

THE IVERON MONASTERY · ORSK
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FLY HIGH
LIFE AS PRAYER

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“Stop talking about Christ. Begin talking to Christ” is one of the most important phrases of this book. Its author is our contemporary, a priest from Orsk, a town in the Urals; a father of six children, who tells us about hesychasm, seeking Christ in our hearts, and the Jesus prayer. We are used to reading all this in the works of the Ancient Fathers, though, it appears we can live through noetic prayer at present, in our contemporary world, as there is no time in the reality of God, and Christ is waiting for us every day hanging on His Cross. This edition is an amended version of the book “Into the Light” by Archpriest Sergiy Baranov.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. CHRIST: HERE AND NOW

SILENCE.....	5
MY FORGIVENESS IS HIS DEATH.....	8
SEEKING JERUSALEM.....	9
RUN TO CHRIST.....	16
I DO NOT WANT TO BE RIGHT, I PREFER TO BE WRONG.....	21
COME BACK!.....	24

CHAPTER 2. PRAYER IS A DIFFERENT FORM OF BEING

OUTSIDE OF TIME.....	29
ABOUT BELIEF IN GOD AND YOURSELF.....	32
WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE JESUS PRAYER.....	38
TRYING TO FIND CHRIST WITH THE MIND.....	39

CHAPTER 3. WHY, LORD?

WHY, LORD?.....	41
DEATH AND CHRISTIANS.....	47

CHAPTER 4. THE HEART IS WHERE THE TRUE MIND IS

THE ENCOUNTER.....	50
A LETTER FROM ATHOS.....	51
“DO NOT BE AN UNBELIEVER, BUT A BELIEVER” (Jn. 20:27).....	55
WHERE IS MY GOD?.....	57

CHAPTER 5. THE COMMANDMENTS AS A RECIPE FOR HAPPINESS

ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AND CONFLICT.....	60
ABOUT WALKING ON WATER.....	64
PULL-UP BAR, MARTIAL ARTS AND SPIRITUAL SOFTNESS.....	65
INDULGENCE.....	67
THE SERVANT AND THE ENCOUNTER.....	69
ABOUT IMPERFECTION.....	71
ABOUT PERFECTION.....	73
DO NOT WASTE TIME!.....	74

HOW GOD GIVES WINGS	77
WHEN YOU BEGIN TO LOVE CHRIST SELFLESSLY	80
CHAPTER 6. PARALLEL WORLD	
ABOUT A WOUNDED VANITY OR WHOM GOD LOVES	82
PARALLEL WORLD	84
ABOUT LOVE.....	88
A DREAM.....	90
CHAPTER 7. HOW TO BECOME A HOMO DIVINUS*?	
ANSWERS TO DIFFERENT QUESTIONS	92

CHAPTER 1. CHRIST: HERE AND NOW

SILENCE

A silent cell in a deserted picturesque valley of Holy Mount Athos.

I sit by the wide-open window.

Night, silence.

We count our beads reciting the prayer for the vespers.

Everyone is in his cell, alone before God, “Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner, Lord...”

The window opens on the jet-black darkness of the southern night, generously sprinkled with myriads of stars.

I see the stars before me, but I do not look at them.

I cannot see God, but I look at Him.

“Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, Lord...”

I must look only at Him.

I want to breathe only by Him.

To look inconspicuously, without creating images, and only at Him.

Nothing should come between me and Him.

Whether it be something good or bad.

Nothing should distract my mind from Him, leading it into a dream, an illusion.

“Lord, Jesus Christ...”

Slowly, syllable by syllable, attentively, and nothing more.

Very simply, humbly, not dreamily.

With a simple mind and a simple heart.

“Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. Lord...”

A passing image, the most harmless thought, and I am losing Him.

“Lord, Jesus Christ...”

I come back with my mind and try not to strain myself, not to be hard.

Mildly, humbly, without getting upset or angry, again and again, “Lord, Jesus Christ... Lord...”

I know that in this fight I should be mild and flexible.

Otherwise, I will break.

No matter how difficult it gets, I say calmly and mildly,

“Lord, Jesus Christ...”

Even from the bottom of hell, “Lord, Jesus Christ...”

Calmly and humbly.

My eyes are open, they see the picture of a starry sky.
But those eyes are not the whole me.
The eyes of my mind see as well.
They may see some other things simultaneously.
But I do not want those things, as my mind is not the whole me either.
There is something else, with which I may see and perceive in the depth of my heart.
But even there, an error, an illusion may come.

That is why I free my spiritual efforts from everything related to my Self.
And I speak only to Him.
Only before Him,
“Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, Lord...”

I do not lose my personality, and do not dissolve it in nothingness.
But this is all I allow myself to leave.
And this is something little (or big) standing before Him.
Before a Huge, Great, and, at the same time simple Him.
“Lord, Jesus Christ, Lord...”

Why do I repeat the same words over and over again?
I pronounce them, as they are sweet to me.
My soul is like a bride, who keeps saying her Divine Bridegroom's name all the time.
And the mere Name seems sweet to her.
And He is Himself behind the Name.
This is not the scream of a victim before a dreadful judge.
This “have mercy on me” does not mean, “do not punish me”; this is more like “do not leave me, my beloved one, as it is hell without You!”

This “do not leave” happens now.
Because I only say, “Lord”, then, “Jesus”, and here I am with Him.
And He is with me.
This is all I want from Him.
No image, no feeling, no emotion, even no answer or attention from Him.
This little thing is enough for me,
“Lord, Jesus Christ, Lord...”

And that's it.
Everything else is up to Him, the way He wishes, and the way He decides.
When everything is for Him and nothing for yourself, it is easier to keep your attention.
And the prayer is pure, “Lord, Jesus Christ...”
It is not pure from sin.
It is pure from everything, which is not Him.
It is pure and it is very simple.
Because He is simple.

“Lord, Jesus Christ... Lord...”

It should be very simple.

I want to say it simply and humbly.

Humility is not about being highly intellectual; it is about being in awe.

In awe before Him.

A wide southern sky is before me.

I can see millions of stars.

But I do not look at them.

I do not see God.

But I look at Him. “Lord, Jesus Christ...

Lord...!”

MY FORGIVENESS IS HIS DEATH

I plead to our Lord and the Holy Theotokos for forgiveness, and they forgive me at once. This was all simple and easy. Before the moment when the Holy Theotokos explained to me the essence of repentance; everything became very serious and even frightening. In fact, They forgive you, and very fast. However, in order to stop the existence of a sin, someone needs to die. I do not die, I am forgiven. But the Lord dies again. He dies for my every sin and gives me one more chance for forgiveness, and then again and again...I confessed one more sin, one more betrayal of Christ, perceived His forgiveness, and, all of a sudden, my eyes met the eyes of the Holy Theotokos. She was very sad. Moreover, she cried. At that moment it came to me as a revelation, I was absolutely forgiven. But this forgiveness was bought at a high price, just like 2000 years ago, at Golgotha; the same happens now, at my confession. It is not a simple, "Forgive me" and "I forgive you", and that's it. Not at all. It ends for me. But what about Him? For Him it is again Death.

As it happens, this is not that simple and easy. Giving my consent to a sin, I make it exist, I give it life, the energy of my soul. And it begins to exist, act, and poison everything in me and all around me. It becomes my suffering, my illness. I have not mentioned or controlled it yet, but it is going to torture and kill me. It co-exists with me. It is in me. When I realize it, I go to confession to Him, to my Savior. As giving life to a sin, making it exist, is in my power. While in order to get rid of it, or rather kill it, someone has to die; and I am not ready for that and not able to do that.

That is when God takes my sin upon Himself and dies with it, stopping its existence. This is the way it happened there, at Golgotha. The Lord took upon Himself our flesh, in full, with existence of sins, except for sympathizing sins; He took this flesh and died with it, killing its sins. It is a dreadful sacrifice. And everyone should understand this sacrifice was not for His Own sake; He sacrificed Himself for the sake of a worthless person, for me. It was not only then, 2000 years ago; it happens every day, for my every sin.

I was standing before the Theotokos, realizing this, and was afraid of asking for a penance, as a small co-suffering and co-dying with Her, and Him. I asked only for an absolute forgiveness, understanding, what price will be paid for it by Her and by Him.

My not changing resembles the situation at Gethsemane, when the Lord suffered for us until sweating blood and told His sleeping disciples, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? For your sins."

I do not do anything, I do not want anything, I do not compel myself for a little bit. Christ bears everything for me. Until sweating blood. Meanwhile, I only tell Him, "Forgive me,"

He forgives and dies.

And I am still living.

SEEKING JERUSALEM

Jerusalem. Old City. The sun is directly above our heads. The midday heat of its rays penetrates to the most secluded, shady corners of the narrow streets of the eastern city. All around, everything is in movement. Thousands of people from all over the world are moving in the multicyclic movement. Someone, in thoughtfulness, has slowed down, someone freezes near a souvenir shop, someone is hurrying.

We are walking down the Via Dolorosa, not losing sight of the risen hand of the guide, who is constantly saying something, moving and talking. Sometimes one can get the impression that he is talking to himself, as his speech is knurled to automaticity. Another group is moving toward us, they are also being spoken to. Spoken to in different languages. Talking fast, because there is a lot to say, because there is something to say, to show, to explain. Wherever you turn to, all the space around you is filled with artifacts, history, events. The concentration of history overfills you, it seems that the measure of the capacity to contain it has long been passed. The guide continues to talk, show, and explain. There is another group nearby, another language. But everyone is talking about one thing.

Via Dolorosa. Christ passed here, right at this place He fell down, here, he touched with His hand, you may venerate this place, at this point was his encounter with His Mother. A lot of information about Jesus Christ.

About Christ, Whom I love, Who is the insatiable food of my soul. There cannot be too much of Him. I want Him more and more. But right here and now something is starting to wear me out, to disappoint and irritate me. I do not yet realize what is going on, do not comprehend the nature of the phenomena. But all of a sudden I wanted to stop, close my eyes, clutch my ears tightly. And after some pause, to suddenly shout into the crowd: “Stop, quiet down! Why are you all talking of Him in the past tense, like that of a faraway historical personality? Why are expressions like “was, passed, spoke, healed” used all the time? Why the blasphemous past tense? People, He is not a “was”, He is here and now. Don’t you understand this? Why aren’t you feeling, experiencing this? How are you, in front of Him, talking of Him in the past tense? You cannot do this. Do not bury Him for the second time after He has already risen.”

The garden of Gethsemane. The Church of All Nations. The building is overfilled, there is a Catholic Mass going on, the priest is addressing the people with a sermon about Christ. He is speaking profoundly, ardently, making a bright emotional impression on the listening people. He is talking about Christ, but again in this blasphemous past tense. Everyone’s attention is fixed on that faraway historical point in Gethsemane two thousand years ago. I have gotten satiated with information and at the same time, I am experiencing a feeling of thirst. I have gotten enough about Him, I want Him, Himself.

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. Lord Jesus Christ... Lord...

In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, huddled up in a faraway dark corner, eyes closed, I direct my mind in my heart, I begin talking to Him. Lord, Jesus, Lord... Everything is in its place. I, finally, get to Jerusalem. The Heavenly Jerusalem, that is objective here and now. I arrived. Hello, Lord.

“I shall love You, O Lord, my strength, Lord my stronghold and my refuge.”

For three times I utter this phrase and kiss the diskos with the Lamb on it, the holy Cup, the altar. The Holy Doors to the sanctuary slowly open, the Creed is resounded. The Liturgy of the faithful enters its most mystical phase.

“Let us stand aright! Let us stand with fear! Let us attend.”

Ever since I have taken up as a rule to pray the Jesus prayer during Liturgy, it happens within me from the first exclamation and up until the last “Amen,” absolutely not distracting me from the progress of the service, exclamations and the priest’s secret prayers. It just passes, as the central thread, through all of the Divine Service, especially deepening in the most important, sublime moments during the Cherub hymn and the singing of “Mercy of Peace” before the sanctification of the Gifts.

I cannot give an estimation to this liturgical night, for, trying to keep my mind in prayer, I involuntarily left the analyzing of what was happening. The praying mind does not analyze, it prays, very simply, purely. Parallel with the progress of the Liturgy, in my heart it resounded, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, Lord, Lord...” I uplifted my hands to pronounce the phrase, “O Lord, who sent down Your most Holy Spirit upon Your apostles at the third hour...”

At this moment, my mind stopped. It stopped experiencing anything except for Christ. There was only me and Him and nothing else. Everything receded into the background. The heart froze in tremulous peace. The entire being began to dive into a state of ecstasy. One more minute, and I would step into a different spiritual area. And all of a sudden, on the very edge, on the very threshold of this transition I suddenly uttered a phrase that broke right out of my heart, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”

The word “sinful” was the key one in this point of my being, of my state. Peter the Apostle one time uttered these words, while he was still the Old Testament Peter, not reborn with his deep repentance. These very words were spoken by many Old Testament prophets in mystical moments of God’s special forthcoming. The keen experiencing of their own nothingness, sinful ugliness, critical disparity to the occurring moment was, at this point in my Liturgy, the brightest, most objective state.

Standing before the All-Holy God, Who is all light, purity, love, truth... standing not in white wedding garments, making stench and reek, was higher than my strength, and I took a step back and said what I said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man, a very sinful man.”

I was experiencing deep sadness, but there was no despair in this experience. Despair that makes you lose heart. The sadness was dissolved with hope. Hope that was not born in me, but was coming from Him, from God, in my desperate spiritual deadlock,

I, like Apostle Peter, who one time exclaimed with fervor: “But who can take this up?” – heard a soft, meek voice of Christ: “For men this is impossible. With God, all things are possible.”

He showed me the direction, the way that will take me to this point of being again, the point that was impossible to overcome with my sinful, worthless humanity.

Entering upon this way to Him, I agree to the terrible descending to hell, hell of my nothingness. I must agree to open my shame to their very depths before Him and before myself. But even this I cannot do without Him. The depth of the heart looks me in the eye with impenetrable blackness. I do not see myself, and then the Savior descends with me, as the Light, lighting all the gloomy nooks of my poor heart. The light shines in the dark, and the dark has not overcome it. Deep dreary disappointment births a scream. It’s not me, it can’t be me, I am not like this. Pride is stretched like a string that is about to burst, birthing incredible pain, disappointment. How could I, how can I, how can I now love myself this way?

For men this is impossible. With God, all things are possible. I am your God, I love you even in the way you have just seen yourself.

Tears of the prodigal son, buried in the father’s knees, both burn and warm me.

Lord, what do I have to do to come back?

Start from zero, agree to being a slave, seeing yourself unworthy of being a son. And then I myself will come out to meet you, will take you by the hand, and take you to the Kingdom.

I believe, Lord, help my unbelief. And let it be this way.

Shortly before His terrible sufferings, at the Last Supper, the Lord says to the disciples, “Truly, truly I say unto you, one of you shall betray Me.” On this, the Apostles respond like children, who had no slyness in them, and this was their main merit, still not courageous, not wise, not enlightened by the Holy Spirit, for the most part, tongue-tied, - then they had this treasure, to which was later added all the rest – their sincerity. One after another, vying with each other, after hearing the prophecy of the Savior about the traitor, they begin, with child-like naivety, asking, “Is it not me, Lord? Is it not me?” Everybody, up until Judas, who heard, in response, a short “You said.”

Blind confidence in oneself will certainly lead a person to error, to opprobrium that is unexpected for him himself. “Even if everyone will deny you, I never will”, - exclaimed, in his naïve insanity, Peter, in these days, and right there, on the next day, was put to shame, “I do not know this Man” – three times. And three times, a rooster crowed. It is said that right from that moment and until his very death, the Apostle’s red eyes often teared up with repentant shame.

Is it not me?

I am carried to that faraway terrible night in the yard of the high priest’s house, to the fire near Peter, trembling more not from the cold, but from the terror of the impending moment. Then the slave girl comes up to me and asks this very uncomfortable, unpleasant question, “And were you with Jesus?” A question that is

brief and very simple, that demands an answer that will be just as certain. But this answer is suddenly stuck in my throat. It passes, as a cold shiver, through all of me from head to toes. The heart is pounding like mad. I make up my own voice badly, I do not believe it, it is saying something wrong, something I do not want. But it does say exactly this, “I do not know this man.” It’s like a shot into myself, into my heart, and it has already happened.

But the rotten, invidious woman comes up a second time and then a third time. And once again, the same result. Fear paralyzes me so much that I betray again and again. I hate myself for the cowardice, for the miserable nothingness, but I cannot do anything with myself.

Lord, who can bear this?

For man, this is impossible. With God, all things are possible.

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy loving kindness, according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgression...” These words were born, with the Holy Spirit, by the heart of the psalm chanter David, the great Israelite king, who was, since birth, predetermined to be not just a king, but, above all, a spiritual leader of the people. His heart burned with reverence for God since his youth, but simultaneously, that very heart was carrying the sinful corrosion that entered it with the mother’s blood.

“And in sin did my mother conceive me...” – that he says of himself, in no way humiliating his parent, but simply stating the fact of this global contagion, the one that everyone living on earth inherits from Adam and Eve. In each one of us, this neighbors in parallel – love for the sublime, pure, holy and the most shameful, nefarious beastly instincts.

On a warm southern night, I come out on a flat roof of a traditional eastern house. I come out into the silence of midnight, to remain in solitude that will attune the heart to conversing with God. These are the best hours, and this has happened more than once. My wistful glance is looking at the starry sky, descends to the line of the night city, glides leisurely from house to house, involuntarily stops at the light movement inside one of the nearby yards. It does stop, and that is my main calamity. It does stop, even though it had to hurry, hurry right to this moment, leave that place, turn away, and go down into the chambers. But it does stop, my poor mind. In the night silence, not suspecting that she could have been seen, a young beautiful woman, baring herself, goes down into the pool, refreshing her youthful body with pleasant water. A few seconds ago, my heart was overfilled with sacred experiences of God’s presence, with Whom a conversation was happening, a meeting. It was just a few seconds ago and all of a sudden...

I still do give myself an account of what I can and cannot do, what I positively cannot do. I do give myself an account, and yet I am continuing to look, I do not look away, because that is pleasing me. Sweetness is spilling all over my body, reaching my very heart, poisoning it, making it mad. The longer the protraction, the deeper this passion enters me, I literally get sick, becoming a completely different person. Just a few minutes of negligence, and I am in captivity, I do not belong to myself.

My poor neck is getting thrown over a cord, and I am led, like a slave, like livestock, from that point of my being where I was with God, led to a place far away, where everything will be different. Tomorrow morning, I will already, like mad, look for information on Bathsheba, for an opportunity of a meeting with her, continually stepping over my conscience and a fear of God. The mad passion will grow, swell, transitioning from one form to another, will drag other sins after itself. And namely, after finding out Bathsheba is taken, belongs, as a lawful wife, to a close warlord of mine, a mad passionate mind, like it's obsessed, will look for a possibility to solve this difficult task. Following my agreement to passion, I agree to a despicable, piffling murder, sending a lawful spouse off to war, to the most dangerous place, to the very hell-fire, where he perishes.

The goal is achieved, the object of passion is in my arms. Am I happy? Yes, of course. Yes, probably. In the most critical moment of the flesh's rampage, nothing is felt, except for the enjoyment of the passion. The heart, like a hungry, distraught dog, gulps without chewing, pieces of food, stuffing and stuffing its empty paunch, but there comes a moment of satiation and repletion. This dog, that has broken off the chain, falls off in exhaustion, having glutted itself and calmed down.

"Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy loving kindness, according to the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgression." From somewhere far away, barely audible, barely perceptible the words sound in the heart, words that were familiar, dear, sweet. At first, barely perceptible, and then louder, louder. And then, they already sound in the ears, in the head and heart, like an alarm bell, like a sentence. I'm trying to hide from them, to run away, to turn away. Possessing the long-awaited treasure, you have to rejoice, enjoy, nothing should cloud the joy of the moment. But suddenly, something happens that does not depend on me. The anxiety thickens, the longing comes up from the depth of the heart, an acute pain rises up, pain that chokes, makes me toss and turn on the bed, deprives me of sleep, joy. Already unbearable enough, but it's growing more and more. It thunders in my head, like it does in a storm: "Traitor."

I have betrayed the One Whom I loved, to Whom I spoke in the night there, on the roof, of my faithfulness, of love, Who asked me, in His commandments, not to act like this.

I am asking you, do you hear?

This was in my heart in the first seconds of passion. This still was, but I preferred this vileness to Him.

In the solemn, thankful prayer of David there is a repentant cry of his own nothingness. Deep repentant prayer will become his companion until the very death. This very prayer of pain and shame must also become mine until my last breath. For what am I against him? Worthless and miserable compared to this great Biblical character, loving God and loved by Him.

If in the story of David, the psalm chanter and king, there was a terrible page of his fall, who am I as a personality, what is my own nothingness capable of? Everything, and that I should not just acknowledge, I should grasp and splinter it into my heart, like a splinter of pain and suffering.

Is it not me, Lord, who will be next time on a roof on a quiet southern night?

Lord, save me, I am perishing.

For man, this is impossible. With God, all things are possible.

He is an object of hate, was, is, and will be. How disgusting his deed is, how unpleasant his personality is, overfilled with worthlessness, envy, avarice, and betrayal.

Judas is a common noun for all times.

We, knowing the commandment not to judge, it seems like, in only one case, with no embarrassment for ourselves, have the right to speak of this person in a contemptuous tone.

But for some reason, time after time, pronouncing this name, I simply fall silent, looking down, embarrassed to look at people, who, it seems like, may tell me in response the scary words, "Is it not you?.." And my conscience repeats that very unpleasant question, "Is it not me, Lord?"

You are not born Judas, you become one.

If I live inattentively, carelessly, not raising within myself conscience and fortitude, the process of my growth may become a fact of my lessening. Usual human frugality with unreasonable stimulation of it may become greed, avarice, skimpiness, madness that leads to murder for the satisfaction of its unbridled passion.

If I allow myself to envy others' virtues, successes, happiness, well-being, my spiritual growth will stop and, falling behind, I will hate all of the world, getting ahead of me.

If I allow myself to lie, this will become a habit, and at one point a lie will become truth to me, and truth will become a lie.

If I allow beastly, vile passions to possess me, I will become a beast in the worst meaning of this word.

If, if, if...

Stop. Why are you saying "if"? Aren't you partly like this already? There was no betrayal, envy, avarice, adulterous shame, anger, malice in your life? The word "if" could be applicable in only one meaning, if you do not see it right now, do not acknowledge it in you yourself, if you are not horrified, do not shudder, if a deep, sad moan does not break out of your bosom, a moan of irreparable sorrow, that must transition into a cry for yourself, for your whole life.

"Lord, save me, I'm perishing" – that is the main keynote of our entire spiritual life, that is the point.

Is it, not me, Lord...

This expression becomes my companion through Jerusalem, no matter where I come, no whatever I touch, this phrase sounds in me.

Wicked paranoiac, mad king Herod. Is it not me, Lord?

Warriors murdering infants. Is it not me, Lord?

Evil Herodias and dancing frivolous Salome.

Flabby king, that could not deny killing John the Baptist for the sake of a careless word in front of his guests. Is it not me, Lord?

Vain Pharisees and Sadducees, blind in their pride, not seeing God in God to this day. Is it not me, Lord?

I cry out, “Hosanna!”, and tomorrow, in life’s sorrows and trials, crucify the Lord with my offenses. Is it not me, Lord?

Hypomerically I wash my hands with Pilate, who faint-heartedly places his fault on others and blesses murder in this way...

In every street of the Holy City, in its every historical point I find a place for myself. Among traitors, adulterers, murderers, perjurers, hypocrites, it sounds in me, like an alarm bell: “Is it not me, Lord?” Is it not me? Me.

I no longer believe in myself. A person without faith dies. He has to believe – that is his stimulus to live on.

Lord, I do not believe in myself. I believe in You. I believe, Lord, help my unbelief. Save me. I am perishing.

Jerusalem. Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I receive a message with a desperate request for prayer for someone close.

Not the holy tomb, not the Golgotha, not the stone of anointing. I curl up in a cave hole of one of the quiet sacrariums. After all of the experienced repentant moments of the pilgrimage, the confirmed seeing of me being Judas, worthlessness, there are no words in me, requests, supplications. Only a deep sorrowful sigh in the heart: “Lord!” In this moment I suddenly stop being like an individual persona, like one in myself. God is praying in me, He has filled all of my being. He is me. And I am Him.

An allegory of a vessel filled with grace does not fit in here, it is not exact, for there is still division: vessel and grace, each all by itself in its nature. It is more like red-hot metal, when the nature of fire has already entered the nature of metal, and they have become one. It is no longer fire and metal, it is red-hot metal.

God is praying in me, and He is making miracles, solving impossible questions. For man this is impossible, with God, all things are possible. It is an axiom. I, in my nothingness, cannot do anything. He can do everything. I am overfilled with mystery.

It is no longer I who lives, but Christ is living in me. It is amazing, awesome, extraordinary. May it last forever.

But already tomorrow... Tomorrow will come tomorrow.

Is it not me, Lord?!

RUN TO CHRIST

In the Lives of the Fathers, you can find a guide given by an elder to his disciple that follows: when a strong and cruel enemy is going to attack, one monk gets armored, takes up arms and confronts the enemy. This is a stupid monk. A wise monk will climb up a tree.

The first one is stupid as he has overestimated his strength. Poor him, he does not understand, he fails to realize that this is an uneven contest. So uneven that he would neither just stand up to, nor even stop the enemy for a moment. No one needs his seemingly brave death, except for his vanity. Those who think they can win using only their own strength, art and courage are already beaten by the spirit of pride and self opinion which prevents them from thinking soberly and without emotions.

A wise monk climbs up a tree, that means, firstly, he runs, secondly, not anywhere, but to the place where he is going to be rescued. He climbs the tree, up there, where his Christ is. The tree is an allegory, it means upwards.

A wise monk is naturally modest while estimating his capabilities and experience. Experience that has been gained from confession to confession, from fall to rise and from fall again. An inner weeping gave rise in him. A grief, and not even for being a great sinner, but more for having no self-control. As he grieves for his sins, but he cannot help committing them. He weeps, rises and falls again. He comes close to despair and there at the edge of doom, at the edge of the hell, he starts to yell, to cry, "O Lord! I can't, I can't do anything, I'm broken, I'm desperate. I'm eager to do something, but I can't do anything. Only You can help me, and I'm nothing without You, just nothing! Lord, have mercy, I'm dying!"

And finally he comes to be a wise monk. Those who climb up a tree, in other words, run to Christ, have an experienced and endured wisdom which is their spiritual immunity that will work not only for their mind, but also for their intuition.

It is not by chance that I start with this example. In the course of our conversation we shall come back to this issue, because it's a crucial one for us. We do not fight against sin, but we avoid it.

The beginning of a sin is in our mind. It comes to our thoughts in our sleep or from the depth of our sinful memory. It stays in our mind and keeps disturbing our heart looking for sympathy. A stupid monk takes up arms and fights against thoughts, while a wise one runs, he is afraid of slowing down. He knows well that after the Fall of our first parents Adam and Eve, humankind inherited a broken, split inner world. One's mind, heart and will that used to work together had got scattered around.

A man of faith with his mind realizes that the sin is bad, but in his heart he sympathizes with the sin against his mind. The heart is trying to fight, but there is no will, and that's it. A wise monk understands it all and accepts it for granted as the

result of the Fall, of corruption. That is why he's afraid of slowing down, he runs at once, runs in his mind from those thoughts and feelings. He tries to avert his mind. And go straight to Christ. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner" – right here.

