. When the Creator created the world, He did it quickly. And when the Lord Jesus came on earth for the sake of the New Creation, for the renewing of the world, He quickly carried out His work: He revealed and handed out His gifts, and at once went His way.

What did the servants do with the gifts they had received? *Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them another five talents.*

And likewise he that had received two, he also gained another two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money. All the application and commerce that exist among men is an image of that which exists, or should exist, in the kingdom of human souls. Of anyone who inherits lands it is expected that he extend them; of anyone who has acquired fields it is expected that he work them; of anyone who has learned a skill it is expected that he use it, both for his own profit and that of his neighbor; of anyone who has a craft it is expected that he pass it on to others; of anyone who has invested money in commerce it is expected that he increase it. Men move, work, beautify things, collect, exchange, buy and sell. Each strives to acquire what is necessary for bodily life, and each strives to improve his health, to take care of his daily needs and to ensure his physical well-being in the longer term. And this is only a rough sketch of what a man must do for his soul, for the soul is the more important. All our external needs are an

image of our spiritual needs, and a reminder and teaching that we must exert ourselves on behalf of the hungry and thirsty, the naked and sick, the impure and the miserable, both in body and soul.

Every one of us who has received from God five measures, or two, or one, of faith, wisdom, benevolence, fear of God, yearning for spiritual purity and strength, or meekness, or obedience to God; we must strive at least to double the measure, as the first and second servants did, and as men generally do when engaged in commerce or some craft. He who does not multiply the talent given him—whatever and however great this talent may be—will be cut down like a barren tree and burned. That which is done by a house-holder to every barren fruit tree, that he has vainly dug-about, grafted and fenced around, the great Householder of the universe, to whom men are most precious fruit-trees, will do.

After a long time, the lord of these servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. God

is never for a moment far away from men, let alone for a long time. His aid to men flows from day to day, like a river in flood, but His Judgment, His settling of His accounts with men, comes after a long time. Swift with aid to all who seek His help, God is slow to take revenge on those who anger Him, and who aimlessly squander His gifts. Here it is the Last



Judgment that is in question, when time shall come to an end and all the workers will be summoned to receive their pay.

And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying: "Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more." His lord said unto him: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things. Enter thou into the joy of thy lord." He also that had received two talents came and said: "Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them." His lord said unto him: "Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things. Enter thou into the joy of thy lord." One by one the stewards came before the Lord and presented their account of what they had received and what use they had made of it. We shall have to come, one by one before the Lord of heaven and earth, and present our accounts of what we have received and what we have made

of it, before millions of witnesses. At that moment, nothing will be able to be hidden or set right. For the Lord will, with His light, illumine all who are present so that they will all know the truth about one another. If we have, in this life, succeeded in doubling our talent, we shall come before the Lord with bright faces and free hearts, like these two first good and faithful servants. We shall be illumined by the light of the Lord's countenance, and shall be made eternally alive by His words: *Thou good and faithful servant!* But woe to us if we come empty-handed before the Lord and His holy angels like this third, wicked and slothful servant.

What is the meaning of the words: *Thou hast been faithful over a few things; I will make thee ruler over many things?* It means that all the gifts that we receive from God in this world, however many they may be, are little compared with those blessings that await the faithful in the world to come. For it is written: *Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.* (I Cor 2:9). The least effort, stemming from love for God, is rewarded by Him with rich and royal gifts. For that little that the faithful endure in this life out of obedience to God, and as a small effort for their souls, God will crown them with glory such as the kings of this world have neither known nor imagined.

What happens now to the wicked and unfaithful servant? *Then he which had received the one talent came and said: "Lord, I knew thee, that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed; and I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth. Lo, there thou hast that is thine."* This is the justification for his wickedness and sloth that this third servant produced for his Lord! He was not, though, alone in this. How very many such are there among us, who impute the blame for their wickedness, carelessness, sloth and selfishness to God? Not acknowledging their own sinfulness, and being unaware of God's loving ways with man, they rail against God from their own weakness, sickness, poverty and failure.

Every word that the slothful servant addresses to his Lord is essentially false. Where does God reap where He has not sown? Where does He gather where He has not strawed? Is there any good seed in this world that is not of God's sow-

ing? Are there any goodly fruits in the whole universe that are not the result of God's labors?