On the contrary, moving from an evil thought to a neutral or even a good one, from thought to thought, from impression to impression, our mind will come back to sin again.

Our sinful mind is like a dog let loose, wandering anywhere. It can find some healthy food, but also can wander into a dump, which is more probable.

In this respect I'd like to point out that our trouble is not just evil thoughts, but our mind let loose, wandering anywhere: in idle, even good, dreams, illusions, seemingly neutral thoughts. The problem is not that you think of something sinful and dream about something good, the trouble is that your mind is loose, it wanders and sometimes will surely find its way to the "dump".

A wise parent will try to engage his child in some activity (I'm not talking about work, but some activity), so that less time is wasted in idleness. So that he or she had less time for playing tricks. The same thing with our mind: leaving it idle we let it wander in dreams, in idle thoughts, and it can find its way...

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Many people feel sure that a pure heart is a heart free of evil thoughts, but both heart and mind could be littered by good thoughts, just like a mess of good things. And so, the heart is pure when it is simple, not complicated, not hoarded by any stuff. A pure heart is free both from a sin and from a pile of complicated idle thoughts and feelings. Why shall the pure in heart see God? Because there are fewer obstacles between them and God, they look straight at Him.

We cannot think only about God, we need to pay attention to our earthly concerns. Surely, we cannot, but to be honest, like during a confession, we have many minutes, even hours, during the day and night, when we can say, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner."

If we find some time for this exercise, our mind will get used to running away from evil thoughts and feelings. It will run to Christ and stand by Him inconspicuously, without visualization. It is very important. We should stand without visualizing Christ, without the illusion of the presence of God, but before God. The difference is that the God we try to fancy, imagine, invent is our imaginary god, while the real God opens up Himself, not otherwise when a man discovers Him on his own. That is why when praying we should stop our creativity, stop fancying and imagining and let God speak for Himself. For this reason, inconspicuously, without visualization, we keep our mind cold and simple, all simple, in order not to push into the background the image of God who always looks at us. The thing is that there is often our creativity, which stands between Him and us. It fancies, creates, worries, interferes.

I would like to say a few words about discernment. People talk a lot about it at present, but these talks are a little bit vague and indefinite. More often, I see that it

is understood as the act of intellect. I believe that discernment, as a gift of God, is a charismatic state. Spiritual discernment is when you know the answer, neither the way it is, nor your own answer, but when you speak for the Holy Spirit.

That is true, as the gift of discernment has always been considered to be the highest gift in the Church. Please note, I tell you again that this gift is not granted to academicians or professors, but to people of proper spiritual life. Careful, prayerful and concentrated life. They own this gift to the full extent. We become acquainted with this gift of the Holy Spirit, but to a lesser degree.

Our discernment should tell us that we are still not perfect and our life is full of mistakes. Therefore, we should be careful with our reasoning, more often ask for advice and do not make hasty decisions. This would be a kind of discernment, not bad for us.

As a matter of fact, we usually know which option to choose, but our fanciful mind makes the issue more complicated by excessive reasoning, it confuses, distracts us, makes us panic. We had better pray. We had better pray properly, and during the prayer think about Christ, not about the problem. The purpose of prayer is not to explain to God what has happened and why it has happened. Could it be that God does not know? The purpose of prayer is Christ Himself, which means that we should mentally find Christ and stand before Him. When you stand before Him, there is no reason talking or explaining anything. You realize that He understands it all, knows it all, and thus simply say to Him, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner". And it should be said in a simple, easy way. Otherwise, complexity will lead you away from God.

I would also like to talk about obedience. Oh, what a miracle, what a mystery it is! And I would like to give it further understanding than just getting the job done. It does not matter if you did it or not, but the way you did it, the way you describe it in your mind matters.

Two novices are carrying a log. One of them thinks a good thought: of course, no one needs the log to be there, but I carry it, because it is my obedience, as the abbot told us, I must obey, and otherwise, it is a sin. Another novice is carrying the log without permitting himself to say anything, except for: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me". And so, the first one, even though he has a good thought, is in a tricky position, as his mind and heart do not always work together. His mind says: you have to obey, but the heart has a touch of distaste to the abbot, and he cannot help it, the heart wants what it wants.

The novice with his good thought brought distaste about his abbot due to his inexperience. An experienced one did not allow himself to think about the abbot at all, neither in a good or in an evil way. He kept his mind bound, bound to Christ. And the place where Christ dwells is pure.

Many Holy Fathers set obedience before fast and prayer. And it is really so, as a prayer will not work without obedience. A true, spiritual and deep obedience makes one's mind simple, consistent and non-disputing. Such a mind can stand pure before God. In other words, a mind free from thoughts can stand face to face with God.

People of the Western Church pay more attention to humanism and thus they are supposed to come to God. In the East people seek God and through God they have love for everyone.

When we hold back our emotions, good impulses, impressions it seems to be dryness, indifference... In fact we hold back what belongs to us, something touched by a sin, in order to get from God what is God's. A pure and perfect sense of love and compassion for every living thing.

And it will not be an illusion of goodness and love, it will be love itself.

Why am I speaking of illusions? Check yourselves and say whether your feelings, or relations are perfect. Tonight we say "I love you", and tomorrow we'll betray and get angry. That's just the way it is. We are not perfect ourselves, but we can become perfect through God.

Due to that we do not seek goodness, we seek God. And through God we get better, purer.

And it works for everything – first of all, we seek God, then – all the rest.

Many people say that by keeping the commandments they come closer to God. And I cannot keep the commandments on my own. I want it badly, I cry, but I fail. I believe everyone fails, because if there were only the commandments to consider, Christ would have left only the commandments. But He left us Himself and said: *For without Me you can do nothing* (John 15:5). That is the reason why we do not attempt to act only visibly, but realize that our act of faith should be based on a proper tacit spiritual life.

Proper spiritual life brings one's mind to Christ. And through Christ our visible feat takes a wise and sensible direction. Our visible feat will never be complete without spiritual life.

Spiritual life is not about inward struggle, it is about avoiding struggle. And running to Christ. In this case a struggle should be understood as a struggle with evil thoughts. We don't need it. We should only struggle to keep our mind on Christ. Do not pay your attention to anything sinful. Even though you contradict a sin, you waste your time on it, wasting your spiritual strength. Just leave it to Christ. Even a struggle, an argument against a sin will all the same get your soul dirty and leave a memory of the sin, and one day your heart will respond with sympathy to it.

Let only Christ be in your heart.

You will admit that without thinking about our sins we may stop perceiving our imperfection, our corruption. But if, living a spiritual life, you keep approaching Christ, you will start to see clearly through Christ, hear through Christ and comprehend through the Holy Spirit. And this comprehension will allow you to have a clear-eyed view of yourself and of Christ. You will recognize yourself as a poor sinner, infinitely small in comparison to the great perfection of Christ, who shortens the distance coming to meet us.

A pure heart is keenly aware of a sin. That is the reason why the saints, getting more pure, kept crying more over themselves.

You may examine your sins, meddle with them and, thus, acquire humility. But also you can seek Christ who is the light, the purity, the spiritual vision and you will have a clear, keen and simple vision. That is to say, first of all, Christ, and then, repentance through Christ. Not the kind of repentance you squeezed out of yourself or made up for yourself, but the one born from the Holy Spirit. And it will work for anything: first comes Christ, then (an unfeigned) repentance. First, Christ, then love (whereas Christ is love Himself).

Why did our Lord leave us the sacrament of confession? So that we, after having sincerely confessed our sins and having heard from Christ “I forgive and remit your sins”, could stop keeping the memory of a sin which is the dirt that stains our heart dwelling there even in contradiction with us. Pin up to your heart the memory of being a great sinner, but do not take the details of your sins for a treasure. Keep your mind in a clean place.

Do not let in anything bad, do not pay attention to it or waste your feelings on it. Let only Christ be there, inside your soul.

Do not try to change the world by worrying about it. You will lose yourself and will not save the world. You may present the world with something real instead of good but idle feelings. Give it sainthood, if this is too much, let it be your aspiration for it, sincere, not a false one. But in no case, your own sainthood, for it is not true. Sainthood is the reflection of the light of Jesus Christ through yourself. In order to reflect you need to be in His glory.

Always be with Christ. Your thoughts, feelings, emotions, concerns should not come from you, but they should come from Christ.

Christ is a Bridegroom and you are only His best man. It is a position of trust and highest importance.

Why do we dare to practice the Jesus prayer? Why do we talk about spiritual life? Do we recognize ourselves as saints or at least righteous ones?

No, we pronounce the Jesus prayer specifically because we are sinners. Great sinners. We are dying and searching for a remedy of salvation, and cannot find some other one.

We need to do something, otherwise, it is going to be hell.

And owing to our false humility, which is close to self-indulgence, it would have been very stupid to give up the remedy which Christ gives us through the Holy Fathers.

I DO NOT WANT TO BE RIGHT, I PREFER TO BE WRONG

When Adam and Eve lost God, their minds became clouded and their thinking reversed. They stopped understanding what was needed and began to understand what was not needed.

It is unfortunate that when people have a sincere wish and intent but because of their inversion, they do everything wrong. One says, "I would like to have God in my life," but suddenly becomes God's enemy. And says, "I would like to have more love," but ends up with war. It is terrifying when the idea of God is being deformed and people understand things in a distorted way.

It is just that there is God's Truth and man's truth. The difference is that man's truth is always a fact or an event. While God's Truth is a result. Frequently, these two truths can be opposite to each other.

God's truth is not an idea nor is it a thought. It is being. And this being is always good.

For example, if I impulsively tell somebody that he is a sinner, and he kills himself, this means I killed him. Because of this, my truth will become untruth. Here is another example: once I heard a confession of a woman who had cheated on her husband. She repented her sin long ago and still loves her husband. He also loves her but he does not know about this betrayal. She says, "I feel ashamed. Should I tell him?" And I respond, "No, no and no. This truth will destroy your relationship and you will part." God's Truth here is that although being a sinner and having committed this sin, about which your husband does not know, you are still in love and you are together."

These examples are very common in life. And here is about the Fall of Adam and Eve. God asks Adam lovingly, "*Did you eat from the forbidden Tree?*" (Gen. 3:11). Adam is lying. What do we mean by "lying"? He is stating a truthful fact, "*The woman you put here with me - she gave fruit from the tree so I ate it.*" But in regard to God, it is a big untruth. Adam tries to justify himself and in a way blames God. Adam thus betrays His love. Eve, in her own turn, says that it is not her fault as the serpent deceived her. What is the end of this story? They separated themselves from God, lost Him and stayed with their truth. Did this make their lives easier?

The lives of those who understood Christ has changed completely. From full of hardships they turned to great joy. Then, why is it so difficult to understand and to accept Jesus Christ? It is because it is much harder to accept God's Truth than man's truth.

When Jesus says: “Do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” (Mt. 5:39) Man’s truth does not accept it well. Because in the man’s opinion it is unfair! Man’s feeling of fairness is rebelling. If you were slapped on your cheek in an abusive manner for no reason, you would want to respond by man’s truth!

What about God's commandment about love for enemies? In man's way of thinking, it is absurd and incomprehensible.

When we try to evaluate everything from the point of view of man’s truth, we face a dead end.

We do not understand Christ. Inside of our souls, we are constantly battling with Him. We cannot comprehend that He talks about the truth as a result, not as a fact. He talks about peace and love and they have to be achieved at any price- by truth or untruth. Otherwise, no idea will warm us up, will comfort us, will touch us or will heal us. No matter how often we say, “Sugar, sugar, sugar!”, it will not feel sweeter until you take that piece of sugar into your mouth.

I believe God’s Truth is accepted more easily by heart and intuition rather than by mind. If we only understood what God’s Truth is, we would be looking for it constantly. We would hate man’s truth because it always causes suffering. The root for all catastrophes, revolutions and fights is man’s truth.

It is probably very rarely that a person commits evil acts consciously. Most often, he thinks that he defends the truth. But this is his (man’s) truth, his understanding and his mindset. He fights for his views, he can even kill for his views! And what is the result? The result is often terrifying.

When we look for fairness, we run away from God. When we look for man’s truth, we turn our backs to God and we constantly feel bad. When we achieve this man’s truth and it seems, we should be content and joyful. We should be feeling like winners but in fact, we feel worse and worse... This is because we distance ourselves from God farther and farther...

We should not judge anyone not only when they are wrong but also when they are right. We should not judge in general! Because this alienates us from each other and brings animosity. St. Paul the Apostle said that he wants to be humiliated for the name of Christ. Here he talked about the result. He wanted to be with Christ and for the sake of this, he preferred to be lied about and to be wrong.

If we are constantly right it is a disaster. This makes us foolish and allows us to judge others and allows us to separate ourselves from them. If we are constantly right, we should pause to think and we should be concerned.

One can convince the whole world in his truth and stay dead.

Of course, at the same time if you are always with the man’s mindset, your “being right” will surely be very satisfying and enjoyable. However, in fact it is the beginning of the catastrophe. It is better not to allow even a shade of the satisfying pride of “being right”. On the contrary, one should cry to God, “God, let me see my untruth and do not let me see my truth. God, I do not want to be right, even when I am right. I even prefer to be humiliated not to be right.” “Being right” often leads us to separation and lack of love.

The feeling of fairness is a disaster. Once my son caused a big problem and I scolded him harshly! I could not sleep after that. I punished him for a reason but I could not sleep and felt bad. I got up and went to give him a hug...

What stops us from making peace with each other? The feeling of fairness. This feeling paralyzes our spiritual life. If you had a disagreement with God, an elder will make peace between you and Him. But if you had a disagreement with the elder, who will help you make peace then?

Sometimes being in a disagreement with someone, you turned out to be mistaken. Your pride rebels. But as soon as you relax and say, "Sorry, God, I am wrong," - it feels like there is light turned on in the room: God is in again. Your grief and suffering turns into joy because you were able to accept your mistake. Yes, you were wrong, but now you are joyous. You have possibly been unfairly insulted but you are at peace now. So, avoid man's truth like the plague.

The Holy Gospel does not fit in the constraints of this world. That is why it is not acceptable for many people. Some people understand that the Gospel is from God, but it interferes with their lives and they try to transform it. They take a part and adapt it for their own mindset. But this is not the real Gospel anymore. The real one is foreign to man's truth. Because His truth is peace and love.

COME BACK!

For my own

I am going for my own. Flying for nine hours, towards the sun, far far away to a foreign country, a different culture and spiritual tradition. I want to get them back, I need to try unobtrusively, with love, with patience.

Why have they left to go so far East, in search of Truth, seeking a point, God?

I am trying to understand them, to enter their thoughts and experiences. And I am coming to a realization that they were driven by thirst. A thirst for spiritual mysticism, that of experience, alive, something they have not acquired in their native Orthodoxy. They have not acquired it, but it does not mean we do not have this experience, or that it is unfamiliar to us. I am not speaking of a personal experience of each one here. The experience of the Church for many centuries tells us of hundreds, thousands of the venerable ones, whose spiritual experience went out of the frames, out of the bounds of the accepted, understandable, it was so mystically exceptional that it made the bystanders first fall reverently silent before such an extraordinary sight, and then share what they saw and experienced with delight and amazement.

Unfortunately, such exceptional sights in the modern world decrease, become rare. People who formally consider themselves Orthodox know it more in its rite, historical, cultural, ethical form, often clueless to the fact that the Church is full mystically not only in its Mysteries, but its 2000-year-old experience of personal inward, noetic prayer. The experience of this prayer not only builds a dialogue with God, which, for the most part, could be called a monologue from our side towards a faraway, unknown God. This practice of noetic prayer leads us to a connection, union with God, to the theosis of our nature - something we were created for. Yes, it is becoming rare, but it does not cease altogether. It is, it can be, it should be, otherwise religion becomes philosophy. It stops being alive, being an experience, it becomes a dead scholastic.

And those who have left, I think they have left from death, from the spiritual nothing, and went on to seek far away foreign traditions - Buddhism, Hinduism, they went on to search for something they have not found in Orthodoxy. They have not found it, not because we do not have it, it is just that the rare phenomenon of the real personal spiritual experience has created an impression that it is just not. Neither an experience nor a teaching of prayer as a mystical state of the soul. Prayer is now called reading, chanting, singing, speaking through. It is no longer defined as a state. This disappoints the inquiring, mystically talented souls, pushes them out of their native tradition into the Eastern cults, practices of meditation.

I am flying to Japan. Flying not to tell my fellow countrymen of the Buddhist, Shintoism culture, my goal is to reveal the cryptic mystical experience of our Orthodox noetic prayer to many. This tradition, teaching is by itself supernatural, extraordinary. But what is most important is the result that it gives: theosis, the connection of our created nature with the energy of God...

A God that is Running Away

A religion with no God - that is how Buddhism is often defined. It does not mean that there is no idea of God in the philosophy of Buddhism, no striving to know the supernatural. Buddhism works hard in this direction. But it is the question of the direction that is key in our differences. One can work hard, sincerely, stably, use many techniques and psycho-physical tools of asceticism that will be very similar to our spiritual practices, but still move in the wrong direction with much labor and sincerity. Buddhists in their practice of meditation, concentrating on the idea of the supernatural, free their mind of impression, experience, of any complexity and gear it upward into space. This exact direction does not allow them to experience a personal God. For the farther the mind runs into the endless space, the farther and the faster, the farther God moves from them. God as a Person. Dissolving, transcending in the endlessness of the universe.

I call this spiritual phenomenon a God that is running away. God that becomes a Nobody God, nobody as a person. He enters into the area of idea, philosophy, that can be spoken about, reflected on, but in no way can it be known or understood.

Our difference lies in the direction. Not in the technical means, that in some details can be similar. The Orthodox direction of practical mysticism as a prompt and suggestion is depicted on ancient Byzantine icons. Reverse perspective. Conscious breach of the linear laws. If the classical laws of space take all the lines into one point toward the horizon - and that is how it is in our physical world, in the ancient Byzantine iconography the perspective is built backwards - all the lines are directed not toward the horizon, but backwards from the horizon towards you and the point of them coming together is not outside, but inside you.

The direction of seeking God lies not into the endless immensity of space, dissolving Him into nothing. On the contrary, it moves from outside into you, gathering, focusing God inside your heart, there where your personal 'I am' is and exactly there, in the depth of the heart, happens the encounter with the Person of God - unblurred, not depersonalized, but very definite and personal.

This is an immersion inside one's heart and it also means to decrease one's emotional, impressionable state of the mind to the maximum. The mind that we try, through spiritual practical exercises, to decrease to simplicity, to the smallness of a dot. This spiritual practice is called noetic prayer in Orthodoxy.

God, from a God that is always running away and transcending, becomes a Person Who is moving in your direction, literally inside you, into your very heart.

The evangelical concept given to us by Christ Himself, on entering the Kingdom of Heaven, is compared to going through the eye of a needle. The Kingdom of Heaven

is within you, as definitely says our Divine Teacher, “within you”, which means, in the heart. And as long as we are still emotionally and impressionably wide, wide with the cares of this world, we will not be able to enter through the narrow path. A camel through the eye of a needle.

In Image and Likeness

In the mystery of noetic prayer we consciously lessen our creative beginnings, constrict its movement forward, into the width, constrain ourselves emotionally, gather ourselves impressionably, constrict the mind, not letting it float, dream, to an extent, experience. There can be an impression, and in a way it is true, that we kill the creative beginnings within ourselves, kill our ability to create, experience, live.

But if we are made in the image and likeness of God, and God is the Creator, and creativity is one of His key features, then our likeness to Him not only allows us to create it, in a way, it obliges us to do so. There is a controversy between the restraint, the restriction of the creative force of the soul, and the point of our being created in the image and likeness, which, by nature, stimulates us to create.

The controversy is eliminated by bringing our creative beginnings to the conformity to its original point, to the way that God made it. The point is that the inspiration of our spiritual creativity is the Holy Spirit, and no other power or energy. Everything that happens of ourselves with the connection to our imperfection or by inspiration from other, foreign spirits. Everything bears the seal of imperfection, imperfection in the best case scenario. Sometimes the creativity acquires the forms of moral and aesthetic, philosophical ugliness. So there is actually no task to kill the creative beginnings in the Orthodox asceticism, in the science of noetic prayer. Not to kill, but to transform, to bring to theosis. So that the power of the Holy Spirit would be the inspiring force, the energy giving us the dynamics of creativity, along with that of our own. That is, God Himself. Only that state could be called the Divine Symphony, the symphony of God and man.

If the globe could be drilled all the way through, then inclined downward, the center of the world would then change into facing upwards. This allegory is very similar to the practice of Orthodox asceticism of restricting the psycho-somatic nature of human impressions, emotions, creative beginnings to simplicity, the smallness of a dot. But this dot is actually not a dead end of our ‘I am’. I would call it the point of focusing, after which happens the widening backwards in the spectral richness of light, divided into a whole gamma of colors. Dying becomes transforming.

An unenlightened person could have an impression that Orthodox ascetic restraints make frames killing the creative beginnings of a soul. In reality though, these frames build up, direct the soul in the right direction and going through that point of encounter, of refraction, after which there is actually not a dead end, but vastness, width of creativity no longer restricted by egotism.

The Holy Trinity icon of Andrey Rublev could never be written by a person of limited flight and inspiration. This work of art is completely free of worldly limited frames and stereotypes. This is not a portrait of God, it is a blasphemy to even approach Him within the laws of portrait. It is poetry about God, about God and to God.

Pay attention to how free the best masters of Byzantine brushwork were concerning frames and conventionalities of worldly principles of image. The ultimate idea and task were beyond frames and tradition. It's the backward perspective and breaking the proportions of anatomical laws, and none of these confined the icon painter. He himself was the master and lord of these laws, made them work for him in connection to his spiritual and creative task.

If the creative task required that they unite a sad, tender tilt of the head with a look within, then the iconographer, with no doubts, breaks the anatomical line of the eyes and unites the tilted head with the look, defined by his creative task.

The artist will not paint the lips openly red. Otherwise they will scream, go beyond the framework. The iconographer will balance everything out with a bold decision - make several strokes with that very red, enhancing the nose, the eye crease, and then everything is in its place.

Pay attention to the life stories of many different artists, how tragic their fates are, how torn their inner worlds are. The demise in the psychiatric tear of the great Vrubel, the drama of Van Gogh, these are all the fruits of the untransformed creativity, art closing within itself, in a psychological dead end, that gives no joys of life, but on the contrary, pain and loss of meaning.

We are created in the image and likeness, created by God, but it is not final, the thing that we are to understand is that He is the source of life, meaning and inspiration. Our self isolation from Him is movement toward a dead end, nowhere. Whether the path is long or short, its end is all the same. Everything that is not moving towards the source of life, inspiration, dies.

From death to life

The being of the spiritual world, unlike the habitual laws of the world often happens against all odds. The spiritual world is irrational, full of antinomy. You cannot enter this area fully equipped with habitual stereotypes. You can't think or get to know it within the laws of logic, which often leads the mind into spiritual dead ends, labyrinths. The spiritual lives its life and we often have to come to terms with the impossibility of understanding the details, the nature of phenomena. But we accept the supernatural according to the fact of its result, its being. I see it as an event, as a result, even though I do not understand it in all the depth of its nature.

Anatomies often do not yield to logical, rational thinking, they are in the sphere of faith that is not philosophical, but of being, as a fact that is and cannot be any other way, for otherwise, everything is ruined.

One of the most difficult dogmas of the Orthodox faith is how God became Man, His incarnation. The rational mind, despite its desire, cannot contain this uncontainable truth. How God, the Creator of the endless universe, unlimited by time and space, all of a sudden is limited by something so small as a human body, and the material world by itself, it is framework and laws. Many view this detail of our faith as its weak spot, theological primitivism. The reduction of space between endlessly perfect God and limited man is experienced as humiliation, the desecration of the greatness of the spiritual.

Christianity is not afraid of spiritual contradictions, it often consciously enhances them, accentuating the faith with them. The incarnation of God is experienced by us

as an act. An act of faith that is of being, not philosophy. This livens God for us, moving Him from the sphere of the transcendent philosophy into the sphere of being. We begin to experience Him, His being becomes ours. For had He remained within the bounds of His perfection, completely unknowable, beyond the world, transcendental, such God dies for us, He ceases to be. For He cannot in any way enter my being, He becomes a dead God, nobody for me. He lives only for Himself, in Himself, He is not in me. Not as a person, a personality. He dies for me, becoming a fantasy, a dream, a God that is not.

It is terrible to suddenly find yourself in an endless void, a blackness of space and time, be there all by yourself - it is torturous loneliness, it is hell. We are used to estimating ourselves within space, the duration of our earthly life, that is full of color, events, persons around us.

But estimate the moment of your life against the void of eternity. Estimate it and tremble at how brief the possession of everything that is dear to you in terms of earthly being is. Against eternity it all decreases into a dot, a dot in an endless ocean, it loses value, becomes an illusion, ceases to be. If along with it, God also ceases to be for us, the cold, scary blackness comes.

But the Light shines in darkness, and darkness has not overcome it. These life-supporting words liven our faith, strengthen our hope, give us meaning. God is not a prisoner of His greatness, transcendency. As the perfect God He overcomes that distance between Himself and man and becomes, by His goodness, our Co-Being. God, from endlessly far, becomes an endlessly near God, the God in me. Inseparable, yet not fully one. Our theosis happens.

“You are gods,” that is how He describes it, how He wants, how he makes it to be. What is needed from us is only our agreement to this act - from the great division of God and man, to make a great union. That very moment of our faith that once seemed a weak point, becomes the cornerstone, as the very meaning of our being.

God comes to life, becomes a living God, a God of being. I Am, as He Himself says of Himself, I am not just in Me, I am for you, I am in you. And person comes to life, comes to life outside the bounds of his earthly limited life. His life stops being a moment's flash, a moment against eternity. It itself comes into eternal life of the eternal God.

God becomes man, to make man god. No other religion or philosophy has such a brave theology. To think, teach and live like this, you are to stop being homo sapiens - man that thinks, and to become homo divinus - a man that is divine. And not any other way.

Come Back!

A person in his baby period of spiritual life tends to fall into extremes to the left and to the right, until the right orientations are achieved, seared in the fire of his life's temptations and searches. Orientations that give him the safe direction of movement. Movement towards a good goal. Nobody is as good as God is.

Grow up, go out into the straight path leading up.

Grow up and come back.

Come back to the home of your Father. He is waiting for you.

He cannot just wait, He comes out to meet you. God coming out to meet you, the dearest and greatest in His humility and love. This is our God that Christians know.

CHAPTER 2. PRAYER IS A DIFFERENT FORM OF BEING

OUTSIDE OF TIME

Saint Paisios of Mount Athos shared that once he stayed alone in his hermit cell, doing his monastic prayer rule. In the utter silence, his heart was set in quiet, peaceful and attentive prayer. At some point, his soul smoothly transferred to a state of contemplation, and he saw the Uncreated Light which filled the whole space of his cell, and Father Paisios himself. This Light penetrated the whole being of the elder and filled him with peace and non-ecstatic quiet bliss which instilled the feeling of humbleness and humility.

Father Paisios was not able to say exactly how long this contemplation of the Uncreated Light lasted. After this moment of grace, Father Paisios started to come to his senses and had to sit down. He grabbed a glass of water, had some food..., and suddenly cried. He was crying because just a moment ago, he was filled with uncreated grace, and now it had seceded and he was back to the mundane everyday things, like food and water.

After the Holy Spirit visited him, the elder more deeply felt his human imperfect nature that has its physical needs.

Father Paisios was thinking, “I am dust and ashes. I should have forgotten about food and about myself in general, after God visited me. I am still such a carnal man...”

When God visits a sinful man, this will always be accompanied by the feeling of unworthiness and deep repentance on man’s part, which differs from the feeling of delusion that often tempts hermits with a high opinion of themselves and their worthiness.

While using this example, I would like to focus on another moment also. Namely, Saint Paisios of Mount Athos, as well as all of the Early Church Fathers, noticed that when grace visits one, during this state of contemplation, they would always lose track of time. In a way, they kind of “dropped out of time itself”. Having united with God, in the state of deification, they assumed His characteristics, one of which is being “outside of time”. Both now and ever and unto the ages of ages eternally. The person does not realize how much time he spends in ecstasy, be it five minutes or the whole day. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

I once spoke to my friend, a hieromonk who could not understand and as a result, could not accept the practice of saying the Jesus prayer fast. He was an educated person with a strong logical reasoning and I had to explain to him in a logical way.

“Can you tell me, please, when do you read faster: when you read out loud or in your head?”- “In my head, obviously.” “As an educated person, you are probably familiar with the method of fast reading, when you scan through the text, getting the meaning of the text, without focusing on the linguistic details of it.”- “Yes, sure.”

If this method works with a complex narrative, where the ideas and events are changing quickly, it is surely possible with a short prayer that repeats. We repeat it without pauses where unneeded things can interrupt it. Later when it becomes a habit, one wants to say it again and again. You finish one and the next one is coming, without losing your focus or getting distracted by something else. Our goal is not a full focus, our goal is God. Focus is just a means.

A very important moment in the practice of the Jesus prayer is being in an imageless state in which the mind does not live through logical and visual thinking, but exists in a simpler non-visual, inward thinking way. Such a mind is fast and light because it is simple. It can say the prayer fast and many times. Which carriage will go faster? The one that will have fewer obstacles on the way. The smoother the road is, the faster the trip is. Thoughts matter; they are the obstacles that slow down the movement.

Thoughts come from visual thinking and logical reasoning. Let your mind move into the area of a non-imaginary and simple state and you will have fewer obstacles.

This will also work better, if your mind is not in or out, but through constant work you will train it to be next to your heart. It is very peaceful, non-visual and focused there.

I used the word “next to your heart”, not “in your heart.” This is very important, because only grace can enter your heart, and our business is to stay by the door and knock at it, with humility. We cannot break in the door. It is the most Holy Place, the key for which is with God. No technical tricks will help you enter there by yourself. We are standing by the door with humility and knocking, or even better-just standing and waiting. However, if your humility, work and dedication develop your skill in finding the place next to your heart, this means a lot. It is peaceful and quiet there.

The threshold of the Kingdom of Heaven has a scent of the Kingdom of Heaven. The prayer here occurs without any linguistic form but through impression, instantly, especially by a person who has a skill of prayer, for whom it works intuitively, very simply, but also very precisely. Without any illusions or fantasies. God is simple, He is also experienced simply, without obstacles and interferences. The Holy Fathers teach us not to overcome obstacles but to work around them while moving only forward, faster and faster. It is not surprising that their interior prayer of a Single Thought would accelerate. This acceleration would break them away from the earth; the laws of friction, of contact, and finally of movement that would change from horizontal and temporary to vertical – directly to God. The vertical stops time. It is the territory of the Holy Spirit.

Once someone told me that it is hard to pray for others with the Jesus prayer, because the image of that person distracts you from God. This would be true if you do not have the skill of interior prayer without using visual images. But if your mind did acquire this experience of prayer without imagining, the person you pray for will go through your prayer as an impression without distracting you from God. You would experience that person as a point without accompanying properties and other difficulties. And most importantly, you can experience two or more people, not like two or three points but like one. And the whole of humankind – like one simple united body.

When they teach you to play the piano, you first learn to hold your hand properly. If this is not done correctly from the beginning, the musician will not be up to standard all of his or her life. In any science, the basics are very important. In the science of all sciences, the Jesus prayer, the mentor forms the correct direction of the novice's movement. It may not be very clear for a novice at first, he may not understand everything; but he simply trusts his mentor.

It is important to have fewer thoughts, impressions, emotions, fewer complexities and more simplicity, stability and hard work. Everything will come naturally. That is why they say, "Say the Jesus prayer and it will teach you itself. Your spiritual father will only keep an eye on you."

Simple things can be done faster, for that exact reason they are not difficult. The Fathers of Athos are an example here – they are experts, whose experience cannot be understood theoretically without actively experiencing their holy work.

ABOUT BELIEF IN GOD AND YOURSELF

One day, St. Paul the Simple came to St. Anthony the Great to become a monk. Anthony came out of his cell and saw Paul sitting. Anthony said, “You’ll gain nothing, you are old. Go home.” The next day he came out of his cell and saw that Paul was still sitting. And Anthony sent him home again. That was repeated several times.

Why did Anthony try to discourage him? He thought that it was difficult for a man to pursue asceticism on the verge of life. And so, we sometimes refer to the fact that we cannot change ourselves, when we are 50, 60, 70 years old.

Meanwhile Paul the Simple did not go away despite everything. He said, “I’ll die, but I won’t go away.” And when Anthony saw his zeal and that he was ready to die for Christ’s sake, then he built a cell for Paul nearby. By tradition, desert-dwellers used to settle at a stone’s cast from each other then.

Anthony gave prayer beads and a precept to Paul, set him some handiwork, and the Simple, just an old man, spiritually unlearned. But sincerely wanting to gain the Kingdom of Heaven, soon succeeded by the grace of the Lord.

This is the way for us. We need not only to gain the belief in God, but also in ourselves. Why did Paul manage and we cannot do this? We need only to believe that we too can become saints with God being our helper. Rather soon the Simple became so saintly that, when a demon possessed girl was brought to Anthony the Great to be cured, he said: “I cannot do this. It’s only my disciple Paul the Simple who can. Go to him.” They came to him and asked, “Cure the girl.” And he answered, “Do not ask me! You have got Anthony!” They said, “Anthony has said that only you can cure her.” Paul instantly kneeled and said, “By the prayers of my Father Anthony, o Lord, drive out the demon!” The demon flew out of the girl at once as it could not stand such a great humility.

Humility is the beginning of the Kingdom of Heaven, it is when nothing can disturb the stillness of human soul, there is prayer in the human soul, and there is God in prayer. Humility is such a state when no circumstances, no enemies, no friends, nobody can disturb your peace. Only the perfect own it outright, in our case it is a procession to humility. One cannot be forced to be humble, one can easily be bullied and develop tricks of survival in the world of intimidation and severity, while humility is born in free will, it may be born when a person is willing to get it. It happens when he or she sees the point of it.

Is it possible to live a happy life without God?

It is. There are people who absolutely do not know God and live a happy life. Well, how is it so - without God? God is still here above them, but they personally live without God.

Can you be a fair, kind person without God? It is also possible. There are very many kind, fair, honest, unbelieving people. But once again, God is still there above them. It is just that they are living without God.

But without God, it is impossible to become a saint, to get to know the spiritual world.

It is possible to live limitedly, in the format of a material life, live, die and disappear, like some bug that is crawling and does not even suspect that there is a God. Crawling out its life path and withering away. And a person is given the possibility to come out of the boundaries of his limitedness.

Everything on earth may become boring, everything has a boundary. A person may enjoy wealth, various interests, and friendships. A person can even be satiated with the singing of a nightingale. And in God there's insatiability and endlessness.

God becomes known not in good deeds and not even in carrying out His commandments. God is known only in prayer. Some think that by doing good deeds, they reveal God for themselves. But once again, there were some communists-atheists who knew about good deeds. There are people of other religions, who do have doing good, as their ethical law. But they do not know God. It is impossible, by leading a godly life, to get to know God. God is known not as a theory, not as a philosophy, but very definitely - and this does not happen in any way other than prayer. Everything that remains - reasons about God, dreams of God, talks of God.

In essence, the holy fathers only call the Jesus prayer, prayer, everything that remains is chanting of psalms, such as, reading the Psalter, canons and akathists. Psalm chanting may be a preparatory phase before the Jesus prayer, attuning the soul to the spiritual tone. But in connection to the complex narratives of the text, it keeps the person away from entering the state of imageless thinking, which is necessary for attentive prayer. The Jesus prayer, different from the psalm chanting, moves not in a forward motion, but in a circle, remaining in the simple brief form, not changing, one from another, but remains one and the same: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Which lets the ascetic leave the logical, complex thinking during prayer, into the sphere of the simple and precise.

This does not happen so easily and fast. It takes years for some, decades for others, even with the main condition, persistence, being met. By the way, persistence, despite everything, is one of the main qualities of humility. That means that when a person has decided on his goal (God), he does not move from the determined road whatever the conditions may be; even if nothing works for ten years, he does not despair, does not get sad, does not give up, but keeps on doing what he's doing. And this gives an amazing result. The person learns the science of humility - that means, among other things, being peaceful, in spite of everything.

This is the main condition of prayer, its foundation - humility. It is no accident the Lord said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 5:3). The poor in spirit, the humble, become heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven, that means, acquiring prayer, as the principle of seeing God.

It is possible to say that humility is inseparable from the state of prayer. In keeping attentive prayer, the ascetic is similar to a rope walker: a little to the right or the left - and you lose balance. He has to be very sensitive, flexible, and soft. This keeps him from being afraid and breaking emotionally. Maintain your equilibrium in the body, and in the soul, otherwise you will fall.

With no patience, humility, or attention you cannot achieve this simply with the effort of your will, only with a long practice of doing, in spite of everything. That is why, in the science of the Jesus prayer, the holy fathers gave a very important role to the quantity, that in time, through the science of humility, it will transition to quality. And it's no accident that the first stage of the Jesus prayer, as they have determined, is the verbal prayer. That means, when an ascetic occupies the maximum sphere of his spiritual space, he begins with simply pronouncing this prayer. In time, this pronouncing becomes ceaseless.

When a person does the same thing many times, this becomes a habit. How often we say: "Habit is second nature". We do the habitual already subconsciously, intuitively. But this is already happening, if, along with the verbal form, we will also continually pay attention to the words of prayer, not thinking into the deep meaning. Our intuition will transition from the subconscious to the conscious mind. We will start getting used to the state of prayer, staying in it longer and longer. Precisely to the state. From saying to the state.

Prayer is either humility, silence, or consistency, and yet it means joy. God created the human for joy, joy is the means for our being. But without prayer there will be no joy and God will be set somewhere far, far away. Some monks say prayers but gain no joy, nothing happens inside of them.

I cannot believe someone has gained joy without having gained love. Of course, I don't mean it's possible to exclude external conflicts. This is an illusion. After the fall of man the external conflict in the world has become inevitable. Those dreamers who hope to create the Kingdom of Heaven on earth are moving the wrong way.

One can indeed have a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth if they have arranged all inside in conformity with God. No wonder they say that God permeates everything, even hell, as He fills the whole Universe with Himself.

Our objective in Orthodoxy is not the feat itself, but joy. However, some people sometimes fall into another extreme. They think it's easy to have joy: just become joyful and that's it.

No, there is no artificial joy. You have to get rid of inner conflict. Fanciers are those who think they can get really happy without spiritual living, without soulful prayer, without unity with God. All of these will bring joy, but incomplete joy, joy that exists today but ends tomorrow.

Prayer is, namely, a condition when you do not just believe in God. You begin experiencing God — mysteriously, unexplainably, not visually, not by feelings. But this experience is much more explicit than any feeling or vision.

What is precious for us is that this is not only the experience of the ancient Fathers who lived 1000 years ago. This experience was shared, for example, by archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), who stands very close to us in time – he passed away in 1993, the Venerable Saint Silouan the Athonite who passed in 1938, St. Joseph the Hesychast - in 1959, Saint Porphyrios of Kafsokalivia - in 1993, Father Gabriel Urgebadze – in 1995. These fathers did not walk a middle path to salvation. Then, why are we always dreaming about Christ, prayer, or a feat? The time has come to move from dreams to actions, at least gradually. Otherwise, one can spend the whole life dreaming.

When you found God in prayer, there is no need for neither explanations nor talks. A boss or a judge may want your justification, not God, but before God you may only cry with joy, recognizing your imperfection, as He wants you to know He loves you no matter what, He wants you to feel safe in His arms and does not want to let you go. Like in a Rembrandt's picture of the prodigal son, he has knelt before his face buried into dad's knees, his dad has hugged his head and he is sobbing, this bad, lost son. There he is, crying the tears full of shame and joy.

That is how easy it should be with God. And it is very hard with god (the one we create in our mind) who is far-far away and makes your existence unbearable, judging your every step, ready to punish you for any sin.

It is very sad when Christians make some dreadful judge out of God. It is sad for God and it makes me scream, "People, He is not like that, He is not like that at all, that's about us, not about Him!"

Glory be to Thee, O Lord!

I recently had a talk with Father N, and he asked me a question, "How can one achieve pure prayer and get rid of sinful thoughts?" I told him what I knew, "There is no other place for pure prayer except your heart."

Why have the Holy Fathers always talked about the heart? Why does Christ say in the Gospel, "The Kingdom of God is within you", in your heart? Unless prayer finds your heart and learns to stay there, it will always be scattered. Scattered prayer does not allow you to look at God. It is like TV static. The TV seems to be turned on but you cannot understand anything, something is rustling and buzzing. Tuning of attentive noetic prayer is like turning the dial on the radio. Something starts to hiss, to whistle, and then there is a quiet subtle spot with clear sound. If you move it a little to the left or right, it rustles again.

Some people wonder, "You pray, and pray, but do not change very fast..." Thank God, we do not change fast. People who change fast are those who are deceived, they wrongly believe that they can change fast.

All the Holy Fathers followed this path, all of them would stand up and say that it is impossible to change immediately. The process of changing is for a lifetime. Those who hope to change fundamentally saying the Jesus Prayer for a month or even a

year are delusional. Comparing yourselves to the Gospel ideal, we can never be calm or satisfied, we cannot think that we have achieved something.

But some changes still do happen, and thank God. Little by little, something was a bit worse yesterday, but today it is a bit better – and that is good; that is our goal for life.

The Holy Fathers preferred gradualism, and it was stable gradualism. It has always given a good result. It is necessary to practice prayer. And fasts are also necessary as they are periods of mobilization.

When the mind cannot find the heart, and it does not see God, moments of desperation, confusion, and misunderstanding come to inexperienced people, while an experienced one understands that Christ is there, in the heart, despite everything. During the worst moments of prayer, when it seems that nothing is happening, Christ is there. He was and He will be in your heart. So you keep saying “Lord Jesus Christ...”

Why does the Lord allow such periods of regression, when we sin, towards one another, when imperfection, rivalry, envy, jealousy, pride, being scandalous, reveal themselves? It is very dangerous when spiritual achievements outpace the ability to see sins. It causes imbalance. It is also very dangerous when one, God forbid, starts believing that they are doing well. No matter how much a person succeeds in their spiritual practice, there is always the danger of falling. There is Lucifer, who was the highest and became satan, who was by the throne of God. He prayed “Holy, holy, holy...”. Nothing is higher. But he appeared to be vulnerable and fell into hell from the very top due to his pride.

We must have the fundamental knowledge that we can lose everything in an instant, to regress. No matter how well your prayer is going, it could even be constant, in the heart, you do not stay safe, you are not safe from falling. Only by remembering that, can you save yourself from spiritual delusion.

Those people who do not know prayer cannot truly get to know God. They can be professors of theology - but know only *about* God, not God.

Some people say, “We need to teach ourselves to cry, teach ourselves repentance.” But when prayer comes - you will not be able not to cry, will not be able to hold back tears of repentance, only it will be happening not because you made yourself to feel that way, and it won't be theater. This comes from God. It was sad for me to hear sometime from one bishop: “Guys, so why are you all about the Jesus prayer, about St. Sergius of Radonezh. St. Sergius of Radonezh lived 700 years ago...” It is sad to hear from the people of the church that Saint Sergius of Radonezh lived 700 years ago... Father Seraphim of Sarov said: yesterday, today, tomorrow Christ is one and the same. And the grace of God is the same.

And now, if someone wants to live like Sergius of Radonezh, then all is possible. I'll tell you that now there are saints, too. So you stand in Arizona, by the altar with Geronda Ephraim - and you are experiencing that you're standing by a holy person... You probably read his book “My Life With Elder Joseph” - and then you commune from the same chalice as he does, you smile at each other... How strengthening this

is - there are still saints, and there will be! If the Church stops birthing saints, it will lose meaning, it will not be needed, the end of the world will come then. That's why, no matter how long ago Anthony the Great or Sergius of Radonezh lived, for those seeking salvation - and I would like to define salvation as not the desire of the guilty to escape punishment in court, I'd like for you to understand salvation as the joy of uniting to Christ, and not just when you're forgiven for something, - so that joy is possible to be received today. We just need to want it really, really much.

We want worldly joys - and we receive them, we put in effort, sometimes huge, and achieve what we have determined for ourselves in the earthly sense, some even step over their close ones, to enjoy what they really want to get. In the same way, spiritual people put aside everything from their path to receive spiritual joy, to enjoy the state of prayer, and in prayer - God.

Do not be lazy to pray, it is your joy. The Kingdom of heaven should start, as Symeon the New Theologian said, in the heart, and the paradise of joy should start in the state of prayer, in the state of theosis, in the state of experiencing God. Saint Symeon says these terrible words, "If here, in this life, you have not felt heavenly joy - then will you be able to feel it there?" We often think this way, "Okay, we'll live here some way, and there the good God will give us something." But God is giving you even now - but you are not taking it! And there you won't either. God is the same way here as He is there, He is always turned toward man. Someone picks God with a full cup, someone - little by little, for some God does not even exist at all. But God is the same for all - and for the godless man, and for the lazy Christian, and for the saint. He is always revealed in the same way - in fullness. Each one of us takes as much as he can and wants to take, that is why, I will repeat, if the person does not want it here, he will not want it there.

There is an expression "the heart is deep." I have already shared the allegory with immersing toward the center of the earth - when at one moment movement downward becomes movement upward. The center is in our heart. If we immerse into it, the immersion downward ends - and upwards movement begins, to the spiritual world. It is no accident the Lord in the Gospel all the time says that paradise is there, in the heart, and not between the rivers Tiger and Euphrates. There, in the heart, - paradise, and space, there is God.

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE JESUS PRAYER

The Holy Fathers often write of the Jesus prayer. And there are different opinions on what word in the Jesus prayer is best to put an emphasis on. Someone says that it is necessary to put the emphasis on the word “a sinner,” for the whole prayer is to become the foundation of our repentance. Someone pays attention to the words “have mercy on me,” to feel the Savior’s mercy fuller. I want to advise you to put emphasis on “Jesus.” Because He is everything: repentance, salvation, mercy, - in Jesus it all converges. If it were not for Jesus, a person could not come to true repentance, regardless of how sincerely he or she would want it. Each one of us is really spoiled, and that damage enters into all of our good intentions and urges. Even if we scream that we do not want it, that damage will manifest itself in our own personality in one way or another.

If we understand that the most important thing in the Jesus prayer is “Jesus,” then everything acquires the right direction. That is the meaning of the Gospel and the meaning of the entire human life - in Jesus. Nothing will save us - not deeds of mercy, not the acting out of the commandments - all of this if without Christ, because of our sinful state, through the prism of our sinful “I am” will be distorted. Even love, if it is not in Christ, sometimes has ugly forms, as we often see in life. If our love is not in Christ, it is not right. If our conscience is not in Christ, it is corroded with craftiness.

We must come, in our spiritual lives, to the point where we say, “Lord, I’ve sincerely tried getting close to You. Because I understand that without You I am nothing.”

Like the Apostle had exclaimed one time, “Lord, who then can be saved?” And the Lord responded to him, “For men, this is impossible.”

For God, all things are possible. And so it happens that the most important thing in the Jesus prayer is “Jesus...”

TRYING TO FIND CHRIST WITH THE MIND

All of our earthly attachments and relationships are very unsteady, unreliable: today they are there, tomorrow, they are not. And what is the most stable thing in the world? God! God, Who has created this world and even time itself. We are all in some time segment, and time continuously changes our state, our being. Today we are in a good mood, tomorrow in a bad mood; today we are happy, tomorrow we are chased by misfortune; today we have Pascha, in a week it will already be over. But when a person enters a relationship with God, when he enters God Himself, into a state of theosis, he comes out of the mystery of time, and God for him becomes the now and forever, and unto the ages of ages. Whether yesterday, today, or tomorrow - for him, everything is today and always good and love.

If Christians do not smile, it means that they live badly. It means that something in their spiritual lives is not right. It means their prayer is not working. It means they need to go to their spiritual father and ask, "Why am I always in some despondent, bad mood, for Christ has risen, for He loves me, and the Mother of God covers me with Her Mantle. Why am I in a bad mood?"

It means there is no prayer. Prayer is not just speaking, not reading from a book, "Lord... Holy Theotokos..."; it is not chanting akathists. True prayer does not demand any books. It can even be without words. Prayer is the breath of life; it is the presence in God; it is uniting with Him Himself.

To find comfort in God, it is necessary to have a relationship with Him. It is necessary for God to become a personality for us - a personality that is just like us. You cannot be comforted by something you do not know.

To learn to understand true music, you need a lot of time and zeal. It's the same in spiritual life. A person says, "Well, so I was in church - I have not seen God; nothing has happened to me." But to acquire God, you need to do it for a very long time. Sometimes God, when we have sincerity, when there is a living search for Him within ourselves, He gives us in advance, a little something, something to interest us, but labor is still needed. We need to transition our psyche from the state of physiology and psychology to the sphere of the spiritual. That is where the science

of spiritual life is, where there is also asceticism, the teaching of prayer, and overall, spiritual practice.

Sometimes people ask me, “Father, I would like to practice the Jesus prayer. How much time do I need to acquire it?”, and I reply, “If you want to enter into this sphere, then know: there’s no going back. You will need to go in that direction your entire life, up until the day you die. And may God grant it that your last breath will be with the prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.”

Prayer is a different form of being. We enter into a different state of being, where we experience the Lord - very close, very sensitively. And then, we do not simply believe the experience of our holy venerable fathers, who, according to their words, were with the Lord; then we say, “And I am, Lord, with You; in the mystery of prayer. I’m not just reading a book or repeating some verbal intricacies. But I have found You with my mind, and I’m already with You. And I am already pronouncing, “Lord Jesus Christ...”

When I am asked how to request this or that from the Lord, I respond: it is not necessary to think of what you are going to ask from the Lord. It is necessary to try to find Christ with your mind during prayer. And if you do succeed at this, if your mind unites to the mind of Christ - you will no longer need to say anything. Because at that moment you will understand, and experience very acutely and sensitively that He already knows everything. He knows what you need and you know what He needs. As they say - one heart, one soul.

So, when a person unites with Christ, he has Christ in his heart. Christ is in his mind. He thinks by Christ. He feels by Christ. Experiences by Christ. And already, there is no need to say anything. They simply dwell - together, one-on-one, and among them is paradise.

CHAPTER 3. WHY, LORD?

WHY, LORD?

The day was overcast, wet, and grey. No, it was completely gloomy, black. This day was unbearable. The car was moving across the town bleakly and monotonously. I wanted it to move even slower, so that the car would completely stop, turn around - just not go there...

I was being taken to the funeral service of a little 4-year-old boy who was kidnapped by a maniac, brutally tortured and cruelly killed. For three days, the town was helping the parents, young people, look for their little angel. Nobody even suspected that he was so near, in the cellar of a neighboring house, in horrific torments, in his child terror that freezes one's blood. We were going there.

I had no right to simply perform the rite and quietly leave.

-“You just have to, Father, you have to calm down the parents. Tell them words of comfort, support them”.

I have to say something, explain what has happened, connect it to God's providence, with His role, His plan in this horrific tragedy. If His name is Love, how then to explain and connect it all?

I had to...

But I am just a young priest with a very short experience in life. I was weak, I can't do anything, I do not want to get out of the car. What do I say to them, so as not to insult, not to offend in such a moment with an empty word, maybe sublime, but empty. Just a little bit wrong - and in this precarious position, when all the nerves are like a stretched string, a thoughtless word cannot comfort, it can insult, kill.

They probably could not make out the words then. There were two half persons in front of me: a half mom and a half dad in front of a small coffin. It was like they were drunk, or in a fog. Half - because with their consciousness, they were only half here. In a critical situation, a protective function of the body was turned on: the

consciousness was blunted. Otherwise, the heart would burst, it could not bear the problem in its full volume and sharpness.

I had to, I was told I had to comfort them. I could do nothing. I was just praying, I tried to read smoothly, just not to cry myself and not worsen a situation that was already hard.

I read, I sang the finishing prayers, amen. And all I could have said, I said in a few words, “Your little son is now where there is no crying, no insults, where nobody hurts anyone, where children are not killed. He is there now.” And that is it.

That is when my words ran out. But that is also when I was faced with the questions, “Why?” Questions that man always asks God in hard, critical, unbearable situations, when he is no longer asking, but screaming them upward! Screaming with reproach, rebuke, even malice! Why?

For Your name is Love! For You can do anything! Why, answer me.

WHY?

I started asking questions, and He gradually, very patiently began answering them. Starting with the simplest, crudest, to the most delicate and spiritual ones.

I started to partially understand some of the WHY's. It makes me a little stronger, a little less contradictory on His side. And sometimes, when my crude nature is able to look into the delicate moments of His providence about man, the heart is able to soften with gratitude, thankfulness to Him! Even in moments of grief and unhappiness it becomes possible to say, “Glory to God for all things!”

So, why?

From the simplest.

Why does pain even exist? For what?

If man is created for joy by the good Creator?

That is exactly why.

To be in joy, you need to be in conditions that give that joy, and, on the contrary, breaking those conditions of joy, we get the absence of joy, that is, sorrow.

It is hard for man to reflect on these things, with his callous mind, after the fall, and sometimes, he just does not want to work on these things with his lazy brain. Let it flow the way it flows. But when God cannot explain it through the mind, cannot get to a person in his crude, beastly state, He is then forced to act through instincts. One of them is called an instinct of self preservation.

Why is a tooth ache apart of human physiology? Because if it did not exist, our teeth would last a week, maybe a month. We would chew on bones, stones, we would crook metal parts and lose our teeth.

But the loving God, when we do not hear His soft voice, begins to scream at us with that pain, “Stop! Stop! You cannot do that, it is dangerous for you”. Just like any other physiological pain, for example, heart ache. We can run to some goal, run and run, speed up, run out of all resources and energy of our bodies, reaching the critical stage, when the heart can just not bear it and burst, and in this moment, God is

screaming to us through that pain in the heart, “Stop, child, you will overstrain, sit down, catch your breath, I will care for you!”

This is how it is with any physiological pain.

But it is the same with the soul. Any breach of the moral law will bring you pain.

Pain as a scream from Him, “Child, you cannot do that, it is unnatural, stop!”

The pain of betrayal, jealousy, envy, offense, the pain of anger, as the absence of peace in the heart, and so on.