The wicked and faithless complain, for example, when God takes their children from them: "See," they cry, "how He mercilessly takes our children before their time!" On what basis are they yours? Were they not His before you called them yours? And how before their time? Does not He who created time know when their right time has come? Not a single householder on earth waits until his entire forest has grown to maturity, and only then cuts it down, but he cuts it, old or young, as he needs it—both that which has been growing a long time and that which has just sprouted—to put to use in his house. Instead of railing against God and cursing Him on whom depends every breath they take, they would have done better to say with righteous Job: *The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.* (Job 1:21).

Then also the wicked and faithless rail against God when hail destroys their grain; or when their ships, laden with merchandise, are lost at sea; or when they fall into sickness or helplessness. They rail and cry out that God is harsh. However, they say this only because they do not remember their sins, or cannot draw teaching from this for the salvation of their souls.

The Lord replies to this false self-justification on the part of his servant: *Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed. Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own*

with usury. Usurers are money-changers. They are those who change one currency for another, and in so doing gain their usury. But all this also has its figurative meaning. We must, by the usurers, understand benefactors; by the money, we must understand God's gifts; and by the usury the salvation of men's souls. The Lord desires in this way to say to the slothful servant: *You have received a gift from God. You were not willing to use it for your salvation; why, though, did you at least not give it to some benefactor, some man of sensitivity, who would both wish and be able to hand this gift over to others who have need of it to aid in their own salvation? And I, when I come, would find more men on earth among the saved: more who are faithful, ennobled, compassionate and meek. Instead of this, you have buried your talent in the earth of your body,*



that has rotted in the grave (for the Lord will say this at the Last Judgment) and that is now of no use to you.

Oh, how clear and terrible a teaching this is for those who have great wealth and do not give to the poor; or great wisdom and keep it locked within themselves as in the grave; or any sort of goods and skills and show them to no one; or great power and do not protect the poor and miserable; or a great name or renown and will shed no ray of light on those in darkness! The best that could be said for them is that they are thieves; for they count God's gift as their own, taking what belongs to others and concealing what is given to them. They are not just thieves but also murderers, for they do not help those they could to salvation. Their sin is no less than that of the man who stood on a river bank with a rope and saw someone drowning, but did not throw him the rope to save himself. The Lord will indeed say to such men what He said in this parable about the wicked servant: *Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance; but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

It often happens in this life that the little that one man has is taken and given to a man who has much, and this is simply an image of what happens in the spiritual realm. Does not a father take money from a loose-living son and give it to a wise one who will know how to make use of it? Is not a gun taken from an unreliable soldier and given to a reliable one? God takes His gifts away from unfaithful servants even in this life; hard-hearted rich men generally become bankrupt and die in want; selfish sages end in imbecility or madness; saints puffed up with pride fall into sin and end as great sinners; violent rulers suffer ridicule, shame and loss of power; priests who have not taught others by word or example fall deeper and deeper into sin until, in great torment, they take leave of this life; hands that have not been willing to do what they were capable of doing begin to tremble or stiffen; tongues that would not speak the truth of which they are capable become swollen or dead; and all who conceal God's gifts end as empty-handed beggars.

This parable gives us clear teaching that not only will he that does evil be condemned but also he that does not do good. The Apostle James teaches: *To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.* (Jas 4:17). All of Christ's teaching, like His example, urges us to do good. Keeping ourselves from evil is the starting point; but the whole of a Christian's life-path must be strewn with good works like flowers. The doing of good works is of immeasurable help in keeping ourselves from evil works. It is hard for anyone to keep himself from evil if he does not, at the same time, do good, and to keep himself from sin without practicing benevolence.

This parable further confirms that God is impartially merciful to all, for some gift is given to every created man. It is true that some are given more and some less, but this in no way changes the situation, because God seeks more from him to whom much has been given, and less of him to whom little has been given. Enough, though, is given to everyone for his or her salvation, and to help in the salvation of others.