Sometimes loving parents watch their child make the first steps in life, not having the experience of pain, stubbornly get into the place where it is dangerous. So then, mom and dad, not finding other ways to overcome the stubbornness of their little fellow, allow them this little experience of self-will. Let it hit them a bit, so that next time, they will be more careful, more attentive, safer. The heart of the parent breaks at hearing their child weep, but they do this in something small, so that they do not get the full outcome in something big.

It is all simple and understandable, but still, there is WHY.

Why do the righteous and the innocent suffer?

WHY?

Why does Christ invite us to the Kingdom of heaven and then, right away, offers us the cross?

Why does His joy go through the Cross?

It is very difficult for us, even more so, it is unnatural. Lord, we cannot understand You, and without understanding, how can we accept You?

LORD, WHY?

Before my eyes stand the parents of a young girl who committed suicide. In a young age where you can still live and live, and then, all of a sudden...

It happens more and more often recently. I am afraid to judge, so I am trying to understand why she and others became able to make this step. But this step is but a moment. What was going on before the person crossed that threshold? It happens sometimes that a person has died a long time ago. He was still walking, blinking, moving in space, eating, drinking, all by inertia, but the soul has already reached the point of no return, and suicide was already a logical point.

Any sickness is accompanied by pain as a signal, as an alarm bell: you are sick, you need treatment right away, otherwise it will be lethal. The sickness of the soul is also accompanied by pain, and often even stronger than physical pain. And then it feels like it would be better if your arm or leg hurt, just not the soul. This pain in its critical stages can become even greater than the fear of death that is natural for man. It can be so unbearable that death can seem like the way out.

The thing is, where does this way of ours lead to? But the person does not think of that, he is in so much pain that he just needs a quick way out.

She was sick and that is why she died. But what exactly is her sickness, why? I will let myself say one thing, that may seem like complete nonsense at the beginning. But that is exactly what I will say. Her negative experience of pain that led to a horrific end, happened as a consequence of an absence of positive experience of pain.

I want to explain this crazy phrase.

We were returning from our pilgrimage to Holy Mount Athos. The past days made my fellow traveler, not a church person, face many questions that he thought and asked me about.

In particular, the man could not understand the reasons, the goals behind such extreme asceticism, the particular examples of which we had to encounter, "I don't understand why to take such extreme ascetic practice. They could just pray for their souls, work in joy. Why redouble it, why be on edge?"

That is why, my dear; try to understand what I am going to tell you: their goal, their joy, just like ours, are in becoming one with God, there is heaven in God, there is delight - the Kingdom of Heaven.

But we can only become one with Him in likeness, when we become like Him in the features of our souls. Things that are like one another become one, and, on the contrary, opposites push away from one another.

We can be taken to heaven, artificially made to live there, but if our inner state will be contrary to God, we will not find peace there. We will be in contradictions, and contradictions will bring discomfort and pain, and heaven will turn into hell. So, we can only unite to God in likeness to Him.

And if He is Love?

And what is the main attribute of love, I would say, its point?

Love is a sacrifice.

Sacrifice is the main sign through which we can see the presence of love, its quality. There is love only where there is sacrifice. Otherwise, everything is an illusion, deceit, something different. A mother sacrifices her sleep, her strength, her habits and her health for her beloved child. She loves him, so she cannot do differently - that is the law of love. She will even die for him without thinking, because she simply cannot do differently, she is a prisoner of love. And this captivity, although it can be hard, sometimes even unbearable, - it is voluntary, it is desired.

I will say even more: it brings you joy. Like a young man who sincerely loves dreams not only of speaking words of love to his beloved, he yearns for her, for suffering, he longs to die for her. Because his true love compels him to action, and that action is his joy, his point.

But our likeness to God, our state of love should not be an illusion, a philosophical idea. It lives only in action. Love must be expressed, it must be. It must become our BEING with all its attributes and signs, the main one of which is sacrifice.

If you want to be My disciple, take up your cross and follow Me. The Lord does not say: I do not want to see you without your cross - it is just that without it, you will not be like Him. You will be different, you will not be love, love that cannot be without sacrifice.

The saints understood this, they experienced this very deeply and sensitively, so they took the feat of sacrifice upon themselves artificially, through asceticism. Through it, they stimulated sacrifice within themselves, fostered it, pulled its strings, bothered these sides of the soul, in order to nurture, grow this.

Sacrifice is the food of our likeness to God, its energy.

The saints understood it, desired it, sought it.

But our souls, simple, mortal, should also have this food and energy. Otherwise, the static state of our inner world will become like a bog, will rot, die, and will lead to the irreparable. So our life is constantly dying through sacrifice. The expression of our true being, of living according to God is in dying for Christ.

This is the true life.

Now I understand the reason, the point of suffering.

A soul that is capable of suffering, one that is in sacrifice is an alive soul, there is love in it, there is God dwelling in it, there is life happening there, there is a point.

In the middle of the 20th century during the horrid world war, when humanity committed horrific things in the relationships between separate persons, between nations, countries, human sacrifices numbered millions: the elderly, women and children perished. In that time, still a young hieromonk, Elder Sophrony of Essex wondered. The question that was a protest, the question that was a scream up there, upward: WHY?

Lord, WHY?

Why is it unbearable even for me, sinful and insignificant? Where are You? Why aren't You there?

And then He saw God, crucified on the cross, Who said to Father Sophrony, "Was it you Who was crucified for them?"

He saw Christ - not that historical Christ, far-away, two thousand years ago, that was some time crucified for us. He saw the Christ of today on that very cross, in that very sacrifice.

He was not the one who made people kill, make war, or act brutally. He just left them to their own will. Left to get through to the hearts of people. To scream at them. My poor, unhappy people, please finally understand how sick you are. You absolutely cannot live by yourselves: the way that seems right, the way that you want. You will surely do everything wrong, you will start fighting, feud, and kill. That all is in you. In everyone, in everyone... in each one of us.

Together with the mother of a tortured baby there, upward, with protest, also screamed the mother of the maniac, "Lord, why? He was a wonderful child, a kind-hearted teenager, why did he become like this and commit what he has committed?"

Why?

Why?

Why?

Because that is present in all of us after the fall. We are in an abnormal state, we're all capable of sin, of murder. God is holding back our tumult, and in our well being we start thinking that everything is well. Our instinct of self preservation is faded, it seems like everything is going by itself, going well.

And then, to shake within us the sharpness of seeing the problem, He does not punish, He just steps away, and we begin punishing ourselves, going to the terrible, and in this terror we scream: WHY?

Why have You abandoned us?

Because victory still has not been attained, the battleground is our hearts, and God cannot, without our voluntary participation, attain victory. He is bound by our freedom. He can only scream to us, implore us, offer us help.

God is screaming to us that the situation is serious, so critical that He does not even leave the cross, and He is not on the cross for Himself, but for our problems. And just like He was receiving spitting from men on Golgotha two thousand years ago, He still is right now.

Spits and offenses, not understanding of the fact that people are themselves to blame for all of their problems. And He cannot fix anything without our participation, without our own work.

Coming back there, in my memory, back to that funeral of the baby, I involuntarily place myself in his parents' shoes, in his own shoes, in the shoes of the maniac, and there is room for me everywhere, for I am human. Human with a small h, yet, because I carry the flaws of the fallen nature. There is sickness, very terrifying, very horrible. And if I see it sharply, very sensitively, and will receive treatment, with God's help, meaning that I will follow all of His commands and suggestions, then I will be able to overcome it. And on the contrary, if I just let it be, the sickness will progress and develop, and the terrible will happen: from a creature made in God's likeness, I will become a beast, a freak.

The process of healing means receiving bitter treatments, procedures, the following of a regimen. All of this restrains my freedom, my "I want." But it also gives results. I begin feeling well, my mood goes up, I begin experiencing the feeling of joy, and along with me, my loved ones rejoice and so does my Doctor - Lord God.

DEATH AND CHRISTIANS

If we live our life spiritually and if we are dying in the Holy Spirit, we will not have the gross, disgusting state - terror of death. We will simply breathe our souls out into God's hands. Our life, for the most part, is not given to us so that we build something, do or acquire something, and not even so that we give birth to and raise our children. It is given to us so that we may someday end it, committing our souls in that way, into God's hands.

Of course, it is unknown how we will die. And we will not be able to live and not think of death, not be afraid of it... But sometimes, these thoughts really do help. Once, a situation happened to me - I just could not overcome an offense within myself. And then that's what I did - I went to a funeral service, bought a cross, wrote on it: priest (then still a priest) Sergiy Baranov... Just as I wrote down the last letter, it all subsided just like that. All the offenses became so small... I sometimes say to myself: Father Sergiy, you have death ahead of you. What if death will be hard and problematic? And you can't bear such nonsense... How did Christ die? Quietly, peacefully? No. And if the whole meaning of our Christianity is imitating Christ, then no one can guarantee that you, a follower of Christ, wearing the cross on your bosom, will die without suffering. Some people think: I am trying to live right - I hope God will give me an easy death. But you know - what death He'll give is what He'll give! Better yet, may God give you patience! And so that it may be easier to be patient - devote your cross to God, be patient for the sake of Christ. You will have to endure anyway, only there is a difference: to endure out of hopelessness - or to endure for the sake of Christ. For the sake of Christ - and right away, a meaning appears in your suffering, and a very sublime meaning, so sublime that it will warm your heart.

“Ask and it shall be given to you.” Yes, we do have the right to ask. But we need to also understand that God often says to us, “Child, I do hear your requests, but you also please hear Me out. Understand that today you need this, today you need to walk this exact path. Hear me out, this path is yours, and it is in My providence, accept it, and it will be much easier for you, because you will remove part of your sorrow - your confrontation, your argument with Me. And by removing confrontation, you will, in its place, acquire trust in Me; and it will relieve your suffering, your sorrow, even more.”

“My yoke is easy, my burden is light” - that is what Christ says. It is all not only about death, but all the temptations. Do not fear sorrows, do not lose faith in time of sorrows, do not lose the ability to give thanks.

At some moment, when we understand that we need to endure, - remove disagreement, and add faith in God in its place, hope that all is in His providence, and also - simply have love for Him. “Sweetest Jesus, You are suffering, and I, for your sake, decided to take this and suffer.” And right away, meaning and inspiration will appear, and right away it will be easier.

Of course it is important what will happen to us before death, - but it is far more important what will be with us after it. When Elder Sophronius (Sakharov) was dying - he was really suffering. And when he breathed his last, Father Nikolai, his nephew, ran to the church to let everyone know that the elder was no more... And when we returned, next to Father Sophronius, it was already Pascha; it was heaven; there was already neither the cross nor sufferings. All the house was filled with Paschal joy.

Why do the relics of the saints not decay, but stream myrrh, fragrance, grace? Because they, for their entire lives, accumulated within themselves the energy of the Deity, and now they are giving it away. It would seem like a dead body - where does grace here come from? And he, for his entire life, prayed, and his spirit nourished itself with the Spirit of God; and the body participated in that, being in the state of theosis.

When you truly love powerfully, not even your enemies, no, that is way too sublime, and not even people, but when you love Christ, who is hanging on the cross, - then you will understand what is happening every day...

How many liturgies are held every day on earth? And do you know, what a priest does at the altar during the proskomedia before the liturgy? He is preparing the sacrifice on the altar table. And this sacrifice - not a lamb, not a calf, not a dove, this sacrifice is Christ Himself. Every day, in every church, Christ is cut again, Christ is pierced again, once again His blood, mixed with water, is spilled. If we believe that the Body and Blood of Christ, not like Body and Blood, but that they really are, in the process of the Liturgy, transformed into the Body and Blood, it means that the sacrifice itself isn't “like a sacrifice,” but truly a sacrifice that happens. The priest takes a spear and says such words, “One of the warriors pierced His side with a

spear” - and makes that movement. If we truly experienced this! If we understood this! But we often perceive this as tradition... And if the Lord suddenly opened the eyes of the heart for us, we would approach Communion and would experience, would understand, that it is not the bread and wine there, it is the Body and Blood there. And how can you get body and blood without tearing the body and spilling the blood? If we loved Christ, each one of us would say, “Lord, I do not ask for any well-being, allow me to support Your cross that You are bearing, allow me to help You.” And we are looking - and see none of it. And all of this is happening at every liturgy! And the scariest thing - it is us, Christians, who do not see it, what then can you say about people who are not believers, are not in church.

More so, it is also us, priests, who serve the liturgy, often do not see it. Ask us - we will respond correctly, like we were taught in the seminary. But do we experience this? Do we understand? When we approach the Chalice, do we realize this? If we experienced this in all its depth, every suffering that God gives us for some reason would not only not be a tragedy - we would desire it!

The hour of death will arrive relentlessly. And it is so desired to die in such a way that our death may be called not death, but dormition. So that it would be quiet and peaceful. But for this, it is important to understand, we need spiritual life. And in spiritual life, asceticism is really necessary, we need to compel ourselves and to endure. And it's also important to remember, that this last moment, the shortest in our lives, will turn out to be the most important. And everything else we took care of, we worried for, will turn out to be a futility of futilities. So do not fear the time that steals your youth, health, strength from you, that steals your loved ones from the left and right. No need to fear this. We need to fear death - and not ending up near Christ. That is why Christ gives us time so that we may acquire the Holy Spirit. And we need to somehow not waste that time on stupid things, on trifles and trinkets...

CHAPTER 4

THE HEART IS WHERE THE TRUE MIND IS

THE ENCOUNTER

Stop talking about Christ.
Begin talking to Christ.
Stop thinking about Christ
as something external and distant.
Find Him inside yourself.
Do not invent Christ,
let Him tell you about Himself.
Do not try to save yourself.
Let Him save you.
He really wishes to take care of you,
console you, direct you.
Just let Him do it,
get your ego out of His way.
All you need to do is just
to look His way and whisper,
“Christ, save me.”
It is easy, it is not difficult,
you just have to want it.

A LETTER FROM ATHOS

Man, from the point of creation, is given a need of thirst. He wants to drink, to eat, he desires comfort and entertainment, he seeks interaction, yearns for creativity, knowledge, new impressions, friendship, love. He has a need to speak and to be heard. He wants to listen, there is an interest within him. He strives to quench his thirst, in all its various forms, for the entirety of his life. And once he has gained everything, he still has that thirst for the unknown left within, a longing for something he does not know, something he has not yet experienced. He longs, he yearns, he is not satisfied. That is just the way we were created by God; if one does not dream, it means one's soul is dead.

Saints grow indifferent to everything of the world, but it does not mean that their thirst has ceased, it is just that it has changed its course and direction. They hunger and thirst for the heavenly, for the spiritual. Man cannot get to know God in His full measure, it is beyond our ability. But it is still the greater Good. That means there will always be the unknown. That means that movement, dynamics, and life will not cease. That means there will always be a point.

Greetings to you, my dear friend. It is exactly how I will address you, with love and sincerity, despite the pivotal differences in our views: my precious, dear Orthodoxy and your dismal, bleak nihilism. Everything could change. I have been a witness to that more than once. It is just that, may it only change for the better... Please, o Lord. I am writing to you from the Holy Mount of Athos, sending you my sunny, spring mood. It is still early spring back home in Russia. It is still all frosty and snowy in

March back there, and here in Greece it is already pretty warm. It is all green here on the foreland, the so-called “Paschal blossom”, or lilac is in full bloom, bumblebees are fluttering around, and the birds are chirping. I breathe in the fresh, spring air deeply, joyfully, and wholeheartedly exclaim in delight, “Glory to Thee, O God, glory to Thee!”

I cannot get the last conversation we shared before I left out of my head. Or should I say, an argument, because we could not succeed at holding a conversation. My extreme zeal is to blame. I ask you to forgive me, sincerely, from the bottom of my heart. It is not how you are supposed to talk about God, He should be spoken about with love and long-suffering. So what I could not convey face-to-face, I will do my best to express on paper. I now, praise God, have no desire to overargue you. I only have the desire to share my treasure of faith with you. God help me to do it sensibly...

You sincerely wonder how you can believe something that cannot be seen, touched, smelled, or experienced. I will partially agree with you that with our senses, such as sight, touch, or hearing, it is difficult to behold God. But, pay attention to this, we do not see many things in this world, we do not feel them, how much is left out of the bounds of the spectrum of our sight, the scale of sound, how many subtle things, unavailable to touch.

Unbelievers often refer to science. But it is the modern science that says that humanity on this stage of development sees, hears, feels, not only with the senses, but also with modern ultra precise devices a truly small percent of material and energy of the universe. The greatest portion is left out of the bounds of our knowledge. Absolutely elusive in hypotheses and guesses. All of this that is beyond today’s human possibilities, the scientists call the dark materials or the dark energy. Not in the sense of its negativity, but in the sense of it being unknown. And that which we do not know, is much greater than what we have experienced.

You say: to see, to hear, to touch, to know. But knowledge has long divided from the senses. Modern science is no longer experiencing this world by touch, and has for long. We have gone out of these bounds. The scientists make their discoveries, already not just by looking through a microscope or a telescope, the greater portion of discoveries is made on paper through mathematical formulas and physical equations hypothetically.

In the course of our conversations you once fervently said that to believe in God you must be out of your mind. I do not know what exactly you have put into these words, but in part, I agree: it is indeed so. If by sanity we understand logic, logical rational thinking. Here I will say to you, and any scientist will confirm this: the world is much wider than we can comprehend. Let’s take quantum physics. To be in this field of science, one must partially give up on logic, the mind must become irrational, otherwise everything will crumble, break, clash.

You trust your mind very much, your personal being seems objective, conclusive. You are the center of the universe. Well try to get to the height of the bird’s flight, and from there you are already a point. Let us fly higher, farther. From space you no longer exist, and the Earth does not seem endless. Higher and farther - and in the blackness of space disappears the Earth. And the Sun became but a small star. Go

farther - and there is no sun. Other stars, other galaxies, farther and farther. You are already not even the dust of the universe, the very objectivity of your being became an illusion, and we can still fly and fly...

And that is about space, what about time?

A snippet of your life is worth something, there are so many events and impressions in it. And in a thousand years, either forth or back in time? What about a million? A billion? Your life is not just lost in this scale, it loses its objectivity, it is no longer even a moment, it just is not, at all. If we cannot understand such things as the endlessness of time and space, how then can we understand God?

The insanity of faith comes to know the unknowable. In order to enter the field of the supernatural, one must leave the field of the rational. There, out of the boundaries of your mind, outside that bound, there is life. Not a life of mind, but life of the spirit that goes according to its own, and often very different, laws. But it is not an illusion, it is objective. The way the endlessness of space is objective, the point of your physical being.

All of a sudden, from the center of the universe, from "something" we become "nothing".

Nothing by ourselves, senselessness, zero. This weird reality makes us fall silent, tremble in endlessness, in the blackness of space and time. And in this sad, eerie loneliness we start to need HIM. Him Who knows the point. Him Who is the point. God is in the sphere outside the borders of our mind.

But He can be known. This antipathy can be explained if we divide the notions of mind and reason. The mind contains reason, but it also lives different, subtle charismatic properties of our soul, that do experience the spiritual. This is the state of prayer that by its nature differs from reflection. When the mind prays, it does not think within the frame of the usual. The state of the praying mind is not at all like wandering the labyrinths of logic. The praying mind acquires the objective knowledge charismatically, through inspiration. Here on Holy Mount, are still retained the notions of the state of mind in prayer, and not just notions, it is practiced daily and nightly. This practice is known as noetic doing. The principle of which is the state of mind outside of logic, reflection. Reflection is subjective, for it is constantly connected to doubt. A person is inclined to either this or that.

Faith is not inquiring conviction. It is a state that does not need process. The Lord spoke of faith in the Gospel like this, "If you believe and do not doubt in your heart." How precisely He described the state of prayer with one sentence - not doubt in your heart! Faith is not testing, not a controversy: yes or no. It's a short "yes" that is like a bolt of lightning. A moment - and you are in the light of mind. Everything is understood for you with no testing or reasoning. In the earthly life they call it: dawned on me. There you go - and that is it!

You yourself, not understanding this, said a very correct phrase: "To believe, you must be out of your mind."

Truly! You must consciously give up on the worldly, crude, rational, logical mind, to live subtle spiritual states. In the world, there is a lot which we are unable to comprehend, but are able to live, not understanding the nature of the phenomenon.

Isn't it a pity for you, you lessen the endlessness of this world to the narrowness of your own ability to understand it? I only believe in that which I can understand - how limited. Don't you want to go out of the frames and borders of your logic? Exactly, go out, stepping there, beyond the line of your mind, there is a whole world there, that your mind cannot contain, but that which a person can live with other means of the soul. Logic is not the whole me. I am wider, deeper.

What I am telling you right now, is not philosophy, it is the life of the Athos monks. The usual life in the state of prayer. They do not speak of it, they live it. Naturally. Coming to Holy Mount, they gradually are taught, by their elders and teachers, to live prayer in the state of no images or imagination. For the logical, image thinking to not contain them in the bounds of the understandable and crude. After years of dedication and persistence, they, still limited by the laws of flesh, go out into the endlessness of moving toward God. They become spiritual eagles, able to ascend high above the earthly.

And if fleshly people look at the horizon, the spiritual from their height, see far *beyond* it.

You think that logic is your treasure, but in reality, it is chains that do not allow you to go far beyond it. Here on Holy Mount, there are many illiterate monks, illiterate in earthly sciences, etiquette, unable to speak beautifully. But among them there are those that you feel small, nothing next to them, acutely experiencing that there is a giant of spirit before you. His world is boundless in comparison to yours. You are nothing, a pathetic, lowlife with all your knowledge, talents and abilities, in the bounds of the earthly, crude being. And at the same time, they have long stepped outside these bounds into spiritual endlessness. This does not need to be proved, they do not really strive to. You will just feel it with no words. There are situations in life when words are not needed.

Forgive me, maybe I am speaking in complex terms, unclearly. I want to say, only a fool understands everything. A thinking person always faces a mystery on every step and in connection to this, always sees his own limitations. Constraint, being captive to borders, that humanity has always wanted to broaden.

This has always been like this in science, culture, religion. A person not thirsting for knowledge is a dead person, boring, wingless. One of the venerable fathers of our time said to his disciples, "Oh how I would love for you to become poets. Poets not in the literature sense, but spiritually. Fly outside of your earthly limitation, fly high. Let them say of you: they are out of their minds. May we be fools, out of our minds for Christ Whom we have loved and desired. We need insanity for spiritual poetry."

“DO NOT BE AN UNBELIEVER, BUT A BELIEVER” (Jn. 20:27)

It seems to some that faith can be found after hearing someone. However, it is not faith, it is sympathy to others' experience or it is reliance on others' experience, so to say. Faith is not an effort you make to verify something that you cannot comprehend or contain in your heart. Faith is a certain state of enlightenment of your mind and heart. But it is very difficult to explain. It is as if you were an unbeliever and have become a believer.

Once a funny story happened on Mount Athos. A Frenchman, a very educated person and atheist, came to the Holy Mount. His life was coming to an end, and as any man whose life is drawing to a close, he started thinking, “What do I live for, what was I born for, what have I become a professor for if everything ends?” And, among other things, he started looking for faith, which he did not have, and went to the Holy Mount.

He visited all the elders there so that they could convince him of the existence of God, and showed him faith. But none of them could prove anything, or he could not hear anything, to be exact. They all spoke to him, but he was not able to hear. Then one day he comes to the last monastery, the Docheiariou monastery, where the icon ‘She Who is Quick to Hear’ is. It is one hour and a half way along the sea from our Russian monastery. Father Charalambos, a Greek, still lives in the Docheiariou monastery. He is nearly ninety, and he has lived there since the previous brotherhood – old-dweller. Having a mind of a child, short in height, he is as a child himself, unremarkable, half naive, half God’s fool.

I met him for the first time when I came to the Docheiariou. Some frescoes were being restored and there were scaffolds inside the church. I go into this church, and

the first person I see is Charalambos. He is almost running towards me and shouting in Greek, “Be careful, there is an iron beam, you may hit your head.” I bent down and walked under it. The second person comes in, and he also runs toward him, trying to protect... He was running for the whole service that way, warning everyone who went inside and outside. It ended with him hitting that beam and falling down. And never had Father Charalambos told any wise teachings, and did not know much about difficult issues of theology...

So, our Frenchman came to the Docheiariou monastery, and the first person who got his eye was not an elder, not a theologian, but this “child” with naive eyes, at the age of ninety. Charalambos says, “Why have you come?” “I am seeking faith, I am a professor, I know the significance of Athos and would like you to convince me.”

There is a very deep well near the church in the Docheiariou monastery. Once there was a problem with water. The fathers prayed, Saint Michael the Archangel showed them this place, and now they have very good delicious water. Father Charalambos leads the Frenchman to this well and says, “How can you not believe in God? This well was given by Saint Michael the Archangel. We had not had water, and now, look, the well is full.” “So, what you are saying is that Saint Michael the Archangel came with a shovel and dug this well for you...”

And suddenly this skepticism and irony made Charalambos so enraged, that he grabbed the professor’s shoulders, started shaking him and shouting, “How dare you not believe in archangels!” Then he took some water and told him, “Here you go, drink this!”

And do you know what happened next? The professor drank the water – and became a believer. Suddenly something was revealed to him, something that he commented on with astonishment, “How could I not see it yesterday?”

He was an unbeliever and became a believer.

WHERE IS MY GOD?

To ask questions is always easier than to answer them. Especially if these questions are serious, difficult, out of the ordinary. “Where is my God?” you ask, “How can I see Him, make sure, believe?”

How to explain what love is to someone who has never experienced this kind of state? It is very difficult to find comparisons. Sometimes I just say, “Love is not in your head. Love is in your heart.” It is easier to be silent about God than to talk about Him because you need to choose words and terms carefully when you speak about the supernatural. I struggle between the desire to be silent about The Great - and the sincere desire to help you find Him, because it will change all your life, all your mind. And I will start exactly the same, “God is not in the head, God is in the heart.” There is an art form called Impressionism. It derives from the French word “Impressionisme” and is formed from the word “impression”. It is literal and very accurate. The principle of how it affects people is that it does not work through logic as realism, it works through the impression. That is to say, the usual logic of a pattern, a composition, a color may be distorted, but the impact on a person consists in that it turns out to be even more powerful and accurate, than in an ordinary form. The artists noticed this feature of the human psyche and started using it for their creative purposes consciously emphasizing the details which they particularly wanted to highlight. And, vice versa, they ignored something that was secondary to their creative purpose. For example, I set a goal to paint not an object but joy, not an event but a state. It might be done in a realistic style. But you can go a different way

– convey joy through naive art, for example. Both ways will work. The first one – through logic to the heart, the second one – straight to the heart.

Impression is more powerful and more accurate than logic. Not by coincidence, in the early 20th century Henri Matisse, a famous French artist, after he had visited Russia and had become acquainted with Russian icon painting, exclaimed, “We are opening something new in art, but all of this has already been in Russian, Byzantine icon painting for many centuries!”

An iconographer paints neither a portrait nor an event. He wants to express a state, and in this creative process he is often fettered by realism. He wants to paint more accurately, vividly, clearly for the heart. Icon painting must not be confused with the sensual, emotional Western painting. A westerner depicts human sensations – a Byzantine paints an incarnated God. Even when they create an image of the Holy Theotokos or saints, they paint deification, which is impossible to depict in realism. No matter how hard you try, in realism you only get a human.

But an iconographer does not depict a human. He is not fettered by the laws of proportions and perspective. He subordinates them to his spiritual and creative goals, makes a reverse perspective, breaks proportions to emphasize the important details. In realism it is a crime, but in icon painting and impressionism it is a typical method for a certain result. And what is the most important is that it works and it works powerfully and accurately.

Why have I paid so much attention to impressionism? That is because I want to say that God is not matter, God is spirit. You must not approach the theme of God with the mind of a pathologist. A completely different “toolkit”, a fundamentally different approach is needed here. You cannot know God by means of logic. Logic can only talk about Him. It can talk about Him but not with Him. He is in a different format. He is not logical. He is irrational.

He is God. Your mind is too narrow to contain God. You will experience a catastrophe, trying to comprehend superlogic by using logic. You will either go insane or be broken and become an atheist, which is not better than the former, by the way.

Faith is not even close to what you have proven to yourself. It is not your reasoning, not a philosophical concept which you analyze without experiencing it. Faith is a state and this state is quite real. You do not think of It, you experience It. This is what you exist in, this is Co-existence. You experience the existence of God, and it is not your fantasy, it is your reality where you are.

One of the leading associates of the Institute of the Human Brain said at the end of his academic career, “My whole life I have studied the brain, but I should have studied the heart...” The mind of a person, and what defines a person is not in one’s head. It is in one’s heart. God gave man the mind, and we use it as a tool given by God. But also keep in mind that we should realize its limitations for some subtle spiritual aspects of human existence, especially in the relationships with God.

The brain analyzes, but the final evaluation is always made by the heart. The heart thinks, sees, hears. Who do we call “an insightful person”? That is what we call one

who sees more than just an object or an event. Insight is the ability to evaluate things correctly. This is rather a charismatic state than logic. This is not analysis; this is intuition. This is very subtle; it originates from the heart. It is the heart that can see the elusive. It is the heart where God is. Intuition is the mind of the heart. The heart thinks through the way of intuition. And the difference between the power of mind and the power of intuition is comparable to the gap between optical and laser microscopes...

“For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you” (Lk. 17:21). The Lord speaks about the heart, which has the ability to experience the Kingdom of Heaven, i.e., God.

Not even the soul can be understood by the mind. It is not enough to be intelligent to hear the music of Rachmaninoff. You should hear it with your heart, but not with your ears. Otherwise, you will have no feelings for it.

But the realm of the spirit is even more subtle than the realm of the soul. The tuning fork of your heart should be even more fine-tuned.

Religious people know where God is, so they build their spiritual life there, in the heart.

The state of faith and the state of prayer are the same for me. The prayer that is in a human's heart leads a person to a different realm of existence. That person lives and perceives the world differently.

The inconspicuous, imageless, pronounced without feelings and, at the same time, not dreamy and very real Jesus prayer is what I call the prayer in the heart. An image or even a feeling will make you experience God roughly, just as man does. It will not reflect the truth. Therefore, in Orthodox spiritual practice one of the essential conditions is that your mind is not in your head, but in your heart.

And it is not only about concentration. The mind thinks in images, logical chains, which always distract it from the essential. But it is also very important that the nature of God cannot be experienced through images and logic. But that nature is very real for one who has focused the spiritual vision on the right things.

If a person was locked in a completely dark room, their optic nerve would die off. The same way, we have lost the ability to see, hear, think with the heart – we are not used to, we are not taught to use it. Thus “the nerve” of the heart has begun to atrophy.

It is a tragedy, but not a catastrophe. There are some actual recipes to restore vital activity of the heart. And the heart here is not an organ pumping blood, but it is an organ of spiritual vision. You just need to give it spiritual work. In the Orthodox asceticism there are many recipes for heart work. They include fast, labor to humble rebellious flesh, obedience, which breaks our ego, and so on. But the most important recipe is prayer, which has to gradually transform from a speech to a state as a person grows spiritually. It is no coincidence that the Holy Fathers shortened their verbal prayer as they advanced to God. Finally, it turned into the form of devout silence, which was deeper and richer than any word.

In the spiritual guidance of nun Juliana, the head of the icon-painting workshop at the Holy Trinity-St. Sergus Lavra, you can find these words, “If you want to learn

to paint icons, you need to do it as often and hard as you can.” So, the Kingdom of God is reached with great difficulty. Only those who make an effort reach it.

But notice that you do not need to be too serious, inhibited and tense. Your spiritual work should be done at ease.

On Athos a young monk told me that when he had become a disciple of an Elder Greek, he had started asking the Elder how to pronounce the Jesus prayer. The Elder just stretched out his arm holding a prayer rope and uttered, “Kyrie lesou Christe, Eleison me.” But the young monk started asking about the technique and breathing, and again the answer was, “Kyrie lesou Christe, Eleison me.”

God cannot be seen with the complex mind. The mind should be pure and simple. The Holy Gospel says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Mt. 5:8). And this is true. This is the truth proved by thousands of Orthodox saints. They were just ordinary people, like us, but through their feat, sincereness and consistency they reached the state of deification. This is the state when God is no more transcendent and distant for you. He becomes your reality. He is not an idea any more, He is a Person. And you do not doubt. And then you exclaim, “How could I have been an unbeliever?!”

CHAPTER 5

THE COMMANDMENTS AS A RECIPE FOR HAPPINESS

ABOUT THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AND CONFLICT

When our monastic community at the Cathedral of Saint George was just beginning, we organized a church brotherhood, which we called “The Thebaid.” Not only lonely people free from family ties and responsibilities, but also those parishioners who could not fully take monastic vows because of family reasons, were in our community. We started with one simple thing at the time. Every night, each and every one of us set the alarm clock to go off at two p.m. at home and we would pronounce the Jesus prayer for an hour. We would also briefly talk about prayer and spiritual life, meeting at the refectory of our Saint George’s Cathedral after each Sunday Liturgy. I wrote down some rules for our brotherhood, showing them the aims and ways of spiritual life.

The chance came to show our parishioners, who were sisters and pious and chaste women, the rules. I hoped to attract them to asceticism and for them to join our spiritual family. However, when they had read my writing, they unexpectedly asked me, “And what is it for? What do we need this community for? We can pray by ourselves, can’t we? In fact, this is what we are doing. Can’t we work hard, help

people, remain chaste, go to church, confess, and receive the Eucharist by ourselves?”

The question remained up in the air at the time. I might have just been bewildered by its suddenness and answered nothing.

Some years went by and our community grew into the Iveron Monastery. It is a good convent with kind, modest sisters who make me and every layperson glad. They warm my heart with the spirit of love and simplicity. The results we dreamt for in the beginning came true.

And now I return to the question, “Why should people go to a monastery? What is so special there? What can we not do or get at home by ourselves?”

Of course, not everything depends on external conditions. Even on Mount Athos, people lead very different lives. There are saints, the righteous, the ordinary, sinners, and great sinners there. Some people live on Mount Athos to pass the time and some people do not even lead monastic lives. By the way, that is why I always advise people who go to Mount Athos for the first time to go there with an experienced priest ready to explain every puzzling thing. Some independent pilgrims, especially if they are only inexperienced laymen, may become scandalized if they meet a person who does not pursue asceticism, a person who may be even spiritually degrading himself. There are such people there as well as here. The place may only be a precondition for spiritual achievements. Of course, Mount Athos is filled with the grace of the Holy Theotokos, the blessings of the Lord, and the blessings of the Holy Fathers who have been living there for a thousand years; this place still holds their prayers. But a place, even a holy one, can save no one if a person does not work for salvation. Even if your daily obedience is to dust the Holy Sepulcher, the question is in what state of mind you will be doing it.

A person certainly can do everything without a monastery: pray, go to church, help people, confess, receive the Eucharist... A person can do everything except for one thing; a monastery gives a unique possibility to do it not by your own will. It is the most precious feature of a monastery. Everything changes qualitatively by the mystery of obedience: prayers, good deeds, and all asceticism.

To make you realize how serious this subject is, I draw your attention to what divided us in the first place, represented by our first parents Adam and Eve, and by God. It was the breaking of the commandment. Breaking the commandment, which made our life full of grief and pain. We lost our friendship with God. We lost it at that moment and we are still losing it. He pleaded, “Don’t do this!” didn’t He? Instead, we do things our own way and the conflict between God and people arises.

We are hounded by conflict all our lives: in relationship with God, with relatives and close people, with just acquaintances. Conflict, conflict, conflict with no end. It suppresses, overstrains, and breaks us. Our lives become unbearable. It sometimes seems it would be better to stop living.

Can you imagine a precious gift of life could become so devalued? The gift which can be a treasure, a joy; happiness becomes complete darkness, toil, something unbearable.

I want to be happy again, to get the joy of life back. And that is why I will do everything I can to stop conflict. So, I will stop thinking I am the best, that my

opinion is righteous, because it is not good for me. It steals my spiritual comfort and leads me to inner war.

There are no winners in this war – and it is very important to understand this. Even if we are right, we still have to prove this, to go through a conflict, a tragedy, which will leave us without inner peace. It is true when they say that the greatest victory is that which requires no battle.

The Lord says love for enemies is a recipe for the highest happiness. That is what paradise is in reality, not geographically. It is paradise when we experience heavenly happiness, having no conflict inside, being so filled with peace and love for everyone. We should protect this inner state. Protect it at all costs as it is too precious to lose it.

When the Lord said to His disciples, “Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.” (Mk. 9:1) The Apostles thought the return of the Lord would happen very soon, but Christ spoke about personally achieving the Kingdom of Heaven in the Holy Spirit during one’s earthly life. A person can look towards the Kingdom of Heaven right here on earth. In contrast, one can also live in hell while still alive.

Precepts of love for enemies, forgiveness, and humility are not the precepts of prohibition, but they are the recipe for happiness. A kind, peaceful person, remembering no evil, is much happier on earth! And, on the contrary, a quarrelsome, conflicting, evil person’s life is so difficult! Such a person only makes other lives miserable and becomes deeply unhappy themselves. We, in fact, realize this, but somehow do not accept it. Of course, accepting this is easier said than done. Firstly, we must have the correct starting point or guide – where to go and what direction to choose. Secondly, I would suggest you train in struggling with thoughts, instead of reasoning with them. This will help you in obedience and give you the precious gift of freedom from conflict and the gift of peace and quiet and love.

Struggling with thoughts is an inner silent noetic work of a person. No outer achievements will bring results without it. External asceticism is only an additional means. When we try to concentrate on prayer, we lock ourselves into our cell and close the curtains from anything external, visual, or audible, which could prevent us from our noetic work. We act on our mind in the same way by locking it into our chest in an imageless, quiet place, and protecting it from any thoughts by using the Jesus prayer.

This place is very retired and silent, but to find it and to be there, we have to pray the Jesus prayer a lot in the simplicity of our hearts and in obedience to humble ourselves. Humility is quietness, steadiness, resignation. Only the mind in such a state can touch a very thin thread of the Holy Spirit.

The mind must become very sensitive. No conflicts or misunderstandings may draw it away from the main subject. Unfortunately, you will never find such ideal external conditions. Even having isolated yourself from all “outer” temptations, you will get into the area of inner conflict with thoughts. A person cannot avoid it; it can only be overcome by the science of humility, which consists in having patience with temptations. Patience forms skill and talent. The most important means of humility

is a talent of always remaining mild, relaxed, open, and far away from conflict. Get used to staying calm, and whatever happens, do not let the evil one make you mad. Whatever happens, pronounce softly and calmly, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."

Of course, it takes hard work for a long time to overcome yourself, to train in patience, but when you manage to do it, the result will bring you lots of joy. It will mend your heart, broken with inner conflicts, and it will do your heart good. You will see that those moments of your conflict with obedience, which has caused you uneasiness, are now your means of achieving humility. The humility which gives peace. The peace the Lord spoke about - "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you." (John 14:27) The world gives you outer peace; it is unsteady like quicksand. God will give you inner peace and a cross which will help to achieve it: the cross of overcoming, the cross of humbling yourself. It is the precious science of obedience which is necessary for you, as it is the way to your heart's paradise.

Venerable Silouan the Athonite, having known the sweetness of obedience, was not only constantly seeking opportunities to obey his hegumen, his spiritual father, but also to obey everyone he met, as he realized how much he gained by obedience. So, it was no coincidence he achieved love for all mankind as the result of his spiritual life.

Every one of us has loved some people: parents, children, friends. We know how sweet this feeling is. And now just imagine what sweetness Saint Silouan experienced loving the whole world! Sweetness, as well as pain, because love cannot be without concern for the beloved.

Do not be afraid of pain. Do not panic in the face of temptations. Stay meek and humble, yet do not be like a stone wall in front of them. Let them be in your life and never stop pronouncing, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." It may be the most important thing in our rapid life.

ABOUT WALKING ON WATER

When Saint John of the Ladder was asked, “Where are miracle workers? Where are the clairvoyant? Where are the people moving mountains?” he answered, “And where can you meet the venerable now?” He was saying that all those miracles were possible only to the venerable. And the Lord simply said in the Holy Gospel, “If you can believe...”

How can you stop doubting if your heart does not belong to you? With your thoughts not belonging to you? With doubts just filling you like flies? How can you stop them, by what willpower? It is in vain... No one can stop doubtful thoughts by any willpower. It may be possible only if a person practices the Jesus prayer sincerely and for a long time, if a person manages to get into his or her heart. There are no thoughts there. That is where – yes is yes, no is no, with no additional senses. That is how life goes on there, very simply: here God is, here I am, here a miracle is – here you go. But you may achieve this state only if you manage to rein in a stubborn horse – your mind. Firstly, try to rein it in, then to lead it to the stable and finally, to hitch it there. The same things happen to your heart in your mind. And then miracles start simply happening in your live.

The main miracle is not when you do something impossible, but when you experience Christ. You were in immensity, in the darkness of space, you were very

lonely, that loneliness overstrained, tortured you, preyed on your mind, some people, acquaintances, meetings, relations constantly surrounded you, but your soul still felt the aim of its creation, what communion, what the most important Person, what Meeting it was created for. So, when your soul finds Him, it is such a miracle that you need nothing more at all. All wishes, all thoughts, all conflicts stop existing.

I heard the other day that a monk came to one Russian monastery and asked if anyone could teach him the Jesus prayer there. And he was told that no one could, because everyone went to salvation as one was able to at that monastery. The story may be wrongly recounted, still it is real to some degree. But I want to say: it is not true, everything is possible, it is still possible to become Saint John of Kronstadt. You just have to be ready to pay a greater price. And if you do not agree to pay a greater price, you will not buy a gem.

You have to be ready to buy a spiritual pearl for all your property. It is a frenzy, a good spiritual frenzy. But we have no determination to do it, we do not know the price, we are wrong to value Christ.

I do not say that we must die accomplishing a feat right now. Nobody demands it, Christ does not wait for us to die going to salvation, He does not need it.

Still, it would be great if we could do the things we have already started doing with joy, with love. This particular word “with love” is very important because if we have no love, everything will be three, four, ten times harder for us, it will be difficult to do the basic things. As the main power giving life is love.

PULL-UP BAR, MARTIAL ARTS AND SPIRITUAL SOFTNESS

Sometimes one is tolerant of their sins considering them as minor. But there is no difference between a minor and a major sin. Is it possible to betray someone more or less? Or is it possible to commit more or less adultery? Adultery is not something that can be weighed on scales. Adultery means adultery. Never think that a minor sin means less.

In order to deal with so-called “minor sins”, it is extremely important for a person to have spiritual strength and patience. So, how do we gain strength and patience? Physical toughness grows when we do physical exercises. To make the spirit stronger, one needs spiritual ones.

I will always remember an event from my childhood. A boy from another city came to ours for summer holidays. At that time, the guys from our yard were crazy about the pull-up bar exercises, while this boy was so physically feeble that he could not do a single pull-up, not to mention any other special exercises. About 40 years have passed since that time until today. I remember the strength of his will. He started to come up to the bar every day – in the morning, midday, and evening – and by the end of the second month he started to perform unbelievable tricks on that bar! All of us were deeply impressed, watching him, with our mouths open, wondering if it was possible to have made such progress within two months? The key to this is very simple: the result was born out of diligence and commitment.

You know, boys enjoy “The Karate Kid” movie, where Jackie Chan – the actor and stuntman – performs the part of a martial arts master. In this movie a boy who faces bullying on the streets comes to the master and says, “I want to be able to protect myself, please train me.” The master agrees and says, “Take off your jacket and hang it up here.” The boy does what he was told. The master continues, “Now put it on.” Everything repeats time and again multiple times... The boy does not get what is going on, because he came to learn how to fight, but got into a complete mess. It turns out that the key to success in fighting is long patience.

This is exactly where the art of the spiritual fight lies. It starts when the warrior monks fight their passions, and fight satan. A patient, long-suffering person will stand till the end.

Recently my priest friend came to see me and said happily, “You have been leading me to the Jesus prayer and I was failing again and again. I would start it and then give up, start again and give up again... But now I will surely not give up. Do you know why? Because I started experiencing the benefits of the prayer. Since my childhood, I have had a very forgetful, dreamy mind and it is very hard to get it together. But now I can see that even such an absent-minded person such as myself, can achieve something.” I am glad that he realized this was not a theory, but a reality.

If a girl wants to skate like the Olympic Champion Irina Rodnina, and this is her dream, in the very beginning she does not even imagine what hard work lies ahead. And only a girl who, firstly – understands that it will require a lot of hard work from her, and secondly – has agreed to this work, she will gain the result. And for her it will be easy to endure. Why? Because she sees and realizes the objective. This is not an illusion, but a real target, an achievable one.

There is one more way to be patient, I often speak about it. When it seems to you that you are losing your patience, you are ready to explode, break something, throw your cap on the floor – all these mean you have tension inside. And here in order to get out of the squeeze you have to do everything very calmly. Try to convince yourself that nothing strange is happening and everything will be fine. This can be achieved through life experiences, and the more you practice in finding such positive notes, training your calmness and ability to relax, the better you will feel.

And gradually you will find great reserves within yourself.

The state of tension and anger is a dead end, while as soon as you become relaxed and softly say, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” everything begins changing little-by-little.

Last time we were ascending Athos we were run down, completely exhausted. Then we approached Panagia and had to do 100 bows. I am thinking, “No, that’s it, what do you mean, bows, I am going to fall down...” But then I tried to find this state of softness, and told to myself, “Nothing critical is going on, I am going to go and do what is needed quietly and with no hurry.”

I returned to the cross and started praying. And out of nowhere I got strength!

By dawn we reached the top of the mountain, and we felt no tiredness but happiness. And if I had allowed myself to be angry, I would have cracked and been broken. Your second wind comes in being calm. One has to practice gaining a sense of calm – this is the essence of humility. When we become calm, converting our tension into kindness, it turns out that more energy is released inside of us. The tough one will break, while the flexible and soft will endure everything.

INDULGENCE

The closer people are to God, the stricter they become with themselves and the more forgiving they are with others. If they go this way, they go the right way. And vice versa. I used to meet ascetics, who were practicing the Law to the last letter, but dealing with them was very difficult, all I wanted to do was to cry and run away from them. Unfortunately such persons, in perfect detail see what is wrong with the others, and stop seeing themselves at all, they become controversial, contentious, and unkind.

That was the decline of the Gospel Pharisees. All their strengths were dedicated to following the letter of the law in detail. But that practice was causing them to become worse and worse in their quality. They practiced harder fastening, longer prayers, and used to give more alms. But it was hard to deal with them as they were somewhat unkind people.

That was because they were blind regarding their own sins. A Pharisee seems great to himself, as he observes all the prescriptions. But it would be better if he had not observed anything, and not become such an arrogant and proud person, who even

while praying speaks mad things, “My Lord I thank You for I am so virtuous.” This is a person with a damaged mind and soul.

Or do you remember the Gospel parable about debtors? A debtor had to become a slave to cover his debts. He was crying, asking for a delay, and God released him from all his debts. The man went out of the prison and met his own debtor whose debt was ten times smaller and immediately demanded payment of the debt. The debtor asked for mercy, but the one who was forgiven just a moment ago, showed no mercy.

Are we not the ones bearing the same infirmity?

There is one more sensitive moment. Do not raise your expectations of your spiritual father, abess, rural dean, or a priest. You have to understand that they will disappoint you sooner or later. Some people are ready to lose their sense of reality before a priest viewing him as St. Ambrose of Optina, or as St. John of Kronstadt. And what if that one fails?... I once had a pathetic situation: a parishioner woman told me, “Father Sergiy, can you imagine that I have been turning to Father N for three years, but he turned out to be not a clairvoyant...”

However, it is possible to be obedient to a non-saintly person. St. Ephraim of Katounakia did not have a saintly spiritual father, but managed to achieve holiness himself thanks to his own obedience.

In our spiritual life, we sometimes find an ideal we aspire to. But somehow we start to compare this ideal not with ourselves but with others. And then we start to judge them.

Today in the Church one can meet such devotees who know apostolic assignments and rules, canon law, rulings of some councils and require from others to follow them fully. While I would tell them, “Looks like you would like to follow the living rules of St. Basil the Great, which presuppose barring from the Eucharist up to twenty years for some sins. But if you are so devoted, let’s start from you.”

Sometimes during meetings, priests start to insist on the rule of law, saying that “parishioners are obliged to do this, and to do that” being concerned because of the parishioner's disobedience. I used to tell them, “Fathers, actually, if we refer to the ancient rules you are mentioning, it will become obvious that we ourselves shall be chased from the altars. We will not be authorized to hold Liturgy. But we do and have no fear of God, no piety — even by the Altar. And we allow ourselves to discuss the ways of punishing our parishioners for disobedience.”

I think mercy is needed. Without mercy our churches would be empty and all of us would be deprived from the Eucharist for about forty five years. Sometimes mercy becomes higher than the rule of law.

And then one starts to obey not because of fear of punishment, but for not wanting to upset the priest with their disobedience. For not wanting to make someone’s heart or head ache. For not wanting to make someone filled with sorrow or even cry.

This is exactly what really helps someone to change. And this is something much more precious.

THE SERVANT AND THE ENCOUNTER

I am not encouraging you to proudly fight the sin now. You should not accept this battle as a recommendation before you are mature enough to confront it. It is better if God grants you this task. But if one of you is granted this by God, do not get lost and do not be afraid. Just remember that even if you feel you are at the brink of losing everything, if you still believe in loving God, Who will not leave us at the mercy of the devil, you may acquire everything at this very moment. Everything! At this very moment, Saints received their dispassion.

This state may be a good start for a novice, but for those who have been in church for many years and particularly for those who lead a monastic life, this state is not acceptable.

On the eve of Great Lent, our heart should be triumphant that tomorrow will start a more attentive and focused life and that our relationship with God will become deeper. Thus, there is a hope for change! Like a person who was sick for a long time

and suddenly found a good doctor who prescribed him the right drug. The patient understands that he or she has to undergo an unpleasant treatment and keep to a necessary regimen, but ultimately there will be relief!

This can also be compared to the feeling a bride has before a date with her beloved groom, when her heart is singing in anticipation of this encounter. She is in front of the mirror, making herself pretty, while her heart is rejoicing because she knows that her beloved is coming soon!

This is the right attitude for ascetics. That is why we practice asceticism. For the anticipation of the Encounter!

It is different, of course, if we only experience Christ at a level of morality, law and philosophy, having never encountered Him in prayer or the mystery of Repentance. But we must arrive at this! Otherwise, our Orthodoxy will linger at the lower stage of legalism. This is the mindset of a slave, who is afraid of a whip.

But God said, “You are My friends, you are My children.” Think about these words! He would like to have such a relationship with us. We should long for this also, as this type of relationship is sweet and full of light.

To do something out of a fear of being punished will become, at some point, sad and unpleasant. It is impossible to live with the constant feeling of fear, anxiety, and a permanent thought of “I’ll be punished, punished, punished...”

Once I heard the confession of a woman who had been a church-goer for many years and who led a spiritual life. During her confession, she kept saying, “I did this wrong and God will punish me. I made a mistake there and God will discipline me.” Her confession was passionately focused around the idea of punishment and at some point I said, “Wait, I can’t listen quietly when you speak about Christ in this way as if He were a hangman with a whip who looks for reasons to punish you. He is on the cross, waiting for your repentance every day. You need to start seeing Christ as loving, long-suffering and expecting you at any time...”

Sometimes we feel especially bad because we insult and betray Christ who is standing on the road waiting for us as a father waiting for his prodigal son. We need to approach Christ through the mysteries of spiritual life in order to walk a step up from the state of a frightened slave to become a loving son.

ABOUT IMPERFECTION

Here is an example of a person who lives in a monastery and he seems to be shielded from exterior temptations. He starts to think that he parted with his former troubling character traits. He becomes more calm and confident. Then suddenly, in about ten or twenty years, some unpleasant trait comes up again!

For a person who did not humble himself, this can be the end of the world, he may become desperate. He may start thinking that twenty years of spiritual life were wasted. On the other hand, a humble person always realizes that his troubling nature may appear again and only thanks to God, he was able to resist for twenty years. No matter that it showed up again – he will continue to resist.

There is a parable in an ancient Patericon, which tells us about two ascetics who lived in the Palestinian desert for twenty years. One day during the holiday of the

Exaltation of the Cross, pilgrims were passing by their caves. The pilgrims invited the ascetics to come along with them to celebrate. The ascetics decided to join since it was not just an entertainment, but a spiritual holiday. They ended up in a big city with many temptations. And that very night they sinned with women. And this is in spite of spending twenty years in the desert...

The next day both of them were returning to their caves. One of the ascetics was completely heart-broken, while the other one was signing psalms joyfully. The first one says, "How come you are singing? We have wasted our twenty years of ascetic life in the desert?"

They parted: each went to his own cave. The one who felt desperate, hung himself. His despair destroyed him. The second one started his ascetic life anew. He said, "I wasted twenty years, but God gave me this day and maybe he will give me tomorrow. Perhaps, he will grant me one more year – why would I waste them in vain?" He began everything anew, like a novice. When he was departing, angels came to get his soul. I am not saying that falling is the right thing; I am saying we need to remember about our imperfection. When we forget about it, we become careless and unsafe, thus, our fall is inevitable. This happens in order to help mobilize us and shake us up to be able to get back to our spiritual state. The more relaxed we become – the harder the fall will be. We fall especially hard when we are prideful and when we judge others; because at that moment God's grace leaves us and we become unsafe again, and with no inspiration.

Temptations are to come because they, first, make us skillful. And second, they show if our love is genuine or if it is just an illusion and a fantasy. Sometimes a person says, "I love...", but when hardships come, there is nothing left of his love. Love has to be proven through actions.

There is one very important property of love that I talked about multiple times. It is the ability to sacrifice. It is the main criterion of love. There is no love without sacrifice.

That is why it is good that temptations happen. Do not be afraid and do not panic. Be joyful about them! They make our hearts work on the pitch of love. They make us experienced. They show us our real state of being. Through them, we can show our loyalty to Christ. There is a certain, maybe a tiny emulation of Christ's cross-bearing.

ABOUT PERFECTION

St. Joseph the Hesychast spent eleven years of his life fighting against a spirit of fornication. When he won, and the bald and smelly demon entered his cell, Joseph the Hesychast did not hide or run away, he attacked him in his rage, because he did not want to insult God with his imperfection. The evil spirit escaped from the cell and never came back to the Elder's cave. I always say that our main principle is not fighting the sin but running away from it. It is true but it is only one half of the truth. There is another level. It is when we do not just run away from the sin, while risking that it will catch up with us, but that we long to get rid of the sin forever. Running away from sin is righteous, but it is not perfection yet.

St. Symeon the New Theologian explained that sometimes men of God would voluntarily face the fight against sin. This is not for us, but God will allow this for saintly people.