It would be a mistake to think that, in this parable, the Lord is speaking only about the rich—of one kind or another—in this world. No; He is speaking about all men without distinction. All are, without exception, sent into this world with some gift. The widow who, in the Temple in Jerusalem, gave her two last coins was very poor in terms of money, but was not poor in the gifts of sacrifice and fear of God. On the contrary; for her good use of these gifts—yes, for her gift of two poor pence—she was praised by the Lord Jesus Himself: *Verily I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast more in than all they which have cast into the treasury.* (Mk 12:43).

Let us take an instance that is the most difficult and the most puzzling. Think of a blind man who is deaf and dumb, who has spent all his earthly life in this state, from birth to death. Someone will ask you: "What sort of gift has this man received from God? How can he be saved?" He has a gift, and that a great one. If he does not see others, others see him. If he does not give alms, he awakens almsgiving in others. If he cannot use words to speak of God, he serves as a living reminder to men. If he does not preach with words, he serves as a proof of preaching about God. He can indeed bring many to salvation, and through this himself be saved.

Thus inequality is placed in the very foundations of the created world. We must rejoice at this inequality, and not rebel against it, for it is placed there by Love, not by hatred, by Understanding, not by folly. Human life is not made ugly by the absence of equality, but by the absence of love and spiritual understanding in men. Let us have more divine love and spiritual understanding of life, and we shall see that twice as much inequality would in no way lessen the blessedness given to men.

This Parable of the Talents brings light, understanding and peace to our souls. It also urges us not to be tardy in carrying out the work for which we are sent by the Lord into the market place of this world. Time passes more quickly than the most swiftly-flowing river, and soon, I repeat, soon, the end of time will be upon us. No one will be able to come back from eternity to take what he has forgotten and do what he has left undone. Let us therefore hasten to make use of the gift we have been given, the talent lent to us by the Lord of lords. May glory and praise for this divine teaching, and for everything, be to the Lord Jesus, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity consubstantial and undivided, now and forever, through all time and all eternity. Amen.

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THE VALUE OF A SPIRITUAL GUIDE

By Elder Ephraim of Arizona, from "My Elder Joseph the Hesychast," *St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery, Florence, AZ, pp. 321-322.*



Geronda frequently spoke to us individually and taught us many things. What I heard, learned, and (above all) lived beside Geronda for twelve entire years, I will present simply in a few words. One of Geronda's primary teachings was the following:

Here on the Holy Mountain, we see that some monks are doing well while others are not.

Do not be surprised by this. Both of them came with the same piety, the same self-denial, and the same zeal that we all had when we first came to monasticism. All of us left behind our father, our mother, our job, etc. That is no great accomplishment. What is a great accomplishment, however, is to find a real elder who will guide us, instruct us, and teach us what monasticism really is. The monks who are not doing well are those who did not find a real elder.

Thus, Geronda made us realize that the learning and progress of a disciple depends on his finding a spiritual guide. If merely living in the wilderness granted noetic prayer, everyone would have it. Unfortunately, the reality is that there are very few monks who

are true workers of noetic prayer. Why is this? Because they lack an elder who can teach and guide them. Living in the wilderness helps, but it is not everything.

Even if one finds a spiritual guide and lives deep in the wilderness, he must still labor in order to inherit grace from his elder. After all, there were several great Athonite fathers in the early twentieth century who left no heirs. There was Fr. Savvas the Confessor, Fr. Kallinikos the Hesychast, that blind monk whose cell was fragrant when he prayed, Elder Daniel the Hesychast, etc. Even though they had disciples, their disciples did not inherit their elder's grace because they themselves did not labor properly. Geronda also said:

You youngsters came here and found everything all set: you found an elder; you found the place clean of demons; you also found a ready schedule of prayer and asceticism. If you only knew what it was like to come and not find a guide! You would have had to search all over the place just to find someone who could tell you a few words about prayer and monasticism based on his own experience. You were fortunate to find a guide as soon as you left the world.

Indeed, I found an elder with a lofty spiritual state, with the Light of Mt. Tabor (cf Mt 17:1-9), with prayer, with theoria, with revelations. This is the kind of elder I found. And I am so blameworthy because I have not approached his state in the least. But at least I can transmit to you what I have learned from him—and not from books—and can assure you that everything in the lives of the saints is true, since I have witnessed such things in my elder.