Once in Athos, an elder said to his disciple, “If you want to win over your fear, you need to get up in the darkest night and walk to the furthest cave, where evil spirits gather together and where for this reason, no one lives. You should enter that cave. If you do this and not turn back, you will reach the very bottom of your despair; having lived through this extreme degree of your own nothingness without God, then in this extreme point of despair, which is also the utmost point of humility, with non-reliance of yourself, God will send you His grace, which will bring the victory. Not you, but God. If you live through it, your fears will go away and will never come back. But if you get scared and run away, they will torture you all your life.”

At some point of our spiritual endeavor, God leaves us behind and lets the devil take us to our extreme point, like with St. Job the Long-Suffering. God does not do it with novices, because they do not yet know what to hold on to. He does it with those, who have experience running away from the sin, while holding on to Christ.

Then, God suddenly lets one confront his own sin. If the person passes the first part of his path well, he will know Who will help him to win.

In this fight, the person may be at the verge of thinking that he will fail and that he is defeated, but at the same time, he will have a distinct clarity that God will not leave him up until the very last moment. If the person manages to persevere during this, then, at some point, God will come to his rescue and will help him to defeat his sin. God resists the proud and sends grace to the humble.

I am not encouraging you to proudly fight the sin now. You should not accept this battle as a recommendation before you are mature enough to confront it. It is better if God grants you this task. But if one of you is granted this by God, do not get lost and do not be afraid. Just remember that even if you feel that you are at the brink of losing everything, if you still believe in loving God, Who will not leave us at the mercy of the devil, you may acquire everything at this very moment. Everything! At this very moment, Saints received their dispassion.

DO NOT WASTE TIME!

St. Poemen the Great says, “Always have good thoughts and you will be saved.” Having this paraphrased one can say, “Always have good thoughts and you will be happy.”

What does it mean, “to be saved?” It means to stay in well-being, in a quiet and peaceful state of mind. This state of Heaven with absence of conflict makes one very happy. And vice versa: one single conflict can make one forget their well-being, and

everything that makes them happy. Serious conflict is a true hell, they experience a sin and lose joy.

It happens that a person stays in permanent conflict with people, life circumstances and with the Providence of God, and thinks, “My Lord, I do not want it to go this way. I think it must go another way. The way You offer to me is inconvenient. I would like to make my little corrections to Your plan.”

This state may grow until the person starts shouting to God, “I have not asked you to create me! Why have you done this?”

If only they heard the peaceful, soft, and mild voice of God saying, “My child, I have created you for joy. I would like you to be happy, drawing joy every day so that it would overflow you. All this world is created in order to bring satisfaction to you. But you are the only one to blame for your sadness and dismay, because you are the one who broke the law I granted to you. You are in conflict not only with Me, but with the whole world. You are in conflict with all nature, which suffers because of your sin.”

For twenty-two years, I have been visiting jails, and I heard something that is hard to imagine. A son kills his mother in a drunken rage, and wakes up in the morning and cannot understand what he has done, then the father kills his son. This is far from the commandment about love to our enemies. We left it a long time ago. We need a commandment about love for our closest ones – our relatives, near and beloved; and even this commandment we cannot fulfill. What “love” do we mean, if a brother sometimes hates a brother, or parishioner quarrels with parishioner?! In this case our sorrowful God may tell us, “At least keep loving your mother, and your own kids. Christian, at least keep loving those standing next to you at the Liturgy on Sunday”. Based on the fact that we become worse and worse, it seems that we will not be able to fulfill even this request, but we have nothing to do but fulfill this, otherwise we will be permanently sad and distressed!

Many secular people consider humility as the state of the weak and stupid – like a kind of slavery, weakness, or indignity. However, in reality, if anyone tries to defeat their false pride, they will feel how tough the fight is ahead of them. Visiting jail and talking with prisoners I ask them, “Some of you consider humble monks weak. But have any of you ever tried to overcome burning anger, false pride, or keeping silent after being offended?” And even prisoners say, “Yes, father, you are right. To keep silent, to be patient, to stand against your fury, and to give in. This requires such steadfastness and strength, which is rare even among the “strong” ones.”

Everyone who goes to church for a long time knows how much strength it requires to reach even a little stability in spiritual life. If one remembers this only from time to time, there will be no result. It requires diligence and a systematic approach. Nothing like oneweek’s practice and a month of rest, then again leisurely reading something out in the lives of the Saints, inflamed and faded all in two days. No result will be gained this way.

So often we justify the so-called impossibility to live spiritual life for the Kingdom of Heaven by our numerous concerns and obligations. Then, in the blink of an eye, we die – and there are no more concerns. They are over. Ashes and dust is left

behind. If one presents eternity as a long straight line, then our life will be a little dot on this line. You put a pencil down, rotate – there is a dot, and that is your lifetime, then it's over.

There is nothing precious in yesterday as it will never return, moreover – it will be forgotten and no one will ever recall it. The present is important, the current moment is precious. Especially when the last second is spent and Eternity starts. This is terrible, and joyful. Joyful for those who have sincerely worked in this life, having devoted all their attempts, all their soul to gain the Kingdom of Heaven.

Surely, none of us serves evil intentionally, and none of us wants to arrive at Hell. All of us want to be saved, to change for the better. Of course each of us would like to gain not only righteousness, but sanctity. Not to keep God from becoming upset with us, but to genuinely bring Him gladness, and by extension; those around us. However, our good wish often remains unsupported without any of the means for its achievement, and only wishing for sanctity, unfortunately cannot change us. To reach the objective one has to use means.

These means are often inconvenient for us, unusual, and sometimes hard. That is because we are used to comfort, worldly liberty and our egoism. Very often these means to achieve sanctity are hardly achievable for us.

Although, do you remember words of the Gospel, “His commandments are not grievous” (1 John. 5:3)? His commandments are not so hard indeed. We are just not accustomed to their fulfillment.

Our attention is dispersed so much that we cannot even discern the moment we fall into condemnation and all manner of sins rush into our poor mind.

Young people often say, “I spend a lot of time on the Internet.” Well, what do you want to gain this way? The Internet tranquilizes the soul. You cannot immerse yourself in it and learn to pray. Just try to spend an hour or two on social media or in front of the TV and then try to take the prayer rope and start a prayer. It will not work properly as your head and your soul will be filled with the TV and Internet.

The Church regulates the life of the Christian, not because it wants to enslave their will, but to offer them means to achieve sanctity. Follow this way – and you will feel better. If you go another way – well, you will keep languishing in the same sins.

We have to know ourselves, and learn what exactly weakens our souls. The reason it becomes unable to work in the service of God. Weakened souls become vulnerable to sins they never knew before. Such souls are inattentive in their mind, they cannot even realize when they are captured.

A concentrated mind is sharp, sees all satan's steps and takes all measures to avoid his traps.

If a person knows they are vulnerable to the passion of anger, then in the beginning of any dispute they have to tell themselves, “Well, now I shut my mouth and leave, because this will take over me, and I will regret my words only after I have offended somebody.”

Of course, we're created by God, and by looking for joy and pleasure all the time this is not a sin, this is God's commandment we were created to fulfill. But one looks

for no spiritual pleasures, only for non-religious ones, which cannot make us completely joyful.

It is one thing to get a gift from God and another to preserve it. If one catches no fish, it does not mean there is a lack of fish. There are plenty of fish, our net simply needs mending. God sends grace with no measure, excessively, limitlessly. We are the vessels who cannot bear it.

Once, an Orsk citizen – a completely secular person, came with me to Athos, his name was Alexander. We met accidentally at the airport. He was far from religion on his way there, had never been to church and did not know prayer... He spent three days on the Holy Mountain. When we returned to our respective homes, about a month later, he came to church to meet me, and I greeted him with a smile. He had tears in his eyes and said, “I found something there on Athos, but then I lost it.” He did not even have an Orthodox vocabulary at that point, but he began to explain. It was obviously hard for him to find the right words. He felt he found something on Holy Mount, but having come home to the everyday buzz and reckless joys, he lost some treasure gifted to him.

Life goes on, each day passes with no return. Yesterday will never come again. One more day will come tomorrow, then one more, and one more – and all of a sudden we lose a year, then a decade, and we keep saying, “Soon we will start,” and you get used to living with this “tomorrow – after tomorrow” until you die. You should fear losing time. Who knows how many days you still have? Please hurry to live a spiritual life!

HOW GOD GIVES WINGS

I will tell you of two ways to see your sins. First one: to observe yourself. It is an imperfect way, for our mind is very limited, thoughts get confused, and we do not see precisely and clearly. This way should also be used, but we need to keep in mind that it will not help us to see all of our sins, for they are intricacies of a thin web.

Another way to see one's sins is given to a person when he or she has acquired the grace of the Holy Spirit, and it has opened his sight. We look with our physiological sight, but there is also spiritual sight. When Nicodemus, an Israeli teacher, had received the Lord, the Lord told him, "It is impossible for a man who has not been born again, to get to know the mystery of the Kingdom of God." Nicodemus asked, "How can a man be born a second time? Surely he can't get into his mother's womb again?" The Lord, with some reproach, said to him, "How can you, an Israeli teacher of law, not understand such things!"

How often the Lord in the Gospel says, "You look and do not see; listen and do not hear." That means - you look at the event and do not understand it. Many people heard the Lord physiologically and tried to understand something, but could not. Such things are understood not with the mind, but with the spirit. What is of the Holy Spirit is more profound, thinner, more perfect. And what is of our mind is very limited.

Today, during the service, a small bug fell into the Chalice. Some might think, "How can that be! How could a bug get into something so holy?" But a bug is a mindless creature, incapable of feeling God in the measure that God gave it to man - but to a man who is perfect, in theosis, in the spirit. A bug, in connection to its limitedness, does not understand grace.

In the same way, if a man represents just a psychosomatic, and not a spiritual being, he also does not see God's wisdom, spilled all over the world, does not hear God in the state of prayer, in which actually the conversation with Him does happen.

When we read about the prayers of the saints, a desire to acquire the same prayer that they had appears in us: to not just perform reading of the books, but talk to God face to face. We burn with this desire and suddenly see, with sadness, with tears, that we do not succeed at all, because we have not entered into this area of human and spiritual being.

Give to a person, who is not used to perceiving true music, something of the classics. He will start yawning, because he hears it as sounds, but does not hear it as music. In the same way, some people are indifferent to poetry. And it is not yet a spiritual, but a soul level, but people often do not even get to it.

The spiritual level is much more sublime and thinner. You can enter the atmosphere of the spirit with the help of spiritual and church life, the practice of attentive prayer. When a person lives a spiritual life that is set up right, suddenly he begins seeing such things that he just did not see before and did not even suspect they existed, he did not know the world was set up much more harmonically and intricately. He only saw the crude and simple things.

The true, profound repentance is not the power of the person himself. A person may see his own sins in all fullness only by the Holy Spirit, when his spiritual eyes are opened. But, first, they do not get open due to us not being ready, and second, the Lord still holds them back a little, because if He had opened to us in its full measure our fall into sin, we would fall into such despair with our pride, that we would die of grief and sadness right there.

No matter how many times you try, with some psychological ways or the straining of the mind, to understand the Gospel, you will not succeed. And it will be even

worse if you do, but in a distorted way. This happens with people from sects. They have stepped away from the Church, lost grace as a means for understanding the Gospel and began learning it with simply their minds. And it is not that book that should be studied with one's mind. It is the book of books and it is revealed through inspiration, through the Holy Spirit.

Can a man jump higher than his head is? No, he cannot. But when God gives a person wings, he can fly very high. It is not lyrical digression or my fantasies. When God visited the sinful, limited, helpless people, they started doing such things that those who knew them said, "A different person is in front of us!". They say it is impossible to change your own character. But when the grace of God touches a person, it is not just his character that changes - his looks change too. However we need to understand that it is not possible for man, and at the same time the grace of God can perform miracles. There is a small temple of the Venerable Mary of Egypt in our monastery. Her fall was so deep that the people who knew her felt embarrassed to even look at her side, and did not want to hear of her. And suddenly she changed so much that she became a different person.

Before the heavens closed their eyes looking at what she was doing, then later she, having become the Venerable Mary of Egypt, raised her hands and took off from the ground.

Sometimes a person comes to church, tries working on himself - a week, a month, a year - and then he says, "Father, I am not succeeding. And I probably will not, because I am so used to sin that it has entered me like a cancerous tumor." Then the priest begins giving him examples. The future Apostle Paul issues a decree to cruelly murder Christians. And suddenly that cruel Saul, the tormentor of Christians, enjoying his evil deeds, he himself becomes a Christian, gets love, mercy, and compassion for all. Saul and Paul are two different people. And at the same time, one and the same.

No person can love another with the effort of will. With what words can we tell the heart to love? It does not obey us. We embarrass it, make it, strain it, and it still says, "I do not love. I do not want to. I do not want to forgive. I will not forgive." We tell it, "There is a commandment, Christ told us to. You will go to hell if you do not forgive." And the heart responds, "I will not."

But when the grace of God comes into the heart, something supernatural happens with it. Suddenly this stone, hard, cruel heart begins to melt like wax, becomes soft, flexible, obedient. Such a heart no longer has to be pleaded: it itself starts to forgive first, then endure, then have compassion even for the enemies, and then begins to love them.

What I am saying right now is very far away from us. But we know, from the example of many thousands of saints, that this was, this is, and this will be until the end of the age because there will always be saints. If the Church ceases birthing saints, then it means it has died. And any one of us could become a saint. To become a saint does not mean to walk on water, to heal people of all diseases, to amaze with the miracles of seeing all things. It means to be able to love even one's enemies.

When a person experiences anxiety for himself, dissatisfaction with himself, sometimes to tears - it is very precious, very good for salvation. God is such a unique personality that as we just open our mouths, He already says, "I forgive." The problem is not that He does not forgive, but that we do not change. We are capable of doing the very same thing the moment after being forgiven - that is the problem. But when your repentance reaches despair, it means the demons are stimulating you to repent. Demons, in their nature, are not creative beings, that's why they're using what God has created but worsen it, distort it, make it crooked. It is no accident the saints call the devil the monkey of God. The devil makes himself a monkey, copying God, but everything turns out crooked and wrong. When the demons do not succeed at turning us to evil openly, they start to really worsen whether repentance or the joy of turning to God, so that we lose attentiveness or the feeling of our sinfulness. That is why, do spiritual life. May the compassion for sins leave you, may it turn to hate for them. And God does not need to torment you for your sins. He has forgiven you long ago.

WHEN YOU BEGIN TO LOVE CHRIST SELFLESSLY

It is very bad when Orthodox Christianity is perceived as if we do all we can in order to go to heaven one day. Orthodoxy has always worked for a better "today." People take a prayer rope, and Grace comes down on them. They say, "The Holy

Theotokos,” and cry. They come into their cells, stand before icons, and turn out to be in the Kingdom of Heaven immediately, not twenty or thirty years later. If we understand Orthodox Christianity this way, it will become the best, the most pleasant education. However, people think that they have to suffer all their life in order to inherit something in the afterlife. And these poor people torment themselves and their children. Thus, Orthodoxy becomes a terrible, horrible torture, when Orthodox Christians do not smile, but frown. But Orthodox Christians have to smile! If you are in the Kingdom of Heaven, it is impossible not to smile. I have already quoted St. Symeon the New Theologian, who said, “If you have not gained the Kingdom of Heaven here, do not hope to gain it there.”

When you have a relationship with Christ, you begin to love Him absolutely selflessly, no matter if He will give you anything or not. You love Him anyway. Even if He sends you grief, you love Him because you are a captive of this love. Sometimes it happens in everyday life. A man loves a woman so much that he is ready to yield her to another man, as long as she is happy. This is true love. It is the same with Christ. That way you will never feel desperate. You can either pray today or not, you love Him anyway and you say, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.” That is enough to console you. His existence itself consoles you. Christ is far higher than all our earthly relationships. As soon as saints pronounced “Sweetest Jesus,” they started crying because it touched their hearts. Christ is the most beautiful thing we have.

Patience is also a spiritual life. I would even say that patience is some form of prayer. Long patience is the deepest attribute of humility. A humble person is stable inside. Nothing can disturb his or her equilibrium. Neither sickness, grief, cataclysms, nor relationships between people would get one out of balance. And this person does not lose a prayer. But such humility is gained with long patience. But if an impatient person starts praying, any little thing can distract them. A long-patient one can do a lot even in less-than-ideal conditions, whereas ideal conditions are not even possible for the impatient. If you want to master spiritual science, you have to understand that temptations are tools for gaining perfection. The Apostles also spoke about that. Temptation gives patience, patience gives humility, and humility gives prayer. The person who gains humility becomes grateful. While gratitude is almost the state of the Kingdom of Heaven.

CHAPTER 6

PARALLEL WORLD

ABOUT A WOUNDED VANITY OR WHOM GOD LOVES

A wounded heart hurts less than a wounded vanity. But if you reveal wisdom and find a spark of humility in yourself, this will bring you the result as if a light were switched on in a dark room. And the deepest sorrow will turn into a good quiet joy. When I was a deacon, we had a confessor who was a schema-archimandrite. My friend was his favorite disciple while I was taking a secondary part. Once, we came to him. My friend entered the confessor's cell while I went to the neighboring room to visit a sick nun. And it appeared that they did not close the door, and I happened to be a witness of their conversation about me. My friend said that our church needed a second priest and he advised to ordain me. But the confessor replied, "What are you talking about? He is crazy, a schizophrenic". You can imagine how deeply this hurt me — to hear the words like these from the people I really trusted. And I got scared. I thought, "My Lord, this is what I really am..."

I was embarrassed to have heard all that. I entered and asked their forgiveness for that. They were confused as well. I went to the doorsteps, and suddenly God sent me a thought: God loves schizophrenics as well. My bitterness and offense evaporated immediately, and I felt as if the sun flamed up in my soul.

Since then, any time I am hurt with false pride — some offenses are always arising — I try to humble myself. As much as I try to excuse myself, I feel only worse. I find some arguments that maybe I am not completely to blame in this case, or maybe God sent this situation to me for my improvement, but nothing out of these works. But as soon as I humble myself and say: so be it, after all God loves me anyway — my offense disappears.

One time, when I was holding a liturgy, suddenly, my inner prayer stopped. No prayer, and that's it. I was standing in front of the altar and felt neither prayer in my heart nor God at the altar as if I was plunged into the cosmic darkness. For a priest holding liturgy is impossible being in a state of mind like that. Then I remember what we were taught at the seminary: God is the Supreme Being, and as the Supreme Being, God cannot change, He is supreme eternally, and He is the eternal love. And whatever happens to me, God loves me equally all the time. And that really switched me back in. Either the prayer returned, or the liturgy went on. And I went out from the altar with such a look that they said about me: he probably saw God in there.

In a poem written by a secular, churchless man, there is a good idea: the only way out of despair is humility. Neither wisdom, nor art, nor patience but only humility that looks only at God. But to make us capable of reaching this extreme patience, God allows us to experience an extreme temptation. It is not about cases when we start to sin and say this is needed for understanding our sinfulness (these are dangerous games). It is about a situation God allowed you without your own plans,

and this circumstance almost destroyed you. It destroyed all your ideas that you are a good person, a person of prayer who has courage, inspiration, and patience. However, after a great sorrow, you will find a great joy you would never attain praying in good, comfortable conditions. I mean, joy up to some extent may be attained even without a great sorrow, but the exceptional God's grace may be attained only after temptations in case we humble ourselves.

I often quote St. Poemen The Great, who told his disciple, "Keep good thoughts in your mind and you will be saved". Try to see the good and not to see the evil. Seeing the evil does not save. What saves is seeing the good, as it is namely the good that softens stone hearts, making them softer than wax. In comparison to this, evil weighs down evil hearts.

St. Porphyrios of Kafsokalivia saw the good in anything he met. I have been visiting prisons for twenty-two years, and if I fixed my eyes only on the bad things, I would get mad. But even in prisons, one can find something good. Even in a prison for the life-sentenced where time is seemingly infinite, you can anyhow find some good things. I often tell about a father and a son who are enjailed there. I was speaking with the father, and suddenly, he hugged me through the cage, kissed, and said, "If only you, father, knew, how close God is here!" One may wonder: close to whom? To these murderers? But it is all equal to God, whoever is before Him. He is unbiased. All our broken relations with God are broken from our side. But nothing changes from the side of God, as He is the eternal love.

PARALLEL WORLD

What can I say about God?

What can I say to an unbelieving person about God?

What can I say to myself?

I often have nothing to say.

At times I can say very little; other times, I can say more, at greater depth.

But there is never a situation where I can say it all. This would be an absurdity. God is not an entirely clear subject. God is God. And He remains like that until the unknown, infinity, is there. When believers try to explain and prove all the points, they do not understand that they humiliate God. The God Who cannot be fully contained.

There must always be a doubt in true faith. Self-doubt. It is noble; it must be like that. The ability to contain begins with an inability to contain. I know that I know nothing. This happens when one stands still before the Great Extraordinary. That exceeded His measure. But this is already an engagement. And this engagement is with Him. With The One Who is. And this is the main thing that we can say about Him. All the rest we can describe only partially, according to our spiritual age.

Therefore I am whispering about Him very carefully, fearing to distort it or being misunderstood. But I cannot keep silent either, because He wants me to talk.

I often put questions about faith to myself. It is vital that one does not pretend to have faith but is looking for it with all one's heart. The verb "to look for" suggests an action. Progressive movement forward from smaller to bigger. My faith is little, paltry compared to the faith of the saints. But it is already within me, and faith urges me to move up, to search, to multiply it.

It is most likely that it all starts with finding meaning in life, with facing losses, disappointments, and instability for the first time, which then leads to a sharper sense of time. All things will pass. We are constantly losing something, and in this regard, everything gets depreciated. If I was born to die, then even if I lived a long life, a relatively long one, as in comparison with eternity, my life is a moment. What is the point of life? Is it to give birth to children who will also die and ask the same question? The wise Solomon asked these questions himself three thousand years ago in the book of Ecclesiastes, perhaps in the final document of his eventful life: Vanity of vanities. All things will pass, and all is vanity. This work could be described as deeply pessimistic, but the last lines were, "live like that and have fear of God."

In the New Testament transcription, the word "fear" can be safely replaced by the word "love." Thinking about the meaning of life is not yet faith, but it is well on the way towards it. We are peering at the world around us more closely and curiously. We are still not seeing God, but we begin noticing His traces and traces of His creativity everywhere because wherever you look, you can see harmony and wisdom. I often hear the response – this is just nature, and straight away I am asking, "What or Who is nature?" Only "Who" can create the wise poetry of being. There is no personal creativity in "what."

You know, when something has already happened inside between man and God, often there is no desire to prove anything at all. You were asked and provided an answer; that is it. Hence in this topic of God's being explored through His creativity around us and within ourselves, I am satisfied with the very first point...

The Big Bang, which is now being talked about a lot, trying to explain where everything came from, saying everything has come from nothing... Has anyone ever heard about an explosion that had great harmony in it instead of destruction? You have to believe very strongly in a miracle to claim that after the explosion, instead of a cacophony of sounds, the thunder spread around, say in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and instead of destruction - coherence, and consistency. Observing the harmony of the universe gives confidence that there is a Creator, with Whom you have not yet met as with an Individual, Personality. But everything around, the whole universe speaks about Him. This is already a faith and at the same time, it is not yet faith, not that faith that works miracles. All this can be just a beginning in seeking out for Him and to return to oneself as an image and likeness.

This is where the most difficult part begins, because the faith supposes a permanent, gradual movement towards Him. This practice is called spiritual life, which involves overcoming oneself, one's imperfections, and limitations. Limitations of vision and experience. God is located precisely beyond these restraints. Only those overcoming these join into one-to-one communication with Him.

Moreover, this is no longer just a reflection on the meaning of life, observation of the universe's harmony, not belief in God's existence, not belief in Him, but a direct relationship with Him. Not many people have achieved this. But this particular state is called faith, the faith that is capable of performing miracles.

Unfortunately, believers often live vicariously, through the experience of saints, in whose lives this has taken place in an extreme, total way. The Lord said about them the following, "They shall speak with new tongues; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them..." Yes, unfortunately, this is often not our personal experience, but rather trust towards those people. But you have to trust someone in your life.

When you ask someone for directions, you often have to trust a complete stranger, and we do trust. But I have much more confidence in a saint who deserves trust by his very righteous life. He is so decent that it is impossible not to trust him. If you are lucky enough to meet a saint in your life, believe me, this meeting will not only inspire you with sympathy for his words, but you will have an irresistible desire to experience his spiritual state. You will just see a really happy person. Made happy not by the external circumstances, but by internal content that does not depend on the external one.

I want to tell you an important thing. There is a difference between intellect and mind. Intellect is the ability to reason, and this is present to a greater or lesser extent in each of us. And the mind (in Greek patristic theology it is called "nous" - cognition) is a knowledge of the essence of things.

The first is from the nature of our mind, and it is good but not perfect. And the second is more of a charismatic nature. It is like a revelation, and it is from God. As you, an unbeliever, would say, from nature. Adam had this state of mind in Paradise when he named animals according to their essence. He did not analyze anything, he just knew and had an intuition. Why am I talking about this? Because I will not be able to answer all your questions to satisfy you. Not because there is no answer, but because there is a need for the ability to listen, and that comes from intuition. Different people reading the Bible, in fact, do not read the same book because of their non-identical abilities to follow the same content. It turns the entire consciousness of some people upside down and radically changes their lives, while others remain completely indifferent to the same book.

The same content and such distinctive actions. Spiritual topics need a spiritual approach, not with pure cold intellect, but more with instinct. It is like in music, it is not composed logically; other mechanisms of our psyche must be activated. And only then everything happens. The questions you ask are also of my concern. When I am trying to resolve those questions, I dive into that area of my psychic existence where there is a possibility of finding the answers. Complicated questions are not solved by intellect, it is rather a field of prayer, and you do not try to make it out but ask God and get an answer. The answer that we are able to hear and accept.

The question of the cruel Old Testament God was also before me, and I queried that and was not happy with the answers. That is why I stopped asking the questions and stopped pondering. I began to pray and got an answer that satisfied me. But this is my answer, the response to me, to my spiritual state, if you will. For you, it may not sound right in this case; I apologize; I have got limited abilities. All that we see around us and in the endless darkness of space is light. Everything that is not light remains dark. Light that emanates from the sources of light and that is reflected from the surfaces of objects. The first light can be called a pure light, virgin light because it carries information only about itself. The nature of the second one that is being reflected gets modified. It includes the information of the reflected object, so, in fact, we see it with our eyes. It is no longer a pure virgin light but rather a synthesis of it and its reflected object.

The Bible often speaks of God as the Light. It is convenient for me to use this concept now. God, as a pure virgin Light, floats in the existence of this world, which He created within the boundaries of time and space, and this world reflects Him; it reflects Him and fills it with the information about itself, as it is at this current moment in history. God's pure, virgin idea of the world includes the present state of this world, the state of a free man who chooses between good or evil at his will. The harsh God of the Old Testament and the God of Love of the New are the same. There are no contradictions in Him, it is all about man, who is not light, but only a reflecting object endowed with free will.

There is a concept that God permeates even hell, but hell remains hell.

Thus, a holy person in a state of Godlikeness partially refracts the virgin light of the Divine, sharing His nature, while a fallen sinner fills the virgin nature with information about himself. And this happens both in individuals and in entire populations of a certain historical era.

Christianity is not a theory; it is a practice; it is life itself. That is probably the place to start. All in all, this does not matter that much, I would not just like to share the information with you, but love itself, as the energy of the Divine. This is the main miracle and acquisition of my faith. If there is love in me, not delicacy, good breeding, good emotionality, but love itself, in its highest manifestation – to the point of love for enemies, God will be in me, and here the word stops, just a slight smile and a kind look in your direction.

A philosopher once said, “If there were no God, it would be worth it to invent Him, because without Him everything collapses. He is like a bracket that holds the whole meaning of being.” I do not need to invent Him; He is in my life. And I am so happy that I do not want to argue, just a slight smile and a kind look in your direction. Amen.

ABOUT LOVE

God is love, and those abiding in love abide in God, and those abiding in God abide in love. As God is complete, then love may be only complete. Incomplete love is a half-love, and without love, it is impossible to find God, as there cannot be a half-God.

Today, actually, people use the word “love” meaning whatever, even fully shame, and everyone has their own vision. But love is only what God defines as love.

Many people build relations, learn to sneak around, and show delicacy and goodwill – this means they have the will to achieve love. And this is a blessing, but it is incomplete.

As I have already said, shunning sins, and running from them is a good thing, but in this case, you are constantly running, and the sin can catch you up at any time.

The same story is with goodwill and sneaking around. This is good, but there is no perfection in this. Yet perfection is love to your enemies. Who is able to reach it? Relations building is not enough in this case. I have already said multiple times that the genuine, sacred meaning of humility and love does not come out of the etiquette “Excuse me... I’m sorry....” field. It comes out of the passionless spirit; this is when in any, even the worst situation, you stay in peace.

Unfortunately, most people, even churching ones, consider Christ's commandment about the love for our enemies as impossible a priori. Yes, we surely can somehow avoid confrontation, gently keep silent, grumble somewhere – but no more. Meanwhile, the commandment given to Christians by God was: “Therefore, you shall be perfect, just as your Father in Heaven is perfect.” (Mt. 5:48) This means God does not call on people to righteousness which is not perfect. He calls on them to holiness. I’m leading you to the idea that love cannot be achieved by running only. Real perfection can be gained in victory. And if you want to achieve real love, which is as complete as everything in spiritual life, you have to agree to fight for it and to win with the help of Christ.

But perfection cannot be reached without bearing a cross. There is no other way, no bypass. One has to take their cross.

I have always had a bad, acute sense of truth, and it would bring a lot of obstacles into my spiritual life. And I am kind of trying to do everything with love, but all the time getting far from it.

God lets us see each other’s imperfections for a reason. Do not be confused seeing wrong things done by your friends, manager, even by a person you worshiped. Especially by this very person. Do not be confused! Maybe this has been sent to you so that you could learn perfect love.

For every family, God allows an imperfection. Parents' imperfection shall keep their children from becoming arrogant and help them overcome it and love their parents not egoistically but saintly. Imperfection of children is sent to their parents so that they would love their kids not as their smart, kind, and obedient toys but completely

– in their indeed beauty. And we could not find more of each other's imperfections anywhere except in married life. And this is also about perfect love.

This way will surely hurt you and require a lot of patience from you, but there is no other way. You have to accept this pain, this sacrifice. And gradually you will get many good things. You will get something best of all because those abiding in love abide in God.

A state of love is a state of spiritualization, a state of a poet. A person who has fallen in love would say, "I forgive everyone for everything, I want to keep no bad things in mind!"

The Kingdom of Heaven is a state of love. And love, as we know, never fails and does not seek its own interest. That is, if there is love, then it is forever. And what makes a person in love happy is to give. And if a person has such a kind of love, it will be for them a threshold of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. This person can sense it. Those who believe sincerely and have saved pure, self-denying, gratuitous love already anticipate the Kingdom of Heaven here, on earth. And can you just imagine how good it will be for them There?

A DREAM

That was a dream. A dream with one peculiarity of complete clarity, pure senses which were evoking a state of reality of what was experienced.

He started rising higher and higher over the ground. First – over the area of his earthly “being” limited by the horizon. Then he raised so much that the far horizon turned from a line to a ring, and he saw the Earth as a sphere. A giant blue ball of light in the infinite space of darkness.

He moved on, and the giant ball that covered half of the sky began decreasing to the size of a football, then of a tennis ball and finally turned into a small far blue star.

An unknown power dragged him further and further, evoking the worry of distancing from the familiar point of his being.

Soon the Sun turned into a small blue dot – his last link with his home. Then it also dispersed in the space darkness.

He was moving with acceleration further and further. Strange worlds, and other galaxies were surrounding him. Anxiety started turning first into fear and then into horror. The horror of everything around is strange, and unknown, and the returning back becomes uncertain, and volatile. The reference points and directions are lost, he could not find where he came from and where he was moving to, and everything mixed and turned upside down. While the motion accelerated more and more, turning the state of fear and discomfort into bone-chilling terror.

He has already gotten so far that he began doubting the existence of his home. Darkness, eternity, cold, and terror.

He was experiencing the state of the Venerable Elder Sophronius, who felt Godforsakenness as a spaceman torn from a spaceship and drifting to open space. A microscopic grain of sand consumed by the enormous, endless black mass.

He has gotten so far that his loneliness becomes endless, terrifying, bloodcurdling, paralyzing the whole of his being. And the only thing he manages to do in this state of horror and despair is to produce a hoarse moan with a strange unknown voice, the voice of a hundred-year-old man, “My Lord... My Lord...” – very short and full of sense. Having consumed him all the terror left a very little space of hope that could hold only this “Lord” and nothing else.

Suddenly the space darkness began reviving with a tender, barely visible blue-and-white light of neon fog, which was getting thicker and covering his body, covering it tenderly, protecting him from the icing darkness.

The state of terror and loneliness was softening, passing, leaving the space for great peace, silence, and a sense of protection. He was no longer alone; he felt no more fear.

Everything changed dramatically. From the great loneliness and sorrow, he made a step into the space of peace and great love, and he felt this both around and inside of him, he was all saturated with this light.

That was indescribable, especially in contrast with the terror he had felt just a minute before.

“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.” (Rom. 5:3-5)

Having experienced a deep and strong tragedy that night, he got an experience. The experience of realizing that at the most extreme point God allows us to reach, almost at the point of no return, He is awaiting us.

And the only thing expected from him is to reveal faith, through patience, laconic and persuasive as “Amen”. And within this faith he should whisper from his torn, damaged by temptation, tortured heart a single word to Him, “My Lord...”.

“Lord Jesus Christ” – and nothing else.

And out of darkness and emptiness suddenly appears a light, barely visible blue-and-white luminous fog. It turns lighter, brighter, swaddling, lulling, saturating the whole being and filling it with the light.

God is Light, and there is no darkness in Him. God is Love.

CHAPTER 7

HOW TO BECOME A HOMO DIVINUS*?

ANSWERS TO DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

*(lat. “a man of God,” “a deified person”)

— **Is everything in our life predestined or do some things depend on us?**

— Of course, under no circumstances can we say that some things in our life are pre-determined. The entire experience of the saints, and even our humble spiritual endeavor, suggest that for God we are not some kind of robots or puppets, whom He leads by pulling the strings. Destiny is the essence of God, so the Lord has determined, so the Lord offers us. And we can take it or leave it. If we accept it - it will be well with us, if not - there will be sorrow. But even when we do not accept, God does not turn away from us but He immediately offers us another scenario, filled with grace. And again we can accept it, or not. And so it goes all our life. All our life we may not accept His good will for us, but He still does not turn away. In spite of our cluelessness and disobedience, He again looks for a good scenario for us, offers us a new plan and cares for us until our last breath. See how great God’s patience is with us!

— **Does God need our love?**

— I think He does.

Otherwise, He would not have created this world. He created this world so it could partake in the mystery of His love. So He could warm and preserve this world, so it, too, could feel joy and happiness that comes from His love. The Lord wishes to gift us this Love, and He wishes us to love Him back. In the big picture, love is paradise; it is happiness. When a person loves, he is in paradise. That is why God wants to give us this very paradise.

— **How to understand: does God hear me or not?**

— The Lord always hears us, even when you feel nothing, or everything is going bad or hard. Not one of your sighs will bypass His ear, nor will one sorrow bypass His heart.

Therefore, in those moments when you are doing your spiritual work but do not feel anything, except your callousness and spiritual dullness, and it may seem that you do not have any relationship with God, perhaps at this very moment you are carrying your cross with God...

It is easy to pray when you are inspired, and it is very hard when inspiration is gone. That is the moment when cross-carrying begins, then Pascha will follow. In the moments of spiritual life, when God seems distant and does not hear, or is inattentive, those very moments are the most treasured in your spiritual struggle. They will give you the best result. Saint Paul the Apostle said those wonderful words

that tribulation brings patience, patience experience; and experience produces hope, which will not make us feel ashamed (Romans 5: 3-5).

Look, everything starts from sorrows. So as it turns out, sorrows or tribulations give us this treasure: patience. And patience brings us another treasure, the art and experience. And the art gives us Hope that will not put us to shame. This is how the chain of struggles brings us our salvation.

— **How to get rid of resentment?**

— It is a very difficult task. But those who endured a lot, are the ones who will learn from their experience. Those who have tried many times to fight resentment, will get better and better over time. You must try it - once, three times, a hundred times. Maybe it will not work out today, tomorrow or even a year from now... Under no circumstances must you despair. It will happen!

There is no such recipe for a quick fix where you wave your hand and all your resentfulness is gone.

Just like pride, and many other things within us, resentment becomes rooted deep inside us, and it is a quality of our fallen human nature.

Therefore, it requires lots of work and patience, we must struggle not to get offended, and to do it again and again. And if you did get offended, try asking for forgiveness. And if that effort failed, at least try not to think about it all day long. It would be best if you could go to confession as soon as possible if this offense weighs heavily on your heart.

Get rid of everything during your confession, so when you leave, you will not need to remember it any longer. Ultimately, it all has to do with our happiness.

The person who is offended or resentful lives a very sad and gloomy life. And if a person is offended all the time, it is like hell on earth – he or she is constantly wounded.

Also, pay attention to those naive people who do not get easily offended, they smile from ear to ear all the time. I'm honestly jealous of such people. It is better to be silly but cheerful, than to be smart but always offended.

— **How to trust God?**

— To do this, you have to start collecting the treasure of humility. Humility is the most important treasure of Christianity; one cannot even pray without it. Humility is gained by the long experience of living in the Church, practicing the spiritual life, spiritual feats, and by Orthodox asceticism as a whole. This is a long and narrow path, but it is the most precious of what a human being has^[B1].

From where do we learn humility? From life experience. The more hard knocks you get because of your emotionality, the more pain you collect for your memory and intuition – the more experienced you become^[B2]. Experience inescapably requires time, long-suffering and persistence.

When humble people give themselves over to the will of God, they start experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Everything brings them happiness, nothing shakes their stability, nothing causes anger, nothing annoys or irritates. They are glad and thankful to God for everything. I believe this is what every Christian dreams of.

Probably even the saints, if they were asked what they would want more of would answer, ‘more humility’.

In truth, the one who practices patience becomes patient. For this reason the saints would intentionally deepen their ascetic feats. But for us, it is enough to bear what is sent by God. Unfortunately, today people have lost this treasure and very few possess it.

Ultimately, humility can be summarized by God’s commandment to, “Love your enemies” (Lk. 6:35). This means to be patient without end, patient not only with your own household, but with your very enemies. God offers this not simply as a commandment for our lives, but as a means of gaining Heaven. Just imagine: you start loving your enemies and your enemies disappear! This is not because they changed, but because of you who took a step towards them and in doing so acquired the Kingdom of Heaven.

Do not be in conflict with anyone about anything – not about people, nor the weather, nor life’s circumstances – nothing. Love everyone and be satisfied with everything. A person of this nature, despite being here on earth, already abides in Heaven.

— **How to resist anger and the wish to judge the neighbor?**

— Remember what God said to the Apostles to express how highly demanding His teaching was: “When His disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, “Who then can be saved?” And Jesus looking upon them said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible” (Mt. 19:25–26). We are hardly capable of overcoming the sin of anger, let alone the sin of judging our neighbor. But everything is possible for the one who receives God's grace.

Some people arrange their spiritual life incorrectly. They try to defeat a sin immediately and having defeated the sin – or so they think - they try to stand pure before God. They think that fulfilling all of God’s commandments is needed in order to begin a relationship with Him. But this results in a never-ending cycle with sin and no relation with God. You see, God has come exactly for this purpose – to save us, to save sinners. The only thing we need to do is to seek a relationship with God through concentrated prayer and the grace of the Holy Spirit. Only in this order will we be able to overcome and defeat sin completely. Of course, it goes without saying that we avoid sin, we confess when we fail, and we continue in our struggle.

We are not able to defeat our sins by ourselves. That is why we should first seek God in concentrated prayer. As soon as we are filled with God, there will be no place for sin – it will be displaced.

Some people say to me, “I follow all of God’s commandments.” I ask them, “Do you practice the prayer of the heart?” They reply, “No, this is only for holy people. I try to follow the commandments and live in accordance with my conscience.”

This is not the way. Isn’t it clear? Without God it is impossible because God is our source of illumination, inspiration and power, and it is He who gives us understanding and ability.

That is why in trying to fulfill the commandments, one should look for the means of their fulfillment, and the only means is Christ. If we focus on Him, we get the sweetness of Heaven. And there is nothing greater and sweeter than this.

— **How to overcome sorrows?**

— There is no person on earth who has never had sorrows. A baby is born and he is afraid of losing his mom and dad. He grows up, finds a girlfriend, gets married and is constantly afraid of losing her. Their babies are born, and fear is born together with them: that they might fall ill, and that they might lose them. Then we lose our parents, and then our health. In addition, throughout our lives we are haunted by the fear of our own death. Our whole life consists of fears, which are rather objective. It is impossible not to lose anything in one's life, and stupid are those people who convince themselves that everything is alright.

Our earthly life is always related to a burden. Any day joy may be replaced with sorrow. We should not expect to have paradise on earth. Paradise exists only in Heaven. We can have it on earth, but only partially, when we accept the scenario of God, and it will become easier and even joyful for us to endure sorrows.

In Georgia, one man asked me, "How should I overcome my sorrow? How can I bear it?" To which I answered, "You know, the Church doesn't always have a recipe for resolving all sorrows. It may happen that you come to Church, pray and cry there, but your situation doesn't change for the better. Very often we cannot change what has happened to us. There is a remedy; we should not avoid sorrows and pain, but dedicate them to God. Be patient for Christ's sake, and dedicate your patience, your cross-bearing to Christ God, and you will feel better. Present your sorrow, pain and burden to Christ and say, "Lord, I accept this for Your sake. I have no other way, I will have to endure all this and be patient. That is why I dedicate my patience to You. Let it be for Your sake." And you will feel better. And there will be a point to it."

— **Why do people have so many problems in family life, if God blesses marriage?**

— Family life may become a great happiness and joy, and at the same time that same family life may turn out to be a curse, such a burden that people simply are no longer capable of living. Often we pester God for happiness in family life and for some reason He does not give it to us. But if we look at ourselves honestly, then we will be able to honestly put up such a question, "Am I ready to live a family life as God intended it to be? Am I ready to not use my spouse as a toy for myself, not as an object for love that is supposed to satisfy and entertain me, but precisely as a person that I will give everything to, until the end. Am I ready?" Exactly these conditions may make family life happy, all the rest is unhappiness. One time I was invited to family anniversary services, to congratulate couples that have lived in marriage for fifty years. It was so touching... Bridegrooms go, their pants all crumbled, shuffling their feet, the brides do not walk lightly either, but they put up a waltz for them and asked them to dance. I looked at them and thought: now this is love! There stand two people: awkward, unsightly, gawky - and with them there is love. Fifty years ago it was infatuation, and here it is love, it was proved by time, temptations, losses, quarrels, misunderstanding - they have overcome it all and now it is love - through the cross, through patience. There was a striving for family life put into us by God, a striving for seeking a relationship, but we fail to understand that we first need to

attune ourselves to that relationship, overcome our own selves, trample down our selfishness - and only then may that relationship happen. One and the same family life, one and the same relationship may bring so much joy that a person will fly as if on wings, and these same conditions may simply trample a person down, rip him to shreds, if he is not ready for family life. Affliction in the married life happens only for one reason - selfishness. Selfishness is the inverse of love. When the law of love is broken and a person stops sacrificing himself for the sake of the one he loves, starts drawing everything to his own side, then an imbalance happens, the relationship breaks, and people lose each other. And here comes that great tragedy of loneliness that tears the heart apart.

— **How to stop judging my neighbor?**

— Our life is often similar to us drawing something with the right hand, and crossing it off with the left. Learn to not evaluate your neighbor with the experience of losing grace. When we lead an attentive spiritual life, then we begin to notice: what we're acquiring and what we are losing. If a person does not even understand this, then he is going to church in vain.

Here he received communion - and he is ready to forgive everyone, ready to forget offenses. And there he got distracted, started gossiping with someone - and in place of peace, hustle comes into the heart, anxiety, hardness. But it is such a pity - you have acquired such a treasure - and lost it in just one minute!

— **It happens that some sins become practically a habit. Is there anything you can do about them?**

— Yes, all of us have sins that have firmly come into our lives, and we cannot just quit them. It is good, in such a case, to push away from some good spiritual event, from some spiritual impression, that gives us inspiration. For example, a person started getting ready for communion, made peace with everyone, started praying sincerely, attentively, started fasting and being in solitude... And all that process softened and strengthened his heart, and he became stronger. You may push away from that, and say to yourself: I will receive Communion, go out - and I will never ever do that thing again. And here you cannot do what some people do, when they, for example, give up smoking or drinking. You cannot just lessen the dose: a cigarette today, half a cigarette tomorrow... You have to quit once and for all and be afraid to even think about it again. Because we all know - should you even think about it, the thought will start growing more and more - and it will curl the person up so much that he will come back to his sin quite fast.

So we, when we are trying to overcome some sort of continual sin, should better avoid situations that tempt us, dispose ourselves very resolutely, strengthen ourselves with spiritual impression - and not allow within ourselves the possibility to even think of that sin.

— **What is true faith?**

— It is not faith in what you have read, heard or what you have already been given, it is already your personal experience - and not past or future, but today's. It is such

a special format of existence, experience. This experience comes in the state of prayer, when your mind changes, clears up.

At this moment, God is revealed to you absolutely not in the way you imagined before. He is revealed to you very clearly, you see Him without any illusions or fantasies. In such a state a person is already a saint. In such a state, he or she experiences God in a very real way.

— **What is true prayer?**

— When a person acquires pure prayer, when he, using our earthly concepts, is face to face with God - he already very advertently senses that he is exactly before God, and is speaking with God, with Him Who is omnipresent, Who is the heart-seeker. And he understands that right now it is not necessary, simply even stupid to explain anything to God - God knows everything, and a person may simply utter, “Lord... Lord... Jesus... Jesus...”

The most important principle of prayer is not about what, but to Whom we will speak. It is like that even in ordinary, everyday matters - if you have not built a relationship with whom you are speaking to, then the point of what you will be saying to them is lost.

When you are too tied to the form of prayer, then you lose its essence. People mistakenly fall in for prayer books, some special prayers, “So how do I say this to God in such a way that He would surely help me in this?” But, as it is said in the Scripture, “He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eye, shall he not see?” (Psalm 94:9). You think God understands us poorly?

Remember how the Lord was standing before Pilate, and Pilate asked, “What is truth?” And Christ said, “I am the Truth.” Not “what,” but “Who.” In the same way, prayer is not a what, but a Who. Christ is our prayer, when we have united ourselves to Him. He is our mind, He is our heart, He is our feeling. We are already praying to Christ by Christ. Our mind is taken captive by Christ. That is true prayer.

— **How to live through difficult situations?**

— I say very often that patience is already prayer; patience is already the beginning of spiritual life. I would even say, it is its foundation. Everything starts with patience, and patience has to be acquired. He who endured a lot, already has a skill, even more precisely - the art of patience. That is why, when there are unfortunate days - whether in the physical way, or by some outward circumstances, or by inner state: inside everything is despondent, confused, prayer is not working, thoughts are overwhelming, - then it is necessary to engage in the art of patience. Endure, and that's it.

In this theme of patience there is one very important moment: when you endure, by no means get strained. Endure softly - and then it will be much easier for you right away.

That, then, is the true, deep, acute understanding of humility. Not when we say “forgive me,” “I'm sorry,” “bless me,” but when we endure without being strained, without anger, without disappointment. Try to always retain a soft state. Whatever may be happening, may even the earth divide right under your feet - and you are still

- without panic, you are still - soft. A hardened person is brittle. And everything that is soft is flexible. And alive. A soft branch is bent to the ground - and it doesn't even think of breaking - it returns to its state again. A dry branch though is dead easy to break, touch it lightly - and it's already cracking. When there is no prayer, no attention, no strength for good deeds, you still have one most important deed: don't despair, don't get strained, don't freak out. If you retain softness, a lot will return afterwards.

— **How do I tell an unbeliever about our faith?**

— Faith should not be preached with words, but shown. But not shown in the way that one elderly lady once told me, "I have such zeal for God, I'm ready to kill." But in such a way, for example. A person was an alcoholic. The whole neighborhood suffered from him, once he was drunk - that's it, the end for everybody. And suddenly he became a believer. Several years have passed, people say, "Wow, what a joy for us! May we all become such believers."

If you have unbelieving friends, try to show them the beauty of our faith - not through dogmatic truths though, but through the changing of your own self. If before they knew you, for example, as a person who is not reserved in some things, who is grumpy, selfish, and suddenly, after some time, see real changes in you, for them that will be more important than any reasons and arguments.

Orthodoxy, if it is real, has a real result. It is not a theoretical religion, but a religion of being, that truly changes a person and gives him joy.

However, we need to act through the heart, not the mind. If you push somebody away right away on the level of the heart, put a barrier on, you cannot prove anything later on.

— **How to pray so that God hears?**

— For God to hear our prayer, we must first learn to hear it ourselves. For we sometimes read prayers from books, from prayer books, and our thoughts are flying somewhere far.

When we learn to lead a dialogue with a person, we are trying to hear the person we speak to and cease everything that is ours. The same happens in the dialogue with God. We cease our impressions, our images, our logical thinking, everything ours - and stand in this emptiness and darkness. And then God Himself appears there meeting us.

Until we cease everything ours, as long as we without ceasing say "ta-ta-ta", we simply do not let the interlocutor open their mouth. It is the same in spiritual life and in prayer, too: we need to cease our "I am" in order to hear God.

— **How to find out God's will?**

— I would say, the worst of all is to wonder about God's will. Your guesses mean nothing, "Maybe this, or maybe that." But the mistakes may cost a lot. The people who are in the state of theosis know God's will. Their mind is in the mind of Christ, their heart is in the heart of Christ. And us, sinners, are like that blind man to whom the Lord gives back his sight and asks, "What do you see?", and he responds, "I see

people like trees.” Similarly to this are we: we see, then we do not. Our spiritual sight is very unreliable. That is why to reason about God’s will is very dangerous and responsible.

In our state, it is better to counsel, to pray - and look at life circumstances. The circumstances themselves may sometimes solve a situation in such a way that you will say, “Here, everything was solved, even though I have not taken any cardinal actions.”

I think, if you approach any sensible priest with a question on God’s will, he will sincerely say to you, “Forgive me, please, but I am not in the condition to speak God’s will. Let’s better pray together and wait. God will, with some outward situation, reveal His will.”

If we take a look from a different side, we will then see: those Holy Fathers who were in the Spirit, knew God’s will very simply. They knew already without doubts, that is why they spoke very convincingly and firmly. But pay attention, even the Venerable Ambrose of Optina, when a person came to him, could afford to say such wonderful words, “Please forgive me, I do not know God’s will about you, let’s pray more.”

And God forbid that we say at some moment, “God’s will is in so and so.” And what if there is no God’s will there? It turns out to be blasphemy on the Holy Spirit. Please do not play with such things.

— **I feel uncomfortable saying “I forgive” without feeling it...**

— Your forgiveness is your business. And the behavior of the person asking forgiveness is their business. If today you reconcile with the person who let you down and keeps doing it, who insulted you and keeps doing it, then you are solving your problem, so that you have no stone inside you that presses down on your heart and your nerves. And his stone is his stone. The demon always distracts us from what is most important, from our problem, from our splinter that is sitting in our heart, and transitions our attention to the splinter of another.

Thinking of another’s sins, as the holy fathers say, is the same as crying over someone else’s dead body. You have a coffin with a dead body at home, and you go to your neighbor to cry over theirs. Such a neighbor's dead body is in the heart of each one of us, and it is decomposing us. That is why, whether the person has changed or not, we ask them forgiveness and forgive them not because they have repented, and we are so generous. We ask forgiveness to solve our problem. Even if we are right for ten years, and they are wrong and keep on deceiving us all the time. Apostle Peter asked Christ a question, “Lord! How many times do I forgive my brother, sinning against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus tells him, “I do not tell you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seventy” (Mt. 18:21-22). Do not forgive seven times, but seventy seven. And the Lord says it for your own sake. He says, “Do you want to be happy? Forgive, forgive even him who is wrong, even the guilty, even the traitor.” What you do not forgive - you carry within yourself. It is your bad sleep, your sad condition during the day, your absence of joy. Do you need this?

— **What does it mean to always have peace of soul? Should lawlessness not invoke any feelings?**

— What does any lawlessness start with? With the absence of peace. We say: “Why should I have peace of soul, when lawlessness is all around?” Because lawlessness developed from the absence of peace. To stop lawlessness, we need to return to peace. First to personal peace, then in the family, in town, in the country. But everything begins with your personal peace. If you see lawlessness and get irritated, you multiply lawlessness. That lawlessness birthed lawlessness in you, the outward birthed your inward lawlessness. And you got angry, and an angry person is capable of lawlessness. And a peaceful and tranquil one is not.

You see someone’s lawlessness - dig up your memory, and you will surely find a similar occurrence in your life. See, someone deceives, just as you start to resent - remember, and you will find out that you also had this. And you will fall silent. You see, someone betrayed, you want to tear them up - wait, do not hurry, search yourself, and you will find not one betrayal in your life, but thousands.

— **Can a Christian think about material things and wish to have a better job and save up money?**

— Indeed, we can and need to think about material things. You know, once a woman came up to Metropolitan Antony of Sourozh and said, “Father, I am a spiritual person. I know only spiritual things, and nothing else matters to me.” To which he answered, “My dear, whether you like it or not, you consist of body, soul and spirit, and you cannot do anything about this. You are material yet.”

The Lord created us in this way, that we consist of three parts – a body, a soul and a spirit. Each of them requires attention. It is no good when the material part prevails or dominates over the spiritual one. We need to differentiate between primary and secondary issues. Surely, for a Christian, his or her soul should be the most important issue. We should realize that our bodies will not exist forever. We can live “by reason of strength” (Ps. 89:11) 70 or 80 years and die, and the body will perish. However, during our lifetime, we are enclosed in our bodies. The Holy Fathers sometimes compare a human body to a donkey carrying a soul to the Kingdom of Heaven. They say, “If you overfeed the donkey, it will become wild, but if you underfeed it – it will fall and die.” That means that everything needs its balance. We should pay attention to our body, but we should not indulge it in any way. Otherwise, it will dominate over our soul, and we will have trouble: the body will enslave the soul. Hence, the body with its mundane passions will bring a person to a swinish state.

Should we wish for a better job and look for it? Of course, we should. And can pursue it. It is another matter, if the Lord does not give us a better job. At some point, however, we should realize God’s Providence, submit to it and be patient.

God does not forbid us to seek something better. Ultimately, Christianity is seeking the best. Before we became Christians, we lived in a bestial state and were satisfied with everything: we were well-fed, comfortable, warm, and employed. But when we became Christians, we began to seek something better: something spiritual and beautiful. Like the merchant who seeks the pearl of great price and sells all his

possessions in order to purchase the pearl of great price, as he realizes how valuable it is. That is why, if necessary, you may change your job.

It is a different matter, if people have ambitions in their spiritual lives. If a person changes his or her jobs and place of living very often, this speaks for his or her inner instability, on the inward problems. Such people always seek something else due to their inability to get along with the given circumstances. If a monk often changes monasteries, this is bad; this shows that he cannot live peacefully at any of them. Will things be better in some other place? Perhaps he is the reason?

May people save up money? Of course, they may. It is a different matter whether you will be attached to it and how much you should save. For example, you do save up and your cousin comes up to you and says, “I am making arrangements for a funeral.”

As long as you easily give your savings and help people – Glory to God, save up then! If no external need arises, then you may use it yourself. In this case, your test will be how much the worldly things attract you. If you are not attracted too much, you are more or less free and this will not cause any harm. Enslavement is bad. It is bad when a relative comes to you and says, “I have a problem and I need your help,” and you, having money, have trouble giving it to him or her. It is a failure if you become a slave of your possessions.

— **How do we begin our spiritual lives?**

Sometimes an event happens which shakes us up. But it is better for you to talk to those people who live spiritually better than you do. You are relaxed, while they strive, pray and perform a spiritual feat. You look at them and have a burning desire to do something. That is why we read the Lives of Saints and go on pilgrimage. It would seem, God permeates everything, but when He appeared before Moses in the burning bush, He said the following words, “Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground” (Exod. 3:5).

The Lord chooses holy sites according to His Providence, and His energy reveals itself particularly at a special place. We call these places holy. The same works with people. Some people strive better, some fair a little worse, but no one should give up. In the end, the Lord will reward our endeavors. You should only watch out for the people who will teach you something intrusively. If a person sees you for the first time, even if he is a monk, and imposes his recommendations upon you, this speaks for his bad spiritual state. A good spiritual state makes a person humble and unintrusive.

— **How does the Grace of God come to a person?**

— I have recently talked to one Father from Athos. He says, “I wonder, why when I disobey, I feel Grace leave me. On the other hand, when I obey, I do not feel it come. Why is this so?”

I suppose, the Grace of Christ is so gentle, so mild and humble that it comes to a person so mildly that he or she does not even notice that. God is very gentle, He does not come accompanied by a flourish of trumpets. Demonic things come gaily and with grandeur.

I always experience the same when I come back from Athos. You live on Holy Mount and naturally become a part of the atmosphere, and the Grace comes unnoticed. But when you come back to the world with its dynamics and passions, your heart begins bleeding and you feel that you lose what you have gained...

— **How should we behave towards our spiritual father?**

— Some people go to extremes – they either see a saint, even an angel, in their spiritual guide, or a great sinner, or get attached to him like an ordinary man. In order to avoid such swings, never evaluate him. He is only a spiritual guide for you, and that is the point. Do not reflect on what kind of person he is, or what he has done today. It is considered bad manners to evaluate your spiritual father. This is so not only from a moral point of view, but also because at some moment you may lose the right relationship with him, attach to him as a man and start losing your spiritual bond. Sometimes you will attribute too much to him, and then you will see his human nature.

You have evaluated him before you made your choice. Now you should relax, trust him and make no assessments.

— **Why do some people improve in a month, while the others cannot succeed for years?**

— We are all different. We were born in different conditions and circumstances, with different characters, that is why we cannot be all alike. In fact, some people may do something very fast, while it will take the others more time to accomplish the same things.

However, the Lord will judge us not by something we have attained, but by the state of our spirit. Someone has done almost nothing to improve, while another has worked hard. Some people have a fast prayer, humility and good deeds, while the others, since their childhood, have a bad temper, which interferes, but they try to their best: repent, cry and apply much effort in order to change. The mere fact that they do not fall into despair and do not say, “Nothing is working out, I give up”, but keep repenting for years instead, applying and applying their efforts – this is very noble and high. This is spiritual beauty.

That is why the main thing we can do in our case is not to fall into despair and never give up.

— **Should we build self-esteem?**

— This is the method of psychologists. But if a person keeps saying to himself, “I am a king, I am a king, I am a king” – he will not become a king. It is better not to build your self-esteem, but to think about the love of the Savior Who loves everyone, whether it be a sinner or not. If you build your self-esteem, saying “everything is ok” and “well done”, and, at the same time, you sin from morning till night, you may fall into delusion and deceive yourself. You will have to face reality soon, and this may result in despair. It is better to look at ourselves soberly, realizing that we are sinners. Of course, we could have fallen into despair, should we not have God, Who

loves both sinners and the righteous, the ugly and beautiful equally, as we always make mistakes and sin.

You should not deceive yourself saying everything is ok. It is not ok, it is bad. The only good thing is that God loves us as we are and waits for us to change. In our turn, we know how God is patient with us. Everyone knows. The Lord says, “I will be a little more patient. Come on, do it.” And we should act, not because we are able to, but because God is expecting you to do this. And you feel shame for treating God’s long patience inattentively and selfishly.

This should be your motivation: the mercy of God and God’s long suffering. He is waiting. He is waiting on the cross. That is why we should hurry. God forgives us and gives us every day, but at the same time He is on the cross. We should act.

— **How to struggle against negative thoughts?**

— Of course, one may struggle against thoughts due to their being a sin, but this is almost useless. It would be perfect and more useful if you fight against evil thoughts because they separate you from God at this very moment. You allow evil thoughts to come into your heart, and you become estranged from God and deprived of His Grace at once. Surely, for those people who have never experienced God in the Jesus prayer, these are nothing but words. Meanwhile, those, who during their noetic prayer, felt the Grace of God as a great peace, silence, serenity, humility and love, begin to see through their experience how the Grace leaves them, or otherwise, how it becomes stronger in them. When they have evil thoughts, they lose Grace. Grace is very sweet. And losing this sweetness is very bitter and hurtful. This should be a criterion of your behavior. Not the words “you will burn in hell” or “they will fry you there” – it will not happen that soon! But the fact that you have just offended your neighbor and lost Grace. You have spent three hours reciting the Jesus prayer and gained silence, serenity, peace and the sweetness of the Holy Spirit, and now you are losing all this gained within three hours in one moment by mistreating your neighbor.

You have lost this and cried at once. And this is not philosophy, this is our life and existence.

— **What is nobility of spirit?**

— St Paisios the Athonite defines such notions as piety and devotion. He says, piety is a sweet-scented perfume, while devotion is like a Divine incense. These are two different things. One may have outward piety, but at the same time admire oneself, one’s deeds. In this case, piety is not being exercised for Christ’s sake, but for the sake of a feat, a good name and relationship among people. Meanwhile, devotion starts when people begin to experience God vividly and keenly, when God transforms from an idea into the Person, a real Person. Their piety becomes different, deeper and holier. Their prayer helps them to experience God. They begin to have devotion, as their relationship with God has started. Not imaginary, but a true relationship, which transforms into love. When a person loves someone, he or she becomes devoted to everything related to his or her beloved. When your relationship with God comes from the realm of piety to the realm of devotion, your

saintly life starts. Perhaps, when people come up with devotion, they become spiritually noble. Everything they do, they do out of devotion, that is why they become saintly and wise.

—**Can one be a sociable person and simultaneously lead a spiritual life?**

— You should always take into consideration the end result, whether it will be advantageous or disadvantageous. What purpose does your socializing serve? Sometimes we may socialize for hours and then find ourselves spiritually hollow after such conversations. It would seem we have talked about good and even spiritual things, but after these talks, we feel spiritually wasted, as we have wasted our emotions and attention for nothing. The Holy Fathers named excessively long conversations on spiritual topics verbosity. Why? Because it is one thing when you just speak about something, but it is quite another thing when you live and breathe by this. Sometimes we talk too much about spiritual issues and start to believe that we live like that. In fact, we do nothing but talk. While a true spiritual life is not in talks, but in acts.

Sometimes we face the fact that we do not know what spiritual life is. We have discussed, read, considered much, but as far as a certain spiritual deed is concerned, we appear inconsistent before it, even in smallest things. Because our whole spiritual life and our whole Orthodoxy have dwelled in the realm of dreams, reflections and philosophy.

Is socializing an obstacle to our spiritual life? Everything, which is excessive, is an obstacle for spiritual life, including excessive socializing. The monastics are not talkative not because they are cold, proud, arrogant or do not like people. No, they simply love and act in a different way. They love and act through prayer. But in order to have prayer one needs to have silence and attention.

— **What is the fear of the Lord?**

— I have been visiting prisons and convicts for 20 years, including those with life sentences, and I have understood there are no conditions so strict as to ensure absolute obedience of a person. The more rigorous the disciplinary procedures, the more cunning prisoners are, and the more devious their self-preservation instinct is. Even when they have been released, the habit of surviving remains with them. They behave like this, for a while, being at large: getting what they want by any means. And some of them act in such a way for the rest of their lives. They do not pay attention to the people who surround them, and ignore relatives...

Here is another example: I noticed something very interesting when I was undergoing surgery in Orenburg in 2000, at the Regional Ontological Hospital. Even the ominous name of the hospital would strike fear into anyone. There were ten people in my room, most of them are probably no longer living. One thing struck me then, not one of them prayed with me, nor read the Holy Gospel. They still told jokes, played cards, and talked about worldly things. Even a near-death encounter, something to be seriously feared, had not changed their thoughts or disposition. Why have I given these two examples? I have done it to show, no fear can help you change

yourself, or overcome selfishness. However, if you develop constant fear of losing your relationship with the Lord, your bonds with Him are true.

No society, no monastery is built on fear. Outward attitudes would be more cunning, smiles wider, bows lower, people would say, “Geronda, geronda...”, having nothing genuine inside. No perfect helpful fear can come from fear of punishment. A person can be broken down to such a state as a mindless robot, but it is not his true personality.

Children are the same, as we overreact and become too strict with them, they seem obedient, but they begin lying to us. It is the most terrible thing, when we lose a genuine relationship. The fear of the Lord is the same, it cannot be based on fear of the end, nor fear of your last minute, nor everlasting punishment. The fear of the Lord is based on love.

— **How can wisdom and bravery be achieved?**

— There is earthly wisdom, and there is spiritual wisdom. They are absolutely different. Spiritual wisdom naturally comes from humility. Thank God, if you think you have no wisdom, it means that your mind is intact. On the contrary, if a person thinks himself or herself quite all right, it is the end! Amen and memory eternal.

A saint was asked: “How does spiritual deception begin?”, to which, the saint reflected this way: A person thinks, “Why would I do what my temporary superior says? I know what I have to do better than they do.” The next thought is, “Why would I do as my abbess says?” Then, “Why would I do as my spiritual father says?” Following the same thought process, “Why would I do as the bishop says – he is also a man.” The next thought will be, “Why would I do as the patriarch says – he is also a human being.” After that, “Why would I do as Apostle Paul says – he was a man too.” It ends in the most terrible thing, “Why would I do as Christ says?”

That saint briefly described the illness which is called opinion. Spiritual deception may be of two types. The first type is when a person trusts some events, dreams, or personal feelings. The second, more dangerous, subtler type is when he or she begins believing in himself or herself. “I know, I understand, I feel,” the person states. It ends in denying Christ. We cannot be wise by ourselves. Our wisdom begins when we reach a very helpful stalemate and say, “Lord, I am all confused. I relied on my mind, on my judgment so much yesterday, and now I see it failed me. I cannot find answers to basic spiritual questions, and I do not know what to do.” In such situations a person stops relying on himself or herself and begins relying on the Lord. Thus, spiritual wisdom is gained.

Our bravery is from the Holy Spirit. To be perfectly frank, not one of us is brave. All of us are very cowardly and weak. Bravery begins to appear in us when we have received the Holy Spirit, and lead a spiritual life. Then we get inspired. That is to say, the Holy Spirit enters a person, so inspiration spreads over him or her. On the other hand, there is another spirit, a malignant thing. When he occasionally enters people, he may inspire quite different deeds. We need the power of Holy inspiration, which makes us stronger, so that we; being weak and cowardly, begin suddenly doing great things.

I watched a documentary about a terrible railway disaster, which happened in Bashkiria in 1989. A large gas explosion occurred there with two passenger cars passing by at the time. They were derailed, and a massive fire broke out terrifying everyone. A serviceman [soldier], had been carrying babies and women out of the burning cars, helping others. With rescuers, physicians, and journalists surrounding the scene, the serviceman was being transported to a hospital with 90% of his body covered in burns, and cameramen managed to film him in the last shots of the documentary. Despite his hopeless state, he spoke to the camera so sincerely and lightly, “Though I am a serviceman, I have always been embarrassed by my own cowardice.” And he had achieved such a feat – giving his own life for people. He was humble and joyful at the same time in his last moments. He was dying happily.

— **How can we find pride in ourselves?**

— Extreme degrees of pride are obvious, there is no need to speak about them. But there is some kind of subtle pride – when a person always insists on his or her own point of view, when he or she cannot back down. Even if a person is right, but cannot agree, in particular, for the sake of peace, for the sake of avoiding conflicts, for the sake of avoiding grudges, this is very bad. The main point of spiritual life is the presence of peace.

People very often ask how to recognize a wrong state of spirit? All of us speak very wisely and very spiritually. Listening to us, we should all be canonized. Looking at our deeds, we should not. Our rhetoric is often so that one is right, and the other is also right, one is spiritual, and the other is spiritual too.

The only means of judging your spirituality, if it is right or not, if it is deception or not, is by examination of your relationship with people. Even if someone does not love and understand you, if they hate you, it does not matter. How you treat people yourself is what is important. If you have tolerated something (I am not speaking about love, it is too difficult for us), if you have stayed silent at some moment, have backed down for the sake of peace, your spiritual state is right, your prayer is right, your effort is not in vain. The number of your bows, prayers, akathists read, and visits to church are not important. Everything is in vain if there is no main result. The main result is peace.

The Lord says in the Holy Gospel, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you.” (Jn. 14:27) It is something more perfect than we can realize with our earthly mind. There must be peace not only in our relationships, but also in our heart. We may seem to have peace in our dealings with people, while staying far from peaceful on the inside. A person may even keep silent, step aside and seem agreeable, peaceful but then condemnation arises in this person, “If I would have only said these words, I could have put him in his place in such a way...”

And a person reaches his or her best state, when he or she can grovel for the sake of love, for the sake of peace. If a person is overtly right and still grovels, being told by everybody, “You are right, so why have you backed down?” And he answers, “I back down for the sake of Christ, to get inner peace, to please Christ.”

What upsets Christ the most is that we quarrel. A parent is always upset if children quarrel, so is Christ. A parent may even say to their children, “Do not help me with anything, I will do everything myself, only do not quarrel, please.”

Even if a person practices the Jesus prayer deeply all the time, and it works day and night – this will be in vain if the person cannot back down for the sake of peace, cannot be of service or, again, cannot grovel, cannot admit that he or she is wrong being a thousand times right.

Peace of soul, this is holiness. Holiness is not in a feat, but in humility. The more humility you have gained, the closer to God you are. Humility, this is a state of Heaven. The Lord says we must anticipate Heaven in this life. What is it to anticipate Heaven? It means that we must gain a state close to Heaven in our lifetime. Of course, it cannot be completely heavenly, but still. Heaven comes to a person not when he or she has gained or has saved something or has defeated someone, but when the person has peace inside. He or she may even live in misery as well as in dishonor.

— **How to learn not to envy?**

— Envy is based on earthly enjoyment. If earthly joy, money saving, superiority, and emotional passions are everything to a person, he or she will not get rid of it. It is necessary to taste the fruits of the Holy Spirit and to feel the sweetness of humility to get rid of envy. And here we are saying “humility, humility”, but it is necessary not only to realize humility, but also to taste it, to feel its joy!

It takes many long years of hard work to reap the fruits of asceticism, still humility may give the joy of the Holy Spirit at once. But, it should be experienced. May God help you to experience these moments of humility, when the Lord is so close.

The proud cannot enjoy the sweetness of humility, so they enjoy earthly joys. Of course, I agree that common earthly things, simple joys lift our heart: family, work, friends, owning nice things. But if we compared these joys with the fruits of the Holy Spirit, they would become tasteless for us.

If a child has been fed only on cream of wheat, and then, one day, they would give him some delicious food, its extraordinary taste would make his head spin. Similarly, we, earthly people, live earthly lives, enjoy earthly joys, earthly friendship, earthly comfort and know nothing of Heavenly food. If we taste Heavenly food, we will lose our appetite for all earthly things. One more important thing is to have the right guideline, to know where to go. Otherwise, a person will work hard, but in vain. The right, good guideline is humility giving Grace. The taste of Grace cannot be compared to anything, and you will agree to be the last, to be three times wrong just not to lose it, to experience it again and again.

That is why, answering the question, how to learn not to envy, I say, you have to experience Christ. And you can experience Christ only in the mystery of humility. Thus, when you have experienced Christ, then you will have a desire for nothing more.

— **What is lukewarmness?**

— Lukewarmness is when a person does not sin, but he or she does not do anything good at the same time. It is some kind of caution.

Nowadays, some no-good spiritual opinion is widely spread in our Church, they say that it is dangerous to pursue asceticism, otherwise a person may fall into spiritual deception. So, people fall into another kind of deception – they do nothing. But a person cannot be constantly in one place: he or she moves up, to God, or down.

In the Holy Gospel, there is a fable about talents, when a master gave his servants talents. The first of them got ten talents, another got five, and the third got one. And that last servant, who had received one talent, returned the same. He had not spent it on bad things, but he had not multiplied it either. Do you remember what the master did to him? He punished him strictly for that and he did not even want to see him...

— **How to get used to seeing the image of God in every person?**

— Seeing is not a habit, it is a mystery. There is no special way of developing vision for you to see spiritual things, they are seen not by an effort of the will, but by the Holy Spirit. When you lead the right spiritual life, practice the Jesus prayer and obedience, you will begin experiencing the Holy Spirit, and then, the Holy Spirit will open your spiritual eyes and you will see. You will see neither cars passing by, nor trees, but spiritual things. You will see deeply, subtly, and then, naturally, you will see the image of God in every person.

— **How to act if the mind begins doubting faith?**

— If we look at how many great scientists were believers, and how many were unbelievers, then there will be more of the believers. When a scientist enters the area of the great mystery – the creation of everything in the world, so clerky, so harmonical, so complex, – he cannot be an unbeliever.

I sometimes say: how strong is the faith of atheists, for there are no facts of God not existing, and yet they continue to believe! If you ask any atheist scientist, what facts can he provide that there is no God?

How can he prove that? There is no way to. Believers have at least some facts: we refer to the experience of the saints, each one of us has their own small experience. No matter what we look at in the world, the Mind, the Architect, the Artist Who has created everything is visible everywhere.

But God is not seen with the mind. Do not prove anything to yourself, live a spiritual life, and everything will be built for you naturally.

— **Can there be a lie for good?**

— If some person has a heavy sin, and we begin to announce that sin to the public - is that the truth? Yes, it is the truth. But will we be really pleasant in the eyes of the Lord with that truth? We will be scoundrels. Because we are baring another's sin, judging it for the whole world to see. God's truth here would be so that we would cover their sin and help them change.

Truth as the result, not the fact.

Or, for example, a person is in despair. They come to me for confession. I see that they are in despair, maybe even only a step away from suicide, but I begin to tell

them the truth: you have committed adultery, you drink, you have lost your family, lost your job... And they leave such a confession and shoot themselves somewhere. And my truth will become a great un-truth. Sometimes all of us love to act that way. Especially journalists have such a saying "but we are writing the truth". But it's not always ethical to say the truth.

Same with lies for good. There is a lie as a fact and a lie as a result. If I walked down the street and saw a person running somewhere, and then in a minute saw another man, with an ax, and he had ask me, "Where did that man I'm chasing run to?", and I pointed him in the opposite direction, would I have lied? Yes, that would be a lie. But I would save a life.

Here, of course, we need to have reasoning. Or now, someone, following my words, will decide that it's necessary to lie from dusk till dawn. We need to always check our actions with our conscience.

— **How to not be afraid of crises?**

— I have heard somewhere that to better the mark of gold, you need to burn through it. Spiritual life is very similar. When you rise at night for Jesus' prayer, there can be such breakings, you so very much don't want to, everything hurts.

Praise God that when you have experience and know for sure - what will be born in this overcoming, will never be born just like that. If you rose and it all went easily - in this comfortable state you will not have that Jesus prayer that you will have at night when you got up and you are so smashed up, both on the inside and physically. Exactly then there will be prayer, when you overcome all of that - but not with your own strength.

Such a moment comes in spiritual life when you are not scared of these critical conditions, but, in a way, you even rejoice to have them. That is why, as I already said, the holy fathers came up with asceticism - when they did not have a crisis, they made it up artificially - because they knew that is how they got grace. Sophrony Sakharov's books are all riddled with it, on every page they speak about that state on the verge of hell.

This experience has to be acquired. Do not be afraid of it, do not shy away from it, do not panic, do not be cast down. For right there, on that verge of hell, Christ meets us, and grabs us - so that we do not fall!

— **Is it necessary to tell another person that they are committing a sin right now?**

— This depends on the situation, on the state - both yours and that other person's. If they are standing on the edge of an abyss, we should not, God forbid, make any moves.

You may push that person in there unwillingly with some emotion of yours. They are standing on the edge, stones are flying off from under their feet! At such a time you need to freeze and, like a surgeon during a surgery, be very careful and precise. In every dialogue, in every action we should seek the result, and not just an action for the sake of it.

I have a play about a mental hospital and in it, a professor says to sick people, “Well, at least you have good motivation!”

Sometimes a person has good motivation but is not striving for the result, and acts like an elephant in a china shop. It is also called a disservice.

Always look at the result and act for its sake, and not for your wise word. And best of all, mind your own business!

— **Without what there will be no result in spiritual life?**

— For example, without sincerity. One time we were conversing on Athos with the fathers, and one of them said, “The most important is that we should not dissemble on no account, we cannot speak highly and live badly, we cannot dissemble not only in front of God, but also in front of the brothers, in front of our spiritual father, in front of people. Hypocrisy is the beginning of the collapse of everything. We should always retain sincerity, otherwise nothing will turn out well.” I think he was absolutely right.

There are people who do not receive grace and live in some kind of despondency. And very often the reason for that is that they do not have sincerity.

— **How not to obsess over the mode of life, over the everyday matters?**

— One Russian bishop wrote a book about how he visited Athos. I remember his story about his stay in the Russian monastery. Staying there for a while, he faced an irreverent attitude toward him by one of the novices. This bishop was outraged by the contempt for the priesthood. Everything within him was so outraged, so disturbed that he was even going to go to the abbot of the monastery and complain about that novice. But time came for the evening service, the service began and the bishop decided to come to the spiritual father of the monastery for confession.

During confession he began repenting and in warm blood telling about that incident with the novice that treated him impolitely. He admitted, of course, that he should also have held back, but that still is outrageous. The bishop spoke very fervently, but the spiritual father was listening in a kind of detached way. And all of a sudden, after a fervent monologue of the bishop, the spiritual father, having come out of the thoughtfulness, pronounced, “You know, right here where we are standing, the Mother of God has passed...” And these words suddenly shook the bishop. He felt the greatness of the spiritual father’s words and the nothingness of his problem. And his offense has vanished without a trace, even the desire to come up to that novice and ask forgiveness appeared.

People live preoccupied with the cares of this world, and sometimes do not even suspect that parallel with them, exists another world, a spiritual one. By and large, right next to us, spiritual life is always happening.

But there are and there will always be people who speak of Christ not in the past, not in the future, but in the present, who are experiencing the presence of Christ today, right now. And besides, His presence is so distinct to them, that they do not even need to prove anything to anyone.

— **How to understand why the Lord sends us sorrows?**

— It is not necessarily that you are doing something wrong if you have sorrows. Sometimes the Lord stops our thoughtless life through sorrows and shakes us a little. Sometimes He makes us perfect, or gives us a crown: the deeper is the sorrow, the closer is God. I cannot speak on this issue in detail; only God knows this all. However, you do not have another scenario of your life; everything has happened already. You have only one option: resign yourself to the will of God. If you do not, your outward life will not change, and you will feel worse and worse inside. If you do surrender to it, you should not find out why this has happened to you.

Yesterday, when I came to the prison, a prisoner who killed his son confessed to me. He goes to the prison church all the time, repents, but does not feel better, as his heart is bleeding. I told him, “Look, what grave sins you have committed. Your heart will bleed all the same, not because God did not forgive you, but because the memory of your grave sins bears down your heart. Try not to avoid this pain, not to get rid of it, but accept it for Christ’s sake instead. Bear it for the sake of your diseased son and the sins you have committed. Take it for your voluntary cross and bear it together with Christ.” You know, his heart lightened right there during the confession, at that very moment. I think if he bears this cross with a sense of gratitude and appreciation to God for Christ’s sake, he will feel better and better, and, just like the Good Thief, he will be able to enter the Kingdom of Heaven with this cross.

About the Author

Archpriest Sergiy Baranov is the founder and spiritual guide of the Iveron Monastery of Orsk, Secretary of the Orsk Diocese, builder and the first Senior Priest of the Cathedral of the Great Martyr George the Victorious, head of the Church Architecture and Iconography Department of the Diocese.

Father Sergiy is the creator of the iconography workshop, whose icons adorn many churches and monasteries of Russia, Georgia, and Greece. In addition, being an iconographer himself, Father Sergiy participated in painting frescoes at churches on Holy Mount Athos.

He is also the head of the Department of Cooperation with Correctional Facilities and has been serving at prisons for 23 years. Father Sergiy is the Chairman of the board of trustees of the orphanage for the mentally challenged children in Gai, creator and a trustee of the Diocese's Homeless Shelter.

A father of six.

A scriptwriter and director of more than 10 documentaries, a part of which was awarded with prizes of international film festivals.

Father Sergiy Baranov's films are available at the «Fly High» YouTube-channel.

Iveron Monastery, Orsk

The monastic community began with a sisterhood, which appeared in 2008 and consisted of several women who, upon the blessing of Archpriest Sergiy Baranov, Senior Priest of the Cathedral of the Great Martyr George, formed the community and started to live together at a prayer house according to the Charter.

On April 7, 2013, the spot of land dedicated for the construction of the future monastery was blessed.

In July 2013, the first nun was tonsured and received the name Xenia. Nun Xenia was ordained an Abbess on May 3, 2016.

The sisterhood lives under the spiritual guidance of Archpriest Sergiy Baranov.

The sisters are socially active: they visit patients at the oncological hospital, children at the orphanage, prisoners at jails where they also help at the Divine services held with confession and the Eucharist.

On Sundays, after the Divine Liturgy, Archpriest Sergiy Baranov holds conversations with the monastics and the parish. The majority of the texts in the book you are holding now appeared owing to those conversations.

The Monastery complex includes eight churches, the main of which is the Church of the Iveron Icon of the Holy Theotokos.

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